

The Usual Suspects

Have you see **The Usual Suspects** too many times to count? Do you love to read Tom Clancy or watch **24**? These comics follow spies, crooks, and everyone in between, telling some of the best crime thrillers out there.

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Torso

ISBN: 1582401748

By Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Andreyko

Image Comics 2001

Any film noir fans out there? You know, thuggish gangsters, whipsmart private detectives, dames with attitude? In **Torso**, an Eisner Award winner, Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Andreyko retell the true story of what happened to Elliot Ness *after* his golden days of catching Al Capone. Promoted to Safety Director of the city of Cleveland, he seemed on top of the world -- little did he know that within weeks of taking the position, he would be faced with the first serial killer to stalk on American soil. By the finish, disgraced and beaten, Ness, when interviewed, insisted that the case was closed...but no one was ever convicted of the crime. Bendis and Andreyko piece together bits of the puzzle to shine light on their idea of the finish, to chilling and immensely satisfying effect.

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Powers

Who Killed Retro Girl?

ISBN: 158240223X

Roleplay

ISBN: 1582402329

By Brian Michael Bendis

Art by Michael Avon Oeming

Image Comics 2001

What, Brian Michael Bendis again? I'll admit, I'm a wee bit biased, but he's also one of the few authors who consistently works in this genre. This time around, with Oeming's artwork a wonderful vision of traditionally bright animation cast into sharply shadowed relief, the tale starts in a world very much like our own. There are those who have Powers. No one's quite sure how it starts -- if it's in their genes or it's something acquired -- but those with Powers are responsible for using them as they see fit. They become either heroes or villains -- regular folks will be arrested if they so much as go near a costume without the correct pedigree. In this city, a regular cop has his hands full with Powers and civilians alike -- until someone commits the ultimate, unimaginable crime of murdering the best and brightest of them all, Retro Girl. Then Detective Christian Walker, with rookie partner Deena Pilgrim in tow, must investigate the ultimate of cases, forcing him to face his own secretive past.

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Milton Caniff's Steve Canyon

ISBN: 0971024995

by Milton Caniff

Checker Book Publishing Group 2003

Ah, the end of the 1940's, when women had "intuition" and men who had fought "the Japs" pined for the excitement of a military life. Milt Caniff sketches an era of arch-eyebrowed villainesses with hearts of gold, and heroes who are almost as quick with a witticism as with their fists. Muscular and lantern-jawed, Steve Canyon considers himself a cowboy of the airways, seeking adventure in the cockpit of a plane as the owner of Horizons Unlimited, a freelance international shipping concern. According to his secretary, Steve is a nearly-bankrupt ne'er-do-well whose charm won't protect him much longer from mounting debt and a seemingly terminal lack of gainful employment. Just as the situation begins to look bleak, Steve and his band of ex-military pals are handed a break in the form of a shipping job for the proud and high-handed Copper Calhoon. Debt and a love of adventure call Steve away from Copper's side to assist a mining company in transporting some equipment before this relationship can blossom. Steve is once again catapulted into a scene of international high jinks, caught in a web of lies and treachery by gangster Big Red and her unwilling accomplice, the beautiful Delta. Just as Steve begins to see past Delta's deceptions to the smart and sensitive woman within, they are separated as Steve embarks on a world tour at the whim of a newly-made millionaire. Steve is still not safe from plots and counter plots in the third episode of our story, but he has finally found a woman who wants neither to kill him, nor to disappear... too bad she's one of those confounded know-it-all woman doctors! The Steve Canyon stories are all "ripping good yarns" which retain most of the humor and excitement for modern readers that they elicited when first published in 1947. Characters in Caniff's stories all eventually defy the stereotypes they at first seem to embody, lending this post-war story an interesting complexity, and plenty of unexpected twists.

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The Road to Perdition

ISBN: 0743442245

by Max Allan Collins

Art by Richard Rayner

Pocket Books 2002

This one (surprise, surprise) has been getting a lot of press lately. Tom Hanks, Paul Newman, Jude Law, and Sam Mendes will do that to a story. I've not yet seen the film, though it's on my short list, but I can say without a doubt: read the book. **Road to Perdition** is a dark but illuminating tale of gangsters, circling around the relationships of fathers and sons. Begun with the unnervingly small leap it takes a good man to commit an evil act, and then to grow accustomed to evil, this story is a noir tale at its heart. Full of murky morals, murkier characters, and hard-boiled attitude, the author and artist make you care deeply about O'Sullivan and his son as they head toward their inevitable conclusion. This tale is not for the squeamish: the violence is explicit and shocking, the black and white doing little to squelch the horror of what occurs. The true star of this title is the artwork, hands down. Yes, the dialogue is fine, though not as sparkling as Bendis' **Torso**, but you can tell by looking at any page that the art took four painstaking years. It shows in the fine detail of a 30s city street and in the pained expressions that cross Michael O'Sullivan's face. In the end, those eloquent lines provides the moment of release and redemption that you realizing you've been holding your breath for the entire time.

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Kissing Chaos

ISBN: 1929998325

by Arthur Dela Cruz

Oni Press 2002

Sometimes stories stick with you because of a particularly well turned phrase. Sometimes it's the characters. With **Kissing Chaos**, like a lot of the great noir films, it sticks with you because of the murky atmosphere and slowly built feeling of tension about to explode. Three teens get caught up in dangerous circumstances, and for much of tale you can't tell who may be a perpetrator or victim. The story begins as if someone flicked on the TV when the movie started fifteen minutes ago, and despite the disorientation, it works well. Arthur Dela Cruz seems to know well how to time the story, how to release each revelation to set the reader off balance just a little more. On top of that, it's hard to imagine any other artwork accompanying this story. The lush gray tones make it seem as if everything and everyone is slightly obscured, and the sketched quality of the lines accentuate the disjointed plot. The tale is a dark one, about desperate choices and consequences, but everything, believe me, is not as it seems.

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The Kindaichi Case Files: The Opera House Murders

ISBN: 1591823544

by Yozaburo Kanari

Art by Fumiya Sato

Tokyopop 2003

In one of those rare manga series containing stand alone volumes rather than 22 plus continuous volumes (I can hear all the librarians out there cheering), **The Kindaichi Case Files** is thus not only a great deal but also a psychologically driven series of Agatha Christie-esque murder mysteries featuring a teen detective. Hajime Kindaichi is not so impressive to his peers -- he's not book-smart, not athletic, has no real ambition, and generally prefers to be on the sidelines. That is until he's drawn into a frightening sequence of crimes and murders surrounding his school's performance of **The Phantom of the Opera**. The drama club, though shadowed by their star's recent apparent suicide, decide to continue with their production anyway. The story of the play is creepy enough on its own to give cast and crew alike the willies, but when they land on the isolated Opera House island for a session of intense preparation for their national drama competition, the atmosphere just gets more chilling. Then people start dying. A sly combination of Christie's **And Then There Were None** and the Phantom's own twisted obsessions and all the shocks and creaking doors you could ask for, **The Opera House Murders** is also very aware of the motives and humanity of the characters, victims, detectives and murderers alike. Kindaichi himself is a sympathetic detective, and deduces the criminal not only through physical evidence (though there are enough for a **CSI** episode) but also through profiling the suspects. The gore here is just gruesome enough to make its point, but never out of control, and the true suspense comes from the cleverness of the mystery and the fun of following the plot threads. Great for teens and adults alike, though those readers easily spooked may want to try another title.

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Hawaiian Dick: Byrd of Paradise

ISBN: 1582403171

by B. Clay Moore

Art by Steven Griffin

Image Comics, 2003

Hawaiian Dick reminds me of those great 1950s crime dramas, full of speeding cars, jumpin' jazz scores, and tough P.I.'s looking for balancing shaky moral ground. It's full of great reaction shots, car chases, snappy dialogue, and a few zombies. Wondering about the zombies, are ya? Not too many scenes of Bogie staring down the walking dead, but I'm all for it. This first volume follows the wavering career of Byrd (gotta dig the single name), a cop exiled from the mainland and cooling his heels on Hawaii trying to make a buck. He and his old army buddy, Detective Mo Kalama, get roped into a dubious case trying to retrieve a car for a less than trustworthy fellow who soon meets his own mysterious end. The local drug king, one Bishop Masaki, has lost something he treasures, and he implores Byrd and Kalama to track it down. Never mind that Masaki's treasure is a woman, and that woman was dead last time Byrd and Kalama saw her. Or was she? Toss in island prejudices, voodoo, haunting pasts, and one sassy, sexy bartender and shake well, and you get one heck of a refreshing drink. The artwork perfectly matches the style of the story, with strong lines and stronger lighting melding with a cool palette of contrasting colors to add energy to all of the scenes. Most fitting, this title also features a full menu of mixed drinks at the end, courtesy of San Francisco's Isotope, the comic book lounge. Older teens and adults will appreciate the slow wit and burn of this story.

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Top 10: Book One

ISBN: 1563896680

By Alan Moore, Gene Ha, Zander Cannon

America's Best Comics, 1999

It's early morning in my favorite alternate reality, and Officer Robyn "Toy Box" Slinger has just boarded a train for her first day on the job as a member of the Neopolis City Police Force (aka Top 10). Neopolis was built by a group of crazed German architects at the end of World War Two, and by 1999 has become a labyrinthine, overstimulating habitat for humans, machines, aliens, and mythical beings with superpowers. The city's denizens manage to live together about as harmoniously as you'd expect for a few million superheroes ... which is to say, not harmoniously at all. In response to each new disaster, Top 10 gallops, rolls, flies, and explodes through Neopolis' back alleys and main thoroughfares, mixing a lot of wittiness with their superhuman abilities. When Robyn joins the force, the Ghostly Goose is still at large, a blind, Zen Buddhist cabby has wrecked havoc with the city's traffic patterns, tenements are being taken over by vermin capable of altering the space-time continuum, and the Libra Killer has struck again. It's up to the new recruit to take on the strangest group of criminals you'd ever hope to meet, and at the same time to find a place for herself in the loving, gossiping, dysfunctional family that is Top 10.

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Top 10: Book Two

ISBN: 1563899663

By Alan Moore, Gene Ha, Zander Cannon

America's Best Comics, 2000

Step outside. Cars are flying through the air, and all around you people, robots, and aliens are levitating, inflating like balloons, blowing up buildings, and becoming invisible. Yes, we're back in Neopolis with the Top 10 police force, just in time to clean up a giant interstellar car accident involving a living chess piece the size of a high rise building. Man, I love this city. Picking up where Book One leaves us, Top 10 is moving ever closer to rounding up one of the city's most important covert crime rings. The newest case, however, turns out to be much more than a routine operation, and crime fighting in Neopolis takes our heroes and heroines into ever murkier and more disturbing situations. While the crime scenes multiply, the team gains a new member, and Police Commissioner Ultima arrives from an alternate reality for a surprise inspection. As Top 10 delves deeper into the seedier aspects of their city, the story line occasionally veers into subject matter only appropriate for older readers, but Alan Moore and company brilliantly maintain the same hilarity and emotion I loved in Book One.

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V for Vendetta

ISBN: 0930289528

By Alan Moore

Art by David Lloyd

Warner Books 1995

An excellent title, this book is also the hardest to define or explain -- like much of Alan Moore's groundbreaking work. An alternate history has unfolded -- after America has bombed Africa and Europe and governments have collapsed into chaos, a fascist regime has risen in what is left of England and is now strict and powerful in their rule. This police state, however, has a lot of dirty secrets to hide, and one man, the enigmatic and poetic V, has taken it upon himself to carefully, but irrevocably, tear down the government. Not for the faint of heart, **V for Vendetta** is a brutal but intriguing look at the true meaning of anarchy and individual freedom.

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Gotham Central: In the Line of Duty

ISBN: 1401201997

By Greg Rucka, Ed Brubaker

Art by Michael Lark
DC Comics 2004

Gotham has always been Batman's city; his to protect and his to serve. But, where does that leave Gotham's police department? Gotham Central is a look at what it means to be a police officer in a city where you only have until nightfall to solve a crime because after the sun goes down it's Batman's city and Batman's collar. **Gotham Central** puts you inside the GCPD with a **Law & Order/Homicide: Life on the Streets** feel to it. This title works as both a police procedural, full of partners' camaraderie and jockeying for rank, and as a glimpse into a world dominated by a power no cop can come close to – and archvillains that no regular guy can really survive. Petra wasn't thrilled with this title through no fault of its own – she's just not a fan of cop dramas. Robin, on the other hand, is known to watch **Law and Order** for hours and counts **Homicide** as one of her favorites shows, and she loved **Gotham Central**. Both agree Michael Lark's artwork evokes a noirish feel to Gotham City that compliments the storyline.

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Ruse: Enter the Detective
ISBN: 1931484198
by Mark Waid
Art by Butch Guice
CrossGen 2002

I am a huge fan of Sherlock Holmes mysteries. I love period mysteries of all sorts, but nothing quite beats the acid tone and deliciously complex mind games of Holmesian cases. Ruse beautifully plays with the Holmes mythology, featuring a razor sharp but emotionally distant detective, Simon Archard, and his beautiful and equally witty partner, Emma Bishop. Note that Ruse avoids one of the major problems with Holmes' world: the lack of admirable women. Set in Partington, on the planet Arcadia, a world very much like Victorian England, with slight differences-- the magic here is real, gargoyles swarm the city rather like pigeons. Fighting equally wonderful villains, from the bewitchingly seductive Miranda Cross (Archard's Moriarty, perhaps?) to Archard's devious ex-partner, Ruse is replete with wordplay, action, magic, and, of course, feats of deduction Holmes would, if not embrace, acknowledge with an eloquent eyebrow.

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