

The Joker espouses a unified philosophy of life. It is a doctrine of existential nihilism, the idea that no reality has meaning, and therefore one embraces that fact as meaning. The Clown Prince of Crime has been the exemplar and prophet of that idea at least since 1988 and Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*. It has, in effect, become his religion. *Batman Annual #3* is therefore a tale of what happens when a skeptic meets a true believer, in this case when a cynical reporter sets out to examine and debunk the Joker, and finds himself the object of the killer clown's friendship. The story unfolds from that point on in the grand tradition of movies and novels that feature the evil, horrible, fiendish friend who unravels your life like a fragile bow. The reporter descends into a hellish quagmire of fear and anxiety, finally finding himself confined to Arkham Asylum where he is under the care of Erik Border, an orderly from Metropolis with a secret of his own. James Tynion IV does a marvelous job of painting the madness and cruelty of the Joker and the desperation of an arrogant man now realizing that reality is not the stories he mocked, but something much worse. In the end this story rises and falls on the reader's reaction to the character of the Joker. Is he a fascinating villain? A fiend incarnate? The symbol of the secret dreams of chaos that lurk deep in the brain of the most civilized person? Or is he simply a very silly creation that passed the level of believability, even by comic book standards, long ago, and who according to all the rules of narrative should have been killed before now? I confess that I am among the last group, and therefore had to restrain guffaws of derision at many junctures. But I am not representative of all, or doubtless even most, readers of this comic book. My suspicion is that many will find this to be an excellent Joker story, probably much better than the efforts of Scott Snyder in the *Death of the Family* arc. Roge Antonio's slightly rough pencils and inks and Nick Filardi's clear but somewhat muted colors give the visuals a very mild blur, as if the story unfolds behind a filter or in a vivid dream. That is in keeping with the *Endgame* arc from which this spins off, as Scott Snyder has very deliberately played with readers' trust in those issues, repeatedly raising the specter of untrustworthy narration and mistaken perception as if the whole thing might be a dream. For what it's worth, the existence of this annual, which tells a story far removed from the perceptions of Batman, upon whom *Endgame* centers, implies that at least the main events of that larger story are actually happening in the Batman Universe. That is a service that even a non-Joker fan appreciates. The post *Batman Annual #3* appeared first on *Weekly Comic Book Review*.

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