

A couple of issues into the second arc of C.O.W.L. things are starting to heat up. With an Alderman held ransom by one of Camden Stone's new supervillains and the strike still on, Chicago is caught between Mayor Daley and Geoffrey Warner. This struggle is hammered home in the book's opening pages. While this scene is probably the issues dullest, literally and figuratively, it helps remind readers of the context of the series and do a lot to prep the reader for what's to come, helping to put them in the right mindset for the comic and planting the seeds of the major conflicts that will play out over the next seventeen pages. Past the title page there are somewhere between two and four major plot threads, depending on how you count: Geoffrey Warner's attempts to clean up loose ends, Radia's continued frustration with C.O.W.L., Sarah Pierce and Evelyn Thompson's attempts to get to the bottom of John's death, and Alderman Hayes' captivity at the hands of Doppler. One thing that's great about C.O.W.L. is how ambiguous it can be. Kyle Higgins has admitted that he doesn't like working with narration and, reasonable as that is, it's actually a significant departure from many of the other superhero comics on the market today. As a result, C.O.W.L. is a comic where we don't know with certainty what is motivating the characters. In some circumstances that can leave a story feeling confusing or undefined, but Higgins and Siegel present the events extremely clearly. The comic that comes out of this is interestingly layered and thought provoking. When asked about Geoffrey Warner's visit, Sarah describes it as a "power play". Clearly Geoffrey is trying to make sure that there are no leaks in his plans, but he's also unable to be honest about his real feelings about Arclight. One has to wonder how sincere his spiel is. Likewise, having seen a brief glimpse of Doppler without the mask in issue #7, it's unclear how sincere he's being or what he means by telling Alderman Hayes that his family probably won't pay the ransom. Ambiguity like this is part of what makes C.O.W.L.'s such an engaging and lifelike world. Readers respect comics that respect them back, C.O.W.L. manages that without becoming obtuse. Still, as strong as this strategy is, it also contributes to one of the issue's greatest weaknesses, namely that it's still a little slow. Comics tend to use narration because dialogue takes time and page space and without that device to clarify, there just isn't as much of either. Overall I think C.O.W.L. #9 comes down just on the right side of the line, offering enough to chew on for one issue, however there will likely be some readers who will feel that things are moving too sluggishly for an issue following up a pair of very measured stories and a jaunt into the world of propaganda. Nonetheless, C.O.W.L. #9 delivers, more or less, exactly what I'm looking for. C.O.W.L. has reached that Game of Thrones-esque place where the plot is really just the interplay between the various characters and their circumstances and issue #9 provides solid looks at most of the title's most interesting characters. The final pages are unsettling in their abruptness but that only lends a degree of uncomfortable power to them, which is really what they're all about, power we're not comfortable with. Rod Reis continues to do utterly incredible work on this series. Even in an issue that's not quite as flashy as its peers, at least when looking at the whole of it, there's both a scientific accuracy and a stunning artistry. We're well beyond examining the realism or stylization of this comic, Reis clearly knows what style he's looking for and how to express it. In fact, many of Reis' compositions look very consciously unfinished, with colors bleeding out of the image or lines carving deep, sketchy crags into the compositions. Even better, it neither feels like these choices were made thoughtlessly nor does it seem like they're overly intellectual, opting to communicate through emotion rather than analysis. Reis is also, primarily, a colorist and it definitely shows this issue. A lot of reactions would be incomplete without the boldness or muted nature of the background colors, which remain consistent but speak through choices of panel composition and the color palette of the

scene. There are also a wide range of colors and kinds of colors used. The opening scene plays out almost completely in greyscale, while others hover in soft pastel hues. By the end of the book the intensity of color has followed the intensity of the story and we're seeing harsh black and white contrasts and beautiful cityscapes full of deep blues and bright lights. While it's never been far from importance, the relevance of the era in which the story takes place is a much greater concern in my mind than it has been in several months. Obviously face time with Mayor Daley and mentions of Director Hoover set the stage for that, but Reis does a great job of communicating the variety and presence of 1960s culture. From the stark retro-modernity of the Pierce home to the incredible flatness of Geoffrey and Daley's stand-off to the gorgeous mod-futurism of David's apartment, every scene feels considered and representative of the styles of the era, whether that be styles of art and decoration or styles of filmmaking and photography. The scene in David's apartment definitely sticks out as a winner, not only for its bold colors and stylistic choices but for things as simple as the effect of the physical layout on the layout of the page. It's also, frankly, an awesome space and the choices Reis makes communicate a lot about David, which supplements the unique juxtaposition of information we have in the scene: his behavior in issue #3, the oddly endearing awareness he reveals in the scene, and the crucial lack of awareness he displays. Despite it all, some of the coolest stuff in this issue is the use of Doppler's powers. Much as this review is separated into sections considering the writing and art, respectively, this issue makes it perfectly clear why such simplifying measures will always be precisely that, simplifications. This is, at it's most literal, the definition of comics, the blending of sequential words and image. It's nearly impossible to piece out what is contributed by the script and what comes from the artist and that's a big part of what's so incredible about it. Reis not only makes the sequence beautiful but he makes it clear when the ideas that Higgins and Siegel were playing with easily could have been muddled and lost for many readers. There are so many cool uses of that power brought into play this issue and Reis' artwork does such a good job of expressing what's happening and how Radia reacts to it. The post C.O.W.L. #9 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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