

Grant Morrison crafts the Gordian knots of modern comics. With his dense plotting and layered references, finding a way into one of his stories is extremely easy, but finding a way out again can prove all but impossible. Like Alexander of old, it's probably best just to cut through the tangle at the cost of whatever subtleties may be destroyed and whatever delicate stranded of meaning may be severed. So, at the risk of seeming a simplistic Philistine, I will say that *The Multiversity: Ultra Comics #1* is a story about evil and about circles. That it is about evil seems self-evident, or as self-evident as anything in a Morrison book. The story is, after all, about *Ultra Comics*, the living comic book, confronting the Gentry. In a recent interview Morrison explained his use of that term. It seems he took it from the noun "gentrification," the process by which outsiders, usually perceived by natives as malevolent, move into a ruined neighborhood and exert control. Whether he also leaned on the historical British class system, he did not say. That these outsiders are evil is proclaimed by their names and characterizations, which are distillations of villainous stereotypes from superhero comics. Thus we have Dame Merciless, the femme fatale (Talía al Ghul); Lord Broken, the villain driven insane by suffering (choose your favorite Arkham inmate); Hellmachine, the evil artificial intelligence (Brainiac, Brother Eye); Demogorgunn, the evil society or hive mind (Hydra, A.I.M., the Brotherhood of Assassins); and the villain who confronts *Ultra Comics*, Intellectron, the representation of such geniuses and masterminds as Lex Luthor and Doctor Doom. They are the invaders scouting for cheap real estate in the devastated environs of our imagination. So far, so depressing. But what has ruined our mental landscape? What has so poisoned the environment of our dreams that the Gentry now are free to enter and claim territory? What can destroy the imagination, except evil ideas? Or maybe one might say evil habits and attitudes of thought. Although Morrison does not give us an encyclopedic explication of these attitudes, he makes them clear enough in a sequence in which he walks through the history of comics, from Golden Age heroism through Silver Age wonder to Bronze Age tragedy and Digital Age bitterness. It is as if a great cataract has gradually formed over the inner eye of the western world, at least that portion of it that reads comics. But here is where the first circle comes into play. For the Gentry are avatars of a greater evil, the very evil that has poisoned the human mind. So the Gentry are summoned forth by evil, and bring with them the very evil that calls them into our imaginative realms. But this is just one of the circles that Morrison presents in this installment of *The Multiversity*. *Ultra Comics* is a living comic book, actually an embodiment of the readers, inhabitants of Earth-33 in Morrison's typology. He goes forth to battle the Gentry, and is infected by them, or rather by the evil that they herald. Yet, in other issues of *The Multiversity*, *Ultra Comics*, now in book form, appears as the carrier of evil. Which is to say we are infecting the comics with evil. But the Gentry are already in the comics, darkening our imaginative space. So we destroy the comics, so the Gentry can destroy us, so we can destroy the comics. One answer to all of this, of course, is to cut the knot in yet another sense. If we just put the book down, as *Ultra Comics* himself urges us, then the darkness stops. But so does the light. *Ultra* tells us he will be fine without us, but of course he won't be. Comics have no life apart from a reader. So if we attempt to save him we destroy him, and if we attempt to destroy him, by continuing to read and forcing him to confront the Gentry, we save him by giving him life. The post *Multiversity: Ultra Comics #1* appeared first on *Weekly Comic Book Review*.

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