

My reaction after reading? A nice slow clap. Kudos, Hickman & Co. Kudos. Spoiler Alert: RED LEVEL! I've been critical of Hickman's writing style before, and I might even do so again, perhaps even as quickly as a few paragraphs, but for now, with this issue in and of itself? That was a satisfying read! The key feature of this issue is the drama, and how the panels alternatively stretch out, or reveal, information for our reading experience to create the best possible tension and surprise. We begin on a slow pace toward a door and another on our key player: Doctor Strange. The Priests' slow walk through the Library, the wordless panels that give way to a 3/4 page splash of the Swans, and the sudden shift into scattered, haphazard panels with bold, scratchy borders for the battle-- all deliberate design choices that enhance the tone and flavor of the reading. And, of course, a multi-panel sequence (with a deliberate palette shift) towards the door, its opening, and the page-turn reveal of the grand villain that's been building for years-- Dr. Doom. Kev Walker draws the layouts well, with a solid sense of characters within the scene. Unfortunately, the actual landscaping of those scenes are a bit bland at times, such as the very generic trees on the first page and, frankly, plain walls of the Library interior. One room, supposedly an icy cavern, has faces on the walls that seem like they should be significant and "full of strange wonder" but aren't actually that distinct. There's also more than a little inconsistency, as some of the poses and expressions change from panel to panel, and some poses appear pushing the boundaries of what's in proportion. At one point, Strange appears cross-eyed and another point his outstretched hand looks like it only has three fingers/thumb.

Of course, what most readers will care about is this issue's story and how it fits in the context of Hickman's oeuvre. On one hand, it's nice to see some puzzle pieces fit into place, most notably with a key reveal of a mystery that's been set up from the very beginning, more than two years ago. (Some message boards point to evidence even longer than that.) To enjoy this aspect, you have to also enjoy the way you need to keep track of the stories Hickman has been spinning, to follow the breadcrumbs of information that's been doled out over time. I've recently been doing just that for a side project, and it's actually brought me a new appreciation for this brand of storytelling. Perhaps it's a new way to enjoy comics in this info-heavy, social media-driven, fan-speculative landscape ("fanscape?"). Of course, on the other hand, if you consider such context, you have to consider *everything* about that context, and thus it's difficult to appreciate the story as a chapter when there is still too much that's assumed or left unexplained. There's a kind of non-linear story that's being told here, being in some ways recursive rather than linear, and that's frustrating. For example, I usually don't read these issues as they come out, and I wait for an "off" week to binge on them all at once. It feels more appropriate to read as a long-form story than as episodic. The post New Avengers #31 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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