

BROKEN FRONTIER

Hatter M: The Looking Glass Wars #1

Review by Dexter K. Flowers,
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CREDIT BOX

Words: Frank Beddor & Liz Cavalier
Pencils: Ben Templesmith
Inks: Ben Templesmith
Colors: Ben Templesmith

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For more than a century we've known the Mad Hatter as a lunatic obsessed with his never-ending tea party. Now we finally know that it was all a lie.



Paris, 1859. With a great SPLOOSH! a man emerges from a puddle. The pool of water is an exit portal, and the man is **Hatter Madigan, ranking High Cut of the Wonderland Millinery and protector of Alyss Heart, the next Queen of Wonderland.** But Alyss has gone lost in our world during her escape from the forces of The Red Queen, who has engineered a coup against her niece. Lost as well is Hatter M's deadly *chapeau*, which, when thrown, transforms into a set of knives. Now Madigan pursues both Alyss and his hat through the dark streets of the City of Light.

It takes as much hubris as imagination to not simply re-imagine *Alice in Wonderland*, but to base its premise on the supposed fallacy of the original. From the first page, *Hatter M* does just that, telling us that "Lewis Carroll changed everything!" Every media market is crowded, with more than enough hubris and its evil twin, hype, to go around. Imagination, sadly, seems to be a more rare commodity; but fortunately, *Hatter M* brings enough of that to bear, as well.

Picking up where his British novel *The Looking Glass Wars* leaves off, Frank Beddor's story, with scripting help from Liz Cavalier, capitalizes on the **natural fit between the high-concept of the novel and the comics format.** A power-struggle in Wonderland causing Alyss to run for her life and her crown, with an expert bladesman at her side, then getting lost in *this* world is extremely compelling on its own and not simply to fans of Carroll's tale. Making our world as absurd as Carroll's Wonderland, and adding a malicious magician towards the end adds to the wealth of ideas in *Hatter M*. Beddor and Cavalier also have a solid collective sense of scene construction, as well as how to manage the transition from one scene to the next, answering a previous dramatic question, then asking a new one, while **steadily upping the ante until the final frame of the final page.** Other, larger questions: Why have Alyss and Madigan come to *this* world? Where is she? And how will her protector find her? These are intriguing enough by the end of the issue that we want them answered. But most interesting in *Hatter M* is High Cut Madigan himself. Sure, comparisons to other bladed bad-asses are inevitable, but still, the character stands on his own. He's dutiful and loyal, pretty smart, too, and has a vicious style; but he also has the wry humor one finds when a stranger comes to a new world.

However, as good as *Hatter M* is, it's not as good as it could be, because the flow of the script is upset by the use of thought balloons. There's a reason why we don't see them anymore—as stories become



more decompressed, with scenes, action, and dialogue doing the heavy lifting that text exposition used to, thought balloons now seem redundant with respect to plot and artificial and obvious with respect to character. When used in *Hatter M*, they drag on the reading experience and drain some of the mystery Hatter Madigan needs. In this day and age, first-person narration is less clunky and keeps the narrative flow going by being more cinematic, like the voice-over in a movie. Had Beddor and Cavalier used that strategy instead of thought balloons, this issue would have been more impressive than it already is.

As with virtually everything he's touched in 2005, Ben Templesmith rocks the house in *Hatter M*. Everything that's noteworthy about his style resonates with the script. The dark, the ethereal mood. The deftly frenetic linework. The impressionistic physicality of the action sequences. How he **evokes such complex emotion with such an economy of strokes**. His Paris is antiquated and sordid, fraying at the edges and entropic, as murky as those recesses of the imagination from which a story like *Hatter M* emerges. And once the grim fantasy has set in, he shifts gears with Beddor and Cavalier as they unleash Sacrénoir the magician and his undead horde upon the city. It's trademark Templesmith horror, and it works.

One miscue aside, *Hatter M: The Looking Glass Wars #1* is an impressive debut. Not only do we have issue #2 to look forward to, but *The Looking Glass Wars* the novel will be released later next year. If what we've seen thus far is any indication, the wait will be more than worth it.