



Saturday, September 26, 2009

Looking Glass Wars/Hatter M



In about two and a half weeks, you'll be able to pick up *ArchEnemy* and *Hatter M: Mad with Wonder*, both part of Frank Beddor's "Looking Glass Wars" story that will be released on October 15. *ArchEnemy* is the third prose novel of the series, while *Mad with Wonder* is the second graphic novel.

The overarching (pun intended) story is that the famous Alice (more correctly spelled "Alyss") of *Alice in Wonderland* was a princess of Wondertropolis, until her parents were murdered by her Aunt Redd, in an effort to seize power. Alyss was banished across dimensions to London, where she was eventually adopted by the Liddell family. Although she told many people of her plight, no one believed her. Her tutor, Lewis Carroll, even felt the story imaginative enough to pen it as a work of fiction, changing some of the details for the sake of storytelling. Royal bodyguard Hatter Madigan went to Earth to look for her and she eventually made it back to Wondertropolis. At the end of

the second novel, *Seeing Redd*, Alyss had defeated Redd but the world's main source of power seemed depleted and an upstart Borderlander by the name of Arch was eyeing the throne.

ArchEnemy begins there and chronicles how Alyss attempts to fight off both Arch and her still-very-upset Aunt Redd, and get the world's power back online. All without her vast powers of imagination. It's generally a good read, as the previous books, and Beddor provides for some interesting twists and turns that keep things interesting. There's certainly enough exposition and characterization that I don't think newcomers to the series will feel at all lost, but Beddor wisely spreads those portions out, so a returning reader isn't inundated with what would be recaps for them. I did feel, though, that the ending came on rather abruptly in almost a deus ex machina manner, as if he suddenly realized that he had to wrap everything up in the next fifteen pages. It makes sense and doesn't come entirely out of left field or anything like that, but the previous books had better dénouements.

Mad with Wonder actually shoots back to when Alyss was still trapped on Earth with Madigan looking for her. The [previous graphic novel](#) was set in 1859, while this one begins in 1864. (Without checking, I believe *Seeing Redd* notes that Madigan ultimately spent seven years in his quest.) Like the first graphic novel, no foreknowledge of the prose works are necessary, and there is a several page graphic recap of the first volume to bring any new readers up to speed within the context of the comics. The main novels focus primarily on Alyss herself and her struggle with Redd; the comics focus almost exclusively on Madigan's search for Alyss on Earth and the adventures he encounters in that process.

Though still written by Beddor and Liz Cavalier, this volume is illustrated by Sami Makkonen who you might know from his work on *Blue* or *Deadworld Slaughterhouse*. Although distinctly different, Makkonen's work does have the tonal qualities as Ben Templesmith and Tyson Schroeder have used in the past, making for a comfortable visual continuity. The story itself is interesting in that we learn how Madigan is able to afford trekking around the world for as long as he did, and we also see how others

react to Madigan's bizarre story about Alyss and Wondertropolis; he's paired up alternatively with a circus sideshow and the inhabitants of an insane asylum. (Which, if you're not familiar with your history, was an obscenely ghastly type of place in the late 1800s.) The story makes for some interesting character interactions and provides some insights to Madigan himself. Although a trained warrior, he does have a gentler side and shows some burgeoning, but still effectively latent, fatherly characteristics which then become note-worthy in *ArchEnemy*. The character of Elijah, too, is a particularly interesting one in light of his passing resemblance to DC's Joker.

I have to say that I've been impressed overall with Beddor's actualizing "Looking Glass Wars" via a transmedia approach. All of the components (prose work, graphic novels, [webcomics](#), MMO and soundtrack) work very well independently but also tie numerous threads together to form a larger tapestry. The approach is more obvious in properties that have a larger marketing budget behind them (like, say, Star Wars) but this is the first attempt I've seen where the approach has been so deliberate and calculated. That might sound cynical, but it's not intended to be. Beddor has put some serious thought into the types of venues he's utilizing and tries to work with those outlets in a way that best serves a particular portion of the overall story. He *could* tell Madigan's story through prose alone, but the type of story it is suggests that comics are a better vehicle for it. Each component is designed with the specifics of the medium in mind, and they're developed in such a way as to be compelling on their own merits. That it's a good story overall and all of the individual elements are well done make it that much better in my mind.

I might point out a curious aside on the graphic novel. The back of *Mad with Wonder* contains a "Process Gallery" showing how a couple of pages of script become an illustrated page. While I was eager to look at that to get a better sense of how the breakdown of storytelling duties is delineated, I was actually left more confused than before. There's a clear progression of script to page layout sketch to page layout rough to final page, but it's unclear who is working on which portions and who the notes to Makkonen come from. Further complicating matters is an early page layout sketch from a "Miss Emily McGuinness" who is credited as "Civil War Raconteur." I did find a woman by that name who works as a storyboard artist but, whether or not it's the same person, that makes it that much less clear how credit for the book should be dispensed. A minor point, certainly, for most people but I do have a personal interest the development process.

The book also provides a five page preview of a third graphic novel, which appears to also be drawn by Makkonen.

ArchEnemy and *Hatter M: Mad with Wonder* will be available on October 15.

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