

I doubt I'm the first to observe that the brilliance of Astro City is the way it inverts the usual focus on the superheroes to explore the lives of the civilians. That's why it's always a little surprising, and in some ways disappointing, when Busiek actually turns the attention back on the Honor Guard or their affiliates. Even though he usually delivers a more thoughtful storyline than most, it still reads like an off-brand Justice League series. In fact, when this issue gets to the Honor Guard's annual Red Cake Day—a day when a generous spread of delicious red cake inexplicably appears in the team's headquarters—the first thing that springs to mind is the JLA/JSA Thanksgiving.\* Red Cake Day does have that same hokey, charming quality that always accompanies people in costume doing ordinary things. The issue might have been better had it literally been the Honor Guard standing around with paper plates of cake and making small talk. That probably would have fit the spirit of Astro City a little better, at any rate. Because what this issue turns out to be is your good, old-fashioned superhero plot with a bit of Astro City's trademark character study finagled in. Honestly, it's hard to see why Busiek even bothered (unless this will all tie into his overarching Broken Man plotline at some point). By the end of the issue, we know that Christopher Martin (a.k.a. Stormhawk) is a nice guy with a bright future, which got tragically though heroically cut short, but we don't get torn up about it. This is hardly the deep exploration we got with Winged Victory during her long arc. If there's any character development at all, it's with Eth of the Quiqui-A, one of the "raggy-looking purple guys" responsible for Red Cake Day. But for all the grief and regret he expresses over what he feels to be his responsibility in Christopher's death, he, too, comes across as somewhat flat. You don't need to exert much imagination to understand his motivations: his entire pacifist civilization was at risk of genocide; he knew no one strong enough to defeat the threat; so he redirected it towards the Honor Guard, who gamely took care of the problem without realizing its exact nature. And its exact nature is pure, senseless violence. Krigari's origin as a subatomic creature that grew into a galactic threat is interesting, but the fact that he just likes power and killing for their own sake makes him hopelessly single-minded and dull as a villain. Krigari exemplifies much of what goes wrong with this issue: something that is more interesting as an idea than as entertainment. Maybe if Busiek framed Eth's crime not as the unfortunate death of Stormhawk, but as the incalculable amount of danger and damage unleashed by Krigari on the Guard's world, we'd have a more complex dilemma on our hands. But seeing as how Eth is practically begging to have a saber run through him for his part in Stormhawk's death, there's very little a compassionate team of superheroes can do except instruct him to remember their fallen comrade. Grummet's work is no more or less impressive than what Brent Eric Anderson usually brings to Astro City. In some ways, Grummet's smoother lines and more fluid action conveys the superhero portions of the issue better than Anderson usually manages to do, but it also brings him squarely within the category of DC's house art. I just think that's the wrong look for a Vertigo title, even one about superheroes. Despite the train of finishers, the linework looks fairly consistent across the board, leaving you with a pleasant, but unremarkable looking issue. Some Musings: \* That's actually one of the things I'll miss the most from the pre-relaunch DCU. That and fade-cut Superboy. The post Astro City #17 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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