

Busiek's been a little off his game in the last few issues, either sticking too close to the superhero conventions that go against the grain of Astro City's spirit, or not diving deeply enough into the human interest material that makes it special. Here, he seems set to get back in the groove by confronting another issue superhero comics almost never have to deal with: aging, and all the slimy, wriggling worms unleashed by that can. It's one of the many escapist qualities of superhero comics that no one ever ages in them, much less retires. This allows the characters to keep doing their crazy shenanigans indefinitely, but it also spares them from the indignities of staying relevant in a field that doesn't tolerate fogeys. In the latter scenario, they have two options: they can bow out gracefully, as Black Rapier does at the start of the issue, or they can stay in the game and watch themselves lose a little more ground with each year. That's the choice Jack (a.k.a. Crackerjack) and Jess (a.k.a. Quarrel) are facing as the superhero biz starts to catch up to them. Their difficulty is while they're not that old ("closing in on fifty"), they're clearly getting too old for this particular gig. Jack no longer has the reflexes to compensate for a single instant of hesitation and Jess needs heavy armor to ensure she survives each bout. While Jess is realistic about their natural decline, Jack is naturally in denial. "I admit nothing!" he says cheerfully when she tells him to acknowledge they've lost a step or two. Jack doesn't have to expressly concede anything; he reveals he's losing touch in the way he over-complains about how his generation knew what was what and these kids don't. When Jack discovers the new set of Chessmen are in it to smuggle cocaine, he exclaims in dismay, "That doesn't even have anything to do with chess!" On a less superficial level, the newbies are darker, rougher, harder for heroes with honor and good humor to handle. Jack's moment of hesitation is in reaction to the Chessmen king's revelation that he killed his predecessor, and that moment nearly costs Jack his own life. Jack doesn't realize the game is no longer fun because the opposition no longer sees it as a game. Jess is fortunate in that she never saw it that way. For her, being Quarrel was (and maybe still is) a way to work out something deeper inside. Busiek reveals that her father, the original Quarrel, was a supervillain not to reduce Jess' life to a simple redemption story, but to play out something more complicated. Jess has all these volatile emotions in her after discovering what her dad really does, and channeling it physically isn't enough, not when his weapons are lying around. She turns those guns on bad guys less out of moral conviction and more because she can't stand the idea of being anything like her dad. In showing us her backstory, Busiek does what he always does so well: excavate the human from her costumed trappings. I'm not talking so much about Jess growing up a backwoodsgirl in the deep South, although that's novel enough to be awesome. I'm talking about her losing the illusion of her dad's greatness, and the attached dream of the better life he keeps promising to bring. I'm talking about her speechless bitterness over the fact that he cared more for himself than his family. I'm talking about her taking on the responsibilities as head of the family to make up for him, and the frustration she feels at having to do so. You may not personally relate to her life, but it feels real enough to empathize with. Anderson always does his best art in the quiet, dramatic moments, especially in the way characters communicate with each other without words. You don't really know if Jess and Jack are married or just living together or what, but the depth of their relationship is clear from the way Jack embraces her from behind with a sly little grin on his face (which loudly broadcasts what he has in mind) and her affectionate, tolerant smile. Compared to the awkward postures their bodies take on in action, this is great work indeed. Some Musings: - Quarrel is a semi-decent name for a villain, but a crappy one for a hero. - In the spirit of Black Lightning, Black Rapier is a black man. Obviously, neither has anything on Black Frasier. The post Astro City #18 appeared first on

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