

The force imbuing *Batman #37* is not fear, nor fear's country cousin, horror. It isn't anger, which usually follows hard on fear's heels, nor panic, which often accompanies fear arm-in-arm. The force that pervades Scott Snyder's latest installment of the "Endgame" arc is not an emotion at all, but a physical phenomenon, or rather the literary analogue of a physical reality. This story is an illustration of gravity, of the tendency of massive bodies to attract smaller ones in fields of influence and attraction. The massive body in this case is Stephen King, and considering Snyder's background in the horror genre it is not at all surprising that his work has been profoundly shaped by the themes and techniques of the greatest modern master of scary stories. Nor is it surprising that James Tynion IV, one of Snyder's own protégés and the author of "Endgame's" back-up scripts, is also indebted to King at a once- and twice-remove. The story that looms behind this issue of *Batman* is King's 1986 novel *It*, which was adapted into a rather inferior 1990 miniseries that was somewhat redeemed by Tim Curry's bravura performance as Pennywise, the immortal clown demon with a taste for death and torture. In King's tale, Pennywise, known more descriptively as *It*, possesses the town of Derry, Maine, using the community through the years as a laboratory of pain and murder and becoming so entwined with the town's psychological and mystical fabric as to, in some sense, become the very soul of the place. Snyder and Tynion hint at a similar nature for the Joker, intimating that he has haunted Gotham for centuries and has become a dark expression of the city's most malign impulses. They even go so far as to borrow King's technique of seeding images of a malignant clown through photographs of the city's history. To be fair, King was himself playing off pre-existing tropes, including the Joker, who has, after all, been present in comics since 1940. Evil tricksters such as Loki or Eris are fixtures of ancient mythology, and medieval folklore often depicted demons and the devil himself as crosses between highwaymen and cruel stand-up comedians. Also to be fair, this is a theme Snyder has played with before. At the end of the "Death of the Family" arc Bruce Wayne muses that he fears to kill the Joker lest Gotham send the murderer back or replace him with something worse. The response to that development was less than enthusiastic, and the speech was dropped from trade editions of the arc, but it's easy to see why Snyder would find it attractive. Not only does it arise naturally from his own literary roots, it also gives the Joker a place in the history and nature of Gotham proportional to the villain's importance in the *Batman* mythos. From a strategic point of view, it also allows the author to address that ever-bleeding wound represented by the constant query of why somebody doesn't just do the obvious thing and protect Gotham by killing the murderous scum, already. Unfortunately, Snyder's chief weakness as a storyteller, his inability to provide clear, strong endings, is likely to prevent the arc from having the impact it should. There are already strong hints that Snyder is angling for an equivocal outcome, one in which the Joker might be supernatural ... or might not. He has said in many interviews that this is the last Joker story he ever plans to tell, and that he expects the Joker to be gone a "long" time. Leaving aside that time frames in comics are notoriously subjective and adjustable, this also speaks to the probability that Snyder will leave the Joker's life or death yet again up in the air, or down in the waterfall as was the case with "Death of the Family." Finally, the entire story is full of hints that the action and events might be illusions created by any of the multiple drugs and traumas to which *Batman* has been subjected in the recent past. Anyone who watched *Lost*, or for an older generation anyone who wasted several months on the 1985 - 1986 season of *Dallas*, could warn about the dangers of that approach. The art of the main story, created by Greg Capullo, Danny Miki, and FCO Plascencia, continues the tradition of this title's unique and attractive visuals. The slightly more lurid art accompanying James Tynion IV's backup story, images by

John McCrea and colors by Taylor Esposito, is more cartoonish, but appropriate to the nature of that tale. The post Batman #37 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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