



Zenith: Phase One

Grant Morrison , Steve Yowell (Illustrator)

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Berlin, 1945: The allies unleashed the second world war hero Maximus upon the German supersoldier Masterman. Maximus's defeat was only kept secret by the nuclear bomb which destroyed both men. Forty-plus years later, and twenty years after a generation of '60s British superpowered heroes came and went, the teenage pop star Zenith is the only superhuman left – and his only interest in women, drugs, alcohol and fame.

So when he is contacted about the threat from the many-angled ones and the impending destruction of our world, his first reaction is to steer well clear. But the superhumans of the past have other plans...

Zenith: Phase One Details

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From Reader Review Zenith: Phase One for online ebook

Damon says

This story has some nice moments. I like the sketches at the back especially.

Dan says

Another 80s British semi-apocalyptic Thatcher government era superpowered comic but it IS a very good one!

Russio says

Fairly tight superhero story, drawing heavily on the X Men mythos and establishing itself in a 1987 rudely interrupted by a reborn nazi super villain and assisted by 1960s post-hippy baby-boom heroes. The dates are important and the two-part origin story at the end links them clearly.

There is a lot to enjoy here and it is the quirks that work best - the alcoholic Welsh hero washed up in his retirement, the Tory MP who has rejected the 60s idealism (given a fairly non-critical treatment here). Zenith himself is very dated but in a cute way; as a character he is little more than a sketch, as is the villain.

The origin tale is distinctly better than the main one, although in five-page instalments, pace is never an issue - development of character on the other hand - well, that was not really that big in the 80s!

Martin Nisbet says

2000AD finally got round to superheroes in the late 80s and this was the result. Magnificent really. I'm so glad this got a good reprint after years in publishing rights dispute.

Chad says

Probably the best of Morrison's UK stuff. You still feel those 80's comic influences like Watchmen and V for Vendetta when reading this. Morrison writes a pretty straight forward save the world from Cthulhu story with a twist on the superhero archetypes.

Kenny says

Morrison and Yeowell's excellent retro superhero and his groovy adventures.

Aditya Kalapatapu says

"I've told you BEFORE about drinking and flying, haven't I? It's a miracle you have made it home at all."

"I'm nineteen, I can fly, I can flatten BALLBEARINGS between my fingers and I'm practically invulnerable to damage. I mean 'let's face it .. What can possibly go WRONG?'"

"You'll be careful in Berlin, Won't you Bill? I don't want you ending up as just another name on a war memorial." "Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. I am Maximus. I expect I'll get one all to myself."

C.T. Hunter says

Classic Morrison, fast paced to suit the 2000AD style, but beautifully scripted with excellent art. Roll on Phase 2.

Brandon St Mark says

This was a very.... different book compared to a lot of Morrison's other work that I read. I liked a lot of the concepts in the book, and I think as this series goes on it'll be better because they can build on the ground work this established. It just felt a little basic compared to other things I've read by Morrison, and the art was hard to follow. Really, the art is my main complaint with this book. The black and white style didn't help it any either. Color would have helped to clarify a lot of angle issues.

Sam Quixote says

Nazi superman/Lovecraftian monster wants to destroy the world - arrogant British popstar superhero gotta stop him!

Zenith is really early Grant Morrison (1987-88, back when he was still writing for 2000AD) but it's not bad and is actually quite accessible and entertaining.

The plot is simplistic so it's a fairly unmemorable read. The approach feels derivative of *Watchmen*, with its postmodern view on superheroes, and has a predictable and rushed conclusion. My main criticism though is that there's no-one here to root for. Both heroes, already established as bastards, grudgingly save the world for selfish reasons - and we're meant to like them??

Steve Yeowell's art is skilful though unappealing and the lack of colour doesn't help, particularly with the perspective. Zenith's outfit is also really lacking and unimaginative - shoulderpads and a domino mask? It suuuucks!

Zenith: Phase One has its problems but overall it's well-written and if you enjoy Morrison's compelling mix of modern superheroes, magic, horror and psychedelia, you'll probably get something out of this book. In other words, Morrison fans only (though keep them expectations low)!

Tony Laplume says

Zenith is a fascinating work, as it turns out.

This was Grant Morrison's first notable project (although by that point he'd already been writing for about a decade), his reaction to *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* or in other words the idea that making superheroes relevant again was to make them "realistic" and therefore more violent.

He had a much simpler approach. As anyone who knows superhero comics at all will be able to tell you, the Golden Age exactly coincided with WWII. You can still see that reflected in Captain America, the curiosity still anchored in that era but successfully revived (literally) in the Marvel age that followed two decades later, the one currently reflected in a popular series of movies. Morrison took inspiration more directly from those days. He envisioned Nazis who were steeped more heavily in occultism and the idea of the superman than you're probably used to seeing (although both are running themes of the Third Reich that tend to be downplayed by the extent of the Holocaust that became its true legacy, which it should be noted also plays a role in the comics thanks to X-Men villain Magneto's origins), and came up with Masterman, empowered by fourth-dimension entities, rivaled by the British experiment known as Maximan but finally eliminated by the American atomic bomb.

Zenith holds a lot of relevance to Morrison's later work. It's been out of print for years, possibly because Morrison used a lot of characters later in the narrative he did not technically have a right to (which is a terrible excuse), but this is the first in a series of collections that is finally correcting that, and hopefully now its legacy will expand.

You can see parallels to his later Batman in the character of Mandala (as if his presentation in *Phase One*, anyway), for instance, or even in his latest project, *The Multiversity*, the idea of the latest generation of heroes having little to do and have as such become regular celebrities, be it rock stars or whatever Kim Kardashian is.

This is the first of four "phases" (or volumes; there was a limited edition that collected all four previously, but that's not any easier to come by than *Zenith* was before this effort), and as such you don't get the whole story here, although as an opening arc, except for the cliffhanger ending, *Phase One* can be read for a complete experience on its own. Like *Watchmen* there's a group of '60s superheroes who for one reason or another disappeared. Much of the volume concerns Zenith's efforts to recruit the surviving members in his

quest to defeat Masterman's twin (if this counts as a spoiler in superhero stories, defeated Masterman *is* by the end).

For its relevance to comics as they actually are, and even for the fact that it made a conscious effort to expand on what comes *next*, *Zenith* absolutely deserves to be rediscovered, as well as put in an argument for being the equal of its rivals. As to whether or not it's *better*, that might need to be revisited in other volumes.

Most of the art is black and white, but Steve Yeowell's work is plenty vivid. The only aspect that seems dated now, nearly thirty years later, is Ruby Fox's hairstyle (almost a female Donald Trump!). Zenith himself is instantly iconic in his look, anticipating much of what the '90s would produce without being weighed down by it. In *that* sense, *Zenith* has already proven to be prescient.

I'm an unabashed fan of Morrison, so have long been interested to see what *Zenith* was actually like, what early Morrison himself was actually like. I think both hold up quite nicely.

Brent says

Thought I read this at least twice in 1980s but all forgotten. Sketches by (the late, great) Brendan McCarthy are as good as the fine comics storytelling art by Steve Yeowell. And, was there scripting by Morrison before this? I can't recall reading his *Near Myths* comic art. I never read *2000AD*, the anthology magazine from the UK, so these all came to me in collected editions: in the 1980s from Titan (books) and Quality (comic books), now this, from a new fine publisher, who has done a good job with printing and reproduction. It's sort of a 1980s hair, new wave, melodrama with superheroes and villains from a mythical UK 1940s and 1960s: a very good audition for Morrison's later work with the Marvel and DC canon.

Recommended.

Godzilla says

Fun

Kevin Wright says

Zenith is the magnum opus of Grant Morrison's early UK comics career. While it may lack the mind-bending chaos magic of Morrison in his prime, the story is refreshingly straight-forward and lighthearted, yet still contains the seeds of Morrison's later thematic concerns.

The idea of spoiled, indolent, self-indulgent superhumans (superheroes as pop stars instead of pugilists) is one Morrison picked up again recently in *Multiversity*. But it was done first and arguably best with Morrissey lookalike Robert McDowell aka Zenith. The story also displays Morrison's abiding interests in magic rituals, multi-dimensional beings and multiple universes, music, fashion, and generational differences. Like the best of Morrison's work, it also takes a firm stand against the grim-and-gritty comics of the day by affirming the power of the imagination.

But, for all that, Phase One of *Zenith* is still more of a pastiche of influences than a fully formed statement of

purpose. While reacting against *Watchmen*, Morrison still seems heavily indebted to Alan Moore's *Marvelman*. Both situate superheroes within their social and cultural contexts, integrating them into the social fabric of not only 1980s Great Britain, but of world history, and working out how they would not only operate in the real world, but also impact global events and pop culture.

Of course, the Golden Age of comics was during one of the darkest times of the 20th century. While American comics largely ignored it, the scars of World War II seem to be permanently ingrained in the British psyche. Morrison deftly balances the real world gravitas of atomic bombs, totalitarian regimes, and genocide with the sci-fi absurdity of Nazi aliens from the 4th dimension summoned by magic. He seems to be having an infectious kind of fun mixing '60s counterculture with superheroes and Aleister Crowley and H.P. Lovecraft, but he remains deadly serious in his conviction that imagination is the best weapon against authority.

While not yet at the peak of his writing powers, Morrison deftly paces a complex story told in 5-page increments. Character development is compact, but economical. It feels like there's more to these characters than what we see on the page, and while we may not be privy to their hidden depths, there's a complexity to the characters' decisions, actions, and relationships.

After being out of print for 25 years, I'd be happy with a mimeograph on the back of an eviction notice. Instead, Fleetway has put out a nice, glossy hardcover edition reproduced in sufficient size to admire Steve Yeowell's intricate and expressive artwork.

Sean Kottke says

Playful Lovecraftian horror, grafted into a multigenerational Gold-to-Silver-to-Bronze Age superhero saga, with a central hero who's a self-indulgent rock star, provides a trippy and light counterpoint to the tortured vigilantes of Alan Moore and Frank Miller in this late 80s saga from Grant Morrison. This series tilts my favor more toward Morrison in the pantheon of legendary comics creators.
