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Astonishing X-Men, Vol. 1: Gifted



Synopsis

Dream-team creators Joss Whedon (TV's Buffy the Vampire Slayer) and John Cassaday (Planetary, Captain America) present the explosive flagship X-Men series - marking a return to classic greatness and the beginning of a brand-new era for the X-Men! Cyclops and Emma Frost re-form the X-Men with the express purpose of "astonishing" the world. But when breaking news regarding the mutant gene unexpectedly hits the airwaves, will it derail their new plans before they even get started? Collecting: Astonishing X-Men #1-6

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Customer Reviews

Growing up, I was the biggest X-Men fan. In the early nineties, I collected X-Men, Uncanny X-Men, Excaliber, and occasional issues of X-Force, X-Factor, Generation X, Wolverine, and the various other character specific series and minis. But above all, my favorite title was "X-Men Classic" ("Classic X-Men" in its early days). That title reprinted issues that started a few years before I was born, starting with Giant-Sized X-Men #1, and followed through the Claremont Byrne years. Those were just the best. There was a small, well defined team having great adventures and plenty of character interaction/drama. The newer issues were great, but there were too many conflicting titles, too many X-Men running around, and too many creative team switches. The stories couldn't maintain any direction because whichever writer happened to be plotting a given issue would have their own ideas of where the books should go, and would likely be off the title in under 4 months.

Add to these conflicts with the editor, and you get one sloppy read. So, eventually, I lost interest. Then Grant Morrison and company began their run, and I was appalled. I realize many liked his take on the team, but to me, they weren't the X-Men. That was the whole point, really. To come up with something that was completely new and different, in Morrison's "love it or hate it" style. It was that, but to this old time reader, it wasn't the X-Men. Through the black leather, secondary mutations, and lord only knows what else, I vowed never to pick up another X-book. Then Marvel did the smartest thing they ever could have. They hired Joss Whedon to write his own X-Men book. Whedon, the creator of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, and Firefly, is a well known X-Men fan (he's the guy responsible for the "You're a dick" line in the X-Men movie, the only thing to remain of a complete rewrite he did of the film, just because he loved the characters and didn't think they were being handled right). Not only is Whedon a huge fan of the X-Men, but he's also one hell of a writer. The guy's proven time and again that he can blend drama, comedy, action, and believable characters like no one else. The following part of the review contains SPOILERS. While they're now fairly common knowledge in the comic book community, some of you might not know them and might not want to have any of this terrific story ruined for you. Astonishing X-Men begins with a rebuilding period for the characters, which I feel is only appropriate, given how many wayward readers were also finding their way back to the X-Men. Kitty Pryde is, appropriately enough, our point of view character for the first issue, much as she was when I began reading X-Men Classics (and including the phenomenal "Days of Future Past" storyline). Kitty's finally been allowed to grow up, so she's fresh out of college and ready to start her role as a teacher at the recently rebuilt Xavier's Institute. Whedon has professed that he loves the character of Kitty Pryde, and I commend him for how she's being handled. Chris Claremont, Kitty's overly protective creator, hasn't been able to write a decent Kitty story in years. Thank God we have Joss Whedon to maintain the character's integrity. When she's strolling through memory lane in the opening scenes, I got a great feeling of nostalgia. Even if you're unfamiliar with the classic issues that those images are drawn from, you can still appreciate that the writer was a big enough fan of the property that he probably didn't even have to look through his back-issue bin to come up with the highlight's of the character's life. The rest of the team, hand selected by Joss Whedon himself, include Cyclops (now head of the Institute in Charles Xavier's absence), Emma Frost (the former White Queen of the Hellfire Club, and one of the X-Men's greatest foes), Wolverine (of course), and Beast. Colossus is brought in later, as soon as Joss is able to resurrect him (and, as much as I loathe comic deaths/resurrections, Joss handles that event about as well as anyone could ever be expected to). Right away, there are conflicts within the team (a trademark of the X-Men that hasn't been handled this well in a couple of

decades). Wolverine and Cyclops are at odds because Cyclops is shacking up with Emma Frost when the dirt is still fresh on his wife's grave (yes, Jean Grey is dead again. Really original, Morrison. Now maybe kill Magneto... oh, wait...). Kitty is extremely uncomfortable with Emma's presence at the school, which I must say, I agree with. When I was coming of age, the White Queen and her Hellfire Club were among the X-Men's deadliest foes, up there with Magneto, Apocalypse, or Mr. Sinister. Now she's one of them, and she's together with Cyclops (which makes me about as comfortable as it seems to make Kitty and Logan). Wolverine is at odds with Beast, whom he feels is betraying the X-Men by studying a supposed "cure" for mutancy. Yeah, Logan's mad at just about everyone here, save Kitty. Their relationship easilly slides back into place after all this time. Whedon proves he really knows these characters and can handle them well. But of course, just having these great characters and having them interacting isn't enough to fill them funny books. And especially with Joss Whedon, you know there has to be some sort of underlying twisting and turning beneath the main plot. As I hinted at earlier, the main story involves the X-Men returning to what they really are: super-heroes. They finally ditch the pug-fugly black leather and get back into the brightly colored uniforms, even if some of them aren't all that great (Beast) and some take a bit of getting used to (Cyclops, Wolverine). Some even required a few running alterations (Kitty). While the X-Men struggle to convince the public that they're once again general-purpose super-heroes, not just champions for the mutant crusade, they must face growing public hysteria related to a supposed cure for the mutant gene, as well as a new foe in Ord of the Breakworld. As anyone who knows Whedon knows, there are no such things as coincidences, so all of this comes together as the story unfolds. The pleasure is in seeing how it fits together, and in having fun along the way (Whedon can somehow manage to keep things very tense and dramatic while injecting some hilarious lines and gags into the story). And of course, there's those twists. Beast wants the cure? Colossus is back? And then there's that ending, which is, in typical Whedon fashion, even more mysterious and pondersome than anything that's come before it. It's not resolved within this first collection, but we should hope that it will be in the second. END SPOILERS. Joss Whedon should be commended for making a story that's not only a great read, with phenomenal character development (squeezed out of 30+ year old characters), but doing so within Marvels rigid "6-issues-so-we-can-make-it-into-a-conveniently-sized-trade-paper-back" story length requirements. When many other writers are forced to do this, the pacing is often uneven; either too rushed, too drawn out, or, often, a bit of both. I guess all those years of having to fit stories into the rigid time limits set by TV networks has taught Whedon a thing or two about pacing. The art fits the story well. John Cassaday's style took a bit of getting used to (I've been reading too many Jim

Lee/John Byrne/Michael Turner pencilled books lately). Cassaday's style is very realistic. He manages the awesome feat of giving each character a very distinct face and body type. So many artists these days have a sort of "male figure" and "female figure" talent range, and each character model is simply a transmogrified version of that (Wolverine = male figure with funny hair, shortened). The colors are also very well done, which in this day of digital coloring is no surprise. But here, they're used to very good effect, complimenting Cassaday's realistic pencils. The way it all comes together, you almost feel like you're reading an adaptation of an X-Men TV show, written by Joss Whedon. So how do I sum this all up into one final pitch? Like this: you must read this book. If you are, or ever were, a fan of the X-Men, comic books, or just Joss Whedon's style, you will love this book. I have yet to encounter anyone who hasn't. People who've never read an X-book before, or who haven't read one in years, are being drawn to this book in droves, and rightly so. This is what the X-Men really are, and should be. I cannot heap enough praise on Joss Whedon for resurrecting what, in my eyes, was a dead franchise, one that I'd loved too much and for too long not to miss. Thank you Mr. Whedon. I can't wait to see what's next.

"Astonishing X-Men: Gifted" brings together the first half of the twelve issue mini-series scripted by Joss Whedon, creator of "Buffy the Vampire," "Angel," and "Firefly." I have been reading this series because Whedon wrote it and except for the "Ultimate X-Men" this is my first time reading one of the titles about Marvel's Merry Mutants in many years (when we got to the "New Mutants" the whole proliferation became too much for me). So when Kitty Pryde returns to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters and walks through a wall to find Emma Frost addressing the student body, I knew that I was going to have a bit of trouble catching up with what had happened to that old gang of mutants. However, Whedon's storyline is grounded what has been the backbone of the "X-Men" storyline since the beginning: that humans will always hate mutants. Professor Xavier's approach has been to exercise control and non-violence to prove that mutants are a peaceful people. But the interpersonal problems of the X-Men (Scott and Logan are still coming to blows over Jean) quickly take a back seat when the renowned geneticist Dr. Kavita Rao tells the world that mutants are neither angels nor devils, they just people...with a disease. Therefore, mutants are not the next step in evolution or the end of humankind, they are simply the victims of a corruption of healthy cellular activity and Dr. Rao announces that she has found a cure. What made the X-Men the most interesting of Marvel's super groups for me, more than the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, or any of the other groups created over the years, was that they were considered outcasts because they were mutants. As such, the X-Men were the counter-part to Spider-Man, as superheroes who were more

commonly treated as villains by the public at large. The sub-text was always the oppression of the minority by the majority, which I always found to be un-American (specifically in the sense embodied by the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy, which is characterized by a respect for the rights of the minority by the majority). As a minority mutants have represented the "other," so that it was never a specific minority group. But when we talk about curing the disease of the mutant gene it seems to be that the subtext is now much more specific because there is only one minority in modern society that is defined by some as needed to be cured of their disease (although it is explicitly stated that homosexuality does not represent a threat to human existence, a point that clearly would be debated in the current political climate. Meanwhile, the X-Men have become a group of superheroes again, just trying to use their powers to help the community at large. When they learn that mutation can be reversed Frost votes for killing her and Scott does not know what to do. But it is the Beast who goes to see Dr. Rao, not to discuss the ethics of her "mutant cure" or to destroy it, but just to know if it works. The next day there are over sixteen hundred mutants lined up outside Benetech labs demanding the "cure." Hank McCoy is the perfect choice to have be tempted by the cure because he is in a secondary stage of his mutation and he may well be devolving. Of course there is more going on. Ord of the Breakworld, an alien, is after the X-Men because they are a threat to his planet, and Kitty discovers that somebody they thought was dead is very much alive and kept in a cell at Benetech. There are no coincidences in the "Astonishing X-Men," and by the end of the six issues making up "Gifted" we know most of what is going on, but the fun is just beginning. I have some suspicions as to what we will find out in "Dangerous," the second-half of the series, but I am sure there will still be some surprises. Those familiar with Whedon's television shows will find the familiar quick quips thrown into the dialogue mix (even Scott makes a joke), and it is not surprising that his focal character is going to be Kitty Pryde. The "Gifted" storyline is character driven, which is what you would expect with Whedon and focusing on Beast, Kitty and the resurrected character allows him more liberty than emphasizing Logan and Scott, not that the supporting characters do not have their moments. The idea of "curing" mutants is certainly a different approach to the efforts of humanity in general and the U.S. government in particular to solve the mutant problem. The key idea is that this cure is something mutants might actually embrace, especially when the alternative is the Sentinels or something equally cheerful. John Cassady's artwork has an interesting quality: I keep wanting to say they look like free frames where motion is always captured but without the sense of dynamism you usually expect. "Gifted" is a twist on the basic humans hate mutant storyline and while I am in no position to judge its freshness relative to what has been happening in the "X-Men" comics the last decade it strike me as being interesting enough. Besides, this is only the

first half.

The highlight of Marvel's X-Men: Reload event is the launch of Astonishing X-Men, drawn by superstar artist John Cassaday (Planetary, Captain America) and written by famed Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel creator Joss Whedon. This first storyarc finds Xavier School co-headmasters Scott "Cyclops" Summers and Emma Frost re-opening the school and reforming the team. Ditching the practical black leather outfits featured in Grant Morrison's brilliant New X-Men run and replacing them with new variations of their classic costumes, the X-Men are presenting themselves once again as a super hero team, and thanks to Whedon's vast writing talent, Astonishing X-Men is truly something special. Cyclops, Emma, Wolverine, Shadowcat, and Beast find themselves among chaos when it is announced that a cure for the mutant gene has been found. However, it is somehow connected to a mysterious creature named Ord, who himself has plenty of secrets, including one of the biggest jaw droppers to be seen in comics in the past decade. The return of a dead X-Men member stirred much fanfare when it was first seen in these pages (and if you don't know I'm not going to spoil it), and it is one of the absolute greatest moments in X-Men history. Whedon's odes and nods to the classic X-Men stories he grew up with that inspired him to create Buffy are pleasant joys to behold, and Cassaday's art is just plain awe-inspiring. All in all, please ignore John Q's review below, and if you've ever considered yourself an X-Men fan pick this up, you won't regret it.

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