BATMAN WHITE KNIGHT

ACADEMIC READING GUIDE

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OVERVIEW

Batman: White Knight is a superhero tale designed for the 21st century. Written and illustrated by Sean Murphy, this graphic novel is filled with themes and issues ripped from today's headlines, including police corruption, activism, mental health, and much more. In doing so, the book attempts to tackle the question at the heart of many Batman graphic novels and comics within the context of today's world: What makes someone a hero or villain, and why?

Set in a modern Gotham City weary from decades of crime and a seemingly unending Rolodex of super-villains, *Batman: White Knight* follows an aging Batman's gradual fall from grace in the eyes of the citizens of Gotham, the police force, and even his fellow heroes. At the same time, Batman's greatest enemy, the Joker, has been cured of his madness and taken on the new mantle of Jack Napier. Over the next year, Napier sets out on a crusade to heal and transform the city of Gotham by showing its citizens their true enemy: Batman.

As Napier gains more credibility as a councilman and local hero, especially to the city's most vulnerable citizens, the distinctions between villain and hero become increasingly blurred. But in an ultimate test of faith and justice, Batman and the Joker must find a way to work together to solve Gotham's greatest threat and save both of their futures. By drawing from the lore of Batman and positioning readers squarely in the 21st century, *Batman: White Knight* explores the fine lines between good and evil, right and wrong, and vigilante and villain as its characters attempt to navigate this increasingly chaotic and complex world.

CHARACTERS

BATMAN/BRUCE WAYNE: Batman's journey of failure and redemption plays out in *Batman: White Knight* through his relationships with Gotham's citizens, Alfred, his fellow heroes, and the Gotham police force. Both Batman and Bruce Wayne feel out of place within this modern, increasingly connected world and struggle to find their place within it throughout the graphic novel. Along the way, Batman/Bruce Wayne is confronted with relics from his past that force him to rethink his and his family's true legacy.

JOKER/JACK NAPIER: Once Gotham's greatest villain, the Joker has found a cure for his madness and, under the name Jack Napier, seeks to heal the city he once eagerly sought to destroy time and time again. After clearing his name of guilt, he uses his genius intellect and dubious methods to ascend from local hero to city councilman. However, he learns very quickly that the path to becoming a hero is sometimes jagged and unclear, and he is forced to make unlikely alliances to save the city he once terrorized.

HARLEY QUINN/HARLEEN QUINZEL: The "original" Harley Quinn, this character is a former psychiatrist, gymnast, and criminal who worked with the Joker, but has since reformed. She is one of Jack Napier's earliest supporters and helps him to transform the city of Gotham by whatever means necessary. Her true role in the plot isn't revealed until the graphic novel's final pages.

NEO JOKER/MARIAN DREWS: The "copycat" Harley Quinn, Marian Drews is a mentally unstable former bank teller who joins the Joker and embraces a life of crime. Unlike Harleen Quinzel, Marian Drews loves the madness that defines the Joker, not Jack Napier, and becomes a leading antagonist in the story. Calling herself Neo Joker, she seeks to destroy Gotham with the hope of forcing the Joker back to his villainous ways.

JIM GORDON: The commissioner of the Gotham City Police Department, Jim Gordon has been tasked with addressing the brutality and corruption within the GCPD. While he has turned a blind eye to Batman's behavior for years, Gordon is beginning to question whether his ally's vigilantism is a blessing or a curse on the city of Gotham.

BATGIRL/BARBARA GORDON: Jim Gordon's daughter and a former trainee of Batman's, Barbara Gordon is a scientist and martial arts expert who works most closely with Batman. As a result, she has a front-row seat to his cavalier attitude and seeming lack of concern for others, including the citizens of Gotham he has sworn to protect.

NIGHTWING/DICK GRAYSON: Formerly one of Batman's sidekicks, Robin, Dick Grayson has taken on the superhero name of Nightwing and works to protect Gotham alongside Batman, though their relationship is strained. Like Jack Napier, Nightwing sees the toll of Batman's actions on the city.

ALFRED: Sick and on the verge of death, Alfred's presence in Batman/Bruce Wayne's life—as a father figure, mentor, and friend—is in jeopardy at the outset of *Batman: White Knight*. Batman/Bruce Wayne's way of dealing with Alfred's sickness is to push others away, and Alfred's physical downfall is mirrored in Batman/Bruce Wayne's actions and mental state throughout the graphic novel.

MR. FREEZE/VICTOR FRIES: Once a central Batman villain, Mr. Freeze/Victor Fries has joined forces with Batman in an effort to save Alfred's life. Like Batman, Fries also struggles with his family's legacy and, by the end of the graphic novel, proves his true allegiance.

LT. DUKE THOMAS: A former military officer and representative of Backport, one of Gotham's poorest neighborhoods, Lt. Duke Thomas forms an unlikely friendship and alliance with Jack Napier, who presents himself as a local hero to Backport.

SETTINGS

GOTHAM CITY: The primary setting for all events in *Batman: White Knight,* Gotham City is a place rife with crime, corruption, and injustice. Tired of the constant state of war they've endured for decades between Batman and super-villains like the Joker, along with rampant police corruption and brutality, the citizens of Gotham are eager to embrace a new hero like Jack Napier who promises to bring them true, lasting hope and change.

BACKPORT: One of the poorest neighborhoods in Gotham City, Backport is made up of mainly underserved minority populations. Residents of Backport typically believe that Batman is only interested in protecting the wealthy elite and businesses of Gotham, while their neighborhoods suffer. As a result, they are primed to embrace a new hero, Jack Napier, who promises to bring real change to their communities and citizens.

ARKHAM ASYLUM: A prison and "insane" asylum for super-villains, Arkham Asylum holds some of the most terrifying and violent criminals in Gotham's history. For the Joker/Jack Napier and Batman/Bruce Wayne, it serves as a place where they are able to rediscover themselves and what drives them most.

THEMES

PERCEPTION: Perception and point of view play crucial roles in this graphic novel. Heroes are viewed as villains to some, while villains are seen as heroes to others.

BIAS & REPRESENTATION: The characters and actions in *Batman: White Knight* are very much in the eye of the beholder. This graphic novel reveals how, even within a single city, representation and biases can be manipulated to twist both public and private opinions.

ENDS VS. MEANS: Do the ends justify the means? Each character struggles to balance the cost of their actions against the "greater good" as their choices lead to unintended consequences.

GOOD & EVIL: The concepts of "good" and "evil" shift constantly within *Batman: White Knight*. What makes a character good or evil, and who decides, becomes a central plot point.

JUSTICE & CORRUPTION: The pursuit of justice is a common theme in Batman stories. *Batman: White Knight* depicts a city and a superhero struggling with both the price of justice and of corruption at the highest levels of government. The graphic novel asks the question: Can you truly provide justice to everyone equally?

BRUTALITY: The brutality in Gotham extends beyond super-villains in *Batman: White Knight*. After decades of rampant crime, police and even the heroes themselves struggle to contain their darker impulses.

RESPONSIBILITY & ACCOUNTABILITY: Who is truly responsible for holding the heroes and villains of Gotham accountable for their actions? And what happens when those who are responsible don't hold themselves and others to the same standards?

TRANSFORMATION & IDENTITY: Secret identities and the transformation from one identity to another, such as from Batman to Bruce Wayne or the Joker to Jack Napier, are prevalent themes in this graphic novel. While Batman transitions from a superhero identity to more of a rogue vigilante or villain because of how his actions negatively impact the city of Gotham, the Joker's identity as a villain is transformed into more of a hero after he is "cured" of his madness after an incident involving Batman.

REDEMPTION & FORGIVENESS: Each of the main characters in *Batman: White Knight* embarks on a journey of self-discovery that calls on them to sincerely consider the ways in which they may need to seek redemption and/or forgiveness regarding their past actions.

MENTAL HEALTH: Both Batman/Bruce Wayne and the Joker/Jack Napier struggle with mental health throughout the graphic novel, and each takes a different path to deal with and overcome past traumas.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS AND TEACHING IDEAS

1. What role should the media play in covering politics in a fictional world that deals with superheroes? What responsibilities does the media have in holding superheroes and super-villains accountable for their actions?

2. In order to fight for their unique versions of justice, both Batman and the Joker work with teammates. In small groups, conduct research on famous teams; these can be superhero teams, historical teams, other literary teams, and so on. Keep a list of the following for at least three famous teams:

   a. Their team goals
   b. Their strengths as a team
   c. Their weaknesses as a team
   d. The final outcomes of their teamwork

   After working in small groups to identify at least three famous teams, conduct a class discussion involving all of the groups and keep notes on the board building on all four areas above (a–d). When the class is done discussing their overall ideas, ask students to leaf through the pages of *Batman: White Knight* (under two minutes, timed) and predict what aspects of teamwork they think may play a significant role in the story.

3. There are a number of significant quotations inserted throughout *Batman: White Knight*. Each quotation sets up the next series of plot events. Ask students to read the back cover of the graphic novel and then the following series of quotations that are sprinkled throughout the story. Using their new knowledge from the back cover and the quotations below, ask students to predict what they think each quotation might mean in the storyline.

   - "Given his newfound capacity, I think you need to be worried."
   - "You ready to be good guys for a while?"
   - "And let's not ignore the biggest cost--the emotional damage to his victims."
   - "We're the victims of their corrupt system."
   - "Gotham's losing patience with you!"
   - "...You'd realize how similar you've become."
   - "I wish I'd never met Bruce Wayne."
   - "Thank you for giving me a chance...to fall in love with you all over again."

Note: This pre-reading idea is built upon in the next section (Discussion Question # 2).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading, ask students: "What does it mean to be a 'White Knight' in Sean Murphy's *Batman: White Knight*?"

2. Building on the third pre-reading idea, and after reading, ask students to refer back to their earlier predictions about the quotations sprinkled throughout the story. Were their predictions similar to or different from what actually happened in the story? How so?

3. What is an alter ego? Which characters have alter egos in *Batman: White Knight*? In what ways do these characters' alter egos either help or hurt their role in the story?

4. The Joker is often seen with a purple Batman symbol in one of his eyes. How is this symbolism important to the storyline?

5. The media is used by both Batman and Jack Napier to send messages to both Gotham and Backport. How do the *Gotham Insider* news reporters influence public opinion throughout the story?

6. Colors play a huge role in influencing the tone and the mood in *Batman: White Knight*. In what scenes do the colors influence the reading experience the most? Why?

7. Who is Neo Joker? Why is Neo Joker important to the story?

8. Relationships are an important theme in *Batman: White Knight*:

    - In what ways is the Joker's relationship with Marian Drews important to the storyline?
    - In what ways is the Joker's relationship with Harleen Quinzel important to the storyline?
    - In what ways is Batman's relationship with Dick Grayson important to the storyline?
    - In what ways is Batman's relationship with Batgirl important to the storyline?
    - In what ways is Batman's relationship with Commissioner Gordon important to the storyline?
    - In what ways are both Batman's and the Joker's relationships with Gotham and Backport citizens important?

PROJECT IDEAS

HOLD A DEBATE: The district of Backport draws inspiration from real-life neighborhoods within large cities. In the book, the citizens of Backport are quick to adopt Jack Napier as a figurehead for change. Real-life citizens of similar neighborhoods may not be so quick to embrace such a divisive figure. Assign students to hold a political debate as citizens of Backport and think critically about Jack Napier's election to the city council. One side will be arguing for the election of Jack Napier, and the other side will be arguing against.

CHARACTER COMPARISON: First, using a table or a thought map, brainstorm qualities that make a hero, and qualities that make a villain. Next, using a three-circle Venn diagram, compare the characters of Batman/Bruce Wayne, Jack Napier/the Joker, and Harleen Quinzel. Make sure to include the qualities of a hero and villain, and only consider the characters as represented in *Batman: White Knight*. Students can use their findings to write a short essay explaining who the true heroes and villains of Gotham are.

MOCK TRIAL: As a class, hold a mock trial of Jack Napier and/or Batman to determine if they are guilty of the crimes they have been accused of in *Batman: White Knight*. The mock trial should include a plaintiff team and a defendant team, as well as a judge and jury.

CREATE AN ALTERNATE GOTHAM: Sean Murphy's interpretation of Gotham is rooted in decades of Batman lore, but Murphy creates his own interpretations of established characters. Other Batman comics and media, such as the video games from Telltale Games, take a similar approach. While the characters are different from what we are used to, their alterations serve specific purposes to the story. Have students pick three characters from Batman lore to reinterpret in their own way. They can draw a portrait of their versions of the characters and describe their interpretations. Have students rationalize any changes they made from how the characters are generally represented.

MEDIA LITERACY: Throughout the book, we see two media pundits from *Gotham Insider* disagreeing about many issues. Pick two real-life news programs from two different networks. View and analyze some of their programming. Then, either through writing or an acted performance, demonstrate how these real-life news pundits would analyze the happenings in Gotham. Would the two different news programs have similar or opposing views? Why or why not?

CORRUPTION: The corruption of Gotham City government and the GCPD is a main focus of *Batman: White Knight*. After the corruption is revealed by Jack Napier, Gotham City chooses to address it by creating the Gotham Terror Oppression (GTO) unit. If you were part of the Gotham City government, how would you address the uncovered corruption? Assume the role of Jim Gordon and write a proposal to the Gotham City government explaining how you would address the corruption. Would it be similar to or different from how it was addressed in the book, and why?

FURTHER PAIRING SUGGESTIONS

- *Batman: The Telltale Series* and Telltale's *Batman: The Enemy Within* (Video Games)
- *Batman: The Killing Joke* (Graphic Novel)
- *The Dark Knight* (Movie)
- *Heathers* (Movie)
- *Mean Girls* (Movie)
- *Watchmen* (Graphic Novel)
- *The Walking Dead* (Comics Series)
- *V for Vendetta* (Graphic Novel)
- *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Novella)
- *Nothing but the Truth* (Novel)
- *Wicked* (Musical)

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