

Occulted Watchmen: The True Fate of 'Hooded Justice' & 'Captain Metropolis'

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In the world of the 1986 graphic novel *Watchmen*, the costumed heroes Hooded Justice and Captain Metropolis are long gone from the scene at the time of the primary story line, set in an alternate October 1985. According to the overt statements of the story, Hooded Justice vanished in 1955, possibly murdered by the Comedian, while Captain Metropolis was decapitated in a car accident in 1974.

These claims and their supporting evidence are somewhat anomalous when compared with the described fates of the other costumed heroes of the novel. We know (and see unfold) the fates of the major characters. Most of the minor characters, the other first-generation, Minuteman-era costumed heroes, have their stories take place off-page and in passing mentions, but their fates are unambiguously described. Dollar Bill was killed in a bank robbery, Silhouette was murdered by a jealous rival, and Mothman was committed to an asylum. Each of these claims is convincing in itself and easy to take at face value, as it can be assumed there were witnesses, evidence etc. to confirm the two deaths.

The cases of Hooded Justice and Captain Metropolis are less convincingly stated, and there may be a good reason we are never fully convinced of their demises: because *both men are actually alive and well at the time of the story's present day, and in fact appear there.*

The Official Stories

Watchmen tells us what happened to both heroes. Their stories run in erratic fragments through the first few chapters but can be easily assembled into a coherent account.

The Disappearance of Hooded Justice

Hooded Justice was the first of the costumed heroes to appear, in 1938, and one of the most brutal. A comment in Rorschach's journal notes that Hooded Justice "went missing in '55." [1:19:5]¹ This would have been after his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee and his refusal to reveal his identity. In any case, the huge costumed hero was never seen after this time. He either foreswore his costume and lived out his life under his real name and identity... or was perhaps murdered shortly thereafter. [3:EM:p11-2]²

Hooded Justice was tentatively identified by Hollis Mason, the original Nite Owl, as a circus strongman named Rolf Müller. Photos of Müller show a man of similar outsized build as Hooded Justice, who was known for his extreme strength. Mason notes that Rolf Müller disappeared at the same time as Hooded Justice and a body tentatively identified as the strongman was found off the coast of Massachusetts. [*ibid.*]

1. Read as "Issue (or Chapter) 1, page 19, panel 5 (counting from top left on each page)."
2. Read as "Issue/Chapter 3, End Material, pages 11-12."

There are implications that the Comedian may have been his killer. After Hooded Justice beats the Comedian severely for assaulting Sally Jupiter, the Comedian threatens to get even with him “one of these days.” [2:7:8] The Comedian later mentions that he went after Hooded Justice after the HUAC testimony but was supposedly unable to find him. Did he find and murder Hooded Justice? Is the body that washed ashore the former hero, Rolf Müller, or both? Or did the Comedian kill another man through mistaken identity... or is the body unconnected to either possible identity? We are never told.³

The Death of Captain Metropolis

Captain Metropolis, we are told in passing, was killed—decapitated—in a car accident in 1974. No one within the story questions or second-guesses this death along the lines of Hooded Justice’s mysterious disappearance. It is never made clear whether the Captain was killed while in uniform or while unmasked, as Nelson Gardner—or if public acknowledgement of his civilian identity was ever made.

The Masked Lovers

It is made clear in the various end materials that Hooded Justice was homosexual and probably a sadist who derived his pleasure from rough treatment of male partners. It is also plainly put that Nelson Gardner and Hooded Justice had an extended homosexual relationship, including squabbling “like an old married couple” by 1948. [9:EM:p3] Although the publicist for the original hero group had Sally Jupiter (Silk Spectre) parade around in public with Hooded Justice, he comments that it is getting harder to cover up for the two gay heroes. [*ibid.*]

The Contradictory Panel

It would be easy to accept all of the above at face value, that Captain Metropolis/Nelson Gardner is a decade dead and Hooded Justice long gone from the local scene, were it not for one panel of the first chapter of *Watchmen*.

Panel 1:25:4 is set in an upscale restaurant in October 1985 and focuses on two older, well-built and obviously homosexual (and openly affectionate) men, with the nominal action of the panel—part of the conversation between Dan and Laurie—relegated to a background detail.

I suggest that this panel is Dave Gibbon’s (and possibly Alan Moore’s) single statement within the novel that these two characters faked their own deaths in order to return to anonymity, and closure on what would otherwise be unresolved elements in a notably well-resolved tale.

The men are of the right age, near 70, and both very large and well-built. The man on the left closely resembles the photo of Rolf Müller seen on 3:EM:p12. The man on the right is an excellent match for all images of Captain Metropolis; see for example panel 2:10:4.

It is just barely possible that the contents of this panel are coincidental; there are other points of interest in the overall scene including the four-legged turkey being served, the knot-top hairdo and the exotic makeup on the woman’s face crowding the foreground. However, it has to be considered that

3. It has rarely been discussed, but one of the purposes of keeping Hooded Justice’s fate unclear is to provide a red-herring suspect for the Comedian’s murder. If the antagonism between two heroes continued from their first bloody encounter through a possible murder attempt 20 years later, the Comedian’s brutal beating and death could easily have come at the strongman’s hands—indeed, it is commented more than once that whoever could so easily thrash the Comedian and throw him through a window must have been very strong. The storyline never quite connects two and two along these lines and eventually the other characters arrive at the truth, but any savvy reader must hold out the possibility of Hooded Justice having returned for his final revenge on his colleague-cum-antagonist.

Dave Gibbons is an exceptionally careful artist and a case can be made that no stroke in the many pages of *Watchmen* is unconsidered or casually drawn. It seems unbelievable that he accidentally drew two passing figures that so neatly match two others of significance. He (and perhaps Moore) also must have had a reason for framing this image as it is, with the two men so strongly highlighted and all the other content, the progress of the overt storyline included, relegated to background images.⁴

No, I think this panel must be considered exactly as it stands: as portraying the older Hooded Justice (very likely Rolf Müller) and Captain Metropolis/Nelson Gardner—alive in 1985.

Consider, too, the statement within Hollis Mason's book, while talking about the mystery of Hooded Justice's disappearance: "Real life is messy, inconsistent, and it's seldom when anything really gets resolved." [3:EM:12] Since nearly every detail in *Watchmen* is resolved (at least, for the careful reader), I take this as a subtle "backwards" hint that the Hooded Justice mystery, and the ambiguities of Captain Metropolis's demise, do have resolutions within the story.

The Question of Why

If the assumption about panel 1:25:4 is accepted, the reader has to consider why the two characters would behave in this manner.

It is not difficult to trace Hooded Justice's choice of action; given the demands of HUAC and his unwillingness to expose either his name or his 'distasteful lifestyle,' it was easier to remove the mask and disappear in plain sight.

It is more difficult to assess Nelson Gardner's actions. In 1974 he would have been in his early fifties and probably longing for a quiet retirement. Since he had exposed his true identity to a congressman, he could not disappear as had Hooded Justice. His personal life would be invaded and his homosexuality likely exposed, sooner or later. So a gruesome accident leaving an unidentifiable body would be just the ticket for him to make a quiet exit.⁵

Such an act, requiring either the murder of an innocent or the pilferage of a suitable body, would seem to be against Captain Metropolis's virtuous mindset. However, consider the following possibility: After some number of years in hiding, Hooded Justice contacts Nelson Gardner and raises the idea of anonymous retirement. It is Hooded Justice, the brute, who may have procured the body—another rough-trade partner, finished off as the ultimate thrill?—and staged the accident.

Whether or not the accident victim was ever identified as Nelson Gardner (instead of just Captain Metropolis), this exit would have freed Gardner from the need to retire openly—such as the first Nite Owl and Sally Jupiter did—or secretly (as did the second Nite Owl), or become a government-sponsored crusader along with the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan. He could not have remained an illegal vigilante since his true identity had been divulged to a government confidant. So a faked death was a way out, a way for a somewhat normal retired life... with the companionship of his long-time lover.

4. The reader is invited to find any other panel in the entire novel in which characters of no story significance are so prominently presented while the flowing story elements are minimized to make room for them.

5. Gibbons and Moore—and by extension, the characters involved—may have been thinking of the death of Jayne Mansfield in 1967. The car in which she was riding hit a truck at high speed and the top of the car was almost sheared off. Although Mansfield is popularly said to have been decapitated in the accident—and photos of what is certainly her blonde wig on the dashboard of the wreck lent the belief credence—the coroner's report described massive head trauma instead. Her head was crushed beyond recognizability, as we can assume the substitute for Nelson Gardner's was.

Acknowledgements

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My sincere thanks to Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons for providing the world with this outstanding work of artistic literature, or literary art. Not for nothing has it been accounted one of the great novels of the twentieth century.

My thanks to Al Petterson both for originally convincing me that graphic novels could be worth reading and presenting his case in the form of *Watchmen*. I believe that Al is the person who pointed out the anomaly of panel 1:25:4 to me as well, but cannot recall with absolute certainty. If so, thanks, Al.

Remember that Rorschach lives. If you don't believe that, the significance of panels 12:24:2-3 has escaped you.⁶

Updates, March 2009

This paper and the basic contention within have an interesting history. I have brought it to the attention of various *Watchmen* fan groups and commentators since at least 1999, and the notion, while acknowledged in most cases, has never caught on in the general interpretations.

In about 2005 I attempted to get the gist of the information into the appropriate entry in Wikipedia, where it would be seen by a wide variety of fans, readers and more focused types. It was promptly erased. Not being a skilled Wikipedia participant, I put the matter aside.

Early in 2009, with the film version imminent, I made a series of attempts to insert this observation into the Wikipedia entry. Each was removed by the same "star" editor for various reasons. I should note that I think the basic contention is neither "original research" nor "unsupported"; it is a factual observation deserving a sentence or two in the list of *Watchmen* characters alongside many other such observed-fact items. Joe Editor disagreed, apparently. Repeatedly.

I turned to a more fan-based wiki at watchmen.wikia.com and inserted my observations and conjecture as an article. It was well-received there and other wiki participants made a number of excellent edits that removed my more far-fetched speculations and presented the basic thesis more clearly. One editor, in fact, noted something in the panel I had overlooked: the two figures' bow ties have odd spots on them that make them greatly resemble the domino masks worn by many of the costumed heroes in the book. No other representation of a bow tie in the book has such oddities... and Dave Gibbons does not make spots he did not intend.

The punchline, which greatly pleased me, is that my contention – supported by a reference to this very paper – appeared on Wikipedia just days after the material was posted on the *Watchmen* Wiki.

6. *Addendum, March 2009*: I have received more mail on this paragraph than anything else. This is a casual personal observation; I believe that since Kovacs believes Rorschach has become his real self and "Walter Kovacs" his disguise, removing his "face" before ordering Dr. Manhattan to kill him means that Kovacs died... but perhaps not Rorschach. Make of this what you like.