Ultimate Spider-Man, Vol. 4 by Brian Michael Bendis

Ultimates Are Pretty Good

This volume shows one of the strengths of this series, which goes back and retells the story of Spider-Man, starting Peter Parker off a bit young, having Mary Jane around from the beginning, and taking several issues to tell each story.

My Personal Review:
Volume 4 of the hardback edition of "Ultimate Spider-Man" by writer Brian Michael Bendis, penciler Mark Bagley, and inker Art Thibert, brings together volumes 7 and 8 of the tradepaper back collections, where the common denominator is that Peter Parker and his alter-ego are having major problems with the women in their lives. The first story line, "Irresponsible" (issues 40-45) finds Peter Parker with two problems. First, he and Mary Jane have broken off their relationship, which has effectively ended their friendship as well. Second, after his battle with Venon, his costume has been ruined (at least he did not lose it this time). He has jury-rigged a mask, but the eye lens keeps falling out. Then while hanging out with all the kids one night, he sees Geldoff, a foreign exchange student who makes cars explode (by looking at them). Things start going better for Peter (he makes up with MJ and she makes half a costume for him), and then he confronts Geldoff.

What I like about this story arc is that Spider-Man and Geldoff have a big argument over whether or not Geldoff is a mutant. Spider-Man thinks it is obvious but Geldoff rejects the idea. Then the X-Men show up. Actually, it would be the female members of the X-Men. Eventually they get around to action, but the most fun in this story arc are the conversations Spidey has with Geldoff and the X-Women. Given that it is interesting that issue 45, "Guilt," consists mainly of Aunt May having a session with a psychiatrist over her feelings about Peter disappearing all the time and that horrible Spider-Man person, running around in his pajamas and doing whatever he wants.
"Irresponsible" does not really make sense to me as a title for this collection of stories. For most of these issues the key factor are the conversations that Peter, Spider-Man and Aunt May have with others. Bendis gets a large portion of the credit that normal this time around, especially because he provides a nice mix of heavy conversations and comic dialogue (Kitty Pryde has a crush on Spider-Man, the first non-mutant superhero she has ever met). Even without a big name Spider-Man villain (the Kingpin shows up for the next story arc), "Irresponsible" flesh out the "Ultimate Spider-Man" characters in some interesting and fun ways.

"Cats & Kings" (47-53) follows up Spider-Man's first significant victory as a superhero came, which came when he broke into the Kingpin's tower and turned over copy of security camera footage of the Kingpin murdering one of his underlings to "The Daily Bugle." When the story broke the Kingpin was forced to flee the country to avoid arrest. Now, after getting the best lawyers money can buy, Wilton Fisk has been cleared of the crime and is ready to make his move. The first three issues collected here comprise the first half of the story arc. In "Men of Influence" the Kingpin throws his support behind the mayoral candidacy of Sam Bullit, who is running on an anti-Spider-Man platform that has J. Jonah Jameson salivating. So when Peter asks JJJ while the "Bugle" is not going after a murderer like the Kingpin, the publisher fires him. Meanwhile, Mary Jane is worried that the list of people who know Spider-Man's true identity is getting longer.

"Suspended," which has to do with what happens at school to Peter when the frustration of not being able to get the Kingpin gets to him, does a nice bit where we get to see a phone conversation between Aunt May and JJJ twice, once from the perspective of each. Then Ben Urish proves the Bullit is crazy and Jameson has to decide whether to print the story. "Hero" comes down to a pair of interesting conversations JJJ has with first Spider-Man and then Peter. For those who remember JJJ admitting he was jealous of Spider-Man back in the Lee & Ditko era, this issue rewrites the rules.

That would be the "Kings" part of the story arc, which then gives way to the "Cats." "The Black Cat" shows up and decides to steal a special artifact from the Kingpin's safe. Spider-Man crosses her path and learns the meaning of bad luck. Meanwhile, Peter and Mary Jane talk about their future, but any plans for happiness go out the window when her father finds her diary and a reference to MJ almost dying on a bridge. Boy, does she get grounded. Then Peter learns that Spider-Man has been implicated in the Black Cat's theft. So when the Black Cat wants to meet again, Peter is up for it in "Shadow Puppets" only to have his interlude interrupted for the greatest "Cat Fight" in history between the Black Cat and Elektra, the latter having been hired by the Kingpin to retrieve the artifact. The situation comes to an temporary ending in "Daughters."

One of the things that "Ultimate Spider-Man" takes advantage of in reinventing Spider-Man for the 21st century is that this time around the Kingpin is the underworld czar developed by Frank Miller in "Daredevil."
Clearly he is going to have the same prominence in these comic books as well. Spider-Man ends up being a spectator a lot in these stories, but when the villains are a crooked politician and a couple of young women, it is hard for our hero to really go around fighting them in public. In many ways the strengths of "Cats & Kings" are the changes in the interpersonal relationships. Aunt Mary’s final insult to JJJ is unforgettable as is the serious talk that the publisher has with Peter.

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