

Media Information

Title

Die

Creator

Kieron Gillen (Writer), Stephanie Hans (Illustrator), Clayton Cowles (Letterer)

Formats

E-book/PDF, hardcover

Version reviewed

Published Hardcover edition provided by publisher

Publication Date

2024

Length

220 pages

Audience

General Adult (16+)

Summary

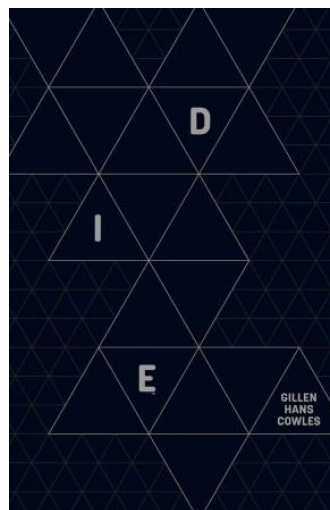
Six teenagers enter the role-playing game world of Die for two years, with only five escaping and no ability to discuss what happened. Now in their forties, the five survivors re-enter Die to face new horrors and adventures.

Reviewer Information

Sierra Schuman
Arizona State University

Editorial Information

Peer reviewed by Aurora Charlow, copy edited by Katie Manwiller.



Book 1

Short Review

Written by Kieron Gillen, illustrated by Stephanie Hans, and lettered by Clayton Cowles, *Die* is a dark-fantasy adventure comic that spans 20 issues. It is broken up into four arcs, each with five issues. Together, Gillen's layered storytelling and Hans' gorgeous illustrations explore themes of physical and mental trauma, personal identity, escapism, and human relationships.

Die opens with Dominic celebrating his sixteenth birthday with his younger sister Angela and friends Matt, Chuck, Isabelle, and Sol. As a present to Dominic, Sol designs and encourages everyone to play his role-playing game: *Die*. After crafting their characters, the party is sucked into the world of *Die*... for two years. Returning to the real world, bloodied and grim, none of them can speak of what happened. Why is Angela missing an arm? Weren't there supposed to be six teenagers? Twenty-five years pass without answers before Dominic receives a box with Sol's bloody D20 die. Assembling the other four survivors, the adults return to the world from which they suffered as teens.

Die is a character-driven comic series. Each party member undergoes major emotional development, and their philosophies and struggles drive them to make difficult decisions about how to proceed, even if these decisions split up the party or cause other conflicts. The party is also influenced by their interactions with *Die*'s characters, who have fleshed-out stories and attributes, even if they can be one-dimensional. The party's roles and distinct powers in *Die* (which are inspired by archetypes in literature and role-playing games) complement their actions and attitudes, pushing the story forward without complicating things for the reader. Throughout their

adventures in *Die*, the party faces similar horrors they encountered as teens, but this time around, each character must navigate across the lands, re-evaluate their strained relationships with one another, and process their lingering trauma.

Perhaps the biggest disability representation in *Die* is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). What exactly the party experienced as teenagers is revealed throughout the story, and it is not pretty. This trauma affects the trajectory of their lives, leaving them feeling broken as adults; furthermore, each character's insecurities play into their behaviors in the world of *Die*. Angela has to cope with her limb difference on top of her self-worth as a mother, and her struggle with feeling useful as a party member further compounds her PTSD. Matt struggles with depression and grief due to losing his mother at a young age, and he is forced to relive his fears and his childhood events on a regular basis. Isabelle finds an overall lack of inspiration in her life, and her bitterness feeds into her desire to influence her surroundings. Chuck is unfaithful to his partners and drinks heavily, and he is so full of self-loathing that he tries to compensate with acts of reckless abandon. Dominic struggles with survivor's guilt and low confidence about his identity as a man married to a woman, so unlike the rest of the party, Dominic swaps gender and enters *Die* as Ash, a lithe woman with male lovers and a terrifying ability that lets her control an individual person with a single command. This confidence, shown when using her power, sharply contrasts with her struggles with her sexuality and gender fluidity, which she does not directly confront.

I appreciate the lengths to which the authors approached disability and mental health to showcase the party's PTSD. For instance, a sensitivity consultant provided insight into life with a limb difference, which is reflected in Angela's physical appearance

and body language, as she adjusts to a cybernetic arm in *Die*. Matt's experiences with depression, anxiety, and grief are very accurate, reflecting the negative thoughts and attitudes that those with depression can have. What's masterfully done is Dominic's struggles in the real world, which feed into Ash's confrontations with her gender identity in *Die*, and I'd go as far as to say that they are major plot points. Ash hardly questions the decisions she makes while in *Die*, but various conversations throughout the story clearly state that so much of her life always remains in question. Ash's actions in *Die* mirror the assertiveness and freedom she would love to have when sorting out her real-world identity as Dominic.

To complement Kieron Gillen's writing and character-building, Stephanie Hans captures each character's struggles and emotional breakthroughs, carefully detailing their facial expressions, body language, and reactions. In fact, for me, Stephanie Hans's art alone gives *Die* a "Recommended" rating. For her first ongoing comic series, each page she illustrates honestly takes my breath away. Her gloomy color palette and style are expressive, yet remain grounded enough in reality to resonate with readers. Inspired by works from authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, Charlotte Brontë, and H.G. Wells, she renders the fantastical landscapes, technologies, and creatures of *Die* to transport readers into the adventures and battles. While she utilizes rectangular panels and white space in some pages, she doesn't shy away from using the whole page for scene establishment, mood, pivotal action, and more. Even her rough sketches after each issue add to the character-driven nature of the comic, depicting the party's personal interests, their relationships, and the passage of time.

Die is an epic not just in story, character development, and art, but also in bonus content, especially in the hardcover edition. Several essays from Gillen and Hans really flesh out the creative processes behind *Die*. I especially felt enlightened by the essays about the worldbuilding and game mechanics, as well as the character generation and artistic inspiration. There are also interviews with influential fantasy and role-playing figures – for instance, Matthew Mercer, one of the masterminds of the actual-play tabletop role-playing series *Critical Role*. Variant issue covers, color moods, and character designs are also included. What's more? There's a separate role-playing game available for purchase, with expansions!

Like all media, however, *Die* does have critiques to consider. While this isn't a series to complete in one sitting, it's definitely not ideal to spread the reading across too long a time period. *Die* takes its time to address lingering questions and resolve conflicts, but because of the sheer amount of references and worldbuilding, it can also take readers time to see how disability directly impacts the characters and larger story themes. On several instances, I had to peruse outside sources or the included author essays to figure out what exactly happened and build connections. Additionally, although even though it's not required to know about role-playing game mechanics, tabletop game history, and classic literature, it can be tough to fully notice all the references without outside reading (thankfully, the authors give recommendations if one wants to learn more).

To say that *Die* is a simplistic dark fantasy takes away from all the complex storytelling, layered references, and authentic human experiences that it offers. If you take the time to fully submerge into *Die* and study its elements, you will be rewarded

with a unique, engaging comic series. Still, if you only seek a beautiful visual story and a neat take on the role-playing game genre, *Die* can fulfill your wish.

In Sum, This Book Is

Recommended

If You Like This, You'll Also Like

Low by Rick Remender, Greg Tocchini, and Dave McCaig

Once and Future by Kieron Gillen, Dan Mora, and Tamara Bonvillain

Promethea by Alan Moore, J. H. Williams III, and Mick Gray