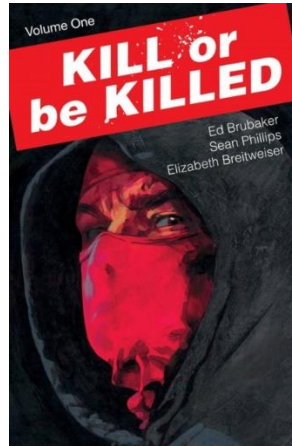




## Kill Or Be Killed by Ed Brubaker & Sean Phillips with Elizabeth Breitweiser

[Crime]

Brubaker and Phillips's most immersive, edge-of-you-seat collaboration to date, this is the psychological self-examination of one young man's descent into mass murder. The key to noir is to relish time spent in the flawed protagonists' heads and Dylan, while externally awkward, comes alive when confiding in us. He's conversationally engaging, self-deprecating, practical and reasonable with a commendably keen sense of social justice. But for all his philosophical self-searching, Dylan fails to join the dots and see what's staring him in the face.



The first six pages are a bludgeoning barrage of quite cathartic violence, all the more brutal to behold because Phillips has dispensed with the frames and gutters to go full-bleed to the edge of each page. Rather than witnessing events through panel-pane windows from afar, you're pulled in to share Dylan's plight. The muted silences are made more intimate; the action rendered more immediate.

That's how the story opens, but not how it begins. It starts instead with a suicide attempt and *that* begins with a girl called Kira, Dylan's best friend since childhood, and the only person he felt understood his sense of isolation which set in long before his flatmate, Mason, came between the two by dating her. "Their relationship ruined the one good thing I had. Kira still came to our place all the time, but almost never to hang out with me. And that made me feel even lonelier than I usually did."

This is made painfully clear by the masterful bottom tier of the 11th page as the three watch TV: the two lovers are bathed in its light whereas Dylan to the right remains shrouded in darkness, further cut off from Kira by the borders of his own inset panel. I can't imagine anything more uncomfortable. Oh wait, I *can*, because that's what happens next. And eventually it leads to the rooftop.



Where *that* leads is even more startling, but then Dylan's head is far from healthy in ways which I *will* not allude to. What sort of trigger do you imagine could override such a strong moral compass? When your eyes first start widening, however, wait for it. Wait for the real reveal which will render what follows so sadly avoidable. As to the logistics – the research and hardware required for any hit, let alone by a layman – Brubaker is forensic in detail.

Dylan is ruminative by nature, thinking things through but (he'd be the first to concede) not necessarily with a clear head. He rummages around in his troubled memories, looking for clues but to all the wrong things and then failing to be guided by the truths he unearths.

"I guess it's different for people whose fathers didn't commit suicide, but if yours did, then he's probably a fairly tragic figure in your memory... That familial memory that shapes who you are. That's how it always was for me. My father was legendary and tragic and sad... And if I had to pick one word that described him best, it would've been a tie between 'lonely' and 'isolated'." Dylan has just described himself, and little wonder: "That familial memory that shapes who you are."



So often there are moments of hope that Dylan will be able to free himself from the shackles of this solitary existence compounded by increasingly pragmatic secrecy; to steer freely away from the desperate trajectory he has locked himself on, and the very real danger he's now exposed Kira to:

"And suddenly every word that she said was a gift. Every smile was a miracle, "I'd been so stupid... We're all so stupid all the time. We stop noticing our miracles."

Yet it's these very preoccupations which prevent Dylan from engaging, from tearing down his proverbial brick wall. He fails to act on his own observations and therein lies the heart of this tragedy. Outside Dylan strolls through arboreal beauty with the love of his life lit bright with laughter, which is all he knows he still craves. Inside the cinema Kira beams, enraptured, while Dylan sits dead-faced, internalised, obsessing over his predicament – and that's *after* his supposed satori.

It's all in the contrast between what's said to us and what's shown, and as well as one of our best directors, Sean Phillips is one of comics' most consummate, communicative character actors. There's something rough, hunched, squat and simian about Dylan's physique and physiognomy. He's fiercely defensive as well as dejected. I kept thinking of the Gallagher brothers.

The final full-page punchline is an arresting, wholly unexpected image whose eyes will bore into your own so hard and so deep – meeting your gaze directly, unflinchingly – that I defy you to look away. Slowly but surely as you begin to digest its implications, you may well find that you too have a lot to think about.