Claims Department

Claims Department March 2017

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Comments?
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OK, so I'm back.

The last issue of Claims Department was the one dedicated to the reason that this issue comes out in 2017 - my twin boys. They're a handful at their best, and nearly brain-eating at their worst. Bless 'em, though, they're my pride and joy.

I've wanted to do this issue for a while. I love comics, and the 1980s and 90s were my decade. That is to say about 1985 to 1995, roughly between Crisis on Infinite Earths and Zero Hour. I will always measure epochs by DC cross-over events. As all sciencers would, I imagine...

Newbury Comics, on Newbury Street in Boston, is the site where I bought so many comics while I was in college. A typical Thursday, the day I got paid, would be class at 9:30, walk over to buy comics, walk back to my dorm and grab lunch, lingering for seconds, thirds, and more while reading, reading, reading. I was buying Flash, and Superman, and indy titles, especially from Slave Labor Graphics. I was exposed to the Big Books from Paradox Press, and Fantagraphix. I was reading and reading, and reading.

Reading anything but Marvel, at least.

I never liked the X-Men. Other than the issue where Kitty tells the kid she's watching a pirate-y bedtime story, I've never really been into 'em. Then, you may ask, why is the 1980s my jam so much when the X-titles were such a part of 1980s comics?

Because everything else was magic.

Frank Miller, and Neil Gaiman (even if I wasn't a big Sandman fan) and Mark Waid, and Los Bros Hernandez, and George Perez, and Howard Chaykin, and Alan Moore, and Dave Gibbons, and Evan Dorkin, and on and on and on. There were the Teen Titans, actually the NEW Teen Titans, and Catain Carrot, and the JLA, and the JSA, and the Doom Patrol a couple of times, and Jonni Thunder, and Wonder Woman, and Man of Steel, and on and on and on again.

It was a great time for a 10 to 20 year old.

While I was working on this issue, I was hit by the death of an artist whose work was incredibly important to me - Bernie Wrightson. Co-creator of Swamp Thing, and the artist of the version of Frankenstein I will always consider canonical even if it was done 150 years after the writing of the novel. He was a force from the 1970s through to the 2000s, though he had slowed. I love his work, and I'm grateful to Derek McCaw for his view.

Lots of friends in this issue. Steve Mix, who I've known since the 1980s, and makes his Garciazine debut!

If you've got anything for the Julie Schwartz issue (Sept.) or our big Year-End issue (This Is The Zodiac Zining...) about the Zodiac Killer, send it along!


TMNT & Usagi
by Steve Mix

The first comic I ever owned was The Incredible Hulk. I can't remember the issue. I'd followed Batman and some X-Men as a kid, but my absolute favorite comics were Stan Sakai's comic, Usagi Yojimbo and Eastman and Laird's comic Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT.)

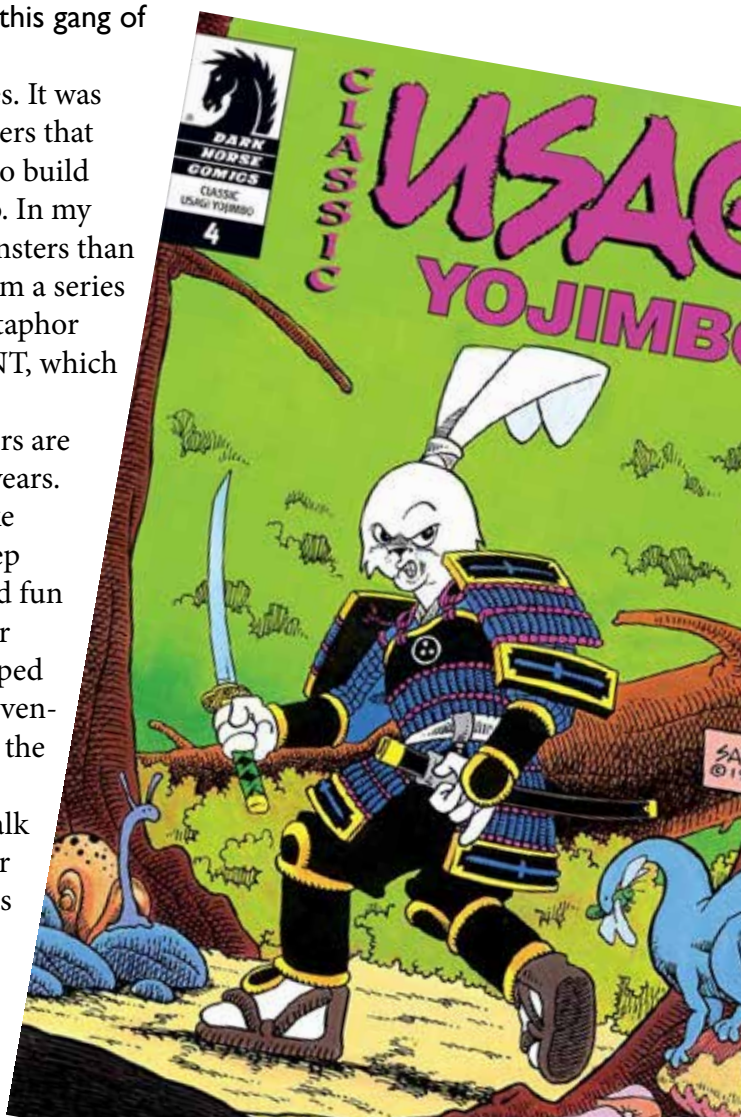
Before we can continue, though, let's discuss the frustration of reading TMNT as a kid. These comics that I read were regularly black and white inked pages. The covers had all four of the turtles wearing red headbands. These books were gritty things, with blood and guts and it wasn't uncommon to find the characters broken and struggling. Although they centered around mutant ninjas, the characters felt flawed and because of that, very alive. I remember reading one issue where one of the turtles had slashed a Foot Clan member in the first panel, and the rest of the panels were formed by the blood oozing out from the dying man's wound. It was brilliant and violent, so my adolescent-self loved them. Only about two of my friends even knew about this series. Every other kid knew the turtles from the cartoon series or Archie series comic book version. In those, they wore different colored headbands and often fought robots or aliens because you can commit violence against robots and aliens in kid's shows and that's not frowned upon as much. Also, the turtles would often say cheesy lines such as "Cowabunga," and "Radical."

It's weird because both versions are still correct, but as a kid, I felt like a huge outsider. Reading those books in public or drawing pictures, someone would always roll up and comment on how their headbands were wrong or look in disgust when I showed them the more abrasive version of TMNT.

I felt the same disgust towards the Archie TMNT series. I could feel my teeth rotting from the mock California slang and happy cartoon-like smiles. Two fandoms from the same source should welcome more people, and yet they somehow made me feel like more of an outsider at times.

Stan Sakai's books did the opposite because he was less known among my peers. Usagi Yojimbo was the tale of a Ronin (masterless samurai) roaming the countryside of feudal Japan. His name Yojimbo meant bodyguard which references that he was often taking odd jobs and chasing adventures which sometimes led to battles with mythical foes. I could show friends these books, and they might have heard Usagi's name in passing (he was featured once in the cartoon), but they didn't know him well. What was brilliant about Sakai's books was he not only gave you a story, but he would teach lessons about the warrior's life and being able to do what's right versus what's easy. These are lessons that have always served me well. When I went into the military, I left for basic training in shape. I was scared, but I knew that with enough courage, strength, and wisdom, I could become dutiful and sharp. I knew that the warrior's life came with great sacrifice. One book, in particular, I believe it was Shi, Usagi is fighting four assassins. During the adventure, a peasant boy decides he wants to be a samurai and not a farmer. He follows Usagi throughout the story begging to become his student. At the height of the story, after Usagi has violently dispatched the assassins when his face overflowing with rage and head teaming with demons, Usagi with dark eyes screams at the boy something to the effect of, "You want this life? This is what you WANT?!" The boy realizes that he is frightened. He can't make this sacrifice and heads back to his family to become a farmer. Usagi's lessons were things I fell back upon when I lost friends overseas, and they are lessons that I still use today.

TMNTs lessons were a bit different. Although the plot-lines were significant levels of excitement and intrigue, TMNT had the ability to get very surreal fast. It wasn't uncommon to find the turtles in a storyline that seemed like it fell out of a dream. I remember one in particular where they wound up in a dimension of folks who drove endless MC Escher-esque freeways speeding the whole way. Apparently, everyone in that dimension loved to drive fast and getting there warped a person into this monstrous thing. One woman at the wheel of the car was just a pair of lips. A gang of bikers would speed through that freeway, sabotaging other drivers, making them crash. If I remember correctly, there was no explanation for it, but along came the turtles, passing through this dream-like dimension on a collision course with this gang of outlaws.

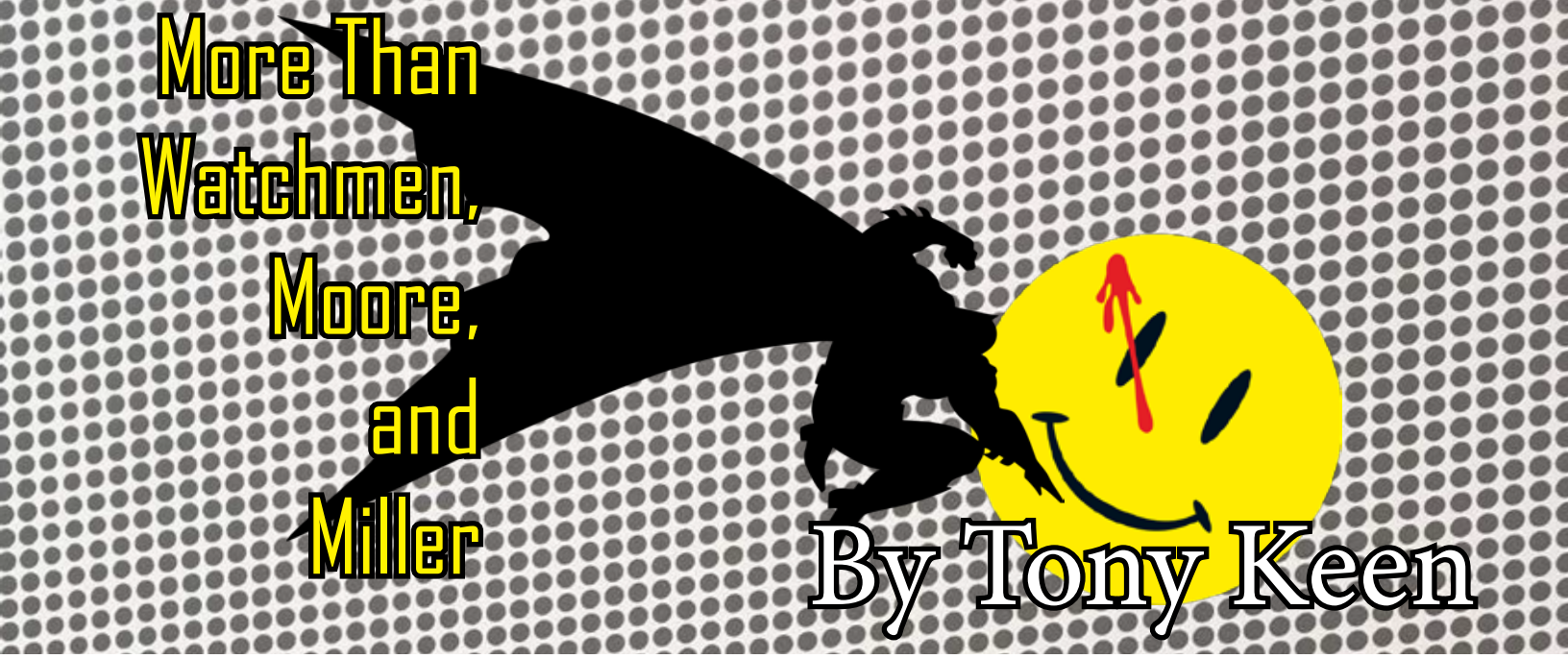


I loved the bizarre quality and randomness of these interludes. It was like the artists and writers were saying, "We have these characters that are strong, and we don't need to explain this. We're just going to build something exciting from it." It's something I use to this day too. In my books, when writing zombie fiction, my zombies are more monsters than traditional zombies and the reason being is they originated from a series of nightmares. I think the truth is, they are a subconscious metaphor for terrorism. I learned to listen to my dreams because of TMNT, which seems to serve me well.

Both Usagi and TMNT taught me that the strongest characters are flawed, which isn't a lesson quickly learned in your early teen years. Usagi showed me that the warrior's life isn't something you take lightly, and it requires a lifetime of patience, even when you step away from it. TMNT taught me that if you build a vigorous and fun foundation, you can let things get a little wild at times and your readers will love you for it. These comics as my foundation helped me grow when I felt like an outsider, to become a soldier and eventually a writer. They taught me to shoulder burdens, and when the time comes to swing the sword or pull the trigger, you find the strength. Then when it's time to move on from that life, you walk on chasing myths and listening to dreams. I don't think I'll ever forget these lessons or these books and a lot of my work reflects that.

I'm thankful for it.

More Than Watchmen, Moore, and Miller

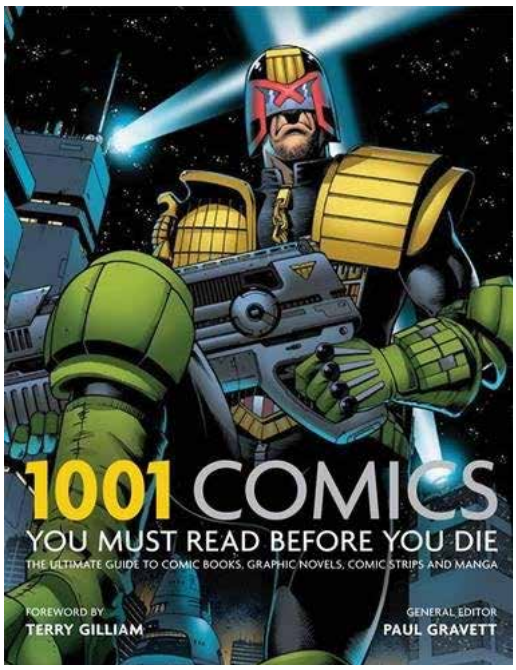


By Tony Keen

Ah, the 1980s. A great period for comics, eh? The time of Alan Moore on *Captain Britain, Marvelman, Swamp Thing*, his *Superman* Annual, *Watchmen* and *The Killing Joke*, Frank Miller on *Daredevil, Dark Knight*[1], *Elektra: Assassin, Daredevil: Born Again* and *Batman: Year One*, and at the very end, Neil Gaiman on *Black Orchid* and *Sandman*, and Grant Morrison on *Zenith, Animal Man*, and *Arkham Asylum*. Well, yes, but, as I said when I was on an Eastercon panel discussing the 1980s in comics, that's what everyone always talks about, and they don't need any more exposure from me. I'm here to tell you that there's so much more to the 1980s than the work of those four writers. (And also, the end of *Watchmen* sucks, and *Black Orchid* is massively derivative, the work of a writer yet to find his own voice.) I want to talk about some semi-forgotten superhero comics of the early 1980s, the ones that are now slightly under the radar.

This article has its roots in a reaction to *1001 Comics You Must Read Before You Die* (2011). In the editorial for that, Paul Gravett talks about how the book can be used not just as a guide to what to read, but as a history of the medium. But as I read the work, I found that as a history of superhero comics, it was seriously lacking.

It doesn't help that some entries end up in the wrong order. Though all the articles are grouped under years, they are not carefully ordered within each year. So, for instance, under 1941, *Wonder Woman* appears before *Captain America* – whereas Cap actually was first published nearly a year before the Amazonian Princess, and, as I've argued in an article for *FA – The Comiczine* (http://comiczine-fa.com/features/flying-the-flag-the-superpatriots-of-the-early-1940s), Diana's costume was influenced by Captain America and the slew of star-spangled heroes he inspired. Under 1986, Frank Miller and David Mazzuchelli's *Batman: Year One* appears before the same team's *Daredevil: Born Again*, implying that Mazzuchelli got the *Daredevil* gig as a result of his work on *Batman*; the reality is, of course, the other way round (indeed, *Year One* was cover-dated 1987, though the vagaries of comics publication meant that the first issue appeared at the end of 1986).



It's in the area of the early 1980s superhero comic that I find 1001 Comics most frustrating. There is a very strong implication that, once John Byrne left *X-Men* in 1981, nothing much happened until Alan Moore began writing *Swamp Thing* in 1983, and after that not much more until 1986's double-whammy of *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight*. The book then devotes several pages to the extremely fertile two years for Moore and, especially, Miller of 1986-1987, where as well as the

1 - Pedant alert: When originally published, The Dark Knight Returns was merely the title of the first issue of a series called Batman: The Dark Knight. Only with the collected edition did Dark Knight Returns become the title of the whole series.

above-mentioned works, Miller gave us *Elektra: Assassin.* (I admit that until reading *1001 Comics I* hadn't realised quite how intense was Miller's period of great creativity around this time.)

The early '80s, then, are presented as a sort of cultural desert in terms of superhero comics. Even Miller's own first run on *Daredevil*, massively influential at the time, doesn't warrant a mention. But in my view, the reality is that after the doldrums of the late 1970s, where there was little worth getting excited about beyond *X-Men* and the Steve Englehart/Marshall Rogers run on Batman in *Detective Comics*, the early 1980s were a period of great innovation in superhero comics. Yes, there was some rubbish, in fact, quite a lot of rubbish, such as Dazzler or *Secret Wars* – a stupid idea then and a stupid idea in the 2010s. But there were also a lot of good comics, which in many ways laid the groundwork for what Moore and Miller (and Gaiman and Morrison) were to do. And the early '80s are often a lot more fun than the unremitting grimness that followed *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight.*

I want to make this case through three main examples. It is probably inaccurate to say that these series are "under the radar". All of these are comics that were fêted at the time, critically highly praised and award winning. They remain highly influential, and have all been collected and can be purchased and read easily today. Yet I would argue that they do get neglected in a discourse that all too often fails to get past Moore and Miller. (I'd also add that all three of my examples went on for too long.)

The three examples are John Byrne's *Fantastic Four,* Walt Simonson's *Thor*, and Marv Wolfman and George Pérez's *Teen Titans*.

Though he has now revealed himself as a transphobic git, comparing trans people to paedophiles, in 1981 John Byrne was a superstar artist. His run with Chris Claremont on *X-Men* had been spectacular, culminating in the Dark Phoenix Saga, plundered for the movie *X-Men: The Last Stand*, and "Days of Future Past", which formed the basis for a more recent *X-Men* movie. Readers at the time had probably not realised the degree to which Byrne was contributing to the plotting of the comic, though it soon became obvious once he left and the quality of *X-Men* plummeted. Byrne moved on to what had once been Marvel's flagship title, the first Silver Age superhero title created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four. FF,* the self-styled "World's Greatest Comic Magazine", was in serious trouble in the early 1980s. Mindblowing in the 1960s, the cosmic concepts that characterised the series had become dull in the hands of the likes of Marv Wolfman and Bill Mantlo. The FF themselves, pretty much static, lacked the dynamism of a team such as the Avengers.

Byrne had pencilled a few issues of *FF,* but now came back to write and draw the book, including inking his own pencils. This was a significant change; for over a decade the inking on *FF* had been done by Joe Sinnott, and the look of the book was more Sinnott than any of the pencillers who had worked on the title since Kirby himself. Now it looked more realistic, less like a '60s comic.

Byrne entered with an overt "back to the basics" approach. In particular, he recognised that the FF are not a professional organization of superheroes, as the Avengers are, but a family who happen to possess superpowers. He also returned dynamism to the book. An attempt to restore Ben Grimm, the Thing, to human form, instead reverted him for a while to his original 1963 appearance. Ben's Aunt Petunia, one of the classic unseen characters of comics, was brought onto the page, turning out to be much younger than any reader had imagined. The Human Torch's girlfriend Frankie Raye acquired superpowers of her own, before becoming the herald of Galactus. New costumes were introduced. The Thing was replaced by She-Hulk. Alicia Masters, long-time girlfriend of Ben Grimm, became involved with Johnny Storm, the Human Torch (though it was later retconned that this was actually a shape-changing Skrull, something with rather betrays Byrne's intentions). All of this was delivered with quite a touch of humour.

Along the way, Byrne gave the readers several entertaining stories.

The twentieth anniversary issue in 1981 features an excellent Doctor Doom tale, and there's also a fine four-part Negative Zone adventure.

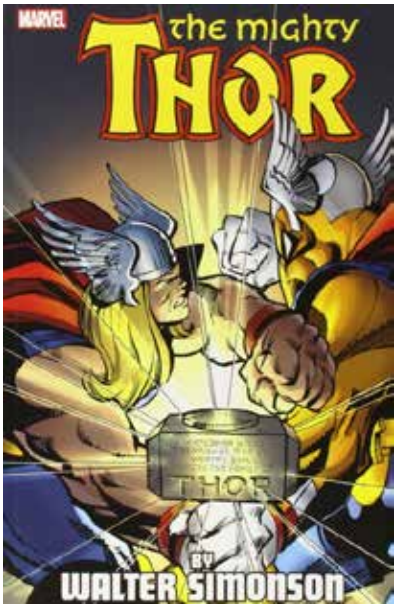
I have two favourite narratives from the time. First is a Galactus story (*Fantastic Four* 257, August 1983) in which the FF don't feature directly, though it has ramifications for them. Led by his herald Nova (the former Frankie Raye), Galactus comes to a new planet to consume, the Throneworld of the Skrulls, one of the major galactic empires of the Marvel Universe. The destruction of the Throneworld, and the death of Princess Anelle, who had once been the love interest of the 1970s Captain Marvel, remains a shocking moment. It led to Reed Richards, Mr Fantastic, being put on trial, for he had previously saved Galactus when he was dying. Byrne resolved the trial storyline with a not wholly satisfactory revelation that Galactus is part of the universe and must survive but no-one can quite say why.

My other favourite is also connected with the Skrulls. In the second issue of Fantastic Four in 1961, the FF first encountered the shape-shifting Skrulls. At the end of the story, they hypnotised three Skrulls into becoming dairy cows. In *FF* Annual 17 (1983), Byrne explored what happened when local people drank the milk that these Skrulls produced.

Sadly, from 1984, a decline set in, as Byrne was over-committed to other titles, running out of ideas, and becoming increasingly dissatisfied with corporate interference from higher up in Marvel. He carried in for another two years, but this material isn't really worth seeking out. The first three years are the best.

My second example is Walter Simonson's *Thor*. *Thor* is the adventures of the Norse Thunder God brought to modern New York and finding himself functioning as a superhero. This had been brilliant in the 1960s, when Jack Kirby had been in charge of it (it's a fairly safe bet that Stan Lee's involvement in *Thor* was minimal). But by 1983 it was probably in an even worse state than *FF* had been when Byrne took over. The comics fan and critic Martin Skidmore detailed what was wrong in a perceptive piece called "Why is Thor Boring?" (http://comiczine-fa.com/features/why-is-thor-boring).

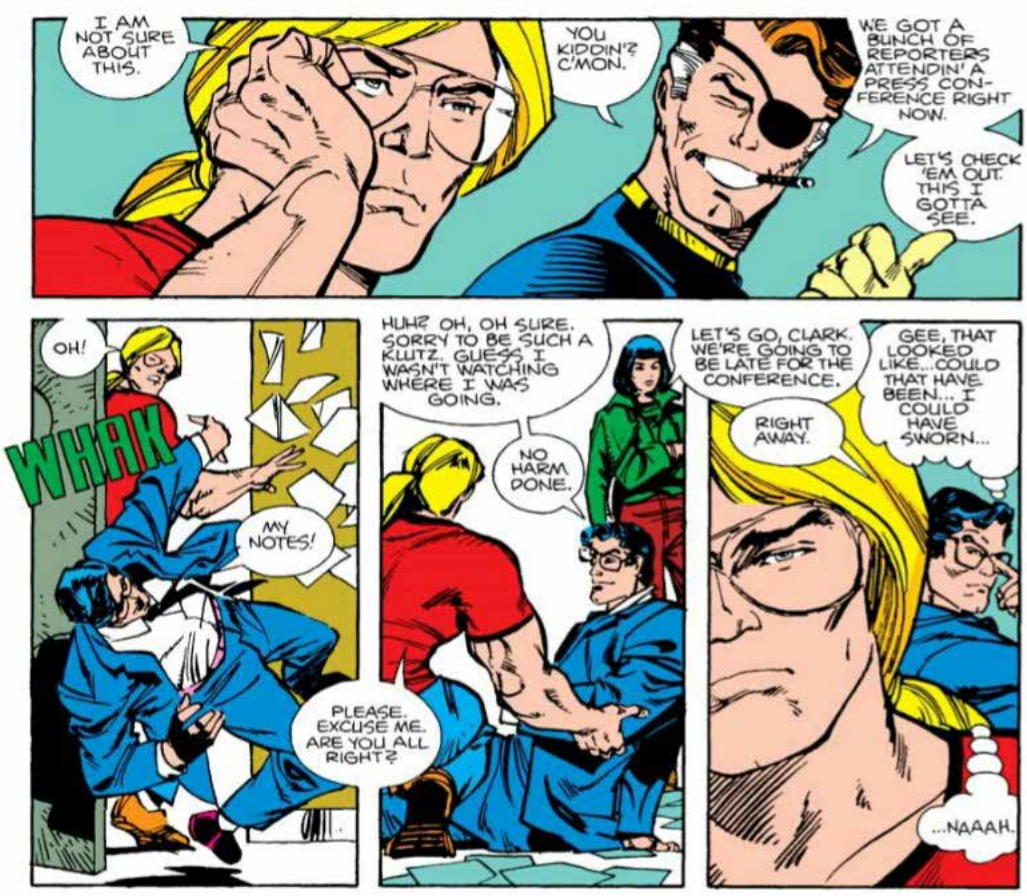
Along came Walt Simonson, like Byrne a well-known artist, best remembered at the time for his work on *Manhunter*, a series that had appeared as a back-up in DC's *Detective Comics* in 1973. He had done some writing, primarily comics adapting the television science fiction series *Battlestar Galactica*. But the 1980s were a time when many artists were able to become writer/artists. Byrne is an example – another is Frank Miller, who got his opportunity with *Daredevil*. And Simonson was given the chance with *Thor*.



Like Byrne, Simonson took a "back to basics" approach. In the case of *Thor*, that meant turning to the Norse mythology from which Thor emerged[2]. Kirby had made this a key part of his version, especially in the back-up *Tales of Asgard*. Simonson integrated this stuff into the main storylines, and for the first time in fifteen years, Thor and his supporting cast felt like mythological beings, and not just a superhero and some powerful and not-so-powerful figures around him.

And like Byrne, Simonson innovated. In his very first story, he introduced the alien Beta Ray Bill. It had always been established that Thor's power came from his being worthy enough to hold his enchanted hammer Mjolnir, and that, in theory, that power could be wielded by anyone who was worthy. Simonson made the theory reality, when Bill picked up the walking stick of Don Blake, Thor's alter ego, struck it on the ground, and gained Thor's power. That led to a shake-up of

2 - If you are interested in learning more about the original Norse myths, I recommend the new retellings of them by Neil Gaiman.



Thor's earthly set-up, that removed the silly device of Thor turning back into Don Blake whenever he let go of Mjolnir for sixty seconds, took Blake out of the picture, at least for a bit, along with, for a while, Thor's earthly love interest Jane Foster, and gained Thor a new secret identity. And that leads to an amusing moment where Thor, unconvinced by Nick Fury's suggestion that simply putting on glasses will work as a disguise, unknowingly bumps into someone for whom that disguise has worked for nearly half a century.

Simonson followed this up with his Ragnarok story, which he began hinting at early in his run, before finally delivering its climax in 1985. Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods, had always been part of the *Thor* mythos in the comics, as it has always been part of the wider Norse mythology. Kirby had wanted to do it for real in the 1960s, and when Stan Lee wouldn't let him, he had taken the idea to DC, where he had reworked it as *New Gods*. Various false Ragnaroks had taken place in the 1970s, but none had been very memorable. Simonson made it work by, once again, returning to the mythology. He gives a key role to the fire giant Surtur, as is the case in the earliest versions of the Norse story. This epic provides classic moments such as when Thor and Loki, rivals and often enemies, line up beside their father Odin to face Surtur, and their joint cry when Odin falls into the fiery hell of Muspelheim. The complexity of Loki is a major achievement of Simonson's run, and influences how he has since been depicted in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

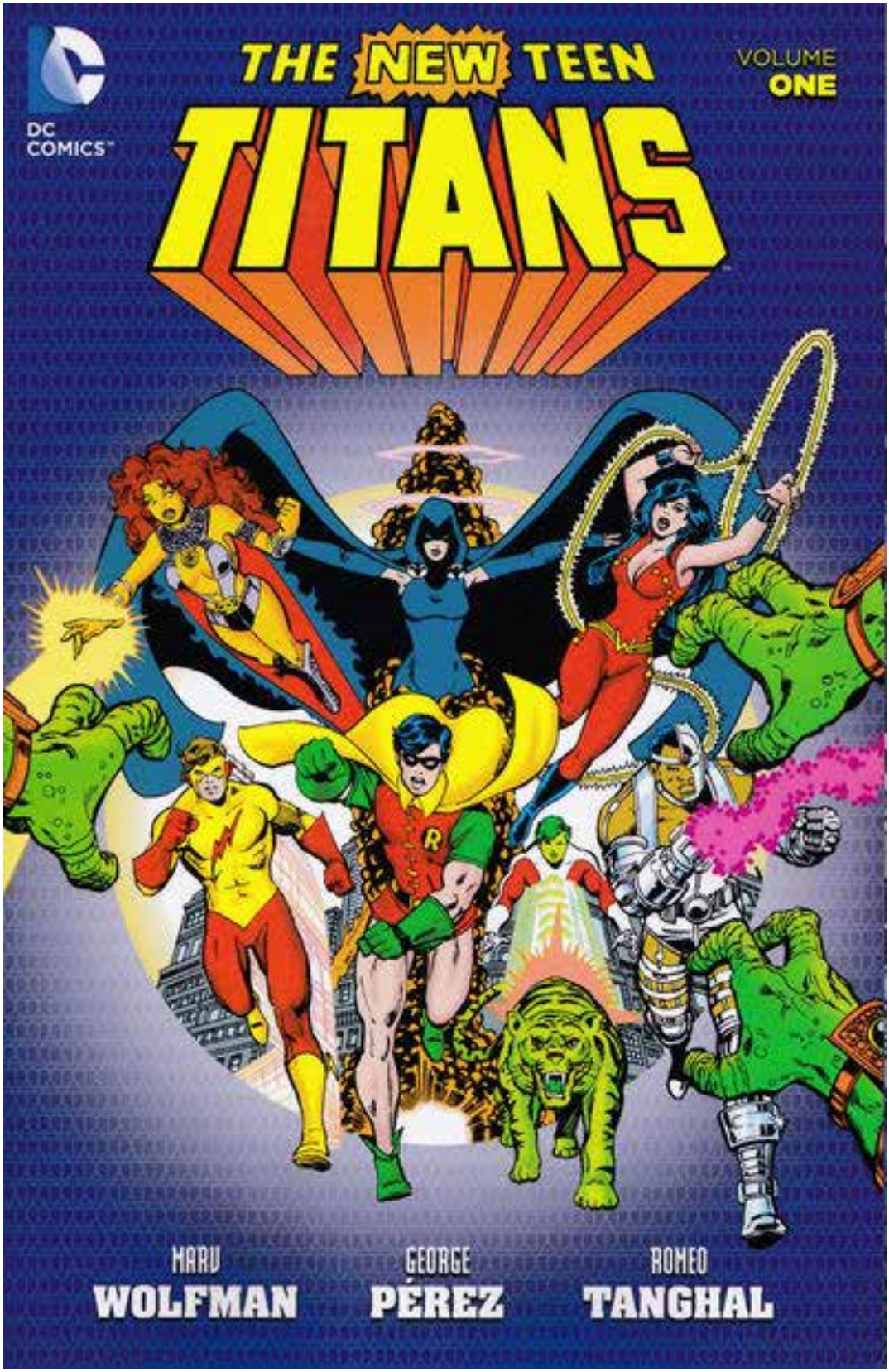
Arguably the series went off the boil a bit after this, especially once Sal Buscema replaced Simonson as artist. Some see the shark-jumping moment as a 1986 story where Thor was transformed into a frog, and became involved in a war in Central Park between frogs and rats, before then transforming into a six-foot tall Thunder Frog. I remember a particularly scathing review of this sequence in one of the Fantagraphics critical magazines, either the *Comics Journal* or, more likely, *Amazing Heroes*, that condemned the narrative for treating animals as intelligent life, and therefore introducing philosophical questions about the rights and wrings of killing

animals for food that had no place in the Marvel Universe. This is possibly an excessive criticism, and the story, whilst not Simonson's greatest, fits solidly into a mythological tradition of beast fables, and clearly references the Greek *Batrachomyomachia,* the Battle of Frogs and Mice, a parody of mythological epic.

Generally, in terms of the idea of the title's decline, it's worth noting Woodrow Phoenix's reviews on the *Slings and Arrows* website of the last two volumes of the collected editions of Simonson's *Thor* (http://theslingsandarrows.com/thor-by-walter-simonson-volume-4/ and http://theslingsandarrows.com/thor-by-walter-simonson-volume-5/); whilst Phoenix acknowledges a slight drop-off in quality towards the end, he feels that even then it remains very high.

My first two examples have been Marvel series; my third comes from their rivals, DC Comics. DC had come through the 1970s in a far worse shape than Marvel, despite the occasional success, such as *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* – they were seen as outdated, compared to Marvel's hipness, and were losing market share without any good way of getting it back. Around 1980, that started to change. DC began offering some royalties on their best-selling comics, where Marvel remained strictly work-for-hire. At the same time, Marvel, once the home of youthful artistic freedom, became progressively more corporate in its internal processes. The combination of the two tempted some key talent over to DC, and *New Teen Titans* is the product of three of these, editor Len Wein, writer Marv Wolfman and penciller George Pérez. The last of these was still under thirty, and known to Wolfman from having drawn Wolfman's *Fantastic Four* scripts at Marvel. *New Teen Titans* was to turn him into a comics superstar.

The Teen Titans had been a team-up of various DC sidekicks, such as



Speedy, Aqualad, Robin, Bat-Girl (not the Barbara Gordon version), etc. It had been known for the silliness of its plots, and whilst it had sold well, had been a bit of an embarrassment to the company. The revival ditched all but three of the original cast (Robin, Kid Flash and Wonder Girl), added a teen member of the then-defunct *Doom Patrol*, and brought in three wholly new characters. Where the old series had presented the Titans as fourteen or fifteen, these Titans were eighteen or nineteen, beginning to find their way in the world, becoming sexually active, etc. In that it shared a lot with Marvel's *X-Men*, which was a model in many other ways. *New Teen Titans* brought a completely new attitude to the storytelling, one certainly not seen in *Teen Titans* and rarely in any DC comic. It's pretty clear that Wein, Wolfman and Pérez's intention was to create a Marvel-style comic in the DC Universe.

And they succeeded. *Teen Titans* soon became a massive hit. Four years later it was one of the first of DC's titles to be issued on better paper than the newsprint then typical of comics. The line-up that was created in 1980 is pretty much the same line-up as can be found in the popular animated tv series, though that has reduced their ages. And one of the new characters, Cyborg, will soon appear in 2017's *Justice League* movie.

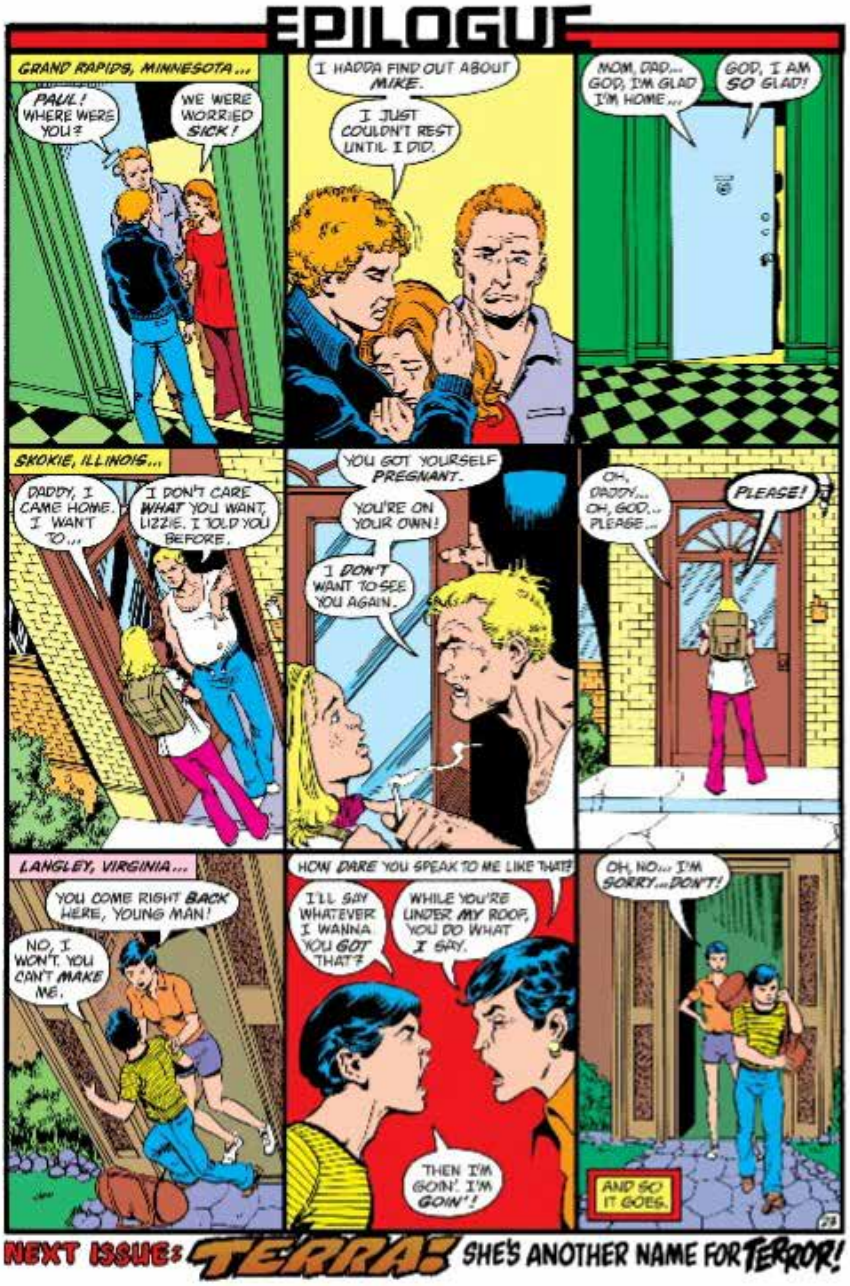
It is true that some of the Titans' villains, for instance Trigon the Terrible and Brother Blood, are, when it comes down to it, a touch on the silly side. But that didn't matter, because the stories built around them were solid superhero fare, and sometimes even better than that, as in the long story arc in which (spoiler alert) the Titans admit a new member who betrays them.

In any case, the very best Titans stories weren't the standard superhero narratives – instead, they were those that most ditched those modes of storytelling. I speak in particular of two stories. One is the classic "Runaways", which ran in issues 26 (December 1982) and 27 (January 1983). This two-parter (which was my first exposure to *Teen Titans*) did what it said on the tin – told the story of some teen runaways who happened to cross paths with the Titans. It's open, honest, unsentimental and heart breaking.

The other issue that deserves highlighting is "Who Is Donna Troy?" in issue 38 (January 1984), an investigation into Wonder Girl's origins. Again, there are almost no superheroics, but tons of genuinely affecting emotion. It's a deserved classic.

Inevitably, Titans fell apart. Pérez left in 1985, and it became obvious how much input he had into the plotting. Wolfman stayed with the title for another decade, but quality plummeted, and no-one much cares about the post-Pérez material (it hasn't ever been collected). But for the first half of the decade, *Teen Titans* was one of the titles that pushed DC ahead of Marvel in the overall quality stakes, a key feature in attracting over Miller, Moore, Morrison and Gaiman to work for DC.

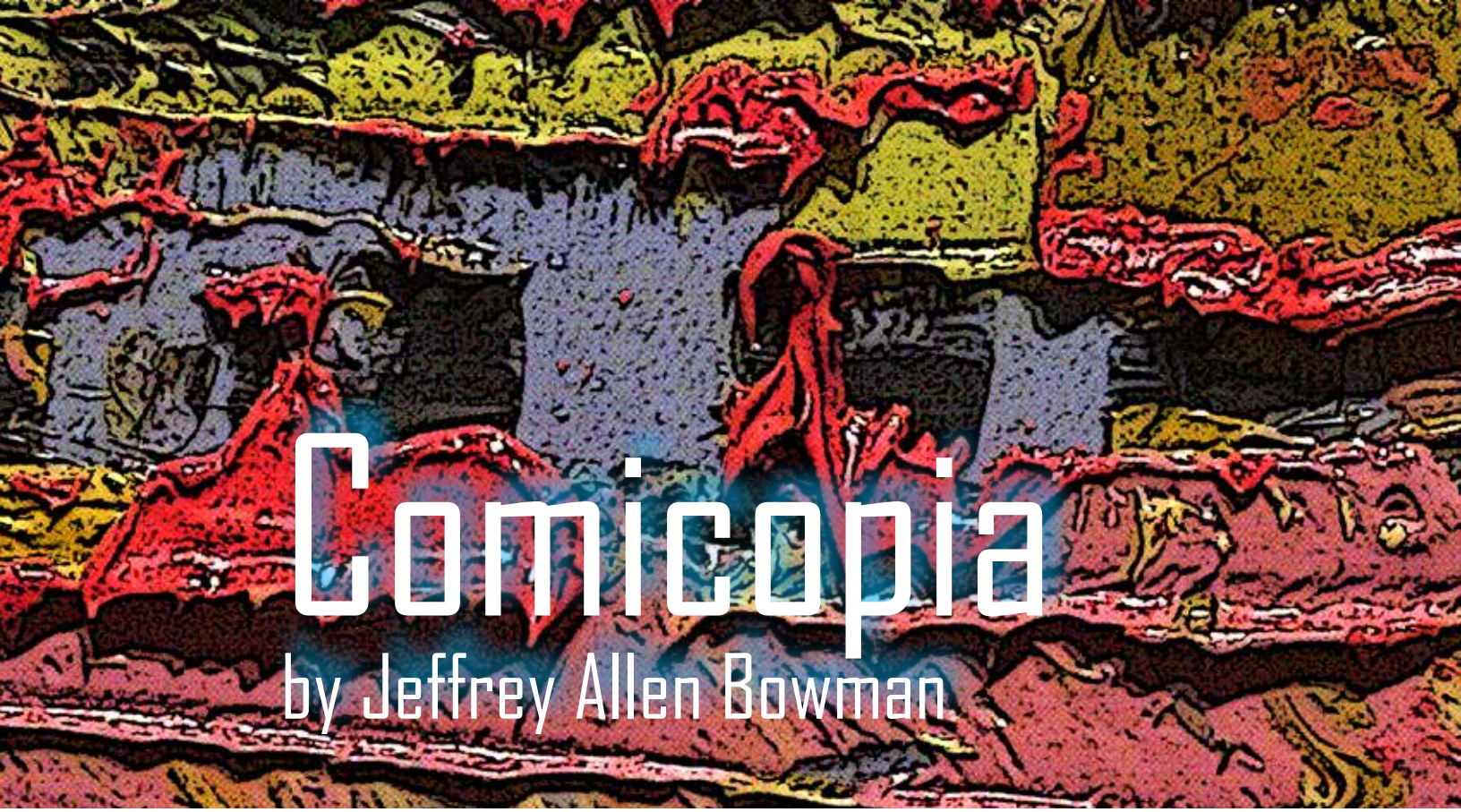
I hope that this brief run through has encouraged you to try out these comics, if you haven't already. And perhaps



you'll try some other comics from this period, such as Roger Stern and John Byrne's all-too-brief run on *Captain America*, which showed more understanding of the character than had been seen for a decade, and made me a Cap fan for life (it's collected as *War & Remembrance*). Or there's Stern's run as writer of Avengers (also collected), probably the most consistent period in the comic's history since Steve Englehart left in 1976. Over at DC, there's Paul Levitz and Keith Giffen's run on Legion of Superheroes, the other jewel besides *Teen Titans* in DC's crown (try *The Great Darkness Saga* for size). Or Doug Moench's run on the two Batman titles, *Detective Comics* and *Batman*, where stories crossed over from one to the other, effectively creating a fortnightly Batman comic, an innovation I wish had been tried more often when the same character stars in different books. Sadly this is uncollected. Criminally, so is Bob Rozakis and Stephen DeStefano's *'Mazing Man*. If you haven't read this, I'm afraid no description of mine can do this charming funny delight justice. Just seek it out, okay?

There were a lot of poor comics around in the early 1980s, and the likes of Miller and Moore were reacting against this in what they did. But they were also benefitting from those that had gone before them, who paved the way for quality superhero comics that explored what the genre could do. If nothing else these predecessors proved that good comics could sell, something that seemed not to be the case in the 1970s. There is quality there, and it is worth reading.

Tony Keen writes for two comics review sites, FA – The Comiczine *(http://comiczine-fa.com/) and* The Slings and Arrows Graphic Novel Guide *(http://theslingsandarrows.com).*



Comicopia

by Jeffrey Allen Bowman

I was asked to write about these, and it's safe to say that I've walked the walk:

I first joined an APA about role playing games in 1989, and in 1990, based on my enthusiasm for the medium, created one devoted to comicbooks called COMICOPIA (I was with it for 100 issues over 17 years. It's still in existence at 26 years in PDF only). I was a member of three others, which led to a month in 1993, when I produced a zine for all four. I don't recommend that anyone else try that, but safe to say that I'm knowledgeable in this field.

The history of APAs is proof that fandom makes everything more interesting - but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit; I know what they are, but readers may not...

APA is an abbreviation for Amateur Press Association. What it is is a collection of individual fanzines in a single volume, compiled by someone called the Distribution Manager (DM) or Central Manager (CM). They then send the compiled volume back to the entire membership.

Now, the history: APAs began between newspaper journalists, who gathered articles not chosen for newspaper publication. This was called NAPA, the National APA. There's a fan connection in that the first DM was H.P. Lovecraft. According to biographer L. Sprague de Camp (Doubleday, 1975. Lovecraft: a Biography), He was a racist and an anti-semitic, but the Cthulhu stories and mythos are a big part of recent fandom history.

The resulting journals were dry and clinical, until fandom came in: in 1937 Donald A. Wolfheim founded FAPA, an APA devoted to speculative fiction. One thing he invented for it we're familiar with now as LOCs (Letters Of Comments) in fanzines: Mailing Comments. Members shared feedback on the offerings of other members.

Many things that we now take for granted began in APAs: the smilies that we now use on-line began for writers with limited printing capabilities to display emotions. Also, although some of the 'text speak' now is new (TL/DR, WTF), some abbreviations that we use regularly now began in APAs, like HHOK (Ha Ha Only Kidding), LOL (Laughing Out Loud) ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing), ROTFLMAO (same, but add my ass off, for more impact).

Many comicbook artists began in APAs. Fred Hembeck and Wendy Pini both began in CAPA ALPHA, a legendary APA itself. Writers too. Tom and Mary Biernbaum, writers on The Legion of Superheroes also began in APAs.

As well as a place for fans, APAs are a place for professionals in a field to relax. They GAFIAte (Get Away From It All). One of my friends, illustrator Gabriel Morrissette, joined with issue 20 and was still with COMICOPIA when I left with issue 100 (I asked him. He still is). Several authors were members of FAPA over the years; members of the Legion APA KLORDNY were writers and artists on the property; I've also been a member of RPG APAs with game designers and authors, including the late, great Aaron Allston. Sometimes they tested out work for other projects. One such APA is an award-winner, ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS. At least one RPG developed there (Over the Edge, a very surreal and Meta game).

Over the years I also saw the start of greats in the animation field and big players (now) in the fields of videogames and tabletop roleplaying games. Even myself… while I don't consider myself a great yet, I still have 11 published RPG products, a short story and novel on the way, as well as other zines plus the award-winner that I will mention.

APAs can be generalized like to all comicbooks (COMICOPIA is) or all RPGs (Mordred was, APA-Calypse was too) or to a specific series or game system (Klordny for fans of The Legion of Superheroes, or Gurps or Hero System for games… even for Dungeons and Dragons). Likewise I've seen APAs devoted to science fiction in general, or devoted solely to the works of Isaac Asimov or H Beam Piper, as examples. They could be a collection of perzines in that way.

Being a member of an APA can teach you a lot about the phases of self-publishing. You are responsible for your own typesetting, page layout, and printing out enough copies of your zine so that every contributing member gets one. The distribution manager/central mailer gets (or uses clip-art, if they prefer) the overall covers and the house organ over everything — then mails contributors the completed volume.

Using myself as an example, I began my publishing journey on an 16-bit Atari computer with a dot matrix printer, then a slower Pentium (than what I have now) and an inkjet printer. Now I have a Core 3 PC (64-bit), use InDesign or Scribus for my page layout, and print out my zines to PDF.

Paper vs. Electronic for zines is still a sore spot for the APA world. Some of us tried to keep dead tree paper alive (I left one APA when it became electronic only) - but a) I'm reading many PDF zines now to save floor space and b) postage is too costly now, especially here in Canada. Several of the APAs that still exist are electronic only, including COMICOPIA.

Running an APA can either be democratic or not. As the creator of COMICOPIA I was the sole DM/CM, with different treasurers and co-DMs. I wasn't good with organization, so I phased out of that end, staying on as the figurehead, then stepped down fully (I learned better for my own zine later on). For some APAs the head and treasurer are both elected. I can see now that the latter option is better: having new people running it over time ensures that they can continue once the creators are gone. APACALYPSE has had 4 for example.

That also gives other people a chance to learn just how much work is involved in running an APA. One of my co-DMs lasted for 2 issues before he gave up! He even reprinted the identical house organ from one issue to the next. That was irresponsible… but that was decades ago now.

My time as the DM of an APA led to me starting my own zine about comicbooks, as I said. That zine won an Aurora award in 2009. That's our Canadian equivalent to the Hugo. It ran until 2012, and will again - but that's a story for elsewhere.

As with anything that you write over time, you improve. I improved on my grammar, and my fiction skills are

better than when I began in 1990… though I still have room to improve. If I ever gain as many awards like some of my fellow contributors have, I'll be happy.

COMICOPIA is a mixture of genres and interests, but we've had a few over-arcing themes. Issue 20 was after Jack Kirby died (if you don't know who he was - shame on you! - look him up on Wikipedia). We dropped all of our individual plans and honored him. Our other 'theme' issue came after the horrific event of 9-11. We all shared our feelings about that day.

I was worried about personal stories outweighing the comicbook-related materials, but I was wrong. Personal stories are what makes the community feeling of an APA stronger.

In many ways APAs are an outgrowth of zine culture, yet in other ways form a different style too.

The OTHER Just'a Lotta Animals...

by Chris Garcia

I've never been a very good reader. I've never read fast, or well, and when I was a kid, despite reading a lot, I was terrible at it. The first full comic series I ever tried to read through was *Captain Carrot & His Amazing Zoo Crew.* In line with the *Crisis on Earth-Prime*, Captain Carrot did a comedy arc called *Crisis on Earth-C,* in which Rodney Rabbit's creation, Just'a Lotta Animals, came from their world, Earth C-minus, and invaded Earth-C, where Cap held court. This cross over was pretty funny, but for an 8 year old who has trouble reading straight text to really get into things, it was nigh-impossible. I mostly stared at the pictures, reading what I could manage and sucking no marrow from the bones.

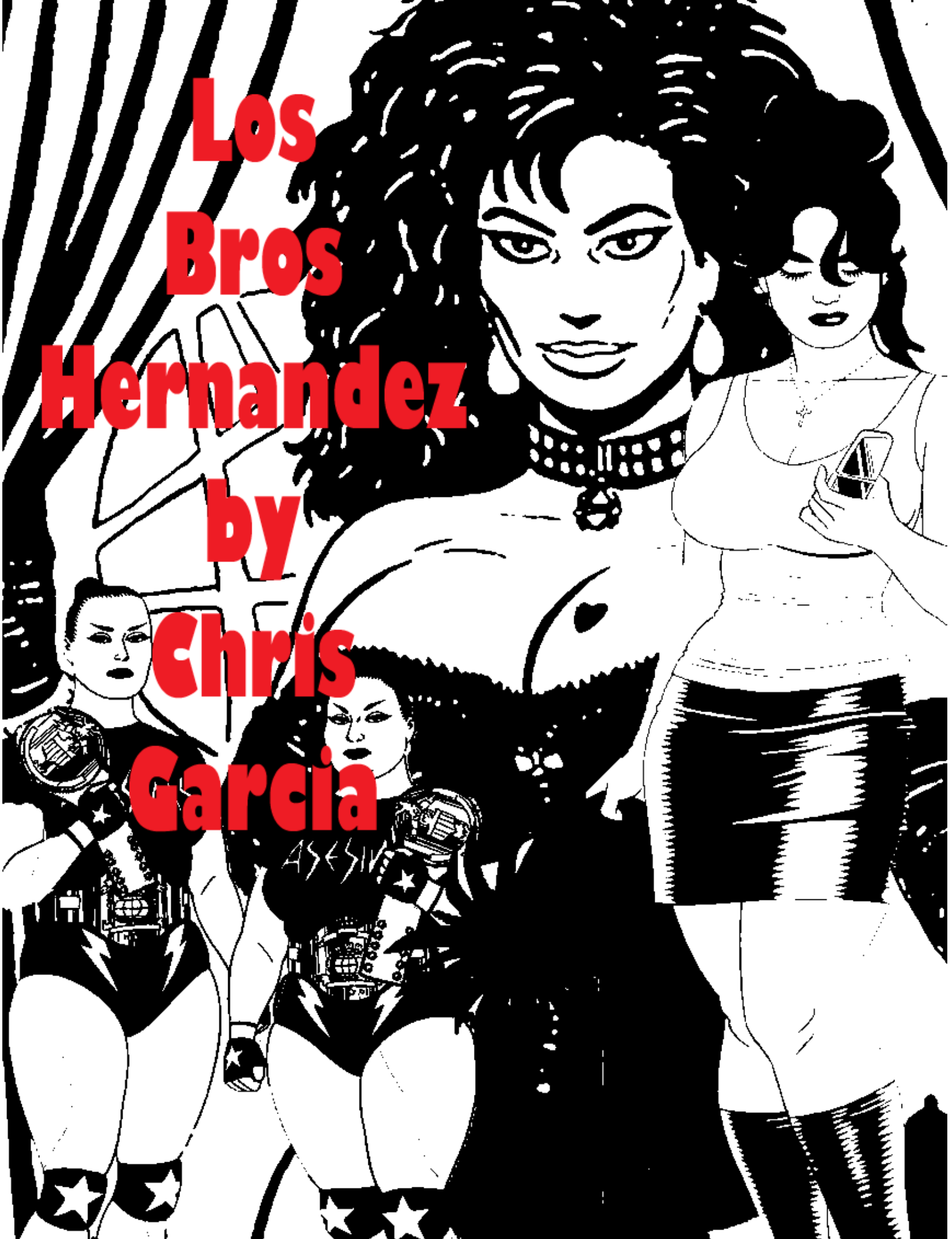
And thus, it was a single page that moved me.

Now, I had grown up "reading" the *Justice League*, mostly 1960s and 70s issues that I could get from the quarter bin at Brian's Books. I'd grab an issue a week at least. I knew the Justice League of Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, and The Flash so well, but the early 1980s version was pretty foreign to me. Thus, Just'a Lotta Animals crew of Batmouse, Wonder Wabbit, Super-Squirrel, Aquaduck, Green Lambkin, and The Crash was totally familiar, but towards the end, we meet the OTHER members of that JLA – Martian Anteater, The Item, Rat Tornado, Zap-Panda, Stacked Canary, Hawkmoose, Elong-gator, Green Sparrow, and Firestork. I know Stacked Canary and Green Sparrow, take-offs on Black Canary and Green Arrow (who I would play when the neighborhood kids would so super-heroes!) and Martian Manhunter was another favorite. Zap-Panda was Zatana, who I didn't know well at that point, and I remember trying to figure out who Elong-Gator was supposed to be. I had to buy the issue of *Who's Who in the DC Universe* to figure that out.

This page, this Just'a Lotta Animals, was exactly what I was interested in.

You see, they never gave us more of them, only that page, and while they were awesome, they were only brief, a blink-and-you'll-miss-'em. I wanted to know more. I wanted to see The Item, an elephantine take-off on The Atom, shrink and grow. I wanted to know how Firestork combined two normal storks and became the hero, I wasn't satisfied with only a picture of Rat Tornado, I wanted to understand the rodent android and see his whirling adventures!

As always happened to me in those days, and sometimes still today, I began to create adventures, typically while walking around my neighborhood bouncing along with my tennis racket and ball. I would read a newer issue of *JLA* and then re-cast it with those other funny animals. I would read an issue of Firestorm and figure out how it would be different with a Stork. I would play with these characters in my mind because there was nothing else of them. That is what comics gave to me: the starting point for mental adventures.


Los
Bros
Hernandez
by
Chris
Garcia

It would be difficult to find a comic book creation team that is better suited to the interests of Christopher J Garcia than Los Bros Hernandez. I first encountered them in the early 1980s, and I'm not 100% sure how. It might have been on the rack at Brian's Books or R & K's or maybe at one of the cons we went to when I was a kid. I know that it was an issue of Love 'n Rockets, and I am fairly certain that the issue was number 10. It was a remarkable thing, and no matter where I paged through it, I did not actually own a copy of it until I was in college. I could always recall the images from it; there were beautiful women and science fiction and the beautiful women.

This was an important time for me. There were little things that were setting me up for the future. It may be nothing of a surprise, but I have a type – beautiful curvaceous brunettes. In truth, the women I have tended to fancy are the kinds who could have stepped off the pages of *Luba* or *Love & Rockets*.

Of course, it was not just the cheesecake that led me to Los Bros. It was also the subject matter. The brothers grew up in Southern California, stepped in magical ideas, places, and people, but also in sexuality, especially with sort of hyper-Vargas-esque imagery. They also watched wrestling, likely on the Spanish International Network, SIN, which featured wrestling from Los Angeles' Olympic Auditorium including the stars Freddie Blassie, Mil Mascaras, Bobo Brazil, and many more. They would give us a look at the world of woman's wrestling in *Whoa Nelly.*

Can you see why I would love the Bros?

Bernie Wrightson
by Derek McCaw

Channeling the spirit of Frank Frazetta and warping it into something weird and wonderful all his own, comics creator Bernie Wrightson, who recently passed away at the age of 68, left a large mark in the comics industry. By most accounts this master of the macabre was warm, bright and upbeat, a contrast to his talent for illuminating characters with dark secrets and shadows in their hearts.

But then again, maybe that's not a contrast, because Wrightson's characters, no matter how monstrous, were so indelibly human. Though his arguably most famous co-creation sprang forth in 1971 – *Swamp Thing,* written by Len Wein – it was in the 1980s that Wrightson pushed the boundaries of his work, gaining attention outside of the comics industry, and using that attention to push mainstream comics.

In 1983, after years of drawing horror comics – great horror comics – Wrightson released his labor of love -- an illustrated version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Done in elaborate pen and ink to simulate the look of woodcuts, the illustrations portrayed a unique vision of Shelley's characters, taken from her own descriptions in the novel rather than any cinematic interpretation. Published by Marvel Comics, it was a sensation and a heavy influence on artists for years to come. (The most recent edition came from Dark Horse Comics in 2007, and filmmaker Guillermo Del Toro owns many of the original drawings.)

Wrightson drew a graphic novel adaptation of Stephen King's *Creepshow* in 1983 as well. More in line with his early work, it made a splash in mainstream bookstores at a time when trade paperbacks and graphic novels were still a bit of a novelty. More importantly, it led to a fruitful series of collaborations with King – first, illustrating Stephen King's first calendar, Cycle of the Werewolf (now collected as a regular trade), then doing a series of paintings for King's expanded edition of *The Stand* and the fifth novel in *The Dark Tower* series, *The Wolves of Calla.*

Teaming with Jim Starlin, another unique comics voice, Wrightson made a brief space for himself as a regular superhero comics artist. Except, of course, it was Wrightson, so when he played with the Big Two's most popular toys, they seemed to be his own.

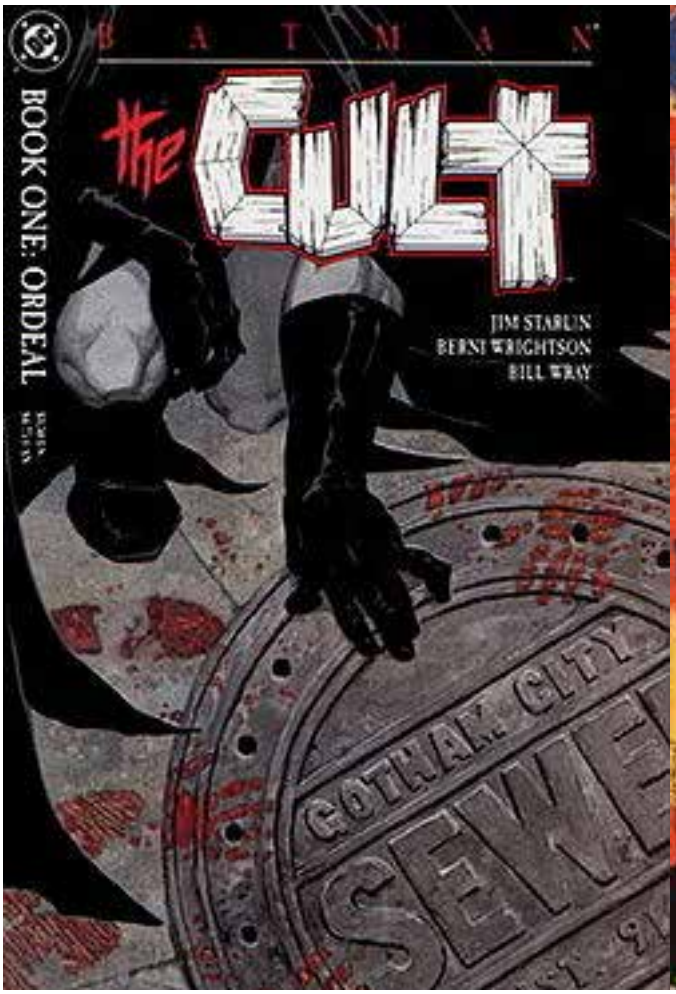
First with Starlin, he produced *Heroes For Hope* in 1985, an all-star comics jam to benefit victims of African famine. Featuring the *X-Men*, it marked the first of several such books over the years for various causes, providing a chance for comics fans and comics creators to give back. The two produced a similar title the next year for DC Comics, *Heroes For Hunger*, featuring Superman and Batman.

Something about dabbling with the main heroes inspired both artists, and their further collaborations for DC were simultaneously brilliant, melancholy, dark, and resonant. They also did a graphic novel for Marvel featuring The Thing and The Hulk, but it didn't have quite the long-lasting impact that *Batman: The Cult* did. Featuring an underground army of homeless (literally underground), *The Cult* gave Wrightson the opportunity to draw a Gotham City as idiosyncratic and as much his own as Frank Miller made it in *The Dark Knight Returns*. Wrightson's Batman was lean and wiry, like most of his figures, and you could feel the sweat and the fear permeating the streets. Though some of *The Cult* was "borrowed" for Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises*, that film can't touch the impact of the four issue mini-series.

Wrightson also expanded to the full Justice League, collaborating with Starlin on *The Weird*. Not as well known as *The Cult*, it's a personal favorite that does a more interesting job of melding Starlin's more cosmic interests with Wrightson's earthier art. An extradimensional bodiless entity made of pure energy, the Weird fled to Earth to help stop an invasion from its own overlords. Possessing a recently deceased suburban father, the alien had to recruit the Justice League to defend the planet while wrestling with strange emotions and memories of his host body's life.

It's the rare superhero story that wrestles with grief and the ineffable, sometimes painful, joy of being alive, and only an artist of Wrightson's sensibility could have given it the right spark. It's only fitting that The Weird sacrificed himself at the end, and though he has reappeared in this century, without Wrightson, he has little traction in fans' hearts.

Wrightson, however, does. He didn't continue much with superheroes, returning instead to his first love, horror. Ill health even kept him from a Swamp Thing revival. One of a kind, he leaves a great legacy in comics, inspiring artists as diverse in style as Mike Mignola and Kelley Jones, who did draw that revival of Swamp Thing. No doubt Wrightson will continue inspiring as new young artists discover his work.



Marvels by Juan Sanmiguel

The Eighties were an exciting time in comics. Frank Miller's **The Dark Knight Returns** and **Batman: Year One** shook up the entire industry. Alan Moore was blowing everyone away with **Swamp Thing, Watchmen,** and **The Killing Joke**. DC Comics was having great success with the reboots that came after **Crisis on Infinite Earths**. Superman and Wonder Woman were given new life with modern sensibilities. The independents were getting more notice with comics like the Hernandez brothers' **Love and Rockets.**

The Nineties at first took the wrong lessons from the successes from the previous decade. The big companies thought darker was better. Jean Paul Valley took over the mantle of Batman and was more brutal than Bruce Wayne ever was. Hal Jordan went mad with the destruction of his city and destroyed the Green Lantern Corps. What I saw from the Image Comics was gaudy and not fun. Most of the great writers of the Eighties left Marvel and DC. Some focused on their own creations, or left the field. I needed something to restore my interest in comics. The book that did was **Marvels** written by Kurt Busiek and art by Alex Ross.

It was Ross' artwork that caught my attention. The comic was using painted art rather than traditional penciled art. This gave the book a photo realistic look. I first saw sample pages at Confrancisco, the 1993 Worldcon. The pages depicted the origin of the original Human Torch. There were no words in the sample, but the story was clear enough. Ross made the impossible, a being that was a walking ball of flame, look plausible.

The story follows the life of photographer Phil Sheldon who becomes an observer in the Marvel Universe. Sheldon at first has reservations over the Marvels, his name for the super beings that start appearing in the world. The original Human Torch seemed dangerous and Prince Namor of Atlantis threatens New York. He comes around to favoring the Marvels when Captain America arrives on the scene and the other Marvels join the fight against the Axis powers in World War II. Despite losing an eye during Namor's massive water attack on New York, Sheldon continues to cover the Marvels.

In the 1960s, Sheldon welcomes the Fantastic Four and the other heroes that follow. He has apprehension over the X-Men and their fellow mutants. When Sheldon discovers his daughters are hiding a mutant girl in his basement, he questions his feelings over the mutants. He realizes that they have the same wants and fears as everyone and challenges others on their anti-mutant feelings.

The book delivers the awe and wonder of the Fantastic Four's first confrontation with Galactus and the Silver Surfer. Ross gives the Silver Surfer body a reflective surface that makes him look more alien and powerful. The book shows the reader key scenes of the battle. Fearing the end of the world, Sheldon goes to his family during crisis and afterwards his loyalty to the Marvels is strengthened.

Sheldon becomes angry at the attitudes people have toward have the heroes who risk their lives for humanity. People on have become cynical and doubt the Marvels. Sheldon tries to clear Spider-Man of the murder of New York Police captain George Stacy. In the process, he forms a bond with Gwen Stacy, George Stacy's

daughter and Peter Parker's girlfriend. She not only believes Spider-Man innocent of her father's death, but sees the beauty and wonder the Marvels bring to the world. Unfortunately, she is killed by the Green Goblin during a battle with Spider-Man. The press ignore Gwen's death and Sheldon decides to retire.

Sheldon's journey renewed my love of the Marvel Universe. One saw the classic Marvel stories through new eyes. The story reminded the audience why they fell in love with the characters in the first place. They were powerful, but had they were human too. Ross' photo realistic art conveyed this.
Ross understood how the action would really work. He showed it from the same angle the regular people would see it. A lot of it would be looking the battle from below or from a faraway distance. The actions of super humans would be awesome and scary at the same time.

From then on, I looked for comics that reflected that optimism and love for the genre. I found this in the works of Peter David, Terry Moore, and Mark Waid. It was a time for heroes.