

THE 100

**GREATEST
GRAPHIC
NOVELS
OF ALL TIME!**

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FILM
AND
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**148 PAGES ON
THE BEST COMICS
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NOVELS *EVER!***

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HELLBOY
CAPTAIN AMERICA
X-MEN
BATMAN**

Future

FEATURING



ALL-STAR SUPERMAN



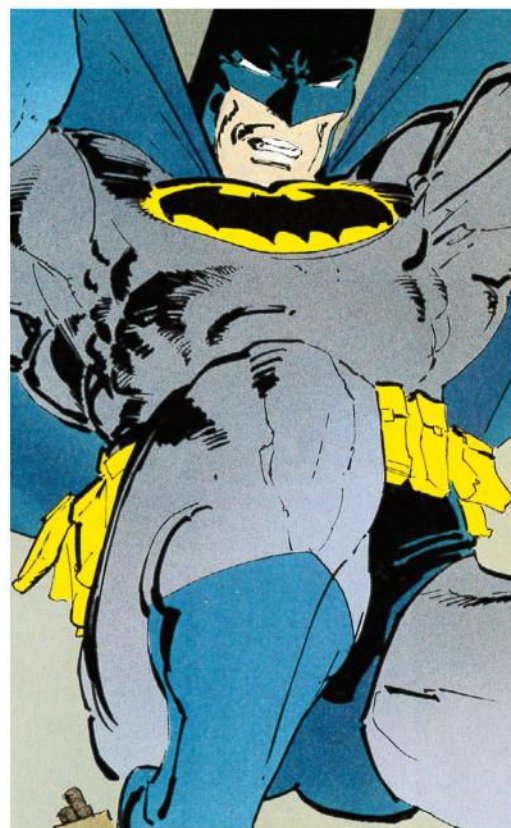
LOVE AND ROCKETS



WATCHMEN

PLUS! INTERVIEWS WITH ALAN MOORE, NEIL GAIMAN, HOWARD CHAYKIN AND MORE

THE 100 GREATEST GRAPHIC NOVELS OF ALL TIME!



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WELCOME!



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How do you define a graphic novel? If you take the term in its literal sense, then you're looking at single, self-contained stories, rather than collected serials and ongoing comics. And that would discount most of your favourites. No *Dark Knight Returns*, no *V For Vendetta* (both originally serialised), no *Love And Rockets* (an ongoing title)... Clearly, we weren't going to go down that route with this list.

Instead, this is a selection of our 100 favourite graphic novels, ongoing comics, collected editions and individual volumes of larger series in all genres. It's a broad slate of titles that we think are essential reading, from super-hero classics to the smartest indies. It's a diverse list where each book has only one thing in common: they're all really, really good.

Are there gaps? Oh, for sure! There are way more than 100 great comics out there and we've tried not to lean *too* hard on specific creators (there's more than a little Alan Moore and Grant Morrison here, but they both could have been far more dominant). But I hope you'll find something cool and new that you want to try as well as a selection of your old favourites.

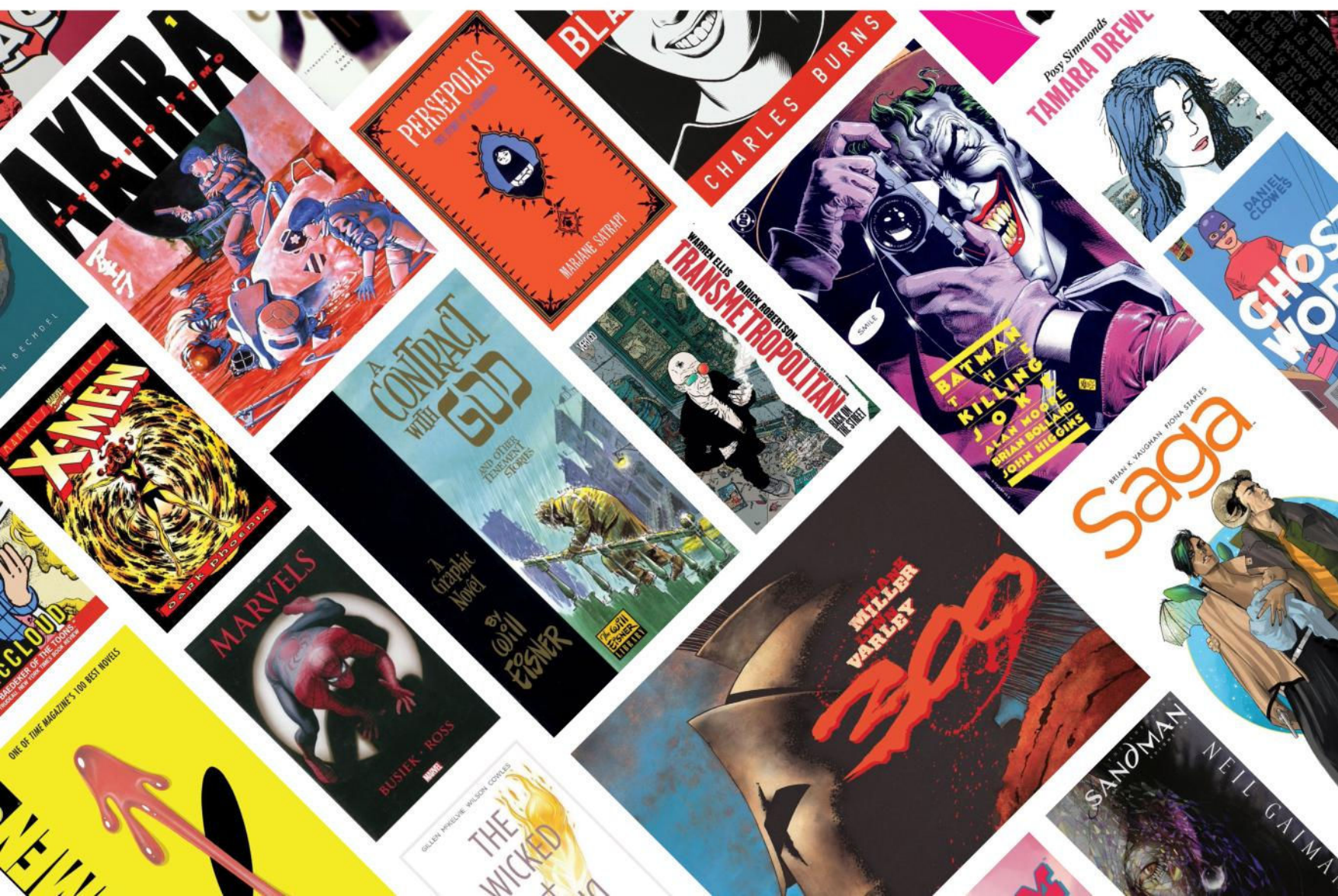
Will

Will Salmon, Editor



THE 100 GREATEST GRAPHIC NOVELS OF ALL TIME

Words by: Carl Anka, Sam Ashurst, David Barnett, Abigail Chandler, Paul Gravett, Miles Hamer, Stephen Jewell, Rob Lane, James Lovegrove, Will Salmon, Alasdair Stuart, Sara Westrop.





SCOTT PILGRIM AND THE INFINITE SADNESS



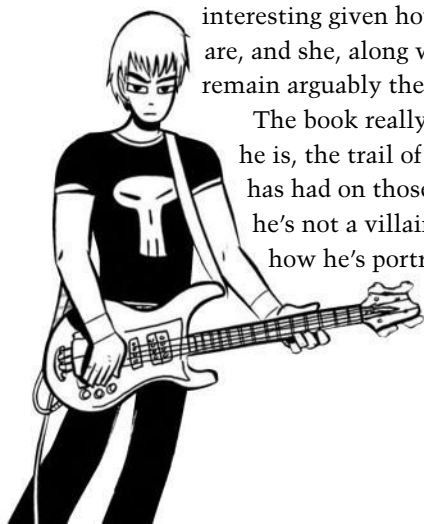
Writer Bryan Lee O'Malley
Artist Bryan Lee O'Malley
Published 2005
Publisher Oni Press

Scott Pilgrim is dating Ramona Flowers. This is good. However, to continue dating her, Scott must battle her seven evil exes. This is bad. Especially because, in this third volume of the utterly individual series, the ex he must battle is Todd Ingram. Todd is a successful musician and is dating Scott's own evil ex, Envy Adams. Even worse? He has vegan superpowers...

Bryan Lee O'Malley's work positively sings here, almost literally at times. The fight scenes (often the highlights of the series) are gloriously over-the-top and at the same time fiercely well-choreographed and hard-hitting. The jokes come thick and fast, and the level of visual invention is extraordinarily high.

But what makes it work are the characters. This is the volume where we get complex, interesting answers for why Envy and Scott are like they are. Envy's transformation is especially interesting given how understandable the pressures on her are, and she, along with the magnificently snuffy Todd, remain arguably the series' best villains.

The book really works when it explores why Scott is as he is, the trail of destruction he's left and the impact this has had on those around him. Scott isn't a hero, yet, but he's not a villain either, and the unflinching honesty in how he's portrayed is one of the things that makes the series, and this volume especially, a classic. **ALASDAIR STUART**



PUNISHER: BORN



Writer Garth Ennis
Artist Darick Robertson
Published 2003
Publisher Marvel (MAX)

The origins of the Punisher are rather simple and to the point. After seeing his family get caught in crossfire between rival Mafia houses, former Marine Frank Castle dedicates himself to a one-man war against organised crime. That was how the Punisher is born.

Or was it?

In *Punisher: Born*, Garth Ennis shows us how the seeds for the Punisher were sown long before that tragic day in New York. Taking us back to Frank's time as a Marine during the Vietnam War, *Punisher: Born* sees him outgunned, burnt out and facing total obliteration. The Vietnam setting might be familiar to those who read Ennis' flashback scenes in *Preacher*, but *Born* uses the senseless war to serve even wilder goals here (the Devil *might* be here, but he's not playing cards this time). You know Frank will make it out of Cambodia alive, of course, but when you consider the costs he has to pay to do so, you'll wonder if that is a good thing.

Set in the more grounded "M for Mature" world of Marvel MAX (where many of our 616 heroes don't exist), this story is Ennis refining his already character-defining work on Frank Castle. A twisted, exhausting story of futile brutality. Yet at the same time, impossible to put down. **CARL ANKA**

I KILL GIANTS



Writer Joe Kelly

Artist J. M. Ken Niimura

Published 2008-2009

Publisher Image

Barbara Thorson is having a rough old time of it. She feels like an outsider and is bullied at school, has a hard home life and causes trouble for her teachers. She escapes this difficult mess by getting wrapped up in her imagination. She carries a hammer in her purse (nicknamed Coveleski after baseball pitcher Harry Coveleski) and, in her mind, she does indeed kill giants.

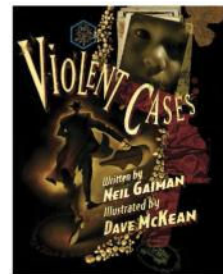
Like *Pan's Labyrinth* reimagined with fabulous manga-indebted art, this is a short and sweet treat that dazzles at every turn. Kelly's script has a melancholy tinge and an affectionate sympathy for his troubled hero, despite the fact that, quite often, Barbara can be kind of annoying. Hey, she is a teenager.

Niimura's art is superb throughout, and key to the book's success. A talented artist with a wide-range of styles, it was he who insisted that *I Kill Giants* should be drawn in a manga style (as well as suggesting Barbara's signature rabbit ears). It gives the book a fresh, modern feel that contrasts nicely with the well-worn premise. **WILL SALMON**



IMAGES © JOE KELLY & J. M. KEN NIIMURA

VIOLENT CASES



Writer Neil Gaiman

Artist Dave McKean

Published 1987

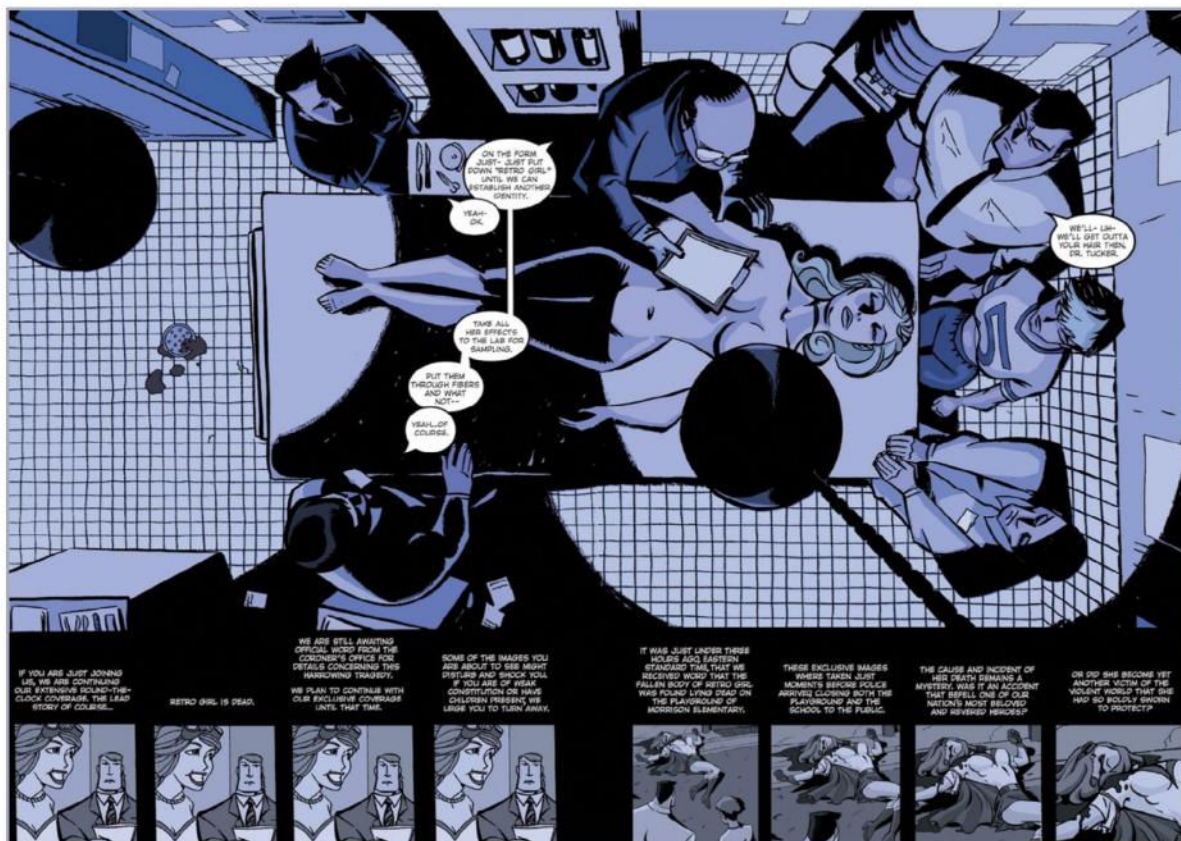
Publisher Escape/Dark Horse

"I wouldn't want to gloss over the true facts," says a narrator who looks very much like a young Neil Gaiman, in the opening panels of *Violent Cases*. "Without true facts, where are we?" In this slim graphic novel, where we are is in the misty interzone between storytelling and reminiscence. Gaiman's tale is a short and bittersweet anecdote about a childhood visit to an elderly osteopath who claims he treated Al Capone, back in Prohibition-era Chicago. But who can we trust? Is it something one or other of them has made up? Faces become mutable, history subjective.

Violent Cases was Gaiman's first collaboration with artist Dave McKean, and while it is a neophyte effort from two exceptional creators who would, separately and together, go on to produce much more substantial work, its mere 40-odd pages contain multitudes. In delicate pencil and ink – beefed up with dashes of colour for the Dark Horse rerelease – McKean captures beautifully the feeling of fragile uncertainty at the heart of Gaiman's narrative, the sense of a youngster getting a first glimpse of the dark undertow that pulses in the deep waters beyond the shallows of life. **JAMES LOVEGROVE**



IMAGES © NEIL GAIMAN & DAVE MCKEAN



POWERS VOL. 1: WHO KILLED RETRO GIRL?

CRIME PROCEDURAL WITH ENGAGING CHARACTERS...
SET IN A WORLD WITH SUPERHUMANS

Detective Christian Walker has a unique gift for "Powers" cases – crimes involving superhumans. Detective Deena Pilgrim has a unique gift for saying exactly what she thinks and annoying people. Reluctantly partnered together, the two deal with the biggest case of their careers: the murder of legendary super-heroine Retro Girl.

Oeming's noirish, spiky art keys you into the "Chandler with capes" vibe from the first page. Bendis's scripting is on top form here too, and the two fit together as easily as Walker and Pilgrim don't. There's incredible pace, as well as economy of storytelling. The world feels lived-in and well realised, even as you explore it for the first time.

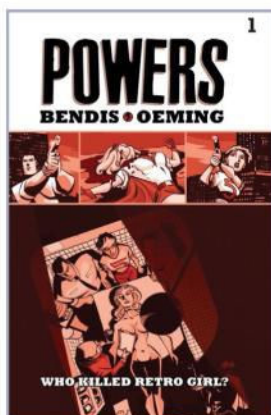
The story perfectly balances the case with the characters, and everything that the series pays off is introduced here. Walker's massive frame, gift for



Powers cases and long-suffering attitude all make him a compelling hero, but it's Pilgrim, all cheerful profanity and casual violence, you'll remember. The series bagged an Eisner Award in 2001 for Best New Series and inspired the TV show of the same name. But these first six issues remain the series' best arc and certainly one of the best "pilot episodes" you'll ever read. **ALASDAIR STUART**

“THE SPIKY ART KEYS INTO THE ‘CHANDLER WITH CAPES’ VIBE”

IMAGES © BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS & MICHAEL AVON OEMING

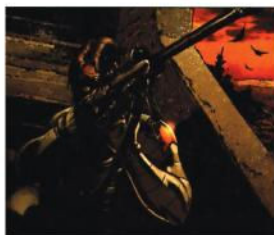


Writer Brian Michael Bendis

Artist Michael Avon Oeming

Published 2000

Publisher Image



IMAGES © MARVEL COMICS

Writer Ed Brubaker

Artist Steve Epting

Published 2004

Publisher Marvel



CAPTAIN AMERICA: WINTER SOLDIER

IF DEATH DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN SOMETHING IN COMICS, THIS RETURN FROM THE DEAD DID

Bucky Barnes was one of the few comic book characters who died and stayed dead. For the best part of 40 years, his demise was both the tragic origin story of Captain America and the greatest failure in his career. To bring him back would have been akin to resurrecting Spider-Man's Uncle Ben and Gwen Stacy in back-to-back issues. Or having Bruce Wayne's parents return and revive Jason Todd in the same story. Folly. A silly story that would critically undermine Captain America.

"I knew that if you were going to take away Cap's biggest tragedy, you had to replace it with another huge tragedy or he would lose that marble for you to play," said writer Ed Brubaker about the making of *Winter Soldier*, and so he set about crafting one of the best stories of reinvention and revival the comic book world has ever seen.

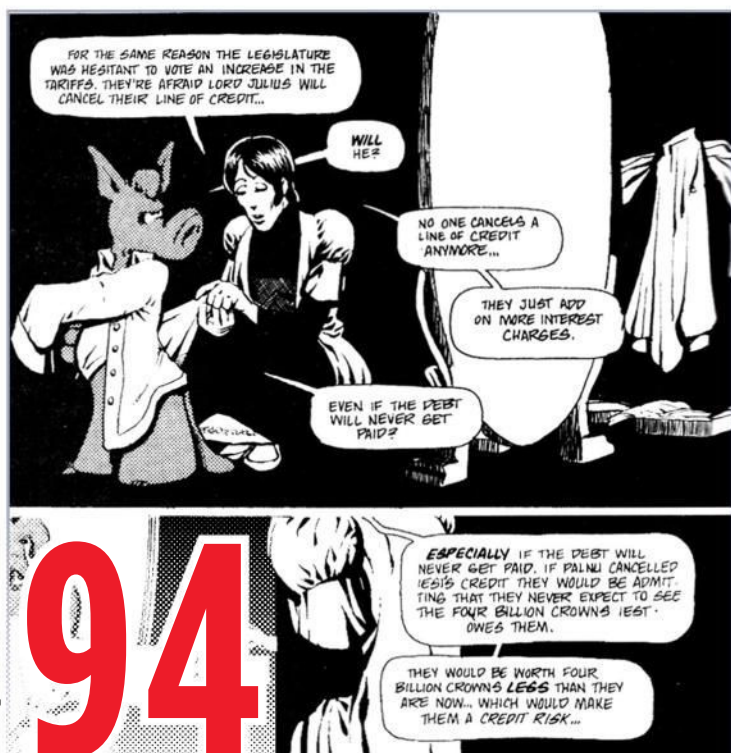
No more was Bucky the fresh-faced kid sidekick of the war-era comics, but instead one of the most

dangerous US assets during the Second World War. Yes, he was a teen when he fought, but that was only because he was probably the best hand-to-hand combatant in the world at the time. He was too good a soldier to not be in the fray.

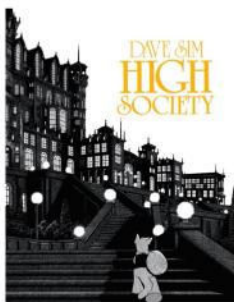
Thanks to the excellent Marvel film bearing the same name, the cat is now out of the bag regarding the identity of the Winter Soldier, but such is the craft of Brubaker's tale that this 14-issue story only gains drama when you read it with knowledge of the twist. This isn't the story of how Bucky came back to life, it's the story of why his return is so important to Steve Rogers, to Sharon Carter, to the Falcon – and to the world at large...

Not only did *Winter Soldier* pull off the impossible in reviving Bucky, it also laid the groundwork for some of Marvel's most important stories of the decade. Comics are undoubtedly better for Bucky's return. **CARL ANKA**

IMAGES © DAVE SIM & GERHARD



CEREBUS: HIGH SOCIETY



Writer Dave Sim

Artists Dave Sim & Gerhard

Published 1977-2004

Publisher Aardvark-Vanaheim

Collected in 16 massive telephone-directory-size albums, *Cerebus* is the story of the titular Aardvark's life, death and everything in between. The series begins as a piece of light, very funny fantasy. Cerebus is essentially Conan – a short, grey, angry Conan. The first volume is split into relatively small stories as Sim and Gerhard find their feet. Later volumes expand as they get more comfortable with the pacing and size of the story, and the result is often extraordinary.

The second volume, *High Society*, is a series highlight. It's a self-contained political thriller, comedy and satire that includes some brilliant physical comedy and a Gormenghastian hotel

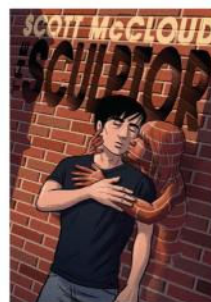
matched only by the ambitions of the people living within it.

The world opens up further in later volumes, like *Church And State*, with increasingly complex plots. However, the volumes that follow the tragic *Jaka's Story* are controversial, with Sim's personal, religious and political views becoming increasingly prominent in the work and increasingly alienating for many readers. The early adventures, however, remain superb works of comic fantasy. **ALASDAIR STUART**



IMAGES © SCOTT McCloud / SELF MADE HERO

THE SCULPTOR



Writer Scott McCloud

Artist Scott McCloud

Published 2015

Publisher Self Made Hero

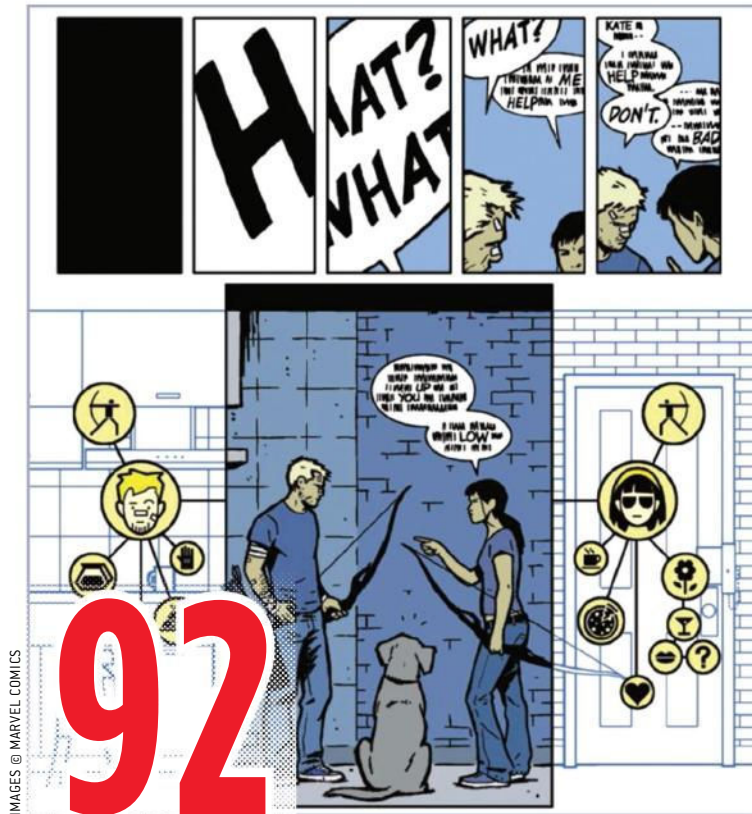
The Sculptor was the first graphic novel from Scott McCloud in ten years. The expectation, then, was naturally sky-high. And while *The Sculptor* may not quite reach the level of sophistication of his *Understanding Comics*, that simply means that *The Sculptor* is an exceptionally good graphic novel, rather than a book that will rewire your brain...

David Smith is an artist whose career hasn't quite gone the way he hoped it would. An encounter with Death (personified here as his late uncle) ends with David striking a bargain. For 200 days he will have the ability to craft whatever he wants using only his hands. After that, however, he will die. David

leaps at the chance, but after he falls for Meg, he begins to wonder if he has made the right choice after all...

A magic-realist love story with a sly sense of humour and a big, beating heart, *The Sculptor* more than justifies the long wait and its own length (the hardback clocks in at more than 500 pages, though expert pacing means the story rushes by) with strong characters, lush blue-and-white art and some amusing barbs at the art world's expense. **WILL SALMON**





HAWKEYE



Writer Matt Fraction

Artist David Aja

Published 2012-2015

Publisher Marvel Comics

Matt Fraction and David Aja's *Hawkeye* run ushered in a new era of modern comics, an era where the day-to-day life of super-heroes can (once again, as in the 1960s *Spider-Man*) be just as engaging and important as their

super-hero life. Here, Clint Barton is more interested in keeping his apartment building safe from a seemingly-endless army of local tracksuit-wearing gangsters than in fighting alongside the rest of the Avengers.

Hawkeye is arguably one of the ultimate experimental mainstream comics of the 21st century so far, with an issue told entirely from the point of view of a dog (making clever use of icons, rather than dialogue) and another in American Sign Language. Aja's art is deceptively simple but enormously smart and expressive, and Fraction's lovable loser Barton is infinitely more engaging than Jeremy Renner's big-screen one.

Aja is the main artist associated with this run, although

Annie Wu later took over on Kate Bishop centric issues and Javier Pulido did some sterling stand-in work. But when you picture comic book Clint Barton, once you've read this book, it's Aja's sad-eyed, Band-Aided version you'll think of. Kate comes out of it well, too, getting her fair share of the limelight.

And, bro, those tracksuit gangsters. They were totally a thing, bro. **ABIGAIL CHANDLER**



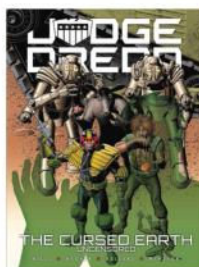
JUDGE DREDD: THE CURSED EARTH

Writers Pat Mills and John Wagner

Artists Mike McMahon and Brian Bolland

Published 1978

Publisher Rebellion



It may not have the same epic body count or world-changing outcome as, say, "The Apocalypse War", but this early Dredd is an all-time classic.

The 2 T (Fru) T virus has hit Mega-City Two, transforming its victims into savages. Unable to deliver an antidote by air, the Judges of Mega-City One are forced to send it overland across the irradiated badlands of the Cursed Earth. On the trek, Dredd and his team of Judges encounter Satanus the Tyrannosaurus rex, meet the insane Robert L Booth – the last President of the United States, who started the nuclear cataclysm that has left the world in such a wretched state – and get caught up in a fight between rival fast food chains. Indeed, the “Burger Wars” chapters proved so controversial in their depiction of McDonalds, Jolly Green Giant and Burger King that 2000 AD owners Rebellion have only just secured permission to reprint them, almost 40 years later.

It's less a cohesive tale, more a collection of exciting short stories with an overriding theme, but that only adds to its charm.



"The Cursed Earth" comes from a time when Dredd's world wasn't quite as well-defined as it is now, and you never quite know what he will encounter next. In getting out of the Big Meg for an extended tour, it lays the tracks for many future stories to come, and the cast of characters have a lot of personality – notably Spikes Harvey Rotten, the criminal punk who becomes a noble ally. **WILL SALMON**



THE NEW TEEN TITANS

A MUCH-LOVED CLASSIC OF THE '80s, COMBINING ACTION, CHARACTERISATION AND YOUTH APPEAL

A few years before they set about destroying the DC multiverse in *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, Marv Wolfman and George Perez gave DC its best selling series of the decade with their 1980 relaunch of the company's premier junior super-group.

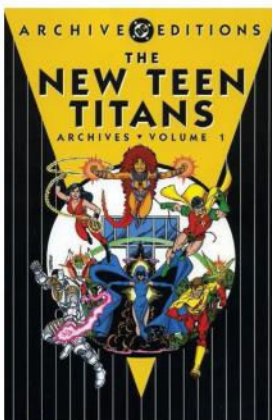
The Teen Titans had been introduced back in 1964, teaming up the kid sidekicks of some of DC's biggest names – Robin, Kid Flash, Aqualad and Wonder Girl. They gained their own title in 1966, which bumbled along until 1972. A brief attempt at reviving it in 1976 lasted just a couple of years. In 1980, in response to Chris Claremont and John Byrne's runaway success with Marvel's youth team the Uncanny X-Men, Wolfman and Perez resurrected the Titans, making them subtly older and masterfully capturing the Zeitgeist.

In addition to updating Robin, Kid Flash and Wonder Girl, they added intriguing new characters: the green-skinned Changeling, who was capable of transforming into any animal form but whose light-hearted demeanour hid a troubled childhood; exiled alien warrior Starfire; brooding empath Raven; and Cyborg, whose high-tech prostheses

had saved his life and given him enormous power but left him looking and feeling barely human.

Crucially, all these characters were credibly adolescent, and the stories skilfully mixed action with the soap-opera elements that made the X-Men so compelling: tangled relationships and romances, teen angst and anguish. Readers also warmed to Perez's lovingly detailed art; while his basic drawing could still be a little shaky, he displayed unmatched skill in handling a huge number of characters and keeping them visually distinct even in the most complex action scenes. He was fully engaged in the series, often co-plotting the stories with Wolfman, and the pair's commitment shone.

The series introduced equally memorable foes, notably Deathstroke the Terminator, who featured in a storyline often cited as a high point of the series, "The Judas Contract" (issues 42-44 and 1984's annual), which was soon reissued in one volume, now scandalously out of print. Still, the collected edition of the first eight issues is ample evidence of why *Titans* was one of the favourite super-hero titles of the 1980s. **STEPHEN JEWELL**



IMAGES © DC COMICS

Writer Marv Wolfman
Artist George Perez
Published 1980-96
Publisher DC Comics



BOX OFFICE POISON

SMART, FUNNY, KNOWING, ALLUSIVE... NEW YORK AND MODERN LIFE DISTILLED TO THE ESSENCE

Take a pinch of '90s smash series *Friends*, add a dash of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* books, throw in a bit of Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* stories, and mix well with John Hughes's post-teen oeuvre such as *St Elmo's Fire*... and you might get an inkling of Alex Robinson's magnum opus *Box Office Poison*.

Following the intersecting escapades of a cast of young New Yorkers, the black-and-white epic was first published by independent company Antarctic Press in the latter half of the '90s, then reached a wider audience when Top Shelf put out a collected edition in 2001.

New Yorker Robinson, who studied at the Big Apple's School of Visual Arts under the legendary Will Eisner, was inspired to create his 600-plus-page story by *Cerebus* creator Dave Sim's similarly monumental vision. But there are no aardvarks in sight here... just a sprawling cast including bookstore worker Sherman Davies (Robinson himself worked in a bookshop), who lives in fear of his terrifying boss "The Dragon", and his extended friendship group, many of whom work

directly or peripherally in the cartooning and comics worlds.

Among them are Jane Pekar, her surname a nod to underground comics luminary Harvey, and Irving Flavor, whose battle with the mighty Zoom Comics for some proper recompense for the Nightstalker character he created for them echoes similar real-life calls for justice for the likes of Jack Kirby and Siegel & Shuster.

It's chock-full of pop-cultural references, from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (there's a couple with the surname Yossarian) to Vonnegut, from Laurel and Hardy to Wallace and Gromit.

Sometimes *Box Office Poison* can seem a little chaotic as it takes sudden off-road turns into the backstories of relatively minor characters, but it is all the richer for it. Robinson's plotting is intricate and detailed, and he rarely misses a beat as he balances drama and humour to fine effect.

The series is also a love letter to New York, and Robinson's portrayal of the city and its denizens is a fully immersive experience, shot through with warmth and heart. **DAVID BARNETT**

Writer Alex Robinson
Artist Alex Robinson
Published 2001
Publisher Top Shelf Productions



ASTRO CITY: VOLUME 1



Writer Kurt Busiek
Artist Brent Anderson
Published 1995
Publisher Image Comics

To understand how fresh *Astro City* felt when it first appeared, you need to remember just how grim super-hero comics had grown in the '90s. *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* had blown everyone away, but publishers gleaned all the wrong lessons and unleashed a swathe of violent, cynical imitators. *Astro City* was the complete antithesis of all that. Bright, optimistic (but not wishy-washy) and designed to re-inject that all-important sense of wonder to the genre, it was a joy for long-time comics fans.

The titular city is a hub for powered folk, including numerous riffs on Marvel and DC characters, such as Superman-alike The Samaritan. Busiek's work repeats some of the techniques he'd used in the classic *Marvels* the year before – telling some stories from the ground level and the point of view of ordinary people, revelling in comics nostalgia and packed with clever allusions. That said, it's not a backwards-looking series. The anthology format allows for a broad range of stories and approaches, all rendered in Anderson's glorious, loving art. The series' third volume began in 2013 and continues to this day. **WILL SALMON**



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TANK GIRL

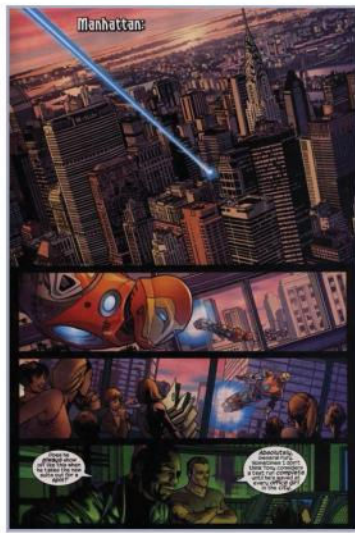


Writer Alan Martin
Artist Jamie Hewlett
Published 1988-
Publisher Titan Books



In a post-Gorillaz world it's occasionally hard to remember just how radical Jamie Hewlett's art seemed in the late '80s/early '90s. Originally published in *Deadline* magazine, Tank Girl was a blast of irreverent, anarchic, punkish weirdness straight from the underground. Today, it looks positively mainstream. This doesn't take anything away from the book, and especially TG herself. Alan Martin's scripts and Hewlett's art have a lunatic energy. The post-apocalyptic future setting and thin plots were simply a framework for the daft adventures of the characters (including TG's mutant kangaroo boyfriend Booga, and pals Jet Girl and Sub Girl among others). Pop culture references came thick and fast, and there's a strong anti-authoritarian streak throughout.

Sure, the stories are usually ephemeral, but they're always funny. And TG herself made a huge impact. Her roots may be firmly planted in the period, but she's proved to be remarkably enduring, returning time and again under various creative teams. Still, it's the original Martin and Hewlett strips, collected in three volumes, that remain the most essential. **WILL SALMON**



THE ULTIMATES



Writer Mark Millar

Artist Bryan Hitch

Published 2002-2004

Publisher Marvel Comics

Millar and Hitch's original 13-issue limited run on *The Ultimates* is probably the most influential reboot of the modern era of comics. In the Ultimate imprint, Marvel gave creators free rein to update its most recognisable heroes, release them from the shackles of continuity and make them accessible again to new readers. Millar's was the toughest task: lifting the then unfashionable Avengers. By adding cynicism and violence and making awesome decisions (basing Nick Fury on Samuel L Jackson long before Marvel movies existed), the team exceeded their target, crafting a series that's become beyond iconic.

The move didn't just change comics (even today, Hitch's *JLA* attempts to recreate *The Ultimates'* impact for DC) but movies: the Marvel Cinematic Universe's *Avengers* line-up and tone are carbon copies of what Hitch and Millar achieved on its pages.

The very definition of a blockbuster comic, Hitch's cinematic art combined with Millar's high-concept plots and quotable one-liners to achieve the unthinkable: *The Ultimates* made the Avengers impossibly cool. **SAM ASHURST**



IMAGES © MARVEL COMICS

86

STRANGERS IN PARADISE: I DREAM OF YOU



I DREAM OF YOU



Writer Terry Moore

Artist Terry Moore

Published 1996

Publisher Abstract Studio

This second volume of Terry Moore's modern romance makes a far more appealing entry point than volume one: the characters are better developed, the art cleaner and the gags funnier. The series follows the lives of three friends caught in an awkward love triangle. David Qin is in love with Katina "Katchoo" Choovanski, who is in love with her best friend Francine (and harbours *some* feelings for David); Francine just feels confused about the whole thing.

"I Dream Of You" handles all of this sensitively, with a real understanding of the longing that comes with unrequited love, and some powerful revelations about the characters' murky pasts. But it's the violent return of some ghosts from Katchoo's past that truly elevates the book – and the rest of the series, which ran for 106 individual issues. What started out as a funny, sweet homage to Moore's cartooning heroes, like *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz, took on an entirely different, more complex, tragic and resonant tone. Moore was nominated for an Eisner for *Strangers In Paradise* and it's fair to say that his entire career is founded on this brilliant, captivating book. **WILL SALMON**

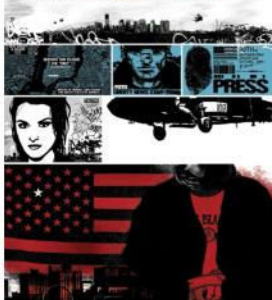


IMAGES © TERRY MOORE / ABSTRACT

85



DMZ
BRIAN WOOD / RICCARDO BURCHIELLI BOOK ONE

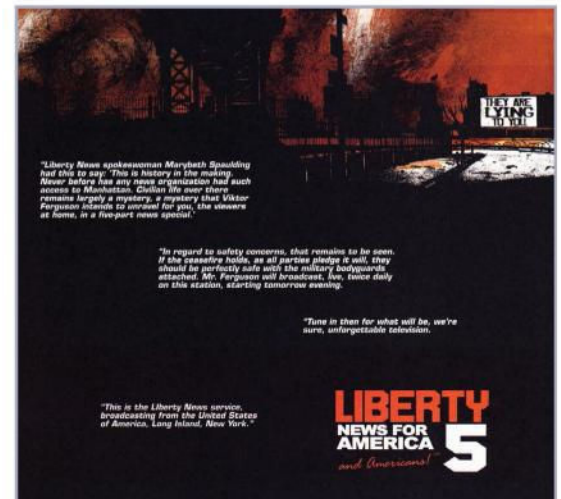
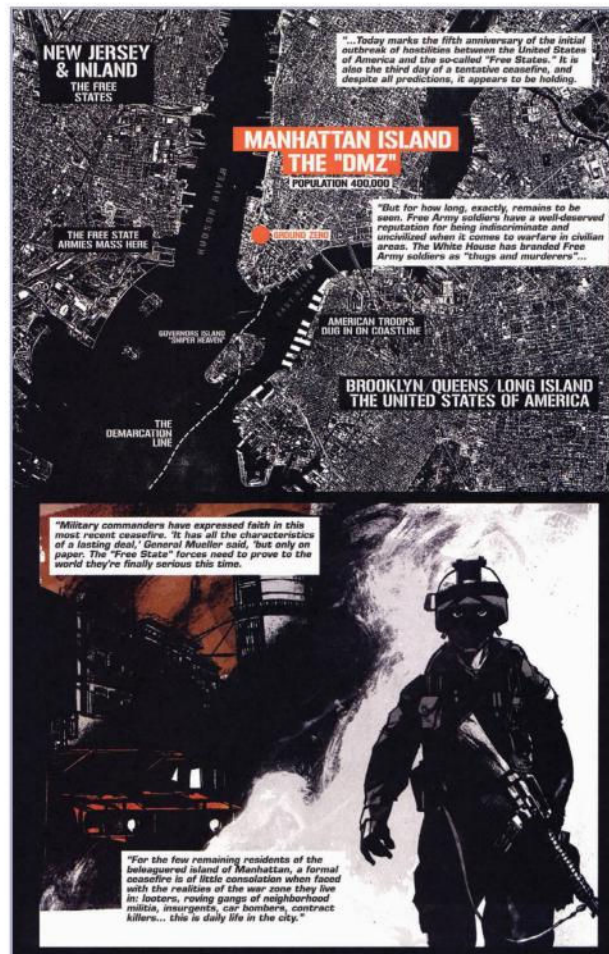


Writer Brian Wood

Artist Riccardo Burchielli

Published 2005-2012

Publisher Vertigo



DMZ

PATRIOTISM, THE MEDIA, THE BRUTALISING EFFECT OF WAR... THE POLITICAL IS INTENSELY PERSONAL

Conceived in the early noughties, not long after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, and serialised over 72 issues from 2005 to 2012, Brian Wood's masterpiece imagines New York City as the locus of a modern-day American civil war. Manhattan Island, the titular Demilitarised Zone, is contested by the US Government on one hand and a ragtag secessionist militia group on the other. The majority of its inhabitants have fled but some remain and are caught up in the crossfire, their lives blighted by deprivation, gun battles and missile attacks.

Into this chaos goes photojournalist Matty Roth, who inadvertently becomes the main conduit for news between the DMZ and the rest of the world. Matty starts out hapless and bewildered, desperately struggling to maintain his impartiality even as he forms a romantic bond with local girl Zee Hernandez, a streetwise medical student who's become a de facto doctor. It's hard not to take sides, however, and in Book 6 of the 12 volumes, "Blood in the Game," Matty finally comes down off the fence and throws in with populist demagogue Parco Delgado, whose charisma and anti-establishment

stance seem to make him a credible threat to the powers-that-be – so much so that Delgado becomes the victim of an assassination attempt.

Matty's decision turns out to be one in a series of missteps and will have serious ramifications, but at least for the time being he goes from antihero to hero, a proactive player in his own story. It's a mark of Wood's writing skill that he can make someone as self-centred and inept as Matty likeable, but then *DMZ* is about compromised individuals doing their best (and worst) in a compromised situation. Naiveté and neutrality are not valid positions to take in a world where corruption reigns. That's the lesson Matty must learn.

Italian artist Riccardo Burchielli illustrates almost the entire run in a scribbly, grotesque style that suits the material perfectly. *DMZ* is a political comic, make no mistake, but it is not a shouty, spittle-flecked polemic. It's nuanced, sophisticated, sometimes gut-wrenchingly dark, and offers a clear-eyed view of the lengths to which the elites will go in order to pursue their aims and the steps ordinary folk must take to resist them. **JAMES LOVEGROVE**



ALL IMAGES © DC COMICS

Writer Jeph Loeb

Artist Tim Sale

Published 1996-1997

Publisher DC Comics



BATMAN: THE LONG HALLOWEEN



ENJOY THE DARK KNIGHT MOVIES? THIS ABSORBING WHODUNIT IS THEIR ORIGIN AND INSPIRATION

A deeply engrossing whodunit mystery that befits the World's Greatest Detective, *The Long Halloween* finds Batman near the start of his career, as Gotham's underworld turns from being run by gangster families to colourful arch villainy. From the talented pair of Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale, this is one of the best mystery thrillers the Dark Knight has ever taken part in.

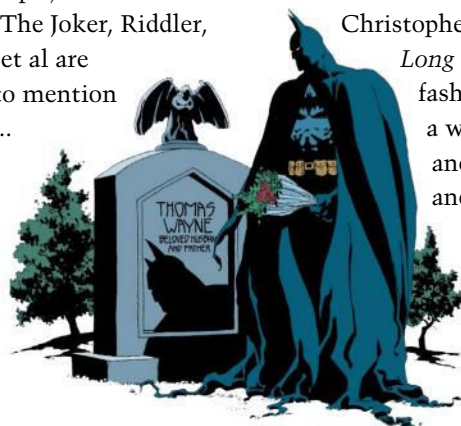
On a frantic search for a serial killer known as Holiday amidst a gang battle for supremacy between mob bosses Maroni and Falcone, Bruce Wayne has his work cut out for him. He allies with Police Captain Jim Gordon and District Attorney Harvey Dent, and the trio aim to take down Carmine Falcone with perhaps just a little rule-bending. And that's before The Joker, Riddler, Poison Ivy and Catwoman et al are thrown into the mix. Not to mention the evolution of Two-Face...

A key feature of *The Long Halloween's* success is its ability to tell a complicated story in

a straight manner. And, in spite of its fantastical roster of villains, the narrative sells itself with an inherent plausibility. Loeb's dialogue has an authenticity, while character motivations are well-defined, truthful and logical. It's a story with purpose, not just punches (though it has those too).

Tim Sale's muted palette conjures a timeless and distinctive pulp noir Gotham, where everyday human characters jar uncomfortably with the circus freaks of Arkham's rogues gallery, and the scowling, brooding Bat has rarely looked this decidedly badass. It's both crooked nightmare and gangster drama, with barely a chink of daylight to be found between the pages' dark-hearted soul.

A notable influence in the creation of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, *The Long Halloween's* ideas and plot were fashioned into the cinematic template for a whole generation's on-screen Batman, and particularly Two-Face. His physical and psychological scarring in a book this well crafted will make you believe in Harvey Dent. **MILES HAMER**





LUMBERJANES



Writers Noelle Stevenson, Grace Ellis, Shannon Watters

Artist Brooke A. Allen

Published 2014-present

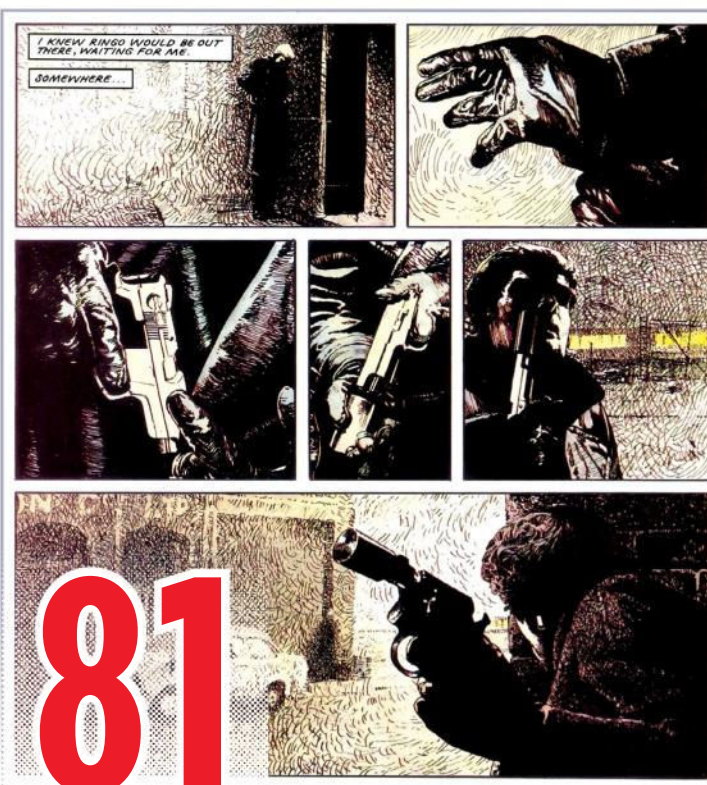
Publisher BOOM! Studios

This wonderful comic about friendship and adventure is the brainchild of Shannon Watters, Grace Ellis and *Nimona* creator Noelle Stevenson. It follows five friends' supernatural escapades at Miss Quinzella Thistkwin Penniquiquil Thistle Crumpet's Camp for Hardcore Lady-Types. Camp inhabitants are affectionately known as Lumberjanes.

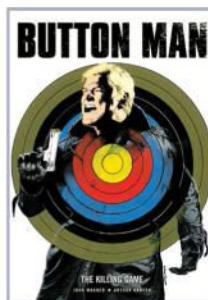
Lumberjanes feels like a comic for a new generation, and fans of *Adventure Time* will definitely get a kick out of it. It's fun, fresh and full of a youthful exuberance that keeps you enraptured with these girls. It's a comic written by women about women

and they're all fleshed out and really unique characters, including the transgender Jo, who is lovingly accepted and portrayed in a positive light. That's rare in comics – and, indeed, the media in general.

The stories are so entertaining and wacky that it's a delight to read. Originally set to be an eight issue series, it's been so well received by fans and critics that it's kept on going, and we're really glad it did. Start with Volume One, "Beware The Kitten Holy," and then invest in the second... and the third... **SARA WESTROP**



BUTTON MAN – THE KILLING GAME



Writer John Wagner

Artist Arthur Ranson

Published 1995

Publisher Rebellion

Judge Dredd co-creator John Wagner was clearly channelling *The Most Dangerous Game* when he came up with this atypically grounded thriller for *2000 AD*.

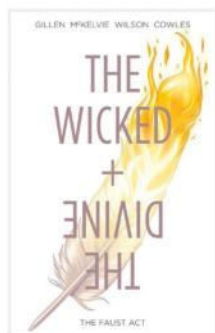
Ex-SAS hardnut Harry Exton is woken in the middle of the night by a phone call. The voice on the other end of the line tells him that someone is coming to kill him and that he must defend himself with extreme prejudice. Exton does – only to find out that he is now part of an international "Killing Game", where wealthy unseen Voices bet on the outcome. He quickly grows wealthy from his involvement in the game, but when he decides to quit, he discovers that it isn't that straightforward...

It's a simple premise, made memorable by Arthur Ranson's European-flavoured art. His work is lifelike, but doesn't suffer from the stiffness that can come with photorealism. The world of *Button Man* is one of shadowy country roads and London Underground stations filled with the lurking threat of murder. "The Killing Game" and its two Ranson-drawn sequels (a third saw Frazer Irving take over) looks like the best '70s thriller never made, while its flashes of subdued surrealism bring to mind the movies of Nicholas Winding Refn and David Lynch.

Originally intended for short-lived British anthology *Toxic!*, *Button Man* found a home at *2000 AD*, where it became one of the comic's most fondly-remembered titles despite not featuring even a whiff of science fiction. **WILL SALMON**



80 THE WICKED + THE DIVINE: THE FAUST ACT



Writer Kieron Gillen

Artist Jamie McKelvie

First published 2014

Publisher Image

Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie are comics' It Couple, working together on critically acclaimed titles such as *Phonogram* and *Young Avengers*, but it was with *The Wicked + The Divine* that they finally hit their creative peak.

The series focuses on 12 gods, reincarnated every century only to live hard for two years and then die. This generation of gods are all young pop stars, modelled on the likes of Bowie, Prince, Rhianna and more.

In the first volume, "The Faust Act", Lucifer – Luci for short, and getting the best lines, as always – finds herself in prison for a crime she swears she didn't commit. Dedicated fangirl Laura sets about trying to uncover a conspiracy at the heart of the pantheon, only to find herself in far too deep.

It's all seriously good-looking. McKelvie's art is gorgeous, assisted by Matt Wilson's vivid, sometimes hallucinatory colours.

As always in a Gillen/McKelvie book, things go from fun to heartbreaking in the turn of a page, and their attitude to character mortality is alarmingly cavalier.

This is an intelligent book, buried deep in a dozen diverse mythologies, but it has more to say about the fame game and modern celebrity culture than it does about gods.

ABIGAIL CHANDLER



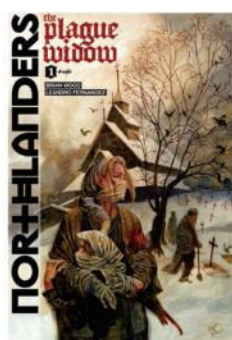
79 NORTHLANDERS: THE PLAGUE WIDOW

Writer Brian Wood

Artist Leandro Fernández

First published 2010

Publisher DC Vertigo



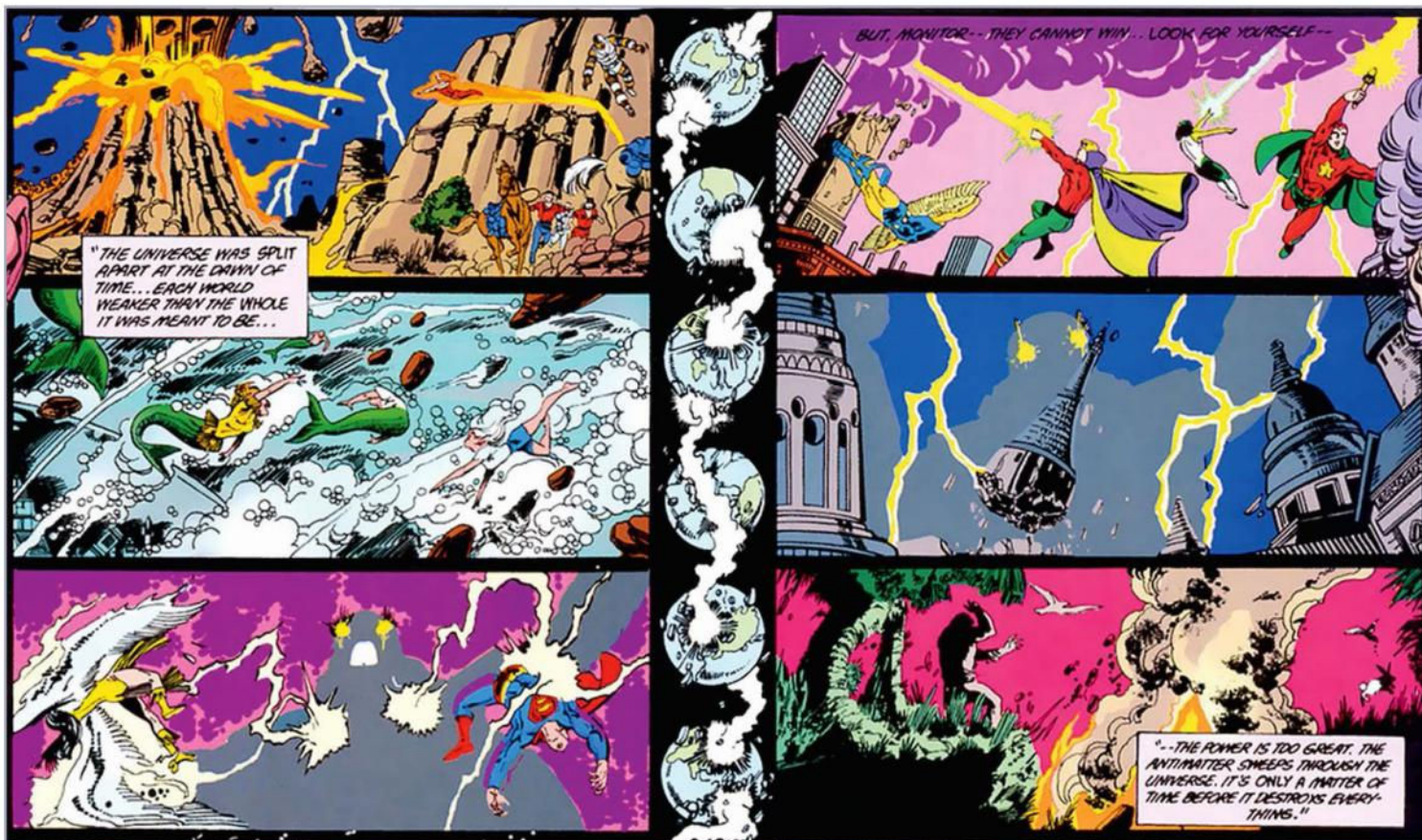
Brian Wood's *Northlanders* is a comic about Vikings, but it's not all longboats and horned helmets and Odin-related oaths. Over the course of its 50-issue run the story arcs range across time periods

and locations, from the Orkneys to Lindisfarne to Dublin to Paris to Iceland and beyond, and from the eighth century to the thirteenth. A mouth-watering selection of artists illustrate, with Dave McCaig's subdued, grimy colour palette uniting their work.

Best volume of this varied but never less than excellent series is "The Plague Widow". The action takes place in a large settlement on the banks of the Volga which is being ravaged by a lethal disease during a long, freezing winter. As the death toll mounts and desperate measures are called for, tensions grow within the small city's wooden walls, and an ambitious rabble-rouser, Gunborg, spies his chance to seize power. He doesn't care who he has to trample over or kill to get it, either, and that includes Hilda, the widow of a prominent merchant.

Drawn with exquisite fluid delicacy by Argentine artist Leandro Fernández, "The Plague Widow" is a harsh, brutal allegory about mob mentality and oppression by violence, making the point that the politics of fear isn't a modern invention; it has always been with us. **JAMES LOVEGROVE**





CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS

78

A LANDMARK CROSSOVER EVENT, POSSIBLY LESS SHOCKING NOW BUT STILL A ROLLERCOASTER RIDE



Writer Marv Wolfman

Artist George Perez

Published 1985-1986

Publisher DC Comics

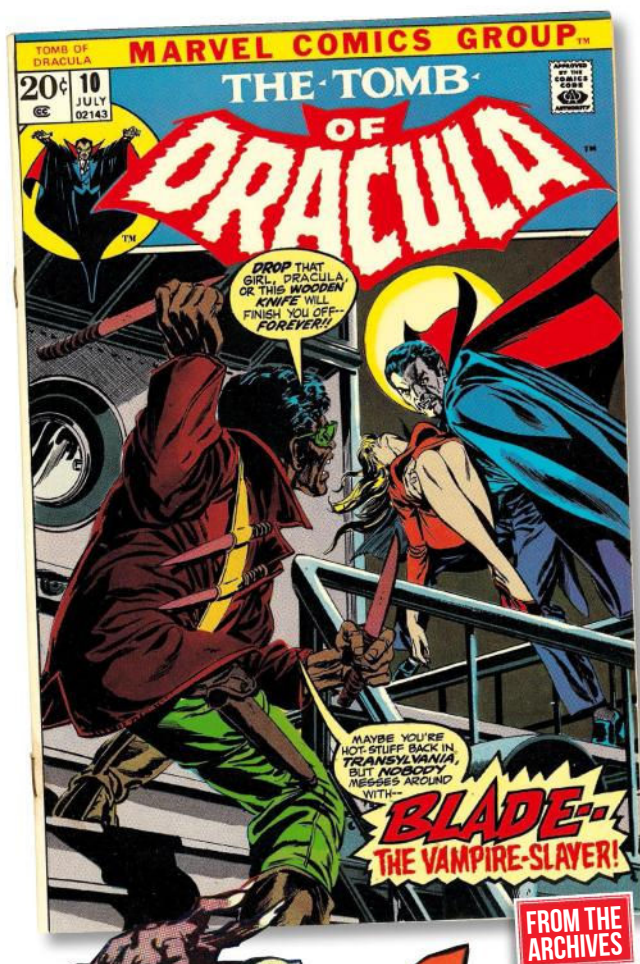
Published to coincide with DC's 50th anniversary in 1985, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was designed to streamline half a century of convoluted, confusing continuity. And while its devastating consequences have been regularly undone – and redone – in the decades since, the 12-issue “maxi-series” (reissued in a one-volume edition in 1998) remains a classic.

Marv Wolfman's bold plan to simplify DC's super-hero “multiverse”, and hence reinvigorate its appeal to new readers, led to the destruction of numerous alternative dimensions and the deaths of many cherished characters, including Aquagirl, Mirror Master and the Earth Two Wonder Woman. Earth One Supergirl Kara Zor-El was killed off so that her cousin Superman was once again the last survivor of Krypton. Even more controversial was the demise of the Silver Age Flash, Barry Allen: his death, while suitably heroic, left readers genuinely shocked. Such ruthlessness, or indeed the death of any major character, had been unthinkable at DC. (The company's past cheerful readiness to embrace variations and incorporate inconsistencies had been a major cause of the mess in the first place.)

True, Barry Allen eventually made a spectacular return 23 years later on the eve of Grant Morrison

and JG Jones's *Final Crisis*, the second of two *Crisis* sequels (the first being 2005's *Infinite Crisis*), both of which served to reverse many of the original series' radical developments. And it's also true that the events of *Crisis* were officially undone in 2015's *Convergence*, which saw various heroes travelling back through the years to prevent the collapse of the multiverse from ever happening. However, it was *Crisis* that laid down the paradigm of the company-wide crossover event that redefined everything (Marvel's first crossover a year before, *Secret Wars*, was devised just to sell spin-off toys), and the original series has stood the test of time. Despite a breakneck pace and numerous allusions that will make sense only to very-long-term fans, the drama and emotional impact are still palpable.

Wolfman's script admirably juggles a cast of thousands along with 50 years' worth of storylines and subplots, and George Perez's dynamic, hugely detailed artwork still stands out. He displays a remarkable ability to squeeze in seemingly countless characters yet keep it all intelligible. *Crisis* is now available in a lavish, oversized Absolute Edition, providing a fitting showcase for Perez's astonishingly intricate art. **STEPHEN JEWELL**



WILD THING

MARV WOLFMAN LIT UP THE '70S AND '80S WITH DARK HEROES, ELEGANT STORYTELLING AND SHOCK MOMENTS, NOT LEAST THE ORIGINAL FROM-THE-GROUND-UP REINVENTION OF THE DC UNIVERSE. HE TALKS WITH **DAVID WEST**

Back in the '70s, irrespective of the quality of the actual comics concerned, one name in a Marvel (or occasionally DC) credit box added an extra frisson of excitement: hey, the writer's called "Wolfman"! How good is this going to be?

Not that Marv Wolfman's scripts weren't thrilling enough in their own right: he was editor-in-chief at Marvel for a stint, where he wrote lengthy runs of *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Doctor Strange* and *Fantastic Four*, and (together with artist Gene Colan) made *Tomb Of Dracula* one of the greatest horror-themed titles there's ever been. Later, at DC in the '80s, he was one

of the forces behind that company's stunning revival: his relaunched *Teen Titans* became its first mainstream super-hero hit in an age, then his *Crisis On Infinite Earths* shook up continuity in an unheard-of way – well, unheard-of since the dawn of the Silver Age, at least – and became the model for wave after wave of similar events ever after.

Indeed, in over 40 years writing and editing comic books, Marv Wolfman has more than made his mark: he created Blade and Bullseye, the Black Cat and Deathstroke; Nova was one of his, and Cyborg too.

So much to talk about, then, but when we met up with Marv in London with his web comic for Shiftylook.com, based on the videogame *Time Crisis*, which he worked on with artist JJ Kirby – we could barely scratch the surface. He may be in his 60s, but Marv has a





lot of work yet to do – and a million stories to tell...

CUTTING HIS TEETH

The US comics industry is dominated by super-heroes – and Marv's done his fair share – but, more unusually, he's also enjoyed a long and fruitful association with the world of horror comics too, from editing Marvel's black-and-white magazine line to the mighty *Tomb of Dracula* in the '70s and *Night Force*, his '80s supernatural series for DC. And then, of course, there's Blade, created by Wolfman and Colan as a vampire-hunting enemy for old fang-face in *ToD*, but quickly taking on a life of his own, not least through three hit films starring Wesley Snipes.

"I loved the first [Blade] movie," Wolfman says now. "I'd have added just a little more humour, but I thought they caught the character perfectly. To me, that was as close to a perfect Blade movie as anyone is ever likely to get, and Wesley Snipes was brilliant. That said, and considering that I'm a big fan of Guillermo Del Toro's anyway, I thought the second Blade was probably a better horror film than the first – but it was not nearly as good a Blade film. The third film, they went off on their own. I can enjoy it purely as something that has nothing to do with Blade, but



it's just a big, fun romp. Is it my Blade? No, but that's okay."

Why does he think horror does so well in other mediums, but – a few notable exceptions aside – splutters along in the comics?

"Horror's much more of a mass market concept," the Wolfman replies. "Comic shops are a place for super-heroes. I don't put them down in the slightest when I say that, because I write that stuff too, but comic shops are primarily adventure-oriented. Horror and sci-fi appeal to a different audience."

Wolfman's often done more than just writing: he's been editor-in-chief at Marvel, senior editor at DC and comics editor for *Disney Adventures Magazine* in his time. But in most readers' eyes it's the characters he's created that he'll surely be best remembered for: Blade, sure, but for a more mainstream audience the thing that really cemented his place in history was a remarkable fan-favourite run on *The New Teen Titans*, working alongside artist George Pérez.

Above: Wolfman had a lengthy run on *Fantastic Four*, launched *Night Force* and created such characters as Cyborg, intergalactic cop Nova and psychopathic killer Bullseye.

Many of the characters that Wolfman created for *Titans* (Starfire, Cyborg, Raven) are still heavily featured in DC's comics and cartoons, but in 2011 a storm of controversy sprang up around the – many thought overly – sexualised portrayal of Starfire in Scott Lobdell's New 52 series, *Red Hood And The Outlaws*. This all must have annoyed him, surely?

"I've always made it a practice," Wolfman says, "that once I give up a book, I never read it again. Remember, there were two series of *Titans* before mine. Bob Haney was the writer back then, and I didn't ask him for his opinion on what I should do... If I'm doing a book then I'm going to do it my way. Similarly with the guys who come after me: I'll never read it, so I'll never know if they screw it up or do it better than me."

But you must have heard about the debate raging around the portrayal of Starfire, surely?

"Oh, I know about it – because every fan in the world felt it was their duty to email me! But I've never read it, so I don't know the context."

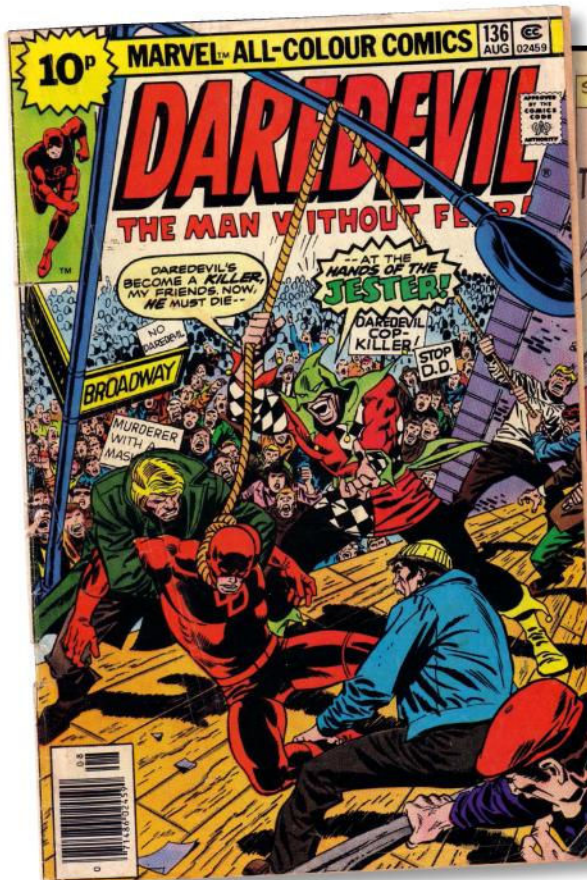
In fact, Wolfman knows Scott Lobdell, and when the two met up at a comic convention in 2012 they posed for a photo with Marv pretending to strangle Scott. It was a gag, but some fans took it seriously.

"My friend, who took the photo, put it on his website, and people actually wrote to him saying, 'Yeah! Marv should be that angry!'"

But you're not angry?

"I'm not! I completely changed Robin, and I didn't even ask Bob Kane. I didn't ask any of the Batman >

“HORROR’S MUCH MORE OF A MASS MARKET CONCEPT – COMIC SHOPS ARE A PLACE FOR SUPER-HEROES”



people. If I can do it, why can't someone else?"

THE CONTINUITY KILLER

It would be awfully hard to accuse Marv of being afraid to challenge the comics status quo – this is the man behind DC's universe-changing *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, remember?

He explains that the influential series was "designed to kill continuity – to start over, because I hate continuity. Oh, I like continuity of character, just not continuity of story or book, and I don't believe in a continuity of the universe."

But doesn't a lack of continuity make everything confusing?

"As a kid, I never had problems differentiating between Lori Lemaris,

Above: Wolfman penned *Daredevil* in the '70s and made his mark in other major Marvel titles as well, co-creating Black Cat in *Amazing Spider-Man* and many others.

who was Superman's mermaid friend from Atlantis, and Aquaman's Atlantis, which was different. I knew they were separate stories; I didn't think that they needed to connect."

Didn't Marvel change the rules, though, tightening it right up...?

"I had no problem when Stan Lee put all his characters in the same universe and they'd occasionally meet," he says, "but they didn't usually affect each other's stories.

When it got to the point where you have to read everything to understand anything, that's when I started to take issue with things. It quickly became ridiculous and self-defeating."

At the time of *Crisis*, DC superhero sales were in the doldrums and Marvel ruled the roost, so Marv very specifically set out to attract Marvel's readers, by giving them something they didn't expect from DC books.

"There are a lot of little things in *Crisis* that nobody was even aware of – except maybe Alan Moore, because he actually spotted it. I was trying to appeal to the Marvel readers who didn't know DC: my assumption was that at some point they'd bought a few DC comics but had decided they didn't like them,

and if they did ever buy a DC comic it would probably be Superman, Batman or maybe Wonder Woman, one of those major characters.

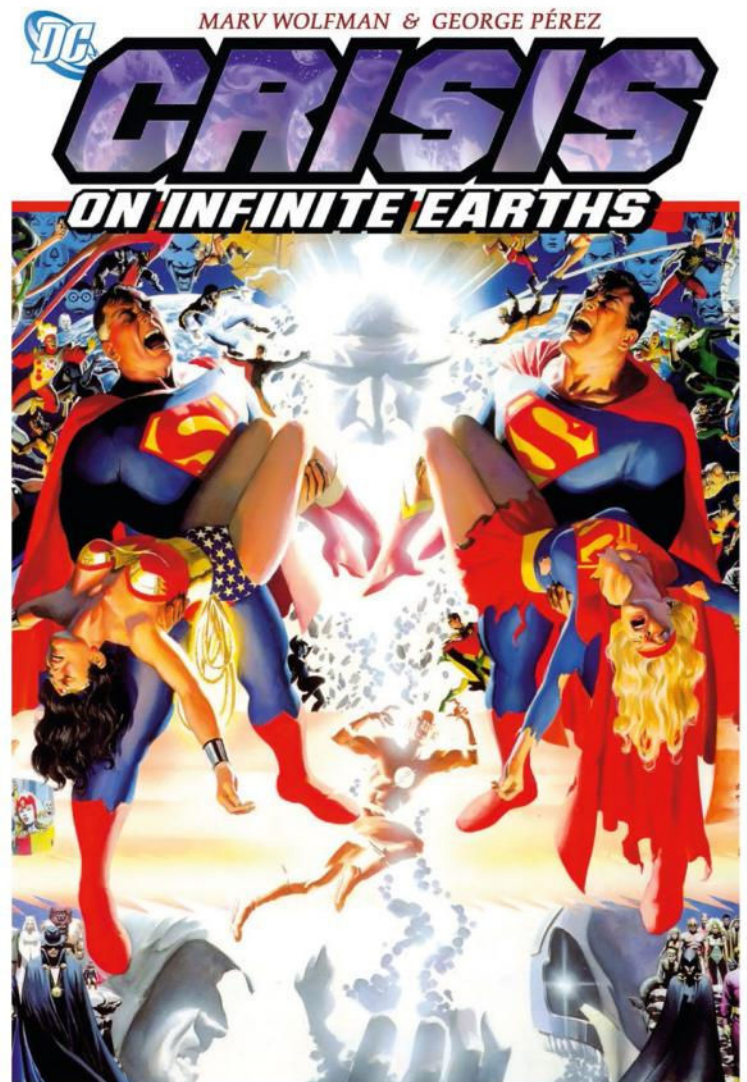
"Because of this I had none of those major characters appear in those early issues. I wanted to show how powerful the villain was first off, so I used Earth 3 – the 'Villain Earth', which had these doppelganger characters – and within five pages, the villain kills the doppelganger Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, Flash. Immediately you understand, without having any of the major characters actually in there, that the villain is powerful enough to destroy all the most powerful characters DC has in five pages. That sets up a mood that moves through the entire storyline."

Crisis was a big hit with comic readers, but it was not an easy ride for Marv behind the scenes.

"Almost to a man, everybody at editorial was against the whole series," he says. "Fortunately the people who liked the concept were Dick Giordano, who was editor-in-chief, and Jenette Kahn, who was the publisher. It was still a nightmare, because everyone fought every step of the way – which is why I never got the ending I wanted. But then, halfway through, the writers who did cooperate found the sales on their books jumped – and suddenly everybody else wanted to tie-in too!"



Left: *Night Force*, illustrated by Gene Colan, actually debuted in a special insert in *The New Teen Titans* in '82.



Marv's original plan for the post-*Crisis* DCU was to have all the series restart with new #1 issues and clean slates. The heroes would have no memory of the pre-*Crisis* universe. It didn't happen quite like that...

"One of the editors there fought me tooth and nail on it," Marv says, "and kept saying that, if the heroes

Above: The *New Teen Titans* was a big hit in the '80s for Wolfman and George Pérez.

don't remember, then we invalidate everything that came before. I kept saying, in a very snarky fashion, 'Our heroes don't buy our comics, they get them free. The readers will remember, and all those comics are still on the shelves, so they're not going to forget'.

"I warned them, if you have the characters remember, it's going to create problems down the line – and, of course, it did. In the next couple of years nobody knew what the continuity should be. If I'd been allowed to do it, it would all have begun afresh."

GENERATION GAP

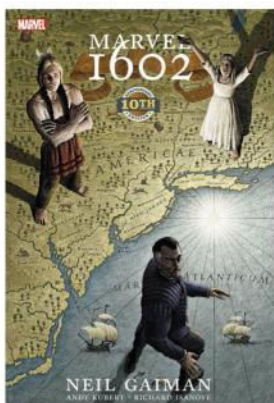
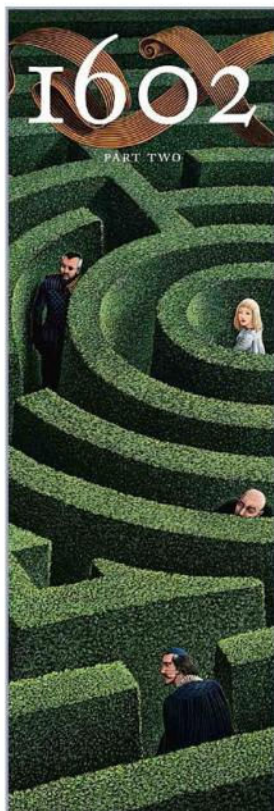
Unfortunately, that wasn't what the comic industry learned from the success of the miniseries. "I actually thought that, because we were starting the books over, *Crisis* itself would be forgotten. I was not assuming it would be anything other than the launch point for what was

to come, but no. Unfortunately, the lesson everyone learned from *Crisis* was that, if you do a mega-crossover, it's going to sell through the roof. That's not what I was trying to do. What I wanted was to rebuild the DC universe so all the new books that came out after it would be fresh and original and fun."

Still, Marv believes that hitting the reset button every few decades remains the right thing to do with super-hero comics. "You should really be bringing it fresh for every generation. That's what happened with me, personally, by sort-of accident, because the Silver Age started at the point I began reading comics – and I didn't even know there had been Golden Age versions.

"So I believe that every 20 or 25 years you should start everything again. But that's a real reason for doing it – not just because, 'Oh well, I guess it's time to do a crossover again'." **TMZ**

“ CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS WAS DESIGNED TO KILL CONTINUITY, TO START OVER, BECAUSE I HATE CONTINUITY ”



ALL IMAGES © MARVEL COMICS

Writer Neil Gaiman
Artist Andy Kubert
Published 2003
Publisher Marvel



MARVEL: 1602

HIGH-CONCEPT WHAT-IF BOOK
 THAT'S SURPRISINGLY FUN

Hardcore Marvel fans will remember “What If” – a series of one-offs dedicated to wild hypothetical concepts, such as “What If Wolverine Was Lord Of The Vampires?” or “What If The Punisher Became Captain America?” *Marvel: 1602* is essentially “What If The Marvel Universe Existed In Elizabethan Times?” and it’s glorious. Originally released over eight issues in 2003, the book sees mystical events causing Marvel’s most iconic heroes to originate 400 years before their time, interacting with real-life historical figures, including Elizabeth I and James I of England.

But forget the history lesson – a large part of the fun of *1602* is seeing

your favourite heroes getting Elizabethan-themed make-overs. Thor looks like a wildling from *Game Of Thrones*, Captain America becomes a native American named Rojhaz, and Daredevil’s a blind Irish minstrel/acrobat.

Just don’t expect to see retooled versions of recent characters, such as Wolverine or Deadpool – Gaiman limits himself to 1960s creations. But with Marvel currently frequently dusting off its branded properties – see *Civil War II* for recent proof – we wonder how long it’ll be before they tap up Gaiman to pen *1603*, featuring current favourites. Until then, we have this – ancient events infused with magic and wonder. **SAM ASHURST**

INSIDE VIEW

In 2013, Comic Heroes caught up with Neil Gaiman. He had this to say about 1602...

“It’s funny, because *1602* kind of baffled people at the time. On the one hand, they went, ‘It’s not *Sandman*’, but on the other hand, it was the top selling comic in America for eight months, though it seemed that nobody noticed. We didn’t do any alternate covers, and *Wizard* magazine – which was still going back then – didn’t really cover it. I thought that it was very odd that I was writing this thing, which was far and away the number one comic month after month, but nobody seemed to have picked up on that – or, if they had, they weren’t saying anything about it! Probably because it was so different from what everybody else was doing at the time that there wasn’t really anything you could say about it. You couldn’t say that it started a whole new trend, because it obviously didn’t; it was just this thing that I was doing.”



DEATH NOTE

Writer Tsugumi Ohba

Artist Takeshi Obata

Published 2003-2006

Publisher Viz Media

Death Note is a relatively short-run series by manga standards, at a mere 12 volumes rather than the customary umpty-billion. The concept is high: a notebook which enables you to kill anyone by writing their name in it is dropped deliberately into our world by its owner, a mischievous death god called Ryuk, and found by brilliant high-school student Light Yagami, who uses it to dispense justice according to his own warped moral perspective. Light comes into conflict with a profoundly weird private detective known only as "L", and their battle of wits and wills forms the core of the story's first half. The second half, perhaps not quite as strong, sees Light becoming even more duplicitous and megalomaniacal.

Ohba's tale excels in its depiction of the machinations of the antihero and his nemesis, each tying himself up in knots as he tries to anticipate and counteract the other's next move. Obata's art is clean and stately but bizarre where it needs to be, not least when portraying Ryuk in all his bug-eyed Goth-monsteriness. *Death Note* is bold and brain-bending stuff, shot through with a ghoulish, macabre sense of humour. **JAMES LOVEGROVE**



KINGDOM COME

Writer Mark Waid

Artist Alex Ross

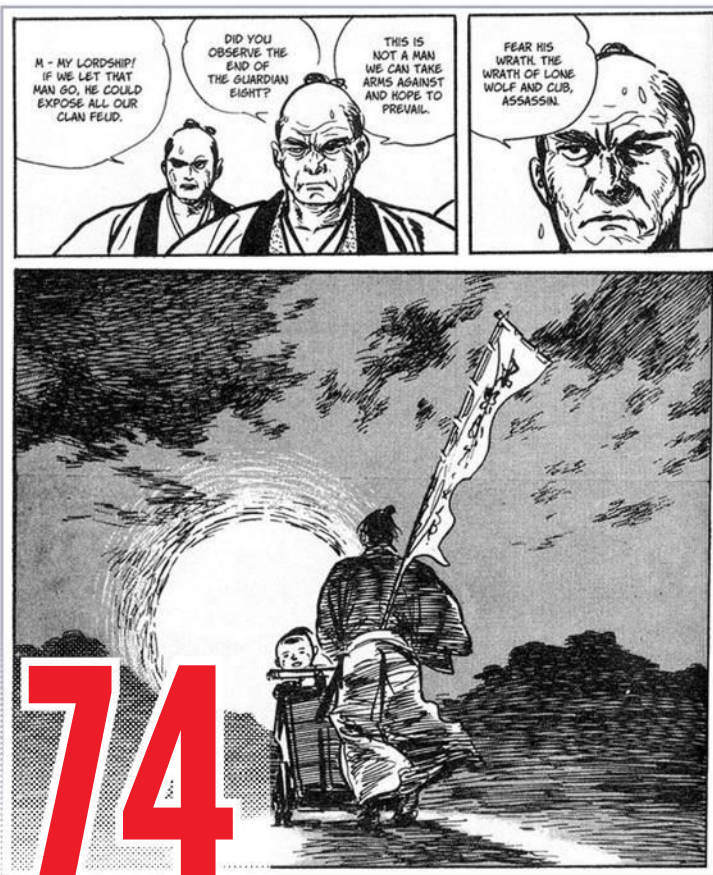
Published 1996

Publisher DC Elseworlds

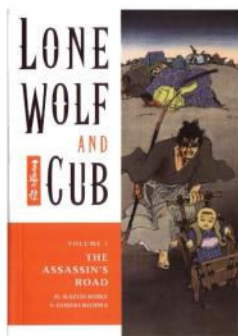
Mark Waid and Alex Ross' fully painted magnum opus is a Norman Rockwell painting with added punching and serious ethical discussion. Set in a world where the traditional heroes have retired and the next generation engage in meaningless, empty fights, it follows Norman McKay, a preacher chosen by the Spectre to help pass judgement on the end of the world.

What follows is an astoundingly beautiful exploration of the Silver Age of DC, the worst possible version of what follows it, and what it means to be a hero. Waid's script is full of Easter eggs and love for the field but never loses sight of the characters at its core. Superman has rarely been better written – or more flawed or human – than he is here, and he's not alone. Wonder Woman, Batman and countless others all get moments to shine and moments of understandable, at times desperately sad, fallibility.

For all that, though, this is a fundamentally joyous story and far more even-handed than it first appears. *Kingdom Come* is ultimately a love letter to super-heroes and one of the very few stories dealing with the violence of modern heroes that has something interesting to say. **ALASDAIR STUART**



LONE WOLF AND CUB



Writer Kazuo Koike
Artist Goseki Kojima
Published 1970-
Publisher First Comics / Dark Horse

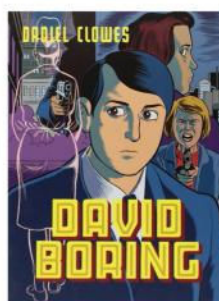
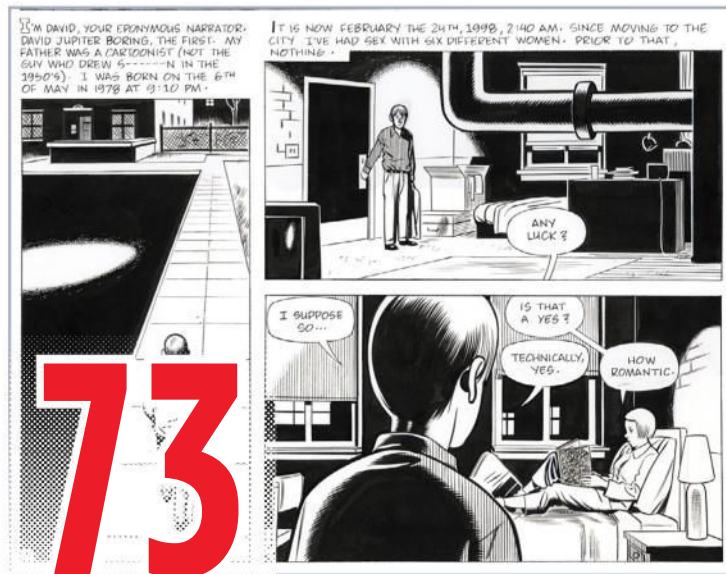
28 volumes, a sequel series, a reimagining set in the future, countless TV shows and half a dozen movies. Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima's epic story of blood soaked historical vengeance and parental love

continues to cast a colossal shadow 46 years after it began.

It's the story of Ogami Itt, Shogun's Executioner. The warrior responsible for assisting those committing seppuku if the pain becomes too much, he's an incredible swordsman and holds a position of near total power. The first makes him dangerous, the second makes him and his family a target.

Itt finds this out to his cost when he returns home to find his entire household brutally murdered. The only survivor is his new born son Daigor. In one of the most powerful scenes in comics, the boy is given a choice; a ball or a sword. If he crawls towards the ball, his father will kill him. If he crawls towards the sword, he joins his father on a quest for vengeance. He chooses the sword.

What follows is a combination of historical epic, family saga and brutal action. Kojima's style is clenched with dynamic tension, a killing stroke never more than a panel away. It's the perfect expression of Koike's script and Itt himself. All three are enraged, all three are desperate and all three are torn between the needs of the tiny baby at the centre of the story and the need for vengeance. **ALASDAIR STUART**



DAVID BORING

Writer Daniel Clowes
Artist Daniel Clowes
Published 2000
Publisher Pantheon

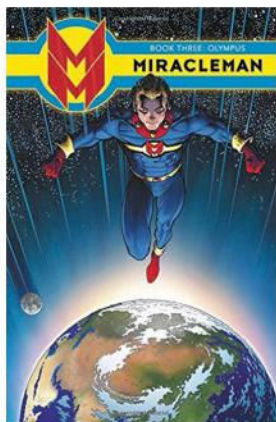
Let's get the obvious out of the way first: *David Boring* is definitely not boring! A fantastical three-act tale about the protagonist's hunt for his ideal woman, Clowes' pre-millennium work is steeped in the paranoia of the time, with end-of-the-world fears offsetting the relative mundanities of one man's search for love. Sex and death are front and centre throughout, as is family and, perhaps more subtly, Freud.

Like Clowes' most famous work, *Ghost World*, *David Boring* would make a great movie – or perhaps an ongoing HBO series. The irony is that, for a comic so far removed from the norm of comic books, *David Boring* has Silver Age comics at its very core. The *Yellow Streak* @ *Friends* annual brightening the book's black-and-white panels with occasional four-colour, old-style super-hero pulp is key to understanding this complex storyline – or at least that's what Clowes would have us believe. Ultimately it's as meaningless as life itself: there is no grand plan; as human



beings our *raison d'être* is merely survival.

But survival alone, of course, cannot sustain us as human beings – as David, with his hunt for his perfect woman, recognises. We also need love, sex, friendship – and comics! **ROB LANE**



IMAGES © MARVEL COMICS

Writer Alan Moore
Artist John Totleben
Published 1987-89
Publisher Marvel



MIRACLEMAN: OLYMPUS

A HYPNOTIC, HARROWING EXPLORATION OF THE INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCES OF GODLIKE POWER

In the first all-new arc to be published following Miracleman's move to Eclipse Comics in 1985, Alan Moore utilised the more expansive format of American comics to weave what still stands out as one of the most revolutionary super-hero stories that has ever been published. Taking Miracleman – né Marvelman – far beyond its 1950s origins as a Captain Marvel imitation, Moore built on the revisionist approach that he had already taken in reviving the character in British anthology *Warrior*.

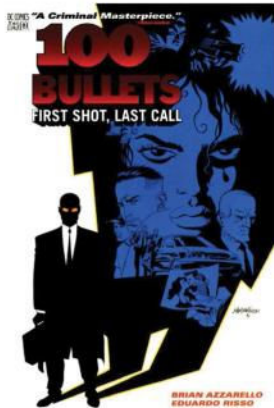
Heavily alluding to Greek mythology, "Olympus" depicts the Zeus-like Miracleman and his equally powerful companions (including Miraclewoman) as unknowable godlike beings presiding over a futuristic utopian society. Tellingly, Liz Moran splits from the being who was once her husband Mick Moran, despite having stuck by him since his spectacular transformation when he muttered the fateful trigger word "Kimota" during a siege at a nuclear base.



Meanwhile, the bitter rivalry between Miracleman and his errant erstwhile sidekick Johnny Bates – alias Kid Miracleman – finally comes to a devastating head. Moore unflinchingly explores what would be the inevitable, bloody outcome of a conflict between two such super-powered beings, with harrowing scenes of destruction as vast swathes of London are laid waste and the majority of the city's population written off as collateral damage.

Following less successful runs by Chuck Austen and then Rick Veitch, the art is by one-time *Swamp Thing* inker John Totleben, whose ornate, painstakingly detailed art adds a real sense of pathos to the carnage.

It's a pity that Moore chose to remove his name from the credits, instead being billed as "The Original Writer": his run on Miracleman – and "Olympus" in particular – is a hugely impressive work and almost the equal of *Watchmen*. **STEPHEN JEWELL**



100 BULLETS

PERSONAL REVENGE AND CONSPIRACY MIX IN AN INTRIGUING NOIR THRILLER

One hundred bullets, one hundred issues, and one damn good reason to read it: it's absolutely brilliant. Pulpish, noirish, violent and brutal, *100 Bullets* would be a masterclass in crime fiction in any medium. It's so unbearably, heart-achingly stylish, you could dress it up in an Armani suit and send it down the catwalk at Paris.

Debuting in 1999, *100 Bullets* did exactly what it said on the tin. Each issue, the mysterious Agent Graves would rock up to an unwitting stranger, present them with a gun and the titular hundred slugs, and give them a target's name. What they did next was up to them. But Agent Graves picked his would-be assassins, and his targets, very carefully. Each person he approaches has been wronged in some terrible way, and the name they are given is the architect of their despair.

What could so easily have become a quickly tiresome "offing of the month" was kept fresh, vibrant and shocking at Azzarello's hands as he skilfully delved into the backstories of both victims and oppressors. Some people declined Graves's offer; most didn't, proving that revenge

is a dish not best served cold, but rather with a side-order of a white-hot hail of righteous ordinance.

Argentinian artist Eduardo Risso's incredible linework gives *100 Bullets* that smoky, down-at-heel, shadowy mystery that Azzarello's story begs for, an alliance of words and pictures that makes you feel *100 Bullets* is the greatest film noir you never saw on screen. And Azzarello's dialogue is both pin-sharp and fogged with agreeable obtuseness, a melange of regional dialects that leap off the page and metaphysical philosophising that suggests here's a writer who should be tapped up for *True Detective* Season Three.

Of course, there's an overarching conspiracy, one that spans the globe, gives a satisfying reason for Graves's murderous mission, and is neatly wrapped up by the end. If there are eight million stories in the naked city, here's an even hundred to keep you going... **DAVID BARNETT**



Writer Brian Azzarello
Artist Eduardo Risso
Published 1999-2009
Publisher DC Vertigo



IMAGES © MARK MILLAR & JOHN S. ROMITA

KICK-ASS



Writer Mark Millar

Artist John Romita Jr

Published 2008-

Publisher Icon (Marvel Comics)

Dave Lizewski wants to be a hero. So he buys a wetsuit, turns it into a costume, goes out on patrol, and... is immediately beaten so badly that he's hospitalised.

Dusting himself off, and after a lot of physical rehab, Dave tries again. Street-level superheroes are rising up to oppose the city's villains, and Kick-Ass is on the front lines.

Where the movie is endearingly goofy, the original graphic novel hits hard, hits below the belt and doesn't stop once its opponents go down. The movie is brutal but good-hearted. The graphic novel is just plain brutal. That will no doubt disappoint some, but there's a lot to enjoy here. The comic version of Big Daddy is especially good, and the common ground that he and Dave share works far better than in the movie. Hit-Girl is both a terrifying and an awesome creation.

Romita's brawny art, with Tom Palmer's inks and Dean White's colours, is a perfect fit for some of Mark Millar's best and most bloody-knuckled work. If you've never met him before, go say hi to Dave. **ALASDAIR STUART**



IMAGES © MARVEL COMICS

THE INFINITY GAUNTLET



Writer Jim Starlin

Artists George Perez, Ron Lim

Published 1991

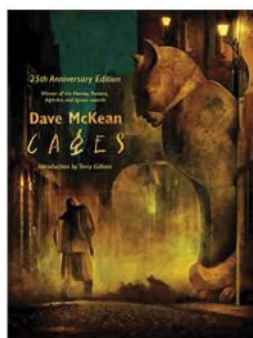
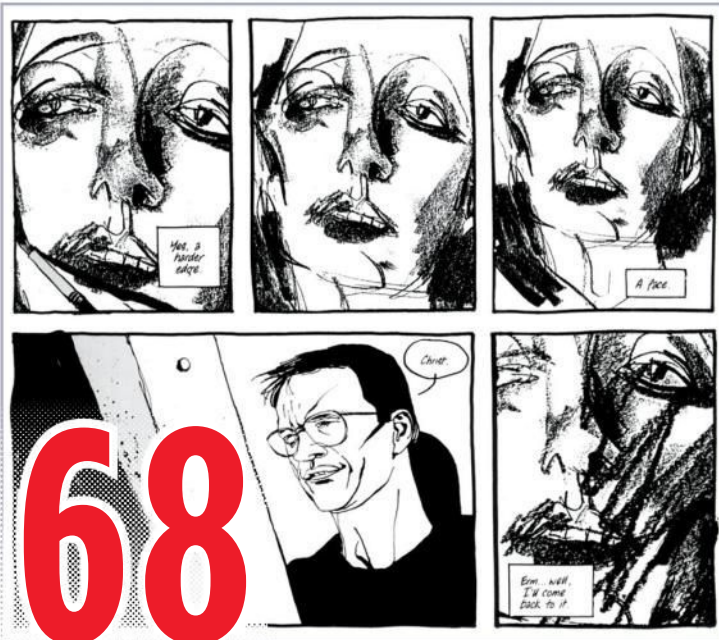
Publisher Marvel Comics

The Infinity Gauntlet imagines the Marvel Universe as the ultimate disaster movie blockbuster, as Thanos is revived by the embodiment of Death to even the score between the numbers of the living and the dead.

Only thing is, Thanos has a little crush on Death, so rather than simply do her bidding and buy her a box of chocolates when the deal is done, the Mad Titan sets out to eliminate life in half the universe in order to impress her. Quite the romantic gesture.

With the stakes possibly the highest they've ever been, what keeps the story anchored is Thanos himself, with Starlin turning him into an alluring, swaggering colossus. Now omnipotent, the normally sour super-villain can finally have a laugh in between all his Shakespearean monologues, his deranged enjoyment keeping everything ticking.

That George Perez and Ron Lim bring their A-game to the pencil work only helps. This is widescreen comic books before they were such a thing, with panels possessing an irresistible sense of forward movement. **CARL ANKA**



CAGES

Writer Dave McKean

Artist Dave McKean

Published 1990

Publisher Tundra/Kitchen Sink

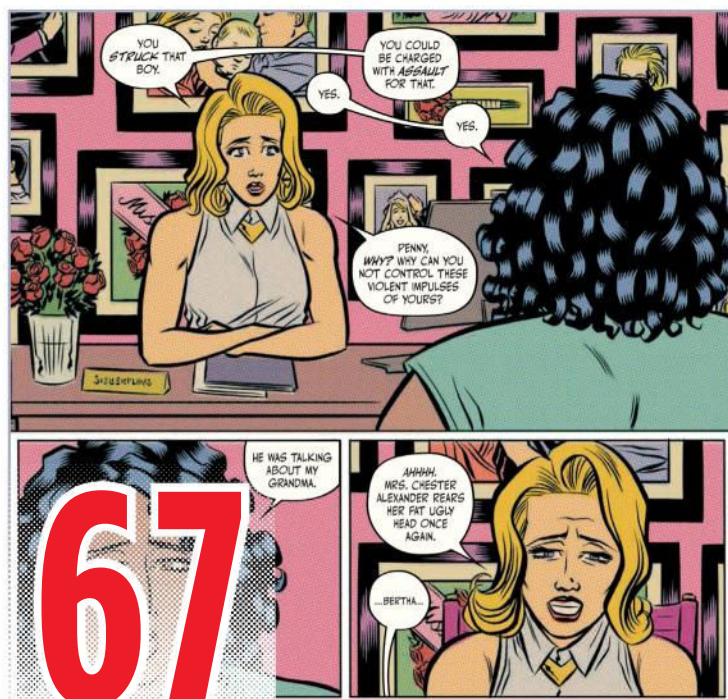
Dave McKean's first published comics work was his 1987 collaboration with Neil Gaiman, *Violent Cases*, and in the years after this his highly original style became almost inseparable from Gaiman as McKean provided the covers for each and every issue of *Sandman*. But in 1990 McKean flew solo with *Cages*, a ten-issue graphic novel initially published by Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles co-creator Kevin Eastman's Tundra publishing house. When Tundra closed down, seven issues into *Cages*, Kitchen Sink picked up the remaining three, and the whole thing has been collected in a single volume four separate times.

Temporarily eschewing the combination of photos and painted montages which made his name, McKean rendered *Cages* in a bleached-out line-drawing style, and proved that his storytelling powers were as good as his amazing artistic abilities.

The story follows a struggling artist and focuses on different



characters in his apartment block: the musician with an almost supernatural handle on his craft; the Salman Rushdie-esque author forced into hiding because of the inflammatory novel he has written; the woman with whom – *Rear Window*-style – the artist becomes mildly obsessed. It's dark and sometimes bleak but utterly compelling and confirms McKean as a master of the graphic novel. **DAVID BARNETT**



BITCH PLANET

Writer Kelly Sue DeConnick

Artist Valentine De Landro

Published 2014-

Publisher Image

Captain Marvel's Kelly Sue DeConnick and *X-Factor* artist Valentine De Landro have struck gold with this superb ongoing series for Image. One of the best books currently on the stands, it's also *very* different from the titles the pair were previously best known for.

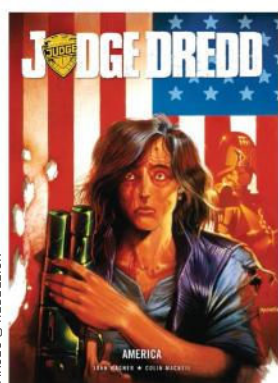
Set on a futuristic "Auxiliary Compliance Outpost" in space, it focuses on a cast of all-female prisoners fighting to survive in extreme circumstances. It's a future dominated by the patriarchy, where women (including, notably, many women of colour) are routinely demeaned, abused and imprisoned for innocuous "crimes" such as disappointing their husbands. It's an extreme, but pointed, extrapolation of the worst aspects of our own present, and it practically boils over with righteous fury.

That said, it's also witty and exciting. A reimagining of the "women in prison" movie sub-genre, it's a pulpy thrill-ride that, first and foremost, aims to entertain – and succeeds in style.

Alongside the likes of *Saga* and *Sex Criminals*, *Bitch Planet* is one of the ongoing titles that has marked Image out as the home of the boldest and most interesting comics at the moment.



The first volume, "Extraordinary Machine," collects the initial six instalments of a planned 30-issue run, and we seriously advise you to hop on this surprising, frightening comic right away. **WILL SALMON**



Writer John Wagner
Artist Colin MacNeil
Published 1990
Publisher Rebellion

JUDGE DREDD: AMERICA

NOT THE MOST HIGH-PROFILE DREDD SAGA AND NOT QUITE TYPICAL, BUT A MOVING INTRODUCTION

Whenever the good droids at *2000 AD* are asked what makes a good starting point for Judge Dredd (a series, let's not forget, that has been running for nearly 40 years now), they pick *America*. It was the first story published in *2000 AD*'s spin-off title, the *Judge Dredd Magazine*, and has been collected many times – most recently as the first volume in the hardback Mega Collection series. Ironically, it doesn't actually feature the big-chinned Judge himself that much... Instead, this is the story of Bennett Beeny and his childhood friend, America Jara. Beeny tries and fails to woo an uninterested America, but they grow up together as firm friends

until she becomes a campaigner for democracy in the totalitarian Mega-City One – a decision that makes her an enemy of Dredd and the rest of the Judges...

By turns romantic and tragic, *America* is the series at its most hard-hitting. Compared to the enemies he faces, Dredd often seems like a sympathetic character, but it should never be forgotten that he is an unrepentant

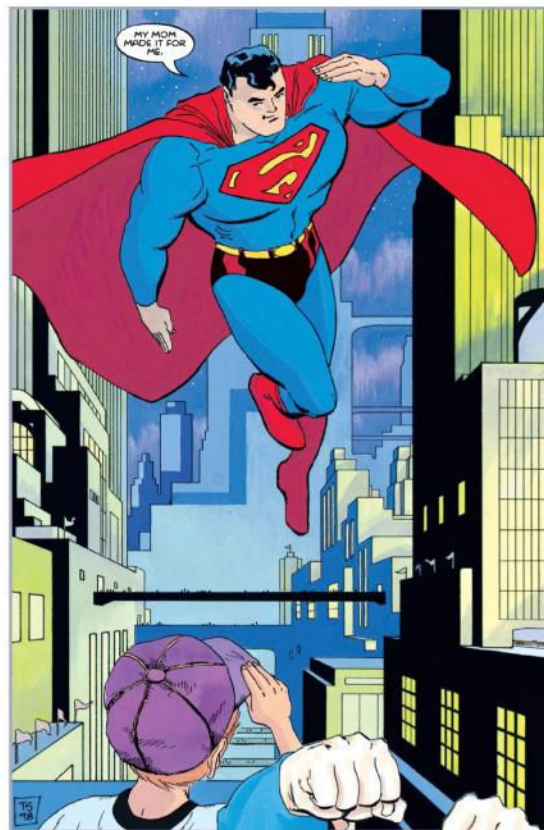
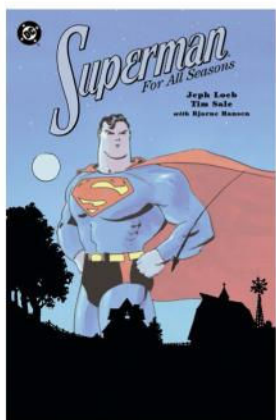
fascist. Although he displays a glimmer of sympathy for the protestors (something that the series continues to explore intriguingly), he is unswervingly loyal to the law and that puts the book's protagonists squarely in his firing line.

MacNeil's beautiful, fully-painted work here is colourful, but haunted with long shadows and blood stains. A couple of decent sequels followed (usually collected in the same volume), but without MacNeil they don't quite reach the same heights – though they do develop the dangling threads in intriguing ways.

Is this the best ever Judge Dredd story? Perhaps – although it is atypical, with less of the weird humour the series is known for. And with such a rich history of great stories and characters, it's impossible to pick an all-time best. But *America* is certainly among the most affecting and politically engaged, and it's known to be Dredd co-creator John Wagner's own personal favourite. While Dredd himself may be sidelined, it works as an excellent introduction to his frightening world. **WILL SALMON**

“DREDD AT ITS MOST HARD-HITTING”





SUPERMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

SEEING SUPES AS OTHERS SEE HIM, THE INSPIRATION FOR SMALLVILLE

Writer Jeph Loeb

Artists Tim Sale with Bjarne Hansen

Published 1998

Publisher DC Comics

Jeph Loeb's nostalgia-swaddled exploration of the man behind the Super is a gently refreshing reinvigoration of Smallville's favourite export.

A character piece told across four seasons, Clark Kent's journey from farm boy to day-saving super-hero is recounted by those whose lives his mere existence has affected deeply: Pa Kent, Lois Lane, Lex Luthor, and Lana Lang. Originally told in four separate issues, one per season, it presents the Man of Steel from very distinct viewpoints: as son, saviour, adversary, and sweetheart.

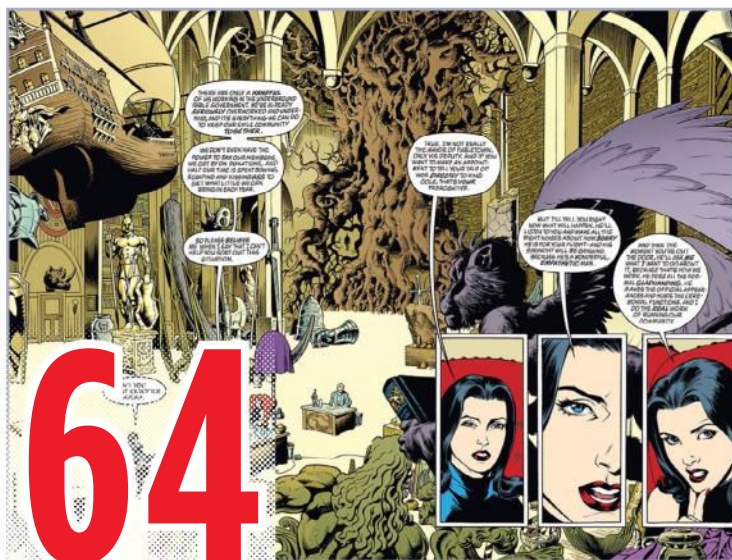
A story that's light on action but strong on introspection, it starts, naturally enough, in the apple-pie Americana of Smallville. A rural idyll of wicker fences, freshly ploughed fields and humble folks, it's rendered beautifully as the perfect unassuming homestead. Through Jonathan Kent's fatherly narration, we're invited to see Clark's formative years as not only a son but school friend, townspeople, and yes, alien. We are reminded throughout that Clark is the perennial outsider, and despite the pangs of self-doubt, his isolation is what drives his desire to be the

inspirational hero to, and protector of, mankind.

Recalling past incarnations, and with an exaggerated beefiness, Superman has rarely looked as powerful as he is awkward, contrasting effectively with the scrawny frailty of his parents or the ugly brutishness of Lex Luthor. With Tim Sale's Norman Rockwell inspired artwork and Bjarne Hansen's elegant watercolours adding a touch of understated class, the book boasts a sumptuous, luxurious quality to every page.

In 1998, keeping up with the comics' knotted continuity entanglements following the character's death wasn't easy. Even his wider pop culture reputation was in disarray – the movie series had crashed with the dismal *Quest for Peace*, the Tim Burton reboot failed to happen, and the *Lois & Clark* TV series had been unceremoniously canned.

Superman For All Seasons washes away that distaste with a palate-cleansing affirmation of the Man of Steel's legacy. While nods throughout acknowledge the series' heritage, it's the humane charm which sells Loeb and Sale's origin story as uniquely super. **MILES HAMER**



© BILL WILLINGHAM / DC COMICS

FABLES



Writer Bill Willingham

Artist Mark Buckingham

Published 2002-2015

Publisher DC Vertigo

Fables takes place in a universe where every fairy tale is real, from Little Red Riding Hood to Aladdin. They all happened to real beings on different worlds throughout a multiverse known as the Homelands. But when a big bad known as The Adversary waged war on the Homelands, the survivors were forced to flee to a world without magic: our own.

A sprawling epic that ran to 150 issues before wrapping up last year, *Fables* was Vertigo's best kept secret. It wasn't a household name like *Sandman*, but it had a cult following that kept the book at the top of the charts, thanks to Willingham's smart, engaging scripts and some wonderful pencils from various artists – chief among them Mark Buckingham, whose elegant work grounds these fantastical beings in a tangible reality. With complex characterisation and flawed, interesting characters (particularly Bigby Wolf, a down-at-heel Big Bad Wolf turned sheriff of Fabletown), it was a series that kept you on your toes as to who exactly you should be rooting for – and one that bagged an astonishing 14 Eisner Awards over its lifetime. **WILL SALMON**



© DC COMICS

PLANETARY



Writer Warren Ellis

Artist John Cassaday

Published 1999-2009

Publisher DC Comics

Many consider *Planetary* to be Warren Ellis's masterpiece, and it's easy to see why. It also shows off the considerable talents and varying styles of John Cassaday, even in his early work.

The narrative centres on new recruit Elijah Snow, who joins the mysterious and independently funded Planetary organisation on a mission to discover the world's secret history. These self-styled Archaeologists Of The Impossible comprise three super-powered agents: Jakita Wagner, The Drummer, and Snow, who replaced the late, but still influential, Ambrose Chase.

A post-modern, alternative take on superheroes – with a dash of *League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen* style intertextuality thrown in for good measure – *Planetary* starts out as a series of lovely one-shot tales, then evolves into something that is ultimately a great deal more than the sum of its parts. Ellis has fun with his sandbox of alternative takes on Thor, Superman, Green Lantern, Hulk, Wonder Woman, James Bond, Doc Savage and the Fantastic Four – but this is also a serious, exciting book that blurs genre lines with considerable style. **ROB LANE**



IMAGES © MARY M TALBOT & BRYAN

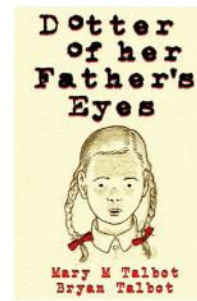
DOTTER OF HER FATHER'S EYES

Writer Mary M Talbot

Artist Bryan Talbot

Published 2012

Publisher Jonathan Cape



Academic Dr Mary Talbot's first graphic novel tells the story of her childhood in 1950s Wigan in parallel to that of James Joyce's daughter Lucia in the early 20th

century. Mary's father, also called James, was a renowned Joycean scholar but a difficult man, whose fiery tempers caused frictions during Mary's childhood, in counterpoint to Lucia Joyce, whose own father was a gentle man partnered to a fiery woman.

A triumph in sequential storytelling with no framed panels, *Dotter* is beautifully illustrated, mainly in ink wash with some pencil marks joyfully still in evidence. The '50s are represented by a sepia wash, the early 20th century in blue/black, and Mary's teenage and adult years in full colour. Typewriter font text – to echo the constant tap, tap, tap of Mary's father as he works on his Joyce thesis – sits comfortably alongside subtle speech bubbles, giving this graphic novel a deserved scholarly authority that in no way detracts from its enjoyment. **ROB LANE**



IMAGES © DC COMICS

BATMAN: HUSH

Writer Jeph Loeb

Artist Jim Lee

Published 2002-2003

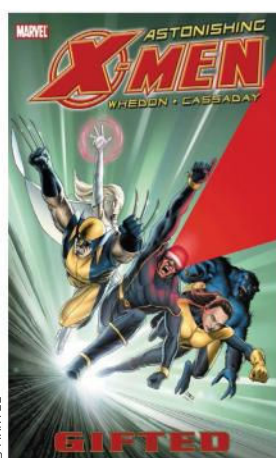
Publisher DC Comics



Running for a year across *Batman* issues 608-619, "Hush" felt, at the time, like a massive change of pace. The length of the story, its scope, and the sheer magnitude of the talent behind it made it one of the first true "event" series of the 2000s. Written by Jeph Loeb, pencilled by Jim Lee, inked by Scott Williams and coloured by Alex Sinclair, it was and remains an impressive piece of work.

The story is a puzzle box that unfolds slowly and takes in an old friend from Batman's past, the history of his parents, his entire rogue's gallery, and Superman.

Some of the later beats feel a little creaky these days, but the sheer scope of it is such that they never really damage the story. The art is top-notch, and the characterisation and depth first-rate. Everyone gets their moment and previously overlooked characters, like Batman's mechanic, are used in fun ways. The story gets positively operatic towards the end but Lee's muscular pencils and Williams and Sinclair's inks and colours ensure that Gotham has never looked so good. Very much the blueprint for the 21st century run of Bat titles. **ALASDAIR STUART**



© MARVEL

Writer Joss Whedon
Artist John Cassaday
Published 2004-2008
Publisher Marvel Comics

ASTONISHING X-MEN

THE FAN-FAVOURITE WRITER'S TAKE ON THE MUTANT TEAM

When Joss Whedon undertook an X-Men run, fans braced for something special. He'd cited the X-Men as a massive influence on his work, notably *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, and unsurprisingly his run is one of the best in the team's history.

He immediately put his stamp on the series, introducing new characters who have all become staples of the X-Men and wider Marvel universes. The dialogue is fast and witty, and Whedon nails the voices and motivations of the characters better than perhaps anyone since Claremont. In his hands Kitty Pryde became the powerful character she still is today and Colossus made a long-awaited return.

In "Gifted", his first story arc, a scientist is developing a mutant cure, but the X-Men are deeply suspicious of it. And if that story sounds familiar, it's because it was butchered a few years later in Brett Ratner's *X-Men: The Last Stand*.

John Cassaday was the ideal choice of artist, capable of bringing humour, emotion and action to vivid life on the page. The famously verbose Whedon even stripped back his own dialogue in places because Cassaday's art conveyed the message clearly enough.

Whedon's run tells a complete and satisfying story, all connected by the warrior alien Ord, who is convinced that one day an X-Man will destroy his planet. The story pays off in spectacular style in the final volume, but we'd strongly recommended



reading it right through from the beginning.

The X-Men have always been about unity and acceptance, but Whedon focused more on their friendship dynamics and their less-than-perfect pasts. They might be mutants, but Whedon makes them achingly human. Whether that's by looking at the past mistakes of Charles Xavier or, in one particularly memorable sequence, giving Wolverine the mind of a six-year-old, Whedon undercuts their squeaky-clean heroism at every opportunity.

Nothing is black-and-white in Whedon's X-Men. The mutant cure is a source of great moral conflict, one that resonates particularly with Beast, and the romantic relationships are all messy and flawed, even when the couple are deeply in love.

This is a stripped-back X-Men, with many popular characters simply not appearing at all (don't hold your breath for the likes of Storm, Rogue or Gambit). And perhaps Cyclops and Colossus are not known for being particularly fun to read. But in Whedon's hands, they're as good as they've ever been.

Whedon's X-Men are scared and determined and breakable. They make mistakes and try to fix them, they sacrifice themselves when they have to, and they remain fiercely loyal – even Emma Frost. Whedon knows that bravery is far more interesting when it's a struggle, and, boy, do his X-Men struggle. **ABIGAIL CHANDLER**



59

THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

A STEAMPUNK ROMP, IN WHICH ALAN MOORE DOES HIS REVISIONIST THING WITH VICTORIAN CULTURE



IMAGES © ALAN MOORE & KEVIN O'NEILL

Writer Alan Moore

Artist Kevin O'Neill

Published 1999-

Publisher America's Best Comics/Top Shelf/Knockabout

If you've seen the film adaptation, pretend you haven't. Block it entirely from your mind. Instead, picture a steampunk world where characters from Victorian literature are recruited to fight a great evil. Picture the whole thing covered in a layer of grime, where the heroes are monsters and where even the best-read reader won't be able to place all the clever literary cameos and references.

In the first volume of the series, the recently-divorced Mina Murray (her married name Harker might be more familiar to readers and movie fans...) is approached by MI5 to recruit a team to act as a force against threats to the British Empire.

She soon recruits Allan Quatermain, Captain Nemo, Dr Jekyll (and Mr Hyde, of course) and Hawley Griffin – the Invisible Man – from a variety of sleazy and murderous backgrounds. And if you're imagining Mina to be some sort of sexy vampire lady, then don't. Here she's the calm and collected leader of the team, with no vampiric qualities besides a horribly scarred neck and a strangely long lifespan.

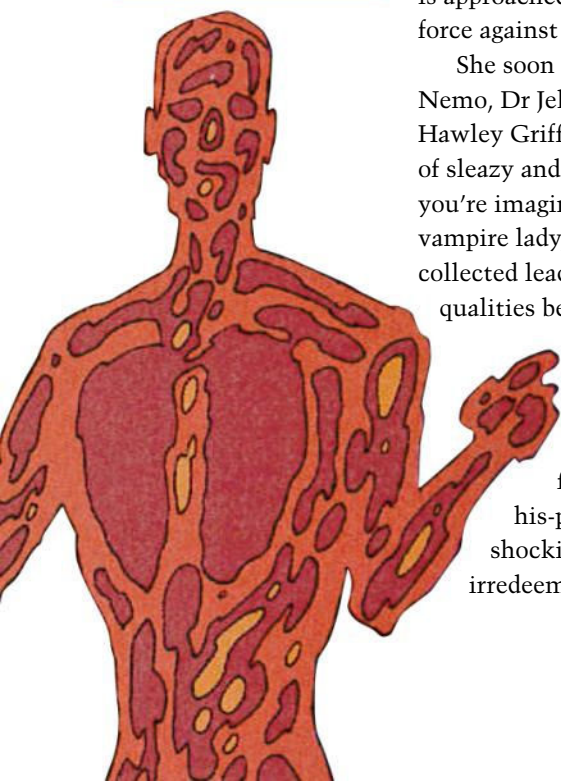
The characters may be from famous fiction but Moore feels no obligation to portray them in a flattering light: Quatermain is a past-his-prime opium addict, Hyde is shockingly violent, Griffin starts off entirely irredeemable and then gets worse. There's a

desperate last-ditch heroism to Moore's characters, though, with most of them (especially Mina and Quatermain) eager to atone for their crimes.

O'Neill's art resembles detailed Victorian illustrations, and he throws in an overwhelming amount of background detail, from portraits of Leagues from previous generations to unnamed cameos including a grown-up Artful Dodger. Many of his background characters were even designed to resemble ancestors of *Eastenders* characters, ensuring that the series is set completely in a world of fiction, both past and present.

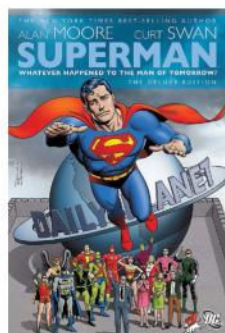
It boggles the mind that every single character in the series comes from fiction, or is a descendent or ancestor of a fictional character (the team's MI5 handler, Campion Bond, is clearly a grandfather of James...). Moore appears to have read every single book written in the latter half of the 1800s – or possibly every single book ever. You could spend days picking apart the references and still not find them all. And that's before you get to the background material included.

So yes, it's smart – but it doesn't matter if you're not a literature buff. All the references that are key to the plot are embedded deeply enough in pop culture that you can't miss them. The book is never too clever for its own good: it's a rollicking good penny dreadful first, and a treasure trove of literary references second. **ABIGAIL CHANDLER**





SUPERMAN: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE MAN OF TOMORROW?



Writer Alan Moore

Artist Curt Swan

Published 1986

Publisher DC Comics

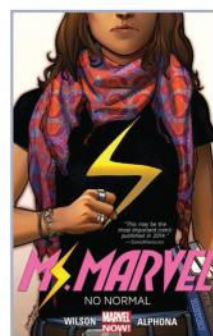
Released in the wake of *Crisis on Infinite Earth's* wholesale overhaul of the DC Universe, Alan Moore's affectionate swansong for the Silver Age Superman is one of Big Blue's most memorable stories.

Originally told in *Superman* #423 and *Action Comics* #523, the final issues of both titles before the character was rebooted in John Byrne's *Man Of Steel* mini-series, the two-parter celebrated all that was weird and wonderful about the Last Son of Krypton.

Given a free hand in this "Imaginary Tale" – the tag DC used in the Silver Age for stories that departed from canon in some way – Moore brings his devastating logic to bear on the entire Superman mythos and reveals the "true" natures of foes such as Brainiac, Toyman, Mxyzptlk and Bizarro, all far darker here than ever before. There are deaths along the way, an awful lot of them, but all meaningful and genuinely touching (including Bizarro's), and the bittersweet twist ending remains one of Moore's finest moments. The art too is a triumphant *Swansong* by Superman's signature Silver Age penciller Curt Swan at his peak, shamefully forced into abrupt retirement by DC's ruthless insistence that the reboot required a more fashionable look. An instant classic that's deservedly never gone out of print. **STEPHEN JEWELL**



MS. MARVEL



Writer G. Willow Wilson

Artist Adrian Alphona

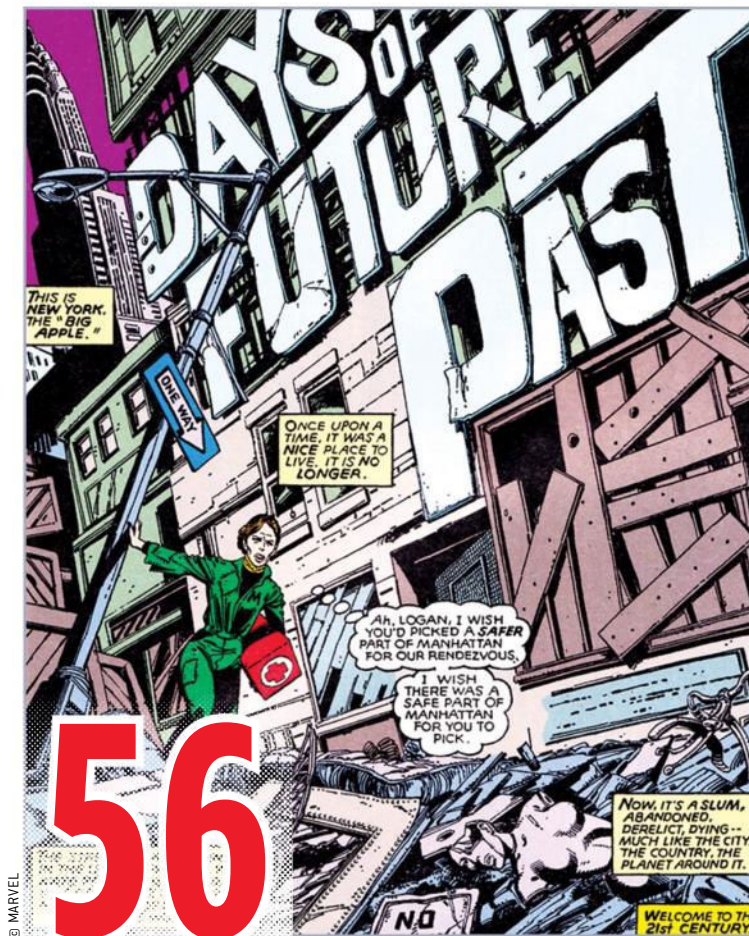
Published 2014-

Publisher Marvel

Kamala Khan is a welcome breath of fresh air. A Muslim teenager from Jersey City, she goes from being a super-hero fangirl to a shapeshifting Inhuman thanks to a dose of Terrigen mist.

Ms. Marvel explores how she juggles her superhero persona with her real-life responsibilities and how she fits in with her very traditional family. We're used to super-heroes struggling to make their "real lives" work alongside their duties as a hero, but it's done with a lot of humour here, and Kamala's religion is shown as a positive aspect in her life. Being the first Muslim character to headline her own Marvel book, Kamala does encounter racism, and the series explores that unflinchingly.

G. Willow Wilson writes with warmth and wit. The whole comic is full of youthful exuberance, which Adrian Alphona's art captures beautifully. Kamala's costume has its roots in her faith but still has a young and fun vibe to it – as the legions of enthusiastic *Ms. Marvel* cosplayers prove. **SARA WESTROP**



UNCANNY X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST



Writers Chris Claremont, John Byrne

Artist John Byrne

First published 1981

Publisher Marvel

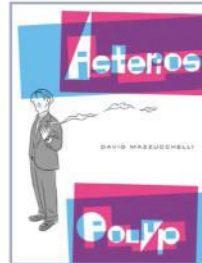
Days of Future Past is a fitting climax to the phenomenal creative team of *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont and artist John Byrne. The plot will be familiar to anyone who's seen the beloved '90s cartoon or the recent movie. A mutant is sent back in time from a dystopian future to prevent an assassination that will set off a mass culling. But what makes this story sing is the characterisation. Claremont understood that the *X-Men*, at heart, is a colourful soap opera, its best stories featuring tales of family drama and romantic intrigue among all the crash bang wallop.

So here, Claremont and Byrne present us with all of the great mutant relationships, and in a spectacular narrative flourish they do it with the introduction of a favourite character, Kitty Pryde.

The art too, is timeless, a vibrant cartoony style that lends itself well to both action and pathos. *Days of Future Past* is a blueprint for how the greatest super-hero stories are always rooted in family, loss and eventually reconciliation. **CARL ANKA**



ASTERIOS POLYP



Writer David Mazzucchelli

Artist Asterios Polyp

First published 2009

Publisher Pantheon Books

Asterios Polyp is a self-important "paper architect" who's never had any of his lauded designs built. His life story is narrated by his twin brother, Ignazio, who died at birth. Asterios has always been haunted by this death, which could so easily have been his, and by the idea that he might have been his twin's murderer.

David Mazzucchelli unfolds his tale through flashbacks – to the architect's family roots, his dying father and his romance with a sculptress, Hana – and through present-day scenes of him rebuilding his ego by working as a small-town auto mechanic, a world away from his former elite milieu. The whole is framed by acts of God, from the opening lightning bolt that destroys Asterios's apartment to a potentially equally dramatic finale.

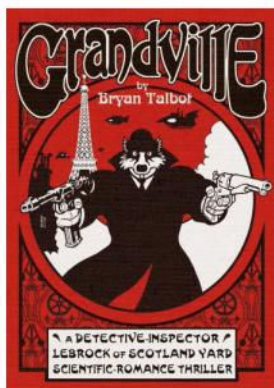
An innovative formalist, Mazzucchelli assigns each of the principal characters a personal visual style, balloon shape and dialogue typeface. As Asterios and Hana fall in love, they take on each other's visual register, their combined style spreading to everything around them. Throughout, Mazzucchelli masterfully demonstrates the medium's allusive possibilities. **PAUL GRAVETT**



54

GRANDVILLE

A STEAMPUNK FUNNY-ANIMAL THRILLER BY ONE OF THE TRUE GRANDMASTERS OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL



Writer Bryan Talbot
Artist Bryan Talbot
Published 2009-
Publisher Jonathan Cape

Any book that cites both Rupert the Bear and Quentin Tarantino among its influences is off to a good start. When that book is written and drawn by one of the greatest comic creators of the last two centuries, it becomes essential...

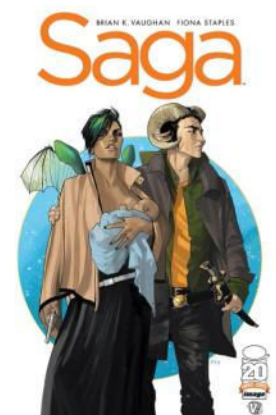
Bryan Talbot's entire body of work is a must-read for fans and fellow creators alike, but *Grandville* is arguably his most accessible work. It centres on Inspector Archie LeBrook, a Scotland Yard detective (oh, and anthropomorphic badger), whose latest case takes him to the streets of Grandville, this universe's version of *belle époque* Paris. In this reality, Britain lost the Napoleonic wars and returned to independence just a few decades before the story begins. Relationships between the two countries crackle with tension, and LeBrook soon finds himself a pawn in a dangerous political game.

Talbot's clean lines, precision design work and absolute understanding of expression and character mean that every page of the book is beautiful. Playful and witty, then dark and brutal by turns, the script grips you from the start and never lets go, with pointed references to our (real) world throughout. A brilliantly realised story on every level. Buy the original, read it and then get the (so far) three sequels. **ALASDAIR STUART**

“PLAYFUL THEN DARK, THE TALE GRIPS FROM THE START”



IMAGES © BRIAN K VAUGHAN & FIONA STAPLES



Writer Brian K Vaughan

Artist Fiona Staples

Published 2012-

Publisher Image

SAGA

A HIT SPACE OPERA ABOUT PARENTHOOD, WITH AN ALMOST UNIQUELY PERSONAL VOICE AND VISION

Saga knows how to grab your attention. Even before the first issue was released some people wanted to ban it because it featured a breast-feeding woman on the front cover. Since then, issues have been banned by ComiXology for graphic imagery, favourite characters have been killed off, and readers are always having the rug pulled out from under them.

But despite all this, *Saga* is never sensationalist. It's a Romeo-and-Juliet saga about a couple from opposing sides of an alien war falling in love, having a child and trying to keep her safe in a world where all sides want her dead. The deaths of characters are so shocking because of how much the book makes you care about them. And the sex is graphic because, well, when is real sex ever coy?

Writer Brian K Vaughan already had a fan following from his previous work on *Y: The Last Man* and *Runaways*, so at the start it was Fiona Staples, the almost-unknown artist of *Saga*, who

came in for the most praise. Her painted and self-coloured art is lush and expressive, her characters are distinctive, their expressions are emotionally powerful, yet she can also draw crazy sci-fi beasts with the best of them. *Saga* marked the arrival of an immense new talent on the comics scene.

Saga is one of the boldest sci-fi/fantasy comics out there, populated with outlandish characters (hello, Lying Cat) and a complicated backstory of war, delicate political alliances and racism. But what really makes it such a great book is the character drama. You might not be able to relate to an intergalactic war, but *Saga* finds other ways to speak to its audience. The story of Marko, Alana and their daughter Hazel has a universality to it that moves parents to tears, while anyone who's had a bad break-up can sympathise with bounty hunter The Will's struggle to get over his strangely beguiling spider-lady ex.

Best of all, Volume One is just the beginning, and the series' quality has yet to dip, some 36 issues

in. **ABIGAIL CHANDLER**



**“To date, the
Star Wars saga has only
picked up one Oscar
nod for acting. Name
the nominated thesp!”**



© MATT FRACTION & CHIP ZDARSKY

SEX CRIMINALS



Writer Matt Fraction
Artist Chip Zdarsky
Published 2015-
Publisher Image Comics

Don't let the provocative name put you off... While *Sex Criminals* is undeniably x-rated, it's also one of the most powerful and humane comics around at the moment. While it's currently in its third arc, the first

two books have been collected into one gorgeous hardback titled *Big Hard Sex Criminals*. Because of course.

Suzie has a gift: whenever she orgasms, time stops – and that's not a metaphor. She meets Jon, who has a similar ability, and the two decide to hook up and rob banks in order to save Suzie's library. Things soon escalate, however, and they find themselves on the run from the self-styled Sex Police...

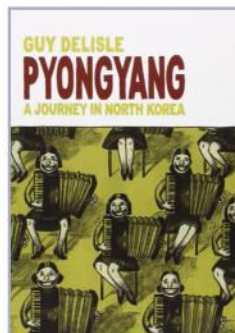
Packed with sight gags thanks to Zdarsky's precise, hilarious art and with a script that practically vibrates with filthy jokes, it's a funny book in the truest sense. But it's the compassionate handling of mental health issues and the wonderful characters that make it such a powerful read. As in real life, everyone in *Sex Criminals* is struggling to understand themselves and get by in a tough world, but the book conjures a real sense that we're all

in this together. It's this emotional core that has connected with its large and devoted audience. That and all the dick gags, natch. **WILL SALMON**



© GUY DELISLE

PYONGYANG



Writer Guy Delisle
Artist Guy Delisle
Published 2004
Publisher Drawn And Quarterly

This graphic travelogue was the result of French-Canadian Guy Delisle's posting in early 2001 for two months to North Korea's little-understood capital as supervisor on a floundering children's animation production. Though rarely able to evade his minders, Delisle unearthed more than they intended through his keen observations of the bizarre, sometimes chilling aspects of the Communist regime's ceaseless manipulation of its people.

Delisle draws himself and the North Koreans he encounters with conscious simplicity, almost as caricatural ciphers, in contrast to the dominating and meticulously detailed architecture and state monuments. He does not disguise his privileges and prejudices, portraying himself as a largely spoilt and harshly judgmental Westerner. Yet it remains hard for anyone to comprehend how omnipresent the country's "beloved leader" has become. On a rare trip into the country, Delisle finds Kim Il-Sung's carved name and pronouncements scarring an entire mountainside, and one disturbing result of his policies is the complete absence of disabled people.

Consistently confounded and kept off-balance, Delisle struggles to penetrate the all-pervasive propaganda. Only a very occasional crack is detected, as overall the smiling mask stays sinisterly intact. His subsequent stays in Shenzhen, Burma and Jerusalem resulted in further candid autobiographical journals. **PAUL GRAVETT**



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TOTAL
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NO. NO SLEEP
TONIGHT. NOT
FOR THE KING.

BATTLE. STILL
MILES AND DAYS
DISTANT.

RESTLESS. FRUSTRATED.
ALL HIS FIFTY YEARS
HAVE BEEN A STRAIGHT
ROAD TO THIS ONE GLEAM-
ING MOMENT OF DESTINY--
THIS ONE RADIANT CLASH
OF SHIELD AND SPEAR AND
SWORD AND BONE AND
FLESH AND BLOOD.

STILL
DAYS
AWAY.

AND THOUGH
HE LEADS HIS
PRECIOUS
THREE HUN-
DRED TO
CERTAIN
DEATH--HIS
ONLY REGRET
IS THAT HE HAS
SO FEW TO
SACRIFICE.

EVERY SPARTAN--
MAN OR WOMAN--
SHOULD SHARE IN
THIS GLORY AND IN
THE VICTORY THAT
WOULD'VE BEEN
SECURED, HAD NOT
KING LEONIDAS BEEN
SO ROUNDLY
THWARTED.

THWARTED--BY
A FOE WHO SQUATS
AMONG THE SUMMER
CLOUDS, AS ROUND
AND FAT AS SOME
GLUTTONOUS
ATHENIAN.

50

RESTLESS.
AS A
EAGER,
EAGERLESS,
USED
FOR
THE.

300

A GRAND, THEATRICAL CELEBRATION OF HEROISM AND MASCULINITY FROM A MASTER STYLIST



© FRANK MILLER, INC.

Writer Frank Miller

Artist Frank Miller

Published 1998

Publisher Dark Horse

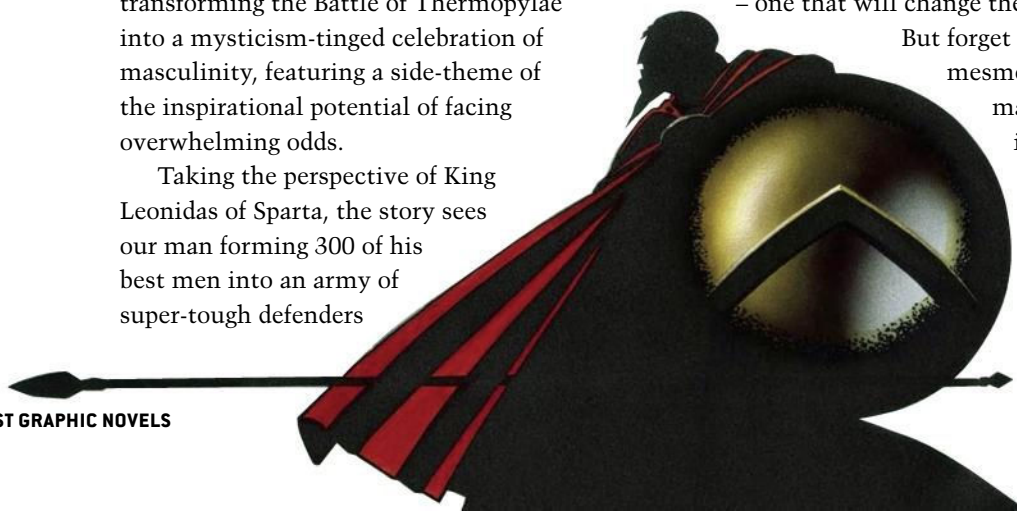
In the '80s, Frank Miller brought operatic themes to the Batman universe with his peerless *Dark Knight Returns*. In the '90s, he brought those grand theatrical influences to real-world history, transforming the Battle of Thermopylae into a mysticism-tinged celebration of masculinity, featuring a side-theme of the inspirational potential of facing overwhelming odds.

Taking the perspective of King Leonidas of Sparta, the story sees our man forming 300 of his best men into an army of super-tough defenders

tasked with seeing off waves of Persian warriors intent on invading Greece. Despite facing multiple thousands of soldiers, Leonidas' band hold for three days, before a Spartan betrayal sparks a final battle – one that will change the course of history.

But forget the plot, what's simply mesmerising about Miller's magnificent book is the incredible art. It's

astonishing, exaggerated to the point of symbol, a towering tribute to Miller's individual stylistic instincts. It's





arguably the pinnacle of his specific gifts. That said, muscular credit has to go to colorist Lynne Varley, whose impressionistic, painted additions to Miller's drawings amp up the high-art ambitions inherent in the work.

Miller was inspired by cinema, with a childhood viewing of 1962 CinemaScope epic *The 300 Spartans* teaching him a key lesson that recurs throughout his work: sometimes, the good guys lose. In fact, sometimes the fact that the good guys fight *knowing* they'll lose is the very thing that defines them as good guys.

Miller's *300* is so perfectly paced that film director Zack Snyder

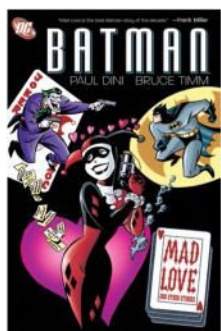
developed his own trademark style (extreme slo-mo) in the edit to enable him to capture the feel of Miller's double-page vistas for his beyond-faithful big screen adaptation. If you've seen that adaptation, you should also seek out the original. Despite source material dedication, one cannot replace the other – you need to experience both.

On paper, *300* sounds potentially ridiculous – a myth-inflected retelling

“ EXAGGERATED TO THE SYMBOLIC ”

Above and opposite: *300* is operatic, with consciously symbolic design.

of a relatively obscure historical battle featuring exaggerated art and a downbeat ending. But such was Miller's artistic power in the '90s, he could have suggested adapting his shopping list and it would have got an eight-issue run. Thankfully, he chose to retell a story that had a profound impact on him when he was five years old: facing the overwhelming odds of what traditionally works in comic-book publishing, he succeeded in creating a work that will echo through the ages. **SAM ASHURST**



MAD LOVE

Writer Paul Dini

Artist Bruce Timm

Published 1994

Publisher DC Comics

Mad Love is, in the words of no less than Frank Miller, “the best Batman story of the decade.” And that guy knows his Gotham. It is the chaotically engaging origin story of The Joker’s number one gal, Harley Quinn. She debuted two years before in the magnificently moody *Batman: The Animated Series*, and the creative team took just one issue of tie-in comic *The Batman Adventures* to explain and explore her irresistible insanity. Appropriately, it’s a darkly bonkers story told with efficiency, wit and not a little tragedy.

Partly narrating her own tale – to a pack of guffawing hyenas, no less – Dr Harleen Quinzel recalls how she fell in love with a homicidal lunatic, in a confession every inch as sympathetic as it is psychotic. Her determination to impress her barmy boyf’ has her concocting a rapturously madcap plot: feeding Batman to a tank of piranhas (upside down, so that they appear to be smiling).

The pages crackle at every turn, each panel sizzles with energy, and onomatopoeic tropes litter the artwork with jubilant glee. It even makes playful jokes at the medium’s expense (why not just shoot Batman?!). Plus, it’s a terrific adventure in its own right: the Joker is equal parts sadistic and silly, the Dark Knight gets to save the day with brain as well as brawn, and it ends on an ironically bittersweet twist, as all great Batman stories should.

Mad Love was in turn made into an episode of the animated *New Batman Adventures*, but thanks to a bizarrely re-rendered Joker isn’t quite as satisfying (even with the wonderful vocals of Arleen Sorkin and Mark Hamill). So, pick up the original to savour a creative team every bit as much in love with their craft and character as Harley is with her puddin’, Mr J. **MILES HAMER**



PHONOGRAM

Writer Kieron Gillen

Artist Jamie McKelvie

Published 2006-2016

Publisher Image

Could there be a more perfect marriage made in heaven (or, more likely, the other place...) than comics and pop music? Not according to Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie, whose three-volume *Phonogram* is an absolute joy from start to finish.

The central concept here is that music is power – magical power to be precise. And it’s shaped and moulded and generally abused by phonomancers. These are not the magicians of your fathers... they’d even give John Constantine a run for his money. Young, beautiful and boozy, they party all night and raise hell.

Following disillusioned phonomancer David Kohl, the first volume, “Rue Britannia”, is a shirts-off, fists-in-the-air paean to Britpop and the ’90s. Part Two, “The Singles Club”, takes place over one night in a club, focussing on a different magician each episode. The final volume, “The Immaterial Girl”, centres on Emily Aster and the transient nature of pop culture.

Perhaps the most surprising thing of all about a comic so quintessentially British is that it was put out by a US publisher.

But then Image has never stinted on originality and risk-taking, and this is one needle on the record that paid off big-time. Altogether *Phonogram* is smart, sexy, sassy and soulful.

Tune! **DAVID BARNETT**

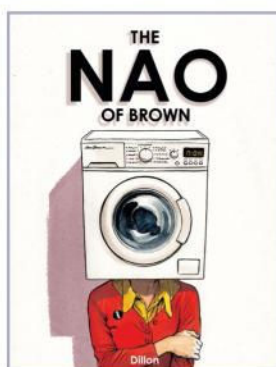




47

THE NAO OF BROWN

A BEAUTIFULLY-DRAWN BOOK THAT EXPLORES A PERSON'S INNER LIFE IN A WAY ONLY COMICS CAN



Writer Glyn Dillon
Artist Glyn Dillon
Published 2012
Publisher Self Made Hero

The Nao of Brown is the story of Nao – a half-Japanese, half-English woman who wrestles with OCD. The book doesn't have her obsessively tidying or hand washing, but instead it looks at her experience of suffering OCD with intrusive and often violent thoughts.

The book is the work of Glyn Dillon, who has since been busy working as a costume concept artist on *Star Wars: Rogue One* and *The Force Awakens*. Dillon is a superb artist and this is a spectacular showcase for his work, which makes the contrast between Nao's violent thoughts and more mundane everyday interactions sharp but not jarring. The colour palette is used to great effect – Nao's signature colour is red, and that pop of bright colour in more muted backgrounds is a very pleasing contrast.

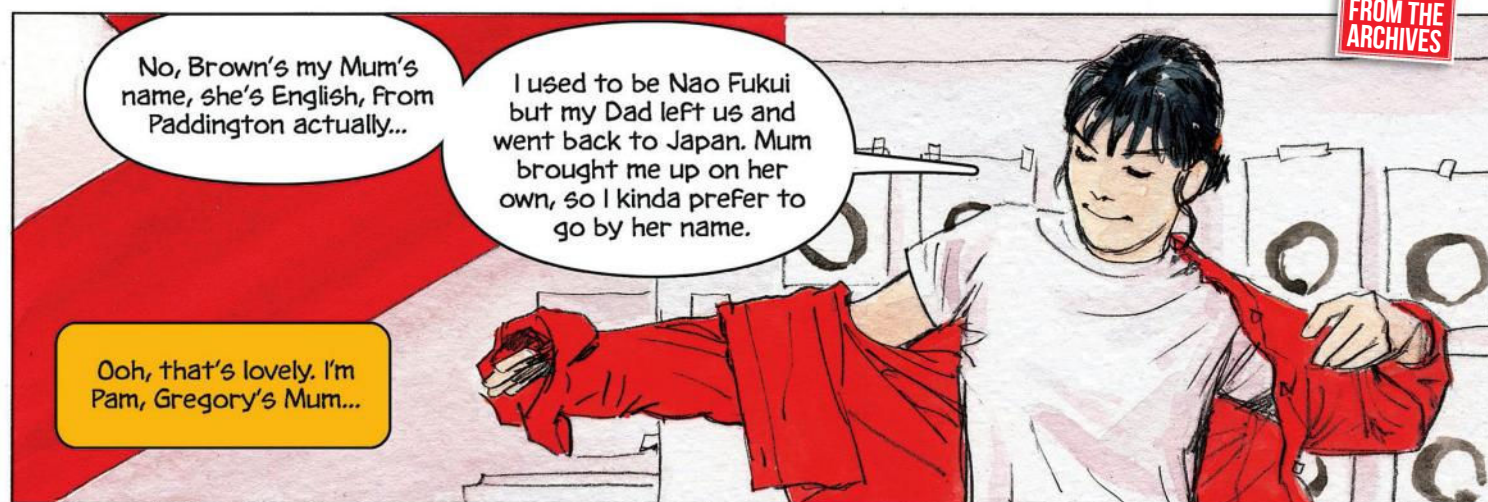
The story doesn't always get the portrayal of living with this type of mental illness spot-on, but it does a lot to increase awareness around it,

showcasing with unflinching brutality how difficult it is living day to day being out of control of your own thought processes. It's by no means the first to take a look at living with mental illness, but it's such an honest portrayal that it makes it a really worthwhile read.

THE REAL AND THE FANTASTICAL

The book keeps one foot in the realm of social realism (it deals with some pretty heavy stuff along the way, including alcoholism and sexual abuse) and the other firmly in the fantastical. But if that sounds like it might be a tough read, don't worry – its compelling story is also laced with humour throughout. **SARA WESTROP**

“HEAVY BUT LACED WITH HUMOUR”



LONDON GIRL



IN 2012, MATT BIELBY SAT DOWN WITH **GLYN DILLON** TO TALK ABOUT HIS GLORIOUS DEPICTION OF SLICE-OF-LIFE LONDON ANGST, THE NAO OF BROWN...

Glyn's a name from the past – younger brother to the mighty Steve, of *Preacher* and *Punisher* fame; promising Vertigo career cut short – who's suddenly re-emerged with a grim-yet-bouncy tale of mighty ambition and no small craft. The *Nao of Brown* is an original graphic novel of some 200 pages, set very specifically and recognisably in north west London.

Its lead is an Anglo-Japanese girl with a similar mix of hip-geek appeal and hidden darknesses; her life combines kitchen-sink drama with bold fantasy sequences and moments of frightening, self-destructive anger.

This is a comic to appeal to about as wide a demographic as the medium gets: boys and girls, fans of European biographical comics and the more broken-hearted end of manga, Vertigo readers and Posy Simmonds devotees. Dillon announces himself as a confident, high-reaching writer here, but it's his art that's going to grab the attention. We're impressed; we think you will be too.

Comic Heroes: With a family like yours (Glyn's dad is also an artist), we're guessing comics were always part of your world...

Glyn Dillon: One early memory is of my brother putting my name, spelt backwards, on a plane in a Nick Fury strip for *The Hulk Weekly*. I was in the infants at the time, and took that comic into school to unashamedly show off about it. But I was met with: 'Your brother didn't do that! Comics aren't drawn! They're just printed!' And so began my life as an 'outsider'.

I got passed down all Steve's substantial *War Picture Library* collection, but *2000 AD* was the next big influence. Seeing the Mean Arena come together in our garage, which had been converted into a studio for Steve, was very inspiring. *The Hulk*, *Abslom Daak*: *Dalek Killer*, *Judge Dredd*: all that stuff has a special place

Above: The eponymous Nao Brown: fond of red trousers. And red shirts.



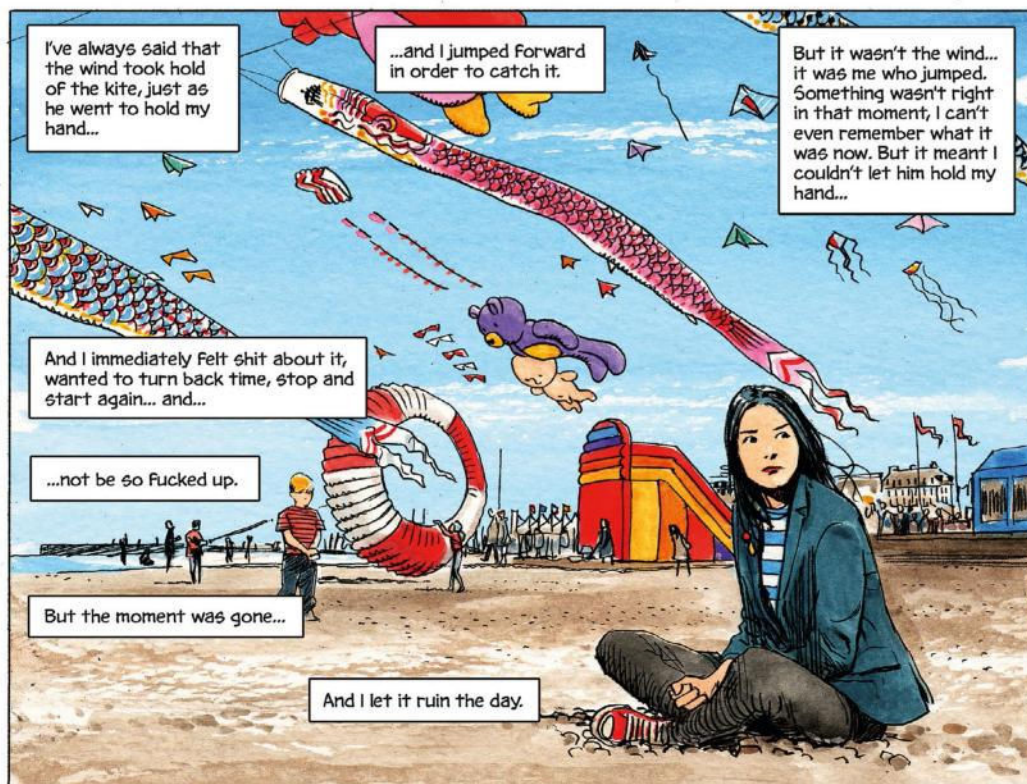
in my heart, because that's when I fell in love with the medium.

CH: You hung out with the *Deadline* crew, of course...

GD: I was really in the 'second wave' of artists; I was 17 or 18 and working on *Crisis* when *Deadline* first started. My brother was keen that there'd be no nepotism – he wanted me to make it on my own merit – and it wasn't until Dave Elliot took over the editing reins that I was asked to do something. So me and Alan (Martin) pitched "Planet Swerve".

They were great times. Living in Worthing, we all flat shared, coming up with stupid ideas and helping each other out on all-nighters and deadlines. My lifelong friends are all from that period, but Jamie Hewlett and Phil Bond were the two artists I looked up to most. I loved that Phil could come up with a wittily written and beautifully drawn four-to-eight pager every month. I could never do that; couldn't do it now.

Jamie, too. He's gone and done alright for himself, but he was always the one who worked the hardest, and he definitely deserves his rewards. Alan's really made *Tank Girl* come alive again in recent years, but for me – despite the new artists being great 'n' all – it'll always be the original Hewlett/Martin version that I go to. Looking back, I didn't understand how lucky we were: to be able to have a stupid idea then two weeks later it'd be on sale.



CH: You've said Moebius is your favourite artist. What is it you like about him?

GD: A lot of great things were written about him after he passed away and the fact that I couldn't stop myself crying when I heard the news – despite having never met the man – goes some way towards showing how much he meant to me. His effortless line always amazed me; his incredible imagination, his ability to jump between wildly different styles, while still maintaining his identity. He was a true genius – and there's not many of them about.

I think if you were to trawl back through some of my *Deadline* efforts you'd see a more direct influence (or, to be honest, me shamelessly ripping him off). But I think having grown up, and the fact that I had a long break from comics, gave me the

freedom to develop my own style – which is, of course, what Jean Giraud would have wanted.

In terms of *The Nao of Brown*, the 'Ichi' pages – the story within the story bit – are supposed to be drawn by a fictional half-French, half-Japanese artist, thus allowing me to try my best to emulate my two, maybe three, favourite artists: Moebius, Miyazaki and Otomo. But they were just my influences – I haven't ripped off anything directly!

CH: Readers may remember you from *Vertigo*: maybe *Shade The Changing Man*, or the 1995 miniseries *Egypt*...

GD: It's funny. At the time there was a bit of a comics boom, and suddenly we were getting offered very healthy page rates from DC Vertigo. I got to do a few things with Pete Milligan, who I always thought was a genius.

Above: Nao recalls a trip to the seaside...

But it was also around that time that things started to change in Worthing; we were no longer the youngest kids on the block. We were all getting older, and the new art school girls were getting younger. It felt like the right time to break away. I fancied I might be able to make it as a director, so I headed up to London in search of storyboarding work.

As it happened, the friends we made through *Deadline* were all becoming successful bands, and Britpop was beginning to blossom. I did a bit of storyboarding for commercials, and a few videos here and there, but I also went on a European tour with Pulp as their 'swagman' (the person who sells the merchandise). I worked at Jim Henson's for a few years, got into concept design as well as storyboarding, made friends with the amazing Dermot Power, Rob Bliss, guys like that. Storyboarded on location in Turkey for three months. Had lots of amazing adventures, intense relationships, drank and drugged myself silly – all culminating in a big nervous breakdown.

CH: And was that part of the genesis of *The Nao of Brown*?

GD: Originally it was going to be more Gregory's story, and I wanted to do it for a possible anthology comic – much like *Deadline*, really. Alan Martin, who I'd pitched my idea to, was into it – but busy with *Tank Girl* commitments. However, it wasn't long before I'd come up with enough material to consider going it alone, without the help of a proper writer. Alan gave me his blessing and I forged on, a bit scared.

CH: Where does the OCD aspect come from?

GD: In 2001 I ended up in the Nightingale Mental Health Hospital in Marylebone for three months, diagnosed with depression and addiction issues. I was in therapy for a year, got completely clean and



Left: ...that didn't turn out quite as she hoped.



Above: Nao's doodles reveal the morbid obsessions that plague her.

sorted a lot of stuff out. At the same time it rekindled my interest in Carl Jung, and I became intrigued by all kinds of mental disorders – but the specific interest in OCD came when I saw the Channel 4 programme *House Of OCD*. (This was a while after my treatment, and I was by now happily married.)

Around the same time I'd started taking a course in meditation at a Buddhist centre. The often misguided idea about meditation is that you're trying to empty your mind; the 'trying' is what makes that impossible, and I saw parallels



between that and people with OCD. The more they tried to control their mind, the more out of control it would get. This was where a lot of themes in the book came from.

Then, over a period of time, my wife revealed to me that she'd suffered terribly with OCD as a child and into her late teens. Not the same kind of obsessive thoughts as Nao, but she did have similar compulsions, the mental rituals performed to ease the anxiety. She was very supportive of me doing the book, and a great sounding board. Although Nao is a fictional character, it was a very personal project.

CH: A big, original graphic novel that you write and draw yourself seems a daunting way back into comics...

GD: I was fed up with trying to get pet projects off the ground in film and television. Suddenly I saw the beautiful simplicity of sitting at my desk, on my own, in my spare time and just doing my own thing. It was a proper little epiphany, and so I just got going – and I would've kept going, I think, until a mutual friend told Doug at Self Made Hero about my blog, which I'd started just to track my progress and post up the occasional teasers. Luckily, Emma and Doug at SMH seemed to be into what I was doing, and I liked them instantly. It was easy to tell they had passion and seemed to know what they were doing.

CH: Did you write it very tightly first, or just loosely plan it?

GD: I had a weird three days quite early on, when I found a certain Jung quote and a washing machine quote all in the same bookshop, on this one weirdly-lit evening. A bookshop that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, on a street that I thought I knew well – but it hadn't had a bookshop the last time I'd been there. It all felt a bit magic, like Mr Benn's shopkeeper appearing. And in the two days that followed I'd managed to plot out the whole book.

Then, when I got the interest I wrote a one page 'elevator pitch' – then a four page treatment, which showed more about the characters. Then, finally, an 11-page treatment that plotted out everything that happened. I'd also already drawn, painted and lettered the first 11 or 12 pages as a sample of the artwork.

Once the deal was agreed I had three months to deliver the finished script. That first draft was the toughest – then, like everyone says, each subsequent draft got easier. I called in Si Spencer, ex-*Deadline* editor and now professional script doctor, and with each new draft I'd email it to him and we would meet in the pub to go through his notes.

It took six drafts before I delivered it to them, and then the final draft was done during the lettering: that was the most satisfying edit of all. Because it'd been such a long time



since I'd written it, it was much easier to see what was working.

CH: Tell us a bit about the art style.

GD: Pedro Almodóvar always does great stuff with colour: his films look like beautiful European comics. I'm a big fan of his, and his director of photography Jose Luis Alcaide – as well as costume designer Bina Daigeler. When it came to colour, *Volver* was a big influence on *Nao*.

Storyboarding adverts involves drawing people doing mundane things. The kitchen sink/washing machine realism comes easily to me.

CH: Who are these characters? And, to your mind, what are they about?

GD: They're all me in some way or another, because I imagined them,

they had to go through the 'filter of me'. Some of the stories happened to friends. One Steve story, in particular, was my very own – but it wasn't the worst one, it was the one with the duvet. And Nao's 'fly story' happened to me, exactly as it's told in the book.

CH: Tell us a bit about the 'Ichi' pages, and how you came up with their very different style...

GD: I don't really want to explain the 'Ichi' story; I think that's something for the reader to work out. But I really enjoyed doing them, and it was a challenge to try to make them feel as though they were by another artist: I had to, y'know, get into character. Colouring it digitally was a lot of fun, and quicker than

“ THE KITCHEN SINK/WASHING MACHINE REALISM COMES PRETTY EASILY TO ME ”

Left: Wise words from the deity of the washing machine!

my watercolour method. But then I did take longer drawing those pages.

CH: You're using Photoshop as an intrinsic part of your artistic process?


GD: Yes! Taught to me by Rob Bliss, who'd hit my hand with his ruler if I asked stupid questions.

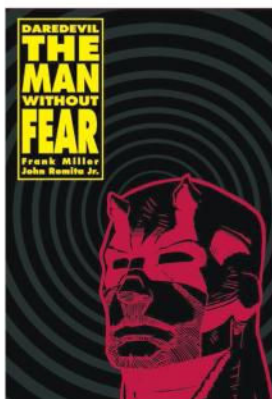
It's easy to play around with the levels, so a crisp HB pencil line looks like a fresh and spontaneous inked line. I'd always wanted to ink like Hugo Pratt, with that kind of loose abandonment, and Photoshop allowed me to retain the freshness of that original pencil line. On all my previous comics work, I always felt like my inking had killed the image; now, if a panel goes wrong, I'll just throw it away and do it again. I drew all of *Nao* on photocopy paper, using a retractable HB pencil, then I darkened up the line in Photoshop and printed it out as a very faint grey onto watercolour paper. I'd then paint the watercolour page and, after scanning that in, I could put them back together digitally.

CH: Now you're done with this, how's your love of comics?

GD: I love comics! But when I started on this, I felt I had some catching up to do. I'd never read *Maus*! I read all six volumes of *Akira*... The whole thing has been a massive learning curve, and a very enjoyable one.

CH: And finally, what is it with all the washing machines anyway?

GD: Yeah! What is it with washing machines? 



© MARVEL

Writer Frank Miller
Artist John Romita Jr
Published 1993
Publisher Marvel Comics



DAREDEVIL: THE MAN WITHOUT FEAR

A SENSITIVE RETELLING OF A CLASSIC ORIGIN STORY MADE ALL THE RICHER BY ITS UPDATED OUTLOOK

Miller and Romita's terse, minimalist approach pares this revision of DD's origin story down to the bone. This is a grounded, real, tough place – a world of blood, gym sweat and desperation. Working-class heroes like Matt's father Jack Murdoch are crushed by the criminal forces that control them, and even Matt's super-hero name is bitterly ironic.

We follow Matt Murdoch as he grows from an idealistic kid, through his first stumbling attempts to thwart crime, to his eventual entanglement with Wilson Fisk and first meetings with Elektra. That's a lot to pack into a mere five issues, but it flows beautifully thanks to Miller's approach – mostly caption-led, with dialogue only when necessary, aiding the sense that these characters are closed off and alone. It hones in only on the key moments in Matt's journey from damaged to Daredevil.

It is, of course, wincingly violent. Jack Murdoch is pretty much defined by his bruises, and Romita lets you feel every blow from Daredevil's weapons (here usually a cane or a baseball bat – it is early days). The creators don't shy away from the moral ambiguity inherent in vigilantism, either. A pivotal

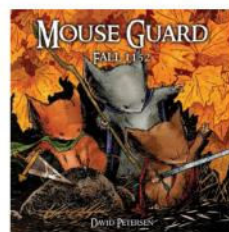
moment for Matt is when his actions lead directly to the death of a woman who, yes, was tied up with the villains but didn't deserve this.

There are moments of hope and beauty too – not least because of Romita's wonderfully dynamic, always moving art and Al Williamson's shadowy inks. A stunning splash page renders Matt framed upside down against a full moon, before we realise he is bounding through the city, on the way to his fateful first meeting with Elektra. JR Jr foregrounds the joy in Murdoch's return to life after years of despair as much as he does the gritty violence.

While it's a stretch to say the recent Netflix series is an adaptation of "The Man Without Fear", the book is clearly a strong influence. But more important was the book's impact in general. Miller and Romita's masterpiece proved popular enough to bring Daredevil back from the brink of cancellation and solidified much of the character's mythology in the public mind. Gritty but not unrelenting, bleak but beautiful, it's an essential part of the Daredevil canon and some of Miller and JR Jr's finest work – and that's saying something. **WILL SALMON**



MOUSE GUARD: FALL 1152



Writer David Petersen

Artist David Petersen

Published 2006

Publisher Archaia Studios Press

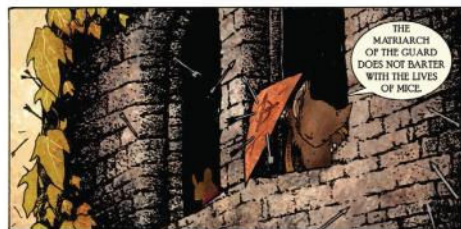
Mouse Guard is something very special. You can tell that from the moment you pick up an issue. It's an 8x8 square instead of the usual format. Then, when you open it you see just how different it is.

The book is set in a medieval world where mice are the dominant culture. Not the dominant species though, as the war against a weasel warlord in the book's immediate past shows.

The leads are members of the Mouse Guard, an elite army. But with the war over, the Guard find their job far more complex than just fighting evil.

Peterson's delicate line art and open pages would make the series, which begins with "Fall 1152", essential all by themselves. Nothing else being published looks like *Mouse Guard* and very little is as beautiful, but it has substance as well as style.

Mouse Guard is an epic and unique fantasy adventure story that's packed with subtle metaphor and gentle characterisation, especially in prequel series *Black Axe*. **ALASDAIR STUART**



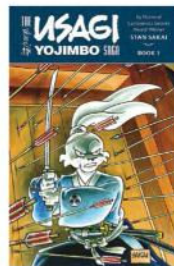
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IMAGES © DAVID PETERSEN



IMAGES © STAN SAKAI / DARK HORSE COMICS

USAGI YOJIMBO



Writer Stan Sakai

Artist Stan Sakai

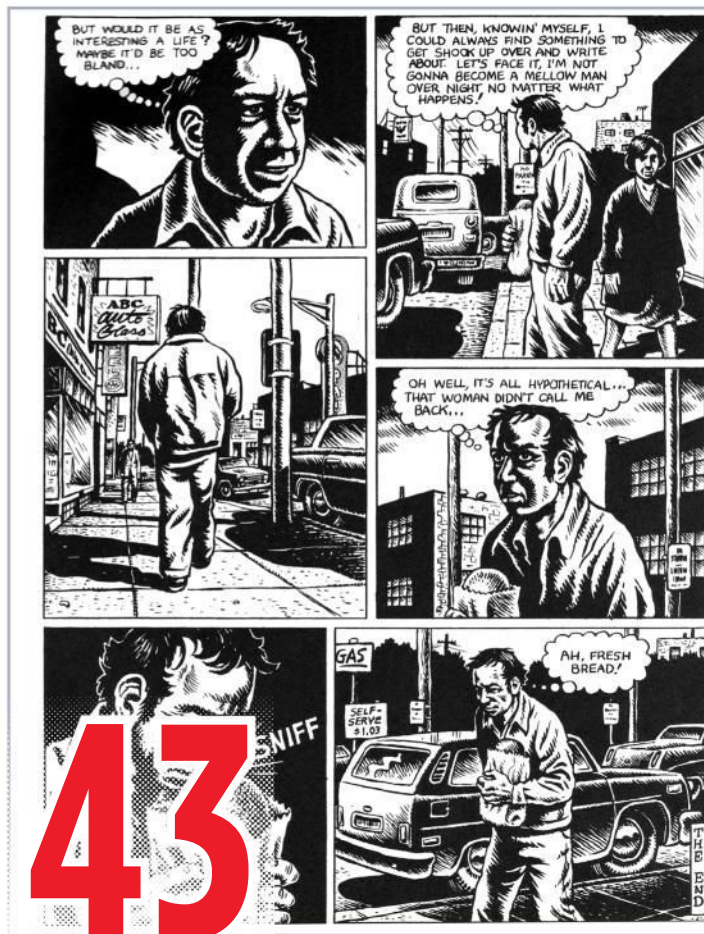
Published 1984-

Publisher Dark Horse Comics

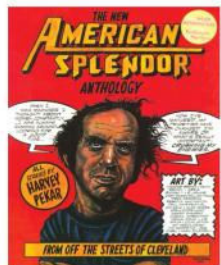
Usagi Yojimbo has had a long, storied career on and off the page. The creation of Stan Sakai, Usagi was originally intended to be a human character partially based on swordsman Miyamoto Musashi. However, when doodling, Sakai added a pair of bunny ears to the character in a Samurai topknot and Usagi was born. He made his first appearance in *Albedo Anthropomorphics* #2 in 1984, moved to *Fantagraphics* in 1987 and has since moved again to Dark Horse.

Much like the swordsman at its heart, there's not a single wasted action here. Sakai's open style combines with the disarmingly friendly appearance of the characters to draw you in.

The anthropomorphic characters act as a universal lens through which Sakai tells stories about and drawn from Japanese culture. The attention to detail is huge but there's no clunky exposition or infodumps. Instead, you're told what you need to know as you know it. You learn as Usagi learns and the book is as much about the world he moves through as the plots and characters he encounters. Follow the white rabbit – we promise you won't regret it. **Alasdair Stuart**



AMERICAN SPLENDOR



Writer Harvey Pekar

Artists Various

Published 1976-2008

Publisher Self-published/Dark Horse/Vertigo

"From off the streets of Cleveland comes... *American Splendor*" proclaimed the cover

of the first issue of the ironically-titled anthology written and self-published by Harvey Pekar in 1976. In the early '60s, Pekar, a file clerk living in Cleveland, had been a neighbour and friend of underground comix legend Robert Crumb. Through their shared passion for record collecting, Pekar would later persuade Crumb to illustrate for his new magazine some of his stick-figure scripts, which Pekar based on his seemingly banal workaday world. The results were a strikingly fresh approach to the portrayal of reality in comics. Crumb praised Pekar's perception of the everyday, which he said "gives us its poignant moments, its humour, absurdity, irony... and mostly, its absolute truth."

Pekar would collaborate with numerous other artists until his death in 2010, notably Frank Stack on *Our Cancer Year*, the award-winning graphic memoir of Pekar's battle with cancer, co-written with his wife Joyce Brabner. The couple appeared on screen alongside the actors portraying them in the playful meta-movie of *American Splendor*, a surprise hit in 2003. Discovering Pekar is discovering an outspoken, opinionated, one-of-a-kind original whose truthful storytelling will transform how you understand the medium forever. **PAUL GRAVETT**



SUPERMAN: RED SON



Writer Mark Millar

Artists Dave Johnson, Kilian Plunkett

Published 2003

Publisher DC Comics / Elseworlds

Red Son imagines a world where Superman crash-landed not in Kansas, but in the Soviet Union. In Mark Millar's acclaimed mini-series, the action begins in the 1950s, with Russia announcing Superman to the world, triggering a global arms race that focuses on superhumans rather than nukes.

As well as giving us a Soviet Superman, we also get to see Wonder Woman and a furry-hat-wearing Batman transplanted into Russia, while Lex Luthor becomes the USA's only hope of stopping Superman and the ever expanding USSR from becoming their new benevolent dictators.

The switcheroo means that *Red Son* can focus on the cores of these characters. Would Superman still be a good man if he was raised in the Soviet Union? Would Lex Luthor have become a villain without Superman on his turf?

There's something thrilling about alternate reality stories, a chance to show familiar old characters in a whole new light. But where *Red Son* really shines is in its redefinition of Luthor as an antihero, and it makes you wonder if the world might have been better off without Superman after all. It helps, of course, that it also has one of the most memorable endings in comic book history... **ABIGAIL CHANDLER**



41



AMERICAN FLAGG!

THIS GRAPHICALLY INVENTIVE TALE IS THAT RARE THING, A FUN DYSTOPIA

Set in a near future where the US government has relocated to Mars and citizens who remain behind are ruled over by self-serving corporation The Plex, Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg!* is an acerbic satire of consumerist society, surveillance culture and reality television, decades ahead of its time when it was originally published by fledgling indie publisher First Comics starting in 1983.

The star of the show is Reuben Flagg, handsome and incorrigible (but, it turns out, fundamentally principled) formerly-famous actor, who turns to a career in law enforcement as a Plexus Ranger after being replaced by a hologram of himself in the top-rating TV show *Mark Thrust*, *Sexus Ranger*.

YOU ARE BEING CONTROLLED

Dispatched to Chicago's Plexmall to replace its fallen deputy, Flagg sets out to make a difference, stirring things up with the locals and stopping a series of subliminal messages that are intended to provoke gang violence. His actions eventually expose the sinister nature of the Plex itself, which naturally incurs the wrath of his employers.



Written and drawn by Chaykin, the opening story arc is *American Flagg!* at its finest. (It was originally published as four interrelated three-part segments over 12 issues; modern collected editions split this into two separate parts.) Creatively integrating Ken Bruzenak's distinctive lettering and explosive sound effects, Chaykin's gritty, angular art has never looked better, and it tells its story using a wide range of narrative tricks and graphic devices that (mostly) still feel fresh and exciting.

The series flagged (pun intended) after the end of its first, freewheeling story arc, and its unique original vision inevitably became diluted when Chaykin relinquished the art duties (with issue 26) and then the writing as well (after #31). When First Comics folded in 1991, *American Flagg!* languished until Dynamite and Image brought out a collected edition in 2008. It's now readily available in trade paperback and well worth reading – not so much as great sci-fi (you can sometimes tell it was being made up on the fly), but as a wildly inventive and entertaining satire skewering targets that, if anything, mean even more today. **STEPHEN JEWELL**

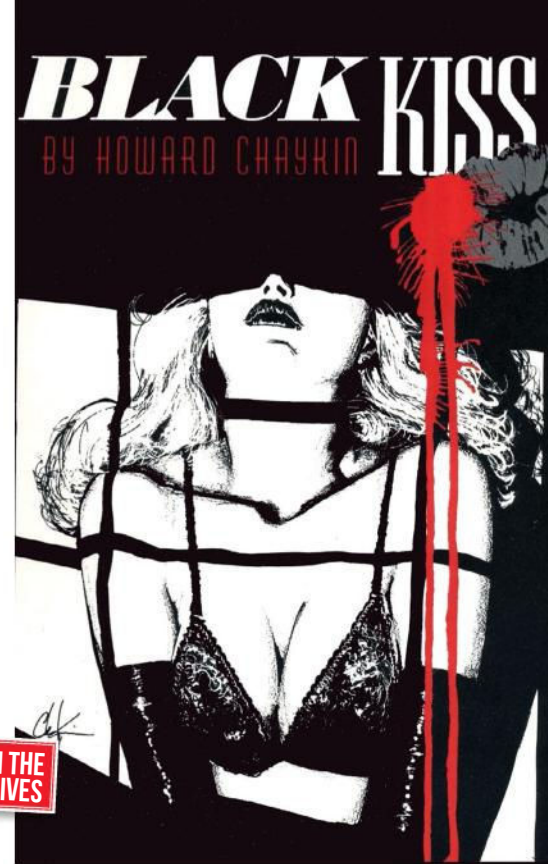
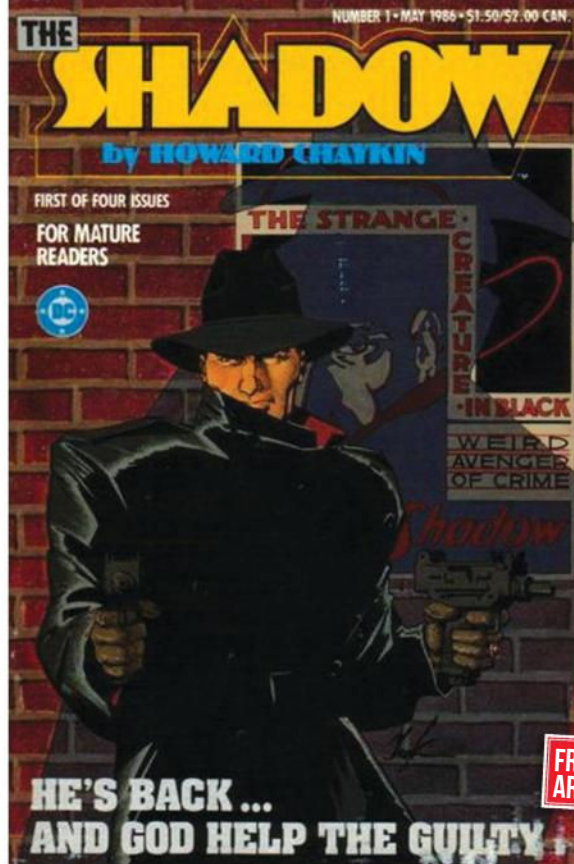
Writer Howard Chaykin

Artist Howard Chaykin

Published 1983-1989

Publisher Dynamite Entertainment





FLAGG OF OUR FATHERS

STEPHEN JEWELL HUNKERS DOWN WITH A LIVING LEGEND - MR **HOWARD CHAYKIN**, CREATOR OF THE SEMINAL *AMERICAN FLAGG!*

Just like Reuben Flagg – the full-on star of his best-known work, *American Flagg!* – Howard Chaykin doesn't pull any punches. Interviewing him at London's SuperCon [in 2012] proves to be a truly entertaining experience, as he breaks off to produce a new sketch or to sign some books for the queuing fans, gently admonishing them for their apparent meekness.

"You Brits are passive-aggressive," he says with a wry laugh. "You're not that nice. I was in Trafalgar Square yesterday and I realised that you guys laid rape to the world for so many years and now you're acting polite about it. When I think of Britain, I think of these huge hulking guys just knocking the shit out of Romans."

Born in New Jersey but now based in California, Chaykin embarked on his near-five-decade-long comics career in the early '70s, initially working as an assistant to Gil Kane

and Neal Adams before going on to illustrate Marvel and DC titles like *Killraven*, *Star Wars* and *World Of Krypton*. But it was on *American Flagg!* that he made his name. Initially published by the now defunct First Comics in 1983, the satirical tale of a TV star turned law enforcement officer living in a dystopian, consumerist America still appears to be eerily ahead of its time.

"*Flagg!* is a book that reflects my politics, obsessions and manias when I was in my early 30s," recalls Chaykin, now in his 60s. "I don't believe in predictive stuff but I do believe that *Flagg!* couldn't reach a wide readership at the time because it was published by a small company. But it influenced an entire generation of cartoonists. To a great extent, *Flagg!* is more influential than it is popular. As long as there are people out there who are aware of the influence it's had on all these careers

then I'm okay. When that's forgotten, I go berserk!"

The bleak vision of the future in *Flagg!* brings to mind Ridley Scott's equally seminal *Blade Runner* (1982) and William Gibson's landmark debut novel *Neuromancer* (1984). "I never read any of that cyberpunk stuff but I'm aware of its existence," insists Chaykin. "By the time I started *Flagg!*, I'd stopped reading sci-fi and started on crime fiction."

DARK DYSTOPIA

Like all good sci-fi, *Flagg!* reflects the era in which it was created. "That's also true of Westerns, crime and all genre fiction," counters Chaykin. "I stay away from that sort of thing. What I was doing in *Flagg!* seemed perfectly logical. The story that I was telling seemed exactly like the way things were going. If you look at it from a predictive perspective, I got a lot right."

“ IRONY WAS SURGICALLY REMOVED FROM THE CULTURE ABOUT 20 YEARS AGO ”

However, Chaykin believes that his artistic techniques in *American Flagg!* have had more of an influence than its story content: “For me, the importance of *Flagg!* was less what I got right from a historical perspective and more the introduction of a different visual language to the material. I was trying to find different ways to tell a story visually.”

To Chaykin, his art doesn’t suit the traditional six-panel grid. “I don’t draw in a particularly dynamic style,” he says. “My work has a finished and studied quality about it and I don’t have the kind of dynamism that Jack Kirby and his acolytes have, or had. So I needed to create dynamics in the graphic as opposed to the image and that’s what I set out to do with *Flagg!*, to find a way to reintegrate different narrative styles.”



Chaykin also credits innovative letterer Ken Bruzenak for much of the success of *American Flagg!*. “Ken and I are twin sons of different mothers,” he laughs. “I’m never happier than when he and I are working together. He’s an absolutely brilliant talent, who gets nowhere near the props that he deserves as he’s responsible for introducing so many tropes into the visual language of comics.”

While Dynamite Entertainment collected the first 14-issue story arc of *Flagg!* in a hardback edition in 2008, complete with a new eight-page story, Chaykin has not so far returned to the series. “We’ve talked about the possibility, but it’s a different world now,” he explains. “You have to understand that my generation was fairly apocalyptic in the sense of the direction the world was going back in the ’80s. We assumed we’d be the last generation of cartoonists because



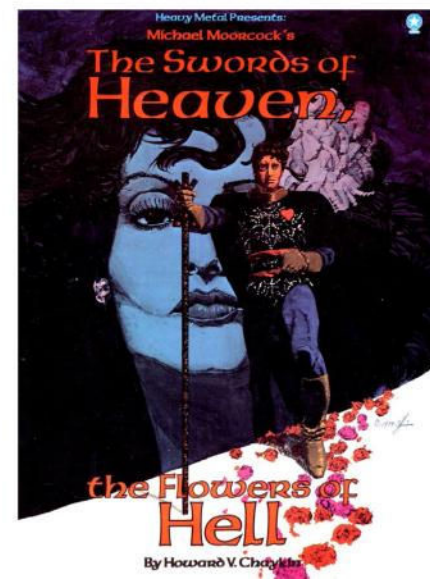
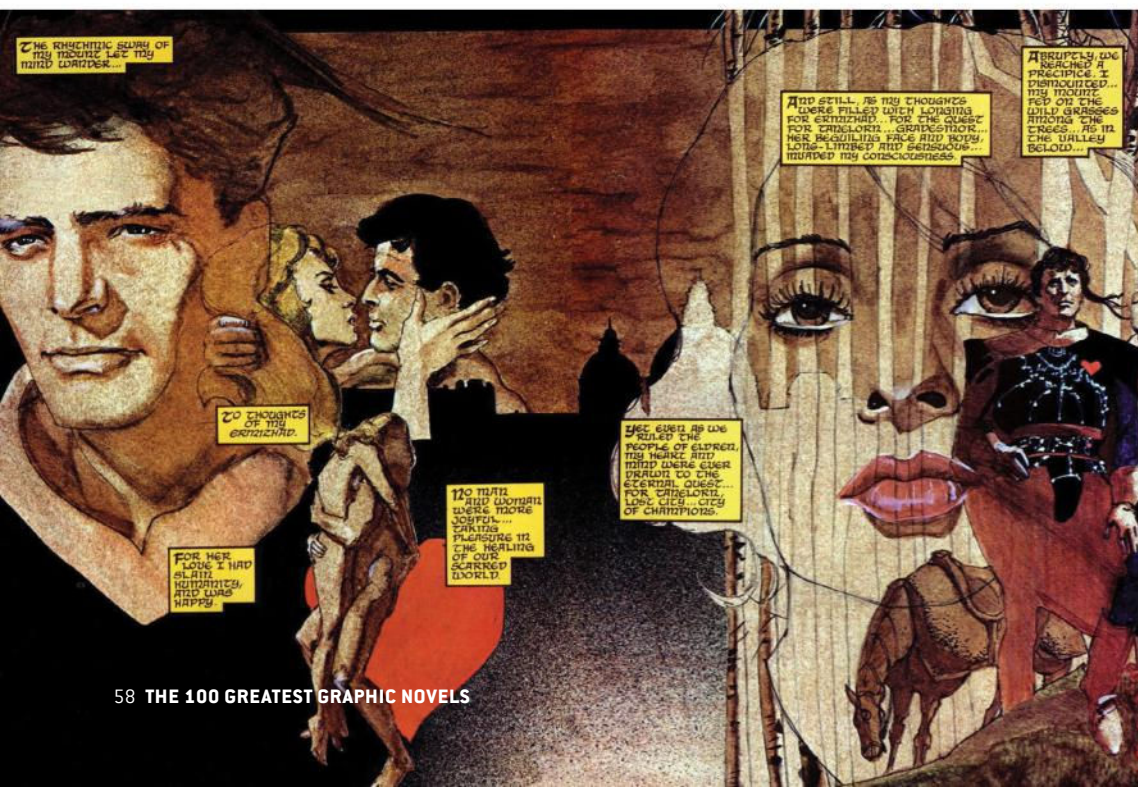
Above: Chaykin worked on major titles, but it was *American Flagg!* that made his name.

Below: Chaykin collaborated with Michael Moorcock on a noted graphic novel.

computers were going to eliminate paper – and the concept of recycling hadn’t evolved, so paper was going to disappear anyway.”

KILLING THE HEROES

Chaykin also believed Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* would be the last word on super-heroes. “In my own naivety, I thought that a book like that, which so completely shits all over everything that super-hero comics stand for, should have been the end of the market,” he says. “It should have absolutely killed super-hero comics. But what it actually did was to create another language for second-rate talent to recreate comics in a language that reflected what Moore and Gibbons were doing. This is true of everything that happened post 1985/86, which demonstrates that I’ve been right all along, in that irony was surgically





removed from the culture about 20 years ago."

Chaykin caught his first glimpse of *Watchmen* in DC's New York offices prior to agreeing to write and draw his 1986 *Shadow* limited series. "I saw the first issue on editor Andy Helfer's desk and I actually had them add a clause to my *Shadow* contract that made it necessary for them to send me the black-and-whites of *Watchmen*," he recalls. "As they came in, I was reading them in black-

Right:
Gideon
Faust:
*Warlock
At Large*
by Chaykin
and Len
Wein.

Below:
Chaykin
dragged
The Shadow
from the '30s to
the '80s.



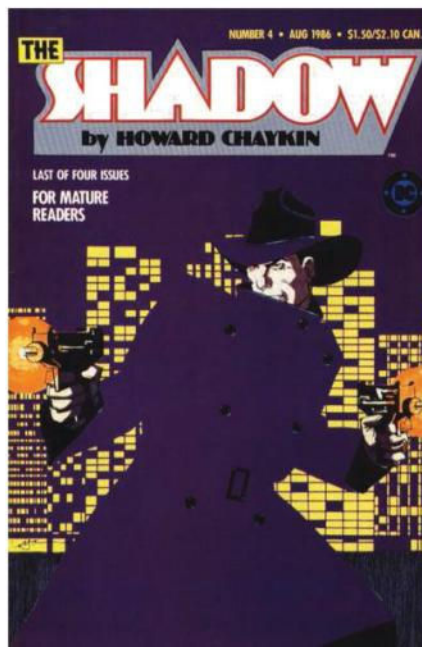
and-white and having no idea that the real value of those first few issues was the back-up feature, 'Under the Hood'. I'm also of the mind that while I love *Watchmen*, it's the perfect illustration of Alan Moore's inability to finish a job. For all the shit the movie took, I thought what Zack Snyder did in terms of tying everything together was actually a much more effective narrative job."

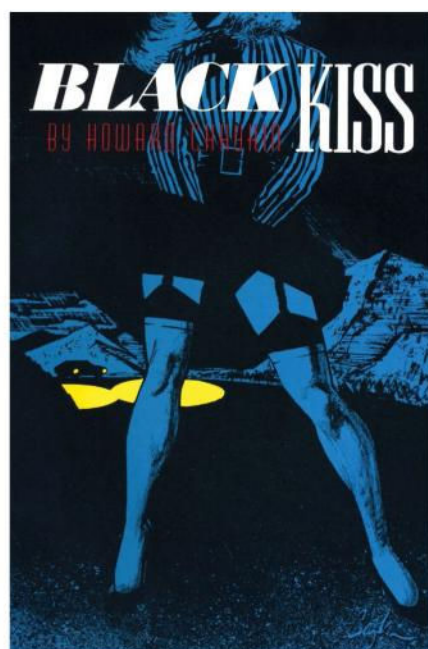
In 2012, Dynamite released a new hardback edition of Chaykin's

Shadow four-parter, *Blood & Judgment*, which had controversially brought the pulp character into the modern world. "I'm amazed about that because the entire function of *The Shadow* seemed to be to piss people off," laughs Chaykin. "I'm not going to make friends by saying it, but I was never a huge fan of the original material and I don't care for the *Shadow* very much."

DC's then managing editor Dick Giordano offered Chaykin the book shortly before Chaykin relocated to California in 1985. "I didn't have any work lined up, so he asked me if I'd do *The Shadow*," he recalls. "I said, 'Sure, it's on the schedule'. At the time, Dick was one of my favourite people in the world. [When Giordano died in 2010], I flew to New York on my own nickel for his memorial because it was my responsibility to demonstrate my love for Dick by being there."

Despite Chaykin's misgivings, *Blood & Judgment* has stood the test ➤





Above left: Chaykin revamped *Blackhawk* for DC.

Above: *Black Kiss*, probably his most controversial work.

of time: "There's nothing about it that shames me, and I'm ashamed of a lot of stuff. The problem with a career as long and varied as mine is that there's some shit out there!"

Chaykin doesn't distinguish between his numerous work-for-hire assignments over the years, such as his 2011 Marvel miniseries *Avengers 1959*, and more personal creator-owned projects like *American Flag!* or controversial erotic vampire series *Black Kiss*. "I've always felt that if I don't deliver the same quality of work with everything I do, I'm cheating everyone," he says. "It's my responsibility to do the best job I can no matter who owns the property,

because sooner or later it all comes back to you."

The shockingly explicit *Black Kiss*, first unleashed in 1988 by short-lived Canadian outfit Vortex Comics, returned for a second series of six issues from Image Comics in 2012-13, collected in one volume in 2013. Chaykin says he took inspiration from Stephen Sondheim's 2010 lyric collection *Finishing The Hat*. "He talks about 'I'm Still Here', the closing song of the first act of *Follies*, which is sung by a character called Carlotta Campion. He talks about how her life is a fictionalised pastiche of Joan Crawford's career. That's when the concept for *Black Kiss 2* came together." Did he plan it to be "just as disgusting as the first *Black Kiss*? Most definitely!"

REVIVING THE PAST

Chaykin also hopes to produce a follow-up to *Avengers 1959*, which featured a version of Marvel's super-team made up of Nick Fury,

Namora, Sabretooth, Bloodstone, Silver Sable and Dominic Fortune.

"I know other people have done Dominic Fortune stories but I don't acknowledge the existence of anything that I haven't written," says Chaykin, who created the garrulous freebooter for Marvel in 1975 and wrote and illustrated a four-part

miniseries in 2009-10 set in the 1930s. "I also enjoy writing *Fury* and doing period material. I had a great time on the series and my editor did a phenomenal job of reining me in on some of the weirder shit.

"There were things that I wanted to do but couldn't because there were some continuity glitches, but overall I think we covered a lot of bases.

"I'd like to do a sequel involving the Blonde Phantom," Chaykin adds, "and I want to do a bit more with the Agents of Atlas, and something with the Dread Dormammu."

While a successor to *Avengers 1959* has yet to appear, Chaykin collaborated with *Iron Man/Thor* writer Matt Fraction on a creator-owned Icon title, *Satellite Sam*. Again displaying the artist's love of period material, it is set in 1951, a noir mystery riddled with sex, depravity and violence – and children's TV, exposing the seedy underbelly of the "golden age" of television. The 15-part series finished in July 2015 and is available in a collected edition.

Coming full circle, despite Chaykin's ambivalence about the character, he returned to *The Shadow* as writer-artist of the 2014 miniseries *Midnight in Moscow*, set in 1950 this time. The collected edition appeared in September 2015. **TOP**



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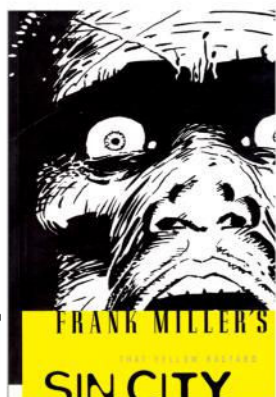
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40



ALL IMAGES © FRANK MILLER INC.

Writer Frank Miller

Artist Frank Miller

Published 1996

Publisher Dark Horse

SIN CITY: THAT YELLOW BASTARD

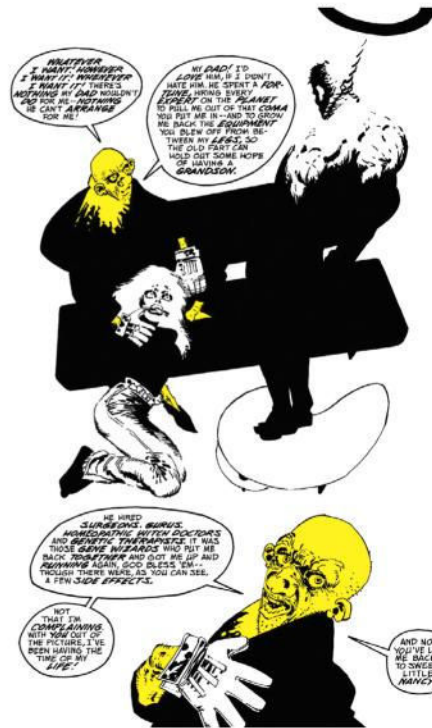
CRIME NOIR WITH A SPLASH OF HORRIFYING, SICKENING COLOUR MAKES A MASTERPIECE

This chronologically earliest story in the *Sin City* graphic novel collection is actually the series' fourth book, but we're glad Frank Miller took his time to craft his universe's stunning beginning.

Considered by most critics to be the best in the epic noir series, *Bastard* is certainly the simplest – narratively and morally. Previous tales followed corrupt or insanely violent leads, confronting readers with complex anti-heroes. Here, our hero is purer. We watch cop John Hartigan as he stands on the precipice of forced retirement, struggling on the side of good in the face of impossible odds.

When Hartigan rescues 11-year-old Nancy Callahan from the paedophile son of evil Basin City official Senator Roark, he enters a dark world of corruption and must balance his continuing protection of Nancy with the fight to save his reputation from Roark's revenge.

Making this instalment a battle between grouchy good and some of the purest evil Miller's ever put on the page intensifies *Bastard's* events to an almost unbearable degree. Miller deconstructs film noir tropes throughout this series, but *Bastard* frequently feels like a horror book, with torture



scenes so vicious you'll find yourself not just cringing but retrieving the book from the far corner of the room, where you flung it out of sheer reflex.

Much of that horror vibe comes from the titular character. In keeping with its noir roots, previous parts of *Sin City* were black-and-white with splashes of red, but here Roark Jr is literally yellow, giving him a monster movie look and making our pages tremble every time we see his sickly signature colour.

Contrast the characterisation of Roark Jr with the most likeable leads of the series (you're instantly attached to Hartigan and Nancy, and their growing connection to each other only intensifies those feelings) and you've got one of the most compelling stories in comics.

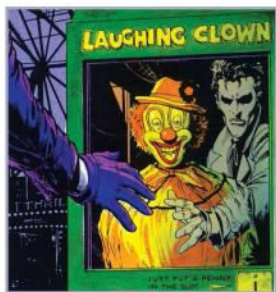
According to Miller, *Bastard* was written in reaction to *The Dead Pool*, the disappointing fifth and final *Dirty Harry* movie (which is why Nancy shares the same surname as Clint Eastwood's character, Harry Callahan), making it his attempt to right the wrongs of that film. Not only did Miller achieve his goal, but he came full circle when *Bastard*'s events became the central narrative in one of the great comic-book movies, Robert Rodriguez's adaptation of *Sin City*.

The series' volumes can arguably be read in any order – hence

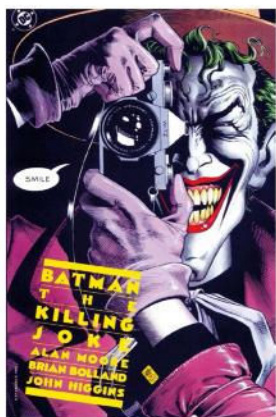
“ THIS IS THE KING OF CRIME COMICS ”

Above and opposite: Stylised, almost abstract forms in black and white – no grey – build an utterly distinctive world.

Rodriguez adapting the first, third and fourth books, juggling their narratives at will – but we'd make the case for reading the first three instalments before this one. *The Hard Goodbye*, *A Dame to Kill For* and *The Big Fat Kill* all have huge merits. They're brilliant noir tales in their own right and their darkness gives *Bastard*'s occasional light more powerful contrast. Also, *Bastard*'s full of references to events we've seen in previous books, so if you want to appreciate those payoffs, you have to be patient. But it's well worth the wait – *Bastard* is the king of crime comics, with Miller operating at his highest level to deliver one of the most impactful and influential tragedies in modern literature. **SAM ASHURST**

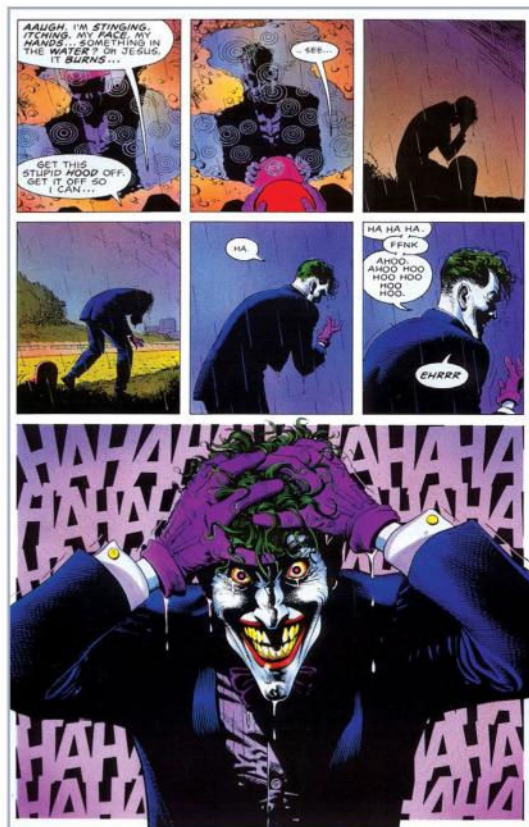


39



ALL IMAGES © DC COMICS 2016

Writer Alan Moore
Artist Brian Bolland
Published 1988
Publisher DC Comics



BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE

A LANDMARK PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER THAT HAS STOOD THE TEST OF TIME

Alan Moore famously dislikes *The Killing Joke*, his superb one-shot exploration of the relationship between Batman and arch-nemesis the Joker. Why? He told George Khoury in *The Extraordinary Works Of Alan Moore*, “*The Killing Joke* is a story about Batman and the Joker; it isn’t about anything that you’re ever going to encounter in real life... There’s no important human information being imparted.”

He has a point but, with respect to the grand wizard, that misses the importance that these characters have played in readers’ lives. Batman and the Joker may not live in the real world but they exist in our imaginations, and *The Killing Joke* remains one of the most potent explorations of two pop culture icons. It helps, of course, that the mighty Brian Bolland is on art duties and that with this book he casually created some of the most enduring images in comics.

ONE BAD DAY

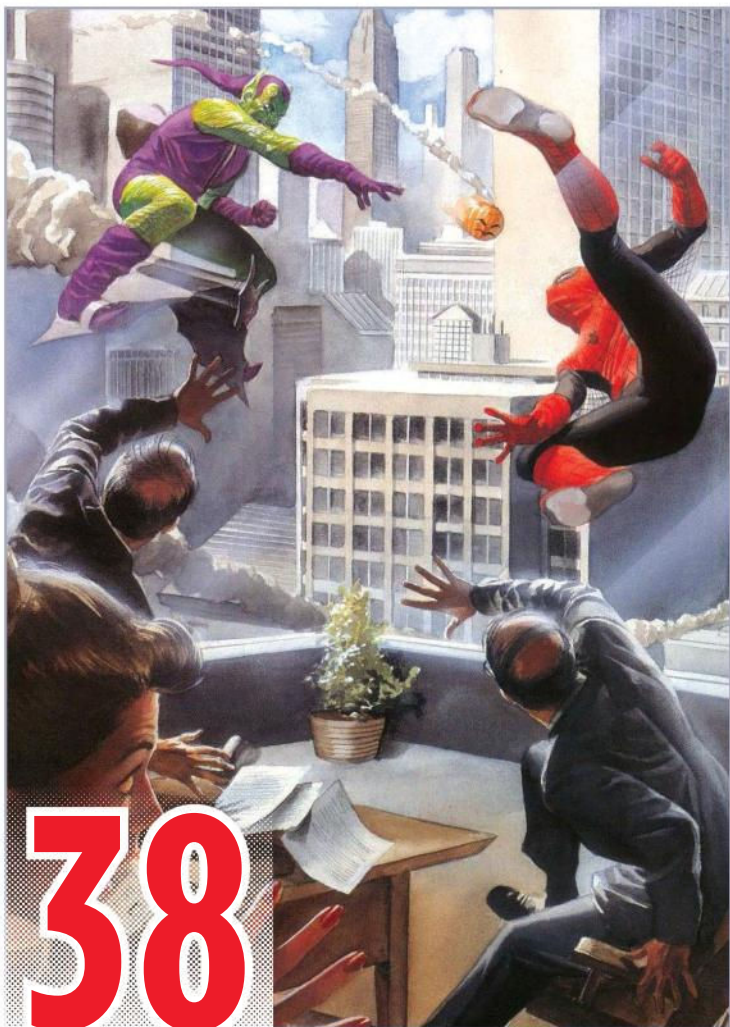
The premise is simple. A man quits his job to become a stand-up comedian but gets caught up in a robbery. Shortly after, his wife is killed in an



accident. Trying to escape a pursuing Batman, he stumbles into a chemical plant, where his skin is accidentally bleached white. The combination of disastrous events on this “one bad day” drives him murderously insane.

This origin of the Joker was intended not as canon but as merely one possibility, and it’s only a small part of the book’s appeal. Instead, this is a brilliant psychological thriller that relies heavily on the relationship between Batman and his nemesis and the (admittedly now well-worn) idea that Batman is only a few degrees less psychopathic than Joker. Moore demonstrates a degree of sympathy for the Clown Prince of Crime – even when he commits one of his most heinous acts...

The Killing Joke won the Eisner Award for Best Graphic Album in 1989, and its influence can be felt in both Tim Burton’s *Batman* and *The Dark Knight*, which also plays with the idea of the Joker as an unreliable narrator. Rich with ambiguity but vividly rendered with Bolland’s crisp lines, it’s a multi-layered masterpiece that proves Moore and Bolland make for a truly dynamic duo. **WILL SALMON**



MARVELS

Writer Kurt Busiek

Artist Alex Ross

Published 1994

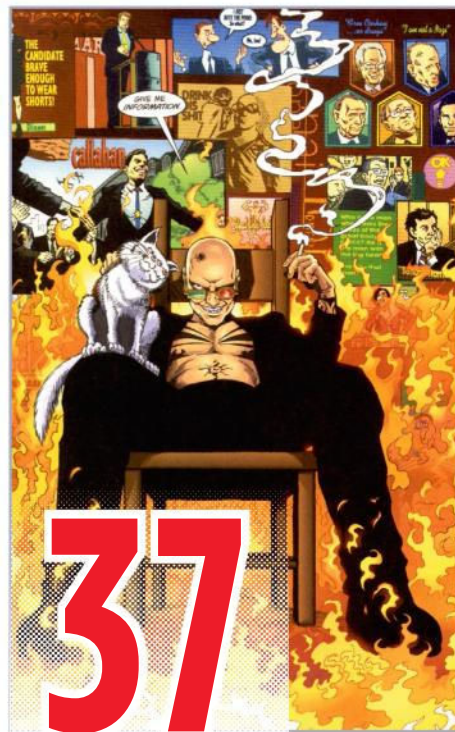
Publisher Marvel Comics

The premise of this legendary miniseries is beautifully simple and instantly appealing.

It's a retelling of the early years of the Marvel Universe, but seen from the point of view of the everyday people who bear witness to the sudden explosion of miraculous events around them.

In 1939 war is raging across Europe, but America is more concerned with the sudden rise of super-heroes. The Human Torch and Sub-Mariner are fighting in the city, and mutants are starting to make their first appearances. By putting us at ground level, *Marvels* restores a sense of wonder to super-comics that had, perhaps, been tarnished by years of over-familiarity.

A lot happens in just four issues – but Alex Ross's fully-painted art is *glorious* throughout. All muted greys and browns in the early scenes of everyday New York, it explodes into colour whenever a powered character is on the page (quite literally, when the Human Torch first ignites), becoming brighter and more joyful as the likes of the Fantastic Four and Thor make their first appearances. Blessed with a lovely retro vibe, but with a brisk, modern pace thanks to Busiek's scripts, it truly lives up to its name. **WILL SALMON**



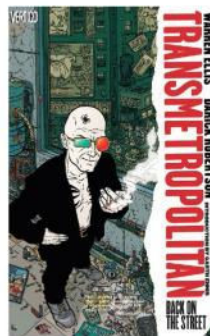
TRANSMETROPOLITAN

Writer Warren Ellis

Artist Darick Robertson

Published 1997-2002

Publisher Helix / Vertigo



Transmetropolitan is both a dazzling future shock and an astute portrait of politics at the turn of the millennium. Spider Jerusalem is a journalist. Bitter, spiteful and occasionally despicable, he's also the only person with enough strength of will to get to the heart of a conspiracy involving "the Smiler" – a slick politician with an eerie, Blairite grin, who manipulates his way into power.

You'll alternate between loving and hating Spider across this gripping 60-issue saga, but he's never less than fascinating. Robertson's art, meanwhile, perfectly evokes the City – an environment that makes Mega-City One look sane. **WILL SALMON**





WE3

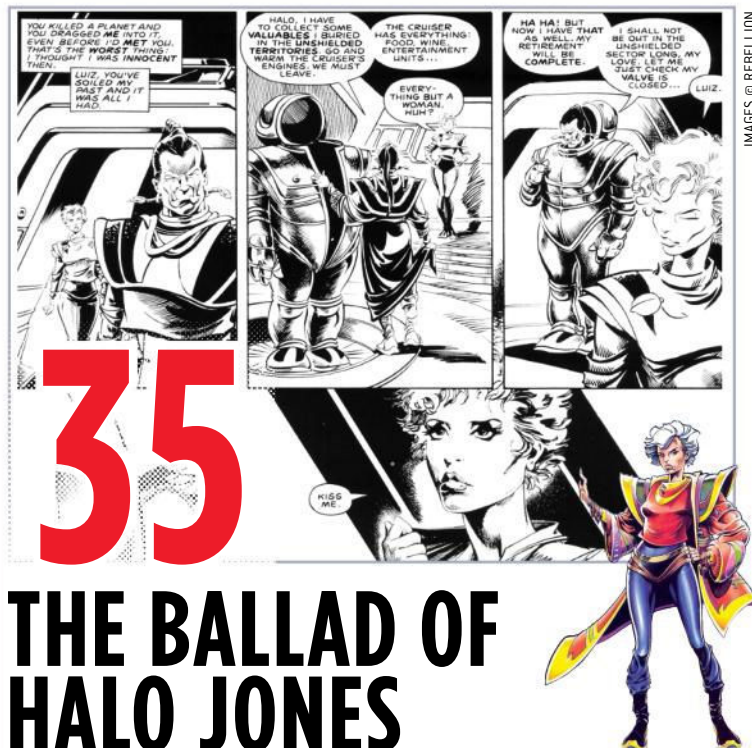
Writer Grant Morrison
Artist Frank Quitely
Published 2004
Publisher DC Vertigo

We3 is Quitely and Morrison's hyper-violent "western Manga". Bristling with kinetic

energy, it sometimes feels like a Disney cartoon gone horribly wrong. Stripped down, with many pages of wordless action, it tells the story of three cyborg assassins who break out of their holding pen and flee from the pursuing military. The twist here is that they are animals – specifically a dog, a cat and a rabbit, kidnapped, rebuilt and armed to the teeth.

Morrison's script and especially Quitely's art tug at the heart as our three heroes try to find their way back to a home that can no longer exist for them. Animal rights has long been a theme in Morrison's work and it's rather rammed home here. Luckily, the terrific action, innovative use of panels and memorably grotesque violence mean that this is more entertainment than sermon.

We3 is fast and furious, but with a core of righteous anger at the cruelty of humankind. Plus there's an ace bit where they all have a scrap with an enormous robot mastiff. **WILL SALMON**



THE BALLAD OF HALO JONES



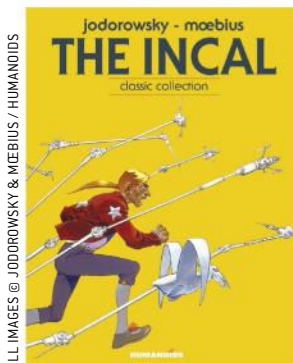
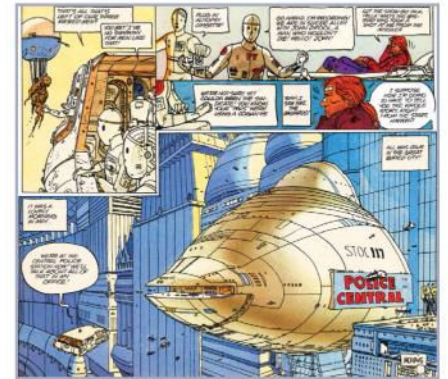
Writer Alan Moore
Artist Ian Gibson
Published 1984-86
Publisher Titan Books

Halo Jones is a normal young woman living on the Hoop, a circular floating city in the Atlantic. She has everyday concerns: paying the bills, doing the shopping, and surviving the increasingly absurd, violent world she lives in. That process begins with her leaving the Hoop and ends with her striking out into the galaxy on her own, and on her own terms.

Along the way Moore shifts the tone and scope of the story constantly. The first volume is a Ballardian, absurdist piece of domestic sci-fi that plays with cyberpunk elements as Halo picks her way through the politely ruined elements of Hoop life. It's funny and disturbing and grounded, like the rest of the story, in her emotional reactions.

Those reactions are especially key to Book 2, where Halo is working her passage as a stewardess on a yearlong space voyage. A lot of the questions from Book 1 are answered, and Halo's worldview, and ethics, are forcibly changed by her experiences. This book is both one of the funniest and darkest things Moore has ever written, with some truly haunting moments. Book 3 sees Halo enlist and becomes a *Catch 22*-esque tragicomic war story. Moore again shifts the story's focus and scale, expanding it in lockstep with Halo's experiences. It's virtuoso writing and it's matched note for note by Gibson's art. His rounded, futurist style is a perfect fit for Halo's world and throws everything from the horror to the comedy and the pathos into sharp, chromed relief.

30 years after its initial publication, *Halo* is still a modern classic. Moore and Gibson have been upfront about both their love for the character and the obstacles stopping her returning. Even if she never does, this funny, horrific, poignant, grounded story remains one of 2000 AD's finest hours and Halo herself is one of the greatest SF heroines of all time. **ALASDAIR STUART**



ALL IMAGES © JODOROWSKY & MOEBIUS / HUMANOIDS

Writer Alejandro Jodorowsky
Artist Moebius
Published 1981-1988
Publisher Epic Comics / Humanoids

THE INCAL

A SWEEPING SPACE OPERA, IN WHICH A RELUCTANT HERO ROMPS THROUGH A RIOTOUS ADVENTURE

What a talent the world lost in 2012, with the death of Jean Henri Gaston Giraud, better known by his nom de plume Moebius. He left us a legacy of distinctive, surreal and off-the-wall comics that bestrode genres, from the Western *Blueberry* to the often impenetrable *Airtight Garage*.

And, in a collaboration with Chilean-born avant-garde film-maker, poet and composer (and possessor of a dozen other talents) Alejandro Jodorowsky, he gave us *The Incal*...

The Incal is a picaresque, metaphysical space opera that debuted in 1981 and was the sort of comic that – back then – only European-originated graphic storytelling seemed to be able to do right.

On a backwater planet of the galactic empire, whisky-soaked private eye and reluctant hero John DiFool is given a powerful crystal – the Light Incal of the title – by a dying alien, which plunges him, and the reader, into an often chaotic plot that's part meditation on the nature of the Tarot (characters are based on it), part satire, and part joyful insanity.

John DiFool doesn't want the Incal, but everyone else does, from cultists to corrupt

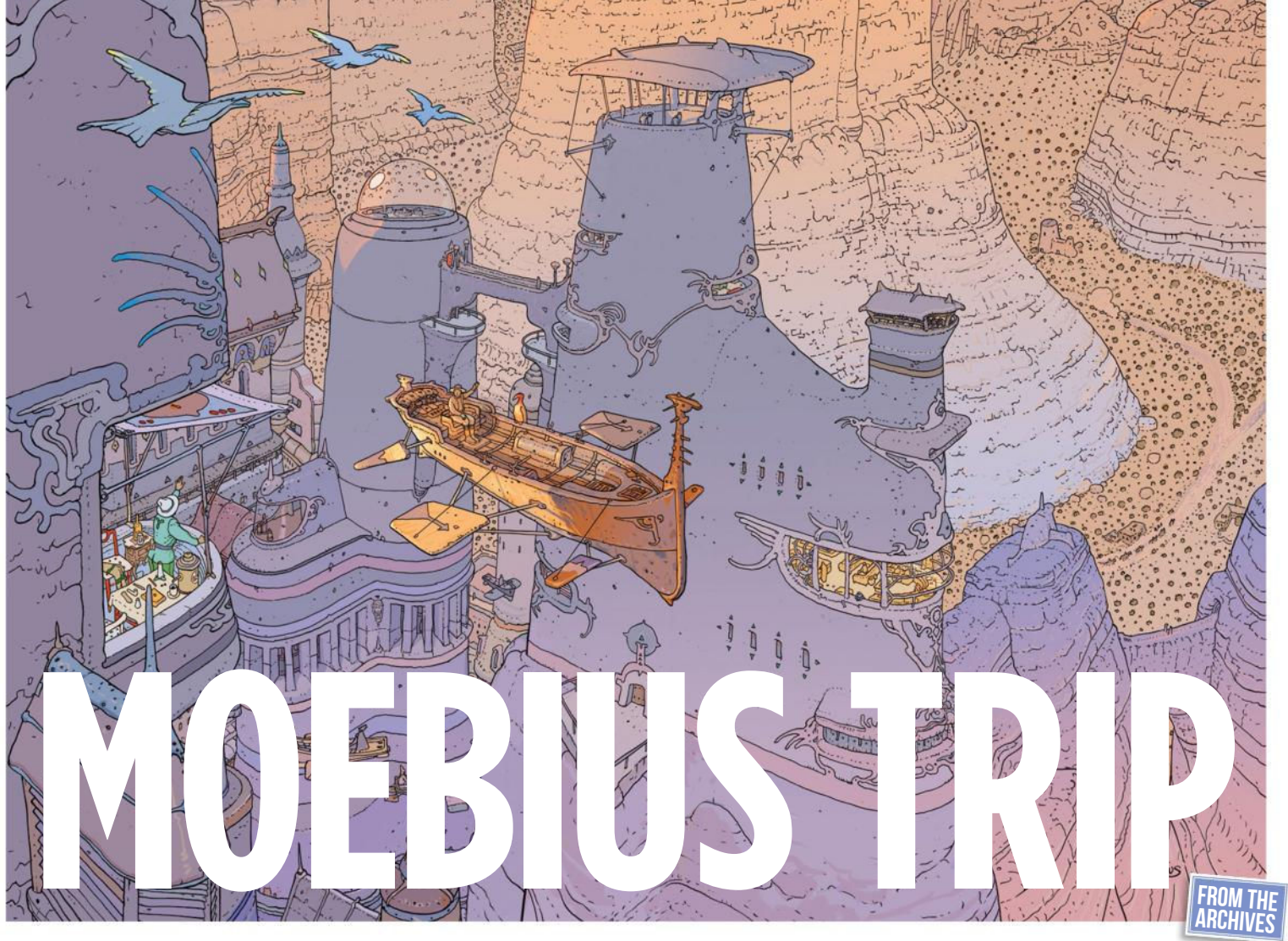
government officials to the aliens who created it, to rebel factions, and seemingly everyone in between.

The series – initially released in French and then in English by Marvel's Epic Comics line – formed the cornerstone for what would become a cohesive universe of Jodorowsky-penned titles (without Moebius) which included *Incal* prequels, the *Metabarons* series, and *Technopriests*.

If the heavily-stylised universe of *The Incal* and its often-cowardly protagonist DiFool sounds naggingly familiar... well, you might be forgiven for thinking of Luc Besson's 1997 movie *The Fifth Element*, starring Milla Jovovich and Bruce Willis.

The publishers of *The Incal* tried to sue Besson, claiming that the plot of the film was a direct lift from the comic. The case failed – according to Jodorowsky in one interview, because Moebius had worked with Besson on the look of the movie, negating the claim.

But best not to dwell on any unpleasantness that might have marred the creative team's relationship in later years... Rather, just buckle up and enjoy the crazy ride. **DAVID BARNETT**



THE DEATH OF JEAN GIRAUD IN 2012 MADE HEADLINES AROUND THE WORLD. **MICHAEL MOLCHER** CELEBRATES THE LIFE OF A MAN WHOSE ART INFLUENCED EVERYTHING FROM ANIME TO ALIEN

Jean Giraud helped make modern comics what they are today. Born in the suburbs of Paris on the eve of World War 2, the Frenchman would go on to have such a lasting impact on the medium that it is difficult not to find an artist, or indeed writer, who has not been influenced in some way by his work.

Although he had some formal training at the Institute of Applied Art and worked as an illustrator in advertising and fashion, Giraud was producing Western comics before he reached 18 – a career that was interrupted only by military service in Algiers. In 1961, he became apprentice to one of the top artists in Europe at the time, Joseph Gillain, otherwise known as Jijé. A year later he collaborated with writer Jean-Michel Charlier on the strip *Fort Navajo*, and a legend was born.

Above:
A glorious example of Moebius's inimitable style.

With his rough looks and roguish charm, Lieutenant Blueberry became *Fort Navajo*'s most popular character. In a genre of time-worn clichés, Blueberry was a different kind of Western. Michael 'Blueberry' Donovan was a real anti-hero. A lieutenant in the US Cavalry, he started out as an unabashed 'Southern' racist but he was saved by an African-American after he was framed for murder, and became an enemy of discrimination, fighting against the Confederates in the American Civil War. The series has continued for more than 45 years.

But it's his other childhood love – sci-fi – for which he's most famous. His nom de plume, Moebius, originally appeared in obscure satire magazine *Hara-Kiri* in 1963, but re-emerged a decade later. In early 1975, Moebius was one of the founder

members of the comic art group Les Humanoïdes Associés. Its first publication, *Métal Hurlant*, changed comics forever.

Moebius created stunning work for the title. Strips such as *The Airtight Garage* and *Arzach* carved a reputation for non-linear plots and surreal flights of the imagination rendered in a style that evoked the Ligne claire style of Hergé or the innocence of *Little Nemo In Slumberland*, with a subtlety and colouring reminiscent of the art nouveau of Klimt or Mucha.

In a world still dominated by American superheroes, these were groundbreaking. *Arzach* was entirely wordless and mixed medieval fantasy with a futuristic world, while *The Airtight Garage* is a sublime jumble of plots about a man constructing his own universe on an asteroid.



In 1981 he began his famous *L'Incal* (*The Incal*) with filmmaker and writer Alejandro Jodorowsky. And in an incredible meeting of comic book giants, he also worked on an award-winning – and mind-blowing – two-issue Silver Surfer miniseries (later collected as *Silver Surfer: Parable*), with Stan Lee.

Superman/Batman and *2000 AD* artist Dave Taylor was a close friend. "When you spoke with Jean," he recalls, "whoever you were, you'd always get the same warmth and bright-eyed enthusiasm. I've sat and watched him at numerous comic conventions while he signed and sketched for folk. He was consistently a joy to meet."

Above: Blueberry wasn't your typical Western hero.


Left: Comic legends unite for Silver Surfer.

Right:
Moebius
brought
fantasy
worlds to
vivid life.

Moebius' influence can be felt far beyond comics. As well as collaborating with director Hayao Miyazaki, he worked on *Alien*, *Tron*, *The Fifth Element*, *Star Wars: Episode V*, and Jodorowsky's unmade adaptation of *Dune*, as well as the animated movie *Les Maîtres du temps* (*Time Masters*).

When so little of his work has been translated into English, how has he become so influential? Taylor believes he defies easy classification. "His 'style' is hard to pin down," he says. "He produced so much work and very rarely repeated himself. What made his work so visually pleasing was his vast knowledge of how to turn a real object in 3D or just an idea into an aesthetic image.

He had such a vast understanding of space, light and movement and he drew with such masterly ability. Probably, more than anything, it was his quality of line that was so dynamic, so fluid and beautiful. He deeply loved beauty and expressed that in each line of every image."

Giraud died in March 2012, aged 73 after a long battle with cancer. Tributes poured in not just from the comics world but from representatives of a vast number of seemingly unrelated creative industries. His work – subtle, surreal, astonishing – had reached far beyond the pages of comic books. Inimitable and irreplaceable, Giraud rightly deserves to be lauded as one of the greatest comic artists of all time. 

“ HE HAD SUCH A VAST UNDERSTANDING OF SPACE, LIGHT AND MOVEMENT ”

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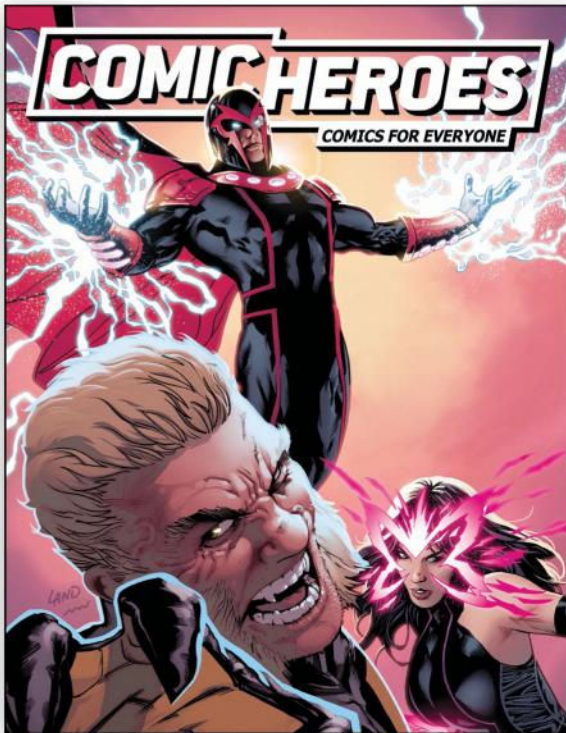
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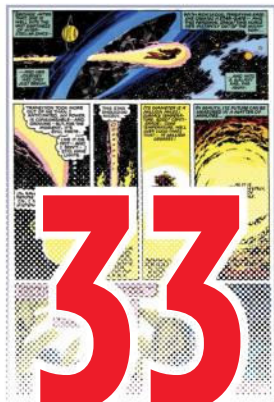
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X-MEN: THE DARK PHOENIX SAGA

A LANDMARK STORYLINE THAT STILL HAS POWER TO MOVE YOU

Writers Chris Claremont, John Byrne
Artist John Byrne
Published 1980
Publisher Marvel

Chris Claremont's run on *The X-Men* is legendary, with complex, even convoluted plots and intense, character-driven, soap-opera storylines. The art by John Byrne is some of the most dynamic and memorable in the X-Men's illustrious history.

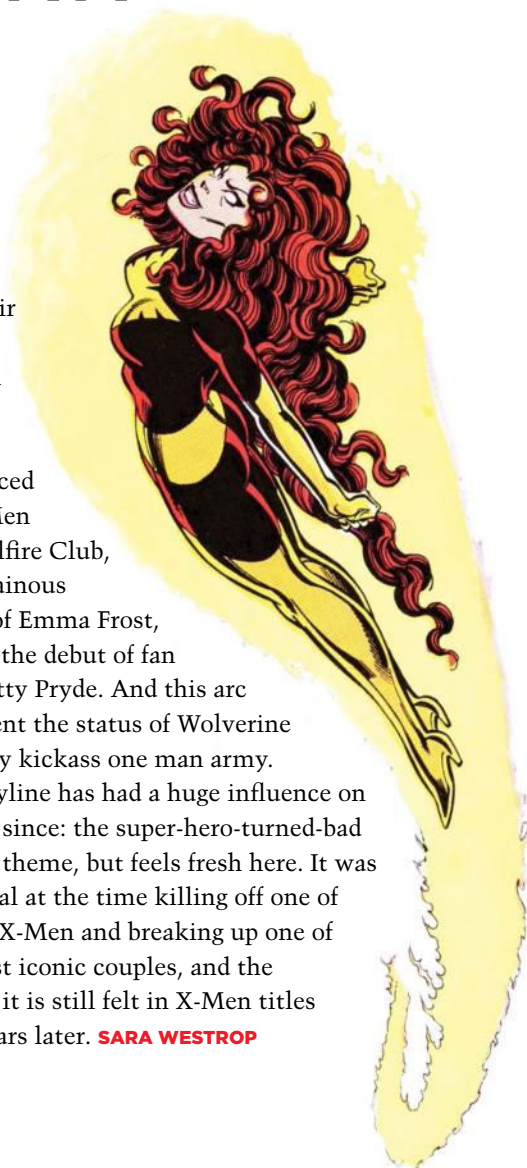
In this famous story Jean Grey embraces god-like power through the cosmic Phoenix force, but with tragic consequences. She's manipulated into embracing a villainous persona, the Dark Phoenix, which brings her into conflict with her fellow X-Men and snowballs into committing genocide before she begins fighting to regain herself.

There's a running theme of how power corrupts from within and love blinds people to things they just don't want to see. At its core, this is a love story, not just about the love between Jean and Scott but between the X-Men as a group. There's conflict and heartache as they come to realise they

can't face bringing their friend and former team mate down.

The saga also introduced popular X-Men foes the Hellfire Club, saw the villainous beginnings of Emma Frost, and marked the debut of fan favourite Kitty Pryde. And this arc helped cement the status of Wolverine as a seriously kickass one man army.

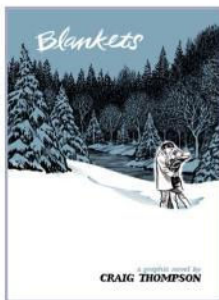
The storyline has had a huge influence on comics ever since: the super-hero-turned-bad is a familiar theme, but feels fresh here. It was also a big deal at the time killing off one of the original X-Men and breaking up one of comics' most iconic couples, and the influence of it is still felt in X-Men titles today, 32 years later. **SARA WESTROP**



“IT WAS A BIG DEAL AND HAS HAD A HUGE INFLUENCE SINCE”

ALL IMAGES © MARVEL

BLANKETS



Writer Craig Thompson
Artist Craig Thompson
Published 2003
Publisher Top Shelf Productions

This semi-autobiographical novel is an unflinching and beautiful work that stays with you long after you've finished reading. The story follows the main character Craig's

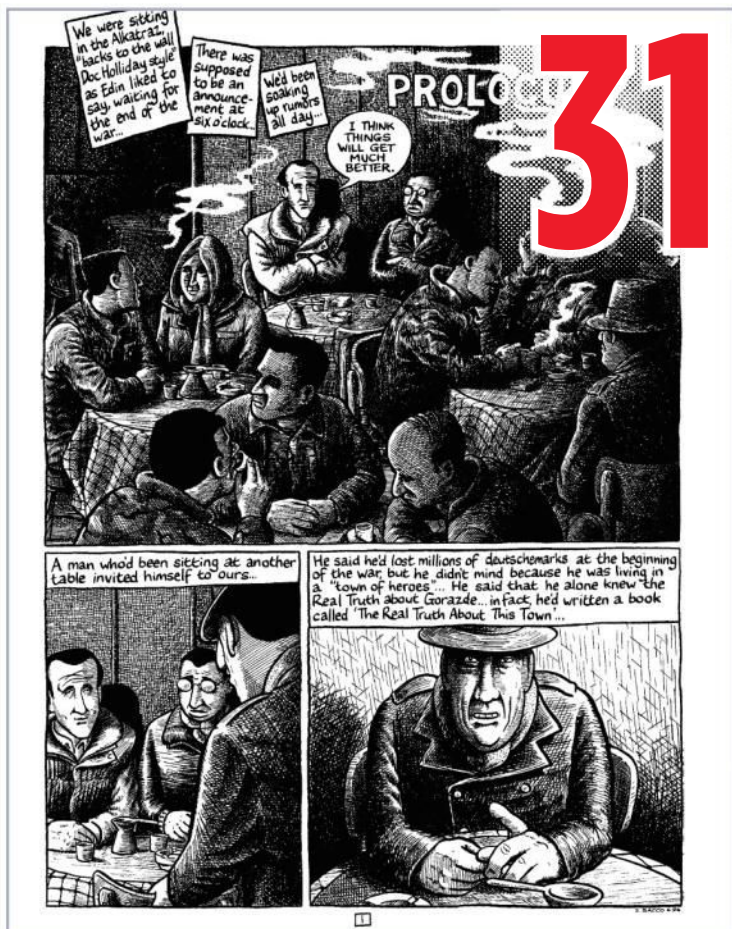
journey as he wrestles with doubts about the Christianity he has grown up with. The book also explores his first love, burgeoning sexuality and the pressure of enforced responsibility.

It's a mammoth read at some 600 pages, but it covers almost a decade in the lives of the characters and the artwork is so rich and evocative that it never feels like a chore to read. It's whimsical and melancholic at the same time. The more surreal parts of the book are darker and full of heavy background detail while everything rooted in reality is simpler, with focus resting on the characters.

Blankets won a string of awards and acts as a reminder that there are no limits in comics. It has something that everyone can relate to. If you're a comics fan, this one has to go on your reading bucket list... Actually, it should even if you're not. **SARA WESTROP**

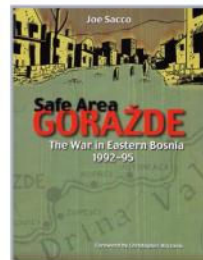


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SAFE AREA GORAŽDE

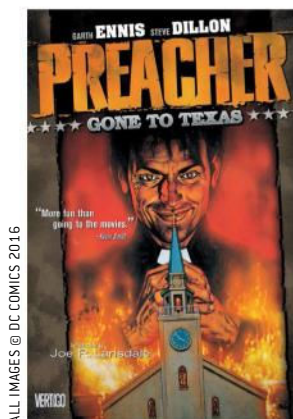


Writer Joe Sacco
Artist Joe Sacco
Published 2000
Publisher Jonathan Cape

In his debut documentary graphic novel *Palestine*, Joe Sacco reaffirmed the power of autobiographical comics as a journalistic medium. Following that assignment, he turned to the brutal ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs in Bosnia and the international community's failure to intervene. He travelled four times to Goražde in 1995-96 to witness for himself a town designated a "safe area" by the United Nations yet besieged by Bosnian Serb forces. He spoke first-hand with the mainly Muslim population, who were suffering fierce attacks and serious deprivations but were determined never to surrender their hometown.

Sacco caricatures himself unflatteringly, his glasses left blank so we cannot see his expressions. Self-aware without being self-righteous, he manages to avoid being polemical or pompous. He gives the locals a voice we rarely get to hear through news media. Drawn with immersive detail and sharp observation, *Safe Area Goražde* makes this tragic yet unfamiliar conflict accessible and human. It became one of four reports from the region alongside *Christmas With Karadzic*, *Soba* and *The Fixer*. **PAUL GRAVETT**





Writer Garth Ennis
Artist Steve Dillon
Published 1995-2000
Publisher DC Vertigo



30 PREACHER

A WILDLY IRREVERENT MODERN AMERICAN
EPIC OF LIFE, LOVE AND REDEMPTION

Jesse Custer is a preacher in rural Texas whose faith is all but gone – until he is possessed by Genesis, the child of an angel and a demon, the embodiment of uncontrolled, conscienceless power looking for something, anything, to anchor to. It finds Jesse, who in turn discovers the truth: God has left Heaven.

Armed with the Word of God (the ability to make anybody he speaks to carry out his will) and aided by Tulip, his former girlfriend, and Cassidy, an Irish vampire, Jesse sets out to find God and punish Him for abandoning everyone.

All of which sounds immensely heavy and grim and, well, it is. But that's not all there is to *Preacher*. The series (an astounding 21 years old this year...) contains multitudes. It's a love story, a buddy story, a tragedy, a comedy, an action movie, a horror story, a western and a religious parable, often all at once.

At times that works against the

series, and there are at least two later volumes that buckle under the weight of the constantly escalating horror and gross-out comedy that sometimes threatens to smother the book altogether. However, volume 1, "Gone to Texas", suffers none of those problems, instead setting up the series with a first arc that's tremendously effective even today.

A huge part of that is how this arc establishes the relationships that drive the book out. Jesse and Tulip are one of comics' great couples – a pair of fiercely individualistic people who are broken when apart but whose shards fit perfectly together. They're equals throughout, and later volumes do really interesting stuff with how Tulip is not the damsel-in-distress that Jesse is conditioned to think she is. Their love is complicated and spiky, acting as the grounded fulcrum around which the entire book revolves.

Above and opposite: Super-natural and satirical in equal parts, *Preacher* is a wild ride.

Jesse and Cassidy make another great duo. Their friendship is one of the best realised in modern comics, mixing love with jealousy, pity, horror, redemption and Guinness. Cassidy himself is arguably Garth Ennis's greatest creation: an effortlessly charming, sociopathic coward of a vampire who is both everything and nothing like you expect him to be. Again, later volumes do especially interesting things with him, but his introduction here remains one of his strongest showings. Hilarious, terrifying and endearingly rubbish at times, Cassidy is the third corner of an endlessly fascinating triangle of lead characters.

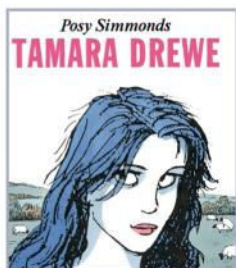
These three resolutely flawed people make the huge religious issues at the book's heart easy to relate to. They have different attitudes to their quest, and all three find their personal ethics tested to near destruction as the series progresses. That carries the book even in the middle, uneven, story arcs. *Preacher* is difficult, brutal and wildly over-the-top at times, but it's also a truly unique, and brave, series. **ALASDAIR STUART**



“THE FIRST ARC IS TREMENDOUS”



TAMARA DREWE



Writer Posy Simmonds
Artist Posy Simmonds
Published 2005-2007
Publisher The Guardian/Jonathan Cape

Posy Simmonds is Britain's grande dame of graphic novels. She first serialised *Tamara Drewe* in *The Guardian* from 2005, on a weekly basis in the newspaper's Saturday Review section, reaching a vast readership new to comics. It brought her flair with colour, polished first on children's books, to adult comics at last.

After reinterpreting Gustav Flaubert's racy *Madame Bovary* into her *Gemma Bovary* serial, Simmonds alludes in *Tamara Drewe* to Thomas Hardy's 1874 novel *Far From The Madding Crowd* but transposes it to contemporary, celebrity-obsessed Britain. When ambitious urbanite and newspaper columnist Tamara returns to the family home she has inherited in the sleepy English countryside, her stunning looks, helped by a nose-job, turn the heads of three rival males – her former boyfriend, her new rock-star lover, and a philandering crime writer at a local writers' retreat – and soon the whole village is abuzz with secrets and desires.

Simmonds is especially convincing in her sympathetic portrayal of Casey and Jody, two listless, working-class teenage girls, desperate to escape their dull "event-proofed" village. *Tamara Drewe* confronts the gulf between city and countryside and the challenges facing Britain's younger generation. Forget Stephen Frears' movie – the original has true bite. **PAUL GRAVETT**



HELLBOY: SEED OF DESTRUCTION



Writers Mike Mignola and John Byrne
Artist Mike Mignola
Published 1993
Publisher Dark Horse

Mike Mignola's glorious demon detective has been the star of two movies, two games, two animated movies and an astonishing 50-plus graphic novels. It all starts with this book. *Seed Of Destruction* opens with the discovery of Hellboy and his liberation from the Nazi occultists who summoned him. Raised by scientist Trevor Bruttonholm, he becomes a renowned investigator and member of the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defence. But when tragedy strikes the BPRD, Hellboy, aquatic partner Abe Sapien and pyrokinetic Liz Sherman find themselves in way over their heads...

Seed Of Destruction is a perfect introduction to the character and his world. Hellboy, Abe and Liz are all introduced in a way that makes them feel familiar even as you're getting to know them for the first time. Hellboy's concerns about his past, Abe's endless calm and Liz's caution are all right here, fully realised, and all three drive future volumes.

A big part of that is Mignola's art. Stark blacks and angular characters match with his instinctive use of space to give you a story that feels claustrophobic, unsettling and expansive all at once. There's a sense of power barely beneath the surface, and when the menace gives way to action you see that power unleashed in every one of his clean, precise lines. Funny, horrific, epic and exuberant, this is an all-time classic and the perfect introduction to a great hero. **ALASDAIR STUART**



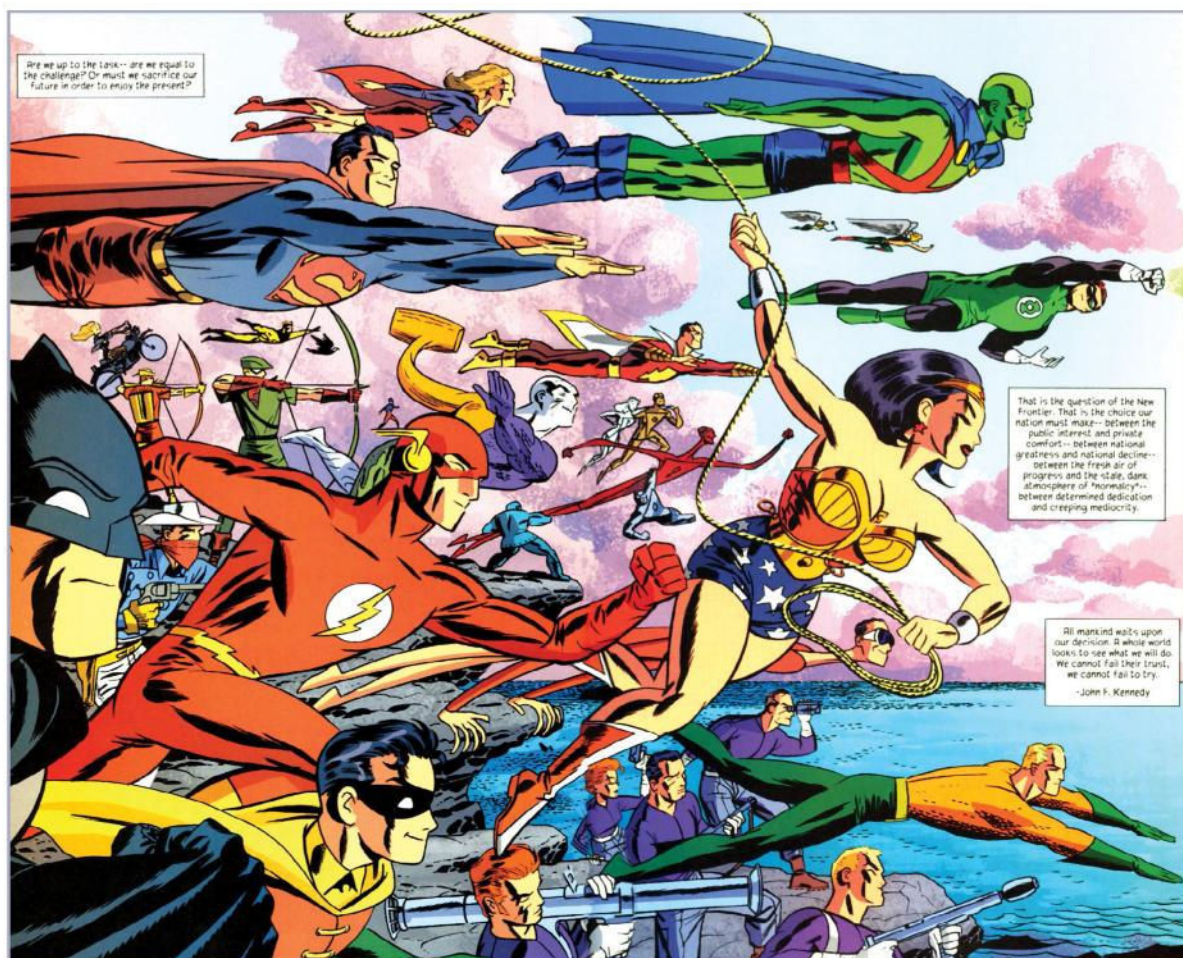
ALL IMAGES © DC COMICS 2016

Writer Darwyn Cooke

Artist Darwyn Cooke

Published 2004

Publisher DC Comics



DC: THE NEW FRONTIER

A JOYOUS, VISUALLY SUMPTUOUS CELEBRATION OF SUPER-HEROES, COMICS AND LIFE ITSELF

Writer/artist Darwyn Cooke's most enduring work is this visual masterpiece. Set in the early days of the DC universe – later retconned into an Elseworlds tale set on Earth-21 – it's a beautiful mash-up of the Golden and Silver Age heroes. Batman and Wonder Woman stride into battle alongside the likes of Flash, Green Lantern and Martian Manhunter, all rendered in their iconic original garb with assured élan by Cooke.

It's the 1950s and the Cold War is in full effect. Super-heroes have mostly gone underground to escape the all-pervading paranoia of the times, but the rise of a monstrous Lovecraftian alien enemy forces them back into action to save the world.

The simplicity of that premise might be seen as a flaw, except that it's the perfect showcase for Cooke's jaw-dropping skills. This is the comic as pop art – virtually every panel in this book would look at home framed and hung in a gallery. His retro character design is elegant and evocative, with the colouring (also by Cooke, with uncredited help from

J Bone) perfectly matched. It's a celebration of DC's rich cast of characters that also gives many of the company's less-celebrated heroes a chance to shine. J'onn J'Onzz, the Martian Manhunter, is a standout, and current team du jour the Suicide Squad get a big moment.

The series deservedly bagged Eisner, Harvey and Shuster Awards, and has since been adapted into an animated feature that retains Cooke's cartoony style. It remains a sumptuous visual treat – the sort of book you want to sit and stare at every panel of for hours.

At the time of writing, we have just learned of Cooke's tragic passing at the age of just 53. He drew many wonderful comics in his career, including *Batman*, *Catwoman*, *Before Watchmen* and Vertigo's recent, stunning, *The Twilight Children* with Gilbert Hernandez. But it's *The New Frontier* for which he will likely be best remembered – a homage to comics' past that also promised a bright, optimistic and uncynical future. **WILL SALMON**





ARKHAM ASYLUM: A SERIOUS HOUSE ON SERIOUS EARTH

A SURREAL, CAPTIVATING, HAUNTING
EXPERIENCE LIKE NOTHING ELSE



ALL IMAGES © DC COMICS 2016

Writer Grant Morrison

Artist Dave McKean

Published 1989

Publisher DC Comics

Written in Glasgow's West End, mostly at 3am, surrounded by cats and books, Grant Morrison's first Batman story feels like half fever dream, half magic trick – probably because that's what it is.

Inspiration first struck Morrison as he flicked through the classic encyclopaedia series *Who's Who in the DC Universe*, landing on Len Wein's Arkham Asylum entry, a single page sketching out the history of Gotham's infamous sanatorium.

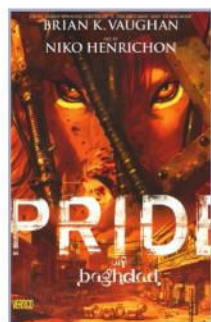
Reading that short section of text, it's easy to see why it appealed to Morrison so much: Dr Amadeus Arkham's origin reads like something from Morrison's trippy run on *Doom Patrol*, with madness, music and dark installation art at its heart. But whatever chord it struck, it gave the writer the idea to parallel Amadeus's story with Batman's journey on a surreal, expressionistic and symbolic stage.

The plot has the Joker taking Arkham Asylum hostage, forcing Batman to take part in a twisted game of hide and seek – pitting him against multiple villains he's committed to the mental hospital. But that one-line description can't possibly do justice to a story so psychologically

layered and narratively complex. Working closely with artist Dave McKean – whose astonishing fully-painted art remains a revelation – and encouraged by Vertigo editor Karen Berger to make something different, Morrison set out to create a Batman book in the mould of European art-house cinema, influenced by directors including Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway. Somehow, this outsider ambition produced one of the most successful graphic novels in history, selling half a million copies by 2004.

Directly quoting psychologist Carl Jung, notorious occultist Aleister Crowley and surreal kids' classic *Alice In Wonderland*, *Asylum* has dream logic at its heart, making it a perfect amalgamation of artist and writer, with McKean's haunting imagery as clear a representation of nightmare vistas as captured in any artform.

Arkham Asylum is a rare example of high art crossing over with mainstream tastes, a graphic novel so good that it deserves both its astonishing commercial success and its incomparable critical reputation. If you haven't read it yet, it's as essential as sleep. **SAM ASHURST**



PRIDE OF BAGHDAD

Writer Brian K. Vaughan

Artist Niko Henrichon

Published 2006

Publisher DC Vertigo

Baghdad Zoo was destroyed in 2003 during the US invasion of Iraq. The 700 or so animals living there were either killed in the attacks or stolen by looters. By the end of the campaign only 35 remained unharmed, but the story that most captured the public imagination following this tragedy was the escape of four of the zoo's seven lions. Vaughan and Henrichon's short and striking graphic novel takes this as the starting point for a powerful story that's as much about the politics around the Iraq War as it is a painfully sad account of man's abuse of the animal kingdom.

Henrichon's art is beautiful and horrible. Detailed, yet with a subtle cartooniness, it feels like a Disney movie that's turned nightmarishly violent – as in the heart-stopping early spread where Zill looks up to see three US jets swooping low overhead.

Each of the four members of the pride (smartly and tastefully anthropomorphised here, neither too human nor completely unrelatable) represents a different view of exactly what freedom means, and the book doesn't settle on any trite, easy answers by the time it reaches its conclusion. Thought-provoking, angry, occasionally funny and moving, it's a powerful snapshot of a dark time. **WILL SALMON**



THE ADVENTURES OF LUTHER ARKWRIGHT

Writer Bryan Talbot

Artist Bryan Talbot

Published 1978-1989

Publisher Valkyrie Press



First serialised in underground anthology *Near Myths* in 1978, Bryan Talbot's *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* was one of the most influential graphic novels of the 1980s, inspiring seminal creators such as Alan Moore, Grant Morrison and Warren Ellis.

It's heavily indebted to Michael Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius saga, as the titular enigmatic secret agent and his partner Rose Wylde travel across a plethora of parallel universes, combating the sinister Disruptors, who are seeking to unleash a doomsday device, Foxfire, upon the multiverse.

While his finished art was a lot rougher around the edges than now, Talbot's layouts and narrative approach were revolutionary for the day, as he drew on the distinctive jumpcut, cinematic techniques of *The Man Who Fell To Earth* director Nic Roeg.

Talbot published *Luther* throughout the '80s in a number of outlets including *Psst* magazine and *Valkyrie*, and finally completed his story in 1989. Then in 1999, he wrote and drew a sequel, *Heart Of Empire: The Legacy of Luther Arkwright*, which is set 23 years later and centres on the long-vanished Arkwright's daughter, Princess Victoria, who discovers she has preternatural abilities of her own. It was later collected together with the first series as *Arkwright Integral*, but the original *Adventures*, for all its flaws, still shines as a classic. **STEPHEN JEWELL**



BONE

Writer Jeff Smith

Artist Jeff Smith

Published 1991-2004

Publisher Cartoon Books / Image Comics

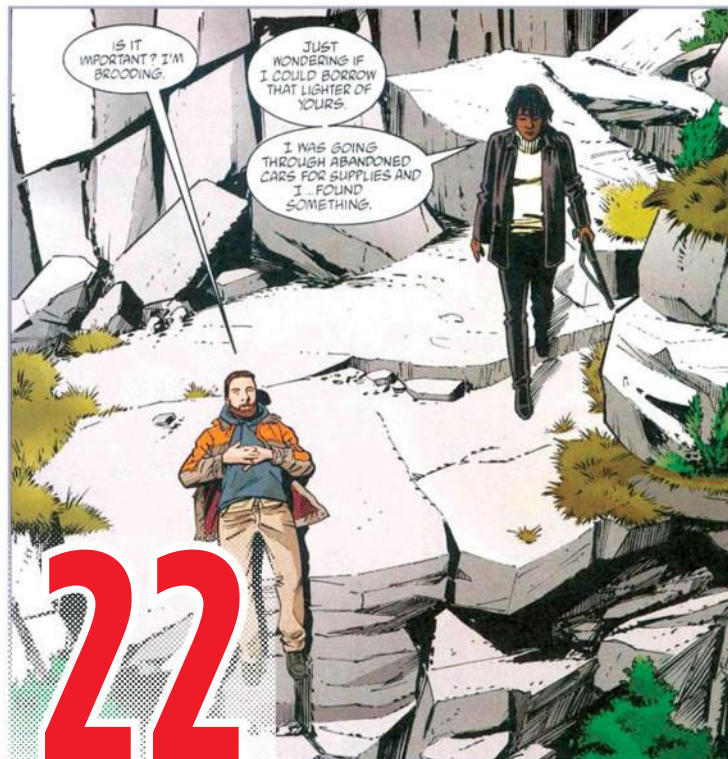
One of the greatest fantasy comics ever written, *Bone* is the story of Phoney, Smiley and Fone Bone, three small white humanoid creatures thrown out of Boneville after Phoney decided to cheat in the mayoral election. Separated in a storm of locusts, the three find their way to the Valley. Where Boneville was a modern town, the Valley is a medieval paradise. One they soon realise is in a lot of trouble...

Jeff Smith's one-man fantasy epic is astounding. The art is open and friendly, and Smith effortlessly balances caricature with fluid, expressive characters and action that never feels cheap or without significance. Better still, Smith is able to change the whole tone of the book with incredible speed and elegance. This is a series that takes in comedy, romance, horror, epic fantasy and a cow race.



There's never a sense of anything being forced, either, just a huge story about three small characters and the massive changes they can make in the world.

Funny, sweet, epic and personal, *Bone* is a classic. If you've read it, you already know that. If you haven't, then honestly, we envy you. Enjoy your first trip to the Valley. **ALASDAIR STUART**



Y: THE LAST MAN

Writer Brian K. Vaughan

Artists Pia Guerra, Goran Sudžuka, Paul Chadwick

Published 2002-2008

Publisher DC Vertigo



Before *Saga*, Brian K. Vaughan was best known for this science-fiction classic, which focuses on a very specific apocalypse...

One day, every mammal on Earth with a Y chromosome dies, leaving behind a planet with an entirely female population. Or, rather, an entirely female population plus two: amateur escape artist Yorick Brown and his pet monkey, both of whom have survived. Brown sets out for the Australian Outback to try to find his lost love, Beth, enduring an endless array of hardships and adventures along the way.



Part character-driven exploration of humanity and part pacey globe-trotting travelogue with shades of *The Walking Dead*, *Y: The Last Man* made a huge impact, establishing Vaughan as one of the best modern writers, while co-creator Pia Guerra's clean, characterful work does a wonderful job of evoking this strange new world.

The series won an Eisner in 2008 for Best Continuing Series and is a fine example of ideal sci-fi comics. **WILL SALMON**



Writer Alison Bechdel
Artist Alison Bechdel
Published 2006
Publisher Jonathan Cape



FUN HOME: A FAMILY TRAGICOMIC

A MEMOIR WITH CULTURAL RESONANCE AND CLEVER NON-LINEAR STRUCTURE

Fun Home is an autobiographical account of Alison Bechdel's childhood and early years. It tells the story of how she embraced being gay alongside the story of her relationship with her father, who was himself struggling with his sexual identity.

Bechdel describes growing up in what seem like idyllic surroundings, her parents buying a Victorian Gothic house and her father meticulously restoring the historic property, his attention to detail bordering on maniacal at times. The restoration is a metaphor for how her father wanted to be seen, with elaborate details filling the house, everything tightly controlled and carefully micro-managed like many other aspects of his life.

Bechdel's evocative description of her early years – also working in her family's funeral parlour (the titular *Fun Home*) – gives a real sense of her day-to-day life. There's a deliberate repetition as events are shown again as new information becomes available, the non-linear narrative helping build up a sense of overlap between Alison's and her father's separate sexual awakenings.

The contrast between their experiences is

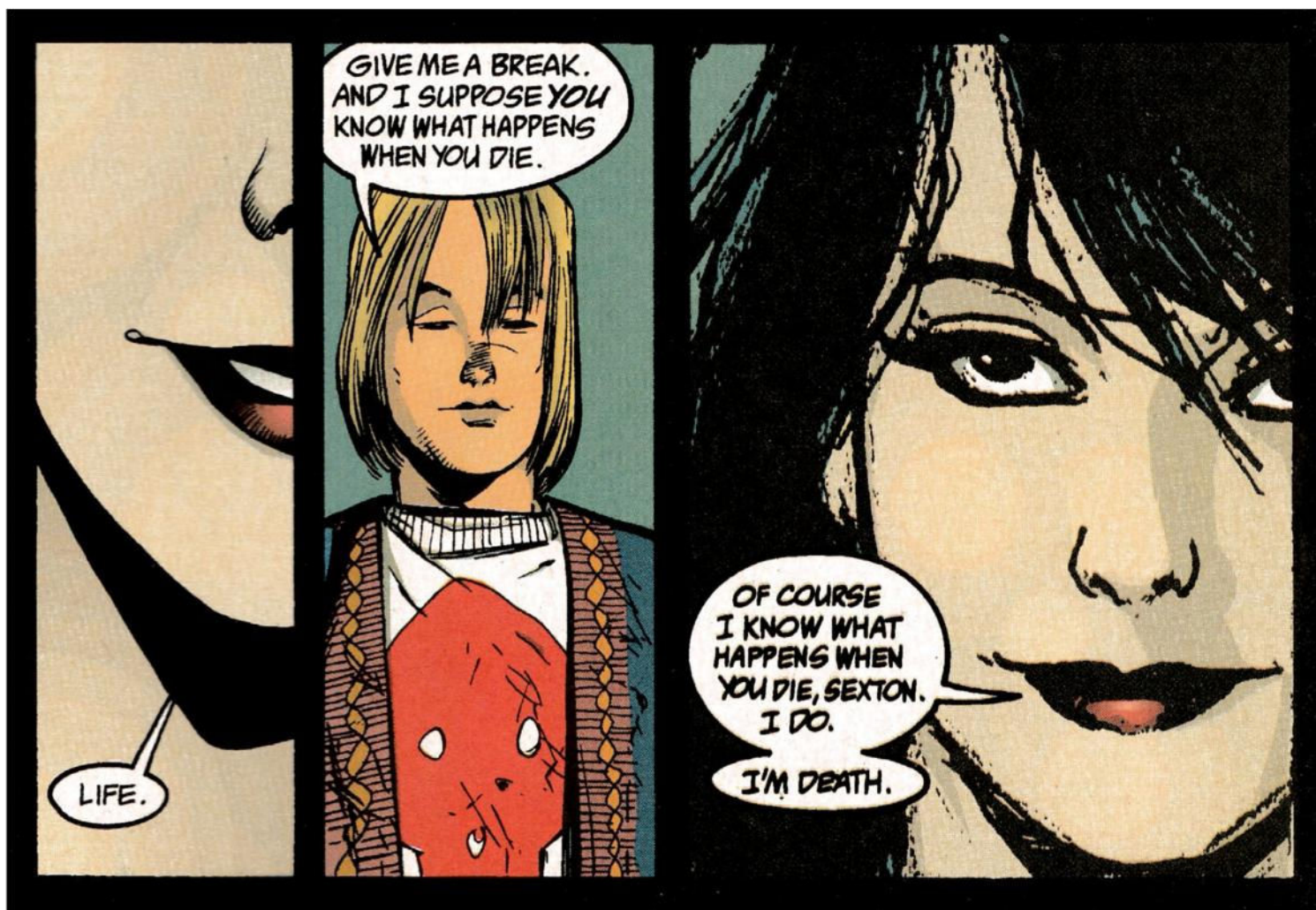
what makes this book both heartbreaking and eye-opening. Bruce keeps his sexuality hidden, ashamed of who he is, fighting to hide it and keeping the illusion of his perfect family unit alive. Alison, however, is decisive: once she moves away from home she quickly establishes her sexual identity and writes to inform her parents that she is a lesbian.

BOOK CULTURE

The book is littered with literary references, with reading being one of the few ways that Alison and her father connected. Bechdel sees similarities between her father and various novels he reads throughout his life, noting his fascination with both *Gatsby* and *James Joyce*. The author uses this cleverly to depict different sides of her father throughout the narrative.

This book deserves its place on this list not just for the beautiful way the story is told but also because of its intense focus on how attitudes towards sexuality and gender norms have changed over the course of the 20th century. **SARA WESTROP**

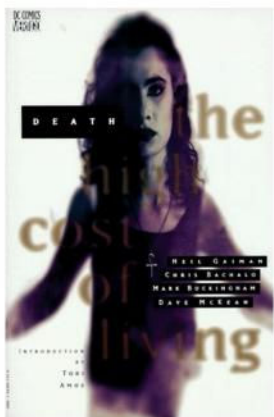




20

DEATH: THE HIGH COST OF LIVING

WHAT CAN DEATH TEACH YOU ABOUT LIVING AND LOVING AND THE VALUE OF SIMPLE PLEASURES?



Writer Neil Gaiman
Artist Chris Bachalo
Published 1993
Publisher DC Vertigo

With a title like that, you'd expect this book to be a fairly depressing affair. And, sure, the narrative does revolve around a suicidal teen gradually falling in love with death. But this is Neil Gaiman, and Neil Gaiman has never met an expectation he couldn't subvert.

Death, usually represented by a hooded skeleton carrying a scythe, here takes the form of Didi, a beautiful young woman wearing an ank, the ancient Egyptian symbol for life. And, rather than appearing to our depressed lead Sexton to carry him to the afterlife, she's on earth to teach him how to appreciate his current existence.

This book is as joyful an experience as a deconstruction of death should ever be. Didi teaches Sexton many lessons during their journey, including appreciating the simple pleasures (such

as the crunch of a good apple) and grasping that kindness isn't necessarily its own reward (you get more by being nice than being mean), and that all powerful experiences – good and bad – are valid, as they all make you feel more alive. It's heady stuff, beautifully delivered. What could seem preachy frequently feels profound, with easily identifiable experiences mixed in with the magic.

Spun off from *Sandman*, this is a more low-key affair than that sweeping epic, containing adventures more focused on solving internal problems than defeating external threats.

The art has been criticised in some circles for being simplistic – certainly compared to *Sandman's* propensity for glorious experimentation – but half of this book's joy comes from Death's upbeat and sweet personality, which is frequently



communicated purely via facial expressions and body language. Making readers fall in love with a series of drawings isn't easy. Even smarter, images that may be simplistic on the surface help communicate the book's key message, that simple pleasures have far-reaching effects, more effectively than over-elaborate art ever could.

Gaiman originally envisioned Didi as a blonde, but artist Mike Dringenberg used his goth pal Cinnamon as the model for the first Death drawing and changed the direction of the character. As soon as Gaiman saw it, he said "Oh, that's

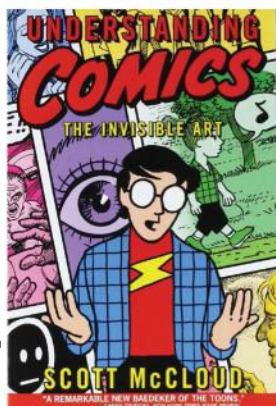
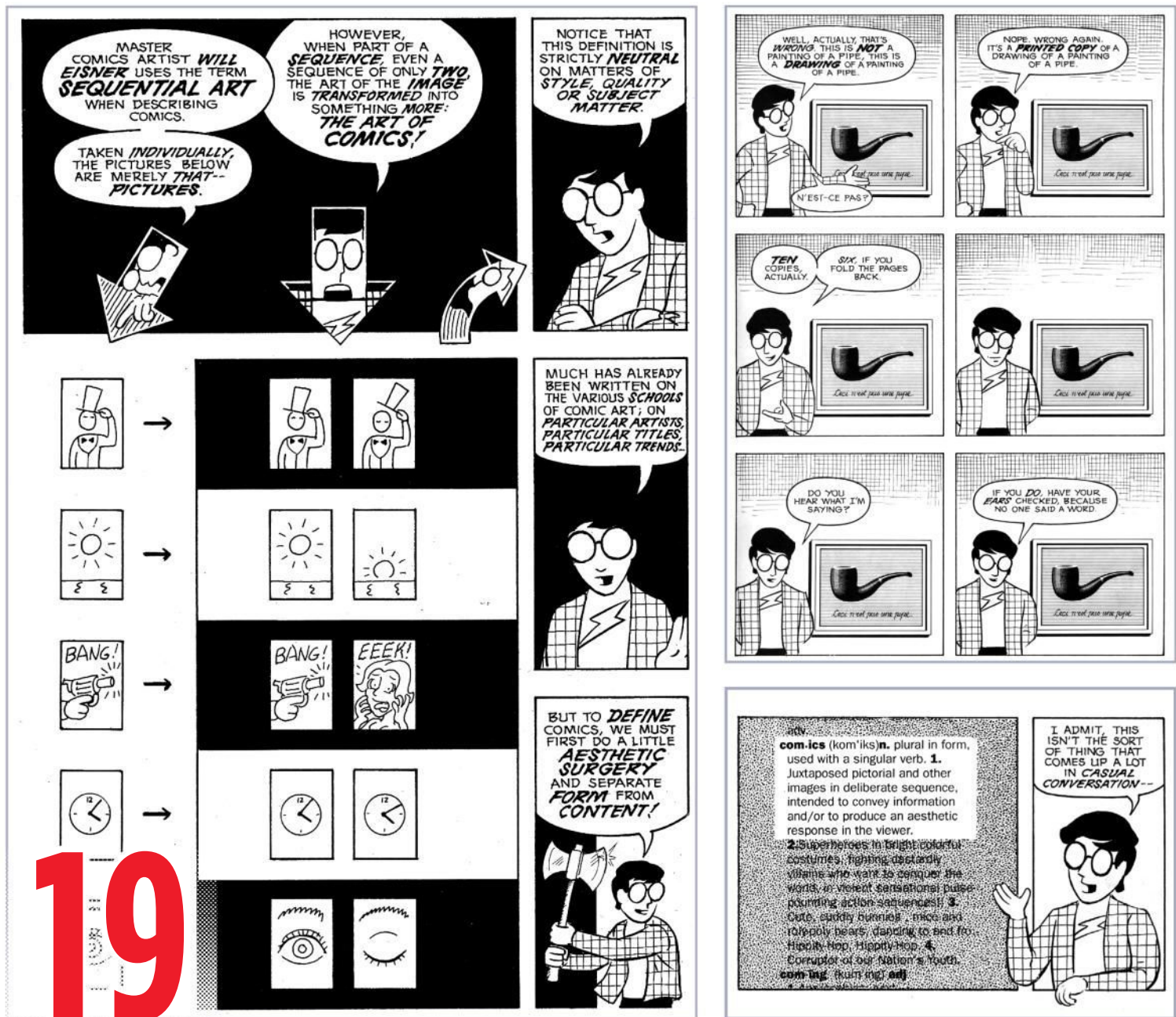
what she looks like." A small part of the larger family epic of the *Sandman* series – which follows Destiny, Death, Desire, Despair, Delirium and Destruction – this close-up focus made her a favourite among fans.

Ironically, considering the story's focus on life versus afterlife, a movie version has been in the limbo of development hell for over a decade, despite Gaiman's strong approval of the "great script." Perhaps when his

“ IT FREQUENTLY FEELS PROFOUND ”

Above and opposite: The book helped define DC's Vertigo imprint.

similarly themed *American Gods* hits TV screens via US network Starz, the property will be picked back up by DC/Warner Bros. We certainly hope so. It's a story that deserves to reach as wide an audience as possible, and if a movie adaptation leads to a *Watchmen*-like spike in sales, all the better. Forgive our optimism but, like Didi, we believe in happy endings. **SAM ASHURST**



Writer Scott McCloud
Artist Scott McCloud
Published 1993
Publisher Kitchen Sink Press

UNDERSTANDING COMICS

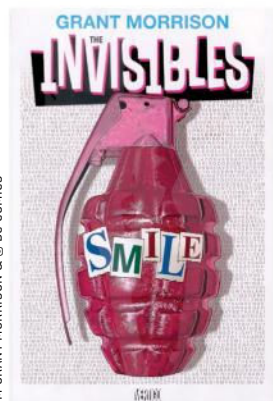
A BLOCKBUSTER 200-PAGE COMIC BOOK ABOUT HOW COMICS WORK AND HOW TO READ THEM

This might come as a surprise to people who grew up with comics, but knowing how to read comics is not necessarily an instinctive thing. People who come to comics whose previous experiences of storytelling are purely prose, TV, cinema or theatre might actually need guidance on how to read comics. Which is where Scott McCloud comes in.

McCloud's 1993 book *Understanding Comics* was a groundbreaking treatise on the history, form and function of graphic storytelling. But more than that, it was the first substantial guide for general readers to the simple matter of how to read comics.

Why was this important? From the mid '80s to the early '90s, comics experienced something of a boom period, with numerous publishers springing up and a flood of comic books from enthusiastic but inexperienced creators. Many people came to comics – both as readers and as creators – who had not had the medium as part of their everyday life, brought in thanks to the mainstream media attention given to titles such as *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sandman*.

In response, McCloud put out there the idea that comics were a distinct artform with their own



TM GRANT MORRISON & © DC COMICS

Writer Grant Morrison
Artist Various
Published 1994–2000
Publisher DC Vertigo

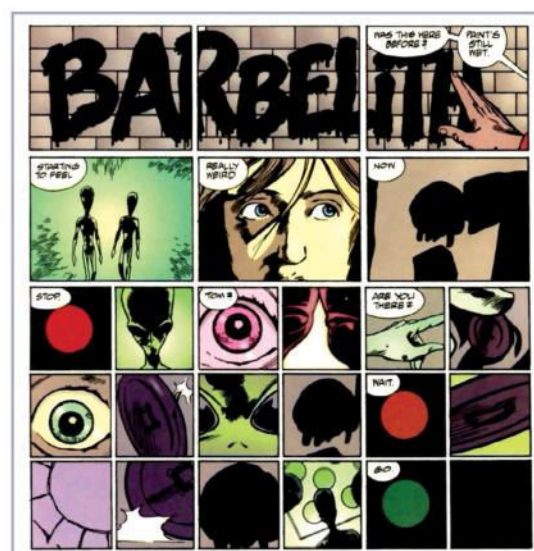
THE INVISIBLES

A TIME-HOPPING, MIND-EXPANDING EXPERIENCE
 WITH A SIDE ORDER OF KINK AND UFOLOGY...

What is *The Invisibles* about? Well, that's a little complicated... Inspired by the writings of American mystic Terrence McKenna, the occult, James Bond, punk, dance and hip-hop, weird old TV shows, and Grant Morrison's own apparent alien abduction experience, *The Invisibles* is about more or less everything. Morrison's most personal work, it's not as concise and perfect as *We3*, or as emotionally potent as *All-Star Superman*, but in its rambling, ramshackle craziness it distills the essence of the pre-Millennial Zeitgeist into a heady, thrilling and – at times – completely barking adventure serial. Sometimes it feels like Morrison has co-opted his artists into drawing an extremely long stream-of-

consciousness ramble on all his favourite topics. It also, if you believe Morrison, was designed as a magickal spell to set the world right again.

Dane McGowan is an angry Northern teenager, rebelling fruitlessly against everything, until he encounters masked terrorist/psychic freedom fighter King Mob and his cell of Invisibles – a secret army waging a war against the forces of repression, as represented by the demonic Outer Church. But what initially seems like a simple case of cool, sexy goodies vs. sleazy baddies rapidly becomes far more morally complex. Remorselessly violent at times, it's a book that dedicates an entire issue to the everyday life of one of the henchmen our “heroes”



mercilessly gun down in issue 1. The book may have its bloody cake and eat it at times, but Morrison explores the moral and psychological consequences of violence. *The Matrix* this is not (although that didn't stop the Wachowskis from, shall we charitably say, "drawing inspiration" from *The Invisibles* for their first *Matrix* flick).

HARD WON VICTORY

The series was divided into three volumes and illustrated by a plethora of artists. Steve Yeowell's work on the opening and closing stories of Volume One defined the characters

and the eerie feel of the series, while Phil Jimenez and Chris Weston's slick pencils brought consistency to Volume Two. The final volume returned to a shifting roster of artists.

The Invisibles had a tough time during its publication. After a strong start, sales fell rapidly with the second arc. Deemed too obscure by readers, and with some strangely unappealing art from Jill Thompson, "Arcadia" took the wind out of the

Above and opposite: Not just a thriller with rebels battling a vast conspiracy.



series' sails – and, indeed, its sales. But, bit-by-bit, the comic won people over and avoided cancellation. (Whether this was down to the spell that Morrison asked readers to cast by masturbating over a sigil in issue 16, or just the book finding its feet and getting better, is open to debate.)

And, the thing is, while its reputation may make the series sound oblique, it's actually remarkably lucid on its grand themes. *The Invisibles* ends on a point of philosophical enlightenment for mankind that's compassionate and hopeful – as well as satisfyingly mind-bending. **WILL SALMON**

“MORRISON’S MOST PERSONAL WORK”



IT'S A GOOD LIFE, IF YOU DON'T WEAKEN

A REFLECTIVE, GENTLY MELANCHOLY TALE ABOUT THE COMPROMISES OUT OF WHICH A LIFE IS MADE

Seth is the pen-name of a nostalgic Canadian who much prefers living in the past to coping with the headlong rush of the present. First serialised in early issues of his one-man comic book *Palookaville*, *It's A Good Life If You Don't Weaken* took its title from his mother's advice. Her mantra ultimately serves as a consoling response to his anxiety about how the past is being trampled over by the rapid changes in modern life.

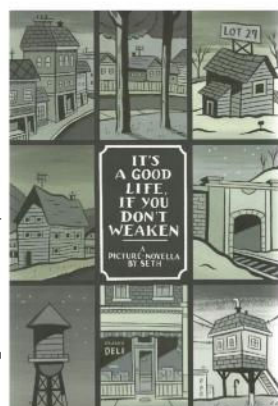
Seth's first "picture-novella" is an understated story about his obsessive quest to find out whatever happened to a mystery gag cartoonist who signed himself "Kalo" during his brief career and has been all but forgotten by posterity. From clues in the fading pages of old magazines, Seth's investigations take him to Strathroy, the town where Kalo lived and, not by coincidence, where Seth himself was also raised.

As parallels gradually emerge between the two men from different periods, Seth increasingly sees himself in Kalo. Plaintive images haunt these pages – wintry landscapes, a faded children's playground

in the snow, and rundown buildings, usually with nobody around, beneath a starry sky – and evoke a gentle, exquisite sadness. The elegant artwork in black and pale blue on cream paper adds to the wistful atmosphere. Seth's perseverance pays off, he locates Kalo's daughter and together they share the pieces of the puzzle of why her father abandoned cartooning despite achieving many aspiring professionals' highest goal, selling a single cartoon to *The New Yorker* magazine. Whether Kalo existed or not, it's as if through him Seth can imagine how he might have lived as a cartoonist who made it only so far and no further, and who gave up not out of weakness but the need to support his family.

Seth combines unravelling mystery, self-critical autobiography, failed romance and appreciation of how comics can affect us with a subtle contemplation of the struggles and choices that shape anyone's fate. As he reflects about life: "You've got to make of it the best you can." This stands as Seth's first and arguably still his most poignant masterwork. **PAUL GRAVETT**

IMAGES © SETH / DRAWN AND QUARTERLY



Writer Seth

Artist Seth

Published 1993-1996

Publisher Drawn and Quarterly

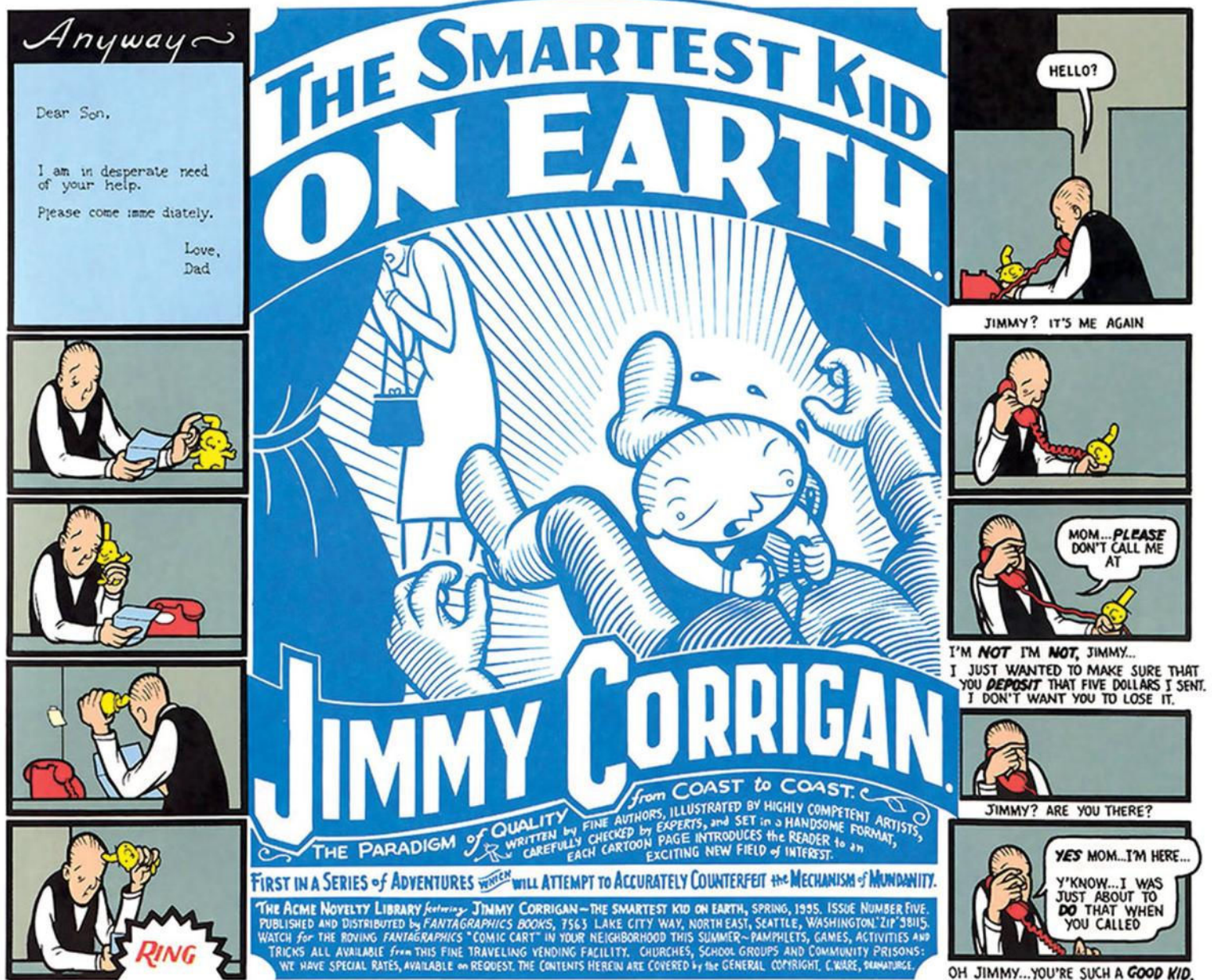
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16

JIMMY CORRIGAN, THE SMARTEST KID ON EARTH

A TOUCHING PSYCHO-DRAMA TOLD THROUGH ASTOUNDING MASTERY OF THE COMICS FORM



Writer Chris Ware
Artist Chris Ware
Published 1995-2000
Publisher Pantheon Books

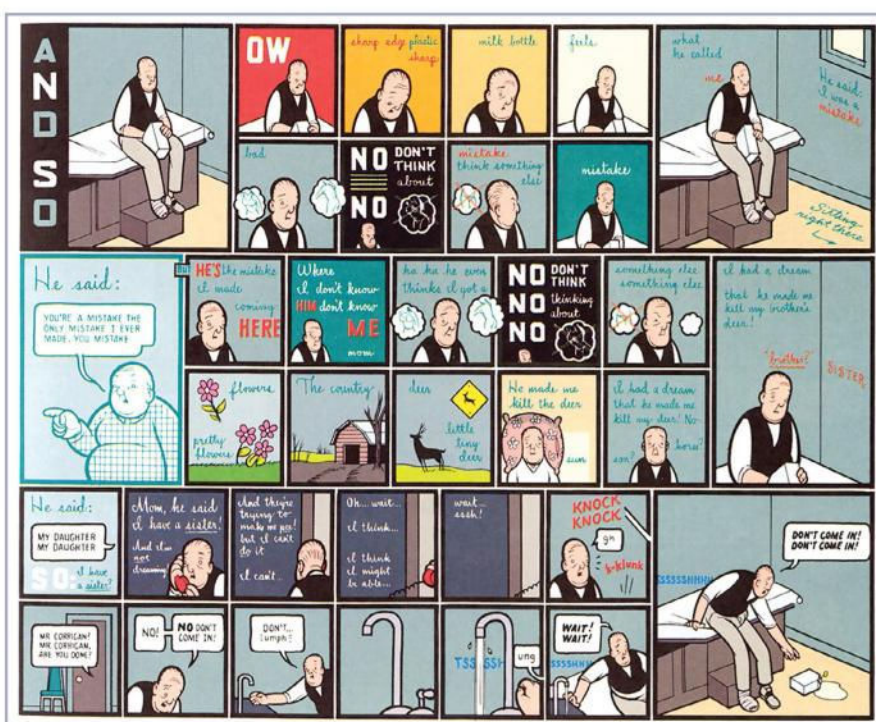
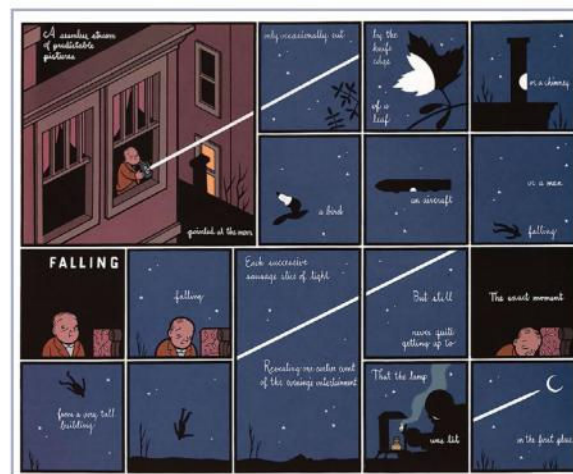
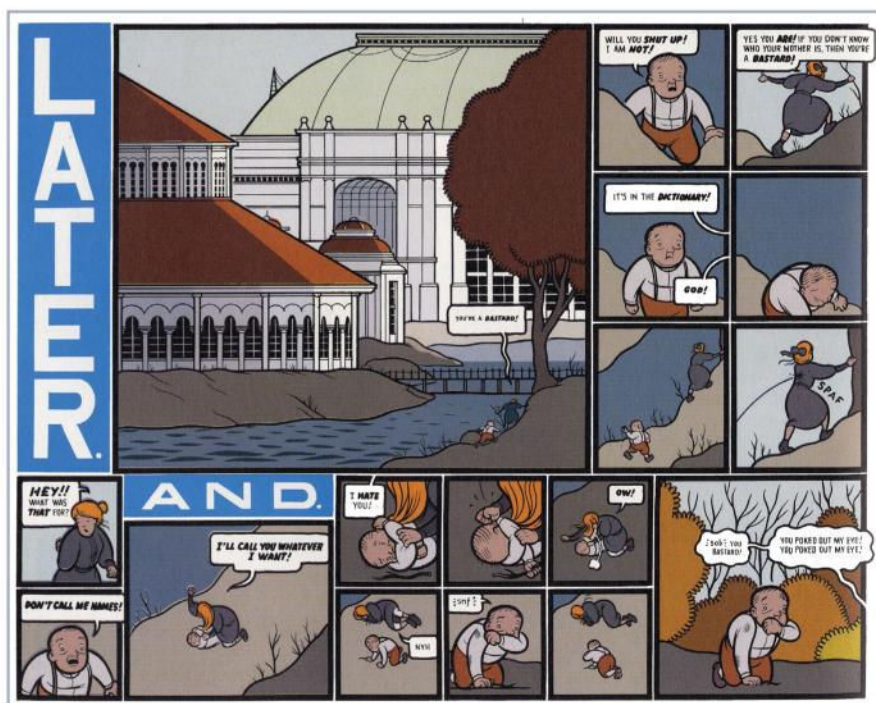
If you're ever in a mood to have your heart broken, then you need to read *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid On Earth*. Chris Ware is nothing less than a genius, and his masterwork *Jimmy Corrigan* quite rightly won the Guardian First Book Award in 2001 – the first graphic novel ever to do so.

So who is Jimmy Corrigan? Let's hear it from the man himself: "Hello. My name is Jimmy. I am five feet eleven and one half inches tall, and I hold an average weight. I have hazel/blue-grey eyes, naturally brown hair, and a sparkle to my smile. I

find I have a great sense of humour. People say I am great fun to be with, however at times I guess I am a little shy."

Forget all that. Jimmy Corrigan is really 36 years old but looks prematurely aged, dresses like his grandfather, and talks like a down-home James Stewart. He has a mind-numbing, paper-shuffling office job. He's the person you ignore on the streets, or maybe laugh at if you're a little mean-minded.

Partly autobiographical, Ware's tale is about the Thanksgiving weekend when Jimmy meets up for



“ IN THE MINUTIAE OF LIFE IS PATHOS AND TRAGEDY ”

Above and opposite: Ware's mastery of his medium makes this a comic like nothing else you've ever read.

cleanliness of line and a curious absence of shadow that is both comforting and oddly unsettling, as though Jimmy's world is a stage-set on to which he's stumbled, not really knowing his part or his lines.

Ware also has a habit of occasionally placing his characters off-centre in his panels, as though our attention is drifting away from them, as though Jimmy Corrigan really is the sort of person you'd hurry past on the street or avoid making eye contact with at work, for fear of getting drawn into a conversation you didn't want to have.

But Ware makes us look, forbids us to ignore Jimmy, and ultimately we are rewarded with not only an insight into an often painful life, but also the suggestion of hope borne on Thanksgiving snow. **DAVID BARNETT**

the first time with the father he never knew, entwined with the story of Jimmy's grandfather, James, whose mother died in childbirth and whose violent, unpleasant father took him to the top of a tower at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and just walked away and abandoned him.

It doesn't sound like the most exciting story in the world, and it isn't. But it is utterly absorbing and involving, and we alternately cringe at Jimmy's social misfit life, which we can only peer at through our fingers, or we cheer him on, the

underdoggiest underdog of them all.

Ware tells his story in an elongated, stripped-down style, following every step of Jimmy's day at work, say, or trip to the grocery store. But in the minutiae of a life most boring, we find pathos and tragedy, and just a little comedy.

There's almost something of Little Nemo in Slumberland in Ware's precise, regimented panels, as if Jimmy is Little Nemo himself, all grown up and having forgotten how to dream. Ware's art has a draughtsman-like quality, a





15

BATMAN: YEAR ONE

A MASTERLY RETELLING OF THE ARCHETYPAL ORIGIN ENRICHED BY MILLER'S SIGNATURE NOIR SENSIBILITY



Writer Frank Miller

Artist David Mazzucchelli

Published 1987

Publisher DC Comics

In the mid-1980s, DC was busy revamping its core trinity of super-heroes: Superman, Wonder Woman and Batman. The first two were in need of serious updating, and got it. Batman, on the other hand – thanks to the return to his roots by Neal Adams et al in the early '70s – was as fresh and contemporary as when first conceived by Bob Kane and Bill Finger back in 1939. His genesis was perfect as it was – unimprovable. His motivations for fighting crime were still relevant, half a century on. There have always been, and will always be, a lot of cowardly, superstitious criminals into whose hearts a night-black, bat-garbed figure can strike terror.

It was decided, therefore, that Batman's backstory needed to be deepened rather than substantially altered, and Frank Miller volunteered for the job. He had recently produced the peerless *Dark Knight Returns*, set in a feverish, apocalyptic near-future at the tail end of Batman's career. *Batman: Year One* took him all the way back to the beginning and prompted him to tell a noir-inflected pulp tale of vigilantism and integrity, focused on a good man doing the right thing in a dirty world.

Two good men, in fact, for the comic is as much about James Gordon – the future Commissioner of the Gotham City Police Department – as it is about Bruce Wayne and his caped alter ego. In the opening pages Gordon arrives in Gotham, aware that he is entering an urban cesspool and fearful that he is dragging his wife and their unborn child down into the muck along with him. As this straight-arrow cop butts up against endemic corruption in the police force, Wayne himself starts to develop the skills and techniques that will eventually make him the much-feared scourge of crooks everywhere. This involves several missteps and a great deal of



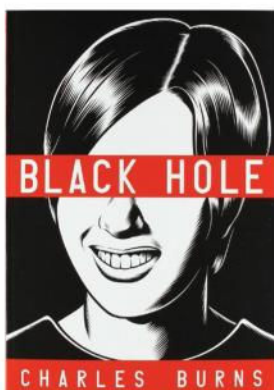
suffering for both characters. Neither learns a lesson that isn't hard-won, and usually painful too, leaving scars both external and internal. At the same time, both discover a mutual respect and forge the bond that will serve them well later on.

Miller originally planned to draw as well as write the book, but stepped aside to let Mazzucchelli illustrate instead. A year earlier the two had collaborated on the much-lauded "Born Again" arc of *Daredevil*, and the synthesis of their talents proved just as glorious on *Year One*. Mazzucchelli's style is bold and graceful, full of interesting angles, artful blacks, superb compositions and stunning panel transitions – for proof, look no further than the bridge-fight sequence that provides the story's dénouement. Add gorgeous colouring by Richmond Lewis (controversially reworked and more garish in new collected editions) and you have a sublime visual treat, images that both suit and offset the bleak, bone-crunching brutality of the plot.

Year One established the template for all Batman origin stories to follow, including the film *Batman Begins* and TV series *Gotham*. It is about rumbled, determined heroes taking their first tentative steps down mean streets, on their way to becoming the legends they are destined to be. **JAMES LOVEGROVE**



...AND I COULD FEEL MYSELF FALLING FORWARD, TUMBLING DOWN INTO NOTHINGNESS.



ALL IMAGES © CHARLES BURNS / JONATHAN CAPE 2016

Writer Charles Burns
Artist Charles Burns
Published 1995-2005
Publisher Pantheon Books

BLACK HOLE

SEXUALLY-TRANSMITTED DEFORMITIES TURN GROWING UP INTO A REAL HORROR STORY

An illustrated exercise in raw ugliness and rejection, Charles Burns' monochromatic body horror drama is often as revolting as it is intoxicating. Set in the Seattle suburbs of the 1970s, *Black Hole* centres on a group of teenagers contracting a rampantly virulent sexually transmitted disease, the symptoms of which are varied, debilitating and grotesque.

Originally serialised in 12 parts (and across ten years of writing), the plot juggles the complicated and infectious sex lives of its four main protagonists, Keith, Eliza, Chris and Rob. The mutations are deformities ranging from the stomach-churning – such as pustules, shedding skin and a second mouth – to the less immediately problematic, such as a wagging tail.

As the infected come to terms with their new-found abnormalities, alienation and fear spread

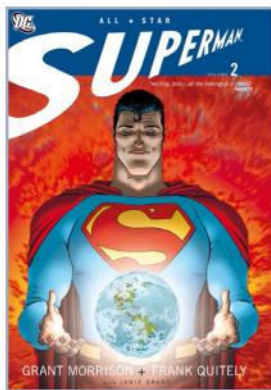
among the teenagers. Some become feral outcasts, shunning and being shunned by the rest of their former classmates. A few keep secret their terrible new afflictions, grinning outwardly despite the pain. And the remainder just hide in the dark, drinking beer, smoking weed and listening to Bowie. Hey, it was the '70s.

And here lies the crux of the novel. Despite the disease's repulsive nature, its actual effect on the teenagers is just to magnify their properties as... well, teenagers.

Black Hole reminds us that adolescence is to be uncomfortable with your changing body, be sex-obsessed, have weighty and crippling anxieties about your appearance, and, of course, to act and think in the hyperbole of the moment, all of the time. The characters talk in terms of absolutes and punctuated exaggeration. They splinter into



Frank
Quinn



Writer Grant Morrison
Artist Frank Quitely
Published 2005-2008
Publisher DC Comics



ALL IMAGES © DC COMICS 2016

13

ALL-STAR SUPERMAN

MORRISON AND QUITELY'S WARM-HEARTED REINVENTION IS A MODERN CLASSIC

All-Star Superman is the least flashy, least stylised, least *out there* of all Grant Morrison's many collaborations with Frank Quitely. Compare it to the stylised hyper-violence of *We3* or their wild *New X-Men* run and it looks almost old-fashioned. And yet, these 12 issues pack the strongest emotional punch of both creators' careers. Sitting to one side of regular DC continuity, it's a pared-back, revisionist take on the Man of Steel that encapsulates all that is wonderful about the character.

Super-hero books can be difficult for outsiders to latch on to (just try explaining decades of *Avengers* continuity to someone who has only ever watched the movies), but this streamlined revision is easy to pick up, utterly mainstream and yet still, somehow, subtly avant garde.

HUMAN EMOTION

When Lex Luthor executes one of his typically mad schemes, Superman is forced to swoop in and save the day. In the process he is saturated with solar radiation, the source of his powers. He grows stronger than ever

before, but at a cost – he will soon die. Accepting that his time is running out, he sets about putting his affairs in order, along the way encountering a parade of mirror-image enemies which he proceeds to defeat using his nobility and kindness, rather than his super-strength (er, mostly – there's still a fair amount of punching here).

For a story about an alien, it's the humanity that shines through here. Morrison's work can, on occasion, be icy and distant. His super-hero work is clever and conceptual but sometimes at the expense of emotion. In *All-Star Superman*, however, he wants you to experience the original super-hero anew. The character's origin is recapped in a scant four panels and the "Funeral In Smallville" chapter moves from the achingly sad death of Jonathan Kent into a hopeful vision of the future. One page from volume two, which

Above and opposite: Heroic but human, both super and a man, at the same time.

sees Superman wrap his arms around a suicidal teenager, is breathtaking in its economy.

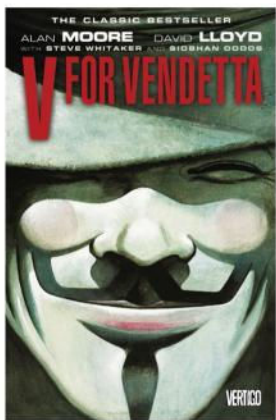
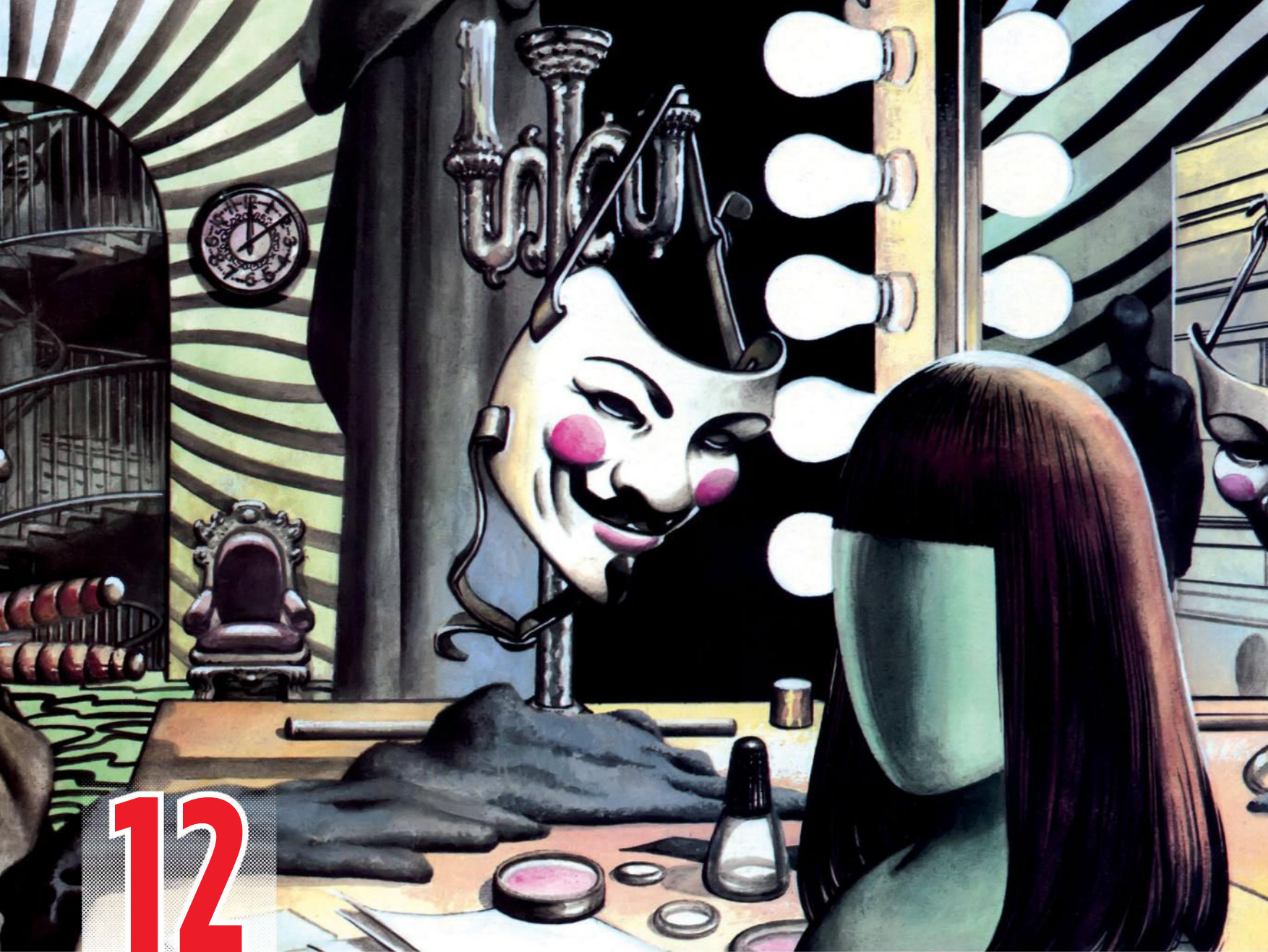
Jamie Grant's rainbow colouring fits this psychedelic peacenik tone perfectly, while Quitely gets the chance to draw some wonderful quieter moments. The differences between his Clark and his Superman are striking – Clark is bulky, bumbling, hunched, while Superman always looks utterly at ease with himself – and yet they're clearly the same man. And while some of the backgrounds are a little vague – this is a world of big, open skies – it fits with the book's optimism. When they visit the Underverse, it's a claustrophobic contrast.

Remember that line from *Man Of Steel* – you know, the good one? It's cribbed from here. Early on, Jor-El says to his son of humanity: "They will race, and stumble, and fall and crawl... and curse... And finally... they will join you in the sun, Kal-El." Tinged with melancholy, yet hopeful for the future, *All-Star Superman* is a humanist masterpiece.

WILL SALMON



“ EXPERIENCE THE ORIGINAL ANEW ”



ALL IMAGES © DC COMICS

Writer Alan Moore

Artist David Lloyd

Published 1988-1989

Publisher Quality
Communications / DC
Vertigo

V FOR VENDETTA

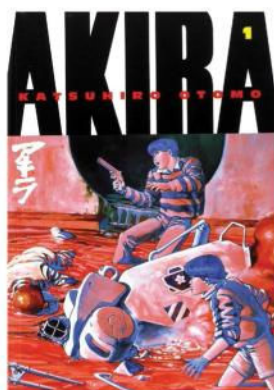
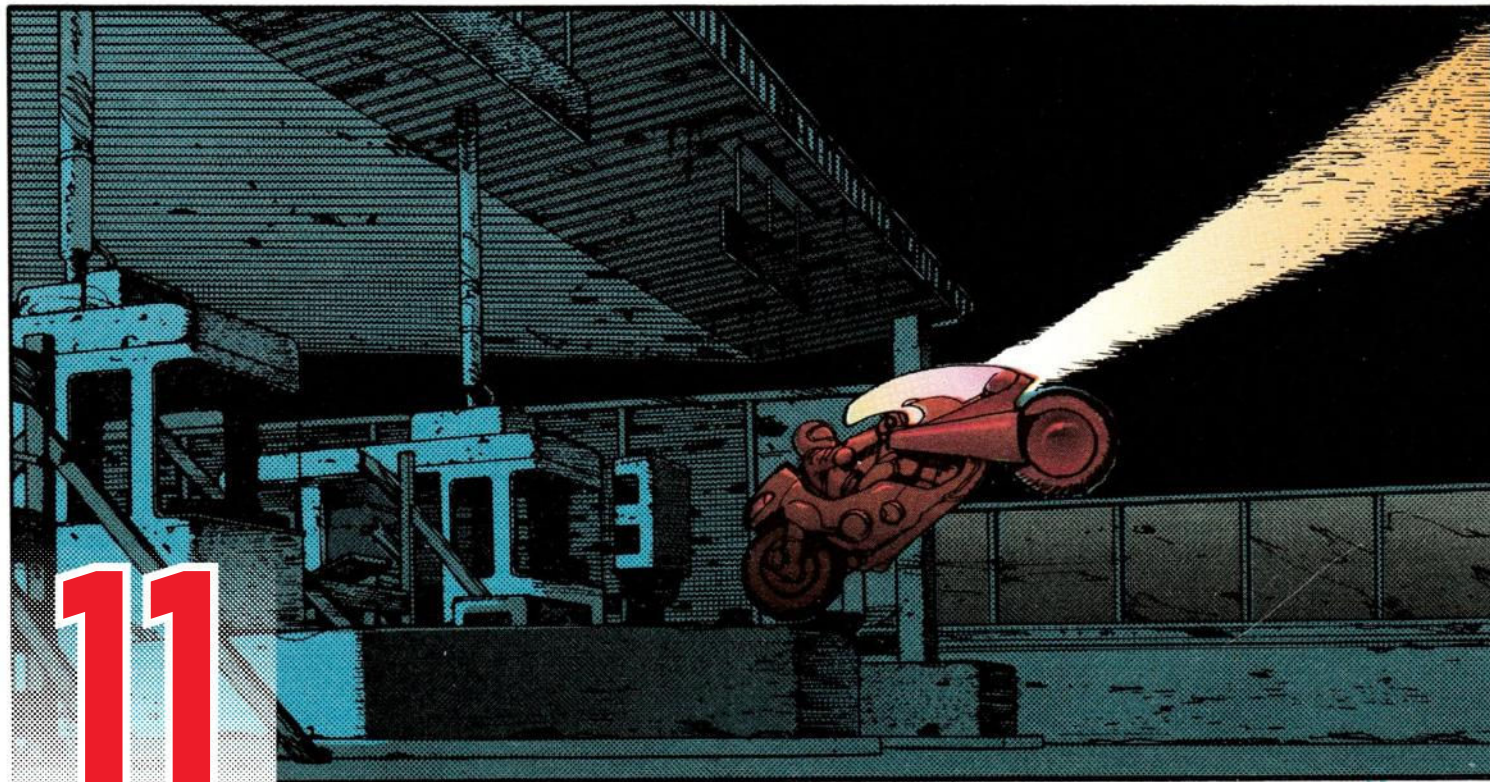
A NUANCED, UNSETTLING POLITICAL FABLE PITTING
RUTHLESS FASCISM AGAINST RUTHLESS ANARCHISM

V For Vendetta was born in the early 1980s very much as a response to Thatcherism. Nevertheless, it has barely dated, and its message – government is not to be trusted and the populace must learn to shake off its chains, through insurrection if need be – remains bracingly, if chillingly, perennial.

The strip first appeared in British anthology magazine *Warrior*, which during its short but memorable lifespan helped midwife the careers of many who became giants of the comics scene, among them Grant Morrison, Steve Dillon, Alan Davis and Alan Moore. When *Warrior* died, *V For Vendetta* remained unfinished. DC stepped in, reprinting the existing parts of the story and

enabling Moore and artist David Lloyd to complete the rest, seven years after they had begun. The stark black-and-white art of the original was given added colouring in the form of subdued pastel washes. The result, looking rather like a series of old tinted photographs, is weirdly effective.

The setting is the then near future of 1997. The UK has become a police state after a global nuclear war. Our protagonist, Evey, is a teenage girl forced to turn to prostitution in order to get by. She is rescued from secret police officers (and would-be rapists) by a cloaked figure wearing a Guy Fawkes mask. This is V, an anarchist whom the authorities consider a dangerous terrorist, and no wonder –



AKIRA

THE EPIC SAGA THAT INTRODUCED THE WORLD TO SCI-FI MANGA AND CYBERPUNK... WITH MOTORBIKES

You can argue until the electric blue virtual reality cows come home who kick-started the cyberpunk genre, but Katsuhiro Otomo's high-octane manga *Akira*, which began serialisation in 1982, has to be in there with a shout.

It's one of the most famous manga, and one of the first to come to Western notice, thanks to a translated 38-issue series published by Marvel's Epic imprint from 1988. *Akira* embodies the tropes of cyberpunk which we now know so well but were fresh and exciting at the time – remember, *Blade Runner* came out in 1982, the same year *Akira*

began, and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* was still two years away from publication.

Set in 2019, some 30-odd years after World War III, *Akira* takes place in Neo-Tokyo, a garish, high-tech, lowlife city that rose from the ashes of old Tokyo. Vicious gangs run rampant, post-nuclear-war children are born with startling abilities, and everyone rides motorbikes. Big, flashy motorbikes.

You might also know *Akira* from the 1988 anime, although the two-hour film necessarily truncated much of the epic manga (2,000 pages by its conclusion in 1990), it is still considered one of the seminal anime movies.

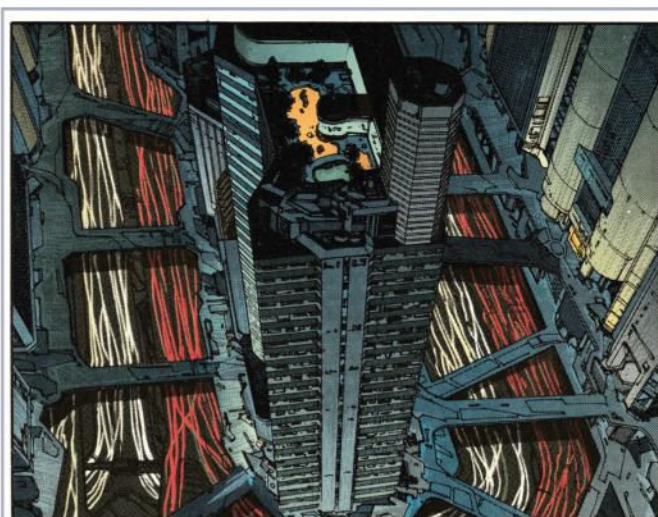


Writer Katsuhiro Otomo

Artist Katsuhiro Otomo

Published 1982-1990

Publisher Kodansha



So who, or what, is Akira? Well, in brief, World War III began on 6th December 1982, when Tokyo was destroyed in an apparent nuclear explosion. But what emerges through the manga's narrative is that the city was actually unwittingly destroyed by Akira, a small boy with psychic powers verging on the godlike.

The surviving government scientists freeze him in suspended animation, where he remains until 2019, when the principal characters of the series, gang member Kaneda and terrorist Kei, stumble across the project and, thanks to Kaneda's gang-rival Tetsuo, set in motion the events that will awaken the child.

As well as being archetypal cyberpunk, *Akira* set out the stall

for the key elements of sci-fi manga, and indeed introduced it to the West – an incredible sense of movement, ultraviolence, big guns, motorbikes. Did we mention the motorbikes?

Although the US Epic series was coloured – in fact, the first ongoing comic to feature digital colouring – the original episodes were black-and-white, and were reprinted for English-speaking audiences in their intended format by Dark Horse (and Titan in the UK) in the early 2000s.

Thanks to its episodic nature – it ran originally in the weekly *Young*

Above and opposite: In the form in which the West came to know it, *Akira* is still stunning.

Magazine from its inception in 1982 until it concluded in 1990 – the story is often sprawling, with a huge cast of characters, and it is never anything less than epic in its scope.

From down-and-dirty gangsters to government conspiracies to the destruction (yet again) of Tokyo, followed by the rise of a new Japanese empire fuelled by Akira's almost limitless powers, this is one manga that doesn't stint on ambition and delivers with speed lines aplenty.

Akira was birthed from the culture that was so influential on cyberpunk when it took hold in the '80s. Or as William Gibson once said, "Modern Japan simply was cyberpunk". And cyberpunk, quite simply, was *Akira*. **DAVID BARNETT**

**“SPRAWLING BUT
EPIC IN SCOPE”**



TOKYO TRAILBLAZER

THE GREATEST, MOST INFLUENTIAL OF ALL MODERN MANGA ARTISTS – AT LEAST AS FAR AS MOST IN THE WEST ARE CONCERNED – IS KATSUHIRO OTOMO. **BY PAUL GRAVETT**

As *The Japan Times* recently put it, “Without Akira there would be no ‘Cool Japan’.” Manga get taken for granted today, widely available as English paperbacks and inspiring global artists with their dynamic styles and techniques. But 25 years ago, what would become an international tsunami of Japanese comics was barely a ripple.

In May 1987, independent US publishers First and Eclipse instigated the first wave with *Lone Wolf And Cub* and *The Legend Of Kamui*, but the big impact came in 1988, when Marvel’s creator-owned imprint Epic unleashed Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira*, in prestige, squarebound comics. His black-and-white pages were put into colour, making the first use of a vibrant, sophisticated computer palette devised by Steve Oliff. Here was a gripping, fast-paced sci-fi manga that would truly cross over to Western audiences.

WAR CHILD

Echoing the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Otomo opens *Akira* with the detonation of a mysterious bomb over Japan, triggering a Third World War. Almost 40 years later, the world of 2030 is rebuilding and a sprawling Neo-Tokyo rises from the ashes, besieged with biker gangs and anti-government terrorists. This future belongs to a new breed of human,

capable of deploying unprecedented inner energies but at a terrible price. A secret military agency wants to harness these gifts for its own ends, but the fragile mind of the child-like Akira, the most powerful and temperamental of these ‘Espers’, cannot be contained. Psychic forces, seismic urban destruction and physical deformations surge out of control, threatening to plunge the city into a second apocalypse.

Akira was cyberpunk before cyberpunk; the term was not yet in the culture when Otomo began serialising his tale in 1982 in *Young Magazine*. He would not come across William Gibson’s seminal 1984 book *Neuromancer* until 1985. Instead, Otomo cites the novels by Seishi Yokomizo – and their preoccupation with ‘new breeds’ of humans mutating to adapt to volatile conditions – as inspiration, a mood echoed in Japan’s rebel youth and rioting students of the ‘60s.

Born in 1954, Otomo sought to evoke this volatile period he knew well in the future-world of *Akira*. “I wanted to revive a Japan like the one I grew up in,” he said, “after the Second World War, with a government in difficulty, a world being rebuilt, external political pressures, an uncertain future and a gang of kids left to fend for themselves, who cheat boredom by racing on motorbikes.”

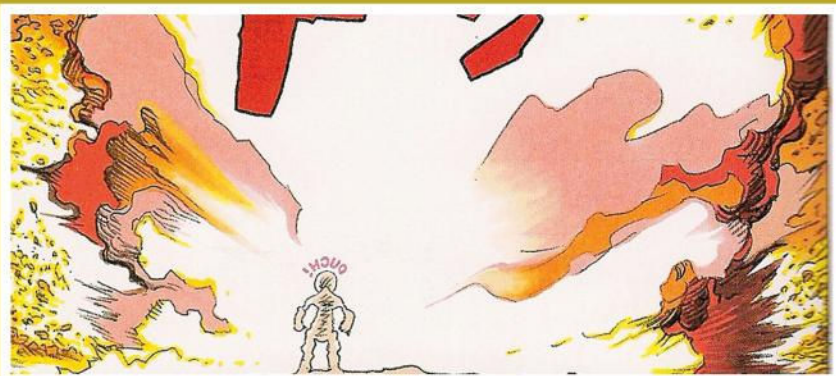
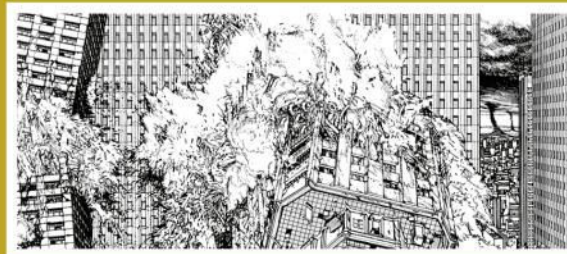
When talking about *Akira* he also pays tribute to his childhood favourite manga by Mitsuteru Yokoyama, the giant robot classic *Tetsujin 28 Go* (1956-66), released as an animated cartoon in America as *Gigantor*, and to the lasting impressions on him of American films such as *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie And Clyde*.

DIG THE NEW BREED

Akira was also a ‘new breed’ of manga – faster, stronger, smarter, and more naturalistic. American comic book fans hooked on Neal Adams, John Byrne and Frank Miller were not yet ready for the alien distortions and large-eyed caricatures of more typical manga, but they were blown away by Otomo’s detailed, realistic fantasy.

His innovative approach grew out of his studies in draughtsmanship and architecture, and his admiration for the meticulous locations in the manga of Shigeru Mizuki (published in English by Drawn & Quarterly). As for those ‘normal’, unexaggerated eyes, he started by using his friends as models for his drawing. “My style took shape naturally by observing them,” he said. “I try to draw things as true as possible, without falling into mannerism.”

Another crucial ingredient to Otomo’s style was the aesthetic shock in the late ‘70s of discovering the work of France’s master of sci-fi ➤



Above:
Akira the movie and *Akira* the comic were both highly effective

comics, Moebius, alias Jean Giraud. "At the time, manga was confined to the real, the everyday, the concrete, the social," he explained. "Everyone swore only by 'gekiga', the adult version of manga which used lots of frames and sombre compositions. The clear yet very expressive and detailed line of Moebius was a real revelation. A fantastical universe like *Arzach* pushed us out of our routines."

The distinctive look of *Akira* greatly helped it to cross language and culture barriers and implant manga internationally. In Japan, the instant success of the first volume in a special, oversized, high-priced format at ¥1,000 – selling out immediately of two print-runs, totalling 300,000 copies – led to Otomo being commissioned to direct his own animated movie version in 1988. Alongside manga, he had been working in the anime field since 1983, and had been getting noticed and praised. Granted complete control to bring his epic to

the big screen, he created a hugely innovative production, advancing the state-of-the-art of adult animation to unprecedented heights. He had not finished his manga story at that time, however, so he had to come up with an original ending for the film. Despite running well over budget, *Akira* the movie and *Akira* the comic reinforced each other's success.

A HANDMADE WORLD

For its original magazine serialisation, Otomo was expected to produce a 20-page episode every two weeks, which put great demands on him.

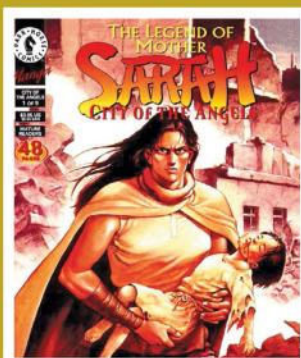
"My method was to completely draw the first page as a warm-up without preparatory sketches, directly on the final board, with no reworking, to get going as quickly as possible," he said. "Once that first page was done, an assistant inked the decors and buildings with a Rotring pen and ruler. Meanwhile, I pencilled the following pages, finishing usually two days before the

deadline. I then needed half a day to draw all the characters, then I gave a finishing touch to the buildings by trying to instil them with life and expressiveness, with dust, cracks, broken windows. I'd finish the last pencils on Sunday at 5am, the inking of the characters by 7pm, and the episode was delivered Monday morning at 8am."

After the movie, Otomo resumed his manga and unfolded his much longer, richer, more complex vision, completing it in 1990. With many more characters and subplots, it finally filled six albums of about 400 pages each, released first in English by Dark Horse and currently by Japanese publishers Kodansha.

Otomo began getting his comics published in 1973, mainly for *Manga Action* magazine, but avoided sci-fi until he switched more to rival title *Young Magazine*, where he left his first stab at the genre, "Fireball", unfinished in 1979.

In many ways, his follow-up –



Domu: A Child's Dream, serialised from 1980 and published as a single volume in 1983 – is a more accessible entry point than *Akira*. Let's hope Kodansha will put it back into print shortly. This chiller presages *Akira* by focusing on a battle between psychically empowered tenants of a crowded, rundown apartment complex in present-day Tokyo. Mixing the mundane with the strange and sometimes horrifying, *Domu* was lined up for a live-action film, which has yet to happen.

In cinema, Otomo's other achievements include his affectionate reinterpretation of Osamu Tezuka's 1949 manga *Metropolis*. He also directed a 2007 live-action adaptation of Yuki Urushibara's folklore fables *Mushishi* about an occult detective in an imaginary Japanese past. Perhaps most significantly, Otomo wrote and directed the ambitious *Steamboy*, realising a striking steampunk Victorian England. Sadly, it failed to set Western box offices on fire.

“ I FELT THE NEED TO RETURN TO A MANUAL WAY OF WORKING, A HANDMADE WORLD ”

As for comics, Otomo keeps his hand in, creating new, mostly short pieces or even writing scripts for others. Otomo often uses his manga as springboards for his later anime projects too. For example, three of his earlier comics inspired three sections of the anthology animated film *Memories* in 1995, Otomo directing the tale “Cannon Fodder” himself. Similarly, his short cartoon, “Combustible” – part of an ensemble movie called *Short Peace* – grew from a nine-page manga of the same name which he crafted for the debut issue of the anthology *Comic Cue*. It was shortlisted as one of 10 nominees for 2013's Oscars.


In April 2012, to accompany an interview and features about him,

Above: Otomo's other works, before *Akira* and since, are well worth exploring too, in particular *DJ Teck* and *Domu: A Child's Dream*.

Otomo created *DJ Teck no Morning Attack*, an original eight-page colour manga, for *Geijitsu Shincho*. It was in this arts magazine that he revealed his return to full-length serial manga.

“I've decided to come back,” he said, “I felt the need to return to an entirely manual way of working, a handmade world, while there's still time, and without an assistant.”

Otomo's already spent several years developing what will be his first manga aimed at an adolescent readership.

It may be just as well that Hollywood's mooted live-action remake of *Akira* has been abandoned. After three decades, it is Otomo's vision which still astonishes in both comics and film. 

A TENEMENT IN THE BRONX

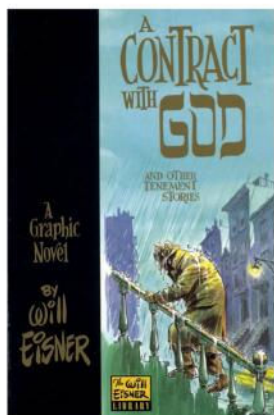
At 55 Dropsie Avenue, the Bronx, New York- not far from the elevated station- stood the tenement.



Like the others, it was built around 1920 when the decaying apartment houses in lower Manhattan could no longer accommodate the flood of immigrants that poured into New York after World War I.



And that night in the cold forest, he wrote the contract on a small stone.



10

A CONTRACT WITH GOD

THE FIRST GRAPHIC NOVEL? WELL, NOT QUITE, BUT IT'S STILL IN A LEAGUE OF ITS OWN...

Writer Will Eisner

Artist Will Eisner

Published 1978

Publisher Baronet Books

Historic twice over, Will Eisner's *A Contract With God* is a hugely important tome. Both a monument in comics chronology and also a piece of social history, it carries considerable heft as part of the medium's sometimes awkward journey towards academic respect and mainstream acceptability.

No, it is not the first use of the term "graphic novel", but it was Eisner's determination to tell an adult tale of fierce intelligence and deep emotional pull, only with pictures, that kick-started the slow process of the medium winning some scholarly credibility. It's the book that in the public's and the industry's eyes legitimised using the techniques of the newspaper funnies and comic books to tell

long-form stories. Hey, its existence is pretty much the reason your local bookstore has a section devoted to trade paperbacks and graphic novels.

PERSONAL RESONANCE

But let's be clear: *Contract* is not here just because it's pioneering. If it hadn't been any good then graphic novels would have been print's amusing sidestep, rather than a powerhouse of publishing. Eisner's often bleak but resonant set of four linked short stories can be an emotionally overwhelming read. In a semi-autobiographical account of his own early life in New York's poverty-stricken Bronx tenements, Eisner recalls the desperation and the



hardened resilience of his upbringing, and the characters around him.

Most personal is the first story, about Russian Jewish immigrant Frimme Hersh. A deeply religious and moral man, he accuses God of breaking a contract when his adopted daughter dies at the age of 16. It's a heartbreaking and at times cruel story that hangs heavy with its themes of faith, loss and duty. Eisner lost his own daughter at the same age, and his raw anger and sense of injustice at the tragedy reverberates through the pages. The rightly famous splash panel of Hersh railing at God's perceived betrayal is a

breath-takingly bitter burst of illustrative fury that demonstrates exactly why this story needed to be told visually.

In fact, what may be most surprising is that the book deploys familiar conventions of the medium throughout. With years of experience, Eisner is simply a great visual storyteller, using every trick of the medium – onomatopoeia, speed lines, characters popping out of frame – to

“ IF NOT THE FIRST, ONE OF THE BEST ”

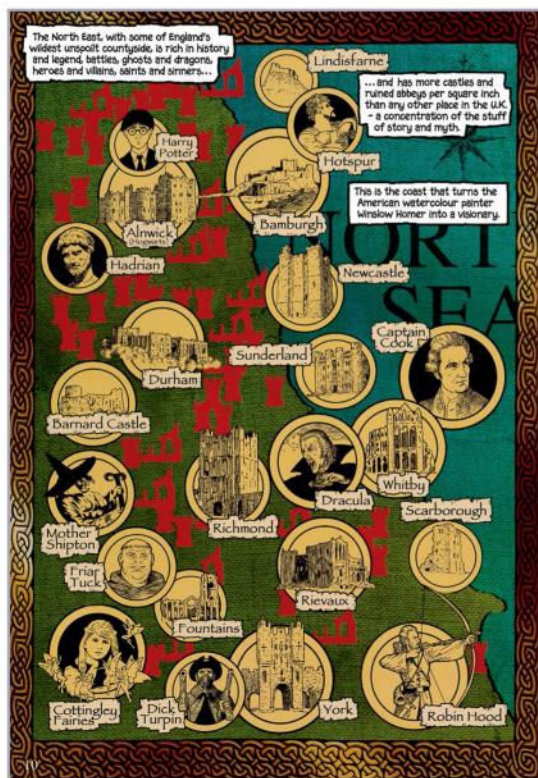
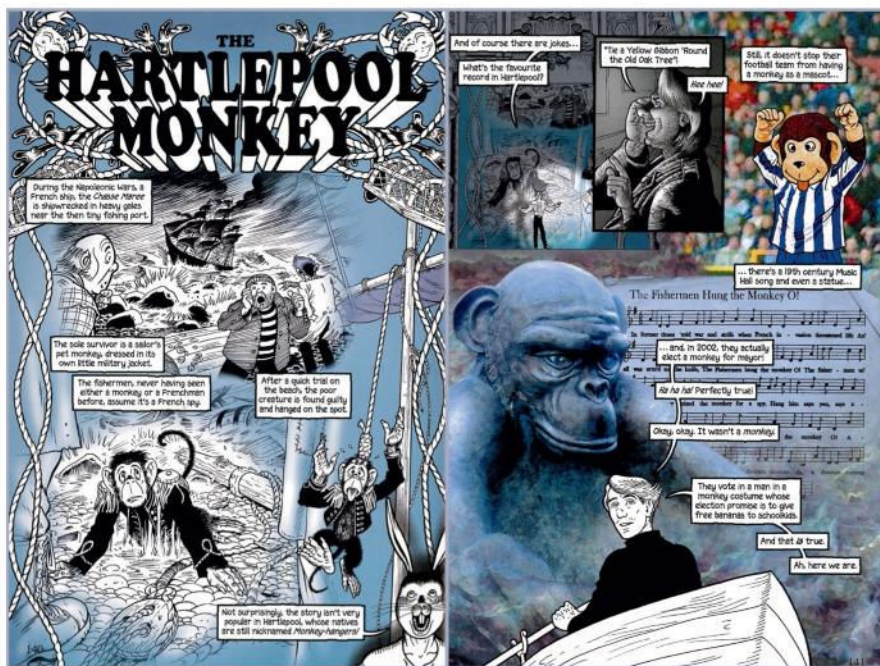


ALL IMAGES © THE ESTATE OF WILL EISNER

Above and opposite: Eisner's individual, often cartoony, style serves a serious purpose.

anchor the tale around a mood. The playful, cartoonish whimsy is occasionally shattered to devastating effect with barely a panel's notice, a juddering stark tonal contrast delivered with brutal poignancy. The street singer's vicious domestic abuse, the spousal beating and Mr Scuggs's fevered sexual dreams, are all shocking moments, made all the more so by Eisner's craft.

A Contract With God deserves its place in this list not because it's the first, but because it's one of the best – an intoxicating and urgent milestone of the genre. No wonder they named an award after him. **MILES HAMER**



embedded in our DNA, no matter whether we hail from Sunderland, Stourbridge or Southampton.

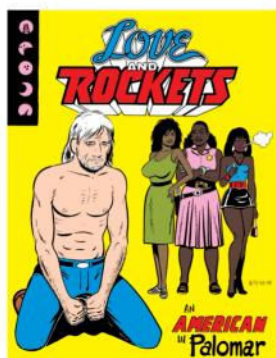
At almost 330 pages you don't half get your money's worth with this on page-count alone, but what is really astonishing is the amount of detailed work that Talbot put into this collage of a graphic novel. It's almost as if this was the culmination of a life's work, the embodiment of everything Bryan Talbot the comics creator had to offer.

Were that the case, and were this the last thing he had ever done, he

would certainly have gone out on a high. But rather than cap his career, *Alice In Sunderland* seems to have revitalised it, given Talbot a new lease of life, almost as if he was granting himself permission to scale ever-higher peaks and drive forward the medium of graphic storytelling with every new project.

Alice In Sunderland is a beautiful, satisfying and fulsome book, and just as the narrative breaks down the boundaries between reality and fantasy, so it demolishes and defies genre categorisations. **DAVID BARNETT**

“ AN EXPLOSION IN AN IDEAS FACTORY ”



Writer Gilbert Hernandez, Jaime Hernandez, Mario Hernandez

Artist Gilbert Hernandez, Jaime Hernandez, Mario Hernandez

Published 1982-

Publisher Fantagraphics

LOVE AND ROCKETS

SPANNING FIVE DECADES AND COUNTING, THIS IS SURELY THE MOST SUCCESSFUL INDIE COMIC EVER

Love and Rockets is one of the most enduring indie comics of all time, now about to start its fourth incarnation in 35 years. It was first published in magazine format by Fantagraphics in 1982, after three brothers from Oxnard, California – Jaime, Gilbert and Mario Hernandez – put out their own self-published comic the year before.

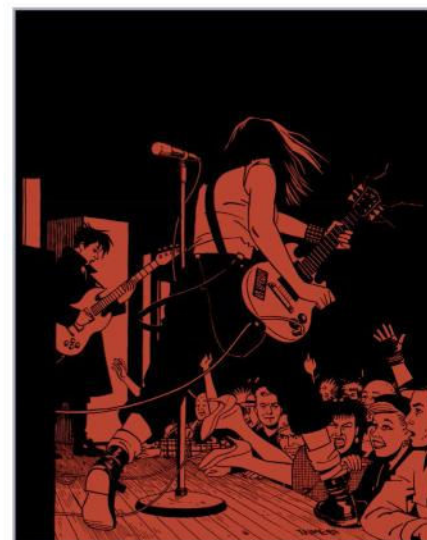
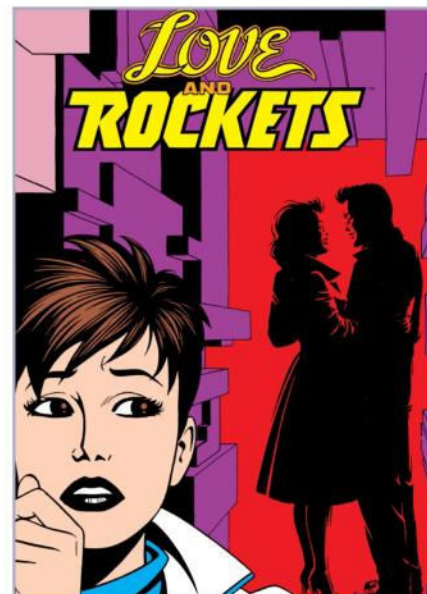
In the early days, Gilbert provided the love while Jaime took care of the rockets. Although they – and initially Mario – contributed a wide range of strips, the two major storylines that endure to this day were Gilbert's Palomar tales, set in a rural Latin American village, and Jaime's Mechanics stories, about Maggie, an engineer who fixed up rocket ships and had adventures.

Gilbert's stories, following a huge cast of characters, have maintained their magic realist feel over the past three and a half decades.

But Jaime's equally wide ensemble have changed along with the focus of his stories... Maggie left the rockets behind and her story morphed into the wider canvas of *Hoppers*, a Californian town based on Oxnard, and the lives and loves of her and her friends.

The appeal of *Love and Rockets* is almost certainly down to Los Bros Hernandez's almost supernatural talent for creating memorable, realistic characters. Anyone who has read the comic for any length of time will feel immersed in the lives of Luba, Pipo, Chelo and the rest of the Palomar tribe, and if you threw a rock at a bunch of comic fans you're pretty much guaranteed to hit someone who's just a little bit in love with Maggie.

Another interesting facet of *Love and Rockets* is that it's pretty much progressed in real time. Maggie and Hopey are in their 40s now and there is



ALL IMAGES © THE HERNANDEZ BROTHERS / FANTAGRAPHICS

fresh, younger blood in the cast of both Gilbert's and Jaime's stories. Time doesn't stand still in either Hoppers or Palomar.

Newcomers often wonder where to start. There are various collections of the earlier work, some focusing on Jaime and Gilbert's work individually, some collecting stories from both. Many of the arcs are self-contained, so it's not a bad idea to drop into something from the middle period when the bros have honed their craft.

For Jaime, try the "Death of Speedy" storyline, collected as Vol 7 of *The Complete Love and Rockets*. Maggie's cousin Esther comes to stay

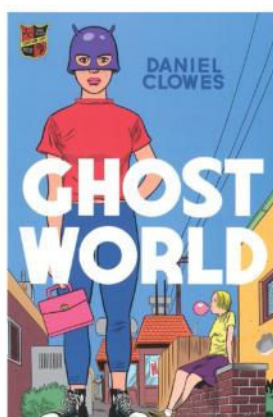
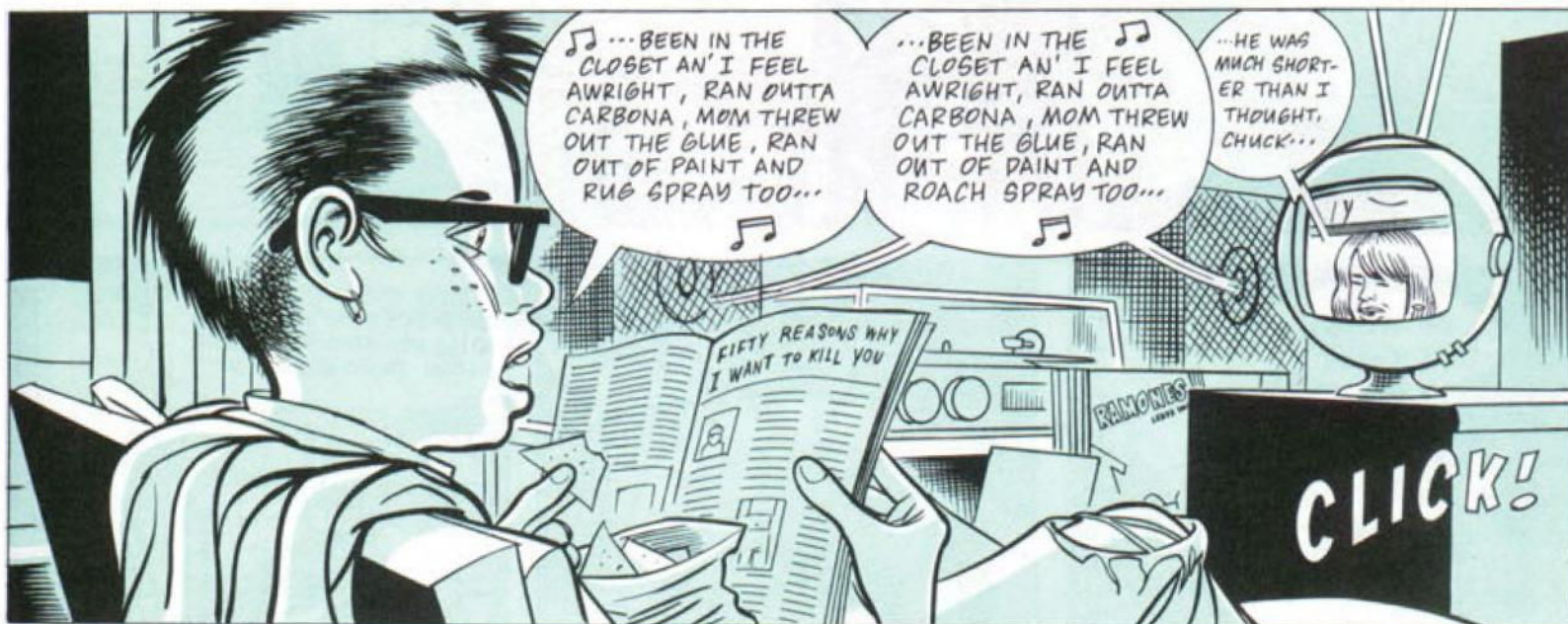
in Hoppers and grabs the attention of local hothead stud Speedy Ortiz, but Esther's boyfriend back in rival Dairytown isn't happy and threatens to start a gang war.

One of Gilbert's many masterful epics is "Human Diastrophism", sometimes collected as "Blood of Palomar", in which a serial killer stalks the remote village.

“ TIME DOESN'T STAND STILL IN LOVE AND ROCKETS ”

Above: The "Death Of Speedy" arc is *Love And Rockets* at its most raw and moving.

But don't be put off by the breadth of the worlds the Hernandez Brothers have created – it's vast and full of people you're not sure you'll ever understand properly, but that's pretty much the same as in real life... just with the occasional robot and lady wrestler. **DAVID BARNETT**



Writer Daniel Clowes

Artist Daniel Clowes

Published 1993-1997

Publisher

Fantagraphics Books

7 GHOST WORLD



NOT LITERALLY A GHOST STORY BUT A TALE ABOUT DRIFTING IN A WORLD YOU'RE ALIENATED FROM

Chronicling the meanderings of a pair of snarky high school graduates, *Ghost World* is author-illustrator Daniel Clowes' discourse on the disaffected adolescence of the '90s slacker generation. Except, you know, wickedly funny.

Often scabrous and occasionally sentimental, the comic began life during the peak of America's grunge scene. Scaling the counter-culture landscape crafted by the likes of Kurt Cobain and Kevin Smith are waspish Enid Coleslaw and blonde WASP Rebecca Doppelmeyer. The best friends are a pair of disenfranchised misfits whose very existence thrives on disdain and cynicism. As they wander through the grey haze of teenage life while ruminating, hilariously, on everything from sports to politics and music to comedy, nothing escapes their acidic scrutiny. The naturalistic dialogue nails expertly the dismissive ire of the stunted adult mindset: you're defined not by what you like, but by what you hate.

In the wrong hands, this could become very tiresome very swiftly, but Enid's razor-sharp anti-conformist attitude is softened enormously by

Clowes' sympathetic stance (her name is literally an anagram of his). Her last grasp at youth is a recurring motif throughout the book: she clings on desperately to childhood treasures and tangible possessions, a feeling any nostalgia-soaked adult has while mourning their own loss of innocence.

LOST WORLD

The "Ghost World" of the title is the Anytown USA whose soft underbelly of freaks, weirdos and the dispossessed provide much nourishment for Enid and Rebecca's hunger to ridicule – but there are also ghosts of Enid's past everywhere, and the book exudes a vaguely hallucinatory and somewhat elegiac tone across the shuffling narrative.

Yes, *Ghost World* is probably now better known by its (very good) film adaptation, which boasts geek chic, hipster cool and a more refined plot, but it is these 80 pages in which Enid and Rebecca's satisfyingly unambitious exploits make the most of the most mundane.

There's no denying *Ghost World* feels rooted inextricably to the Generation X era in which it was created (hey, even the duotone colour scheme gives it the feel of a '90s punk zine). However, the themes it explores – growing-up, friendship and alienation – are universal, timeless and relatable. Oh, and again, it's really, really funny. **MILES HAMER**

“DISENFRANCHISED MISFITS THRIVING ON CYNICISM”





Writer Neil Gaiman

Artist Various

Published 1989-1996

Publisher DC Vertigo

THE SANDMAN

NEIL GAIMAN'S ASTONISHING MODERN FANTASY AND ITS POST-MODERN HIGHLIGHT, "WORLDS' END"...

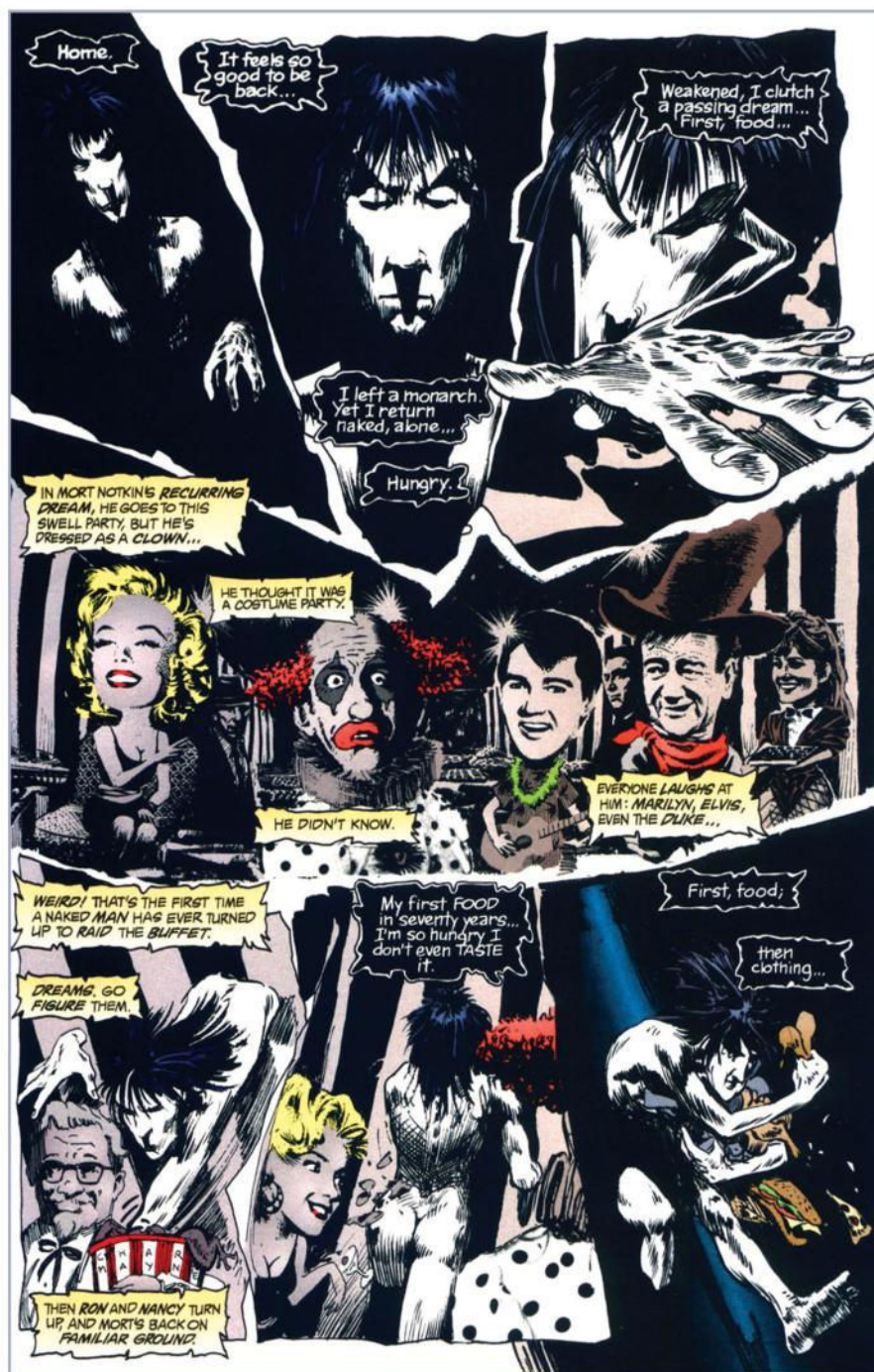
Neil Gaiman's popular, acclaimed *Sandman* series centres on the Endless, seven immortal siblings more powerful than gods – Dream, Desire, Despair, Delirium, Destiny, Destruction and Death – who like any family have their feuds and internal alliances, their golden boys and their black sheep.

Dream, the Sandman of the title, is also known as Morpheus among many other names, and is a self-absorbed, brooding soul, prone to melancholy and pique but basically benevolent. He drifts languorously through life, seeming both protagonist and spectator, a character as hard to pin down as his namesake yet sympathetic all the same. The series traces his efforts to overcome his pride and atone for past mistakes and transgressions, moving inexorably towards a doomy conclusion. The story arcs fall into two distinct categories: short-story collections such as "Dream Country" and "Fables

and Reflections" and longer single tales such as "The Doll's House" and "Season of Mists".

The series highlight, "Worlds' End", is both of these at once. Mimicking the episodic structure of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Gaiman assembles a group of disparate travellers in what purports to be a quaint, Tudor-period inn. They have been driven to seek shelter there from a "reality storm" that is assailing every dimension, and to pass the time they drink and tell stories, either about themselves or about people they've met. Almost all of the tales feature an appearance by Morpheus, which is apt: he is not only Lord of Dreams, but in the episode titled "The Golden Boy" he dubs himself Prince of Stories. The line dividing dream from imagination is, after all, vanishingly thin.

The writing is a feast of poetic prose and wide-ranging allusiveness, but by this point in the



comic's initial 75-issue run, readers had come to expect that. Always less certain was the art, especially in the single-story arcs. In this volume a sumptuous range of illustrators is recruited, and Gaiman writes to the strengths of each – Alec Stevens' spare, woodblocky style, Mike Allred's '60s-influenced wackiness, John Watkiss's masterful use of brushwork and blacks. Everything is tied together by the recurrent framing sequence by Bryan Talbot, who excels in his depiction of the earthy, lamp-lit interior of the storm-battered inn with its host of wayward wanderers and washed-up ne'er-do-wells.

The book is a story about stories. There are stories within the stories, and stories within those, nesting neatly one inside the other. There are mysterious cities, sea serpents and fairy tricksters. There's an affectionate reworking of the short-lived 1970s DC oddity *Prez*, about a flower-power teen President of the USA. There's a tale about ghoulish workers in a vast necropolis that's as grisly as it is matter-of-fact – a day in

“ THIS IS A STORY ABOUT STORIES ”



Above and opposite: This volume is a tour-de-force of different tales and artistic styles that subtly knit together.

the life of a place of death. It all culminates in a grand, sombre vision of a funeral cortège passing by in some higher realm, a foreshadowing of a tragedy to come. All tales, even the tallest ones, even ones about immortal entities, must have their climax and dénouement.

In *Worlds' End* Gaiman really lets his imagination loose. It fits tidily inside the *Sandman* universe, with callbacks for a number of the existing cast of characters and references to events both past and future, but it stands out, too, as a testament to its author's sheer, abiding love of storytelling. **JAMES LOVEGROVE**



It begins, as so many things do, very small. Just a simple advert, running throughout DC Comics' monthly comic book titles. The profile of a gaunt, pale face, black hair strewn across it, inside of which the eyes are small red, fiercely burning orbs. A hand reaches into the foreground of the image. A tiny golden glow. A spark. A supernova.

"I will show you terror in a handful of dust," reads the tagline – a proclamation and a promise borrowed from TS Eliot's "The Waste Land". Additional words run across the bottom of the ad: "The Sandman: HE CONTROLS YOUR DREAMS. A horror-edged fantasy set in the DC Universe."

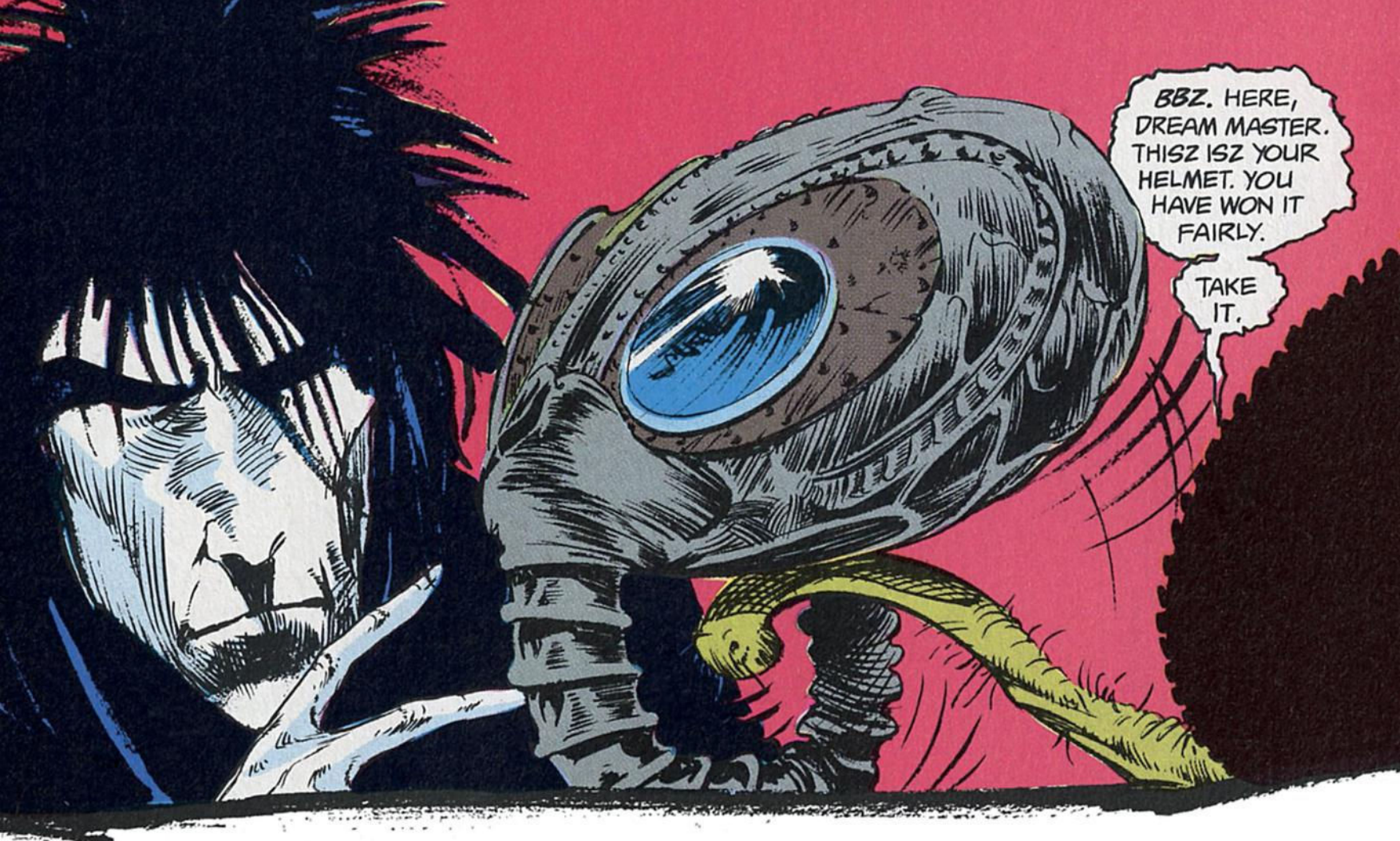
Neil Gaiman's wildly popular, critically adored and terrifically trendsetting comic cosmology began its landmark 75-issue run (eventually collected in 10 volumes) at the perfect time, in January of 1989. Inheriting an audience eager for adult graphic literature like that of Alan Moore and Frank Miller, *Sandman* provided Gaiman with the perfect means to explore the medium's potential – and incorporate the narrative ideas and techniques of the finest prose fiction – while examining the foundations of graphic storytelling.

It would draw from world mythologies, theologies, philosophies, punk music, modern art, transgender subculture and Mary Poppins. But, first and foremost, it was a story. One its creator summarised as "The King of Dreams realises he must change or die and he makes his choice." It would prove a fitting epitaph for the comic itself.

"I always knew that was what the book was going to be about," Gaiman tells *SFX*. "What I didn't know was whether or not I was going to be able to tell that story, which is slightly different. I set up pretty much everything I needed. The important part of the end was set up in probably the first two issues, over the first

IN DREAMS

MORE THAN 25 YEARS AFTER NEIL GAIMAN'S FANTASY EPIC BEGAN, **JOSEPH MCCABE** TALKS TO THE MAN HIMSELF ABOUT HIS TRIUMPH



four or five. Although “Preludes And Nocturnes” really didn’t hit its stride or hit its shape until the end, most of what I was doing there... I knew where it would end.

“I was setting up in the very beginning. I didn’t believe that I was ever going to get to tell my story, but I didn’t see there was any reason not to set up for the kind of story I wanted to tell. If that makes any sense.”

ENDLESS DREAM

In telling his tale, Gaiman conceived of the seven dysfunctional Endless siblings, each an embodiment of a particular aspect of the universe: Destiny, Death, Destruction, Despair, Desire, Delirium and the tall, moody, haunted title character himself, Dream – whose lengthy imprisonment on Earth, and subsequent release, is detailed in the series’ first issue, inked by then newcomer Mike Dringenberg and illustrated by Sam Kieth. All three gentlemen had a deep love of DC’s ’70s horror titles – books like

House Of Mystery and House Of Secrets – out of which came Bernie Wrightson and Len Wein’s *Swamp Thing*, and Alan Moore’s ’80s reboot of the title. The early issues of *Sandman*, collected in “Preludes And Nocturnes”, are bursting with a passion for such material. Though some growing pains were felt.

“*Sandman* #1 was written without really knowing who was drawing it,” says Gaiman. “I think I had to write *Sandman* #1 while we were still looking for an artist. *Sandman* #2 was written to Sam’s strengths, because it was sort of pure Bernie Wrightson. *Sandman* #4, I wrote to Sam’s strengths, and Sam loved it so much, he went off and inked the double-page spread [pages 12-13] himself.”

Though Gaiman would tailor his scripts to the skills and interests of each of his artists, *Sandman*’s first illustrator felt he was the wrong choice for a story that quickly transcended its horror roots.

“Sam was miserable. Sam really was in the wrong band. Sam said,

Above: The Sandman with a mask that recalls his ’30s predecessor.

‘I’m like Jimi Hendrix in the Beatles. I’m miserable here.’ And we were all relieved – I was terribly relieved – when Sam quit. Not because I didn’t want Sam as an artist, but because I’d have these phone calls with him, and he would sound like he was going to slit his wrists... ‘Hi Sam. How’s it going?’ ‘They’re going to see this comic come out and they will hate me.’ ‘I don’t think they will hate you...’”

Kieth eventually chose to leave and, with issue #6, his friend and inker Dringenberg took over the book’s pencilling, helping Gaiman establish a style and tone that would become synonymous with *The Sandman*. Most famously with the introduction of Death, Dream’s older, eternally wise and perennially perky >

“ I ALWAYS KNEW WHAT THE BOOK WAS GOING TO BE ABOUT ”

“CHANGE OR DIE. IN THE END DREAM MADE HIS CHOICE”

sister, in #8 (“The Sound Of Her Wings”).

“With Mike working on the book,” explains Gaiman, “I had that sense of place. I could actually say, ‘Great. I have a diner. I have the front of this diner, I have this whole space, and I can move people around in it. And you will believe in it the whole time.’ In the same way that I could do #8 and move the Sandman across New York. Although, even when Sam was still on the book, it was always planned that one was going to be drawn by Mike.”

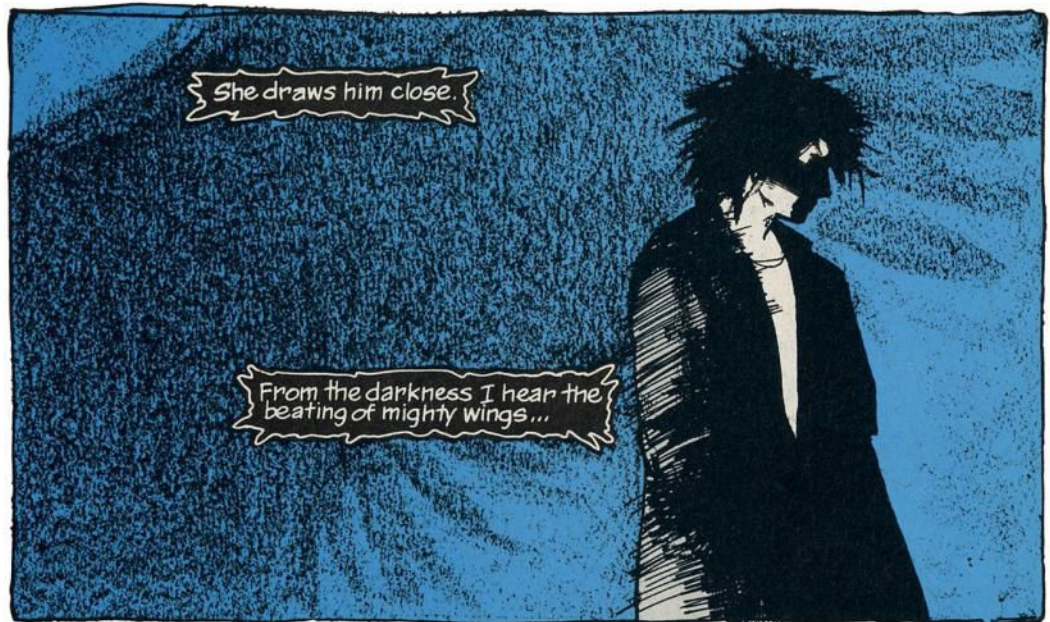
After 11 issues, which spanned “Preludes And Nocturnes”, the title’s acclaimed second volume “The Doll’s House”, and the prologue and epilogue of volume 4, “Season Of Mists”, Dringenberg too departed, and a new artist was brought on for each subsequent story arc.

“Mike’s departure was a complicated thing. Mike basically said, ‘I can’t always do a monthly book. I can’t meet these deadlines. I’d

DREAM A LITTLE DREAM

ON DESIGNING THE SANDMAN...

“Dave McKean had drawn a couple of pictures of a guy in a trench coat,” says *Sandman*’s first penciller Sam Kieth. “He looked like John Constantine... I sent some sketches off, and nobody liked the first round. Then I sent a second round off and the one they chose is the one we went with, which looked a little like David Bowie, a little bit of a cropped top. The look was really heavily championed through Neil and Karen Berger... I would have his hair matted to his head. I wasn’t with the whole, hip trendy Sandman. I wanted the goofy Sandman.”



Above: The Cure cover that never was?

like to do some painting, I would like to do something more...

Because Mike had gone off and we got Kelley Jones in, we just sort of had the perfect artist doing “Season Of Mists”. At that point, there was a sort of ‘Okay, what are we going to do now? How are we going to do this? Are we going to try and get a regular artist for the book forever?’ I think there were things that Kelley wanted to do. For “A Game Of You”, I began by saying ‘I want an Eric Shanower kind of look’. And we got Shawn McManus, who I loved. I loved his ‘Pog’, his Swamp Thing story. For “Brief Lives”, I wanted something very, very understated. Very realistic. Done by somebody who could draw girls who looked like girls. I was shown this Jill Thompson drawing and I thought, ‘Yes, that’s what I want.’”

SISTER ACT

“Brief Lives” found Dream and his mad sister Delirium (formerly Delight) on a quest to find their brother Destruction, who’d abandoned his realm. The Sandman’s next major arc, “The Kindly Ones”, would be its longest. Adorned with the minimalist art of Marc Hempel, it pitted Dream against the Furies (or Fates), who sought vengeance on behalf of a human woman who

blamed the Prince of Stories for the loss of her son. The resulting conflict would forever alter the Sandman’s realm, the Dreaming.

“Technically, the thing I’m most proud of, in the whole of *Sandman*,” says Gaiman, “is probably in “The Kindly Ones” – watching Lyta Hall, on the one hand, going through this huge internal quest through all sorts of mythic realms with all sorts of mythological characters, and, on another level, wandering completely crazy around LA. You realise that she’s talking to her reflection, or a traffic light, or whatever. And managing to make that work – and Marc Hempel’s genius in designing the pages – so that you realise that both of these things are true. One of them is a way of looking inside her head.”

March of 1996 marked the release of *Sandman*’s final issue, #75, “The Tempest”. This standalone tale was illustrated by Charles Vess, the artist with whom Gaiman had won, in 1991, what is to date the only World Fantasy Award (for “Best Short Fiction”) ever given to a comic book – #19’s similarly Shakespearean “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”.

Change or die. In the end, Dream made his choice. Did it reflect any options that Gaiman himself had faced?



LITTLE DEAD GIRL

THE SANDMAN'S MOST POPULAR CHARACTER WAS NO DREAM...

"The way Neil originally described her," says artist Mike Dringenberg of Dream's older sister, "was very much a Louise Brooks kind of concoction. He wanted that look, with sort of a short, black bob... [But] Death is based on, primarily, my friend Cinnamon, who was a ballet dancer. Death's ankh was indeed my idea. Since Cinnamon was prone to wearing a little silver ankh – a sign of immortality and rebirth – I thought it both a fitting tribute to a beauty, and a lovely irony – worthy of such a deity, a kind of cosmic joke."

Left: The foxiest grim reaper you ever did see.

Nights. A 25th anniversary project, *The Sandman: Overture*, written by Gaiman and illustrated by JH Williams III, also started at the end of 2013. (*Ed – Overture was beset by delays during its original publication, but is now complete and available in a handsome collected edition.*)

Sandman's greatest legacy may be – in addition to launching the career of one of the most popular and acclaimed writers of our time – the sheer number of doors it opened for storytellers not only seeking to tell comic book stories with the depth and complexity of prose, but who wish to tell full, complete, adult stories within the medium. Per Gaiman's wishes, DC has not continued Sandman since he ended his saga. Instead, the book's success launched the publisher's Vertigo line, and the many titles comprising it, from *Preacher* to *The Invisibles*, *100 Bullets* to *Y: The Last Man*. And it all began with a handful of dust. **100**

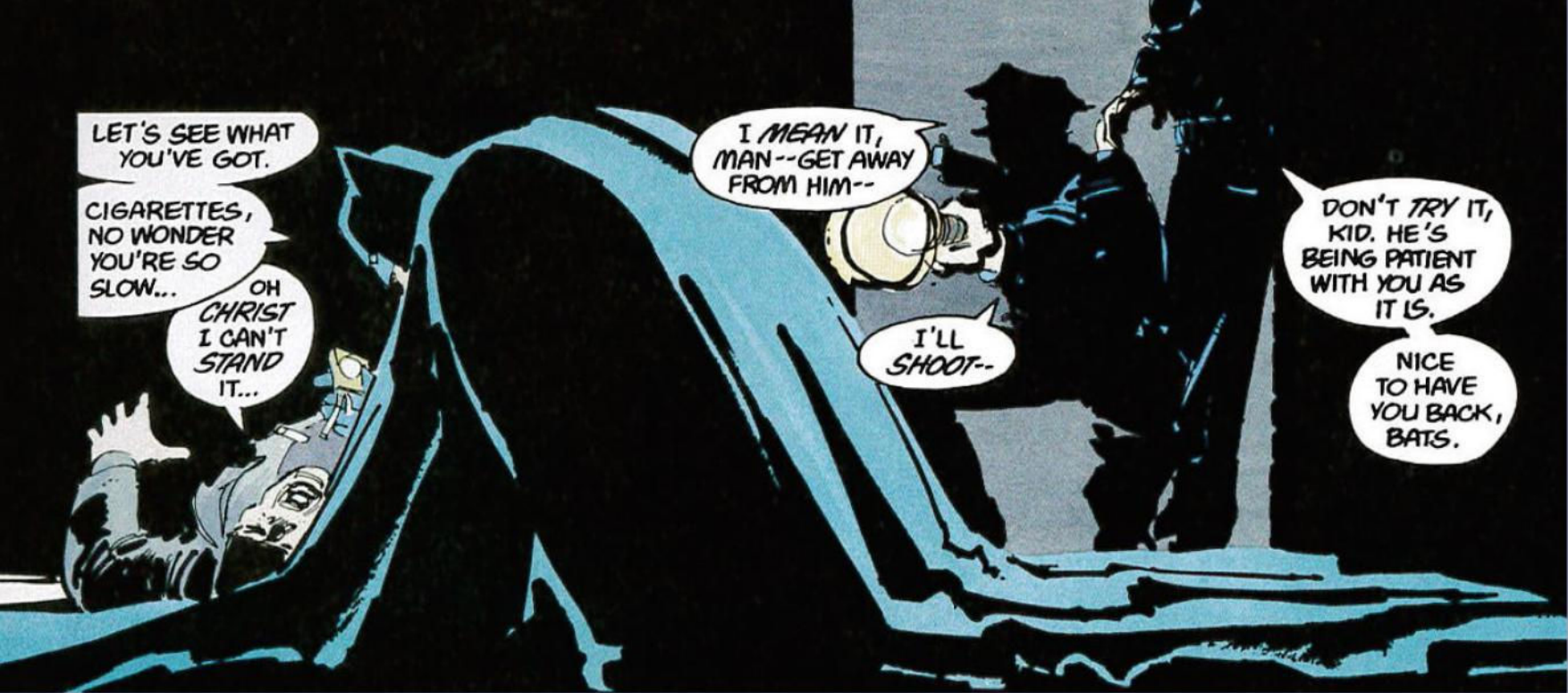
Below left: There's always Alton Towers.

Below right: Sam Kieth – mad landscapes and "goofy" hero.

"I don't know," he tells us. "That's the most honest answer. There are three different philosophies about coping with untenable situations. There is Destruction's point of view and there is Lucifer's point of view, both of which sum up to, 'You really don't have to stay anywhere forever. You can move. If it's horrible, you get out of there. If you're not happy, you move on.' And then there's Dream's point of view, which is 'You do the right thing if it kills you. You have your responsibilities. You cannot walk out on them. There are things you cannot get out of.' I'm sure that I must have been in both of those positions during my life. I'm pretty much more likely to do a Sandman than I ever would be to do a Lucifer. I'm much more likely to stick to somewhere, even if it's untenable, and say, 'I gave my word, I'm going to see this one through.'"

Though *The Sandman's* story ended, as befits one of the Endless it never really stopped. Spin-off titles like *The Dreaming*, *Lucifer*, the rebooted *House Of Mystery* and a line of *Sandman Presents* books followed, as well as Gaiman's own Death miniseries (*The High Cost Of Living* and *The Time Of Your Life*), his illustrated novella *The Dream Hunters*, and his anthology collection *Endless*





Writer Frank Miller

Artists Frank Miller and Klaus Janson

Published 1986

Publisher DC Comics

5 THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

A LANDMARK REIMAGINING OF AN ICONIC CHARACTER BY A VISIONARY CREATOR AT THE TOP OF HIS GAME

Frank Miller's densely plotted, still-dizzying masterpiece of masked mayhem is an astonishingly angry rebuild of the Batman mythology. Ten years after *The Dark Knight's* "retirement", Gotham has devolved into an oppressive, sweltering city of crime and fear, provoking the ageing, grizzled, now rather corpulent Bruce Wayne back into the cape and cowl once more. What ensues

is an epic and operatic narrative that summons immense strength from its chaos, making for one of the most exhausting comics ever published.

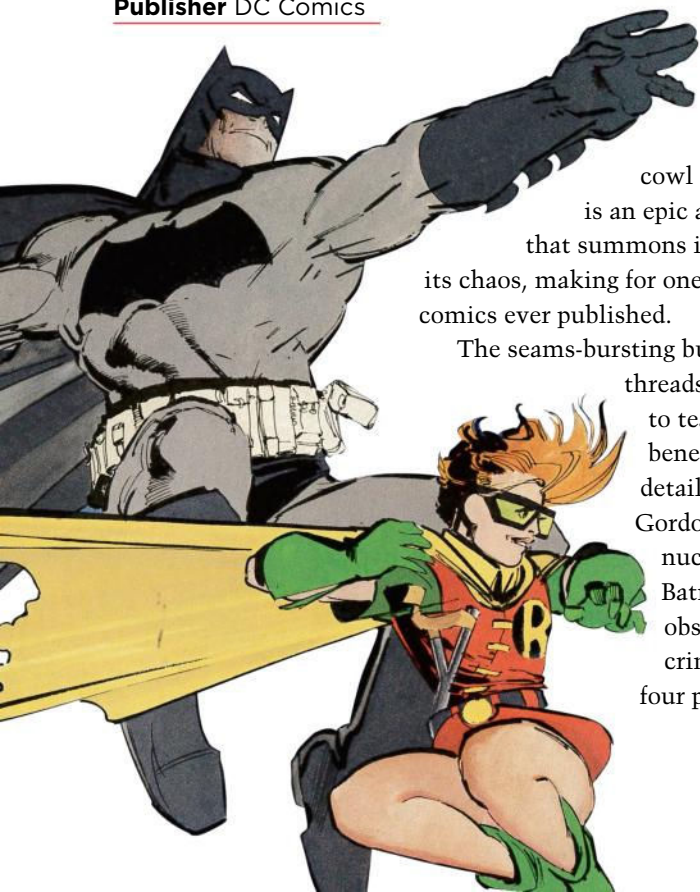
The seams-bursting busyness of its many threads threatens constantly to tear the story apart, but beneath the many textures of detail – the talk show hosts, Gordon's retirement, the nuclear arms race – lies Batman's still vengeful obsession with taking down criminals. Across the tale's four parts, we see the character

devolve from ageing billionaire into a far more ruthless avenger than we've ever seen before. Miller's depiction pushes the Bat to the extreme, crystallising his utter essence for what feels very much like a final savage victory lap. His physical and ideological battles with Superman highlight the crucial differences between them: Clark is an alien who tries to see the best in humanity and so serves it; Bruce has seen the worst in humanity and in its protection distances himself further.

HECTIC YET ICONIC

Visually, Miller crams his pages with a bewildering array of panels and background detail. His audacious framing devices demonstrate his mastery of the medium – the pages jumble with juxtaposed enemies, TV screen insets provide satirical media commentary over battle footage, and heroes making un-heroic decisions are cast in ominous silhouette against a raging, painful sky. Renderings range from the mundane to the macabre, and the

“ PUSHES THE BAT TO THE EXTREME ”





sheer hectic excess of art and text is an overwhelming experience.

It's even more impressive then that the book is responsible for so many instantly iconic images: the Dark Knight on horseback, the shockingly emaciated figure of a lightning-bolt-struck Superman, and the Joker's final bitter, ironic grin are just a few of the many times Miller widens the frame and allows his pencils to create moments of pure aesthetic awe. Batman's portrayal as a huge, brutish adversary is offset beautifully by one of his few tender moments in the book – cradling the new Robin, Carrie Kelley. Bright, kickass and fiercely loyal, she's the young Robin that this Batman needs

Above and opposite: Frank Miller brought us a Batman we had never seen before, but he and the world he inhabited proved to be utterly compelling.

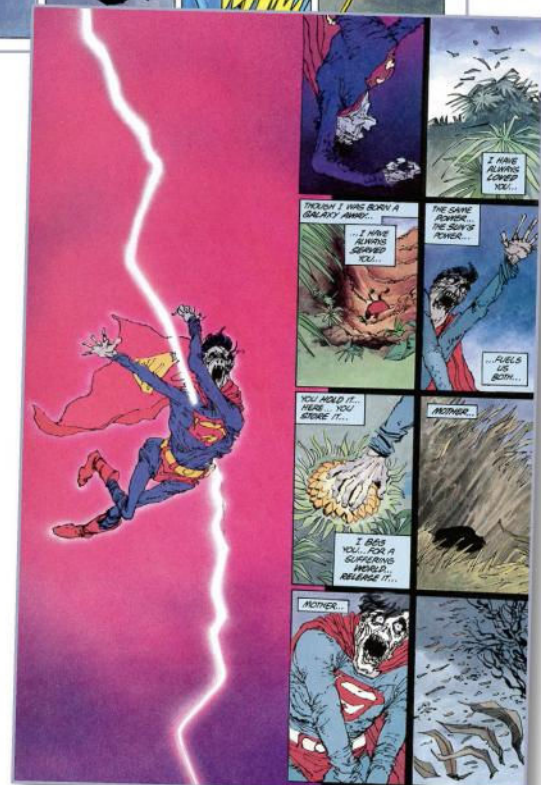
to both balance out his ferocity and ensure that his legacy endures.

Thanks to Frank Miller, The Dark Knight returned in more than just his own fiction. A monumental publishing success that kicked into touch any lingering trace of the character's once camp past, became a touchstone for his future portrayal, and became a benchmark for multi-layered adult-orientated storytelling, *The Dark Knight Returns* is an indispensable read.

It's a seismic and dystopian blockbuster still demonstrably influential 30 years on. You don't need to be a Batman fan to read it, but it'll make you become one anyway. **MILES HAMER**



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THIS SHOULD
BE AGONY.

I SHOULD BE A MASS OF
ACHING MUSCLE--BROKEN,
SPENT, UNABLE TO MOVE.

AND, WERE I
AN OLDER
MAN, I SURELY
WOULD...

...WILD ANIMAL.
GROWLS. SNARLS.
WEREWOLF.
SURELY.



...MONSTER! LIKE
WITH FANGS AND
WINGS AND IT
CAN FLY--



... BUT I'M A MAN
OF THIRTY-- OF
TWENTY AGAIN.

THE RAIN ON
MY CHEST IS A
BAPTISM--

REALITY CHECK,
MI CHELLE. TALK ABOUT
COMPOSURE. TOTAL LACK OF.
HE'S A MAN-- ABOUT--
TWELVE FEET TALL--

I'M
BORN
AGAIN...



FROM THE
ARCHIVES

By the 1980s, the popular image of Batman was still mired in memories of the 1960s TV show, with a comically-earnest Adam West gallivanting around a broad-daylight Gotham City in an ill-fitting costume – a far cry from the original image of a terrifying avenger prowling the night, obsessively waging war on crime. In 1986, however, this camp legacy was thoroughly blown away with the release of *The Dark Knight Returns*, a four-issue mini-series chronicling Batman's apocalyptic last stand.

"It's hard to argue with something that made my career," Miller told us candidly. "It's one of my most fond professional memories, one of those

"I was really just trying to write a kick-ass Batman story," Miller says. "I certainly didn't realise how political it would get, or how intense the reaction would be."

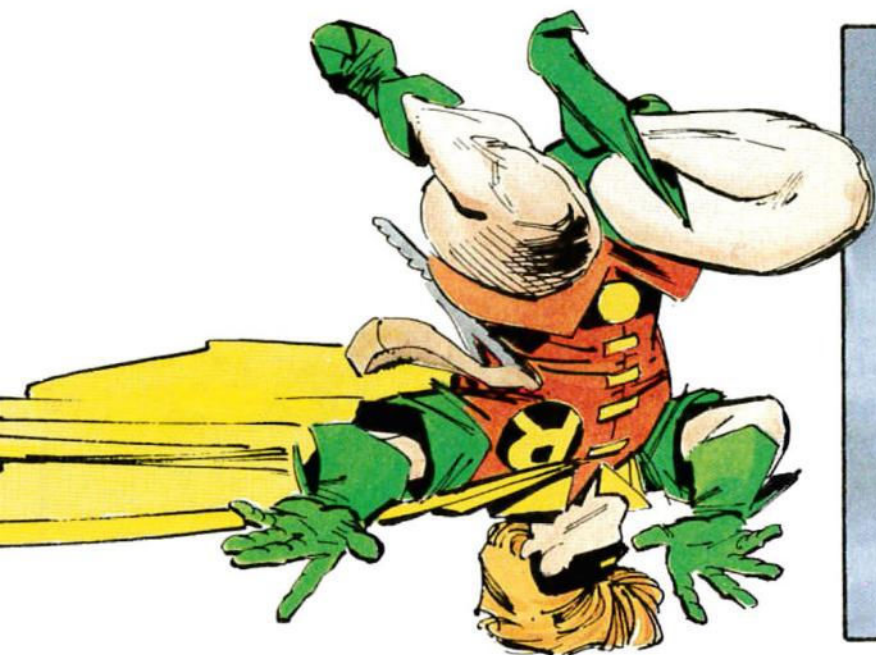
Miller's answer? Focus on the character's least heroic but key trait:

Below: The series was also much less “comic book” than comics had been in its portrayal of violence.

Surprisingly, given the radical nature of Miller's story and the fact he was utilising one of DC's flagship properties, he encountered little resistance from the publisher: "After the initial wave of shock, their support was total – especially when they saw the sales numbers."

The presence of Robin – always a tricky element of the Batman





mythos – was an undecided issue until Miller shared a flight with fellow artist John Byrne in 1985. Byrne said “Robin must be a girl.” Miller loved the idea, and Carrie Kelly was born. “It was immediate. All of a sudden, that stupid costume made sense,” Miller exclaims. “Forcing [Batman] into a more overtly

Above: Batman's relationship to Robin is different...

Below: Take that, flyboy! Heroes and philosophies clash.

fatherly role would humanise him.”

As striking as Miller's re-casting of Robin was, it was easily trumped by his deeply cynical portrayal of Superman, now squarely under the thumb of a Reagan-esque US government. It allowed Miller to pass intriguing comment on the ideologies of super-heroes and their loyalties: “I tried to think of both characters in Nietzschean terms. Batman is clearly Dionysus, the volcanic, passionate figure, and Superman is Apollo: more responsible, more worried, who sees an order to the world. Batman doesn't believe there is any order in the world, it just has to make sense.”

Consequently, such ideas led Miller to a masterful evolution of Batman's war against criminals into something larger and more complex: “As I was working though it, I was going through the Batman villains, but then it crystallised in my mind that the real enemy was Superman. So, I turned ‘World's Finest’ on its head.”

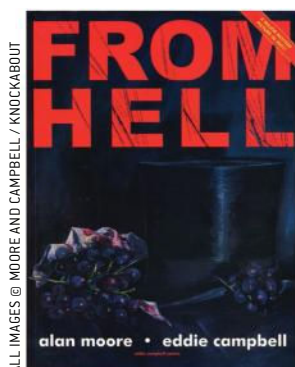
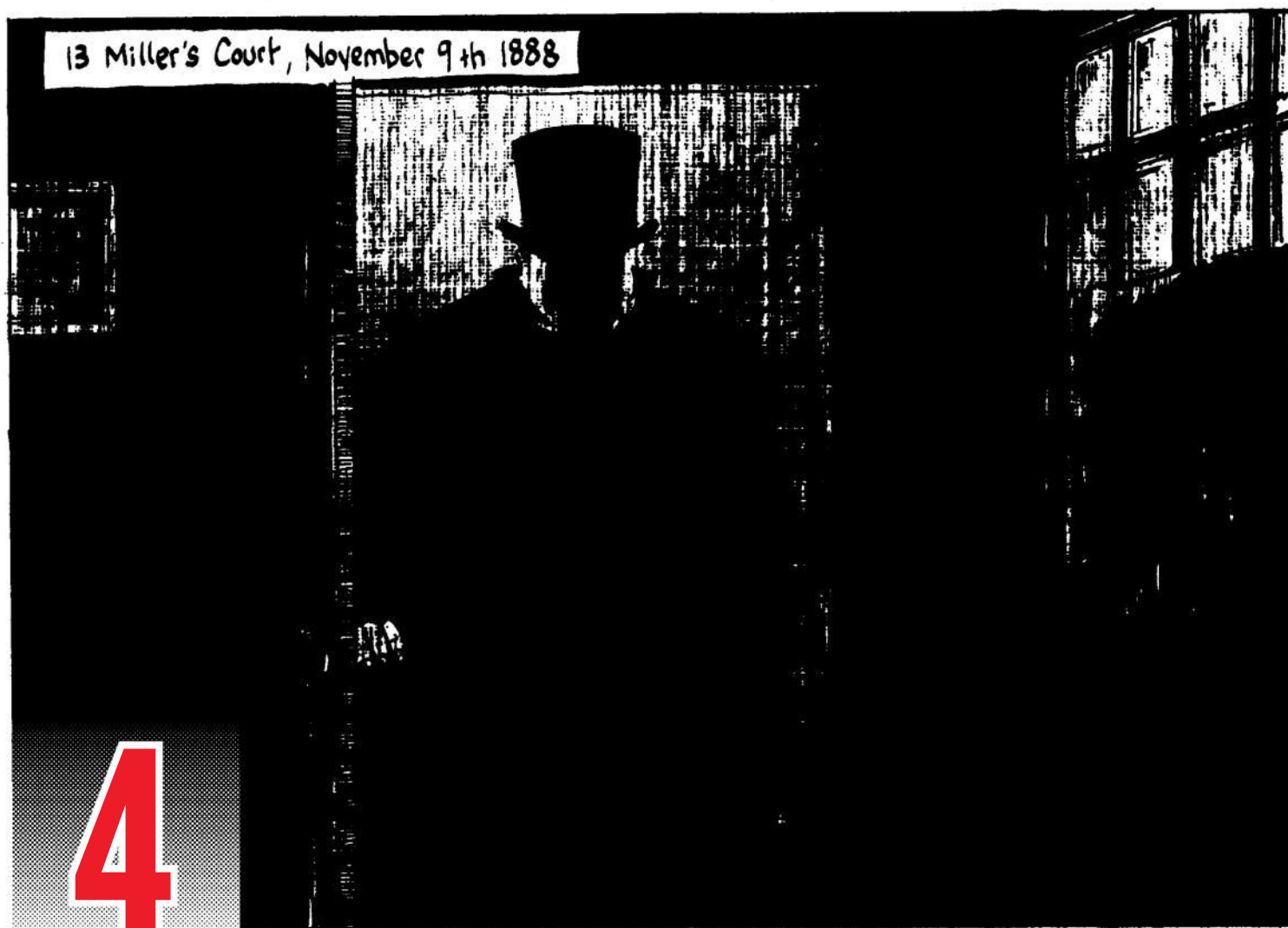
The powerful result saw an end to what had previously been a benign relationship in the comics, highlighting tensions now routinely explored today to great effect.

Not that the classic Batman villains were given short shrift: “I had to use the Joker – because my career wouldn't be complete otherwise – and I wanted Two-Face because he was a fun emblem for Batman's own dichotomy.” Batman's doom-laden final encounter with the Joker is one of *Dark Knight's* high points and ranks as Miller's favourite sequence. “I wrestled with that scene a lot,” Miller remembers. “DC's irreversible dictum was that Batman *never* kills. Actually, it was a healthy limitation: if there is *anyone* he's going to murder, it's [the Joker]. But then, the Joker literally manages to get the last laugh by killing himself, which was a far stronger climax.”

For the first time, Batman's relationship with his nemesis was given a macabre new edge: Batman is literally Joker's *raison d'être*, an idea similarly explored in Alan Moore's seminal *The Killing Joke*.

“ I LIKE PUTTING BATMAN THROUGH HIS PACES ”





ALL IMAGES © MOORE AND CAMPBELL / KNOCKABOUT

FROM HELL

OBSESSIVELY DENSE YET WILDLY FAR-REACHING, DARK, DISTURBING... A UNIQUE WORK OF GENIUS

Writer Alan Moore

Artist Eddie Campbell

Published 1989-1997

Publisher Eddie Campbell Comics/Top Shelf/Knockabout

Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's forensic analysis of the Jack the Ripper murders is possibly the most exhaustive study of the subject – and that's saying something, given the plethora of books that have been written about the unknown perpetrator behind the grisly deaths of five prostitutes in London's Whitechapel district in 1888.

While centred on the theory that Sir William Gull, Queen Victoria's personal physician, was the culprit, Moore's script ranges far and wide, drawing in just about every other potential suspect along with numerous contemporary celebrity figures and weaving them all together into a Byzantine conspiracy that incorporates Freemasonry, psychogeography, masculine/feminine duality, visions of God, a royal bastard child, and more.

This weighty police procedural in graphic

novel form, clocking in at nearly 600 pages, is dense and allusive, a work of dizzying, almost lunatic detail, perching atop a whole mountain of research. Some would call it Moore's masterpiece, superior even to *Watchmen*, *Promethea* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Certainly it is unrivalled in the comics world, and perhaps the literary world, in its evocation of period. Seldom has late-nineteenth-century Britain been shown in quite such a bright, unflinching light, as a place of vast social inequality, appalling squalor and grandiose imperialism. Like a petri dish alive with bacteria, the world of *From Hell* teems and festers, fertile soil for a set of serial killings which caught the public imagination like no other and inspire curiosity and fascination even today.

Much of the credit for the book's achievement





must go to Campbell, whose scratchy art deliberately evokes the often lurid engravings that graced the gutter press and penny dreadfuls of the time. Working within the same three-by-three panel grid that Moore and Dave Gibbons used to such effect in *Watchmen*, Campbell brings a restrained, metronomic tempo to the proceedings. There is space and darkness and a scalpel-fineness in his lines, which are softened by occasional forays into ink wash.

Campbell's visual storytelling skills are never better displayed than in the long, almost wordless sequence during which Gull eviscerates and dismembers his final victim, Mary Jane Kelly. Moore takes the bold step

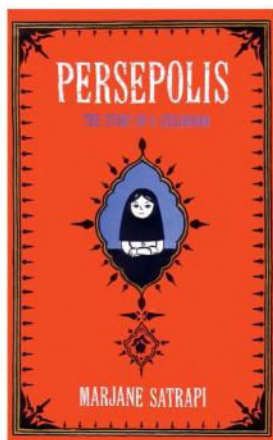
of interrupting the gory business with a time-slip vision of a hundred years in the future, the murderer witnessing the 1990s in all its money- and technology-obsessed glory. When his coachman accomplice John Netley asks him afterwards, "Is it finished?", a visibly shaken Gull replies, "It is beginning, Netley. Only just beginning. The twentieth century. I have delivered it." A future of conflict, slaughter and misery comes bawling into existence, birthed by blood sacrifice.

“ DENSE, ALMOST LUNATIC DETAIL ”



Above and opposite: Campbell's scratchy art grounds the book in reality while its ideas take flight.

Accompanying the story are copious text notes where Moore sets out what is authentic and a matter of record and what he has invented or massaged for the sake of narrative cohesion. A lengthy epilogue, "Dance of the Gull-Catchers", outlines the evolution of Ripperology and his own and Campbell's place in it. *From Hell* takes one of history's most notorious unsolved crimes and not only posits a solution but, in a manner both chilling and brilliant, extrapolates from it a compulsive enquiry into the deepest, darkest crevices of the human soul. **JAMES LOVEGROVE**



PERSEPOLIS

A REVEALING PERSONAL REFLECTION ON ONE OF THE SEISMIC REVOLUTIONS OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Writer Marjane Satrapi
Artist Marjane Satrapi
Published 2000
Publisher Pantheon

Marjane Satrapi's superb graphic memoir of growing up in Iran in the 1980s should be – and often is – taught in schools as a matter of course. It's also banned in some schools, as it was in Chicago a couple of years ago on the grounds of "graphic language and images". Which is disturbing as we're not talking over-the-top superhero violence here, we're talking about things that actually happened, conveyed using a blocky monochrome drawing style.

And for an understanding of something that's very important to us yet remains shrouded in mystery for many – the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran – Satrapi's work is not just required reading, it's utterly vital.

Persepolis is the ancient name for the Persian capital, and what Satrapi has created under the title *Persepolis* is actually two novels, *The Story of a Childhood* and *The Story of a Return*. In the first segment, Satrapi details from her perspective as a 10-year-old in 1980 what happened when her temperate, liberal world is turned upside down by a new hardline regime that takes control in Iran.

She goes from attending a non-religious, bilingual school, which teaches French and allows mixed classes, to a single-sex establishment where she must wear the veil. Her parents – "modern and avant-garde" – protest the new regime and attend demonstrations against the imposition of the head-



Above and opposite: Satrapi's clear art conveys an eye-opening story.

scarf for women, but it gradually becomes very clear that the new government is not going away... and will not brook dissent.

For anyone to whom Iran is just a distant, fundamentalist Muslim country seen in snatches of news broadcasts, *Persepolis* is both an eye-opener and a timely reminder that people are people, wherever you go.

NEWFOUND FREEDOM

Whereas the first book offers us an insight into an utterly alien world, the second flips this entirely on its head by having the teenage Satrapi studying in Europe, sent away from

the increasingly religious and repressive Iran by her parents.

Here we see what it is like for a moderate Muslim transplanted to the West, and how her newfound freedom both chimes and jars with the life – and the family – she has left behind, as she discovers boys and drugs and yet always feels different and other from her peers.

It's a neat inversion on Satrapi's part, and using the same flat black-

“AN INSIGHT INTO AN ALIEN WORLD”

and-white art technique across both books she manages not only to shine a spotlight on the hidden mysteries of Iran but also to enable us to cast an often critical gaze upon our own Western society. The effect of the two books read back-to-back is quite astonishing. Satrapi, who now lives in Paris, writes in her introduction to *Persepolis*: “I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists.”

Too extreme for schoolchildren? This book should not only be on the syllabus of every school in the world, but mandatory for every politician in the West as well. **DAVID BARNETT**

FROM THE
ARCHIVES



THE POWER OF MEMORY

MARJANE SATRAPI, IRANIAN CREATOR OF THE MAGNIFICENT PERSEPOLIS, TALKS PERSONAL, POLITICAL AND POSSIBILITY WITH **PAUL GRAVETT...**

Where were you on 11 September 2001? My mother and I were in upstate New York, having flown in the night before. On the Tuesday morning we woke to news of those shocking attacks by Islamic terrorists. Amid the subsequent demonising of the 'Axis Of Evil', some people wanted to understand more about what Islam really means and how it affects the lives of ordinary people. I thought back to interviewing Marjane Satrapi for the first time earlier in 2001, when she had won the Prix du Lion in Brussels, Belgium for her debut graphic novel, *Persepolis*. I had met a charismatic Iranian exile, a gifted cartoonist living in Paris, who was relating with great humanity and humour how she grew up in Tehran under the Islamic regime during the Iran-Iraq war.

From the book's modest origins in French from the alternative creator-run collective L'Association, its first volume sold out of four printings totalling 16,000 copies. Post-9/11, as Satrapi finished her story in four volumes, *Persepolis* would take off, topping two million copies and still counting. It's even been taught to cadets at America's military academy West Point.

Drawing with a spare, childlike directness in bold black-and-white,

Marjane opens her tale in 1980 on the first anniversary of the Shah Of Iran being deposed, when the new regime decrees that all women must henceforth wear traditional Islamic headdress. Marjane, just ten, has to start wearing hers at school, which is now sex-segregated and no longer bilingual and 'decadent'.

KEEPING PROMISES

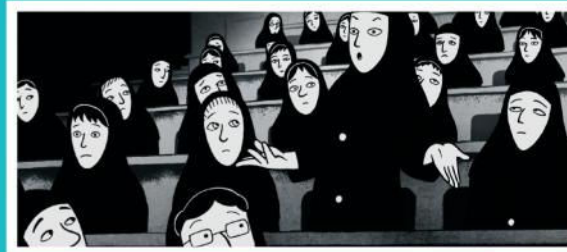
We then flash back to Marjane aged six, growing up in Tehran in a well-to-do, politicised family during the final troubled years of the Shah, as she tries to make sense of the injustices around her, even in her own home where her maid is not allowed to eat at the same table.

In a life-changing scene, her uncle Anouche is arrested, accused of being a spy, and before his execution is granted just one ten-minute visit. He chooses to see his little niece Marjane and tells her his family's secrets because they must not be lost. "I will never forget," she promises him. It's a promise she will ultimately fulfil by creating *Persepolis*.

In 1984, as a teenager, Marjane was forced to leave her homeland, partly to escape the bombings, but also for her own safety, because she had been denouncing the Islamic regime. After her five years of exile in Vienna, she returned to Iran to attend

art school, and continued to protest against injustices and absurdities such as a life-drawing class where the female model had to be covered head-to-toe in a chador. France has been her home since 1994.

This summer, Marjane Satrapi came to London for the Barbican Centre's spectacular exhibition 'Watch Me Move: The Animation Show' (open until 11 September), which spotlights the Oscar-nominated animated feature adaptation of *Persepolis* that she co-directed in 2007. She explained how she might never have become a cartoonist, if not for her exile in Austria. "In an Iranian family, if you don't become president of the world, you must at least become a doctor or lawyer. I was good at maths so it was obvious I would become an engineer like my father. But in Austria I met lots of alternative people, when I was living in communes with hippies and punks. I had been told that if you didn't live in this certain way, you would be miserable, but I realised this wasn't true. They were much happier than anyone else I knew. I had always drawn, so I started engineering school for a few months, but I didn't like the ugly boys in the school – I didn't want to marry one of those! So I decided to take art studies."



As a young girl, she and her younger cousin were not widely read in comics. "This toyshop near our house was selling American comics including *Dracula*. Inside it said that if you wanted to become *Dracula* yourself, you had to eat raw chicken, so the whole summer we were stealing pieces of raw chicken, and as a result both of us got worms! After that, I stopped reading comics." What brought Satrapi back was discovering Art Spiegelman's memoir of his parents' survival of the Holocaust, *Maus*, in 1994. "I realised that comics is not a genre, it's just a way of telling a story where I could feel exactly what was going on. Drawing is much closer to a human being than a photo, because you create the world in your own image – it's very personal, an international language. Before humans started talking, first they started drawing."

It was the ignorance Satrapi encountered in the West towards her country that inspired her to share

“ IF WE DON'T USE THE TALENT AND INTELLIGENCE OF HALF OUR SOCIETY, WE CAN'T ADVANCE ”

Top left: In Europe it's important to smoke while looking moody.

Above left: Standing out from the crowd may cause offence...

Above right: The benefits of being heard: scenes from *Persepolis*.

what she had witnessed through the graphic novel medium. "I left Iran twice, first in 1984 to Austria, then in 1994 for France, and both times, when I was asked 'Where do you come from?', if you answered Iran, it might well take 45 minutes of explanation. 'I am Iranian but my father is not Ayatollah Khomeini! And he doesn't have 15 wives!' I didn't want *Persepolis* to become a political, historical or sociological statement – it's only my truth, the way I saw it.

"It happens in Iran, but dictatorships anywhere in the whole world work in the same way. You have a revolution made by idealists, it's recuperated by the cynical ones

who create a climate of fear, so you don't think any more and they can manipulate you. The same thing happened in Germany, in Chile, in China – the ideology might change a bit, but the mechanism is the same. I wanted to describe this mechanism because as Pushkin said, if you want to talk about the whole world, write about your small village."

LAUGHTER IN THE DARK

Considering these sombre circumstances, *Persepolis* is surprisingly humorous. "In the worst moments of life, you make a joke. I don't think I laughed so much as during the Iran-Iraq war because that was our only way to survive. When



you have a regime that arrests you for having one hair out of place, with all the executions, bombings, no matter what happened, the next day we could make jokes about it because it might be your last day."

Satrapi's self-portrait as a teenager also surprised many Western readers. "People here might think that kids in Iran in 1984 were sitting reading the Koran and crying, beating themselves and wanting to blow up the world! No, they listened to rock music, they had posters. I remember when Duran Duran were popular, we all had that Simon Le Bon haircut. That's why I put the Kim Wilde chapter in, because when I was listening to her, kids around the world the same age were also listening to her, so that makes a connection."

When the offer came to film *Persepolis*, Satrapi tried to avoid it by asking for the impossible. "I want animation, black-and-white, 2D, everything should be drawn by hand,


the studio should be in the centre of Paris, because no way I would go to the suburbs, I want Catherine Deneuve, and I want this, I want that. And two months later they said yes to everything, and I'm like, 'Shit! Now I have to make this movie!' I didn't have a clue how animation worked so I had to learn everything." She also got her wishes when it came to the English translation. "I'm a fan of Iggy Pop since I was aged thirteen, and he said yes! I met Iggy Pop in London and suddenly he takes off his t-shirt because the guy has to always be naked!"

WAITING FOR CHANGE

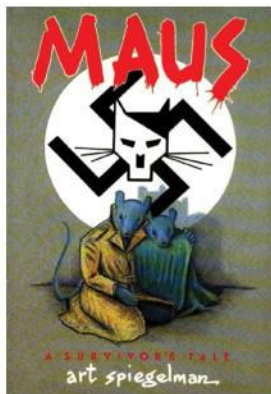
In her second graphic novel *Embroideries*, Satrapi recounts some of the hilariously frank conversations that her grandmother, aunts and friends used to have about love and sex. "It's important to talk about women's sexuality. The biggest enemy of democracy is not a Mullah, it's patriarchal culture. Half of society

Above: Love's young nightmare? Marjane's relationship with Markus in *Persepolis* skewers Western male attitudes towards 'exotic' women.

has less rights than the other. If we don't use the talent and intelligence of half our society, we can't advance." She has just co-directed a live-action adaptation of her third graphic novel, *Chicken With Plums*, about her great-uncle, a musician, who tells his life story over the last few days before he dies, which is released in France on 26 October.

Satrapi has not been back to Iran in 12 years, but she expects to return one day. "I grew up in Tehran with the mountain 6,000 metres high, with eternal snow, like the guardian of the city. In Paris I just see the Eiffel Tower! I have to go back there – even if it's not for living, then for dying. Today when 65-70 per cent of the students are women, later they'll have to work and they're more educated than their father, their brother, and their own husband. This new generation has much more guts. When the Green Revolution started in 2009, I believed that change would come. I still believe that." 





Writer Art Spiegelman
Artist Art Spiegelman
Published 1980-1991
Publisher Pantheon Books



MAUS

A LANDMARK STORY OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVAL AND RELATIONSHIPS TOLD THROUGH “FUNNY ANIMALS”

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* is the graphic novel all your intellectual non comic reading friends have heard of, and might even have read. And that’s no surprise: in 1992, *Maus* was the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize, and in the 30-odd years since it first appeared it’s won legions of admirers.

Maus began life in the indie comics magazine *Raw*, which Spiegelman co-edited, serialised from 1980 to 1991. It wasn’t, perhaps, until it was first published in its collected edition in 1986 that it came to mainstream attention. The second volume in 1991 cemented its place in both comics and literary history.

Maus is a tough read. It’s uncompromising, it’s desperately personal, it saddens and enrages. It’s a multi-layered story that at its heart is the tale of Spiegelman’s Polish-born father, Vladek, and his experiences amid the horrors of the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau.

Even if you’ve never read *Maus*, you’ll know its central conceit: Jews are portrayed as mice, the Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs. Does such anthropomorphism, more

commonly associated with children’s books or Disney animation, in any way lessen the story that Spiegelman is trying to tell?

The answer has to be no. By replacing people with animals, Spiegelman allows us to put a little distance between ourselves and the story while at the same time fully immersing ourselves in it. Had he drawn in a more realistic style, *Maus* might have been a story of unrelenting bleakness too much to bear, perhaps a story that should not be told in comic book form at all.

REMAKING MEMORIES

That is Spiegelman’s masterstroke here. *Maus*, though a memoir based on the author’s own interviews with his father, would not be the story it is without the animal characters. It is a story that could only ever be told in the graphic novel format. *Maus* is comics, pure and simple.

“MAUS IS COMICS, PURE AND SIMPLE”

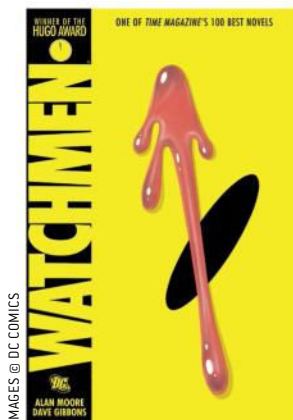
Above and opposite: Depicting people as different types of animals subverts, disturbs but also challenges the Nazis’ assertion that “the Jews are not human”.

This is not to suggest that the story Spiegelman tells is without humanity, or not as grim and horrific as the reality. *Maus* packs a greater emotional punch than almost any other book, comic or otherwise.

Counterpointing the central story of Spiegelman’s parents’ experiences during the war and afterwards – his mother Anja killed herself in 1968 – is an examination of the author’s own relationship with his father, revealed through their sometimes awkward meetings as Vladek tells his story to Art for the comic book he’s creating.

It’s at once a testament both to the inhumanity and the humanity of man, filtered through the cartoonist’s eye, which skews the world we know just enough, so that we are looking at the horrors of our recent history through Spiegelman’s pen-and-ink safety net. This functions not, of course, to insulate us from the evil, but conversely to allow us to get closer to it, through a subversion of the familiar and comforting “funny animal” genre, so we might recognise it for what it is – and never forget what happened. **DAVID BARNETT**





IMAGES © DC COMICS

Writer Alan Moore

Artist Dave Gibbons

Published 1986-1987

Publisher DC Comics

WATCHMEN

INVITED TO REWORK SOME MORIBUND CHARACTERS, TWO MASTERS CRAFTED A COMPELLING NEW WORLD

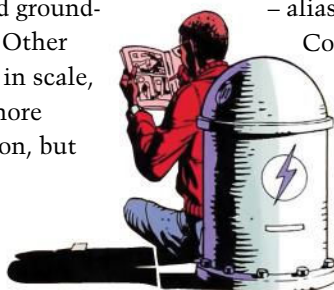
A few pages back, James Lovegrove referred to *From Hell* as being perhaps the pinnacle of Alan Moore's comics work. He's not wrong – that book is a multi-layered masterpiece that looks at a real-life subject in a fresh, exciting way. So why have we picked *Watchmen* for our number one slot instead of that?

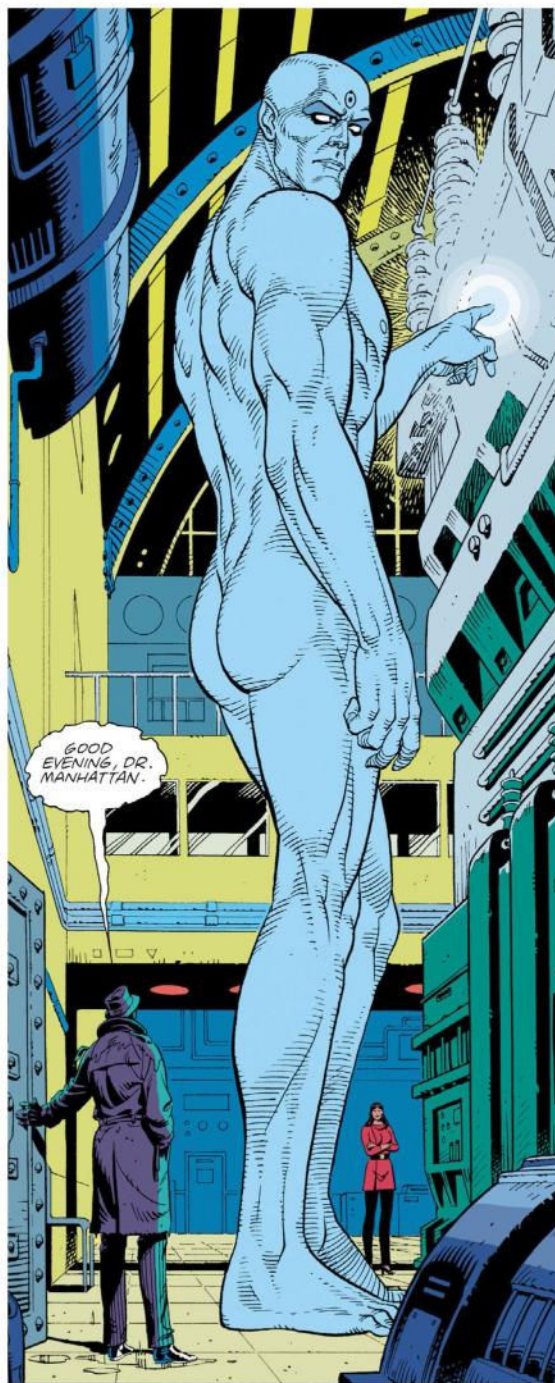
Quite simply because *Watchmen* remains the most important, influential and groundbreaking work in the medium. Other comics may have been grander in scale, or – conversely – smaller and more focussed in their characterisation, but *Watchmen* remains a work of

storytelling genius from two creators at the height of their powers.

EVERYTHING CHANGES

It's hard to imagine that anyone reading this publication hasn't read *Watchmen*, but just in case you need a refresher... The story takes place in an alternative 1980s. The body of Edward Blake – alias government-backed super-hero The Comedian – has been discovered. Rorschach, an ink-blot-masked vigilante, begins to investigate Blake's death but soon gets drawn into a conspiracy that will change the world forever...





Put like that the plot sounds like a bit of standard-issue pulp fun. The difference here, however, was in the way that Moore and Gibbons treated their subject matter, approaching the question “what if super-heroes were real?” with forensic precision. And they created a world that was both brand-new yet steeped in a palpable sense of history. The existence of their blue-skinned Superman analogue, Dr Manhattan, has altered society fundamentally, and there’s a thick vein of cynical realism at work. In one memorable flashback a super-hero gets his cape trapped in a door and is consequently shot dead...

Then, of course, there’s the sheer craftsmanship of the thing. Gibbons sticks to a nine-panel grid structure throughout, merging panels at certain moments for impact. This rhythmic approach perfectly suits a ticking time bomb plot that is laden with apocalyptic dread. Likewise, Moore’s puzzlebox script is perfectly tooled and designed for multiple re-readings. Look back at the opening pages with the ranting street preacher after

“ AN EPIC TOLD ON A HUMAN SCALE ”

Above and opposite: Moore and Gibbons ask simply “What if super-heroes were real?” and then make it so.

you’ve finished the book and see how it neatly encapsulates the story.

It’s no exaggeration to say that *Watchmen* redefined super-hero comics and what they could be. Through a combination of talent, timing and innovation, the book wowed fans while also introducing a whole new audience to their many and varied charms. Morally complex, troubling, weird and funny, it fully deserves the hype.

Ignore the movie (it’s fine but fundamentally redundant and we still prefer the book’s nutso ending) and pick up the original. Frankly, we’re all here because of it. **WILL SALMON**

WATCHMAKER

NICK SETCHFIELD MEETS COMIC BOOK LEGEND **DAVE GIBBONS**

FROM THE
ARCHIVES



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Dave Gibbons is one of the quiet revolutionaries of comic books. *Watchmen*, his landmark 1986 collaboration with Alan Moore, was a loving assault on the certitudes of super-heroics. But his career has been so much more than that genre-shaking graphic novel. Over three decades Gibbons has lent his slick, kinetic yet characterful style to every pop-culture icon from Superman and Batman to Dan Dare and *Doctor Who*. “All I ever wanted to do was draw comics,” he says. “I never had an aspiration to be any other kind of artist. Telling stories was what I wanted to do, and I only ever wanted to draw well enough to tell a story and make people believe it.”

***Watchmen* obviously came from a deep love for super-heroes. What was**

their primal appeal for you as a kid?

There’s something almost dreamlike about the world of the super-hero. And American super-heroes were in colour, of course. A lot of British comics were in black-and-white and a bit murky and a bit fusty, but American super-hero comics had this clarity and this luminosity to them. And it wasn’t just the stories. It was the sense of them being an artifact from somewhere else. You’d get these advertisements for Schwinn bicycles and Tootsie Rolls – this whole other world. I remember the first time I went to New York. A lot of people would be thrilled to see the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty. Me, I was thrilled to see the water towers on the rooftops, just like Steve Ditko had drawn them in *Spider-Man*! It was this glimpse of a

Above: Fixated vigilante Rorschach represents the obsessive, driven side of the super-hero.

fabled land. For all I knew when I was a little kid, they really did have super-heroes in America. And there are lots of elements in the classic super-heroes that appeal to a kid. The stories of Superman and Batman play to innate fears and desires in children. They’re both orphans, and the most terrifying thing a child can imagine is their parents dying. But then somehow afterwards you’re redeemed, or you have these powers... They’re very primal. They were created by people who weren’t trying to create myths, but there’s something very raw and personal about super-heroes.

There was a huge American influence on your art...

Yeah, it was primarily American comics that I was interested in. My



favourite kind of artists were what I would call transatlantic artists – people like Joe Kubert, Wally Wood. I saw a lot of this American stuff in black-and-white to begin with, and I learnt to draw by copying it. I think my work has got a transatlantic feel, and it was fortunate that I was coming into my own when *2000 AD* started up, because it was a fusion of American and European influences. There was a whole generation of us – myself, Brian Bolland, Kevin O'Neill – who had grown up with the same influences. I think *2000 AD* changed everything. We finally had a clubhouse where we could work with our fellows, a group of artists almost in friendly competition with each other, not wanting to let the team down.

And that's where you got to do Dan Dare. Did you feel the long shadow of Frank Hampson and the classic strip?
Oh yeah. Dan Dare was almost a supernatural kind of thing to read in

the '50s. There was this tangibly real sense about Dan Dare, and that did imprint itself on me. And certainly when I came to do *Watchmen* I wanted to make everything about the world equally as real and consistent and bullet-proof. The circumstances under which Hampson produced Dan Dare were unique in the field of comics – comics has always been a really cheap operation, but Hampson had half a dozen assistants, a huge photographic budget, produced two pages of artwork a week... this was the reason it looked so wonderful.

When I got the chance to do Dan Dare I felt slightly cheated, because obviously they say to you "Hey Dave, do you want to draw Dan Dare?" and you think "Oh yeah!" and then you think "Oh God, that's a heavy mantle to carry..." The first version I did was very militaristic – it was like a military *Star Trek*. Then when we revived him again and I was promised it would be much closer to the



Above: *Watchmen* rough for fanzine *Amazing Heroes*.

Left: '50s throwback: Gibbons reinvented Dan Dare in *2000 AD*.

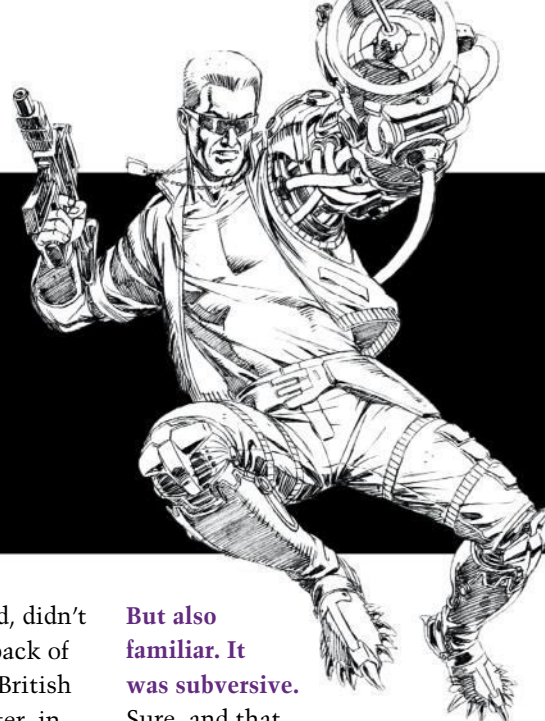
original in that it featured the Mekon and so on, it turned into some kind of quasi-super-hero thing where he had this glove that contained "the power cosmic" ... It wasn't very satisfactory.

Did you ever meet Frank Hampson?

I was lucky enough to meet him towards the end of his career. He was rather a bitter man, and that's a great shame, because he wasn't treated well, as so many people of his generation ultimately weren't. He didn't own Dan Dare, despite the fact that he'd created everything about it. I was introduced to him rather mischievously by Denis Gifford, who was a comics historian. He said, "Oh Frank, this is Dave Gibbons, who's drawing Dan Dare for *2000 AD*..." I said "It's a great pleasure to meet you, Frank. I only wish I could do it a tenth as well as you did it." And he said "Oh, that's alright, old son, we all have to make a living!" And I felt that at least if I hadn't been blessed then I'd been absolved of my sins!

Did you always have your sights set on working in American comics?

I did, though in the early days it seemed to be an impossible thing. It all seemed to be run by gangsters – people with Italian names who were obviously part of the Mob! Or hard-bitten Kirbys and Ditkos. But the real >



corner-turning moment for me was when I bought a copy of *Nick Fury, Agent Of SHIELD* and I thought it was terribly drawn. And it was drawn by somebody called Barry Smith, from Britain. And I thought "Hold on a minute, this is a guy from England... He's drawing Marvel comics! It can be done!" So I went and bought 20-odd sheets of illustration board and redrew the whole story to show that I could do it better than Barry Smith. As it happened, I probably didn't do it better than him. In 1973 I went over to the States and took my samples

Above: Gibbons' own take on first meeting his *Watchmen* co-creator.

Above right: Gun crazy: a cover illustration of the Bionic Commando from Capcom.

with me, showed them around, didn't get any work, though on the back of them I did get some work for British comics. Then several years later, in 1981, the Americans came over here and recruited me and some others to draw their comics. It was a long path, but there was a point at which I realised it was not an impossible path, and that kept me going.

What did that wave of British talent bring to the American comics scene?

I think that sense of wonder, of being an observer of something "other". Things that are everyday to Americans, like the water towers on the roof, like fire [hydrants] in the street, to me were objects of wonder. I think we saw things that were obvious to Americans in a completely different way, which was refreshing. And there's a certain kind of anarchy that we bring to things. *2000 AD* was very scurrilous and very sarcastic and satirical. I think we brought a little of that. The bloodline of American comics had got a little inbred and incestuous, and this was new blood.

Do you think that only two Brits could have done *Watchmen*?

You can always play the "what if?" game, but only Alan and I could have done *Watchmen* as it is. Again it's timing. We were in the right place, we'd honed our talents. And just as US comics felt quirky and off-centre to me, *Watchmen* was quirky and off-centre to the bulk of American comics. It was just different enough to be intriguing.

But also familiar. It was subversive.

Sure, and that was very much the idea. I deliberately drew *Watchmen* in a very accessible, no-frills style, completely direct. Alan used this phrase: what a good story does is beckon you down the leafy path, and then once you're in the shadows it beats you over the head with a baseball bat. When people read *Watchmen* they should think "Oh yeah, this is just like a comic book... but hold on a minute! It feels wrong, it feels strange..."

Did your love of super-heroes clash with the need to deconstruct them?

It's good that you identify that there was a great love of super-heroes, because that's what a lot of people missed. We loved the idea of super-heroes, we loved the characters. It was an act of love. There was nothing cynical about it. We said, let's just be honest about these things that we love: if super-heroes were real, what would they really be like? And we tried to answer that question truthfully. And as much as there are depressing, dark and gritty passages – Rorschach looking into the fire and deciding that there is no God – it's offset with Nite Owl in the basement with his Owlship and his wonderful gadgets. This was completely misunderstood by mainstream American comics [creators], who thought "Right, let's give everybody a psychological problem, let's make everybody a drunk or a junkie..." They completely missed the point.

MEET DAVE

THE GLORIES OF GIBBONS

2000 AD Futuresport tale "Harlem Heroes" helps launch Britain's punky SF weekly in '77. Gibbons later resurrects Dan Dare for the same title and co-creates Rogue Trooper.

Doctor Who In Marvel's adaptation Gibbons illustrates both Baker and Davison incarnations between '79 and '82.

Green Lantern Gibbons makes his US debut in '82 with *Tales Of The Green Lantern Corps* (and he returns to DC's cosmic hero in 2005).

Superman 1985 finds Gibbons collaborating with Alan Moore on classic tale "For The Man Who Has Everything".

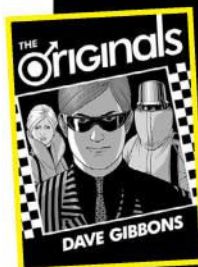
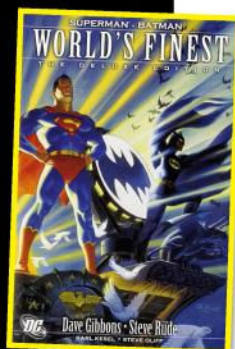
Watchmen Moore and Gibbons reteam in '86 for momentous, career-best deconstruction of super-heroes. Everything changes.

World's Finest Gibbons proves his writing chops in 1990's Batman-Superman team-up, illustrated by Steve Rude.

Give Me Liberty 1990 begins the politically charged saga of Martha Washington, a collaboration with *Dark Knight* creator Frank Miller.

The Originals Gibbons' 2005 homage to his '60s youth with this monochrome, Mod-flavoured SF yarn.

The Secret Service In 2012 Gibbons illustrates this pointed spy-spoof written by Mark Millar, made into a movie as *Kingsman* (2014).





Scary thought: we're as far removed from *Watchmen* as *Watchmen* was from Lee and Kirby's *Fantastic Four*.

Are you disappointed that nothing so revolutionary has come along since?

We were certainly disappointed that it was only the superficiais that were picked up on. There was a wonderful feeling in the mid '80s... I compared it once to D-Day. "Finally we've made the beachhead! Here's *Watchmen*, here's *Dark Knight*, here's *Maus*... Come on, guys!" And nobody was there behind us!

What did you think of the *Watchmen* film? Is it a buzz seeing it come alive?

It's very strange. It's almost as if it existed and Alan and I did a comic book version of it.

Are you surprised it's so faithful?

I suppose I am. I didn't ever think it would be as well done. I thought they'd take the characters and mess them around. [But] it works as a movie. It's not an attempt to slavishly recreate the comic. A lot of things have been recreated but only because they are essential to telling the story. And there are new scenes in it which were never in the graphic novel but work perfectly in terms of the film. They amalgamate elements, they shortcut. To some people that would be sacrilege, but to me it's more important that it be a good movie and be true to the spirit and the message of *Watchmen*, rather than a slavish

Above:

Using an intentionally direct style, Dave Gibbons made each *Watchmen* character individual and very relatable.

“ WE WERE DISAPPOINTED THAT ONLY THE SUPERFICIALS WERE PICKED UP ON ”

reconstruction. And it was made at the right time, when the moviegoing audience was as familiar with super-heroes as comic book readers were in the '80s. You could deconstruct without having to explain what it is that you're deconstructing.

Alan Moore famously wants nothing to do with the film. Do you think he has no curiosity about it at all?

Well, if he says he hasn't then I believe him. I would find it hard not to have curiosity. Alan's a man of principle and I'm sure if he says he's not going to see it then he won't.

Is it true that he banned you from talking about it to him?

Yeah, we did reach that point. He said he was pleased that I was enjoying myself but that he couldn't share my enthusiasm. And although he was always perfectly happy to talk to me and [felt] I'd behaved impeccably as far as anything to do with *Watchmen* was concerned, he really didn't want to talk about it with me any more. And I respect that. I'm really sad that it's come to that because creatively it was such a wonderful experience to share, and he's now unable to enjoy it... But I do understand. Alan's a unique figure in comics, and he's had pressures and expectations put on him and has almost become prey for so many people that he is put in very difficult positions. If he finds that he has more peace of mind by not being involved then I support him entirely. He doesn't want his name on it and he doesn't want the money. Someone

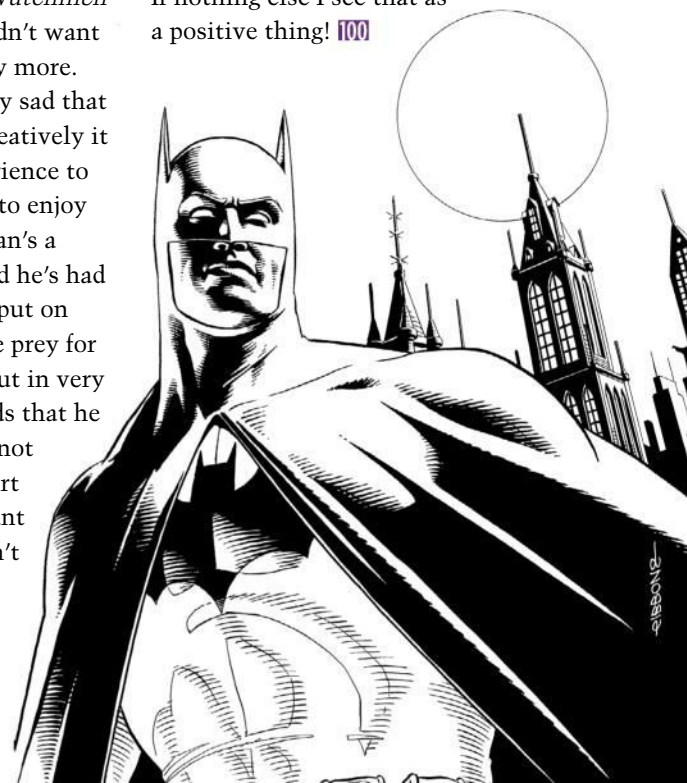
asked me "Is Alan Moore really crazy?" and I had to say no, he isn't. He's a very intelligent, thoughtful man who processes things in a very rational way. But to Hollywood, which is all about fame and money, they just can't understand it. It does seem crazy in their value system.

How do you view the relationship between comics and movies?

Movies have always dealt in legend and fable and archetypal situations and stories, [but] I think you have to respect that they are two different mediums. [That said,] I find it inconceivable that anybody who buys the *Watchmen* DVD will only watch it once. I think people are going to do exactly what they do with the book: they're going to stop and step back, come back to it and find more stuff. And of course we're going to get thousands and thousands of new readers looking at the original work. If nothing else I see that as a positive thing! **100**

Right:

Gotham's finest has also been brought to life by the versatile artist.





THE EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMAN

FROM THE ARCHIVES

MINDS DON'T COME MORE FERTILE THAN ALAN MOORE'S. IN 2009 **DAVID QUANTICK** PROBED HIS LITTLE GREY CELLS...

Geniuses are not supposed to be prolific. They're supposed to think of one brilliant thing, do it, and then die of exhaustion. In fact, proper geniuses – like Beethoven, Spike Milligan and Paul McCartney – are always doing brilliant things, and terrible things, and things that are baffling, often simultaneously. One such prolific genius is Alan Moore. Apart from accidentally inspiring most of the interesting movies, comics, and ideas of the last 25 years, Moore produces works of genius with a regularity my local post office can only dream of. Currently he is the man behind two extraordinary virtual siblings; the very rude, pinkly proud *Lost Girls*, which takes several of the most powerful female archetypes of 19th century children's literature and makes them have it off with

each other, and the slightly more strait-laced *League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, which does pretty much the same thing with heroes of boys' fiction, only with more fighting and less sex. Both are, in their many levels of imagination, experience and knowledge, typically Mooreish (nobody else is so detailist as Alan Moore) and both are like nothing else in modern fiction.

You can now buy *Lost Girls* in a huge mauve box, while the latest *League* is among us, taking the story into the 20th century and bringing in more heroes and villains from fiction. This time *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen* references *Performance*, the Kray twins, Michael Moorcock's brilliant Jerry Cornelius and – perhaps unsurprisingly for magic practitioner Moore – Aleister Crowley.

Top left:
Tossing and turning in 1910.

Top right:
Kevin O'Neill provides *League's* exemplary art.

It's a good day to go shopping, and a fine pretext to telephone Alan Moore ("throw the phone number away after the interview," says his press representative, "and don't mention the movies". I didn't mention the movies, but I did call him back with more questions a week later, and he was utterly lovely) and talk to him about, you know, everything. Not that an interview with Moore is entirely conventional...

What are you up to right now?

I've just been writing today, as usual. At the moment I'm working on chapter 26 of my novel *Jerusalem*. Probably somewhere near three quarters of a million words. I've suddenly decided to make matters more difficult for myself by telling the story of Lucia Joyce, James Joyce's daughter, who spent 31 years



Above: Melinda Gebbie's vibrant panels for *Lost Girls*.

in Saint Andrew's Hospital. I've decided to make it her wandering around the madhouse grounds but in an approximation of her dad's use of language, so I'm having to make up every word. I'm having fun with it, it's a fantastic chapter.

Over the years you've written epic serialisations, produced comics like *Watchmen* and written novels which begin with pre-linguistic speech... is there anything you do that doesn't involve making a rod for your own back?

Em... no. It's a bit of a problem, that. I think it probably dates back to when I'd just finished *Watchmen*, Christ, 25 years ago. After I'd finished that and it had got this ridiculous reception I thought I can either do something that isn't good as *Watchmen* or I can try to do something that's as good or better. And I thought if I try and do something as good or better... what then? That's a problem I'm wrestling with. After this book I won't be trying to write anything as long...

Well, you say that now...

Once you've actually done it, and done something where you really surprised yourself, where you didn't

know you were that smart, it's hard drugs in the writing stakes. You're never gonna be able to put it down.

There's one thing that recurs in so much of your work, from reinventing Batman and Swamp Thing in the 1980s, to reimagining the characters who make up *Lost Girls* and *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, which is taking an archetypal fictional character and getting inside it and seeing just what that character actually is, or means. You really use those fictional archetypes.

Increasingly since I went completely mad and got into magic, one of the principles of how I live my life and how I do my work, is that actually the world of fiction, the world of the imagination, is a completely separate world to the physical world we inhabit, but is if anything more real and more important. These fictional characters that we assume are there purely for entertainment purposes, we shape our lives around them. When we're looking for someone to shape our lives around, some real person, some mentor, very often if you're talking about young children it's going to be a fantasy figure. With the *League* particularly it's the possibilities that that world opens

FIVE BRILLIANT MOORE CHARACTERS



1 SINISTER GLOVES

From the strip "Who Killed Rock'n'Roll" in the late, great rock weekly *Sounds*, Sinister Gloves was the man responsible for the death of rock and roll. He's still working...



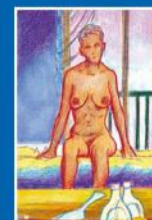
2 THE COMEDIAN

The Comedian is both lynchpin to the *Watchmen* story and the bleakest superhero ever. Just don't ask him where he was when Kennedy died.



3 HALO JONES

Ordinary can be brilliant too, as *The Ballad Of Halo Jones*, the story of a fairly normal girl who went and saw the universe, proved.



4 LADY FAIRCHILD

She may be Alice Liddell all grown up, but your servants are definitely not safe with her, as the cast of *Lost Girls* find out, again and again and again.

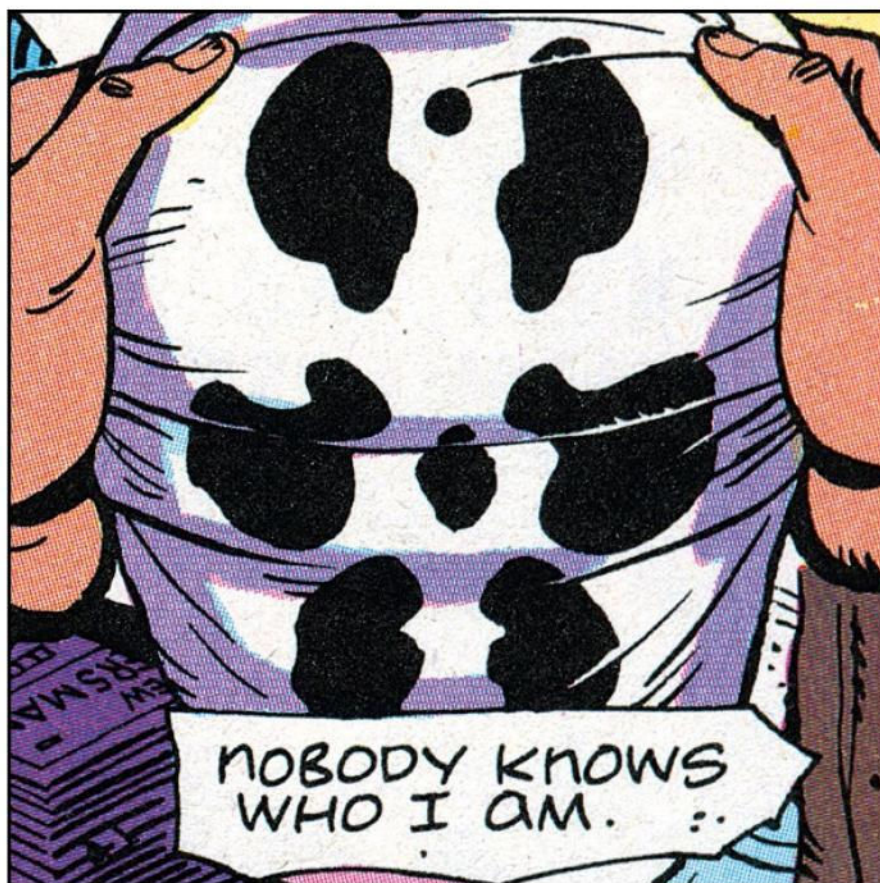


5 NAMRON LAMRON

The man who lived his life backwards, in Moore's poignant story for *2000 AD's Future Shocks*. Same idea as Amis's *Time's Arrow*, only 200 pages shorter and 500 times better.

up. In the first issue we suddenly realised we'd got Robert Stevenson's Mister Hyde murdering Emile Zola's Nana in the Rue Morgue... and I thought, this is fantastic, what if we made everything in this entire series a reference to some pre-existing work of fiction? And that was what threw it all open. It's become obsessive.

You're now a magician yet much of your work has been around the world of science fiction. So which is better, magic or science?



I don't really see that there's any discrepancy at all. Science is something that grows out of magic. It depends how far you want to take science. Look at ancient Egypt, the city of Khem where they were creating all of these new alloys and metals and they were attributing properties to the metals, they'd link gold with the sun, and Khem is where the word alchemy comes from. Albert Einstein had a copy of Madame Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* by his desk. Isaac Newton was an alchemist and he said he couldn't have done the work he did

do without standing on the shoulders of giants, and one of the giants was Doctor John Dee who was for my money the greatest magician of all time and also the bloke who invented the world we're living in today. And yet he spent the greater part of his life communicating with "angels" in a language that had been revealed to him in a crystal ball.

So you think that there's not actually much difference between the two?

I don't think there's a huge discrepancy. I'll tell you what it's like. Science is actually the child of magic.

Top left:
Rorschach – one of the troubling "heroes" at the heart of *Watchmen*.

Top right:
Taking the plunge into *League...*

It's like many of us, it's reached an age where it became resentful of, and a bit embarrassed by, its parents, who sat in the corner mumbling magic words and drawing talismans in the air. So what science would like to do is get magic carted off to a maximum security home. It would like to say this is all completely nonsense. But a lot of us, even if we're embarrassed by our parents, we reach a certain age and we find actually we've got a lot in common with them. Look at quantum theory. I would say, with quantum theory you have got a range of concepts that are more unfathomable and maybe even less proveable than the demonology of the 16th century. It's not a huge leap from talking about all these hypothesized angels that you're never going to see but you believe are there to a bunch of particles that you're never going to see but the mathematics suggest are there.

But what about people who say that this is a rational world, and more importantly, that we've spent the last hundred years trying to get away from religious fundamentalists?
I've got the greatest sympathy for

FIVE MAJESTIC MOORE MOMENTS



1 The ending of *Watchmen*. The best cutting of a Gordian knot (look it up) in history.

2 The *Swamp Thing* episode when the cast of *Pogo* come to earth. Eco-sad.

3 "Chronocops" in *Tharg's Future Shocks*. A brilliantly drawn (by Dave Gibbons)

homage to early *Mad* magazine.

4 The finale to *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen Black Dossier* in which the idea of story is celebrated, and the Golliwogg rescued from Carol Thatcher.

5 "Now looks I down, to grass in low of hill, and sees I pigs. Big pigs and long

with one on other's back and shanking she, by look of they." Moore's first novel takes on the English vernacular and wins.





anybody like Richard Dawkins who's trying to battle against the tide of nonsense that the creationists are putting out. At the same time, I think he forgets what the word "religion" means. It comes from the Latin word *ligare*, which has the same root as *ligature* or *ligament*, and what it means is "tied together in one belief". That doesn't have to be a spiritual belief – in fact, ardent believers in Darwin, whether they like it or not, are part of a religion. And so you'll get people like Dawkins sometimes sounding every bit as dogmatic in his pronouncements as the religions he's attacking are in theirs.

So it's not just crazy wizards versus clever scientists?

Just because science is admittedly the best tool we have for understanding the universe, that doesn't mean that it knows everything, and most of the best scientists would admit that.

If everything was erased from your mind, what would be the last thing to go?

I don't know, there's such a lot of contenders. Whichever one I say, there'll be 50 alternatives at the back of my mind screaming for attention. I'll go with Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*. If you've only ever seen the television series, that is



not Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*. Peake's *Gormenghast* is the language he used to write it... they were the books that someone said taught them the immense power of fiction. That's not a bad description. You're immersed in a completely invented world which seems more real to you than your own front room.

Apart from everything, what's left?

When I've completed the projects I'm working on now – *The Moon And Serpent Bumper Book Of Magic*, and the *League* books – which I'm doing coherently and quite amusingly at times – then *Jerusalem* is the main thing. I'm going to be a couple of

Above: One of the strands of *Century* concerns a dying Captain Nemo.

years on that. *League* will continue indefinitely... I'd really like to write an enormous poem. Something with clout. On the scale of TS Eliot's "Wasteland", only probably nowhere near as good. I'd like to give it a try. And I might even play around with film. On an amateurish level and it wouldn't see the light of day, and it wouldn't be treated as a commercial project. It would just be me having fun, playing in a new playpen, with a camera and some friends. Most of my favourite films look like they cost ten quid to make.

Alan Moore's movies... now that would be something.

I believe there's a straightforward inverse equation that applies not just to films but lots of areas, and that is the inverse relationship of money and imagination. If you haven't got any money then you're going to have to use an incredible amount of imagination. Whereas if you've got tons of money, you're not going to have to use any....

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WRITE AN ENORMOUS
POEM. SOMETHING
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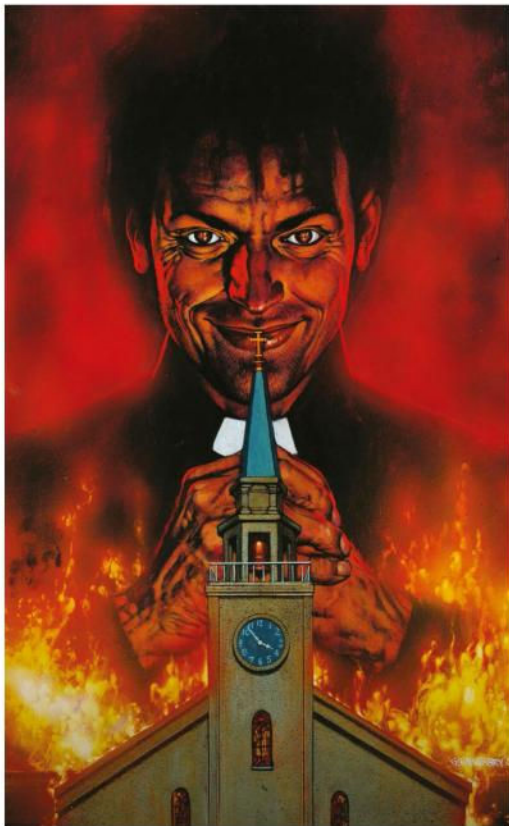
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