

**THE GREAT  
COMIC BOOK  
HEROES**

**JULES FEINBERG**

Originally Published 1965  
20037

**FANTAGRAPHICS BOOKS**

7563 Lake City Way NE  
Seattle, WA 98115 USA

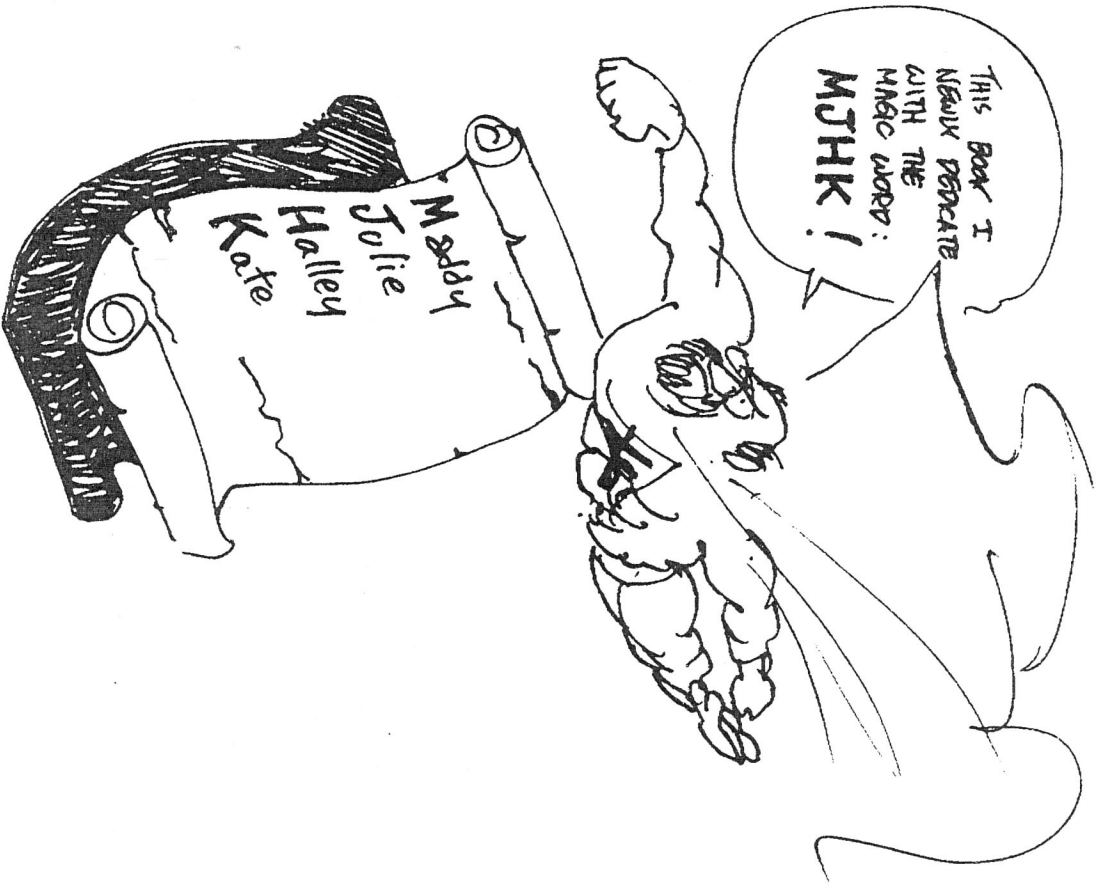
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Published by Gary Groth & Kim Thompson

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First Fantagraphics Books edition: February 2003

ISBN 1-56097-501-6

Printed in Canada



## FOREWORD

Jules Feiffer's *The Great Comic Book Heroes* was originally published in 1965. By that time, Feiffer had established himself as a social critic and a barbed and satiric observer of personal relationships through his strip *Feiffer* that had begun appearing in the *Village Voice* in 1956. But either because of or despite his growing status as a New York intellectual and a burgeoning playwright (*The Explainers*, 1961) and novelist (*Harry: The Rat with Women*, 1963), it was suggested to him by an editor at Dial Press (New York) that he write a book about the subject that had captivated him in his youth and influenced his career choice: comic books. He agreed to do so and the result was *The Great Comic Book Heroes*. (The editor was an aspiring novelist by the name of E.L. Doctorow.)

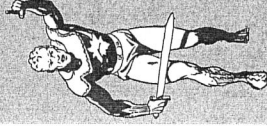
This is probably the first sustained essay on comic books of the '40s and '50s. Nowadays, it is practically a de rigueur subject of University dissertations, but in 1965 no one wrote about comic books, much less superhero comics. Today, our budding academicians subject superheroes to Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridaean philosophical speculation. Thankfully, Feiffer knew better than to apply ponderous theoretical models to the superhero comics he enjoyed in his youth; in their absence, he delivers a fond reminiscence of what it was like to have thrilled to the new four-color medium as a kid from the point of view of a literate adult – intellectually playful, never condescending, qualities that are no longer deemed sufficiently serious for the study of old superhero comics. And when he theorizes, when he describes the anti-social virtues of junk, for instance, it's eminently rooted in human experience – his experience.

He also has the advantage of having been there at (almost) the beginning: his recollections of reading comics segue seamlessly into his earliest recollection of working in the comics business in 1945.

The original edition appeared in hardcover and contained 127 pages of the comics Feiffer talked about – stories starring Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and so forth. In our streamlined 2003 edition, we felt that the comics were no longer needed; in our more enlightened times, Marvel and DC Comics are providing reprints of most of those comics in handsome hardcover editions that are readily available to anyone interested in reading them. Thus, this edition is in an affordable trade paperback format.

We are proud to put this classic back in print where it belongs.

– Gary Groth  
Seattle, December 30, 2002



**I have known many adults who have treasured throughout their lives some of the books they read as children. I have never come across any adult or adolescent who had outgrown comic-book reading who would ever dream of keeping any of these “books” for any sentimental or other reason.**

FREDRIC WERTHAM,  
*SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT*

**“What th-?”**

SUPERMAN, ACTION COMICS

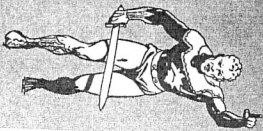
# I.

## INTRODUCTION

Comic books, World War II, the Depression, and I all got going at roughly the same time. I was eight. *Detective Comics* was on the stands, Hitler was in Spain, and the middle class (by whose employment record we gauge depressions) was, after short gains, again out of work. I mention these items in tandem, not only to give color to the period, but as a sly historic survey to those in our own time who, of the items cited, only know of comic books.

Eight was a bad age for me. Only a year earlier I had won a gold medal in the John Wanamaker Art Contest for a crayon drawing on oak tag paper of Tom Mix jailing an outlaw. So at seven I was a winner — and didn't know how to handle it. Not that triumph isn't at any age hard to handle, but the younger you are the more of a shock it is to learn that it simply doesn't change anything. Grownups still wielded all the power, still could not be talked back to, still were always right however many times they contradicted themselves. By eight I had become a politician of the





grownup, indexing his mysterious ways and hiding underground my lust for getting even until I was old enough, big enough, and important enough to make a bid for it. That bid was to come by way of a career. (I knew I'd never grow big enough to beat up everybody; my hope was to, somehow, get to own everything and fire everybody.) The career I chose, the only one that seemed to fit the skills I was then sure of — a mild reading ability mixed with a mild drawing ability — was comics.

So I came to the field with more serious intent than my opiate-minded contemporaries. While they, in those pre-super days, were eating up *Cosmo*, *Phantom of Disguise*, *Speed Saunders*, and *Bart Regan, Spy*, I was counting how many frames there were to a page, how many pages there were to a story — learning how to form, for my own use, phrases like: @X/#?/: marking for future reference which comic book hero was swiped from which radio hero: Buck Marshall from Tom Mix; the Crimson Avenger from the Green Hornet ...

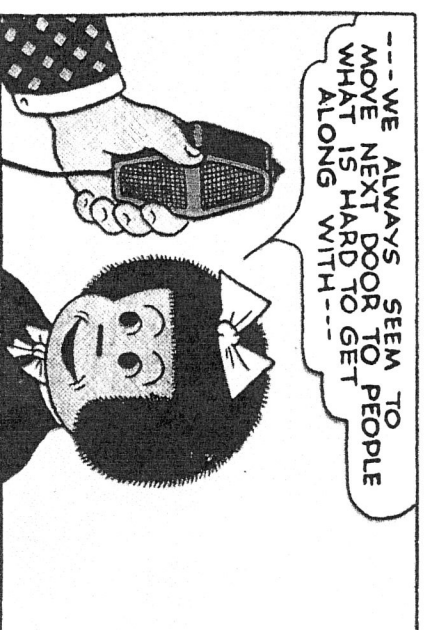
There were, at the time, striking similarities between radio and comic books. The heroes were the same (often with the same names: Don Winslow, Mandrake, Tom Mix); the villains were the same: Oriental spies, primordial monsters, cattle rustlers — but the experience was different. As an apprentice pro I found comic books the more tangible outlet for fantasy. One could put something down on paper — hard-lined panels and balloons, done the way the big boys did it. Far more satisfying than the radio serial game: that of making up programs at night in bed, getting the voices right, the footsteps and door slams right, the rumbling organ background right — and doing it all in soft enough undertones so as to escape being caught by that grownup reading Lanny Budd in the next room who at any moment might give his spirit-shattering cry: "For the last time stop talking to yourself and go to sleep!" Radio was too damn public.

My interest in comics began on the most sophisticated of levels, the daily newspaper strip, and thereafter

proceeded downhill. My father used to come home after work, when there was work, with two papers: the *New York Times* (a total loss) and the *World-Telegram*. The *Telegram* had *Joe Jinks* (later called *Dynamite Dunn*), *Our Boarding House*, *Our Way*, *Little Mary Mixup*, *Alley Cop* — and my favorite at the time, *Wash Tubbs*, whose soldier of fortune hero, Captain Easy, set a standard whose high point in one field was Pat Ryan and, in another, any role Clark Gable ever played.

For a while the *Telegram* ran an anemic four-page color supplement that came out on Saturdays — an embarrassing day for color supplements. They so obviously belonged to Sunday. So except for the loss of Captain Easy, I felt no real grief when my father abandoned the *Telegram* to follow his hero, Heywood Brown, to the *New York Evening Post*. The *Post* had *Dixie Dugan*, *The Bungle Family*, *Dinky Dinkerton*, *Secret Agent 6 7/8*, *Nancy* (then called *Fritzi-Ritz*), and that masterpiece of sentimental naturalism, *Abbie an' Stats*. I studied that strip — its Sturges-like characters, its Saroyanesque plots, its uniquely cadenced dialogue. No strip other than *Will Eisner's Spirit* rivaled it in structure. No strip, except *Milton Caniff's Terry*, rivaled it in atmosphere.

There were, of course, good strips, very good ones in those papers that my father did not let into the house. The *Hearst papers*: *The Daily News*. Cartoons from the outlawed press were not to be seen on weekdays, but on Sundays one casually dropped in on *Hearst-oriented homes* (never very



Nancy © 1938  
United  
Feature  
Syndicate





clean, as I remember) and read *Puck*, *The Comic Weekly*, skipping quickly over *Bringing Up Father* to pounce succulently on page two: *Jungle Jim* and *Flash Gordon*. Too beautiful to be believed. When *Prince Valiant* began a few years later, I burned with the temptation of the damned: I begged my father to sell out to Hearst. He never did. My Hearst friends and I drifted apart. My cause lost its urgency: my attention switched to *Terry and the Pirates* — in the *Daily News* — more hated in my house than even Hearst. Why, I must have wondered in kind, was it my lot to be a Capulet when the best strips were Montagues?

It should have been a relief, then, when the first regularly scheduled comic book came out. It was called *Famous Funnies* and, in sixty-four pages of color, minutely



Terry and the Pirates © 1935  
Chicago Tribune-N.Y. News  
Syndicate, Inc.

reprinted many of my favorites in the enemy camp. Instead, my reaction was that of a movie purist when first confronted with sound: this was not the way it was done. Greatness in order to remain great must stay true to its form. This new form, so jumbled together, so erratically edited and badly colored, was demeaning to that art — basic black and white and four panels across — that I was determined to make my life's work. I read them, yes I read them: *Famous Funnies* first, then *Popular Comics*, then *King* — but with always a sense of being cheated. I was not getting top performance for my dime.

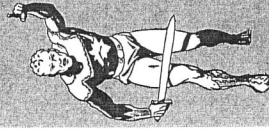
Not until March, 1937, when the first issue of *Detective Comics* came out. Original material had previously been used in comic books, but almost all of it was in the shape and style of then existing newspaper strips.\* *Detective Comics* was the first of the originals to be devoted to a single theme — crime fighting. And it looked different. Crime was fought in larger panels, fewer to a page. Most stories were complete in that issue (no more of the accused "to be continued ...") And a lot less shilly-shallying before getting down to the action. A strange new world: unfamiliar heroes, unfamiliar drawing styles (if style is the word) — and written (if written is the word) in a language not very different from that of a primer:

In every large city there are G-Men. In every large seaport there are G-Men known as Harbor Police. 'Speed' Cyril Saunders is a special operative in a unit of the river patrol.

So began story one, issue one of *Detective Comics*.

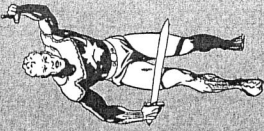
The typical comic book circa 1937-38 measured about 7 1/4 by 10 1/4, averaged sixty-four pages in length, was glisteningly processed in four colors on the cover and flatly and indifferently colored on the inside, if colored at all. (For in the early days some stories were still in black and white; others in tones of sickly red on one page, sickly blue on another, so that it was quite possible for a character to have a white face and blue clothing for the first two pages of a story and a pink face and red clothing for the rest.) They didn't have the class of the daily strips but, to me, this enhanced their value. The daily strips, by their sleek professionalism, held an aloof quality which comic books,

\*The *Funnies* in 1929; *Detective Dan* in 1933; *New Fun* in 1935. The single unique stroke in the pre *Detective Comics* days was the creation, by Sheldon Mayer, of the humor strip, *Scribbly* — an underrated, often brilliantly wild cartoon about a boy cartoonist with whom, needless to say, I identified like mad. I regret that it is not within the province of this book to give Mayer or *Scribbly* the space both of them deserve.









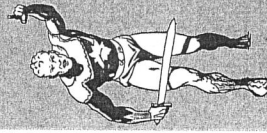
usually bald with a few MacArthurish strands of hair — burly butcher boys smelling of sweat. In a fair fight they could easily take the hero — and often did, the first couple of times. Never in the end. But by that time I no longer cared. If the bad guy won every fight save the last, I had my doubts.

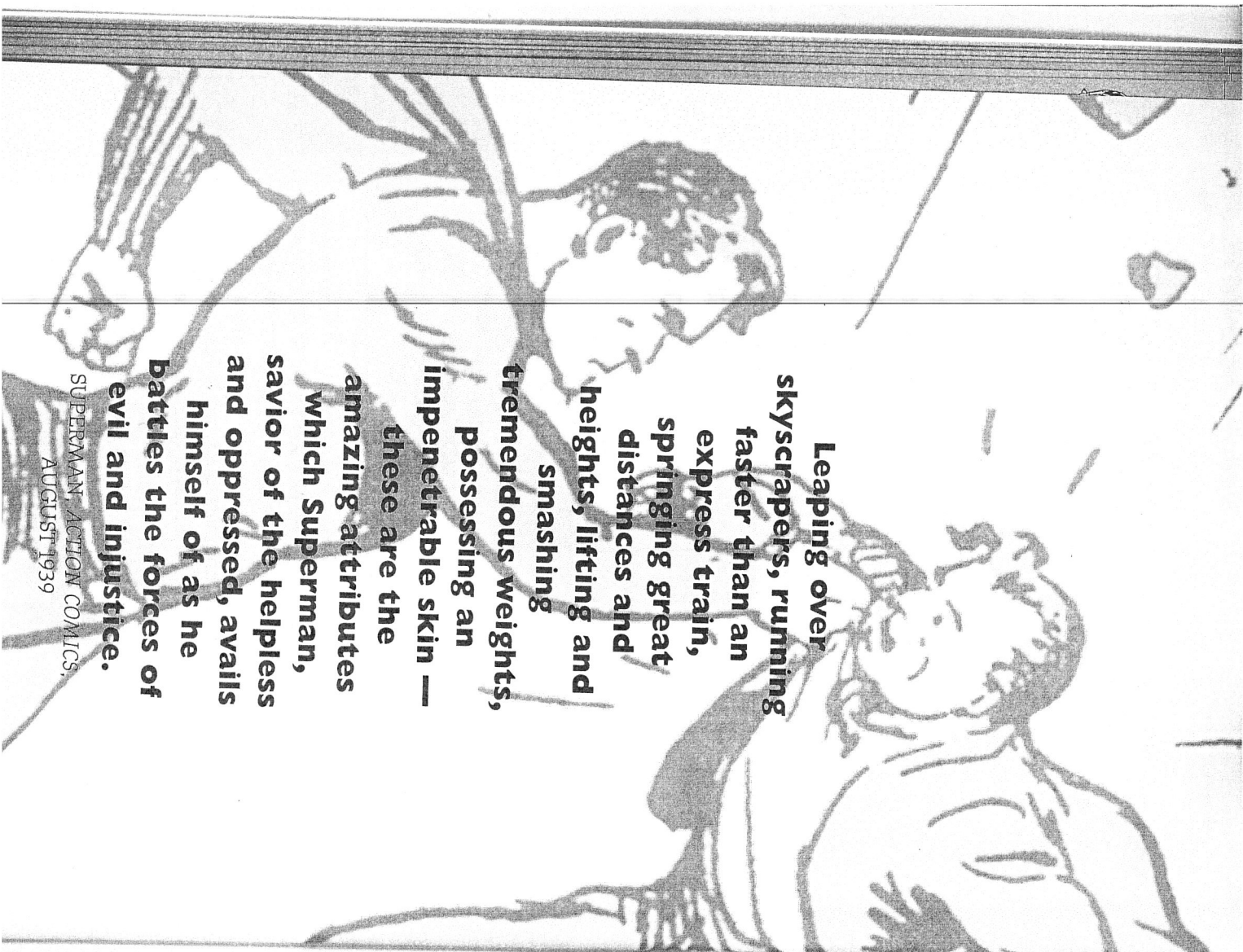
There was Fred Guardineer, whose career was magicians — he drew more than anybody, all of them looking like Mandrake. Top hat, tails, flossy tie, mustache, glassy eyes. Each magician was equipped with an enormous brown servant not named Lothar. Guardineer's magicians, whatever they were called, wherever they were published, cast their spells by speaking backwards. "SKCOR KAERB NWOD LLAW!" Zatarra would cry and rocks, rising from nowhere, would break down that wall. A fine point: could anybody speaking backwards have Zatarra's magic — a villain for instance? The metaphysics shaky, the drawing style stiff, I gave up on Fred Guardineer.

The problem in pre-super days was that, with few exceptions, heroes were not very interesting. And, by any realistic appraisal, certainly no match for the villains who were bigger, stronger, smarter (as who wasn't?), and even worse, were notorious scene stealers. Who cared about Speed Saunders, Larry Steele, Bruce Nelson, et al., when there were Oriental villains around? Tong warriors lurking in shadows, with trident beards, pointy fingernails, and skin the color of ripe lemons. With narrow, missile-like eyes slantingly aimed at the nose; a nose aged and curdled with corrupt wisdom, shriveled in high expectancy of the coming tortures on the next page. How they toyed with those drab ofay heroes: trap set, trap sprung, into the pit, up comes the water, down comes the pendulum, out from the side come the walls. Through an unconvincing mixture of dumb luck and general science, the hero escaped, just barely; caught and beat up the villain: that wizened ancient who, in toe-to-toe combat, was, of course, no match for the younger man. And readers were supposed to cheer? Hardly! The following

month it all happened again. Same hero, different Oriental, slight variance in the torture.

Villains, whatever fate befell them in the obligatory last panel, were infinitely better equipped than those silly, hapless heroes. Not only comics, but life taught us that. Those of us raised in ghetto neighborhoods were being asked to believe that crime didn't pay? Tell that to the butcher! Nice guys finished last; landlords, first. Villains by their simple appointment to the role were miles ahead. It was not to be believed that any ordinary human could combat them. More was required. Someone with a call. When *Superman* at last appeared, he brought with him the deep satisfaction of all underground truths: Our reaction was less "How original!" than "But, of course!"





**Leaping over  
skyscrapers, running  
faster than an  
express train,  
springing great  
distances and  
heights, lifting and  
smashing  
tremendous weights,  
possessing an  
impenetrable skin —  
these are the  
amazing attributes  
which Superman,  
savior of the helpless  
and oppressed, avails  
himself of as he  
battles the forces of  
evil and injustice.**

SUPERMAN ACTION COMICS.  
AUGUST 1939

# 2.

The advent of the superhero was a bizarre comeuppance for the American dream. Horatio Alger could no longer make it on his own. He needed "Shazam!" Here was fantasy with a cynically realistic base: Once the odds were appraised honestly, it was apparent you had to be super to get on in this world.

The particular brilliance of Superman lay not only in the fact that he was the first of the superheroes,\* but in the concept of his alter ego. What made Superman different from the legion of imitators to follow was not that when he took off his clothes he could beat up everybody — they all did that. What made Superman extraordinary was his point of origin: Clark Kent.

Remember, Kent was not Superman's true identity as Bruce Wayne was the Batman's or (on radio) Lamont Cranston the Shadow's. Just the opposite. Clark Kent was the fiction. Previous heroes — the Shadow, the Green Hornet, The Lone Ranger — were not only more vulnerable;

\*Action Comics, June 1938



they were fakes. I don't mean to criticize; it's just a statement of fact. The Shadow had to cloud men's minds to be in business. The Green Hornet had to go through the fetishist fol-de-rol of donning costume, floppy hat, black mask, gas gun, menacing automobile, and insect sound effects before he was even ready to go out in the street. The Lone Ranger needed an accountremental white horse, an Indian, and an establishing cry of Hi-Yo Silver to separate him from all those other masked men running around the West in days of yesteryear.

But Superman had only to wake up in the morning to be Superman. In his case, Clark Kent was the put-on. That fellow with the eyeglasses and the acne and the walk girls laughed at wasn't real, didn't exist, was a sacrificial disguise, an act of discreet martyrdom. *Had they but known!*

And for what purpose? Did Superman become Clark Kent in order to lead a normal life, have friends, be known as a nice guy, meet girls? Hardly. There's too much of the hair shirt in the role, too much devotion to the imprimitur of impotence — an insight, perhaps, into the fantasy life of the Man of Steel. Superman as a secret masochist? Field for study there. For if it was otherwise, if the point, the only point, was to lead a "normal life," why not a more typical



Superman #1  
© 1939-1940  
DC Comics

identity? How can one be a cowardly star reporter, subject to fainting spells in time of crisis, and not expect to raise serious questions?

The truth may be that Kent existed not for the purposes of the story but for the reader. He is Superman's opinion of the rest of us, a pointed caricature of what we, the noncriminal element, were really like. His fake identity was our real one. That's why we loved him so. For if that wasn't really us, if there were no Clark Kents, only lots of glasses and cheap suits which, when removed, revealed all of us in our true identities — what a hell of an improved world it would have been!



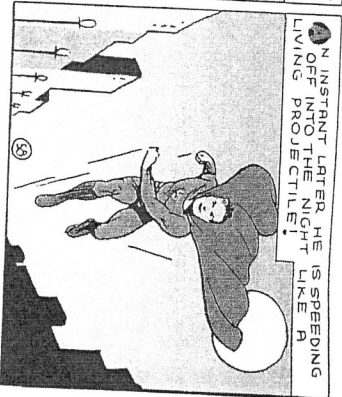
Superman #1 © 1939-40 DC Comics

In drawing style, both in figure and costume, Superman was a simplified parody of Flash Gordon. But if Alex Raymond was the Dior for Superman, Joe Shuster set the fashion from then on. Everybody else's super-costumes were copies from his shop. Shuster represented the best of old-style comic-book drawing. His work was direct, unpretitled — crude and vigorous; as easy to read as a diagram. No creamy lines, no glossy illustrative effects, no touch of that bloodless prefabrication that passes for professionalism these days. Slickness, thank God, was





Superman #3 © 1939-1940 DC Comics



beyond his means. He could not draw well, but he drew single-mindedly — no one could ghost that style. It was the man. When assistants began “improving” the appearance of the strip it promptly went downhill. It looked as though it were being drawn in a bank.

But, oh, those early drawings! Superman running up the sides of dams, leaping over anything that stood in his way (No one drew skyscrapers like Shuster. Impressionistic shafts, Superman poised over them, his leaping leg tucked under his ass, his landing leg tautly pointed earthward), cleaning and jerking two-ton get-away cars and pounding them into the sides of cliffs — and all this done lightly, unportentously, still with that early Slam Bradley exuberance. What matter that the stories quickly lost interest; that once you’ve made a man super you’ve plotted him out of believable conflicts; that even super-villains, super-mad scientists and, yes, super-Orientals were dull and lifeless next to the overwhelming image of that which Clark Kent became when he took off his clothes. So what if the stories were boring, the villains blah? This was the Superman Show—a touring road company backing up a great star. Everything was a stage wait until he came on. Then it was all worthwhile.

Besides, for the alert reader there were other fields of interest. It seems that among Lois Lane, Clark Kent, and Superman there existed a schizoid and chaste *menage à trois*. Clark Kent loved but felt abashed with Lois Lane;



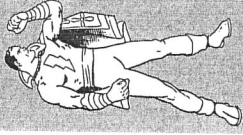
Superman saved Lois Lane when she was in trouble, found her a pest the rest of the time. Since Superman and Clark Kent were the same person this behavior demands explanation. It can’t be that Kent wanted Lois to respect him for himself, since himself was Superman. Then, it appears, he wanted Lois to respect him for his fake self, to love him when he acted the coward, to be there when he pretended he needed her. She never was — so, of course, he loved her. A typical American romance. Superman never needed her, never needed anybody — in any event, Lois chased *him* — so, of course, he didn’t love her. He had contempt for her. Another typical American romance.

Love is really the pursuit of a desired object, not pursuit by it. Once you’ve caught the object there is no longer any reason to love it, to have it hanging around. There must be other desirable objects out there, somewhere. So Clark Kent acted as the control for Superman. What Kent wanted was just that which Superman didn’t want to be bothered with. Kent wanted Lois, Superman didn’t — thus marking the difference between a sissy and a man. A sissy wanted girls who scorned him; a man scorned girls who wanted him.

Our cultural opposite of the man who didn’t make out with women has never been the man who did — but rather the man who could if he wanted to, but still didn’t. The ideal of masculine strength, whether Gary Cooper’s, Li’l Abner’s, or Superman’s, was for one to be so virile and handsome, to be in such a position of strength, that he need never go near girls. Except to help them. And then get the hell out. Real rapport was not for women. It was for villains. That’s why they got hit so hard.



Superman #4 © 1939-1940 DC Comics



# 3.

The problem with other superheroes was that the most convenient way of becoming one had already been taken. Superman was from another planet. One of the self-denigrating laws of all science fiction is that every other planet is better than ours. Other planets may have funny-looking people but they think better, know more languages (including English), and are much further along in the business of rocketry and destruction. So, by definition, Superman had to be super: No outer-space weakling had ever been let in. The immediate and enormous success of Superman called for the creation of a tribe of successors — but where were they to come from? Not from other planets; Superman had all other planets tied up legally. Those one or two superheroes who defied the ban were taken apart by lawyers (nothing is as super as a writ).

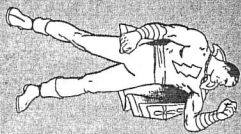
The answer, then, rested with science. That strange bubbly world of test tubes and gobbledy-gook which had, in the past, done such great work in bringing the dead back to life in the form of monsters — why couldn't it also



**The Shield — symbol of Americanism and all America stands for — truth, justice, patriotism, courage. The Shield is no importation from another planet nor an accidental freak of nature. He is the product of years of painstaking toil, the climax to brilliant scientific research.**

THE SHIELD, SHIELD-WIZARD COMICS, WINTER ISSUE, 1940





make men super? Thus Joe Higgins went into his laboratory and came out as the Shield; and John Sterling went into his laboratory and came out as Steel Sterling; and Steve Rogers went into the laboratory of kindly Professor Reinstein and came out as Captain America; and kindly Professor Horton went into his laboratory and came out with a synthetic man, named, illogically, the Human Torch. Science had run amok!

And not only science. With business booming comic-book titles, too, ran amok: *Whiz*, *Startling*, *Astonishing*, *Top Notch*, *Blue Ribbon*, *Zip*, *Silver Streak*, *Mystery Men*, *Wonder World*, *Mystic*, *Military*, *National*, *Police*, *Big Shot*, *Marvel-Mystery*, *Jackpot*, *Target*, *Pep*, *Champion*, *Master*, *Daredevil*, *Star-Spangled*, *All-American*, *All-Star*, *All-Flash*, *Sensation*, *Blue Bolt*, *Crash*, *Smash*, and *Hit Comics*. Settling loose a menagerie of flying men, webbed men, robot men, ghost men, minuscule men, flexible-sized men — men of all shapes and costume blackening the comic-book skies like locusts in drag.

Skyman, Sky Chief, The Face, The Sub Mariner, The Angel, The Comet, The Hangman, Mr. Justice, Uncle Sam, The Web, The Doll Man, Plastic Man, The White Streak — all scrambling for a piece of the market. Their magazines



were competitively dated months ahead, so that if *Big Shot* released an issue in January and dated it March, in reprisal *All-American* would date its February issue August. Aficionados began to check: comic books not dated a minimum of four months in advance were deemed shabby. One was hesitant to be seen with them.

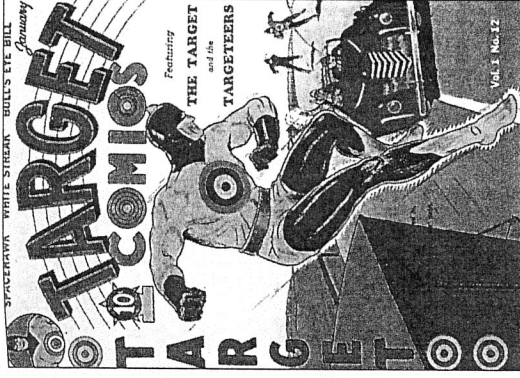
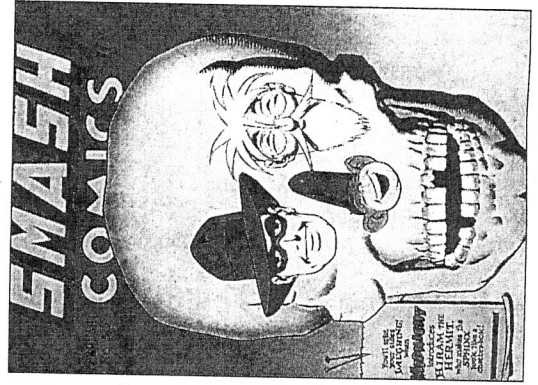
Understandably, this Pandora's box of men-of-steel was viewed gravely by Superman. One story of the time, denied by everyone, but for years a legend in the business and reported as such, was that rival impresarios, worried lest the Superman people bring legal or marketing reprisals (their distributive arm circulated not only their own, but most other comic books), volunteered certain major concessions. Such as capes. It was granted that Superman, being the *premier danseur* of superheroes, was the only one entitled to wear a cape. All others were, with appropriate ceremony, circumcised. (One could imagine the scene: The Shield, G-Man Extraordinary, standing in a field, his modest emblem, the American Flag, plucked from his burly shoulders, folded in half, then in quarters — neatly — so that no part touched the ground. Buried in Arlington, a choked-up marine playing taps: J. Edgar Hoover, a prominent character in the strip, standing alongside. Rumor had it

that he sent flowers.)

The most savage reprisals in comic books were, just as in revolutions, saved not for one's enemies but for one's own kind. If, for a moment, Superman may be described as the Lenin of superheroes, Captain Marvel must be his Trotsky. Ideologically of the same bent, who could have predicted that within months the two would be at each other's throats — or that, in time, Captain Marvel would present the only serious threat to the power of the man' without whom he could not have existed?

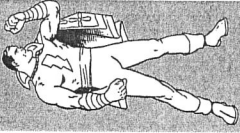
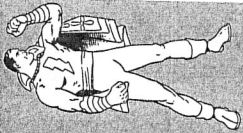
From the beginning, Captain Marvel possessed certain advantages in the struggle. In terms of reader identification, Superman was far too puritanical: if you didn't come from his planet you couldn't ever be super — that was that. But the more liberal Captain Marvel left the door open. His method of becoming super was the simplest of all — no solar systems or test tubes involved — all that was needed was a magic word: "Shazam!"

"Pie in the sky!" retorted the pro-Superman bloc, but millions of readers wondered. If all it took was a magic word, then all that was required was the finding of it. Small surprise that for a while Captain Marvel caught and

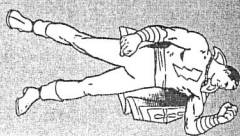


passed the austere patriarch of the super-movement.

More than that, Captain Marvel was gifted with the light touch. Billy Batson, the newsboy, who Captain Marvel truly was, was drawn by artist C. C. Beck as an oval-faced, dot-eyed, squiggly-haired boy familiar to any child who ever sent for a how-to-draw-heads course. The magic for readers in Captain Marvel was that not only did it appear easy to become him, it looked easy to draw him. Deceptively so. Captain Marvel was better drawn, really, than Superman. C. C. Beck followed in the tradition of Roy Crane's *Wash Tubbs*, drawing with a virginal simplicity that at times was almost sticklike — but still there was style. Villains ranged from mad scientist Dr. Sivana (the best in the business), who uncannily resembled Donald Duck, to Mr. Mind, a worm who talked and wore glasses, to Tawky Tawny, a tiger who talked and wore a business suit. A Disneyland of happy violence. The Captain himself came out dumber than the average superhero — or perhaps less was expected of him. A friendly fullback of a fellow with apple cheeks and dimples, he could be imagined being a buddy rather than a hero, an overgrown boy who chased villains as if they were squirrels. A perfect fantasy figure for, say, Charlie Brown. His future seemed assured. What a





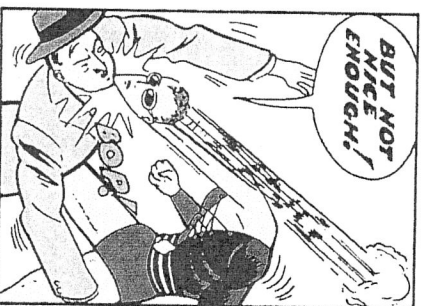
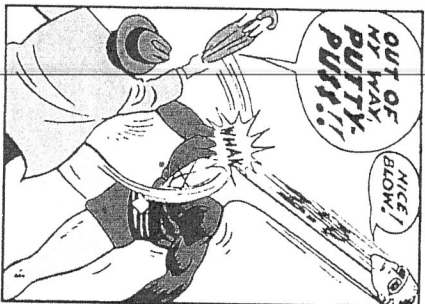


shock, then, the day Superman took him to court. Happily, I did not learn of the Superman versus Captain Marvel lawsuit until years later. It would have done me no good to discover two of my idols, staunch believers in direct action, bent over, hands cupped to lips, whispering in the ears of their lawyers. No one should have to grow up that fast.

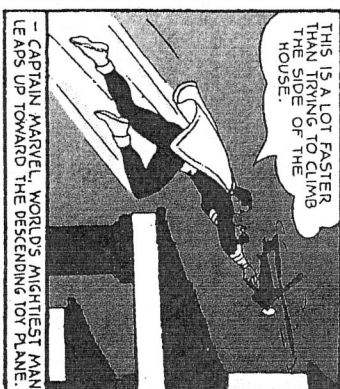
The Superman people said that Captain Marvel was a direct steal. The Captain Marvel people said what do you mean; sheer coincidence: isn't there room for the small businessman: we don't know what you're talking about. It went on that way for years, but the outcome was clear from the start: Captain Marvel fought hard but he was a paper tiger. One wondered whether he was beginning to drink. He was losing his lean, Fred MacMurray look, fleshing out fast in the face, in the gut, in the hips, moving onward and outward to Jack Oakie.

Then too there was great disappointment in the word "Shazam!" As it turned out it didn't work for readers. Other magic words were tried. They didn't work either. There are just so many magic words until one feels he's been made a fool of. How easy it became to hate "Shazam! Shazam! Shazam!" That taunting cry that worked fine for Captain Marvel but didn't do a damn thing for the rest of us.

I had the vague feeling that Captain Marvel was making fun of me. More and more his adventures took on



Police Comics #2, September 1941 "Plastic Man" © 1941 DC Comics



Whiz Comics #9, © 1040 DC Comics, Inc.

the tone of parodies — item: Billy Batson being turned into a baby by mad scientist Dr. Sivana and thus not being able to say the magic word, it coming out "Tha-Tham!" I was not prepared for frivolousness on the part of my superheroes! When the Captain Marvel people finally settled the case and went out of business, I couldn't have cared less.



Whiz Comics #12, © 1041 DC Comics, Inc.



**The 'Bat-man,' a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrongdoer, in his lone battle against the evil forces of society ... his identity remains unknown.**

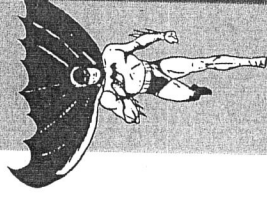
**EPISODE ONE OF BATMAN  
DETECTIVE COMICS, MAY, 1939**

# 4.

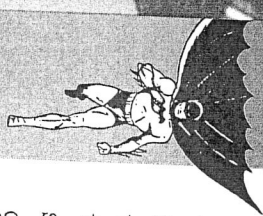
**B**atman trailed Superman by a year and was obviously intended as an offshoot, but his lineage — the school of rich idlers who put on masks — dates back to the Scarlet Pimpernel and includes Zorro, and The Green Hornet, with whom Batman bears the closest as well as most contemporaneous resemblance. Both the Green Hornet and Batman were wealthy, both dabbled in chernistry, both had super-vehicles, and both costumed themselves with a view toward striking terror into the hearts of evildoers. The Green Hornet buzzed; the Batman flapped — that was the essential difference.

Not that there weren't innovations: Batman popularized in comic books the strange idea, first used by the Phantom in newspapers, that when you put on your mask, your eyes disappeared. Two white slits showed — that was all. If that didn't strike terror into the hearts of evildoers, nothing would.

Batman, apparently, was in better physical shape than the Green Hornet, less dependent on the creature comforts







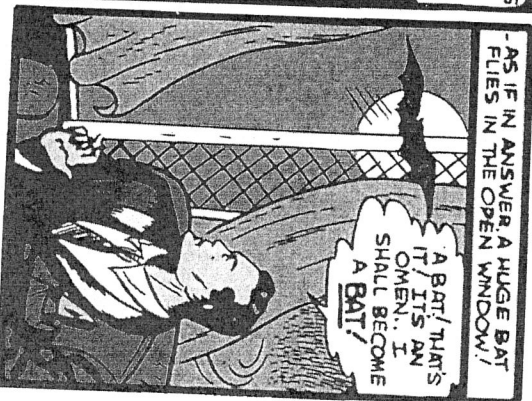
of super-vehicles, or the rich man's use of nonlethal gas warfare. Batman got more meaningfully into the fray and, in consequence, was more clobbered. Though a good deal was made of his extraordinary stamina much of it, as it turns out, was for punishment — another innovation for superheroes: There was some reason to believe he had a glass jaw.

But Batman was not a superhero in its truest sense (however we may have liked to think of him). If you pricked him, he bled — buckets. Superman's superiority lay in the offense, Batman's lay in the rebound. Whatever was done to him, whatever trap laid, wound opened, skull fractured, all he had to show for it was a discreet patch of Band-aid on his right shoulder. With Superman we won; with Batman we held our own. Individual preferences were based on the ambitions and arrogance of one's fantasies.

The Batman school preferred a vulnerable hero to an invulnerable one, preferred a hero who was able to take punishment and triumph in the end to a hero who took comparatively little punishment, just dished it out. I suspect the Batman school of having healthier egos. In my own case, the concept of triumph over adversity was never very

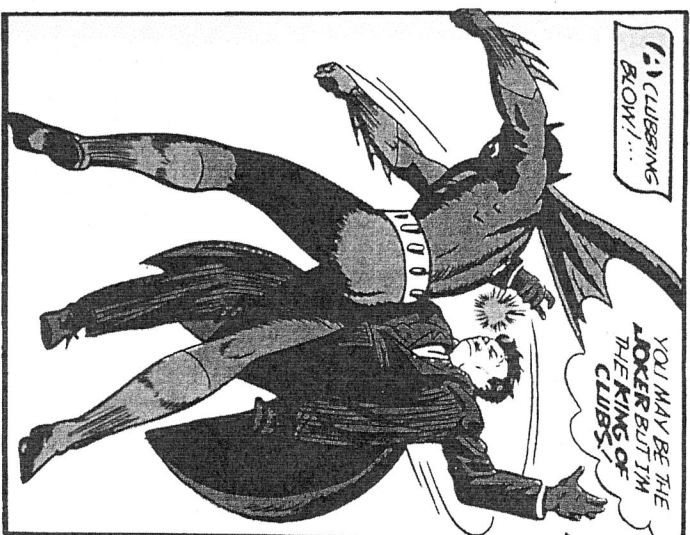
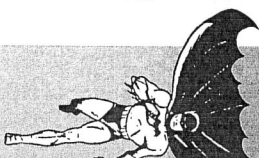


CRIMINALS ARE A SUPERSTITIOUS  
COWARDLY LOT, SO MY DISGUISE  
MUST BE ABLE TO STRIKE  
TERROR INTO THEIR HEARTS, I MUST  
BE A CREATURE OF THE NIGHT,  
BLACK, TERRIBLE... A... A



-AS IF IN ANSWER, A HUGE BAT  
FLIES IN THE OPEN WINDOW!  
A BAT? THAT'S  
IT, IT'S AN  
OMEN... I  
SHALL BECOME  
A BAT!  
A BAT!

Batman #1, Spring 1940 © 1940 DC Comics



YOU CLUBBING  
BLOW!...

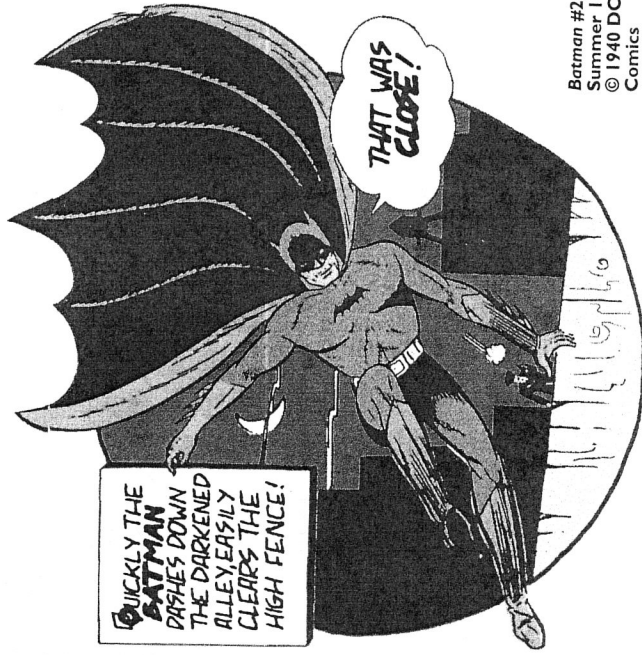
YOU MAY BE THE  
LOKER BUT I'M  
THE KING OF  
THE CLUBS!

Batman #1, Spring 1940 © 1940 DC Comics

convincing. My own observations led me to believe that the only triumph most people eked out of adversity was to manage to stay alive as it swept by. With me, I didn't think it would be any different. I preferred to play it safe and be Superman.

Another point: I couldn't have been Batman even if I wanted to. If I were ever to be trapped in a steel vault with the walls closing in on all sides, I was obviously going to have to break out with my fists because it was clear from my earliest school grades that I was never going to have the know-how to invent an explosive in my underground laboratory that would blow me to safety. I was lousy at science. And I found the thought of having an underground laboratory chilling. My idea of a superhero was some guy, bad with his hands, who came from an advanced planet so that he didn't have to go to the gym to be strong or go to school to be smart. The sort of superhero I admired had to be primarily passive, but invulnerable.

What made Batman interesting, then, was not his strength but his storyline. Batman, as a feature, was infinitely better plotted, better villained, and better looking than Superman. Batman inhabited a world where no one, no matter the time of day, cast anything but long shadows — seen from weird perspectives. Batman's world was scary; Superman's, never. Bob Kane, Batman's creator, combined Terry and the *Pirates*-style drawing with Dick Tracy-style villains, e.g., The Joker, The Penguin, The Cat Woman, The



Batman #2,  
Summer 1940  
© 1940 DC  
Comics

Scarecrow, The Riddler, Clay-Face, Two-Face, Dr. Death, Hugo Strange.

Kane's early drawings, pretentious and stiff, coordinated perfectly with his early writing technique — a form of florid pre-literacy so typical of comic books of that day (as witnessed in the excerpt introducing this chapter). Or another example from a Kane feature of that time:

Africa — the dark continent whose jungles teem with insects, beasts, fever, and wild natives. A

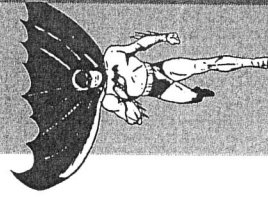
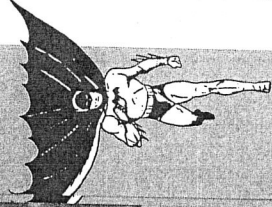
land of terrible secrets no man can read ... up the river to the shore of Kenya, Clip Carson, vagabond adventurer, paddles his canoe.\*)

Despite it all, I remember Clip Carson warmly — and who, having once noted Batman smart-assing his way through a fist fight, has not forever been taken with him? Kane's strength, as did Shuster's, lay not in his draftsmanship (which was never quite believable), but in his total involvement in what he was doing (which made everything believable). However badly drawn and crudely written, Batman's world took control of the reader. If Kane said so, men *did* pose stroking their chins whenever they weren't fighting, running, or shooting in such a way that hand and chin never quite made contact; if Kane said so, gangsters *did* wear those peculiarly styled hats and suits — bought off the rack from a line nobody in the world had ever seen before; if Kane said so heads were not egg shaped, but rectangular; chins occupied not the bottom sixth of a face but the bottom half — because Kane's was an authentic fantasy, a genuine vision, so that however one might nit-pick the components, the end product remained an impregnable whole: gripping and original. Kane, more

\*Clip Carson, Action Comics.



Batman #3,  
Fall 1940  
© 1940 DC  
Comics





than any other comic-book man (except Will Eisner, who will be discussed later), set and made believable the terms offered to the reader:

Batman's world was more cinematic than Superman's. Kane was one of the early experimenters with angle shots and though he was not as compulsively avant-garde in his use of the worn's eye, the bird's eye, the shot through the wineglass, as others in the field he was the only one of the *Detective, Adventure, Action Comics* line who managed to get that Warner Brothers fog-infested look.

For just as the movie studios had their individual trademarks, their way of lighting, their special approach to subject matter by which they could be identified even if one came in at the middle, so did comic books. National, who



Batman #4, Winter 1941  
© 1941 DC Comics

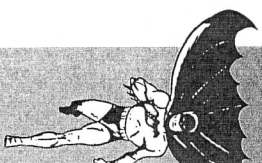
produced the D.C. line, was the MGM of the field. It had the great stars, the crisp-brittle lighting, the elder statesman touch — smoothly exciting, eschewing the more boisterous effects of its less wealthy competitors.

Superman was the best, but the most humorless of the superheroes (befitting his position); Batman was the best, but the most wooden of the masked heroes (a bit of early Robert Taylor there) — neither was quite touchable. They were State Department White Papers of the mind. And National, who issued them, was the government in power.

The opposite extreme was Fox — the Monogram Studios of the industry. Fox had the best covers and the worst insides. The covers were rendered in a modified pulp style: well-drawn, exotically muscled, half-undressed heroes rescuing well-drawn, exotically muscled, half-undressed maidens. The settings, often as not, were in the conventional Oriental/mad scientist's laboratory — hissing test tubes going off everywhere; a hulking multi-racial lab assistant at the ready to violate the girl; the masked hero crashing through a skylight, guns, aimed at nobody, flaming in each hand; the girl, strapped to an operating table, screaming fetchingly — not yet aware that the crisis was passed.

Since the covers of Fox books were drawn by good men and the insides drawn by bad men, the hero on the cover could only be connected to his facsimile on the inside by the design of his leotards. Fox, like Monogram, had few stars and a deeply felt plot shortage. It pushed hard on the Green Mask, a slender, inadequate-looking hero who beat up slender, inadequate-looking criminals. While this business of fighting crime within one's weight division had something to recommend it, The Green Mask, somehow, never caught on.

To recoup, Fox made a star of the Blue Beetle, another Green Hornet derivative (in this case, a cop in real life), who, in order to fight criminals outside the reach of the law, liked to dress as a beetle, this being his idea of a symbol that would strike terror into the hearts of evildoers (not the first cop to work outside the law, but one of the





Sheena,  
Queen of the  
Jungle.

few who had the decency to take off his uniform while doing it). As it turned out — and unpredictably — evil-doers were impressed with the Blue Beetle. His sign — the shadow of a great beetle projected into the evildoer's line of vision — struck terror into their hearts. He wore a Phantom-type uniform, with scales — rather unpleasant looking without being impressive. He was a great favorite for a far longer time than he deserved.

Fox titles included *Mystery Men Comics*, *Wonder World Comics*, *Science Comics*, *Fantastic Comics* — all of them washed out, never looking quite alive or quite finished — existing in a mechanical limbo. The good men working for Fox soon moved elsewhere. Fiction House, a better outfit by inches, was often the place. As Republic was to Monogram, Fiction House was to Fox. Its one lasting contribution: *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle*, signed by W. Morgan Thomas (a pseudonym), drawn and very likely written by S. R. Powell, who was later to do the best of the magician strips (not excepting Mandrake): Mr. Mystic.

Sheena was a voluptuous Tarzan who laid waste to wild beasts, savages, and evil white men in the jungle of her day, always assisted by her boyfriend, Bob, a neat, young fellow in boots and jodhpurs who mainly stayed free of harm's way while Sheena, manfully, cleaned out the trouble spots. Not as unfair a division of labor as you might think once

you saw the two of them back to back, for while the boyfriend was supposed to be taller and more muscular, it was Sheena who gave the impression of size. Standing proud in the foreground, challenging an overmatched lion to hand-to-hand combat while her admiring young man stood in the tree shadows holding her spear.

Sheena was the star of *Jungle Comics*, a book I looked at only when there was nothing but novels to read around the house. Beating up lions did not particularly interest me; my problem was with people. Nor did the people Sheena laid out interest me very much: They were the usual crop of white hunters in search of the elephants' graveyard, a strip of land so devout in its implications to jungle-book fanciers that one could only assume the elephants took instruction in the church before dying.

Fiction House books had a boxed, constipated look. Balloons were rectangular, restricted-looking. Anybody knew — or should have known — that good balloons were scalloped bubbles floating light as air on the tops of panels. Free and imaginative. Rectangular balloons were depressants — something architectural-looking about them; something textbooky. They were no more to be trusted than those cartoons that gave up balloons entirely and ran an open narrative across the bottom of the panels — cartoons trying their damndest not to look or sound like cartoons — set in the past tense, full of he saids and she saids. The past tense was a violation of comic-book decorum (and newspaper strips too). Comics were too immediate an experience to subjugate the reader to a past tense. Written narratives posed a deliberate similarity to real books: those wordy enclosures that threatened knowledge, threatened advance, threatened a hold on one's soul so that one could not keep it to mark time with, but must move ahead, learn, grow — all dubious outside values. (*Prince Valiant* too was guilty of that bookish style but it was set in King Arthur's day. So I learned to live with it. But I couldn't put up with it in *Tarzan* and I could barely tolerate it in *Flash Gordon*. And I didn't like it anywhere else.)

