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BACK SEAT DRIVER

by Roger Ash



John Morrow and I were talking on the phone about an idea I had for a theme for BACK ISSUE. I asked if it would be ok to use *Bone* as one of the articles. I've been a fan of the series since the first issue and I thought it was a good fit for the theme. John said that an article on *Bone* would be fine, but it needed a different topic. His first suggestion was dragons. That got my attention.

I've been a fan of fantastic stories for a long time. I grew up loving Disney animated movies with many of the movies adapting fairy tales full of fantasy. My world expanded when my older sister gave me a copy of *The Hobbit* for Christmas when I was in junior high. My friends and I played *Dungeons and Dragons* fairly early on in its existence, back when religious groups screamed that it was Satanic. But we knew better. We got to have adventures in a fantasy world. How cool was that?

Since I loved fantasy, it was a small step to loving dragons. What amazing beasts! They were visually stunning and could be friendly or nasty. There were the bulkier, winged European version as well as the more snakelike Asian version. They were glorious! And they populated many fantastic adventures.

With this background, when John suggested dragons as a theme, I was all in. *Bone* had dragons, most prominently the Great Red Dragon, so it fit. I immediately suggested *Daughters of the Dragon*. John suggested *Killer Croc*. We were off and running and the issue you hold in your hands (or on your computer screen if you're reading a digital version) is the result.

Confession time. As a reader of and writer for *BACK ISSUE*, I learned a lot. It could be about a comic I was unfamiliar with. It could be a behind the scenes story I'd never heard before. It may be a creator explaining their inspiration for a story or character. Whatever it was, I learned something without even trying. As editor in chief, it's still the same. I learn something every single issue.

For example, while I knew of DC's *DragonLance* comic, I never read it and knew very little about it. Marc Buxton's article made me very curious about the series and I'm certain to be going through comic boxes at the next convention I attend looking for issues. They also contain some pretty cool dragon art.

It even happens with characters that I know. I've read stories featuring *Dragon Man*, but seeing the character's history, how he's developed, and how he fits into the Marvel Universe, gives me a new perspective of and appreciation for the character.

I need to give a shout out to Jason D'Ambrosio for allowing us to use his wonderful *Kitty Pryde* and *Lockheed* artwork by Paul Smith as the cover for this issue. When I think of *Lockheed*, Paul Smith is the first artist that springs to mind, so having his art grace our cover is a real treat.

Speaking of our cover, when this issue was first announced, I saw a bit of chatter online about this being the first time an Image comic character appeared on a *BACK ISSUE* cover. I'm not sure if that's true or not but yay, us! *Savage Dragon* is a perfect fit for this issue. He was a character who immediately sprang to mind. Erik Larsen has given his all to this book and I admire that. Image is an important part of comics history and should be covered.

Those are our dragons in this issue. I hope you find something here that you enjoy. If you didn't gather this from what I've written, I'm very excited about this issue.

Wait. What's that? What was the theme I was talking to John about? I purposely didn't mention it because I think it's a good theme and I'll likely return to it at some point. That said, all the articles I was considering for that issue have been scheduled for upcoming issues, so it's back to square one. For now, on with the show!

Is it the Great Red Dragon or the great White Whale?

TM & © Jeff Smith.

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON MAN



by *Paul Burns*



Stan Lee and Jack Kirby have a rich history of creating monsters. From the 1950s through to the early 1960s, their frightening creations appear in such titles as *Journey Into Mystery*, *Tales To Astonish*, and *Tales of Suspense*. An insight into Lee's preoccupation with mythical creatures was highlighted in a "Stan 's Soapbox" column, printed in UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, in 2018: "When we were kids, we all loved to read fairy tales. Fairy tales are all about things bigger than life: giants, witches, trolls, dinosaurs, and dragons and all sorts of imaginative things. Then you get a bit older and you stop reading fairy tales, but you never outgrow your love of them."

Strange Tales #89 (Oct. 1961) debuts Lee and Kirby's most famous dragon creation: Fin Fang Foom. This talkative monster inspired a humanoid, mute version of a dragon four years later in the pages of *The World's Greatest Comic Magazine*.

Dragon Man debuts in the pages of *Fantastic Four #35* (Feb. 1965). State University's Professor Gregson Gilbert constructs the lifeless android, while FF nemesis Diablo uses a potion to bring it to life, sending it to attack the Fantastic Four. The creature flies, has great strength, and breathes fire. Dragon Man is antagonistic to the male members of the team, but is charmed by Sue Storm, responsive to her kindness. This is the start of Dragon Man's romantic attachment to Sue, a characteristic he develops with other female characters. Dragon Man turns on Diablo and the two disappear under ice at the issue's conclusion. Reed hopes it's the last they see of Dragon Man, but Sue feels pity for the monster.

This writer shares Sue's sympathy for Dragon Man. As will be shown in this article, Dragon Man has a long history of being manipulated, used, and beaten down in the service of villainous masterminds. For years he exists as nothing more than a convenient punching bag.

The splash page of *Fantastic Four #44* (Nov. 1965) is the first time Dragon Man is described as "ever-delightful." The android emerges from the ground to be entranced by the Inhuman, Medusa. He defends her against Gorgon, who is intent on returning her to the Great Refuge. In *FF #46* (Jan. 1966) the mysterious Inhuman hunter, the Seeker, captures Dragon Man, but releases him when he determines he isn't an Inhuman. While Reed and Sue remain in the Great Refuge, Johnny and Ben battle Dragon Man in New York in *FF #47* (Feb. 1966). After the Torch defeats him, Reed turns

Dragon Man as he appears in *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe #4*. Art by Paul Smith.

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(left) Dragon Man's first appearance in *Fantastic Four* #35. Art by Jack Kirby and Chic Stone. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

(right) Dragon Man goes to college on the cover of *Fantastic Four* #35. Art by Jack Kirby and Dick Ayers.

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Dragon Man over to the authorities for examination on a desert isle.

Dragon Man is delivered to Hank Pym by crate in *Avengers* #41 (Jun. 1967). Pym becomes his legal guardian and tells wife Jan he hopes to learn "what makes him tick." Unfortunately, Diablo isn't far behind and revives Dragon Man. What follows is an epic battle between Dragon Man and Goliath, beautifully illustrated by John Buscema, who begins penciling *Avengers* with this issue. In *Avengers* #42 (Feb. 1967), Diablo reveals to Goliath he has made an army of Dragon Men but is unable to give them life. He forces Pym into helping him recreate his potion, threatening Janet Pym's life. Poor Dragon Man faces another beating, this time from Hercules, before he is unceremoniously dumped into lava by the Olympian.

Roy Thomas and Marie Severin bring Dragon Man to the surface in *Sub-Mariner* #15 (Jul. 1969). He is reunited with creator Gregson, who is being tricked into helping Dr. Dorcas, seeking revenge on Namor. The Sea King finds Dragon Man standing

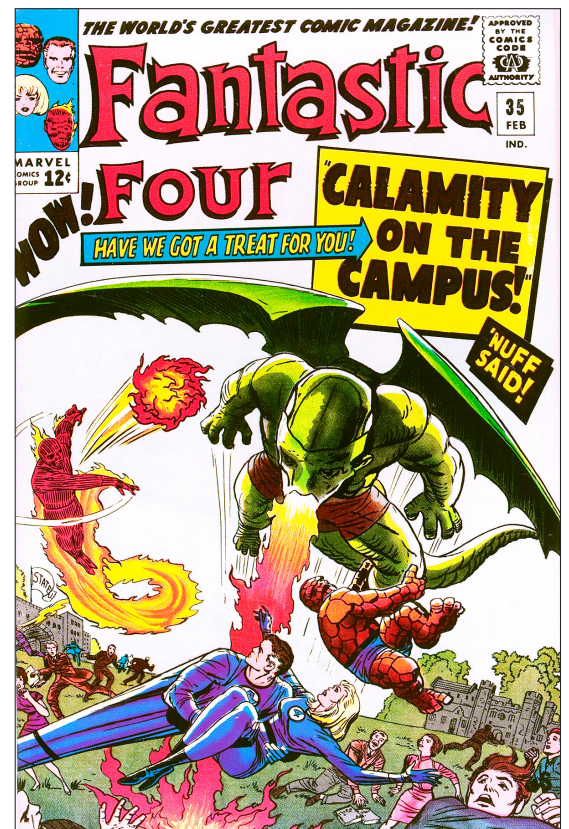
guard over the captive Dorma and attacks him. Namor literally puts Dragon Man on ice by throwing him into a temperature-controlled railroad car and drenching him in gallons of water.

A strangely talkative Dragon Man appears in *FF* #100 (Jul. 1970) as part of the Puppet Master's android army of Fantastic Four villains to attack the team. It's a different story 200 issues later when Puppet Master uses the real Dragon Man to stop The Mad Thinker and Wizard ruining his step-daughter Alicia's wedding to Johnny Storm in *FF* #300 (Mar. 1987).

This writer first encountered (and became a fan of) Dragon Man in the UK weekly, *The Complete Fantastic Four* #2 in 1977. It contained a black and white reprint of *Fantastic Four* #134 (May 1973). John Buscema's incredible cover, depicting Dragon Man holding Sue Richards (very King Kong/Fay Wray), made the issue pop off the shelves (British readers would have to wait until issue #3 of *Complete FF* a week later to enjoy that cover). Dragon Man was always a visual treat, never more so than on page ten of *FF* #134 with his full-page dramatic reveal through flames. It's a powerful and beautiful illustration by Buscema.

Gerry Conway had taken over *FF* writing duties from Roy Thomas one issue earlier and he had been waiting for the opportunity, as he explains in the foreword to *FF Masterworks Vol. 13*: "As it was for Roy, having a chance to script the adventures of the Fantastic Four was something of a dream come true, but for me (unlike Roy) it was the fulfilment of a childhood dream."

The *FF* face the return of Gregory Gideon (last seen in *FF* #34) who uses Dragon Man to capture Sue and lure the rest of the *FF* into a trap. Conway explains his choice to use Dragon Man and Gideon:



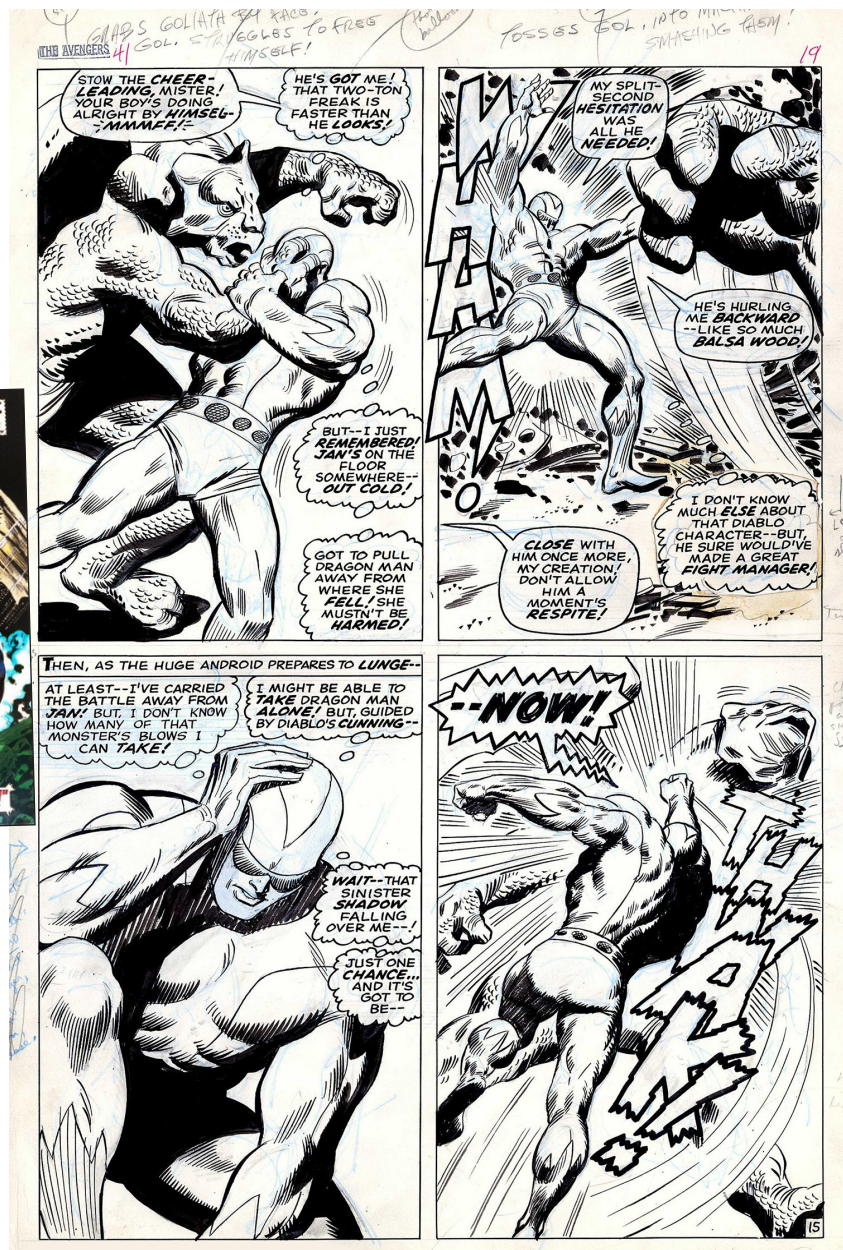
"There's a reason I brought back semi-forgotten characters like the Dragon Man and Gregory Gideon. It's a purely personal, totally unprofessional reason, and I make no apologies for it: I was (and am) a total FF fanboy."

In *Fantastic Four* #135 (Jun. 1973), Gideon explains to Medusa that he is going to use the team's cosmic ray infused genes to cure his and his son's radiation poisoning. Medusa removes the sonic device controlling Dragon Man who attacks Gideon and the two are caught in an explosion, seemingly killing them both.

The only sighting of Dragon Man in the next few years, in comics at least, is on his own Marvel Value Stamp (No. 83). Collectors could clip it out of *Thor* #231 (Jan. 1975). Although the 1978 *Fantastic Four* animated series features an adaptation of FF #35, the green, frog-faced cartoon Dragon Man bears no resemblance to the comics version. A far more faithful animated depiction of Dragon Man shows up in the 2012 *Ultimate Spider-Man* season one episode, "Back in Black." Dragon Man made his big screen debut (kind of) in *Fantastic Four: First Steps* (2025) in an animated post credits sequence.

Captain America #248 (Aug. 1980) features the dream team of Roger Stern and John Byrne. Behind a striking cover featuring Dragon Man chomping on Cap's shield, we discover Machinesmith is the latest mastermind to use Dragon Man to attack a hero, after learning the creature didn't die in FF #135, but was in "A dormant state, just waiting for the spark that will return him to full vitality."

In a 2002 interview with Newsarama, Stern explains his taking over the book: "I had been the editor of *Captain America* for a couple of years in the late '70s, and despite the efforts of several writers and artists-often under battlefield conditions—I was never able to get the kind of stories I really wanted. As I recall, some were pretty good. But Cap stories should be great."



(top) Giant-Man and Dragon Man battle on this glorious page by John Buscema and George Roussos from *Avengers* #41. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

(inset) Dragon Man battles the Avengers in issue #41. Art by John Buscema and George Roussos. (bottom left) The cover to the UK's *Complete Fantastic Four* #3 was a new presentation of John Buscema and Joe Sinnott's cover from (bottom right) *Fantastic Four* #134.

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(left) Dragon Man makes a dramatic appearance in *Fantastic Four* #134.

Art by John Buscema and Joe Sinnott. (right)

Things don't look good for Cap on the cover of *Captain America* #248.

Art by John Byrne and Joe Rubinstein. (opposite page) Cap takes aim at Dragon Man on this action-packed page from *Captain America* #248.

Art by John Byrne and Joe Rubinstein. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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Its undeniable that *Cap* #248-249 is one of those great stories, with stunning artwork by Byrne. Cap battles Dragon Man and destroys the ultrasonic sphere controlling the monster, Dragon Man leads Cap back to Machinesmith, seeking revenge on his tormentor, but the villain electrocutes him.

Steve Ditko is the next artist to take a stab at illustrating a Dragon Man story in *Fantastic Four Annual* #16 (Jan. 1981). Once again, Dragon Man is described as "ever-delightful". Ed Hannigan's tale has Dragon Man hiding out in his own "Sanctum Sanctorum" in Pennsylvania. We are reminded how childlike the creature is, sleeping with a doll, which reminds him of Sue Storm. He is soon embroiled in the machinations of Ral Dorn, who befriends Dragon Man and takes him to his own dimension as his steed.

Bill Mantlo glosses over the fact Dragon Man was last seen in another dimension (in much the same way as previous writers have ignored Dragon Man being burnt, frozen, or electrocuted), in *Incredible Hulk* #292 (Feb. 1984). Sal Buscema gets the chance to follow in the footsteps of brother John in illustrating a Dragon Man clash, this time with the Green Goliath, after the android returns to Earth and falls under the hypnotic control of the Ringmaster.

Louise Simonson and June Brigman would be the next creators to reactivate Dragon Man, in the pages of their book, *Power Pack*. Simonson explained to Marvel.com the germ of the idea to create a team of superhero children: "I'd seen a little kid in Central Park learning to ride a bike and I thought-even a kid with super powers would have so much real life stuff to learn. I had three siblings-there were four of us, as there were in some of my favorite kids books. And I liked writing group books. I loved shifting group dynamics."

Dragon Man's childlike sensibility makes him a perfect fit with the Power children. In *Power Pack* #6 (Jan 1985), Dragon Man kidnaps his creator, Gregson Gilbert, bringing him into conflict with Spider-Man, Cloak and Dagger, and Power Pack. Gilbert tells Julie and Katie Power that kindness influences Dragon Man, and Katie bonds with the creature, giving him the name Baby. There could be a reason for this bond, as June Brigman explained to the *Unpacking the Power of Power Pack* podcast: "Katie keeps on being called a monster or keeps thinking she is a monster and she is the most monstrous looking of all four."

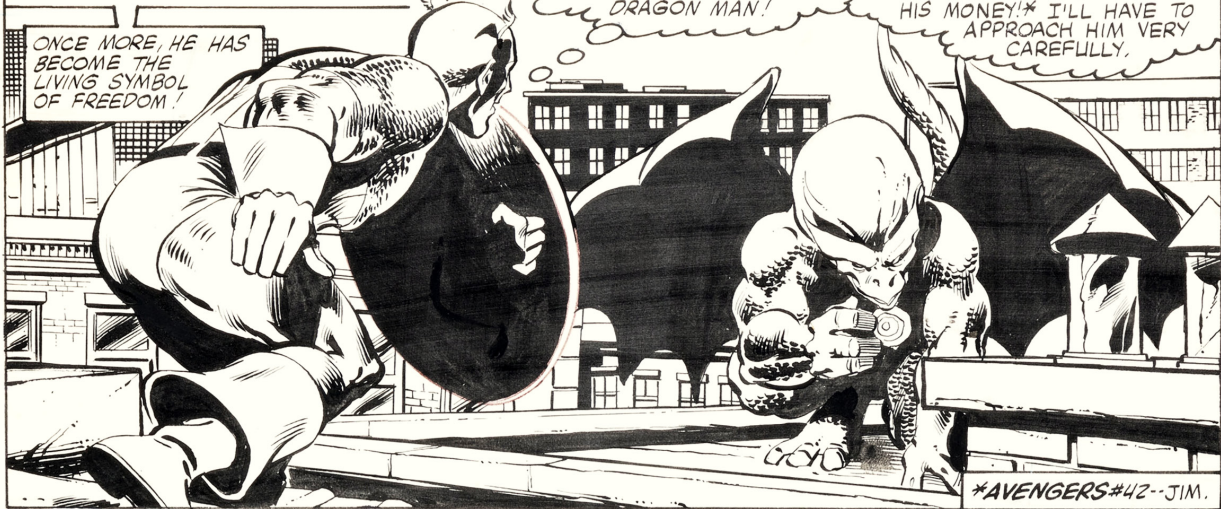
After dispatching the latest villains controlling him, the kids give Dragon Man sanctuary in their basement.

BUT THE MAN WHO BOLDLY DASHES ACROSS THE ROOFTOPS IS NO LONGER A WEARY FREELANCE ARTIST.

ONCE MORE, HE HAS BECOME THE LIVING SYMBOL OF FREEDOM!

I'D HOPED I WAS WRONG ABOUT THAT SILHOUETTE, BUT... IT'S HIM ALL RIGHT! DRAGON MAN!

I NEVER WENT UP AGAINST HIM MYSELF -- BUT AS I RECALL, HE GAVE HERCULES A RUN FOR HIS MONEY! I'LL HAVE TO APPROACH HIM VERY CAREFULLY.



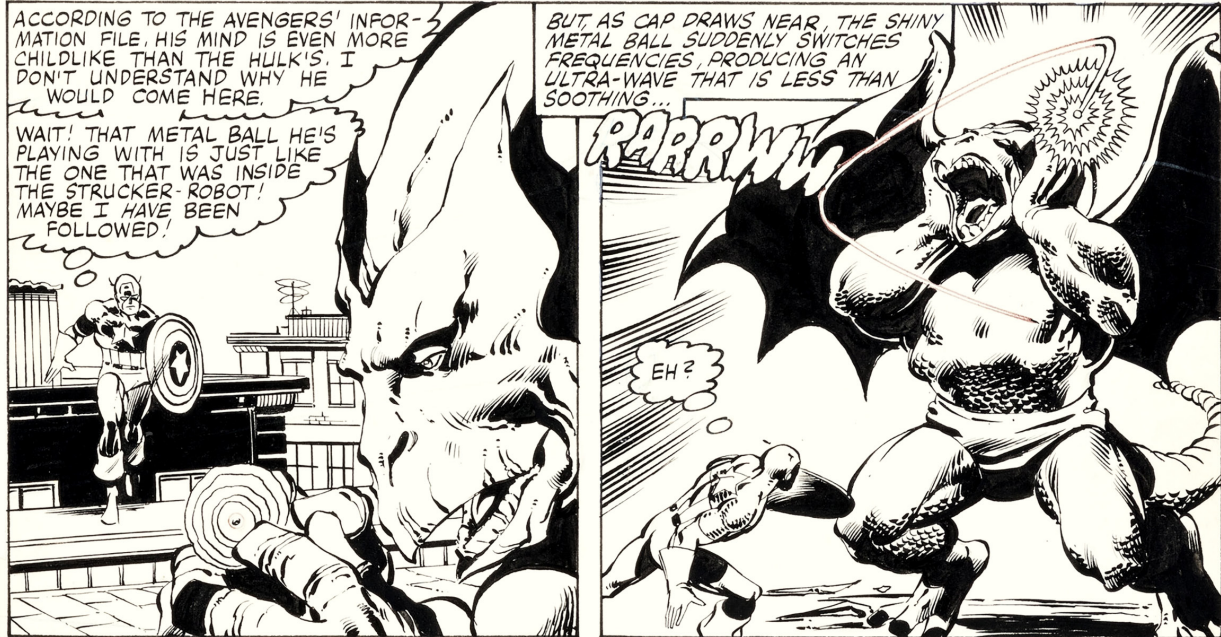
*AVENGERS#42--JIM.

ACCORDING TO THE AVENGERS' INFORMATION FILE, HIS MIND IS EVEN MORE CHILDLIKE THAN THE HULK'S. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY HE WOULD COME HERE.

WAIT! THAT METAL BALL HE'S PLAYING WITH IS JUST LIKE THE ONE THAT WAS INSIDE THE STRUCKER-ROBOT! MAYBE I HAVE BEEN FOLLOWED!

BUT AS CAP DRAWS NEAR, THE SHINY METAL BALL SUDDENLY SWITCHES FREQUENCIES, PRODUCING AN ULTRA-WAVE THAT IS LESS THAN SOOTHING...

RARRRRRR

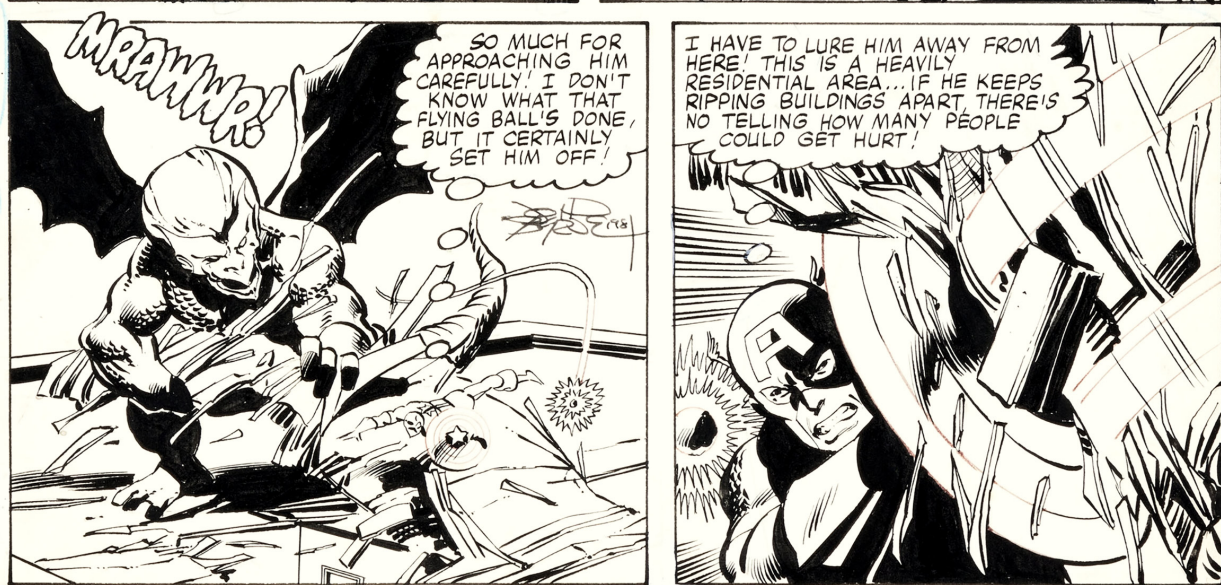


EH?

WRAWWW

SO MUCH FOR APPROACHING HIM CAREFULLY! I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT FLYING BALL'S DONE, BUT IT CERTAINLY SET HIM OFF!

I HAVE TO LURE HIM AWAY FROM HERE! THIS IS A HEAVILY RESIDENTIAL AREA... IF HE KEEPS RIPPING BUILDINGS APART THERE'S NO TELLING HOW MANY PEOPLE COULD GET HURT!



(top) Dragon Man by Steve Ditko.
 (bottom) There's not much worse than a dragon with a cold. From *Power Pack* #7. Art by June Brigman and Bob Wiacek.
 (inset) Dragon Man got his own Marvel Value Stamp.

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Power Pack #7 (Feb. 1985) sees Dragon Man with a cold and sneezing fire, making his stay with the family untenable. Mobster Chic DiAngelo forces Gregson into building more robots. Gregson relays Dragon Man's origin to Julie in the visual form of a fairy tale, with him pictured as a wizard. The sequence highlights Gregson's motivation in the creation of Dragon Man: his loneliness. The following issue sees Gregson regretting abandoning his prize creation, as he builds a headband for Dragon Man to block the sonic waves controlling him, and Dragon Man is returned to the care of his creator.

Steve Englehart is the next writer to bring back Dragon Man. Englehart remembers his first encounter with Dragon Man: "His first FF story. I didn't buy it off the stands but got it two years later when I started collecting."

Aron the rogue Watcher has gained control over Dragon Man to attack She-Hulk and Ms. Marvel (Sharon Ventura) in *Fantastic Four* #321 (Dec 1988). Realizing Dragon Man has a weakness for beautiful women, She-Hulk puts herself between Dragon Man and the monstrous Ventura. Dragon Man has little agency in the story, as Englehart explains: "He's a sweetheart, but in this case, he was hired muscle."

Thus begins Aron's plan to collect cosmic ray altered cell samples to create clones of the Fantastic Four. By *FF* #328 (July 1989), Englehart is using the pseudonym John Harkness. "Marvel was screwing with my stories editorially," Englehart explains. "So I took my name off them. John Harkness is sort of my standard pseudonym when I need one." And for those readers wondering about that surname: "No relation to Agatha."

In *FF* #329 (Aug. 1989) Aron sends his clones to battle the Mole Man, with Dragon Man ever the passive observer. *FF* #332 (Nov. 1989) sees Dragon Man mooning over the real, imprisoned Sue Richards, but won't rescue her as he perceives her to be sleeping and in no danger. In the following issue, Dragon Man disappears halfway through the issue while the real and clone FF battle. As with other villains who use him, Aron seemingly loses interest in Dragon Man and disappears with the FF clones.

John Harkness appears in the final panels of *FF* #333, handing over the writing baton to Walter Simonson. "Frankly, I ignore that issue," Englehart states. "I wanted to do something nice for my family but editorial put that toupee on me and wiped it all away."

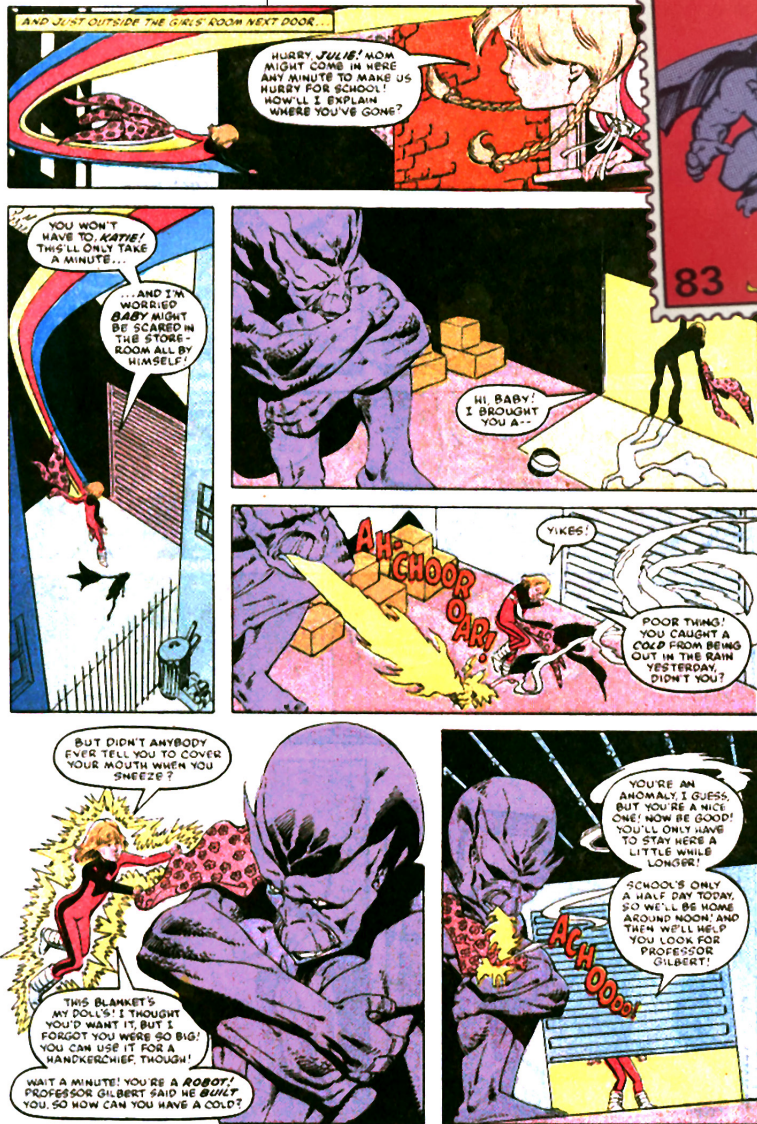
The Nineties sees Dragon Man flying in and out of several titles.

Gerry Conway returns to the character in *Web of Spider-Man* #61 (Feb. 1990). This time, Dragon Man is under the control of the Wizard in a chapter of the "Acts of Vengeance" crossover. The amazing Alex Saviuk art shows Spidey going toe to... claw with Dragon Man, emerging unscathed after facing blasts of fire breath, thanks to having the powers of Captain Universe.

In *Sensational She-Hulk* #27 (May 1991), Simon Furman and Rick Levins have the Killer Shrike and the Grey Gargoyle use Dragon Man to attack Shulkie.

Dragon Man joins the new Enforcers in *Web of Spider-Man* #99 (April 1993) by Terry Kavanagh and Alex Saviuk, alongside Eel, Blitz, Dreadnought, Vanisher, and Super-Adaptoid.

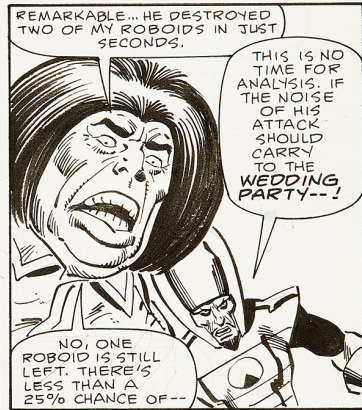
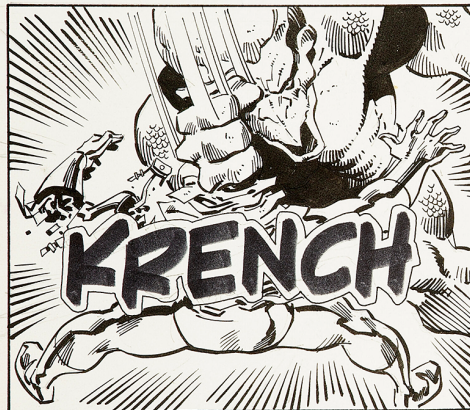
In *Fantastic Four* #400 (May 1995), Tom DeFalco and Paul Ryan bring back Aron the rogue Watcher who again enlists Dragon Man to battle the team.



(top) Brothers Buscema, John and Sal, team up for this page from *Fantastic Four* #300. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

(bottom) Steve Englehart with toupee. *Fantastic Four* #333. Art by Rich Buckler and Romeo Tanghal.(inset) Dragon Man's back with the FF. Art by Ron Frenz and Joe Sinnott.

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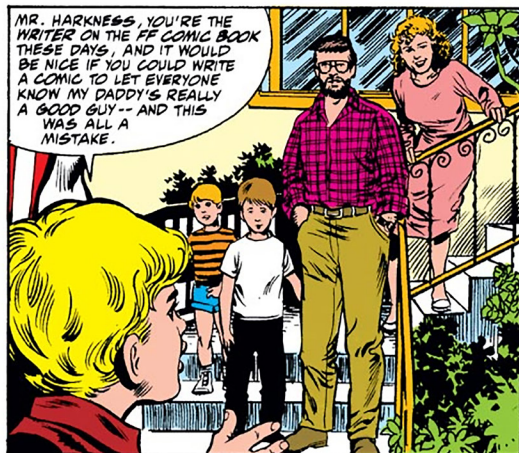
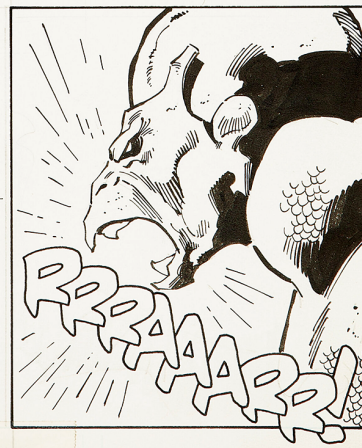
Spectacular Spider-Man #235 (Jun 1996) by Todd Dezago and Sal Buscema has Ben Reilly as Spider-Man battle a Jonas Harrow controlled Dragon Man for the first time. The epic clash continues in the following issue, which features a strikingly dramatic cover with Dragon Man dominating the top half, breathing fire onto a cowering Spidey and his logo.

Harrow returns in Todd Dezago's *The Thing and She-Hulk: The Long Night* (May 2002) and once again, Dragon Man is used, beaten up, comes to the rescue, and flies away. As with previous artists, Bryan Hitch displays what a visual treat Dragon Man is with an amazing full-page introduction. What Dragon Man lacks in speech, he makes up for in dynamic splash pages.

In *Human Torch* #12 (Apr. 2004), Karl Kesel and Paco Medina have a Skrull posing as Gregson Gilbert, who Dragon Man can smell isn't the real deal. At the end of the issue, the real Gilbert sums up his creation: "Once caged, all Dragon Man can think of is escape... but if left free, to come back of his own volition, he's quite receptive to certain training."

The rest of the 2000's sees Dragon Man showing up in, among others, *She-Hulk* #5 (Jul. 2004), *Fantastic Four Foes* #1 and #6 (2005), and *Black Panther* #9 (Oct. 2005). Scott Kollins' breathtaking depiction of Dragon Man in *Beyond!* #2-3 (2006) perfectly displays just how much fun artists have with the android. His battle with Deathlok and Firebird is stunning.

In *X-Men: First Class Special* (May 2007), Jeff Parker and Paul Smith reveal Kitty Pryde wasn't the first X-Man to have a pet dragon. They tell the story of the original team adopting Dragon Man as their "mascot," after he forms a bond with Jean Grey.



However, it's evident the android can't be easily controlled, and Professor X insists they find another home for Dragon Man. Jean accompanies the creature to Monster Island, kissing him goodbye and calling him "best dragon ever."

In another retroactive reveal, *Fall of the Hulks: Red Hulk #1* (Jan. 2010) sees Jeff Parker add a new dimension to the creation of Dragon Man. Red Hulk and A-Bomb discover the history of a cosmos automaton, a self-replicating entity seeking a form and influencing Gregson Gilbert to build it a body: Dragon Man.



(top left) Spidey's getting a bit toasty on the cover of *Web of Spider-Man* #61. Art by Alex Saviuk and Andy Mushynsky. (top right) Dragon Man likes roasting Spider-Man, regardless of who's wearing the suit. Art by Sal Buscema and John Stanisci. (bottom left) Dragon Man becomes a central part of the Future Foundation. *FF* #12 cover by Steve Epting. (bottom right) Dragon Man doesn't so much swim as sink on the cover of *FF* #9 by Mike Allred.

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After Diablo gives Dragon Man life, the cosmos automaton cannot inhabit the android's body.

It is remarkable that so many writers and artists were keen to use Dragon Man for a bit of mindless muscle but were not bothered with developing the character beyond his usual tropes of being used by masterminds and having a weakness for women. That all changed in *Fantastic Four* #579 (May 2010), courtesy of Jonathan Hickman and Neil Edwards. Valeria Richards gives Dragon Man an upgrade to increase his intelligence and he becomes part of the Future Foundation.

In *FF* #580 (June 2010), a bespectacled Dragon Man finally speaks: "Nothing compares to the laser-like focus of a well-heeled mind, Dr. Richards." It only took him 45 years to find his voice! Dragon Man embraces his new role as scientist and mentor to the younger members of the Foundation.

Hickman focuses on Dragon Man, Valeria, and Franklin in the ongoing *FF* series in 2011. In *FF* #3 (July 2011), Diablo sees for himself the change in "his" creation. In *FF* #12 (Nov. 2011), artist Juan Babilo gives Dragon Man a more fantasy dragon look, before the aptly named Nick Dragotta returns him to his regular appearance in *FF* #15 (Feb. 2012).

Dragon Man plays a significant role in Matt Fraction and Micheal Allred's *FF* series in 2012, becoming part of Scott Lang's support team. In *FF* #8 (June 2013), Dragon Man dons a white scientist coat to create Thing rings for Darla Deering to access her Thing suit and an apron to bake muffins in at the same issue. The series also serves to push Dragon Man, and the troublesome Wizard clone Bentley-23, closer together as frenemies.

One android saves another in *Fantastic Four* #9 (Aug 2014). S.H.I.E.L.D. forbids the *FF* from entering the Baxter Building, taking the Future Foundation kids to a secret location. Original Human Torch, Jim Hammond, aids the kids in rescuing Dragon Man from government ordered deactivation.

Future Foundation are given their own five issue limited series in 2019. Written by Jeremy Whitley and illustrated by Will Rosbon, Paco Diaz, and Alti Firmansyah, the book has Dragon Man reuniting with old friends Alex and Julie Power.

Diablo names 'his' creation Draconus in *Fantastic Four* #28 (Jan. 2021) before attempting to remove his life force. The Human Torch saves him and Valeria repairs him, at Bentley's impassioned request.

Dragon Man is last seen in Dan Slott's *Fantastic Four* #39 (Jan. 2022) flying off with Bentley as the new Wizard. Dragon Man's story has flown full circle. He is once again in the thrall of a scientist, but it remains to be seen if he reverts to being a mindless pawn for villainy. That would be a huge step back for such a great character after many years as an intelligent, ever-delightful, Dragon Man.

Paul Burns is a writer from the UK. As well as being a lifelong Doctor Who fan he is also against cruelty to animals, in particular, dragons. Paul would like to thank the always kind Steve Englehart for his contribution to this article.



end

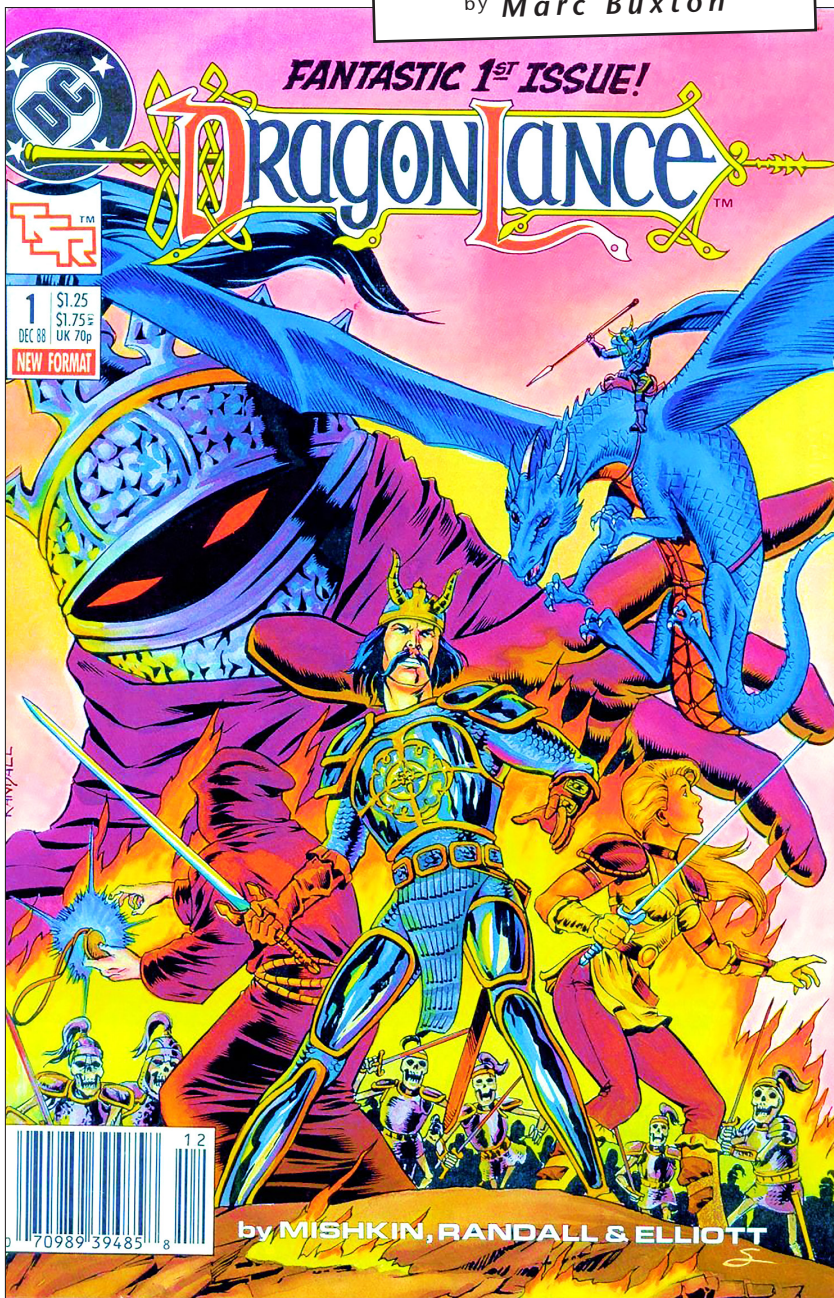
DragonLance



HERE THERE BE DRAGONS



by Marc Buxton



'Twas the year 1988, adventurers, and when it came to the world of DC Comics, it is not a stretch to say, superheroes ruled. In the past, DC Comics experimented with many new heroes who wielded sword and axe. Heroes such *Claw the Unconquered*, *Beowulf*, *Hercules Unbound*, and the one breakthrough fantasy hit to land at DC: *Warlord*. The '80s saw some fantasy sparks with *Arion, Lord of Atlantis*, *Conqueror of the Barren Earth*, and *Amethyst, Princess of Gemworld*. But most DC fantasies failed to capture lasting success. In the heady days of the late Bronze Age, that did not stop DC from trying, because elsewhere fantasy was as hot as ever. Fans of a certain age will remember sitting in basements, rolling up characters, slaying orcs, and encountering those grandest to beasts: dragons, as *Dungeons and Dragons* defined a generation.

Adding to the worlds of D&D, the company TSR began searching for new RPG worlds and new gaming ideas. In 1984, Margaret Weis, newly named editor for TSR's new novel and book department, a unique venture that would soon etch *DragonLance* into literary fantasy history, and Tracy Hickman, a game designer with a few published TSR adventures stored in his quiver, began work on *DragonLance* and the world of Krynn. Hickman and his wife Laura were inspired to write a series of new adventures that would tell a single story, a serialized adventure where players would end with a cliffhanger so role-players would be eager to purchase the next chapter.

Thus, *DragonLance* and the setting of Krynn were born. In March of '84, TSR published Hickman's first module *Dragons of Despair*. Unlike the amorphous, ever present classic D&D, *DragonLance* and its roll out would be a full-on marketing blitz, with rule books, modules, art books, miniatures, and for the first time, novels. Yes, it was the novels that would make the World of Krynn a fantasy staple for decades to come. Another, unnamed, writer was tapped to head the *DragonLance* novels, but after Weis and Hickman disliked the manuscript, the two intrepid creators wrote *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, and the rest is history.

The core idea behind *DragonLance* is a world without hope where a small band of ordinary heroes would bring light to a despairing world. Weis and Hickman introduced gamers and readers to the Heroes of the Lance. Tanis Half-Elven, a brooding ranger who lived in two worlds and was accepted by none; Sturm Brightblade, a noble and pompous knight; Raistlin Majere, a mysterious and complex character; Caramon Majere, Raistlin's brother and protector; Flint Fireforge, a gruff but sensitive dwarf; Goldmoon, a kindly female cleric who was the symbol of hope for a broken world; Riverwind, Goldmoon's protector and betrothed; and the Kender Tasselhoff Burrfoot, the comedic heart of *DragonLance* and master thief. These heroes had to survive and try to

The quest begins in *DragonLance* #1. Cover by Ron Randall.

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(left) Riva Silvercrown and Sturm Brightblade in action from the first issue. Art by Ron Randall and Randy Elliott. (right) Riva has a bad night. *DragonLance* #3 cover by Ron Randall.

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save their world as dragons returned to Krynn along with a conflict that could plunge the world into eternal darkness.

The authors introduced a rich and detailed past to the world of Krynn, and it was with that history other authors stepped in. *DragonLance* was such a literary hit that a huge series of adventures were published alongside Weis and Hickman's core novels. More books and games soon followed, along with a video game, and soon, comics, as DC Comics threw down the gauntlet and entered the complex skies of Krynn.

AD&DC

Editor Barbara Kesel related how the DC and D&D union began, "A box of Ral Partha figures showed up at DC," Kesel told *BACK ISSUE*.



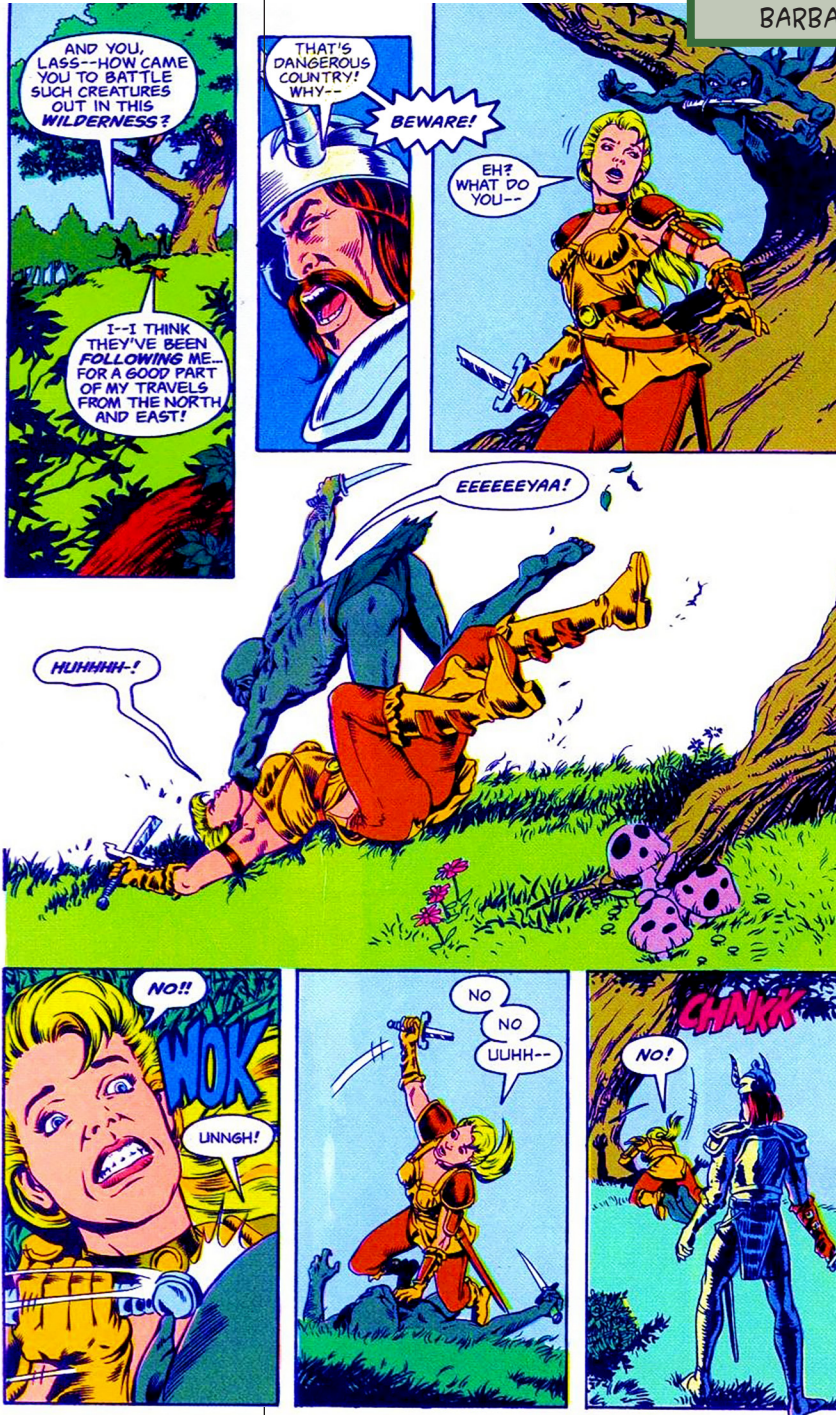
BARBARA KESEL

"I saw them in Dick Giordano's office, and I said, 'Oh, you've got gaming miniatures there.' They had a query from TSR about doing comic stuff. And so, I had the head of marketing drop into my office and say, 'We understand you understand this gaming thing?' And I said, 'Yes, I speak geek.'"

After about a year of development between DC, Kesel, and TSR, the initial roll out began and consisted of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, *Forgotten Realms*, the sci-fi laden *Gamma-raid*, and yes, adventurers, *DragonLance*.

The books, particularly the three direct *Dungeons and Dragons* adaptations, including *DragonLance*, would be moderate hits. In the first year of the licensing arrangement, some of the TSR books outsold *Wonder Woman* and a few other DC mainstays. It seems there were indeed many gamers who crossed over into the world of comics, and the partnership seemed healthy.

To bring Weis and Hickman's world to life, DC and TSR turned to a writer who was no stranger to fantasy. Writer Dan Mishkin had recently completed a run on his co-creation *Amethyst: Princess of Gemworld*, another high fantasy, *Dungeons and Dragons* adjacent concept. Kesel, Mishkin's editor on both *DragonLance* and *Advanced Dungeons of Dragons*, fondly recalls how she picked the creator of *Amethyst* as the



main writer on the DC D&D books. "I chose him because he's one of my favorite human beings, and we were talking about working on a project together during that time. And there's some people you just know are going to give it their all to do a good solid job."

Mishkin was not a seasoned role-player. He revealed to *BACK ISSUE* that, "When it first came out, I was just finishing college and by the time it gained traction, I was trying to establish a comic book writing career and raise children." But Mishkin was no stranger to high adventure and fantasy, so he was comfortable with playing in the *DragonLance* sandbox, particularly after he got to experience Weis and Hickman's novels.

"I was given the books to read and liked them very much," Mishkin recalls. "And as someone who was never a big fan of *Star Wars*, I was impressed by the fact that the books did what I considered a much better job of bringing together a group of unrelated characters and making them the hinge point of momentous events."

Joining Mishkin in the world of *DragonLance* was artist Ron Randall. Like Mishkin, Randall had a legacy of fantasy comics for DC with *Conqueror of the Barren Earth* (1985) which Randall created with writer Gary Cohn. Randall recalls getting the gig on *DragonLance*, "Well, at that time I'd been away from DC for a while, but I guess they still remembered me. Dan might remember this more clearly, but when they were putting together the TSR books, someone, maybe it was Laurie Sutton, who'd been my editor on the *Barren Earth* series that I'd done with Gary Cohn, might have suggested me."

Editor Kesel recalls why Randall was chosen to visually bring *DragonLance* to life. "I chose Ron Randall for the series because Ron's style has a strong naturalistic quality to it," Kesel said. "So, you could do the weaponry and things and make them look real as opposed to like, you know, kind of weird, plastic, and all that. The same strengths that made him not my first-choice artist for a superhero book made him perfect for this one."

Randall's detailed linework and pacing were perfect for a world as huge as Krynn, and, unlike Mishkin, Randall was a devotee to the myriad worlds of TSR and Dungeons and Dragons. "Oh, I'd played D&D from its earliest days," Randall told *BACK ISSUE*. "When I was at the Kubert School and after (late '70's/early '80s), I played some more with some of my fellow Kubies. Playing D&D with a bunch of cartoonists was a blast."

Most of the early story arcs of *DragonLance* would feature some of Weis and Hickman's familiar creations, but they would be in supporting roles to the original creations done at DC. Early on, DC and TSR had a perfect roleplaying to comic synergy that would last until behind the scenes squabbles would derail the adventures. But these were things beyond the scope of Mishkin and Randall who began the TSR/DC era with *DragonLance* #1 (1988). When this issue was published, it had been a



DAN MISHKIN



(top) In a book called *DragonLance*, there better be dragons. Though Riva probably wishes that there weren't. From issue #4, art by Ron Randall and Randy Elliott. (bottom) Kalthanan takes center stage on the cover of *DragonLance* #5. Art by Mike Collins and Ron Randall. (inset) Randall's cover to *DragonLance* #4.

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(top) Kalthanan makes a new friend in issue #5. Art by Mike Collins, Ron Randall, and Randy Elliott. (bottom left) Kalthanan puts the sword in sword and sorcery. (bottom right) Dragons and minotaurs. How cool is that? *DragonLance* #9 covers by Ron Randall.

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while since Randall picked up his dice. "By then I'd drifted away from the D&D world. So, I read the first three or four novels to get some background before I started the assignment." The novels must have struck a chord, because Randall brought Krynn to life.

Like any great band of dungeon crawlers, Mishkin and Randall, along with Randy Elliot (credited as background inker), were ready to go as we open the first issue of *DragonLance* which begins with novel hero Sturm Brightblade on the road to meet with his friends at The Inn of the Last Home. Sturm stumbles upon a warrior woman in battle with D&D mainstays, hobgoblins. Sturm helps her dispatch the classic roleplay foes, and she introduces herself as Riva Silvercrown, daughter of a Knight of Solamnia. She informs Sturm that even through a woman is not allowed to take the knightly vows, that will not stop her from serving the forces of good.

Mishkin took an instant liking to the novel's characters, telling *BACK ISSUE*, "What we *could* do was weave the main characters from the novels into our stories—the seemingly adlebrained wizard Fizban in our first four issues, and the much more serious, brooding mage Raistlin in our next—and that was a lot of fun." But it was his and Randall's original creation Riva Silvercrown that really stood out to Mishkin.

The writer remembers. "One of the tricks of writing that comic was that I couldn't really do anything with the established characters from the novels that would advance their stories. Which is why Ron Randall and I created Riva Silvercrown, a character we both really loved. I think Ron and I have always been attracted to the idea of young women playing the action hero roles that were traditionally given to men, so Riva came very quickly to us, both in her position of having to break gender stereotypes in the world of our stories, and in Ron's visual realization of her."

With Riva, the first troubles between DC and TSR began as the company that owned D&D balked at a female protagonist. Kesel remembered, "We got some pushback on the first ones from TSR, where we said our lead character Riva is a paladin. And they said, 'Girls can't be paladins.' We said, 'That's our story.'"

To this day, Kesel remains proud of the creation of Riva in a time when female protagonists in mainstream comics were rare. Kesel remembered, "I liked doing that character. I've always been obsessively pushing for female heroes and the pushback I would get all the time is girl heroes don't sell. I'd say, 'You know, crap doesn't sell.' It's like, let's do stories where the girl is in the driver's seat. And then I kept getting, 'We don't have any numbers on that.' 'Yes, because it doesn't exist. Let's try one.'"



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DC COMICS OFFSET

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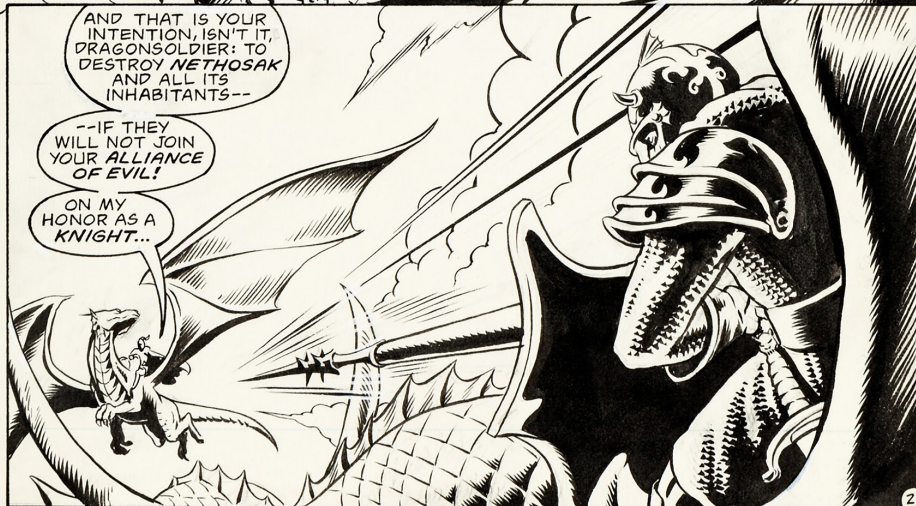
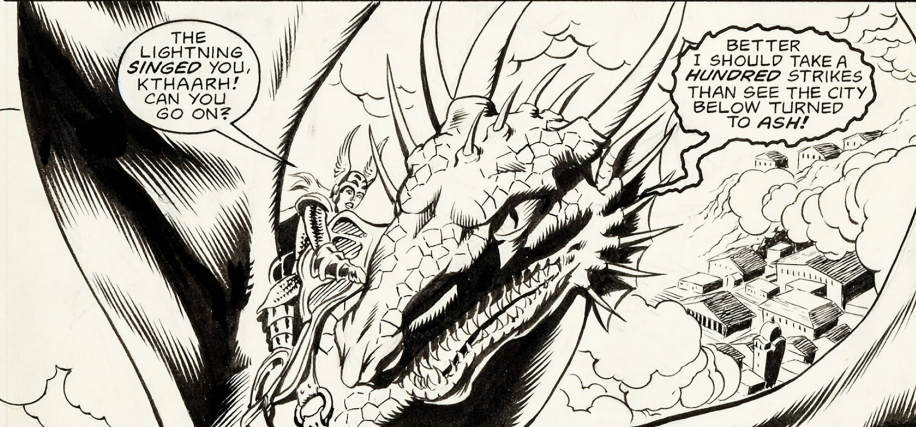
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COLOR: RAVAS DRAGON IS GOLD. OTHERS ARE BLUE.



RON RANDALL

Ocean Yamaha from Portland, USA.

Dragons and riders battle it out in issue #9. Art by Dave Simons, Ron Randall, and Randy Elliott. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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INSTRUCTIONS FOR DOUBLE-PAGE SPREAD: CUT AS SHOWN, ABUT PAGES, TAPE ON BACK. DO NOT OVERLAP!

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ALL BLEED ART MUST EXTEND TO OUTERMOST SOLID LINE

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UH-OH, IT'S MAGIC

Before we chronicle the rift that would tear two companies asunder, dear adventurers, let us examine Mishkin and Randall's second arc which began in issue #5 (Feb. 1989). Mishkin, joined this time by artist Michael Collins (Randall remains on inks), again weaves more classic *DragonLance* characters in the comic narrative. The issue introduced Kalthanan, a dark elf outcast, who runs afoul of novel anti-hero Raistlin Majere. Like Riva, with Kalthanan, Mishkin introduces a fresh hero that weaves with the novels as Kalthanan meets Flint and Tanis.

Mishkin doesn't have great recall of his time writing Kalthanan, but upon revisiting the arc for this article, Mishkin mused, "I mean, he seems from the one issue to be a combination of various tropes of this kind of fiction (wanderer unsure of his place, tainted patronage, quick witted, maybe a bit of a rogue) and I guess I combined them in the right way to let him become an individual rather than a stereotype."

The next issue (March 1989) introduces Kalthanan's old friend Myrella Haarvan, a pirate mage who must help the exiled elf navigate his dual nature now that he is possessed by Raistlin's dark powers. The arc serves as a guide to the major gods, locales, and players of Krynn and ends with Kalthanan's final confrontation with Raistlin and a very dark and shocking secret revealed about the dark elf's true nature. "Raistlin's Pawn" was an epic adventure filled with shades of grey characters battling alongside the *DragonLance* classics. It truly showed the potential that the DC/D&D pairing shared. Until that pairing was torn apart because of... Buck Rogers? How's that for a tease? Read on.

CRITICAL HIT? NOT QUITE

The first two arcs of *DragonLance* showed the power of DC's newest fantasy venture. The creatives on *DragonLance*, led by Mishkin, Kesel, and Randall, were realizing the complex world of the novels into a very accomplished comics series that was selling well. You'd think all parties involved would be in harmony, but such was not the case as DC and TSR

were heading into their second year. Mishkin recalls, "Except for Jeff Grubb, who was my point of contact for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, and himself a writer, TSR was the most difficult licensor I ever had to work with. I had my gripes with Paramount on occasion when I was writing *Star Trek* comics, but nothing like this."

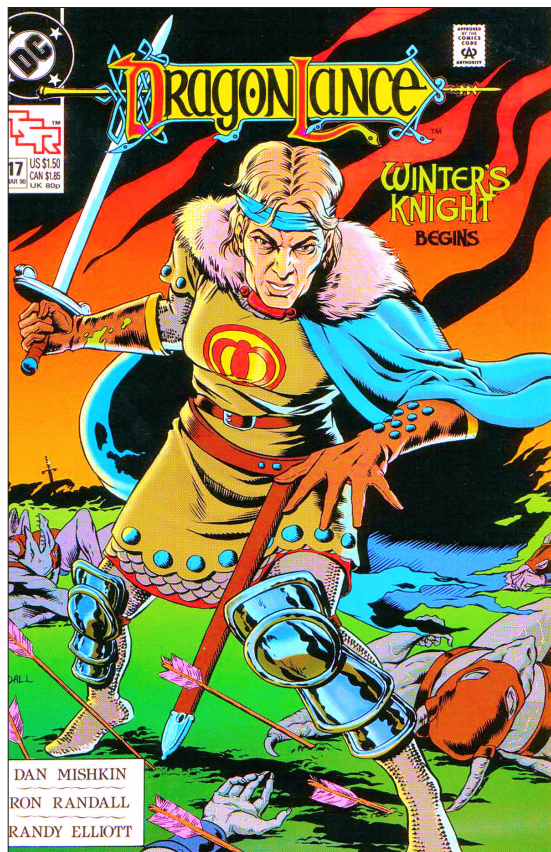
Kesel agreed and offered an explanation on why the partnership became shaky. "They were very particular about a lot of the usage of the characters, especially with *DragonLance*. They had an extremely valuable trademark to protect. So, they want to make sure it was true to the source material and true to the audience in a way where, you know, they didn't want us bruising their golden goose. So, they were particularly hard to work with."

Mishkin added, "I think they fundamentally did not understand that I was writing stories, and that process was very different from running a D&D campaign. They, of course, held me to the rules of how their world worked, which is absolutely what they were there for. But the way I remember it, they would block things or ask me to drop or change things for reasons that were not at all made clear. Kind of a stereotype of the nerd who's so buried in their interests that they're unable to shift perspectives, not seeing the forest for the trees."

Kesel has a less harsh view of the growing rift between Mishkin and the execs at TSR. The editor recalls, "Part of the problem we had was two sets of rams clashing at each other, and I was there in the middle, sometimes making nice with people on both sides. There's passionate interest in the guys in TSR and protecting that world and their property, and most of them had been gamers who were there working on staff. And here's a guy who's passionately pushing forward good story stuff on his side, and he's a grownup who comes from a literary environment. So, you run into clashes based on the things you can or can't do within the fictions. And sometimes fiction comes from breaking the rule."

(left) A new story begins in *DragonLance* #14. Cover by Mike Collins and Ron Randall. (right) A much older Riva Silvercrown returns in *DragonLance* #17. Cover by Ron Randall.

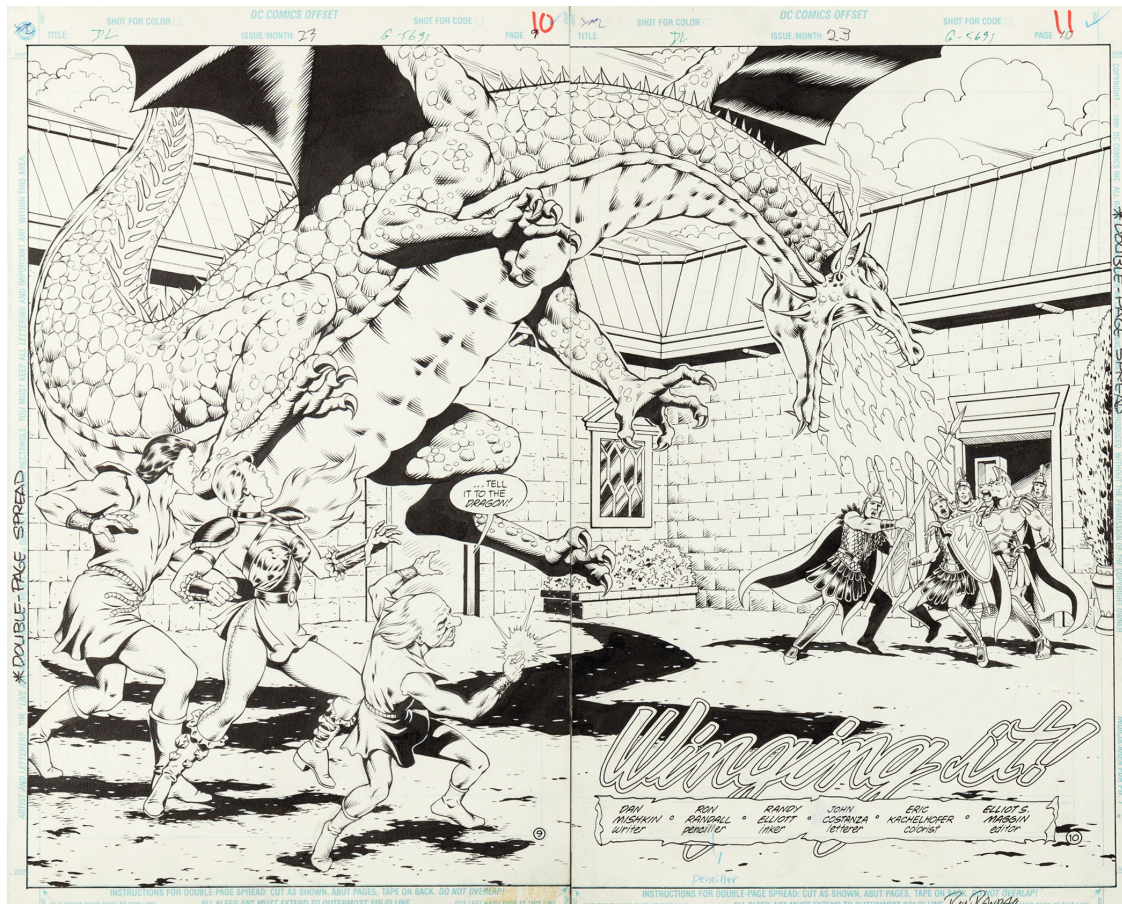
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One can imagine, adventurers, that working with a company so precious about their license could make things difficult for even the staunchest comic vet. But despite these challenges, Mishkin did the work of a true warrior as he began the third arc with *DragonLance* #9 (July 1989) "The Arena of Istar." Artist Dave Simons joins Mishkin and Randall to tell a story set after the original trilogy of novels. This post-War of the Lance adventure serves as a bridge between Weis and Hickman's two trilogies.

With issue #11 (Sept. 1989), Elliott S. Maggin took over as editor, but it was business as usual for Mishkin and his artists in the next arc, "High Sorcery." Here, Mishkin brings back Myrella and has her navigate the complex history of Raistlin as she must pass the test to become a full-fledged wizard. Riverwind and Goldmoon come to Myrella's aid, giving readers their requisite classic character connection. But perhaps here, in this arc, the cracks are beginning to show. There's nothing wrong with the story as Mishkin hands in his usual strong world and character-building script, but there seems to be less of a TSR connection. For about eight issues, the D&D lore filled back matter is absent until issue #15 (Jan 1990). Is this the first signal the executive interference and lack of understanding of the comic book medium was beginning to fray the relationship between the two stalwart foundations of the nerd world-DC and D&D?

Mishkin reunited with Randall on full art for issue #17 (March 1990) with a new arc entitled "Winter's Knight." The two creators certainly had a tremendous dynamic, as Randall fondly remembers his time working with Mishkin. "Dan would have to run it through the approval process, making sure that TSR was comfortable with what we have in mind," Randall remembers. "I think that was a huge part of his job, and he did it great. Again, my input, beyond designing Riva, and a few other secondary characters that came into the stories, was very minimal."



(top) New lands are explored beginning in *DragonLance* #22. Cover by Ron Randall. (bottom) Even though they're in new lands, there are still dragons. From *DragonLance* #23. Art by Ron Randall and Randy Elliott. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (inset) Ron Randall's cover to *DragonLance* #25.

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So, it seems it was the writer who had to combat TSR's lack of faith in the comic book medium as Randall just did his best to put the epic feel of *DragonLance* on the page as evident on his work in this new arc. But Mishkin had to dodge the sword blows sent his way by the TSR powers-that-be. "As I said before, they were by and large a pain, but I assume they were supportive of getting licensing income." Mishkin had to hit some Nat 20s on his Charisma checks to deal with the corporate interference from the licensee, but the work did not suffer in "Winter's Knight," where Mishkin returns to Riva Silvercrown. This tale chronicles Riva's later years as an aged knight, an opportunity that was perfect for the types of stories Mishkin and company were telling.

"Ron Randall and I seized the opportunity to tell a final story that takes place in her old age. Depicting her as young in one storyline and old in another was one advantage of not being allowed to have any impact on the official *DragonLance* continuity."

"Winter's Knight" sees Riva at the end of her life relating tales of how the Knights of Solamnia freed the world from eternal winter three thousand years ago. This arc proves that it was with Riva that Mishkin and Randall shined, and it is with Riva where the DC and D&D alliance was at its peak.

ADVENTURE'S END

From "Winter's Knight," things started to be more random and sporadic for DC's *DragonLance*. Issue #21 (July 1990) was, according to the intro page, "A special interim issue,"



featuring two stories of the women of *DragonLance*. Writer Larry Ganem joined with artists Dave Simons and Bob Downs to present a tale of Myrella and writer Don Kraar joined with artists Aldrin Aw and Randy Elliott for a story of young Riva. Truly, this issue goes a long way to prove that Kesel's vision of a book featuring strong women had come to fruition, but we seasoned historians know that the issue was a fill in, with more to follow.

Perhaps this fill in signaled that the rift between DC and TSR was growing, a rift caused by, of all things, a classic science fiction character (I promised we'd get there!). You see, adventurers, TSR also held the license to *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*. When the DC and TSR deal was done, TSR greatly wanted a Buck Rogers comic to join with the gaming properties. DC was not eager to produce a Buck Rogers comic in the marketplace of 1990. As Kesel put it, "What I understood is that we would have to do a Buck Rogers comic at some point, but we didn't want to lead with it, because it really didn't make any sense in the market as it was right then, but the fantasy gaming stuff did."

But TSR held firm. The gaming company envisioned vast licensing potential in Buck Rogers, and with DC balking, TSR decided to start its own comic book line to market Buck. DC pushed back; after all, DC had paid good money for the TSR license and didn't want shelf space competition from its partner. So TSR could not publish comic books; instead, the gaming company called its new line "Comic Modules!" The whole thing fell flat as TSR couldn't publish comics for its cash cow, *Dungeons and Dragons*. It also caused a fracture between DC and TSR that spelled doom for *DragonLance* and the other D&D books.

It was a shame because *DragonLance* was still going strong with the return of Mishkin and Randall in issue #22 (Aug 1990), as the story branches off from the classic locations and characters of the novels and delves into the unexplored land of Taladas where Riva must battle the Dark Queen on a whole new continent. The next arc in issue #26 (Jan. 91) is the beginning of the end for the *DragonLance* comic. TSR's Buck Rogers was up and running and DC was not happy about it.



That's not to say there weren't good stories yet to be told. Mishkin's curtain call came with *DragonLance* #28 (Mar. 91) another issue with two short stories. The first, with fresh new editor Jim Owsley (Christopher Priest) aboard, features a minotaur focused tale by Mishkin and artist Alan Kupperberg. Despite challenges,

Mishkin still holds his time on *DragonLance* in high regards, even if the assignment came with some career challenges. He said, "I really enjoyed the fact that we were working in our own domain, outside of DC continuity. Despite the difficulties communicating with the TSR people, we were largely left alone by DC and could do our own thing."

The second story of the issue was by Jack C. Harris and Tim Gula, a tale of a hobgoblin sludge spreader. If stories of Hobgoblin poop didn't spell the end of the TSR/DC alliance, I don't know what did.

Mishkin's final *DragonLance* tale was in issue #28. Cover by Jan Duursema. (inset) Randy Elliott's cover to issue #29.

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(left) A beautiful Michael Wm. Kaluta cover to *DragonLance* #30. (right) The adventure concludes in *DragonLance* #34. Cover by Ron Randall and Randy Elliott.

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THE POKÉMON CONNECTION

But there were still three arcs to go before we close this Dungeon Master's Guide. After Mishkin's last issue, Charles and Lisa Moore joined Alan Kupperberg for *DragonLance* #29 (Apr. 91), another Riva in Taladas story. The cast had begun to grow unwieldy and just about every connection to the novels had been lost to this point.

A new writer came aboard for *DragonLance* #30-32 (May-July 91), one Maddie Blaustein. Writing under her deadname in 1991, Blaustein was an intersex individual who was assigned male at birth and served as an editor, writer, and penciller for Marvel before arriving at DC. There, Maddie wrote DC's first transgender hero in the Milestone Comics series *Deathwish*. After a time at DC, Maddie transitioned to female and became an advocate for trans rights. She later became a voice actor and won acclaim as the voice of the popular *Pokémon* character Meowth (1998-2006).

Blaustein also made a stop in Krynn. Who could imagine that the voice of a Pokémon once penned tales of dragons and D&D mayhem? But Blaustein was versatile indeed, adventurers, as evident from her three issues drawn by Randall and Elliott. In Blaustein's arc on *DragonLance*, she presented a tale of young Riva struggling with her gender identity as she is torn between her duties as a young noble and a desire to protect her people as a knight. Blaustein brings her own experiences into the story as Riva must cast off societal expectations and become the knight she is destined to be.

THE LAST RIDE

An arc by comic stalwart Pauk Kupperberg was to follow as DC's *DragonLance* fought its final battle. Kupperberg remembers getting the assignment to turn out the lights on the project. Something he was all too familiar with. "Kim Yale turned to me one day and said, 'You want it,' and we were off," Kupperberg said. "I read some of the previous issues and learned the basics of the world. The book was ending, and like *Aquaman* and *V* and *The Web*, I was the guy who was assigned dead books it seemed."

With Kupperberg's arc, the experiment was over. He delivered a two-parter with Grant Miehm and new editor Kim Yale that saw Riva and company nursing their wounds at the home of an old healer. There, the healer relates a story of the past that saw Kupperberg skillfully navigate the world of Krynn. And with this tale, DC's *DragonLance* was over. No back matter, no word from the editor. Just a few final thoughts from Riva to close this chapter on comic book/fantasy history.

What began with a partnership between two giants in the geek world and a box of gaming miniatures discovered by Barbara Kesel in the DC offices, ended with this final story of healing. Did *DragonLance* sell for DC despite the intercompany turmoil? Initially, despite a lack of faith from DC higher ups in the project and in fantasy comics in general, according to Kesel, yes it did. She told *BACK ISSUE*, "After we got the sales figures in from *DragonLance* #1, I heard this stomping down the hallway, and a marketing person appears in my office door and says, 'How come you didn't tell us it would sell this good?'"

Kesel continued her musings on what could have been, "I'll tell you, at the time I had access to TSR sales figures. We wanted that audience. And I kind of got them"

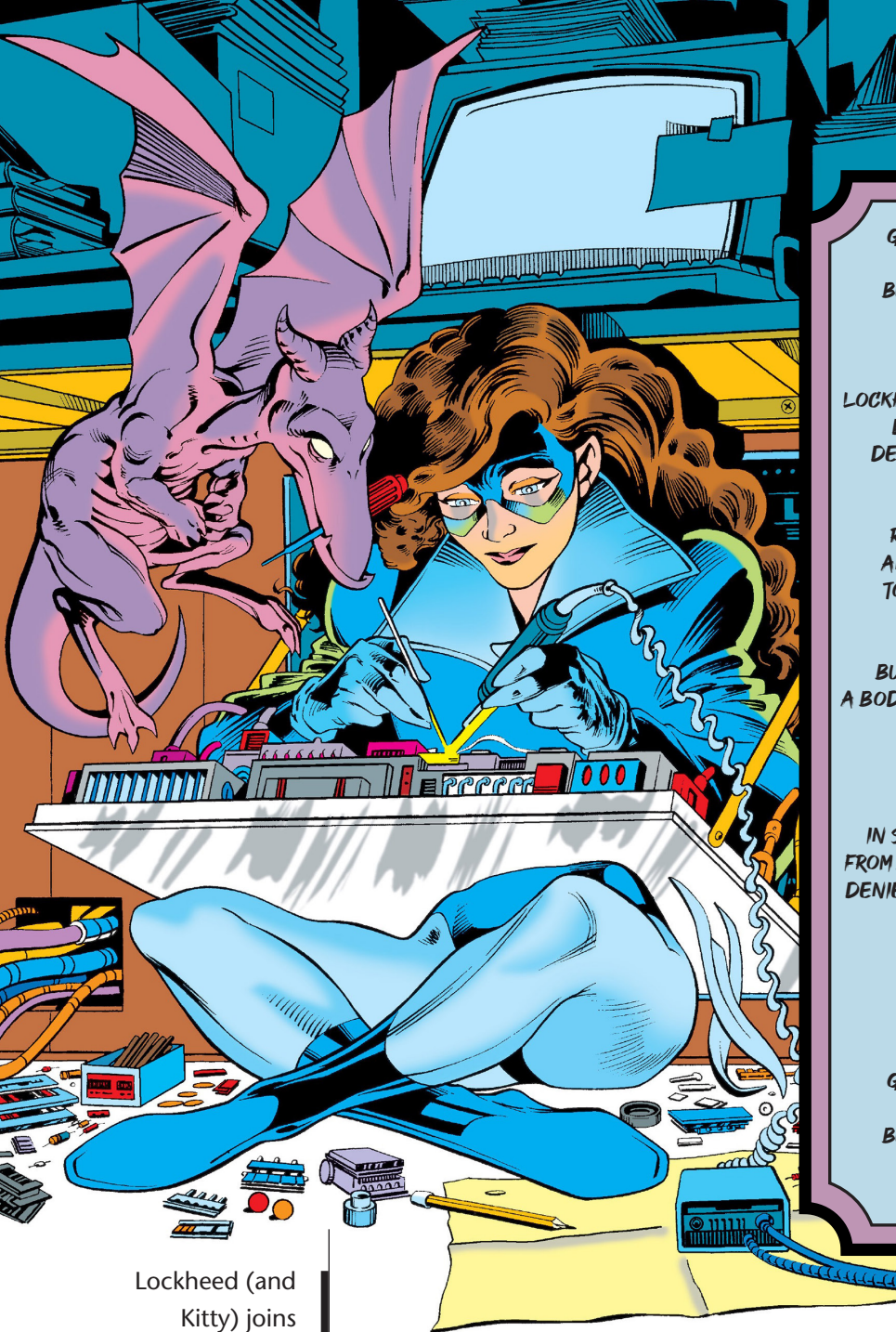
But in some obscure way, the work of Mishkin, Randall, Elliott, Kesel, Kupperberg, and Blaustein lives on. Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro, now owners of all things Dungeons and Dragons, still consider DC's *DragonLance*, this semi-forgotten piece of late Bronze Age history, to be canon in the cosmos of D&D. Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman are still writing *DragonLance* novels, so maybe there is hope that, someday, fans might see Riva and a few of her friends again.

MARC BUXTON is a proud contributor to websites like *Comic Book Resources* and *Den of Geek US*. He is an English teacher, and Marc's loving wife thinks he owns way too many comic books. Marc has been reading comics since the dawn of time and is still deeply in love with every era of the great medium.



end

TWOMORROWS AD PAGE



Lockheed (and Kitty) joins Excalibur. Pin-up from *Excalibur* #2 by Alan Davis and Paul Neary.

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GATHER ALL YE 'ROUND FROM FAR AND NEAR,
AS WE LEARN ABOUT A FAITHFUL FRIEND.
BELIEVE IT OR NOT, A DRAGON, FROM A DREAM
WOULDST APPEAR
AS A COMPANION TO ONE OF THE X-MEN.

LOCKHEED, WAS HE NAMED, THOUGH NOT OF THIS EARTH.
DISCOVERED IN SPACE BY ONE KITTY PRYDE,
DEFENDED HER HE DID, AND PROVED HIS WORTH,
WHEN ALONE SHE NEARLY DIED.

RETURNED WITH HER, WHEN DANGER PASSED
AND HE BECAME AN ERSTWHILE ANIMAL CHUM.
TOGETHER MANY ADVENTURES THEY AMASSED,
IN VARIOUS TITLES OF COMIC-DOM!

BUT LOCKHEED PROVED MORE THAN JUST A PET.
A BODYGUARD, A SCHOLAR, AND EVEN A COVERT MOLE.
ALSO, A JEALOUS LOVER, TO HIS REGRET.
LOCKHEED INDEED PLAYED MANY ROLES.

BUT THIS DRAGON EVOLVED TOO LITTLE.
IN STORYTELLING HE COULD REACH NEW HEIGHTS.
FROM A BACKGROUND CHARACTER, TRAPPED IN DRIVEL,
DENIED TO BE A MAJOR CHARACTER IN HIS OWN RIGHT.

AS SUCH, THIS ARTICLE WILL NEED,
A DETAILED LOOK, FILLED WITH CURIOSITY,
IN CHRONICLING HIS MANY IDENTITIES
AND HIS STORY IN ALL ITS COMPLEXITY!

GATHER ALL YE 'ROUND FROM FAR AND NEAR,
AS WE LEARN ABOUT A FAITHFUL FRIEND.
BELIEVE IT OR NOT, A DRAGON, FROM A DREAM
WOULDST APPEAR
AS A COMPANION TO ONE OF THE X-MEN.

The Curious and Complex Chronicle of Lockheed the Dragon

by John Kirk

(left) Lockheed from "Kitty's Fairy Tale" in *Uncanny X-Men* #153. Art by Dave Cockrum and Joe Rubinstein. (right) Lockheed on the cover of *Uncanny X-Men* #153. Art by Dave Cockrum and Joe Rubinstein.

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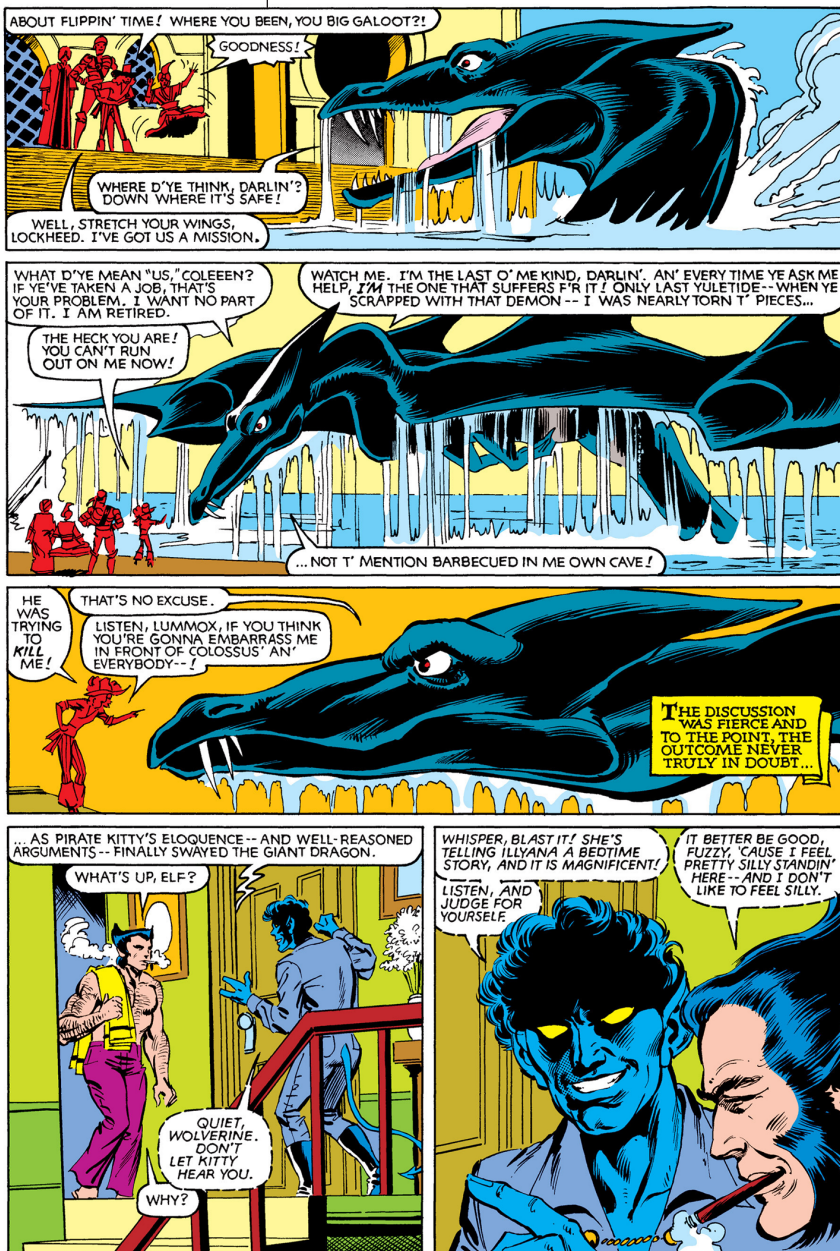
If you were a teen and a fan of *The Uncanny X-Men* in the 1980s, you might have had a crush on Kitty Pryde. Computer whiz, girl-next-door looks, and completely nerdy, she pretty much checked all the boxes. Who wouldn't have had a crush on her? But as if she needed anything else to make her cool, she also had a pet dragon.

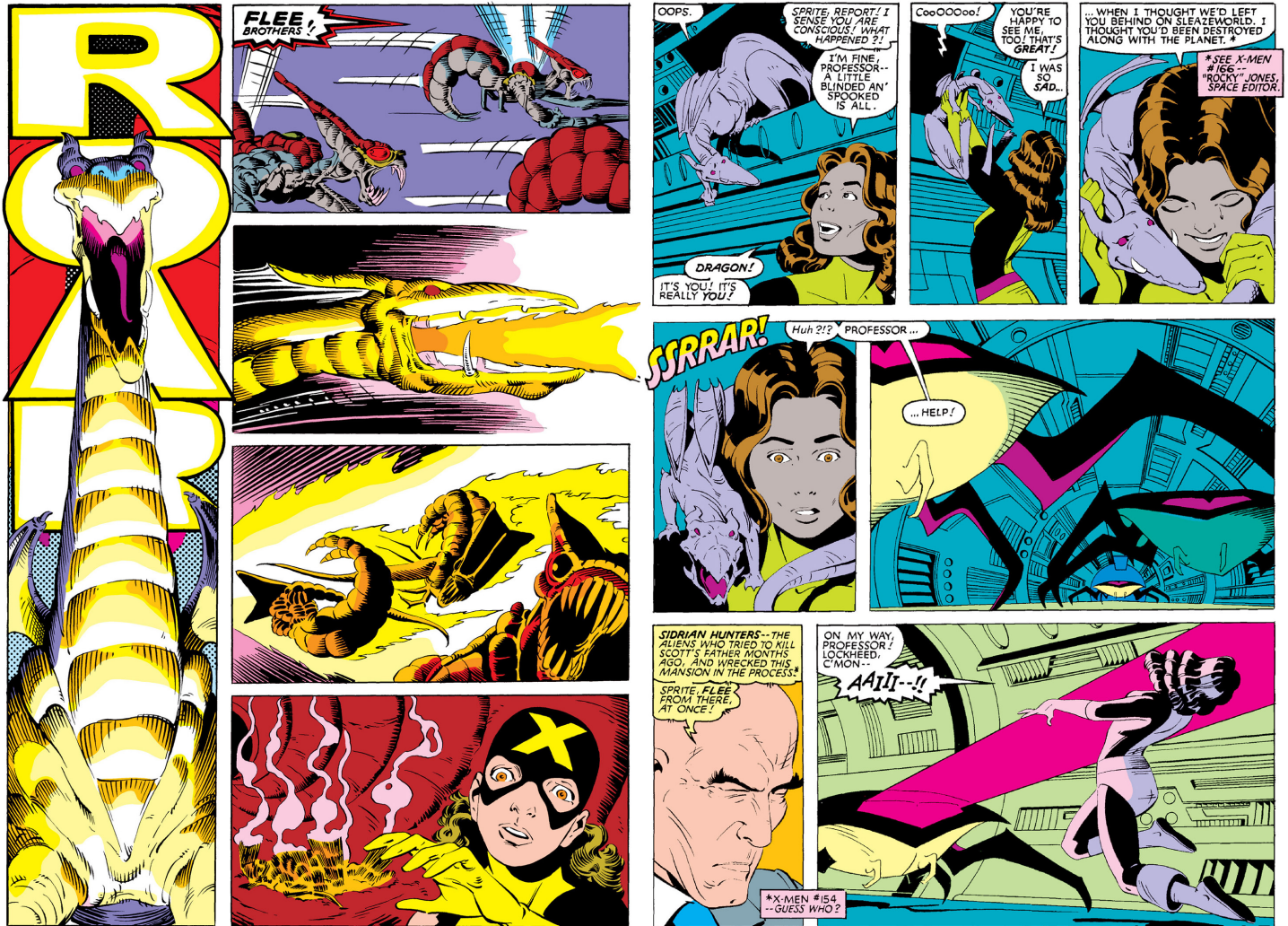
Lockheed the Dragon was a formidable character with a mysterious background for a good amount of his existence, making his presence more of a bonus to Kitty than about his own story. Trapped in his "fifth business" status, Lockheed was denied the chance to take on a more active character identity of his own. In his sublimated role, readers accepted him as Kitty's pet, forgetting that he was an intelligent alien with an array of abilities and experience, and sublimated for the sake of taking Kitty under his wing—no pun intended. As we look at his history, we'll look at his growth and take the time to evaluate when fans appreciated him most.

THE DREAM PET FOR THE ESSENTIAL DREAM GIRL

Lockheed first manifests as a dream concept. Chris Claremont introduced Lockheed as a full-sized dragon in "Kitty's Fairy Tale" (*Uncanny X-Men* #153 [Jan. 1982]), an actual character to add to the fantasy team in her story. More specifically, he was to be a companion to Kitty Pryde. Essentially though, even in this stage, Lockheed was meant to be just an accessory. It just made sense that a character spawned from the imagination of a young Kitty Pryde should be one that represented the extreme range of fantasy. In fact, to this point we see Kitty wearing an *Elfquest* T-shirt, playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, and indulging in video games at the local arcades in Westchester. Kitty was a true 1980s nerd in every sense and the fact that she had a dragon just made her even cooler to that audience.

It also tracked that Lockheed should have a poetic introduction with his early first incarnation as the Dragon companion to Pirate Kitty in *Uncanny X-Men* #153. But Lockheed was more than just a loyal companion to the then youngest X-Man, but a character who had the potential for development heralded by this first appearance. In this issue, Kitty needed to tell Illyana Rasputin (before her imprisonment in Limbo) a bedtime story. Kitty's story used exaggerated caricatures of her teammates as the basis for the characters in her fantasy story to great comic effect. The mansion is mostly demolished, and the team is at a low ebb, trying to repair and rebuild. It's a major touchstone for X-Men fans; not just for the introduction of Lockheed, but one that was fun, lighthearted, and a positive tone for a book that normally tackled dark themes including exclusion and racism. There is laughter and it comes at a time when the X-Men need it.





Lockheed's job is to transport Pirate Kitty and her companion, Peter, aka Colossus, on their many adventures. Drawn by the late Dave Cockrum, Lockheed speaks with an Irish accent and also bears characteristics of the X-Men's modified Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird with the wing fins and superstructure.

So, though this is the dragon's first appearance, we also can see the inspiration for the fantasy version comes from technology sources that would also endear Kitty to her audience. After all, given that a good portion of her audience would have known the film, "The Neverending Story," that Kitty knew how to pilot her SR-71 would have driven her nerd fans nuts.

From these origins, Lockheed was simply a dream that later came true for Kitty, and one that readers benefited from in future issues.

THE SIDEKICK

Kitty takes on more of an active membership by the time the X-Men are kidnapped by the Brood, and their bodies are implanted with alien embryos. In the double-sized *Uncanny X-Men* #166 (Feb. 1983), they determined to give the Brood fair payback for what has been done to them, written by Chris Claremont, and drawn by the incredible Paul Smith. Kitty and her teammates descend on the surface of the Brood's Sleazeworld to release

the soul of one of the Acanti, a star-faring race the Brood hunts and enslaves for space travel. In doing so, they accept that there is no way to remove the implants. It is, effectively, a suicide mission.

While in the catacombs of the city, Kitty is surrounded by the Brood hunters who wish to take her back to the Queen and hatch the implanted embryo.

Paul Smith's dramatic depiction of Lockheed is exciting and entertaining. With five frames, not only do we see the Brood dispatched by a fearsome beast, but when the flames and smoke settle, the terrifying Lockheed is revealed to be the rescuer and smaller than he appeared. Both a joke and an escape, Lockheed's introduction is interrupted by the discovery of the soul of the Acanti, a revered place of great spiritual power that is able to purge the unclean embryos and heal the X-Men. When they are transported to the Starjammers' vessel, and escape the Brood's planet, Kitty misses the dragon and as readers, we feel her disappointment.

Of course, this episode of the X-Men is not done as they realize that the last embryo, a royal one at that, must have been implanted in Professor Xavier. Their task is now to destroy the embryo who lives within him. After they manage to resolve this problem, Kitty is invited to study with the New Mutants leading to Issue #168 (Apr. 1983), the famous "Professor Xavier is a

(left) The Lockheed we know and love first appears in *Uncanny X-Men* #166. Art by Paul Smith and Bob Wiacek. (right) We learn that Lockheed has followed Kitty home in *Uncanny X-Men* #168.

Art by Paul Smith and Wiacek.

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(top left)) Lockheed makes a new friend on Battleworld in *Secret Wars* #12. Art by Mike Zeck and John Beatty. (bottom left)) Even a dragon's heart can break. From *Uncanny X-Men* #181. Art by John Romita Jr. and Dan Green. (right) Lockheed gets a chance to shine in *Uncanny X-Men* #181. Cover by John Romita Jr.

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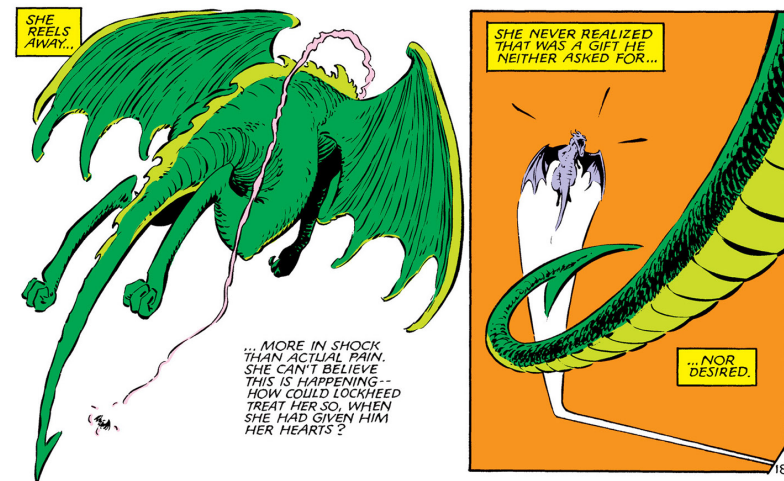
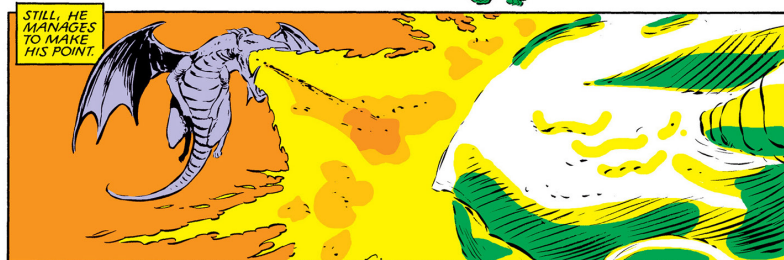
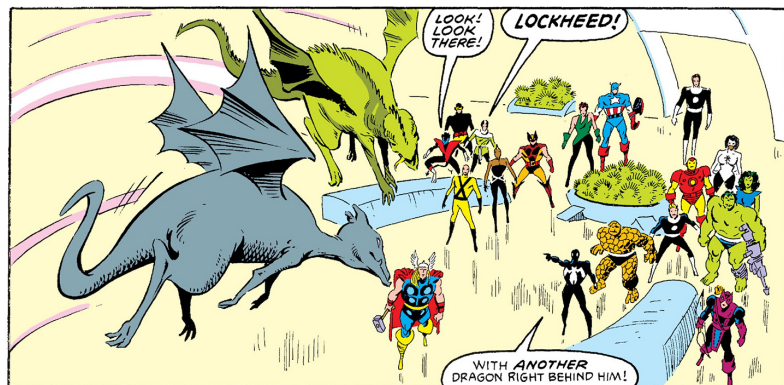
Jerk" issue, and the next time we meet Lockheed, who we discover managed to sneak aboard the X-Men's escaping ship teleportation beam and escape with them two issues prior. Lockheed is gratefully welcomed by Kitty and the two begin their friendship.

We learn a great deal about Lockheed during this issue. While Kitty is desperate to convince Professor Xavier that she should remain within the X-Men, the existence of the Sidrian Hunters (who were responsible for the destruction to the X-Men's mansion prior to their kidnapping by the Brood) who managed to hide within the basement of the mansion is revealed. Kitty's encounter with them shows his abilities and bond with Kitty.

Lockheed is able to breathe fire. He is considerably intelligent, understands English, and has more power than one would expect him to have, despite his small size. He and Kitty also prove to be an able team. Lockheed's agility, claws, fire as well as his voracious appetite, make him a considerable opponent. With Kitty's phasing, from a comics writing perspective, they prove to make a formidable team. In fact, the phrase "Team Supreme" becomes quite popular in a number of Chris Claremont stories around this point and in fact, this is how Claremont describes them. Kitty and Lockheed are definitely a team.

Secondly, it's the instant bond between the two that makes them such a great team. Kitty and Lockheed are instantly in sympathy. Lockheed has saved Kitty's life at least twice to this point. His attraction to her is enigmatic, but who cares? It's comics and this is the stuff that makes comics great.

There are so many occasions in his adventures with Kitty and the X-Men during this time that endear Lockheed to the readers. He's not just the ultimate pet;



he's a true sidekick whose special abilities make him an indispensable ally in a fight, but also the best extension of Kitty Pryde's character.

LOCKHEED, IS THAT YOU?

Lockheed's independence is also made known during the events of the *Secret Wars*. When the X-Men are transported to the Beyonder's Battleworld, for some reason, Lockheed joins them. Not only does he function as a member of the team, but he even meets another dragon. When they are returned to Earth, they are accidentally transported to Japan and the dragon Lockheed befriended is with them. Due to a malfunction, the transporter increases its size gigantically and wreaks havoc on Tokyo.

Lockheed is the hero of this story. When it is revealed that the dragon was trying to nest and create a home for the two of them, Lockheed's refusal to requite the larger dragon's love breaks her heart. This shows Lockheed to be a more independent character capable of carrying a storyline.

When the X-Men disappeared on their Australian Walkabout, leaving Kitty, Lockheed, Nightcrawler, and Rachel to fend for themselves, this brought new changes and stories to the Team Supreme. Kitty and Lockheed found themselves in a new team: Excalibur. Even with the presence of Captain Britain and other heroes, one would expect that

there would be story options that would inevitably feature Lockheed as a central focal point.

Prior to the "Cross-Time Caper" storyline (that just never seemed to end), when the team was brought to different versions of the Earth through the extra-dimensional energies of Widget and they encountered variants of themselves, we saw hints of it appear. In issue #9 (June 1989), Lockheed was left to guard the team's lighthouse while the heroes were in the US. Taken by surprise by the emaciated concentration camp survivor version of Kitty (from the timeline when the Nazis had won the Second World War), this is the first inkling we get that Lockheed and Kitty have more than just a friendship bond. Lockheed can actually sense her presence, hinting at the start of a deeper insight into the dragon's capabilities.

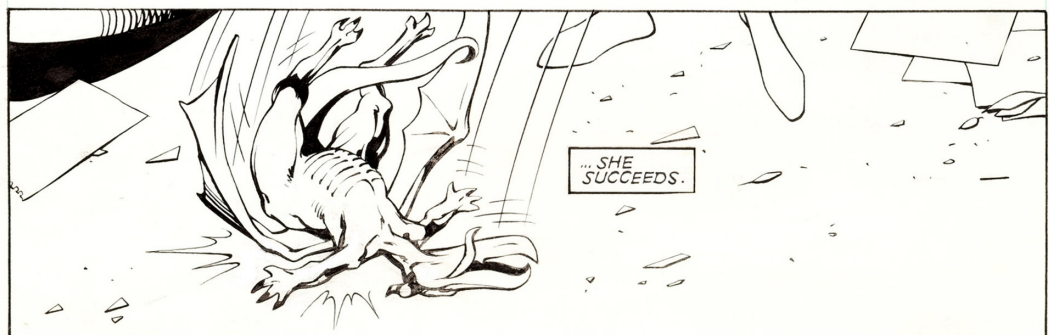
He gets further attention throughout the storyline. In issue #11 (Aug. 1989), the variant of Excalibur known as Lightning Force discover the power source of the train their doppelgangers use to be a larger version of Lockheed.

When they reappear in a Camelot version of England in another realm in Issue # 12 (Sept. 1989) (the actual beginning of the "Cross-Time Caper"), Lockheed encounters a young prince of the realm, William, who he contests with for Kitty's affections. We see Lockheed demonstrate more than just a mere animal-level of intelligence. He

(left) Lockheed consoles Kitty in *Excalibur: The Sword Is Drawn* special by Alan Davis and Paul Neary with Mark Farmer. (right) Lockheed and Kitty as roomies in the Excalibur lighthouse in *Excalibur* #3. Art by Alan Davis and Paul Neary

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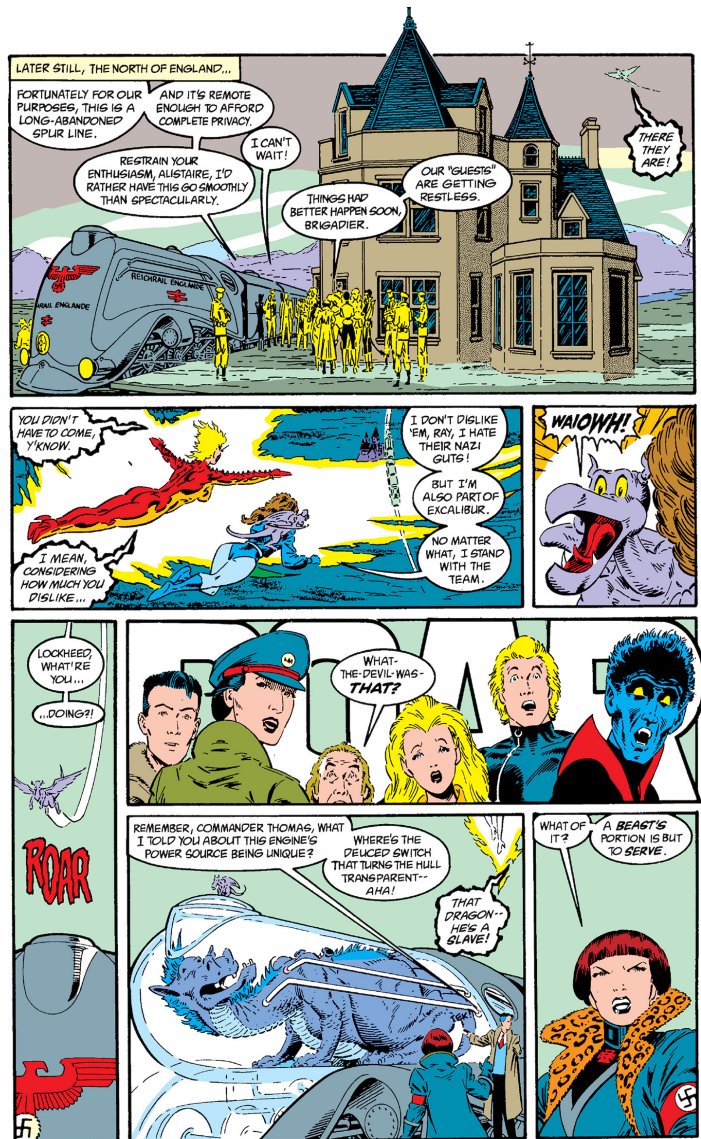
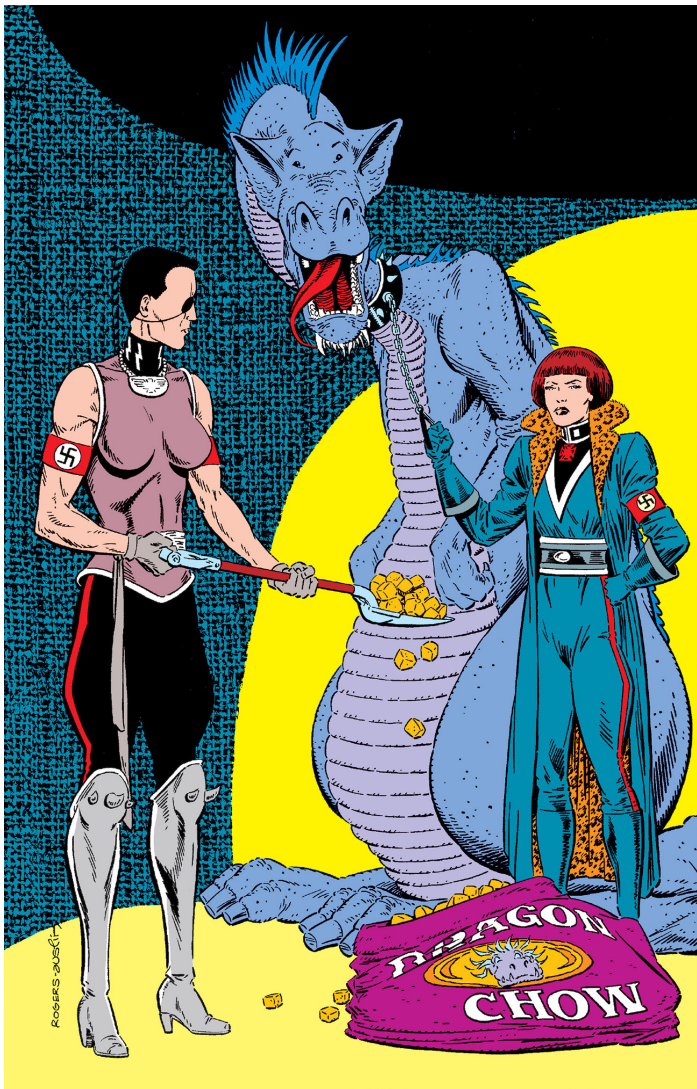




Lockheed is surprised by Kitty in *Excalibur* #9. Unfortunately, it's not the Kitty he knows. Art by Alan Davis and Paul Neary. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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EXCALIBUR™ Vol. 1, No. 9, June, 1989. Published by MARVEL COMICS, James E. Galton, President, Stan Lee, Publisher, Michael Hobson, Group Vice-President, Milton Schiffman, Vice-President, Production OFFICE OF PUBLICATION, 387 PARK AVENUE SOUTH, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10016. Published monthly. Copyright © 1989 by Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc. All rights reserved. Price \$1.50 per copy in the U.S. and \$2.00 in Canada. Subscription rate \$18.00 for 12 issues. Canada and foreign, \$20.00. Printed in the U.S.A. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with those of any living or dead person or institution is intended, and any such similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. This periodical may not be sold except by authorized dealers and is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not be sold or distributed with any part of its cover or markings removed, nor in a mutilated condition. EXCALIBUR (including all prominent characters featured in the issue), and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are trademarks of the MARVEL ENTERTAINMENT GROUP, INC.



shows sarcasm, a lack of patience, and a considerable amount of jealousy for anyone who stands between him and Kitty Pryde.

It's in *Excalibur* where we see Lockheed develop more personality than in his previous incarnations. While *Excalibur* had more of a sense of humor than other X-titles, Lockheed seemed to be a manifestation of that direction of writing.

Issue #17 (Dec. 1989) sees a humanoid variant of Lockheed. Equally as devoted to Kitty, he and his diminutive counterpart square off in a peaceful but tense scene. Shadowcat has to intercede and reduce the hostility her Lockheed shows.

As a sidenote, *Excalibur*'s storylines are a bit jumbled because of the "Cross-Time Caper." Though it was to only last nine issues, it somehow managed to survive across thirteen issues, culminating in issue #24 (July 1990). Yet somehow, in the storyline "Girls School from Heck," a Kitty-central story, we see nothing of Lockheed, save for a few token appearances. It isn't until issue #39 (July 1991) when he is injured in battle with Doctor Doom, that Lockheed's identity fully comes to light in issue #40—"The Trial of Lockheed." (Aug. 1991)

In this issue, Lockheed is in surgery. His unconscious self is summoned to a spaceship where we see others of his kind who wait to stand in

judgement of his activities. If he cannot defend himself, he will be instantly put to death. Not only can Lockheed talk, but he rhymes. This seems to be particular to only him, however, as the others around him either speak in modern or 17th century dialect. Weirdly, to communicate in an astral form is also normal for his fellow dragons, who refer to themselves as "the Flock".

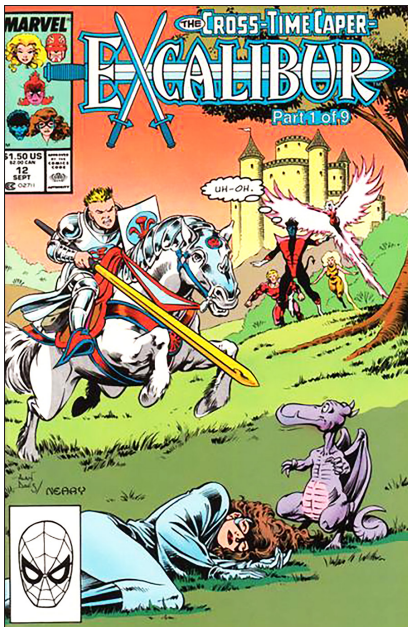
Despite the fact that *Excalibur*, at this time, is a confusing comic with art that struggles to continually include the talents of Alan Davis, it is this book that gives us the greatest development of Lockheed. In fact, this issue is the first opportunity Lockheed actually gets to speak for himself. We read his thoughts, we learn about his perspective, his attitude, and even motivations. In the nearly ten years of his comic existence, this is a unique moment in Lockheed's existence when readers get to finally understand him better.

It is of note that this issue was not written by Chris Claremont but Scott Lobdell, which might account for the departure from the usual way that Lockheed had been presented to this point.

First of all, we learn that Lockheed was betrothed and that while he was battling the Brood (in Kitty's first encounter with him), he instantly fell in love with Kitty. He abandoned his fiancée at

A dragon as a power source. That can't be good. Pinup and interior art by Marshall Rogers and Terry Austin from *Excalibur* #11.

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the altar. Moreover, we also learn that he and his kind are empathic and his honesty is instantly verified by the others. It is his love for the independence evinced by humans that overwhelms his sense of communal identity to the Flock and his sense of duty. Lockheed, for lack of a better explanation, is simply in love with the values that Humanity espouses as well as with Kitty Pryde.

Phew.

Lockheed can also pilot a spacecraft. During the course of his impassioned defence, his rhymes put the pilots of the ship to sleep, and he is forced to take over the controls, despite being in an astral form. His bravery shows his peers that he is worthy of being saved. Though found guilty of abandoning his race for Humanity, his sentence is reduced to exile instead of death. His astral form returns to his comatose self, and his secret is still kept from the X-Men.

It's a thoroughly ridiculous story, but it represents a vital change in this character's established history. It has so many insights into Lockheed and, while it is mostly written in poetic verse emphasizing its frivolous nature, the entire issue reads like a summary of the preceding issues until now. Like one of those mid-season "best of" episodes of 20th century television that allows viewers to catch up with the story so far. "The Trial of Lockheed" also organizes *Excalibur* for the sake of its readers who may have been confused to this point. Of course, Lockheed's injuries also set *Excalibur* up for a reunion with the X-Men and finally, the X-friends are reunited.

This would have been a perfect opportunity for Lockheed to now communicate with Kitty, but it is surpassed by the fact that the X-Men are not who they purport to be, but the War-Wolves who have assumed their forms. Still, after the fake X-Men are dispatched, and a call to the real X-Men is arranged off-scene, Lockheed is still unconscious and will remain so until a brief appearance in the special double-sized issue #50 (May 1992) when he simply sits on a box, watching Kitty and relegated to the status of a sidekick.

This underscores a grave devaluation and unwillingness to capitalize on Lockheed's revealed identity. Though issue #40 may have been just silly in nature, Scott Lobdell gave X-Men and *Excalibur* fans a chance for Lockheed to develop into something greater than just a pet, whether they wanted it or not. Lockheed was created by Chris Claremont and given that Lobdell had taken this character in a completely new direction, could there be more to that decision? Just a speculation, but the future developments of Lockheed owed themselves to this change of character. In fact, despite the few words he actually mumbles (which really needed more attention) in issue #66 (June 1993), we hardly see any more development as dramatic as that in the rest of *Excalibur*. Despite Lockheed's growth in this series, opportunities for more character development could have been taken and he could have been more viable member of *Excalibur*.



(top left) This doesn't look good for Lockheed. Cover by Alan Davis and Paul Neary. (top right) Lockheed meets a humanoid version of himself in *Excalibur* #17. Art by Alan Davis and Paul Neary. (bottom) Lockheed almost gives everything away on the cover of *Excalibur* #24.

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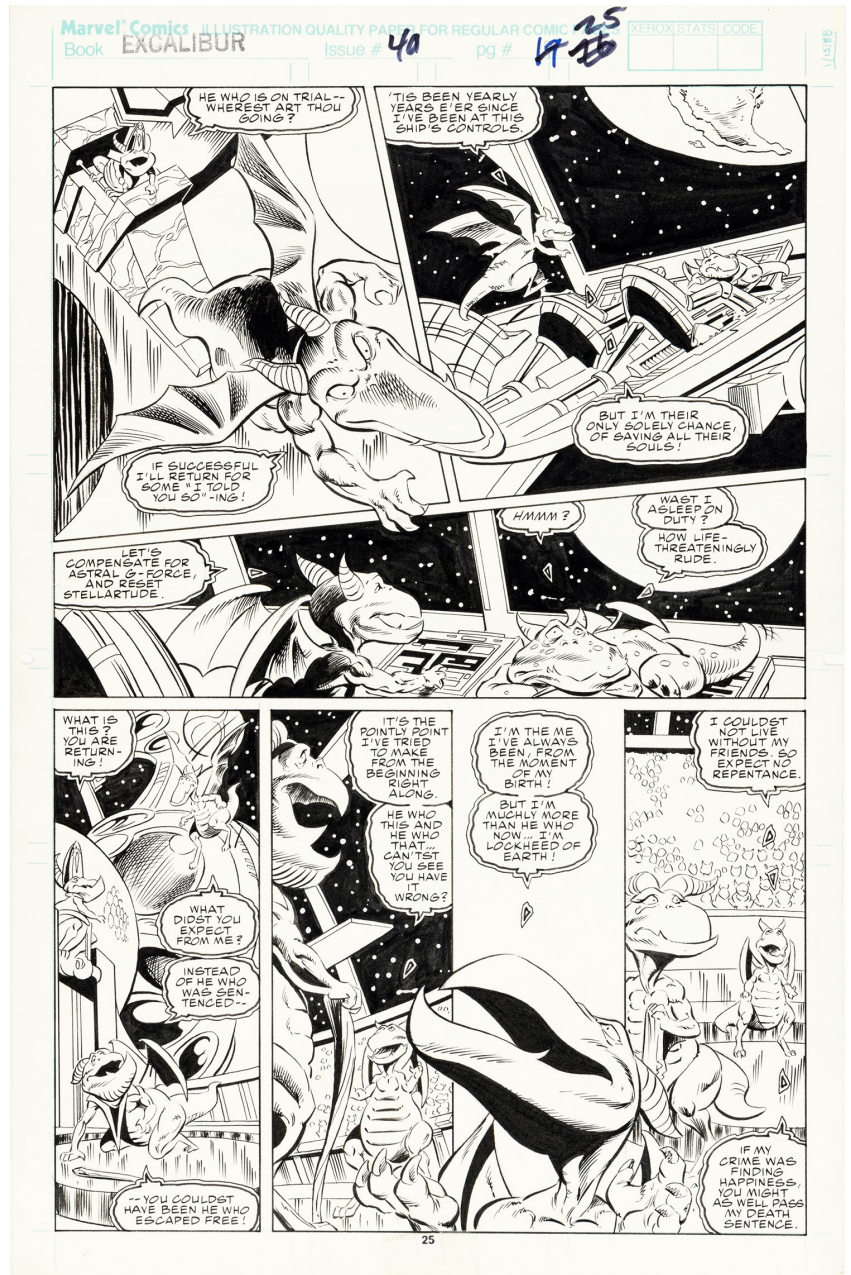
THE ALIENABLE TRUTH ABOUT LOCKHEED

The thing about Lockheed is that he has always been an alien. Though he looks like the common perception of a terrestrial, mythological species, he isn't. After the revelation of Lockheed's sophisticated technological knowledge and advanced nature, his alien intelligence, his empathic powers, and the fact that he has a sense of devotion to Kitty Pryde, very little is done with this character. Which is a crime as Lockheed is trapped in a cage of untapped storylines that really were never exploited.

Then, there is Joss Whedon's *Astonishing X-Men*. When the aliens of Breakworld intend on destroying the Earth, as one of their prophecies reveals, it will destroy the X-Men. They find themselves involved in a cosmic adventure that takes them to the far corners of space. This involves the members of S.W.O.R.D. (Sentient World Observation and Response Department) who, like their S.H.I.E.L.D. counterparts, are responsible for protecting the world from extra-terrestrial threats. Lockheed's alien nature makes him an ideal candidate for this storyline.

We discover that he is an information mole for S.W.O.R.D. in issues #17 (Nov. 2006) and #19 (Feb. 2007), keeping tabs on the X-Men for them. When it is fully revealed in front of Kitty in issue #22 (Oct. 2007), much to the dragon's palpable embarrassment and shame, it is heartbreaking to Kitty. Kitty's expression as drawn by the incomparable and late John Cassaday reveals the full depth of the betrayal. Yet for such a major story development, it only features in a few pages.

It was a cruel break in their relationship, especially when Agent Brand commanded Kitty to "stop simpering at him" when she asked



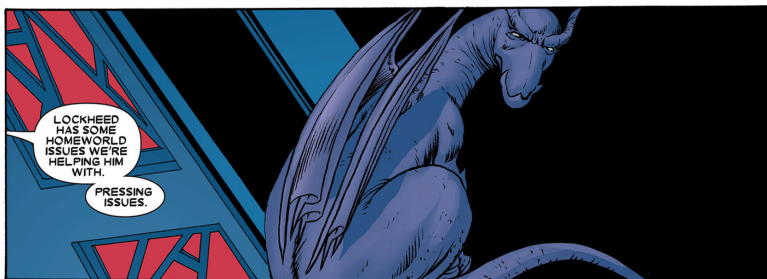
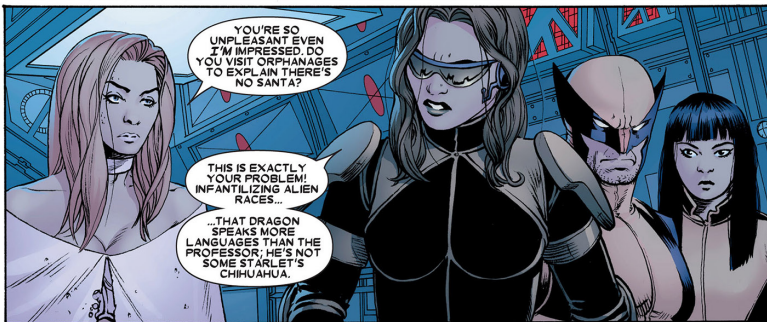
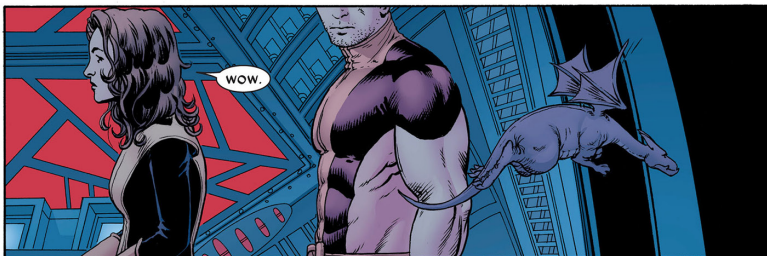
how he was. The realization that Lockheed was of an advanced alien species who Agent Brand and S.W.O.R.D. were helping to alleviate his home world issues was an added shock to the revelation that her companion of years kept such a secret from her.

While it was given minor service, it was still another major development in not just how Kitty viewed her companion, but how readers did. Joss Whedon's *Astonishing X-Men* was a masterpiece that brought clarity and understanding to the X-Men franchise and also imparted some of this into Lockheed. No longer was he the cute little dragon; he was a patriot to his planet—yes, to the peers who had exiled him to Earth.

But Lockheed's emotional ties to Kitty run deep. When she sacrificed herself to phase a giant missile launched from Breakworld at the earth through the planet, Kitty doomed herself with no hope of survival.

(left) Lockheed is put on trial by "The Flock" in *Excalibur* #40. Cover by Dave Hoover. (right) Our hero pilots the spaceship when the actual pilot falls asleep. Dave Hoover, Harry Candelario, and Tim Dzon art. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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In fact, after this, Lockheed essentially disappears. Without Kitty, it's as if there is no need to develop him further. He becomes the focal point for a story in *X-Men Unlimited* #43 in a short story, almost as an afterthought. Hunted by strangers in Scotland, he is rescued by girls thought to be witches in their small town. When they encounter an actual witch, it is she who tells Lockheed that Kitty is still alive and in Chicago.

OTHER ASSOCIATIONS

After this, Lockheed has a few occasions to stand out on his own, but the limited comic runs of these appearances really do very little for his growth.

The X-Men's association with Abigail Brand and S.W.O.R.D. gave way to a spin-off comic and a new path for both Hank McCoy (Beast) and Lockheed. While this comic had a lighthearted tone in its short run of five issues, it actually treated both of these characters with an offbeat sense of humor. While it reduces Hank McCoy to a comic relief character, what stands out in this book is the brief return of Lockheed's voice.

Thinking Kitty to be lost, Lockheed takes to extreme drinking to numb his pain. A later conversation with Abigail Brand about Kitty Pryde's status onboard the giant missile is one of the rare opportunities to see Lockheed actually converse (in Flockish-Brand having the distinction of being the only known human to speak to him in his own language) as a fully sentient being. He is angered by Brand's patronizing dismissal of Kitty's plight and threatens to torch her hair.

But this comic gives Lockheed a chance to be more than just a mere accomplice or second banana. He is a member of a crew, taking direction from a superior command hierarchy. He is concerned about the welfare of his home planet and actually works towards its welfare. He has character motivation and very little is done with it.

When Lockjaw, favored hound of the Inhumans, puts together a crew of ... sigh, Pet Avengers to seek the Infinity Stones, we hear Lockheed's voice again. They find him at the X-Mansion in Westchester and appeal to his warrior's spirit. He is morose, speaking about the loss of Kitty. Strangely, he can converse openly with Lockjaw and Throg, the Frog of Thunder. It's an overly cutesy portrayal of Lockheed.

True, these mere pets manage to stand against Thanos, protect the infinity stones, and earn the respect of their human superhero peers, but once more, Lockheed is part of an ensemble instead of a character in his own right.

FULL CIRCLE

Though Lockheed has the background and the abilities to be a hero in his own right, he will never get his own story. He will always be a "second banana" and his place will always be at Kitty Pryde's side. While we may enjoy the times that Lockheed stands out, Lockheed is best portrayed as a sidekick. While he started as a pet,

(top left) Kitty and Lockheed on a variant cover of *Astonishing X-Men* by John Cassaday. (top right) Lockheed is all out of bubble-gum. Cover by John Cassaday. (bottom) Lockheed is revealed to be a mole for S.W.O.R.D. in *Astonishing X-Men* #22. Art by John Cassaday.

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TWOMORROWS AD PAGE

ERIK LARSEN

ON THE SAVAGE DRAGON



ERIK LARSEN

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by Joshua Winchester

When it comes to comic books, nothing is off the table in terms of characters. Audiences have seen it all, from overly muscular Men of Steel to Friendly Neighborhood Web-Slingers to a quartet of Ninja Turtles with some serious attitude.

Even beings as fantastic as those from mythology have made it onto the printed, penciled and lavishly colored page. Whether it is witches, wizards, goblins, kobolds, or the gods of ancient cultures; all have been reworked, revamped, and extensively rewritten over the years to suit the ever-changing tastes of comic book readers.

Yet where dragons are concerned, those great beasts of lore and legend, sometimes the changes come in new forms. One such change is found within the creative mind of Erik Larsen. We all know Larsen and the many positions he has held over the years; publisher, CFO, one of the founders of beloved indie comics giant Image Comics. Yet there are two titles Larsen has continually upheld throughout his career, writer and artist. And it is through these two roles that one of comics most enduring, epic heroes has continued, Savage Dragon.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to speak with Larsen about Savage Dragon, his origin, various adventures, and a deep dive into some of the standout moments across the character's vast history.

JOSHUA WINCHESTER: *Let's start at the very beginning. What were some of the comics that pulled you into this world as a child, and how old were you when you first started getting interested in writing/drawing them?*

ERIK LARSEN: My dad bought comics when he was a kid. So, my first exposure was his Golden Age comic book collection. After that it was a stack of Silver Age comics we scored at a used bookstore—mostly DC books—Batman and Superman. I went for the 80-page giants because it was the most bang for the buck. When I started getting new comics it was in the '70s. *The Incredible Hulk* #156 was my gateway drug. And my brother brought home a short stack of Hulk comics that he got at school. He gave them to me in exchange for doing

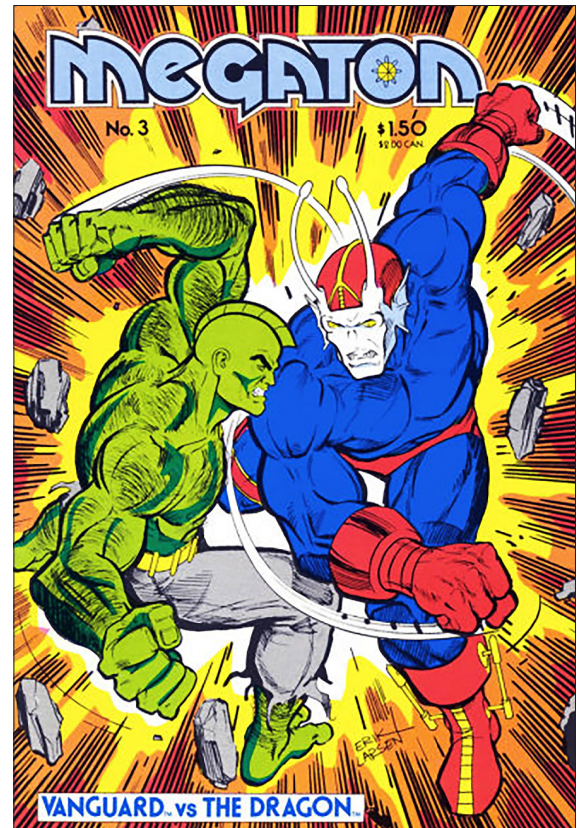


The Savage Dragon as most readers first met him on the cover of his first Image comic. Unless otherwise noted, all art with this article is by Erik Larsen. (inset) Larsen's "gateway drug," *Incredible Hulk* #156. Cover by Herb Trimpe.

Savage Dragon TM & © Erik Larsen. Hulk TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc.

(left) The Dragon, as well as a couple other Erik Larsen creations, on the cover of *Graphic Fantasy* #1. (right) The Dragon battles Vanguard on the cover of *Megaton* #2.

TM & © Erik Larsen.



the dishes for a couple weeks. I started drawing my own comics in 1972 or so. I would fold a piece of 8½ x 11 paper in half and just go at it. I was a nine-years-old and I've been at it ever since.

WINCHESTER: *Who were some of the creatives that sparked your desire to create your own characters growing up?*

LARSEN: I didn't know the names at the time. The Batman and Superman stuff was uncredited. Likely Dick Sprang and Jerry Robinson were in that mix. The Marvel books had credits at least and Herb Trimpe was an early favorite. I discovered Jack Kirby over at DC doing *Mister Miracle*, *Kamandi*, and the *Demon*, and that stuff blew my mind. But I had all kinds of favorites and the more I looked, the more names I'd add to that list. Walter Simonson was doing these cool Manhunter backups in *Detective Comics* and I loved that. I was exposed to Joe Staton and John Byrne early on in the pages of *E-Man*. Their work was very raw. *E-Man* seemed very homemade in a way. It wasn't as slick and professional as the Marvel and DC books. But I was buying anything and everything. Whatever I could get my hands on.

WINCHESTER: *Where did the idea for Dragon come from? Was he inspired by anything you read during your childhood?*

LARSEN: The Dragon came right out of Dick Sprang Batman comics, only instead of those bat ears he had a fin. He had a utility belt, and he had a cape and he drove a car that was reminiscent of Speed Racer's. He kept evolving over the years. I went through a few variations. Eventually he became a guy who transformed into the Dragon, but I didn't have much interest in telling stories about his secret identity, so I pulled the character into two guys and Dragon became a green-skinned character with a fin on his head.

WINCHESTER: *When you first created the character as 'Paul Dragon' in *Graphic Fantasy* #1 (June 1982), he comes across as a working stiff sort of character, an everyday individual who just wants a quiet life with his daughter now that he is "retired" from being a superhero.*

LARSEN: That was me basically following up on ten years' worth of unpublished comics drawn on 8½ x 11 paper. That story continued the adventure that I had set in motion. It was the culmination of everything that had come before.

WINCHESTER: *In that first appearance, 'Paul' is based out of Chicago. Why did you choose the Windy City, instead of New York, LA, or even someplace down south like Miami?*

LARSEN: When I was a youngster, I'd originally had the Dragon in San Francisco, which was a city I had at least visited with my family once. But I migrated the character to Chicago after a couple years. I thought New York had been done to death and Chicago had something of a mystique with all of the gangster stuff from back in the day. Plus, I knew *Dick Tracy* was set there, and I was a big fan of *Dick Tracy*. As a kid, I had never heard of Miami and Los Angeles didn't excite me in any way.

WINCHESTER: *Jumping ahead to the late '80s, Savage Dragon shows up in *Megaton* #2 as the head of the S.O.S. and is active as a superhero again. What made you decide to pull him back into superheroing again?*

LARSEN: I had two trains of thought here. One was that I regretted killing off Dragon's wife and I could just pretend her death never happened, that Dragon never retired to raise his daughter away from the chaos at the S.O.S. and carry on from there or—that the *Megaton* stories took place prior to *Graphic Fantasy*. At the end of the day, I wanted the Dragon to tackle Vanguard, and it made more sense for him to do that if he was part of a government super team than as a single dad raising his daughter.

WINCHESTER: *Between the late '80s and early '90s, did you ever think you'd return to a character you'd developed at the start of your career?*

LARSEN: That was always the plan. My thought was always to return to doing the Dragon. But I thought, once I start doing this book on the regular—I'm going to continue until the end of my career.

WINCHESTER: *Let's focus on the revival of the character. It's 1992, and you and the rest of the founders of Image Comics have struck out on your own. What inspired you to dust off Savage Dragon and make him one of Image's brand-new kick-off titles?*
LARSEN: The Dragon was what I had. I'd toyed with the thought of doing SuperPatriot since I'd just designed that costume for a Marvel pitch and I wanted to get it in print ASAP, but I quickly dismissed that idea. I had a million ideas for the Dragon and not so much with SuperPatriot. My only hesitation was that I wasn't sure that I should start a book that I'd promised myself I'd do for the duration. I wasn't sure I wanted to start the end of my career just then, but there was really no choice.

WINCHESTER: *In that first initial run, you establish Dragon as being a person of serious principles (the moment where he squares off against Officer Howard Niseman being a prime example). Why is that?*

LARSEN: The Howard Niseman stuff was actually a bit added in the first *Savage Dragon* trade paperback. We had planned to do a benefit book called *Operation: Urban Storm* following the

riots in LA after the Rodney King verdict and that was very much about police brutality and whatnot. Pretty heavy-handed, in retrospect. In any case, that benefit book failed to materialize when some of my Image partners couldn't get their sh*t together, so I ran it in that first collection, which took the initial *Savage Dragon* miniseries and expanded on it. Savage Dragon is supposed to be the good guy, so having him be highly principled seemed the way to go. I recall this coming up on the cartoon. Savage Dragon was in the lobby of the Daily Voice and there was a sculpture of R. Richard Richards, the publisher, and the writer wanted to have Dragon flick his nose off or something and I said, "No, no. Dragon would absolutely not deliberately destroy somebody's private property—at most he'd disrespectfully plop a hat on his head or something." He was very much by the book.

WINCHESTER: *After the first series wrapped up, Dragon continues as a police officer, and eventually he is loaned out to the NYPD and runs into the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in issue #2. Can you fill me in on how this crossover came about?*

LARSEN: I'd made friends with fellow cartoonist Michael Dooney some years ago and I'd wanted to do something with him. We were pen pals for a number of years. He had bought *Graphic Fantasy* through



(left) Savage Dragon mixes it up with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. (right) Someone's in trouble. Original art scans courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (inset) Super-Patriot almost got the nod. Savage Dragon for the win.

Savage Dragon and SuperPatriot TM & © Erik Larsen.
 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles TM & © Viacom International Inc.





the mail and we kept in touch. At one point he had contacted Eastman and Laird about trading his self-published comic book for theirs, and apparently they both wanted a copy and sent Michael two copies of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #1. Michael sent his extra copy to me. I guess he thought—why do I need two copies of this book? In any case, by 1993 Michael was working at Mirage. He had contacted me about doing a pinup for *TMNT* #50 and we got to talking and I thought, “Hey, you’re working at Mirage. I’m doing a book at Image. We can actually do something now.” And that was really it. Michael gave me a quick rundown on which Turtle was which and what their personalities were and we just did it. His part of the crossover was, apparently, the best-selling Mirage *TMNT* book ever published, which was pretty impressive.

WINCHESTER: *In the mid-’90s there was a Savage Dragon animated series, featuring Jim Cummings as the voice of your creation. What was it like, seeing him leap off the comic book page and onto TV screens in animated form?*

LARSEN: It was cool enough. I’d actually pitched the show to CBS with a whole different creative team and studio, and they’d passed on it, so this was my second attempt. The first strayed a bit further from the book and the writer had inserted a character of his own creation onto the police force—the second stuck a bit closer to the book but, of course, it was a cartoon for kids so we couldn’t push things too far. There are forever little things that make you happy and piss you off. It’s pretty neat just seeing characters come to life and walk around and do stuff. At the same time, the network has its own ideas of how things should be, so we were constantly butting heads.

WINCHESTER: *Another major crossover happened with Hellboy in issue #34. How on Earth did you and Mike Mignola make this happen?*

LARSEN: It was just a matter of asking. I’d known Mike for a bit and was trying to convince Mike and Arthur Adams to create their own characters and come to Image. Arthur wasn’t super keen on doing that as he thought (and rightly so) that some of the Image artists were perhaps a little too influenced by him. I think they both determined that it would be better to be a big fish in a small pond than a small fish in a big pond. Mike even said he didn’t want to be the first Image book that didn’t sell a million copies. He ended up creating a character and taking it to Dark Horse. In any case, I broached the subject at some point and we traded pinups. He has an open invitation to use Savage Dragon whenever he wants, but he’s never taken advantage of that. I ran the script past Mike and he made a few changes. By the second issue, he just changed one line. It wasn’t a lot.



(top) The Savage Dragon gets animated. Original art scans courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (bottom) Savage Dragon meets Hellboy in issue #34.

Savage Dragon TM & © Erik Larsen. Hellboy TM & © Mike Mignola.



(top left) The Savage Dragon and S.O.S. (Special Operations Strikeforce). (top middle) Sometimes things go right for the Savage Dragon. (top right) The Overlord and the Vicious Circle return. (bottom) Savage Dragon, the father. From issue #68.

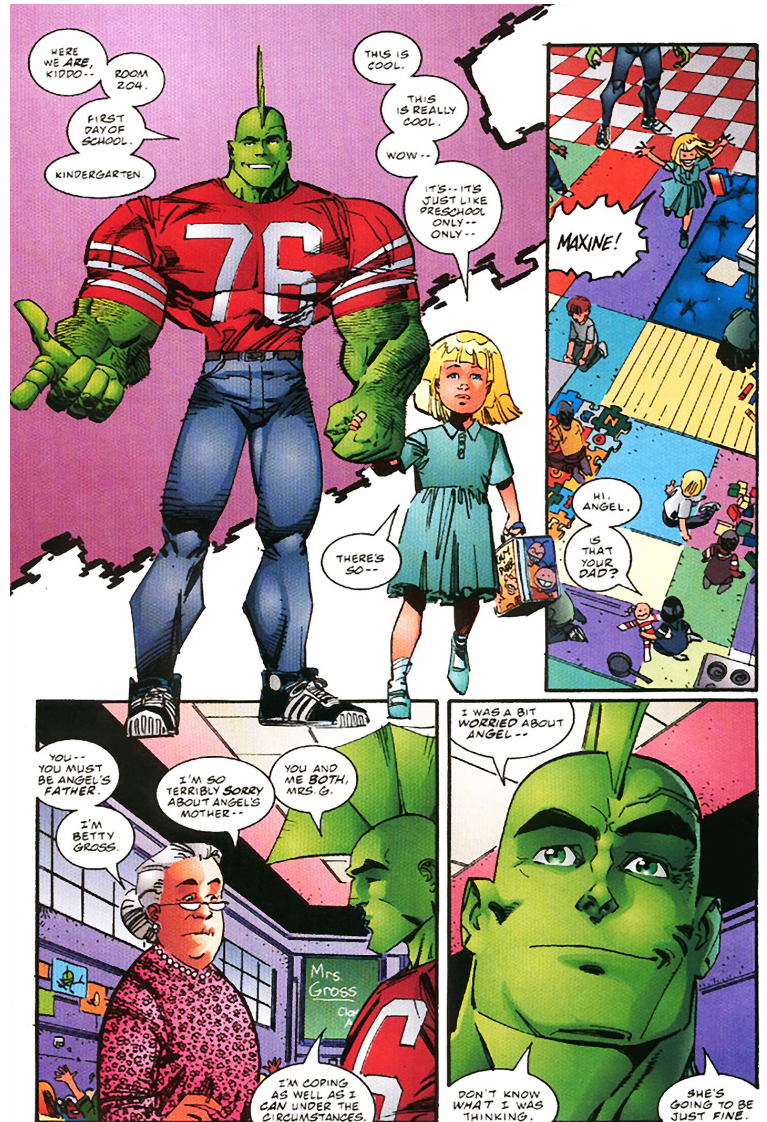
TM & © Erik Larsen.

WINCHESTER: During the revived S.O.S years, there is a huge chunk of time involving parallel Earth travel, the introduction of Damien DarkLord, plus Dragon, Debbie, and Jennifer spend time in outer space. Was that always the plan or did it develop as the series progressed?

LARSEN: My only real goal when I started the series was to eventually get to the same place that I had with *Graphic Fantasy* and retell those two Dragon stories. The rest was pretty much up in the air. I knew that I couldn't retell all of the same crappy stories that I did as a kid, but I could work toward that same point and take a different route to get there. I knew that in my *Graphic Fantasy* stories that Dragon used to be part of a government superteam called the S.O.S., so I needed that to happen. He didn't need to be there for long, but he needed to be part of that group for a while at least. But I did not start the book off with hundreds of plots all figured out. First, that would be insane, and second, I would lose any enthusiasm I had for the current book if I had long-term stories all mapped out before me. I honestly felt too confined as it was having those *Graphic Fantasy* stories hanging over me.

WINCHESTER: A huge surprise came in the form of Overlord (the major villain who ran the Vicious Circle back in the first series), returning with a new face behind the mask. Why bring back a dead villain, even one as formidable as him?

LARSEN: Overlord was in the *Graphic Fantasy* stories, so Overlord had to be brought back. It was as simple as that. He was also all over the cartoon and I thought it made sense to have the cartoon and comic book resemble each other at least a little. Also, some readers thought that Overlord was going to be somebody from the book and that when



his identity was revealed, they felt cheated. It had never occurred to me that readers thought this was a mystery. It never made sense to me that Overlord would have a dual identity and be a crime boss by night and something else by day. So, this was an opportunity to play with that a bit and hopefully give that thread a more satisfying conclusion. Not sure that I accomplished that, honestly.

WINCHESTER: After having Jennifer and Dragon marry, Jennifer is seemingly killed and Dragon takes on the challenge of being a single parent to Jennifer's daughter Angel. Why the choice to add parenting to the big guy's long list of achievements and endeavors?

LARSEN: That's all from *Graphic Fantasy*. It had to happen that way because I did that as a kid. I knew early on that I wanted *Savage Dragon* to take place in real time. So, having kids and seeing them grow up into adulthood was baked in early on. When I was a kid, I was too eager to have these characters grow up and I would involve some magic spell to transform them into adults. I didn't want to do that this time out. I wanted to play fair and have them age month by month. You can take the approach Marvel took with Franklin Richards in the *Fantastic Four* or DC took with *Generations* and Superman's son and just leapfrog ahead to a place where the characters are older and the world is different, or

you can take the patient, painstaking approach of gradually aging characters over the years, and I decided early on to do the latter. Having the characters skip ahead to when things are more dramatically different without doing the heavy lifting just felt like cheating to me.

WINCHESTER: There are a lot of shifts in *Dragon's* adventures with the revamp that took place in issue #75. You pivoted the focus to another parallel Earth arc entitled "This Savage World" that features a lot of Jack Kirby-esque post-apocalyptic artwork. Was that intentional or just a fun direction to go artistically?

LARSEN: There was a scene earlier on when SuperPatriot had baby DarkLord in his grasp and I'd gotten to thinking about how things might have gone differently had he killed this time-traveling foe before he grew up to become the tyrant that he became. I was tempted to do it right then and there, but then I thought—this is *Savage Dragon's* book and if somebody is going to do that—it should be the Dragon. It had also occurred to me that if I was going to do this—I really should set it up properly for maximum effect. But really, I just wanted to do some more Kirby-inspired stuff. I indulged the artist this time and let him have his fun. The writer was given his time to set it all up—but after that, the artist got to have his way.

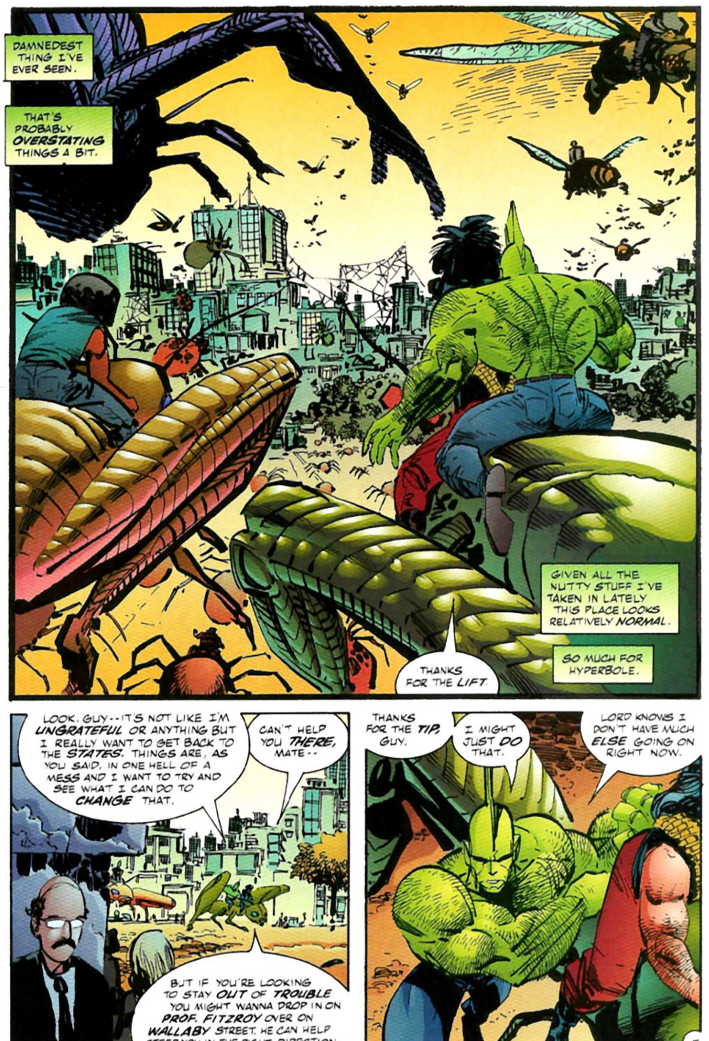
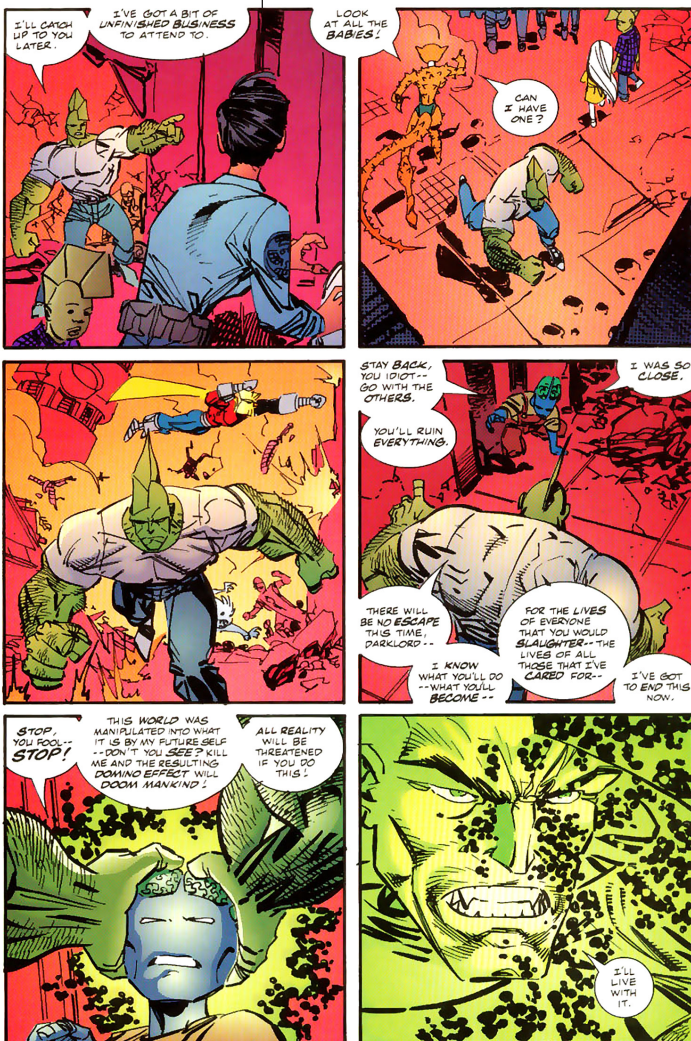
(left) Kill a bad guy, change the world.

From issue #75.

(right) *Savage Dragon* hitches a ride with the Bug Riders.

From issue #82.

TM & © Erik Larsen.



WINCHESTER: When "This Savage World" was finished, new troubles face Dragon. He is now a parent to Angel and his newly returned son Malcolm, a third Overlord has taken control of the Vicious Circle, and you tossed in an Imposter Dragon, plus killing Savage Dragon for a little bit. With so much happening at once, how did you manage to juggle all these plot points?

LARSEN: I mean, that's all part of the job, isn't it? It's like that with anything. My dad used to be in plays and people would constantly ask, "How do you remember all of those words?" But that's part of the job. You get used to doing this thing and it's all you focus on. That becomes your life. At certain times I would take extensive notes, but I found that those just got in the way. It was more fun to just go in with a vague idea of where I'm headed and wing it than have this whole list of things to check off a list.

WINCHESTER: Another major shock came in the form of Dragon's true identity, Emperor Kurr, coming to light after his resurrection. Did you always plan on this from the very beginning, having him being a former alien overlord?

LARSEN: That really came about once I told his origin. My thought initially was to keep that a secret forever. I knew what his story was so there was no fear of contradicting it. I could keep it consistent and keep throwing out red herrings every so often, but I ended up telling Dragon's origin simply because I had nothing else to do. The Image gang was assembling an anniversary book where all the Image creators did a new story with their original characters, but I had never stopped doing my book—so the only way to make this special was to do something they hadn't seen before. And also, I know these mother*ckers and I know that more often than not they won't get their act together and make their deadlines. If I introduced an important new character in my story and the book was delayed a year or two—that would mean this character wouldn't be able to show up in the ongoing title for years. And because my characters age, that would mean I'd either have a story where the characters are a few years younger than they are when the book comes out or I'd tell some story set in the future and hope all the pieces fit. Given the various options, I decided to just tell his origin and once that was out in the open, ideas started springing from that. Often I plot the book by looking at various forks in the road and choosing the path which might give me the most story possibilities for the future. That was the case here. Once the Kurr stuff was out there, it just seemed too exciting to resist. Plus, it gave me the opportunity to pay off that WildStar story that I had set up back in *Savage Dragon* #29.

WINCHESTER: Perhaps the biggest surprise for readers came when you more or less permanently killed off *Savage Dragon* and had Malcolm take his place. What led to this change in story, and removing a hero who had been a part of your life and career since the early days?

LARSEN: The whole point of doing a book where characters are born, age, grow old, and die is to eventually have them do that. One of the things I've often pondered is—why do TV shows "jump the shark?" Why can't a show like, say, *Seinfeld*, which features a group of single characters



(top) Things can get pretty crazy in *Savage Dragon*. From issue #152. (bottom) *Savage Dragon* used to be a ruthless emperor. Didn't see that coming. From *Savage Dragon* #0.

TM & © Erik Larsen.



(top, left and right) Savage Dragon doesn't shy away from current events, characters, or situations. (right) Malcolm Dragon takes over.

TM & © Erik Larsen.

looking for love, transition into a show like *Mad About You*? Why can't the status quo, and even the cast, evolve over time? When I was a few years in, I decided that one of my long-term goals would be to have the book eventually be handed off to Malcolm and just keep going. I hadn't seen anything like that happen in comics before.

WINCHESTER: *One of the things you've always skillfully done over the years is interweaving real world figures and events into these stories, including former Presidents Bush and Obama. Where many other superhero comics seem to skew away from consistently having the heroes interact with political persons and true-life situations, you went in the opposite direction. Could you share why that has been the case?*

LARSEN: I think people shy away from featuring real world figures and events for fear of dating their stories. But because I set my book in real time—that is exactly what I'm trying to do. I want to say to the reader, this story takes place on August 3rd and you can tell that it's August 3rd because real world events that happened on August 3rd are happening. If characters go see a movie, it's a movie that's in theaters now. If there's a mention of the President, it's whoever is in that office today. I want each issue to be a kind of snapshot of the world today, so that if you read it in ten years, you'll see all of those things that take you back to that time.

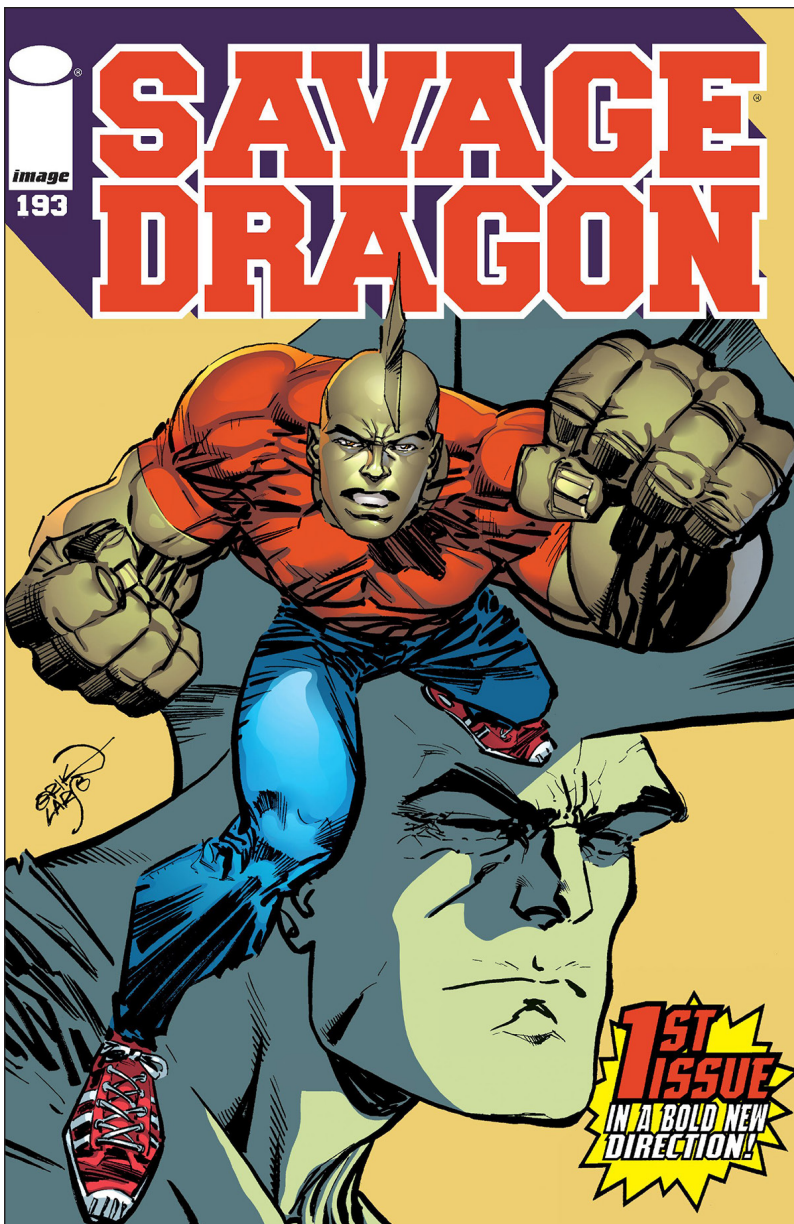
WINCHESTER: *Do you think the world is ready for another Savage Dragon animated series, or maybe even some sort of movie project?*

LARSEN: I don't see why not. But it is a lot of work and it's even more work to get it to be something that you'd like it to be. I'm not willing to put the book on hold to chase a dream that I don't have. At the same time, if the opportunity arises, I'm not going to turn people away.

WINCHESTER: *When attending conventions and interacting with fans, whether newcomers or long-time readers, what is running through your mind when you meet them?*

LARSEN: I don't actually have anything in mind other than the desire for them to have a pleasant experience. I am there for them. If I'm drawing a commission for somebody, I want it to be something that they're happy with. I want them to be happy. I don't want them thinking, "He's probably sick of drawing Spider-Man, Savage Dragon or Venom—I'll ask him to draw Daredevil or Batman." If you want Batman, sure, ask for Batman. But if you want a drawing of Venom—ask for Venom. This isn't about what I want to draw. It's about what you want on your wall.

WINCHESTER: *Out of all the comics currently being published by Image, you hold the title of being the sole founder who is still writing and illustrating his own work. Where do you see yourself and the Savage Dragon world in the next ten years?*





LARSEN: Ideally, 120 issues ahead of where I am now. Unfortunately, these don't come as easily as they once did, and every issue is like pushing a boulder up a hill. It's not getting any easier. In ten years' time, most of Malcolm's kids will be almost 20 years old. I'm looking forward to that, honestly.

WINCHESTER: *What sort of legacy do you hope to leave behind one day, both as a creator and as the 'father' of the rich and fantastic world of Savage Dragon?*

LARSEN: I'm not overly concerned with my legacy, to be honest. I would hope that they enjoy what I've left behind, but if I'm forgotten—that's fine too. Once I'm in the ground, I stop caring what people think.

Since its debut as one of Image Comics' founding titles in 1992, *Savage Dragon* has stood apart in the crowded superhero landscape. Erik Larsen's commitment to writing and illustrating the series continuously, without reboot or hiatus, has given readers a rare experience: a comic that ages in real time, evolving alongside its audience.

In an industry often defined by constant reinvention and rotating creative teams, Larsen's singular vision has been the steady heart of *Savage Dragon*. The series has boldly navigated complex themes—family, identity, politics—while reflecting real-world events and maintaining its raw, pulpy energy.

Larsen's approach is refreshingly straightforward: he's less concerned with legacy and more focused on the page in front of him. This grounded philosophy—doing the work and letting the story



unfold—has been the foundation of the comic's enduring appeal and creative integrity.

The story continues today with Malcolm Dragon stepping into the spotlight, carrying the weight of his father's legacy while forging his own path. This ongoing evolution, driven by one creator's passion and consistency, offers readers something increasingly rare in modern comics: a coherent world with a singular voice that grows in real time.

Whether *Savage Dragon* wraps up tomorrow or continues onward for another few decades, its impact is already cemented—not through grand ambition, but through perseverance and dedication. In that sense, Erik Larsen's work is a testament to what it means to create with heart.

Joshua Winchester is a life-long resident of Illinois and loves to spend as much time as possible in Chicago, especially at the museums. He is a big fan of the Silver/Bronze Age of Comics, enjoys listening to jazz (whether on vinyl, CD or digitally), and on occasion likes to flex his culinary skills by making baked goods for friends and family. Josh also produces/co-hosts a weekly podcast entitled The CCC Podcast, dedicated to all things pop culture based.



(left) Savage Dragon keeps on going. (right) Dragon vs. Dart in this undated sketch. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © Erik Larsen.

Let's take this opportunity to enjoy a few more original Erik Larsen pieces of art! (top left) Larsen draws a mean Batman. (top right) *Wizard: The Comics Magazine* #3 (1991) cover featuring Wolverine. (bottom left) A 1992 *Wizard Magazine* Savage Dragon illustration. (bottom right) Mysterious original art from *Amazing Spider-Man* #338. Original art scans courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).



Batman TM & © DC Comics. Savage Dragon TM & © Erik Larsen. Wolverine, Spider-Man, and Mysterio TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc.





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AUG NO. 253

BATMAN AND BOB HOPE



PERHAPS I SHOULD'VE MENTIONED ON MY EMPLOYMENT APPLICATION THAT OL' BOB IS EQUAL PARTS PUSSYCAT--

--AND WOLF--! RRUFF! RRUFF!

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TWOMORROWS AD PAGE

KILLER INSTINCT

THE WAYLON JONES STORY

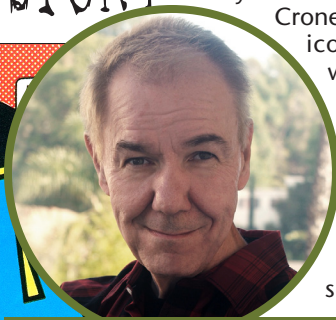
by James Heath Lantz



Waylon Jones, better known as Killer Croc, went from side show freak and mob enforcer to tragic figure throughout his appearances in *Detective Comics*, *Batman*, and related titles in the DC Universe. Jones has gone through a number of changes in the hands of various creators. *BACK ISSUE* will look at Killer Croc's journey from a scaly bruiser to reptilian sewer dweller with so much inner turmoil. Read these pages with caution, comics fans, because Killer Croc bites.

KILLER HISTORY

As we walk through the hallowed halls of Arkham Asylum, let's take a look at Killer Croc's journey through the DC Universe. In a year that brought us the final episode of *M*A*S*H*, David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome* and the only time music icons James Brown, Michael Jackson, and Prince would ever be on stage together, Gerry Conway, Gene Colan, Tony DeZuniga, Don Newton, and Alfredo Alcalá debuted Killer Croc, then known only as Croc, in the pages of *Detective Comics* #523 and *Batman* #357 (Feb.-Mar. 1983) when both titles starring the Dark Knight began crossing over with one another.



GERRY CONWAY

Gerry Conway took time out of his busy schedule to discuss creating Killer Croc with *BACK ISSUE*. "When I started writing *Batman*," he began, "I had to kind of choose where I was going to settle on the character. Was he a kind of the Gotham knight, a crime fighter, or a detective? Which version did I want to use? As a longtime fan, I wanted to emphasize his street level adventures."

Conway continued, "Most of his villains are almost intellectual characters. You have the Joker who is a terrific character, but his baseline is tricks. The Penguin, while I did use him, was a bit absurd for my run. I had brought back Golden Age villains Hugo Strange and the Monk, but I wanted to create a character who would challenge Batman physically and at the same time push him into an area where he would have some major disadvantages. He is a guy who zooms around the street in the car and also goes from rooftop to rooftop. He's an elevated character who operates best at the ground level. With Croc, my first thought was, 'Let's put Batman in a place that he's not familiar with, put him underground in the tunnels under Gotham City.'

"I was a fan of a French heist film with some scenes set under a city. I don't know if I can be more specific. There was also *The Third Man* which had Orson Welles in the tunnels under Paris. That was a visual image that I embraced. I built up a character who would be appropriate in that environment. I was a fan of *Dick Tracy* as well. Chester Gould always had these distinctive, deformed, most incredible characters as the enemies of Tracy. I liked that, and I thought that would work well with *Batman*. I think that was the original impulse for the creation of all those original villains by Jerry Robinson and Bill Finger."

Conway told *BACK ISSUE* how Croc got his name and the character's back story. "The thing I tried to do with Croc was make him an interesting character on his own. When I was growing up in New York, there were always stories of alligators in the sewers. Unfortunately, the name alligator is just too long and too specific to the Florida Everglades, but Croc was short and immediately brought to mind someone living in the subterranean sewer system. I thought of Croc as a character.

Killer Croc makes a bold claim on the cover of *Batman* #359. Art by Ed Hannigan and Dick Giordano.

TM & © DC Comics

(left) Killer Croc rises in the sewers on the cover of *Detective Comics* #525. Art by Ed Hannigan and Dick Giordano.

(right) Killer Croc tosses Batman like a ragdoll in *Batman* #359. Art by Dan Jurgens and Dick Giordano. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © DC Comics



From there I built his visual appearance and wrote a backstory as being a deformed kid growing up being abused and hunted, retreating into the sewers as an escape from reality and from the unpleasant life that he was living. Then he turns to crime. He wonders how else he is going to make money if he's living in a sewer. Eventually, Croc becomes an extremely important figure in the crime world. That's pretty much how I developed him and his story."

Gerry Conway has had mixed feelings on how Killer Croc has been handled by other creative teams and media. While he understands that Croc is an important addition to Batman's rogues gallery, he feels that many have veered away from a mere gangster with a rare skin condition in favor of a more crocodilian villain. Some creators have brought Killer Croc back to his criminal underworld roots. Yet, that tends to go away to make room for the more beastly aspects of the character.

Gerry Conway confirmed his feelings about Killer Croc with *BACK ISSUE*. "It's true I have mixed feelings about Croc's development as a more monster character," he stated. "But generally, those feelings are positive. I do wish Batman had more down-to-earth villains in the original Croc mold, and I'm tired of the cycling roster of Joker, Two-Face, et al. That said, Killer Croc has become my major contribution to the *Batman* universe, and how could I not be grateful for that?"

Conway continued, "I will say I really approve his re-invention as a sainted monster. I think that started in the *Batman: The Animated Series*. The *Batman: Arkham* video games have done well with Croc because he's really the perfect visual character for the medium, and consoles like the PlayStation take advantage of that perfectly."

The artists involved with Killer Croc's creation had different styles. Yet, their work on *Batman* and *Detective Comics* complement each other, and the inkers gave each panel the look needed for the atmosphere of a colorful and dark voyage to Gotham City like what Neal Adams started in the late '60s and early '70s. Even Curt Swan and Dan Jurgens, best known for their work on *Superman*, made their clean line work fit perfectly into Killer Croc's plot to become the greatest crime lord in Gotham.

Dan Jurgens discussed his artwork in *Detective Comics* #525 and *Batman* #359 and his thoughts on Killer Croc with *BACK ISSUE*. "It was a long, long time ago, but a couple of things stand out," he began. "I was still very, very new. I think I had only done a couple issues of *Warlord* at that point—maybe three—but I was slowly getting more comfortable with the process. One of the things I definitely remember is that the writer, Gerry Conway, had part of the story taking place in the circus. I hadn't ever drawn a circus in my life and trying to figure that out was an immediate obstacle. It certainly slowed me down and the deadline, which was already tighter than I might have wished, became a bit tougher to deal with. Despite that, it was a fun gig! It was great fun to be drawing Batman and be part of the more prominent DCU, rather than the much smaller *Warlord* universe."

Jurgens continued, "One of the biggest problems I had was trying to figure out what Killer Croc actually looked like. As I recall, I had a sketch that Ed Hannigan had done for *Detective Comics* #525's cover. It showed the back of Killer Croc—not the front. I believe that's about all I had for reference. I asked about the rest of the character's look and was told, 'Scales all over, just like the back.' They sent me the pencils to *Detective Comics* #523, which didn't have much on Croc at all. I think Don Newton was drawing #524 at the exact same time I was doing #525. And Curt Swan was drawing *Batman* #358 at the time as well. We were there because Don Newton was going to skip ahead to draw



Detective Comics #526, which was a special anniversary issue. I just kind of skipped around the Croc scenes until they sent a sketch of Hannigan's design for *Batman* #359. That gave me much better feel, and I could dig into the Killer Croc scenes with more of an idea of what he looked like, but that kind of explains why Newton, Swan, and I all drew him somewhat differently."

Jurgens then opined on the character of Killer Croc. "He's a very worthy addition to Batman's list of villains and he's become more interesting over time. Also more physically threatening, which makes him an even better addition. He also has a fairly unique look for a Batman villain, which is nice. To me he works best as something of a lonely, isolated figure."

Gerry Conway's characterization of Croc is influenced by a mixture of real-world stories of corruption and, as stated before, villains from Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy*. It has been considered by fans as one of the best of Waylon. It's an integral part of Conway's celebrated run on *Batman* and *Detective Comics* that highlights his strengths as a comic book writer. He gives depth to a bad guy who may have come off as two dimensional in the hands of someone else.

Killer Croc's initial story consisted of seven issues- *Detective Comics* #523-526 and *Batman* #357-359. Croc tended to be in the background through the early part of his character arc. The pacing and positioning of his parts of the plot lead smoothly into his first confrontation with the Batman. Jones calculated his moves and studied the people and environment of Gotham City before fully taking on the Caped Crusader. He also wanted to eliminate his competitors, thereby rising in the criminal ranks. *Detective Comics* #524, the issue in which we see his scaly, reptilian face for the first time, brilliantly shows Waylon's methods. Members of former spy, the Squid's, gang are searching for Batman. Croc spots him, but doesn't alert the others. Croc's intentions to kill Batman with his own hands becomes clearer in subsequent chapters of his saga.

Killer Croc kills the Squid in *Detective Comics* #524. He probably could have done so without the aid of weapons, but he chose to use a high-powered rifle. Possibly knowing Batman would investigate and learn who shot the Squid, Waylon lured the Dark Knight into confronting him. Croc believed he could become the king of Gotham's criminal empires if he could kill Batman. In a sense, Killer Croc in Gerry Conway's serial is very similar to another of Batman's foes, Bane, who would appear in comics roughly ten years after Croc.

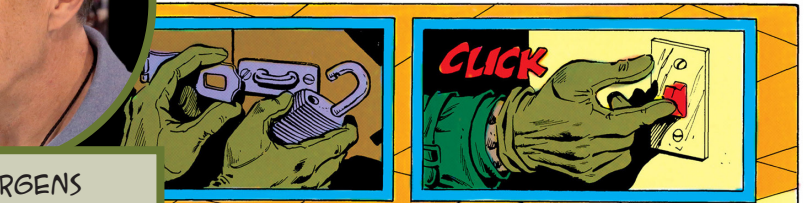
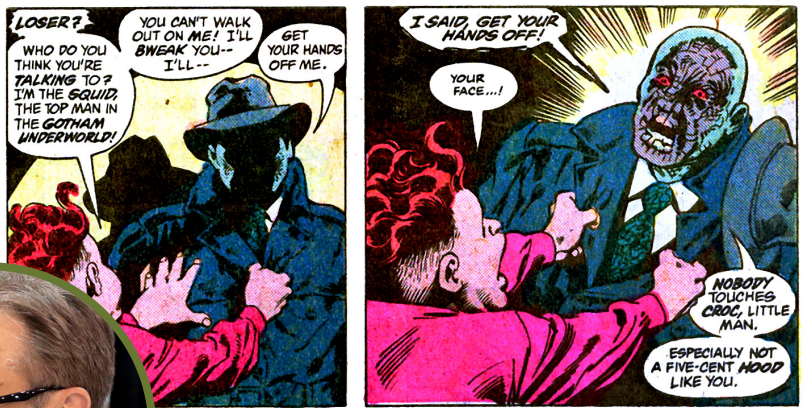
Waylon Jones' past before coming to Gotham City under the Croc name is a complex one. He was born in a Tampa Bay, Florida slum with a rare form of atavism that gave him reptilian traits. His mother died giving birth to him, and his father left him. Jones was raised by an alcoholic, abusive aunt. Children teased him for his appearance. This created rage within young Waylon that led him to attack a boy and eventually led a life of crime. He worked in a carnival sideshow wrestling alligators as an adult.

Jones attempted to prove himself to the gangs of Gotham, and his mind was one that planned for nearly everything. However, his anger issues from his abusive childhood sometimes got the better of him. *Batman*



DAN JURGENS

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(top) The Squid makes a mistake, and we see Killer Croc's face for the first time in *Detective Comics* #524. Art by Don Newton and Dick Giordano. (bottom) Batman surprises Killer Croc in *Batman* #358. Art by Curt Swan and Rodin Rodriguez.

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#358 shows this perfectly. Croc returned to his tenement apartment to find Batman greeting him. Waylon considered this place his sanctuary where nobody could call him a freak. Batman's invasion of that sanctuary ruined it in Croc's eyes. He flew into a rage, attacked the Dark Knight, and blew up his own home. While Killer Croc's actions are inexcusable, readers do understand his need for solace from the torments he had faced during much of his life.

In the midst of his attempt to be the king of Gotham City's crime, Killer Croc took over a protection racket that the Squid had begun. Among the businesses strong armed by Waylon Jones was the Sloan Circus where the family acrobatic act the Flying Todds consisting of mother Trina, father Joe, and son Jason Todd perform. Joe and Trina agree to help Batman and Robin stop Croc's operation. Their method of assisting the Caped Crusaders—following one of Croc's men—does not go as planned when Croc kills them, leaving their bodies in the Gotham Zoo.

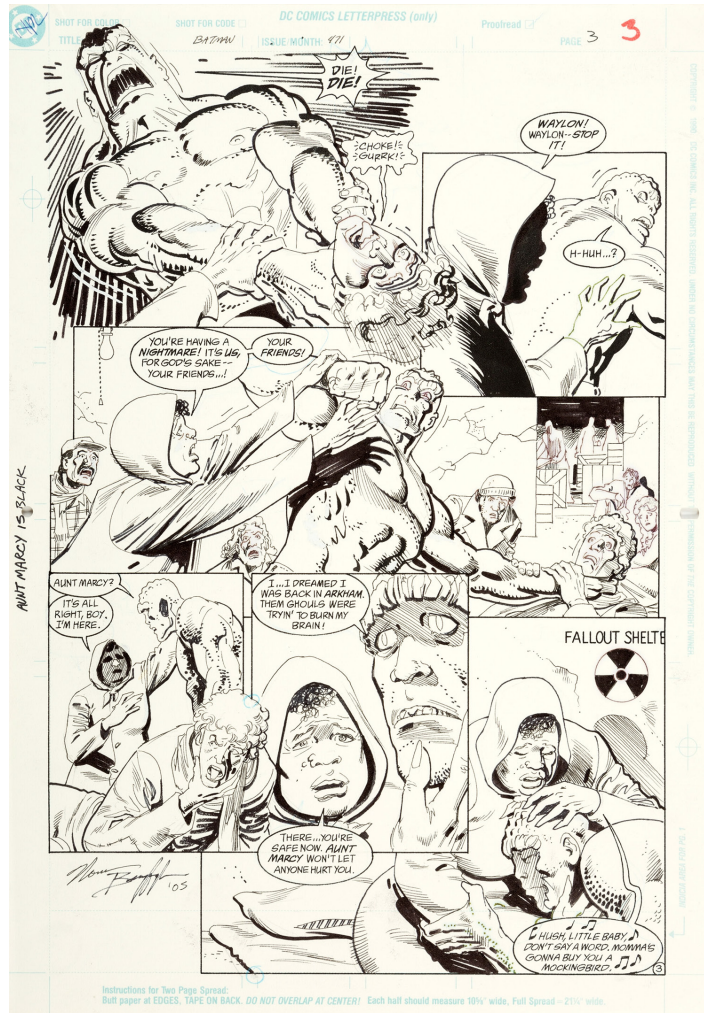
One way to look at Killer Croc in his debut serial in *Detective Comics* and *Batman* is like a new predator placed in a new environment. Waylon Jones sees the world around him as a jungle thanks to the abandonment, abuse, and bullying he suffered as a child. When he arrives in Gotham City, he's out to prove himself to be the dominant animal in a world full of beasts ruled by the bat.

Waylon's need to prove he's more than a freak or a monster stems from the same cruel treatment his family and peers had given him. Conway's version of Jones does this by planning, plotting, and using his brain while observing his prey. Creators who followed Conway would use more animalistic means which would also make the beliefs of those who wronged Croc right. Waylon would basically say with his actions, "If they think I'm a monster, then I shall be a monster." Does this make him more or less sympathetic than the Lizard, the Abomination, the Hulk, or any other comic book character deemed a horrifying menace? That is a matter of opinion, but whether or not we do understand the reasons for Killer Croc's behavior, one thing is clear. He is a force to be reckoned with.

Many mob bosses in Gotham are disappointed in Croc by the concluding chapter of Gerry Conway's Killer Croc story arc and in his *Detective Comics* and *Batman* run. However, he gets a chance to prove himself worthy of being a deadly foe of the Batman when confronted by the Dark Knight's rogues gallery. Various factions of villains are getting together in *Detective Comics* #526, Batman's 500th appearance in that title, to knock off their cowed arch enemy before Croc can. However, Waylon has a score to settle with Batman. Being territorial made Jones feel a need to avenge the masked detective's breaking into his apartment by crushing him with his bare hands.

(left) Batman comes face to face with Killer Croc in *Arkham Asylum*. Art by Dave McKean. (right) Killer Croc awakens from a nightmare in *Batman* #471. Art by Norm Breyfogle. Original art scans courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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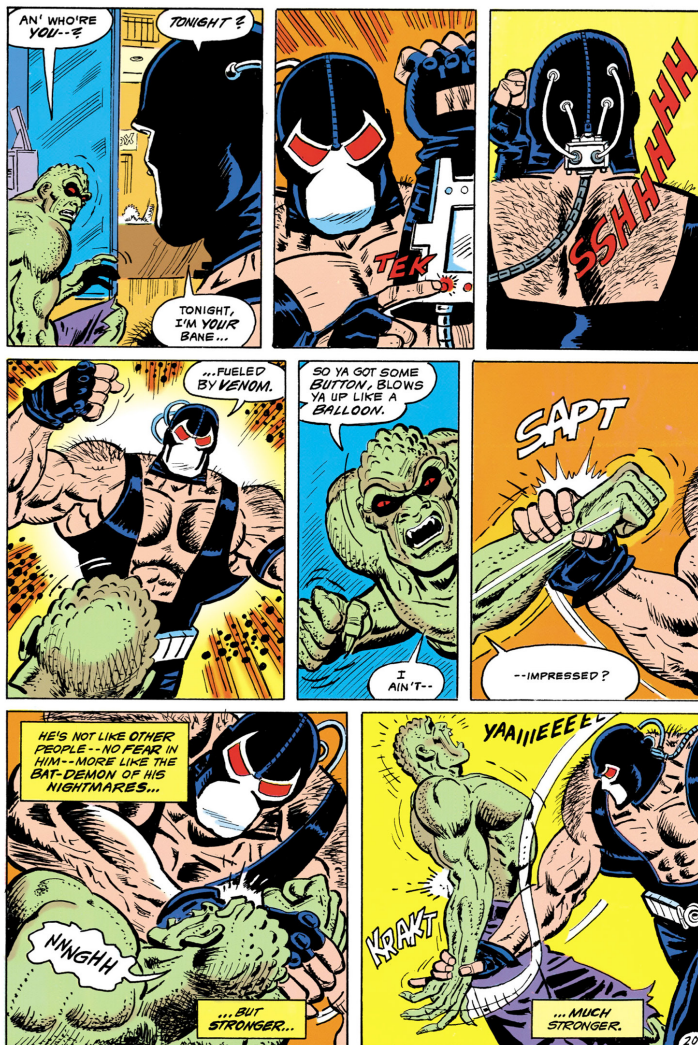
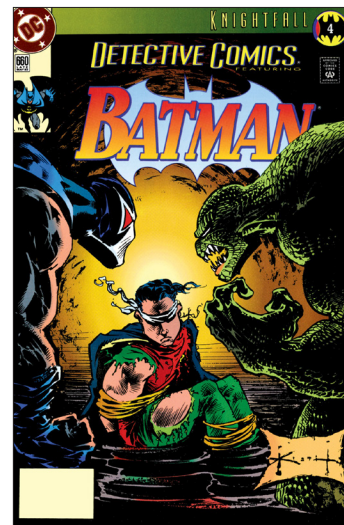
Killer Croc's Pre-Crisis iteration had but a brief time in the comics spotlight. Yet, it had a great impact on readers and fans. There was the mystery of his likeness and an equally greater mystery of what he was plotting to become Gotham's King of Crime. The *Crisis on Infinite Earths* maxiseries and crossover would be literally universe shattering for DC's heroes and villains. However, Killer Croc's battles with the Batman were only beginning.

POST-CRISIS CROC

After *Crisis on Infinite Earths* rebooted DC Comics' main universe, much of the characters' canon was changed. The biggest difference for Killer Croc was also significant for another Gerry Conway creation, Jason Todd. Unlike in Conway's comics, Croc had nothing to do with the death of Jason's parents, and much of the scheming gangster aspect of Waylon Jones was taken away in his Post-Crisis appearances. His origin still remained intact. Plus, the events of Gerry Conway's story involving the Squid were part of the then current DC Comics continuity. The Squid is recalled in the soon to be discussed *Batman* #512. Yet, Waylon wasn't a menace like Ra's Al Ghul, the Joker, or Two-Face. He seemed to be placed in the second-rate villains files in the Batcomputer. In fact, Two-Face is the Post-Crisis killer of the Todds, and Waylon Jones gradually became hired muscle and more like a crocodile due to his condition. Readers do still have sympathy for Jones. There is just more brutality in his actions compared to how Gerry Conway and the various artists brought him the pages of his beginning story arc.

Batman #400 (Oct. 1986) by Doug Moench and various artists and Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious Place On a Serious Earth* (1989) hardcover graphic novel have Croc being part of another bad guy's plans alongside the rest of Batman's rogues gallery. Ra's Al Ghul plots his revenge by using the Dark Knight's other enemies as pawns with Killer Croc sent to kidnap loyal butler Alfred Pennyworth in *Batman* #400's "The Resurrection Game." *Arkham Asylum*, a tale for mature readers inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*, takes place on April Fool's Day. The Joker and the other inmates of the mental institution for the criminally insane threaten to kill hostages if Batman doesn't participate in their attempts to drive the Cowled Crimefighter mad. Among the captured are doctors whose questionable methods seem to make the patients worse. One of these psychiatrists is the mastermind of the entire plot. Croc's part in the maze of insanity in *Arkham Asylum* is more savage than others. He's using his brute strength to beat the bat. However, Dave McKean's elegantly painted artwork depicts the fight like that of an archangel combating a dragon. The stunning visuals combine with captions from Amadeus Arkham's journal to give the conflict a deeper, psychological edge.

After Frank Miller and David Mazzuchelli's classic *Batman: Year One* gave the Caped Crusader a sort of rebirth, Killer Croc didn't really get the Bat Signal shined upon him until 1991 in *Batman* #471. Now, there are going to be comparisons to Spider-Man's foe the Lizard and the Hulk's nemesis the Abomination when one looks at this issue and all of the comics starring those antagonists in that period. Yet, what sets Waylon Jones apart from Curt Connors and Emil Blonsky is that Jones has a more child-like need for protection. This is evident when he wakes up from a nightmare at the beginning of issue #471's story. Aunt Marcy, one of the homeless people who befriends and welcomes Waylon into their group, provides that for him and becomes the mother figure he never had when he was growing up in Florida. In fact, Croc now has a family and people depending on him to keep their underground sanctuary safe. This gives the Post-Crisis version of the character a different sympathetic edge from the gangster version in Gerry Conway's tales. Both iterations have depth that allow readers to understand and identify with Waylon, but each one is, in a positive sense, a product of the time in which they were published.



(top left) Killer Croc is back in *Batman* #471. Art by Norm Breyfogle. (top right) Sam Kieth's cover for *Batman* #660 hints at what's in store. (bottom) Killer Croc's first battle with Bane does not go well. *Batman* #489 art by Jim Aparo.

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The celebrated creative team of Alan Grant and Norm Breyfogle crafted a comic that was more than a hero versus villain conflict in *Batman* #471's "Requiem For A Killer". Sure, there is a brief fight between Croc and Batman, but that happens because Batman believes that Jones is too dangerous not to be placed back into Arkham Asylum. Waylon feels like his home has been invaded as he did in Gerry Conway's Croc saga. He also thought his new family was in danger. The latter fact was true, for Batman warned them that Gotham City was going to close and flood the tunnels they occupy. Killer Croc saves them from the oncoming deluge of water, supposedly sacrificing himself in the process. This leads the Caped Crusader to believe there's more to Waylon Jones than the rage fueled bruiser he had encountered in the past.

Living in the sewers shows Waylon Jones' forced isolation from humanity can be interpreted as an effort to distance himself from his own humanity. Yet, he finds everything the boy within him had longed for since he lived in the Florida projects upon meeting Aunt Marcy's group.

The psychological scars from the abuse, neglect, and even poverty of Waylon's childhood are some things the original Killer Croc have in common with his Post-Crisis counterpart. There is still the child within Jones that longs for a family that loves him and friends who don't tease or bully him for his skin condition. That child is hidden by the beast who revels in his actions which, looking deeply into his psyche, are a means of lashing out at those who hurt him.

Is Waylon Jones more human than animal? Well, perhaps the more accurate question would be the following. Is Waylon Jones

more human than monster? Animals only act violently when defending their group, family, or territory. There are times when Jones does that, but he tends to let his more bestial side that serves as a defense mechanism stay on the surface. His reptilian visage makes him feared by many, and Killer Croc uses that to his advantage, even if it means being more brutal than he should be.

Other things that both Waylons use to their advantage is the Gotham City underworld's vices. This is especially true of the need for power and money and believing that only the strong survive in Gotham. Jones sees his enemies as prey in the darkest jungle of them all, and the weak will die by his hands if need be. They only stand in his way of becoming the king of Gotham's criminal empires. Waylon's mindset stems yet again from his upbringing. He had to prove to others and himself he could live through his tormented childhood.

WHEN A KNIGHT FALLS

The late '80s to the early-to-mid '90s saw DC Comics taking greater chances with their more iconic characters. Jason Todd/Robin and Superman had died, and Batman was being put through the ringer by new villain Bane in the "Knightfall" saga that ran through multiple Battitles. As stated before, the Pre-Crisis Killer Croc is very similar to Bane. The major difference between the two baddies is Croc wanted to kill Batman, whereas Bane wanted to break his body and spirit, which could be considered as a fate much worse than death by the Dark Knight.

One of the issues leading into "Knightfall," *Batman* #489, brings Waylon Jones back from the dead as a delusional Croc creates chaos in Gotham's homeless community while he piques Bane's curiosity. Bruce Wayne is exhausted, and Tim Drake, the then current Robin, must train Jean-Paul Valley to act like Batman.

Croc's survival from the flood shown in his previous appearance came with a price. His mind is forcing him to relive all his nightmares and torments. The audience gets to look inside the

broken mind of what would otherwise seem like a second-string nemesis. The hallucinations created by Waylon's trauma cause him to go on a rampage that nearly kills the novice Batman. Bane intervenes by beating Croc to a pulp and breaking his arms. Jones was then returned to Arkham Asylum with one thought on his mind-revenge against Bane. Croc gets his rematch with Bane in *Detective Comics* #660 (May 1993). Their clash in the sewers causes a flood that nearly drowns Robin. Bane later explains in *Batman* #494 that Croc was taken away by the current of sewer waters during their bout.

Chuck Dixon gave each character a distinct voice throughout his run as writer on various Batcomics. His take on Killer Croc was one of understandable

brutality. It takes what previous scribes have done before while adding Dixon's unique touches that give Waylon a humanity that shows beyond the surface of an antagonist perceived to be a monster. Dixon would do this with a vast majority of the baddies he wrote from Marvel's Killer Shrike to DC's Darkseid.

A majority of Dixon's *Detective Comics* scripts were drawn by Graham Nolan. However, Jim Balent provided art for #660.



Kelley Jones and John Beatty's stylish take on Killer Croc in *Batman* #522. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (inset) Swamp Thing joins Batman's battle against Killer Croc.

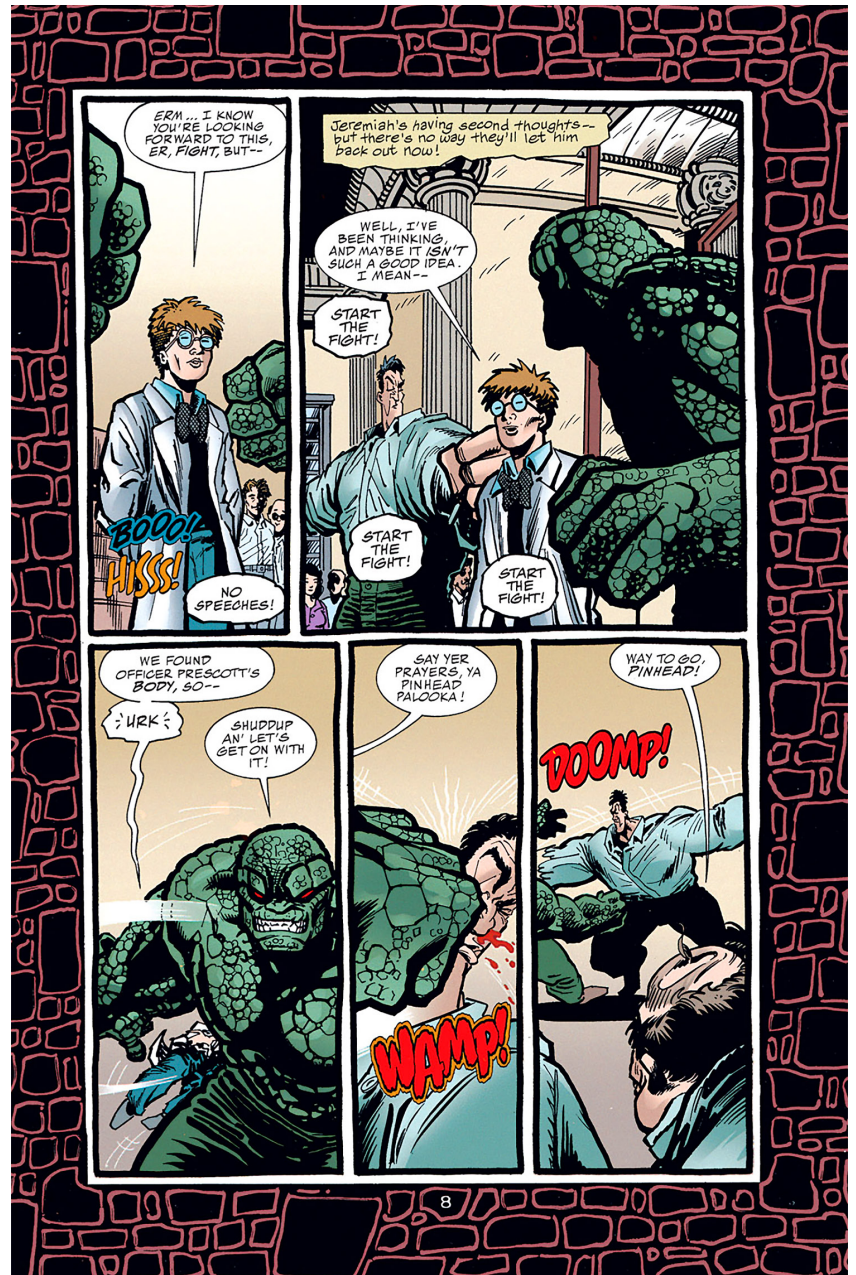
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Balent's work would give style, grace, and beauty to Feline Femme Fatale Selina Kyle's first solo monthly *Catwoman* series for nearly seventy issues. Balent's visuals are smooth and clean combined with the fearsome darkness, making it a perfect fit for any Batman story with or without Killer Croc.

Waylon Jones washed up on the shore of Gotham Harbor after Bruce Wayne recovered from his broken back in "Knightquest," reclaimed the mantle of the Batman in "Knightsend," and gave it to Dick Grayson in "Prodigal," the story in which *Batman* #512 (Nov. 1994) was the first chapter. Jones was still looking to avenge his defeat at Bane's hands, and he was looking to make a name for himself in Gotham's organized crime once again. Angered because Bane is in Blackgate, thereby denying him of his vendetta, Jones takes his anger out on the newly cowed Batman. Dick barely makes it out alive. Quick thinking on his part allows him to trap Croc in a net. Bullets meant for Robin strike Jones' scaly body, leaving Killer Croc injured upon his return to Arkham Asylum.

Batman wasn't the only one Bane broke during the entire "Knightfall" saga. In his quest to shatter the Dark Knight mentally and physically, he did the same to Killer Croc, though he did so to a lesser degree. Croc's arms were injured, and his body battered. Physically, Waylon could heal from whatever Bane had dealt him. The mental humiliation was another story. Jones needed to vindicate himself after Bane made him look like a fool. When he was robbed of his revenge, Croc took his anger out on Dick Grayson, and while Dick was taking over as the new Caped Crusader and dealing with doubts, he manages to defeat Waylon Jones, embarrassing him even more.



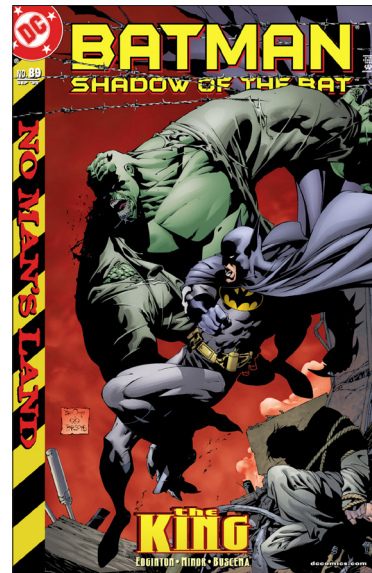
"All my life people been screamin'... ever since I was a kid-just cuz I was born different... just cuz I look different, but lemme tell ya... you people ain't no joy to look at neither!"

That quote from Killer Croc written in *Batman* #521 can describe what he feels and sees about what society perceives as normal humans. Yet, it can also be his way of telling readers how he sees the ugliness of those who had mistreated him throughout his life. It can be interpreted as Waylon saying that he may be physically horrifying to the eyes, but people have been psychologically terrifying, thereby showing the worst parts of themselves to Waylon and the world.

In the aftermath of the final serial of "Knightfall," "Troika," Bruce Wayne dons a darker cape and cowl to become Batman again, and Alfred returns to Wayne Manor after disagreeing with Bruce in "Knightquest." Killer Croc would come back in the aforementioned *Batman* #521 and 522 (Aug.-Sep.

(left) Man-Bat and Killer Croc cross paths. Cover by Flint Henry and Kevin Nowlan. (right) Killer Croc battles Pinhead in *Batman: Shadow of the Bat* #81 art by Mark Buckingham and Robert Campanella.

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1995). Arkham Asylum has been rebuilt. An unknown entity has possessed an already mentally fragile Killer Croc, compelling him to search for a place called the Wet Dark. Jones is more primal in this story when he escapes Arkham, and the being uses his need to belong and find a home. Jones hijacks a train that crashes in Louisiana. Swamp Thing intervenes in *Batman* #522's "Swamp Things" (Sep. 1995), revealing that a disturbance in the Green, what Swamp Thing calls the natural world, is possessing Waylon and caused him to devolve. Batman is not permitted to take Waylon Jones back to Gotham City. The gentle muck monster promises to let Batman know if Jones commits further atrocities. *Batman* #522 ends with the Caped Crusader and readers wondering how long it will take for that to happen.

Killer Croc has appeared in a number of other DC comic books that aren't technically part of the *Batman* line over the years. Yet, few have been directly connected to the Battitles like *Swamp Thing* #160. Croc, now no longer under the disturbance's control, wants to fight Swamp Thing, which does not go well for Waylon, for his time in the swamps does not last long. He takes a train back to Gotham City in the short story "Workin' My Way Back to You" published in *The Batman Chronicles* #3 (Dec. 1995) by Chuck Dixon, Gabriel Hardman, and Robert Campanella. Croc returns to the sewers and befriends and heals Man-Bat in Mach 1996's *Man-Bat* #2. He found his way back to Arkham Asylum until a great disaster hits Gotham City.

WELCOME TO NO MAN'S LAND

Another massively serialized story consisting of multiple titles starring the Batfamily was "No Man's Land" which dealt with an earthquake hitting Gotham City and its effects on citizens, police, numerous villains, and Batman himself. Beginning with "Cataclysm," continuing in "Aftershock" and "Road To No Man's Land," and concluding in "No Man's Land," Gotham City is recovering from Ra's Al Ghul's infecting the population with the Clench virus in "Contagion" and "Legacy" when the earthquake occurs. The United States government has given up on Gotham and its people. Heroes and villains alike have divided it into various territories, leading to power plays and rotating changes in the status quo.

Now, the similarities to the Lizard and the Abomination have been discussed, but there is another character much like Waylon—the Hulk. Waylon, like Bruce Banner's green skinned alter ego, is searching for friendship, family, and/or someone who loves him for who he is. However, Croc uses the fear and hatred as a weapon in Jones' arsenal that is more powerful than his brute strength. Croc also showed in *Batman* #521-522

(left) Batman and Killer Croc face off in *Batman: The Animated Series*. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (middle) Killer Croc goes after Robin on Jason Pearson's cover for issue #82. (right) There can only be one King. *Batman: Shadow of the Bat* #89 cover by Matt Broome and Sean Parsons.

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that, like the Hulk, he can be manipulated by outside forces. Such incidents do not occur as often as they do with the Hulk, and Waylon tends to be more vicious than Marvel's gamma irradiated man-monster and tends to react more violently to being controlled, be it through medical means like in Arkham Asylum, goading by other inmates, or a more supernatural force like in "Swamp Things".

Batman: Shadow of the Bat #80-82's "Road to No Man's Land" story, "The Wax Man and the Clown" (Dec. 1998-Feb. 1999) by Alan Grant, shows Waylon being coerced by the Joker to fight the Wax Man's henchman Pinhead after the Clown prince of Crime changes the medications in Croc's records in Arkham Asylum. The Wax Man had humiliated the Joker at breakfast, and Jones was his means of revenge. Croc is easily duped in this story. However, without proper pharmaceutical treatment, he became more aggressive, thereby proving that Jones at times needs therapeutic means to remain calm.

Killer Croc is among the inmates Jeremiah Arkham sets free in the end of *Batman: Shadow of the Bat* #82. Waylon comes back to his early 1980s roots somewhat when he rebuilds his gang to take other territories in the ravaged city.

Batman isn't the only Batfamily member to deal with Killer Croc as Chuck Dixon, Staz Johnson, and Wayne Faucher demonstrate in *Robin* #71-72. Waylon Jones proves he's back to his tough gangster ways from *Detective Comics* #523-526 and *Batman* #357-359 in these "No Man's Land" chapters. "I ain't going back to the sewers! That's over! That's history! I'm not going back to that! You with me on this? I used to run this town 'til the cops and Black Mask and Bane hounded me into the sewers. And I blame nobody but myself! But I'm Killer Croc, damn it, and I'm back for what's mine! Mine!" He declares to his gang in the beginning of #71 while a tailor fits him for a designer suit.

With Batman, the new Batgirl, and the Huntress otherwise occupied in Gotham and Nightwing injured, Tim Drake, still recovering from the Clench virus, must observe Killer Croc while

the reptilian nemesis of law and order uses fear and his scaly visage to expand his territory. The third Boy Wonder is taken hostage and tied to Waylon's car during a confrontation with the Penguin and the Gotham City Police Department. Alfred rescues Robin while Croc has a showdown with the Penguin, allowing Tim to use his speed and skills and assistance from the GCPD against a raging Killer Croc.

Throughout these comic books, readers get to see Waylon Jones attempt to become the most important underworld figure in Gotham City. "The King" from the September 1999 cover dated *Batman: Shadow of the Bat* #89 by Ian Edginton, Jason Temujin Minor, and Sal Buscema puts a monkey wrench in those plans. Batman needs help from the King of Gotham, a reformed ex-convict named Stanley Demchaszky, to get medicines and relief supplies to ill children. Yet, Killer Croc sees this so-called royalty as a threat to his having that title. This shows Waylon's need to be top of the food chain, as it were, and for a place to call home and his equally important need to keep it as a sanctuary while Jones is attempting to be the king Gotham's territories during the various power plays throughout the entire "No Man's Land" arc.

Waylon discusses his need to take refuge in the sewers after his battles with Batman, the police, and Bane. However, much like his criminal career, he chose to do so. This is most likely due to his childhood trauma forcing him to go into hiding from bullying and abuse. Deep down, Jones is still that child with the desire to protect himself because, with a few exceptions, nobody else in his life would do so.

Now, readers of these words are probably asking why Killer Croc chose to return to his gangster life during the "No Man's Land" serial. Well, the short answer would be the creative teams' choices. However, the more complex response could be a combination of two things. The medications given to him at Arkham Asylum, while making him susceptible to control at first, gradually brought Waylon's more calculating and scheming mind from the abyss of savagery that had overtaken him in earlier Post-Crisis comic books. His resurrected intelligence could have led to the second possible response. Killer Croc saw the earthquake and Gotham City's near destruction as an opportunity to rebuild what he created in Gerry Conway's stories. He even entertains thoughts of calling himself King Croc. This is obviously his way of proving himself to those who mistreated him. He wants to show everyone he isn't just a freak. He's somebody important who nobody would dare mess with.

Aside from books mentioned in this article, much of Killer Croc's actions to expand his criminal empire and his encounters with Batman and the Batfamily occur off panel or are mentioned in dialogue and narration throughout both the "No Man's Land" comics and Greg Rucka's novelization. He does take on Two-Face's gang, and we already saw his confrontation with the Penguin. Yet, Croc wants people to fear him. He uses his skin condition to his advantage. Ordinary citizens are frightened of him because they see him as a creature from the depths, much like the children who picked on young Waylon. He may not have been around as long as most of Batman's bad guys, but he's shown he can tussle with them and give them a run for their money.

Devin Grayson, Dale Eaglesham, Jaime Mendoza, and John Floyd gave readers of *The Batman Chronicles* #18. "Spiritual Currency" provides more proof of Waylon Jones' heart and his need to fill the emptiness within him with the love and acceptance he never received as a child. Stumpy, Waylon's only friend and one of the few people who could make him laugh, was nearly killed by Victor Zsasz. Doctor Leslie Thompkins, surrogate mother to Bruce Wayne, runs the only functioning medical facility in the ravaged Gotham City. She tries to maintain neutrality and her own sanity as she tries



(top) Killer Croc inquires about his friend Stumpy in *The Batman Chronicles* #18. Art by Dale Eaglesham, Jaime Mendoza, and John Floyd. (bottom) Jim Lee and Scott Williams' monstrous Killer Croc on the cover of *Batman* #610, part of the "Hush" storyline.

TM & © DC Comics



Batman visits with Killer Croc in issue #620, Art by Eduardo Risso. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (inset) Dave Johnson's stylized cover to *Batman* #620.

TM & © DC Comics

child of a wealthy family in hopes that the ransom money can pay for a cure. A back-up serial in the previously mentioned *Detective Comics* #808-810 tells Waylon's story in the aftermath of "Hush." It was published roughly a year and a half to two years after the Loeb and Lee fan favorite story. Waylon hopes Doctor Maria Belleza can cure him of the effects of the Hush virus. She nearly does so, and Jones is nearly back to his normal self. Yet, he cannot resist the cannibalistic urges caused by the infection. Croc is hired to kill Elisabeth Lupo in "Broken City," and "War Games" deals with Jones being part of a gang war in Gotham City.

Each of these stories expand on Killer Croc's origins, personality, and his need for acceptance and his desire to become the King of Gotham. However, they also delve into Waylon's war within himself. The physical pain of his devolution and his insatiable hunger drive him mad. Plus, he doesn't want to eat anyone. This is particularly demonstrated in the three *Detective Comics* secondary features. Waylon is seeking help from Doctor Belleza, and he keeps fighting within himself not to harm her. She does manage to transform him back to his original

physical state, but the effects of the Hush virus are too strong, forcing Waylon to give into his instincts.

Killer Croc has gotten a redemption of sorts in recent years. He has been part of one of the newer *Suicide Squad* teams in comics, possibly due to his being a member of the team in the 2016 *Suicide Squad* movie. Speaking of Waylon Jones in other media, he has appeared in the acclaimed *Batman: The Animated Series* and battles Batman in various stages of the aforementioned *Batman: Arkham* video game series. Yet, it is his 1983 debut bout with the Dark Knight that is perhaps most fondly regarded by comic readers and collectors. You can check them and all of Killer Croc's comic book appearances out at your local comic and bookstores or find them digitally through various online services.

Dedicated with all the love in my heart to my beautiful and amazing wife Laura, Jadis, Pupino, Odino, and our four-legged Caped Crusaders and the true King of Gotham, my nephew Kento. Without your affection, assistance, support, and patience, none this would be possible. This article is also dedicated to Gerry Conway, Gene Colan, Tony DeZuniga, Don Newton, Alfredo Alcalá, Dan Jurgens, Curt Swan, Doug Moench, Chuck Dixon, and the various comic book writers and artists past, present, and future who brought Killer Croc out of the Gotham City sewers and into our lives. May the Batman and his family always be your guardian angels.

James Heath Lantz is a freelance writer who was heavily influenced by television, film, old time radio shows, and books—especially comic books—growing up in Ohio. He's co-authored Roy Thomas Presents Captain Video with Roy Thomas. He also wrote the introductions for Pre-Code Classics: Weird Mysteries Volumes One and Two and Roy Thomas Presents Sheena- Queen of the Jungle Volume Three (all published by PS Artbooks), self-published his Trilogy of Tales e-book (available at Smashwords.com and other outlets), and reviews various media for Superman Homepage. James currently lives in Italy with his wife Laura and their family of cats, dogs, and humans from Italy, Japan, and the United States.



to heal both an unconscious Mister Zsasz and Stumpy. This isn't easy when she, the Huntress, Batgirl, and Batman are caught in the middle of a fight between Croc and policeman Bill Petit.

Much like with Aunt Marcy's family seen in *Batman* #471, Waylon is willing to do anything to protect those he holds dear. This is because Stumpy and most of the people living underground with Aunt Marcy had shown Jones the love he never received as a child. He wanted to keep that love in order not lose it. If anyone does anything to those Waylon cares for, he's willing to do anything to protect them, even murder the perpetrators of wrongdoing. He wants to kill Zsasz for what he did to Stumpy. Yet, Leslie Thompkins won't permit that because Zsasz, like Stumpy, is her patient. Croc lashes out in other ways leading to Petit confronting him. Nobody is technically hurt by Croc in Leslie's clinic. This leaves the reader to believe Croc has more respect for the rules Doctor Thompkins had made for the makeshift medical facility than Petit, who fires his gun when he shouldn't. Waylon Jones may be savage and monstrous to many, but he has a code of honor and will open his heart to those who truly treat him like a "normal person" with affection and respect.

THOROUGHLY MODERN CROC

As the world went into the year 2000, Gotham City was rebuilt. Killer Croc does show up off and on in various Batcomics after the *BACK ISSUE* era. Perhaps his most significant appearances are in *Detective Comics* #808-810, Jeph Loeb and Jim Lee's "Hush," Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso's "Broken City" (*Batman* #608-625) and the "War Games" Batfamily wide crossover. "Hush" has the title villain infect Waylon with a virus that accelerates his devolution into a more primal being. He kidnaps the

THE BRILLIANCE OF

BONE

AN INTERVIEW WITH

JEFF SMITH

conducted and transcribed by
Amanda Powers



JEFF SMITH

© Larry D. Moore / Wikimedia Commons.

Since 1991, readers have been enjoying the many stories that add “flesh” to Jeff Smith’s world of epic fantasy—*Bone*. Indeed, his characters stand in opposition to social norms whereas they would have been the ones who were relegated to the roles of layabouts, jesters, and villains in traditional fairytales. For example, little Fone Bone from Boneville grows into a capable hero while his new friend Thorn is both a tomboy peasant and royal princess. His fellow Bone cousins, Smiley Bone, a friendly jester, and Phoney Bone, who starts off as a boorish bully, respectively rise to achieve personhood through their ordeals and commitment to their unlikely leader’s quest. Then, there’s Gran’má Ben, a woman in her later years who would have been the witch jealously oppressing her stepdaughter. Instead, she is a physically powerful, graceful, and wise protector who helps advance the plot of *Bone* by both keeping and taking part in unraveling the mystery that is Thorn. Moreover, toothed and scaly, the unlikely good doer known as the Great Red Dragon always seems to know when he is needed as a protector, while Bartleby, a fluffy and innocent rat cub, befriends the cousins and eventually brings them to safety instead of offering them plague. Through such layered characterizations, Smith is clearly sharing complex perspectives of emotions and societal norms with a universal appeal to readers of all ages. Out of the desire to learn more about his amazing creative process behind *Bone*, I conducted a one-on-one interview with the maestro himself to dive into the deepest parts of his storytelling process continuously inherent in this glorious long-form work...

AMANDA POWERS: Jeff, what formative stories during your childhood and adolescence influenced the creation of the *Thorn* college newspaper strips, which would lay the creative baseline for *Bone*?

JEFF SMITH: My first experience with comics was when my father would read to me from the Sunday newspaper. My favorite was *Peanuts* for sure. I went on to like all kinds of comics, whether they were from newspapers or comic books. I like *Archie* and *Casper*. Comics as an art form attracted me almost immediately, and I never stopped reading them. I made up Fone Bone and the Bone cousins between the ages of five and nine. In the fourth grade, one of the girls in my class brought me one of her father’s *Pogo* books. I was mesmerized! The drawings were as good as anything I’d seen in a Disney movie; the pages were filled with hilarious talking swamp animals! It was the thickest comic book I had ever held! This was the beginning of wanting to create a *Peanuts* or *Pogo*-like book with Fone Bone. This was in elementary school when my favorite comics had funny animals like Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny,

Meet the Bone cousins Fone, Phoney, and Smiley on the cover to *Bone* #1. All art by Jeff Smith unless otherwise noted.

TM & © Jeff Smith.

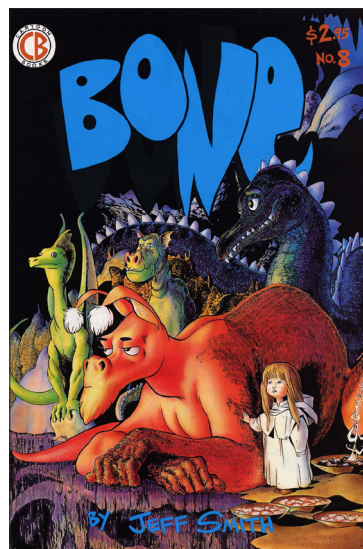
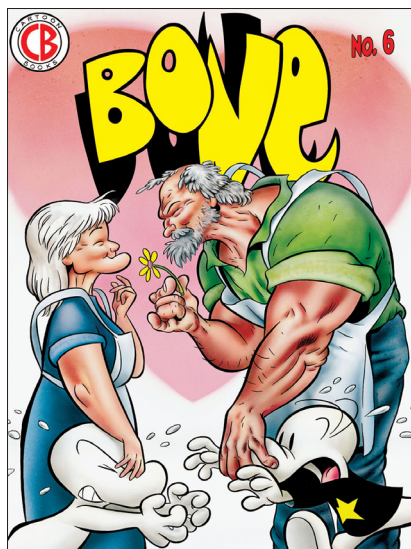
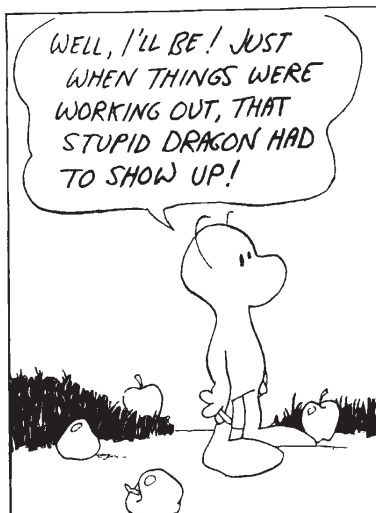


(top) *Thorn*, featured an early version of Smith's Bone story published in Ohio State University's *Lantern* student newspaper.

(bottom left) Gran'ma Ben and Lucius on the cover of *Bone* #6.

(bottom right) *Thorn* as a child surrounded by dragons, issue #8.

TM & © Jeff Smith.



but then it was in middle school that I began to discover fantasy. I saw the Frank Frazetta paintings on the *Conan* books, where you've got these muscular men, sexy women, horrible monsters, and big snowy mountains. It was during my junior year of high school, in the summer of 1977, that *Heavy Metal* magazine came out. It was a French comics magazine featuring some of the world's greatest fantasy artists such as Moebius and Bilal. That same year I read *The Lord of the Rings* and saw the first *Star Wars* film. When I look back at some of my drawings from that period, Fone Bone was suddenly running around carrying a sword! This young woman then appears in a scantily clad Princess Leia or Frazetta-type skimpy costume. But I never gave up the funny animals—I never gave up the Bones. I just wanted to incorporate them into a new kind of a story.

I attended The Ohio State University, where they had a student newspaper called *The Lantern* that ran five days a week. I didn't really go to college to get a specific degree; I just went to draw in the newspaper. By doing that for three years, I came up with this cache of characters, and I learned how to pace a joke. I learned about the timing—how to time panel-to-panel movement. After four years, I almost had enough credits to be a sophomore, so it was time to go. Once I left the university, I sent my college strips to newspaper syndicates because that's what I really wanted to do. I wanted to make *Bone* a newspaper comic strip. In order to do that, you had to be accepted by a newspaper syndicate who would then sell your comic to newspapers all over the country. The downside is that they would own your property, which is something I didn't want to do. Walt Kelly, who did *Pogo*, owned the copyright to his intellectual property. And if that's what my hero does, then that's what I'm going to do! Of course, that didn't go over too well with the syndicates, but they absolutely kept me drawing for two more years. They would make little inane suggestions that I didn't want to do, and I just felt like they were trying to wear me down. Eventually, I stopped taking their phone calls or responding in any way.

POWERS: Can you speak to how you feel about the physical delivery of your strips from the original newspaper to the collected edition of *Thorn*?

SMITH: I hadn't looked at the original strips in forty years! I donated the artwork to Ohio State's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum. When we were planning our Kickstarter, I needed to access the files to scan them—I was surprised by how good they actually were. The foundation of the unfinished *Bone* story was there, with the Rat Creatures and the Great Red Dragon, but now the strips were together in continuity, which helps to tie the feature together. Not to mention, they're now printed larger and on better paper than the original newspaper.

POWERS: What unique traits and characteristics did you possess as a child and as an artist that you feel shaped the collected *Thorn* strips and *Bone*?

SMITH: I just loved to draw. I needed to draw. I loved comedy, and I studied *MAD Magazine* and *Looney Tunes*. Even as a child, I paid attention to how humor worked and how it was constructed.

POWERS: Since there is a noticeable difference between your early years as an illustrator to the present, how did your artistic choices evolve regarding your complex background details and character line work?

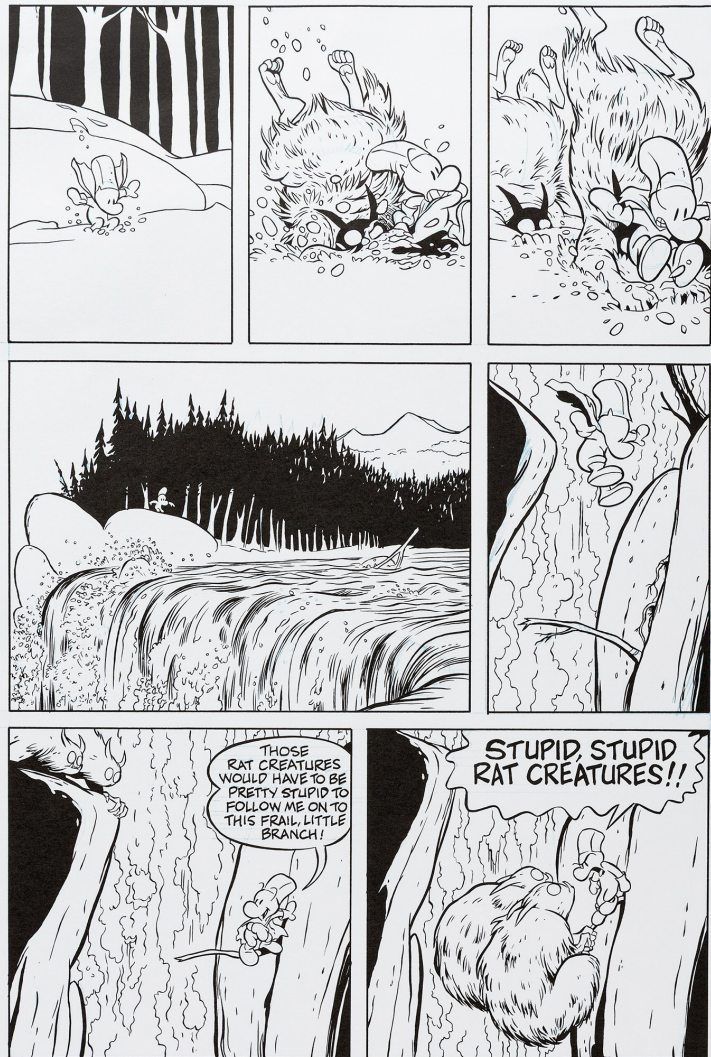


SMITH: As a child, I looked at the *Uncle Scrooge* comics by Carl Barks, where he's drawing the adventures of Donald Duck and his nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie. The backgrounds are very realistically rendered, whether they're climbing in the mountains or diving to the bottom of the ocean to reach Atlantis. Another influence came from the European comic *The Adventures of Tintin* by Hergé. The character Tintin is very cartoony. The backgrounds, again, are detailed, and the perspectives and everything in the panel are realistic. It's so beautiful! For me, that was always the way to do it.

POWERS: How did those short-form strips inform your choices in the long-form epic that is *Bone*?

SMITH: The four-panel strips helped me figure out how to pace and time my comics work. Even though later in the comic book I could use more than four panels for a joke or a bit, the learned discipline of the shorter form greatly improved my storytelling. Another thing was I knew was which jokes worked and were popular, so I was able to load the story with proven material!

Before we started the comic book company, and after I gave up, all the newspapers just turned me down. Even with the ones that didn't turn me down, I didn't want to work with them because it was just taking too long. So, I actually quit cartooning. Well, not all the way. With some of my buddies from college, we started up an animation studio, and for about seven years, that's what we did. We made commercials for local companies. When animating, I learned to tighten up my lines and my figures. I also learned to keep every detail light, because you must draw them exactly the same in every panel. You have to be able to see the characters turning around in three-dimensional space and make sure everything looks right. The company was called Character Builders, and all the artists were on the same level, so we all drew, learned, and criticized each other's work. That's



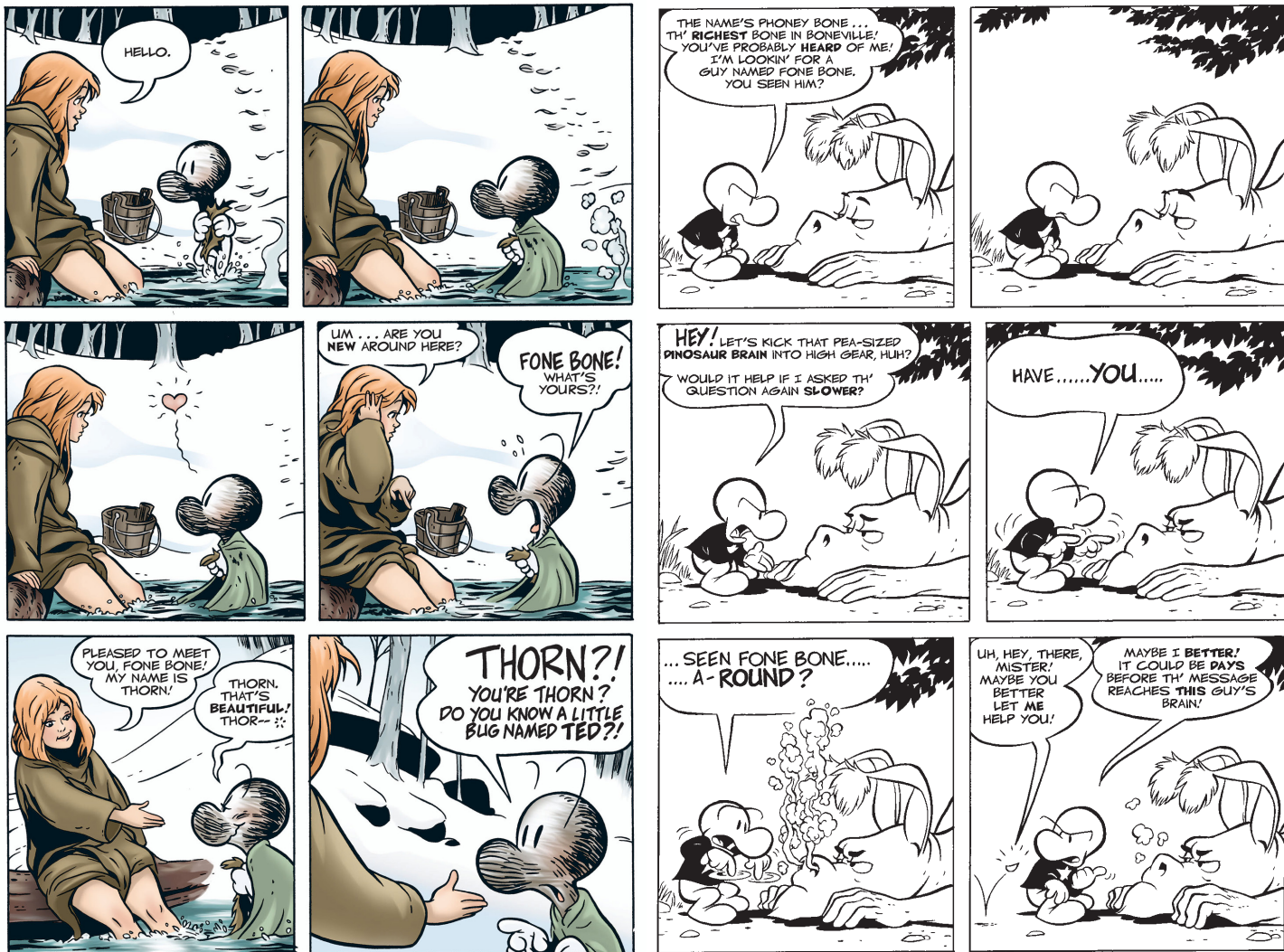
why, when I went back to start *Bone* over again as a comic book, I was much more consistent with my drawings. I was faster at it. I still used a dip pen [a quill] for issue #1 (Jul. 1991) of *Bone*. For the second book, my animation pals asked, "Why aren't you using a paintbrush? It's so much faster, and you'll get more of a Walt Kelly *Pogo* line." I tried it, which took a little practice, but I got the thicks, thins, and swoops to look as much like Walt Kelly as I could. I couldn't quite do it, but that's how you get your own style—by failing to steal your hero's style [laughs]!

POWERS: With your evolution as an artist, how did *Thorn* evolve as a character for you?

SMITH: Thorn was made up in high school or shortly after. It was when I met my wife, Vi [Vijaya Iyer], that the character just suddenly started behaving and talking like her and had her personality. Thorn became less of a fantasy girl, and all the skimpy outfits went away. She became more real. She would do little gestures, like putting her hair behind her ear or leaning forward to hear you. All those details in the comic just suddenly came out of Vi.

(right) Possibly the most famous page in the entirety of *Bone*. From issue #2. *Bone* was originally published in black and white but was colored for the collections from Scholastic. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © Jeff Smith.



(left) Fone Bone meets Thorn in *Bone* #2. (right) Phoney Bone making friends. From issue #3. We're presenting some pages as originally printed and some in color so you can see the difference.

TM & © Jeff Smith.

POWERS: Now I understand more about why she just feels so real!

SMITH: Yeah! All of the characters' personalities are based on real people I know or who I've seen. Even me. Fone Bone is like me in a lot of ways. So is Phoney Bone! There are times when I can be rotten [laughs]. Even with Gran'ma Ben, I feel very much like one side of my personality comes out through her—same with Lucius!

POWERS: Speaking of your design choices, Jeff, how did you decide to change look of the villainous Rat Creature known as Kingdok from the way he is seen in the Thorn strips to how you portrayed him in *Bone*?

SMITH: I did the first five issues of the comic while I was still working at Character Builders, and my animators were always good about giving me feedback on the comics. I had finished the cover of *Bone* #5 (Jun. 1992), where one Rat Creature was stepping out of the darkened forest. My animators mistakenly thought that the Rat Creature's front arms reaching out into the moonlight were his back legs, as if he was two-legged like a T-Rex, which was kind of a cool idea. So, I thought, "Well, I'm going to make Kingdok stand on his back legs like that," and he just got bigger and bigger every time I drew him until that is what he became.

POWERS: Could you please share more on how you moved between whimsy and realism with your drawings and plot in *Bone*?

SMITH: It wasn't difficult for me. I just had to believe that the Bone cousins could be hurt and that they were scared! Sometimes the whimsy just pops out at me. In the early first drawings, Fone was fighting this giant dragon that became the Great Red Dragon. How did he end up with these big Christmas balls on the ends of his ears? At first, they weren't like that. The Red Dragon had big, long, giant cat ears. Cats have that one leading edge of hair inside their ears. That's what the hair was originally like, but as I was drawing them, they somehow just moved up and became these giant Christmas puffs.

I'll tell you a quick story: I set up in San Diego every year for so many years. One day I set up my booth with this giant picture of Fone Bone kicking back on the Red Dragon's back. I was signing books for people, and a gentleman with his son was walking by. I wasn't even paying attention to him, but I heard the kid say, "Look, Dad! It's a Christmas donkey!" I laughed very hard at that.

POWERS: Your other dragons are much more traditional when you see them in the cave together.

SMITH: I tried to make them like all the dragons from around the world. There are the long Japanese dragons that are more like serpents, and there were some that had wings. I tried to mix them up.

I don't know why the Red Dragon became a giant Christmas donkey. I didn't do it on purpose; that's just how he came out. The fact that he had human arms and hands [laughs] was because he just needed them for the expression. I had a big Labrador back then. His name was Commander, and he sat around with his front paws crossed. At first, the Red Dragon was kind of a crazy, dangerous enemy dragon in my drawings. Then, he became more like my dog Commander and started becoming a friend and protector.

POWERS: *Could you please share more about how you bravely embarked on the mission to self-publish Bone. How gritty were you?*

SMITH: It was a gritty...experience [laughs]. I'm very proud of *Bone*, and it would not have been what it is if it had gone to the newspapers. The first two to three years, I didn't really know what was going to happen. As I mentioned, I had started an animation company, and we had to sell ourselves to advertising agencies. We had to keep records, and we had to do accounting, hire people, and pay them. I was at it for about seven years until I started *Bone*. When I decided I wanted to get into the comics, I knew how to run a business. I knew how to fill out paperwork to get the name of a company and to make it real. Vi was doing it with me. Although she had a full-time job, she was doing the books for me at night. That still allowed me enough freedom to write, draw, and promote the comics.

POWERS: *You had mentioned that fans influence how you look at your characters. How does their perspective impact how you approach writing and drawing?*

SMITH: I was annoyed by things like flashbacks and balloons when reading comics. I just have certain rules like, "I'm not going to draw any flashbacks." So, when I first was planning out the story for *Bone*, I thought, "Well, I will eventually get to a point where Fone Bone explains where they came from, and I will do a flashback to draw Boneville." When I got to that point, I'd been out at shows for two or three years where people were already telling me what they thought Boneville would look like—there were great giant anthills or crystalline houses. Everybody has their own Boneville, so I decided that I'm not going to draw Boneville. If I draw it, I'll make it small. I got to the part of the story where Fone Bone had to explain why they got run out of there, but I just had him explain it to Gran'ma Ben while they're getting the cow cart out. In that moment, they talk about the balloon. I always thought the idea of the balloon was funny—just because. Only Phoney Bone would have a balloon of himself made [laughs]!

POWERS: *Could you please talk about your lettering for Bone?*

SMITH: In the first issue of *Bone* and in the *Thorn* comics, I hand-lettered every single balloon. If I misjudged the amount of space that I could letter, I could get into trouble. I had to squeeze the letters smaller and smaller before I could get to the edge of the panel, or I had to start going up. Throughout *Thorn* and the first six issues of *Bone*, they were all hand lettered. By that point, Vi got tired of hearing me cuss in the next room whenever I'd have to white out the lettering to start over. She found some kind of a fontography software and had me write out the alphabet, once in a normal size and once in bold. I made my own numbers, question marks, and exclamation points. She ran it through the program. Starting with issue #7 (Dec. 1992), I was able to type my font in. I never had to letter again, except for the sound effect "Bams."

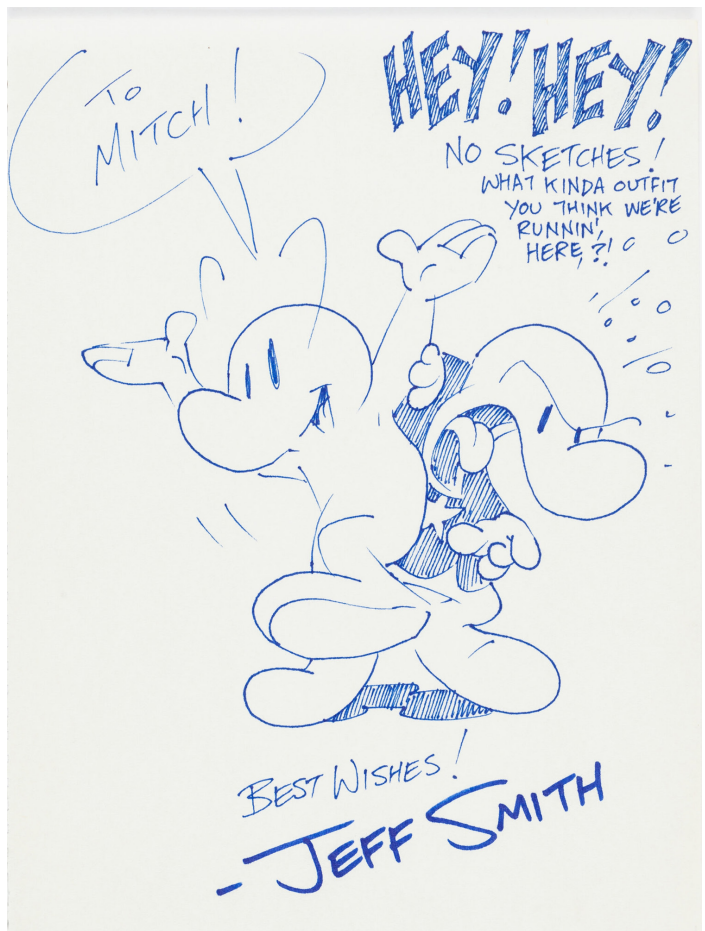
POWERS: *And do you pencil under your inked lines?*

SMITH: Oh! Amanda, I always pencil first—with a non-photo blue pencil so there is no need to erase the pencil lines after inking. That's a trick I had learned from Lucy Caswell. She's the one who founded the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum to which I donated the entirety of *Bone*. I used to go there at lunch; I'd never seen original comic strip art before college. I work on 2-ply Bristol Plate board, which is very high-grade. I also use ink and a Number One Sable Hair watercolor paintbrush.

POWERS: *In the early issues of Bone, the cousins split up for quite a long time over the first winter. Why was it important to separate them before you brought them back together?*

SMITH: The best way to get the characters moving forward was having them split up. We are with Fone Bone, who is the main character, who kind of shares the main character billing with Thorn. He has to find his cousins, which was sort of my plan for the first arc. That allows Fone to meet Thorn, the Red Dragon, the Rat Creatures, and kind of be aware of this creepy Hooded One who is controlling the Rat Creatures. Finally, Gran'ma Ben, Thorn, and Fone Bone all get to the town, and the cousins reunite. They were separated to allow the light to shine on Fone Bone. It also let him meet Thorn before he had to keep moving deeper into the story. Then, the next thing was the cow race. My original notes said that Phoney works up another scam, and he's going to get in trouble, and that will get them stuck in the Valley. Thorn just said one time, "Oh, my crazy old Gran'ma, she raises cows," which was just my memory of this crazy old lady I once saw chasing cows. I had no intention of making a cow race [laughs].

But suddenly, the book really started to sell. In the scope of a year, it blew up, and with that came all this fan mail. They couldn't wait to see Gran'ma Ben in the cow race. And I thought, "There's no cow race. What are you talking about?"

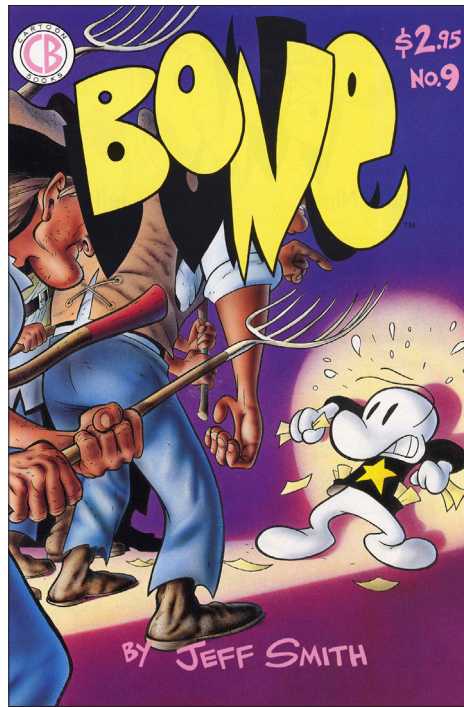


An original sketch by Jeff Smith. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © Jeff Smith.

(top) The town has had more than enough of Phoney Bone on the cover of *Bone* #9. (bottom) Smiley Bone “helps” Lucius repair a hole in the roof. Originally published in a *Wizard* #1/2 issue.

TM & © Jeff Smith.



That was a joke!” There were so many letters saying that I have to make a cow race. So, that became the whole focus of the second story, and I just decided that will have to be the scam that Phoney commits and causes everyone to be stuck in the Valley. It was hard. I didn’t even know how to draw a cow, so I bought a big plastic cow I could look at to figure out how to draw one from different angles.

POWERS: *In terms of Smiley’s characterization, you have him reveal that he can’t distinguish between reality and fantasy. Can you please share a little more about him?*

SMITH: I think he just was a fun-loving fellow. He doesn’t want to be saddled with any responsibility or anything, because, by the end, you do realize he is capable of being sensitive, and it’s really clear once he meets Bartleby. I think Smiley is actually smart. He just doesn’t really care to share that part of himself.

POWERS: *Your dragons are very unique when comparing them to different myths and fantasy works. Could you please share more about your story choices for the Great Red Dragon?*

SMITH: I thought it would be more interesting if he couldn’t just show up whenever he wanted to. There were some rules that the world of dragons had laid down. They are not supposed to be seen very often by humans. That is in the mythology of the book. They had early on in history been friendly with the first humans, but long ago, the dragons decided to go deep into the earth, leaving the surface to the humans. The Red Dragon is not supposed to be helping the humans, but he fears the Locust is building an army of Rat Creatures to attack the Valley. The Red Dragon still cares about the people up there and all the other creatures, especially Thorn and her grandmother. He does not like the Hooded One, and he fears that it could all go wrong if the hooded figure is able to take over the land. So, that’s why when he meets and rescues Fone Bone, the Red Dragon realizes, “Hey, this guy’s good!” He says, “I’m going to use this guy to wake Thorn up,” because the Red Dragon is trying to get around Gran’ma Ben, who, out of fear, doesn’t want him to influence her granddaughter. Some of the Dreaming was still being worked out as I went!

POWERS: *Could you please elaborate on the Dreaming?*

SMITH: I had created these dragons that all have their own world, mythology, and connection to the Dreaming. I knew I’d use this concept from the beginning. The Dreaming itself became much more complicated. It was a gift. That’s how some of the humans, like Gran’ma Ben’s ancestors, knew how to use the Dreaming. It kind of came out of the characters—out of Gran’ma Ben; she was strong. The Dreaming seemed to have the ability to give the people that could tap into its strength the ability to see, not quite into the future, but into other people’s dreams, and even maybe control things a little bit. People like Briar had a Dreaming Eye that let her control other people.

POWERS: *Could you explain more about the origin of the dragons?*

SMITH: The dragons had originally kept the world on an even keel, almost like the way we think of Eden. The world was in a harmonious place because the dragons kept the Dreaming in a way that all the creatures were pretty cool with. Some were carnivores, but it would all fit into a giant workable framework. When the humans showed up at some point, the dragons decided to cede their power to turn over the control of the Dreaming to the humans. They gave it to Gran’ma Ben’s ancestor, a woman named Ven, which is why they’re called the Veni-Yan.



POWERS: You mentioned a little about how the cow race evolved in the early books of Bone. We also find out in the three-issue spinoff *Rose* (Nov. 2000; Apr. 2001; Feb. 2022) that Gran'ma Ben has been obsessed with cows her entire life.

SMITH: I had Thorn make an offhanded comment about cows in the comic. To explain, I had a girlfriend in high school whose grandmother lived on a farm, and she raised cows by herself. She was an impressive lady. One time, the cows were in the wrong field, and she just yelled, "Hey, cows!" and she climbed over the fence. She had on Adidas shoes, and she ran and grabbed the cows and turned them around! Gran'ma Ben is just based on that one idea of that lady with the Adidas shoes who was so tough, and she became way tougher as the story went on.

POWERS: So, she was a tough lady first, but did you know she would become queen when you initially came up with her rough edges?

SMITH: I kind of always knew that it was a *Sleeping Beauty* kind of story. Thorn and Gran'ma Ben were the hidden queen and princess of the kingdom. By the '90s, the interest in fantasy had disappeared. Part of the reason was that a lot of people just started doing elves and dwarves on quests. They were just nowhere near as interesting, so I didn't really want people to know I was doing a fantasy quest at first because they weren't looked on very well by the public. At first, I just played it off, like "Here's these three cartoon cousins stuck in a fairy tale." At some point, I couldn't hide it anymore; it was *Bone* #15 (Aug. 1994) or #16 (Oct. 1994) when I realized that the fantasy has to break loose. That's when Gran'ma Ben, in *Bone* #17 (Jan. 1995), said, "I was the queen before you..."

POWERS: Did Looney Tunes influence your use of wonderfully exaggerated onomatopoeias like those found on the pages where Phoney is directing Smiley to play the role of his terrifying cow for the Great Cow Race?

SMITH: Oh, huge! The *Looney Tunes* are my North Star! They're the best thing in the world! I love Tex Avery, Chuck Jones—all those guys!

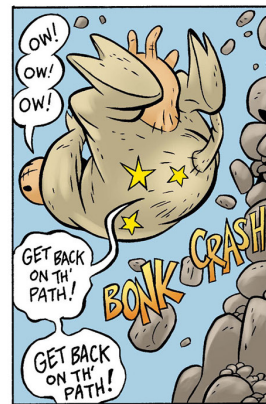
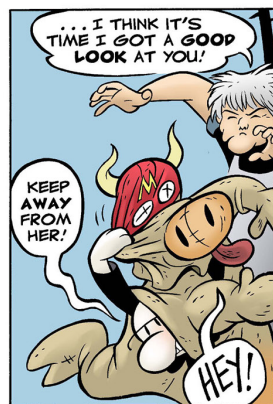
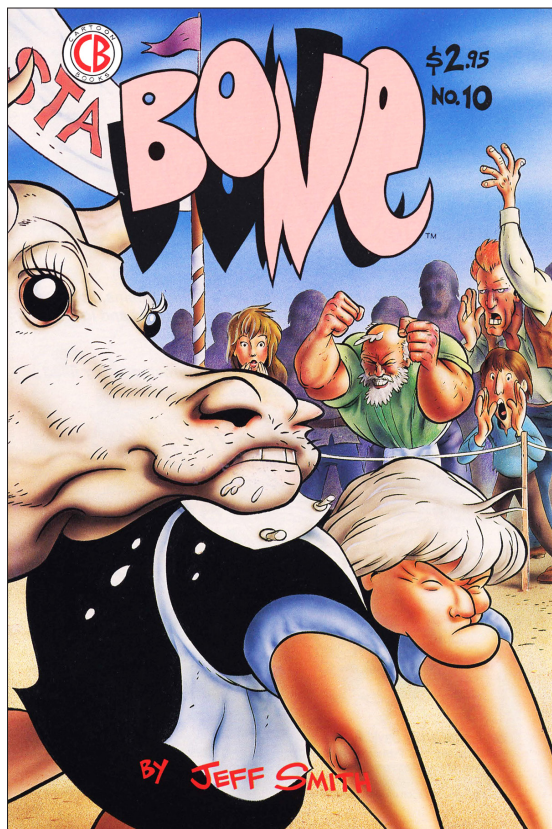
POWERS: I noticed at the end of *Bone: Book Two: The Great Cow Race* that you depict Lucius falling off a roof while Smiley talks to him in a perfectly slapstick kind of way.

SMITH: [laughs] You're right! Off the roof and everything, and...it was so good. I went an extra page too long on that. I was having so much fun doing "Bam! Roll! Roll! Roll!"

POWERS: Later, in *Book Three: Eyes of the Storm*, Gran'ma Ben asks Fone Bone and Phoney to help her prepare and kill four chickens for dinner,

(left) It's time for the Great Cow Race, *Bone* #10. (right) Gran'ma Ben unmasks the mystery cow, and they both land in a heap of trouble.

TM & © Jeff Smith.



The Hooded One spooks the bejeezus out of Phoney Bone. Or maybe it's just the clang of those dishes...

TM & © Jeff Smith.

but they faint. Do you feel that they learned how to deal with death throughout the story?

SMITH: They all realize they have to deal with the situation in front of them. Fone Bone really cares about Thorn and Gran'ma Ben, so I think he rises to the occasion. By the end, they all learn how to deal with death, even Phoney.

POWERS: *Phoney seems to owe the Grim Reaper character his soul.*

SMITH: Phoney has inadvertently offended or frightened the Hooded One, and the bigger picture is that his campaign balloon is perceived as an omen as well. He has this campaign balloon slogan that says, "Phoncible P. Bone will get you," which is a ripped version of his slogan, which was possibly "get your vote." The balloon goes across the desert and into the Valley and crashes into the Hooded One. But she perceives it as a threat and assumes that this must be a little dreamy creature that is trying to mess with

the future, which is why she is out to get him. It had to be something big, the omen, because she's looking for a sign.

POWERS: *While we are talking about Phoney, do you feel that he redeems himself?*

SMITH: Yes, or it is also like the trope of the Marx Brothers in *A Night at the Opera*. When I talk to Hollywood studios, they always talk about Thorn being the star of the movie. "Thorn is the Luke Skywalker character." I'm like, "No, no, no, it's the Marx Brothers." Nobody thinks that the Marx Brothers aren't the stars of their movie, but the story is not about them. They don't grow at all. But Fone Bone sort of grows a little, and Smiley grows by the end of the story. Only Phoney does not.

POWERS: *On the very first page of Book Three: Eye of the Storm, we see another mention of Moby Dick. I really need to know more about the intermittent commentary on Herman Melville's classic novel.*

SMITH: The original idea of bringing *Moby Dick* into this world was because it is my favorite book! I am always talking about *Moby Dick*, yet I put everyone to sleep. After a few hours of hearing me talk about *Moby Dick*, Vi even would just start snoring. She didn't really fall asleep, but she was just like Thorn. She is always teasing me, saying, "Did you talk about *Moby Dick* again?" There's so much about *Moby Dick* that I love, but don't get me talking about it—I don't want you to go to sleep!

POWERS: *Sounds like you're due for another read, Jeff!*

SMITH: I just bought a new copy of it [laughs]. Anyway, it really is an onion, and you just peel back layer after layer, and, by the third or fourth time you read it, you can see that the metaphors are off the hook! I just think that book is perfect. I was modeling my story after that as much as the *Lord of the Rings*.

POWERS: *Moby Dick is your onion in that it taught you how to onion?*

SMITH: That's my onion. It turned into a verb!

POWERS: *And you've been onionating ever since?*

SMITH: Yes. It onionated itself right in front of me. It's fantastic!

POWERS: *You even use Moby Dick in the Dreaming sequences. Real things happen in Thorn and Fone's dreams when Fone is depicted as Ishmael.*

SMITH: I was a *Star Wars* fan, and I loved The Force. Although the Dreaming is not the same thing as The Force, they have similarities when we think how there's something going on that we can't see, and there are only certain people who can tap into it and do things that other people can't. The idea of having something come from *Star Wars* I thought was cool, but I did work really hard to have it be something very completely its own thing.

POWERS: *Thorn dreams of Fone and later Rose as enemies. Why does she keep seeing those closest to her in this dark way?*



SMITH: That was the Hooded One doing that to her—inserting that dream into her mind. It was a deception. She was poisoning Thorn with those dreams, but she wasn't quite able to completely get in there because Thorn herself is as powerful as Briar. She doesn't know how to control the Dreaming or even understand what it is yet. So, the Red Dragon was trying to move her along in that direction, and that's how the story starts.

POWERS: *We later learn more about the Lord of Locusts, who is this intangible evil character. How did you come up with the idea of a creature from another realm who covets our physical matter?*

SMITH: I read a lot of mythology and fantasy stories. That's just an idea I wanted to have when I was doing *Bone*. Long before *Harry Potter* started, I wanted to have a creature who was not able to get into the real world yet, so I needed some way to get into the physical world. By the time I started talking about the Lord of the Locusts in more detail, I'd already really established that the Dreaming was this force that goes through everything. I definitely worked hard to base it on a lot of mythologies and pieces that I got from those kinds of stories. I didn't want the Lord of the Locusts to be free yet, so I had him trapped by the dragons. He took over the Queen of the Dragons, Mim. She was the first dragon, the queen of the dragons, and she was big! She wrapped herself around the world and held her tail in her mouth like Ouroboros. That kept all the Dreaming under control instead of having nightmares, which was the same kind of stuff in all myths.

We also have the dragons' burial grounds. That's more like the famous elephant burial grounds. They're not allowed to go there because it is a sacred place. The Crown of Horns, which is a giant crystal that comes down from the ceiling of the cavern into the bottom area, is an absolute physical manifestation of the Dreaming in the physical world. Touching it would be bad. Only the dragons could do that.

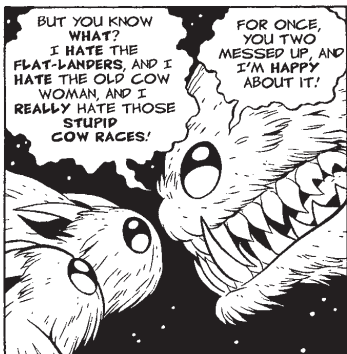
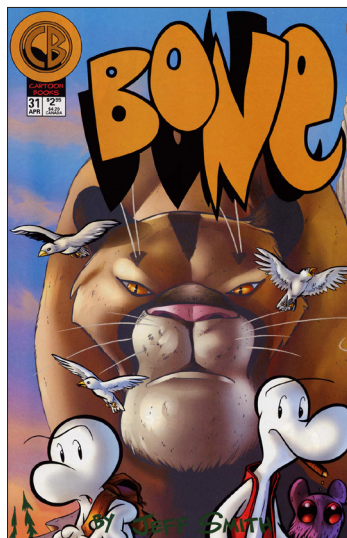
POWERS: *In Bone Book Four: The Dragonslayer, there is an incredible sequence where Thorn defeats Kingdok, the rat king. How did you create this sequence?*

SMITH: I needed Thorn to show her powers, strength, and bravery. Gran'ma Ben had already kind of told her about her lineage. This is a part of the story where I really wanted Thorn to do something very brave. Kingdok beats up Thorn and Gran'ma Ben and even Fone Bone. When Thorn is going for it, I had her cut off Kingdok's arm. That was fun.

Kingdok thinks the Hooded One is an advisor. He thinks, "Yeah, the Hooded One's kind of helping us out. We're going to listen to him." Later, he realizes that he's a puppet. I just started being horrible to Kingdok, so I cut off his arm. Then, I had Roque Ja, aka Rock Jaw, the giant mountain lion, rip out his tongue! I still need Kingdok to talk sometimes, so I had to pretend there was enough tongue for him to talk a little bit. He's resilient! By the end, he really traded away any chance at humanity, so to speak. At this point, he was like, "Just kill me." No, he does not redeem himself since he just was a puppet. He had given away control over his life. And he lost everything—his arm, his head, and his soul. And he confronts Thorn at the Crown of Horns because he wasn't a good guy. He was just a Rat Creature and still kind of a bad guy. I mean, he had to pay, and he did.

POWERS: *In Bone Book Seven: Ghost Circles, is Lucius the voice of reason for the Veni-Yan?*

SMITH: I always thought there's a lot of mob mentality in *Bone*, and it's not just the Rat Creatures—it's the villagers as well. Fortunately for the villagers, they've got Thorn,



(top left) The Bones meet Rock Jaw. (top right) The Hooded One commands the rat Creatures. (bottom) Kingdok encounters a couple of his subjects.

TM & © Jeff Smith.

Fone, and the Red Dragon to keep an eye on them so that they don't lose everything. But the Rat Creatures do not have that protection. They have their mob mentality, and they are being used by the Lord of the Locusts, and he does not care about them and doesn't care if they survive. He has his own goals, whereas the humans are still being kind of stupid by following this mob mentality. But they understand what they're doing after a while.

Well, there's a slight difference between the mob mentality and the Veni-Yan, who have this doctrine that they're following. Fortunately, they kind of realized that Lucius is right and that they have to do something, or no one will survive. Their education as a brotherhood enables them to be able to make better decisions faster than the villagers. It kept them sane, and it kept their feet on the ground, but it was really Lucius who figured out what really needed to be done, so he had to convince the Veni-Yan.

POWERS: Moving onto Book Eight: Treasure Hunters and Book Nine: Crown of Horns, we discover a hoard of new creatures in a double-page spread of Atheia. If you were to expand the world beyond Bone, then what other tales would you want to tell about this world?

SMITH: That one! [laughs] Where there are so many weird little creatures that people weren't as freaked out by the Bones when they first showed up!

POWERS: Do you still fight to get your work out there?

SMITH: Not only do I work on all the behind-the-scenes stuff with retailers, distributors, and businessmen but I also need to understand their world as well. I would go to these retailer shows and hang out in the bar. You find out what's going on in their world, and after you spend a little time with them, if they like you, then they'll start ordering more books. You have to just get to know them, and the other thing is you must make a book that works. That can be exhausting!

POWERS: Getting back to Bone, the ending is really intense! I like that you switch back and forth between different stories as it adds a sense of urgency, and it made me want to read faster. How did you create this feeling through your sequential art choices?

SMITH: I'm so grateful for you saying that, Amanda, because that's exactly what I really wanted to have happen! My artistic influences have come from comics, but they also have come from books and film. I mean, there are a few directors who I adore! Kurosawa, Spielberg—these directors are very good at pacing, and all of them choose to, at the end of their movies, close out the story in the way that it starts. All of them are brilliant at that, and I studied that as much or more than I study comics because comic books aren't usually told that way. Comics are kind of like how *Charlie Brown* went on for fifty years, and he still had the same shirt on, which is why it works. I'm not knocking that, but that's not the same thing as telling a story. That's telling jokes. And they're wonderful. So, I chose to study Kurosawa, John Ford, and Spielberg, and I like Lucas, too.

POWERS: How do you feel that young Bone readers reacted to the city of Atheia going into a giant ghost circle as the stars slowly disappeared from our heroes' sky?

SMITH: I never tried to write *Bone* for children. I was writing a book I would have liked to have read when I was ten. I liked that kind of scary stuff. *Bone* is a story where the good guys are going to win since it's a comic book. The Great Red Dragon is around somewhere. But if I can make the reader nervous about it, I will.

POWERS: Did the ghost circles creep you out, and where did the idea come from?

SMITH: Amanda, they really did! Especially with the idea of the ghost circles when Fone Bone and Thorn go in and almost get caught and lost in them! My favorite place in Ohio is about forty miles south of Columbus. There is a river and gorge system called Old Man's Cave. There is the big cave where we see all the Veni-Yan as they're practicing that I drew exactly as it looks like in real life.

I've noticed that when I'm out in the woods, I'd walk through a place where I felt a cold shiver. I don't know if I'm just making it up, or if it is just really a cold spot where the sun has not reached it yet, but I have experienced that enough times that I thought, "That's going in the book." That was kind of the origin idea for the circles. I wrote that in the book since there's places like that. There could be these pieces that could get bigger and turn into bigger circles. Maybe a long time ago they were really huge, and now they're just smaller and smaller. Evidently, Briar makes a mistake by choosing



Lucius and Rose share what may well be their last tender moment together. From *Bone* #37.

TM & © Jeff Smith.

Phoney for her sacrifice, and the circles expand outward. **POWERS: Speaking of the unknown, Thorn magically flies over the army at the end of Bone. In this stunning moment, is her power increased by the Lord of the Locusts's piece within her?**

SMITH: No, this is now her own powers coming into their own. I have definitely had dreams like that, especially when I was younger. And that's how I flew! I was just two or three feet above ground. Occasionally, I could fly up over the roof. That was the idea in the story, and since the power is brought on by the Dreaming, I wanted to use that to get Thorn past that army. Maybe I needed a reason to have her fly. It all came together right there. Her powers were awakening, and she started to understand them. It was so real and perfect, and Thorn just flies over them like in a dream!

POWERS: *In the same pages filled with battles, in an unexpected twist, Lucius Down dies. What does Lucius's struggle mean to you and to the story of Rose?*

SMITH: He had an affair with Briar earlier instead of being with Gran'ma Ben, and then, at the end, he had to take Briar down, which works better for the story. After I did the story, I was talking to Michael Ouwelen, who was in charge of Cartoon Network, and we were talking about maybe getting together to do something. He said, "I love how you got the Holy Grail in your story," which I did because *Moby Dick* and the Holy Grail were really the two things that were driving forces of that storytelling point. But he said, "No, no. Lucius was the Grail King." He

was the older generation. The land has been destroyed, and he was even wounded in the thigh by Kingdok. When Thorn and Fone touch the Crown of Horns, the threat of the Ghost Circles is destroyed, and so is Briar. Lucius was sacrificing himself to save Gran'ma Ben. Since he's wounded in the thigh, which is some sort of metaphor for no longer being able to have children, he's impotent, just like the King in the Grail Story. He really was the Grail King.

POWERS: *Our heroes return at the end of Bone to the Valley to honor Lucius with a proper burial. Any thoughts on why you ended the story where it began?*

SMITH: Lucius was the one who died because my original outline for the story had Gran'ma Ben dying to save Thorn. I wanted to make people like Gran'ma Ben, so I worked really hard on her character. But then I liked her as well! So, when I got at the end of twelve years, I finally got to this part of the story where it was supposed to be Gran'ma Ben who sacrifices herself for Thorn and the world. But I couldn't do it! I didn't really want to kill Lucius either, but somebody had to take The Hooded One out, and in the end, it felt correct that the grizzled old tavern owner would make the play.

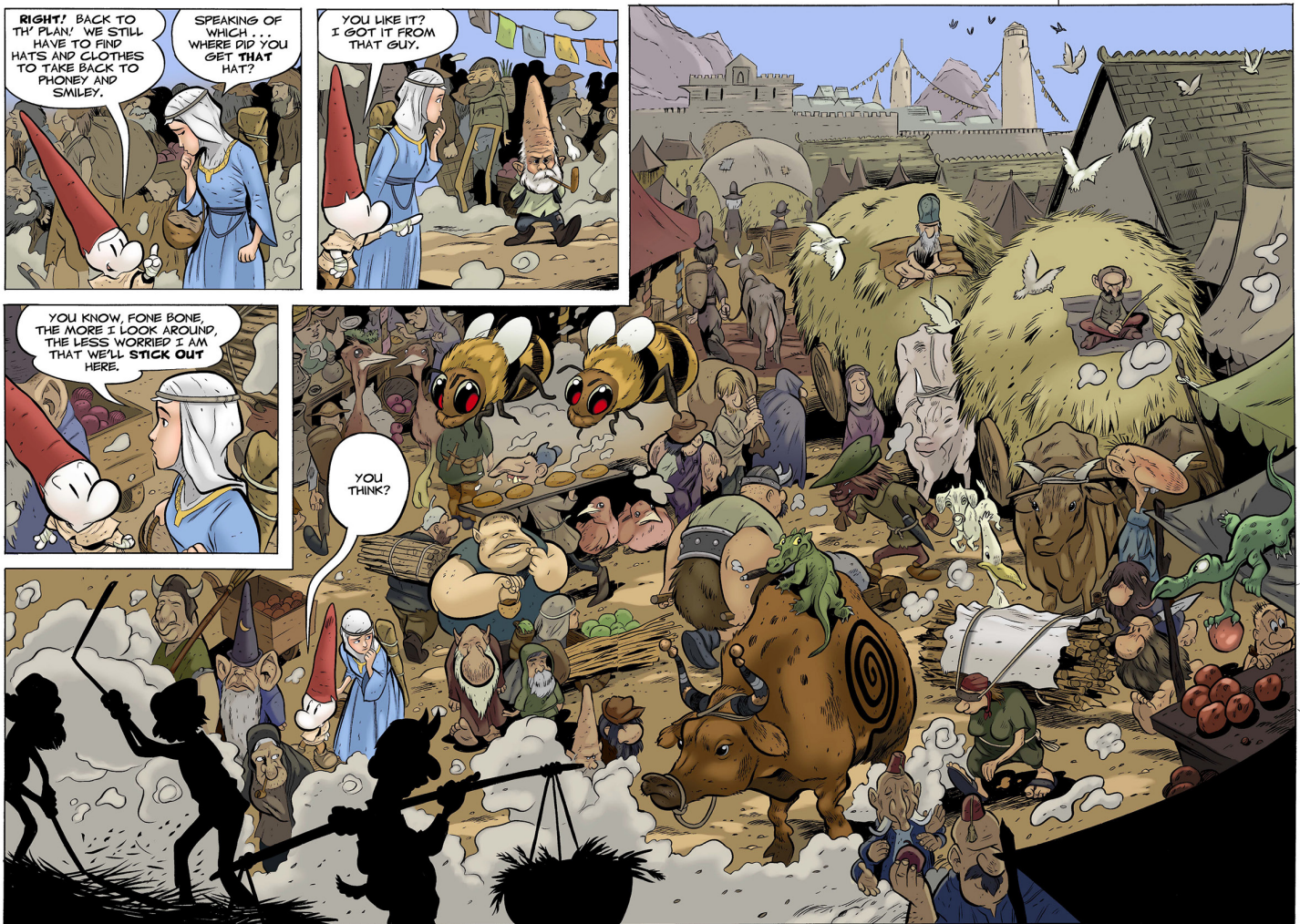
POWERS: *It definitely hurt when I watched Lucius die.*



TM & © Jeff Smith.

Bone seems downright normal in the city of Atheia.

TM & © Jeff Smith.





(left) Thorn flies in issue #53. (right) It all comes to an end in *Bone* #55.

TM & © Jeff Smith.

SMITH: Gran'ma Ben and Thorn are going to escort the Bone cousins back to where they came in to see them off. They make the journey back to Barrelhaven, where they're going to bury Lucius near his tavern. It was just always a great way to ease out of the story.

POWERS: *It's so sad and unfair! Briar really screwed this guy and Rose up.*

SMITH: Oh, she was bad. The whole time they were growing up, Briar was lying to everybody, saying she is a part of the royal family, and they all have this Dreaming Eye. But she kept saying, "I don't have one, or if I do, it's blind," and she was lying. She was talking to the Lord of the Locusts the whole time.

POWERS: *With the Bone 25th anniversary one-shot (Jul. 2016), you wrote and illustrated a story called "Coda." What inspired you to put together a new adventure for Phoney Bone, Smiley Bone, and Bartleby?*

SMITH: Scholastic really wanted some more *Bone*. The Bones had made it back to Boneville, but Smiley Bone became a Bone scout leader. He and Bartleby take these three Bone cousins, Ringo, Bingo, and Todd out camping. They tell stories around the campfire. Originally, I had done these for the *Disney Adventures Digest* (1994).



Fone Bone and Phoney Bone are kind of just walking through the woods and talking about what's important in life. They come across a map, which they start following. They get chased by a giant eagle, fall down a cliff, and they end up in a place where an "X" is near a giant tree. They find the spot marked "X" before they dig it up. The treasure is dirty laundry [laughs], which was planted by Thorn. The only problem with this story is that it has Phoney and Smiley finding a second map right before Fone Bone and Thorn talk about the first map they found. Having the fake map and then the real map did not work in the story, so I created the "Telling Stories Around the Campfire" as a place to use it.

POWERS: *Continuing with this theme of Bone side stories, specifically, prequels, with Stupid, Stupid Rat Tails #1-3 (Nov. 1999-Jan. 2000), did you know that you were going to create a spinoff series with the "stupid, stupid Rat Creatures" when you first coined the term in Book One: Out from Boneville?*

SMITH: *Bone* is a comic strip, and comic strips love running jokes. One of the jokes was that the Rat Creatures would have to be pretty stupid to follow them down onto this little branch. Then, they followed them down a little branch, and Fone Bone just goes, "Stupid, stupid Rat Creatures."



One of my buddies, who is still one of my best friends, even to this day he reads that and laughs so hard! When I went to do the books, I definitely knew that that joke was going to be included.

POWERS: *You're also influenced by those around you as you make your work?*

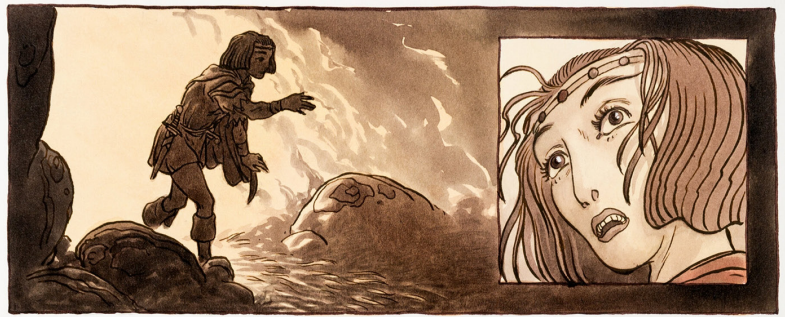
SMITH: Yeah! Through friends, family and fan letters. They all knew I was the cartoonist guy, and I was always trying to impress them, especially right after high school.

POWERS: *In this miniseries, you share adventures of Boneville's founder Big Johnson Bone. Unlike the Bone cousins, he is strong, brave, and resourceful. Why was it important to establish this difference between him and the cousins?*

SMITH: I came up with the character just when Fone Bone was telling the story to Gran'ma Ben early on. I made it up when Phoney tied his balloon to the statue of the founder of Boneville—Johnson Bone. I didn't have the character's personality down at all yet.

POWERS: *How did this collaboration with Tom Sniegoski come about, and what did his voice bring to these issues?*

SMITH: We started hanging out at conventions. Tom wrote books like *Buffy* and *Vampirella*. He does that very well. To this day, he's the funniest human being I've ever met! I get on the phone with him, and I'm laughing so hard that I can hardly breathe. One day, I was talking with Tom, who suggested, "Why don't we do some tall tales? Tell the story of Big Johnson Bone, and maybe he got to the Valley generations before they did." He would meet the Great Red Dragon for



that first story I wrote with Tom, and we wanted it to be a tall tale that is similar to a Pecos Bill story. He was a frontiersman, and he had a big, crazy personality.

So, this collaboration was funny and serious. I said, "We're going to have to write a story because you need to write humor." There was this other side to Tom that needed to be let loose. He got it right away, and it was very good. We've done projects together ever since, so we have a lot of fun working together.

POWERS: *Also, in Stupid, Stupid Rat Tails, I could not look away from the queen of the Rat Creatures. What influenced your design for her?*

SMITH: I thought it would be fun because Kingdok was obnoxiously large—weirdly large, so I thought it would be interesting to make the idea of the queen's son being the biggest Rat Creature ever! But for that to happen, I thought she needed to be pretty big as well. The royal family has some kind of gene that made them,

(left) *Stupid, Stupid Rat Tails* features the adventures of the founder of Boneville, Big Johnson Bone. (right) A beautiful page from *Rose* by Charles Vess. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © Jeff Smith.

every now and then, turn gigantic, and Kingdok is one of them.

POWERS: *As we close out this wonderful conversation, Jeff, could you please talk about the Bone prequel Rose, in which Charles Vess lushly illustrated your lyrical scripts for this prestige format miniseries?*

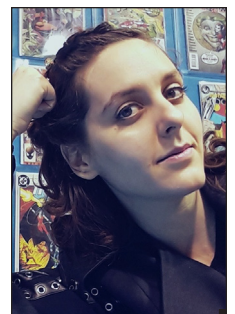
SMITH: I did not originally plan to tell the backstory of sisters Briar and Rose in print. Their backstory was something I needed to understand in order to write about their relationship to each other and their family, as well as to the Great Red Dragon and even to the Lord of the Locusts. Character backstories are important elements in writing, of course, and bits and pieces of these stories often emerge during the telling. One of those pieces is the ceremonial setting for Royal Studies, Old Man's Cave, which is where the Veni-Yan believe the Dragons bequeathed the knowledge of the Dreaming to the first Queen of the humans.

As we talked about earlier, Amanda, Old Man's Cave is a real place here in central Ohio that is about forty miles south of Columbus, where I live. It sits in a State Park within the Hocking Hills, and I have visited it many, many times since childhood. It is a beautiful, forested place with limestone cliffs and river trails. As I was getting to know Charles Vess in the early '90s, and we were starting to plan a national tour together, he visited Vi and me for a few days. I knew he would love the park. It was full of ancient trees growing out of massive rocks surrounded by ferns, pines, and waterfalls, so we took a trip down to Hocking Hills. As we walked the trail to Old Man's Cave, I started telling him the backstory of Gran'ma Ben. I pointed to two parallel trees standing on opposite ends of a large boulder and said, "That's where young Rose stood when she first was taught the secrets of controlling her Dreaming Eye." Charles was very enthusiastic about the setting and the story of Rose and Briar. By the time we reached the real Old Man's Cave, a massive overhanging cave ledge that is awe-inspiring, Charles stopped, looked me in the eye, and said that he wanted to paint the story I was telling him. Even though I hadn't planned to make any of this background material public or into a comic book, when Charles Vess, one of the best fantasy painters alive, says he wants to paint the story, then let's do it!

My backstories for these characters in *Bone* were only loose outlines, so I needed to go back and flesh things out. As I worked, I talked to Charles often over the phone. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of high fantasy and symbolism, and we had a good time bringing the tale to life. My scripts are written as rough-sketches of comic pages, so they include suggested layouts for each page. Charles followed these layouts for the most part, but whenever he thought a different layout would be better, he would show me, and he was always right. It was a good collaboration.

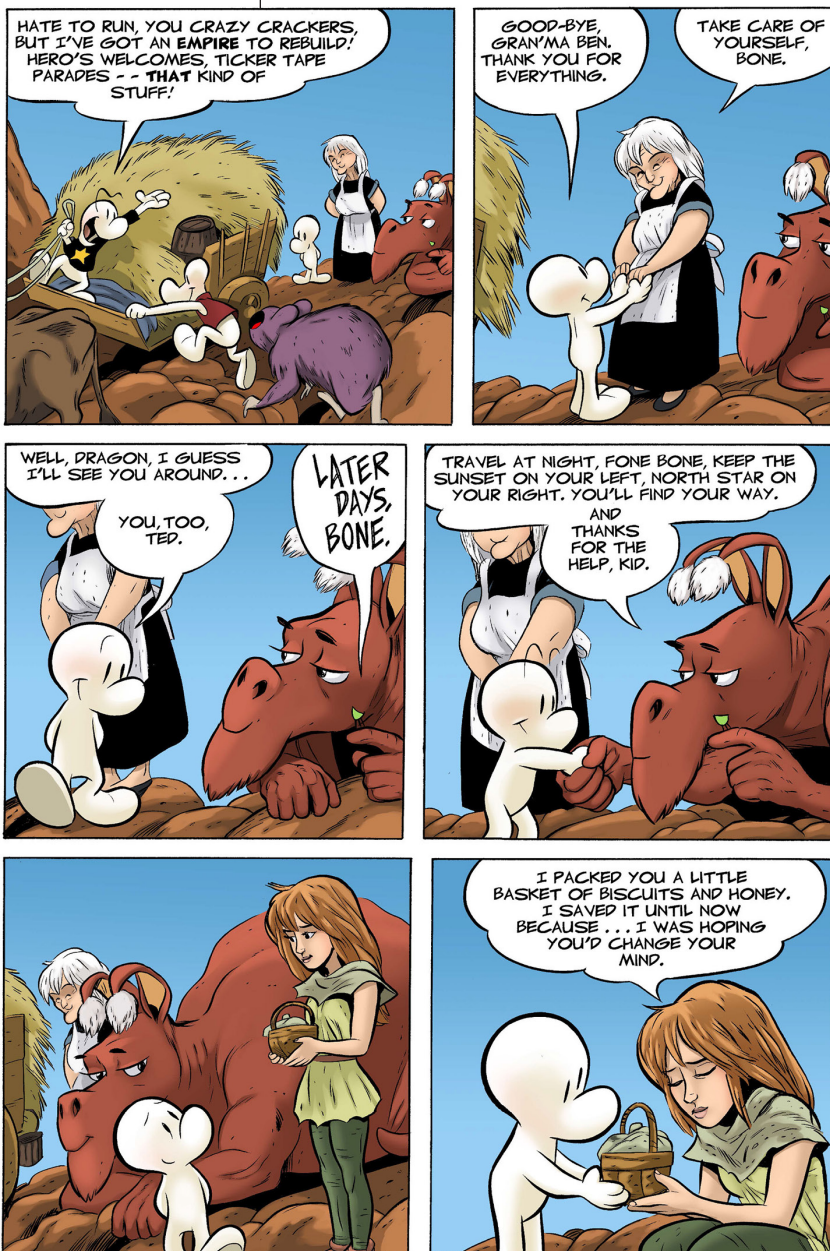
One last anecdote: The ending of the story has a fairly brutal Brothers Grim-worthy turn, that I really liked, but as I was preparing to send Charles the last set of script pages, I started to have second thoughts. It was too cruel. I changed the ending and made it much less devastating. I was in Europe at the time on a book tour, and I faxed the final pages to Charles in Virginia. He called me almost immediately, saying, "You changed the script!" I explained that I worried that my original idea went too far for most readers. Charles disagreed. Thank goodness for Vess—he knew it was right and wouldn't let me cop out! I rewrote the pages and restored the original ending. As I said, it was a good collaboration!

Amanda Stella Powers, a Philadelphia-based artist with a BFA from Arcadia University, has recently illustrated three strips for Don Simpson's Megaton Man: Multidimensions anthology (Cosmic Lion Productions 2025). She would like to thank Jeff Smith and Kathleen Glosan for helping to make this article a reality.



It's time to head home in issue #55.

TM & © Jeff Smith.



MARVEL'S TWO-HEADED DRAGON: DAUGHTERS OF THE DRAGON

by Ed Lute



For most of the 20th Century, the entertainment industry in the United States was focused on white males while (with few exceptions) overlooking other cultures. This focus began to change during the latter part of the century with more movies and television shows bringing much needed diversity. This shift not only included people from various cultures but also shifts in how women were viewed as well.

Comic books were an integral part of these shifts that would have lasting impacts on our culture. These changes brought an influx of different cultures and races to readers that helped to bring a more real-world variety to the comic page.

From comic books' beginnings, most superheroes were males with even the few female superheroes seen as little more than damsels in distress. However, during the Bronze Age, the changes that began to permeate entertainment in general began to make inroads into the four-color world as well. Although Marvel introduced the Black Panther during the 1960s, it wasn't until the 1970s that more characters of color and from a variety of backgrounds were brought to your local comic book rack such as the African American Luke Cage who made his dynamic debut in his self-titled series in 1972 and Sam Wilson co-headlining *Captain America and the Falcon*.

However, the House of Ideas wasn't done helping to bring social relevance to readers during that decade as the publisher introduced two powerful minority females with Colleen Wing and Misty Knight—the Daughters of the Dragon.

BACK ISSUE explores this two-headed dragon with an examination of these two characters, why their pairing was groundbreaking, and just what they bring to Marvel's stable of characters.

WINGING IT

In *Marvel Premiere* #19 (Nov. 1974) writer Doug Moench and artist Larry Hama gave us Japanese American Colleen Wing. This was very progressive for the time because she was a female and a minority. While depictions of Japanese had changed since the racist portrayals that permeated the comic books during World War II and after, it was still not common to see a Japanese character during this time.

Although Moench and Hama introduced the world to Colleen, it wasn't until writer Chris Claremont and artists Pat Broderick (and then John Byrne) came onto the book that she started to become the character that readers would come to know. Issues #21 and #22 (Mar.–June 1975) gave readers the first signs that Colleen was more than she appeared to be. She showcased her martial arts skills making Danny Rand (Iron Fist) remark to himself, "You are beginning to accept the fact that women here are not the frail carefully-tended flowers of K'un-Lun."

Claremont (as evidenced in his work on the *Uncanny X-Men*) was never one to shy away from writing about powerful female characters and it showed here. Colleen

Misty Knight and Colleen Wing stand behind (or rather, in front of) their body of work as the Daughters of the Dragon. Art by John Byrne.

TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc.

(left) Iron Fist meets Colleen Wing in *Marvel Premiere* #19.

Art by Larry Hama and Dick Giordano.

(right) Colleen makes it onto the cover of *Marvel Premiere* #21. Art by Gil Kane and Tom Palmer.

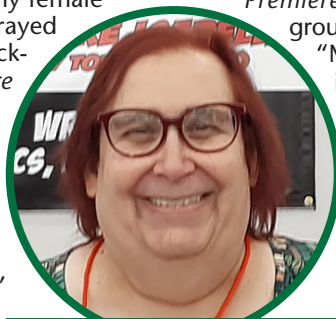
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was trained as a samurai who could hold her own against dangerous adversaries. She was definitely not the damsel in distress that many female comic book characters were portrayed as and wasn't going to take a back-seat to any man. In *Marvel Premiere* #24 (Sept. 1975), Danny had an issue with sparring with Colleen, he stated, "You don't understand, you're a girl, and men aren't supposed to fight girls." Colleen's response told us so much about her character, "One, I'm a woman, not a girl and two people fight people. Sex doesn't enter into it." She was a woman of the progressive 1970s and showed that women could hold their own against men. Although she lost this match, she gave Danny a run for his money.

PLAY MISTY FOR ME

It seems that the "Iron Fist" feature in *Marvel Premiere* was the place to introduce new groundbreaking characters with Mercedes "Misty" Knight making her debut in issue #21 (Mar. 1975), after being mentioned in the previous issue as a roommate and partner of Colleen. Writer Tony Isabella and artist Arvell Jones were the creative team.

Isabella (now known as Jenny Blake) spoke with *BACK ISSUE* about Knight's creation. She reveals, "Misty Knight's creation is easily the most uncomplicated creation of my career. I'd agreed to write at least three issues of Iron Fist and wrap up the current storyline. I



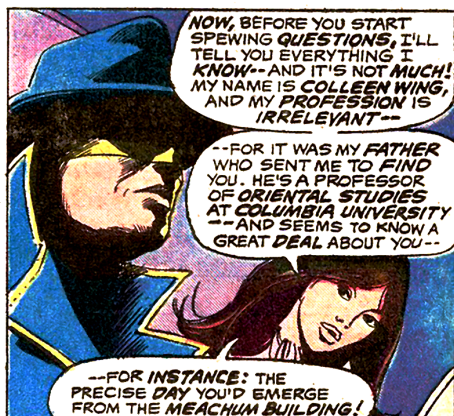
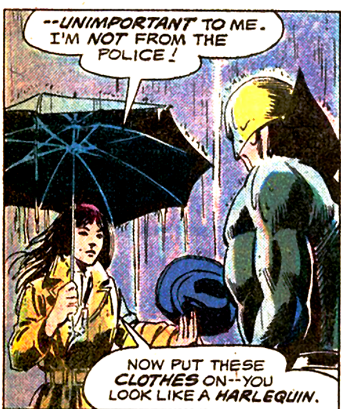
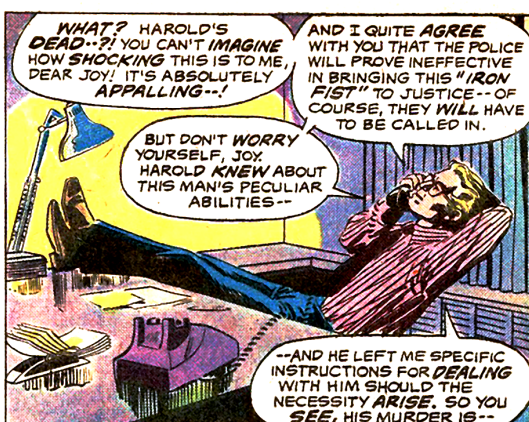
JENNY BLAKE ISABELLA

Facebook.

found I hated writing the character and especially those stupid second-person captions: 'You are Iron Fist and you are eating a hot dog, which does not taste like dog at all.'

"My solution was to give Danny some partner to talk to, though I hadn't yet figured out who. I went to see [the 1974 movie] *Black Belt Jones* with some of the young Black artists I was working with. Arvell Jones and Ron Wilson and others. The movie wasn't very good, but I was taken by Gloria Hendry's ass-kicking martial artist.

"I decided then and there that she was what I needed. My concept was a kind of bratty older sister-type who would frequently call out Danny on being naive. After the movie was over, since Arvell was going to be drawing my three issues, I told him my plans and named the character Misty Knight, which was a name I had come up with years earlier. He asked if it was Misty with a 'Y' or





with an 'I.' I answered Misty with a 'Y' because I'm not a savage. This pleased Arvell. I also told him to base the character on Pam Grier. Because who didn't love Pam Grier," Isabella states.

Even though Isabella brought Misty to life, she wasn't the only creator to have an impact on the character. Isabella tells *BACK ISSUE*, "I only wrote Misty in one issue and never developed her as I originally planned. When my pal Chris Claremont followed me, he did all the heavy lifting on developing Misty and Colleen further. He launched the romance between Danny and Misty. He came up with the bionic arm and back story for the arm. He did an amazing job, and I credit him as the primary reason Misty caught on with the readers. She is and remains a great character."

Just as with Colleen, Claremont and Byrne helped to redefine both the characterization and look of Misty as well. While she previously demonstrated her impressive hand-to-hand combat skills, readers would soon learn that Misty was a former NYPD officer who had a bionic right arm. *Iron Fist* #3 (Feb. 1976) mentioned the arm for the first time and #4 (Apr. 1976) offered readers a small look into how she lost her arm trying to defuse a terrorist's bomb. As more of Misty's backstory was revealed, readers would find out that Misty received the state-of-the-art arm designed by Tony Stark and that it received upgrades from

time to time including a replacement one made of vibranium making it virtually indestructible. During her time in the police academy, she received high marks for her marksmanship and for her skills at hand-to-hand combat and martial arts. So, while Misty is an ordinary human without superpowers, her bionic arm and physical prowess make her a force to be reckoned with.

In Misty's initial appearances, she was in a jumpsuit that made her look like a super spy. However, this didn't fit with the backstory that Claremont was building for her, so out went the suit and in came the more realistic attire. In 2013 on his blog (Byrnerobotics.com), Byrne disclosed, "I should add that Misty Knight has been a favorite of mine since I 'met' her, which happened to have been the first time I drew her. I was SO happy I was allowed to get rid of the Emma Peel inspired outfit she had on in that first meeting."

KNIGHTWING RESTORATIONS, LTD.

After a successful run in *Marvel Premiere*, Iron Fist was given his own title, and Colleen and Misty were along for the ride. In *Iron Fist* #1 (Nov. 1975), we learned that Misty and Colleen's private investigations firm, Knightwing Restorations Ltd, specialized in missing persons. Although they were associated with Iron Fist, they were not dependent on him.

(left) Colleen and Iron Fist spar in *Marvel Premiere* #24. Art by Pat Broderick and Vince Colletta. (right) Iron Fist's first meeting with Misty Knight in *Marvel Premiere* #21. Art by Arvell Jones and Vince Colletta.

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(top) Misty makes it onto the cover of *Iron Fist* #3. Art by Keith Pollard and Klaus Janson.

(middle) Our first glimpse of Misty's bionic arm in *Iron Fist* #3. Art by John Byrne and Frank Chiaramonte.

(bottom) Misty Knight in her jumpsuit from *Iron Fist* #1. Art by John Byrne and Al McWilliams.

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During the run of the title, Iron Fist, Misty, and Colleen faced off against Master Khan (#7), Wrecking Crew (#11-12), Boomerang (#13), and Sabertooth (#14). The book was canceled with issue #15 (Sep. 1977). After the cancellation of *Iron Fist*, the ongoing Steel Serpent storyline was wrapped up by Claremont and Byrne in a two-parter in *Marvel Team-Up* #63-64 (Nov.-Dec. 1977). While the story itself was good, it was the relationship between Misty and Danny that made this a groundbreaking issue. Early in the issue, Misty told Danny that she loved him, but it was the next to the last page that truly broke new ground. Although there had been some interracial kisses in comics before this, the kiss between Danny and Misty was the first for a mainstream superhero. One of the best parts of the scene was that it was shown as a natural evolution of their relationship. There was no fanfare, no cover blurb, just as there wouldn't be if it was two white characters kissing. This helped to normalize the actions when many people were unfortunately still against interracial relationships.

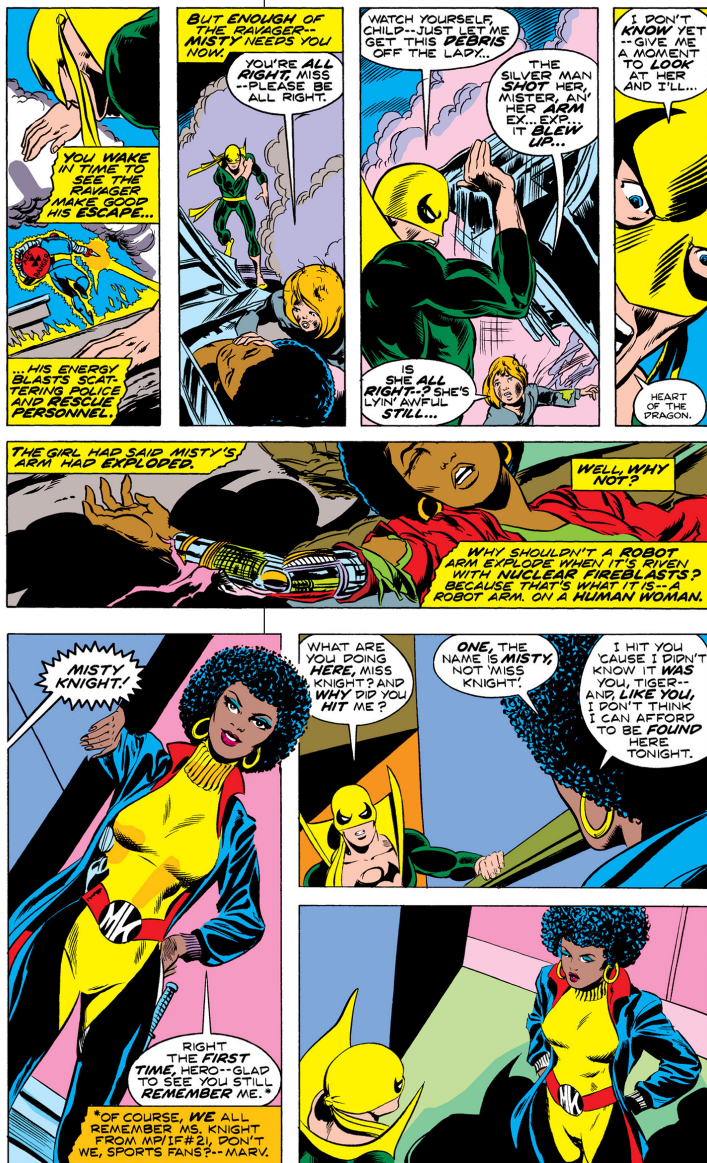
For readers who were paying attention, this development in their relationship shouldn't have been a surprise. It had been building as early as *Iron Fist* #7 and 8 (Sep.-Oct. 1976) with Misty and Danny sharing a deep embrace in the latter issue. The creators continued to put subtle hints about the relationship in the book. This was not the original plan. Danny was going to end up with Colleen not Misty. The cover blurb for *Iron Fist* #6 (Aug. 1976) reads: "The Living Weapon vs. the Woman He Loves" as Iron Fist faced off against Colleen. This was further confirmed by Byrne on his blog. He revealed, "Chris and I spent MONTHS build[ing] the relationship between Danny and [Colleen]. Forever after, whenever we showed Danny and Misty being romantic, in would pour the mail. 'Hey! What does Colleen have to say about THIS?' Sigh." A relationship between Colleen and Danny would still have been an interracial one, but due to the still simmering tensions between whites and Blacks, the Danny/Misty relationship went further to normalize these relationships which should have already been seen as normal.

After the conclusion of the Steel Serpent story, the *Iron Fist* cast guest starred in *Power Man* #48 and #49 (Dec. 1977-Feb. 1978) before the title was renamed *Power Man and Iron Fist* with issue #50 (Apr. 1978) as both casts were merged to save the two titles which weren't selling too well at the time. Shortly after the new title came to be, Claremont and Byrne left the book. Byrne posted, "It made me sad to leave *Iron Fist* mostly because it meant leaving Misty."

Colleen and Misty remained with the newly rechristened book. A variety of different writers and artists worked on the book after Claremont and Byrne left. Except for a few fill-ins, it was writers Jo Duffy, Kurt Busiek, and Christopher Priest (then known as Jim Owsley) and artists such as Kerry Gammill, Denys Cowan, Ernie Chan, and Mark D. 'Doc' Bright who were the main creators to chronicle the continuing adventures of Luke, Danny, Colleen, and Misty.

This almost wasn't the case because Claremont took Colleen and Misty with him to the *Uncanny X-Men* making them supporting players in that ever-growing cast. In an interview for *The X-Men Companion*, Claremont remarked, "I was bounced off *Power Man and Iron Fist*. (Writer) Ed Hannigan didn't want either of the women in the book, and I said, 'Fine, can I take them to *X-Men*?' and he said, 'Sure.' You see, I pretty much created them, and I wanted to keep control of them."

However, thanks to Duffy, Misty and Colleen were soon back where they belonged. In a 2022 interview with Omar Guerrero for his *I Am Iron Fist* Blog, Duffy revealed, "I had to get Colleen and Misty back from Chris. *X-Men* has dozens of characters, whereas *Power Man and Iron Fist* had only a few. One of Chris's tremendous strengths, but one that is a little difficult when you are working in a shared universe where none of us actually own the characters we are writing, is that once he has written a



character, he wants to keep on writing the character, bringing them, if possible, into whatever book he is on at the time, whether they have a strong narrative tie to it or not. Depriving Iron Fist of his entire supporting cast in order to add them to a series that was already so full of great characters was just not something that was going to work out well for either series."

Duffy came onto the book with #56 (Apr. 1979) and stayed until #84 (Aug. 1982) with Busiek's first issue being #90 (Feb. 1983) and his last #105 (May 1984). During the time that Duffy and Busiek were on the book, both Misty and Colleen continued to grow as characters, although in ways that were different from the racial or gender defining ones that had come before. Both characters were now being developed as more nuanced, realistic characters. Their short-comings, struggles, and everyday interactions were the focus of their character growth at this time. It worked well for both the book and the characters.

From things such as Misty going through Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as the heroes faced a terrorist bomber (#56) to the duo showing Danny how to roller skate (#97) to Colleen's growing relationship with Bob Diamond, Danny's friend and occasional sparring partner, these simple, but important aspects, made the characters more three-dimensional than ever before. These were depicted as normal (at least as far as a superhero relationship can be normal), and readers could feel that these were real, actual people with problems and relationships. This helped to ground these characters and make them more believable than others.

Priest took over the writing duties on *Power Man and Iron Fist* #111 (Nov. 1984) and remained there until the final issue (#125). Bright joined Priest with #115 (Mar. 1985). While Misty was a groundbreaking

character when she first appeared, during the 1980s her look seemed to be stuck in the previous decade. Priest and Bright wanted to change that. On his blog (digitalpriest.com), Priest stated, "Doc [Bright] and I had a lot of fun, without deliberately trying to make any 'statements' about race. About the biggest 'statement' we made was getting rid of Misty Knight's afro, which annoyed some at Marvel so much they inexplicably returned her to the afro after we left—ignoring the fact Black people, by and large, do not wear afros anymore. In #122's [Mar. 1986] 'What's Eating Misty...?' Doc revisualized Misty Knight, doing a terrific likeness of one of Shooter's secretaries,"

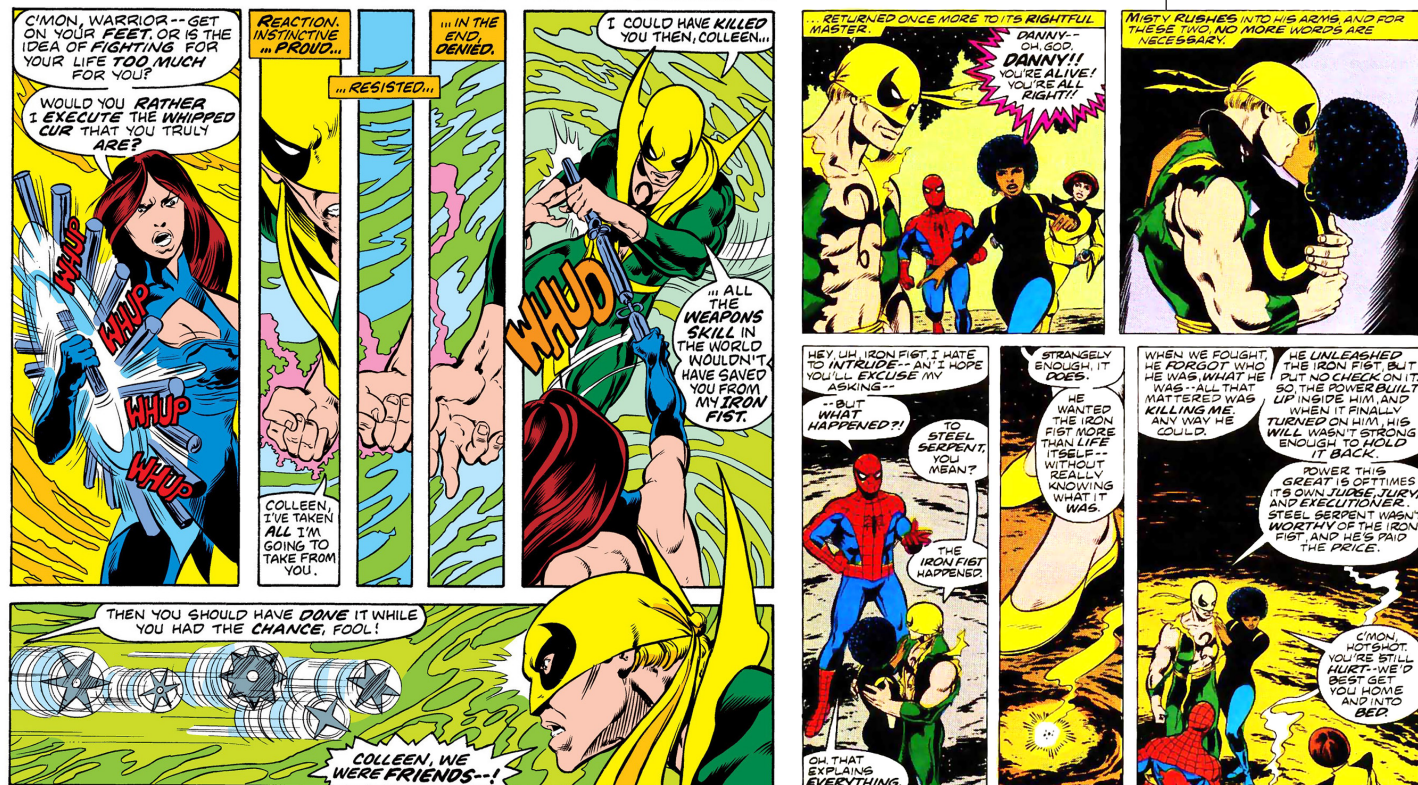
Priest also wanted to examine Colleen Wing and move her character further than she had before. From his blog, "In issue #118 [July 1985], we got away with titling a story, 'What's Eating Colleen...?' dealing with Knight's detective agency partner, Colleen Wing, and beginning my long fascination with dysfunctional, imperfect women. Comics have traditionally portrayed women as generic extensions of the male characters in the book. Industry legend Chris Claremont started breaking those rules early on, and created a fascinating, multi-faceted string of female characters in the early '80s that showed women could have more dynamic range in this genre. I actually don't remember what was eating Colleen, although whatever it was led to our big epic, 'Daughter of the Dragon King,' where we trashed K'un L'un and turned Iron Fist evil (blatantly ripping off Claremont's own Dark Phoenix)."

Again, these characters continued to show growth but not related to racial or gender issues. This helped to normalize powerful, independent women on the comic book page. Their growth during this time continued to show that these were more than just cookie-cutter characters.



(left) Iron Fist fights the "woman he loves" in *Iron Fist* #6. Art by John Byrne and Frank Chiaramonte.
(right) Danny and Misty make it official in *Marvel Team-Up* #64. Art by John Byrne and Dave Hunt.

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DAUGHTERS OF THE DRAGON

During their time on *Power Man and Iron Fist*, Misty and Colleen also had their own adventures. Although their company was called Knightwing Restorations, they are more commonly known to readers as the Daughters of the Dragon. The name was a reference to a story by Claremont and artist Marshall Rogers. The first part of a two-parter in *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #32-33 (Jan-Feb. 1977) was called "The Daughters of the Dragon." A name that has stuck with them ever since.

With Misty and Colleen, Claremont and Rogers wanted to showcase that female characters could stand alongside the male superheroes. The story

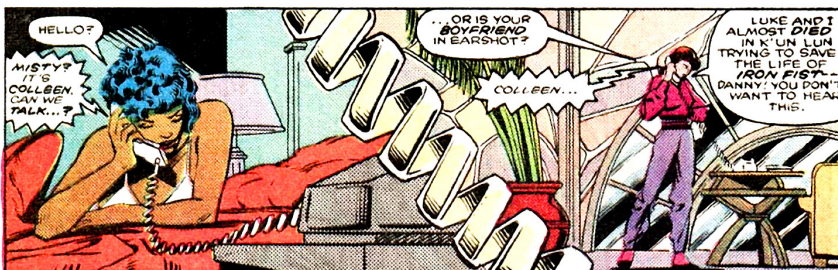
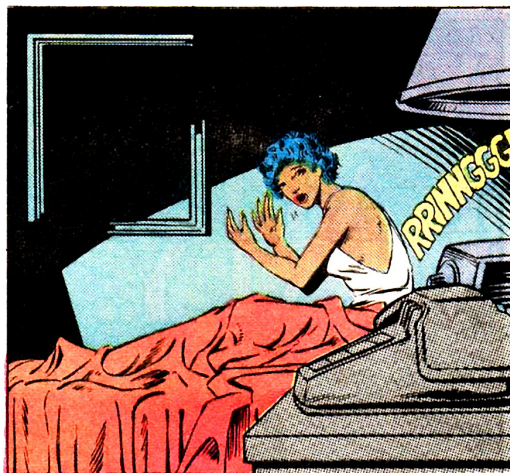
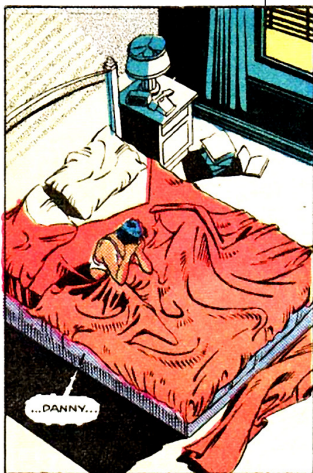
with its cinematic illustrations and fast paced narrative could have been a movie. It centered on Colleen's search for Emil Vachon, who had killed her beloved grandfather. Of course, Misty accompanied her friend and partner.

Since the story was in the magazine *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*, it was not subject to the Comic Code Authority approval. Claremont and Rogers took full advantage of not having to conform to the CCA. The story featured drug use, nudity, and most importantly, violence. Both Misty and Colleen killed in this tale which was something not seen in the pages of *Power Man and Iron Fist*. As was made clear from the beginning, they were not searching for Vachon to bring him to justice. Colleen wanted revenge for the death of her beloved grandfather, and she was able to get it.

The tale was more than just a story of revenge though, because it showed that these two characters hold their own without a male superhero in sight. The black and white artwork by Rogers leapt off the page and brought a sense of importance to the story that it might not have otherwise had. The story moved at breakneck

(top) Misty and Colleen hanging with the X-Men in *Power Man and Iron Fist* #57. Art by Trevor Von Eeden and Frank Springer.

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(bottom left) Misty loses the afro in *Power Man and Iron Fist* #122. Art by M. D. Bright and Jerry Acerno. (bottom right) Things look bad for the Daughters of the Dragon on the cover of *Power Man and Iron Fist* #101. Art by Mike Zeck.

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pace, but with Rogers' skillful artwork, it was easy to follow. It kept readers on the edge of their seat until the final panel.

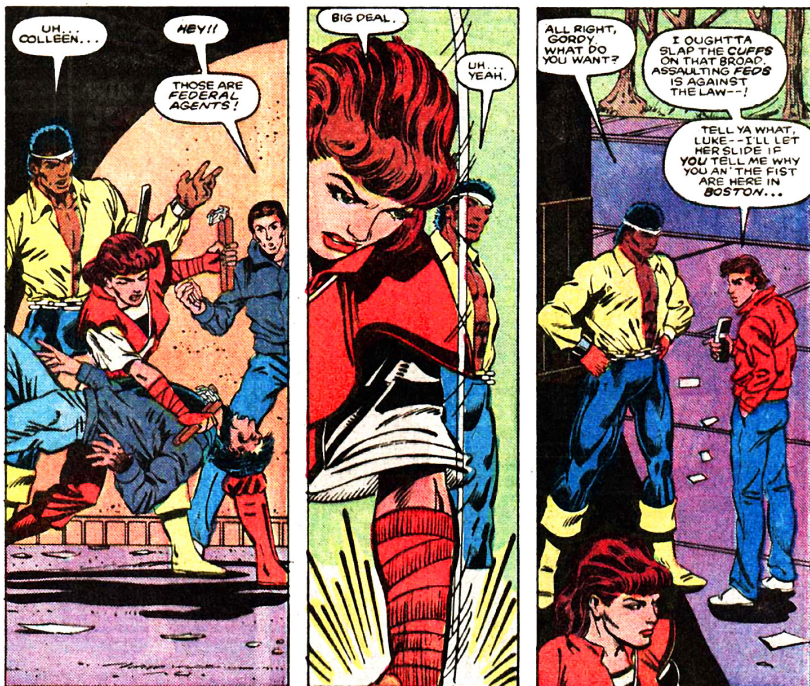
In addition to this two-parter, Claremont and Rogers also worked on a third Daughters of the Dragon story in *Bizarre Adventures* #25 (Mar. 1981). The three stories were collected into *Daughters of the Dragon: Deadly Hands Special* one-shot (Jan. 2005). The compilation also included a then-new interview with Rogers conducted by Mark Paniccia. Rogers discussed their first pairing: "I don't remember when I first met Chris Claremont, but if I recall correctly, I was in the offices one day and Chris came over and asked me if I'd be interested in doing a story with him about a couple of women called the Daughters of the Dragon. I said, 'Of course!' Chris was pitching the job and he wanted me to work with him (for which I will always be grateful).

"That was the time when the 'Marvel style' of working was in full spring: an artist would get a plot from the writer and 'write' the story visually and then the writer would make it a cohesive whole with dialogue. This allowed an artist a lot of leeway with story element inputs."

Claremont and Rogers both used the freedom afforded to them to make a story that couldn't have appeared in a color comic of the time. Rogers told of one of the more adult scenes from the book, "Here comes the 'infamous' fight scene. Chris's plot called for Colleen and Misty to move from point 'A' to point 'B,' fighting a \$#!load of bad guys along the way. My thought was, 'When a male protagonist was in that situation, nine times out of ten, he would end up with the shirt ripped off of his back. It would be very sexist of me to assume that a woman wouldn't fight as hard to be in a less precarious situation so...the shirts were ripped off of their backs. Besides, the female form is enjoyable to look at and draw.'"

While groundbreaking characters, not all of their adventures featured stories that challenged the racial or gender status quo and that's okay. Sometimes the adventures were just fun, action-packed stories. That was the case with the next two exploits of the Daughters of the Dragon. First was the Claremont and Rogers story in *Bizarre Adventures*. The black and white story was inked by Bob McLeod. This time Misty's childhood friend Angie Freeman showed up to turn Misty into a vampire. Colleen was able to rescue Misty from Angie's vampiric hold with the assistance of silver-coated shuriken. A weird page-turner that continued to deepen the bond between the two heroines.

Next up was the 2006 five-issue *Daughters of the Dragon* miniseries written by Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti with pencils by Khari Evans and inks by Palmiotti. Nightwing Restorations turned



(top) Colleen Wing gets the spotlight in *Power Man and Iron Fist* #118. (bottom) Colleen Wing and Misty Knight's first appearance as Daughters of the Dragon in *The Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #32. Art by Marshall Rogers. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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Very cinematic art from Mashall Rogers as Misty Knight and Colleen Wing kick butt. From *The Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #33. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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to working as bondswomen hunting down super humans who had jumped bail. C-list villains such as Freezer Burn, 8-Ball, Humbug, and Whirlwind made this tale a fun, rollercoaster, popcorn adventure. The artwork on the title was a retro, cartoony vibe that fit the nature of the characters and the tone of the story.

In the *Deadly Hands Special*, Paniccia also interviewed writers Gray and Palmiotti. Gray discussed the development of the tone, "Over the last six years there's been a resurgence of the exploitation style of filmmaking and as much as we wanted to go in that direction, we understood the need to bring some different ideas to the project. We did want there to be an exploitation flavor but also add humor and throw together a cast of villains who could evoke comical situations. In the past, *Daughters of the Dragon* was a detective book and while it was novel during its time, we didn't want to go down that road again...not exactly. Instead, we chose to put a spin on it and make them fugitive recovery agents. I've always wondered what happened to villains after they were captured because in most cases, jail in the Marvel Universe has a revolving door."

Palmiotti stated, "Each character brings something different to the table and these girls were begging to be updated...the hard part was finding just the right mixture of humor, violence, sexiness, and adventure. I think we are adding something

real solid to these characters' backgrounds and taking them from being considered 'B' characters to the 'A' game."

While most of the villains Misty and Colleen encountered were previously established, the creators also gave them new adversaries in Ricadonna and the Mad Juggler. While Ricadonna was a force to be reconed with, let's just say that C-lister would be a stretch for the Mad Juggler. Palmiotti disclosed, "[The story and characters] also offered us the opportunity to create their own rogues gallery along the way which you don't get to do very often with established characters.

When creating Ricadonna, I had Madonna in mind all the way...a powerful, beautiful woman that could manipulate everyone around her. Once we received the designs from Khari, we were instantly sold. It all came together."

Although it would be over a decade, Colleen and Misty were again featured in another *Daughters of the Dragon* adventure. The 2019 miniseries was a Marvel Digital Original (MOD) from writer Jed Mackay and artists Travel Foreman (#1 and 3) and Joey Vazquez and Craig Yeung (#2). This story was a mixture of the detective type that Claremont and Rogers told while the artwork had the fun, retro feel of that from Evans and Palmiotti.

Mackay tells *BACK ISSUE*, "I'd always loved the espionage/martial arts comics of the '70s



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ALL BLEED ART MUST EXTEND TO SOLID LINE

Book

Issue

Story
Page

Line Up
Page



Misty Knight and Colleen Wing kick butts in the cover art for the 2006 *Daughters of the Dragon: Deadly Hands Special* reprint special. Art by Marshall Rogers. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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MARSHALL/06

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The Daughters of the Dragon cross paths with a vampiric cult in *Bizarre Adventures* #25. Art by Marshall Rogers and Bob McLeod. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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which was where Misty and Colleen came from. I think [they resonate with readers because] they're such products of the 1970s and what people were interested in, and yet they've stuck around to the present day. They have a certain fun retro vibe they carry with them, but not in such a way that hampers their appearances in contemporary stories. That, and they have such a long history in the Marvel Universe without ever having been main parts of it- Colleen Wing dated Cyclops, for instance, which is bonkers to look back on now. Misty was Jean Grey's roommate. Whatever else was going on, the Daughters were always in the background, getting into martial-arts shenanigans."

The story was a sequel to the first Daughters of the Dragon story from *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*. However, what do you do when the villain of that tale died at the end? Mackay reveals, "I wanted to root the story in the Marvel Universe and pay tribute to the Daughters' history, but couldn't really

square who would be their specific arch-villain. As they've usually appeared as side-characters, they didn't really have the kind of rogues gallery to fall back on that other Marvel characters do, so I had to do some digging and came across Emil Vachon, someone that was solely theirs. Of course, Vachon dying in that story meant he was off the table, but creating a character in Emila Vachon, his daughter, meant that we could tell a story with some more personal stakes."

While the story was a sequel, it added new depth to the relationship of the two protagonists. As the story began, they hadn't seen each other for a while because they had ended Knightwing Restorations. Wing was affected by the lack of time with her best friend. This echoes how people feel when their friends and loved ones move on. This was one of the best parts of the story and really one of the strongest parts of their relationship. It shows just how much they mean to each other and why readers keep wanting more stories with them.

"I'd always thought that Colleen got a bit of short shrift over the years, compared to Misty. Misty tended to appear more frequently, while Colleen would fade into the background. So, some of that got channeled into the story-two friends, one of whom is afraid of being left behind, and how they come together when something from their shared past comes back to threaten them. I think a duo is a great thing to write-you have characters who can joke and bounce off of one another without getting bogged down with a full team situation, and exploring that long shared history between Colleen and Misty was a lot of fun," Mackay states.

Together Misty and Colleen are the Daughters of the Dragon, a two-headed dragon that worked to take down villainy in the Marvel Universe. But this term has a deeper meaning for these two characters. They were both female and from minority groups when both were underused and underrepresented not only in the pages of Marvel Comics, but across comics in general. Their inclusion and development both in the pages of *Iron Fist* and then *Power Man and Iron Fist*, along with their own adventures, showed that characters who were not just cookie-cutter vanilla types could engage fans. Misty and Colleen really were a two-headed dragon, one that continues to roar from time to time in the MU to this day.

Special thanks goes out to Jenny Blake Isabella and Jed Mackay for their invaluable input into this article. The author would also like to thank Kurt Busiek who responded to this writer but was unable to help with the article at this time. Thanks also go out to Omar Guerrero for the permission to quote from his interview with Jo Duffy.

Ed Lute doesn't have a bionic arm and isn't trained in hand-to-hand combat, but he is an educator, comic book historian, and freelance writer who has written some kick-ass contributions for BACK ISSUE as well as The Jack Kirby Collector and RetroFan.



end



BACK TALK

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DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

The photo of Dan Jurgens on page 44 of *BACK ISSUE* #165 was taken by Gage Skidmore, not Luigi Novi. We apologize for the error.

HOW DID THAT STORY GO?

“Flashback: Watch The Sky! DC’s *Invasion!*”: I was really hoping Joe Norton would cover/include the 1989 *Action Comics Annual* by Chris Claremont and Michael Golden that tied in with *Invasion* but was never published. What’s the story on that? I remember it being advertised first as a tie-in, then as a Special after *Invasion* had come and gone.

Delmo (*The Saint*) Walters Jr.

That’s a darn good question, Delmo. You stumped me. I don’t even recall hearing about that comic. Luckily, I have friends who I thought might know the answer. Here’s what I learned. Claremont wrote the story, but Golden never finished the art, and it was cancelled. Why wasn’t the art finished? I don’t know. Your guess is as good as mine.

ALIEN THOUGHTS

In your editorial, you mused about comics aliens you enjoyed: Howard the Duck, Silver Surfer, Superman, etc. Agreed. They, along with Thor, Loki, and others, were terrific. They may not have been born locally but certainly had an abundance of human qualities. Less so some of the invading aliens examined, in more depth, this issue. Still, even if every series wasn’t a nostalgic favorite, many were interesting and others a learning experience.

Never a JLA aficionado, I knew of Starro, but not much about him. I found, in studying the large cover repro of *B&B* #28, with the team’s introduction, two interesting elements. If the FF, subsequently, was prompted by the great success of the team, they also were fighting a huge monster on the cover. Secondly, and I’d not noticed before, the line about the “world’s greatest heroes...” predates *FF* #3’s cover claim of being the world’s greatest comic magazine.

Starro’s inner red circle reminds me of Cap’s shield, only with the star on the outside.

This business, years later, of him using starfish masks to take over the heroes, as

on your cover, while ominous, is a comics trope of the heroes behaving out of character under the sway of a sinister force (Puppet Master, Ringmaster, etc.). Not as engaging, personally, as a confrontation where both parties are at their peak.

Did enjoy your finding a then-recent movie (*Warning from Space*) with starfish-like aliens. Inconclusive but interesting timing. Completely new to me.

Wasn’t quite as enamored with the Alien/Predator material. In my view, they’re more like monster characters only from outer space rather than Transylvania or a laboratory.

Wish you would have covered the Goodwin/Simonson adaptation in more depth, but perhaps next invasion?

Did learn that talent I enjoy like Claremont, Wrightson, and Corben did some work on the characters.

Same with *Alien Legion*. Discovered precisely which issues Terry Austin inked.

Interesting, too, Carl Potts’ speedbumps and roadblocks, along the way, in getting the series accepted. Deals that went astray and others opportunely timed.

Speaking of Terry, greatly enjoyed his “Terry’s Toons.” So many diverse characters to identify! I didn’t manage them all. Two still are elusive: the kid at the top and the lady next to a silent Henry. My favorite was his Sgt. Fury, with the stubble, chest and arm hair noodled in.

To my surprise, one article I really enjoyed was *DC Super-Stars*. The book had a wild range of material: space hero reprints, superheroes, sports, humor, war, and science fiction. Variety with no consistency. Amusingly, when it morphed to new material, rather than reprints, it got canned. Perhaps the funniest aspect was the redrawn Flash story. A Golden Age work, it wasn’t up to then “modern standards.” Now, fifty years later, is the reconstituted version up to today’s standards? Or are there any standards today?

Joe Frank

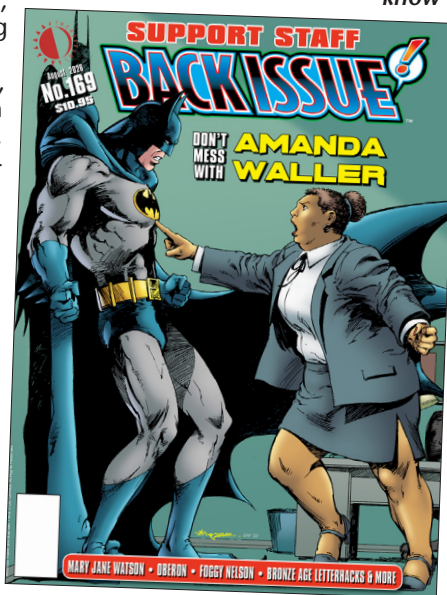
We (actually, I) made the choice to focus on the Dark Horse stories featuring Alien and Predator. Since the movie adaptation was published by Heavy Metal, it fell outside of that focus. Does it deserve more attention? You bet! It’s on my list. If you’re a fan of the Goodwin/Simonson team, we’re going to cover a different movie adaptation of theirs in an upcoming issue. What could it be? That would be telling...

I’m not sure who the lady next to Henry is, but the kid at the top is Gerald McBoing Boing. He starred in several UPA cartoons and could only speak in sound effects. It may interest you to know that he was created by Theodore Geisel,

better known as Dr. Seuss. The first cartoon he appeared in won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short. I may be a bit of an animation fan.

Next issue: Sure, we all love our heroes, but where would they be without the friends, co-workers, teammates, and even pets who are there for them? Join us in raising a glass to the “Support Staff,” with a special thank you to Amanda Waller, Foggy Nelson, Mary Jane Watson, Krypto, and more! Plus, a look at Bronze Age letterhacks. Featuring the work of John Ostrander, Walter Simonson, Sal Buscema, Al Milgrom, Marv Wolfman, Cary Bates, Mark Evanier, Kevin Maguire, Tony Isabella, and others. Amanda Waller and Batman cover by Jerry Bingham!

*Don’t ask—Just BI it!
 Roger Ash, editor*



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