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Comics' Bronze Age and Beyond!



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BACK seat driver

by **Roger Ash**

When Jim Shooter passed away in June of 2025, I immediately began getting emails asking if we would be doing a tribute issue. Considering that I learned of his passing from the initial email, I hadn't really thought about it. With each passing email, it became apparent that we should do something, and publisher Jon Morrow agreed. But we wanted to find a way to focus it. After all, he had been a writer, editor, Editor-in-Chief, and had a hand in launching several new comics publishers. His impact on the Bronze Age of comics is undeniable. John and I had a long phone discussion about it and we kept throwing around ideas that were ok, but we weren't thrilled about any of them. John at one point commented that he enjoyed a number of the books that came out during Shooter's tenure as EIC at Marvel such as Frank Miller's *Daredevil* and Walter Simonson's *Thor*. That opened the floodgates.

If we focused on Shooter's time as EIC, we could spotlight him as a creator (*Secret Wars*) as well as books and storylines that came out during his tenure. The idea allowed for focus and also breadth.

Secret Wars had to be included. I doubt that there was a more prominent series that he was directly involved with during his time as EIC. (Special thanks to Cory Sedlmeier for getting us a scan of the cover of issue #11 to use as our cover.) You could argue that the series he impacted most was *Avengers*. He had two memorable runs on the title and they need a spotlight. His attempt at creating a New Universe did not turn out as planned, but it's worth looking at his attempt to do something different with *Star Brand*.

There were many memorable runs during his time as EIC such as the aforementioned *Daredevil* by Miller and *Thor* by Simonson. While we've covered many of these titles, one that has deserved a deep dive is Roger Stern's work on *Spider-Man*, both *Spectacular* and *Amazing*. These issues, many done with artist John Romita Jr., remain fan favorites to this day, with good reason. The introduction of Hobgoblin and memorable battles with Juggernaut and Vulture are only the beginning of the fun to be found in these issues.

Within these classic runs were some memorable storylines. When I think back to when I read these comics as a fan, nothing had a bigger impact on me than Chris Claremont and John Byrne's classic death of Phoenix story. I doubt that I'm alone in feeling that way. In my opinion, it simply had to be included.

One that people may argue with me about is the Frankie Raye/Nova storyline during John Byrne's run on *Fantastic Four*. It's not a storyline I hear about much these days, but it had an impact on me at the time. Someone willingly becoming a herald of Galactus

struck me as a big deal. This also gave us the opportunity to look at what happened in the life of Nova after this storyline.

One thing that I've often read is that Shooter was proud of his stance on creator rights. This took form during his time as EIC as the Epic Comics line. Under Archie Goodwin and Al Milgrom, we got such comics as *Dreadstar*, *Coyote*, and *Groo*. We also were treated to the critical and fan favorite, *Moonshadow* by J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth, which we give a well-deserved spotlight.

To cap things off, we've got a fun and fond remembrance by Dewey Cassell.

What I haven't mentioned yet is the first article you'll see, which is an "Off My Chest" column by JayJay Jackson. Jackson is a creator who knew Shooter for many years and he helped guide her along her writing path. Her piece adds a much-needed look at who Shooter was as a person and gives context to the rest of the issue. It's a wonderful piece and I'm glad that Jackson agreed to share her remembrances with us.

We aren't going into this issue with blinders on. Shooter was also a controversial person. He rubbed a number of people the wrong way. If that became an issue in a topic we're covering, it will be included but not sensationalized. For example, even when I was a young comics fan, I knew that the ending of *X-Men* #137 was not what Claremont and Byrne originally intended but was changed at Shooter's insistence. That is addressed in the article.

Many of my favorite comics as a young reader came out during Shooter's time as Marvel's EIC. I wouldn't be the comics fan I am without the Claremont/Byrne/Austin *X-Men*, Stern's *Spider-Man*, Simonson's *Thor*, Bill Mantlo and Michael Golden's *Micronauts*, Byrne's *Fantastic Four*, and so much more. For that, I owe Jim Shooter thanks. I hope you enjoy this look back at that unforgettable era.



Next issue: What would a hero be without a good villain? Pretty boring—which is why BACK ISSUE #172 spotlights those who would do our heroes harm, in our Big Bad issue! There are can't-miss profiles of Lex Luthor, Dormammu, the Royal Flush Gang, Scorpion, Killer Frost, and Juggernaut! Plus, the debut of a new feature, "BACK to the Drawing Board," examining misguided attempts at character creation—and our first subject is the Ten-Eyed Man! Featuring the work of ROY THOMAS, STEVE ENGLEHART, GERRY CONWAY, PAUL LEVITZ, RON FRENZ, MARV WOLFMAN, JOHN BYRNE, PAT BRODERICK, and others. With a mystical Dormammu cover by Frank Brunner. Don't ask—jut BI it!

Roger Ash, editor

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Jim Shooter

LARGE MAMMAL



by JayJay Jackson



Jim and JayJay at a comic store signing in Pittsburgh. All photos are courtesy of the author.

I recall the day that Jim first walked into the boardroom of Chase North America bank to discuss buying Marvel Comics.

Jim and I were friends. The kind of buddies who hang out a lot and talk on the phone constantly. It didn't seem real to me that my friend was thinking of buying Marvel. Of course, I knew he'd been the editor-in-chief for years and I'd heard all his crazy stories of the business side of the comics industry, but buying Marvel?! Who does that?

Apparently Jim felt the same way.

After that first intense meeting he related his insecurities about sitting down at the conference table with all these men and noticing they were all wearing the same Ivy League college rings. A club that Jim, a high school graduate from Pittsburgh PA and the son of a struggling steel worker, was most definitely not a part of.

I think almost everyone knows the story of how Jim started creating comics around the age of 12, teaching himself and submitting his ideas after a year or so. His family was desperate for money and his paper route wasn't cutting it. But he had the bravado to try to do something impossible. And he pulled it off. DC Comics hired him to write comics. So, when faced with a room of rich elites, all those years later, he did what he always did, he put on a brave front. That first meeting went well. He impressed them enough that they agreed to have more meetings. And they eventually backed him to the tune of \$80 million. (Spoiler: It was a rigged game and he lost.)

Jim told me once, only once, that he had to stand in front of his bathroom mirror in his tiny studio apartment and psych himself up for these meetings trying to overcome his self-doubt. I pictured that scene from *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* where J. Pierpont Finch sings to himself in the bathroom mirror to get ready for a big meeting. Jim used to sing

show tunes and I would frequently ask him to sing that song, "I Believe in You," because it was forever linked with him in my mind. Also, because it's a great song and he sang it well. But Jim had to remind himself that he belonged because he felt like a perpetual outsider, someone who would never, could never, be a part of that high finance world. I wonder if he felt like a part of any world. I think he felt like an outsider in almost every situation. We had that in common. But I realized something back then. Those banker guys might have been the cart, loaded with everything, but that cart doesn't go without something to pull it.

Yeah, I know I just compared Jim to a horse.

He was actually a creative force with a lifetime of knowledge and wisdom. And he was willing to share everything he had learned. He was almost desperate to share it. He created the *Marvel Try-Out Book* and he came up with his storytelling lecture in the '90s and toured conventions with it in the hopes that it would inspire new generations of comics creators.

I was an ambitious kid. In kindergarten I decided I would become an artist and started getting very serious about my art. Around the age of 12 I added writing to that goal, and I soon thought of combining the two as comics and started working on my own stories. I can't even imagine what my life would have been because when I was 25 I met Jim, much the way the Colorado River met the Hoover Dam. I had all this ambition and yearning and Jim taught me the tools to focus it and make it real. Though at first he was just working and letting me watch.

We were hanging out a lot when we were both working at Marvel and he was writing *Secret Wars* in the evenings. I think it reminded him of his bitter high school days when he would come home tired and have to start work writing comics. There were times in his teen years when things got pretty bad and he was struggling. He was going through a bit of that with *Secret*

Wars. Probably because it was just so damn big and connected to every book Marvel had. We would sit around and I'd suggest dumb ideas. He encouraged that. He always said that sometimes a not-quite-right idea would lead to a better one. He would get stuck and have to work late into the night. But I watched him keep plugging away at the story, analyzing what would work and building it like complex interwoven architecture. It was a revelation. I remember I watched him do it again at VALIANT when he was writing *Magnus Robot Fighter*, some of his best work in my opinion. I began to see how a story is structured and it only made me more curious to learn the craft.

I was working as a colorist and graphic designer at Marvel, but Jim always encouraged me to stretch further. Jim was someone who always looked beyond the surface of things and dug deeper into the meaning and themes of stories. He would call out lazy thinking when he encountered it. In fact, I guess he was famous for it, but for someone like me, I craved the input and the feedback on my work. And in my life. I knew I didn't have things figured out.

Jim taught me to approach problems analytically and he made me realize that every situation in life is a problem to be solved. The very qualities of his personality that some people found difficult to deal with were the things that served me the most. He was fiercely intelligent and endlessly curious.



(top) Jim and JayJay at a Halloween party in the '80s.
(bottom) A more recent photo of Jim and JayJay.

He showed me how to achieve insight. He would sometimes do something like that "5 whys" problem-solving method where you dig past the first easy answer to the real ones underneath. In his own way. It was revealing and taught me to look below the surface and reach a deeper understanding.

Because I'm a history buff I had long had a vague idea for a character who had been alive for a very long time and wasn't a vampire. I wanted to do parallel scenes in each book, a historical scene that related to the current story, making his memories relate to and become the foundation for his present. Jim helped me develop that vague idea into the Eternal Warrior at VALIANT. But Jim came up with Armstrong, his brother and his opposite. Jim knew that pairing two opposites together made for great friction and conflict. He saw what was missing and added it, then created Archer to be the opposite in their own book, *Archer and Armstrong*.

Jim didn't just create stories; he infused them with relationships. He knew that was the engine that powered a story. An immortal alone is a concept. An immortal who carries the weight of forever with a brother who made an opposite choice, *that* turned every scene with the two of them into an argument. He knew a character is only as interesting as what they push against.

And at Defiant and Broadway comics, Jim continued to give me opportunities and encouragement. I wrote several issues of Defiant comics and was part of the writing team at Broadway. It was an incredible experience.

What Jim taught me went far beyond comic books or work. Analytical thinking and looking deep is a life skill and it has affected every decision, every problem as well as every creative choice I've made for decades. The man literally rewired how I thought.

And working with Jim made me think I could do more. On my own I've written and drawn some stuff. He always reviewed my work and gave me feedback and help, right up until the end. A couple of weeks before he died he gave me advice on a book I was working on. Really good advice. As always.

Jim succeeded enormously, but he never hesitated to reach back and help people.

And yet, Jim was also just my friend who joked that his superpower was changing light bulbs, helped me move (though every time he swore never again), and left unheeded messages on my answering machine or voicemail. In nice weather we used to walk all over Manhattan, sometimes for miles. We jogged in Central Park. And we used to sing. Nothing formal or fancy, we'd just break into song with a comfortable ease.

Jim's mom had wanted to be a singer and she'd won a talent show in Pittsburgh. He said the prize was a record album of her performance. When he was young they used to sing together. The duet "It's a Lovely Day Today" from *Call Me Madam* was one of their tunes. When he got older he joined a local community theater and was in a production of *Bells Are Ringing*. He knew all the lyrics of the *Superman* musical he'd seen as a kid on his first business trip and treasured the album.

I fancy I still hear him sometimes, breaking into song on one of our walks, on my answering machine, or even in a restaurant, completely unselfconscious, a large mammal in full voice.

Jim spent his whole life having to convince himself he belonged in rooms that were never built for him. I don't know if he truly understood how many of us believed in him without needing any convincing.

I believe in you, Jim. I always did.

JayJay Jackson is an eclectic artist and writer living in New York, best known for her work on comic books, graphic novels, and gig posters. She has worked for Z2 Comics, Marvel Comics, DC, Valiant, and many other companies. Her illustrations have appeared in Vibe and Royal Flush Magazine, among others.



end

JIM SHOOTER & MARVEL SUPER HEROES **SECRET WARS**

FlashBack!

You probably have all of this maxiseries in your long boxes, in your closet, if not the omnibus on your shelf. Of course, I'm talking about one of the most heralded and remembered titles in comics history-and arguably Jim Shooter's greatest success: *The Marvel Super-Heroes Secret Wars*.

And in order to appreciate the landscape of *Secret Wars*, it's important to understand Jim Shooter, because ultimately the series was a microcosm of the sum of his experiences, his history, his education in the comics world, and the way he ran Marvel during his tenure as Editor-in-Chief.

Shooter's mindset towards any of his projects, including *MSHSW* was rooted in his financially challenged upbringing and applied to the way he managed Marvel Comics from 1978 to 1987. It wasn't an enlightened perspective of management and in his personal memoirs, he referred to it as "righting the ship", implying that the ship was off course. *MSHSW*, midpoint in this Herculean task, was instrumental in accomplishing corporate success for Marvel Comics in this time.

He possessed a perfectionist's attention to quality, heightened awareness of the comics industry, and he felt there was a lot of work that needed to be done at Marvel, and only he could do it. He rarely shared his thinking with the majority of his co leagues or peers and appearing inflexible also didn't win him a lot of allies. He had his own agenda and his own set of ethics, even if that wasn't apparent to those around him, but he believed he tried to do the thing that was best, regardless of the impact it had on others and that did not earn him any friends.

His strict adherence to detail over dates was a work style tempered by an uncompromising need to revise creators' work. "Stan used to do that all the time," Joe Rubinstein told us in an interview. "What was the difference?"

He was simple, direct, and he could be frustrating to the people he directed with his insistence on perfection, constant changes, and demanding nature. He came by this honestly. His disadvantaged childhood, his brutal lessons in the comics industry, and an intuitive eye for quality and innovation all combined in making the Editor-in-Chief he became.

If you speak with any of Jim Shooter's friends, they will unanimously agree that he tried to do the right thing. Though there was a fair share of others who celebrated his departure from Marvel Comics, because, while he loved comics and comic creators, he always put the company first. He learned the comics industry the hard way. He himself became hard, unrelenting, and abrasive but he loved comics and loved relating them to fans. He enjoyed being challenged by talent, fought for talent, and he had a respect for talent, even when the talent didn't respect him, and in that history and tumultuous, stress-ridden process lay the success of how *MSHSW* was created.

THE PRODIGY YEARS—"I WAS A TEEN AGE COMIC WRITER"

The environment of Jim Shooter's "boy genius" childhood was punctuated by the presence of two destabilizing influences: poverty and alcoholism. Though it's common knowledge that Jim was a comics prodigy and sold his first comic story at the impressionable age of 13, it was a feat that never got the acclaim it deserved, overshadowed by his family's poverty.

In an interview at Toronto's Fan Expo *Secret Wars* panel in 2016, Shooter shared this with me.

"My family were broke. I was a kid. I couldn't help my family by getting a job in a steel mill. A paper route wasn't

"It Was Better Everyone Hated Me"

by John Kirk



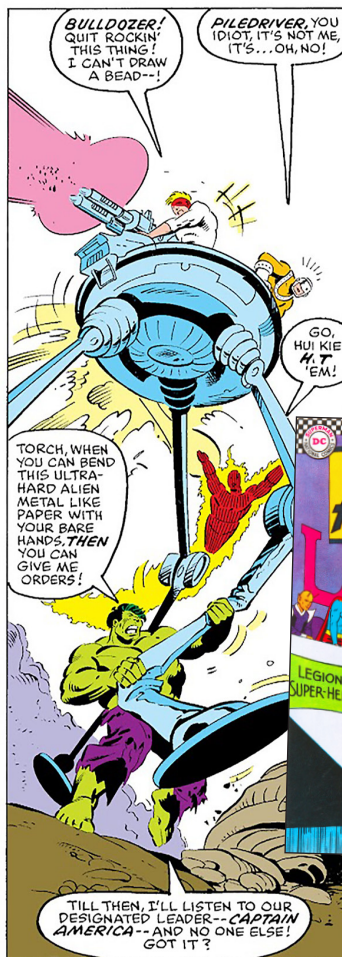
JIM SHOOTER

© Luigi Novi /
Wikimedia Commons.



Get ready to rumble! It's *Marvel Super-Heroes Secret Wars* #1, autographed by Jim Shooter. Cover by Mike Zeck and John Beatty. Image courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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available. So, I was at a doctor's appointment. I saw a pile of comics on the table. It occurred to me that I could do that."

Shooter was a bright child. He was skilled in language arts, and he described experiences of being a success in school. His teachers were surprised at his facility with language. When he discovered comics, they weren't just an escape though, they were a means to an end. It was something in which he could utilize his prodigy level talent and perhaps exploit.

Shooter's father, Ken, worked in a steel mill. He was also an alcoholic and while Shooter didn't like to talk about his childhood and family, it was clear that the combination of a low-paying job and alcoholism had an effect on the way Jim grew up.

From Shooter's own memoirs, he remembers discovering comics in those years of financial hardship.

"It seemed that all my life, lack of money had oppressed my family. We always seemed to be on the brink of financial oblivion. Struggling. Hanging by a thread. Wolves at the door."

Reading comics from the age of 8 to 13 was an on-and-off again luxury for Shooter. It was a learning period, and comics weren't often widely available, but he was aware, even at that young age, of the story structure. Money was always an obstacle to prevent his further education as a child and also always on his mind. It's sad when a child has an awareness of their own socio-economic status. Shooter recounted this on his blog:

"Two things prevented me from getting (back) into comics up to my earlobes right then—first, my family, always in hard times, had fallen into even harder times, and there simply was no money for such things, and second, those whatchacall'ems—Marvel Comics? They were impossible to find around Bethel Park, Pennsylvania in those early days. How Bruno's Barbershop acquired one remains a mystery."

Shooter wound up reading more comics after that doctor's visit when he landed in a hospital room recovering from a surgical procedure for a hernia as a kid that his family could barely afford. He couldn't afford the comics either so during that time he had access to a great many. He maximized that opportunity and, in that time, his talent for story composition emerged as he describes at jimshooter.com:

"During the summer of 1964, I spent a week in Pittsburgh's Mercy Hospital where I had minor surgery and a major revelation. There were lots of comic books lying around in that kids' ward, and I had lots of time to read. There were Archies, Harveys, Dells, Charltons, Nationals—and Marvels!"

As he spent his time in the hospital, Shooter didn't just read the comics, he studied them.

"At age thirteen, I was ready to write a comic book. I had desperately sought copies of Marvel Comics—borrowed, traded for, or managed to scrape up twelve cents to buy. I studied them.

(top) The heroes arrive and are mighty confused. *Marvel Super-Heroes Secret Wars* #1 art by Zeck and Beatty. (bottom) Ya can't beat a good scrap. Issue #2 art by Zeck and Beatty. (inset) Shooter begins his career as a comics writer in *Adventure Comics* #346. Cover by Curt Swan and George Klein.

Secret Wars TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc. Legion of Super-Heroes TM & © DC Comics.

Analyzed them. Read till I knew them by heart. So, I wrote and drew, as best I could, a story of the *Legion of Super-Heroes* starring Superboy, for National's *Adventure Comics* and sent it off."

It worked. It caught the attention of Mort Weisinger at DC, who, unaware that he was a teen-ager, invited Shooter to talk about the submission. He surprised Mort with the response of asking if his mother, Elenor, could come as well.

It was this education that formed the basis for Shooter's knowledge of how comics worked and how *MSHSW* would be shaped.

In Shooter's favor, his love of comics and his career aspirations were also supported by the presence of his mother. The measure of a supportive parent, even one, in times of challenge and hardship is invaluable, but Ellie Shooter's support was severely limited given both poverty and her husband's alcoholism. Fortunately for Shooter, it was enough to give him his break.

He received permission to continue to write for National Publications (DC Comics) and for Mort Weisinger. The education he received from Mort was wide-spread and painful. He learned almost every aspect of the business close-hand and empirically, as described in his memoirs.

"Soon after, school ended for the year, and almost a year after I'd written the first *Legion* story DC bought. Fresh out of ninth grade, I was off from home in Pittsburgh to New York City to spend a week in DC's offices learning more about comics production—things like coloring and inking that are hard to explain over the phone.

"So, I spent a fair amount of time in DC's offices, meeting with Mort (Mort Weisinger) and other DC people—Jack Adler, who gave me an education with regard to art production, coloring, and printing; Carmine Infantino, who discussed cover design with me, Tatjana Wood—I think—regarding coloring, George Klein—I think—explaining inking. And lots more. E. Nelson Bridwell, who was Mort's assistant, of course. Lots of other people, especially people who worked in the office. I think I met everyone who worked in the office. Not so many freelancers. I attended several general editorial meetings. I learned a lot."

Weisinger was infamous for shooting down ideas and invasively replacing work with his own storyline ideas. He was a cruel boss and though he knew the business well, he treated his employees harshly. Though Shooter was on record for praising Weisinger's writing style and admittedly abusive style of management, he criticized his inflexibility. He remembered this from his blog:

"Mort's rules *always* worked, story-mechanics-wise. Easy, idiot-proof, safe. Trying things that explored the frontiers beyond the confines of Mort's rules was tricky—fraught with opportunities to fail—but if you were daring, if you had the necessary depth of understanding and the skills, you could do wonderful things."

MSHSW was a successful but simple storyline. It was idiot-proof in a way. Its essence was to take a bunch of heroes and villains, place them on a battlefield with headquarters and battle vehicles and let them go full-bore at each other.

This validated and demonstrated Shooter's basic rule under Mort: "I shut up and listened." As much as he enjoyed hearing challenges to his perspective, this became the default he had for his writers.

Shooter's education was reinforced with as much negative conditioning as one could stomach. If he made a mistake, he

was insulted. He was the joke of the office—the "boy-genius" who wrote *Legion of Super-Heroes* and his success was paraded by Weisinger in front of the adult peers the teenaged Shooter worked with, alienating him from them. Shooter was a *wunder-kind*, but he was also isolated and lonely, thanks to Mort's instructional and management style.

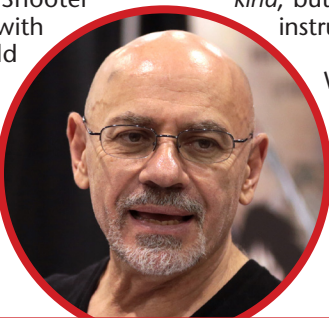
Joe Rubinstein had a less diplomatic take on Weisinger.

"Mort Weisinger was notorious for being a scumbag." Speaking about Shooter's formative years under the DC editor.

"He was a horrible human being. He was always guilt-tripping Jim that he wasn't worthy and that he was a charity case."

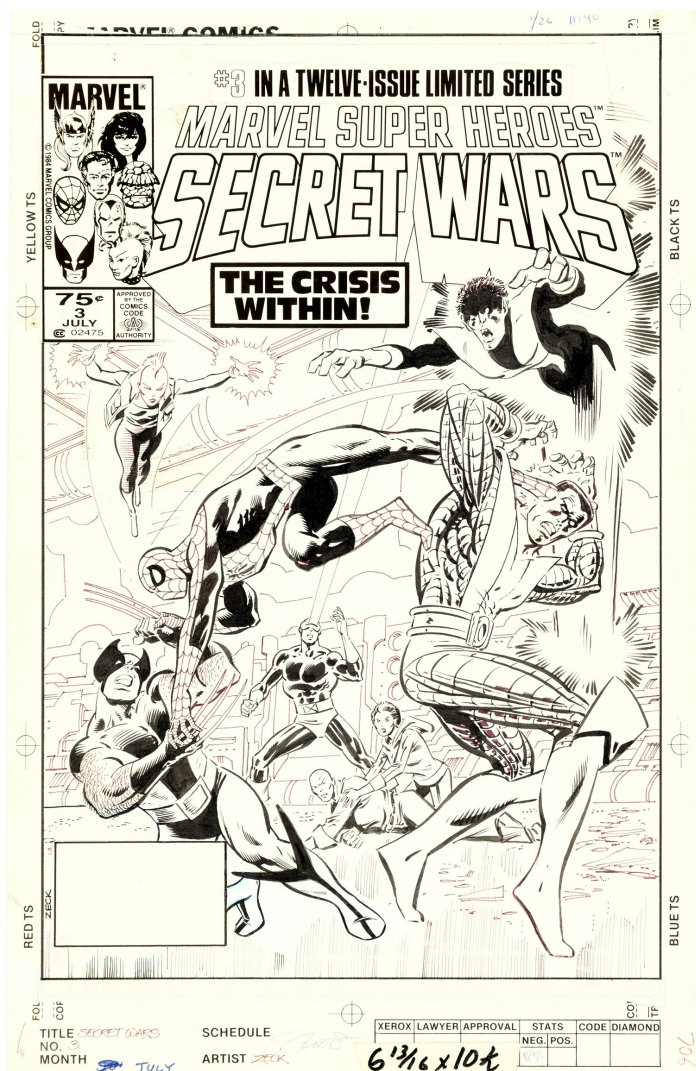
Weisinger would continue this abusive editorial practice during Shooter's early years writing for DC. This was his apprenticeship, seasoned by mistreatment and negativity. Shooter was told by Weisinger that he was "retarded" or called other hateful epithets.

"Mort would call me every Thursday night, right after the *Batman* TV show, to go over whatever I'd delivered that week. He'd call me other times, too, whenever, but Thursday night was our regularly scheduled call. The calls mostly consisted of him bellowing at me. 'You f*cking moron! Learn to spell! What the hell is this character holding? Is that supposed to be a gun? It looks like a carrot! These layouts have to be clear, retard!' When you're 14 and the big, important man upon whom your



JOE RUBINSTEIN

Gage Skidmore.



Spidey takes on the X-Men on the cover of issue #3.

Art by Zeck. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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family's survival depends calls you up to tell you you're an imbecile, it makes an impression....

"It got to the point where any time I'd hear a phone ring I'd clench up, white knuckled. Very Pavlovian. Even in school, or some other place that was ostensibly safe, a ringing phone jolted me.

"Mort used to tell me I was his 'charity case.' He said that the only reason he kept me on was because my family would starve otherwise."

It certainly made an impression on the young Shooter that he could remember these incidents with such clarity. They left scars.

"Jim also had to endure the abuse he suffered under his dad, who was an alcoholic." Joe Rubinstein added. "I'm not exactly sure what the nature of the trauma was, but he had to deal with that too."

Shooter's education and introduction to the comics publishing world was set in this time, offered in the worst possible way anyone could have imagined.

Influenced by his home life and combined with the abusive crash-course introduction to the world of comic publishing, Shooter was somehow able to be a full-time comics writer. It became a regular occurrence for him to start making trips to New York by himself as a teenager. Shooter's start in comics may have seemed a lucky break to anyone trying to break into the industry: being essentially scouted at a young age by a major corporation. He had made the Big Leagues. But there was no joy or excitement in this break: it was, as Weisinger correctly observed, motivated out of necessity.



There was guilt in trying to help his family. But Shooter DID learn to understand the world of comics on a level that other entrants into the industry didn't. He didn't just have a talent for writing comic stories, he also knew how they could succeed, reinforced by expert, if harsh direction by some of the leading professionals in the industry at the time. Shooter, a survivor of an impoverished, alcoholic-abusive home environment, was enrolled in the empirical comic version of the School of Hard Knocks. Essentially, he traded one abuse-filled situation for another and earned by injury and tears.

Survivors of abuse are never the same. In fact, internalizing and normalizing abuse they unintentionally repeat the same cycle, while also being aware of the nature of their own abusive history. Sometimes, it can be too much, and it manifests itself in other ways.

"Jim was an alcoholic too." Rubinstein pointed out. "I don't think that anyone knew. I think people presumed that because he was so tall that he could take ten drinks. No one ever saw him slobbering, fall-down drunk. He did get an attitude. But look what it did to his esophagus."

THE EARLY YEARS

Imagine just turning 18 years old, feeling like you need to make a change from being treated abusively for five years of your adolescence while providing for your parents when you should have been thinking about school, university, or new career or trade opportunities. Heck, even thinking about graduating high school or even the prom.

Shooter recounted being a kid on his blog:

"Yes. It was tough sometimes. The guys would pass by my house on their way to play basketball or whatever the sport of the season was. They'd yell 'Hey, Jimbo,' my invitation to play. Couldn't do it most of the time. Deadlines. Had to sit there—the left end of the couch was my spot—sketch the pictures and write the words.

"I wore out that end of the couch. Upholstery rubbed bare. Armrest frayed.

"No choice. First of all, my family needed the money. Badly. Second, my editor, Mort Weisinger, mean as a snake at his nicest, would have screamed at me more than usual if I was ever late."

The truth of the matter was there was a lot in Shooter's young adulthood that he missed out on.

"Net, net, net I spent a lot of time not being a kid. I don't recommend it.

"I made up for it a little bit in my senior year. Just took some time for me. Went to a couple of football games. Went to a couple of parties. Went to a couple of dances. It was my last chance to be a kid and I wanted a taste."

Thinking about it: *MSHSW* was like a kid's ultimate entertainment: superheroes and villains putting themselves against each other, surrounded by aliens, sci-fi technology and weaponry, all within one setting. Limited by its simplistic concept but epic in scale, all set under the shadow of Galactus. But imagine an entity more powerful than Galactus. In a way, it was like Shooter was making up for all those lost years of childhood by playing with the characters of Marvel Comics in a way that only the Editor-in-Chief could.

(top left) Bob Layton's cover for issue #4 is one of the classic covers of the series. (bottom) The Molecule Man shows everyone who's the boss. Issue #5 art by Layton and Beatty. (top right) Bring on the bad guys! Layton's cover for issue #6.

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MSHSW has been criticized for its oversimplified nature. But if there was anything Shooter was good at, it was knowing what the fans wanted. The maxiseries resonated with fans justifying his choice of writers—himself—and the storyline he created. If anything, this validated Shooter's writing, ignoring criticism from his peers. He talked more about this in his memoirs.

"I sussed out that DC wouldn't keep sending me checks if I wasn't any good. I learned to ignore Mort's abuse, let it run off my back.

"Years later, I found out he used to brag about me to other DC editors. I was his 'discovery,' a 'prodigy,' to whom he could give any assignment, any book, any character, and always get good material, never a rewrite needed. I was the young hotshot he was grooming for big things. Not bad for a f*cking moron/retard, I guess."

While the memory of Mort Weisinger's instruction was no doubt traumatic, at least it validated the way Shooter had been taught to publish a comic story. It also injured him to the abuse he took—and gave—during the chaos of MSHSW. He described this in further detail in his memoirs.

"Mort Weisinger trained me about more than just writing. He taught me about running a creative organization, and professionalism, and making order out of chaos. It seemed like there was tremendous talent and energy at Marvel, and no organization. I was the line editor, going over 45 books a month. I had this little crew of guys, but the way it was organized was pretty idiotic. When Stan and Sol were this little two-man tag team, and the company was eight books, it worked. When it was 45 books, it didn't work. Nobody had bothered to install an organization. I thought, 'I can fix this.' I was hoping I'd get a chance; I was pretty much last on everybody's list, but eventually they'd used up everybody else, so I got my chance. But I was the second-in-command, and I got overlooked three times. Since there were no other remotely qualified candidates available at that point, Stan hired me and I took over as editor in chief on January 2, 1978."

RIGHTING THE SHIP AT MARVEL: ENTER SECRET WARS

Shooter's style of management was entirely pragmatic. He had learned how to make unpopular decisions. Whether this was a by-product of Mort Weisinger's cruel tutelage or an innate understanding that someone needed to make the hard calls, it was difficult to discern. The fact was, he knew to do it.

In an interview, Bill Sienkewicz recalls the machine-gun direction he received from Shooter on his days of drawing *Moon Knight*.

"He had me redraw every page of the first issue of the *Moon Knight* comic book, both for clarity and to do more full body and establishing shots rather than, as he put it, 'artsy fartsy' angled panels with figures breaking the panel borders for no narrative reason. Still his points and druthers made sense. I did feel inclined to push against his dictates (i.e.; restrictions/prohibitions) and those of some editors. I felt like some rules had no real practical

The Human Torch meets the new Spider-Woman in issue #7. Art by Zeck and Beatty. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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reason to be obeyed all the time, silly things like using a straightedge to draw buildings. I said, Well, what if it was an old ramshackle tenement? Wouldn't a freehand less perfect ink line feel more like an old building? I'd ask a lot of whys about the rules, got a lot of 'that's not how it's done, not how we do things' which led to me asking a lot of 'well then why not?' So again, Jim pushed; I pushed back. It was a weird dance. I defended my choices. Sometimes he'd agree, sometimes not. Jim also felt that it was important for any potential new reader to be able to pick up any issue of any comic and immediately know who the characters were. Jim wanted every issue of every title to have a short recap of what came previously in the story and an introduction to the cast of players, done organically as part of the story. This. For. Every. Single. Issue."

Shooter's unrelenting push for quality also came at the expense of relationships with the creators he respected. His clashes with legendary creators like John Byrne, Doug Moench, Marv Wolfman, Gene Colan, and Steve Gerber became sagas unto themselves. Byrne would leave for DC, working on *Superman*. Marv Wolfman would

see success with artist George Perez on *The New Teen Titans* at DC as well. His insistence and rigid editorial style created more strife than his respect for their talent instilled loyalty. Echoes of Mort Weisinger's style of managing talent, if you like, also a premonition of MSHSW as it either broke artists or drove them away.

THE SECRETS OF THE SECRET WARS

This was the same way Shooter forced Mike Zeck to MSHSW.

The dynamic art style that Mike Zeck was known for became pedestrian with every change, every comment, footnote, and every redrawn issue began to lose its lustre. Shooter rushed Zeck to the point where they had to work overnight in a hotel penthouse in order to make deadlines.

If fans were asked to recount the most remembered titles of the 1980s, MSHSW would undoubtedly rise to the top of the list. Yet, it was a work that was riddled with nerve-wracking deadlines and constant re-writes and changes unknown to the fans. *Secret Wars* is long remembered by fans but desperate to be forgotten by its creators.

The inception of MSHSW was actually based on a concept that Shooter had been knocking around in his head, inspired by a \$220 purchase of a concept by a fan from Chicago. The idea was loosely titled *Cosmic Champions* and this, in his mind, was how the future of Marvel Comics should be: each character pitted against each other in a way to answer a child's ultimate question: who is the best superhero?

Dr. Doom and Galactus on the same page? How cool is that?! Art by Zeck and Beatty. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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The plot lacked moralizing or character depth. There was the typical misunderstanding between superheroes (to this day, Spider-Man trouncing the entire X-Men is a high point in readers' memories) and the sophisticated characterizations that existed in the other comics-like Chris Claremont's work on Magneto's evolution towards Xavier's dream—was absent.

Nonetheless, it seized the fan's attentions. They couldn't get enough of it, proof of Shooter's connection to what fans wanted.

He also seemed to have a fascination with underdog Owen Reece, aka the Molecule Man, who became a major pivotal point of character growth in the Marvel Continuum. It was a very interesting parallel to Shooter's own history with Marvel comics.

Molecule Man's character arc saw the realization of his power; essentially announcing to the other villains about how bad his life had been until he could show

them the power that he possessed. He was no longer disadvantaged and beaten-down Owen Reece, now he was the mighty Molecule Man, the true victor of *MSHSW*. A comparison between Shooter and Reece's individual rises to power can be made.

TOYS, TOYS, TOYS!

Jim Shooter was also aware of the relationship between toys and comics. He pounced on opportunities with toy companies like Mego to create *The Micronauts*. He also partnered with Parker Brothers who had released an electronic action figure called ROM. This spawned ROM: *Space Knight*. He also signed a deal with Hasbro for rights to *G.I. Joe*, a series that survives to this day, published by Skybound, an imprint of Image Comics. *The Transformers* also was licensed by Hasbro. Of course, there was also the Care Bears, by license through Kenner Toys. All of these titles managed to find lasting places in comic fans' hearts and memories. Of course, this line of thinking was also present in *MSHSW*.

When approached by Mattel to license action figures from the big-name characters of the Marvel Pantheon (Captain America, Doctor Doom, the Fantastic Four, etc.), he was eager to make a deal.

Kenner already had a deal in the works with DC Comics to do the same with their characters. Mattel was panicked and Shooter was the type of business shark who could smell chum in the water.

Mattel's "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe" was very successful and all the toy company needed was a major comics event as a tie-in. It forced Shooter to put all of his *wunderkind* imagination to work. It also enabled him to see a destiny for Marvel Comics that would justify his abusive training at Weisinger's hands and be a good "company soldier". This was Shooter's chance to make a major impact on the comics industry landscape and even though Mattel would post a \$394 million dollar loss, Marvel wouldn't.

The series was historic and permanently changed the landscape of the Marvel diaspora for decades. For instance, in an interview panel with me, artist Mike Zeck remembered the cover of *Secret Wars* #8, the iconic introduction of the black Spider-Man costume.

"Jim hated it. But when he found out Mattel got excited about how easy it would be to produce the action figures, he said to keep it."

At the same panel, Bob Layton added this:

"The toy visits were fun! Who doesn't like toys? They were sh*tty toys, but they were still toys! There were challenges though because they used single molds for the bodies. So, my mandate was to design the characters so that they could be used with the single bodies. Paint jobs, different implements. I had to redesign all the costumes to fit into the molds that they had."



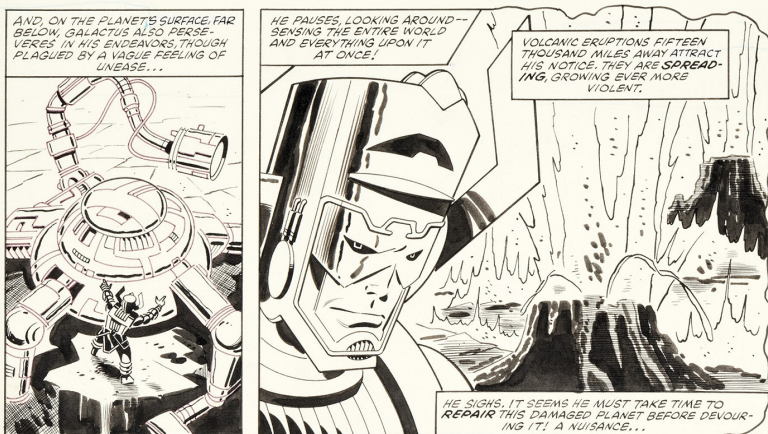
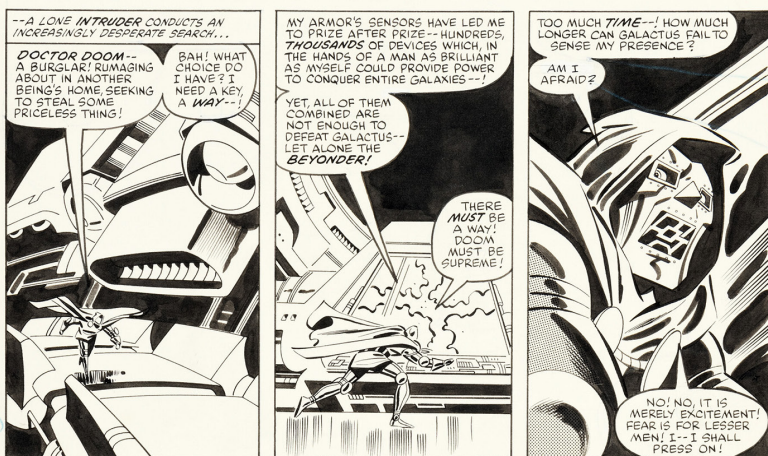
MIKE ZECK

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THE SECRET WARS

SHHHH! IT'S A SECRET!

7



13

CREATING THE WARS

The choice of the creative team behind *MSHSW* was difficult. Shooter decided that he needed to write the series.

From his blog, he remembered it this way.

"When time came to actually do it, I realized that only I could write it. I was busy enough being Editor-in-Chief, I didn't need the additional burden and we didn't have a shortage of writers, but....

"Marvel's writers at the time, some of the best in the business, were, to a person, very possessive about the characters they were writing. To some extent, that was a good thing, indicating a love for the characters that generally showed in their work. It also led to some intense rivalries and bitter arguments regarding crossovers and guest appearances."

However, it was suggested that Chris Claremont was interested but turned it down on the basis of it being a "toy comic" and that it wouldn't sell. On Syfy.com's "An Oral History of the Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars," Tom DeFalco expressed puzzlement as to why other writers weren't as interested, given his belief in the success of the project.

"I remember that when we finally decided to do that book,

we went around trying to get the best creative team we could. We asked Chris Claremont to write it and I forget who else. Every person that we approached told us that they were just not interested. Nobody wanted to work on a 'toy book.' I heard a lot of 'It's not going to sell; I don't want to have anything to do with it.'"

But Shooter contradicted this idea, suggesting that others wanted to write the series. When asked about this at Toronto's Comicon in 2016, he shared that "it was best that everybody hated me instead of fighting with each other for the job. It meant a lot of heat and resentment went my way, but in the end, it was worth it."

It was more likely a case of the sense of ownership and control over the characters.

However, it is important to note that with the new creator contracts that allowed editors to get paid for

(left) The cover for issue #8 may be the best remembered of the entire series.

(right) Peter gets some new threads in issue #8. Art by Zeck and Beatty. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

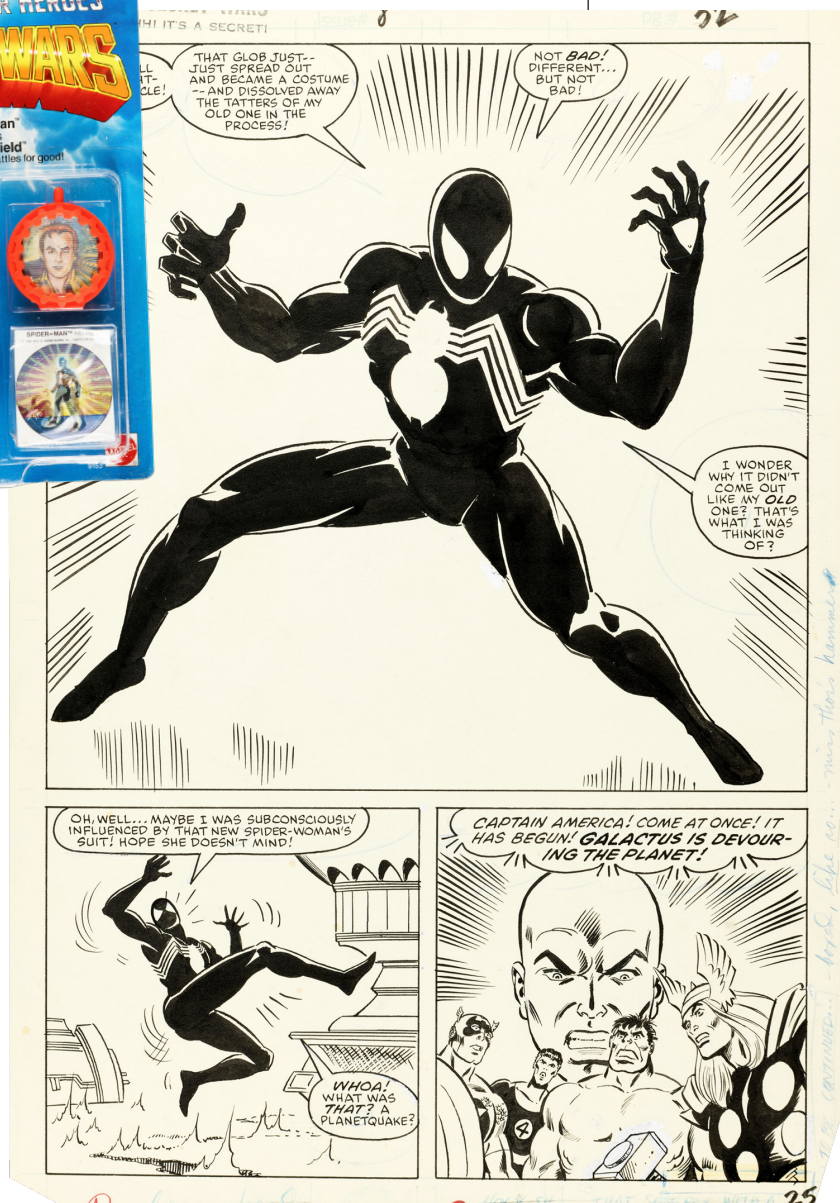
(inset) Spidey gets the blister card treatment.

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BOB LAYTON

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writing work, Shooter not only got writing credit for the maxiseries but also got paid for the work as well as being Editor-in-Chief.

Tom DeFalco was the choice for the series editor. However, it was extremely awkward for DeFalco to edit his boss as well as manage the other challenges of the series. But his affable and friendly style enabled him to balance the awkward dynamic with the requirements of editing the massive undertaking.

"Working on a project like *Secret Wars* was like running a super marathon." He admitted. At a Fan Expo Panel at MegaCon, Bob Layton would call him a tool.

"Of *The Secret Wars*." He would add.

Tom DeFalco later affirmed the back-and-forth marathon pace in decision-making over Spider-Man's black costume, remembering the huge ton of mail about what a bad idea the costume was.

"Shooter came to me and said, 'what issue does Spider-Man get his black costume?' #252, I said. 'Get rid of it by #253. Sales are going to plummet. Everyone hates it.' I convinced him to keep it for eight issues. However, when Mattel discovered it, they fell in love with the idea; now they could sell two versions of Spider-Man by keeping the same mold and just repainting the second one black." The day that they were going to send Issue #252 out, Shooter came into DeFalco's office and said "Oh, by the way, keep the black costume."

The Amazing Spider-Man #252 saw the continuation of the suit in the series, which would eventually lead to one of Marvel's greatest stories and the creation of Venom, one of the most recognized Marvel characters in the 21st century.

The choice for artistry was also a difficult one. It was thought that Big Name talent was needed for this book. But Jim Starlin and Steve Englehart were working for Archie Goodwin at *Epic*

The heroes begin their assault on Galactus. Cover by Mike Zeck and Bob McLeod. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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*Illustrated and John Byrne was writing and drawing *Fantastic Four* and *Alpha Flight*. Frank Miller was on his way out, passing on the duties of *Daredevil* to Klaus Jansen. Essentially, list of talent names dwindled.*

When it came down to Mike Zeck and John Beatty, they did manage to achieve crowd-pleasing work with *Captain America*, but they lacked a popular fanbase that names like Miller or Byrne had. This they thought was needed to solidify advance sales.

Zeck actually had to discontinue his work for stress reasons, bringing Bob Layton into pinch-hit for a few issues.

Layton also remembered at *The Secret Wars* panel (MegaCon, Orlando, 2018): "I had just finished *Hercules*, and I was still on contract. So, I was told, 'we need you'. So, I was drafted. Drafted by *The Secret Wars*! Shooter wanted a lot of changes. So, I had to fill in or lose my health benefits. I became the first Prisoner of War of the *Secret Wars*!" He joked. "More like the first casualty!"

When asked about the editorial relationship, Zeck and Layton were quick to point out that technically, Tom DeFalco was the editor.

"We lovingly called him Linguini-Breath." Layton quipped at the panel. "Tom was a character to be appreciated."

"I just called him 'Puppet'." Zeck chimed in.

"Yeah, 'cause it was all Jim's call." Layton responded.

"Jim would tell Tom what to tell us and then Tom would tell us." Zeck confirmed.

When Zeck returned to duty, he settled for simply drawing little more than the stick figures that Shooter would use for layouts.

"Jim just used stick figures towards the end. I was fine with that. It was rush, rush, rush. We had to do the last five pages overnight at the hotel just to make the deadline. We had inkers like crazy. The pages were all spread around."

"I had some in Florida." John Beatty added.

"Rubinstein had some. There are even some pages inked by Art Adams." Zeck said. "Probably some Bob Layton ones too!" Layton laughed at that.

"Jim was the George Lucas of comics. He had to retrofit everything. Even when you were done, you weren't done!"

With the last issue, the exhausted Zeck was given a bottle of Dom Perignon by Shooter with a card that had "the war is over" written on it. Zeck opened the bottle and downed it in its entirety.

THE REWARDS OF THE SECRET WARS

But the partnership with Mattel Toys, brokered by Shooter, also meant huge revenues for Marvel with the licensing of their characters for an action figure line based on the comic series. With *MSHSW* reaching 800,000 copies monthly, this meant major success for the series.

Both Zeck and Layton had their favorite moments.

"The end!" They both declared, laughing.

"No, but Mike had iconic covers." Layton acknowledged, referring to *Secret Wars* #8, with its status in the top 100 covers of all time.

"The real success of *The Secret Wars* is its longevity. People always come up to me at conventions and tell me that this was the comic that got them into reading comics. I don't think any other comic in history has ever had that same degree of success." Zeck observed.

"I always get to sign your covers." Layton laughed. "But I made more money designing the box art for the toys than I ever got for *Secret Wars*!"

THE CASUALTIES OF SECRET WARS

The Toys

As much as *MSHSW* lauded incredible sales and overwhelming fan appreciation, there were some casualties. Sadly, Mattel was one of them and did not experience the same success. Posting a \$394 million dollar loss that year, the same could not be said for them, and the toy line dwindled into obscurity. They probably suffered the most, corporately.

Creators' Rights

In his memoirs, Shooter regarded what he did for creators was his greatest achievement while at Marvel. *MSHSW* affected that.

"Negotiating better deals for creators. It was a big significant thing that changed peoples' lives for the better. It was the type of thing that Neal Adams always wanted. My very first day on the job was a perfect storm, the new Copyright Law of 1976 took effect. It required that everybody had to sign a document, which they had never had to do before. At the same time Neal Adams was trying to start a Creators' Guild. He took one of my Work-For-Hire documents and wrote 'If you sign this document, you are signing your life away' on it. Printed it up all over the place: the lobby, in front of the elevators. He was going to start a strike against Marvel and I kept telling him, 'Just give me a little while and I'm going to do all that. I just need a little time.' We remained the best of friends, and he and I were on the same page. It was just that I was management and he was labor. We got along splendidly but I was on the inside and he was on the outside. The Guild fell apart and I was able to get all these things done. I think that was my biggest accomplishment."

In an interview with me, Joe Rubinstein added this.

"Shooter invented something called *Battle Pay*. If you had to get work done over the weekend, he'd get you more money. He was trying to be decent, fair, and get people what they wanted."

Still, the pressure of *Secret Wars* would take its toll, regardless of how well Shooter was willing to pay creators. Shooter's demanding nature and the pressure of getting a book on the shelves every month for a year not only soured his relationship with his immediate team but it also affected his standing as Editor-In-Chief.

This was epitomized in a parody memo posted in the bullpen, dated April 27, 1984:

From: Jim Shooter

To: The Editors

Subject: The Secret Wars

Since I don't have a lettercol to hype Secret Wars (and myself), I'd appreciate some help. How about in your lettercols for the rest of the year, mentioning how marvelous a job I'm doing, and how being the E.I.C. and therefore the ultimate authority on all the characters and like unto the Very God of the Marvel universe, my work is absolutely perfect. Definitive, even. That seems to be the only

*gripe we're getting—that the characters are not exactly as dull and boring the same as they appear in their regular titles. If you guys would talk up the wonderful job I'm doing, we could trick the little f*cks. Make it clearer to the charming readers that, despite my stylistic differences from the other writers, we're writing the same characters. Only I write them better. Let's legitimize the hell out of it, okay?*

Assistant Editor Eliot Brown claimed responsibility for the hoax memo, but the identity of the author wasn't confirmed.

Still, the cost of the success of *MSHSW* was felt internally as well as in the markets and it impacted the work Shooter did for Creators' Rights.

THE GOOD IN JIM

"Jim was a good person." Joe Rubinstein described in an interview with us. "He was the type of guy who would always have three or four hundred dollars in cash in his pocket in case an artist or a writer's check didn't clear for the weekend. He paid for all the Christmas parties and dinners. That always came out of his pocket."

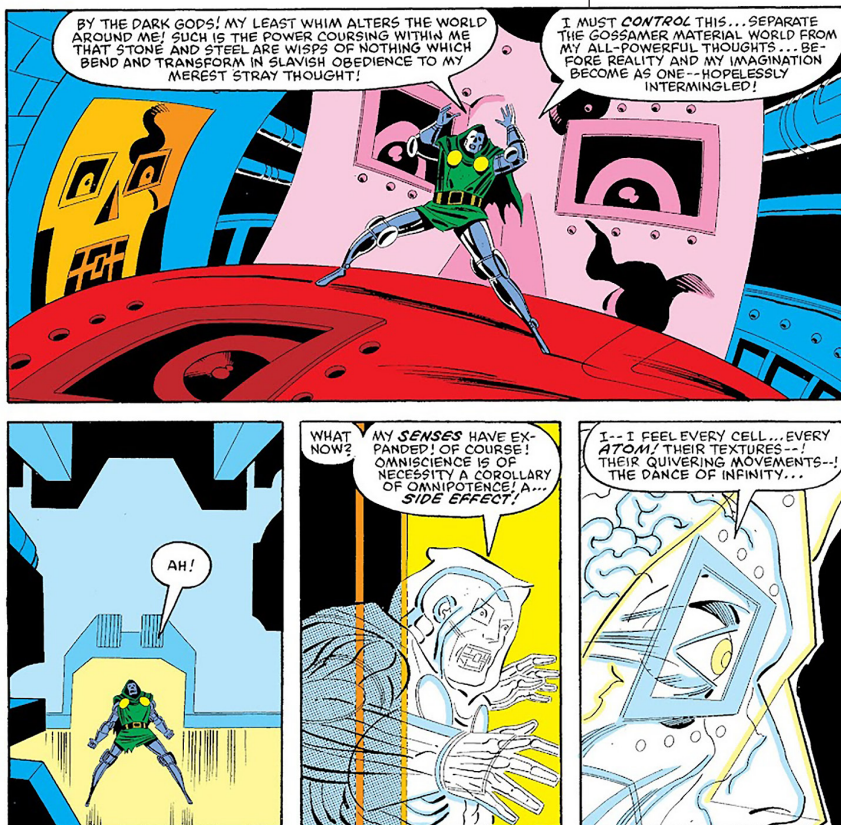
"There is a story when Shooter overheard an assistant-editor patronizing one of the fans who called in and Shooter yelled at him. He said, 'That's our public. You treat them with respect.' A lot of people didn't like Jim. Jim was a friend of mine and I liked Jim, but a lot of people don't realize how hard he worked; how sensitive he was, and how hard he drank. He never became stupid drunk, but it changed his demeanor."

Other professionals remember Shooter's consideration. Bill Sienkiewicz shared with me:



Dr. Doom gains the power of the Beyonder in issue #10. Art by Zeck and Beatty.

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"I feel he changed the medium. He was a fascinating guy. His years at Marvel were some of the most explosive, creative years ever. He knew it. We all knew it; lightening in a bottle. He loved the medium and he loved creators as much as he might have passionately disagreed with them. Those who stood up to him for their choices, beliefs, and creative commitments and convictions got respect. Sometimes free from animus, sometimes grudgingly."

In the same interview, Rubinstein had this to share about Shooter's commitment to the medium and to creators' rights.

"There were a lot of egos, a lot of prima donnas. Jim had to deal with all of them. But he fought for creators and for the right thing, as he saw it. Once, they did a *Labyrinth* comic book—John Buscema, I think—and they wanted to put out a coloring book. When Jim asked how they were doing this, they said that they were just going to use xeroxes of John Buscema's pencils and that they didn't need to pay anyone. He said, yeah, you do. You have to pay John Buscema because you are using his work. You know, he hired John to go do a seminar on how to draw comics. It was free for anyone who wanted to attend. But Shooter was willing to pay for anyone who wanted to advance in comics."

Bill Sienkiewicz shared this with us about his experience with the Work for Hire Contract—the same agreement that was in force for *MSHSW*, giving the artists all the work they wanted—and more.

"Shooter takes me back into his office and says, 'Look, I can offer you all the work you want—but you have to sign a work made for hire contract.' He briefly explains what that is. I'm two weeks into being 20 years old, naïve, and excited, so I hear the first part of Jim's pitch, and my adrenaline starts to really spike; and though don't really fully understand the magnitude of the WMFH contract I quickly respond. "'Where do I sign?'"

Shooter flooded Sienkiewicz with meeting names like Ralph Macchio,

Doug Moench, and Rick Marschall. These would be his collaborators working on *Moon Knight* and other titles in the future. It was enough to dazzle Sienkiewicz, but he also admitted to us that as he grew to know more about Shooter, he understood him better.

"Jim gets a lot of bad press for his editorial position and his mandates. He definitely had an ethos and p.o.v. of how things should be done storytelling wise. As we became friendlier over time, I came to learn—and understand—that Jim was the breadwinner for his family in PA (a state we had in common, as well as Polish roots); writing comics at 15 years of age or thereabouts. He talks about how he's treated by the older guys like Weisinger, how he's dismissed, ridiculed, and belittled while also being given immense responsibility in the scripting and idea arena. Jim came by his comics and narrative world-view honestly; via typically being subjected to 'abuse of the golden goose' by older, grizzled, jaded, '50s era businessmen and higher-ups. I later learned a lot of these guys whose names

I only knew from the comics' credits were real pieces of work; some were—as I was later told—also real pieces of sh*t. The push and pull, love and hate, accolades and dismissal thing he experienced has to f*ck with your head as a kid, with your self esteem and perception of how the world works; on top of that weight is the insecurity of being an incredibly tall teenager with a pock-marked face. We bonded over our less-than-ideal childhoods. I respected Jim. Respected his p.o.v. and the fact that he had a vision for comics in general and for Marvel specifically. He took me under his wing; he 'took an interest in my progress, a decidedly mixed blessing."

Shooter also believed in knowing the job. Joe Rubinstein remembered how Shooter would credit Weisinger for knowing every facet of the comics industry that most editors wouldn't know about. He knew about delivery. He knew about costs on paper and sundries. He knew about timelines and schedules and how to ensure that people were producing quality work in whatever their job was.

"I asked him, given that you're an intelligent guy: how do you know all this sh*t? He answered: Mort. Mort showed him everything that he needed to know about the business. It was one thing to know how to be an editor or a writer



BILL SIENKIEWICZ

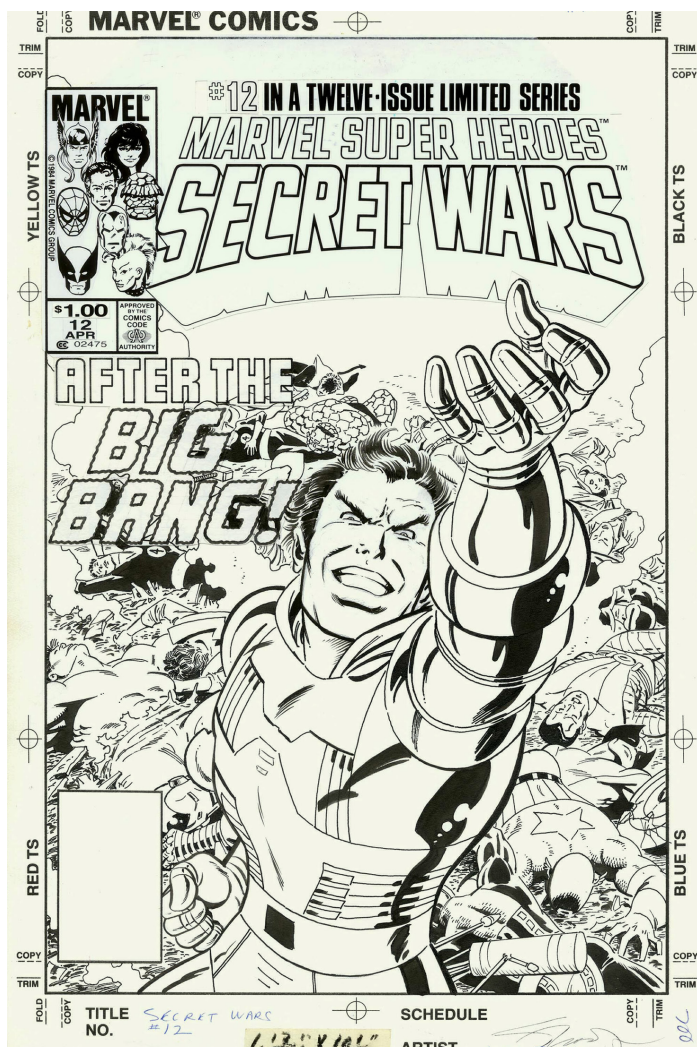
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Behold, the face of Doom. *Secret Wars* issue #11.

Art by Zeck and Beatty.

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like Len Wein or Marv Wolfman, but they didn't know about distribution and all the other things Shooter knew about. I think he encouraged Carol Kalish to get that whole direct system going."

Of course, Kalish was responsible for a large part of the sales of *MSHSW*. She was smart, funny, loved comics, and loved sales. She spoke sales, embodied the role of the hardcore salesperson, and her ambitions matched Shooter's. She saw the opportunity that *Secret Wars* presented and while the toy sales were lagging, she took comic store owners to dinner, asked their opinions, validating their roles and moreover, pushed the book, accounting for a good deal of its success in the market. She was loved by the market but made editors worried that her push for sales would creatively stifle the quality of the comics. A case of the tail wagging the dog. Still, a large part of the success of *Secret Wars* goes to her.

"It was the Jim show" Bob Layton commented at the 2018 panel. "It was all Jim—he took center spotlight and we all knew it was his baby. That was why Tom DeFalco wasn't the editor for *The Secret Wars II*."

There was an unwritten rule that if you had edited one of Shooter's books, you were fired from the next one.

THE DEPARTURE FROM MARVEL

Shooter's departure from Marvel was set against a tapestry of high-energy and controversial events.

Creators at Marvel were experiencing a celebratory recognition of their work. Sales were through the roof, and titles were seeing figures of 500k, 600k and in the case of the *Secret Wars*, 800k a month. But creators were also seeing that their work was being used with no associated royalties. Of course, they went to Shooter with their complaints.

By 1986, Marvel's parent company, Cadence Industries, was in the process of liquidating its assets. Marvel was being sold to new World Pictures. During this turbulent time, Shooter claimed that he was stymied by the changes in corporate leadership every time he brought forth the issue of creators' royalties. In fact, at one point he even stated that he threatened to bring a class action lawsuit against the corporation if these issues weren't properly addressed.

Shooter believed in protecting the company, but he also believed in Creators' rights. JayJay Jackson, artist, comics industry veteran, and longtime friend, of Jim Shooter described the issue further for us:

"Here was Jim's dilemma throughout this situation: he knew Marvel was screwing over his people but if he told them what was happening, they would walk. As time went on Jim was under increasing pressure to explain why people weren't

(left) The war comes to an end. Issue #12 cover by Zeck and Beatty. (right) Mike Zeck, Arthur Adams, and Mike Mignola come together on a page from issue #12. How's that for a dynamic art team? Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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The heroes mount an attack against a Beyonder-powered Doctor Doom. Issue #12 art by Zeck and Beatty.

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being paid and he couldn't tell them. An executive of a company has a contractual and fiduciary responsibility to protect the company they work for. He was a vice president of Marvel at this time. Telling the freelancers, even some whom he considered long-time friends, would absolutely harm the company. He just couldn't do it.

"Jim couldn't take it anymore. He met with New World management and threatened them with a class-action lawsuit. We spoke about it the night before that meeting and he said it was going to be the biggest gamble of his life. He hoped his value to the company might win out, but it didn't. He rolled the dice and lost. They fired him almost immediately."

It's of note that when Shooter was fired, some creators hosted a "Ding Dong—The Witch is Dead" themed party.

Jim Shooter was a controversial figure but, in his mind, had a very straight-forward ambition: publish the best for the company. He was abrasive, disliked missing detail, quick to take credit when things worked out and according to a lot of the

creators who worked for him, everything was always late. But Jim Shooter knew comics and what fans wanted to read.

"It wasn't so much the quality of the books the fans liked," Zeck said.

"Actually, I don't even think it was even our best work," Bob Layton answered.

"But fans were in love with the idea of *Secret Wars*. Jim's idea was that someone picking up a comic for the first time should know the story instantly. He made comics work-for the fans." Affirmed Zeck.

It's really easy to make a snap judgement about someone on the basis of their creative work. If we've seen them perform, read their writing, heard their singing at a concert, or even just listened to them discuss their latest work on a talk show, somehow people seem to know them.

It's not accurate, but it fills that immediate need to understand them without asking questions.

People pick up gossip, second-hand stories, or develop opinions on what people are like on those biases after they've looked at the work and say: "oh—THAT'S why."

There was a lot riding on Jim Shooter's shoulders. But they were human shoulders: poverty, an education at the school of hard-knocks, abuse and privation and, in the end, accepting that some things had to be taken on the chin; especially from those who you worked for. His belief in his ability to understand comics was the standard when it came to managing the success of *MSHSW*.

In *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, Sean Howe recounted how Carol Kalish once addressed a meeting of comic shop owners before the release of the sequel. "Remember *Secret Wars*? It was crap... but it sold, right? Well, get ready for *Secret Wars III*!"

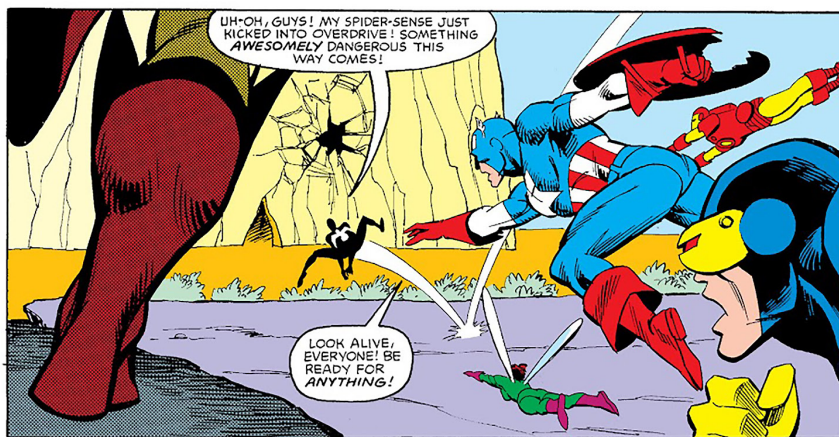
It might have been story crap, but it sold. While Shooter's methodology might have been uncomfortable and abrasive, it was the product of the environment he was raised in and professionally educated. There could be no doubt of the impact he left on the world of comics. While his achievements may be questioned, they had a groundbreaking impact nonetheless that shaped the face of modern comics today.

Love him or hate him, Shooter was a just a human being, capable of faults and vulnerable to the frailties that all humans are wont to possess. Ultimately, people will make up their own decisions about what type of person he was.

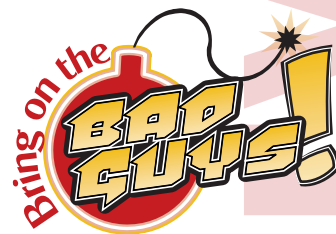
For peers and professionals, well... that's a totally different story. They either loved him or hated him, but in the end, it was probably easier for them to do the latter.

In the end though, for fans, it's really about what sort of comics he published, and the success of *Marvel Super-Heroes Secret Wars* was a realization of that achievement.

Based in Toronto, Canada, a popculture writer, comic, and celebrity panel host for FAN EXPO's comic conventions, John "Captain" Kirk has written for *Den of Geek*, *ScreenRant*, *Star Trek Explorer*, *Star Wars Insider*, and *www.original-CIN.ca*.



THE DARK PHOENIX SAGA



*The X-Men are unlike a lot of the other superteams in comics. If you make your way through longboxes of, say, *Avengers* or *Justice League*, you'll read some fun stories and might come to see the overall framework as that of some kind of high-octane workplace drama. The X-Men are different down to their DNA—theirs is a story of found family and intense bonds. With a series that's built on that kind of foundation, "The Dark Phoenix Saga" is absolutely harrowing, since it's asking questions like this: what would you do if someone in your family became dangerous to others? How far would you go to protect this person, and if you did...would you be in the right?*

ENTER: THE PHOENIX!

"The Dark Phoenix Saga" is a triumph of comics storytelling in part because of how all of the pieces fit together over the course of many issues of the *X-Men* title (later gaining an official "Marvel Title Adjective"—*Uncanny*—by issue #114). Today, you can easily pick up a trade paperback reprint of the Saga that will start you off with *Uncanny X-Men* #129 (Jan. 1980), but simply diving in at that point would be a mistake, since the seeds for what happens later begin to be planted as far back as #100. The final pages of *X-Men* #100 (Aug. 1976) show the team in a dire situation, needing to get home from the clutches of madman Steven Lang aboard a S.H.I.E.L.D. space station and only having a banged-up space shuttle. Besides that, a solar flare is nearby. Passengers will be safe and sequestered, but someone has to pilot the shuttle. It's in these pages that the hero's journey of Jean Grey takes some huge steps forward. Writer Chris Claremont and artist Dave Cockrum had major plans for the character, wanting to completely transform her away from how she had already been portrayed in dozens of issues of *X-Men*. In all of those comics, Jean had never had a moment as "big" as this.

The X-Men's ally, scientist Peter Corbeau, warns that "one of you might survive the flare, but you can't pilot the shuttle. We need someone who can do both, and there's no such animal."

Jean's simple, direct answer: "Wrong, Mr. Corbeau...I can do both."

There are attempts to talk her out of it, but Jean telepathically absorbs Corbeau's piloting knowledge and gives a protesting Cyclops a little telepathic knockout. It's more dangerous than anything she's done before, and the X-Men have to trust that things will work out.

In *X-Men* #101 (Oct. 1976), Jean's gamble pays off...though she is missing during the X-Men's emergency water landing for long enough that everyone is in a panic. Just then, blasting out of the water comes the redheaded heroine, adorned in a new costume of green and gold: "Hear me, X-Men! No longer am I the woman you knew! I am fire! And life incarnate! Now and forever—I am Phoenix!" This seems like a huge change, but both the characters



The Dark Phoenix is in control. John Byrne and Terry Austin's cover is a tribute to the cover for issue #56 by Neal Adams.

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(top) Phoenix makes her dynamic debut in *X-Men* #101. Cover by Dave Cockrum. (bottom) Phoenix goes toe-to-toe with Firelord. *X-Men* #105 art by Dave Cockrum and Bob Layton.

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in the story and the readers of *X-Men* would have to wait to better understand just what happened to Jean Grey.

X-Men #102 (Dec. 1976) features Jean on about half a page of the story. She's continuing to recuperate at the hospital she was admitted to in the previous issue. Things seem pretty normal until Jean is alone with her roommate, Misty Knight. Jean's face falls into dramatic shadow and letterer John Costanza contributes a double-lined, somewhat jagged word balloon to convey a haunting line: "...how would you feel if you'd...died, then brought yourself back to life?"

Continuing to trace the early appearances of Phoenix, Jean's plot line is entirely ignored in *X-Men* #103 and she hardly appears in #104 but has at least left the hospital. *X-Men* #105 (June 1977) is titled "Phoenix Unleashed!" with a story that certainly lives up to its name. Jean Grey and Misty Knight are entertaining Jean's parents and Charles Xavier at their apartment when Lilandra of the Shi'Ar arrives. Firelord is right behind her, declaring that he seeks to bring Lilandra and Xavier with him. Responding, Jean's face again transforms into darkness and her word balloons suggest a gravelly tone (Tom Orzechowski continues and further expands on the idea initiated earlier by Costanza). During the battle with Firelord, Jean's thoughts convey her dangerous new state: "I don't believe this! I'm...flying! And...there's power surging through my body I never even dreamed existed!" and "My power—it's hitting me like a drug. I've never felt such...ecstasy! God in heaven, what have I become?"

The *X-Men* head into space again to help Lilandra, and there are a few "behind the scenes" things to note. First, *X-Men* #106 halts everything, as an inventory issue is explained as a flashback. #107 would be the last issue penciled by Dave Cockrum before the arrival of John Byrne in #108, and it seems easy to say that Phoenix's co-creator hardly got to begin working with the character that he and Claremont had revolutionized. In Byrne's first issue, Phoenix's massive powers are shown off, as she prevents all of reality from collapsing due to the trouble with the M'Kraan crystal...no small feat!

The "personnel change" on *X-Men*'s art duties is extremely significant to Phoenix's overall story arc. Speaking to Peter Sanderson in *X-Men Companion Volume One* (Fantagraphics, 1982), Chris Claremont shared that "the Phoenix that Dave and I created was not the Phoenix that John and I evolved her into. Doing a 'What If?' scenario, if Dave and I had stayed together, the Phoenix story would not have happened as it did, and I think if Louise [Jones] had been the editor from the very beginning, the Phoenix story would not have happened as it did."

Peter Sanderson was the author of another source of insight in an article for *Comics Feature* #4 entitled *The Many Alternate Fates of the Phoenix*. John Byrne is quoted here as feeling that the cosmic power now wielded by Jean Grey made it so that "the *X-Men* had become guest stars in their own book."

PHOENIX PUSHED ASIDE

Coming back to earth after an incredible display of power, Phoenix...begins to become pushed to the sidelines in *X-Men*. Jean isn't seen in costume again for several issues. In #110, we get more glimpses into her thoughts, in which she acknowledges the grave danger she finds herself in: "I—I'm scared! I never wanted Phoenix' power—and yet, using it feels so...good—I'm not sure I can handle it. What's the saying...? 'Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' I'm lost inside and no one can help me find my way." *X-Men* #112 shows Phoenix going to toe-to-toe in a solo battle against Magneto as her teammates are



incapacitated. This moment is significant because Jean's powers let her down, having reached some kind of limit that she didn't know was there. Perhaps it's only her moment of self-doubt that allows Magneto to put her down for the count.

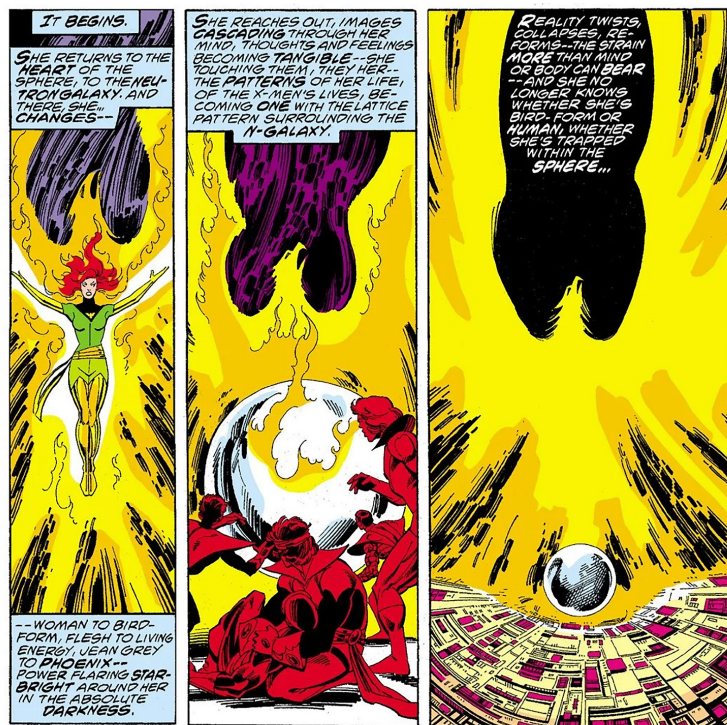
Phoenix truly becomes separated from the team with the ending of *X-Men* #113. The destructive fight with Magneto leaves Beast and Phoenix isolated from the rest of the heroes, having to make it back home from Antarctica by themselves. Luckily, the pair doesn't have to wait long for a rescue, as Phoenix's power manifesting makes a curious sight for a helicopter flying overhead (*Uncanny X-Men* #114). A week later, Jean is back at Xavier's and has to break the news of what she thinks has happened to her mentor (they hadn't really died, of course—they merely began a far longer journey home that started with a stop in the Savage Land!).

Jean Grey recedes more in the issues that follow. In fact, she is completely absent for the next two issues. In *Uncanny X-Men* #117, she is only present for a couple of scenes as she leaves Xavier Mansion and then as she awaits boarding a flight to get to an unnamed vacation spot. Claremont's narration makes clear the significance: "Jean Grey suddenly finds herself shivering, and she realizes with a start that for the first time since joining the X-Men, she's on her own... with no one to turn to, or depend upon, save herself. And that scares the hell out of her." *Uncanny X-Men* #118 is another complete absence for Jean, and it takes until one of #119's last pages to see where her plane ride took her—she's greeted by the familiar faces of Moira MacTaggart, Lorna Dane, Alex Summers, and Jamie Madrox and will soon be at Muir Isle in Scotland. There's no room in the narrative for Jean Grey across issues #120-121, either.

Again speaking with Peter Sanderson (this time in *X-Men Companion Volume Two*, Fantagraphics, 1982), Chris Claremont had the following to say: "John's antipathy toward Phoenix as a character was one of the primary motivations behind the entire decision to begin a Dark Phoenix storyline and get rid of her, or at least change her in such a way that she could not remain on the team as Phoenix." For quite a while, the strategy had just been to keep Jean away from the others and not even be seen as a superhero at all. Jean's scene in *Uncanny X-Men* #122 (June 1979) is of extreme importance because it's where the road to Dark Phoenix truly begins, as she encounters a man during a shopping trip in Scotland. Introducing himself as Jason Wyngarde, Jean can't help but notice how he's later watching as she meets Moira and heads back to Muir Isle.

Everything we need to know about Wyngarde is contained within a single masterful panel that both Claremont and Byrne bring so much to. "Ah, yes! She's attracted to me—and why not, when, in so many ways, I'm the man of her dreams. Soon she will love me. And then she will belong—mind and body and soul—to the Hellfire Club." The shadow on the wall behind him doesn't match the handsome looks of Jason Wyngarde, but rather a villain not seen in the pages of *X-Men* since its earliest issues: Jason Wyngarde is Mastermind! After her moments in #122, Jean would again be left out of the story entirely for the next two issues.

Uncanny X-Men #125 makes it clear from Dave Cockrum's cover art that Phoenix is back, promising "The dramatic return of Phoenix!" within its pages. In this issue's opening



(top) Phoenix saves reality in *X-Men* #108. (bottom) Jean Grey lays the smackdown on Magneto in issue #113. Art by Byrne and Austin. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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(left) In *X-Men* #122, Jean meets Hason Wyngarde. That isn't a good thing. (right) Moira MacTaggart tests the power of Phoenix. Issue #125 art by Byrne and Austin. (above) Phoenix returns in *X-Men* #125. Cover by Cockrum and Austin.

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scene, Moira MacTaggart's study of Phoenix's power leaves the scientist with little else to say besides that she is afraid of what she's seeing. If there's an upper limit to the powers, it can't be found, and Jean acknowledges that it's been a lot to handle. Meanwhile, Jason Wyngarde reflects upon how he's been tracking Jean throughout her trip, disguising himself as various unassuming people. He thinks about his goal to transform Jean into the Hellfire Club's Black Queen. Jean can tell that Moira is in some kind of trouble, so she responds in full Phoenix power. However, something surprising happens...thinking it all a hallucination, Jean can't explain why she is momentarily transformed into 18th century regency clothing, with everything she sees matching a mansion of that vintage as well. It's all back to reality, though, as soon as an attacker gets ahold of Phoenix. That's the cliffhanger concerning Jean, though, and the final moments of #125 finally resolves the long-running plot line of the missing (and presumed dead) X-Men. Cyclops makes a call to Muir Isle and tells Lorna that they are alive and well. Hearing about the trouble at Muir Isle, Cyclops promises that they'll be on their way to meet as soon as they can.

The threat of Proteus, Moira's extremely powerful mutant son, dominates the next issues of *Uncanny X-Men*. When Cyclops finds a barely conscious Phoenix at Muir Isle in issue #126 (Oct. 1979), the reunion is definitely awkward—Mastermind's games confuse Jean into seeing *his* face initially rather than Scott's. Later, Phoenix flies over the Scottish countryside to try and help with the fight against Proteus. Mastermind is watching, thinking to himself that "in so many ways, Phoenix is the most powerful X-Man...yet also the most vulnerable." With that, he sends her into another illusion. The final page of *Uncanny X-Men* #127 (Nov. 1979) shows Phoenix just about ready to cut loose on Proteus in a dramatic panel that shows

her rage. However, at that precise moment, Proteus takes Moira hostage and the plan needs to be dialed back. Phoenix gets the chance to attack in the next issue, as Claremont's narration describes her sheer power: "Proteus hardly has time to react before she attacks! Again and again, Phoenix lashes out with a ferocity that shocks Moira, her power a symphony within her...a song of joy that builds too quickly in its crescendo."

THE DARK PHOENIX SAGA

The next nine issues of *Uncanny X-Men* bring Phoenix's story to the forefront, continuing to build in each monthly installment. In #129, Jason Wyngarde again violates Jean Grey's mind and continues to twist her will. This time, the setting is a ship cruising across the Atlantic to reach America. "Is anything amiss, Jean? I thought I heard you cry out," says an ever-charismatic Wyngarde. "I know we've had rough passage, my darling, but we'll soon be in New York. And then you'll be mine forever!"

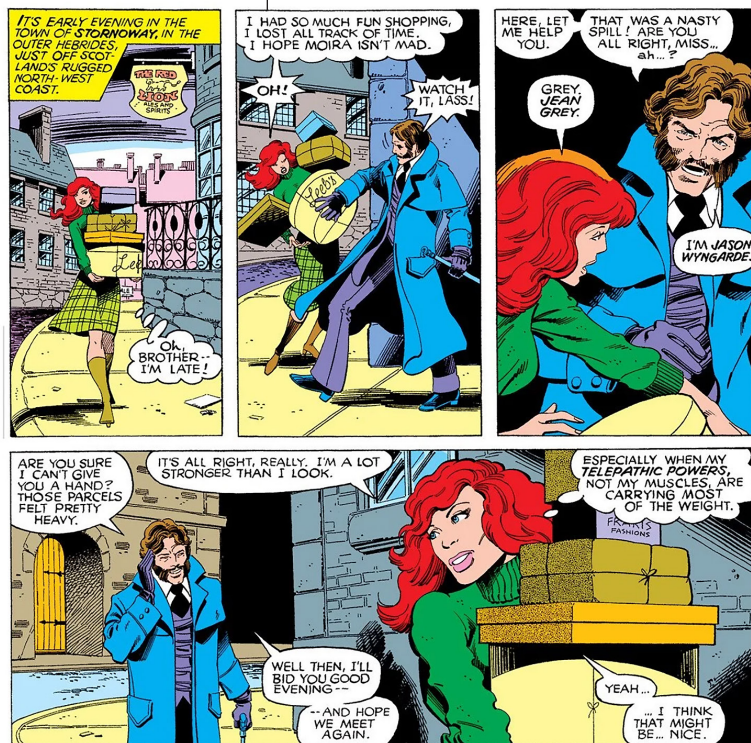
Jean's spoken response: "Yes, Jason. Oh, yes..."

She then realizes she is having a harder time staying in control, but it's not too late yet. Breaking away from Wyngarde, she seeks solitude on the ship's deck and the illusion is shattered when Cyclops approaches. Claremont writes a touching reunion scene here, ending with an iconic panel of the pair embracing.

"Jean—I love you," says Scott.

"And, I, you, Scott. With all my heart," responds Jean.

Phoenix goes to investigate a Cerebro reading of another new mutant that is traced to a night club in New York City in *Uncanny X-Men* #130. Alongside Cyclops and Nightcrawler (their teammates were taken captive by the Hellfire Club in the previous issue—little do they know!), the three X-Men really don't know what to expect. Mastermind turns up at the club, reintroduces



himself to Jean...and it's another illusion. This time, 18th century Jean is marching into her own wedding to Jason Wyngarde himself. The mock wedding goes through, and as he lifts his now-wife's veil for a kiss, the villain goes further to tear away her entire cloak. Jean is in the attire of the Hellfire Club's Black Queen, and Mastermind's stratagem is nearly completed. When Jean snaps back to reality, she really is kissing Jason Wyngarde, with a very confused Scott Summers looking on.

"I've never seen her act like that—it was as if she wasn't Jean at all, only someone who looked like her," thinks Scott.

The X-Men find their new mutant in Dazzler, one of the club's performers, just as soon as the Hellfire Club's armored soldiers arrive to round up the rest of the mutants they haven't captured yet. Needing to act quickly to respond to the threat, Jean flashes with power, leaving Cyclops to wonder: "She transformed my street clothes into my costume, just like that! I'm beginning to wonder if there's any limit to Phoenix's power. And if there isn't, how much longer can Jean keep it under control?! Still, it's nice to have that kind of muscle on our side in a fight."

The Hellfire Club's ambush is unsuccessful, largely because of Phoenix. As the X-Men and Dazzler drive away from the night club, Nightcrawler points out a man waiting on the street corner. Cyclops recognizes him as the man who caused some trouble, but his odd shadow doesn't quite register. Again, the profile of Mastermind from *X-Men's* earliest issues is seen in shadow behind Wyngarde. The villain cackles as the X-Men's car drives off...he's had a good night and advanced his plans for Jean Grey.

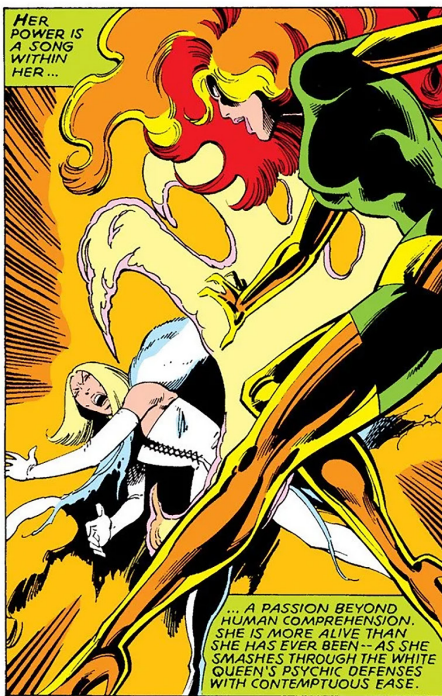
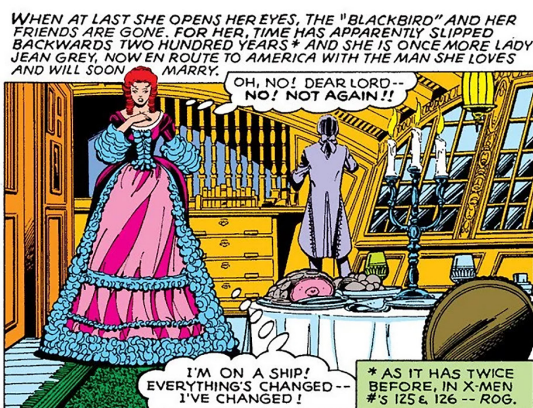
Phoenix's darkness grows in *Uncanny X-Men* #131 (Mar. 1980). Kitty Pryde is on the run from Hellfire Guards, and Phoenix responds by destroying the entire front end of the villains' car.

"What have you done?! I told you to stop that car, not turn it into instant junk!" says a worried Cyclops.

Phoenix replies: "you didn't feel the girl's stark terror, Scott, or the thoughts of the killers chasing her. I'm a telepath. I did. These...animals got no more than they deserved."

The Hellfire guard hostages are useful—Jean probes their minds to learn where the captured X-Men are being held. The battle at Frost Enterprises is in large part a fight between the two powerhouse telepaths: Phoenix vs. Emma Frost, the White Queen. Phoenix looks absolutely menacing as she confronts her opponent and proceeds to cut loose with her powers. A frightened Storm watches on and wonders: "the Phoenix-effect is so beautiful... yet so terrible. Like Jean herself. I've seen her like this only once before, in the heart of the alien M'Kraan crystal—before she saved the universe from destruction." Emma Frost is easily defeated.

The X-Men are outside Kitty Pryde's home the following morning. The teen's father is enraged by his daughter's disappearance shortly after allowing Xavier and his students to take her. This scene is also a pivotal one for Jean's dramatic changes: "Enough's enough," she thinks, and a moment later, the furious Mr. Pryde has completely changed his tenor, becoming ever-so-friendly



toward Xavier. Xavier is surprised, and Scott Summers is flabbergasted. Jean confirms that Kitty's father changed because she made him. Cyclops and Storm compare notes about their dear friend, their worry deepening.

"Ororo, you were in that lab when she fought the White Queen. What was it—what was she—like?"

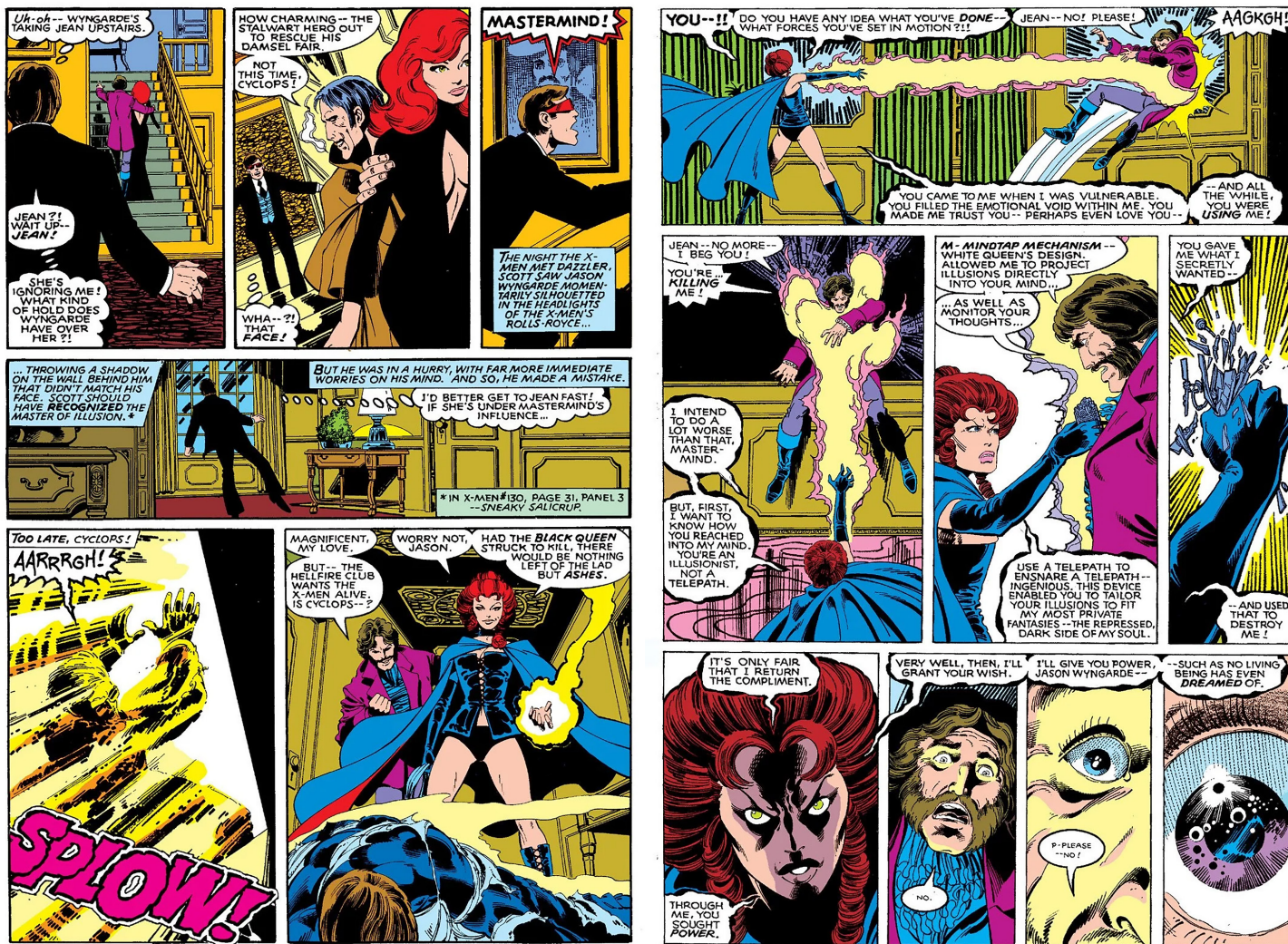
"Not human," Ororo replies. "When she uses her power—as Phoenix—there is a ferocity about her...and a grandeur...she has changed so much."

Suggesting that maybe someone or something is manipulating their friend, Storm walks with Cyclops to join with the others.

Uncanny X-Men #132 (Apr. 1980) sees the plot advance drastically. The X-Men pay Warren Worthington III a visit at his home in New Mexico. This gives Scott a chance to talk through recent events

(top) Wyngarde messes with Jean's mind in *X-Men* #129. (bottom) Phoenix battles Emma Frost in *X-Men* #131. Art by Byrne and Austin.

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(left) Wyngarde is revealed as Mastermind and Jean becomes the Black Queen. That's one heck of a page. (right) Mastermind picked the wrong person to mess with. *X-Men* #132 and 134 art by Byrne and Austin.

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with his old teammate. As it turns out, Warren has connections to the Hellfire Club, though he assures Scott that there's no way he could have been exploited to give the group information about the X-Men. Warren spreads his wings when Phoenix arrives. Left by themselves, Jean and Scott share an intimate moment...but Scott can't help but find her displays of power "disconcerting." She changes into plain clothes from her costume and, astonishingly, removes her lover's visor. When Scott opens his eyes...no deadly optic blasts escape. Jean holds it all back with her telepathic powers, and for just a little while at least, they can ignore all of the danger and the superpowers.

The X-Men are soon back in New York with a daring plan to infiltrate the Hellfire Club itself. They are largely successful, but Jason Wyngarde's presence means Jean is a weak link. Cyclops must again watch as his partner is whisked away by Wyngarde's charm. The villain fully reveals himself to a shocked Cyclops, who can only yell out "MASTERMIND!"

The next thing Cyclops knows is that he's being attacked, and it's Jean Grey, the Black Queen who stands triumphantly over his incapacitated body. Mastermind is pleased with how things are going. The X-Men are defeated one by one by the Hellfire Club's impressive roster (though a single member escapes, as the tagline for the next issue

declares "Next: Wolverine—Alone!). The Hellfire Club members are proud of themselves and toast to their newest member. The Black Queen stares back at them smugly.

There's really no Phoenix, Dark Phoenix, or even Jean Grey in *Uncanny X-Men* #133 (May 1980)—there's only room for the Black Queen. This issue reveals much about the extent of Mastermind's control. Jean is completely trapped in his illusions, seeing her captured teammates as just a bunch of other characters in the midst of Mastermind's 18th century inventions. Cyclops is hopeful that the psychic report he and Jean share will help him to reach through to her, but it's really not the key he is hoping for. He enters the illusions too, engaging in a sword fight with Mastermind much to his own detriment. A one-page interlude in this issue shows Moira McTaggart struggling mightily with her understanding of the data scans she had worked on with Xavier. Describing Phoenix's self-limitations as "psychic circuit breakers," she shares with Banshee that these have all been breaking down because of "someone—or something—" that has been tearing all of these failsafes away.

"Is there nothing we can do, Moira?" asks Banshee.

Moira can only offer a terse response. "We can pray."

Wolverine finally makes his way to where the rest of the X-Men are held captive in *Uncanny X-Men* #134 (June 1980). Mastermind admits to underestimating the X-Men, and beneath the Black Queen persona, Phoenix breaks free. She helps Cyclops to free Nightcrawler, Colossus, and Storm. Before long, the X-Men are free from the Hellfire Club. Just one piece of business has to be taken care of first, as Phoenix confronts the man who has caused her so much trauma. She confronts Mastermind, full of malice, and sends the villain's mind on a cosmic trip of destruction. Jason Wyngarde is left as a destroyed, drooling mess when Phoenix is done with him. The X-Men are about to head home when things start to really get strange for Phoenix. Thinking about how "it's too late...for me, for us, for... everything," another dramatic transformation takes place. The X-Men are astonished as Phoenix repeats the exact words she proclaimed when first emerging from the waters of Jamaica Bay in *X-Men* #101. While her words are the same, the green from her Phoenix costume has been replaced with a dark crimson. Her face is in shadow; her eyes are without pupils—she looks, in a word, evil.

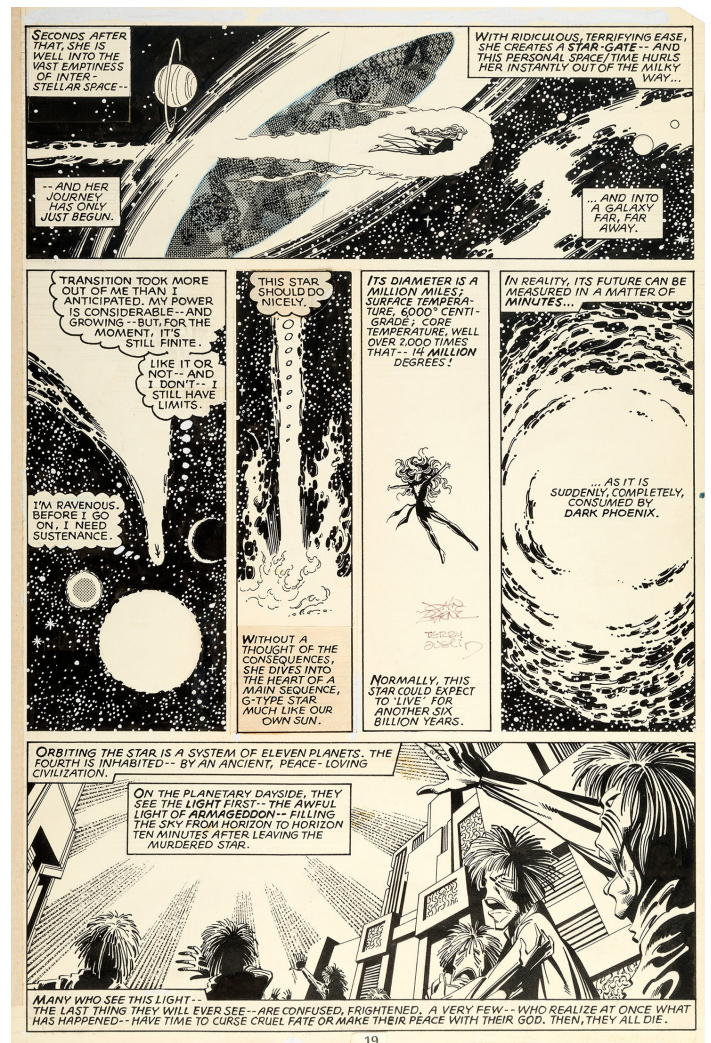
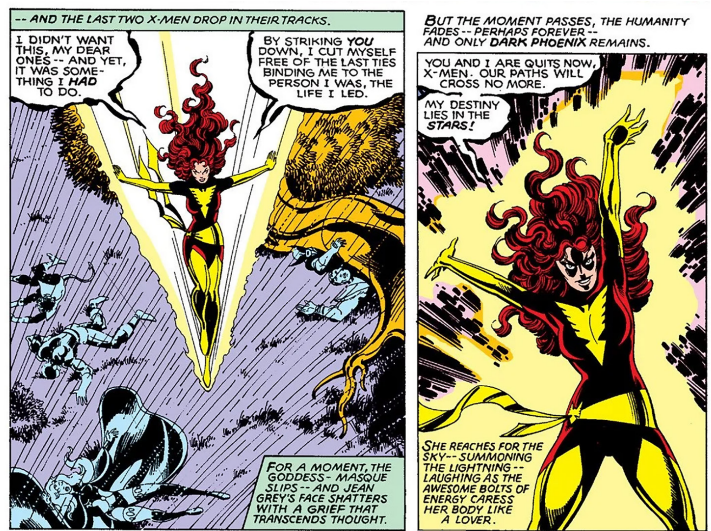
Dark Phoenix is all consuming in *Uncanny X-Men* #135. The X-Men are lashed at by Dark Phoenix's mighty powers in a battle at Central Park. Though the X-Men try to appeal to their teammate, always using the name Jean, it seems that Jean is very far gone. Referring to herself only as Dark Phoenix, the power-mad woman tears her way through the entire roster of X-Men. "I didn't want this, my dear ones—and yet, it was something I *had* to do. By striking you down, I cut myself free of the last ties binding me to the person I was, the life I led. You and I are quits now, X-Men. Our paths will cross no more. My destiny lies in the stars!"

The hungry Dark Phoenix blasts into another galaxy entirely and finds a sun that she completely devours. An entire inhabited planet's populace is wiped out within moments. The crew of a Shi'Ar starship catches sight of the fleeing Dark Phoenix, agitates her, and reports to Empress Lilandra. Recognizing the Phoenix, she resolves to find and deal with this grave threat to all galaxies. This issue's cliffhanger has Cyclops fearfully blurting out that he can tell that Phoenix is returning to earth, hungry once again.

When Dark Phoenix returns to earth in *Uncanny X-Men* #136 (Aug. 1980), the location is the home where she grew up. She wanders into the house and is spotted by her father, who's understandably confused. Seeing her mother and sister as well, Dark Phoenix is very conflicted, and clearly very dangerous. The X-Men arrive, and Beast's invention temporarily helps to block Dark Phoenix's psi powers. As if round one wasn't hard enough for the X-Men, they are once again locked in dangerous combat with their beloved teammate. When nearly everyone is again defeated, Cyclops emerges to attempt to reach through to Jean Grey. Finally, Xavier himself attacks his student, provoking her to a psi-war. Xavier seems to claim victory, as everything evil is stripped away. However, the X-Men have no chance to process their victory, as they disappear in a flash of light, leaving the confused members of the Grey family behind.

All that remains is "The Fate of the Phoenix," the entire saga's double-sized finale that saw print in *Uncanny X-Men* #137 (Sept. 1980). The X-Men had all been teleported aboard a Shi'Ar vessel, in time for quick sentencing by Empress Lilandra.

"Phoenix must be destroyed!" Lilandra proclaims, even though her mad brother's schemes were completely stopped by Phoenix's mighty power during the X-Men's previous space adventure. The destruction of a sun that provided for over five billion inhabitants is not something that the Shi'Ar can forgive, though the X-Men plead. Xavier remembers a Shi'Ar custom that Lilandra will not be able to refuse: "For Jean Grey's life—I challenge you to a duel of honor!" The stage is set for battle between the X-Men and Lilandra's champions, the Imperial Guard.



(top) Phoenix bids farewell to the X-Men in issue #135. (bottom) The death of the "broccoli people" in *X-Men* #135 seals the fate of the Phoenix. Art by Byrne and Austin. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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(left) Jean pleads with Scott to kill her on this dramatic page from *X-Men* #137. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

(right) Phoenix faces her destiny. Cover by Byrne and Austin.

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After a quick rest, the X-Men must be ready for the toughest battle they have ever been a part of. "I just want to tell you that I'm fighting for Jean," says Cyclops, speaking to his teammates. "I won't ask any of you to join me—I haven't the right—and I won't think any less of you if you decide not to." Angel responds for the rest of the group—they are also in this to the end, all for Jean.

The X-Men put up a great fight, but they fall one by one to the Imperial Guard. Jean and Cyclops are the only heroes left standing, and they continue to fight bravely. Seeing Cyclops attacked shatters the safeguards that Xavier had placed on Jean—Phoenix is back. While the Shi'Ar want to act quickly to destroy Phoenix, Xavier realizes that it's all too late to save Jean. He commands the X-Men to take Phoenix down before her power surges more. When the X-Men's attempts to harm her fail, Phoenix begins to see things clearly: "Jean to Phoenix to Dark Phoenix—a progression as inevitable as death."

She can't go on with all of the deaths on her conscience and the dangerous unknown of what could happen next. An alien weapon of war activates as Phoenix speaks with Cyclops, and with an energy blast and a single word exclamation of "SCOTT!," Phoenix is disintegrated. Claremont nails the ending with the words of the Watcher, who has seen all of these events unfold: "The X-Men do not realize it—they may never realize or accept it—but this day they have won perhaps the greatest victory of their young lives. Jean Grey could have lived to become a god, but it was more important to her that she die...a human."

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN...

The Dark Phoenix Saga is seen as Marvel Comics masterpiece decades after its publication. It was the payoff for years' worth of careful setup, as has been seen throughout this article's highlighting of moments from nearly forty issues of *Uncanny X-Men*. For all the praise this story consistently gets, it can be easy to lose sight of how the way it all ended is far, far from the initial intentions of Chris Claremont and John Byrne. Being one of the most significant works to come out during his tenure as Marvel's editor-in-chief, it's important to know the huge impact that Jim Shooter had on what saw print in "The Fate of the Phoenix." When he saw the nearly press-ready pages of *Uncanny* #137, Shooter "wanted the book completely repencilled, started from scratch," according to Chris Claremont in Peter Sanderson's *X-Men Companion Volume One* interview. More of Claremont's words from this source describe how "Jim's saying, well, he understands that it's not our fault...but he feels that it is his responsibility as Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics to



A Dark Phoenix commission by John Byrne. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

(inset) *Phoenix: The Untold Story* presents the original ending to the story. Cover by Byrne and Austin.

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see that nothing goes out of the office that reflects a moral position that he does not think Marvel should take, and he felt that this story made a moral statement, that Marvel should not stand behind."

What changed between the issue that was initially submitted and what saw print in the final version of *Uncanny* #137? The clearest picture is painted in *Phoenix: The Untold Story*, published a few years later. This comic presented the original version of *Uncanny* #137 as well as a roundtable discussion of those who were involved with the comic's different versions. The final six pages of the issue were reworked completely, providing a drastically different ending to "The Dark Phoenix Saga". According to Claremont, "what I was trying to write in the Phoenix story is a story about forgiveness, about mercy, about how the greatest mass-murderer in the history of the cosmos can, and in certain circumstances, should be forgiven" (once again, the Sanderson interview from *X-Men Companion Volume One* is indispensable reading!). In the original ending, following the battle against the Shi'Ar Imperial Guard, Jean Grey would be granted to return home with the X-Men only following what can only be described as a psychic lobotomy. The Shi'Ar would have mercy in the sense of not killing Jean, but they would have left her forever changed. The six page "original ending" is still very powerful stuff, with a dejected X-Men leaving and Cyclops' controlled, yet seething line: "C'mon, X-Men...let's get the hell out of here."

Comics Feature #4 ran both an article about the story's ending(s) alongside a review of the final version of *Uncanny* #137—it was contemporary to the comic's publication, so you can really read into the raw emotions captured in Peter Sanderson's article. "It was Jim's decision; it was the system's fault," Claremont said. "Jim was perfectly justified in doing what he did. He saw what he thought was a major thematic flaw and acted to prevent it. What I object to is the fact that the system didn't catch it sooner." Jim Shooter is quoted here as saying that this was "the first time I've interfered with anyone's story."

Sanderson's article closes with this:

"What is the final judgement of the concerned parties on 137 as it now stands? Byrne thinks it is 'a better product all the way down the line' than it was, with 'a visually better ending.' Claremont and [editor Louise] Jones agree that it is a 'stronger' story now, and Shooter and Byrne hope it proves to be controversial since that would mean it had a strong effect on the readers. 'The ending is the best possible compromise considering all the circumstances, creative, economic, and in scheduling,' declares Claremont, who also observes that 'People may despise me for this, they may hate me, but they won't be uninterested.'"

John Byrne has much to say on the subject in *TwoMorrows Publishing's* own *Modern Masters: John Byrne* by Tom B. Cooke and Eric Nolen-Weathington. "[Dark Phoenix] was a big, big story that we'd been building to for the better part of a year. And then right at the end—even after the end, really, as far as Chris and I were concerned—Shooter had to come in and, as I so discreetly phrase it, piss on it and make it his. There we were, with this thing that had been worked out, plotted out, he knew about it, everything had been detailed. And then all of a sudden it had to be a different story. And just to really frost me all that



much more, what came out of all that was a better story... [laughs] When the emotional thing settled and it finally came out and I read the printed book, I said, 'Yeah. This is better.'"

Finally, Jim Shooter is eloquent with his thoughts about how he felt things needed to be when he says this in the back pages of *Phoenix: The Untold Story*:

"I felt that there had to be some consequences for the actions. I felt that the way the story was originally designed to end, it did not have enough consequences for what happened—it wasn't an ending. I found that the story was kind of...in a way, it wimped out. It ended with her being back with the X-Men, seemingly without much concern on their part for what she had done, which struck me as being out of character for them...we had a few more discussions and Chris eventually came up with the ending of *X-Men* #137, as it finally saw print. As it turned out, it was probably the biggest event in comics in the last decade. I look back at it, and I feel that, one way or another, we came up with a fantastic story. It's just a milestone in comics and it really put the world on notice that Marvel really does treat these characters as if they were alive. And, that there will be consequences and there will be logical ramifications for whatever happens, and that there is no limit to what may happen to our characters—right up to and including the death of one of the most popular characters we've had in many, many years."

Christopher Larochelle is a lifelong comics fan whose first article for *BACK ISSUE* appeared in #62.



end

TWOMORROWS AD PAGE

KORVACS AND TIGRAS AND PYMS, OH MY!

SHOOTER'S AVENGERS

by Dan Tandarich



Jim Shooter's work on *Avengers* first appears in issue #151. Cover by Jack Kirby and Dan Adkins.

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FlashBack!

And there came a day when Jim Shooter found himself writing *The Avengers*! On that day, Shooter was determined to fight the foes every writer must overcome: the Dreaded Deadline Doom and unclear storytelling. Add his name to the ranks alongside Captain America, Scarlet Witch, Iron Man, Vision, Thor, Wasp, Yellowjacket, Beast, Hawkeye, Black Panther, Wonder Man, Moondragon, Ms. Marvel, and Tigra. Heed the call, then—for now, *BACK ISSUE* presents Jim Shooter on *The Avengers*!

Shooter had two distinct eras on *The Avengers* from #'s 151, 156, 158-168, 170-177, and then #'s 211-217, 219-220, plus assorted plots in-between. Scripting work on some issues was provided by David Michelinie, Bill Mantlo, Steven Grant, and Alan Zelenetz. George Pérez, John Byrne, and Roger Stern provided plot points as well. In both of Shooter's runs on Earth's Mightiest Heroes, behind-the-scenes chaos seems to have spurred him into his role as writer.

Back in 1976, Steve Englehart held the writing reins on *The Avengers*, but something happened in issue 150 when all-new material was replaced with a partial reprint. *Avengers* #151 (Sept. 1976) featured writing credits by Gerry Conway, Jim Shooter, and Steve Englehart. According to the *Wonder Man: Cooler Than Superman* website (2017), Shooter stated that his first issue on the *Avengers* was actually #150, as Gerry Conway asked him to write the dialogue overnight due to Steve Englehart's lateness. However, Shooter's dialogue was later replaced by Steve's, once it arrived at Marvel. Shooter said, "In my opinion, mine was better, though I was winging it without even a copy of the plot."

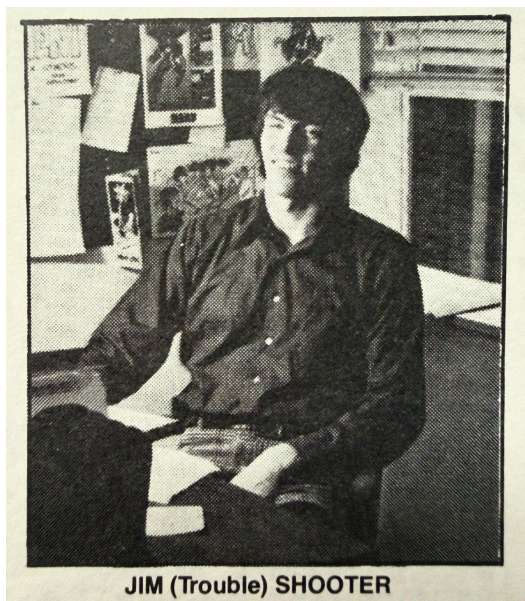
We all know the main characters like Captain America, Iron Man, and Thor, but Shooter focused on characters without their own titles on his first run. Henry (Hank) Pym was one of these characters, along with Janet Van Dyne. One of Marvel's earliest characters, Hank Pym, started his crime-fighting career as Ant-Man, and it was in this guise that he first joined the Avengers as one of its original members. Janet Van Dyne, the Wasp, heiress and fashion designer, known for her many original costumes, started as Ant-Man's partner, and was also an original Avenger, even naming the team. Hank and Jan have been romantically linked since their early days as crime-fighting partners and eventually marry.

Hank's career and the Avengers' history are deeply connected. Hank Pym has changed superhero identities many times, morphing from Ant-Man to Giant-Man, possibly because he felt inadequate as a hero alongside powerhouses like Iron Man, Thor, and the Hulk. Hank later changed his name to Goliath. Retreating into his lab, Hank wanted to prove himself and eventually created Ultron, an indestructible robot that could think on its own. But Ultron soon turned on his creator and wanted to destroy mankind. Originally, Hank's identity as Yellowjacket occurred because of a mental breakdown in the form of schizophrenia. But he got better and returned to the Avengers. Henry Pym had a history of mental imbalance. Pym had previous mental breakdowns in *Tales to Astonish* #44 (June 1963), *Avengers* #'s 59-60 (Dec. 1968-Jan. 1969), and *Avengers* #161-162 (July 1977-Aug. 1977).

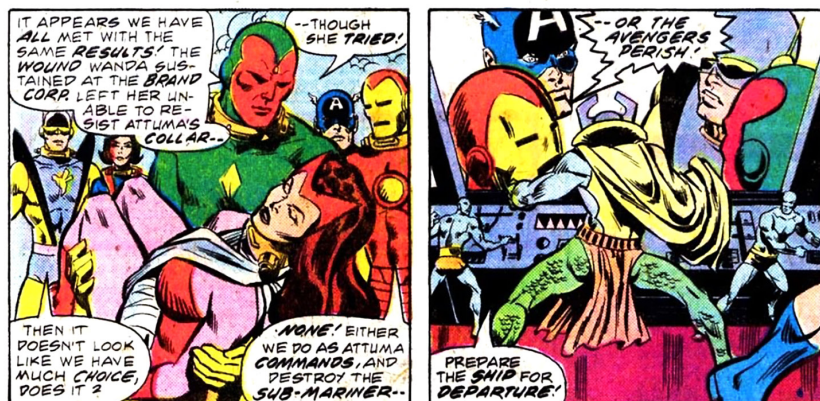
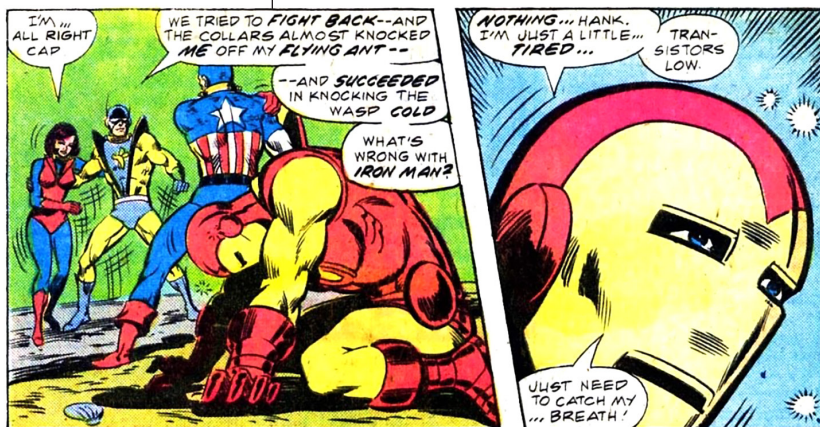
In his introduction to the *Avengers Marvel Masterworks* Volume 15 (2015), Steve Englehart wrote, "So Yellowjacket is super-sensitive to the Wasp. It's the relationship they've always had, and the relationship which sums up why he never became a hero like the other originals...including the Wasp. He's a beta in an alpha world. (If you were to believe in his reality... you might attribute that to his original desire to become the size of an ant, rather than a giant.) However you get there, his constant attempts to be more than he felt comfortable being are not doing him any good."

(top) Jim Shooter's picture from *FOOM* #17 from the time when he was first writing *The Avengers*.
(bottom) Shooter even drew the Avengers in *Super Villain Team-Up* #9. Inks by Sal Trapani.

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JIM (Trouble) SHOOTER



Before Shooter completely took over the writing reins on *The Avengers*, he illustrated the team in *Super-Villain Team-Up* #9 (Dec. 1976) in his first Marvel art job, ably assisted by Sal Trapani and written by Bill Mantlo. Shooter was an associate editor at the time and helped out where needed.

Simon Williams, Wonder Man, made his first appearance in *Avengers* #9 (Oct. 1964) and "died" in the same issue. Wonder Man had super strength and invincibility. When Shooter started writing the book, the mystery of Wonder Man's resurrection had just begun. Even though his strength rivalled Thor's, Wonder Man would suffer from bouts of inadequacy and fear of dying (again). He couldn't decide whether he wanted to be a superhero. When the synthozoid Avenger Vision debuted, it was revealed that his creator, Ultron, used Wonder Man's brain patterns as his template.

Shooter wasted no time on *The Avengers* as he added the new villain Graviton with artist Sal Buscema to the team's rogues' gallery and brought back a new and improved Count Nefaria with artist John Byrne.

The Department of inFOOMation from *Foom* #16 (Dec. 1976) revealed more about Shooter's thoughts on Simon Williams, Wonder Man. "...He is going to fill a much needed role of balancing the fact that Thor stood alone on a power level above the rest of the Avengers. In a way, he's a kind of superman. Since his character is so blank at the moment, it's going to be a challenge to evolve his personality from scratch."

During "The Trial!" in the pages of *Avengers* #160 (June 1977), the brother of Wonder Man, the villainous Grim Reaper, wants the final verdict on who his real brother is, the man returned from the dead and who claims to be Simon Williams or the android Vision whose brain patterns are based on those of his dead brother, Simon Williams. The Vision states, "Perhaps...if Wonder Man has stepped beyond humanity...He and I are the true brothers!"

Just as Wonder Man is beginning to find his new identity, Henry Pym (Ant-Man, Giant-Man, Goliath, Yellowjacket) is losing his in the pages of *Avengers* #161 (July 1977) in a storyline that goes through Shooter's first run on the title and into his second run years later. A mind-controlled Henry Pym, as Ant-Man, goes on the attack, successfully taking down the team. Janet Van Dyne (Pym) explains, "It's been...building for a long time...and I'm afraid his mind...has finally snapped." Pym created the indestructible robot Ultron, and the villain considers Pym his "father." Although Henry Pym was already experiencing bouts of inadequacy, Ultron pushed Pym's mental state even further down the line. Shooter doubles as writer and colorist on this issue, demonstrating that he pitched in where needed to get the job done.

Shooter added family drama in the form of the original character, The Bride of Ultron, later named Jocasta, mixing it up with Henry Pym, Janet Van Dyne, and Ultron. The "son" of Pym wanted a bride and used the life essence of his "father's" wife, the Wasp, to be the "soul."

Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers, started making appearances with the team. She was Marvel's "modern feminist super-heroine," complete with the powers of strength, flight, and a seventh-sense to warn her of danger.

Foom #17 (Mar. 1977) revealed more of Shooter's thoughts behind the stories, some of which

materialized and some which did not. "...Expect a development with a certain very large-sized black character who used to live on the West Coast. His costume is being redesigned by Ed Hannigan. [Black Goliath/Bill Foster]. There are going to be Avengers coming and going all over the place, and there will be steps back to the formal roster they had once. I actually intended to reveal the secret of Wonder Man's return all at once in issue #160, but George Pérez, who co-plotted it, broke it down differently than I expected, and so the secrets will be coming out little by little, instead. One of the things that really impressed me about Marvel when I wasn't working in comics...is best exemplified by the Kree/Skrull War: a sequence of books...that stand alone. And each book in the sequence also stands alone as a story—which is, of course, ideal. George Pérez has half of a master plan to do a one-year epic, twelve issues. His half of the plan is that he wants to draw everybody in the whole Marvel system, and my half of the plan is to come up with the plot!"

Avengers #167 (Jan. 1978) kicked off that master plan, officially known as the Korvac Saga. George Pérez and Pablo Marcos supercharged the art for "Tomorrow Dies Today!" featuring not only the regular Avengers team but guest stars the Guardians of the Galaxy, Nick Fury, and Nighthawk.

"Once, he was called Korvac, the Machine Man, and as such he was the evil nemesis of the Guardians of the Galaxy, who pursued him from the 31st century across time to our era. He eluded pursuit...a bizarre twist of fate transformed him into the essence of knowledge and power. [His] stated goal is ownership of the universe, which he claims is his by right," from the splash page of *Avengers* #177 (Nov. 1978).

An idea that did not materialize right away was a crossover with *Ghost Rider*; a title Shooter was also writing at this time. In *FOOM* #18 (June 1977), Shooter reveals, "...There will be a crossover with *The Avengers* and *Ghost Rider*. There will be a new villain (with the working name Infernus); it all ties in with an earlier issue of *Thor* [Journey into Mystery #120 (Sept. 1965)], when Thor repaired his hammer in Pittsburgh and a sliver of Uru metal from the hammer fell off. The sliver will be instrumental in the villain's creation. The Avengers will be summoned to Pittsburgh to face the villain." Later, David Michelinie used this idea for *Avengers* #'s 192-193 (Mar.-April 1979), but without *Ghost Rider*. He would show up later in Shooter's run.

Shooter established an enduring friendship between the Beast and Wonder Man, two characters who were both struggling with their identities and how they fit in on a team like the Avengers. Again, from the *Wonder Man: Cooler Than Superman* website, Shooter explains, "I thought a comedian like the Beast would naturally gravitate to a classic straight character like Simon Williams, and vice versa. They're both bright and intellectual. I had fun playing them off against each other."

Wonder Man would get his red safari jacket costume during Shooter's run in *Avengers* #167 (Jan. 1978). In *Modern Masters Volume 2: George Pérez* by Eric Nolen-Weathington (2003), Pérez comments on the outfit. "The idea I was going for, and I don't know if it was my idea or the writer's suggestion, was a Doc Savage type of approach to the character, where he wouldn't look quite as super-heroic with the spandex and everything. Just trying to make him the reluctant super-hero."

During the Korvac saga, Shooter added a subplot with special agent of the National Security Council, Henry Peter Gyrich. The Avengers' priority status was in jeopardy after Count Nefaria attacked Avengers Mansion. Gyrich ranted, "Iron Man, I strolled into this place thru a twelve-foot hole in the south wall! It wasn't difficult then to subdue your butler and gain access to everything in this entire building—including your records, virtually tons of sophisticated, classified hardware—and your computers which are tied in to the U.S. security network!"

On his blog, www.JimShooter.com, in 2011, Shooter explained that "Gyrich...was supposed to be a tough, strict security guy who cleaned up the Avengers' sloppy operation, ultimately the best friend they ever had, though he happened to come along at an inconvenient



(top left) Shooter's first full issue of *Avengers* over a Gerry Conway plot. Cover by Jack Kirby and Al Milgrom. (bottom) Wonder Man loomed large in Shooter's *Avengers*. #158 cover by Jack Kirby, John Romita, and Joe Sinnott. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (top right) Your brother is Wonder Man. Or Vision. Which is it, Grim Reaper? Comics are confusing. *Avengers* #160 cover by George Pérez and Pablo Marcos.

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time for them. It was my way of addressing things that made no sense to me related to having a superhero HQ in Manhattan that had previously routinely happened in the *Avengers* book."

FOOM #20 (winter, 1978) checked in with Shooter for more of his behind-the-scenes thoughts. "George and I are going to continue our policy of guest-starring as many other characters from the Marvel Universe as we can—virtually anyone can turn up... the Champions ...will officially disband, which I feel will be kind of a milestone. Hopefully, it will have the same kind of impact as the Jim Starlin Thanos epic. We're really pouring our hearts into this and we are having a lot of fun producing it."

In *George Pérez On His Work and Career: A Conversation with Bill Baker* (2008), Pérez said, "...He [Shooter] gave me freedom to add to the story... How to connect A to C by finding a new way of doing B. And he would write his plot in longhand on a memo pad, as opposed to a typed one, so it was...a lot of stream-of-consciousness stuff."

George Pérez added character bits and plot ideas as he drew the pages. Shooter told one of his favorite Pérez stories to John Bua on *John's Longbox Podcast* in 2024. "I had this story with Ultron [Avengers #171], and Ultron builds a robot replica of Jan because he has the Oedipus Complex and so... Jocasta gets away, and so she's fleeing. Now, in the plot, I didn't specify a particular building or anything like that. I had some location that I said, 'So she hides out here, and then they find her.' And George says, 'Can she hide out in the Cloisters?' The Cloisters is this old building that was moved from France brick by brick and put back together in Upper Manhattan in a place called Inwood. And it's a convent, and so, it's incredibly ornate and has

complicated architecture... a beautiful thing. So, we altered the story a little bit. So, the Avengers figure out that maybe that's where Jocasta is. Well, you're not going to crash into or break into a convent. That would be bad. So, they knock on the door, and the Mother Superior comes to the door, and George draws the Beast talking to Mother Superior, and in the margin, he writes me a note. 'Hey, wouldn't it be great if the Beast spoke to her in Latin?' And I thought, 'Ok, Pérez, you're on.' And so I wrote the scene, and I went to Berlitz. I paid them to translate part of this scene into Latin. Later, when he [George] starts reading it, and he comes to the scene where the Beast speaks in Latin, and I swear to you he fell off his chair. He was laughing so hard. And I said, 'Do you want to try for Chinese next time?' We had a blast!"

Avengers #171 (May 1978) marked Jim Shooter as writer and editor as he became Marvel's newest editor-in-chief in January of 1978, making him the busiest man at Marvel. *FOOM* #21 (spring, 1978) captured his thoughts about the transition from that time. "Archie [Goodwin] decided to step down and be a writer/editor, so Stan [Lee] asked me if I would take the job, since I was the associate editor and second in command. I'm going to continue to script *The Avengers*. But we're pretty far behind schedule, so I'm going to concentrate on bringing everyone back on schedule—including me."

David Michelinie stepped in to write *Avengers* #173 (July 1978), and Bill Mantlo helped out with *Avengers* #174 (Aug. 1978), both with plots provided by Shooter during the Korvac Saga.

In *The Comic Times* #4 (Jan. 1980), in an interview with David M. Singer, Shooter was asked the following questions: How did you approach the

(left) This is one hell of a sibling rivalry.

Art by Perez and Marcos. (right) Hank Pym never could catch a break. Cover by Perez and Marcos. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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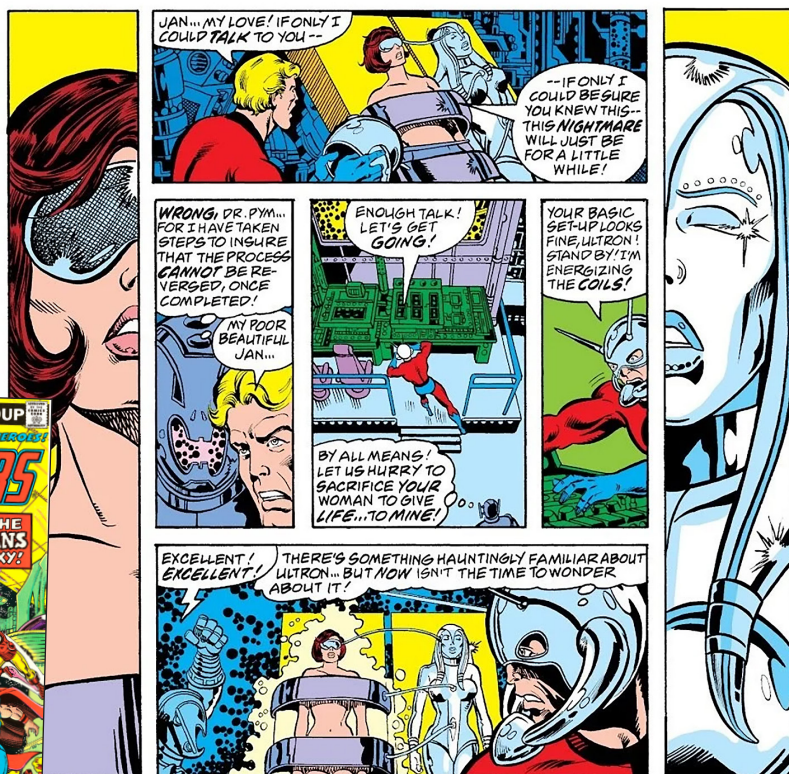
Avengers? Did you find it difficult to handle so many diverse characters? Shooter's response, "One of the letters I got that I was proudest of was a letter from a fan who picked out something I was deliberately trying to do. In one *Avengers* story, every character under the sun appeared even though there were a couple of characters who only had a couple of lines. Their character was conveyed, even though they only had a couple of key lines. I spent more time on that than anything else. Not only what they would say but just how Captain America would say this, or just how the Beast would handle it. There was an issue of the *Avengers* [#172] ...where Iron Man gives the order for the Wasp and someone else to start trying to get in touch with the Avengers who aren't present. So they're coming in to give their report, and he asks, 'Well, who'd you get in touch with?' and the Wasp says, 'Well, we got in touch with Black Panther ...and oh, yeah, Captain Marvel called us, he said something about being aware of our need.' That wasn't in the plot, and it wasn't in the pencils, but when I'm writing this, and I came to the part where they were supposed to have gotten in touch with Captain Marvel, I felt that No! He would get in touch with *them*, 'cause he would know, he's cosmically aware. It leaped up and screamed at me and I put it there. I'm so proud of little things like that because anybody could write, 'Yeah, we got in touch with Captain Marvel,' but it's the essence of the character, that Captain Marvel knew. In every place where a person talked or did something, I tried to find something unique about them to emphasize."

Moondragon receives a spotlight during Shooter's tenure. The self-proclaimed goddess of the mind joined the team in *Avengers* #137 (July 1975). Adventurer, priestess, narcissist, her arrogance and superior attitude rub everyone the wrong way.

Avengers #177 (Nov. 1978) featured the conclusion of the ten-issue Korvac Saga titled "The Hope...And the Slaughter!" with Shooter returning to write the issue and Dave Wenzel, Pablo Marcos, and Ricardo Villamonte on art. As the assembled heroes fall one by one, only Moondragon stands back and takes it all in, as Thor fights on.

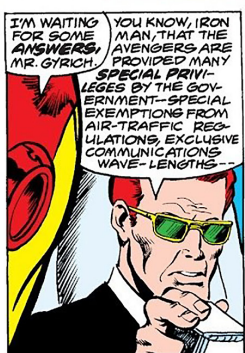
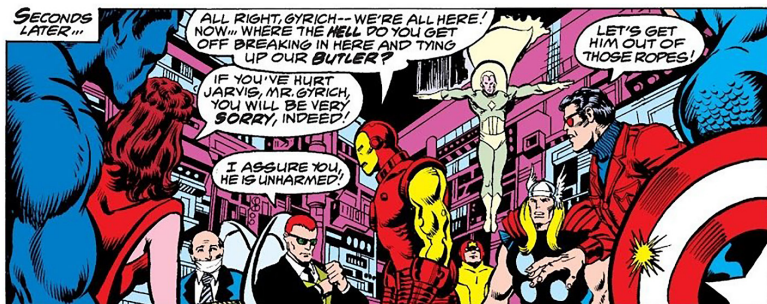
Shooter gave Wonder Man his full-circle moment when he took on Korvac and asked, "Why am I here? To be a coward? But I see now...if you're brought back from death, there must be a reason...something you were meant to do! This is my moment! The whole damn universe is depending on me...and I'm not gonna blow it!"

Michael Korvac believes that the love he shares with his partner, Carina, will "light up the universe..." Their love was the foundation for his strength. Korvac was able to build strength slowly without arousing the known powers of the universe. But the Avengers were the vanguard that awakened that knowledge in others. However, once Korvac felt that Carina hesitated when he needed her the most, a hesitation born out of the idea of cosmic war with the forces of the universe and the conflict of whether what she is doing is right, that moment, that pause, ended Korvac. He died.



(top) Meet the bride of Ultron, Jocasta. *Avengers* #162 art by Perez and Marcos. (bottom) The Guardians of the Galaxy tell the Avengers the story of Korvac. Art by Perez and Marcos. (inset) The Korvac Saga begins in *Avengers* #167. Cover by George Perez and Terry Austin.

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(left) Henry Peter Gyrich introduces himself to the Avengers. #168 art by Perez and Marcos. (right) The Korvac Saga concludes in issue #177. Cover by Dave Cockrum and Terry Austin.

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Moondragon explains, "In the heat of battle I dared to walk the planes of Michael's mind! He was not evil, Thor! He sought not to rule us...nor even to interfere with our madness! He wished only to free us from the capricious whims of Eternity! [His] was not an evil heart."

Thor asks, "Can it be that Michael was just... and we were the villains?"

Shooter would explore this idea of benevolent rule again with Moondragon during his second run on the book. Could paradise be achieved if someone took over to do it? On his blog, www.JimShooter.com, in 2011, Shooter explained more about Moondragon, writing about continued stories and teases. She had used her mental powers to erase prejudice against artificial beings [specifically the Vision] in Quicksilver's mind. "She's high-handed...and, oh, so smugly superior. She treats the other Avengers as subordinates, even leader Iron Man." During the fight with Korvac, Moondragon can sense what he is trying to accomplish, a type of "benign dictatorship." Shooter continues, "She judges Michael the good guy and the Avengers, unwittingly, the bad guys who... 'slew the dream...then the hope!' But she would think that, wouldn't she...? Moondragon, who thought it was just fine to 'fix' Quicksilver's mind. Her take on what happened is colored by her belief that it is okay for 'superior' beings like herself to make things better for us lowlives."

Artist Bob Hall shares a behind-the-scenes look at this idea of total control in *BI* #66 (Aug. 2013).

"Jim Shooter had this concept that he once called the 'Cosmic Eraser.' He demonstrated it in his office with an eraser. 'Suppose this eraser had the power to make everyone on Earth obey you, without question? What would you do? Would you be satisfied to be obeyed without a struggle? What are the philosophical implications?' I think Jim first suggested it for the Doom/Magneto/Avengers story [*Super-Villain Team-Up* #14 (Oct. 1977)]. Then about five years later we tackled the same thing in a Moondragon arc in *The Avengers* (#219-220)... with Shooter writing." The idea continued in the Marvel Graphic Novel *Emperor Doom Starring the Mighty Avengers* (1987) by David Michelinie and Bob Hall, with a nod to Shooter.

After a story by Steve Gerber and two by Tom DeFalco, David Michelinie takes over as *Avengers* writer on #181.

Avengers #200 (Oct. 1980) involved a pregnant Ms. Marvel and a problematic plot. Credit on the splash page for plotting goes to Jim Shooter, George Pérez, Bob Layton, and David Michelinie in "The Child is Father to...?" A character named Marcus, later revealed to be Immortus's son, needs someone to "birth" him out of Limbo. Immortus was the Master of Time and ruler of Limbo. Marcus chooses Ms. Marvel. By the story's end, she abruptly goes with him to Limbo while Iron Man and Hawkeye watch, and Thor transports the two to their destination. In *Avengers Annual* #10 (1981), writer Chris Claremont explained that Marcus used mind control on Ms. Marvel to

make her accompany him to Limbo, while the Avengers watched her leave with her abductor in the story called, "By Friends—Betrayed!"

Mark Gruenwald later wrote about what had happened in his "Mark's Remarks" column in *Marvel Age* #122 (Mar. 1993). "Funny thing about Ms. Marvel and Marcus Immortus in the original scenario Marcus wasn't supposed to be the father of Carol Danvers' 'child,' the Supreme Intelligence was. The child in *Avengers* #200 was supposed to be a newborn cosmic baby with the S.I.'s spaghetti-head look. But a *What If* story [*What If* #20 (April 1980) by Tom DeFalco] about the Kree-Skrull War ["What If the Avengers Fought the Kree-Skrull War Without Rick Jones?"] came out around the same time, with a plot featuring a Supreme Intelligence spawn, so the editor-in-chief [Shooter] ordered writer David Michelinie to find a different father. Thus the nonsensical finale of issue #200!"

Shooter addressed the story on his blog in 2011, although he didn't remember specifically how it got that way. "But, in those days...the buck stopped at my desk. I take full responsibility. I screwed up. My judgment failed, or maybe I wasn't paying enough attention. Sorry. *Avengers* #200 is a travesty."

Avengers post-200 was a chaotic time for the title. Creative teams came and went, adding a fill-in here and there. Shooter wrote a short prose story for the *Marvel Novel Series* #9 called "This Evil Undying" featuring the Avengers in 1979, which was then the basis for *Avengers* #'s 201-202 (Nov.-Dec. 1980) with Ultron. Shooter wrote a slightly more adult version of an *Avengers* story while David Michelinie adapted it into more "approved by the Comics Code Authority" fare.

Bob Budiansky, along with Shooter, created the plot for *Avengers* #204 and #205 (Feb.-Mar. 1981), with scripting by David Michelinie, featuring the Yellow Claw's villainy.

Bill Mantlo and Gene Colan were announced as the new creative team. But just when it was time for the Mantlo/Colan run to begin in full force, Mantlo was out, and the big boss, Jim Shooter, took over.

"Editor-in-chief Jim Shooter was working hard to improve the writing and storytelling across the board at Marvel, and it's safe to say he wasn't greatly pleased with the results of the Mantlo/Colan team," stated editor Jim Salicrup in his introduction to the *Avengers Marvel Masterworks* Volume 20 (2019). "Jim Shooter had a real handle on what made *The Avengers* click and come alive."

Shooter's goal was to showcase good storytelling: establish the setting, introduce the characters, introduce the problem, build suspense, and resolve the problem by the story's end. Each issue could be a new reader's first issue, and the storytelling had to be clear.

An unpublished house ad that also looked like it could have been the opening splash for *Avengers* #206 announced, "Join Wonder Man! The Beast! The Vision! The Scarlet Witch! The Wasp! And special guest stars every month in... *The Avengers*." But what about Cap? Iron Man? Thor?

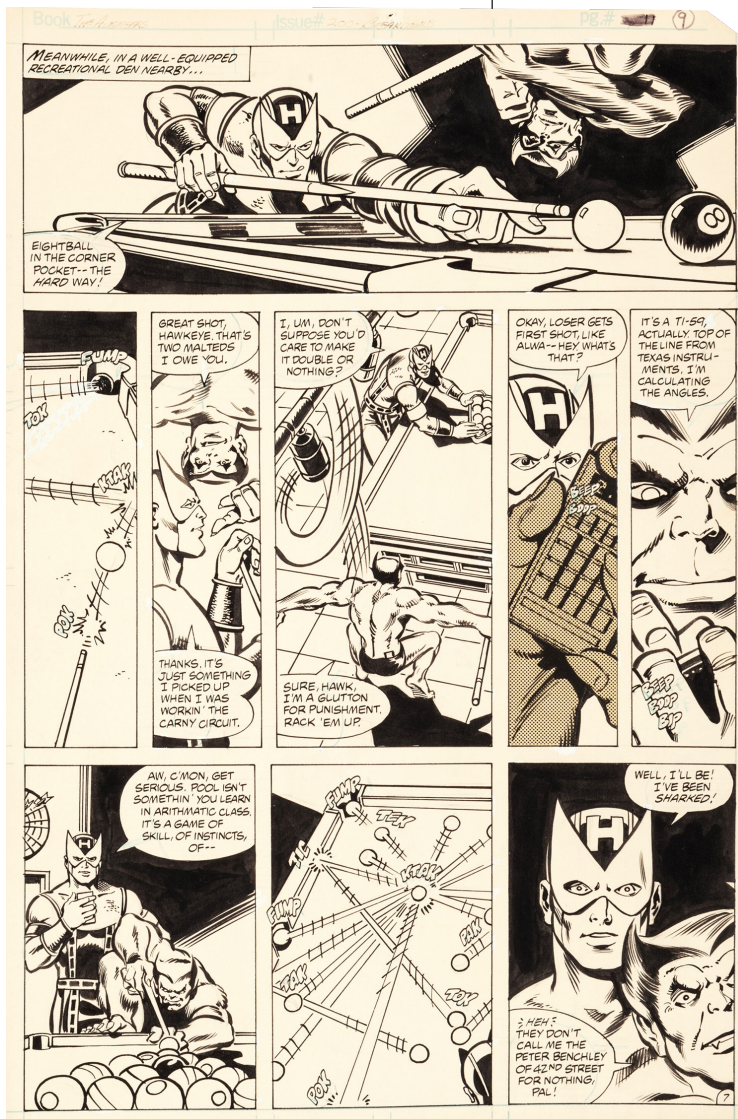
On the letters page from #206, Mantlo was hosting the chat. He dropped a few hints about possible future storylines, including his plans for the Wasp. "As you can see from this ish, the wondrous Wasp is depicted as neither subordinate nor scatter-brained. You'll find her character developing in some interesting ways in issues to come, eventually initiating a change so surprising that it catches her, and, I hope, you, totally unaware." Could this have been the beginning of the Wasp on her road to legendary *Avengers* leadership?

Jim Salicrup had a mission to find the next creative team for the monthly adventures of *The Avengers*. Salicrup



(top) *Avengers* #200. An issue that Shooter would one day call "a travesty." Cover by George Perez and Terry Austin. (bottom) The fate of the world wasn't always at stake. *Avengers* #200 art by George Perez and Dan Green. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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shares with *BI*, "I don't remember the precise reason why Mantlo left *The Avengers*, but I suspect it was simply because Jim had so many ideas about the series that it seemed best to just have Jim write it rather than for me to try to direct writers on what Jim was looking for." So, to give the title some continuity and to show other writers and artists what he wanted story and art-wise, Shooter wanted to lead by example and took over the *Avengers* to show how he wanted it done."

Shooter picked up the writing reins on *The Avengers* again with #211 (Sept. 1981) titled "...By Force of Mind!" with art by the team of Gene Colan on pencils and Dan Green on inks. Captain America wants to reorganize, and so, "the old order changeth." He says, "I believe that a lean, close-knit group is better...stronger!"

The drama with Korvac inspired Moondragon, and she decided to take control. Moondragon forcefully suggests that other heroes arrive at Avengers Mansion in a misbegotten membership drive of sorts. So, just as Cap is about to announce who he thinks would work best on the new team, Hawkeye, Black Panther, Tigra, Yellowjacket, Hercules, Black Widow, Moon Knight, Angel, Ice Man, and Dazzler arrive on the scene. Moondragon states, "I sensed your need for order...for organization! So I returned!" Iron Man replies, "What right do you have to interfere?" And she high-handedly responds, "Why, divine right, naturally!"



JIM SALICRUP

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Longtime members Scarlet Witch and Vision want to find a life outside of the team. Wonder Man wants to pursue acting and says, "I know I'm darn near invulnerable and loaded with raw power...But I just don't like facing death a dozen times a week." Beast needs to see what he can do when he is not being an Avenger. Did Moondragon manipulate the other Avengers into leaving? Captain America wonders in the next issue. So, with that, Shooter establishes the new team almost identical to the original line-up with Thor, Iron Man, Wasp, Yellowjacket, Captain America, and new member Tigra on the roster! Avengers Assemble!

Shooter wrote Tigra as brave, fearless, determined, and even a little reckless. Tigra stayed in Shooter's mind as he had previously written the character in *Marvel Chillers* #7 (Oct. 1976), and he thought of her for his *Avengers* run, but unfortunately, it was as someone who couldn't make it as an Avenger. At least, not on this first run. Greer Grant Nelson, a.k.a. Tigra, originally patrolled the streets of Chicago as The Cat until a series of events transformed her into Tigra, the Were-Woman. Eventually, Greer Nelson did return as a founding member of the Avengers West Coast branch, but that was still in the future. For now, Tigra was the newbie Avenger.

Tigra provided a fun, light balance as the rookie Avenger compared to the not-as-fun, heavy storyline of Hank and Jan with Yellowjacket as the bitter veteran. Tigra tended to break up the tension of the serious Avengers. She gave us a different perspective on the Avengers, as someone new to a team of heroes who had already worked together for years.

Shooter added the psychological question to his storytelling, "Why be an Avenger?" and he used Tigra as a rookie to tackle it.



In 2021, Shooter told this writer at a Big Apple Comic Con in New York City that he wanted to use Tigra to explore the thinking of an Avenger and why they do what they do. Captain America, we know why he does it. What would Tigra think in that situation with an all-powerful villain, and what would she do, and why would she do it?

In *Amazing Heroes* #1 (June 1981), in a Marvel News section "Avengers Re-Assemble," it was reported that "The line-up of the *Avengers* changes in #211 in a way that harkens back to the original concept of the group—superheroes who have their own series banding together in a single comic book." Shooter adds, "I think that the point of the *Avengers* is to have Thor and Captain America and Iron

Man and the stars of other books together in one book."

Amazing Heroes #2 (July 1981) continued the updates in the news section entitled "Shooter's *Avengers*: Superhero Smorgasbord." Shooter said, "Basically, we're going to have a core team of Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and, eventually, the Wasp—she'll be back after a couple of issues. They will be our basic four." In *Comics Newsline* #20 (Mar.-April 1981),

The Avengers face Moondragon in issue #211. Art by Gene Colan and Dan Green. Courtesy of the author. (inset) Shooter returns as writer with issue #211. Cover by Colan and Green.

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it reported, "Hulk was considered, but since he is in the *Defenders*, they probably will not include him here."

"One thing I'm going to do is create a new Ms. Marvel. In the *Avengers* annual this year, Chris [Claremont] ends the Ms. Marvel storyline. But I like the name, so I may create a new character. She can inherit the name," he explains in *Amazing Heroes* #2. Shooter had pledged to "bring it back to... [what] I think the concept of the book is, which is 'your favorite heroes together.'"

Regarding a new Ms. Marvel, Roger Stern told Tom DeFalco in *Comics Creators on Spider-Man* (2004), "Jim Shooter was writing *Avengers* at the time, and we decided that one of us would create a new Captain Marvel and the other would create a new Ms. Marvel to replace Carol Danvers, who had more or less retired at the time."

In *Avengers* #212 (Oct. 1981), Shooter picks up the story threads on Henry Pym from his first run, only this is a Henry Pym with a chip on his shoulder and something to prove and is very mean to Jan. Hank wanted to be the star of the team.

Linnea, the Elf Queen, an amazingly powerful energy-wielder, and Gorn (a Conan look-alike) debut in #212. Gorn wants to be out in the world again, making his way as a warrior to be feared. It doesn't go well. Linnea, ever the supporting partner, pleads with him to leave this modern world, and that is when he slaps her across the face! Before Hank and Jan's story plays out, Linnea and Gorn demonstrate the consequences in one relationship. Linnea leaves, and Gorn dies at the hands of the police. Linnea wants revenge!

From one troubled relationship to another, Hank snaps at Jan, again, before they take off for Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, Linnea rages around the capital city. The Avengers go on the offensive. Cap almost calms her down enough to surrender, but that is when Yellowjacket uses his disruptor blast, ratcheting the battle back up again. The Wasp arrives in the nick of time to save YJ from an attack. But Hank can't accept the fact that he was saved by Jan. He wanted to prove his worth to the team, and now she "ruined it." When Linnea protects Gorn, he strikes her. When the Wasp protects Hank, he rejects her. Both men fall under the title for this issue, "Men of Deadly Pride!"

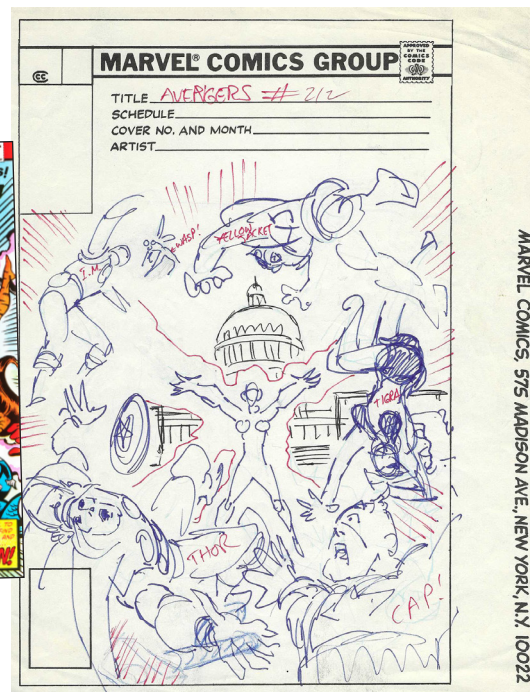
And now... "The Court-Martial of Yellowjacket!" in *Avengers* #213 (Nov. 1981) featuring perhaps one of the most controversial pages in Avengers history! Jim Shooter wrote the story, and Bob Hall took over as penciler. Due to Yellowjacket's inappropriate action of attacking a foe who had already stopped fighting, Captain America levels charges against YJ, believing the Avengers must be held to a higher standard.

And, with a fateful comic book panel, we lose the hero that was Hank Pym. Hank reveals to Jan that he has to create a situation where he is the hero. He makes another robot, this time called Salvation 1. If things go poorly at his trial, he will secretly call on his creation to attack, and he can save the day. The team will see his worth.

Jan objects. "Hank, no! You can't go through with this! ... I can't let you... OHH!" With a back-handed slap and a sound effect "Whak!" Hank Pym strikes Jan. He yells, "Shut up! I've got to do this! I've got to save the day right before their eyes! Don't you see? It's my only chance to redeem myself!" At Avengers Mansion, when Hank tries to get Jan to go along with his warped side of things at the trial, she takes off her sunglasses and reveals a black eye.

Jim Shooter participated in a monumental, nearly eight-hour interview with Alex Grand and Jim Thompson on the *Comic Book Historians Podcast* in 2021. Shooter explained his plot directions regarding the slap. "...In that story in the plot, it's carefully described that Hank Pym is leaning on his lab table, okay, with his head hanging down and Janet comes up behind him, okay, and she's trying to, you know, be nice, she's trying to be supportive and he doesn't realize she is right behind him and he was supposed to do this... are you ready? [Shooter throws his hands up]. 'Leave me alone!' And accidentally hits her. So, Bob Hall, who went to the John Buscema School and was taught, you know, always do extreme action, he turned it into a right cross."

Shooter continues, "The book comes in. It's late... This isn't what I wanted... but there's no time. I didn't think it was a big deal at that time. The book goes out... All of a sudden, my story becomes the wife-beating story.



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(top) Ed Hannigan's rough for the cover of issue #212 and (inset) the finished cover by Alan Kupperberg and Dan Green. Hannigan rough courtesy of the author. (bottom) Tigra enjoys being an Avenger. And messing with Jarvis. Issue #212 art by Kupperberg and Green.

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(left) The page featuring the infamous panel with Hank Pym (Yellowjacket) and Janet Van Dyne (The Wasp). Art by Bob Hall and Dan Green.

(right) Bob Hall's art commission from 2023, where he reinterpreted the scene with Yellowjacket and The Wasp. Both images courtesy of the author.

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It had nothing to do with that. It was an accident." And again, in the interview, Shooter reiterates, "...If he accidentally hits her when he's just throwing his hands up, that's an accident."

In 2011, on his www.JimShooter.com blog, Shooter wrote an entry titled, "Hank Pym was Not a Wife-Beater." He explained that he reread all of the appearances by Hank Pym and Janet Van Dyne. "His history [Hank's] was largely a litany of failure, always changing guises and switching back and forth from research to hero-ing because he wasn't succeeding at either. He was never the Avenger who saved the day at the end and usually the first knocked out or captured. His most notable 'achievement' in the lab was creating Ultron. Meanwhile, his rich, beautiful wife succeeded in everything she tried. She was always flitting around his shoulders, flirting, saying things to prop up his ego. As I was developing the storyline, I discussed the potential pathology of their relationship with a psychologist who happened to be sitting next to me on a five-hour flight. The story made sense, he thought."

Shooter explained the story arc he wanted for the character. "My plan was to bring all birds to roost, to have him break down, lose his beloved wife, fail catastrophically, end up in prison...hit bottom. Then come back, become a great hero

and save the world. The ultimate fall from grace and redemption. The very stuff of heroes."

In his *Marvel Masterworks* introduction for *The Avengers* Volume 20 in 2019, Jim Salicrup weighed in on the controversial storyline. "...This was yet another example of what made Marvel Marvel—heroes who were flawed. Instead of taking the safe approach, Jim was always willing to shake things up to create the most exciting, dramatic and compelling stories he could."

Finally, Shooter made good on the promises he had made in 1977, having Ghost Rider appear with the Avengers. "Three Angels Fallen!", the title of *Avengers* #214 (Dec. 1981), could have referred to Hank Pym, guest star, Warren Worthington a.k.a. the Angel, or antagonist for this issue, the Ghost Rider, the living Spirit of Vengeance. Also in this issue, as Janet Van Dyne transforms from flighty, flirty heiress to take-charge leader, she tells Hank, "I'm getting a divorce!"

Next, Enter: artist Alan Weiss! *Avengers* #215-#216 (Jan.-Feb. 1982) featured guest star, the Silver Surfer, who inadvertently gave the Molecule Man the idea of eating the planet, as inspired by Galactus, the World-Devourer. The team had to grapple with the idea of killing an enemy. Do you kill a human to save the world? In the end, it was Tigra's words that helped convince Molecule

(top left) Things go downhill fast for Hank. Cover by Bob Hall and Dan Green. (top right) The Avengers join forces with the Silver Surfer to take on the Molecule Man. Cover by Alan Weiss. (bottom left) Moondragon brings peace to an alien planet through the force of her mind. Cover by Bob Hall and Bob Layton. (bottom right) Shooter's final issue as scripter though he would provide plots for several more. Cover by Bob Hall and Brett Breeding.

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Man to redeem himself. Captain America and Tigra also learned the secret identities of Iron Man and Thor, Tony Stark and Don Blake, respectively. By the end of #216, Tigra decided to leave the team. She explained, "I'm just not in the same league as you guys! I mean, sure, I've got lots of super-ability, and, usually, I'm even pretty heroic, but not up to your standard."

Janet Van Dyne, no longer Mrs. Hank Pym, nominates herself as leader of the Avengers in *Avengers* #217 (Mar. 1982). The team confronts Yellowjacket. Later, the Daily Bugle runs the headline, "Ex-Avenger Jailed!"

Avengers #'s 219-220 (May-June 1982) featured Shooter's follow-up to the Korvac Saga, only this time with Moondragon bringing about peace by force. Inspired by Korvac, Moondragon took control of an alien war-torn planet. Iron Man asked, "Is tyranny by force of mind any better than tyranny by force of arms?" Once again, the Avengers were there to stop this threat, specifically with a punch from the Wasp.

In *Jim Shooter: Conversations* (2017), edited by Jason Sacks, Eric Hoffman, and Dominick Grace, they explained that "In 1982, in recognition of his efforts, Shooter was named vice president, by which time he was overseeing fourteen editors, over three hundred creative personnel, and some fifty to sixty titles." So, it's no wonder that Shooter's *Avengers* output was relegated to plots, and then the writing reins were handed over to Roger Stern, who completed the saga of Henry Pym.

Shooter thought of the Avengers as the All-Stars. "I tried to focus on the classic characters, the ones who were stars of their own titles, and live up to the legend 'Earth's Mightiest Heroes.' I did use characters like Tigra and ... Wonder Man, because I felt it was good to have characters to contrast and challenge the established stars..." (*Wonder Man: Cooler Than Superman* website, 2017).

In 2002, then editor-in-chief of Marvel, Joe Quesada, asked Shooter to write the sequel to the Korvac Saga, entitled "Ill-Begotten—The Samuel Saga," an eight-issue limited series featuring the Avengers. Cosmic beings are notoriously hard to kill, and Korvac wasn't dead yet. Shooter's detailed plot can be read on his website www.JimShooter.com. The sequel remains unpublished.

Korvac's son, Samuel, inherited his father's power. However, where Korvac wanted to create a paradise with himself as the sole creator, Samuel chooses evil. From Shooter's script, "He [Samuel] has chosen 'wrong' over 'right.' Korvac's original goal for the universe was to do right (according to him), to establish order, eliminate suffering, etc., albeit with himself as the benevolent God. Samuel's goal is to indulge his wicked whims. With great power comes great irresponsibility." And it's up to the Avengers, Captain America, Tigra, Thor, Moondragon, Iron Man, Wonder Man, Black Panther, and Sersi, to stop him.

In his plot, Shooter does make a distinction about the Avengers. "The Avengers are like the NBA All-Star team. Sure, they work together and rack up points, but they tend to be individual stars rather than a well-oiled team. It's subtle, but discernible—they're a group, not a team like the X-Men or a family, like the FF."

Jim Shooter told *Avengers* stories that mattered to the Marvel Universe. He wanted the reader to know the characters and personalities that made up the team, from Captain America's determined ability to win against all odds, Iron Man's ingenuity and compassion, Tigra's playful feline up-for-anything attitude, Hank Pym's "the taller he grew, the smaller he felt" feelings, the Wasp's winsome personality evolving into leadership qualities, and Wonder Man's "Am I really a hero?" superhero. Shooter believed that no two characters should act the same, speak the same, or walk the same. Maybe Shooter put Henry Peter Gyrich in the Marvel Universe to keep an eye on them in the comics, as Shooter was keeping an eye on them in the real world? Shooter and Gyrich wanted the Avengers to be the best. Gyrich had rules for the Avengers, and Shooter had rules to push storytelling to the forefront. As Shooter said about Gyrich, "[He was] ultimately the best friend they ever had." And maybe Shooter was as well. Jim Shooterwriter, associate editor, artist, editor-in-chief, vice-president, honorary Avenger!

This article is dedicated to Jim Shooter and his contributions to the comic book industry. Special thanks to Jim Salicrup, Bob Hall, Alan Weiss, Charlie Boatner, the Comic Book Historians podcast featuring Alex Grand and Jim Thompson, and John's Longbox podcast featuring John Bua (John's comic is *Heroic Tales*).

Dan Tandarich is an educator in New York City. Contact him at yellowjacket74@hotmail.com.



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Revisiting MOONSHADOW

From its sprawling, multilayered narrative to the watercolor artwork that captured its fantastical imagery, *Moonshadow* made an unprecedented splash as a 12-issue maxiseries under the Epic banner of Marvel in the mid-1980s. In so many ways, this picaresque tale perfectly expressed the vision of writer J.M. DeMatteis, from earthy hedonism to elevated spirituality, always with rich streaks of humor and pathos. As the protagonist, Moon, travels the universe on a coming-of-age journey like no other, he faces and comes to understand the true nature of war, commerce, crime, sexuality, religion, friendship, family, and more. These discoveries are informed by his traveling companion Ira, a bowler-wearing, cigar-smoking, fur-covered id who never met a depravity he didn't embrace.

More than 40 years later, this unique graphic novel continues to delight and inspire new readers. Looking back at their groundbreaking creation, DeMatteis and illustrator Jon J. Muth share their insights into its development and legacy. They explore both surface and subtext, discuss literary and pop culture influences, retrace their techniques for collaboration, and reconsider the Vertigo sequel, *Farewell, Moonshadow*. They also talk about the continued popularity of the work and where it might lead them in times to come.

If you've always wondered how *Moonshadow* was born, what it all means, and how it relates to the lives of its creators—or if you have yet to discover this rich and monumental "journey to awakening"—this is the interview for you.



J.M. DEMATTEIS

Federico Vinci.



JON J. MUTH

Stuart Ramson.

THE BEGINNING

ROBERT JESCHONEK: What can you tell us about the genesis of *Moonshadow*?

J.M. DEMATTEIS: Keep in mind that this was a long time ago and memory is a tricky thing. Much like *Old Moonshadow*, I can't swear this is exactly how it all played out, but it's the way I remember it.

The idea for *Moonshadow* was one I started playing with years before I ever got into comics. It was called *Stardust* at the time and had a more playful, cynical-but-compassionate, Kurt Vonnegut feeling to it. It was also more of a cosmic superhero adventure in the Jack Kirby-

A Conversation with J.M. DEMATTEIS and JON J. MUTH

by **Robert Jeschonek**

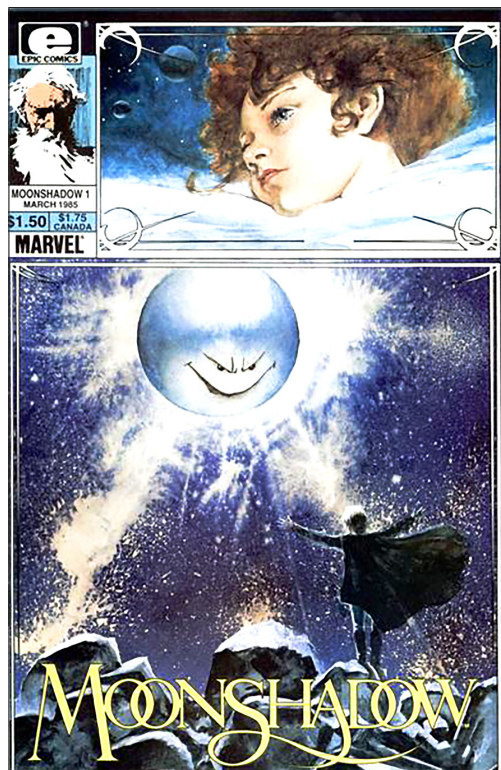
interview conducted February 2026

The story begins. Jon J. Muth's cover to *Moonshadow* #1 from the DC/Vertigo reprint of the series. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth.

(top) An example of Muth's two image cover from *Moonshadow* #1.
(bottom) Moon's father boots him from the zoo in issue #1.

TM & © J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth.



Jim Starlin mode. I kept playing with the idea for years (in fact, when I sent some writing samples to DC way back in 1977 when I was trying to break into the business, *Stardust* was one of them) until it took its final form. I can't really say where the seeds of the idea came from, but it had a life of its own from the start, as all my favorite stories do. I think *Moonshadow* wrote me more than I wrote it!

JESCHONEK: *How long did the project gestate before you began to commit it to written form?*

DEMATTEIS: I suspect the idea started percolating around the same time that I wrote that sample script, so I probably started playing with it in written form soon after the idea emerged.

JESCHONEK: *What role did Archie Goodwin play in developing the project?*

DEMATTEIS: A little more history first: Before the series got to Epic, I'd pitched it to Karen Berger at DC. I'd been exclusive to Marvel for a few years and Len Wein and Dick Giordano invited me to come back to DC, where I'd started my career. If memory serves, they offered me *Justice League* and *Swamp Thing* (some guy named Alan Moore ended up getting the gig after I turned it down. Whatever happened to him?) and I pitched *Moonshadow*. Karen loved it and wanted to do it. She even had an artist in mind: a new guy named Dave Gibbons (whatever happened to him?). In the end, I decided to stay at Marvel and pitched it to editor-in-chief Jim Shooter who, wisely, said: "That's an Epic Comic. Take it to Archie."

Archie Goodwin was a wonderful writer/editor and, just as important, one of the nicest guys in comics. He welcomed me to Epic and, once Jon came aboard, he and his team (Laurie Sutton, Margaret Clarke, and Dan Chichester) gave us all the creative room, and enthusiastic support, we needed to tell our tale in exactly the way we wanted to. It was a joy working with Archie, with all of the Epic team.

JESCHONEK: *How and when did Jon enter the picture?*

DEMATTEIS: I was looking around for an artist and shared my original outline with my friend Dan Green who, in turn, shared it with his friend Jon J. Muth. I remember getting together with Jon at my house—we all lived in the same area—and being so impressed not just with his art, but his insights and intelligence. We clicked right from the start and so began a great collaboration and a cherished friendship.

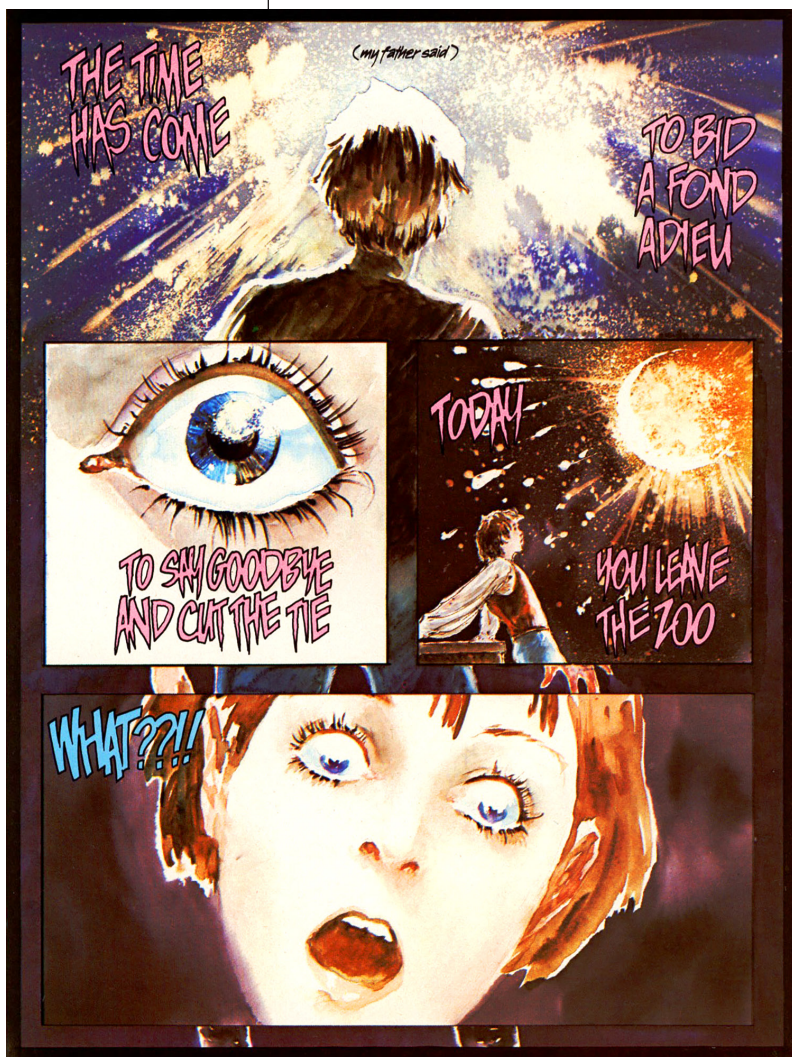
JESCHONEK: *Was Jon always the first choice as artist on this project?*

DEMATTEIS: I seem to recall thinking of other artists, more traditional comic book artists, but I'm not sure if I ever pitched it to anyone. I have a very vague memory—and it may not be correct!—of talking to Mike Zeck about it. Of course, *Moon* would have been a very different story with another artist—but, as I said, stories have lives of their own, they're in control, not us, and the story knew that Jon was the absolute perfect artist to bring *Moonshadow* to life.

JON J. MUTH: I thought of other writers too. Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare weren't available, so I went with J.M.

JESCHONEK: *J.M., what made you realize Jon would be the perfect illustrator for this story?*

DEMATTEIS: I know the exact moment. Jon was at my house, I think we were meeting for the first time, and he brought some sketches inspired by my outline. "These," I said, "look very Dickensian." "Well, yeah," he said, "that's what you wrote, right?" And it was!





Muth's dual images on the cover allowed for some interesting juxtaposition.

TM & © J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth.

I'd poured my love of *David Copperfield* into the story... but I hadn't consciously realized it. Jon had. He saw what I was doing better than I had! That sealed the deal for me.

When you're working with an artist of Jon's skill and artistic vision, you have no choice but to up your game to meet his level. Jon definitely did that for me and I hope I did that for him, in turn. I think we challenged each other to grow, be better, evolve creatively. I can't imagine *Moonshadow* coming to life with another artist. It had to be Jon.

MUTH: This was my first collaboration so I had no real idea how it was supposed to work. I was very fortunate that it was with J.M. He had unending flexibility when it came to my approach.

JESCHONEK: *What role did the Cat Stevens song "Moonshadow" play in the project? Was it an inspiration or just something that felt like a good fit?*

DEMATTEIS: Since Moon's mom was a classic hippie, I was looking for a name for our main character that evoked the heady, idealistic, spacey '60s. I knew Stardust wasn't it. I remember going through all my albums, looking at song titles, seeing if anything landed. When I came across "Moonshadow," the lightbulb lit up. Yes, it was a '70s song, but it evoked exactly what I was looking for.

MUTH: I was always surprised that the Cat Stevens song wasn't mentioned more as inspiration, but we never talked about it. It's a beautiful song. If they ever make our book into a film, I hope they will get the rights and find a place for it.

THE APPROACH

JESCHONEK: *J.M., you've said that the characters dictate the path for you. Was this particular series tightly plotted and developed from the start, or did you set off with a general idea of where you wanted to go and let the characters lead the way?*

DEMATTEIS: If you look at my early outlines and notes, many of which are included in the recent Dark Horse edition, you can see that I had lots and lots of ideas for the direction I wanted the story to go in, the themes I wanted to explore. I had a very clear vision. But...

...once I started writing, Old Moonshadow, our narrator, starting talking to me, leading me off into places I hadn't expected, deepening and expanding the story. I had no choice but to follow him!

JESCHONEK: *While using an improvisational, character-guided path, how did you maintain the intricate narrative with its many digressions, cross-references, and stylistic flourishes?*

DEMATTEIS: I'd start each issue with guideposts, character arcs, themes, etc., but I learned early on not to be attached to any of it. I had to let the story take me where it wanted to go. So, I always had a map, but learned it was important to burn the map along the way.

JESCHONEK: *How much of the series, if any, was autobiographical?*

DEMATTEIS: It was completely autobiographical and completely fabricated simultaneously. I've often said that *Brooklyn Dreams* and *Moonshadow* are the same story, but one deals with (so-called) reality and one tells the same tale through the lens of fantasy and metaphor. So *Moonshadow* was my attempt—some of it conscious, a lot of it intuitive—to take a certain period of my life and filter it through my imagination, through a fairy tale lens. Of course, once you do that, once you begin almost any story, the characters come alive, become distinctive, unique, with lives and intentions of their own that have nothing to do with the autobiographical aspects of the tale. So there's a paradox built in there. I'm talking about my own life and Moon's life at the same time. He's a part of me, yes, but I'm also learning from him. In fact, one of the wild things that happened was, late in the series, I realized that our narrator, Old Moon, was completely unreliable, that what he was telling me (and that's what it felt like: he was telling me his story) wasn't necessarily accurate. He was doing what I had been doing: Telling his life story through the filter of his imagination!

JESCHONEK: *Which character was closest to you, or did several represent aspects of yourself?*

DEMATTEIS: Moon, of course, and probably "Sunflower." (Especially her life growing up in Brooklyn.) But, really, all the

characters are, in a way, a reflection of *some* aspect of my psyche. And, once he started drawing, probably Jon's, too. And, yet, as I've said, they were very much their own people, with individual lives, individual wills. (Writing really is about diving into a sea of mystery. There are never any simple answers.)

MUTH: I'd say visually it was autobiographical for me too. People at conventions especially seemed to think so.

JESCHONEK: *What made you decide to write the series in first person, from Moon's point of view?*

DEMATTEIS: It was Old Moonshadow whispering in my ear. He started talking, I started taking dictation.

JESCHONEK: *What can you tell us about the selected literary passages that you used to open each book, from Dostoyevsky to Shelley to Keats to Beckett to Henry Miller?*

DEMATTEIS: These were writers that meant something to me, and to Moon, and I looked for selections that reflected the themes of each issue.

JESCHONEK: *How did you maintain suspense and reader interest though the narrator is clearly established throughout the series as having survived his many ordeals? Jon, did the visual design play a role in this?*

DEMATTEIS: I have no idea! I don't think that way: "Hmmm, I must maintain suspense." I just follow the story and the characters and see where they lead.

MUTH: The unconscious plays an enormous part in making any art.

If you think of the story like a piece of music—something long like a symphony—visually, you have to have a sense of pacing. How intense is this crescendo? Where do I need to keep

a chord suspended without resolving it? Where are the silences? I was trying to do that. It was all in J.M.'s story. I was going by intuition because the story had a lot of digressions.

JESCHONEK: *Might there be a touch of Monty Python's influence in Moonshadow?*

DEMATTEIS: There was absolutely a touch of Python in there. The wonderful thing about *Moonshadow* was that there was a touch of just about every book and movie, every author and story, I loved. It all came gushing out of my unconscious onto the page.

Moon became a vehicle not just for paying homage to the stories I loved, it became a vehicle for all my thoughts and feelings about life in general: a framework for saying everything I wanted to say about how I saw the world at that point in time. (Which is why our sequel, *Farewell, Moonshadow*, was a very different beast. It was a decade later, I was a different person and the story reflected that.) Every once in a while you get a project like that, I've had a few over the years, and it's an extraordinary experience.

MUTH: I can quote all the Monty Python albums...

JESCHONEK: *J.M., the series seems to equally reflect your literary, spiritual, and comedic voices. Did you see it at the time as the synthesis of your key personal and creative characteristics?*

DEMATTEIS: I didn't really see it at the time. It was only later that I realized *Moonshadow*, in bringing all these elements and influences together, actually helped me to transcend them and find my own distinctive voice as a writer. Again, it wasn't conscious, but I approached writing *Moon* not as "writing a comic book," but just as *writing*. The same way I'd approach writing a novel. Because it was for Epic, because I had a creative collaborator like Jon, I was able to push myself into areas I'd never explored before. I was free.

But, again, this wasn't conscious, I never thought, "Oh, I'm finding my voice! Oh, we're doing something unique!" I was just enjoying the creative process and unfolding with it. I suspect Jon had the same experience.

THE ILLUSTRATION

JESCHONEK: *Jon, how much of the character design were you responsible for? Or were the designs a collaboration between you and J.M.?*

DEMATTEIS: I'm sure we had discussions about the characters and how they looked—and the original outlines and notes had general descriptions—but I trusted Jon right from the start and he had the freedom to design the characters and their world as he saw them. And what an amazing job he did!

JESCHONEK: *What about iconic aspects of the characters like Ira's bowler hat and cotton tail or scraggly Frodo or the demented and capricious smiley-faced spheres of the G'L-Doses?*

DEMATTEIS: I remember having some specific ideas about Ira and the G'L-Doses but, again, Jon took those ideas, deepened them, expanded them, made them his own. Another artist would have landed in a very different place. As for Frodo: He was originally a dog, and Jon asked if he could be a cat instead, which was fine with me. Jon always had Frodo doing fun bits of business in the background and it added a wonderful texture to the stories.

MUTH: I felt there was something too similar between a dog and Ira. Too furry.

There were lots of conversations between us about characters, but I don't remember specific conversations about how they looked.

JESCHONEK: *Jon, the artwork has the appearance of watercolor throughout. How difficult was this to achieve? Was each page indeed fully painted in watercolor?*



■ Moon finds Ira in the wastelands in issue #5. Art by Muth.

TM & © J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth.

MUTH: Yes. Each page was painted in watercolor. Being able to inexpensively print full-color was relatively new. What I had done in comics for *Epic Illustrated* magazine was watercolor so Archie Goodwin encouraged me to do that. There were places where I used ink, or pastel, or whatever the scene seemed to cry out for, but the main medium was watercolor.

JESCHONEK: *Did this lead to deadline problems?*

MUTH: Yes. I tend to do pieces over and over. I didn't have a technique that I knew would make a picture work. I just had to do it until it felt right.

JESCHONEK: *Jon and J.M., tell me about your collaborative process in the pre-online era of the 1980s. Did you fax materials back and forth? Send them by snail mail? What difficulties, if any, did this present?*

DEMATTEIS: Jon and I lived in the same area, so we would get together in person. When we started, I thought we'd do the book so-called Marvel Style, with Jon drawing from a detailed plot, followed by my scripting from the art. But I learned during the first issue that wouldn't work, the story kept changing and, by the time I was ready to dialogue, I was adding many things that were never in the plot, completely upending what Jon had drawn. So out the window went that method!

I think what we finally landed on after experimenting with various approaches was me writing the script—with all the copy in place and either a brief description of the visual action for each page or, sometimes, goofy drawings (I hesitate to call them layouts) to communicate what I was seeing in my head. (You can see some of those so-called layouts in the Dark Horse edition.) Jon would take that and run with it, either meeting the vision in my head or, more often, completely transcending it. He was free to visually interpret the story however he wanted, as long as he didn't contradict what was in the script.

But we worked in a lot of different ways. I have wonderful memories of the two of us meeting up in a local diner where we'd discuss the outline I'd written for that issue, with Jon literally drawing layouts on napkins as we discussed it. It was all very free form!

MUTH: Much drawing during diner breakfasts. He probably paid, then I would go away and make pictures.

JESCHONEK: *Jon, how did you design the unique look of each chapter? For example, the dark and desolate wastelands of the Machovia-Goyimia War in Chapter 5, "In a Lone Land" or the brighter palette of the village of Poof on planet Pillbox.*

MUTH: I saw them as chapters. And they were memories. My memories of people are all different. That's just the way I remember things. Some people and situations I remember more like *MAD* magazine's Don Martin. Some are like a Terence Malick film, or Tarkovsky. I just tried to be Moon remembering what J.M. had written, then I painted that.

JESCHONEK: *Was the occasional use of full-page splashes a mutual decision between you and J.M.?*

DEMATTEIS: My memory is that it grew out of serving the story. *Moonshadow* was a very novelistic approach to comics, which meant we didn't have to adhere to typical comic book storytelling. Some sections followed the classic panel-to-panel template, but I liked the idea of stopping the story, taking a breath, and going deeper into Moon's head, exploring backstory, philosophical ideas, emotions, inner monologues, for a few pages. That was the beginning of the full-page illustrations, which we explored even more deeply in *Farewell, Moonshadow*.

Jon is, as everyone knows, an extraordinary painter and he made every full pager look worthy of a gallery. I probably tried that approach a few times, saw how well it turned out thanks to Jon's interpretation, and thought, "Yes, this is a fantastic way to go."

JESCHONEK: *Jon, during production of the series, did you and J.M. have any disagreements about specific elements or directions of the material?*

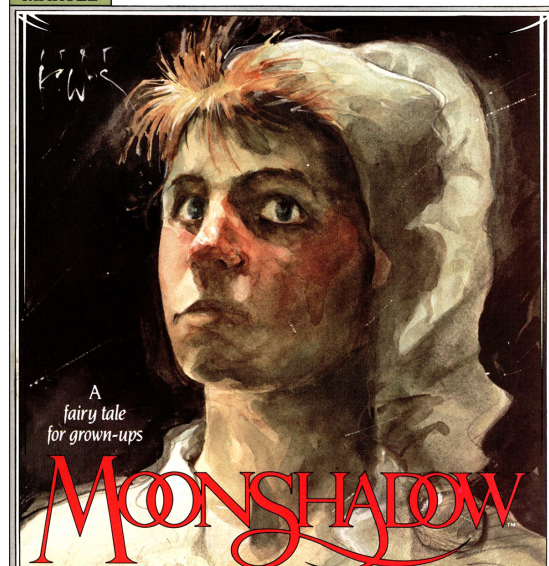
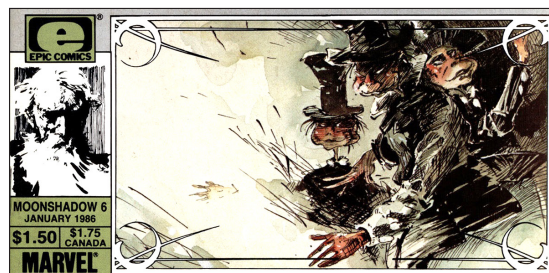
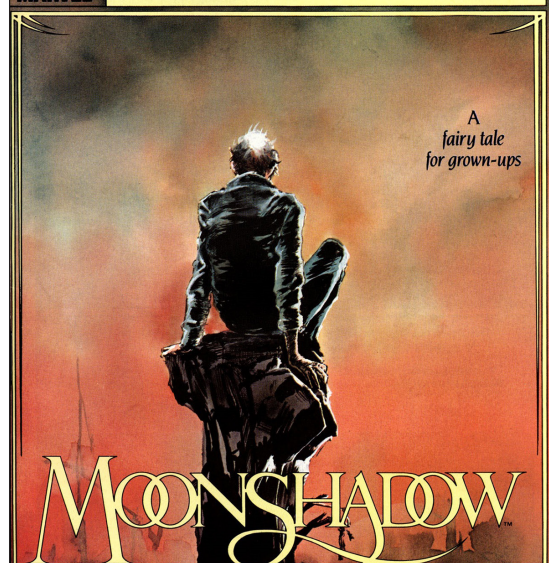
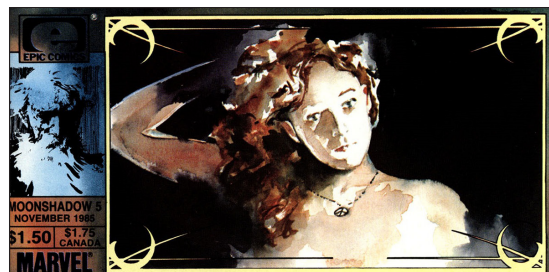
MUTH: I don't remember any real disagreements.

I remember J.M.'s drawings were wonderful! Hilarious. I couldn't turn them into pages but they were fantastic and inspiring.

J.M. was already on the Marvel-DC track, in the sense that he had established himself in *Weird War Tales*, creating *Creature Commandos*, and terrific stories in *Defenders*, *Marvel Team-Up*, and *Captain America*.

On the other hand, I was at the outermost rings of comics with the smattering of things I had done.

Moonshadow took the form it did partly because of my ignorance. I couldn't make the story work using a traditional approach. I tried,



Moonshadow's title was at the bottom of the cover, adding to its unique look.

TM & © J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth.

Kent Williams' take
on Moonshadow
and crew from
issue #6.

TM J.M. DeMatteis and
Jon J. Muth. © J.M. DeMatteis,
Jon J. Muth, and Kent Williams.

but I wasn't versed in drawing comics. I knew who Kirby, Ditko, John Buscema were, but I had been studying Caravaggio and Whistler and Repin.

When Archie Goodwin saw the first Moonshadow images I had done in a more traditional approach, he said, "No, no, no! Paint it!" Since I was so limited, I think J.M. leaned into his natural prose writer's voice. What came through that writing wasn't like anything else in comics. It was more Dickens, Jonathan Swift, and mystical like Blake, with heavy doses of...vaudeville.

JESCHONEK: What can you tell us about designing the covers for the Epic series?

MUTH: I am mostly a terrible cover artist. It frustrates me to reduce a story to a single image. That becomes advertising and I'm just not good at that. However... if we had two images... that would be interesting. So I designed those border elements that separated a lesser and greater

image. I used a border design for the text pages on *Dracula* as well. When I told Archie Goodwin I wanted to do this, AND I wanted to put the logo on the bottom of the front, he just stood there blinking. Then he went to battle for us. The problem, which I was oblivious to, was that comics are displayed in a store so you don't see the bottom. But he felt the book was different enough that it would be noticed.

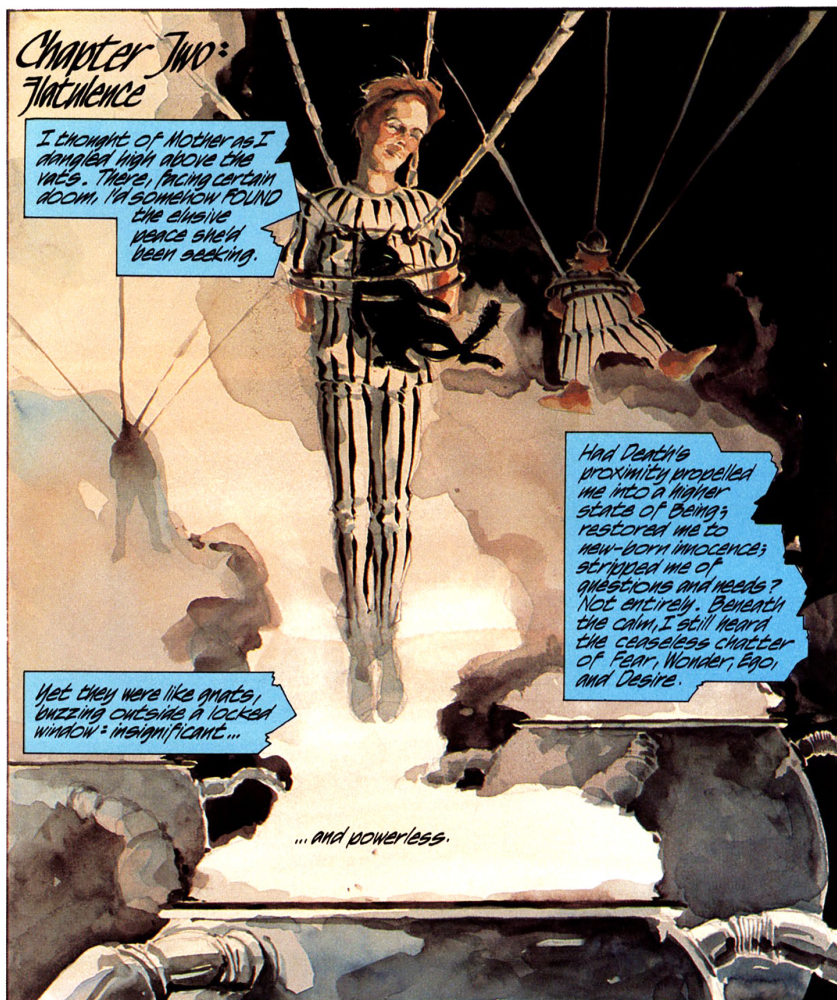
JESCHONEK: What led to Kent Williams' and George Pratt's involvement in the series?

MUTH: I was getting backed up. And I am slow anyway. I had exhibits scheduled and I was working on writing *Dracula*, plus going to school. Kent and George were my best friends and supremely talented. Kent stepped in on issue 6. George did 11. I think I did thumbnails for at least some of that. Then, later, they stayed up with me for a 24-hour marathon and helped finish issue 12. I am so grateful for their friendship and help.

JESCHONEK: How did Kent and George's work mesh or contrast with yours?

MUTH: They had seen me painting the book so they knew how it was different from their work. When I asked them to work on it—you'd have to ask them to be sure—I think they both did a kind of riff on what I was doing. It didn't really look like Kent's or George's personal work.

Interestingly, seeing their interpretations clarified things for me, showed me what I was doing.



THE STORY

JESCHONEK: J.M., did you intend to comment on mental illness and the journey to recovery?

DEMATTEIS: Not consciously, no. But the book certainly deals with childhood trauma and how it impacts our life's journey. I think that's something many of us can relate to.

JESCHONEK: Tell us about any parallels between Moonshadow and Peter Pan.

DEMATTEIS: I didn't read *Peter Pan* as a kid—I read it as an adult when I had kids of my own—but, growing up, I adored the Disney animated movie and the Mary Martin TV version and the story has been marinating in my unconscious ever since. (I think *Peter Pan*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Pinocchio* are the three children's stories that resonated most deeply for me as a kid—you can find echoes of all of them in a lot of my work.) As for *Pan*'s impact on *Moonshadow*, I suppose it's the idea of being set free of the nursery and flying out into a strange, surreal universe. That's what happened to the Darling children and that's what happened to Moon. But, aside from Moon quoting Barrie when he leaves the G'l-Doses' zoo, I didn't put that in there consciously. It just happened. And I'm sure you can find many other stories with similar themes.

JESCHONEK: Were there intentional similarities to the work of Charles Dickens?

DEMATTEIS: Yes. *David Copperfield* especially. But, as noted, just about every book and author I've ever loved had an impact on the story.

JESCHONEK: Did JRR Tolkien's work influence the series (beyond the naming of Frodo the cat)?

DEMATTEIS: Not really. If it's in there, it's unconscious. I read, and adored, *Lord Of The*

Rings when I was a teenager, but I wasn't really thinking about it beyond the cat's name and the Tolkien quote.

JESCHONEK: *What purpose and/or symbolism informed the unpredictable G'L-Doses?*

DEMATTEIS: They're the unfathomable universe, the cosmic questions that we all have to wrestle with if we want to make sense of life. They're meaninglessness, meaning—and whatever answers we find along the way.

Moon's relationship with the G'L-Doses was also a way for me to grapple with my relationship with my father—he was a bit of an unfathomable G'L-Dose in his way—not that I realized it at the time.

JESCHONEK: *Tell us about Ira and his role in the story. He seems to represent the unbridled id but is more complicated than that.*

DEMATTEIS: In one way Ira is the embodiment of all the worst impulses floating around in our psyches. He's also comic relief. But, as the story evolved, so did the character. He was far deeper and more complex than that. We saw that there was more to him than just lust and greed and anger. There was a beating heart, and a deep, contradictory soul, underneath that. And the tension between those things made for a fascinating character.

JESCHONEK: *Are there any unreliable narrators in the story other than Ira?*

DEMATTEIS: As noted, Old Moonshadow himself is completely unreliable. And, who knows, maybe I was an unreliable narrator, too! But we were both unreliable in terms of *details*. The *essence* of the story was true. That's fiction, right? We lie to get at the deeper truths.

JESCHONEK: *Have you ever considered telling the true story of Ira's life? Do you know what it is?*

DEMATTEIS: I don't know what the true story is and I never want to know! I loved that the truth of his backstory remained elusive.

JESCHONEK: *Do you still agree with Moon (and Aunt Ettie) that the universe is a madhouse?*

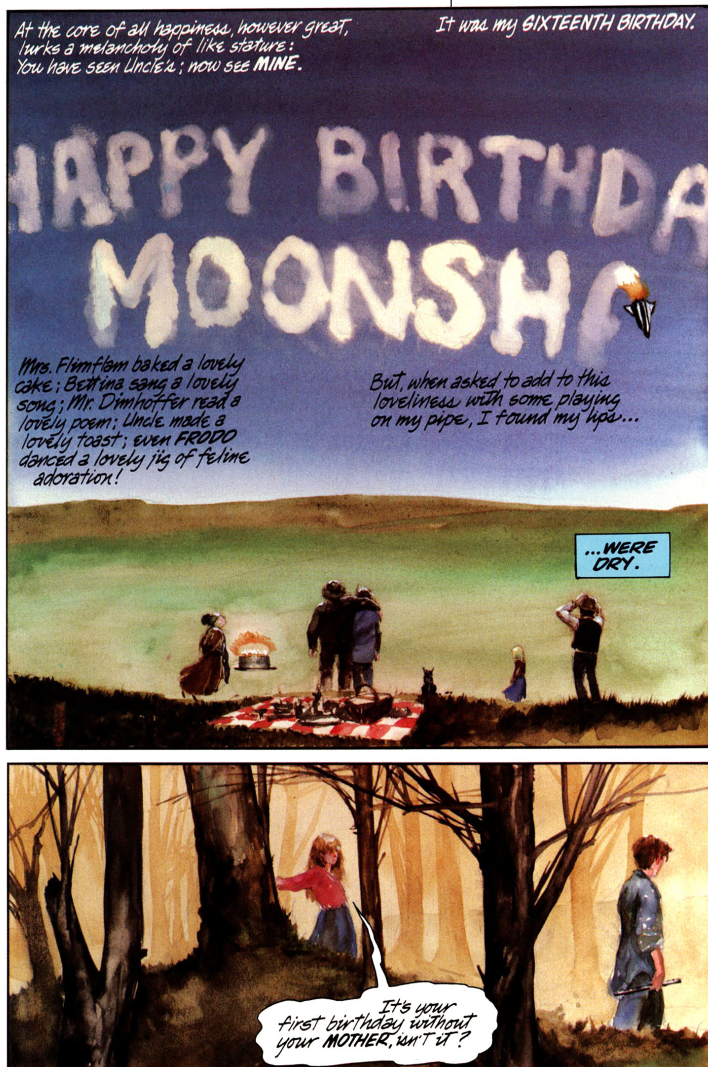
DEMATTEIS: Not in the least. I think the world can seem like a madhouse, but when you dig beneath the skin of the universe, you discover magic, miracles, divinity. Moon's journey isn't just from innocence to experience, it's from (apparent) meaninglessness to meaning.

JESCHONEK: *At the end of the 12-issue series, the narrator says, "And so I conclude my song of innocence; the tale, not of my life – but of my awakening." Were those solely intended as the words of the fictional narrator? Or were they also meant to describe your personal purpose in telling the story?*

DEMATTEIS: Yes, both.

(left) Muth's inspirations are on full display on this page from issue #8 featuring an homage to Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss." Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (right) Moon celebrates his birthday in issue #8. Art by Muth.

TM & © J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth.





Ira and Moon on the cover of issue #9. An example of the two-image cover without the trade dress. (inset) the final cover art. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth.

THE (FIRST) ENDING

JESCHONEK: *What was the reaction like from Archie Goodwin? From Marvel Comics? From readers? From critics?*

DEMATTEIS: The Epic crew was incredibly supportive and really believed in the book. And, from what I recall, the reviews at the time were generally very good. We were even nominated for a Kirby Award, which was the precursor of the Eisners.

JESCHONEK: *Were there any issues related to marketing this unique series? Or did everything fall into place, given Epic's reputation for publishing quality work and the growing market for more mature and literary comics and graphic novel content?*

DEMATTEIS: My memory is that Epic did an excellent job of promoting the book.

MUTH: Epic did much to promote the book. Like you said Robert, "the growing market..." but back then, it was still new. There were several snags. I mentioned the title on the bottom—that was relatively minor. The direct distribution channels were both a boon and a difficulty. It meant we could do more

adult themes, but the system wasn't really ready for that. As usual, not the violence, but the sex and nudity was an issue. The mention of masturbation caused a little stir.

DEMATTEIS: Oh, yes. I remember that! And it was just the mention of it. We didn't show anything.

MUTH: Archie Goodwin and Epic were completely behind us. None of my art was ever changed or censored. I don't think anyone ever asked you to change your text, did they?

DEMATTEIS: I think early on they removed a "f*ck." And, later, they said, "Nah, it's okay, so go ahead and use it." But it wasn't like that came up every issue. Those words were used very judiciously.

MUTH: Those elements being part of our story let us deepen the emotional connections in the book, but they also got noticed.

JESCHONEK: *Did you have a sense when you were creating Moonshadow that it was groundbreaking and unique in the graphic novel medium?*

DEMATTEIS: Not in the least. I think anyone who believes the work they're doing is "groundbreaking" is delusional. It was groundbreaking for me as a writer, it was a groundbreaking collaboration for the two of us, but I had *no idea* how it would be received by readers and I certainly didn't think it would

still be in print, still being appreciated, all these years later. I'm incredibly grateful for the long life *Moonshadow* has had.

MUTH: I don't think "groundbreaking" is something you can shoot for. We just told the story we wanted to in the way we wanted to. I didn't imagine it was going to be remembered. I remain astounded.

ABOUT "FAREWELL"

JESCHONEK: *What made you two decide to revisit Moonshadow one last time for Farewell, Moonshadow?*

DEMATTEIS: The idea for *Farewell* started back in the '80s. We discussed doing it as the original series was wrapping up, but the timing wasn't right. A decade later, we'd moved *Moonshadow* from Epic to Vertigo and discussed resurrecting the idea. And since the story was about an older Moon, tested and tried by adulthood, and we were also older, it was the perfect time to tell the tale.

JESCHONEK: *How did you decide to tell this coda of a story as you did, primarily (but not exclusively) with text pages flanked by full-page color illustrations?*

DEMATTEIS: We didn't want to tell the same kind of story the same way, we wanted to challenge ourselves and stretch creatively. I loved working on *Farewell*: I think it's some of my best writing and Jon's art was just magnificent. As brilliant as he was on the original series, he transcended himself with *Farewell*.

JESCHONEK: *How did it feel to return to Moon's story?*

DEMATTEIS: It felt the same and completely different, because we were reuniting with a character we knew very well, but finding him at a very different place in his life, and telling his tale in a very different way.

MUTH: The original *Moonshadow* had a very broad spectrum of emotions. In *Farewell*, the emotions were in a different range, more distilled. For me, the restraint in *Farewell*, *Moonshadow* is more devastating.

JESCHONEK: *What were you trying to convey with Farewell?*

DEMATTEIS: In many ways, it's the same journey young Moon took, but from the perspective not of a boy, but a grown man with responsibilities to work, family, all the burdens that come with adulthood. Moon had a revelation in his youth (his spiritual awakening at the climax of the original series), a new way of



seeing the world, being in it—but that's been lost. And it takes a terrible tragedy to put him on a path, however difficult, that will help him rediscover that lost truth, but in an even deeper, truer, and more lasting way.

That, of course, is just one way of looking at the story, there are other levels and layers at work.

JESCHONEK: Did you intend to further reinforce the theme of awakening to the cruelty and madness of life, as Moon recalls finding and losing happiness to capricious fate?

DEMATTEIS: Losing to what *appears* to be a "capricious fate"—and finding something deeper, truer, something eternal, that lies beneath that *apparent* capriciousness. I don't for a moment believe the universe is cruel and meaningless. And neither does Moon.

MUTH: At the time, I identified with the Moon in the original—someone who cannot see any meaning, or order, who lives in terror about the future and history, who copes using humor, and desperately wants to not be alone. And I identify with the Moonshadow in *Farewell*—someone who recognizes that to overcome suffering, you must look for the meaning in suffering. Someone who has faith in love. Not because it wins every time, but it ultimately wins.

JESCHONEK: When Moon dies at the end, does he become a G'L-Dose like his father, or is the image

of the G'L-Dose rising from him into the night sky intended solely to be symbolic and elegiac?

DEMATTEIS: That's up to the reader to decide. If we overexplain these things, they lose their magic and mystery. And, of course, both answers can be true simultaneously!

JESCHONEK: How would you characterize the response to *Farewell*? Did readers and critics embrace it?

DEMATTEIS: My memory is that some people understood what we were doing and took it into their hearts, while others, who were expecting something akin to the original series, might have been disappointed. I think, over time, that disappointment has fallen away and folks get what we were going for.

THE FUTURE OF MOONSHADOW

JESCHONEK: Looking back from your current vantage point in life, what aspects of the series, if any, might you change? (E.g., elements of the story, aspects of the artwork)

DEMATTEIS: I've learned, over the years, to respect, and accept, the work of my younger self. There are things I'd change about just about *everything* I wrote years ago (maybe even *weeks* ago!) but that work is a reflection of who I was at the time, and I've learned to appreciate that.

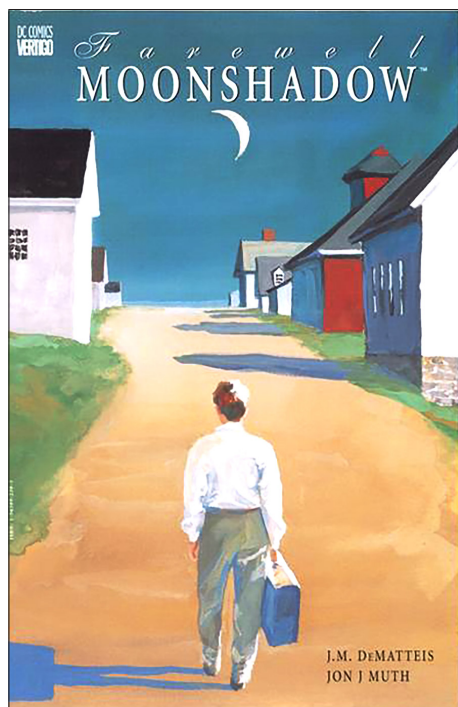
(left) A sublime portrait of Ira from the cover of the DC/Vertigo reprint of *Moonshadow* #10.

(right) Artist George Pratt lends a hand in issue #11.

TM J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth. © J.M. DeMatteis, John J. Muth, and George Pratt.

(top) DeMatteis and Muth returned to the character in the *Farewell Moonshadow* one-shot. (bottom) We close with a dynamic original page from *Moonshadow* #5. Art by Muth. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © J.M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth.



MUTH: My answers here are only bravado. I don't really know why it worked or resonates. I wouldn't know how to change anything. It's like changing a child.

JESCHONEK: *What do people say to you today about Moonshadow?*

DEMATTEIS: I'm continually amazed that *Moonshadow* is still being reprinted in new editions—the Dark Horse version is the very best of them all—and that new readers are discovering it for the first time. So many people hold this book close to their hearts and I am incredibly grateful.

I was recently at a convention in Brazil and I can't tell you how many copies of *Moonshadow* I signed. Oceans of appreciation for the work flowed my way and it filled my heart. *Moonshadow* is a story that's made its way around the world, something I never could have imagined back in the '80s.

MUTH: I get overwhelmed by how much the book has meant to people.

JESCHONEK: *Might it be possible for Moonshadow to be adapted for film or television?*

DEMATTEIS: Absolutely. I'd love to see it translated to the screen. In my mind, I envision an animated movie, aimed at adults, done in Jon's style: paintings come to life. I think that would be fantastic.

JESCHONEK: *Do you think such a project could again come to pass and succeed in today's comic book and graphic novel marketplace?*

DEMATTEIS: Yes. Back in the '80s, the avenues for creator-owned work were limited—which is why Epic was such a wonderful imprint, you could do your own unique work and be paid fairly well for the effort; it was, in many ways, the blueprint for DC's Vertigo line. Today there are many more avenues open to creators. Of course, getting paid for that work is a lot harder these days. For every *Walking Dead* or *Invincible* there are dozens of creator-owned projects where writers and artists are barely scraping by.

JESCHONEK: *Do either of you have a feeling that Moonshadow was a high point of your careers in one way or another? Do you think of it as a sort of magnum opus?*

DEMATTEIS: Definitely a high point. *Moonshadow* allowed me to find my voice as a writer and became a springboard for all the work that followed. It cracked me open and set me on a new creative path. And my creative partnership with Jon was certainly a high point.

Moon is one of a small group of projects I hold closest to my heart.

MUTH: *Moonshadow* has repeatedly nudged, and elbowed, and cajoled me to remember how important it has been in my life. I'm very grateful.

JESCHONEK: *Would you consider collaborating again on something new? Have you ever discussed the possibility?*

DEMATTEIS: I'd work with Jon again any time on pretty much anything. But more important than our collaboration is our friendship.

MUTH: Agreed! I think we are both waiting for the right thing to show itself. But it's going to have to take us both by surprise!

ROBERT JESCHONEK is a USA Today-bestselling author based in Steve Ditko's hometown of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. He has scripted comics for DC and AHOY and edits the *Legends of Indie Comics: Words Only* series of prose fiction anthologies featuring classic indie comics characters (including Concrete, Nexus, Cerebus, Grimjack, and Flaming Carrot) as written by their creators. He has also written official Star Trek and Doctor Who fiction. Visit him online at www.bobscribe.com.



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THE BRIGHTEST STAR IN THE SKY:

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

FRANKIE RAYE

NOVA

by Joe Norton



ROY THOMAS

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Since the birth of the Marvel Universe, the Fantastic Four has always given comic readers the most memorable cast of supporting characters. Doctor Doom and Black Panther are some of the faces that made their debut within those pages and are still resonant today. While the first one hundred issues of the Fantastic Four are widely considered the blueprint of the industry we all love, the memorable characters did not stop appearing in the pages when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby left the book. In fact, a second wave of Marvel creators left their mark as well and no character burned as intensely as Frankie Raye's Nova.

Originally introduced by Roy Thomas as a love interest for Johnny Storm, Frankie Raye looked like just another pretty face in a long list of the Human Torch's girlfriends. But it was clear that Frankie's story could not be contained in a typical romantic B plot. A few years later in John Byrne's historical run, she became a fully-fledged, albeit derivative, hero. And then in a nod to a groundbreaking FF story, Nova became the herald of the Fantastic Four's most epic supporting character, Galactus.

It was in that role that Nova's intensity shone brightest. Her time as Galactus's herald would give her the most important role in the Marvel Universe. Or would it? Join *BACK ISSUE* as we endure bad dates, fly the skies, and witness galaxies dying. Watch Nova as she shines briefly and brightly in the Marvel Universe.

A NEW FLAME

One of the reasons that *The Fantastic Four*, both the characters and the flagship Marvel title (and arguably of the industry), remained popular through the mid '70s was the book's consistent tone and quality. Wunderkind writer Roy Thomas took over after Lee left *The Fantastic Four*, and while he steered into standard tropes and characterizations of the genre, he kept the book bursting with excitement and energy.

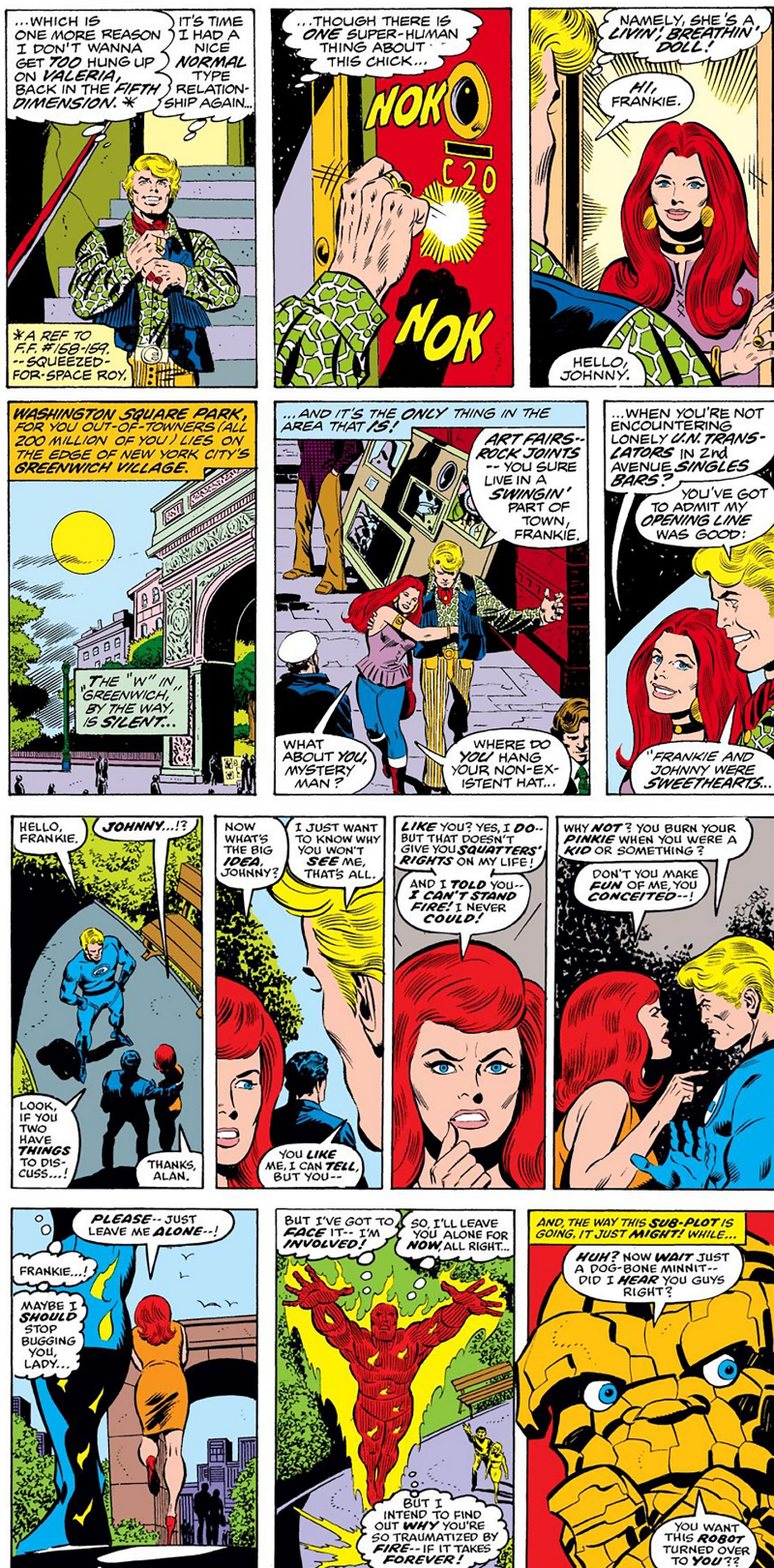
For the entirety of the Fantastic Four's history, Johnny Storm had been shown to have a roll call of girlfriends. At this time in Johnny's life, readers had seen him dating Dorrie Evans, a member of the Inhuman Royal family, Crystal, and less memorably, blue-skinned Valeria of the Fifth Dimension (the place, not the musical group).

He was licking his wounds from that fling with Valeria when readers met Frankie Raye in *FF* #164 (Nov. 1975). In a recent interview for *BI*, Roy Thomas was hard pressed to recall Frankie as anything but a romantic interest for Johnny but did give some insight into her origin. Thomas told *BI*, "I chose the name 'Frankie Raye' because of the earlier 'Frankie Ray' pseudonym used at Marvel by [classic Marvel Bullpen inker] Frank Giacoia." A closer reading of Frankie's introduction, rendered by a young artist in his very early work named George Perez paired with Thomas' knowledge and love of Marvel history, her debut looks remarkably familiar to another red-headed love interest in *Amazing Spider-Man*. Watch Johnny's surprise as he opens the door and sees a glowing and gorgeous red haired Frankie and the reader had to consider that Thomas and Perez were referencing Mary Jane Watson's "Jackpot" introduction to Peter Parker several years prior.

As expected, the first date with Frankie (A United Nations interpreter by trade) was a disaster, interrupted by an attack from the Crusader, a revised Marvel Boy, another Thomas nod to Marvel's deep history. Johnny was attempting to keep his secret identity from Frankie but that failed and the reader briefly saw Frankie startled by the Torch's "Flame On" transformation.

Nova is born in *FF* #244. Cover by John Byrne.

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(top) Frankie Raye debuts in *Fantastic Four* #164. Art by George Perez and Joe Sinnott. (bottom) Not being able to stand fire seems like a deal breaker for dating the Human Torch. *FF* #181 art by Ron Wilson and Joe Sinnott.

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But it was more than surprise when in *FF* #171 (June 1976), readers saw Frankie's reaction to Johnny's flame with her anguish captioned as "this has all happened before" as he flies out her window to face Gorr, the Golden Gorilla (not Thomas' finest character work). *Fantastic Four* #181 (Apr. 1977) had Frankie break it off with Johnny when she simply admitted, "I can't stand fire!" a seeming deal breaker for dating the Human Torch. Frankie's last appearance (for a while at least) was issue #191 (Feb. 1978) when Johnny left her waiting at her door as he flew yet again to face the dangers of the Plunderer.

At this point in her history, it is hard to see Frankie Raye as anything more than the long-suffering girlfriend plot device. But her stars were about to change as John Byrne began his historical run.

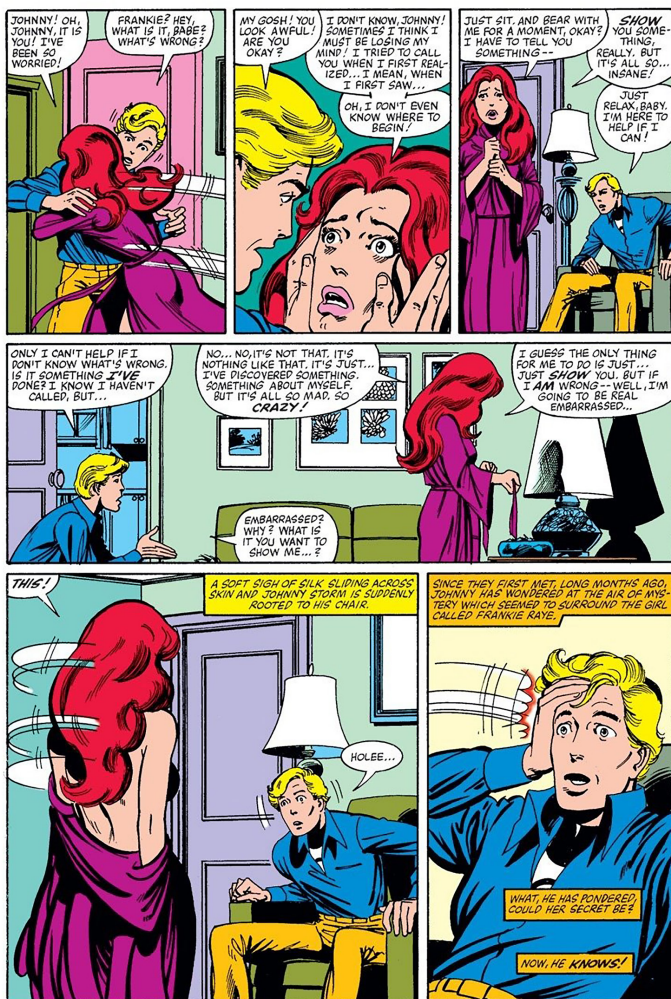
A NEW STAR

John Byrne had just come off one of the most transformative runs of comics history when he left *Uncanny X-Men* with Chris Claremont and took over full creative control of the *Fantastic Four* with issue #232 (July 1981). Byrne's time on the book re-invigorated classic characters like Diablo and the Puppetmaster, doubles down on the menace of Doctor Doom, and in *FF* #237 (Dec. 1981) brought back Frankie Raye. We meet her again in the most dramatic way possible when she drops her robe and reveals something off panel to Johnny only hinted at in Roy Thomas's era.

FF #238 (Jan. 1982) has one of Byrne's most iconic covers of the '80s that draws direct attention to Frankie Raye's "Startling Secret." Inside readers were treated to one of the more convoluted origins stories, even to seasoned readers. Johnny listened as Frankie revealed her innermost secrets. Frankie's stepfather, Thomas Raye, was actually Professor Phineas Horton, the creator of the World War 2 Invader, the android Human Torch. As a teenager, while helping an increasingly crazed Horton, Frankie was covered in chemical fire which caused her to transform into a flaming torchlike figure. Fearing for her safety and sanity, Horton gave her a costume of special properties to harness the flame, brain washed her into forgetting the fire all together and implanting an aversion to fire as well. Meeting Johnny triggered Frankie's dormant fire compulsion (and fear) and now she revealed all to Johnny.

Byrne's depiction of Frankie in her monochromatic costume was only slightly less impressive than her debut fully engulfed in flame, recalling the Human Torch look but maintaining her own style. After a playful chase flying through Manhattan skies, Frankie was examined by Reed Richards in the Baxter Building's laboratories and readers were tantalized by Byrne with a possible "Fantastic Five". The newly fire-powered Frankie spent a brief time adventuring with the *Fantastic Four*. Contributing immediately as a hero, she faced mysterious aliens with Ben's Aunt Petunia (239), battled Quicksilver (240), and fought against ancient Roman robots alongside the Black Panther (241)

Frankie also made a cameo in Marvel's first miniseries, *Contest of Champions* (June 1981). All of this excitement was typical *Fantastic Four* fare and Frankie was now firmly in place as a member of Marvel's first family. That stability was threatened by the arrival of Terrax the Tamer, a former herald of Galactus. It was in this storyline that Frankie Raye's true destiny was revealed.



FRANKIE GOES SUPER NOVA

In *Fantastic Four* #242 (May 1982), Terrax appeared riding into town on an asteroid, involving the group (plus Frankie) in a plot against an ailing Galactus. Depicted in Byrne's usual clean and focused art style, this three-part story is the definition of a mini epic with Manhattan's World Trade Center being cast out into space by Terrax and appearances by Spider-Man, the Avengers, and "a whole slew" (according to the promotional material) of Marvel's finest heroes. Byrne was always a master of visual storytelling and the grandeur of Kirby matched with his own fluid pencils made this a thrilling and tense showdown with Galactus.

In *FF* #243 (June 1982), Terrax explained that he wanted the Fantastic Four's help in breaking free from Galactus's control. Terrax revealed that Galactus was weaker than ever and could be defeated by the combined strength of Terrax and the Four. *FF* #244 (July 1982) was told in a flashback as an emotionally wrecked Johnny Storm recalled the previous night's events to Frankie's roommate Julie Angel. Galactus was too weak to survive beyond the encounter with the collected heroes and had planned to consume Earth immediately.

Here, Frankie Raye stepped into the spotlight. Taking a page from the Silver Surfer's memorable sacrifice told back in *Silver Surfer* Vol 1 (Aug. 1968), Frankie volunteered to serve as Galactus's herald in order to spare Earth. Initially, Galactus was hesitant because he was too weak to give Frankie the full set of powers. Frankie demonstrated her true character in this exchange as she explained to the Devourer of Worlds that she was already imbued with fire abilities (not so with previous heralds). All the failing Galactus had to do was augment her already considerable strengths with the star spanning "Power Cosmic" and thus Nova was born.



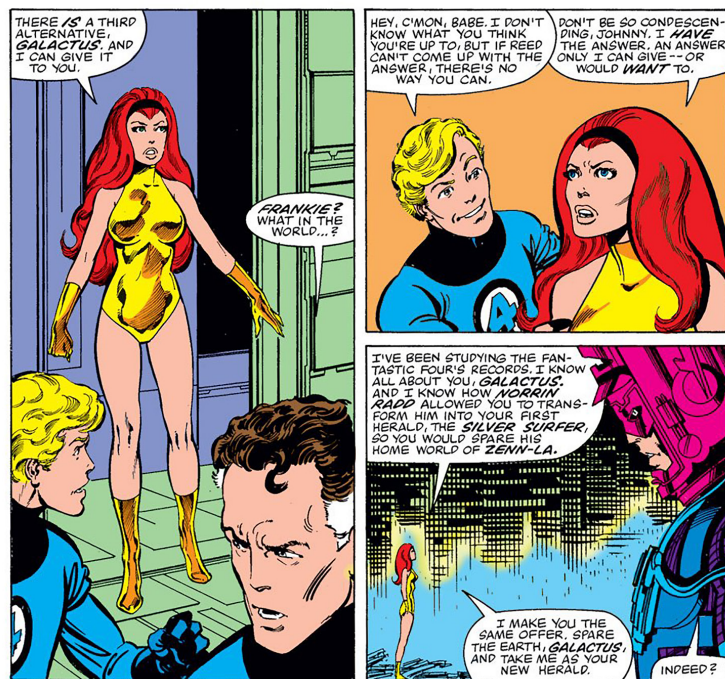
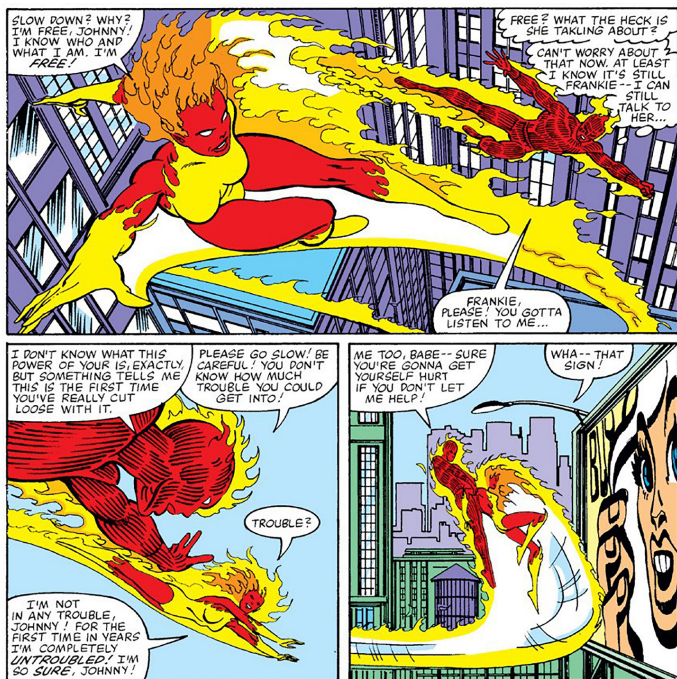
(left) Frankie has something to show Johnny. Take a wild guess. (right) If this is what you guessed, congratulations! *FF* #237 and 238 art by John Byrne.

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John Byrne remembered Frankie's transformation to Nova on his wide-ranging blog *byrnerobotics* in February of 2006: "Nova was more of an extrapolation than an actual act of 'creation.' Frankie Raye already existed and had a mysterious 'fear of fire.' When I took on the *FF* my choice was to abandon her or build on what little we knew. I opted for the latter. Then, as I did my stories designed to restore Galactus to his former place in the pantheon, the idea of Frankie becoming his newest herald seemed a natural."

He continued on that point in July of 2010, "The way storylines assemble themselves in my head is complicated. I usually like to just let characters bump into each other, kind of in free fall, until threads start to weave themselves together. When I have enough of those, I think 'This is a Doctor Doom story' or 'This is a Galactus story.' In the case of Nova, I wanted to move Frankie out of the story, and Galactus needed a new herald, but the two did not begin as the same thing. They just sort of drifted into the same plot thread and one day I saw what I needed."

Byrne clearly embraced Frankie's physical transformation into Nova: part Human Torch, part Silver Surfer, all in full '80s chromatic glory and the artwork rendered it gorgeously. Frankie took the name of Nova and flew off into the galaxy leaving behind a broken-hearted Johnny, the rest of the Fantastic Four, and a thankful Earth behind. But Nova's adventures had just begun.



A LIVING STAR'S PATH OF DESTRUCTION

It did not take long for Nova to reappear in the skies of the Marvel universe. In *Fantastic Four* # 256 (July 1983), Nova was seen fully engaged in her duties as a herald of a still weakened Galactus. Inside the issue, Nova encountered a fleet of Skrull ships and in issue #257 (Aug. 1983) readers were treated to some inner monologue that highlighted Nova's true feelings (or lack thereof) about her obligation to Galactus. "The fools! Do they really think they stand a chance against the herald of Galactus!" This thought made clear that Nova was comfortable in her complicity in the destruction of planets.

Nova led Galactus to Tarnax IV, the Skrull throne world, and watched as he consumed it. Here is John Byrne at his finest. The emotional and dramatic stakes were unforgettable with Galactus and Nova bearing down on the planet, intent on absolute annihilation and indifferent to the death of billions. Readers were given a full movie experience for their sixty cents as Byrne crafted Kirby-esque action scenes in a storyline with consequences that reverberated through Marvel continuity for decades to come, up to and including the 2006 event *Secret Invasion*. In the ensuing years, Byrne's *Fantastic Four* reputation was well earned and issues like 257's "Fragments" were the main reason.

Slightly more problematic for Byrne, despite the thrilling panels of the story, were some of Nova's thoughts concerning Galactus depicted inside the same issue. Nova was pictured thinking to herself, "Do I dare put the word to it? Am I in love with Galactus?" while she watched as the energies of the Skrull planet coursed through Galactus. Comic books were never meant to be anything more than serial entertainment and John Byrne understood the assignment. Despite his mastery of the genre though, these scenes read disappointingly shallow then and are disturbingly insulting to modern sensibilities. Byrne had just dedicated considerable story time over several years to develop Franke Raye's Nova as a strong, independent, and groundbreaking female character. Her sacrifice for planet Earth and her role as Galactus's herald positioned Nova thematically and in continuity, as one of the most powerful characters of any gender in all of Marvel comics. To have her say, "I know my liberated sisters back on Earth would have kittens but I find him absolutely irresistible" arguably undid much of the work Byrne had just done with Nova inside the pages of *Fantastic Four*. Re-reading Byrne's quotes, he clearly put some thought into Frankie Raye's transformation. Seeing her reduced to a love-struck teenager was a disappointing turn for such a well-developed character and regardless of intent in 1983, difficult to read 45 years later.

(top left) Frankie uses her powers for the first time in *FF* #238. (bottom) Frankie flies into action with the *FF*. (top right) Frankie volunteers to be the new herald of Galactus. *FF* #244 art by Byrne.

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THE HERALD ORDEAL

After Nova's appearance in *Fantastic Four* #262 (Jan. 1984) "Trial of Reed Richards" (John Byrne famously included himself in the action here), she disappeared from continuity for several years. Nova returned in *Silver Surfer* #1 (July 1987) where she was written almost as a co-lead to the Surfer, who was now free to roam the stars after breaking free from his banishment to Earth. Nova was used well by writers Steve Englehart and then Jim Starlin in that title as she was shown every bit the equal to the Silver Surfer.

Throughout the '80s, Nova continued to appear in other Marvel titles like *Power Pack* and *Alpha Flight*, playing her role of Galactus's herald like so many before. There was even an adventure in Roy Thomas' *Doctor Strange* run where Nova served as a priestess of Cytorrak eventually fighting the Juggernaut. Readers now continually saw what a powerful and fun character Nova could be.

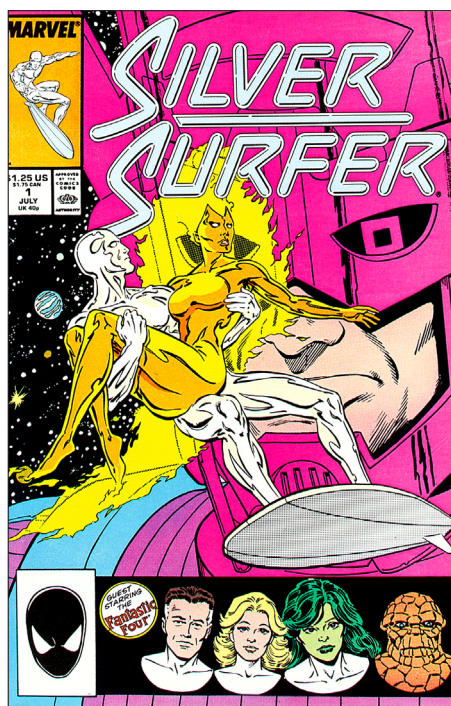
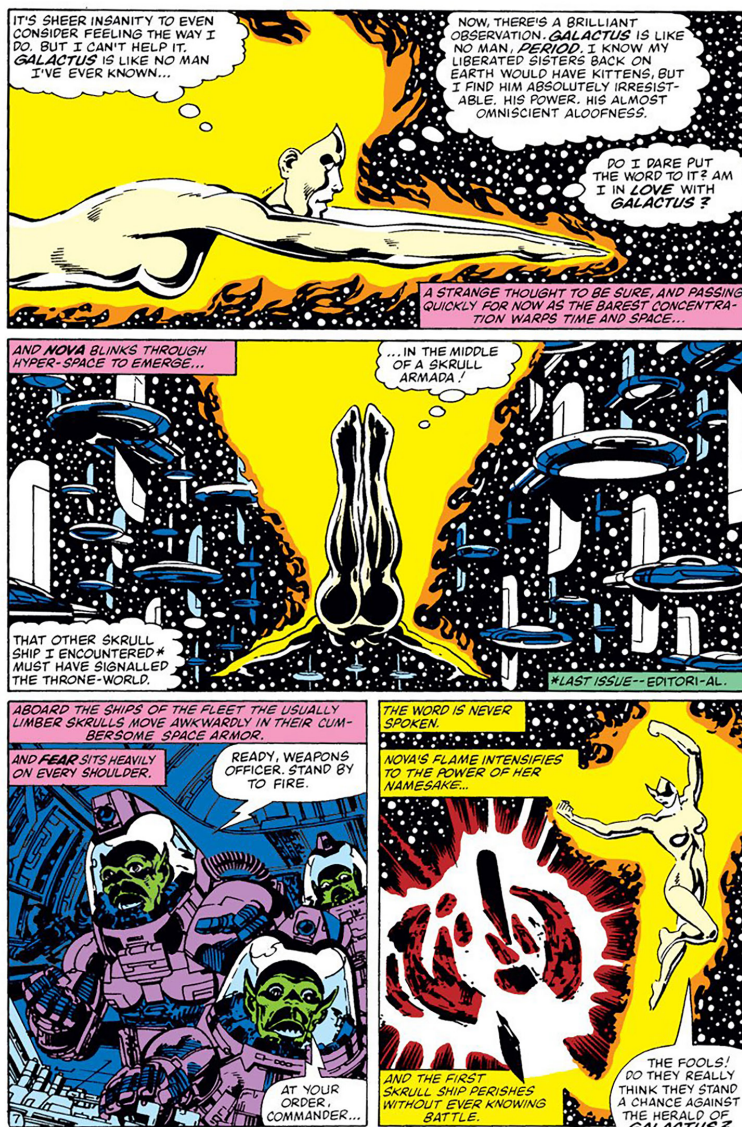
However, her finest moments came in writer Ron Marz's time on *Silver Surfer* during and after the company-wide crossover event *Infinity Gauntlet*. Marz tells *BI*, "Those were really the first comics that I ever wrote, so I was learning the job as I was doing the job. Obviously I had great mentorship from Jim Starlin showing me the ropes. I inherited the title from Jim when he left and started the *Infinity Gauntlet* storyline."

Marz started his exploration of Nova's mindset in a fantastic story from *Silver Surfer* #51 (Jul 91) where she finally started to feel the moral weight of her deal with Galactus. The Surfer brought her back in time to a planet later revealed as Stone Age Earth in an attempt to make her see the consequences of her continued servitude to Galactus. That trip to Earth's past set the wheels turning for a bigger emotional journey ahead for Nova.

Marz explains, "Galactus and his herald, whoever it happens to be at any point, are a package deal. I wanted to explore Nova's guilt and complicity in what Galactus was doing, so obviously Galactus was going to be a part of it. There was also a hint that Nova could be a love interest for the Surfer. Nova was one of the few characters who could understand the same anguish that the Surfer had suffered and continued to deal with."

After several more *Infinity Gauntlet* tie-in issues of Surfer, Marz began to tell a story long brewing in the psyche of Nova as well as the Marvel universe. The six-part "Herald Ordeal" told in *Silver Surfer* #70-75 (Aug.-Dec. 92) was a cinematic showdown between Galactus and many of his former heralds. Marz had just the story to give Nova her due. "The 'Herald Ordeal' was actually the first storyline that I wanted to tell when I took over the book. It was something I was really planning from very early on, but when I took over the book it was right in the midst of the *Infinity Gauntlet* saga, so I had to write a series of tie-in issues that dovetail with that. Once those tie-in issues were done, there were a few other stories and characters the editor wanted me to touch on, so the 'Herald Ordeal' ended up getting moved back to starting in issue #70, giving us an opportunity to have a big finish to the storyline in the anniversary #75 issue. It was a story I really wanted to explore, I just had to wait a year and a half to do it. I felt like the issue of Frankie Raye willingly serving Galactus, and on occasion being a participant in planetary genocide, was a story that needed to be told."

Marz adds, "Her agreement to serve Galactus was a selfless decision, but certainly it comes with the baggage of



(top) Nova leads Galactus to the Skruul homeworld. An event whose effects are still being felt today. *FF* #257 art by Byrne. (bottom) Nova prominently appears on the cover of *Silver Surfer* #1. Art by Marshall Rogers and Joe Rubinstein.

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being part of the destruction that Galactus wreaks. Ultimately, I thought most people would be a lot more reluctant in her role than she appeared to be.”

The ‘Herald Ordeal’ started in *Silver Surfer* #70 (Aug 92), when Nova was banished from Galactus’ service after she refused to participate any further in the destruction of planets. Nova was never braver than when she defies her master with “There are people there! Millions of people! I can’t just look the other way while you casually erase them from existence!” Galactus empowered another herald, this time Morg the Executioner, an emotionless killer with no moral qualms with the utter destruction of planets and civilizations. The Surfer got wind of Galactus’s treatment of Nova and, after meeting former herald Firelord, they found a temporarily amnesiac Nova pole dancing on a back water planet (Another unfortunate use of a cosmically powered female character). Nova was

reinvigorated while she and the Surfer gathered up the other former heralds, Terrax and the robotic Gabriel the Air Walker, for an ultimate showdown with Morg and Galactus.

Artist Ron Lim did some fine pencils in this exciting and explosive tale filled with space combat and heroic clashes. Marz praises Lim, “A big part of it is working with an artist who can pull off the scope and grandeur of those kinds of fight scenes, and certainly Ron Lim is near the top of the list. The story you are telling is only as good as the artist drawing it. It was a blessing for me to work with a talent like Ron early in my career.”

The ‘Herald Ordeal’ ultimately reads as one would imagine the battle between six cosmically powered figures and one Galactus. The fight scenes were riveting and Nova made the ultimate sacrifice when she was slain by a backstabbing Morg. This enraged Galactus so much

that he allowed Morg to be defeated and then grudgingly accepted another deal from Firelord to be led to uninhabited planets (Will these heralds never learn?).

When asked about Nova’s death, Marz disclosed, “There was no real resistance on editorial level because we had talked it through and decided this was a story worth telling. I think there was some surprise on the part of readers, but this was before social media, even before message boards, so if you wanted to register your displeasure about a story or a character death, you had to write a letter, get a stamp, drop it in a mailbox. In a lot of ways, I feel like Nova’s death was her paying the price for being complicit in the destruction that Galactus brings.”

STAR LIGHT NEVER FADES

By the time of her death at the end of the “Herald Ordeal”, Nova had become a major player in the Marvel universe. No longer constrained by the pages of the *Fantastic Four* or *Earth*, Nova thrived in other titles and her loss had dramatic weight beyond her last panel. Nova has had a long afterlife even beyond her resurrection in the 2010 miniseries *Heralds*. Nova has appeared in animated series, video games, and movies in the ensuing decades. Her position in the pantheon of Marvel characters is firmly in place. In 2025’s *Fantastic Four: First Steps* the Silver Surfer is played by Julia Garner. Watching her soar next to Galactus made it easy to see how the DNA of Nova was intertwined in that performance.

Frankie Raye’s character arc showcased the best of the Marvel universe. Introduced as a minor supporting character, under the direction of inventive and imaginative creators, Nova became one of the most powerful characters in comics continuity, a major player in major storylines. From girlfriend to hero to cosmic entity, Frankie Raye’s Nova shines brightly in Marvel history. Ron Marz summed up why Nova still holds up after all these years “She was a great companion and counterpoint to Surfer, as well as being a character worthy of her own stories. While Surfer has seen cosmic wonders and experienced things human minds can scarcely imagine, seeing a story through Nova’s eyes humanizes the experience. Surfer is, in a lot of ways, a mirror held up to humanity, while Nova allows humanity to gaze in wonder and experience what’s out there.”

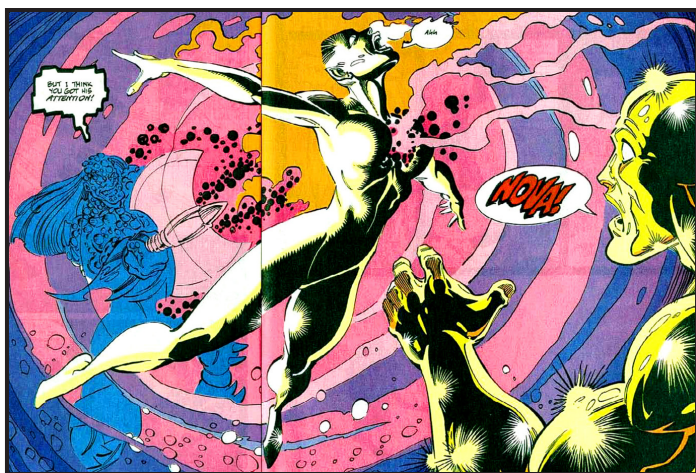
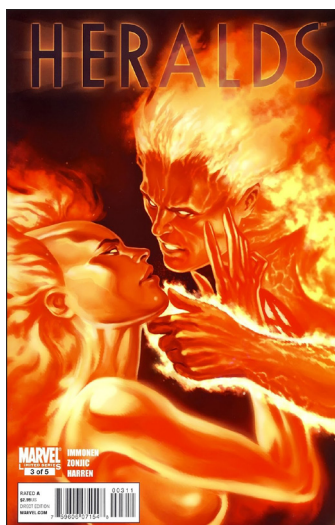
BACK ISSUE thanks Roy Thomas for his background information and Ron Marz for his insightful answers as a creator and a fan.

Author Joe Norton recently lost his chance to serve as a herald of Galactus after failing the physical. He will try again when Galactus re-appears in the South Jersey skies.



RON MARZ

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(top left) The heralds unite against Morg and Galactus.

Cover by Lim and Christopher. (bottom) The death of Nova. *Silver Surfer* #75 art by Lim and Christopher.

(top right) Nova returns in *Heralds*. Issue #3 cover by Jelena Kevic Djurdjevic.

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THE GREATEST STORY NEVER..... FINISHED

Epic Illustrated was a novel experiment for the Marvel Era. Part *Heavy Metal*, Part *Creepy*, the magazine was first published in Spring of 1980. It was common to see familiar names like John Buscema and Bernie Wrightson next to newer artists like Rick Veitch and Pepe Moreno. In the '80s, John Byrne's name attached to a comic was essentially a sure thing. His imagination was barely contained in the monthly titles like the *FF* and *Alpha Flight*. *Epic* was perfect for Byrne to flex his creative muscle. Enter "The Last Galactus Story."

The story was told in nine issues running from #26-34 (Oct. 1984-Feb. 1986) and was exactly as advertised, Galactus and Nova at the end of the universe investigating mysterious cosmic events. The artwork was stunning; big panels and glorious colors perfectly suited for a magazine enhanced by the work of inker Terry Austin and colorist Glynnis Wein.

No character benefited more in this serial story than Nova. Her monochromatic look and fiery fluidity was never better depicted than in the huge panels. Scenes with Nova on a long-dead Earth were certainly more inviting than cold oversized machinery in Galactus's world ship.

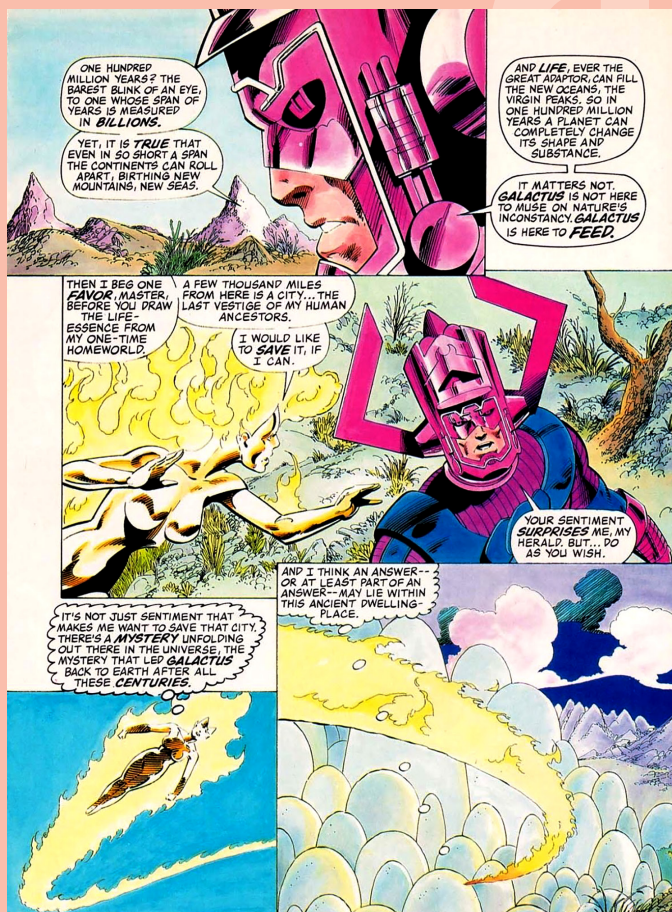
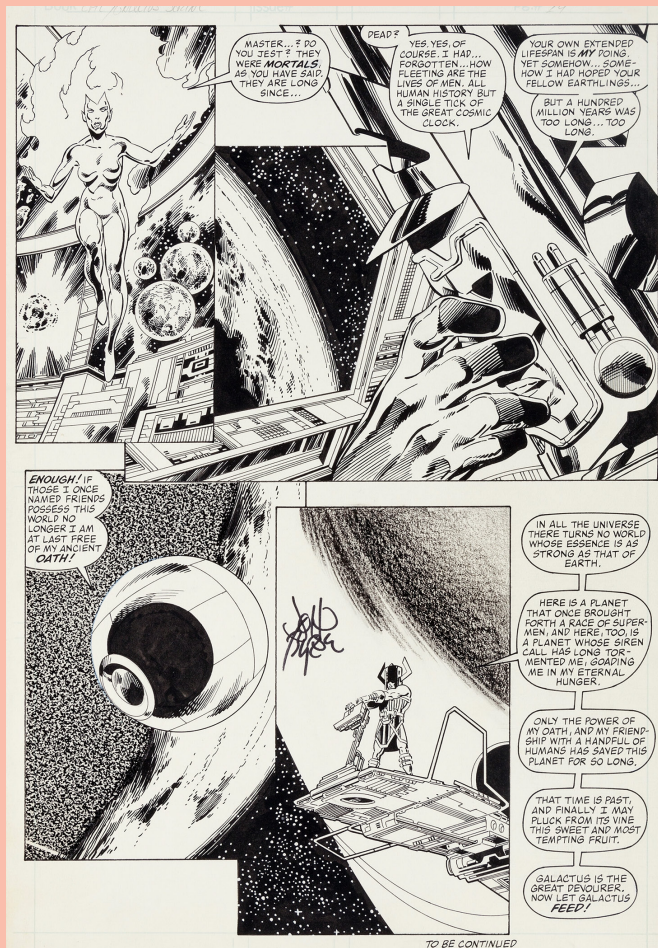
Unfortunately, *Epic* was cancelled before Byrne could conclude his story. Years later, he spoke about how the story would have ended. And it was big news for Nova. On his blog Byrne revealed, "Nothing is left but Galactus and his loyal herald, Nova. Realizing at last what his

purpose is, Galactus cracks the seal on his suit, starts to remove his helmet, and in that instant all the energy he has absorbed explodes out of him. He becomes the 'big bang' of the next universe, and when the smoke clears, we see Nova has been reborn, as that universe's Galactus." Frankie Raye is now the Devourer of Worlds in a new universe. Except it never happened.

"The Last Galactus Story" may have not been seen by many, but those who did remember it well. Ron Marz recalls "I remember reading 'The Last Galactus Story' and wondering what the hell happened to it when it didn't continue. In the *Silver Surfer: Rebirth* series that Ron Lim and I did recently, there's a sequence set on the abandoned Earth seen during 'The Last Galactus Story.' I remember that original tale fondly, and Ron Lim and I wanted to reference it in our story especially visually, because it's some of Byrne's best work." It is hard to question that statement and it is certainly one of Nova's finest moments as well.

(left) Nova and Galactus converse in *Epic Illustrated* #29. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (right) Nova makes a deal with Galactus before he consumes the Earth. *Epic Illustrated* #30 art by Byrne and Austin.

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TWOMORROWS AD PAGE

SPINNING A SPECTACULARLY AMAZING WEB

ROGER STERN'S SPIDER-MAN

by Tom Powers



Roger Stern begins his run on *Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-Man* #43. Cover by John Byrne and Joe Rubinstein.

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While *Spider-Man* in the early 1980s enjoyed a steady readership, it is the arrival of Roger Stern on *Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-Man* with issue #43 (June 1980) where reader excitement began to catalyze in recognition of his inherent understanding of this complex web-spinning superhero and his supporting cast of characters. This successful run led to Stern assuming the reins of the flagship title, *Amazing Spider-Man*, with issue #224 (Jan. 1982), treating us to an empathetic new take on the Vulture. From crafting a brutal-yet-thoughtful battle with the Juggernaut in *Amazing Spider-Man* #229-230 (June-July 1982), to debuting the brilliant Hobgoblin character in issue #238 (Mar. 1983), and giving us one of the most powerful Spider-Man stories ever—"The Kid Who Collects Spider-Man!"—in issue #248 (Jan. 1984), Stern revitalized and refined the character, setting a secure foundation for his Marvel renaissance through the remainder of the decade. Wishing to learn more about the creation of these classic tales, I contacted this Spider-Man writing legend via email, which resulted in this rewarding conversation:

TOM POWERS: While growing up, Roger, how did reading *Spider-Man* as a teenager shape your professional approach to writing the character?

ROGER STERN: *Amazing Spider-Man* wasn't the first Marvel Comic that I bought, but it was certainly the series that I followed most avidly. I'd never seen anything quite like *Spider-Man*. First, there was the way he moved, bounding over rooftops and hanging upside down from a web. And then, there was the way his stories were always told with a bit of wit. *Spider-Man*, as well as *Peter Parker*, has a distinct way of speaking... a unique voice, if you will. When I eventually got a chance to write stories about him—after reading *Amazing Spider-Man* for about fourteen years—I already knew how he should sound.

ROGER STERN

Andrew Fuld Frazier.

POWERS: Your tenure as writer of *Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-Man* essentially begins with issue #43. I find this debut issue to be significant for two reasons: 1) It offers a rarity in *Spider-Man* comics, a female villain in the form of the fashion-centered Belladonna. 2) Roderick Kingsley is first introduced. What did you enjoy about bringing these characters to the *Spider-Man* mythos, who are also featured in PPSSM #47-48 (Oct.-Nov. 1980)?

STERN: Aside from the Black Cat—and Princess Python, back during Steve Ditko's tenure—*Spider-Man* really hadn't any female villains to call his own. I'm not sure why I came up with Belladonna, other than I had been rereading a lot of Will Eisner's *Spirit* stories around that time. And Kingsley was mainly there to give her a motivation, at least, at first. He later became much more.

POWERS: A month later, *Amazing Spider-Man* #206 (July 1980) was published with your script that smoothly closes out several of Marv Wolfman's plotlines from previous issues of ASM. Moreover, with PPSSM #45 (Aug. 1981), you also conclude a two-part story that was written by Wolfman (and co-plotted by Steve Leialoha). How did you approach working on these issues?

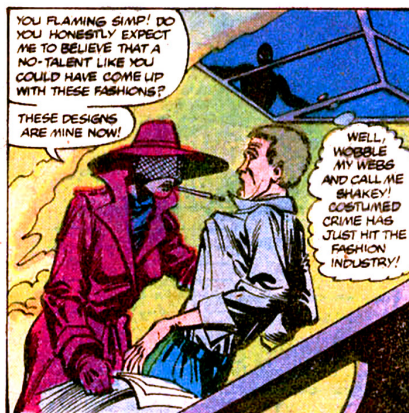
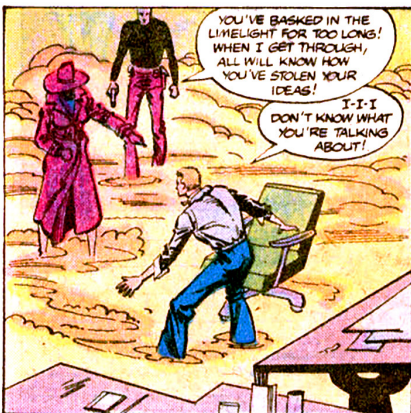
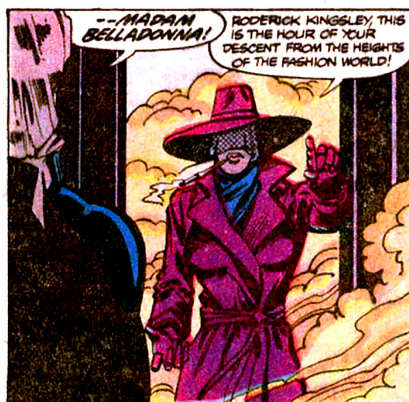
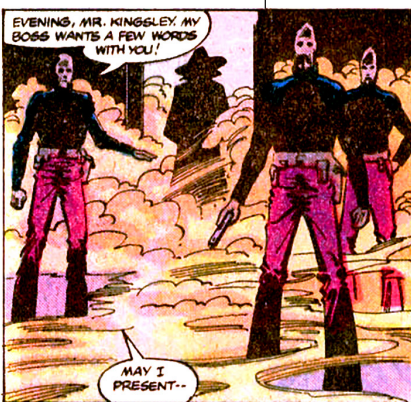
STERN: Interesting story behind that. Around the time that I was wrapping up the script for *Spectacular* #43, I was also lending Denny O'Neil a hand, by compiling letters pages for *Amazing*. So, when I stopped by his office to deliver some work, I asked about the title for issue #206, to make sure its letters page ran with the correct issue. Denny told me that the title was "In Love and War," and I said that was the title for issue #205 (June 1980), which had wrapped up the previous Black Cat story. But when I asked the title of his first issue, he said, "It's 'Mesmero's Revenge!'"—but my first issue is #207 (Aug. 1980)." And that's when we realized that there was no issue #206!

Amid all the confusion of an editorial reorganization, an entire issue had been overlooked. And Denny couldn't just move up his first issue because a major storyline still had to be resolved. There'd been a running subplot wherein Daily Bugle publisher J. Jonah Jameson had been acting irrationally. Jameson had been hospitalized and then had gone missing. But he needed to be back and in full command of his faculties by Denny's first issue. We needed to clear up that subplot, and fast. So, Denny and I sat down and quickly worked out a story for the missing *Amazing* #206.

Denny didn't have time to write it, so I wrote up the plot. But we needed a penciler, and all of the regular Spider-artists were tied up. Luckily, John Byrne was able to fit a rush job into his schedule, so I read the plot to him over the phone. (No Internet in those days.) We all managed to produce a complete story for *Amazing Spider-Man* #206 in about two weeks. Even better, the readers actually liked it. (I went into all this in more detail in my introduction to the *Spider-Man* by Roger Stern omnibus; it went into a second printing if you missed it the first time around.)

Of course, no good deed goes unpunished. Writing that issue of *Amazing* put me behind schedule on *Spectacular*. But luckily, sitting in the Spider-Office art files was the first part of an unfinished two-part story started by Marv Wolfman and Steve Leialoha. So, with Denny's kind permission, I copyedited that story to fit it into our ongoing continuity, and within a few weeks, it became *Spectacular Spider-Man* #44 (July 1980). And while issue #44 was going through production, I devised a plot for *Spectacular* #45 that wrapped things up.

(left) Roderick Kingsley is menaced by Madam Belladonna in issue #43. He would play a major role in Spider-Man's future. Art by Mike Zeck and Steve Mitchell. (right) *Amazing Spider-Man* #206. The issue that almost wasn't. Cover by Al Milgrom.



POWERS: *The ending of that issue, where the Vulture despairs over the death of his nephew Malachi (which occurred earlier in the issue), lamenting that he has lost his only living relative, hits hard. What inspired you to present a more empathetic side to the Vulture?*

STERN: At the time, I was just delighted to get a chance to write a story with the Vulture, who was my all-time favorite Spider-Man villain. I got to tell more of his story later, in *Amazing Spider-Man*.

POWERS: *Several months later, PPSSM #50 (Jan. 1981) shows you making an alteration to Spider-Man history by revealing the aliens who worked with the Tinkerer back in Amazing Spider-Man #2 (May 1963) were, in actuality, Mysterio's henchmen. Why did you wish to craft this revisionist change to the aliens' origin story?*

STERN: I always agreed with Len Wein that extraterrestrials really don't fit all that well into Spider-Man's corner of the Marvel Universe. Len, as you may recall, revealed in *Amazing Spider-Man* #160 (Sept. 1976) that the Tinkerer had never been an alien being. And I thought, "What if the other *aliens* in ASM issue #2 weren't extraterrestrials either?" Of course, you'd need some great special effects to make everyone think they were aliens. And who's better at effects than Mysterio? It made for a fun couple of issues, and it gave the pre-Mysterio Quentin Beck a little added motivation in his antipathy towards Spider-Man.

POWERS: *The next month, PPSSM #51 (Feb. 1981) presents this astounding moment when the typically meek Debra Whitman, who is the secretary for Peter's graduate department at Empire State*



University, attacks Mysterio, who is holding her hostage, smashing his "fishbowl" helmet. How did it feel empowering her in this sequence?

STERN: Hey, even shy, retiring people can be pushed too far. And really, I felt it was about time that Deb stood up for herself.

POWERS: The following issue, #52 (Mar. 1981), brings to fruition the four-part backup story that ran in PPSSM #48-51 featuring the White Tiger as Spider-Man finally takes down Gideon Mace, the villain who nearly killed his fellow hero in issue #51. Why did you structure this storyline in this unique way, and did you have any other plans for the White Tiger?

STERN: I had enjoyed the White Tiger's adventures ever since his first appearance in *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*. I thought that Bill Mantlo and George Pérez came up with a great character in the Tiger. During Bill's previous tenure on *Spectacular*, the Tiger had become a recurring cast member in his civilian identity as Hector Ayala. And *Spectacular's* readers really took Hector into their hearts, to the point where they kept asking to see the White Tiger acting as "Spider-Man's partner."

Okay, I had problems with those requests. First, Bill had written Hector out of the series in issue #32 (July 1979), and I really saw the Tiger as his character. And second, *Marvel Team-Up* aside, Spider-Man worked best as a loner; he's not the sort of character who should have a partner. And things were further complicated by the fact that Hector's secret identity as the White Tiger had been revealed on television in *Spectacular* #20 (July 1978).

Well, you can't be a costumed man of mystery without a secret identity. We're not talking celebrity superheroes like that Fantastic Four, who live in a high-security headquarters. The White Tiger was this working-class guy who lived with his family in an apartment in the Bronx, where any supervillain could easily attack him. It's a dangerous lifestyle. The idea behind the slow build in those back-up features was to concentrate on Hector's life before bringing in Spider-Man. Anyway, by the end of *Spectacular* #52, we had Hector survive the experience and sent him and his girlfriend Holly riding off into the sunset, hopefully toward a happy ending. In hindsight, the White Tiger—who was Marvel's first Puerto Rican superhero, after all—deserved a better send-off. But I never seriously thought that issue #52 would be the end of his story. If anything, I expected Bill Mantlo to pick up on Hector's and Holly's travels, perhaps in the pages of the *Incredible Hulk*. I'm still kind of surprised that he never did.

POWERS: With PPSSM #53 (Apr. 1981), you depict, as in issues #49-50, Spider-Man having a soft spot for the Smuggler. Before that, he saved the new Prowler's life in issue #48. Why was it important to craft more vulnerable villains for Spider-Man to interact with in these stories?

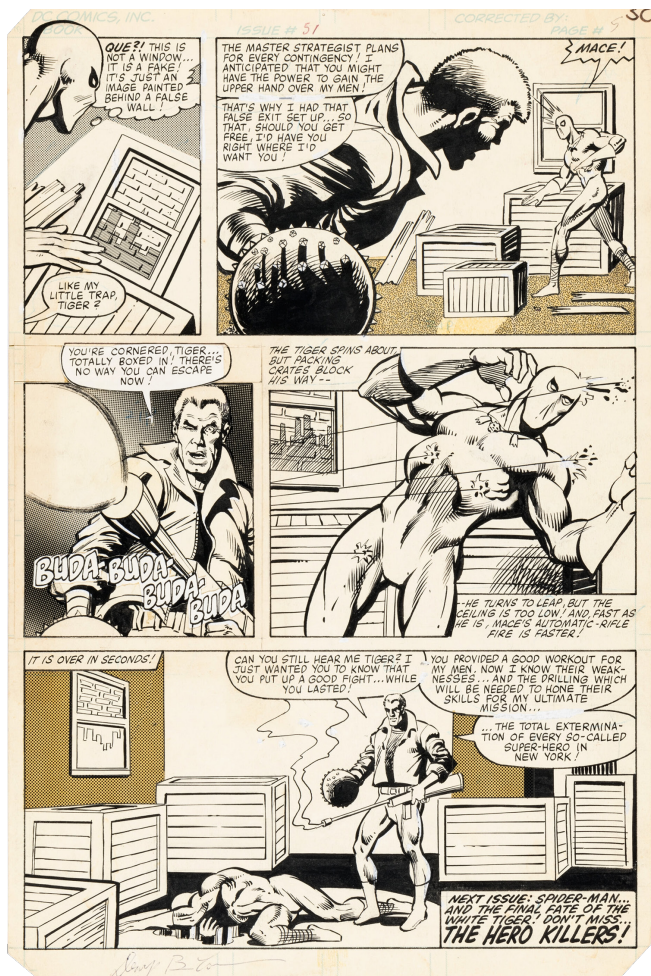
STERN: I never saw Spider-Man as a vengeance-seeking superhero. And I don't know that the Smuggler proved all that vulnerable. After all, he eventually became Goliath and later Atlas of the Thunderbolts.

POWERS: That's a fair assessment of the character. Continuing with this theme of unconventional villains fighting Spider-Man, your vision of Nitro in PPSSM #55 (June 1981) is quite bleak with your depiction of his bitterness and madness, especially in the way he betrays the only two people who believed in him, his daughter and attorney. What led you to depict him as such an irredeemable villain?

STERN: That's the kind of guy Nitro is. I was just trying to be faithful to the character as he'd been depicted by Steve Englehart and Jim Starlin in *Captain Marvel* #34 (Sept. 1974). My general rule of thumb is: The creators probably got it right.

POWERS: The next issue, PPSSM #56 (July 1981), Spider-Man fights Jack O'Lantern for the first time. Why did you want to bring Jack O'Lantern into Spider-Man's orbit, and did this story in any way inspire you to create the Hobgoblin the following year?

STERN: I had been intrigued by the craftiness of Jack O'Lantern when Tom DeFalco and Steve Ditko introduced him in the final



(top left) Stern writes his favorite Spider-Man foe, the Vulture, in #45. Cover by Alan Weiss. (top right) The White Tiger back-up story concludes in issue #52. Cover by Frank Miller and Bob Wiacek. (bottom) Things don't look good for White Tiger on this page from his back-up story in PPSSM #51. Art by Denys Cowan and Dave Humphrys. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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(top) What was supposed to be the beginning of a Stern/Byrne collaboration. Cover by Byrne and Rubinstein. (bottom) Spidey's origin is retold in issue #60. Art by Greg LaRocque and Bob Wiacek. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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issue of *Machine Man* (#19: Feb. 1981), and I thought that he'd make a great opponent for Spider-Man. A brand-new supervillain? Designed by Steve Ditko, the cocreator of Spider-Man?! How could I resist? But no, I never gave Jack O' Lantern a thought when creating the Hobgoblin.

POWERS: PPSSM #57 (Aug. 1981) brings back Will-O'-the-Wisp, a tortured almost-hero who rightfully wishes to enact revenge upon the Brand Corporation and the people responsible for his condition. Why did you wish to return to this character, who had not been seen since *Amazing Spider-Man* #167 (Apr. 1977)?

STERN: By that point in my tenure, I decided it was time to finally bring in more of Spider-Man's previously established bad guys—especially any who hadn't appeared all that often and who hadn't yet shown their full potential. And Will-O'-the-Wisp was arguably the most intriguing antihero to be introduced in Spider-Man by Len Wein. Moreover, his origins were still a complete mystery, and I love solving mysteries. So, I started formulating a backstory for the Will-O'-the-Wisp, and I decided that it would involve the Brand Corporation... the Corporation that you love to hate! Of course, several months would pass before I revealed the full story—by that point in *Amazing Spider-Man*, rather than *Spectacular*.

POWERS: PPSSM #58 (Sept. 1981) is a fun tale depicting the offbeat, admittedly low-stakes villain the Ringer battling Spider-Man. What did you like about working on this issue with your friend John Byrne?

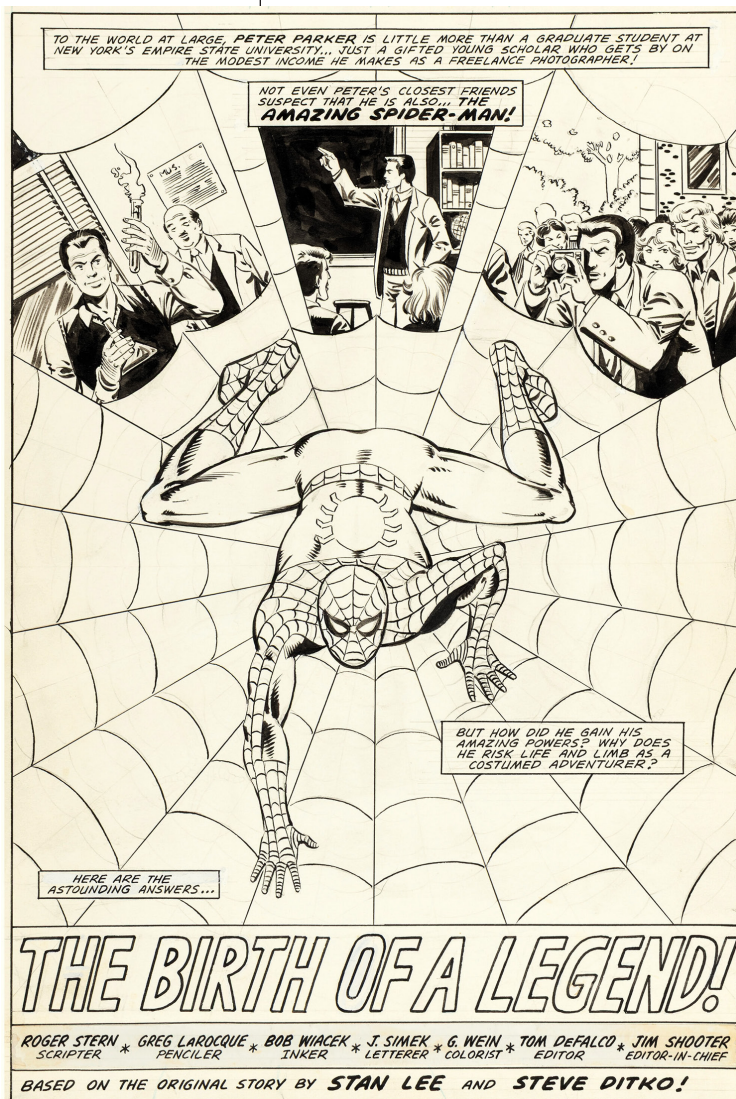
STERN: After John and I wrapped up our brief run on *Captain America*, we were looking for a new project that we could work on together. And when he heard that I still didn't have a regular artist on *Spectacular*, he offered to draw it. So, I made plans for a trilogy of stories that would re-introduce the Beetle and make him a more formidable Spider-Man foe. John redesigned the Beetle—as well as the Ringer, who obviously was never a serious threat, just an amusing opponent for Spider-Man to make fun of. Unfortunately, shortly after we completed issue #58, John had to give up penciling *Spectacular* due to scheduling problems on the *Fantastic Four*. But our one issue together was still a lot of fun.

POWERS: In PPSSM #59-60 (Oct.-Nov. 1981), you continue to develop your darker interpretation of the Beetle when we see how dangerous and manipulative he can be, especially in how he treats the Gibbon, who joins forces with Spider-Man against their now-mutual foe. How did you approach rehabilitating these admittedly b-list villains?

STERN: The Gibbon had been created by Stan Lee and John Romita Sr. in *Amazing Spider-Man* #110 (July 1972), which made him the last Romita/Lee Spider-Man creation. As with Jack O'Lantern, I couldn't resist reintroducing the Gibbon. And it was less a matter of rehabilitation, and more a matter of helping a character reach his potential.

POWERS: Perhaps most significantly since *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (Sept. 1962), you offer an extended version of Spider-Man's origin in the second story appearing in PPSSM #60, one that adds new elements to this story. What led to your retelling of this seminal tale?

STERN: First of all, someone at Marvel decided to make *Spectacular* #60 a double-sized issue. Why, I still don't know. But I'd already plotted the end of the Beetle Trilogy for twenty-two pages. And anyway, Ed Hannigan wouldn't have had time to draw an entire double-sized issue and still make the deadline. Our new editor Tom DeFalco saw the problem and suggested that I write a short story recapping Spider-Man's origin. He figured that we just needed to



find an available artist, while I expanded the origin's plot to fill seventeen pages. So, I went back over all the previous retellings—from the first 1968 black-&-white *Spectacular Spider-Man* magazine (July 1968) and from *Amazing Spider-Man* #94 (Mar. 1971), as well as the original story from *Amazing Fantasy* #15. I expanded a few scenes, but really, the only new thing I added to the origin was showing how Peter made his first costume.

POWERS: Around this time, how did you make the transition from working on PPSSM to working on *Amazing Spider-Man* with issue #224, and did you have a specific mindset to differentiate it stylistically from your work on PPSSM?

STERN: I'd just finished plotting *Spectacular* #61 (Dec. 1981) when Tom DeFalco offered me the writing assignment on *Amazing*. I had been writing Spider-Man stories for about a year-and-a-half and no longer felt like such a rookie. And since writing *Amazing Spider-Man* meant that I would get to work with John Romita Jr., I couldn't pass up the offer. But there was really no switch in mindset. I just kept writing about Spider-Man.

POWERS: With ASM #224, you start off on a strong note with a story titled "Let Fly These Aged Wings!" which shows a vulnerable, incarcerated Vulture convalescing from his last encounter with Spider-Man in Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan. Although he is staying there to avoid having to escape from a higher-security prison, he forms a warm connection with Nathan Lubensky. Why did you wish to begin your run on ASM with a focus on these two older characters forging a brief—yet memorable—connection?

STERN: Pardon me if I repeat myself, but the Vulture was always my favorite of all of Spider-Man's enemies. I had left the old bird pretty broken when we last saw him in *Spectacular* #45, so I figured that it was time to check and see how he was doing. Besides, I knew that J.R. would do a great job of drawing him. And yes, this story also featured Nathan Lubensky, who was then the new man in May Parker's life. Nathan and the Vulture just seemed to work well together, as a couple of older gents who had been around the block a few times. Side note: I'd planned to eventually have Nate and May get married, but I never got around to it.

POWERS: The following issue, *Amazing Spider-Man* #225 (Feb. 1982), brings to fruition your long-running plotline from PPSSM concerning English major Greg Salinger, who was gradually forming a bond with TA Peter Parker but is revealed to be the antiheroic—and mentally unstable—Foolkiller. How did you feel about finally bringing the resolution of this storyline to readers?

STERN: Ah, the Foolkiller! A great name and concept for a supervillain. I could never understand why such a great-looking character had never before been cover-featured. Well, with issue #225, I finally got the Foolkiller on a cover. As you noted, I'd started setting up this story in *Spectacular* and took advantage of

my newest writing gig to finally turn him loose on Spider-Man. It felt good to have Salinger's story pay off after all those months of setting him up.

POWERS: In *Amazing Spider-Man* #226-227 (Mar.-Apr. 1982), you bring back the Black Cat and reveal that she is actually not insane regarding her obsession with Spider-Man—as revealed by Marv Wolfman at the end of ASM #205. Instead, she was "faking it" in order to be put into a low-security mental health facility from which she could easily escape. How did you formulate this interesting revelation regarding Felicia Hardy?

STERN: When we'd last seen the Black Cat in ASM #205, Spider-Man had tracked her down, only to discover that she had some strange obsession with him... or did she? Was the Black Cat really in need of psychiatric care, or was there a method in her "madness?" I thought that Felicia was crafty enough to fake mental instability, knowing that it would be easier to escape from a hospital than from a prison.

POWERS: Showing that cunning side to Felicia definitely strengthened her character! Also, in *Amazing Spider-Man* #227, Spider-Man successfully convinces Captain Jean DeWolff to secure a pardon for the Black Cat. What inspired your decision to set Felicia on a more heroic path—one which has paid off in creative dividends in the Marvel Universe?

STERN: Even though he'd become involved with the Black Cat, Spider-Man still tried—though often in vain—to maintain some sort of order in his life. And while he'd been accused of being a criminal for much of his career, clearly he wasn't. If he was going



Stern comes to *Amazing Spider-Man* with issue #224 and bring the Vulture with him. Cover by Ed Hannigan, John Romita Jr., and Bob Layton. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com). (inset) One of the best-known stories from Stern's run begins in ASM #229. Cover by Romita Jr. and Milgrom.

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(left) One way to get rid of a pesky Spider-Man. ASM #229 art by John Romita Jr. and Jim Mooney. (right) Spider-Man battles Will O' the Wisp and the transformed Tarantula in ASM #235. Art by John Romita Jr. and Frank Giacoia. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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to have any kind of serious relationship with Felicia, he had to convince her to go straight.

POWERS: *What was your inspiration behind the two-part all-time classic "Nothing Can Stop the Juggernaut!" that runs in Amazing Spider-Man #229-30?*

STERN: That's one of those stories that just came to me one morning. "Nothing Can Stop the Juggernaut!" was already sort of the guy's catchphrase, and I suspect that the story was born from a desire to give Spider-Man some bigger physical challenges. I know that J.R. wanted a chance to cut loose and draw some big, tough characters. And, boy, did he ever! Fourteen pages into issue #229, John gave me four panels of the Juggernaut walking through the side of a building, just to scrape Spider-Man off his back. After that, I knew that J.R. could draw pretty much anything.

POWERS: *Speaking of John Romita Jr., your collaboration with him over your two-year stint on Amazing Spider-Man is quite iconic as you bring out the best in each other as writer and illustrator. What did you appreciate about this classic collaboration?*

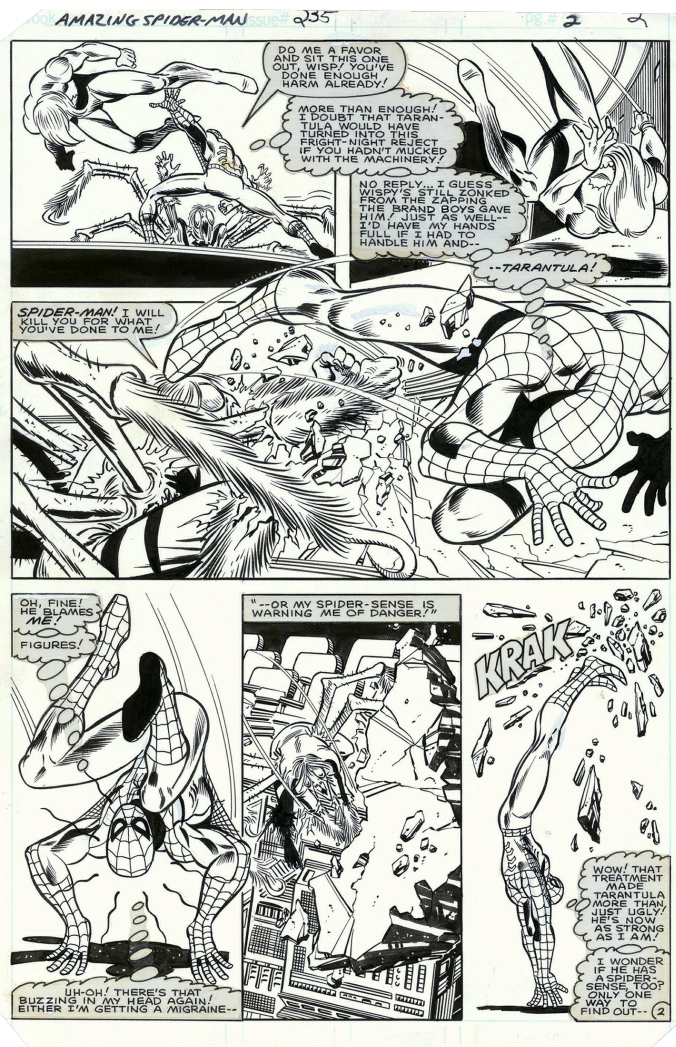
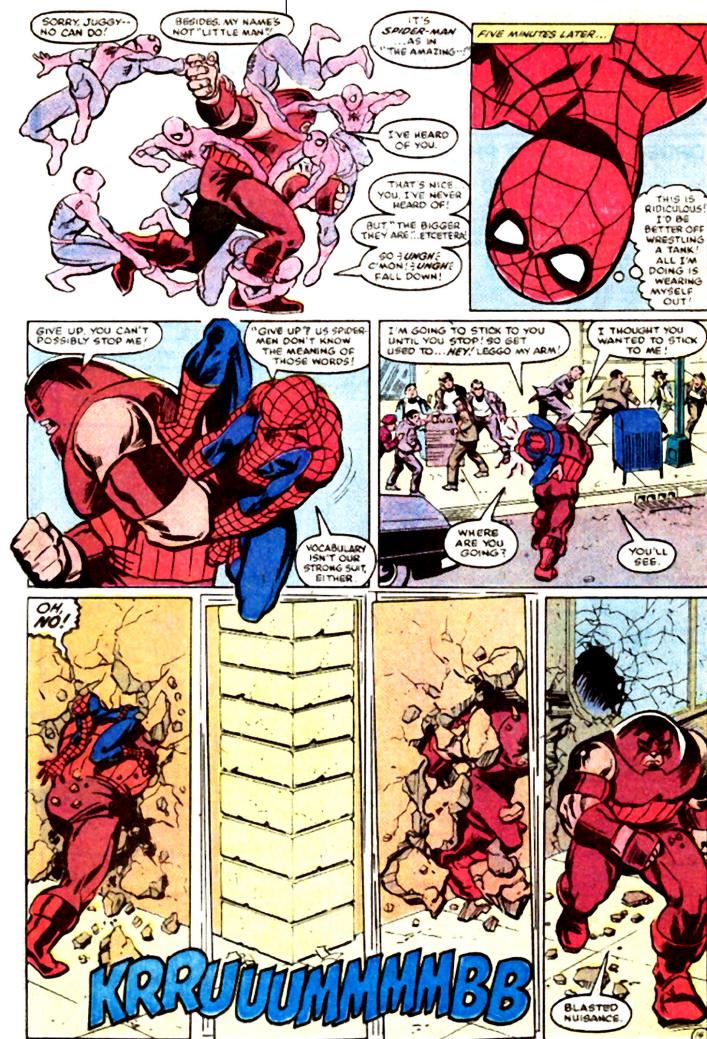
STERN: John Romita Jr. is—hands down—a great storyteller and a wonderful artist. No matter what crazy thing I asked him to draw, he did it and

made it look great. And he got better with every consecutive issue! I owe John so much. We worked together on *Amazing Spider-Man* for just two years, but they were some of the most fulfilling years of my career.

POWERS: *At the end of issue #229, an enraged Spider-Man is determined to bring down the Juggernaut after he nearly kills Madame Web. Why was it vital to remind readers of this selfless side of their hero, who, at the same time, is a bit out of control when he sacrifices a tanker truck in his attempt to defeat the Juggernaut, who is clearly out of his power range?*

STERN: That's just who Spider-Man is. With great power comes great responsibility, after all. Plus, he was desperately trying to stop someone who supposedly couldn't be stopped, without getting himself killed in the process. Incidentally, I'd already figured out how the Juggernaut could get out of the fix he finds himself in at issue's end. What I didn't know was that it would be twenty-eight years and almost four-hundred issues before I got a chance to follow up on that idea.

POWERS: *In Amazing Spider-Man #231-32 (Aug.-Sept. 1982), you present an interesting story in which Spider-Man is forced to protect the villainous Cobra, whom you previously featured in*



The new Captain Marvel debuts in *ASM Annual* #16.

Art by John Romita Jr. and Sr.

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PPSSM #46 (Sept. 1980), against Mr. Hyde. What did you enjoy about presenting this dynamic and pitting Spider-Man against Mr. Hyde for the first time?

STERN: That's correct; it was the Cobra's second appearance as an adversary for Spider-Man, and with the Cobra back in action, you just know that Mr. Hyde would have to show up eventually. The two former partners-in-crime were not getting along at that point in their careers, so it made for some interesting conflicts.

POWERS: You also narratively shift the Tarantula into a tragic figure by having the Brand scientists chemically change him into a large tarantula à la the classic 1958 science-fiction horror film *The Fly* at the end of *Amazing Spider-Man* #235 (Dec. 1982). Why did you take such a body-horror approach to this more low-key Spider-Man villain?

STERN: I don't think that "body horror" was what I had in mind at the time. Was that even a term in 1982? Anyway, I had never been that impressed by the Tarantula in his previous appearances; he was really just an acrobatic terrorist with trick boots. He never seemed powerful enough to give Spider-Man a serious fight. So, we made the Tarantula more powerful... just not in the way he hoped.

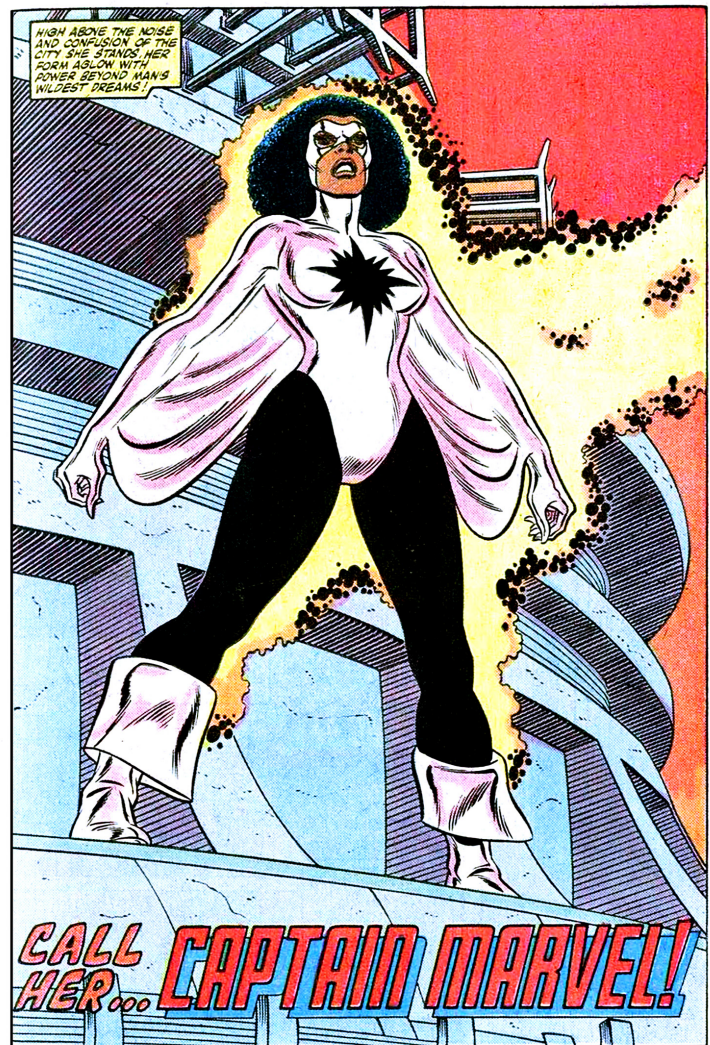
POWERS: The introduction of Amy Powell as Daily Bugle freelance photographer Lance Bannon's girlfriend in *Amazing Spider-Man* #233 (Oct. 1982) reveals they are in an "open relationship," which allows her to start romantically pursuing his rival, Peter. How did you come up with this steamy scenario, and, more importantly, get away with it in an all-ages comic that was still under the Comics Code Authority?

STERN: Amy Powell was a character suggested by J.R., and I don't think that her relationship with Lance was all that steamy for the time. It wasn't any different from any relationship that could have appeared on prime-time television of the day. And, as far as I know, the Code people never even blinked.

POWERS: *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #16 (Oct. 1982) represents a significant moment in Spider-Man history as it introduces the new Captain Marvel—Monica Rambeau—to readers in an extended flashback origin story. Why was it important to debut her in this issue?

STERN: There was a long-standing Marvel tradition of introducing characters in an already-established title. The Inhumans, the Silver Surfer, and the Black Panther all made their debuts in the *Fantastic Four*. The Sub-Mariner got a major push in *Daredevil* #7 (Apr. 1965), prior to Namor taking over the lead feature in *Tales to Astonish*. For that matter, the Black Widow had gotten a soft relaunch in *ASM* #86 (July 1970). The *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #16 provided us with an opportunity to premiere a new hero in a venue where she might get some attention. Seemed to work out pretty well.

POWERS: I agree! She's been such an inspirational character over the years. For my next question, I would like to ask you about the Stilt-Man, who surprisingly defeated Spider-Man with stun-gas back in *Daredevil* #27 (Apr. 1967) and has now returned for a rematch with the web-spinner in *Amazing Spider-Man* #237 (Feb. 1983) in a story plotted by you and scripted by Bill Mantlo. Why did you wish to give Spider-Man a rematch with the Stilt-Man, one which ends with both characters showing mercy to each other?



STERN: I'd earlier given my blessing to Frank Miller to use the Kingpin in *Daredevil*, and I thought that he'd done a great job with the character. Certainly, the Kingpin turned out to be much more believable as a *Daredevil* villain. So, after getting a thumbs-up from Frank, I took on the challenge of trying to upgrade the Stilt-Man into a threat worthy of Spider-Man. We were at least partially successful.

I plotted "High & Mighty!" for Bob Hall to draw, in part to buy John a little extra time to draw *Annual* #16. But then, I came down with the flu before I could script it. Tom DeFalco wisely enlisted Bill Mantlo to fill in for me on the script.

POWERS: In my most humble opinion, the pièce de résistance of your memorable run on *Amazing Spider-Man* is issue #238, which introduces the Hobgoblin. Can you talk about the genesis of this groundbreaking story?

STERN: Ever since I first started writing about Spider-Man, I had wanted to give him some new villains. Don't forget, I began my run on *Spectacular* by introducing Madame Belladonna. I hadn't yet developed any additional new foes in the pages of *Amazing*, but the Hobgoblin gave me the opportunity I'd been looking for.

You see, a lot of readers wanted to see the return of their favorite villains, and their number one choice was the Green Goblin. But at the time, Norman Osborn—the original Green Goblin—was quite dead. And his two Goblin successors—Norman's son Harry and Harry's former psychiatrist Bart Hamilton—had really been pretenders to the throne. Neither of them had possessed Norman's strength or cunning. As far as I

(top) Stern's most famous addition to the Spider-Man mythos debuts in ASM #238. (bottom)

The Hobgoblin is here! Spider-Man, beware. #238 art by Romita Jr. and Sr.

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was concerned, the Green Goblin's story had come to an end. But it eventually occurred to me that I could introduce a new character who could be inspired by the Goblin—and using some of his gear—but who would have an entirely new and different persona. Really, the major thing I took from the earliest stories of the Green Goblin was that Spider-Man wouldn't know who was behind the Hobgoblin's mask, and neither would the readers!

At first, Hobgoblin's identity was a mystery even to me. When I plotted ASM #238, I hadn't yet decided who he was going to be. It wasn't until I wrote the dialogue for the final pages of the story that I suddenly found his "voice" and knew who was behind the Hobgoblin's mask. And then, I kept it to myself. So that the secret wouldn't leak out, I refused to tell anybody. Didn't tell my editor or my artist. I didn't even tell my wife. I kept completely mum, until I left the series. Then I told Tom DeFalco. He was going to follow me on ASM, so it was only fair that he knew what I had planned.

POWERS: *In light of the later revelation in the Spider-Man: Hobgoblin Lives miniseries that the man behind the Hobgoblin mask is fashion designer Roderick Kingsley, I notice that you lay the seeds for this plotline in ASM #238 by showing the unknown man possessing great skill in re-designing and crafting the Hobgoblin costume, which makes perfect sense. Can you please talk about this scene and what went into your original vision of Kingsley as the Hobgoblin?*

STERN: Slight correction there: Kingsley wasn't so much a fashion designer as he was a fashion mogul, more of a corporate money man. Any designs credited to him had been appropriated—read: stolen—from others. He was the type who would use other people to get what he wanted. Oh sure, he'd learned a few design tricks, but he still wasn't a designer per se. The real credit for designing Hobgoblin's togs should go, of course, to John Romita Jr.

POWERS: *Thank you for clarifying Kingsley's background. Your two-part Vulture story in Amazing Spider-Man #240-41 (May-June 1983) continues your rehabilitative work on the Vulture in terms of making him a more sympathetic villain. This approach is challenged by having him seek revenge on Gregory Bestman, the man who cheated him out of their partnership and thereby precipitated Adrian Toomes' transformation into the Vulture. Why did you decide to return to the Vulture's origin story and present his side of this tragic tale?*

STERN: For one thing, the Vulture was one of Spider-Man's oldest enemies—in more ways than one. He was the only major previously established Spider-Man villain that I kept coming back to. And, as far as I'm concerned, the Vulture is the definitive Spider-Man villain. He represents age and guile, versus Spider-Man's youth and enthusiasm. The Vulture had been around since *Amazing Spider-Man* #2, but up until that point, he'd never had an origin story. I always wondered where he'd come from. How had he created his flying gear? Why was he strong enough to stand up to Spider-Man? And it finally occurred to me—"Hey, dummy, you're writing *Amazing Spider-Man*! You can give him an origin!" So, I did.

POWERS: *In Amazing Spider-Man #242 (July 1983), the Mad Thinker, who is in prison, pits his intellect against Spider-Man by attacking him with his Battle-Droid. At the end of the issue, the Mad Thinker recognizes that his foe possesses a precognitive ability to sense danger (which we know as his Spider-Sense) and so now wishes to uncover the secrets of this power. What inspired you to bring the*



Mad Thinker into ASM, and did you plan on developing this plotline in a future issue?

STERN: J.R. had been itching to draw some more big Kirby characters, and since the Thinker has these big, honkin' androids at his command... well, you get the picture. I did have a rough idea of revisiting the Thinker at some point, but I never had the chance to get back to him.

POWERS: Throughout your runs on PPSSM and Amazing Spider-Man, you achieve a nuanced balance between Peter Parker's personal life and Spider-Man's role as a hero, which is perhaps best exemplified, when, immediately after his battle with the Mad Thinker's Battle-Droid in ASM #242, Mary Jane Watson makes a long-awaited return to Peter Parker's life as she catches him in an awkward kiss with Amy Powell in the issue's cliffhanger ending. Why did you wish to bring her back into Spider-Man's story?

STERN: I had long wanted to bring Mary Jane back and give her a new role in Pete's life. It needed to be done carefully, because Peter had once proposed to her, and she turned him down in no uncertain terms. MJ had an aversion to long-term commitments, and that needed to be respected. On the other hand, she genuinely liked Peter and wanted to be his friend. And that was the approach I followed, slowly establishing her as the former girlfriend who would now become a close friend... maybe even a confidant. In fact, I saw Mary Jane as someone who would set Pete up with dates. My ultimate goal was for MJ to introduce him to the woman who would eventually become a real romantic interest.

In the meantime, of course, all of their mutual friends would be trying to get MJ and Pete "back together again," despite what a huge mistake it would be.

POWERS: In the following issue, ASM #243 (Aug. 1983), Peter makes a controversial decision that perhaps sets him back for decades (in terms of how we have read his stories in our linear time since the 1980s)—he drops out of graduate school. What led you to this storytelling choice?

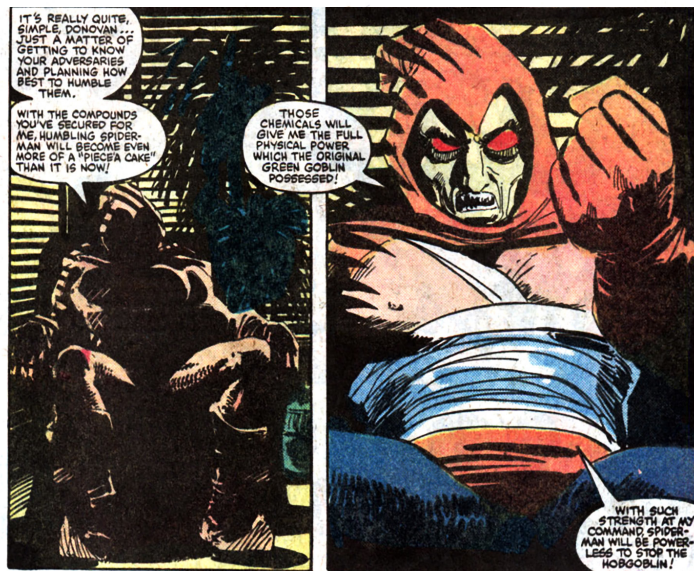
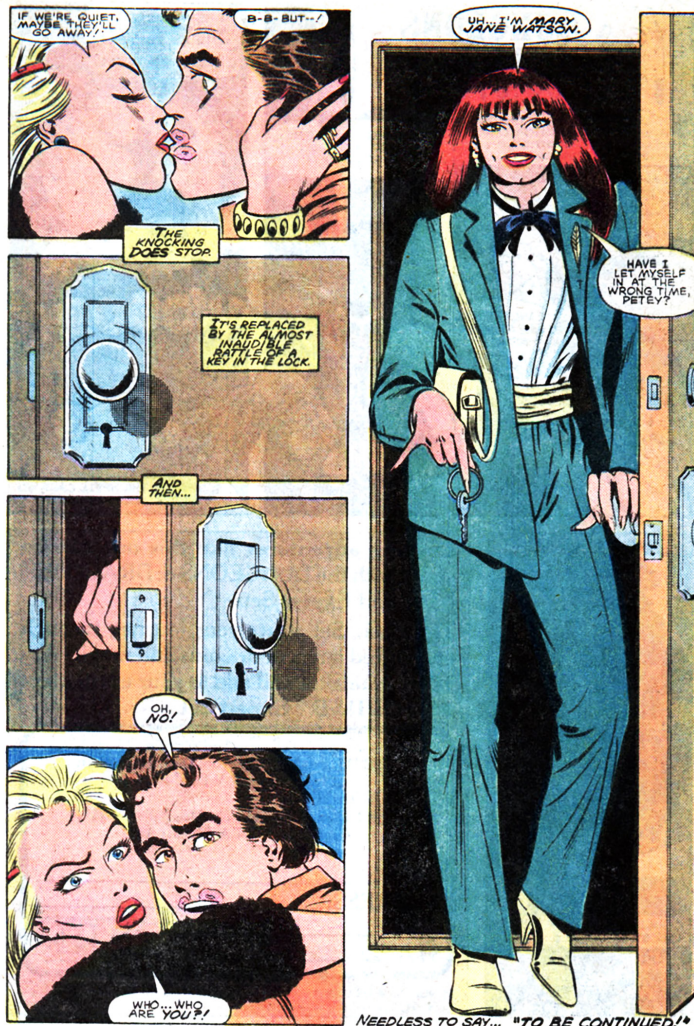
STERN: Plotting these stories was very much an organic process. In many ways, the characters themselves showed me where they were going to go. Peter's life had become incredibly complicated by that point, and something had to give. Leaving grad school seemed like the most natural choice for him to make. I don't know if I would ever have had him return to pursue his doctorate. Maybe... maybe not.

POWERS: You patiently waited several months to bring back the instantly fan-favorite character the Hobgoblin in Amazing Spider-Man #244-45 (Sept.-Oct. 1983). However, unlike the original Green Goblin, who would always directly engage Spider-Man, the mysterious Hobgoblin plays dirty by testing the Goblin Formula on Lefty Donovan and brainwashing him to don the Hobgoblin costume. What inspired this different approach to the Hobgoblin?

STERN: That all gets into the differences between the Green Goblin and the Hobgoblin. The Green Goblin was quite mad, while Hobgoblin was coldly calculating... someone who used people to accomplish his goals. Of course, he would have tested the Goblin Formula on someone else before using it on himself.

POWERS: Many comic book readers love a decent "What If?" story, and you take this concept a step further in Amazing Spider-Man #246 (Nov. 1983) by having the Watcher play host to four stories featuring the daydreams of the Black Cat, J. Jonah Jameson, Mary Jane, and Peter himself. How did you come up with this offbeat, revealing story?

STERN: The idea behind the "Daydreamers" story was months in the making. I'd wanted to start bringing Mary Jane's past to light, to get to the heart of who she is and what makes her tick.



(top) Mary Jane finally returns to Peter's life in ASM #242.

Art by John Romita Jr. and Kevin Dzuban. (bottom) The Hobgoblin's back in ASM #244... or is he? Art by John Romita Jr. and Klaus Janson.

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We really knew very little about her background, other than that she loved to party and never got involved in lasting relationships. Slowly, but surely, in discussions with my wife Carmela, I assembled an outline of what MJ's early life must have been like and started seeding little clues.

In plotting the issue, I had a thought about the Black Cat—then recovering from injuries—being bored out of her mind, but I wasn't sure where I wanted to go from there. I wanted something more than just the Spider-Man connection to link the two women's stories together. And a thought occurred to me, "What would any of these people daydream about?" And then, everything just fell into place.

POWERS: *Bill Mantlo scripts Amazing Spider-Man Annual #17 (Nov. 1983) working from your innovative plot of presenting Peter attending his high school reunion. Why was it important to show Peter attending this sort of event—one which many people choose to avoid?*

STERN: Do people really avoid their high school reunions? I've always kind of enjoyed the ones I've attended. It's a good way to quickly catch up with people you haven't seen in years. I just wish that I'd been able to script the story; a conflict prevented that. Fortunately, Bill Mantlo came to our rescue again, turning the script around in record time and keeping things on schedule.

POWERS: *While you were writing the Avengers concurrently with Amazing Spider-Man, you answer a long-running fan question: "Since Spider-Man is always whining about money, why doesn't he just join the Avengers?" with Avengers #236-237 (Oct.-Nov. 1983). What did you enjoy about finally presenting this scenario to Marvel readers?*

STERN: It was fun showing Spider-Man interacting with the Avengers, of course. And I think it helped show why he didn't really fit in with the group... even if we did ultimately use a technicality to keep him out. I never thought that Spider-Man worked well as a team player—again, *Marvel Team-Up* notwithstanding.

POWERS: *In PPSSM #85 (Dec. 1983), you are listed as helping to supply the plot for Bill Mantlo's pivotal story of the Hobgoblin at last exposing himself to Norman Osborn's Goblin Formula in order to gain super-strength, which he later uses against Spider-Man and the Black Cat in this dark tale. What led to this important development occurring in this issue?*

STERN: Tom DeFalco had asked me if the Hobgoblin could appear in an issue of *Spectacular*. I not only agreed to it but also suggested how they could show my new mystery man undergoing the process to gain superstrength. For that, I was credited with a "plot assist," but it's really Bill Mantlo's story.

POWERS: *You pair Spider-Man against the villainous Thunderball in Amazing Spider-Man #247-48 (Dec. 1983-Jan. 1984). What led you to concocting this unlikely match up?*

STERN: That was another case of giving Spider-Man an adversary that was 1) someone he'd never encountered before, and 2) someone who was way above his weight class. We can't make it too easy for the guy. I mean, where's the challenge in that?

POWERS: *The second story appearing in ASM #248 (Jan. 1984)—"The Kid Who Collects Spider-Man!"—is such a tear-jerking tale of Spider-Man connecting with a dying child. What was your inspiration for this story, which has profoundly affected readers over the years?*

STERN: Several months earlier, I had a dream about a kid who was Spider-Man's biggest fan. Really. The story was all there in my head, just waiting to be written. So, I ran the idea by Tom for his opinion, cautioning him that it was a short story, ten or eleven pages, tops. Tom liked it, and he decided that we'd fit it in somewhere, possibly in some future annual. Instead, it wound up as part of Marvel's Assistant Editors Month event.

POWERS: *Your remarkable tenure on Amazing Spider-Man ends on both a high—yet frustrating—note for what could have been with the three-part Hobgoblin-Kingpin comprising ASM #249-251 (Feb.-Apr. 1984). What did you think of this story (and*

(left) Spider-Man joins the Avengers? Say it ain't so! Cover by Al Milgrom and Joe Sinnott. (right) Spider-Man meets his biggest fan in "The Kid Who Collects Spider-Man" in ASM #248. Art by Ron Frenz and Terry Austin.

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(top left) Stern's run as scripter on ASM abruptly ends with issue #250, though he would plot the next couple issues. Cover by Romita Jr. and Janson. (top right) One of the issues he plotted introduced Spidey's black costume. Cover by Frenz and Janson.

(bottom left) The true identity of the Hobgoblin is finally revealed in the *Spider-Man: Hobgoblin Lives* miniseries. Cover by Ron Frenz and George Perez.

(bottom right) Spidey faces Juggernaut again in ASM #627. Cover by Lee Weeks.

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should it have gone in a different direction since Tom DeFalco scripts issue #251)?

STERN: I think that it worked just fine. Tom and Ron Frenz did a great job of bringing my plot to life.

POWERS: *That's so nice to hear. As you have mentioned, you had worked extensively with Tom DeFalco, who was your editor for your last several issues of PPSSM and the majority of your Amazing Spider-Man run. What did you appreciate about his editorship, and how did it shape your approach to writing Spider-Man?*

STERN: Editors rarely get the credit they deserve, and Tom was a most important part of our team. He contributed so much to the stories as supervisor, advisor, and sounding board. Tom was the perfect choice to take over as writer of *Amazing Spider-Man*, and he and Ron Frenz became one of the great Spider-Man teams—and great Thor teams, for that matter. They never get enough recognition.

POWERS: *Amazing Spider-Man #252 (May 1984) likewise works from one of your inspired plots with the shocking introduction of the black suit/sentient alien symbiote. How did this seismic event in Spider-Man's life occur?*

STERN: That happened because Jim Shooter wanted something big to happen with Spider-Man during the first *Secret Wars* limited series. And he asked us to introduce the new outfit in ASM #252. It's as simple as that. My main contribution was that the new costume was an alien life form.

POWERS: *How did you feel at this point as you moved on from the book, and were there any storylines that you planned on developing?*

STERN: I did have in mind introducing The Blank as another new villain for Spider-Man. Since I left the series, I later used The Blank in the *West Coast Avengers* limited series, and I was finally able to turn him into a Spider-Man adversary in ASM #580 (Feb. 2009). And, of course, I wanted to more fully develop Mary Jane's backstory. Thankfully, Tom and Ron did an excellent job of fleshing that out from the outline I'd left them.

POWERS: *Many years after your celebrated run on the Amazing Spider-Man, Spider-Man: Hobgoblin*



Lives #1-3 (Jan.-Apr. 1997) provides a very satisfying rewriting of the true identity of the Hobgoblin—Roderick Kingsley—thanks to your efforts to see this long-abandoned plotline of yours become a reality. Can you please explain how this project originated?

STERN: While I was still following the Spider-Man titles in the 1980s, the issue which "unmasked" Ned Leeds as the Hobgoblin was evidence to me that Ned couldn't possibly have been the Hobgoblin. So, for years, whenever I would cross paths with a Spider-editor at a convention, I'd point out the major error in that story and offer to address things, if they were ever so inclined. And, again for years, no one was. But then, one day, Glenn Greenberg gave me a call and said that they really wanted me to set things right. Glenn and Tom Brevoort were the editorial team instrumental in getting that project going. If not for them, I doubt that it would have happened.

POWERS: *How did you feel about finally being given this magical opportunity to rectify all the convoluted plot twists/revelations concerning the identity of the Hobgoblin after you left Amazing Spider-Man in 1984?*

STERN: I was delighted. Writers in the intervening years just assumed that Ned was the Hobgoblin, and so they hadn't done anything to monkey with



the clues I had left behind. Glenn and Tom helpfully had the then-current Spider-writers reintroduce some of the likely suspects in their stories, and I just went to town. The fact that they got Ron Frenz to draw the miniseries was an added plus.

POWERS: *Three months later, Untold Tales of Spider-Man #-1 (July 1997) gave you the incredible chance to flesh out Richard and Mary Parkers' lives as spies before Peter was born. What was your strategy for "filling in the blanks" of Spider-Man history with this story, which was penciled by the legendary John Romita?*

STERN: I have Tom Brevoort to thank for that opportunity. Marvel set aside a month for Minus-One issues to tell stories from their characters' pasts. The problem there was that *Untold Tales of Spider-Man* was already set in Spider-Man's past. I think it was Tom's suggestion to tell a story with Peter's parents, and everything just flowed from that. And working with John Romita Senior was an absolute joy. Knowing that he would be penciling the story—and knowing what a huge fan he was of Milton Caniff—I threw in several Caniff references in the plot. And he picked up on them all. Was that a beautifully drawn issue or what?

POWERS: *It truly is a great-looking issue! Three years later, with Spider-Man: Revenge of the Green Goblin #1-3 (Oct.-Dec. 2000), you convincingly write Norman Osborn romancing Kolina Frederickson, the nurse who is helping him to recover from his madness as a result of "The Gathering of the Five" storyline. Why did you wish to reveal this softer side of the Green Goblin?*

STERN: It really all began when Ralph Macchio asked me to write a three-issue series that would tie into the regular monthly Spider-Man titles. He basically asked me to help set up the Goblin for a major storyline. I introduced Kolina as a way to help get at the heart of Osborn's madness. Once she was there, it seemed a natural turn of events for Norman to feel an attraction to his caregiver.

POWERS: *At the end of 2008, your script for Amazing Spider-Man #580 featured police detective Ray Donovan, whom you had created in PPSSM #47. You also brought back The Blank, whom you had introduced in West Coast Avengers #2 (Oct. 1984). How did it feel weaving two of your original characters into your triumphal return writing ASM?*

STERN: I don't know that I'd call it triumphal, but it certainly was fun writing Spider-Man again. Plus, I got to work with Lee Weeks as my artist and Steve Wacker as my editor.

POWERS: *In Amazing Spider-Man Family #7 (Aug. 2009), you contribute to the history of Aunt May and Uncle Ben during their younger days by building upon their dangerous love triangle involving budding criminal Johnny Jerome, who was first seen in Bill Mantlo's story in PPSSM Annual #4 (Nov. 1984). Why did you wish to expand upon this story?*

STERN: May was about to marry Jonah Jameson's father in *Amazing Spider-Man*, and I was asked to write a short story about her previous loves. It would have felt wrong to exclude any reference to Jerome.

POWERS: *The three-part "Something Can Stop the Juggernaut!" that appears in Amazing Spider-Man #627-29 (May-June 2010) works as a satisfying sequel to your classic two-part Juggernaut tale in ASM #229-30. At the same time, you do not resort to depicting a clichéd "everything-is-at-stake" battle between Spider-Man and Juggernaut as they interact with Captain Universe. What inspired this unique story?*

STERN: That came about from editor Steve Wacker wanting me to write a story arc for *Amazing Spider-Man*. He was the one who suggested the title. I loved the idea. To me, it was an opportunity to finally write the

(top) Stern finally writes a Doctor Octopus story in *Web of Spider-Man* #12. Cover by Jelena Kevic Djurdjevic. (bottom) The four-armed Spider-Man and Spider-Man Noir join forces in *Spider-Verse Team-Up* #1. Cover by David Williams.

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follow-up to the Juggernaut story—telling how he'd escaped his entrapment—that I'd wanted to write back in the '80s.

POWERS: *You also contributed a story to Web of Spider-Man vol. 2 #12 (Nov. 2010) that focuses on Doctor Octopus's terrible childhood, which includes him being bullied and dealing with an overbearing mother. Notably, since Doctor Octopus did not feature in any of your classic Spider-Man stories in the 1980s, what did you appreciate about writing this poignant story about him?*

STERN: That story actually had its beginnings about six years earlier. A then-new Marvel assistant editor asked me to pitch an idea for a Doctor Octopus miniseries, prior to the release of the second Spider-Man movie. This assistant said that another editor had recommended me, but I got the impression that the new guy didn't know that I'd ever written Spider-Man before. He basically asked me to audition for the assignment. But since I had some time on my hands, I did a bit of research and submitted an outline for a four-issue series about who Doctor Octopus was and how he came to be such a threat to Spider-Man. The assistant thanked me but then said that they decided to go in a different direction. So, I filed the outline away.

Years later, I was asked by a different editor for a short Doc Ock story for *Web of Spider-Man*, so I reached back into my files, dusted off the outline, and refined it down into a highly condensed version of my submission from the previous decade. This editor was very happy with my story, and I was delighted to see that it worked well in the shorter form. I'm glad that you found it so poignant.

POWERS: *As part of Marvel's fiftieth-anniversary celebrations for Spider-Man in 2012, you wrote the script for the one-shot Peter Parker Spider-Man #156.1 (Oct. 2012), which features you returning to a story that relates to your classic Brand storyline from PPSSM and Amazing Spider-Man, and you offer a deep-cut by bringing back the pushy Brand security guard who can be clearly seen in the first two panels of page 9 from ASM #235. What did you enjoy about writing this nostalgic issue?*

STERN: That story was inspired by an inventory cover that J.R. had drawn. I was sent a copy of the cover and built the story around it. It was a fun little challenge, and it gave me a chance to revisit both Spider-Man's origins and that old Brand storyline.

POWERS: *You likewise tell a fascinating story in Spider-Verse Team-Up #1 (Jan. 2015) in which two alternative Spider-Men—a version of Spider-Man from Amazing Spider-Man #100 (Sept. 1971) who retained his four extra arms and Spider-Man Noir—work together to prevent another Peter Parker from becoming a mindless human-sized spider. How did you come up with this alternate origin for Peter?*

STERN: Again, I was asked to write a story for that team-up book and was given a list of alternate Spider-Men to choose from. Those two seemed as though they'd make for an interesting pair. As for the more-spidery Peter Parker alternate, I'd long wondered what ill effects an irradiated spider-bite



might have on an individual, and this assignment seemed a good place to explore that.

POWERS: *Looking toward the future, if we are fortunate enough to see you write a new story featuring Spider-Man, what would you wish to explore about Peter Parker and his extensive cast of friends and villains?*

STERN: Well, I would have to see what circumstances Pete and the others were currently in before I could think about any possible story. Who knows? It might be fun.

TOM POWERS teaches English at Montgomery County Community College, which is located in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania. He is also the author of *Gender and the Quest in British Science Fiction Television: An Analysis of Doctor Who, Blake's 7, Red Dwarf and Torchwood* (McFarland, 2016).



Just for fun, and because the editor likes it, a classic cover from Stern's run. ASM #226 cover by Romita Jr. and Milgrom.

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TWOMORROWS AD PAGE

STAR BRAND

the star of JIM SHOOTER'S new universe

During his time as Marvel Editor-in-Chief, Jim Shooter drove the company to creative heights not seen since Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the rest of the Bullpen ran the show in the 1960s. Shooter's creative endeavors included the development of multiple best-selling miniseries (*Wolverine*, *Hercules*, *Falcon*), the creation of company-wide crossovers (*Marvel Super-Heroes Secret Wars*), and some of the most beloved Marvel runs ever (Chris Claremont's *Uncanny X-Men*, John Byrne's *Fantastic Four*, Walter Simonson's *Thor*). Behind the scenes he helped to get royalties for creators and kept the books running on schedule. However, unlike the myth of King Midas not everything Shooter touched turned to gold. In fact, he was responsible for one of Marvel's biggest failures with the New Universe. This new line of books was developed to celebrate Marvel Comics' 25th anniversary.

Beyond spearheading the line, Shooter even wrote one of the titles—*Star Brand*. Come along as *BACK ISSUE* pays a visit to the New Universe to see the power of the *Star Brand*.

THE NEW UNIVERSE

Before looking at *Star Brand*, we need to take a short look at the New Universe as well. For a more comprehensive examination of this line please check out *BACK ISSUE* #34.

Stan Lee and company wanted Marvel to reflect reality as much as they could with superheroes and villains all over the place. The Marvel Universe stories were set in real-world locations, not made-up cities. The characters had similar problems to everyday people. All of these things worked in a world where gods walked alongside monsters and aliens. These things made the Marvel Universe a truly magical place to visit.

However, Shooter wanted the New Universe to be even more like "the world outside of your window" making these comics more realistic than ever before or in other words "what if superheroes existed in the real world?" With that in mind, the line dealt with how a world would change if there were super powered beings in it.

With the New Universe, Shooter limited and in some cases even excluded the wondrous elements such as gods and magic that permeated the MU. Furthermore, the stories were told in real-time with one month taking place between each issue. The Earth of the New Universe was identical to our world until a white light bathed the planet leading to superpowers in some people. This was dubbed the White Event and would be the impetus for the characters gaining powers in the New Universe. According to Shooter, in a 1999 email exchange with fan Nathan Cheever, "It was the same blinding whiteness that swept Marvel Earth at the end of *Secret Wars II*, though that would have never been explicitly revealed. The theory is that it was an event of such magnitude in the Marvel Universe that it created a 'New Universe' very much like our own, or, in fact, changed our own irrevocably, into a New Universe." Eight New Universe titles including *Star Brand*, *DP 7*, *Justice*, *Kickers, Inc.*, *Spitfire* and *the Troubleshooters*, *Mark Hazzard: Merc*, *Nightmask*, and *Psi-Force* hit the stands in 1986.

Since the New Universe was supposed to be a huge event to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Marvel Universe, Shooter was given a budget to develop and promote this new line. In an interview on *Comic Book Historians*, Shooter disclosed, "Well, about two weeks after that meeting where the whole budget and everything was approved, [Marvel President Jim] Galton calls me up to his office. He says, 'That budget, how much of it have you spent?' I said, 'I don't know about \$10,000 bucks or something like that.' He said, 'Don't spend another penny. I don't want to spend another nickel on this.' I said, 'You mean you don't want us to do it?' He said, 'No, you just have to do it



Star Brand makes its mighty debut. Cover by John Romita Jr. and Tom Palmer.

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(left) An early house ad for the New Universe. (right) The New Universe made the cover of *Marvel Age*. Art by Ron Frenz and Brett Breeding.

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on staff.' [This was] because they had just decided to sell the company. They didn't want to invest a penny in anything." In 1986, Marvel's owners Cadence Industries sold the comic book publisher to New World Pictures.

Shooter continued, "So if you look at the credits, who did the work, me, Archie Goodwin, and mostly assistant editors because they're the only ones who would just stay after work and help me for free. So, you would see a lot of assistant editors names. They were pretty good, but we didn't have any guaranteed royalties. We had no special rates. We had nothing like that. If I had been able to have that budget and get good artists and do good promotion and stuff. I mean, Archie was a hero. He created a bunch of stuff and he wrote some stories



TOM DEFALCO

Hildy DeFalco.

that were great, but basically the artists that we got just couldn't get any other work that week and a few good ones. We had a couple of guys that turned out to be good, but they were new at the time. Whilce Portacio, but he was really brand new, and Mark Texeria. He also started out and he wasn't fully developed yet. So, we had some good guys who grew up later."

However, this wasn't exactly what happened. According to then-Marvel Executive Editor (and future editor-in-chief) Tom DeFalco, "Shooter's official story was that the budget got cut. I'm not so sure about that. I'm unaware of the budget getting cut or anything like that. I know that there was a big rollout. They spent a lot of money sending people to conventions and coming up with special displays and all sorts of other things and t-shirts and that other stuff. Probably the biggest rollout we had up until that time. That's what the budget was for. Shooter's often said that the budget got cut and as a result things were late, he was desperate to get people. I'm not so sure that any of that was really true."

No matter what the story was, the New Universe hit the racks with the first two titles (*Star Brand* and *Spitfire and the Troubleshooters*) cover dated October 1986. Even with the big rollout, the line wasn't a success with half of the titles cancelled a year later and the entire line itself being shelved by 1989. One of the more high-profile books due to its creative team was *Star Brand*.



STAR BRAND

The New Universe title with the most creative star power behind it was *Star Brand*. Shooter wrote the title with penciler John Romita Jr. and inker Al Williamson on board for art duties.

The series' protagonist was Ken Connell. Like many of Marvel's superheroes, Ken was a flawed but realistic individual. He worked in a garage, was uncommitted to his girlfriend, and did not have a plan for his life. Unlike most comic book characters, however, he wasn't the most likable or sympathetic. According to DeFalco, "Jim Shooter patterned the character after himself. Patterned it after some of his relationships. *Star Brand* was very sort of kind of autobiographical but not really, if you know what I mean. Jim really identified very much with the character.

"The character is always complaining about how people didn't appreciate him. That's how Shooter would talk in the office. A lot of time, I would see those word balloons and think, you know this is Jim. He nailed it, but I don't think he realized just how unpleasant the readers saw the character."

While riding his motorcycle through the wilds outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Ken was visited by an Old Man (who claimed to be a dying alien) and given the ultimate power in the universe—the Star Brand. If this sounds like something from the Distinguished Competition, original series editor Michael Higgins had a response for you in *Amazing Heroes* #101. "I'm not sure the Green Lantern origin is, in and of itself, a completely original concept. The idea of aliens coming to Earth with powers and abilities to pass on to someone else is not all that unique—I think it's how you handle the concept that makes the difference, that makes the character what it is. Superficially, there may be similarities, but I don't think the GL origin is completely unique."

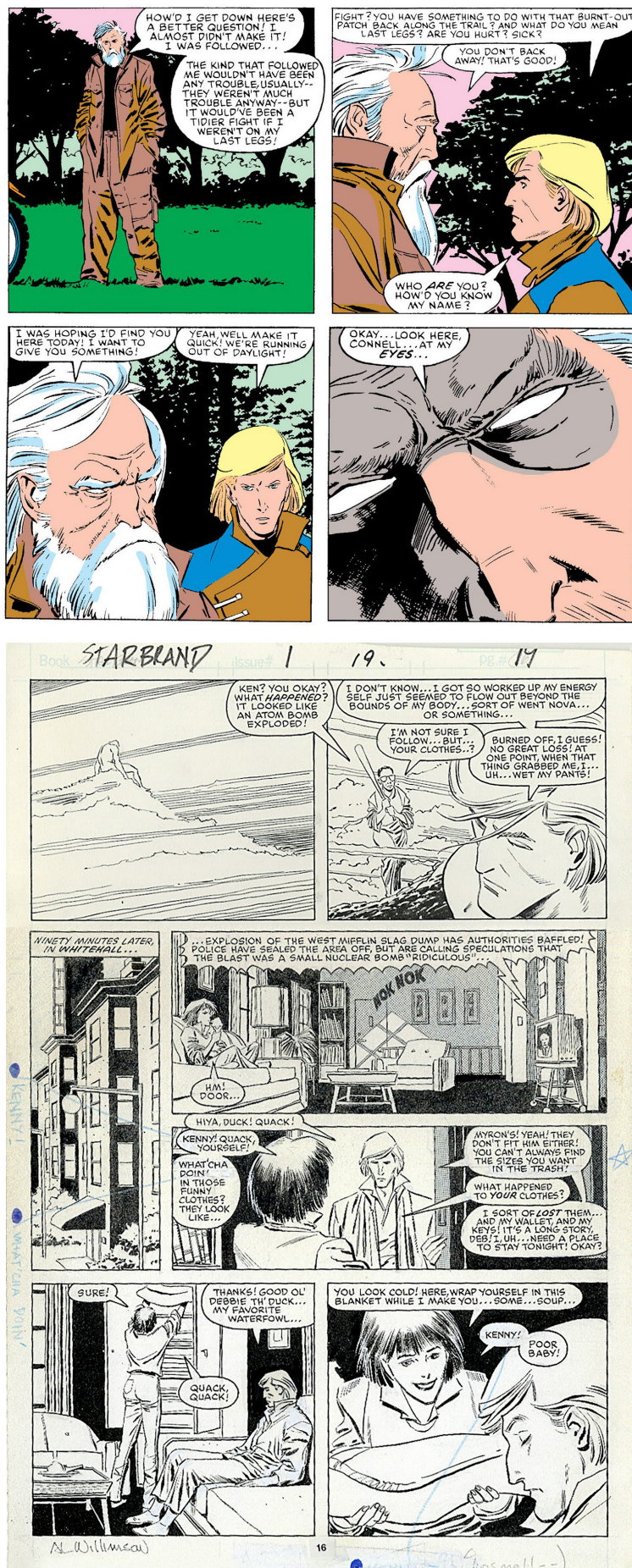
Despite similar origins, Ken Connell was nothing like Hal Jordan, Guy Gardner, or any of the other Green Lanterns. While those heroes were fearless, Ken questioned himself at first. He did not fully embrace his role as a hero as quickly as others. In reality, he kept doubting what to do with his newfound power. In this regard, he was the perfect Marvel character with problems and foibles that many DC characters did not possess. Ken fit in nicely with Shooter's edict of "the world outside of your window." Many people if they received the power of the Star Brand would question what to do with it just like Ken and not just jump into a heroic or villainous role.

Higgins continued, "It's the question of how to handle the responsibility that comes with a great amount of power. Take a person who is very down-to-Earth, very normal. He works in a garage. He's a car reconditioner, basically. Suddenly, he has this great amount of energy at his disposal, energy from an alien source. This is going to have a great effect on his life." Since each issue of the New Universe was supposed to be set 30 days apart, it was actually several months until Ken finally fully embraced his heroic side.

Ken's supporting cast consisted of his best friend Myron, his single-mother girlfriend Barb, her children Laurie and Bobby, and his friend, Madelyne "Debbie the Duck" Felix, who had a crush on him. Although these characters would have important roles in the series, Deb would have a bigger part to play in the latter half of the series.

(top) Ken Connell meets the Old Man in *Star Brand* #1. (bottom) John Romita Jr. and Al Williamson provide the art for *Star Brand* #1. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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Every superhero needs a costume and those in the New Universe were no exception. Usually, superhero costumes are brightly colored and stand out amongst the crowd. This wasn't the case with Star Brand's costume or many of the costumes in the New Universe in general. This was another aspect that helped the book to feel more realistic than other superhero books. Romita Jr.'s costume design (which was a version of Ken's red dirt biking suit) worked for this more realistic world since it wasn't as colorful or dramatic as those from the MU or even the DCU. The muted color scheme and minimalist design worked for what Shooter was going for with the New Universe but did not set the world of superhero costumes on fire.

While *Star Brand* #1 made #7 on the top ten bestsellers list for June 1986 (and *Spitfire and the Troubleshooters* #1 sold enough copies to take eighth place), subsequent issues never made another appearance on the list. This was the case with the rest of the New Universe books as well.

This was definitely the nicest looking of the books. How could it not be with Romita Jr. penciling and Williamson inking? So, with the company not putting any money into the New Universe, how did this title score two of the best artists working at the time? In his interview with *Comic Book Historians*, Shooter recounted, "John Romita Jr. came to me and he said, 'Do you have an artist for your book?' I said, no. He said, 'I want to draw your book.' I said, John no. It's going to fail. It's just ridiculous the way they took away all our support. You'd have to give something up and why would you give up something that's making a lot of money? He said, 'I don't care, I want to do your book.' So anyhow, [He wanted to do it] as a favor to me. So he gave

something up, *Iron Man* or something else. [JRJR left the *Uncanny X-Men* to do *Star Brand*.] The same day Al Williamson called and said, 'I heard JRJR's doing your book, I want to ink it.' I said you guys are nuts. At least *Star Brand* had great art and it wasn't because I used clout. That was because two guys volunteered."

As with the development of the New Universe, DeFalco recalls an alternate take on Romita Jr.'s involvement in the book. "Shooter convinced him that this book was going to outsell the *X-Men*. That he would make bigger royalties on *Star Brand* than anything else. JR has said as much himself. He learned that *Star Brand* did not outsell the *X-Men* and that's why he eventually left the book.

"Shooter was very involved with this thing and a lot of the very top talent were working on books that were paying them terrific royalties and they didn't want to gamble with something new. They also knew that Shooter was going to be on this thing 100% and a lot of the top talent didn't want to be bothered by that. They knew that they would be aggravated beyond endurance."

While many of the common superhero comics concepts were jettisoned for the New Universe, one of the best was used. A hallmark of the Marvel Universe was that all of the heroes, villains, and supporting cast were in the same shared universe and would interact with each other. Even though Shooter wanted to differentiate the New Universe, he kept some things that worked including that shared universe concept. Connell met up with Spitfire and the Troubleshooters in *Star Brand* #2 and 3 (Nov. & Dec. 1986). It was seeing these heroes in action that helped him decide to take the heroic pathway. He even returned the favor when he guest starred in *Spitfire and the Troubleshooters* #5 (Feb. 1987).

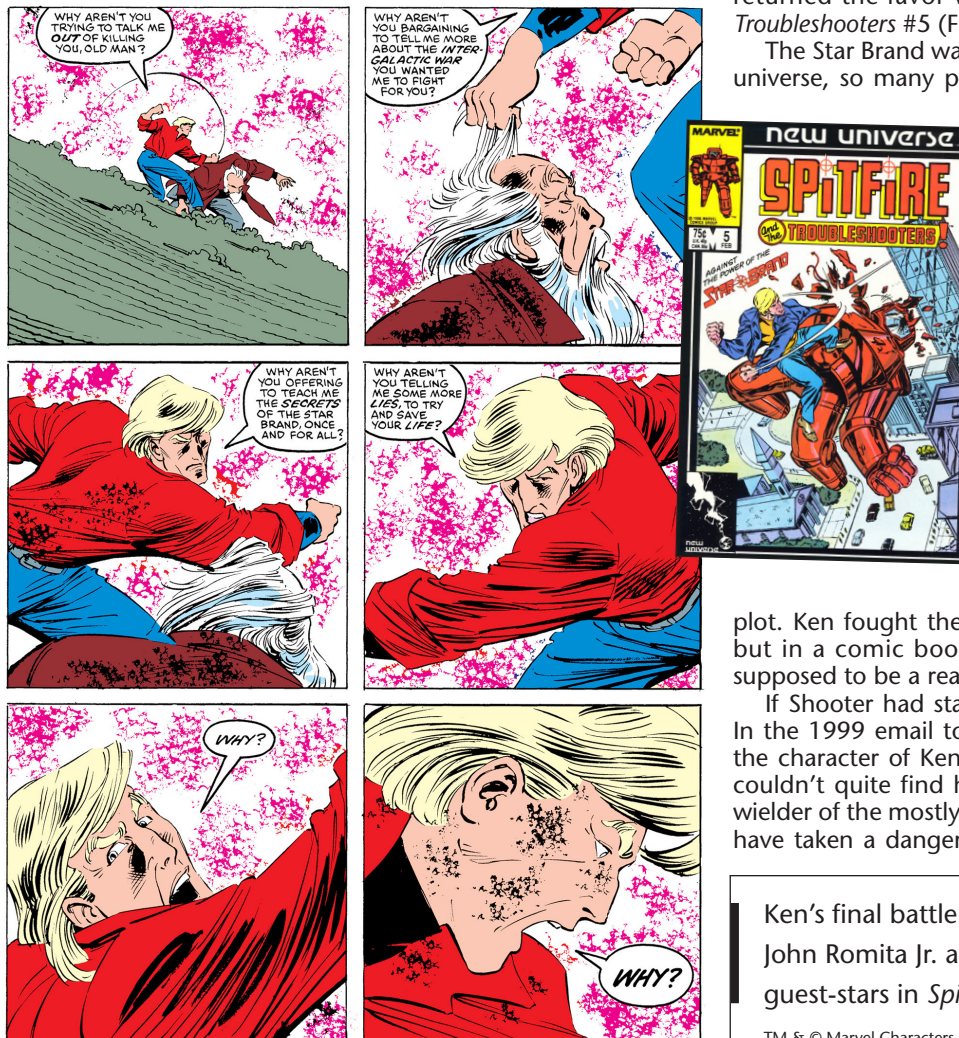
The *Star Brand* was one of the most powerful weapons in the universe, so many people and aliens were out to take it from

Ken. Along with Ken coming to terms with his powers, this made up the plots for many of the early stories. This gave the book a sense that it could be happening in the real world, but it was also missing one aspect. It did not have a supervillain for Ken to face. The closest that the series would come to a reoccurring villain was the Old Man. The saying goes that a hero is only as good as his villains, and the Old Man wasn't a compelling adversary.

Star Brand #6 (April 1987) saw the return of the Old Man. He wanted the power back and would do anything including threatening Deb's life to get it. The next issue was the final issue that Shooter and Romita Jr. worked on. Roy Thomas wrote the script from Shooter's

plot. Ken fought the Old Man and apparently destroyed him, but in a comic book no one stays gone forever even if it is supposed to be a realistic superhero title.

If Shooter had stayed on the title, he had long term plans. In the 1999 email to Cheever, he wrote, "I planned to evolve the character of Kenneth Connell from an underachiever who couldn't quite find his purpose in life to the just and rightful wielder of the mostly powerful weapon in the universe. It would have taken a dangerous odyssey of mind, body, and spirit for



Ken's final battle with the Old Man. For now. Art by John Romita Jr. and Art Nichols. (inset) Star Brand guest-stars in *Spitfire and the Troubleshooters* #5.

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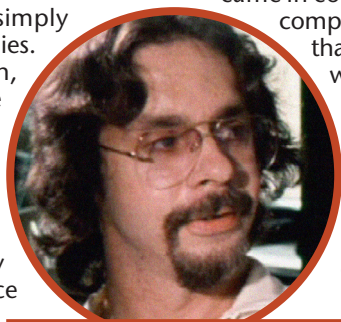


him to reach the pinnacle of his power, and to assume his place as the ultimate Champion of Life.

"Along the way, early on, I planned for him to naively reveal himself to the Feds. They, of course, after becoming convinced that his power was no trick or illusion, would pretend to be his best friends, but secretly-fearing him-would work to destroy him. (No government would suffer the existence of an individual who, on a whim, could destroy it-or a continent, for that matter.) Ken would grow suspicious just in time to stay a step ahead of them."

"Possessing the Ultimate Weapon," Shooter continued, "would make you the ultimate target. Evil beings across the universe coveting it would constantly seek to steal it (destroying you in the process). Fearful people, like the Feds, would try to steal it, or destroy it. The wrong wielder would abuse it, be corrupted by it, or simply have it ripped away by ruthless enemies. Only someone strong enough, incorruptible enough could take the pressure, defend the Brand and use its power wisely. It would take a rare being, the Right One. Ken Connell (and the readers) would slowly learn that he had the Right Stuff. I thought Connell's journey from common man to Cosmic Force would prove interesting."

Writer Cary Bates took over for the next two issues with artists Arvell Jones and Danny Bulanadi on #8 (July 1987) and Keith Giffen and Bob Wiacek on #9 (Sept. 1987). These did not seem to be mere fill-ins either. While these issues did not bring the more mystical elements from the



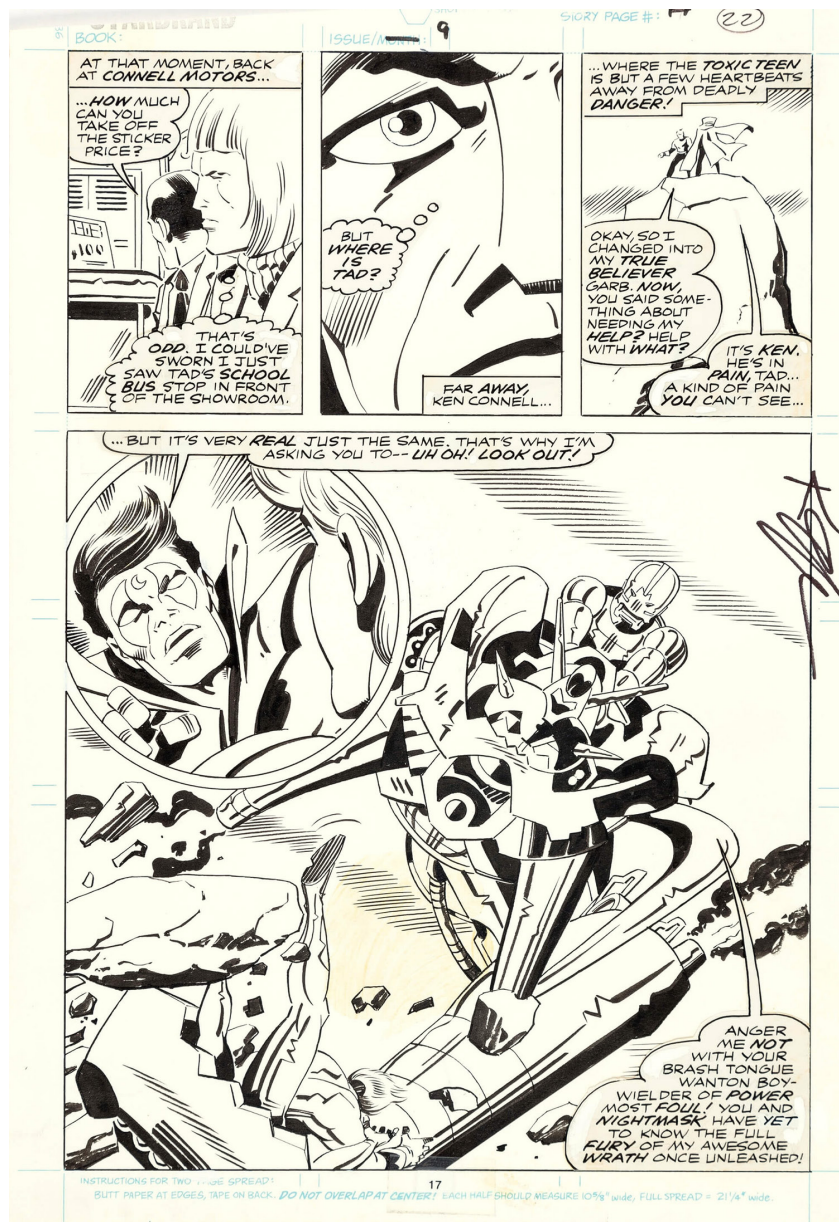
CARY BATES

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Marvel Universe to the New Universe, they did offer more drama than previous issues. Ken came in contact with Tad, a boy dying due to a company's toxic waste, who found out that Ken had the Star Brand power and wanted him to help the others in the town so that they wouldn't suffer his same fate.

According to Bates, "Shooter and Marvel had parted ways after issue #7. Around that time, I was no longer exclusive to DC, so I approached Marvel to get additional work. I contacted Bob Harris who was the acting editor in chief I believe, so he assigned me the two issues of *Star Brand* (as well as a few issues of *Nightmask*)."

Bates continues, "Issues #8 and #9 could be viewed as one extended story spanning two installments. #8 featured Star Brand befriend- ing a teenager suffering the ill effects of toxic waste

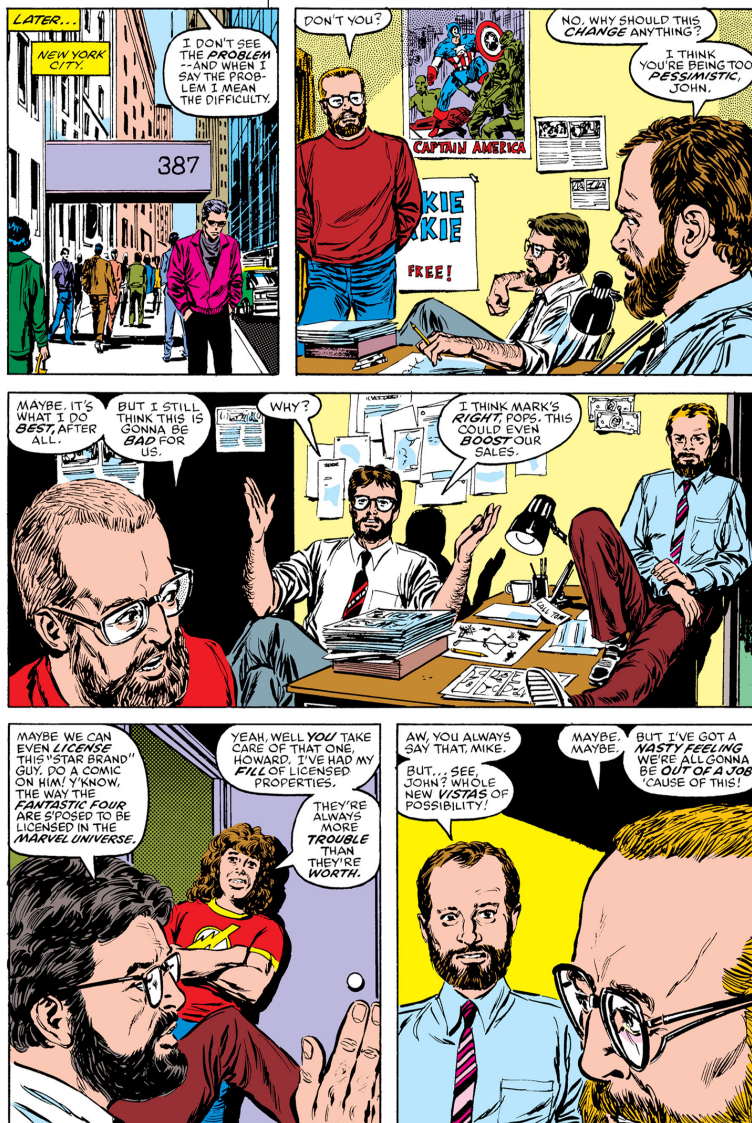


(left) Cary Bates comes aboard for a two-issue story. Cover by Geof Isherwood. (right) Keith Giffen and Bob Wiacek provide the art as Star Brand meets Nightmask in issue #9. Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

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(top) John Byrne arrives and Star Brand gets a new costume. (bottom) "The world outside your window" apparently includes the Marvel offices. *Star Brand* #11 art by John Byrne and Tom Palmer.

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dump in a straightforward plotline that pitted Star Brand against an unscrupulous corporation. #9 was a subversive alternate take dealing with many of the same story elements. After the death of the teenager he had tried to help in #8, Ken Connell is racked with guilt and seeks out dream therapy administered by Keith Remsen (aka Nightmask). Keith Giffen and I conceived the dream sequence to serve as an homage to the classic Silver Age Lee and Kirby stories, hence the title "Where Walks the True Believer." Not only did issue #8 have the Lee flare to the storytelling, but the artwork screamed Kirby. While both of these issues brought a sense of much needed drama to the book, issue #8 stood out with its Kirby-esque artwork.

Bates recalls, "I can't recall why I did just the two issues of *SB*, though it might have had been due to schedule conflicts, since I was also scripting *Nightmask* as well as some issues of *Spitfire* and *theTroubleshooters*."

Bates tells *BI*, "I found writing for the *Star Brand*/Ken Connell persona to be an interesting change of pace after all my years on *Superman* and *Flash*, but to be honest I never gave the character much thought after Keith and I completed issue #8."

"I can't relay any inside knowledge of The New Universe, since I was just one of several fill-in writers that were brought in to keep the books on schedule. That said, this was at a time when I was grateful for the work, since my *Superman* assignments DC were diminishing due to the impending arrival of John Byrne," recalls Bates.

Writer George Caragone and artists Mark Bagley and Pablo Marcos gave readers a Cold War story in *Star Brand* #10 (Nov. 1987). Ken debated whether to use his powers to end the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. Ultimately he chose not to get involved and even stopped another super powered American from interfering.

It wasn't too long after Shooter's final *Star Brand* issue that he was removed from his editor-in-chief position as well. However, Shooter's exit from the title and company did not mean the end of the New Universe or *Star Brand*, but it did mean that changes were afoot.

THE STAR BRAND

After the first year of the New Universe, the line was cut in half. Only *Star Brand* (downgraded to a bi-monthly title), *DP 7*, *Psi-Force*, and *Justice* were saved from cancellation. DeFalco tells *BI*, "All cuts were based on sales. The sales on *Star Brand* were not great but better than most of the other New Universe books. I liked *Star Brand*, and I liked *DP.7*. I thought Gruenwald did a fabulous job on *D.P.7*. I found *Star Brand* very interesting."

The remaining titles were even a little harder to find for some readers as they became direct market. Starting with issue #11 (Jan. 1988), new creators writer/penciler John Byrne and inker/finisher Tom Palmer came onboard. With the new creators came a slightly different title for the book, *The Star Brand*. The cover also told readers that this wasn't the same comic that they had been reading. Ken was in a newly designed costume that was more akin to the Marvel Universe than to the New Universe.

According to Byrne on his blog *Byrnerobotics*, "I did *Star Brand* as a favor to Howard Mackie, who was then the editor. The first thing we agreed upon was that it would NOT be an 'and the horse you rode in on...' to Jim Shooter.

"I had a pretty full plate at the time, as I recall. When Howard Mackie asked me to write and pencil the book, I said I would provided I could do breakdowns and we could get Tom to do finishes."

Mackie responded to the comment on Byrne's blog, "My recollection is, as with most things I asked you to do, you immediately refused because of the full plate thing... and I would always say, 'Oh... you don't have to give me an answer NOW! Just think about it.' Knowing full well how the JB mind works... a week later you would always come back to me with a year long overview... whilst cursing me out. Or, in the case of *The West Coast Avengers*, two completed issues. Ha!"

DeFalco comments, "I think John wanted to do *Star Brand* in order to outsell Shooter on his own book. John Byrne was not going to get on a book that he was going to tank. John is a professional and he wants his books to sell. By making it a big success, it would have been a screw you to Shooter."

A house ad appeared featuring the tag line "One of these paranormals is going to kill a million people..." Spoiler alert for an almost 40-year-old comic, but it was Ken Connell who committed the atrocity when he accidentally destroyed his (and Shooter's) hometown of Pittsburgh in *Star Brand* #12 (Mar. 1988). Ken wanted to get rid of the excess power he received when he battled the Old Man. He tried to put it into an inanimate object, but he failed and ended up blowing up the city. The event, called "The Black Event," changed the direction of the book dramatically. This definitely wasn't the "world outside of your window" that Shooter had envisioned. The area where the city had been was then referred to as the Pitt.

Beyond the new costume and destruction of Pittsburgh, the book offered up other changes for Ken and his costars. Ken found out that the Old Man wasn't an alien but was an ancient human who acquired the Star Brand centuries earlier. Deb was visiting friends out of town when Pittsburgh was destroyed, so she was saved while Myron, Barb, and her children were killed. Deb revealed that she was pregnant with Ken's child.

In *Star Brand* #13 (May 1988), Deb died when the baby ripped itself out of her womb but not before absorbing her essence. The Star Child tried to get Ken's essence in the next issue causing them to fight. A fight in which Ken lost his powers and began a nomadic existence. He would essentially become a minor player in the book going forward.

The Star Child was now the protagonist of the series. Over the next few issues, he aged rapidly, destroyed a creature who came out of the Pitt, shared his power with two others who were in either physical or emotional distress, and searched for the origin of the Star Brand.

The final issue of the series was *Star Brand* #19 (May 1989). The story, titled "Finale," saw the Star Child return to Earth. It was revealed that the Old Man was an older Ken Connell who tried to

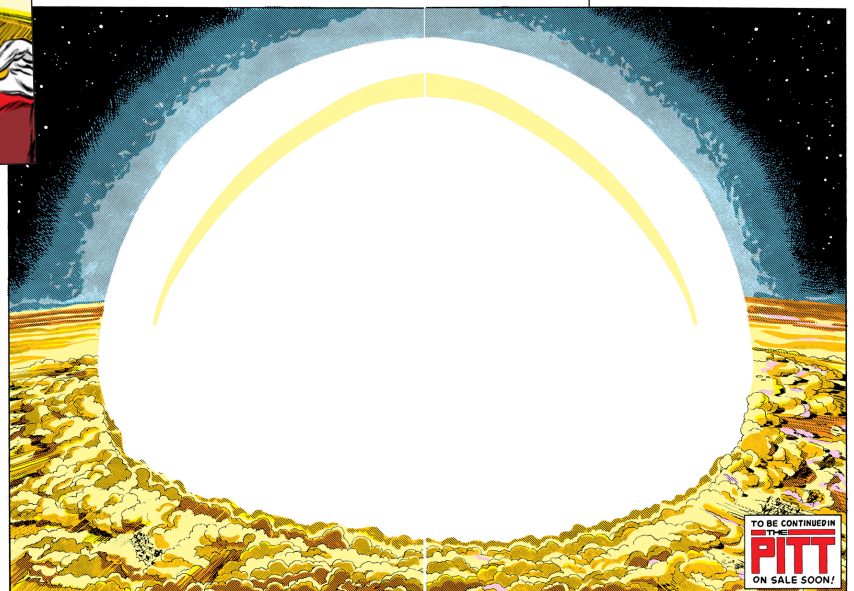
destroy the Star Brand by placing it on an asteroid. The explosion that took place not only initiated the White Event which introduced paranormals on the Earth, but it was also responsible for creating the Star Brand itself. The Old Man was also thrown back in time 500 years as an amnesiac. The issue ends with the Star Child, the Old Man, and Ken fusing themselves into one being and then creating a time loop to keep the power trapped forever.

The ending was a far cry from Shooter's concept. It was a weird, wacky ride from Byrne's first issue until his last. On his blog, Byrne recalled, "I followed thru on the character arc I felt Shooter had established for Connell. One of the rules I set for myself, in fact, was that I would not use the book to take cheap shots at Shooter. Revenge, as they say, is a dish best eaten cold."

On an April 26th, 2005 post on his blog, Byrne stated, "It was fun to work on a book in which there were, essentially, no rules. No mountain of continuity to deal with, and yet at the same time a need to operate within a cohesive 'universe.' It was also fun, since everyone expected me to turn it into my giant 'F*CK YOU to Shooter, to do exactly the opposite.'"

(top) Spoiler alert:
It's Star Brand.
(bottom) Goodbye,
Pittsburgh. *Star Brand* #12 art by
Byrne and Palmer.

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(left) Deb's pregnancy does not end well. *Star Brand* #13 cover by Byrne. (right) *newuniversal* was a fresh look at the New Universe. Cover by Salvador Larroca.

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One of the main edicts of the New Universe was that it was supposed to be what would happen if super powered beings existed in the real world. Many years later, Byrne would deal with a similar concepts in his creator-owned *Next Men* series. When asked on his blog if his time on *Star Brand* was a first draft for that, he replied, "Not so much a 'first draft' as an earlier take on the same concepts: if there are super powered beings in the world, how does the world change?"

In 1989, all the remaining New Universe titles including *Star Brand* were cancelled. DeFalco tells *BI* they were canceled because of "sales, they were just not making the grade. The problem with the New Universe was that I think Jim was hoping to catch lightning in a bottle. Jim wanted to create his own universe. He kind of wanted to compete with the Marvel Universe. He was convinced that his books would outsell the Marvel things. He wanted to kind of prove that he was as good as Stan Lee. I think that whatever problems we see in our industry is that everyone wants to be Stan. You know, come in and create a whole bunch of titles. But even Stan did not initially start a universe. It eventually morphed into a universe but there was no master plan there."

While this officially marked the end of the New Universe line, the characters and concepts including *Star Brand* continued to return.

BEYOND THE NEW UNIVERSE

In 2007 writer Warren Ellis and artist Salvador Larocca brought readers *newuniversal*. This was a reimagining of *Star Brand* and the rest of the New Universe. In an interview with *Comic Book Resources*, Ellis stated, "[I don't] think the original creators and editors realized until it was too late—it was all a single story. It shouldn't have been eight books (or whatever) that were eventually consolidated into ensemble miniseries. It was a single story that should have spun new series and serials off of it." Two miniseries and two one-shots were published.

In 2013, a new version of *Star Brand* was introduced in the pages of *Avengers* #7 (May 2013). This wasn't Ken

Connell, though. College student Kevin Conner wielded the power this time around. He was eventually killed by Ghost Rider Robbie Reyes's Penance Stare. Upon his death, the *Star Brand* power was transferred to Suzanne Selby. Suzanne died giving birth to her daughter Brandy who received the *Star Brand*.

In 2025, Marvel released the five-issue miniseries *Battleworld* in which heroes from across Marvel's multiverse were thrown together. This included *Star Brand* and other heroes from the New Universe. *Star Brand* even made a solo appearance on a variant cover for *Battleworld* #1 (Nov. 2025) by Mark Bagley.

Star Brand (and the entire New Universe) was an attempt at a more realistic approach to superheroes. While it didn't succeed as well as Shooter and the other creators had hoped, it gave readers an even more flawed protagonist than other Marvel books, it was set in a city that wasn't known for its superheroes, and kept itself mostly grounded, at least at the beginning. The creators were also some of the top names in comics. The concept of superheroes in the real world keeps reappearing because it's an intriguing one that in the hands of the right creators works. Comics such as Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s *Kick-Ass* and J. Michael Straczynski's *Rising Stars* are just two examples of the concept done right.

The author would like to thank Cary Bates and Tom DeFalco for their time and invaluable assistance with this article. Thanks also goes out to Nathan Cheever for the use of his email exchange.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Jim Shooter. As a comic reader during the Bronze Age, his time as Marvel editor-in-chief was a magical one even if not all of his ideas turned to gold.

Ed Lute is an educator, comic book historian, and freelance writer. He first visited the New Universe in 1986 and enjoyed his recent return visit. He met and spoke with Jim Shooter at HeroesCon in 2023. It was one of the many highlights of that weekend.



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SHORT STUFF ABOUT SHOOTER



by Dewey Cassell

*This article is a brief reflection of short stuff about Shooter to round out this BACK ISSUE dedicated to him. The accompanying "self-portrait" sketch is a case study in the contrasts that characterized the man. Shooter is, of course, best known for being a writer and editor. I was particularly fond of his writing on the *Legion of Super-Heroes*. But when he first started out working at DC Comics as a teenager, he would actually draw out the Legion stories, panel by panel, complete with word balloons. While he was clearly a better writer than artist, his layouts reflected strong storytelling. And when he went on the comic book convention circuit later in life, he was known to do some drawing (of something other than his legs), but sketches by Shooter are still in fairly short supply.*

However, he was well known for writing very long and detailed comic book scripts. About Shooter's scripts, renowned *Legion* artist Mike Grell said, "A typical Cary Bates script would be a page, sometimes maybe a page-and-a-half, for every page in the book, and a typical Jim Shooter script was the New York telephone book. I would say that Jim probably averaged 90-100 pages on a 25-page book. Every month. Let me be charitable and say 60-90 pages, but I would say 60 pages would be incredibly light for him. He would generally write a half-a-page per panel." (*Mike Grell: Life is Drawing Without an Eraser*, TwoMorrows Publishing, 2018.) They were anything but short.

During his tenure on the *Legion*, Shooter created several new characters that became favorites of fans, including Karate Kid, Ferro Lad, and Princess Projectra, as well as the villains Nemesis Kid and the Fatal Five. He was never short of new ideas, although the character of Ferro Lad was short-lived, dying in issue #353 of *Adventure Comics*, only seven issues after his debut.

When it came to business, Shooter had a reputation for being no-nonsense as an editor. He had his own opinion about how things should be done. It was said he could be short—as in terse or abrupt—at times and it rubbed some people the wrong way. Ironically, the drawing suggests he was not short on humor, even the self-deprecating kind.

Not everyone was a fan of Jim Shooter, including some artists whom I was fortunate enough to call friends. At the time, some of his decisions seemed short-sighted and they adversely impacted some creators, especially the older ones. But history has reflected somewhat kinder on his decision-making with the benefit of hindsight. His success proved that you shouldn't sell him short.

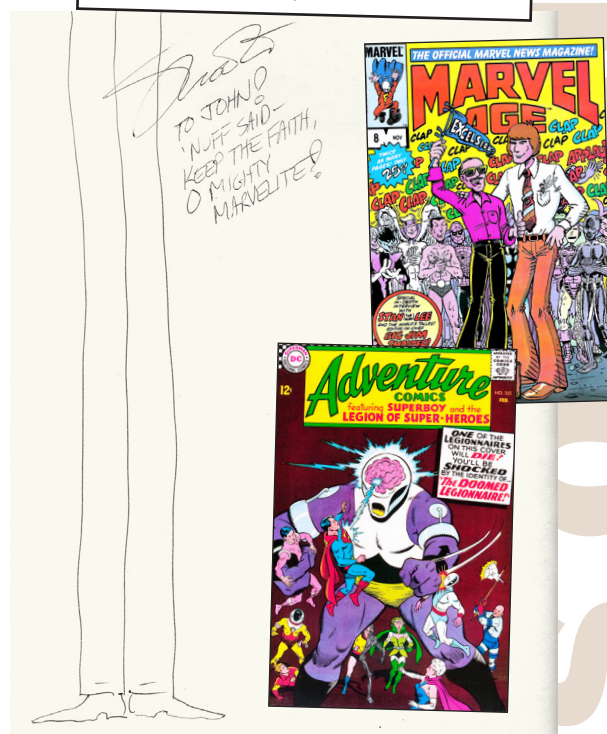
Shooter was later fired from Marvel, but went on to found several new comics publishers, including Valiant, Defiant, and Broadway Comics, but his tenure at each was short. Of the three, Valiant was the most successful with comics based on Gold Key characters like Magnus, Robot Fighter, and Solar, Man of the Atom, followed by a host of other titles.

For my part, when I saw Shooter at comic book conventions, I always found him to be personable and more than willing to sign autographs, take photos, and talk at length about the good old days. It seemed like he afforded everyone his full attention, never giving anyone the short shrift.

I trust it was not lost on anyone, the irony of a short article about a man who was anything but. Would I have liked to have one of those original Legion sketches by Shooter from when he was a teenager, which he brought with him to conventions to show to fans? Of course. But am I glad to have any sketch by the creator who so entertained me in my youth? Absolutely. Like him or not, his impact on the industry is undeniable.

When Jim Shooter shuffled off this mortal coil, he left tall shoes to fill.

Dewey Cassell is the twice Eisner Award nominated author/co-author of five books and over 50 magazine articles. He never thought of himself as short until he stood next to Jim Shooter.



(top) A self-portrait by Jim Shooter. Courtesy of the author. (inset top) Jim Shooter and Stan Lee share the cover of *Marvel Age* #8. Art by Ron Zalme. (inset bottom) Ferro Lad makes the ultimate sacrifice in *Adventure Comics* #353. Cover by Curt Swan and George Klein. (bottom) Jim Shooter and the author at Heroes Con in 2023.

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