

# Comic book lament

## Burned collection doesn't incinerate childhood memory

By Charles Lieurance

What did Superman ever do for Me?

The big, mean evil dad came into the adolescent's room, looking like some Jack Kirby Olmec demigod with circuitous head gear and some kind of light-emitting amulet around his neck. What was he looking for?

He was rattling about in the closet, where I'd hoped the Gene Simmons poster, spewing blood from its venomous tongue, would frighten him off. But he continued his search. Being a Jack Kirby Olmec demigod however, and using a clever combination of X-ray vision, astral projection and tapping for hollow spots in the paneling, he found the secret panel in the back of the closet. He whistled between his teeth and swore, disgust and admiration, the same sound I heard him emit when there was a streaker on the Academy Awards presentation.

"Jesus Christ, it's endless."

I felt a twinge of pride. The unwieldy stacks toppled at his touch. Maybe he'd be put off by the precarious heights of the stacks, by their helter skelter, every-which-way imbalance. Maybe he'd spot the issue where the Silver Surfer discovers he might have to destroy the world to save it. Then, he'd know. I'd find him in the morning, sitting in the closet in his boxers and undershirt, filling out order forms for onion gum, sea monkeys and miniature revolutionary war soldiers.

But this was some kind of '60s fatherly ritual and his hand would not be stayed. Any obsessions at my age were bad obsessions. If I wanted an obsession I'd have to resume it beyond the family. I was to be weaned away, always weaned away.

He toted the stacks out of the room one by one, grunting and cussing as he went. I didn't try to stop him. I knew it had to happen someday. I'd heard about these midnight raids from my friends. They advised me to hide the collection, but they also told me it wouldn't do any good. When the comic books were gone, there would come masturbation, and when it was time for me to stop that, well, I wasn't sure what my father would do then.

I went to the window and watched my father in the backyard, standing dappled orange by the incinerator. The Mighty Thor swung his hammer uselessly around and around as his upper torso caught in the wind and fire and burned away. At least it was an appropriate Nordic death. Swamp Thing was plucked from the mire and sent brooding off into space. It was dazzling, watching the pantheon immolated. I was almost proud of my father.

The last stack had fanned like a

peacock's tail atop a sprawl of ragweed. One by one, slowly now, he popped these stragglers into the flame. The last one he leafed through. I couldn't tell what it was, but he smiled and shook his head. He tucked it under his arm and came inside. I stood in the hallway.

"That's that," he said, clapping ashes off his hands. He made a little ash cross on my forehead with his forefinger and handed me the last comic book. It was *The Shadow*, with the circus freak assassins, the deadly harlequin twins.

"I used to love that radio show," he said. "The weed of crime bears bitter fruit."

He did *The Shadows* laugh as he walked into the darkness and I read along with it on the page. The laugh started out small, little letters that began to coil around the darkened streets of New York, around lampposts, becoming louder and more magnificent, the letters thick and dripping with frost on the chilly docks. The criminal, in his long coat and baggy trousers, fired his .45 automatic uselessly into the dark as *The Shadow's* laughter built an invincible helix around him.

In the beginning, there was the 3 inch by 5 inch James T. Chick pamphlet, published in Cucamonga, California, but shipped worldwide. Chick has probably frightened more kids into the arms of the fundamentalist Christ with his little comic books than all the Revelations docu-dramas and Jimmy Swaggarts put together. Like Dostoyevsky's novels, Chick pamphlets may end with redemption, but it's not that you remember.

What are captured most vividly are the contorted faces of anguish, the exaggerated abyss of evil. Chick's black and white pamphlets are filled with virulent human monsters Jim Thompson would be proud of: cigar-chomping, muscle-bound truck-driver serial rapists; drooling, lecherous, mad Catholic priests whipping screaming, virginal nuns with the cat-o-nine tails; acid-addled young Mañsons brandishing voodoo dolls and draining the souls from innocent but confused runaways. Albrecht Durer had nothing on Chick where the Gothic horror of Christian history is concerned.

Chick pamphlets showed up everywhere in my youth and I answered nearly 17 altar calls because of Chick's hell on earth. Oddly, none of his panoramas of the subterranean hell were very convincing. His devil was strictly central casting, pointy beard, horns and obligatory pitchfork.

Chick is still at work, having joined forces with Alberto Rivera at the Anti-Christ Information Center in Canoga Park, California. Rivera claims to have been some kind of Jesuit assassin who barely escaped the clutches of the monstrous Catholic church. Nuns, in the confes-

sional, admitted to Rivera that they had been guilty of lesbianism, of sex with priests, and that their illegitimate children had been smothered and buried in the basements of convents.

EC comics. Although known for corrupting the youth of this nation during the '50s, EC was actually fiercely moralistic, as anyone who watches HBO's wonderful *"Tales from the Crypt"* can tell you. No evil ever went unpunished in an EC horror title. As in film noir, one evil snowball until no amount of character reversal can stop the hideous retribution. The only difference between EC and noir is that the retribution rarely came in the form of man-made justice. Instead retribution came from beyond the grave, from the stars, from another dimension, from the animation of inanimate objects. . . . You name it. Those who made fun of short people were shrunk to the size of microbes. Those who used magic to evil ends, who conjured demons for material gain, were soon feasted upon by those same demons.

But EC was also funny. Grinning candy skulls unlike the ugly, rotting damned things that littered Chick. EC was a hallucinogenic, exuberant death trip, whose spiritual result was a certain indescribable self-confidence. As a suburban youth there wasn't as much chance as I might have liked to visit the dark side: ECs vault of horror was filled with undeniable wisdoms about the human condition, gave a strange worldliness to those who read it. You wound up with these dreaded comic book geeks, wimps with amazing amounts of ego who might have otherwise opted for teenage suicide.

In short EC was a life saver, scorned by adults because — and I don't know how the Kefauver committee that investigated the comics industry knew this at the time — it created more artists than soldiers.

Spider Man broods for whole issues. Whole issues. The Silver Surfer glitters in deep space, a half-god trapped in a universe not of his own making, reluctantly trying to help without throwing off the natural balance of an alien and preposterous earth. The angst-ridden su-

perhero created by Marvel in the late '60s was a further sentimental education. Heroism as curse, as unbearable responsibility. The possibility of real death unleashed amid the wish-fulfillment of comic books. From movies I knew what it was like to be a teen-age werewolf, cursed with hairy palms (hmm), but to be a teen-age superhero, voice changes, stomach butterflies and all.

Alas, the teen-age hipster beatnik hero unafraid of the supernatural adrift among the Philistines. Maybe I won't save the world today, how would that be? Maybe I'll just sit on this ledge high above the burning city and blow bazooka bubbles all day long. How would that be?

If you want assurances, move to Gotham or pristine Metropolis.

Ohmigod should I be feeling this way. Everything's just vibrating sort of vibrating. Lemme see that Ed "Big Daddy" Roth statue. Lemme see. His tongue's blown back three feet behind his head, his teeth all chipped and protruding, bulbous Basil Wolverton eyes, veins like bloated lightning. Those mag wheels are bending those axles to hell, man. What is that, a Chevy? I saw a kit for that in Car Toons. You're such a freaking gear head, man. You got an STP sticker for a brain. He popped me on in the forehead. Don't touch my head, Kyle.

She said, "Yummy Fur" makes me sick, but I think it's great.

Whole panels of excrement, she said. Whole panels. And what's with the straight telling of the New Testament? She said, I like "Love and Rockets" because of the strong female characters. I can't believe it's drawn by two men.

I don't get "Eightball," she said. Maybe I need to see more Russ Meyer movies in order to get it, right? If I see "Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!" it'll all come clear then?

I like Stick Boy, she said. He's cute. So what if his world exists only up a dog's butt.

I wasn't really listening, too busy reading David Lynch's comic strip, "The Angriest Dog in the World" from the L.A. reader. It's always the same three panels. A backyard. A

dog drawn so angry and tense that the panels pulsate with his wrath. His head is thrust forward, his muscular legs taut and shooting out behind him. He's chained to a tree and the chain is stiff. First panel: Suburban human inanities coming from the back window. Second panel: more of the same. Third panel, the angriest dog in the world.

Have you seen this Drew Friedman cartoon? She asked. Do we still call them cartoons? Is that okay?

It depicts in disturbingly photographic black and white pointillism, Rock Hudson and Jim Nabors consummating their love on the magic fingers bed of a Hollywood motel. On the next page, Sheriff Taylor, Goob and Barney lynch a black man who's just passing through town and then they all go back to Sheriff Taylor's house to have blueberry pie courtesy of Aunt Bea.

Is Art Spiegelman's "Maus" better than Elie Weisel's "Night"? Is it really possible to compare Thomas Pynchon's "Gravity's Rainbow" with "Watchmen"? Marquez's "100 Years of Solitude" with "Love and Rockets"?

And I hope you understand what I'm getting at here, she said, how can Superman die without Lois Lane knowing his secret identity? What will that do to Western Pop Consciousness? Maybe we've been waiting for that revelation before we can complete some cycle into new and better beings. Maybe we need a sense of closure where that issue's concerned. Spiritually speaking.

What's with Harvey Pekar, anyway?

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