

Comics' history no joke

Cartoon heroes tromp decades of decadence

Glancing over a shelf in a comic book store is like staring at a mixed-up mosaic based on our culture, through the eyes of the dreaming preadolescent.

Every current fad and controversial issue is represented in the funny books: Vampires, Malcolm X, The Avengers, Guns N' Roses, Batman, Led Zeppelin and a dead Superman. On the shelves of Trade-A-Tape Comic Center, a comic book about the L.A. Riots sits next to one about Swamp Thing trying to win his daughter's soul back from the legions of hell.

Lying on the rack above them, the Punisher solves the drug problem with a raging Gatling gun, the Avengers avenge something, and Spider-Man fights Venom for the millionth "last time."

Here on these racks, all the problems of our society are solved in 22 illustrated pages, with a fist fight or the blast of a laser gun.

Comic books are a glorification of the Heroic: open, drooling worship of man's idealized power over just about everything. This need for heroes is nothing new; it can be traced back to the first stories humankind has written.

Moses summoned the Angel of Death to punish the Egyptians, and later parted the Red Sea. Perseus sliced off Medusa's head, Beowulf ripped off Grendel's limb. And Odysseus poked out the Cyclops Polyphemus's eye.

In the Middle Ages, Arthur pulled the sword out of the stone, George killed the dragon, Galahad got the Grail, while his dad, Lancelot, contended himself with Arthur's wife. Whether they gain power from Almighty God, under the order of the Nazerite, from their birthright as a divine bastard of Zeus, or from a wayward radioactive spider, heroes always stay the same.

They beat up monsters, destroy villains, and triumph over evil, and

that's it.

In the folklore of Americana, our stories have been no different. John Brown, Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan began the mythos of the American demigod; slightly silly beings none too bright, in a fashion much like Hercules or Samson, who did amazing things with brute strength, crude cleverness and an indomitable will.

They faded away to make way for the Western heroes, and the Penny Dreadfuls. Jesse James, Billy the Kid and Crazy Horse graced the covers of what would become pulp-fiction, and later comic books.

After the turn of the century, radio descended on America, and with it a new slew of heroes. The Green Hornet, the Lone Ranger, the Shadow: all waged war on the underworld from behind a cape or a mask, obvious predecessors to the Batmanish avengers that would soon make safe the night.

The true comic book, and the comic book hero, originated during the 1930s. When Hitler was trying to organize his race of supermen, two Jewish youngsters in America were doing the same.

In the late 1930s, the two young men, Siegel and Schuster, published a hero named "Superman" in the pages of their fledgling Action Comics.

Out of Superman, Action Comics, and the D.C. Comics Company, comic books were born.

Comic books caught on at an exponential rate, all through the pre-World War II, and World War II days. Superman was joined by Batman, the Flash, Wonder Woman and the Spectre in the pages made by the D.C. Comic Book Company.

Rival companies soon popped up to compete with D.C., most notably Marvel Comics, with its new champions: Dr. Strange, the Flaming Torch and the Sub-Mariner, all in the first pages of Tales to Astonish. And it was Marvel who had Captain America punch Hitler in the mouth, before the United States even thought of beginning to try to storm German soil.

It was in the Atomic Age that a

new era of comics began. Under the twin shadows of the American-created Atomic Bomb and the Communist Threat, American super heroes were given both an All-Father and a nemesis. Bruce Banner was hit by the full force of a "Gamma" radioactive bomb blast, and turned into the Incredible Hulk. Introverted Peter Parker was bitten by a radioactive spider in a laboratory experiment and became the James Dean of comic books, full of teenage angst, a character who wondered if he could ever be loved and accepted for who he was, as he punched Dr. Octopus in the mouth.

Mutants, of radioactive origin, popped up by the dozen in the pages of Marvel, becoming the X-Men, now the dominant force in comics today. And while these individuals were discovering the gifts endowed upon them by the power of the atom, Batman, The Green Lantern, and others were beating the heck out of the incorrigible U.S.S.R.

The late '60s and '70s were an awakening of America's social conscience, and this was reflected in comic books. Spider-Man, in his civilian garb, went to college and watched his roommate almost overdose popping pills.

The Green Arrow's sidekick, Speedy, was found shooting up on the cover of Green Arrow's comic. The problems of vigilantes, inherent in the super-hero type, were explored with the machine-gun toting Punisher, a man whose lust for justice and vengeance drove him out of control, and who needed to be put away by other super-heroes for his own good. Sensitive, albeit clumsy, portrayals of minority individuals began to creep into the funny books: the Master of Kung-Fu, the Black Panther, Power Man, and Black Lightning most notably.

But as Glitter-Glam exposed the effeminate qualities of the Free Love Movement, kids began to yearn for something else. "Peace" was exchanged for "Anarchy" and "Skate and Destroy." The Namby-pamby attitudes of the '70s, were put away for the stern, authoritarian heroes of the mid '80s.

Batman was reborn as "The Dark Knight," a 50-year-old man in a bleak future, in which he broke arms and legs of criminals, as the Joker practiced genocide at the County Fair.

Wolverine became the most popular character to children of the '80s, a killing machine with perpetually blood-stained extending claws, slashing his way through his adversaries. Judge Dred, a merciless cop in the far future, who was judge, jury and executioner, gained an enormous following in the U.K. and in the States. And the Punisher, whose extremist attitudes were



Courtesy of DC Comics
Superman died last month in this issue. His long-awaited departure is clouded by rumors that he will return within the year. This unfortunate rumor is, no doubt, because of the regrettable penchant comic book companies have for doing just that. We can only hope DC is above this kind of thing.

condemned in the '70s, was changed from a villain to a hero, and became one of the best-selling sensations for Marvel.

Comic Book heroes are ever-going through a process of renewal, reflecting the current social issues of the day. The Incredible Hulk has been re-explained in Freudian terms, the Hulk being Bruce Banner's repressed Id, repressed ever since he was abused as a child. Gay rights has also made an impact in the kiddie comics: Northstar of Alpha Flight, the Flash's friend the Pied Piper, and the police chief of Superman's town, Metropolis, all have come out of the closet.

It's ironic that in the Post-Nuclear Age, as the first modern president-elect who doesn't have an origin in World War II replaces one who does, the Super hero who found his making there, also found himself ushered out.

But, for the same reason that America looks to its president, heroes, and the dollar-comic super-hero, will eternally be in vogue.

America is still a place that puts it trust in the personality. Even though the real power in our country probably rests in the law-making Congress, the federal bureaucracy, or the American voter, we still hold our presidents responsible for virtually everything that happens abroad, or domestically.

We, as Americans, curse the president when our economy slips, praise him when we win a war, and look to him when we have problems because we still have the myth of the dynamic hero. We believe that a single individual can triumph over anything, be it an oil crisis or the deficit, by sheer force of will, and that we need individuals larger than ourselves to do it for us.

Therein lies the heroic, the super hero and the spandex-clad avengers. And that's why you can bet your right kidney that Superman will reappear again inside of two years.

Patrick Hambrecht is a comics fan and Diversions Contributor.

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