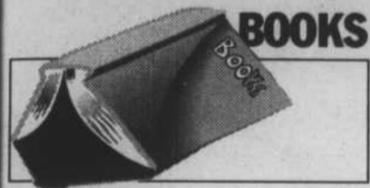


Comics' inserts discuss sex and its risks Character speaks frankly of diseases and prevention



By Anne Steyer
Staff Reporter

"Life . . . is a disease sexually transmitted and invariably fatal."

So begins "Death Talks About Life," the six-page insert published in three of DC Comics' mature line publications — "Hellblazer," "Shade, the Changing Man" and "Sandman."

DC's conception of Death is not as a grim reaper carrying a scythe. Instead, Death is an attractive, friendly, young, immortal woman — a popular recurring character in the comic "Sandman" and the star of her own three-part comic miniseries, "Death: The High Cost of Living."

Written by "Sandman" writer Neil Gaiman and drawn by Dave McKean, the insert is a public-service message that talks frankly about acquired immune deficiency syndrome, sexually transmitted diseases, safer sex and condom use. It is serious, funny, and informative.

The insert is part of DC's "Get the Facts" campaign that, according to DC publicity manager Martha Thomas, was over a year in the making.

Thomas said wheels started turning when DC became aware that teens and young adults were the fastest growing demographic group of HIV-positive cases.

That age group makes up most of DC's customer base, Thomas said.

In addition to the insert in the mature line, DC ran full-page announcements in all its superhero titles, featuring familiar superheroes such as Robin, Green Lantern and the Flash. A variety of writers and artists worked on these ads.

Gaiman was approached to do the insert, Thomas said, because he's such a popular writer.

"Neil obviously cares about the subject matter," she said. "That is obvious through his work."

Gaiman's comic has featured gay and lesbian characters, and homosexuals are often the most highly profiled — although certainly not the only — AIDS victims.

Gaiman said he turned down the offer at first.

He said he didn't want to do a benefit book because most of the people who would buy such a thing would already be informed.

"Preaching to the converted is no good," he said.

He offered instead to do a story that could be inserted into the comics and reach more people, but he insisted upon being given the freedom to be explicit.

Gaiman said he told DC he wanted to talk about anal sex, oral sex and hypodermic needles, and that he wouldn't do it otherwise.

DC agreed. Gaiman said he was drawn to the project because "people get AIDS and die and that's really shitty."

He expressed sadness and outrage about the disease, mentioning a friend who had been afflicted with AIDS.

"He died because he didn't spend 25 cents for a piece of rubber," Gaiman said. "That's kind of stupid."

Gaiman said Death was the most appropriate choice to discuss sexual activity and its consequences.

"She's appropriate — that is the end result of AIDS. She's sensible — there aren't a lot of characters in the DC universe that could talk about these things unblushingly," Gaiman said. "And she's friendly, she's attractive, and she's unfucked up."

"He died because he didn't spend 25 cents for a piece of rubber. That's kind of stupid."

-- Gaiman,
comic book writer

Gaiman did his homework, reading everything he could find on the subject. He went to an STD clinic in London and took a copy of every leaflet it had available. He also talked with doctors and other professionals in the medical field.

The story was taken to various AIDS agencies, he said, and it also went to the Gay Men's Health Clinic in New York. Gaiman said they were very helpful there and made some suggestions as to how to make the insert better.

"A man down there said he preferred the term 'safer sex' to 'safe sex' because there's really no such thing as 100 percent safe sex," Gaiman said. "Condoms break."

Gaiman has received mostly positive feedback, although some said he should have promoted abstinence and chastity more.

Both alternatives were mentioned in the insert, but more space was given to a detailed description of the proper application of a condom — demonstrated on a banana.

Gaiman said he was pleased with how the project turned out, and was pleased with DC for doing it.

"I was trying to write something for our audience, the 16-25 age group," Gaiman said. "An age group that is the fastest rising group of positive cases (of HIV)."

Gaiman is not alone in his concern for DC's readership.

"Through this (promotion), we hit everyone," Thomas said. "Everyone who reads a DC comic will see at least one — either the insert or the ad."

Thomas said the initial plan was to run the



Courtesy of DC Comics

ads in the December comics to coincide with AIDS Awareness Day. But because of DC's printing schedule, Thomas said, at DC it became AIDS Awareness Month.

"People here feel pretty strongly about it," she said.

The same public-service ads that appeared in the superhero comics appeared in both Entertainment Weekly and People magazines, she said.

Thomas said she hadn't seen or heard any negative reaction to the announcements, but that she had received plenty of positive feed-

back. Regarding the superhero ads targeted at younger audiences, Thomas said DC wasn't trying to play parent, and didn't intend to take away the parent's role in talking to children about sexual activity and its results.

"Instead," she said, "if parents were wondering how to talk to their children about it, this gives them an opening."

Neither the ads nor the insert pretend to be the definitive authority on the subject; they simply want readers to understand the seriousness of the topic.



Courtesy of Ballantine Books

Clarissa Pinkola Estés

Wild Woman Book explores passionate force in females' psyche

"Women Who Run With the Wolves"
Clarissa Pinkola Estés Ph.D.
Ballantine Books

She is powerful, intuitive and passionate. She is the force within the psyche of every woman that allows us to experience, comprehend and react to every event that occurs during our lives.

Most of the time we repress her, ignore her or fight against her because she enables us to think and feel at greater depths than ever before. She is the Wild Woman.

According to Clarissa Pinkola Estés Ph.D., in her book "Women Who Run With the Wolves", there is a wild and passionate force deep within the psyche of every woman. This force is the Wild Woman.

Being a cantadora storyteller and Jungian analyst, Estés integrates a vari-

ety of legends and folk tales with just the right amount of psychological training to make this book stimulating to both the intellect and the senses.

Every chapter begins with a myth, fairy tale, folk tale or story. Estés intensely examines and explains each of these so that the reader may evaluate the ideas in relation to her own life. Estés refers to these evaluating and application processes as "psychic archeological digs" into the depths of the female unconscious.

She describes the disappearance of the Wild Woman as a catastrophic loss to not only the woman involved, but also to society as a whole. She goes on to explain that it is the fault of society that women feel the necessity to disregard the Wild Woman.

According to Estés, this blatant disrespect toward the innermost part of a woman is currently evident throughout society. However, the degradation of the

Wild Woman is harmful primarily to women who continually deny themselves access to this inner strength, which in turn becomes inhibitive to those around her.

The book's major problem is its distinct ability to confuse the reader by retelling too much information.

While Estés has many good and informative ideas, she often explains them once and then explains them several more times, just in different ways.

The reader often identifies with the first explanation and then becomes confused due to continual reexamination of the ideas.

If you have the patience to wage war with 502 pages of intense, thought-provoking, and confusing mental stimulation, you're encouraged to pick up a copy of "Women Who Run With the Wolves."

If you can withstand the battle, you might find the victory sweet.

— Elaine Clair

