

R.F. COMIC SECTION

COMIX CASSEROLE

Book tells about struggles of visionary comic artists

"Comic Book Rebels"
Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette
Donald I. Fine Inc.

The real men and women behind the valiant superheroes, villains and mutants get their chance to explain the reason behind the mayhem of the comic book industry in "Comic Book Rebels."

"Comic Book Rebels" leaves a dissection of comic book characters and the comic books themselves on the wayside as it focuses on the motivation behind the creators.

"Comic Book Rebels—Conversations with the Creators of the New Comics," by Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette, is a compilation of interviews with comic legends and newcomers in the industry. The book is broken up into five sections from "Basics: What are the New Comics" to "The New Independents: Pass the Ammunition."

Scott McCloud, Howard Cruse, Denis Kitchen, Dave Sim, Neil Gaiman, Frank Miller, Colleen Doran and Todd McFarlane are only a sampling of creators and producers drawn into this mecca of rebels with a cause.

Their cause includes making comic art valued as fine art, along with fighting the creative limitations of big comic industries, such as Marvel, and starting an independent publishing company.

"Comic Book Rebels" dismisses such commercial comics as Superman and Batman and focuses on the more underground "comix" with pioneers such as "Cerebus," "Spawn" and "A Distant Soil."

These underground comix artists were often fallout from major comic industries that limited the artists' creative license. It came to a point where the industries were stealing their art.

"Comic Book Rebels" is an introspective look at a misunderstood art medium. Although a lot of people dismiss comic book art as juvenile trash, this book shows how the individual artist is just as passionate about his work as any Shakespeare or Monet.

The artists in the book describe their dedication to their art and their wish to preserve it from becoming commercialized. The book also opens up the world of international comics and other comic forefronts.

Cruse used his work to tackle a taboo subject in art and literature. Through his series "Wendel on the Rebound," Cruse dove into the problems of being homosexual in a world of homophobes. Because of his work, he faced another problem comic artists encounter: censorship by printers and binders who refused to work on his book.

The ever-loving, strong-hearted and yet fierce "Cerebus," a talking aardvark, allowed Sim to air his perspectives on "life, love, politics, power, religion and reality."

With the majority of the comic book industry dominated by men, Colleen Doran gives a moving explanation of how she broke into comics with her series "A Distant Soil."

Image Comics cornerstone Todd McFarlane includes his personal experience with battling for creative rights and breaking off his bonds with the industry to start a home for "Spawn" and himself.

The book concludes with "A Bill of Rights for Comics Creators"—a kind of "how to" guide for preserving the rights of the individual artists in a world of very real industry villains.

By reading the lives of "Comic Book Rebels," a touching and humorous portrayal appears of an artist or a publisher with a dream to make her or his art come alive.

It's a wonderful exploration of an undervalued art form and its artists. Where would the villains and superheroes of today be without them?

—Paula Lavigne

'Quarter comics' can provide cheap, excellent entertainment

Remember when "kiddie market" surplus trading fare like trading cards and comic books were cheap? Those days are gone.

Today, an average comic book costs \$2-\$5. Deluxe comic books, called "graphic novels," can cost anywhere from \$20 to \$40. Funny books are big business.

So what's a comic heroholic supposed to do, shoplift? Pawn some brain matter to Harris Labs? Mortgage his or her 10-speed bicycle? Nah. Instead of doing something drastic, visit the comic store quarter box.

Comic store owners buy their comic books at a discount, but they can't return unsold items. As a last-ditch effort to cash in on their dead stock, most comic retailers place their unsellables in a sale box. Sale box merchandise, or "quarter comics," is usually sold for 25 to 50 cents.

Needless to say, most close-out comic books are awful. But if you know the territory, some literary dumpsters can be a gold mine.

Here are a few quarter-comic gems:

Dreadstar by Jim Starlin. This science-and-sorcery epic is crafted in a far-out '70s style, with strong characters and expert plotting. It details the life of Dreadstar, the last man from Earth, who stops a war between church and state in an alien universe.

Atari Force, an excellent comic from the early 1980s, was cursed into oblivion by its dorky name. The original Atari Force series

was a give-away included with Atari 2600 games. The second version of Atari Force swept the comic awards for its excellent art and plot, but the fans snubbed it because of its silly corporate name.

Hex. Jonah Hex was the last of the cowboy comic heroes, wandering through the Old West in his Confederate Army uniform. But when Jonah's comic sales plummeted, DC Comics sucked the facially scarred hero into a time warp and placed him in the midst of Earth's nuclear-ravaged, biker-babe-ridden future. This "gunslinger meets the Thunderdome" series is kooky to the extreme.

Judge Dredd. He is judge, jury and executioner, as well as Britain's most popular comic hero. Reprints of his 2000 A.D. magazine exploits are abundant and always worth looking for.

Ambush Bug and The Heckler are evidence that Keith Giffen is the unappreciated genius of comic books. Although Giffen now has his own comic-book line, "Blackball Comics" by Image, he used to be given the dirty work at DC Comics, finishing up dead-end series like "Hex" and "Atari Force." Occasionally, Giffen was also given a miniseries of his own making. Ambush Bug and The Heckler are hysterical, madcap fun.

—Patrick Hambrecht

Comics can be serious

Let's get serious. Are comic books really serious literature, or are they still just fanciful juvenile shlock? The best argument for comic book tenure in the stuffy library of academic renown rests on a handful of comicdom's best. Here is a sampling:

"The Watchmen" by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. This comic novel asks a simple question: "What if there really were superheroes?" Moore's Dickensque answer is beautiful, serious and mind-boggling. You must read this. Really.

"Dark Knight Returns" by Frank Miller. The passion of this comic book is fierce and magnificent. Miller's interpretation of an elderly Batman in a damned world exemplifies what a hero is. The power of his vision cuts across literary boundaries and shows what a comic book can do.

"La Maus" by Art Spiegelman, winner of the Pulitzer Prize. In this biographical comic book, Spiegelman tells the story of his father through the Holocaust. Using the Nazi propaganda symbols of Jew equals rat and Nazi

equals cat to tell the story, Spiegelman tells a story that is uncompromising, quirky and jarring.

"Cerebus" by Dave Sim and Gerhard. This moody aardvark wanders through reality, becoming an elemental force of society, religion and the cosmos in his ongoing quest for nothing. The Cerebus paperbacks are expensive but necessary reading.

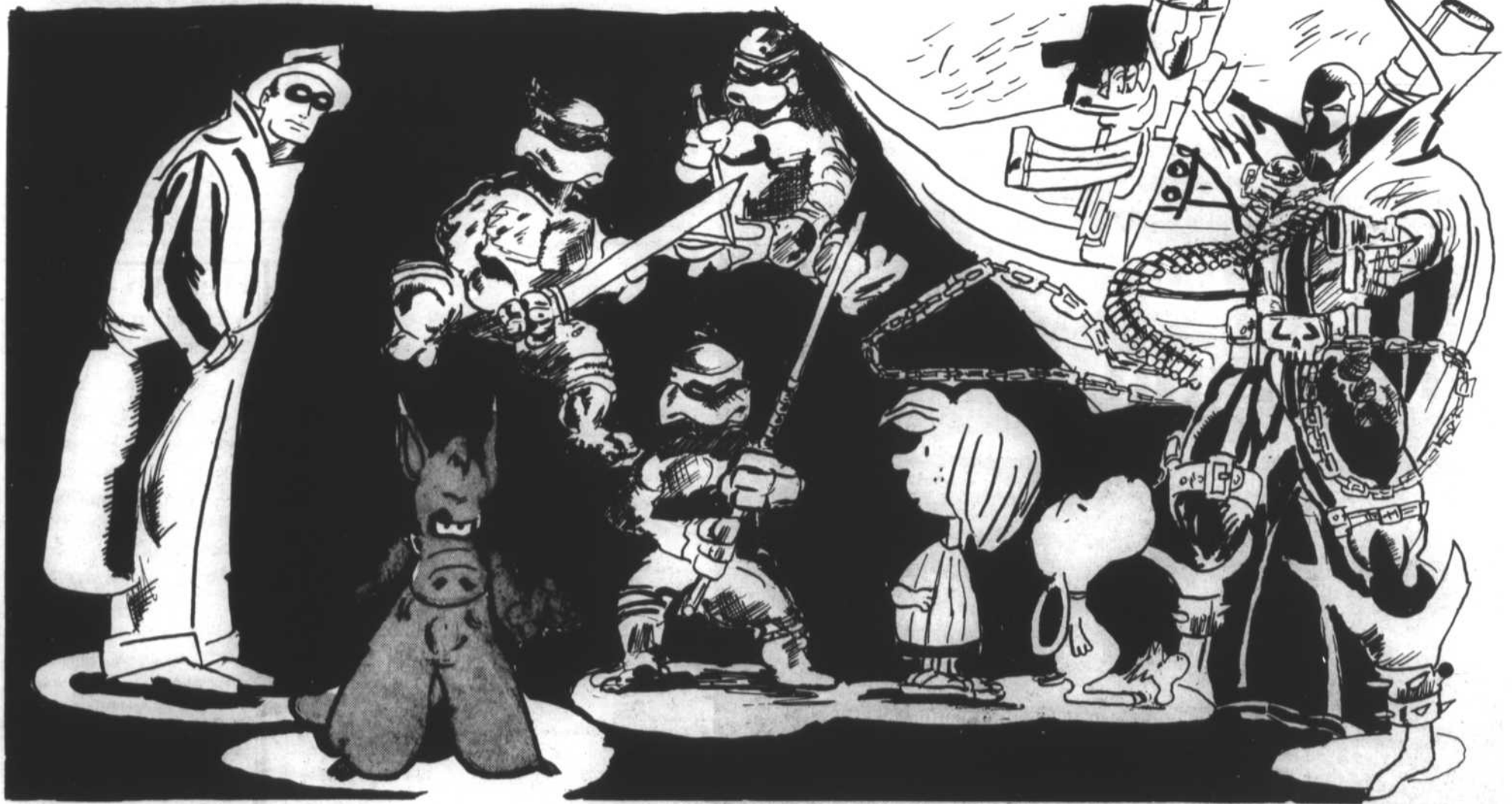
"Arkham Asylum" by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean. This book meshes paintings, history, illustrations, photographs and comic villains into an alluring, demonic wonderland. Art and story mesh perfectly in this sick, powerful vision of insane fancy.

"The Sandman" by Neil Gaiman. Gaiman's mythology for the '90s has engrossed both the college scene and comic insiders with his brooding stories of heaven, hell and the dreaming.

—Patrick Hambrecht

All of these comic books are available in soft and hard editions.

EVOLUTION OF COMICS



James Mehling/DN