

DC IN THE '80s ISSUE!

# BACK ISSUE!

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Behind-the-scenes looks at

## SECRET ORIGINS

and

# ACTION

COMICS WEEKLY

**DC CHALLENGE • ELECTRIC WARRIOR • SUN DEVILS • THRILLER**

with David • Evanier • Grell • Jurgens • Von Eeden • Waid & many more



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## BACK ISSUE

Comics' Bronze Age and Beyond!



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# THEIR LIVES WERE AN OPEN BOOK:

# SECRET

There is a school of thought that the origin story is a necessary evil, a preamble to get out of the way before the real fun begins. There's some truth in that, particularly in an age when endless film and comics reboots seem concerned with nothing *but* origins at the expense of moving forward. And yet, there's an almost primal need on the part of superhero fans to know how their favorite character started out. Lee Falk realized that early in his 1930s *Phantom* newspaper strip, introducing a concise, oft-repeated recap of the hero's roots "for those who came in late."

At DC Comics, the Spring of 1948 seems to have been the point when the publisher realized that such things might have commercial appeal. *Batman* #47 and *Superman* #53 each cover-featured "the origin of..." their respective leading men, expanding and revising details from the late 1930s' accounts. During the 1950s, "origin" stories—i.e., tales actually using that word—also popped up at other publishers, but none did more so than DC.

It seems to have been writer-editor Robert Kanigher who decided those episodes could be spun in a more sensational way. Hence, the "Secret Origin of Wonder Woman" in *WW* #105 (Apr. 1959), a provocative title that almost commanded kids to pick up the issue so that they, too, could be privy to facts known to no one else. A scant four months later, "secret origin" was used again on the cover of *All-Star Western* #108's Johnny Thunder reboot.

DC cemented its association with the phrase in 1961 when it published *Secret Origins* #1, a gloriously over-stuffed 80-page collection of reprints featuring the likes of the new Flash, the new Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, the Superman/Batman team, and more. Kids of the day ate it up and a sequel—"More Secret Origins"—eventually followed in 1965's *80-Page Giant* #8.

*Secret Origins* returned late in 1972 as an ongoing reprint book, one that benefited considerably from having DC expert E. Nelson Bridwell as its editor. Supplementing the vintage material, Bridwell also included a text page in each issue that briefly laid out the history of the sometimes-obscure characters featured in its pages. A nationwide paper shortage prompted the title's cancellation after seven issues, but the name was far from retired.

*Limited Collectors' Edition* #C-39 (1975) and C-45 (1976) were each devoted to "Secret Origins of Super-Villains," while a hero-centric

hardback was published in 1976 as a response to the hit *Origins of Marvel Comics* volume of 1974. Significantly, 1977's *DC Super-Stars* #14 abandoned the reprint model for a new trio of stories featuring supervillains. It was followed in short order with a pair of similarly original specials keyed to heroes (1977's *DC Super-Stars* #17 and 1978's *DC Special Series* #10). *Secret Origins* returned to its...well, origins in 1979 with the first of several reprint digests (*DC Special Series* #19) alternately keyed to either heroes (*DC Special Blue Ribbon Digest* #5, 9, and 22) or villains (*Best of DC* #10; *DC Special Blue Ribbon Digest* #15). Bonus new stories devoted to Wonder Woman, Zatanna, and the Penguin opened the earliest editions.

## SECRET ORIGINS, REVISITED

By the summer of 1984, the last of those digests was more than two years old and writer-editor Roy Thomas was formulating a new take on the old title. "While on a 6000-mile drive with my wife Dann around the western half of the US," he wrote in *The All-Star Companion* #4 (2009), Thomas wondered, "Why couldn't we redraw and re-dialogue—and even, where necessary, re-think—those fabled stories from the 1930s and 1940s? That would avoid the stigma associated in some readers' minds with simply reprinting old stories."

There was also the fact that several of those early costumed heroes never had origins at all, instead debuting fully formed with no explanation of how they got there. Thomas was, in fact, working on a story that was a virtual prototype for what he envisioned for the new *Secret Origins*. Noting that Starman had debuted in 1941 with no real backstory, Thomas built on details that had taken place back in *Adventure Comics* #61, added a retroactive sequence involving Phantom Lady, and plotted a proper origin that ran in *All-Star Squadron* #41 (on sale in October 1984).

Managing editor Dick Giordano and DC's higher-ups approved the proposal with one revision. Despite the success of Thomas' World War II-based *All-Star Squadron* title, the reality was that period books were a tougher sell to young readers than books set in the 1980s. Consequently, every third issue of *Secret Origins* would feature a Silver or Bronze Age hero. To that end, Thomas decided on Adam Strange and the Elongated Man for his initial post-1940s heroes and respectively assigned Gerry Conway and Mike W. Barr to write the scripts.



ROY THOMAS

© Luigi Novi / Wikimedia Commons.





Thomas otherwise intended to spotlight Golden Age heroes in the order in which they first appeared... with a few exceptions. Although he'd been preceded by the long-lost Dr. Occult, Superman was the unquestioned choice to launch the new *Secret Origins*. In an inspired touch, Thomas approached the long-retired Wayne Boring to pencil the story. The 80-year-old artist had originally been a ghost artist for Superman co-creator Joe Shuster before becoming the defining illustrator from the late 1940s through the 1950s. In *Secret Origins* #1, Boring's work was given a modern polish courtesy of inker Jerry Ordway (who also revised Superman's "S" shield throughout to match the classic early 1940s design).

"I think Boring liked the idea of doing Superman again," Thomas remarked to Jim Amash in *Alter Ego* #100 (Mar. 2011). "In addition to inking, I had Jerry fix up the Earth-Two 'S' on Superman's chest. Boring's didn't come out quite right. But I'm real proud of our retelling of the origin of Superman."

An expert in the art of the adaptation (including multiple Robert E. Howard characters), Thomas hewed close to the original material in *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938) and *Superman* #1 (Summer 1939) but sharpened dialogue and plot points throughout. That was also the case in his follow-up, the retelling of the original Captain Marvel's birth (from 1940's *Whiz Comics* #2). "All I tried to do is some re-dialoguing and to get inside the head (heads?) of Captain Marvel and Billy Batson with an eye toward the future as well as the paradoxes of the past," the writer noted in *Secret Origins* #3. Striking a different tone than the original, Jerry Bingham illustrated the adventure in a more realistic style than C. C. Beck's cartoony original.

Like the Superman tale, the Captain Marvel episode violated Thomas' chronological plan, a concession to Dick Giordano who specifically requested an early appearance by one of the 1940s' most successful properties. By the time both stories were published in early 1986, much about the plans for *Secret Origins* had changed.

### GOLDEN AGE GREATS AND DC TIE-INS

Rather than devoting every third issue to a non-Golden Age hero, DC now insisted on doing so in every even-numbered issue. Moreover, those more contemporary heroes needed to be characters who were prominent in DC's mid-1980s line. "At this stage, it just didn't make sense anymore for me to edit the whole series," Thomas wrote in *Secret Origins* #1, "so it was decided that each

hero's origin would be edited by the person who edited that hero's regular mag."

Consequently, Julius Schwartz—nominally the editor of the new *Blue Beetle* title—oversaw *Secret Origins* #2's Gil Kane-illustrated history of Ted Kord and his predecessor Dan Garrett. Scripted by Len Wein, the story established the underpinnings of the ongoing *Beetle* title that premiered in March 1986 and represented a secondary function of the new title. On several occasions during its run, *Secret Origins* became a promotional arm for the DC Universe, kicking off new series, tying into crossover events, and setting up situations that would pay off in other titles.

There was none of that in *Secret Origins* #4's Firestorm spotlight, but the story did provide a challenge for writer/co-creator Gerry Conway. Since the Nuclear Man's debut in 1978, Conway had already done two lengthy origin recaps (1980's *Flash* #289–290 and 1984's *Fury of Firestorm* #22). Virtually all of them, though, had been told from the point-of-view of teenager Ronnie Raymond, so Conway took a fresh approach and made *SO* #4 all about the background of Firestorm's other half, Professor Martin Stein. Although George Tuska penciled the origin itself, Firestorm co-creator Al Milgrom also contributed to the issue via an original cover.

Up to this point, the material presented in *Secret Origins* was also culled largely from earlier issues, but issue #5 marked a notable departure. The Crimson Avenger was one of those heroes referenced earlier, a masked vigilante who was already in business when he premiered in *Detective Comics* #20. It was up to Roy Thomas and his wife Dann to come up with his origin, adding real-world background to soon-to-be-hero Lee Travis and adding depth to his Chinese partner Wing.

"When I learned that the cover date of the Crimson's first appearance was October 1938, I had no choice," Roy declared on issue #5's text page. "That was the date of the famous/infamous Orson Welles 'Invasion from Mars' broadcast that panicked half a nation and I felt compelled to set the Crimson's origin in that context, even though the October-dated book, then as now, would have gone on sale at least a couple months before October."

Atmospherically illustrated by Gene Colan and Mike Gustovich, the story won raves from fans and critics alike, so much so that a 1988 miniseries was later greenlit to continue the story. A more immediate sequel appeared in issue #7, though, where the Crimson figured into the origin of the Sandman. Once again, the Thomases worked up an origin where none had existed before, this time built around the



the perspective of schoolyard bully and traitor Danny Maddox. Scripted by Michael Fleisher and drawn by Adam Kubert, the Maddox plot thread picked up eight months later in 1998's *Warlord* #127.

Sharing a third of *SO* #16's cover but only one page within, Bob Rozakis' and Stephen DeStefano's 'Mazing Man had enjoyed a year-long run in his own comic book (1985–1986) but never garnered big sales. The charming feature had a passionate fan base, though, and Robert Greenberger included the short feature in the issue as a show of support for the 'Mazing Man Special that ran the same month in April 1987. Described as "the closest thing to a secret origin," it told how Siegfried Horatio Hunch III found his "M" helmet.

## THE FIRST ANNUAL

One month later, *Secret Origins* Annual #1 threw its support behind another launch, this one a revival of *Doom Patrol* slated for July 1987. Paul Kupperberg "was the natural writer," Greenberger notes, "and he brought in John Byrne [to draw it] so that was a surefire hit." The presence of former *X-Men* artist Byrne called to mind the *Doom Patrol*'s longstanding, if coincidental, parallels to Marvel's mutants, and that suggested a fitting co-feature. Joined by artists Ron Harris and Bruce Patterson, Roy Thomas retold the story of DC's own original mutant superhero Captain Comet in an adaptation of 1951's *Strange Adventures* #9–10.

Benefiting from a higher profile following a late 1986 appearance in Alan Moore's hot *Swamp Thing* title, space hero Adam Strange shared the spotlight in *Secret Origins*

#17. Scripted by Gerry Conway, the adaptation of 1958's *Showcase* #17 was one of the first things that Roy Thomas had commissioned for the title when he believed he would be sole editor. In an inspired touch, Thomas assigned the pencils to Carmine Infantino. Regarded as the feature's signature artist in the Silver Age, Infantino hadn't drawn the pilot issues of *Showcase* and the 1987 retelling belatedly gave him a chance to illustrate Adam's origin.

Adam shared the issue with Dr. Occult, an obscure pre-Superman creation of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster who first appeared in *More Fun Comics* #6 (Oct. 1935). Aware that DC editor, writer, and general continuity cop E. Nelson Bridwell was a big fan of the character, Thomas invited him to co-plot the story, incorporating established details like the demonic Koth and the supernatural Seven to craft an origin where none had existed before. Tragically, the story was Bridwell's last published credit. He died of lung cancer on January 23, 1987 at the age of 55 and was memorialized by Dick Giordano on the inside back cover of *Secret Origins* #17.

"By that point, it was decided to give the entire package to Roy and Greg [Weisman] to run," Robert Greenberger recalls of his exit from the series. "I wasn't privy to the conversation but I certainly had other things

## A Golden Age Wonder Woman

Roy was kept hopping in *Secret Origins* by post-Crisis continuity changes. Courtesy of Heritage, here's the Grindberg/DeZuniga splash for the Golden Age Fury's origin, from issue #12 (Mar. 1987).

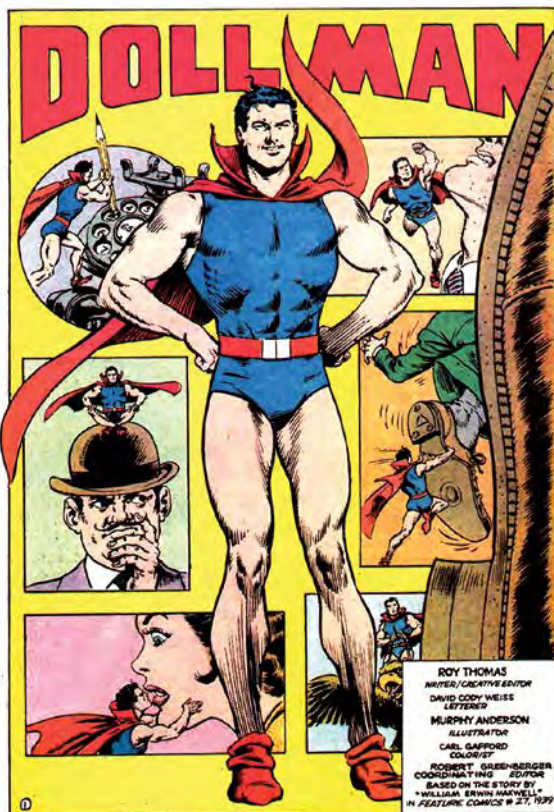
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## Action Figure

Splash page to issue #8's (Nov. 1986)

Doll Man origin, illustrated by the late, lamented Murphy Anderson.

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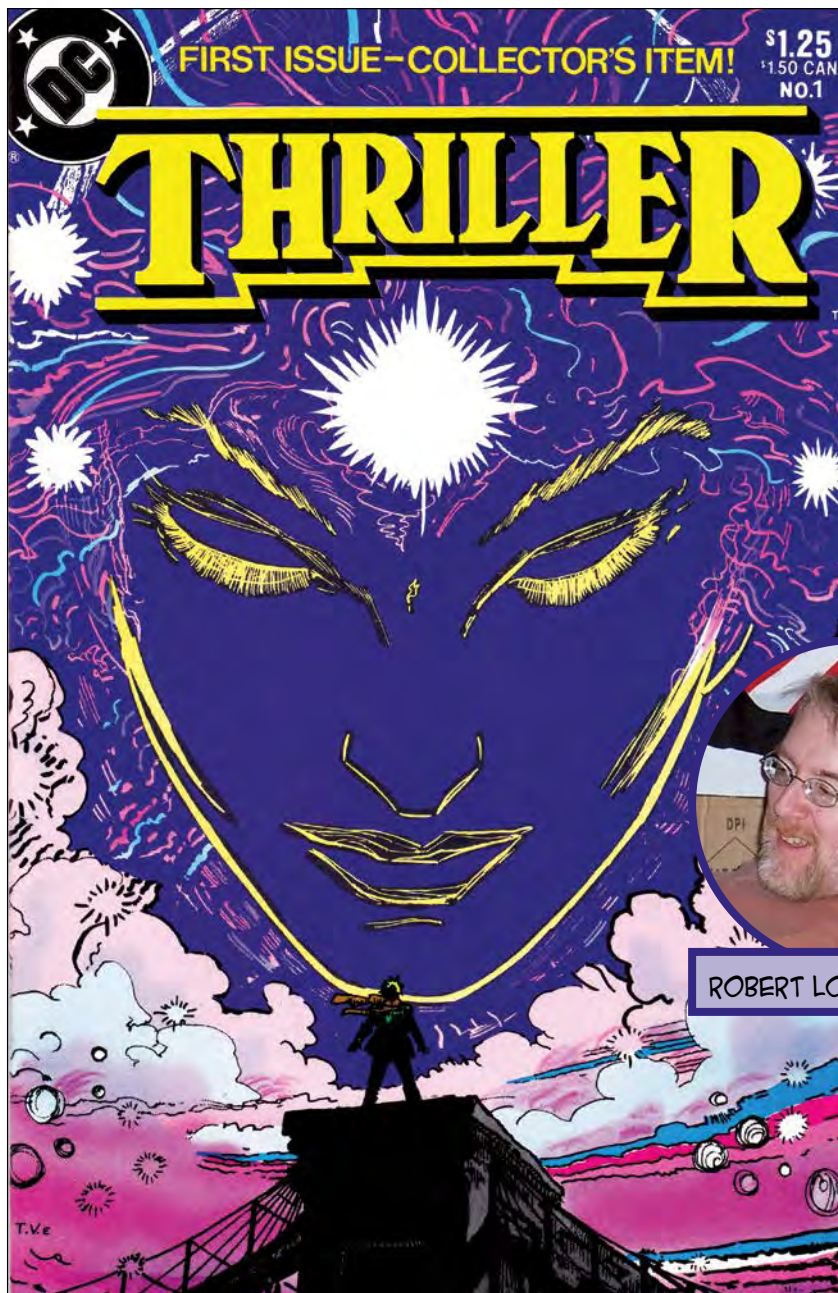




# THRILLER™



by Ed Catto



ROBERT LOREN FLEMING

You'd think that a 1984 visit to a warehouse full of comics would have excited a young comics fan-turned-professional like Mike Gold. It was a business trip and he was representing independent publisher First Comics. They were touring the warehouse of an industry distributor, Capital City. But there was one part of that visit that was particularly depressing.

Mike recalls that their Madison, Wisconsin, warehouse was a cavernous place subdivided into many smaller rooms. One room was referred to as the "Thriller Room" because it was filled with unsold copies of the DC Comics maxiseries *Thriller*. Capital City had wildly over-ordered, expecting it to be a big hit.

*Thriller* had been marketed with great expectations, but fans and retailers quickly rejected it.

"Seriously," Gold remembers, "it couldn't have been more depressing if bats were flying out of the room. We all made a bunch of cheap jokes at everybody's expense, but the reality was that there was a lot of money on that floor and I'm sure that didn't help anybody."

There were lots and lots (and lots) of copies of the early issues of *Thriller* in that room. Most were still packaged in their original boxes from the publisher.

How could it all have gone wrong?

*Thriller* burst onto the comic scene with great promise and bravura. In 1983, there was a vibe of experimentation and an expectation that the clever new series would change comics as we knew it. That's exactly what would soon happen with *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*. But just before those titles debuted, the industry in general and DC in particular was ramping up with precursors like *Camelot 3000* and *Ronin*.

*Thriller* was billed as a new reading experience that would combine the best of the old pulp heroes, new superhero teams like the X-Men, and tomorrow's headlines into a "must read" that would be fresh and different.

Fresh new talent was celebrated in *Thriller*. It was their time to take center stage and show the world how it was done.

Robert Loren Fleming was the writer and creative visionary. He was a novice writer recently published.

Trevor Von Eeden was the artist. He was one of DC's first African-American illustrators, having been recruited as a teenager to work on *Black Lightning* a few years earlier. His style had evolved to a point where his previous work on a *Batman Annual* and *Green Arrow* miniseries exploded with creative risks, non-traditional storytelling, and impactful compositions.

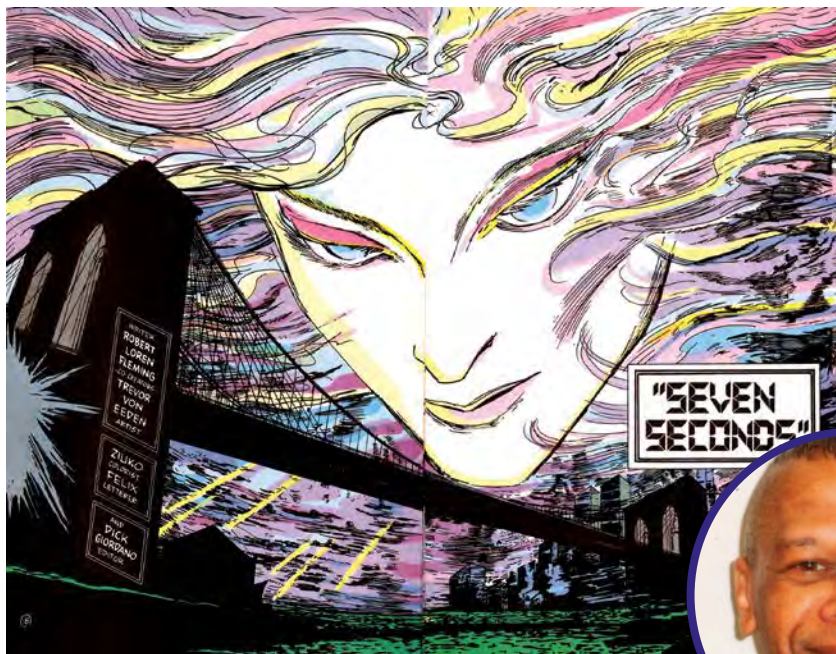
The DC marketing machine let the world know that *Thriller*, the title character, "had seven seconds to save the world." That sense of urgency was part of the series' DNA from the start. Fleming's writing and Von Eeden's art amplified this urgency to a fever pitch. Fans would soon

## Not a Michael Jackson Tie-in

Trevor Von Eeden's mind-blowing premiere cover to writer Robert Loren Fleming's revolutionary series, *Thriller*, issue #1 (Nov. 1983).

TM & © DC Comics.





TREVOR VON EEDEN

Courtesy of Comic Vine.

## Meet Angie Thriller

(left) Double-page title spread from *Thriller* #1. (right) Trevor Von Eeden posted this photo on Facebook, commenting, "At work (on 'vacation' in a hotel room)—on *THRILLER* #3—1983. While waiting for the women to get dressed, I tried to sneak some work in, and got busted! (I don't normally work in sunglasses.) This is the only photo ever taken of me at work, during my entire DC career! Figures I'd be working on *THRILLER*..."

TM & © DC Comics.

learn that the tagline's "seven seconds" was a double entendre, but that didn't minimize the excitement and suspense.

This was not a casual reading experience. This was clearly something intentionally different. The problem was—would anyone like it?

Despite an incredible cast of characters, prescient storylines, cutting edge art, and fantastic printing, *Thriller* is a forgotten footnote of '80s comics.

How did the brilliant experiment go horribly awry? How did it disappoint and scare away fans? What made distributors place big orders and why couldn't retailers sell it? What went right and how did it go so wrong?

## THE THRILL RIDE

In the early '80s, the comic industry was infused with creativity and new thinking from all quarters. And the establishment wanted to be a part of it.

DC created a first wave of mature titles. Executive editor Dick Giordano gave longtime freelancer and mailroom clerk Robert Loren Fleming a chance and offered to greenlight his *Thriller* concept.

Fleming, in turn, recruited young artist Trevor Von Eeden. They had recently collaborated on a short horror story. Von Eeden bought into the grand vision presented by Fleming, and immediately cemented the deal with Giordano so that no other artist would be assigned.

"Robert Loren Fleming was working in the DC Comics mailroom when he bumped into me in the hallway of the DC offices, and asked for a few minutes to pitch me his idea," recalls Von Eeden to *BACK ISSUE*. "That's all it took to impress me enough to take him straight down the hall to then-editor-in-chief Dick Giordano's office, and do something I'd never done before—interrupt his business to ask for a few minutes of his time. Being as graciously obliging to me as he always was, Dick listened to Bob's pitch—and in a remarkably short while, the *Thriller* series was a reality!"

The title itself broadcast the series' genre. It was going to be, first and foremost, a fast-paced thrill ride. Set in the near future, *Thriller* embraced a cinematic feel, eschewing thought balloons and captions long before that became the norm. It told the story of an extended family of world-saving adventurers. Surprisingly, it was also essentially divorced from the superheroes of the day.

"Thriller" ostensibly referred to the lead character of the series. But as the entire world was the stage and the title character was essentially a goddess, it made sense for the series to employ a large ensemble cast.

The Shadow had set a precedent for *Thriller*'s basic structure. In the Street & Smith pulp stories, scribe Walter Gibson provided the Shadow with a rich network of agents. Often the story would focus on one or more agents as they each played a role in solving the mystery or frustrating the antagonist. Alternately, the Shadow was often depicted as a

mysterious "boss" undertaking tauntingly indiscernible actions.

This became a standard formula for many pulp heroes including Doc Savage and the Avenger, and by 1983, a recent pulp revival (with both prose story reprints and comic adaptations) had reintroduced this paradigm.

But *Thriller* would have more than agents. It would have family. Fleming, as a guest columnist for one of Dick Giordano's "Meanwhile..." columns, promoted *Thriller*, not by explaining the premise, but by wisely focusing on the ensemble cast.

He reiterated that *Thriller* was story about a family, concluding his pitch with a quip to reinforce the branding. "Hey, I know they're weird. That's family for you."

## THE THRILLER FAMILY

The title character was Angeline Marietta Salvotini Thriller. Angie, as she was called, had "died" and become a pseudo-ghost spirit, manifesting herself by controlling inanimate objects. Her visual appearance was striking, as she would make her hauntingly lovely face visible to the characters as a floating vision in the clouds, as a pattern in broken glass or imprinted, Escher-like, on medical bandages. Von Eeden's energetic artwork made her long tresses swirl in an enthralling hypnotic way, despite the static nature of printed comics.

Fleming would frequently write that Angie Thriller was a cross between Jesus Christ and his mom.

Dan Grove was a direct descendant of the Shadow's most trusted agent, Harry Vincent. In the very first adventure, the Shadow recruited Vincent in his first printed adventure. Both readers and Vincent were soon introduced to the secret network of the mysterious Shadow, now his boss. Vincent served as both the proxy hero and as instrument of exposition and introduction.

Readers met *Thriller*'s Dan Grove with a creative bang. In *Thriller* #1 (Nov. 1983), he's on location in Mecca as a video cameraman. He plays second fiddle to his on-camera, charismatic twin brother, Ken. And it only gets worse when we first meet Dan; he films his brother's live decapitation.



only way to create a non-outline logo with two colors at the time. Registration marks were there to help keep the two layers lined up, and the two layers meant extra work for the production person putting the covers together, most likely Bob LeRose, but everyone seemed to like it.

"I don't remember a lot about doing the logo, but I think I worked mainly with editor Dick Giordano and writer Robert Loren Fleming, who asked for something suggesting crime pulp magazines of the 1940s. That led to the letter forms I chose. It was my idea to stairstep the letters at each end and add the zig-zagged bottom line to insert a little more energy. The logo is symmetrical in general, with mirrored stairstepped letters at each end. I think I did one sketch, it was approved, and I went on to the final version."

It's interesting that the letters column, entitled "Filler," also used Klein's stairstep design.

There were several references by Alan Gold, who took over from Giordano as the book's editor with *Thriller* #3, about the need to change the letters column's title. He felt that Filler never felt right for the letters column name. Several times a new column title was promised.

By issue #8, Gold seemed resolute. He wrote: "Oh, yes, one last point. As a number of letter writers have noted, 'Filler' has become an inappropriate name for this ongoing forum of ideas. The joke has worked a little thin. So next month's column should have a new title."

But in the next issue, there was this note from Alan Gold: "Oh, yes, I announced prematurely last issue that the name of this column would be changed. To be honest, I haven't come up with yet with a name I like enough to commission a new logo for. So keep watching this space for Gold's Latest Brainstorm—next month." The change never came.

## GLIMPSES BACKSTAGE

Like a reporter at the scene of a traffic accident, *Thriller* letters columns provide an ongoing commentary. They offer evolving clues to fans' initial enthusiasm, subsequent confusion, and eventual abandonment of the series.

The early issues showcase letters that offer a mix of enthusiasm and consternation.

By issue #5, a reader could feel the writer's frustration. He started the letters column with this salutation: "My name is Robert Loren Fleming, and I've got a gripe. Editor Alan Gold asked me to take over this page, but it's awfully difficult to put a together letter column without... letters!"

Fleming went on to implore readers to send constructive letters—not overwhelmingly filled with praise (because we already know what we are doing right) and likewise not filled with hate. He clearly had read enough of each of those types. He was imploring fans to tell him what they liked and didn't like in an effort to learn how to improve.

That same column featured a letter from Beau Smith of West Virginia, who would become a comic writer himself and create the series *Wynonna Earp*, now an ongoing television series on the Syfy Channel.

In his letter, addressed to original series editor Dick Giordano, Smith positively observed, "Hey, this *Thriller* comic is not bad at all! I think that you guys have found a reader for this series."

Smith's letter also included a backhanded compliment, alluding to the confusing nature of the series. "Please give the creative staff my best for a job not yet done. (And I hope that it never ends.)" He ended his letter with the friendly admonishment, "Stay outta trouble."

## Thriller in Transition

(left) With issue #8 (July 1984), Fleming's creation was taken over by writer Bill DuBay. (right) Page 22 of *Thriller* #8 shows Von Eeden's frenetic, cinematic storytelling... too bad it was Trevor's last issue.

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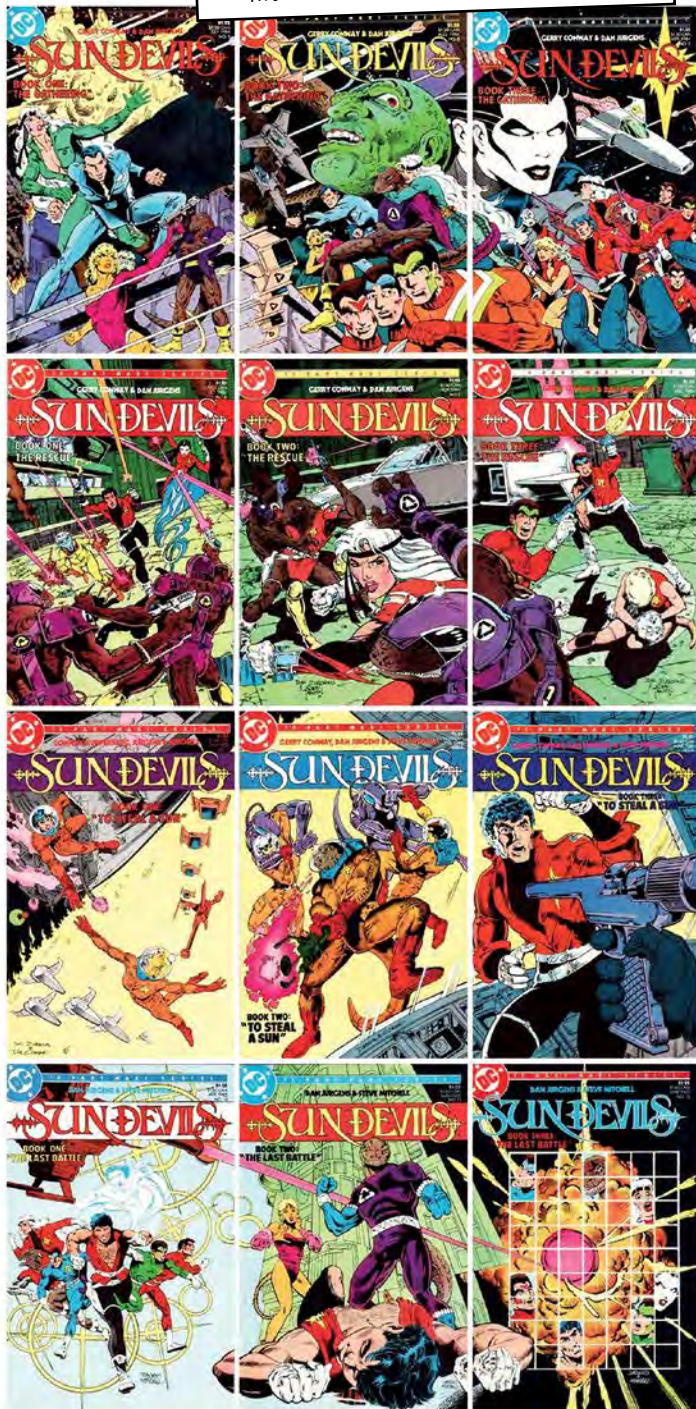




# BRINGING THE HEAT WITH THE **SUN DEVILS**™

## AN INTERVIEW WITH GERRY CONWAY AND DAN JURGENS

by **Dan Johnson**  
interview conducted January 2017



*The '80s were a wonderful time to be a DC fan. The company was starting to explore new presentation styles for their comics, including the prestigious Baxter paper format and the concept of the maxiseries. DC was also beginning to take advantage of the new opportunities that the direct sales market presented.*

*Alas, this decade was also the last one where DC was willing to venture into different genres outside of superheroes on a regular basis. The '80s were the last decade that DC regularly published war, Western, funny animal, and horror titles... but before closing the door on the science-fiction genre, DC and gave its readers something truly out of this world: Sun Devils by writer **Gerry Conway** and artist **Dan Jurgens**.*

*This 12-part maxiseries, published between July 1984 and June 1985 (cover dates), followed the adventures of a space-born group of adventurers led by Rik Sunn who fought the good fight against the dread Karvus Khun, the leader of the Sauroid Empire. It was a rousing SF story presented by Gerry and Dan. In this BACK ISSUE Pro2Pro, we get the behind-the-scenes scoop on this maxiseries, straight from the men who sent us into orbit.*

– Dan Johnson

**DAN JOHNSON:** *How did the idea for Sun Devils first come about? What inspired the maxiseries?*

**GERRY CONWAY:** I was a fan of space opera, and particularly, a fan of the kind of space opera [DC editor] Julie Schwartz used to publish back in the 1950s and early '60s in comics like *Mystery in Space* and *Strange Adventures*. It was also the era of *Star Wars*, and I'd be lying if I said that wasn't a major influence.

**JOHNSON:** *I was going to mention that at the time Sun Devils came out, science-fiction movies were huge. We had the last Star Wars film being released and Star Trek getting underway as a franchise. I was curious if that box-office success played a role in DC green-lighting the Sun Devils series.*

**DAN JURGENS:** I'm sure [the early-'80s SF craze] played a role in DC wanting to do it.

**CONWAY:** I assume so!

**JURGENS:** In a way, I found it to be a bit frustrating, because trying to capture the feel of ships moving through space on paper can be a very hard thing to do. It's sort of like trying to do a car chase in comics. It just doesn't have the same impact as it does on film, no matter what you do.

**JOHNSON:** *Roy Thomas is credited as a creator of this series. What was his role in the origin of Sun Devils?*

**CONWAY:** Roy and I talked over the idea as a possible film project, I think. That was the springboard, and Roy may have coined the name of the group. Or it could have been me—I was a fan of the *Sea Devils* comic, so "Sun Devils" sounds like something I might have come up with as a sly tribute to that book. Honestly, I don't recall the specifics. Roy and I were collaborators in screenwriting at the time and did a lot together. Supposedly I helped create *Captain Carrot and the Zoo Crew*, but I don't remember making much of a contribution, if any at all, so who knows, really?

**JOHNSON:** *That is fascinating. I remember that you and Roy had worked on screenplays together in the early 1980s, and that you wrote Fire and Ice and Conan the Destroyer together.*

**JURGENS:** Don't forget that the original name [of *Sun Devils*], Gerry, as you and Roy presented it to me, was *Star Birds*. I'd forgotten about that until I unearthed some old notes.

**JOHNSON:** *Dan, how did you come to be picked as the artist on Sun Devils?*

### '80s Space Opera

The 12-issue run of DC's *Sun Devils* (July 1984 through June 1985), featuring interlocking covers by then-emerging artist Dan Jurgens.

TM & © DC Comics.



## FlashBack!

*"Can you solve it before we can?"*

That was certainly an interesting dare, one tossed before an unsuspecting comics readership in late 1985 when the much-ballyhooed *DC Challenge* was finally released. A 12-issue maxiseries, it was a round-robin featuring DC Comics' biggest writers and artists, delving deep into the company's character library, and in some ways, a palette cleanser of gonzo fun just as the very same creators helped disassemble the familiar DC Universe in the concurrent *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

### A CONVENTION CONCOCTION

It started, innocently enough, on the Executive Hotel's roof as Len Wein, Mark Evanier, Gerry Conway, Bill Warren, and Bill Rotsler escaped a stifling Marvel Comics party during the 1983 San Diego Comic-Con. Marv Wolfman was separated from his friends and entered the elevator by himself, thinking he'd find his pals in the lobby, but somehow he wound up on the roof. With a perplexed look on his face, he studied his friends and asked what just happened.

That moment of incongruity was a flash of inspiration to Evanier, who suggested the DC talent roster team-up for a round-robin story.

"It was just one of those ideas that comes out of nowhere," Evanier tells *BACK ISSUE*. "I have a lot of them and usually, 'nowhere' is where they should stay. I mentioned this one aloud to the writers around me and they all jumped on it."

Different creative teams would be selected, and each would write one issue of a longer story following only a handful of rules, then hand it off to the next writer with just a handful of plot threads and a kickass cliffhanger to work with.

The next team would have to solve the immediate danger and propel the story forward, handing it off to the next team. And so on, until it wrapped up.

The company's top 11 writers would

be recruited, along with a dozen artists, with the plan being the 11 would collaborate on the concluding chapter.

Everyone's eyes lit up at the notion, and Conway coined it the *DC Challenge* and its marketing slogan. "I recall a lot of predictions that it would not do well sales-wise and that it would screw up production on other DC titles because we'd be yanking artists off other books," Evanier says.

As the posse ran into some of the very writers they needed at the con, everyone fell in love with the idea and agreed to participate. It was Roy Thomas who cautioned that while *DC Challenge* was a great idea, they needed executive editor Dick Giordano to bless it and get the project approved by Jenette Kahn, DC's president and publisher, and Paul Levitz, the company's manager-business affairs. By then, it was after 1:00 a.m., and since Dick was a notoriously early-to-bed guy, it would have to wait until morning. No sooner had Wein left an urgent note for Dick to join him for breakfast did the beloved artist/editor/executive walk into the hotel, up past his bedtime. The group whisked Dick up to the rooftop to set the stage, and maybe it was the late hour or the collective enthusiasm, but Giordano, normally a rational man, agreed to the project.

Marv Wolfman recalls, "For some reason we decided to keep the answers to our cliffhangers to ourselves; the idea being like me in the elevator, nobody else would know the answer to how I got there. So writer A would set up a cliffhanger and writer B, not knowing what writer A had intended, had to

### Tag... You're It!

A puzzle montage from the 12 covers for one of the most offbeat DC series of the '80s—heck, of any decade—the writers' round-robin maxiseries *DC Challenge*.

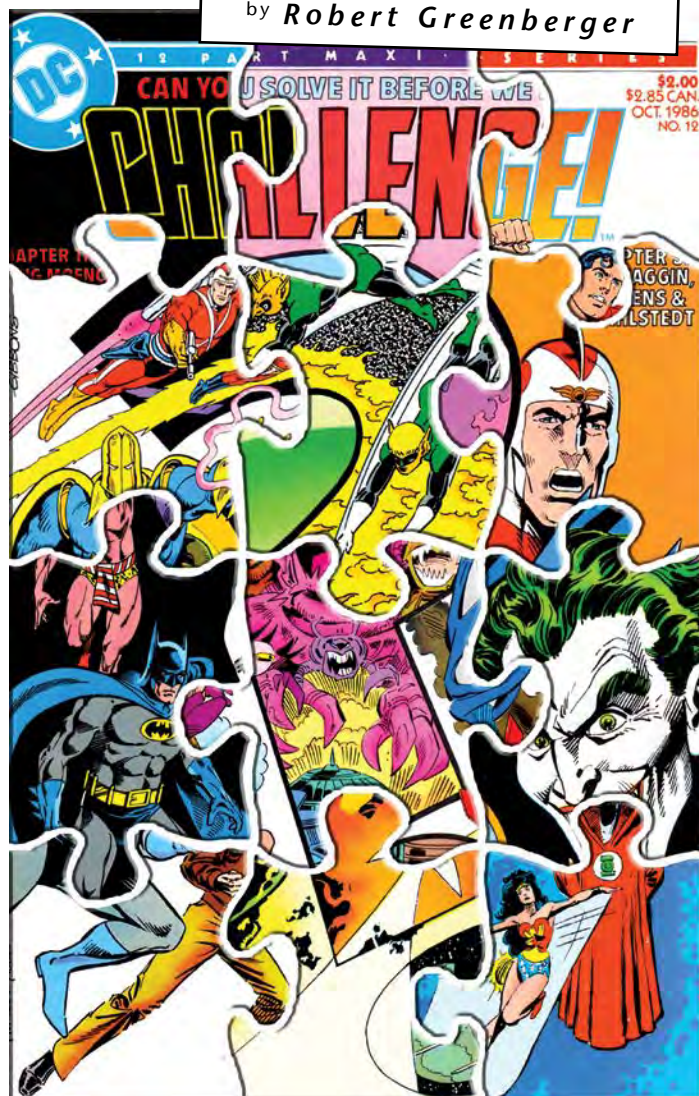
TM & © DC Comics.

# IT SOUNDED LIKE A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME A LOOK AT THE



## CHALLENGE!

by Robert Greenberger





come up with their own solutions, then stick it to writer C to solve writer B's cliffhanger, etc. I seem to recall the cliffhangers had to have real solutions the writer planted in their story; they just couldn't come up with something totally absurd. The idea was to challenge us, the writers, as well as the readers. It meant we had to figure out what another writer had set up without having the foggiest idea what they intended. We tried to use all the writers at DC that we could, and if memory serves everyone we approached thought it would be fun, too.

"I had done something like this previously in a crossover at Marvel between [Amazing] Spider-Man and Nova where my Nova story had set up clues to a death and the Spider-Man writer had to figure out who the bad guy was based on those clues then write a story solving the murder."

Evaniar adds, "When Dick Giordano okayed the idea—which he did in about ten seconds once he heard it—he said that I, as the originator of the idea, had to go first. There were several other writers present, so they were all included. Then someone made a list and said, 'So-and-so will be upset if he's not included,' and before long, we had a working list. A few names went on and off it later due to availability. It was kind of a group decision."

Evaniar spelled out the rules in the first issue's letters column, including the cliffhanger portion:

"That Writer must have a solution planted somewhere in his chapter, but the next Writer need not use that particular solution. You also have to end your chapter by naming the next chapter. The major characters of your chapter must not be any characters that you currently write for DC. The story can go anywhere in the DC Universe, but you cannot solve a story problem by declaring something a dream or a hoax or a hallucination. In other words, no cheating.

"You must forward the plot and you must tie up some story threads left by those who have gone before as well as leaving new story threads for those who follow you."

Evaniar recalls, "Selecting the artists was another group decision of whoever was present. We made up a list of artists and then I tore up some paper into scraps, wrote one artist's name on each, and we had a drawing with proxies drawing for the writers who weren't present. Later, a lot of that had to be adjusted because of schedules. I recall George Pérez wanted very badly to draw the last issue but that was not possible because of other things he was doing for the company." The initial lineup included artists Joe Kubert and Don Newton, with the former unavailable as his turn drew close, and sadly, Newton passed away before his turn.

## A PUBLISHING CHALLENGE

At the time, I was at San Diego on behalf of *Comics Scene*, and the following morning I ran into some of the perpetrators at breakfast and they were so giddy with excitement that I was sworn to secrecy and told all about it. It certainly sound ambitious and fun, just what they wanted to hear.

Fast-forward 18 months. I was now now on staff at DC, and while sitting in Giordano's office I saw the first issue of the *Challenge* on his desk, half-buried under other projects, memos, budgets, and submissions. He explained that work had begun with him as editor and he was swamped, barely paying attention to it.

A month or two later, there were more papers atop the story, but by then, a second issue had been produced and work was underway on a third. As had become clear, I had time on my assistant-editor hands, so Dick asked me to help him with it, which rapidly became my taking it on to edit.

I sat with the completed issues, and the notes that existed on issue #3 and realized months had gone by without much work getting done. Issue #4 was to be written by Paul Levitz, the keeper of the budget.

## No Comic Shop Nearby?

This mail-order house ad enabled DC's newsstand readers to purchase the direct-market *DC Challenge*.

TM & © DC Comics.



MARV WOLFMAN

These completed stories were sitting in inventory, which meant money was spent without a solid plan for recouping the expenses.

Shortly after writing his script and the arrival of a fifth from Mike W. Barr, Paul put on his management hat and instructed this new editor to prove that the project was still viable. I had to get three scripts (issues #6-8) written in a month or he'd scrap the entire maxiseries.

>Gulp!< I made a quick series of calls to the writers who all said it *could* be done and sure enough, Levitz had three vouchers to pay in time to keep the *DC Challenge* alive.

That was Summer 1984, and then it became a matter of getting things penciled, inked, lettered, and marketed. Design director Neal Pozner helped me come up with a cover treatment centering on the Question Mark surrounded by that issue's main players. It was a no-brainer for me to recruit Jerry Ordway, too busy with *Crisis* to participate otherwise, to produce the first cover. Todd Klein supplied our fine logo. By then it was decided that each issue's letters column would have the previous issue's author share how he would have resolved the cliffhanger.

As it was, the publishing schedule didn't really open up for something like this until late Summer 1985, so we definitely had some breathing room. We arrived on August 29, the same week as *Crisis* #9, which I think is emblematic of the line's flexibility back then.

What follows is an issue-by-issue breakdown with commentary from as many of the creators involved as time, memory, and circumstance allowed.



**DC CHALLENGE** is a special issue maxi-series available only through specialty stores and this subscription ad. It features a different writer/artist team on each issue, using characters from DC's 50 year history, trying to "stump" the next team with their cliffhanger endings. It'll be lots of fun! Can you solve it before we do? We'll set aside enough issues to send you the entire series, if we receive your order by September 30, 1985. Any orders received after this date will be returned to you. You may receive your first issues in a batch, depending upon when your order gets processed. Each issue will be sent in a plastic wrapper, protected by a cardboard stiffener, so you can save this collector's series for years to come.

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# THE *Prestige* FORMAT

by **Bob Rozakis**

**60# Pub Web Gloss. 12pt C1S. Perfect-bound.**

We called it the "Dark Knight Format" and later changed it to the "Prestige Format." I think Marvel had another name for it. And some others may have called it the "Squarebound Format." But when I was talking to the people at Ronalds Printing, it boiled down to the specs for the interior paper, the cover, and the binding.

None of these specs were brand new to the printing of comic books. The interior pages were on virtually the same paper that was used for comic-book covers. The cardstock cover, glossy on the outside and uncoated on the inside, had been used on the small assortment reprint collections that had appeared over the years. And the "perfect" or square-back binding was familiar to readers who recalled DC's early Annuals and the 100-Page Super Spectaculars.

But the first time we put all three together was for *The Dark Knight Returns*, and that's how the format got the name.

I could go into a long story about how this format was one more step in the sophistication of the printing of comic books. How, after half a century of printing them on letterpresses with their "giant" (60 dpi) dots and very limited palette, the industry discovered offset printing and the ability to double the number of colors and halve the size of the dots. The "Baxter Format" and the "Mando Format"—those first forays into better printing of regular comic books—were the first steps that led to the upscale look of *The Dark Knight Returns* and the many books that followed it. This combined with earlier work with painted color and "full-process color separations" (as opposed to the "hand-separations" that were the mainstay of the industry for 50-plus years) on *Ronin*, which allowed Frank Miller and Lynn Varley to refine their skills and maximize the look of the material.

I could tell you about meetings with color-separation companies and paper manufacturers and countless discussions with the folks at Ronalds about how to get the look we wanted for each new project that utilized the format, but, frankly, it's not all that interesting. The printed results speak for themselves; rest assured that there was a lot of effort behind the scenes that got them to look that way.

So, what to talk about instead? Some amusing anecdotes?

Printing at Ronalds was a 24/7 operation. They did not just print comic books in the plant; there were plenty of magazines, advertising materials, and the like that ran on their presses. You would think, then, that if I was going there to do a press okay on a job, that I had a pretty good shot that it would be during normal waking hours. Somehow, that was rarely the case. It always seemed like I was in the plant in the middle of the night!

As a result, I became good friends with Larry, the press foreman of the night shift. Larry's voice and cadence always reminded me of Yogi Bear—with a French accent—and I would make jokes about bringing back the proofs and a pic-a-nic basket.

Where standard procedure was for the customer to wait in the lounge for Larry to bring samples that he had already reviewed, I was standing next to him at the press, "noodling" the colors. ("A little less yellow here; pump up the cyan a bit there.") Larry loved the term. One time when one of the upper-echelon execs came through and saw me, he asked Larry, in French, what I was doing there. "Noodling," Larry replied with a laugh.

Frank Miller and Lynn Varley were the first creators who came on a press okay. Not surprisingly, the press run started in the evening. The three of us sat in the lounge and Larry brought in proofs to review. Since the presses ran at high speed and could turn out many thousands of 16-page sections an hour, okaying the color quickly was very important. Since Lynn had devoted many hours to painting the pages, I let her spend time with Larry, making minor adjustments to one spot here, another spot there. Larry was enjoying it and so was Lynn. Frank, on the other hand, was exhausted and, as the hours went by and Lynn and Larry continued to fiddle with the colors, he just wanted to go to the hotel and go to sleep.

Finally, at about 2:30 in the morning, Lynn announced that the pages were perfect. "That's good," I told her, "because the press run is almost done."

"What do you mean?" Lynn asked, aware that we had a print run of hundreds of thousands for the book.

"I okayed the color hours ago," I said. "We're not throwing out all those sections that are printed. But I'll have Larry mark what's coming off now to be used for the copies of the book you and Frank get."

One of the things you should realize about printing is that every color you see on the page is a combination of dots of cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. Those four colors are the only true solids (unless a custom fifth color—a fluorescent green or metallic gold, for example—is used). Any paint or dye that a colorist uses is scanned and separated into some combination of the four primaries.

After the printing of the first issue of *Dark Knight*, Lynn was concerned because some of the grays she was using were not reproducing as she had painted them. To help her, I had her put together a paint sample palette with all the colors she was using. I had the color separator scan it, then had the folks at Ronalds print it. Lynn got a color chart that enabled her to see how the colors would print and painted the rest of the series with an eye towards what would come off the press.

Another thing that Frank and Lynn became aware of was how the printing of one page affected another. The books were printed in 16-page sections and the positioning of each page on the sheet had some significance. They realized that if Lynn wanted to adjust the tone of a gray on page 2, she would also be affecting the colors on page 15. To minimize the effect, Frank asked for and received the page layout for the press and deliberately paced *DK* #4 so that the scenes with specific colors would be side-by-side.

After the printed books arrived at the DC offices, I was discussing the story with one of the other staff members. "Did you notice," he asked, "that the pacing in the last issue seemed a little odd?"

"Yes," I said. "Frank did it to follow the press configuration so Lynn could get the colors she wanted."

My late nights in the Ronalds plant were not only when we were printing issues of *Dark Knight*. As we expanded the use of the Prestige Format, more and more books required press okayes. (This was not the case with the regular comics; they were limited to three sizes



## The "Dark Knight Format"?

Frank Miller's heralded miniseries not only revolutionized Batman and superhero comics, it also gave birth to a new format for graphic literature.

TM & © DC Comics.



*Electric Warrior*, a DC Comics publication that spanned a brilliant yet brief 18 issues, is one of those rare and overlooked science-fiction gems that could easily be rediscovered by a larger contemporary audience through a reprinting of the series.

Doug Moench, a Bronze Age icon, is the caliber of writer whose major works for Marvel and DC (*Master of Kung Fu*, *Moon Knight*, *Batman*) still set the standard for superior comic-book writing.

Together, this comic and its writer offer texts that are complex, nuanced, and most definitely intertwined.

For the uninitiated, *Electric Warrior* is set in the future on a planet that may be Earth. One of the lead characters is Derek Two-Shadow, who escaped from the City years earlier to stay in the Wilderness, where the people who live there, the Primmies, have shunned the use of all technology. Meanwhile, 9-03, the other lead, is a Lek, a robotic warrior who defends the City for the Elites and finds himself suddenly gaining consciousness when he meets and falls in love with the elderly Zig woman known as Kinsolving, who lives below the City in the Warrens. In the first eight issues of the series, one watches the twin conflicts of Derek and 9-03 unfold until their storylines coalesce with issue #9 (Jan. 1987). With this plot refresher (or primer) in mind, please be sure to dive into your many long boxes and dig out those *Electric Warrior* issues (or visit your LCS and pick them up) as you prepare to read a tale that will provide you with greater insight into this daring comic book and its unique writer.

#### ELECTRIC LINES OF CONNECTEDNESS

Synchronicity—roughly speaking, psychoanalyst Carl Jung defines it as an acausal series of connecting events, or meaningful coincidences, that are not as random as they may initially appear to the person who experiences them. In Doug Moench's view, the less you go looking for synchronicity to occur, the more it happens in your life, and I definitely agree with him as I feel like some sort of mystical energy field has connected me to this article. In other words, I believe that I was always destined to write it, starting several years ago during a challenging summer of doctoral coursework at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, when I curiously picked up all 18 issues of *Electric Warrior* at a nearby comic-book store. Immediately, I became enthralled with Doug and artist Jim Baikie's story involving a robot who learns he has a soul, a longhaired dreamer outcast from the City, fearsome Genetrix mutants, pointy-headed Zigs, pretentious Elites, and terrible medical experimentations to create a cybernetic warrior who will supposedly protect them all from a mysterious otherworldly threat. Today, I realize that I was not only working on papers for my courses but prepping for this very article as well...

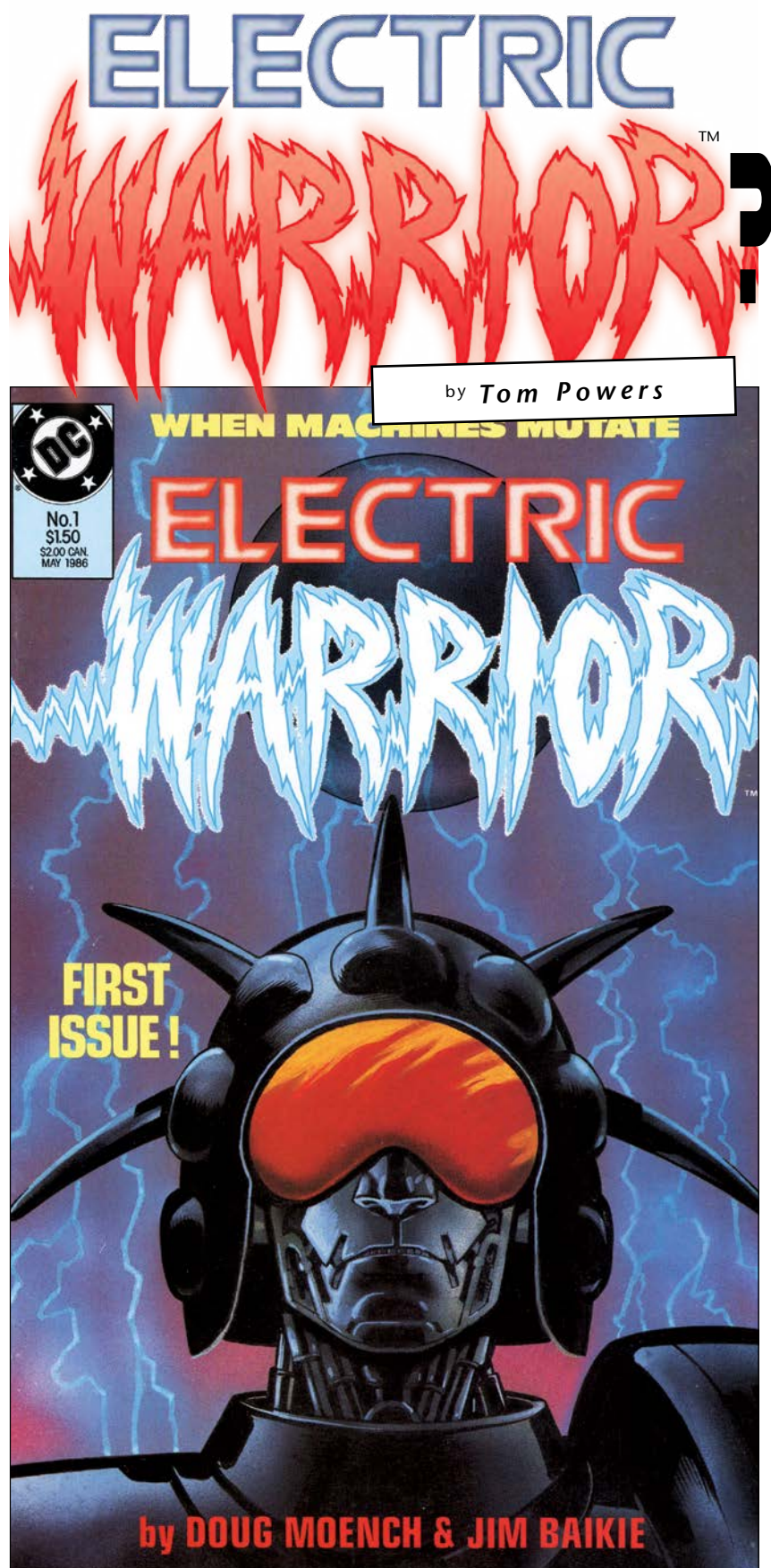
Flash-forward several years later, and I am contacting Doug via the safe distance of email to request an interview. He soon agreed to a telephone conversation. However, when I saw his number, I recognized a local area code. Although I had heard years ago that Doug had lived somewhere in my area, I was still amazed to consider the fact that the man who wrote the poignant tale of Lek 9-03 and Derek Two-Shadow could exist so impossibly close to me. Feeling ambitious yet tentative, I asked Doug for a live interview, but he politely wrote back that he couldn't grant me one right away as he and his wife Debbie were recovering from a serious bout with the flu. As I waited several weeks to contact him again, the synchronicity

#### Machine Man

Jim Baikie's electrifying cover to Doug Moench's '80s sci-fi saga, *Electric Warrior*.

TM & © Doug Moench and Jim Baikie/DC Comics.

## DOES DOUG MOENCH STILL DREAM OF







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Patrick Caidon, Controller

Welcome to what we here at DC sincerely hope will become a habit called **ELECTRIC WARRIOR**. However... If you've just finished reading the preceding 28 pages of "The Whole Nasty Night," you know the title's a lie; we haven't seen the whole night. Not yet. Similarly, and even though it's been some two and a half years since I crafted my 23-page proposal for this series, the process of chronicling The Electric Warrior's saga has also just begun.

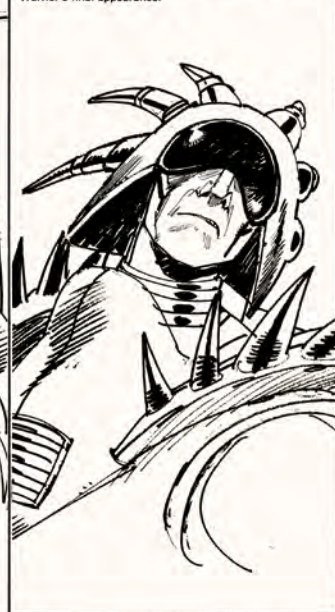
But this first issue is a beginning, the best one Jim Baikie and I could collaboratively devise and execute—with the aid and assistance of a whole slew of folk at DC—and you now hold in your hands that which enables you to gauge what level of accomplishment our best efforts have attained. We look forward to your letters with not a little suspense, but mostly with huge gobs of eagerness. Until your commentary arrives, how-

ever, and can be swiftly typeset to overcome our printing schedule's lead-time—until your letters can appear on the two pages set aside for them—I'm going to use the space in this and the next one or two or three issues to show and tell you how we've reached this beginning. And this time it's mostly show, courtesy of the following preliminary sketches by Jim Baikie, albeit briefly annotated by me. Enjoy.

Jim felt this visual was just a tad too insectoid and I agreed...



Whereupon Mr. Baikie struck upon the "Indian war-bonnet" look. With modifications, it has survived to the Electric Warrior's final appearance.



This is perhaps the earliest sketch—which, frankly, elicited lukewarm response from both of us, even though Jim was definitely on to something. I asked for nasty shoulder and arm spikes, more intrinsic weaponry, and a more formidable look overall.



Jim's response was closer, much closer, but still embryonic and destined to pass through myriad alterations. Still, it's interesting to compare this sketch to the final version of Electric Warrior 9-03 as portrayed in this issue's actual story matter.



I okayed this first version of Amber Brightstar enthusiastically and without reservation...



...and then Jim surprised me with this revision, and I was glad he did. The change in the hair and greater prominence of headband add just the right touches. So much for my editorial acumen, and let's hear it for diligent artists!



Hope you get the same kick I always do from these behind-the-scenes peeks. Rough as such sketches always are, they're almost always equally fascinating.

Next issue on these pages we'll probably run another sketch or three (including the more-or-less final version of the Electric Warrior as well as a no-

holds-barred gawk at one of those truly hideous fellows merely glimpsed at this issue's conclusion), and I'll tell you a little about Jim Baikie and Dick Giordano and Barbara Randell and maybe even myself. Where we're headed is definitely strange terrain; better we should all know each other.

And so, even before the starting point

it's already been a long, strange, adrenaline-fueled trip... and as I say, now it's begun. Buckle up and join us, won't you? The future, after all, is no longer far away...

Oh, yes—next issue's story is entitled: "Geneticks Berserk"—and it's just our quiet little way of kicking you in the teeth...

—Doug Moench

## Sparks Unplugged

Behind the scenes of *Electric Warrior*, as penned by Doug Moench in this two-page lettercol from issue #1, featuring character developmental art by Jim Baikie.

TM & © Doug Moench and Jim Baikie/DC Comics.

## WHAT'S IN AN *ELECTRIC WARRIOR* CHARACTER'S NAME?

As we talked for timeless hours and Doug's cigarette smoke deeply permeated the air with its rich, seductive toxicity, our conversation evolved into an exhilarating discussion about his thought process behind the names of *Electric Warrior*'s diverse group of characters. Regarding Derek Two-Shadow, I first asked Doug, "Where did the Two-Shadow name come from?" and he replied, "Foreshadowing for what he will become—an amalgamated electric warrior with 9-03." He added, "Derek Two-Shadow is an extension of myself and my own beliefs. When I was a kid playing cowboys and Indians, I always insisted on being the Indian. They were so much cooler with their long hair in contrast to the cowboys' short hair, their bows instead of six-shooters, their feathers and moccasins instead of boots, and their fringe on leggings instead of blue jeans—although I loved the latter. So Derek and all the people living in the Wilderness definitely represented the Native Americans for me."

Then we chatted about 9-03. For the first digit in the character's name, Doug commented, "I don't know if it was in my mind when I was coming up with 9-03, but John Lennon talks about the number nine all of the time. I believe it was the address where his aunt lived. He also had the song 'Revolution 9' on the Beatles' *White Album*." The "03" part of the Lek's name, however, proved to be more elusive, as we prompted Doug to recall what the numerals represented. He started to remember that it had something to do with the three parts of the character's gradual development in *Electric Warrior*. With this clue in mind,

we easily pegged the first part as referring to 9-03's original mode as an automaton Lek. Gradually, we saw the second phase as him gaining consciousness when he fell in love with Kinsolving, which led to us concluding that the third part of the numeral foreshadowed 9-03's shared existence with Derek Two-Shadow. As we cracked Doug's memory codes during this enlightening part of the interview, I experienced a dualistic perspective on the moment. The part of me who is genuinely a diehard fan of *Electric Warrior* felt ecstatic to learn about these hitherto unrevealed elements of Doug's conception for the 9-03 character. Simultaneously, I knew I had to maintain a quasi-journalistic head in copying down the details and eventually relaying them to you, my fellow *BI* reader.

When we next pondered the meaning of Kinsolving's name and her function in *Electric Warrior*'s narrative, Doug mentioned, "Her name is about solving the mystery of kin and genealogy. She's old enough that she isn't as devolved as the rest of the Zigs." Furthermore, in regard to 9-03 and Kinsolving's May-December romance (or the reverse if one considers that 9-03 is actually a few hundred years old), Doug commented, "I had probably seen something about African or Japanese culture where they revere their women while Americans make them a hag. So, in the case of Kinsolving's advanced age, I said to myself, 'Let me correct that for my fellow Americans.'"

We next discussed Quintana, and Doug said, "There is a place in Southeastern Mexico called Quintana Roo. It's the kind of name that sticks in your ear. I might have been thinking about that, and it came through in the



## FlashBack!

*It must have felt like a homecoming. Or at the very least the return to a familiar place.* When comics began, most titles were anthologies and contained lots of pages. So when *Action Comics* underwent a metamorphosis with issue #601, it was really just going back to its roots.

The difference was, this was 1988, not 1938. There were not a lot of superhero anthologies around in America, and not a lot of comics with this many pages (48 for \$1.50, in this case). And none of those were published weekly.

"At the time ACW was proposed, all we had was *New Talent Showcase* as a recent example of an anthology," begins Bob Greenberger, one of the team of editors on the project. "It didn't really count considering its mandate to introduce and hone new talent."

DC executive editor Dick Giordano was certainly interested in the anthology concept. In fact, "Dick and I tried a weekly comic for the Charlton characters and we did a dummy issue, while many weeks of certain features had already been written and drawn," confides Greenberger. (The title was to be *Comic Cavalcade Weekly*, and was covered in *BACK ISSUE* #79.)

The weekly anthology idea remained of interest to Giordano, however, and gained another proponent when editor Mike Gold arrived at DC. After the success of the weekly *Millennium* crossover miniseries, Gold was instrumental in convincing DC's powers-that-be that it was time to explore the idea of a weekly comic. Over time, the idea metamorphosed into *Action Comics Weekly*. Almost. The idea itself was "an experiment," according to supervising editor Gold, but it could have had a different title. "Originally, it was supposed to be *Adventure Comics* and ad-free," reveals Gold. "*Action* was having deadline trouble, so the publisher thought it best to switch over to ACW. I still wish we went with *Adventure*. *Action Comics* carried certain expectations and had a certain weight."

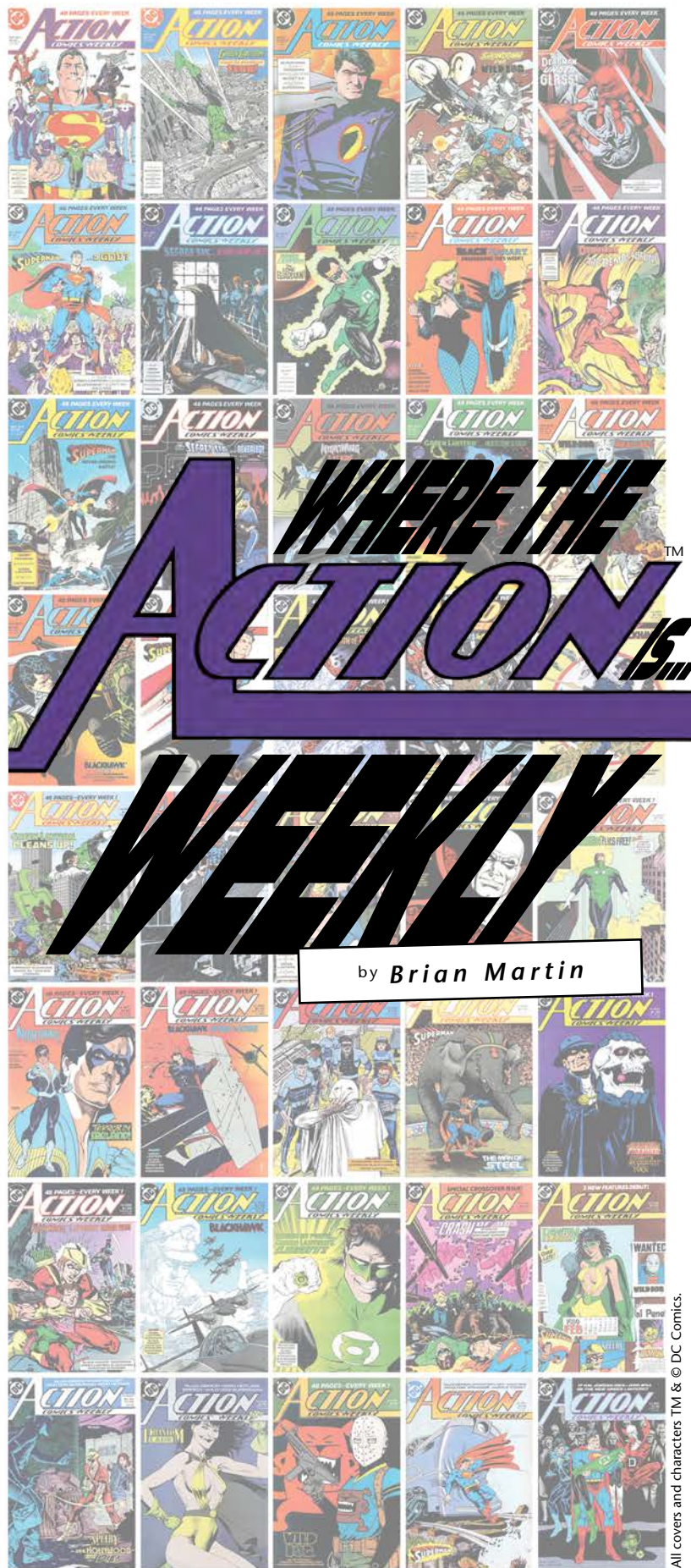
Once the decision to begin was made, "I distinctly remember Brian Augustyn, Barbara Kesel, and I being called into Dick's office with the news that *Action* was going weekly and would contain multiple features," recalls Greenberger. "It was clear we'd all be editing stories for the book but spreading the wealth so no one editor was overwhelmed."

Greenberger then did some research into a venerable British weekly comic. "I took a big stack of 2000 ADs and did an analysis," Bob tells *BACK ISSUE*. "I determined how their lineups worked, including cover slots. Given my broad range of artist contacts via *Who's Who*, Mike Gold asked that I take on [editorially managing] the covers." Gold adds, "Bob and I would get together and toss around ideas based upon which feature was up for cover treatment, with preference given to new launches."

For Greenberger, the assignment for the first issue was a simple one. "Dave Gibbons was always getting the first cover since he did the Charlton dummy cover for me [for *Comic Cavalcade Weekly*] and I felt I owed him something higher profile," Bob states. "We began prioritizing which characters got which covers, going obviously with the most recognizable first." The character most associated with *Action*, the big "S," would have to wait a bit, "so as not to confuse readers with the previous incarnation of the title."

The title also pulled another idea from across the pond. When writing letters to the book, readers were asked to rank the features as well. Mike Gold liked the idea since it was "an old comic and pulp tradition that I think 2000 AD did for a while as well." Bob Greenberger doesn't feel the rankings were ever taken as gospel, but "more of a scan to get a feel for what people responded to and which ones were not connecting."

Content-wise, there were several what could be considered experimental features in *Action Comics Weekly*. The choosing of those features came down to Mike Gold. His criteria? "My whim. Totally. I wanted a variety and to spotlight new



All covers and characters TM & © DC Comics.



things as they came on board." When it came to those "new things," it was announced in the text page of #601 that there would be a series-within-the-series called "Showcase." These were to be four-issue previews of an upcoming series or miniseries. As the weekly schedule began, the editorial team even knew what the first Showcase feature was. After that... well, we'll see how that worked out a little later.

As with most experiments, there had to be a control element or two. In the case of *Action Comics Weekly*, those controls would come in the form of proven stars Superman and Green Lantern, even though GL's career had its ups and downs.

One final thought on content: *Action Comics Weekly* was an early mainstream title published without the Comics Code seal. "Dick Giordano and I had a real commitment to ignoring and destroying the Code," says Mike Gold. "I just didn't like the Code, so I took the opportunity to bypass it. I was still reeling from a fight I had with the Code in the 1970s about why Swamp Thing didn't wear pants."

Now that we've achieved lift off, let's take a look at how each individual feature fared. To keep things neat and tidy, we'll look at each feature in the order it first appeared. With the exception of Superman. There has to be some reward for being there first!

## AT THE CENTER OF THE ACTION

Since its very inception, *Action Comics* always had Superman as its centerpiece. It only took him until the 19th monthly issue to take over the cover spot permanently. When the title went weekly, the Man of Steel took that "centerpiece" designation literally. Throughout the weekly run, Superman was featured in a two-page spread that was almost always placed just after the middle of the magazine. This presentation was reminiscent of the comic-book format's comic-strip origins. (Superman's first-ever appearance was made up of repositioned pages from a proposed newspaper strip.)

The *Action* feature's writer, Roger Stern, would soon begin writing the regular *Superman* title, taking over for John Byrne. This weekly series was a bit different, though, but Stern came in with his eyes open. "That was the assignment I was offered—two pages of Superman per issue," Stern tells *BACK ISSUE*. "I don't recall whose idea it was that we should do it as a two-page spread, but it worked out well. I just did my best to emulate the Sunday comics of my youth." (As an aside, a two-page Superman strip was to have been featured in the aforementioned *Comic Cavalcade Weekly*, though for that magazine it was planned to be a reprinting of the *World's Greatest Superheroes* newspaper strips, not original stories.)

Tapped to pencil these stories was Curt Swan, THE Superman artist of the Silver and Bronze Ages, just two years after entrusting the character to John Byrne and Jerry Ordway. Roger Stern describes working with this legend: "It was absolutely wonderful. He was always so damn good. Curt took everything I wrote for him and made it better. His Superman, of course, was wonderful—but he was also a master of depicting everyday people. Visually he created a very real world for all the people in the story to inhabit."

Swan also proved to Stern that he was more than just a wonderful artist. "One of the biggest highlights of my career came just a few weeks after I had been writing the strip," Roger reveals. "Curt called to tell me how much fun he was having drawing the story. Hearing that left me momentarily tongue-tied. I had always loved Curt Swan's Superman, and now Curt was telling me he liked *my* Superman. I don't recall my exact words, but I managed to stammer out something about how fantastic he was making the series look, and how much I'd always loved his work. The series made us co-workers, but his call made us friends as well."

John Beatty inked the first 12 episodes, but with #613, Murphy Anderson took over, reuniting the iconic "Swanderson" team of the

Bronze Age. At first, Stern was sorry to learn that Beatty was leaving the strip, saying, "That was too bad, because John had been doing a nice job and I hated to lose him." Roger's consternation was short-lived, though, because, "[Superman editor] Mike Carlin said that Murphy was going to be taking over, and I started doing the happy dance. (Sorry, John. No offense, but we're talking Murphy Anderson here.) As a team they couldn't be beat, and for several months I got to write for that team."

The Superman story begins in #601 (May 24, 1988) and continues all the way until #638 (Feb. 7, 1989), and commences with our hero rescuing a man from what appears to be a mob hit. Things get more complicated when the assailants would rather die than be captured.

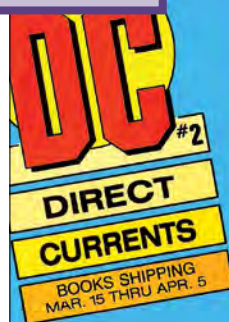
The crux of the story comes to light when the intended victim, Bob Galt by name, reveals that he is a member of a cult that worships Superman as a god! A graphic depiction of this adulation (and Superman's reaction to it) adorns the cover of issue #606.

As Superman investigates this turn of events, he gradually uncovers the roots of the cult, and the extent of the reach of their enemies. He also finds out that Bob has some extraordinary powers himself: He can project any scene he has witnessed. Bob believes this power is a gift from Superman himself.

Around this time, Stern ran into a bit of a snag. He tells *BACK ISSUE*, "Midway through the run, my schedule was getting more and more frantic. At one point I was writing three books a month—*Superman*, *Starman*, and *Power of the Atom*—and was scripting Steve Ditko's *Speedball* [at Marvel]. I was younger then, but even so, I was starting to run a little ragged."



MIKE GOLD



### IN THIS ISSUE:

**ACTION COMICS WEEKLY**  
Ongoing weekly series  
**SUPERMAN**  
Ongoing semi-monthly series  
**HISTORY OF THE DC UNIVERSE**  
Limited Edition Hardcover  
**MANHUNTER**  
Ongoing monthly series  
**BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE**  
Prestige Format One-Shot

### PLUS . . .

An interview with Mike Baron



Cover Of The Month  
SGT. ROCK #422

## INTRODUCING ACTION COMICS WEEKLY #601...AND SUPERMAN TWICE-MONTHLY

In June of 1988 the premiere issue of **ACTION COMICS** made comics history when it introduced the world to **SUPERMAN**. Now, fifty years and 600 issues later, **ACTION COMICS** once again makes history as it undergoes a minor change of name and a major change of format to debut as **ACTION COMICS WEEKLY** #601.

Now, **ACTION COMICS WEEKLY** will be on sale each and every week, featuring 48 pages of all-new story and art. **SUPERMAN** will still be there, in a weekly spot written by Roger Stern and pencilled by Curt Swan, but he's going to be joined by a host of DC characters, each starring in their own weekly features.

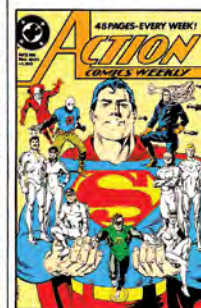
Leading off the **ACTION COMICS WEEKLY** line-up are **GREEN LANTERN**, written by Jim Owsley with art by Gil Kane; **DEADMAN**, written by Mike Baron and pencilled by Dan Jurgens; **THE SECRET SIX**, written by Martin Pasko, with art by Dan Spiegel; **WILD DOG**, written by Max Allan Collins, with art by Terry Beatty and Jon Nyberg; and **BLACKHAWK**, written by Mike Grell, with art by Rick Burchett and Mark Farmer. Dave Gibbons supplies the cover for **ACTION COMICS WEEKLY** #601.

But the action doesn't end there, because as features begun now in **ACTION COMICS WEEKLY** wind up their storylines in the weeks and months to come, they will be rotated with two additional new continuing features and occasional one-shot special stories.

You're probably thinking that the change in **ACTION COMICS WEEKLY** leaves **THE MAN OF STEEL** one book short every month, but we've taken care of that by increasing the frequency of **SUPERMAN** from monthly to semi-monthly.

Now writer and penciller John Byrne with inkers Karl Kesel

and John Beatty will present two issues of **SUPERMAN** a month, beginning with **SUPERMAN** #19 and **SUPERMAN** #20. Considering he's got to deal with losing his super-powers, the



mystery of Supergirl, teaming up with The Doom Patrol, and the assorted villainies of Psi-Phon, Lex Luthor, and Metallo, even two issues may not be quite enough this month. And, of course, there's also the regular monthly **ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN**, written by John Byrne and Jerry Ordway, with art by Ordway.

**ACTION COMICS WEEKLY**, **SUPERMAN**, and **THE ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN**...three titles that have just become seven great invitations to adventure.



## Step Aside, Superman

DC's *Direct Currents* newsletter, touting *Action's* new weekly format.

TM & © DC Comics.



## Listen to the Mockingbird

Title page from "Blind Impulse," the Martin Pasko/  
Dan Spiegle Secret Six adventure in ACW #608  
(July 12, 1988). Mr. Spiegle died on January 28, 2017,  
as this issue was in production, making this among  
his last interviews. R.I.P., sir.

TM & © DC Comics.

The Secret Six were six people with various problems ranging from an incurable disease to being on the run from the mob. A mysterious figure known only as Mockingbird had some kind of a hold on each of them, and basically blackmailed them into performing missions. The real kicker to the series was that one of the Six was actually Mockingbird! This meant that whatever hold he or she supposedly had on that person was probably a sham.

Even early on, writers to the *Secret Six* letters page wondered how long readers would put up with Mockingbird's identity remaining a mystery. Mockingbird's identity was still unrevealed when the series was canceled, though Bridwell knew the truth, giddily telling DC staff newcomers until his passing in 1987. Unfortunately, no one I spoke to remembers who Mockingbird was.

Consisting of one continuous story by writer Martin Pasko, the Six's feature in *Action* ran in issues #601–612 and #619–630, with artist Dan Spiegle on the first arc and artists Frank Springer and Frank McLaughlin on the second. As the story begins, time has passed for the Six pretty much as it has in the real world, and they are now six aged figures who get together once every five years to reminisce. This year they receive their first mission from Mockingbird since they split up all those years ago: they are to travel to San Francisco to train their successors.

The new Six each suffer from a physical disability. These include blindness, deafness, and epileptic seizures among others, and Mockingbird has provided the Six with technology to help them overcome them... provided they do his bidding, of course.

Artist Dan Spiegle recalls, "I didn't know much about the [original] *Secret Six* series, though I did enjoy doing it." Dan does not know who designed the new team's uniforms, just that it wasn't him. Since Martin Pasko wasn't available for an interview, maybe we'll have to ask Mockingbird.

At the start, everything sounds just great. A new group to be trained by their experienced predecessors. All going according to plan. Until the plane flying the originals to San Francisco crashes into the side of a mountain.

From there, Mockingbird sends his new troops, initially unaware of their predecessors' fate, on missions to discredit a few corporations that are up to no good. First is a chemical company that may have killed the population of a small town to demonstrate a new product. Next is a meat packer suspected of selling contaminated meat.

All the while, the son of one of the original Six is trying to find out why their plane went down. Unbeknownst to Mockingbird, he hooks up with the new operatives.

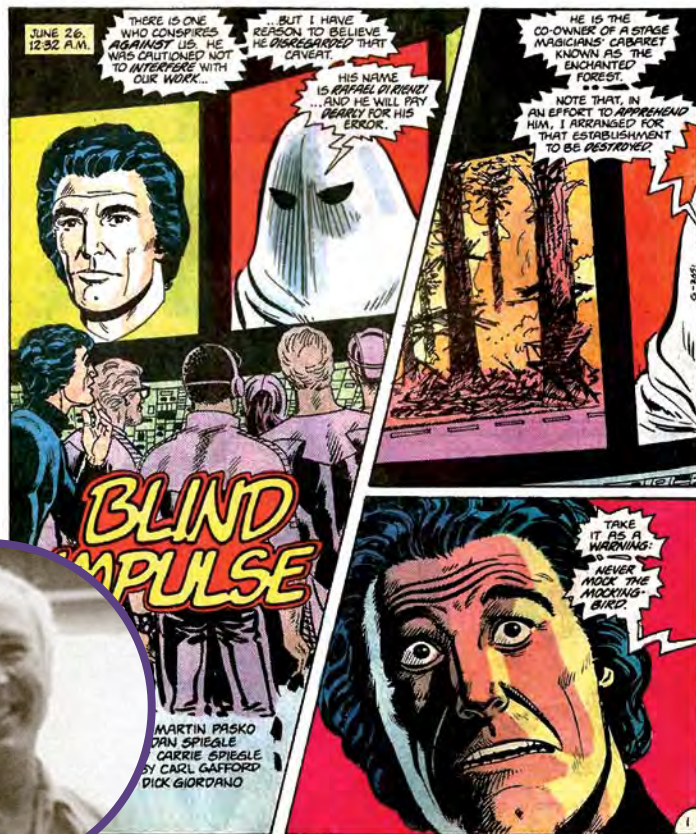
These new Six soon begin to realize that all of their missions are connected, leading toward one ultimate goal. That goal turns out to be directly related to the mystery of who Mockingbird was in the original series, and brings the group into conflict with a covert government agency. They also discover that this agency engineered the crash of the original group's plane, but that one of the group survived that crash.

Tracing the path through the intricate connections, the group discovers that the Mockingbird who has been leading them is not the original, but that the original did begin the process that led to their creation, intent on righting some wrongs connected to the original group.

The new Six manage to track down the new Mockingbird and find out the history of both Sixes while putting an end to the nefarious government group and their plans.

In the end, all secrets are revealed and all plot threads are tied off. Seemingly never meant to continue, this incarnation of the Secret Six

# THE SECRET SIX!



DAN SPIEGLE

had no life beyond this series, and though it was always near the bottom of *Action Comics Weekly* readers' polls while it ran, readers of the original series surely appreciated finally discovering Mockingbird's identity.

As for who Mockingbird was in the original series and who took over the role this time... I'm not telling. As mentioned, if you were a fan of the original series, I'm sure you've read this story. If you weren't, well, part of the fun is the mystery, so I'll leave it up to everyone to search out back issues. That is the name of the magazine you're reading, after all.

## BRING OUT YER DEAD

Deadman was no stranger to anthologies when he arrived in *Action Comics Weekly*, having been a regular feature in *Adventure Comics* when that title experimented with the anthology format in issues #459–466 in 1978 and 1979.

Written by Mike Baron and drawn by Dan Jurgens and Tony DeZuniga, the first Deadman story in *Action* appears in issues #601–612 and features an ancient Mayan deity, CIA machinations, spaceships, and the Devil himself. Setting-wise, it travels from the jungles of Belize through the halls of Washington, D.C. then into Hell and back. The plot revolves around Deadman's attempts to thwart the plans of the various antagonists and escape the traps and dangerous situations they involve him in.

You would imagine a plot this intricate would require significant forethought, but Mike Baron recalls that was not the case. "My method today is nothing like it was back then. Back then, I was a hip-shooter. That's one of the big differences between now and then. I wouldn't dream of starting even an eight-page story today without an outline."

In the course of this adventure, we discover that the devil in this tale is really an insane alien being who can inhabit other bodies the same way Deadman can. "The Merk in *Nexus* [Mike Baron and Steve



Those strengths are what actually got Jones work at DC in the first place. While illustrating superheroes for Marvel, the artist's penchant for dramatic lighting got him into some hot water. "Oddly, Len Wein noticed this in me then, and wanted to have me do a *Swamp Thing Special* with him in 1985 when Bernie [Wrightson] dropped out," reveals Kelley. "I only found out later when we did the [never-published] *Hangman* at Archie in 1989 that he thought I had the 'gift' he said. Horror comics are different in approach than superheroes, and he could see that in my scrawls at Marvel."

As the end of Deadman's run in *Action Comics Weekly*, it was becoming apparent that there were many people who enjoyed the stories Baron and Jones were crafting. To capitalize on this, DC was preparing to do a *Deadman* Prestige Format miniseries. "John Totleben was to do it with Mike but had health issues arise," says Jones. Still championing his approach, Jones was told by Barbara Kesel that "[art director] Richard Bruning was editing [the *Deadman* series], and she was going to sit on Richard's desk until he called and gave me the job." In addition, Jones feels "in both cases, *Action* and the Prestige series, I wasn't the first choice and feel that was the biggest blessing. I had to live up to better talent, and so that kept me in my place."

After Jones received the call from Bruning and accepted, he went on to collaborate with Mike Baron on a pair of two-issue *Deadman* series, *Love After Death* and *Exorcism*, proving that some of *Action*'s experiments were downright successful!



KELLEY JONES

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## HAWKS AND NO DOVES

This was not your father's Blackhawk. Mark Evanier and Dan Spiegle produced a well-respected 1982–1984 *Blackhawk* run with issues #251–273 of that title, but Howard Chaykin upped the ante, giving the characters a slightly more cynical worldview in his 1988 Prestige Format miniseries. That tone was continued and allowed some freedom due to the lack of the Comics Code seal when the characters appeared in *Action*.

Running from #601–608, the first story was written by Mike Grell, with Rick Burchett and Pablo Marcos illustrating. Grell himself had not experienced the Blackhawks in a while, but had been a fan, saying, "When I was a kid, back in the '50s, it was always one of my favorites."

Grell so enjoyed those comics that he set his Blackhawk story in Southeast Asia in 1947. To add authenticity to the story, he got some expert help. "The inspiration for my Blackhawk stories came from a friend who is the smartest man I ever met," begins Mike. "His name is Bill Guthrie and among other things he had a great deal of knowledge about the world as it existed in the time between World War II and the Korean War. I phoned Bill up and said I would like to have you call me back in a week and give me a one-hour bonehead lecture on the subject." Armed with this knowledge, Grell set out to tell his story.

Artist Rick Burchett had a little preparation to do himself before the series began. "We were set in a particular era," begins Burchett. "While many of the readers wouldn't be familiar with the period, there would be some who knew it well." He believes that "the reader can tell whether or not you've done your homework, because getting things right can help sell the believability of the story."

Janos "Blackhawk" Prohaska has fallen pretty far when we find him—so far, in fact, that his prospective employer has to travel to a

Singapore brothel to track him down! His team scattered to the four winds, Blackhawk takes the proffered job, one that involves stealing a load of gold from a bandit known only as the Red Dragon, a bandit we soon find out is a prototypical femme fatale.

"The script did mention that the character was based on Milton Caniff's Dragon Lady," reveals Burchett. "But the only description Mike gave was that she was half Chinese and had red hair."

After falling afoul of the Dragon's second-in-command, and falling into bed with the Dragon, Blackhawk learns the real reason for his mission. It seems his employer is actually a nun, and while the hoard of gold is real, her main concern is a religious icon contained within. Using some of the background information he had collected, Mike Grell reveals, "There was actually a cache of gold that went missing after World War II," though the icon came straight from his imagination.

Luckily, before leaving on his mission, Prohaska sent word to the rest of his team. Though it takes a while for the messages to reach the other Blackhawks, in true heroic style, they arrive just in time to pull their leader's fat from the fire.

Grell penned only the single story, noting, "I left because I was probably beginning to do my development work on *Shaman's Tears* [a series he would write and draw for Image]." That doesn't mean he

didn't have more ideas for the series, though (see sidebar on next page).

Mike's ideas were almost MIA before the series even started, although according to Burchett, "It was a weekly book and everyone was to start their strip at the same time and turn in eight pages a week. Under normal circumstances this wouldn't have been a problem. At the time I had a day job as an art director at an ad agency and did my comics work at night." No problem so far, right?

"At the time Mike Grell was on an extended tour of Asia," Rick continues. "He would dictate his scripts into a tape recorder and send the cassettes to DC in New York to be transcribed. When the tape for the Blackhawk script got to this country, US customs lost it. And they couldn't find it for six weeks! So while everyone else was busily working away on their weekly stories, I was cooling my heels anxiously awaiting the arrival of my script."

Blackhawk returned in *Action* #615–622 with a new writer, Martin Pasko, and Rick Burchett ascending to full art chores. This made for a significant change in the look of the art. Rick reveals, "Up until that time I had worked as an inker or inked my own pencils. I had never penciled for someone else to ink, and frankly, I wasn't very good at it. Pablo was saddled with some pretty rough pencils because I pencil very loose and do most of my drawing during the inking phase."

On the full art, Burchett developed his own touchstones for each character. "One of the things I focused on was how they wore their caps," reveals the artist. "Chuck's was always on the back of his head. Andre's and Chop-Chop's were

tilted at a rakish angle. Olaf and Hendrickson wore theirs pretty much squared away, and Blackhawk's was cocked a little. I used this as a visual indicator of the character's personality." One further visual aid Rick developed was, "I also spent time working on different walks for the guys so you could tell who it was if they were in silhouette."

In this tale, the team once again embarks on a mission only to find out later that they have been given a false story. A man named Leslie





## Flying High

Retail poster for ACW  
#606's Blackhawk  
serial by Grell,  
Burchett, and  
Marcos. Courtesy of  
Russ Garwood.

TM & © DC Comics.



## MIKE GRELL'S UNUSED BLACKHAWK PLOT

Mike Grell tells *BACK ISSUE*, "I had specifically asked Bill Guthrie for the political and military situation in that part of the world at the time. Among other things we talked about was the French being pitched out of Vietnam after Dien Bien Phu in 1954, which was catastrophic for them.

"This was to be the basis for the unwritten Blackhawk story. During WWII, the Japanese were in control of Vietnam and like so many places they took prior to and during the war, they were pretty brutal to the local people who had to live with the Japanese, rubber plantations, and so on. But we were how the French was in Asia. So the 'You did a good job going to Vietnam with guns and brutalizing the people, but the problem was you didn't solve the problem.'"

"At what point was the vocal, and the situation was the ass that to what at the CIA, and we would have been the one who helped Ho Chi Minh escape to the North."

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### BACK ISSUE #98

"DC in the '80s!" From the experimental to the fan faves: Behind-the-scenes looks at SECRET ORIGINS, ACTION COMICS WEEKLY, DC CHALLENGE, THRILLER, ELECTRIC WARRIOR, and SUN DEVILS. Featuring JIM BAIKIE, MARK EVANIER, DAN JURGENS, DOUG MOENCH, MARTIN PASKO, TREVOR VON EEDEN, and others! Featuring a mind-numbing Nightwing cover by ROMEO TANGHAL!

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MIKE GRELL

Richardson hires them to investigate a plane that crashed in Sumatra, killing all aboard. Richardson's wife was the pilot and is blamed for the crash. He doesn't believe this and employs the Blackhawk team supposedly to find evidence to clear her name. But Leslie is not his real name, and the pilot was actually his sister.

The Blackhawks, of course, find out too late that they have become involved in a covert government operation and their mission is actually to recover a "microwave generator" that the crashed plane was endeavoring to locate.

Complicating things are the provisional governor of the region and an erupting volcano. The team manages to rescue the woman, Marcia, a survivor since the plane crash was a ruse to begin with, but the generator is destroyed when the volcano erupts as the Blackhawks escape in a hail of gunfire.

The third storyline, presented in issues #628-634, picks up just moments after the second one ended with Marcia lying in the back of the plane, riddled by bullets and near death. Her fate leads to a few more complications and altercations for the team when they return home.

Before things can get too quiet, the team receives a summons to the White House to meet President Harry S. Truman and begin a mission to recover a supply of LSD. And this wasn't even the 1960s yet!

During the course of their mission, the 'Hawks run afoul of Nazis, a beautiful but acerbic pharmaceutical company heiress, and another femme fatale, while also being exposed to the wonder drug. All is worked out in the end as the team successfully completes the mission, though not without complications and a few casualties.

As a subplot, while the Blackhawks perform their mission, Natalie, the former Lady Blackhawk from Chaykin's series, is chased through the streets and kidnapped by a number of men. Of significance is the fact that we will not see her again in *Action Comics Weekly*.

top of every ACW readers' poll, and in issue #630 it was made known that *Blackhawk* was graduating to its own series. That meant that there was no need to tie a neat bow on the series when the run in *Action* ended. Besides the fate of Natalie, other plot lines from the *Action* run were carried over when *Blackhawk* #1 appeared, cover-dated March 1989, with the same creative team. That series would run 16 issues and an Annual, definitely another successful *Action Comics Weekly* experiment.

### ALWAYS A BRIDE'S MAID...

Black Canary always seemed to have quite a fan base, but she never managed to make it to A-list status. Still, she was a bankable character that was well suited to the experiment

that was *Action Comics Weekly*, and those fans must have been quite pleased when they found out she would debut in #609. Too bad the love affair didn't last.

The Blonde Bombshell was the first character after the initial group to show up in *Action*, with her first tale running in issues #609-616. Both her appearances were written by Sharon Wright, with art by Randy DuBurke and Pablo Marcos. DuBurke was a graduate of DC's Bonus Book program, kind of a continuation of *New Talent Showcase* except the Bonus Books were bound into existing DC titles. *Doom Patrol* #9 (June 1988) first showcased Randy's talent.

Right from the start it is determined that, at least visually, this was your father's Black Canary, as the cover to *Action* #609 shows our heroine burning the new costume she had adopted in *Detective Comics* #554 (Sept. 1985). Thing is, that image is mostly symbolic since Ms. Lance doesn't wear her old costume at all in this story. Instead, she adopts a fairly plain and certainly more functional outfit when she is in costume. For a lot of the story she is merely Dinah Lance.

The tale itself is a fairly dense plot that involves a crop duster suing a former employer and a family of illegal immigrants trying to take advantage of a government amnesty program. The link between the two is a chemical the crop duster and the patriarch of the immigrant family have both been exposed to. The star of the feature becomes involved when the daughter in the family, an acquaintance of Dinah's,