

comic book CREATOR

No. 12, Spring 2016

A TwoMorrows Publication

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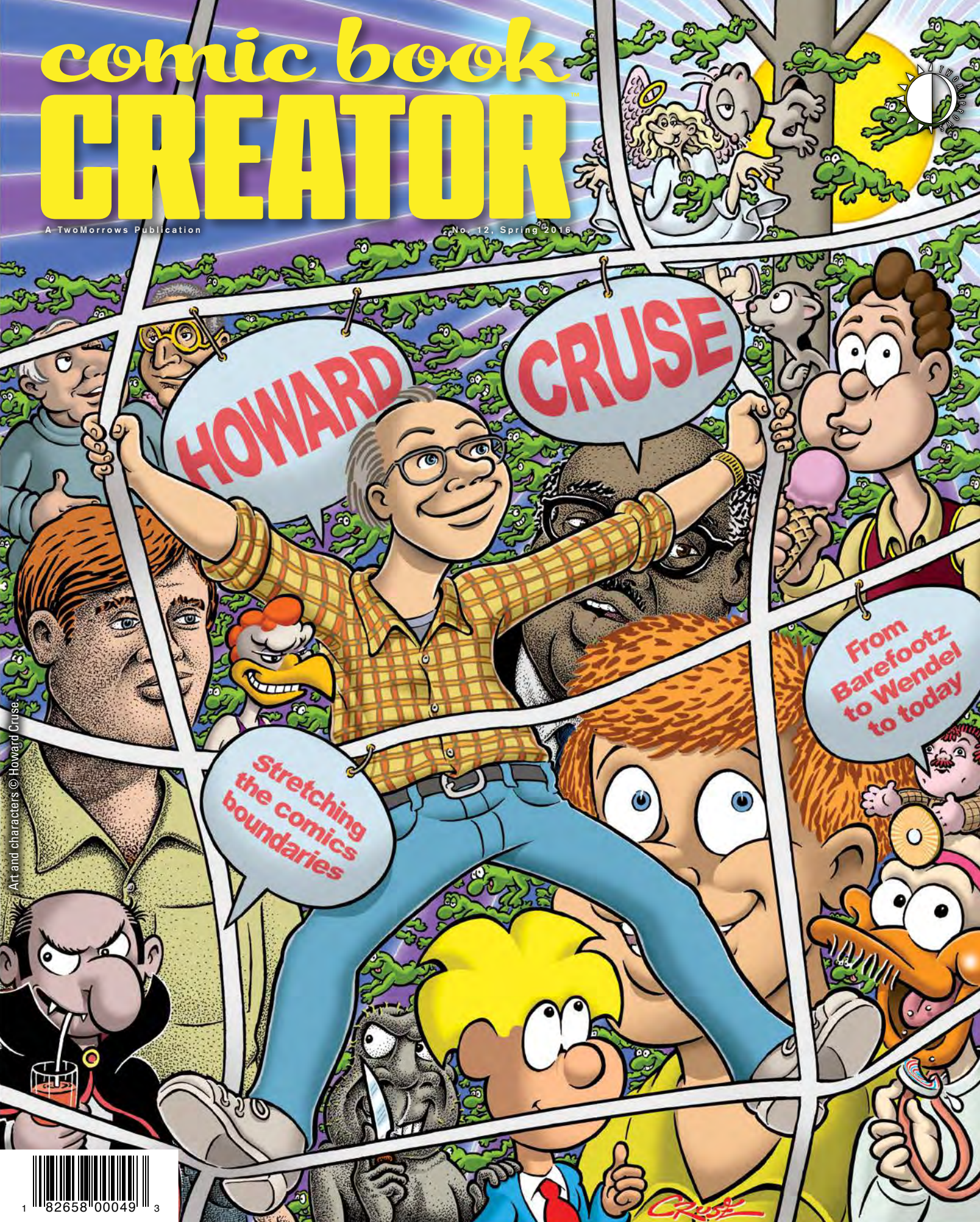


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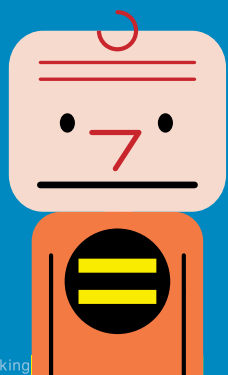
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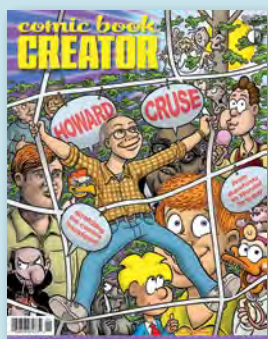
also: JACK KIRBY'S FOURTH WORLD MASTERPIECE • COMIC BOOK FEVER • HEMBECK



EQUALITY-WOODY
CBC mascot by J.D. KING
©2016 J.D. King.

About Our Covers

Art and Colors by
HOWARD CRUSE



Above: Mr. Cruse draws himself.
Below: When we saw Steve "The Dude" Rude's apokoliptik Fourth World art, we just *had* to make a cover feature out of it!



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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

Ye Ed's Rant: For the Love of Murphy Anderson..... 2

COMICS CHATTER

Forbidden Pleasures: George Khoury gives us an outtake from his *magnum opus* 3

Incoming: Letters o' comment containing words on *Warp* and Allred accolades 6

Incoming Extra: Hugh Surratt shares his favorite Gil Kane science fiction covers..... 8

Hembeck's Dateline: Our Man Fred on the ruler who dares not speak his name 13

Comics in the Library: Rich Arndt judges books by their cover (binding, at least!) 15

JACK KIRBY'S FOURTH WORLD SPECIAL SECTION

The King's Pinnacle: Inspired by our amazing Steve Rude cover, *CBC* looks at the history behind Jack Kirby's magnificent work at DC Comics in the early 1970s, from his late '60s break with Stan Lee at Marvel, to subsequent tribulations with publisher Carmine Infantino at the House of Superman..... 16

THE MAIN EVENT

Finding the Muse of the Man Called Cruse: *CBC* shares an afternoon with the great Howard Cruse, learning about the cartoonist's Alabama roots, emergence into the underground comix realm with *Barefootz*, pioneering work as editor of the seminal anthology *Gay Comix*, mainstream recognition courtesy of *Wendel*, and breakthrough with *Stuck Rubber Baby* as an important graphic novelist. The artist's life parallels the rise of the LGBTQ rights movement — Howard was even witness to the Stonewall rebellion! — and he shares intimate and candid stories, about life in the homophobic Deep South in the '60s or surviving the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic in New York City, as well as the more mundane experiences of a freelance cartoonist, and his current state of domestic bliss in this modern, more enlightened age of marriage equality..... 32

BACK MATTER

Coming Attractions: Michael W. Kaluta! Ramona Fradon! Wacky Packs! 77

A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Words: Doug Wildey's Jonny Quest..... 80

Note: Your humble editor would love to know if you have suggestions for *CBC* about artists and writers you would like to see covered! If you like what we're doing, you can tell us that, too! Thanks!

Right: Detail of Howard Cruse's cover art for his 2012 *BOOM! Town* book, *The Other Sides of Howard Cruse*.

SPECIAL THANKS: Glenn Whitmore colored our awesome Steve Rude cover of Kirby's *Fourth World*.



Comic Book Artist Vol. 1 & 2 are now available as digital downloads from twomorrows.com!



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Forbidden Pleasures

Remembering the great Forbidden Planet in this outtake from *Comic Book Fever*!

by **GEORGE KHOURY** CBC Contributing Editor

On a perfect day in 1980s' Manhattan, if you felt like forgetting yourself and your problems, there was no better place to do so than at Forbidden Planet at 821 Broadway (at 12th Street). In terms of comic book stores, it was like nothing seen before in the Big Apple: 4,000 square feet filled to the brim with comics, genre books, international toys, games, and more. In other words, it was paradise.

The Forbidden Planet comic book store was founded in England in 1978 by three partners who shared a passion for comics: Mike Lake, Nick Landau, and Mike Luckman. Their London store was an immediate success, a revolutionary destination that became a cultural trailblazer throughout Europe as an authority in science fiction and as a major importer of American comics. In 1981, partner Mike Luckman, a late bloomer to the comics medium, headed alone to America and opened a Forbidden Planet shop in New York City, which developed into an influential trendsetter at the epicenter of everything cool in comics.

"I was a teacher in London," states Luckman. "I used to be the guy who was brought in to take the problem kids, and I had a bunch of kids that were leaving school who couldn't read or write properly. I think the same with American education, these kids just got pushed to the edge, you know? Nobody gave a sh*t. I was trying to take a class after school of these kids who desperately wanted to read and write, [but] didn't know how to go about it because no one had given them the time. I quickly realized that I didn't have any material for them to learn from, because all the textbooks in schools are totally irrelevant to most kids. So I decided to try comics, which, of course, was a huge success. The kids were so desperate to read the comic book,

they really applied themselves, and we got some really good results. And that's really how it came about, because I met some people who I used to try and scrounge comics off [of] so I could take them for the kids."

Pursuing his heart, a smitten Luckman came to America as he began courting an American named Jonni

Levas, the business partner of Phil Seuling (founder of the comics direct system of distribution, the drop-ship delivery of Marvel, DC, and other comic titles to specialty stores) at Sea Gate Distributors.

During this period, comics were slowly disappearing from newsstands and becoming a staple mostly found in comic book specialty stores. Since a man's got to make his own way (and Luckman wanted to extend his stay in America), he used a little divine inspiration, and the store just followed.

"It was a gamble," confesses Luckman. "What we were trying

to do was make it a supermarket,

have everything to do with science fiction, comics, toys, all in one store. And it really wasn't that difficult to figure out. If the material is good, the people will come."

The British impresario found his ideal location at 821 Broadway, a retail space of 4,000 square feet — about double the size of the original London store. As he began to put his unprecedented megastore and staff together, his efforts started to intrigue the media and whet the public's appetite. As the day of the grand opening arrived, any nervousness subsided with the steady arrival of enthusiastic customers, all wanting to survey the latest sensation in town. Luckman says, "The opening day was phenomenal. We did have press releases, and Channel 7 (WABC-TV) did a whole news thing on us. It was quite amazing. I can't remember what they said, but, 'Coming up at eleven, we'll show you a new store that's opening tomorrow.' And you couldn't buy that space. It was unbelievable. I think they gave us three



CBC SPECIAL!

As a special bonus this ish, *Ye Crusading Editor* is delighted to spotlight as our opening feature an outtake from Gentleman George Khoury's magnum opus, **Comic Book Fever: A Celebration of Comics 1976 to 1986**, shipping in June 2016 by TwoMorrows. The 240-page book, sporting a fantastic Alex Ross painted cover (above), is a love letter to his personal golden age of comics and simply an amazing compilation of articles, art, and artifacts, all put together in the indomitable style of the author of *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore*, *Kimota! The Miracleman Companion*, and *True Brit: Celebrating the Comic Book Artists of England!* Must-have double-bagger!

Inset left: Brian Bolland artwork on Forbidden Planet's custom shopping bags.

FORBIDDEN PLANET

Left: Typographer/designer extraordinaire Alex Jay's 1984 logo design for the retailer.

Words on Warp; Allred accolades

The creators of the Broadway science-fiction epic weigh in on *CBC #10*'s coverage

Write to **CBC**: jonbcooke@aol.com or P. O. Box 204, West Kingston, RI 02892



Above: One of CBC editor Jon B. Cooke's latest projects is a reworking of *CBC #5* into the book *Everything But the Kitchen Sink*, now available from www.deniskitchen.com.

Below: Courtesy of Barcelona reader Julian Soriano, covers of the 1973-74 Spanish *Man-Thing* series, *El Hombre Cosa*, which sported painted versions (perhaps by artist Lopez Espi) of American comic book covers. ¡Muchas gracias, Julian!

Lenny Kleinfeld

Thanks for sending your article. Talk about comprehensive! I'm pretty sure it has more words than the *Warp* trilogy did... An impressive piece of work on your part, and it was fun to see all those "then and now" shots of the cast.

[Lenny is, of course, the playwright of *Warp*, which was exhaustively showcased in *Comic Book Creator #10*. And now a word from the Broadway science fiction epic's other creator (and celebrated horror film director)... — Y.E.]

Stuart Gordon

Your article is terrific and really brought back memories, good and bad. Many thanks.

[And, thirdly, this in from Stuart's wife, co-founder of the *Organic Theater*, and *Warp* actress... — Y.E.]

Carolyn Purdy-Gordon

What a trip down memory lane! I enjoyed reading your marathon saga of *Warp*'s inception, life, and after-life... Frankly, I am impressed at the depth and breadth of your piece. I am amazed at how well you captured the personalities of your interview subjects. I got lonesome for the old gang. There were memories and observations that I'd forgotten, and some that I never knew until I read this article. Simultaneously nostalgic and illuminating about a time that was one of the best of our lives.

[Thanks to Lenny, Stuart, Carolyn, and the cast and crew of *Warp* who helped out with the *CBC #10* coverage! Yours truly loved putting together that comprehensive piece, and though we were worried there might be complaints that, aside from the Neal Adams connection and its comic book influences, the extensive article had little to do with comics directly, no one seemed annoyed enough to write in to com-

plain. (Though, in truth, the following missive from faithful reader Joe Frank was the only letter of comment we've received about *CBC* in quite a spell...). — Y.E.]

Joe Frank

CBC #8 was a very intriguing issue. The interviews were somewhat shorter, but most still had content of great value. The cover subjects had an element in common: both emphasize the idea of fun in comics.

I've read less of Bob Burden's output. The only thing I recall offhand was the *Gumby* he did with Arthur Adams, but I remember it as playfully bizarre and, as such, far different from other books. A welcome contrast.

Michael Allred I recognize from his work on *The Atomics*; another pleasing, unpredictable book. And although, unless my math is off, he's four years younger than I, he still shares some common childhood experiences. I loved the wistful nostalgia he expressed for all the cool '60s shows, after school, in syndication.

A contrast: I missed the Wednesday *Batman* episodes when they first aired, as they were opposite *Lost In Space* (which I wasn't missing for anything). Had I known episodes would available 50 years later, the selection dilemma wouldn't have seemed so momentous.

The thing I like most: Michael's story of meeting his wife, Laura. It makes for terrible drama as there were few obstacles or complications. But how cool to have it happen so ideally and continue on indefinitely! It's nice — and all too rare — to have such a happy ending in real life.

I love Allred's *Batman '66* covers and the very idea that he is, in some way, contributing as an adult to the show he delighted in as a kid. I'm eager to see him do a story eventually.

I appreciated Batton Lash's stated philosophy that setbacks or frustrations are learning experiences. That puts a positive spin on what could be seen as a depressing



Kane's Science Fiction Classics

A selection of fave Gil Kane stories in *Mystery in Space* and *Strange Adventures*

by HUGH SURRATT

Below: The stunning cover art for *Strange Adventures* #80 [May, '57]. Gil Kane pencils and inks and Jack Adler's graytones. Although not specifically *Space Cabbie*, this is a good example of Kane's self-portraiture. Spectacular effect!

[For the previous issue of *Comic Book Creator*, our Gil Kane retrospective, yours truly asked old pal Hugh Surratt, a tremendous fan of editor Julius Schwartz's line of science fiction titles at DC Comics, to help with that ish's somewhat sparse section dealing with the artist's work in the 1950s. Hugh was kind enough to deliver, but complications arose, and we are including the man's list of favorite Kane stories and covers here! Take it away, Surratt! —Y.E.]



Between *Strange Adventures* and *Mystery in Space*, Gil Kane penciled almost 130 stories. A prolific output, indeed, especially considering he was also, at one time or another, simultaneously contributing pencils for *Green Lantern*, *The Atom*, *Rex the Wonder Dog* (pencils and inks), countless other miscellaneous stories, and a multitude of covers.

To drill down and identify his best DC science fiction stories is just too daunting of a task, so I've decided to isolate just two aspects of the artist's work: stories he both penciled and inked, and some of his best covers for those two SF titles.

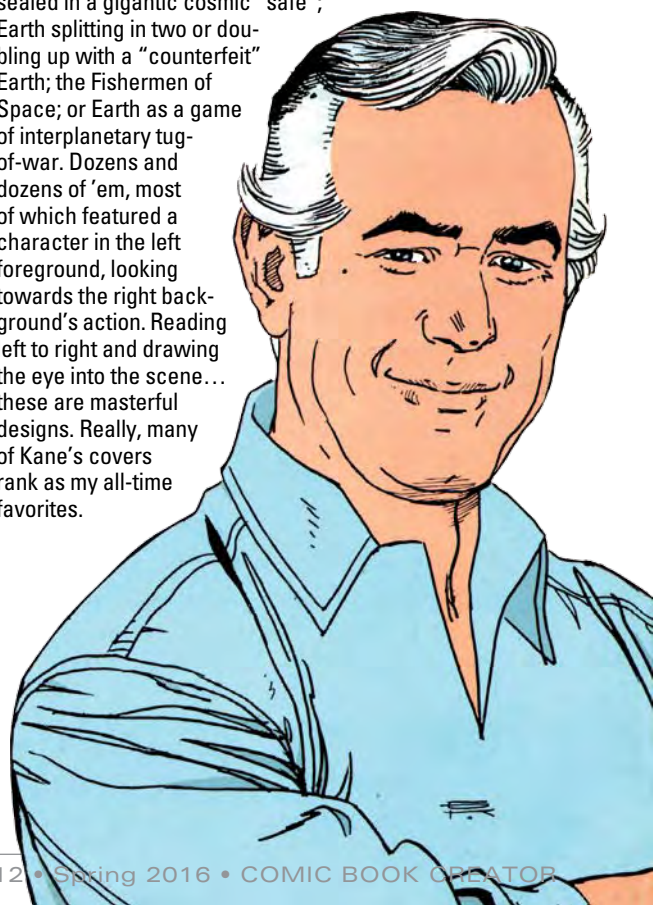
Surprisingly, out of those 120-plus stories he penciled, Kane only inked a handful — and amazingly, only one during Julius Schwartz's tenure as editor of DC's two flagship SF titles, the aforementioned *Strange Adventures* and *Mystery in Space*. Maybe Schwartz assigned

other inkers to his work to increase Kane's productivity or maybe the editor wanted to maintain a certain "house style," but both probably played roles into these respective assignments. Inkers Bernard Sachs, Joe Giella, and Frank Giacoia rotated over Kane's pencils (with rare inks provided by Murphy Anderson), which certainly freed the artist up to generate more work but, even more certainly, the results were similarly stylized, and frankly, homogenized finishes. I always thought these inkers flattened Kane's pencils into utter blandness. For my part, his oddball "Space Cabbie" series in *MIS* was my favorite of from Kane's work during this era (despite heavy-handed inks by — mainly — Sachs). And speaking of that interstellar taxi driver, the character's face, like many of Kane's other protagonists, was actually somewhat of a self-portrait of the artist himself.

Ironically, after working throughout the '50s and '60s on Schwartz's comics, it was only when Jack Schiff was assigned as editor of *SA* and *MIS* that Kane began finishing his own SF pencils. When Schiff took on these

comics, he brought along his posse of old cronies from his days on *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets*: Jack Sparling, George Roussos, Mort Meskin, Dick Dillin, Lee Elias, Howard Purcell, Bernard Bailey, etc. These were all old-time veterans from the trenches, and perhaps Schiff counted Kane as one of the old guard, too. Because when "Star Hawkins" was rebooted in *Strange Adventures*, it was Gil Kane who furnished the full artwork. Unfortunately, the surrounding lackluster work in those comics probably meant that Kane's gems were overlooked for the most part... nobody bought 'em. But, in fact, the wacky five "Star Hawkins" stories that appeared in *SA* between 1965 and '66 are my favorite SF stories that he produced for DC. Kane also did the complete art for six other SF tales during this period, all of which were also gems, standing out within these comics like solar flares. Check out *MIS* #101's "Space Baby" for a good example (for which, incidentally, Kane also did the cover.) Or have a look at the previous issue's "Secret of the Double Agent." The story layouts flow seamlessly and crackle with surprising energy. When inking his own pencils, Kane's work was always looser and more frenetic. Faces were more expressive, spaceships sleeker, aliens more... well, alien.

And, oh, those covers! Gil Kane had long runs of covers for both *MIS* and *SA*, many of which he inked himself. As has been mentioned elsewhere many times, apparently Schwartz would meet with his cover artists to hammer out wild ideas for the illustrations. And when Julie did indeed meet with Kane, the results were often jaw-droppingly bizarre: spaceships towing the planet Earth; our planet sealed in a gigantic cosmic "safe"; Earth splitting in two or doubling up with a "counterfeit" Earth; the Fishermen of Space; or Earth as a game of interplanetary tug-of-war. Dozens and dozens of 'em, most of which featured a character in the left foreground, looking towards the right background's action. Reading left to right and drawing the eye into the scene... these are masterful designs. Really, many of Kane's covers rank as my all-time favorites.



Inset right: Cover detail from *The Comics Journal* #113 [Dec. '86], a self-portrait by the late, great artist, Gil Kane.

Next page: Four outstanding Gil Kane covers for DC's science fiction anthology comics. From left, *Mystery in Space* #101 [Aug. '65], sporting Kane pencils and inks; *Mystery in Space* #34 [Oct.–Nov. '56], also with Kane pencils and inks; *Strange Adventures* #93 [June '58], yet again with Kane's pencils and inks; and *Mystery in Space* #55 [Nov. '59], another spectacular Kane (pencils) and Adler (wash) collaboration.

Strange Adventures TM & © DC Comics. Self-portrait © the estate of Gil Kane.



THE ROAD FROM APOKOLIPS

Jack Kirby's search for the awesome in the Fourth World

"I know the names of the stars. I know how near or far the heavenly bodies are from our own planet. I know our own place in the universe. I can feel the vastness of it inside myself. I began to realize with each passing fact what a wonderful and awesome place the universe is, and that helped me in comics because I was looking for the awesome." — Jack Kirby, The Comics Journal #134

The New Age

In the early months of the young decade, the company had seen better days. Its major competitor was bearing down, forcing the outfit to rethink strategy and consider innovative, radical new approaches. Their rival had brilliantly developed a cohesive universe in their comics, with characters interacting and teaming up in a shared realm, an inventiveness that sparked readership attention — and response. The bothersome business adversary actively interacted with that coveted audience with pithy and informative letter columns, filled with friendly, chatty editorial responses to the oft ecstatic missives (which would include the printed addresses of the letter writers), connecting enthusiasts to one another all over the nation. Lines were being drawn with readers becoming ever more partisan in brand preference. Fandom was growing and the company,

exhausted from the vagaries and boom-and-busts of the field, began looking beyond the office to enlist a creative giant to shift the paradigm. A master of the form — a king, if you will — was needed to shake up the publisher's line and hold back the competition's onslaught, one ravenous to gobble up ever-larger slices of the marketplace.

Such was the situation not only at DC Comics in 1970, but at down-in-the-dumps Marvel in 1961. Stan Lee, facing limping sales of the line's monster, *Millie the Model*, and Western genre titles, received a dictate from publisher Martin Goodman to appropriate competitor DC's super-team concept (or so goes the perhaps apocryphal story). The *Justice League of America*, which joined fan-friendly editor Julie Schwartz's revamped super-heroes in their own clubhouse, was igniting kids' imaginations and fledgling fandom was all atwitter with this new cohesive universe. Marvel's own mystery-men characters had been mothballed long since a half-hearted attempt or two to resuscitate the genre, and aside from a period in the '40s, before the All-Winners Squad became losers under a deluge of crime, horror, and humor titles, there was rarely any notion for a tangible "world" in which the Timely characters would interact. Few, it seemed, had the imagination to contemplate such an inventive ambience.

Top: Jack Kirby by his Thousand Oaks, California poolside, in a 1971 photo by Bill Bridges. This portrait appeared in The New York Times Sunday magazine, May 2, 1971.

Essay by
Jon B. Cooke

Art by
Steve Rude

Coloring by
Glenn Whitmore



Above: Jack Kirby's self-portrait featuring many of his Marvel Universe co-creations. This piece was originally drawn for a 1969 *Marvelmania* portfolio. Color by Tom Ziuko.

Below: Stan Lee (left) and Jack Kirby in 1965.



Lucky for Goodman and his wife's cousin, Stan Lee, there was one of the most creative comic book visionaries, suddenly available for full-time work. Jack Kirby, having a tough go of it lately, was still stinging from a humiliating legal suit brought against him by an editor at DC* (where the creator had become *persona non grata*) and he had just lost his daily newspaper strip assignment due to syndicate cancellation. That science-fiction feature, *Sky Masters of the Space Force*, had experienced a strong start in those post-Sputnik days of 1958, debuting in a reputed 300 papers. But, by early 1961, after 774 daily strips and 53 Sunday episodes, the exquisitely rendered strip about an astronaut of the near future sputtered and crashed. The artist, responsible for keeping a housebound wife, two teenagers, a nine-year-old, and now a newborn fed and sheltered (in a suburban, heavily mortgaged Long Island home), was at a desperate turning point.

Though he had been taking on freelance assignments for Lee pretty steadily since the company's 1957 brush with death, Kirby was suddenly in need of more page-rate work and the Marvel editor/chief writer just as urgently needed a super-hero concept to counter the DC Silver Age explosion.** Thus, in the spring of '61, the pair hammered out a science-fiction proposal that resembled a Kirby co-creation of recent years for that rival publisher. Whether intentional or not, the general idea of *Challengers of the Unknown*,

*For a thorough examination of the Jack Kirby/Jack Schiff squabble, please refer to "The Story Behind *Sky Masters*," *The Jack Kirby Collector* #15, Apr. 1997, by this writer.

a quasi-super-heroic series, was adapted (perhaps an unconscious spitting of litigious Jack Schiff, editor of the DC series and Kirby's recent courtroom adversary?), though the co-creators expertly finessed a more refined take on the notion of a quartet of adventurers transformed through extraordinary experience. On top of their atomic age conception of the characters altered by mutating cosmic rays during a brief jaunt into space, Kirby and Lee bring to the future "World's Greatest Comic Book" a novel concept — for super-hero stories, anyway — one that added a familial bond between team members, each with their own foibles.

What made *The Fantastic Four* of immediate appeal was certainly the exploding Kirby imagination, artistic excellence, and storytelling expertise; but there was also the family dynamic inherent in the foursome's rocky relationship with one another, which added a resonance and offered ample fodder for an ongoing series. And, expanding beyond the exploits of Reed Richards, Benjamin Grimm, and Susan and Johnny Storm (the latter, an echo of the imprint's bygone golden age, sharing both an alias and ability with a '40s Timely super-hero, the Human Torch), the makings of an interconnected universe came into focus by the winter following their debut, with the explicit revival of another long dormant character, the Sub-Mariner, in *FF* #4 [May '62], linking the group to the imprint's World War II-era roster of costumed characters.

The same month Kirby and Lee resurrected Bill Everett's Prince Namor, a wholly new player in the burgeoning Marvel milieu exploded onto the racks: *The Incredible Hulk*, the pair's green giant part-monster, part-hero. Two months later, the collaborators conjured up their mythological Norse god, the Mighty Thor (hitting the spinner displays along with the first Spider-Man comic book, a Lee/Ditko creation), and thirty days after that, in September '62, there came Ant-Man. In October, the duo joined with writer and Lee sibling Larry Leiber on a *FF* spin-off series starring the Human Torch.

An Expanding Universe

By early 1963, the Marvel Universe was increasing exponentially. Lee and Kirby authored a story in the first issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, where the title character hoped to join the Fantastic Four, and the Hulk, whose own comic book had been cancelled that same month, gets into an epic knockdown, donnybrook with The Thing, in *FF* #12. These crossovers formalized the conceit that the super-heroes existed in a shared setting — most of them populating not some metropolis with a made-up name, but the real-world New York City — a development stimulated by one simple fact: the Marvel comics line, under the creative direction of Lee, Kirby, and Ditko, was a breakout success, now snapping at the heels of rival DC.

In 1961, the company had sold less than 19 million copies of its comic books; by late '65, Lee boasted to a reporter that sales had increased to 35 million. In 1968, that number grew to 50 million; by 1971, it would be 70 million. Much of the ever-increasing circulation was doubtlessly due to an influx of older readers, many responding not only to the interlocking and thrilling storylines, but also to the pithy, hip

**This is not to imply that Marvel, which would shed the Atlas company name on comics cover-dated July 1961, was not already a significant account for the man. Within the Marvel releases cover-dated 1960 — remember, this was while Kirby was producing a daily newspaper strip — the creator completed 415 pages (including covers) for Goodman's outfit: though in indicia year 1961, that output would more than double to 993. With Kirby working almost exclusively for the publisher, the imprint developed a title virtually custom-made for the creator, the short-lived but lively *Amazing Adventures*, which would immediately morph by year's end, upon Kirby taking on *The Fantastic Four* assignment, into *Amazing Adult Fantasy*, a showcase for Marvel's other major artistic contributor, Steve Ditko.

Tempting the Apocalypse

The roots of Jack Kirby's masterpiece, one that would rise from the ashes of his Marvel Universe work, are to be found, in part, in the back pages of his *Journey into Mystery/Mighty Thor* comics, where the artist was given considerable freedom to re-imagine the mythology of the Norse gods, within a series called "Tales of Asgard." An aspect of Viking legend was the notion of the apocalyptic Ragnarök, a series of foretold events that culminate with the death of the old gods and birth of a new race of men. In his afterword for the first volume of the *Fourth World Omnibus*, Mark Evanier explains:

While doing *Thor* [at Marvel] in the sixties, [Jack Kirby] had the notion of a series commencing with the day of Ragnarok when, legend had it, the old gods perished. Replacing them all with rookies was a fertile idea, he decided — too good to give Marvel just then. This was the period when he was starting to have real contract/compensation issues with the firm... and anyway, he knew they weren't about to kill off *Thor* and that set of characters.

The creator obviously had relished his tenure on *The Mighty Thor*, likely his favorite after *Fantastic Four*, infusing the demi-god's title with a mind-bending mix of myth and science fiction that oddly seemed a natural blending for such contrasting subjects. The Thunder God would encounter ancient heroes from alternate mythologies and just as quickly jump to the cosmos to explore Ego, the Living Planet, with space colonizer Tana Nile and the Recorder, then interact with the High Evolutionary and his Man-Beast, then traverse the Rainbow Bridge to his home in Asgard, and drop in to visit Earth now and again. The series was constantly in motion and wildly inventive.

As mentioned, "Tales of Asgard" explored Norse legend through a Kirby prism and it was obvious the creator was contemplating deeply the olden tales of Odin and company. There's a constant verve and relentless enthusiasm to the five-page stories which, in the early issues especially, eclipse the main feature in vitality and excitement. In a long-running serial that ran in the back-up series [in *Journey into Mystery* #117–128], we literally see visions of Ragnarök with the death of Asgard and forging of a new planet in its ashes, life beginning anew in a paradise where grows an enlightened, advanced civilization — a new genesis and emergence of a race of new gods.

After the back-up series was cancelled, Kirby continued to tease *Thor*'s readers with the notion of the old gods' annihilation through the multi-issue onslaught of Mangog over a series of stories that build to a harrowing, apocalyptic crescendo, where the monster with the power of a "billion, billion beings" is relentless in his drive to unsheathe the Odinsword and bring on Ragnarok and, thus, the death of our universe. (Who saves the day? Odin, the All-Father, pops in with a power scepter and dispatches the nefarious behemoth in a page or two.) For a moment, given the epic's pile-driving march towards doomsday for the Norse gods and the actual universe itself, readers must have thought, in a weird mix of both dread and delightful anticipation, that glorious, grandiose Asgard, with its pantheon of brave and mighty warrior heroes, would be reduced to ash... and hope, with shuddering glee, that a new generation of Kirby-created deities might rise from the dust of the dead.*

Soon enough, the real-life end-time was looming for Jack Kirby at Marvel. Though he would try to negotiate an equitable contract with the new corporate owners, the co-architect of the House of Ideas was dismissed as just another replaceable freelancer. "They thought everything good on the pages came from Stan," Mark Evanier later

*Between 1968-69, Kirby had actually prepared colored presentation pieces featuring characters for his new *Thor* proposal, most inked by Don Heck.



quipped. But, over at the Distinguished Competition, certain parties had retired or were about to depart — folks who had been hostile to the King — and thus it seemed there might be a more hospitable climate at DC.

For a creator whose name was synonymous with the Universe of which he was the chief architect, it must have been sad for Kirby to consider that Marvel — for whom he had conjured up many dozens of concepts and hundreds of original characters, properties mined again and again by other writers and artists — could get along without him. By '68, the House of Ideas was selling 50 million copies a year, a 400% increase since when *FF* #1 hit the stands, only seven years prior. (By 1971, that number would reportedly increase to 70 million, a good many of which were reprints of his work.) It was time for the king to move on and find a new realm. "I'm basically a guy from the East Side," he told Groth. "I'm basically a guy who likes to be a man, and if you try to deprive me of it, I can't live with it. That's what the industry was doing to me, and I had a gut-full of that. I couldn't do anything less. I had to get myself far away..."

The Daring and the Different

While Marvel was having occasional flashes of brilliance in the late '60s, with Ditko gone and Kirby keeping new ideas

This spread: Various DC Comics house ads touting Jack Kirby's *Fourth World* comics.





Schwartz and E. Nelson Bridwell was squandered at the time, an oddly myopic hesitance given the urgency to replicate a major aspect of Marvel's appeal to fans — an interconnected universe — and here, handed to them on a silver platter by the King of Comics, was a cosmic blueprint.

Don't Ask, Just Buy It

The very first comic book published by DC Comics featuring Jack Kirby's work during his ballyhooed return was *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen* #133, released in the late summer of 1970. It remains one of the most astonishingly inventive stories to be conceived, a tale bursting with new ideas and characters, one that even retrofitted a '40s Kirby co-creation, the Newsboy Legion (though here a new generation of adventurers plus plebe Flippa Dippa all joined the Daily Planet cub reporter for the entire Kirby run as exuberant sidekicks). In a mere 22 pages, the tale introduces the half-car/half-jet Whiz Wagon, sinister Morgan Edge and his Galaxy Broadcasting System, the Wild Area, the Hairies, Intergang, Iron Mask, Vudu, the Outsiders, Habitat, Zoomway, and foretells the Mountain of Judgment. After withholding new ideas from Marvel for years, concepts and characters exploded from Kirby's mind and onto the page in a raging torrent. This promised to be one freakin' wild ride.

The following issue gave us our first glimpse at the great Darkseid, seeker of the Anti-Life Equation and the dominant villain of Kirby's Fourth World, and with the other linked titles being released alongside *Jimmy Olsen*, the King's universe was unfolding before a readership that was sometimes receptive, sometimes perplexed. While the creator professed great freedom at his new home, there was immediate evidence of editorial interference with the altering of faces on certain characters.

Asked if he was disturbed by the changes to his Superman and Jimmy Olsen faces, Kirby told Groth, "Yes, it bothered me, of course, because a man is entitled to draw things in his own style. I didn't hurt Superman. I made him powerful. I admire Superman, but I've got to do my own style. That's how I would see it, and I had the right to do that, and nobody had the right to tamper with your work and shape it differently."

Carmine Infantino had something different to say about Kirby's reaction. "Jack himself never objected to this," the publisher said. "He understood about when you had a licensed character like Superman, you don't mess around with him. He didn't make an issue out of it... But think about it. Do you think Walt Disney would allow Mickey Mouse to be changed or altered in any way?" Whatever the justification, the effect appeared unnecessarily jarring to many a reader.

Whether Kirby was enthusiastic about his *Jimmy Olsen* work is hard to determine — remember, this was the guy who said, "I believe that I'm in a thorough, professional class who'll give you the best you can get. You won't get any better than the stuff that I can do" — but he gave it one hell of an exciting go, and integrated aspects of his three otherwise more closely linked books with innovative panache. Darkseid agents Mikkari and Simyan tormented Olsen and his super-pal; Clark Kent encountered

Lightray of *The New Gods*; Superman visited the New Genesis floating city of "Supertown," sensing kindred folk... Plus the King shared the then-new conception of cloning, reintroduced his Golden Age character, the golden Guardian (who had been allied with the original Newsboy Legion), gave us the DNAliens and Dubblix of the DNA Project, hinted at the secret of life in the DNA "molecule" (the opposite of Darkseid's coveted Anti-Life Equation?), and foisted on us rampaging monsters whose birth, Mikkari exclaims, "Heralds the age of the holocaust! Hail homo usurpus!"

After a breathless, frantic multi-issue race to save Metropolis from thermonuclear destruction, the title gets decidedly wacky with the appearance of Goody Rickels, doppelgänger of real-life Las Vegas comedian (and unauthorized guest-star) Don Rickles. And from there on, one gets a mild sense that the series was playing out for Kirby. There are adventures in a Universal monster movie-inspired world, an encounter with a Nessie-inspired Loch Trevor monster, and battle against a 150-year-old (or so) Jules Verne knock-off determined to "Form the world in the shape of Victor Volcanum and all that surges inside him!" The villain fails, Jimmy and the Newsboy Legion in the Whiz Wagon (a Hot Wheels-inspired vehicle that travels the sky), and Superman fly towards the sun setting over Metropolis, and after 15 issues of vigorous entertainment, Jack Kirby finishes his run on *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen*, the first Fourth World casualty. To fill the sudden hole in his work schedule, the creator begins developing *The Demon*.

But even in those less inspired latter issues, there are clever moments, both poignant and funny, whether Superman's chat with New Genesis spiritual leader Highfather while both are seated on a Supertown bench, or the introduction of Evil Factory creation Angry Charlie, a wily, bug-eyed monstrosity and now beloved pet of Gabby, the Newsboy Legionnaire. Most issues sport unenthusiastic inks by Vinnie Colletta and fine lettering by John Costanza, but those stories inked and lettered by Mike Royer are graphic standouts, expertly complementing the King's pencils and capturing the intensity of the work as few other delineators.

Infantino, who had ascended to the publisher's office in the middle of the King's nineteen-month run on the Superman family title, said in a mildly confrontational exchange with Gary Groth in 1996, "[Kirby's] version didn't sell. The artwork was not great on *Jimmy Olsen* before he did it. But it was selling. Go figure. I don't know how you figure these things. So, I gave him how many issues to do? A couple, right?... And the book sank. I took him off it. Jack was a great talent and he had more success than anyone else in this business. But, unfortunately, these books did not make it. That's the simple fact. If Jack were a ballplayer, he would be batting 750. Since Ted Williams batted 400 and he was a superstar, what would that make Jack? Remember — nobody hits 100%. Anything else?"

The Boom Tubers

The first all-new Kirby comic book to be released by DC in 1970 was *The Forever People* #1, which featured the "big bonus guest star," the Man of Steel, a crossover presumably planned to help give the title a start-up bump. The series, jumping head-first in the Fourth World mythos, was about a quartet of New Genesis denizens from Supertown, a floating city above a planet resembling the Garden of Eden, a peaceful group with the joint ability to transform into a super-powered fighter known as the Infinity Man.

A *New York Times* Sunday magazine feature from 1971 describes the Forever People as well as anyone: "There are five of them," writes Saul Braun. "[O]ne is a relaxed, self-assured young black man [Vykin] who, probably not by accident, carries the group's power source, known as the 'mother box'; another is a shaggy-bearded giant [Big Bear] who overwhelms his small-minded taunters with a loving, crushing bear hug; the third, a beautiful saintly flower child named Serafin is called a 'sensitive'; the fourth, a combination rock star-football hero transmogrified into one Mark Moonrider; and the fifth, a girl named Beautiful Dreamer."

The 1971 *NYT* piece shares Kirby's description of the five-some: "[They are] the other side of the [generation] gap — the under-30 group. I'm over 50. I've had no personal experience of the counterculture. It's all from the imagination." Certainly, the creator had extensive doings with young people though, and his sympathies were with the day's youth. Hinting, perhaps, at an envy for free-living Baby Boomers as opposed to his upbringing during the Depression, Kirby told interviewer Mark Hebert in 1969, "[A]ll my generation could do was work. You worked, you connived and you fought. My generation was very hostile, and that's why it's so authoritarian and why it loves kids. I know that I would have loved... I never had a childhood, I never ever had a young manhood. I never had time for it."

The Forever People would last for eleven issues and though a number are outstanding, some (due to editorial interference) are uneven. Of particu-

Finding the Muse of the Man Called

An in-depth interview with the comix pioneer and graphic novelist

I confess it was a little weird when first encountering Howard Cruse's work. His Barefootz stories in the pages of *Comix Book*, that strange underground comix hybrid published by (of all things) the Marvel Comics Group, were... well... exceedingly cute in appearance, quite the juxtaposition from the S. Clay Wilson and Kim Deitch strips featured alongside the episodes of the big-footed, business-suited Candide-like character, his bossy lady friend, and an apartment full of snarky cockroaches. But editor Denis Kitchen found a solid cartoonist in the young talent from Alabama, whose wit and meticulous style soon became a personal favorite, an artist worth following, and someone I hoped to someday interview.

Understandably, the cartoonist, who today lives a modest domestic life in western Massachusetts with husband Eddie Sedarbaum, is reluctant to be categorized as merely a gay comic book artist. But Howard's impact on the gay liberation movement through the prism of comics cannot be understated, if not as the first editor of *Gay Comix*, then certainly as author of the semi-autobiographical graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Plus, Howard witnessed the first of the Stonewall riots, contributed his charming *Wendel* weekly comic

strip to *The Advocate* for a good portion of the '80s, and volunteered his artistic talents as an activist during the AIDS epidemic, so there's no denying the man has got solid cred. Primarily, though, Howard is a great cartoonist.

The comic book creator was interviewed at home, on Feb. 1, 2014, and Howard copy-edited the transcript for accuracy and clarity.

Below: A 2010 self-portrait of Howard Russell Cruse. **Next page:** Original painting by Howard, which appeared as *The Comics Journal* #111 [Sept. '86] cover.



Comic Book Creator: Howard, what is your middle name?

Howard Cruse: Russell.

CBC: What's your first memory of comic strips? Was it Uncle Scrooge and Little Lulu that you were mostly interested in?

Howard: Little Lulu. Well, comic strips, of course, would have been in the newspaper, but in terms of comic books, *Little Lulu* was the first one that I was aware of and fascinated by and devoted to.

CBC: What was it about it?

Howard: Well, I was too young to realize at the time how good it was. I just knew it was good. I knew the stories were really funny. As time went on, I realized it was widely respected as one of the great comic book series. But I would read pretty much any comic series that one could buy from the spinner rack at the local drugstore. I probably was around five when I first saw a *Little Lulu* comic. We moved from Birmingham, Alabama, to a small town named Springville when I was four-and-a-half. My dad got ordained as a Methodist minister and they gave him a church in Springville, so we moved out there, and that's where I spent the next ten years or so.

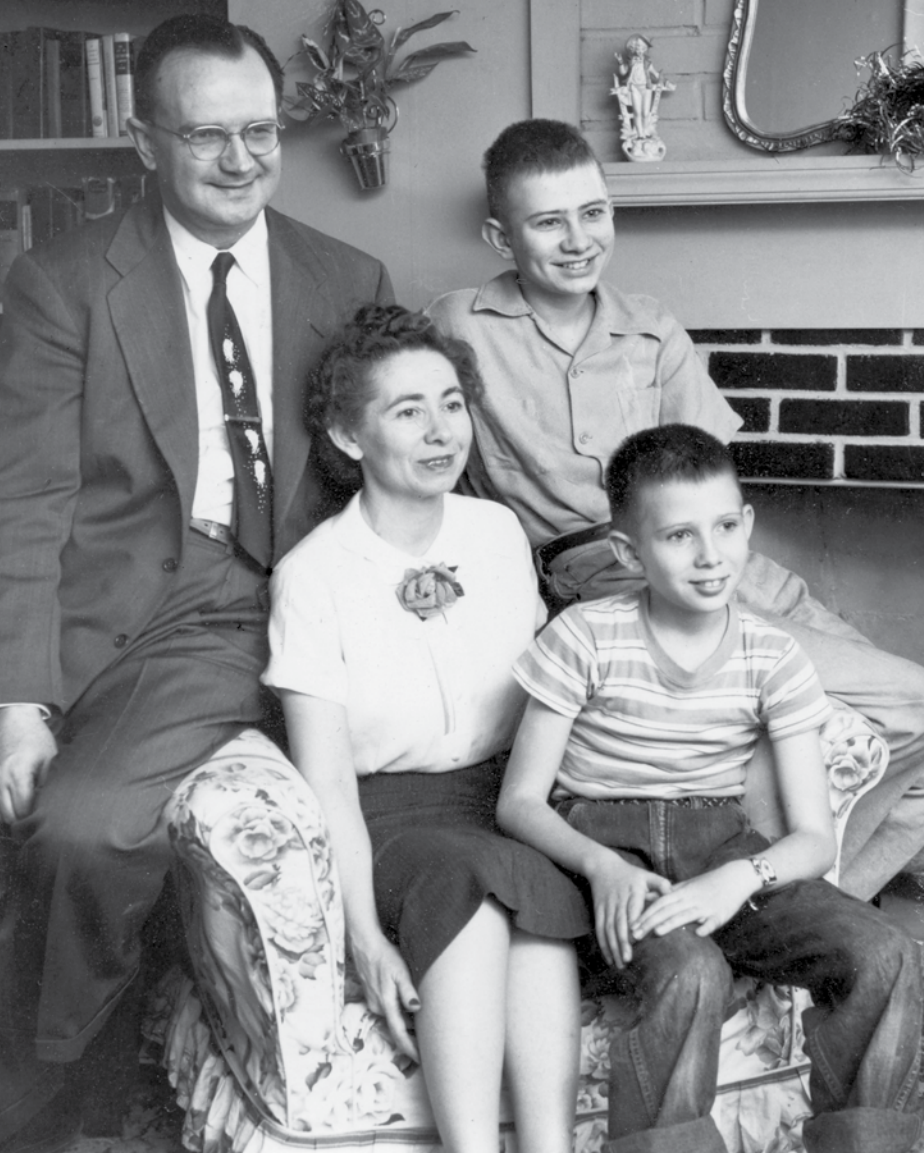
CBC: Are you an only child?

Howard: No, I have a brother, Allan. He's three years older than me and lives in San Francisco. He recently retired from teaching computer science at the University of San Francisco.

CBC: Were you close?

Howard: Yes, we played together a lot as kids. We went through a brief period where he outgrew our games and I was the embarrassing younger

Interview conducted by Jon B. Cooke
Transcribed by Steven Thompson



Above: Photo of the Cruse family, circa 1952, in their Springville, Alabama home — father Clyde and mother Irma, older brother Allan, 11, and Howard, 8. **Inset right:** Perhaps Howard's greatest influence was *Little Lulu* written by John Stanley and drawn by Irving Tripp, and published by Dell. **Below:** Another inspiration were the Carl Barks Duck comics, also Dell titles.



brother, but that didn't last long, and we've been close ever since.

CBC: Did you share your interest in comics? You were just a regular reader? You weren't obsessed or anything?

Howard: Correct. I was never a collector; I was an accumulator.

CBC: Now, what's the difference there, Howard?

Howard: Well, an accumulator doesn't bag his comics in plastic but he doesn't throw away his comics after he's read them, either. One of our closets at our home had a stack of various titles that was several feet high.

CBC: So it wasn't important for you to have all the issues in sequence, the sign of a collector? If you missed one, you just missed one. No big deal?

Howard: That was mostly true, except that I never missed an issue of *Little Lulu*! [laughter] *Little Lulu* was the only comic I ever subscribed to, unless you count *MAD* magazine. I was so anxious not to miss an issue of *Little Lulu* that I kept my subscription going until I reached high school age

and went off to boarding school. Other than *Lulu*, it depended on what was available at the drugstore. I read *Uncle Scrooge* and all of the various funny animal comics, but I could tell there were differences in quality. I knew there was something special about the *Donald Duck* and *Uncle Scrooge* comics, which I later came to realize had to do with Carl Barks' talents. Comics rarely listed credits when I was a kid, so I didn't know about Barks or *Lulu*'s John Stanley until years later. I just assumed that since "Marge" was above the title on *Lulu* comics, that that was a woman who wrote and drew every issue of *Little Lulu*.

CBC: Was it anything about the depiction of gender in *Little Lulu* that — at least in retrospect — had any impact on you? It really was at least in some ways a role reversal, right? The girls were empowered; the boys could be stupid.

Howard: I think that I subconsciously absorbed the unusual fact that *Lulu* was the smartest kid in the neighborhood. Very rarely were girls portrayed in comics as being especially smart. For one thing, most of the humor comics didn't develop rounded enough characters for you to have a feeling for them. I mean, how smart was Little Dot? Who knows?

CBC: She was clever.

Howard: I could tell the difference in sophistication between the Harvey comics and my favorites of the Dell comics, before I knew what sophistication was! I grew up before the big super-hero explosion. I read *Superman* and *Batman* and I played super-hero games in costumes and stuff like that, but I didn't live and breathe super-heroes. I was interested in all the various genres that were available — cowboys, space adventures, spin-offs of TV shows. I read all of those. On a subconscious level, I developed a sense of which ones were better. Occasionally they would bring in substitute artists who were inferior. I could always tell if one of my disfavored artists was drawing a particular *Little Lulu* story. The weight of the lines around the balloons was a giveaway, for instance.

CBC: Stanley was a writer, right?

Howard: Yes, but he was a cartoonist, too. It's my understanding that he drew the covers for *Lulu* comics. The covers had a radically different style from the interiors, which seemed strange to me as a kid. But I accepted it as just the way things were. I knew a good comic when I saw it.

CBC: Were you drawing from your very youngest years?

Howard: Yes. I still have stuff that I drew when I was in first grade thanks to my mother's packrat tendencies.

CBC: What was the subject matter?

Howard: Oh, I had a succession of characters. I had a little elf named Landie Lucker. Don't ask me where you'd come up with a name like that. His father's name was "Lusty" Lucker. I have no idea what was up with that; I had no idea what the word "lust" meant. It was just a nonsense name to me, like "Landie." But it's sort of funny in retrospect.

CBC: Did you tell stories with the character?

Howard: Yeah, I did comic books in pencil and crayon.

CBC: Did you share them with anybody?

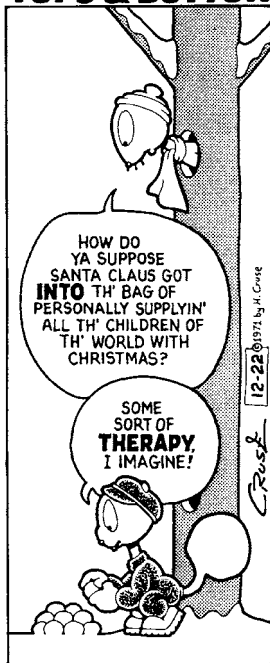
Howard: Yes, I shared them with my parents and showed them to friends sometimes.

CBC: Did they like them? Were they supportive?

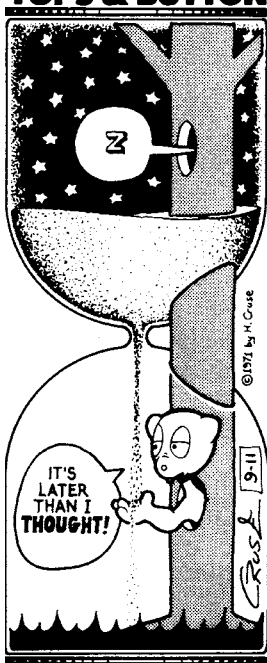
Howard: My parents were always supportive of anything I did that was creative. I was fortunate in that my parents were totally devoted to their parenting. It was very important to them to be supportive. I did little puppet shows and my mother in particular was encouraging. Dad usually had a job outside of the house



TOPS & BUTTON



TOPS & BUTTON



roommate decided to help me become more socially skilled and arranged a couple of blind dates for me, double-dates with him and his girlfriend. They were just awful. I didn't know how to behave. I knew I was supposed to be sexual and try to grab my date's breast if the opportunity arose, but the inclination wasn't there. On our first double-date we went to a movie and I summoned the courage to put my arm around her in the dark. Then I started gradually trying to cop a feel, like you're supposed to. I was sort of actually, y'know, going to town a bit! But I wasn't getting any reaction. So I squeezed harder and she asked me why I was squeezing her purse. [laughter] That ended my little attempt at...

CBC: Foreplay.

Howard: Yeah. After that I refused to go to anymore movies at public places where I would be expected to make a move. But he gave it one more try. This time we went to a drive-in, where there was a little less pressure because the girl and I weren't shoulder-to-shoulder. I had the whole back seat to be shy in. I'm sure this girl was a perfectly nice person, but we had nothing in common and it just felt awkward. In the front seat my roommate and his date were seriously necking. My date and I were just sitting like statues.

CBC: What was the movie? [laughter]

Howard: I don't remember. My mind wasn't on the screen. But I refused to go on anymore dates with girls.

With each year at Indian Springs it became clearer to me that it was boys I was attracted to, not girls. Theoretically this was just a phase I was going through, so I kept desperately waiting for the phase to end. But it just wasn't happening. On the outside, it looked like I was a cheerful, successful student, but on the inside, I was getting more and more depressed. Then, during my senior year, I had a crisis. I attempted suicide.

CBC: Was it over your identity?

Howard: Probably, but I didn't realize that yet. I thought it was just about depression. I was convinced I was going to have an unhappy life. I didn't connect it to my fears about being gay until later.

CBC: How did you, uh... attempt it?

Howard: Oh, in just the most ineffective way possible. I tried to overdose on aspirin. Right on the bottles, it says don't take more than six, you know? Being naïve, I took 25 and figured that would do it. That turned out to be short of a lethal dose, but my doctor said it was a wonder I hadn't

destroyed my liver! My ears rang for a week. That's a classic symptom of acetylsalicylic acid poisoning. On the night I took the aspirin, I went to sleep genuinely expecting that I wouldn't wake up. But then I did wake up with my ears ringing.

CBC: Too much aspirin?

Howard: Yeah, that'll do it. Once it seemed clear that I wasn't going to die, I decided to tell my most trusted faculty member what I had done. With my permission, he told my father and the school's headmaster, who I was close to. Everybody agreed that I should get some professional therapy once they had had me checked out by a doctor. So I went for counseling and, for the first time, was able to talk honestly to a theoretically knowledgeable adult about my homosexual feelings. One of the first things the therapist did was assign me to write a totally honest essay about myself. So I brought in the essay on my second visit and, when he read, "I think I'm probably homosexual," he immediately saw that as a crucial piece of information.

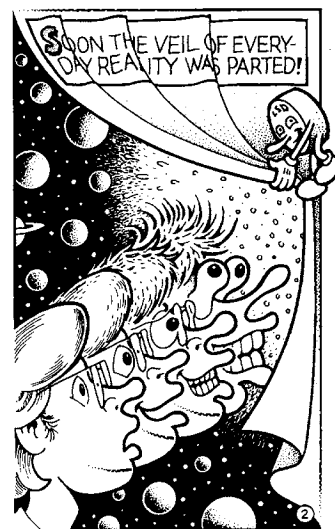
Unfortunately, he wasn't all that knowledgeable. He did me some good in the few sessions we had, but his attitude was basically, "You just *think* you're gay. The problem is you've been going to an all-boys school. You need to spend more time with girls." He assured me that if I went to a co-ed college the next year and made a point of dating girls, I would be just fine. So, given that you're supposed to believe what your therapist tells you, I tried to follow his advice. He was the expert.

So I enrolled at Birmingham-Southern College, which was co-educational, and I did my best to follow the therapist's advice and not be a social misfit anymore. I went to frat parties during rush week. I even took girls to a couple of the rush parties. I felt like a fish out of water. But then I saw that auditions were being held for the college theatre's fall production and I decided to try out. The difference between the fraternity scene and the theatre scene was like night and day. I got cast in a small role and was immediately welcomed into the theatre group. They were loose and funny and quasi-bohemian. I could enjoy the camaraderie without feeling sexual pressure. Sex aside, it was my first time to hang out with girls who not only were smart but weren't afraid to *act* smart. Southern girls in those days were not supposed to seem smart because that might scare the boys away. That had left me with the impression that girls just weren't all that smart. This was the first time I got to have human-to-human relationships with girls. I met Pam, who was part of the theatre group, and she and I connected in an especially nice way.

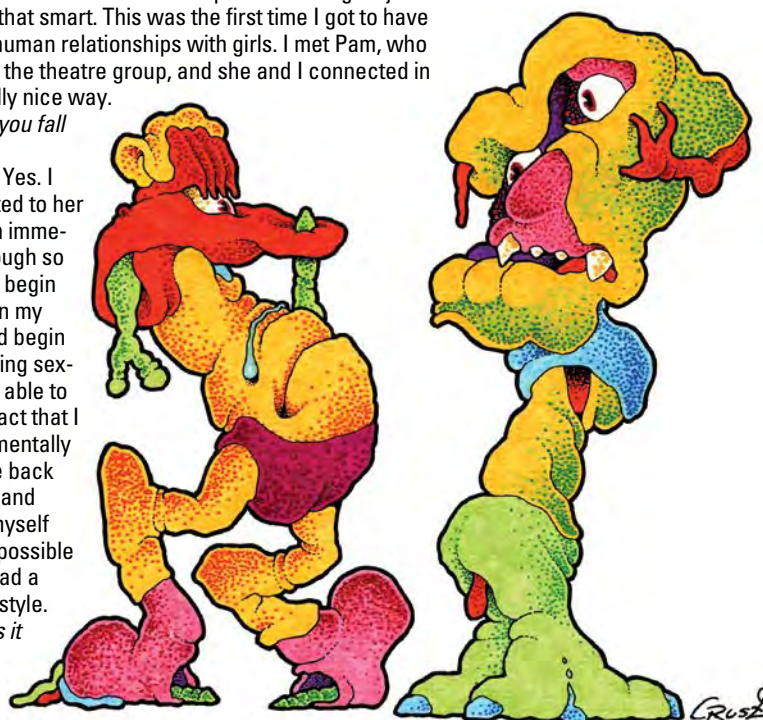
CBC: Did you fall in love?

Howard: Yes. I was attracted to her as a person immediately, enough so that I could begin letting down my barriers and begin experimenting sexually. I was able to shove the fact that I was fundamentally gay into the back of my mind and persuade myself that it was possible for me to lead a straight lifestyle.

CBC: Was it about making other people happy?



Above: Panel from "The Guide," Dope Comix #3, which is more commonly known as "My First Acid Trip," an autobiographical story about Howard's experience taking acid with a bunch of friends in Alabama during the 1960s. LSD, of course, would have a significant impact on the cartoonist, as it did on any number of underground comix artists. The Kitchen Sink anthology title included not just gratuitous exploits involving drug use, but often featured cautionary tales of "bad trips" and the consequences of addiction. **Inset upper left:** More of Cruse's Tops & Buttons newspaper strips. **Below:** Howard shares that this psychedelic gag cartoon is from the early '70s, drawn with ink, Pentels, and Magic Markers.



"QUITE FRANKLY, I QUESTION YOUR RIGHT TO EXIST!"

shop at Indian Springs. Doing paste-up work for a salary stabilized my income and left time on the weekends for my roommates and me to take our LSD trips.

My acid experiences were drawing me farther away from mainstream syndication styles more and more toward surreal underground approaches. I hadn't yet seen many underground comic books, but I was fascinated by the underground *newspapers* like the *East Village Other* that were being sold in New York that year. I strolled over to the *Other's* office one time with some samples of my weird drawings. The editor liked them, but we hit a roadblock. I wanted to have a regular feature in every issue, but he said, "Oh, we never do that. Even Crumb, we won't run in every issue." They were into egalitarianism and didn't want "stars" on the staff. So I lost interest in doing that.

CBC: What was the content of the feature you wanted to do?

Howard: They were little cartoon panels called *Phenomena*, just trippy images. I still have a few of 'em I can show you.

CBC: Have you ever gotten 'em published?

Howard: Not as a regular feature. Some have made their way into print here and there. One of the *Phenomena* drawings was included in a British anthology called *The Mammoth Book of Skulls* a couple of years ago. It showed a lady sitting on a skull as if it were a toilet, with her underwear pulled down and reading a magazine called *Potty Jokes*. I had always liked the image, but I asked the anthology editor if I could redraw it because my drawing skills had improved a lot in 45 years. There aren't that many times when I've done remakes of my artwork, but there are a few.

CBC: Were there gay periodicals in New York at the time?

Howard: I think there were beginning to be, but it's easy for me to get my chronology mixed up because I moved to New York in '69, then lived in Birmingham for seven years, then moved back to New York in '77. There were tabloids like *Fag Rag* and *Gay* that sprang up in the years after the Stonewall riots, but I don't remember exactly when they got started. I know that *The Advocate*, where my comic strip *Wendel* appeared many years later, had already been launched.

What I mainly remember about the New York gay scene during the summer of '69, after the riots, was the growing sense among gays that, "Hey! We should be liberated, too!" Liberation on various fronts had been in the air for years before Stonewall, all through the '60s, thanks to the Black Civil Rights Movement down south and the early stirrings of women's liberation. Harry Hay, one of the pioneers of gay liberation long before Stonewall, said that it was

as if a stream of gasoline had been being poured all over the country and Stonewall lit the fire. What was startling was the speed with which the riots led to political activism. Within a day, flyers started going up all over Greenwich Village announcing gay liberation meetings. The anger had already been there, waiting to be focused.

CBC: And what was the target of the anger? What were the flyers about?

Howard: Homophobia. We were finally refusing to be ashamed of ourselves, to accept second-class citizenship!

CBC: What kind of action would you take?

Howard: It was time to become a movement like the Civil Rights Movement. You know, homosexuality was still illegal in a lot of states in 1969, including New York. It was illegal in New York to serve alcohol to a homo-

sexual. The reason gay bars could exist is because their owners would pay off the police.

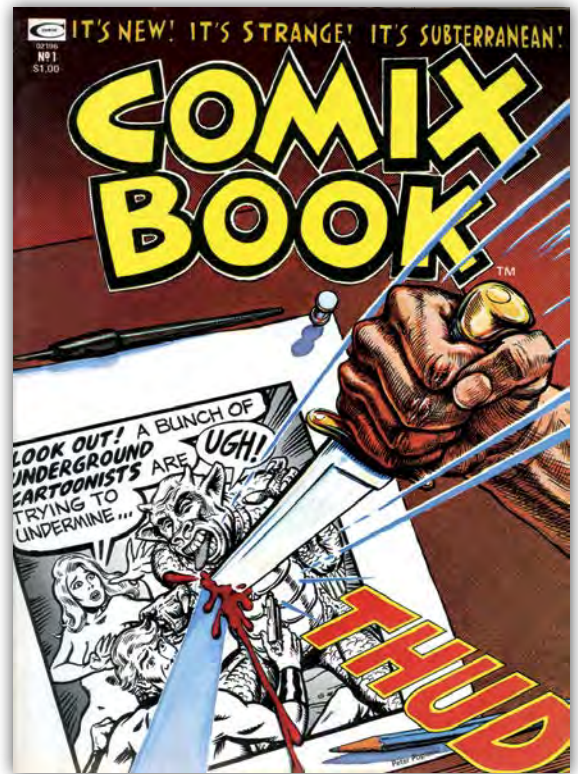
CBC: The Stonewall Inn was mob-run, right?

Howard: Right. So the mob always had its relationships with the police and the police would look the other way as long as money changed hands, except when there was political advantage to be gained by harassing homosexuals. [New York City Mayor] John Lindsay, who was generally

billed as a liberal Republican, was not above exploiting homophobia. His cops started raiding lots of gay bars, and most times the gays would be embarrassed and humiliated and go quietly. Sometimes their names would be in the papers and their lives would be ruined. But, on this one particular night in June, the bar patrons had had enough.

CBC: It was kind of late in coming, right? It needed incidents to happen and the frustration got so pent up. You had Watts in '65, you had Detroit in '68, you had all this social upheaval...

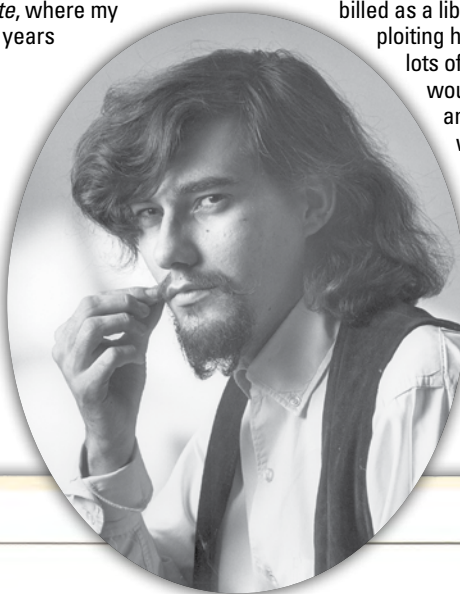
Howard: Recent history had shown that if you were an op-



Above: *Comix Book*, the Marvel Comics Group/underground hybrid edited by Denis Kitchen, offered a national audience for burgeoning cartoonist Howard Cruse, whose *Barefootz* was included in every issue along with an array of comic pros.

Inset left: The head honcho of Krupp Comix Works and Kitchen Sink Press, the indomitable Denis Lee Kitchen, in a 1969 photo. Howard Cruse was among the innumerable contributors to *Everything*. Including the Kitchen Sink: *The Definitive Denis Kitchen Interview*, a reconfiguration of the print and PDF editions of *Comic Book Creator* #5. The tome, designed by Ye Ed (with an long introductory article by same), is now available at www.denis-kitchen.com.

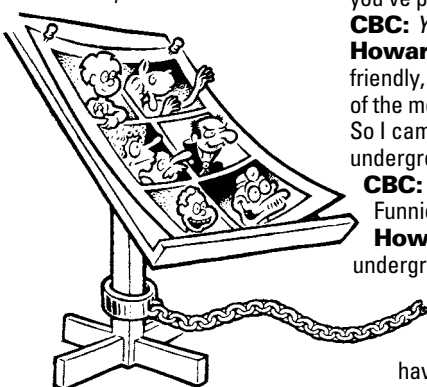
Below: Courtesy of Heritage, a 1972 *Barefootz* strip playing with comic strip conventions.





Above: Howard Cruse at his drawing board in 1986, drawing Doctor Duck, his regular *Scholastic* assignment for *Bananas* magazine. The photo is by friend and colleague from *Starlog* magazine, Dave Hutchison.

Inset below: For a period in the late '70s, upon moving to New York City, Howard put his paste-up and artistic skills to good use as art director for the *Starlog* magazine group. Though he would soon move on to a freelance cartooning and illustration career, Howard was given his own column for *Starlog's* sister mag, *Comics Scene*, with his feature "Loose Cruse." Subjects included a three-part history of a notorious copyright infringement case, where monolithic Disney Inc. took on the underground cartoonists who adapted the studio's famed cartoon characters for a pair of rather subversive "Hell" comics titled *Air Pirates* (a case which the comix artists lost.) This illo accompanied Howard's column.



conventions then and Birmingham certainly didn't have any. The first time I lived in a city that had a comic convention was when I moved to New York in '77 and Phil Seuling was having his conventions. I would read about cons in the fanzines, though. And, in 1976, before my move back to New York, I attended the Berkeley Con, which was organized by Clay Geerdes and focused specifically on underground comix. That was the first convention I ever set foot in, and being in underground territory instead of Marvel super-hero territory was great!

CBC: Did you drive out there?

Howard: Oh, no. I had money saved up from my ad agency job and could afford plane fare. I had become a full-fledged fan of underground comix by then

and was continuing to do stuff for Denis, and had begun corresponding with a number of the other underground cartoonists, including Crumb. But attending the Berkeley Con was my first time to be under the same roof as the people whose comix I had been reading, so that was a big thrill.

CBC: Any highlights there?

Howard: Any number. I walked in feeling very insecure because I had learned from fanzine interviews that the San Francisco underground scene could be very insular and cliquish. I had already learned through the grapevine that the ZAP crowd hated *Barefootz*, and didn't consider it a real underground because it was too "nice." So I steered clear of most of the Big Names. But Trina Robbins was very welcoming. So was Phil Yeh. Trina and Phil remain good long-distance friends to this day even though I almost never get to see them. Sergio Aragonés couldn't have been nicer. He greeted me with such enthusiasm when we were introduced that you would have thought that I was the star instead of him!

CBC: He knew who you were?

Howard: Yeah, he was apparently somewhat aware of me. I think he knew that his standing in the cartooning community was such that he could give me a real morale boost, which of course he did. I mean, I guess he actually liked my work, but I also think he knew that it would make my day for him to praise it. So he saw me and went, "Howard Cruse! I'm so glad to meet you!" I was in heaven!

CBC: He was kind.

Howard: He is a kind man. I'm sure you know that since you've probably spent time with him.

CBC: Yes, I have.

Howard: And the women undergrounders were all friendly, probably because they weren't as uptight as some of the men about comix that were not drawn in ZAP style. So I came away with a feeling I did have a place in the undergrounds after all.

CBC: Did you have copies of *Barefootz Funnies* #2 in hand when you went?

Howard: Yes. Some of the less snobbish of the undergrounders were friendly and remarked about the gay aspect of "Gravy On Gay" without acting weird about it. I'm sure everybody must have figured that Cruse had to be gay, since it would never have occurred to any straight person to draw that

story. But I was treated with respect. And I briefly crossed paths with Aline, even! She was with other people and we didn't get a chance to really chat. But, overall, my experience at the con was validating.

CBC: You said you had worked in the *Atlanta Children's Theatre*. Not that there were that many, but there were children's comics. Was there any thought to getting into that area?

Howard: Not really. I had gotten pretty addicted by then to the "adults-only" freedom of undergrounds, even if I didn't make use of it all the time. And my earlier experience with tripping and making peace with my full-self made me resistant to drawing comics where I would have to carve off and hide parts of myself. I mean, I had avoided being out in my comix for several years, but I had always felt that it would be temporary. I knew that eventually I was going to do comix about being gay, ones that would include actually gay sex. Showing a world that didn't have sex in it would have felt very unreal to me. Even now, people sometimes say to me, "Why don't you do regular children's books?" And I love a good children's book! There are people I admire hugely who do children's books. But anytime I start trying to make up stories, I can't go on too long before I start wanting somebody to have a sex life, y'know?

CBC: Those are the stories you want to write.

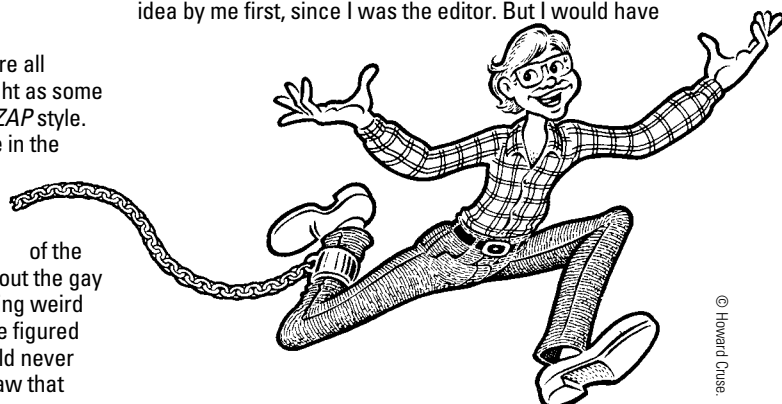
Howard: Yes. Some good friends on mine invited me to illustrate a children's book they were going to write, and I almost agreed to do it. But then I got cold feet. It's not that anybody in their story was going to have sex; it's that I would still be publishing stuff elsewhere that was very sexual. I told them, "I'm afraid to proceed with this because the comics I publish at the same time might contain sexually outrageous stuff, and the association with me could harm you and harm the book. If the right wing tabloids got hold of my undergrounds they'd say, 'Look what the artist for this children's book is doing.'"

CBC: What was the depiction of homosexuals in underground comix of the late '60s and early '70s?

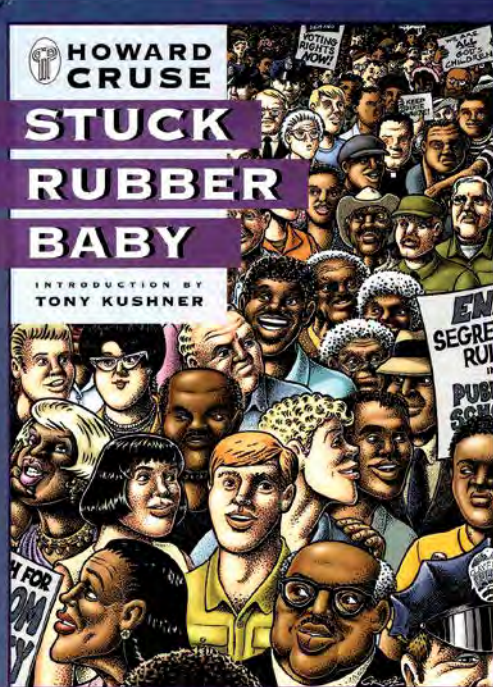
Howard: Well, gays were mostly invisible.

CBC: Non-existent?

Howard: There were practical no homosexuals — in the best known underground comix, at least. The stories that had sex in them were mostly about men f*cking women, since they were drawn mostly by straight men. When gays did appear, they were typically shown as freaky stereotypes. Now there were exceptions. Take Rand Holmes. Despite how heterosexual most of his comics were, he did one very outrageous *Harold Hedd* strip in which he ridiculed *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* and showed Harold Hedd and a guy giving each other bl*wjobs. He also volunteered to do cover art for the first issue of *Gay Comix*. I had no information in 1981 about what his orientation was. I understood that he was married, and he usually showed Harold Hedd f*cking women. But he also did these very pro-gay strips. He was a mystery man to me. I myself never had any contact with him. When he told Denis Kitchen he'd like to do the cover for *Gay Comix*, Denis said yes immediately and then apologized to me for not running the idea by me first, since I was the editor. But I would have



© Howard Cruse.



Above: Since its premiere in 1995, *Stuck Rubber Baby* has had three editions, most recently under the Vertigo imprint. **Below:** The graphic novel is a coming of age tale staged before an Alabama backdrop during the 1960s and is a nearly autobiographical examination.

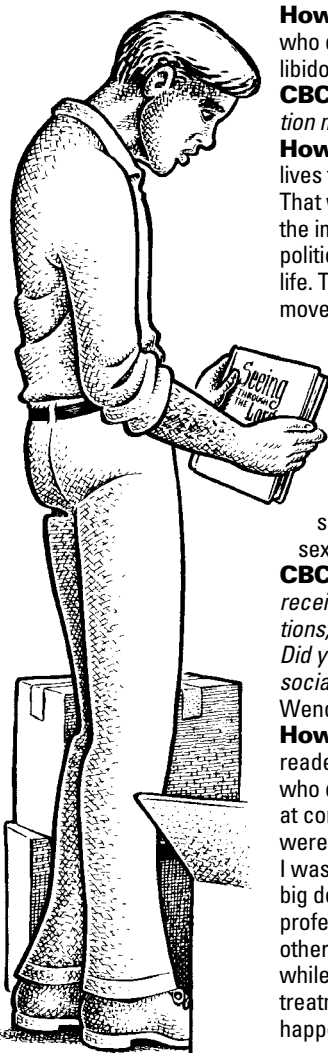
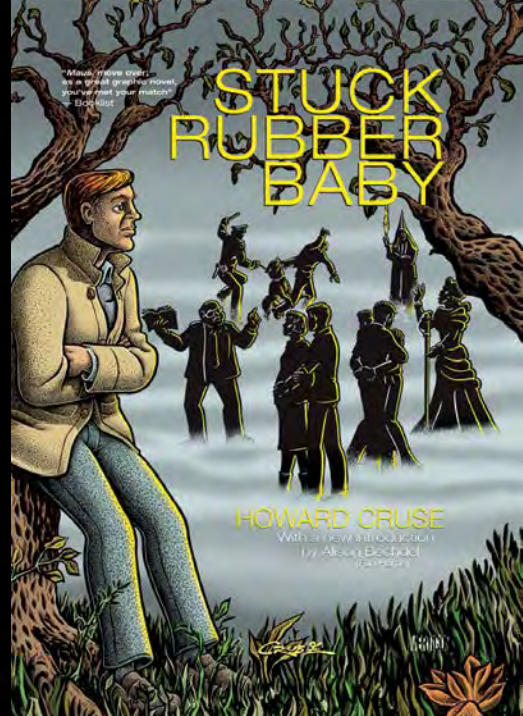
Stuck Rubber Baby

A NOVEL



Howard Cruse
Introduction by Tony Kushner

"MAJUS: 'MOVIE JOPER' IS A GREAT GRAPHIC NOVEL. YOU'VE MET YOUR MATCH." —BOOKLIST



impulsively. If Eddie noticed a cute guy cruising us back when we were young, he'd be the one with the nerve to go over and say hello, not me. The first time Ollie brings Sterno home to meet Wendel, he leaves the room to get wine, and by the time he returns, Sterno is crawling all over Wendel on the sofa. Eddie proudly accepts the part of him that is Sterno, although he also identifies with Tina, Debbie's lesbian lover.

CBC: Is that so?

Howard: Yeah! Tina is a very uninhibited gay liberationist who doesn't put up with sh*t from anyone. Sterno's about libido; Tina's about not being an asshole.

CBC: Do you think Wendel was an asset to the gay liberation movement?

Howard: Well, the characters in *Wendel* had everyday lives that mirrored the lives of many of the strip's readers. That was kind of validating, I think. *Wendel* recognized the importance of balance in your life, of being aware of political imperatives without letting them take over your life. The *Wendel* characters didn't live and breathe the movement, but when the time came to be in a demonstration, they stepped up to the plate. That's pretty much the way Eddie and I and our circle of friends were. Gayness didn't define our lives. Cartooning was important to me and Wendel was an aspiring science-fiction writer. Ollie held down assorted jobs, but made time to work in community theatre. So I think the strip humanized the notion of activism, showing that it's only one side of a rounded life, the way sex is a part of life without being the be-all and end-all.

CBC: Comic book artists, generally speaking, would receive their accolades when they went to comics conventions, or they'd get interviewed by the comic book press. Did you get much public acclamation? If you met people in social situations and were introduced as the cartoonist of *Wendel*. Would you get, "Oh!"?

Howard: Once in a while I'd run into some *Advocate* reader I didn't know who was impressed that I was the guy who did *Wendel*. On the whole, straight comics readers at conventions didn't know me from Adam unless they were into undergrounds. My friends in everyday life knew I was doing *Wendel* and were supportive, but it wasn't a big deal. I was a cartoonist and that was an interesting profession, so people were interested in that. It's not like other people weren't doing interesting things, too. Once in a while I would do a talk or book signing and get the celebrity treatment for a few hours. Ego boosts are fun when they happen.

Sometimes you get useful feedback when you run into people who read your stuff. One time Eddie and I were down in Birmingham visiting my mother, and we went to a gay bar and fell into conversation with a nice young guy. He asked me what I did, and when he discovered I drew *Wendel*, he was, like, "Oohh!" He was really excited! Then a few drinks later he was telling me what was wrong with *Wendel*! He gave me some constructive criticism that led me to make changes in the strip once I got back to New York! Before that, I had used *Wendel* to satirize oppression a lot, to make fun of homophobes. But this guy said, "You should quit telling people how oppressed they are. They already know." I hadn't thought about that. Maybe it was useful in those days for straight people to hear about anti-gay oppression, but how much did gay people need to hear it? They already knew! They were living it. Because of that fellow's criticism, I decided it was time for me to broaden my characters. So, when I got back to New York, I began working on a sequence that would do that, that would show more about Wendel's inner life — apart from the gay movement; apart from Ollie, even. That was the genesis of Wendel's trip to visit his uncles, who led him to do some soul-searching about what his goals in life were, which had nothing to do with being gay.

Another time, I ran into a guy at a Los Angeles book signing who complained there weren't enough young people in *Wendel*. I mean, Wendel was comparatively young, but he wasn't representative of the kids who were just coming out. I realized that the one young gay kid in *Wendel* had been a video game-obsessed airhead. This reader in L.A. said that was kind of insulting to his generation. Once I was back home, I devoted more energy to showing more sides of that character, whose name was Cyril. So it can be nice to the ego to get praise from strangers, but it's also useful to have feedback from people who are not your friends, who will just say what's really on their mind about what you're doing.

CBC: How much effort would you have to put in on a weekly basis?

Howard: It was a full-time job.

CBC: You're slow, right?

Howard: Yeah.

CBC: And what makes it slow? The stippling?

Howard: Well, the thinking, drawing carefully, not having a loosey-goosey style.

CBC: Are you harsh on yourself? Do you say, "Forget it. That's not good," and do it again?

Howard: Usually back then I could recognize very early



when I was going down a wrong track, at the preliminary-sketching stage, before I had inked anything. But once in a while I would realize that there was something really wrong with an already inked panel and I'll have to mortise in a redrawn one.

CBC: What'd you call it?

Howard: "Mortising." It's a way to avoid winding up with an original that has a big patch stuck on its surface. It's hard to explain in words, but if you look at my originals you'll find plenty of times that I've made corrections that way. It's a bit of work, but you end up with neater originals that are more collectible. As I said, though, usually it's during the sketch phase that you realize you need to rethink the way you're building a picture, not when you're already inking. These days, of course, I do most of my corrections in Photoshop, so the old mortising technique is largely obsolete.

CBC: You put a lot of detail in your drawings. I just think your artistic style — just being a fanboy here — I just think you're a wonderful artist and a great cartoonist. You're a quintessential cartoonist! You do it all, down to the lettering and some coloring... I saw some coloring that you did.

Howard: Yeah, you can find a fair number of color drawings in my files here. I miss the chances to be really goofy in my illustrations, the way I could when I was doing spot illustrations for magazines like *American Health*. Still, back in the days before digital coloring, if I did color at all, I had to paint it, which is a lot more trouble than coloring digitally. If you made a mistake, it could be hard to fix. If you knocked a jar of paint over onto your drawing, there was no "undo" button you could push on a keyboard. That's why such a small percentage of my work from before the '90s is in color. When I did color illustrations for magazines, I used gouache, which is water-soluble but opaque. But, for the most part, I kept things simple and stuck to black-&-white. Now, of course, I can do color easily because of Photoshop.

CBC: Easy-peasy.

Howard: And people can publish color drawings inexpensively. It's a whole different world.

CBC: Why did you interrupt the *Wendel* series in the mid-'80s?

Howard: Well, that happened because of a decision *The Advocate* made that kind of blindsided me. *Wendel* had gotten promoted to the magazine's white pages and was coasting along comfortable when I was suddenly told that the format was going to be changed. The tabloid format was going to be ditched in favor of the more conventional

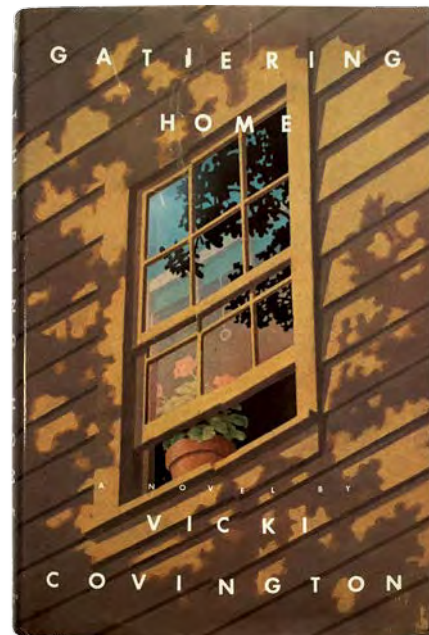
newsstand size: 8½" by 11". More like *Newsweek* or *Comic Book Creator*. So would I mind shrinking the strip to fit? They didn't give me a lot of warning and, once I began thinking about that, I realized that it would totally ruin *Wendel* to try to do it at that smaller size. Each *Wendel* strip had been like a little one-act play when I had the tabloid pages to play with. But, if I formatted it for the smaller size, I would have so few panels to work with that I wouldn't have room to develop any interesting nuances. It would have to become a gag strip and I wasn't interested in drawing a gag strip. So I saw that I didn't have any choice. I would just have to end the strip. And I did. I pulled together a nice ending, with *Wendel* and *Ollie* having a fantasy wedding. But as far as I knew at the time, that would be the last *Wendel* strip I would ever draw.

CBC: So you were suddenly out of work?

Howard: Pretty much. Because of the time *Wendel* took to draw and the stability it had provided for a couple of years, I had let my stream of freelance illustration gigs dwindle to a trickle. I assumed I could beef up that part of my life to compensate for the loss of *Wendel* income, but I discovered that wasn't going to be easy. All of my old art directing contacts at magazines seemed to have moved on from their jobs. It was almost like starting my career from scratch. I tried

to drum up jobs wherever I could. I even experimented with yet another attempt to syndicate *Barefootz* for newspapers. That didn't go anywhere; one of the editors told me I might have a shot if I got rid of the cockroaches, which was sort of missing the point of the strip. It was a pretty unnerving time. This went on for about eighteen months, after which I had the bright idea of proposing to *The Advocate* that we resurrect *Wendel* as a two-page feature. Having the extra page would restore the space I needed to do what I had been doing on the single tabloid-size pages before. I also asked for a heftier payment than I had gotten before. That may have been kind of nervy, but it was the only way I could afford to revive the series, given the amount of inflation that had occurred between 1983 and '86. To my relief, *The Advocate* liked the idea. By then, *Wendel* had a fan base, so it was an asset

This page: The cartoonist did father a daughter in real life, just like his SRB counterpart. At upper left is an informal 2009 photo of Eddie and Howard with Pamela Montanaro, inspiration for the character of Ginger in *Stuck Rubber Baby*, taken by her husband, Raymond Barglow. Above is Howard's daughter, Kim Kolze (in white blouse), and her two children, Ethan and Emily, all posing with Eddie (far left) and Howard in 2012. **Inset left:** The *Stuck Rubber Baby* herself. **Below:** Inspired by the heartfelt reunion of father, mother, and daughter, Vicki Covington, the wife of Howard's cousin, was so moved, she wrote a novel, *Gathering Home*, published by Simon & Schuster in 1988. "It's a tender, lovely book," Howard says. "It's totally fictionalized, though, except for the fact that the central character who goes searching for her birth parents finds out that her birth father is a gay cartoonist who lives with his Jewish lover in New York City." The book would serve as a catalyst for the artist to tackle his own memoir (of a sort) in comic book form.





Above: Stuck Rubber Baby is not only about the transformative experience of a young gay man beginning to comprehend his real identity in the repressive Deep South but, as it takes place during the early to mid-'60s, the graphic novel is also about the Civil Rights movement for African-Americans which so consumed that turbulent era.

Below: A glimpse at the page size and meticulous detail given by Howard to his magnum opus.



the magazine's readers would be happy to see again. So the series resumed in November of 1986 and continued running until '89.

CBC: And you owned it outright?

Howard: Yes, it had always been mine. The copyright had always been in my name.

CBC: Were they asleep at the wheel or anything like that or were they just...?

Howard: About what?

CBC: Well, here they had a property that they were running for a period of time and you decided that you were gonna quit because they decided to change the format. Did they come back asking you, pleading...?

Howard: They regretted losing it for that period of time, but it was an artistic decision I could make because the strip belonged to me. It hadn't occurred to either them

or me that we could have kept the feature going without an interruption by expanding it to two pages. I only thought of proposing that later on.

CBC: But they cared about the strip?

Howard: Yes. It had a lot of followers.

CBC: Did it ever make the cover?

Howard: It did when it returned from the hiatus. I got a big cover drawing with a banner: "Wendel's Back!"

CBC: That's nice!

Howard: Yeah, it was a popular feature. And, for a while, selling the originals was an extra source of income for me. Most of the earliest pages have gone to collectors by now.

CBC: Do you still have any of the tabloid originals?

Howard: [Digs one out from his files.] Here's one. I only have a handful left.

CBC: [Looking at the 1996 sin-

gle-pager "Little Howie In Slumberland," which was drawn for the final issue of *Gay Comix* when Andy Mangels, who had renamed the series *Gay Comics*, was editor] Wow. Is this a true story?

Howard: Well, no.

CBC: It's not?

Howard: I mean, I never went to a party and encountered the Wendel characters. [laughs]

CBC: No, no, no. The dream! You had that dream?

Howard: Not literally. It's based on a certain kind of a dream that I have had, a dream where you're talking to people in a really noisy crowd, and you just can't quite make out what the person you're talking to is saying. That's what this strip sprang from. It's a challenge to show dialogue that's not understandable in a comic strip. I had to invent an alphabet that looks like it ought to be normal letters but isn't.

CBC: So how many Wendel strips did you do? You did it once every two weeks.

Howard: Yeah, for something like five or six years if you don't count the year-and-a-half in when it didn't appear. I launched the series in '83 and ended it in 1989. Around 130 episodes, I guess, if you count a few extras I drew for special circumstances. All of 'em are included in my 2011 collection, *The Complete Wendel*.

CBC: How were you received at comics conventions after you came out?

Howard: Actually, that was the point when I began getting more respect from other creators. Before then I got the feeling that most mainstream comics people viewed me as an unimportant, fringe guy at the edge of their scene. It's not that everyone was suddenly at ease with gayness, but I think they could see the difference it was making in my art to be free to be who I really was. As I've often said, there's nothing like honesty for jacking up the voltage of your art. After the first *Wendel* book was out and available to everybody, one straight comics creator came over to me at the Great Eastern Convention in New York and said that looking at Wendel and Ollie's relationship had opened his eyes. He hadn't visualized gay couples as hugging and sharing everyday life the way straight couples do. He had thought we'd be somehow more exotic, not like him and his wife.

The Great Eastern Cons were organized for many years by Fred Greenberg and his wife Nancy. They were nice people and very welcoming to me. Fred made a point of putting me in the middle of the room. He didn't want me sitting off in some corner as if I wasn't a real cartoonist, y'know, like everybody else. He didn't want me to be ghettoized because of being gay. Eddie would spend a little time with me at the cons sometimes, even though he has a limited interest in fan culture. He pointed out how a lot of times some daddy would come drifting toward our table with his young son in tow, and as soon as he spotted the word "gay" on my stuff he would veer away. Eddie called it "bouncing off of my gay force field." But that kind of thing happened less and less as people got used to seeing me and decided that my comics weren't going to seduce their children.

CBC: So it was during the whole Gay Comix-Wendel period that the AIDS epidemic hit. How did that affect you, aside from your comics?

Howard: Well, it was scary. It started with a story in *The New York Times* in 1981 about a rare cancer that was hitting a lot of gay men in California. And the big mystery was: why would that be happening? Cancer isn't contagious! And then PCP [pneumocystis pneumonia] started also showing up in gay men, not just in California, but in New York and other cities, too. I mean, in retrospect we learned that people had begun being infected years before the *Times* article, but because of the disease's long incubation period we didn't start hearing about it until '81.

CBC: Did you know people with AIDS?

Howard: It took a while before it started making it into my circle of friends, but not that long. In the very early days,



for me if DC really wanted to go ahead with the book, and I showed him my first draft of the proposal. He made some useful suggestions for making my synopsis stronger. For example, he said the story needed additional interesting female characters besides Ginger and Anna Dellyne Pepper. So I added Mavis Green and Toland's sister Melanie to the mix.

CBC: So you gave the proposal to Mark Nevelow and...?

Howard: He liked it and said he'd show it around to the decision-makers at DC.

CBC: How long did that take?

Howard: I don't remember exactly. Nearly a year, I think. Wondering whether DC would go for it was always in the back of my mind, but there was nothing I could do to push it along. Finally, late in 1990, they okayed it. Mike negotiated the contract, everybody signed it, and I started working on my script.

That's when I first began getting an inkling of how long this project was going to take. Since my proposal already had a plot synopsis in it, I had figured that fleshing out the details and dialogue could be done in a couple of weeks. Maybe a month. I was really wrong about that. It was like writing a full-length play from scratch! The more I got into it, the more ideas I had for improving it and taking it in directions that weren't included in my proposal. It ended up taking five months and several drafts before I had a script worth showing to Mark Nevelow. And I had only allowed myself two years to do the whole book.

CBC: Did that make you nervous?

Howard: Totally! Before that the longest underground comic book story I had done was thirteen pages long, and this one was going to be more than 200! I can't blame anybody but myself for that inadequate timetable. Two years had seemed like a really long time when Mike was negotiating the contract, but almost a quarter of that time was gone before I drew the first picture. At first, I thought I could make up for that by being disciplined. I would simply make myself draw faster than usual by sheer will power. But I quickly discovered I can't force my creativity that way. I freeze up. My brain stops working and my hand can't make the necessary marks that fast. I started feeling panicky about time right away, but there was no backing out.

Fortunately, DC never gave me a hard time about not meeting their original schedule. The problem was that my advance wasn't an amount of money that would support living in New York City for as long as the book was gonna take to draw.

CBC: Was it a big advance?

Howard: It was lavish advance compared to any other book I had done. If I could have drawn it in two years there would have been no problem.

CBC: They were thinking that they could make that money back, I assume. I mean, they wouldn't do it otherwise.

Howard: Yeah. I was amazed that they would gamble on this book by an underground cartoonist who had never made much money for anybody. They did earn the advance back eventually, but it took seventeen years.

CBC: Did you have any champions there that, uh...

Howard: Sure. Mark Nevelow wasn't the only person at DC who stood behind the book. He'd accepted it and shepherded it through all the approval hurdles, and when I handed in the working script, he critiqued it. Part of our original verbal agreement was that his critiques would be suggestions, not commands. In other words, I promised I would take his suggestions seriously and he promised I wouldn't be obligated to follow them if I disagreed with them. That was his concession to the independence I had gotten used to from doing underground comix. It was a system that worked well. I thought lots of his suggestions for improvement were valuable and I made changes based on them.

A few months after I started drawing the book, some changes happened that made me nervous. Mark called me to say that he was leaving DC. I've never known what was behind that, but since Mark and I had established a good rapport, it was scary to hear. I wasn't sure what that was going to mean for me and worried that my book might be orphaned. Soon after Mark left, the Piranha Press division was renamed Paradox Press and Andy Helfer was named its editor-in-chief. I had never met Andy and didn't know if he would honor all of the promises Mark had made about our working arrangement. But, to my relief, Andy stood by Mark's commitments and let me do the book my way, as did the editors whose job it was to look over the finished pages I would lug in periodically, chapter by chapter, for the next few years. Margaret Clark was my editor briefly, but for most of those years it was Margaret's successor, Bronwyn Taggart, who was great at spotting corrections that needed to be made. Bronwyn was a joy to work with. She encouraged me all the way and was quick to run interference for me when I needed to insert Toland's shower scene in chapter eleven. The scene hadn't been in the working script DC approved and Bronwyn later said there had been a little eyebrow-raising about that in the halls of DC, but she stood by me. It was an important moment to insert, because Ginger needed to show a mischievous side to soften what was in danger of seeming like a terminally earnest personality.

Nobody at DC ever saw penciled artwork before I walked in with my inked finishes.

It worked. I never had to leave other people's images I'm not sure I had developed. There was no whatever artist.

Once the book was in the hands of the readers, it was parsed. It was years I originally had in mind about how fast it was going through it. I was getting any sense out of the book was no matter what, and it was inevitable and some way to put on every credit. I worked out some of the things described in the book to manage to finish it.

CBC: Was it

Howard: About the most exciting thing in my working life. The proposal the character of Toland had been much more like me than he ended up being.

CBC: You were drawing on your own life experience, weren't you?

Howard: To a significant degree, but being literal about that was holding me back. In my proposal's plot summary, Toland is in college just like

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