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**VAN LENTE
DUNLAVEY
GUZOWSKI**

THE **FOUR COLOR**

COMIC

BOOK

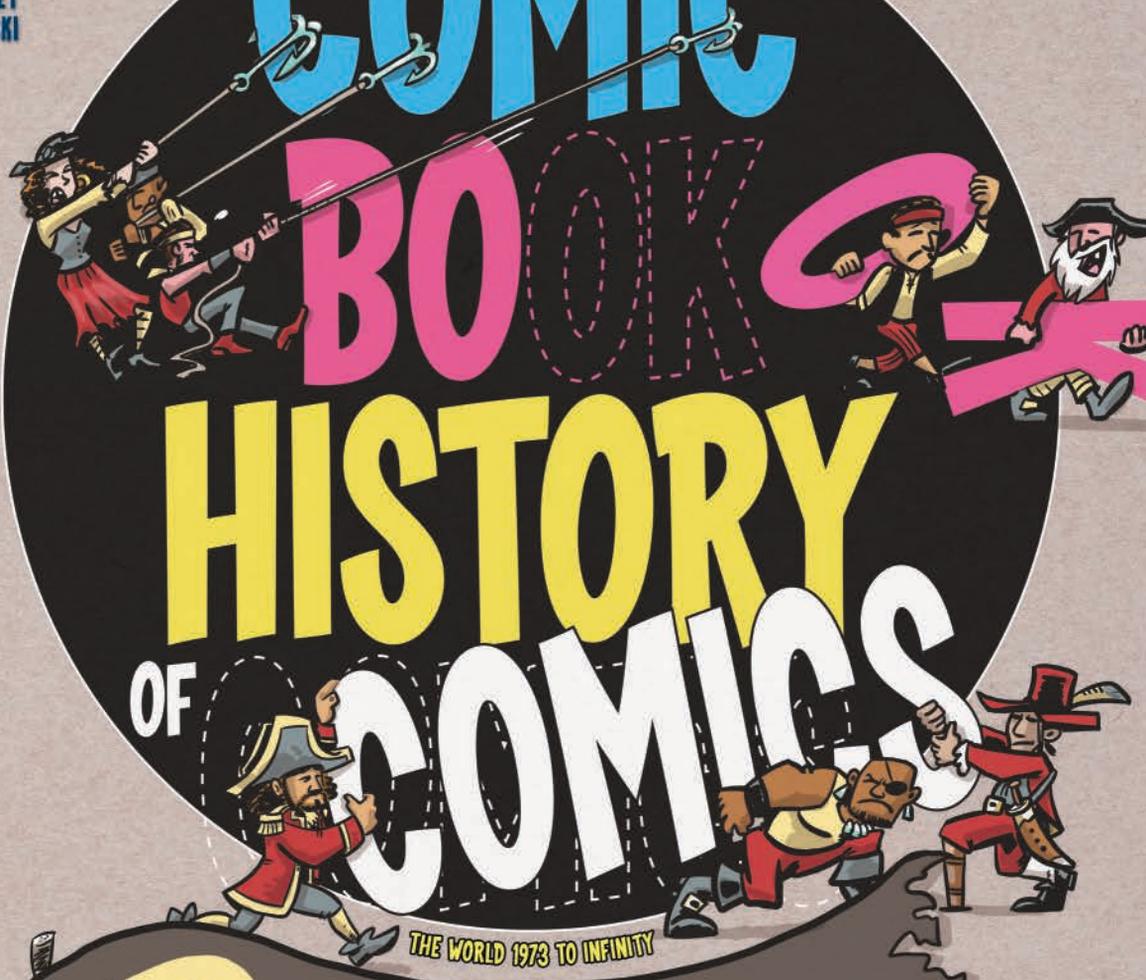
HISTORY

OF

COMICS

THE WORLD 1973 TO INFINITY

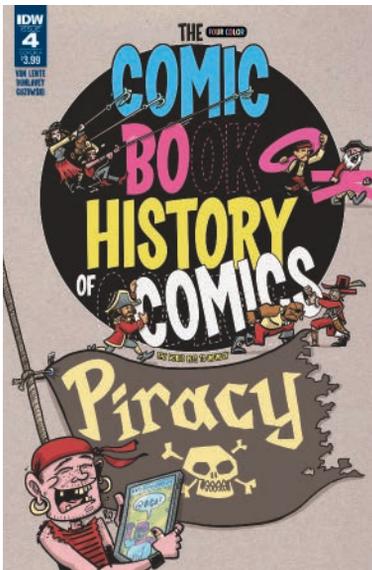
Piracy





Comic Book History of Comics Vol. 2 #4 "Comics For All"
 - The World 1973 to infinity

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ANY GIVEN WEDNESDAY

HERE'S WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE A *FAN* BEFORE THE COMIC BOOK *DIRECT MARKET*:

REMEMBERING HIS NEW JERSEY CHILDHOOD OF THE EARLY 1960s, FUTURE *BATMAN* AND *SWAMP THING* MOVIE PRODUCER **MICHAEL USLAN** SAYS HE AND HIS FRIENDS "HAD TO DOPE OUT FOR *OURSELVES* THAT COMIC BOOKS WERE BEING DELIVERED TO ALL THE DRUG STORES AND CANDY STORES ON *THURSDAYS*."

"EVERY THURSDAY AFTER SCHOOL WE WOULD RIDE OUR BIKES TO THEM AND ASK TO BUY THE *NEW COMICS* THAT CAME IN."



"THE PHARMACISTS ALWAYS FOUND US TO BE PARTICULARLY *ANNOYING*, AS THEY USUALLY SAID THEY WERE TOO *BUSY* TO OPEN THE WIRED BUNDLES OF COMICS. SO WE WOULD SIT THERE IN THEIR STORES AND *WAIT*--SOMETIMES FOR *HOURS*."



"THE PROBLEM WAS THEN THAT EVERY DRUG STORE AND PHARMACY DID *NOT* RECEIVE EVERY COPY OF *EVERY* COMIC BOOK TITLE. WE HAD TO SEARCH STORES ALL AROUND OUR TOWNS BY BIKE, SEARCHING FOR WHAT WE BELIEVED WERE *MISSING* DCs AND ALMOST UNLOCATABLE ACGs* OR GOLD KEYS."

(* AMERICAN COMICS GROUP (1943-1967), BEST KNOWN FOR *HERBIE*, "THE FAT FURY"...)



JERSEY'S DRUGGISTS TREATED COMICS (AND THEIR FANS) AS AN ANNOYANCE BECAUSE THEIR LOW, KID-FRIENDLY COVER PRICE ENSURED A RAZOR-THIN PROFIT MARGIN. TO THE RETAILER THEY WERE A "PENNIES BUSINESS" LIKE CANDY, GUM, OR ANY OTHER IMPULSE ITEM.



PUBLISHERS SOLD COMICS AT A DISCOUNT OFF THE COVER PRICE TO NEWSSTAND DISTRIBUTORS WHO THEN SOLD THEM AT A SLIGHTLY HIGHER COST TO INDIVIDUAL SHOPS AND STANDS IN BULK -- BY AMOUNT, NOT TITLE, AS USLAN DISCOVERED.



TO ENCOURAGE BULK ORDERING, PUBLISHERS MADE THEIR TITLES RETURNABLE. A DEALER SIMPLY HAD TO TEAR THE COVER OFF A COMIC (TO SAVE ON SHIPPING COSTS) AND SEND IT TO THE DISTRIBUTOR TO PROVE IT WAS UNSOLD SO THEY COULD OBTAIN A REFUND.

THIS FINANCIAL RISK RESTED ENTIRELY ON THE PUBLISHER'S SHOULDERS -- HE HAD TO MAKE SURE HE HAD SUFFICIENT CASH FLOW ON HAND TO COVER ANY AND ALL RETURNS.

IN THOSE DAYS, IF LESS THAN 65% OF COPIES WERE RETURNED (A "35% SELL-THROUGH," IN CIRCULATION PARLANCE) YOUR COMIC WAS A HIT.

BUT THE SYSTEM WAS RIFE WITH FRAUD AND WASTE, PARTICULARLY ON THE DISTRIBUTOR END.



COMICS WERE REPORTED AS UNSOLD JUST BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T FIT ON THAT WEEK'S TRUCK; COVERLESS COMICS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE DESTROYED, BUT OFTEN THEY WERE SOLD TO FLEA MARKETS WITHOUT PUBLISHERS RECEIVING A DIME.

YEAH... UH... WE DIDN'T SELL NO COMICS THIS WEEK!



AN ENGLISH TEACHER FROM CONEY ISLAND WOULD **CHANGE** ALL THAT.

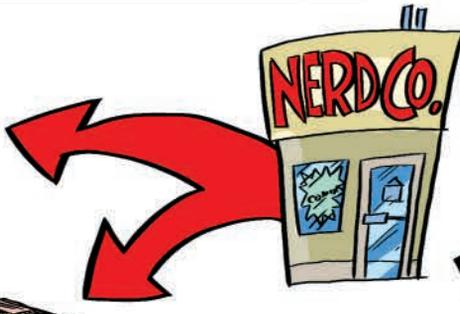
PHIL SEULING, A LIFELONG FAN AND DEALER IN BACK ISSUES, VISITED DC COMICS AROUND 1973 AND WAS **HORRIFIED** TO SEE A PILE OF RIPPED-OFF COVERS IN ONE CORNER. WHEN TOLD WHAT HAPPENED TO UNSOLD TITLES, HE KNEW HE COULD DO **BETTER**.

"THAT'S **CRAZY!** THESE ARE **COLLECTIBLE!**"

SEULING **FOUNDED SEA GATE DISTRIBUTION**, DEDICATED **SOLELY** TO GETTING NEW COMICS TO THE **FAN MARKET**, BYPASSING THE NEWSSTANDS **ALTOGETHER**.

AT THE TIME, THERE WERE PERHAPS **THIRTY** STORES SPECIALIZING IN COMICS IN ALL OF NORTH AMERICA.

BUT SEULING MADE THE PUBLISHERS A DEAL THEY **COULDN'T REFUSE**: HE WOULD BUY TITLES DIRECTLY FROM THEM AT **60% OFF COVER PRICE**, **SAME** AS THE REGULAR DISTRIBUTORS...

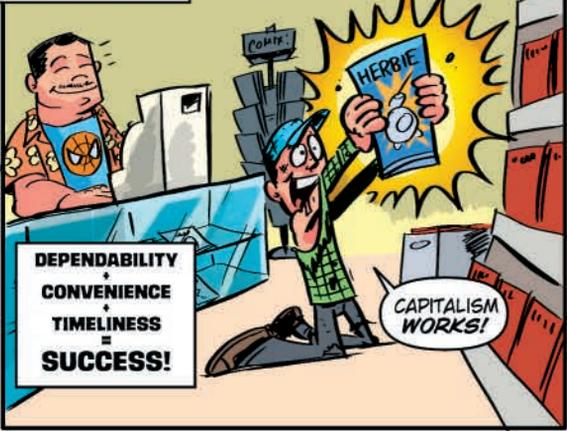


...BUT THESE COMICS WOULD BE **NON-RETURNABLE**. HE SHIFTED THE **FINANCIAL RISK** FROM THE PUBLISHERS ONTO THE **RETAILER**.

LOCKED AS HE WAS INTO THE FAN NETWORK, SEULING DIDN'T SEE THIS AS A PROBLEM. HE WAS **CERTAIN** HE COULD SELL **EVERY SINGLE COMIC** HE BOUGHT, BECAUSE NEW COMICS THAT DIDN'T MOVE WITHIN A FEW WEEKS OF PUBLICATION WOULD BE SAVED AND PUT INTO HIS **BACK ISSUE BINS** TO BE SOLD TO COLLECTORS.

THIS NEW **DIRECT** RETAILING MARKET WAS **SUPERIOR** TO THE OLD NEWSSTAND MODEL IN PRETTY MUCH **EVERY WAY CONCEIVABLE**.

FANS NO LONGER HAD TO SCOUR DRUG SHOPS AND TOBACCO STORES IN A DESPERATE SEARCH FOR **SPECIFIC** TITLES. INSTEAD, THEY COULD GO TO THE COMICS SHOP TO GET **ANY** TITLE THEY WANTED, AS **SOON** AS IT CAME OUT!

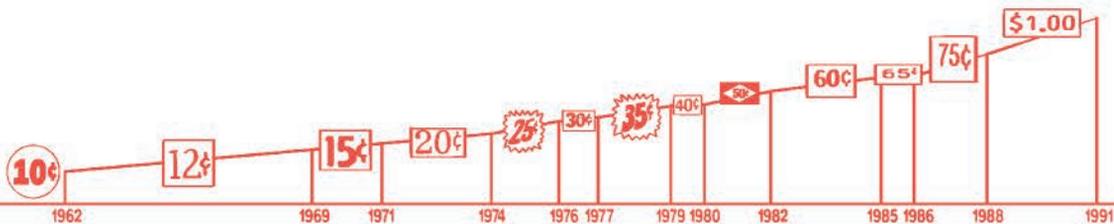


DEPENDABILITY
CONVENIENCE
TIMELINESS
= SUCCESS!

A FEW OF THE **NOTORIOUSLY** **MOBBED-UP** NEWSSTAND DISTRIBUTORS DID NOT TAKE TOO KINDLY TO THESE LIPPITY **GEEKS** HORNING IN ON THEIR TERRITORY. SAN DIEGO RETAILERS HAD THEIR **TIRES SLASHED** AND **BRICKS** SENT THROUGH THEIR WINDOWS.

BUT BY THE MID-1970s, DENVER-AREA RETAILER **CHUCK ROZANSKI** REPORTS, THE OLD-SCHOOL WHOLESALERS "DIDN'T REALLY **CARE** THAT MUCH ABOUT COMICS ANYWAY. THE WHOLE ECONOMICS OF THE DISTRIBUTION BUSINESS WERE **CHANGING** AND THEY WERE TOO FOCUSED ON SAVING THEIR **CORE** BUSINESS TO GO AFTER COMICS BUSINESS."





EVIDENCE OF THE NEWSSTAND'S GRADUAL DECLINE CAN BE TRACED THROUGH THE RISE IN COMICS' PRICE POINT.

A "PENNIES BUSINESS" TURNS A PROFIT ONLY IF SOLD IN BULK. AS CIRCULATION DROPPED, PUBLISHERS RAISED COVER PRICE TO MAKE UP THE LOSS IN REVENUE.

THE DIRECT MARKET ("DM") CAME ALONG JUST IN TIME TO SAVE THE INDUSTRY BY GIVING IT AN ALTERNATIVE, DEPENDABLE SOURCE OF CUSTOMERS.

MARVEL FULLY EMBRACED THE NEW RETAILING MODEL EARLY AND RELEASED ITS FIRST TITLE EXCLUSIVE TO THE DM, DAZZLER, IN 1981. THE FIRST ISSUE SOLD 400,000 COPIES WHILE DC'S TOP SELLER SUPERMAN SOLD JUST 235,000 A FEW YEARS BEFORE ON THE NEWSSTANDS!

THE DIRECT MARKET WOULD GROW BY DOUBLE DIGITS EVERY YEAR FOR THE NEXT TWO DECADES. THE NUMBER OF COMICS SHOPS GREW FROM 700 IN THE 1970s TO 3,000 BY THE BEGINNING OF THE 1980s.

CLUB COMIX

WHOLE PUBLISHERS WERE CREATED JUST TO MEET DEMAND. WEST COAST DISTRIBUTORS STEVE AND BILL SCHANES STARTED BRINGING OUT THEIR OWN TITLES UNDER THE PACIFIC COMICS IMPRINT "BECAUSE THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH PRODUCT FOR OUR STORES."

PACIFIC'S FIRST COMIC WAS CAPTAIN VICTORY AND THE GALACTIC RANGERS BY PERENNIAL PIONEER JACK KIRBY, WHOSE POPULARITY HAD WANED ON THE NEWSSTAND... BUT STILL APPEALED TO THE OLDER FANS WHO FREQUENTED THE SPECIALTY SHOPS!

IT'S SAFE TO COME OUT, JACK! THE NATIVES OF THE PLANET NERDIA ARE FRIENDLY!

(...ALBET SOCIALLY AWKWARD...)

NEW TALENT ALSO FLOURISHED IN THE SPECIALTY SHOPS-- THANKS TO THE ECONOMIC SECURITY PROVIDED BY SUPER HERO FAN DOLLARS, RETAILERS WERE ABLE TO SUPPORT THE POST-PACIFIC WAVE OF INDEPENDENT PUBLISHERS LIKE FANTAGRAPHICS, FIRST AND ECLIPSE.

SELF-PUBLISHERS LIKE CEREBUS' DAVE SIM AND ELFQUEST'S RICHARD & WENDY PINI ALSO THRIVED IN ONE OF THE FEW INDUSTRIES WHERE TALENTED AND DEDICATED INDIVIDUALS COULD AFFORD TO PUT OUT THEIR OWN WORK TO A LARGE, BUILT-IN AUDIENCE--IN THE DM!

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL SELF-PUBLISHERS OF THIS ERA WERE KEVIN EASTMAN AND PETER LAIRD, WHOSE FRANK MILLER PARODY TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES PREMIERED AS A HUMBLE BLACK AND WHITE COMIC IN THE DIRECT MARKET IN 1984 AND WENT ON, THANKS TO THE BUSINESS ACUMEN OF THEIR SHREWD LICENSING AGENT, TO BECOME A LUDICROUSLY SUCCESSFUL MULTIMEDIA FRANCHISE THAT MADE THEIR CREATORS MILLIONAIRES.

THE UNEXPECTED POPULARITY OF *TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES* CAUSED A RUN OF SPECULATION IN THE BACK ISSUE MARKET.

AS A SMALL SELF-PUBLISHED BOOK *TMNT* HAD A LIMITED PRINT RUN WHICH SOLD OUT RAPIDLY -- AND SO BACK ISSUES PRIZED BY COLLECTORS RATED HIGH PRICES.



RETAILERS BEGAN BUYING UP MORE AND MORE B&W INDEPENDENT BOOKS THAN EVER BEFORE -- THEN MARKED UP THE COVER PRICE IN THE HOPES SPECULATORS MIGHT THINK THEY'D BE THE NEXT *TURTLES*. CREATORS AND PUBLISHERS WERE HAPPY TO OBLIGE BY FLOODING THE MARKET WITH AS MANY B&W TITLES AS THEY COULD -- THE VAST MAJORITY UNREADABLE DREK.

AN INDY BOOK THAT MIGHT ENJOY A PRINT RUN OF 10,000 COPIES IN 1984 SHOT UP TO 100,000 IN 1986!



IT WAS A CLASSIC ECONOMIC BUBBLE IN ACTION: AN ISOLATED SUCCESS CAUSES A MISPERCEPTION OF DEMAND AND AN OVER-ABUNDANCE OF SUPPLY.

DEMAND DROPPED OFF SIGNIFICANTLY ONCE THE GULF IN QUALITY BETWEEN *TMNT* AND THE KNOCKOFFS BECAME CLEAR.

UNDER THE OLD NEWSSTAND REGIME, NO PROBLEM: JUST TEAR THE COVERS OFF THE UNSOLD PRODUCT AND RETURN THEM TO THE DISTRIBUTOR FOR A FULL REFUND!

BUT THE ENTIRE DIRECT MARKET IS BASED ON NON-RETURNABILITY. THE RETAILER ATE WHATEVER HE COULDN'T SELL.

BY 1989, ALMOST ALL OF THE PUBLISHERS CREATED TO CASH IN ON THE B&W BOOM HAD GONE UNDER, TAKING MANY DISTRIBUTORS AND SPECIALTY SHOPS WITH THEM.

"THE BLACK AND WHITE BUST" WAS THE WORST CALAMITY TO HIT THE DIRECT MARKET...

