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THE **FOUR COLOR**

COMIC

BOOK

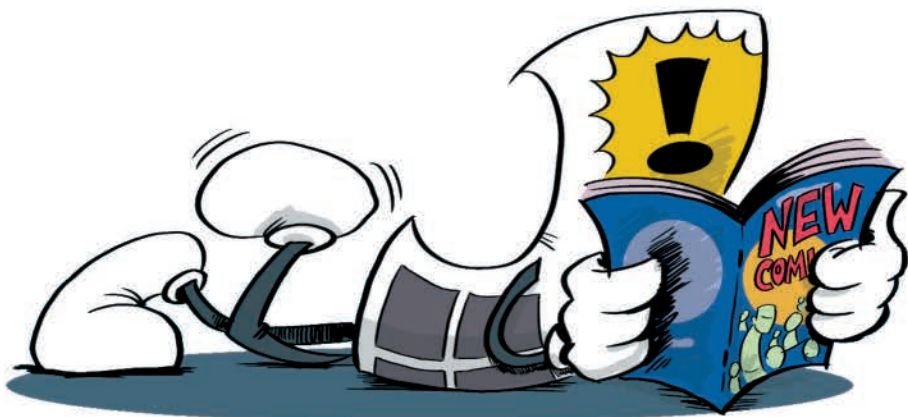
HISTORY

OF COMICS

THE WORLD 1973 TO INFINITY

Piracy





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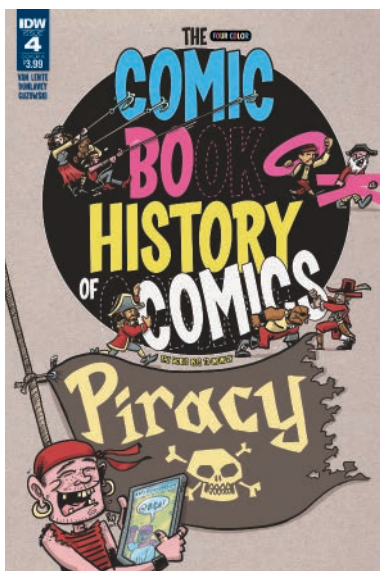
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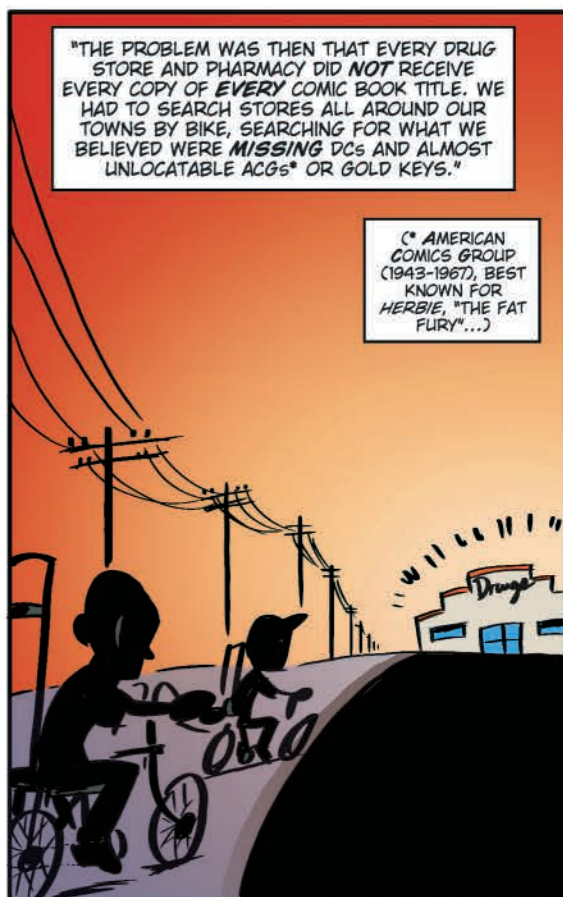
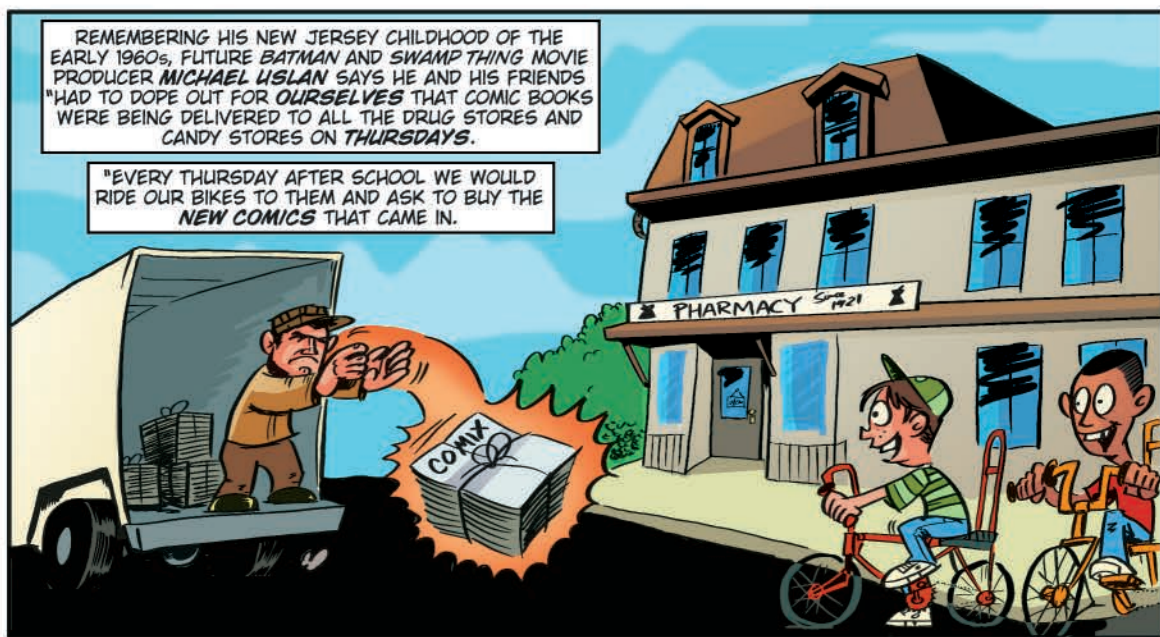
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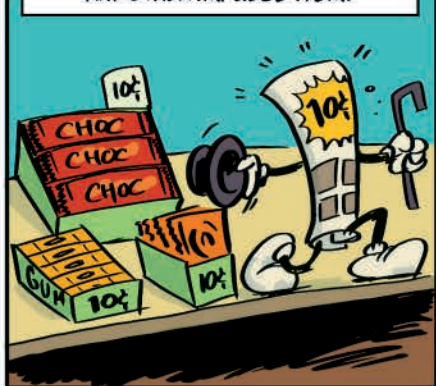
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ANY GIVEN WEDNESDAY

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



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**.



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

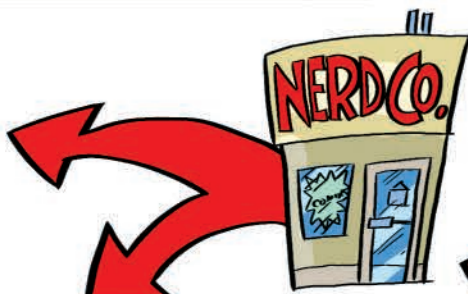
PHIL SEULING, A LIFELONG FAN AND DEALER IN BACK ISSUES, VISITED DC COMICS AROUND 1973 AND WAS **HORRIFIED** TO SEE A PILE OF RIPPED-OFF COVERS IN ONE CORNER. WHEN TOLD WHAT HAPPENED TO UNSOLD TITLES, HE KNEW HE COULD DO **BETTER**.

"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**.

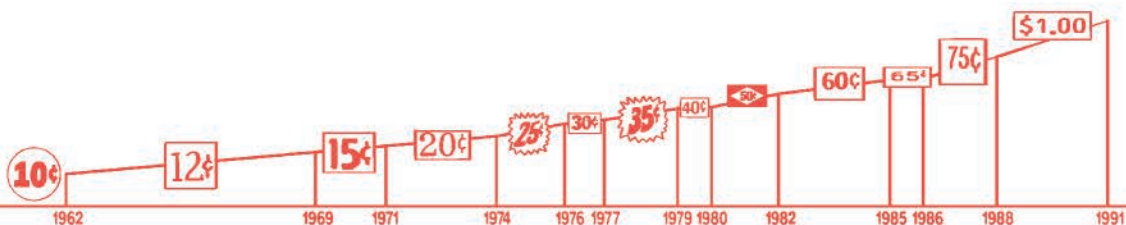
FANS NO LONGER HAD TO SCOUR DRUG SHOPS AND TOBACCO STORES IN A DESPERATE SEARCH FOR **SPECIFIC** TITLES. INSTEAD, THEY COULD GO TO THE COMICS SHOP TO GET **ANY** TITLE THEY WANTED, AS **SOON** AS IT CAME OUT!



A FEW OF THE NOTORIOUSLY **MOBBED-UP** NEWSSTAND DISTRIBUTORS DID NOT TAKE TOO KINDLY TO THESE UPPITY **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...

