MIKE GRELL.

Life Is Drawing Without An Eraser

by Dewey Cassell
with Jeff Messer

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Origins

Most of the comic book artists from the "Golden Age" really wanted to be illustrators. Many drew comic books because it was the only work they could find. And many used a pseudonym, so no one would know they were drawing comics. But their true aspirations remained to one day become illustrators such as the great J. C. Leyendecker and James Montgomery Flagg.

Over time, the success of artists like Al Capp, Milton Caniff, and Hal Foster brought an allure to drawing comic strips. The work was steadier than comic books, which could rise and fall on the whim of the editor, and your work was seen by millions of people across the country, most of whom were adults. There was a respect afforded artists drawing comic strips not found with comic books.

Michael Jon Grell was part of a new breed of artist who, while they may have still aspired to be an illustrator or have their own comic strip, actually enjoyed drawing comic books. They were fans of the medium and wanted to be a part of bringing the four color stories to life. For them, drawing comics was not just about making a living, it was about making your mark in the industry. And through the success of their work, drawing comic books became not only respectable, but cool.

Here, then, are the "origins" of artist and writer Mike Grell.

Dewey Cassell: *Let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?*
Mike Grell: I was born September 13, 1947, in Iron Mountain, Michigan, but my hometown is Florence, Wisconsin. Iron Mountain's the nearest town hospital, and that was across the border, in Michigan.
Cassell: *Tell me a little bit about your parents. What did they do?*
Grell: Mom was a barmaid and later worked in an electronics factory that made components that went into Telstar, the first communications satellite; Dad was a lumberjack. They were very fortunate to have any jobs at all. In 1961, during the Kennedy Administration, the government did a survey of the 10 most depressed areas in the United States. My hometown area was tied for first with Appalachia. I was very much a child of the '50s, and we grew up without television. I never saw a TV until I was eight and we didn't get one until I was 11, but it was great because, for one, we had no context of what we were missing. Number two, we had radio, we had movies, we had comic books, comic strips, and learned to read real books. We were sent outside to play and told, "Be sure to be home before the street lights come on."
Cassell: *Do you have any brothers or sisters?*
Grell: I have two older brothers, and I survived them both. I mean, I survived their best efforts to take me out when I was four years old. They once dug a pit trap in the backyard and covered it over and told me there was buried treasure on the other side. They said, "Anybody who digs it up can keep it." And I said, "What's the treasure?" They said, "It's money." I said, "How much?" They said, "It's, like, a dollar!" Well, at four years old, I knew what a dollar was, so I go to find the treasure, and down I went straight into the bottom of the pit trap. They dug that thing deeper than I was tall. I'll tell you what, I had sand in my everything. They finally hauled me out and filled it in before the folks got home.

My crowning achievement as a little brother was, 35 years later I told that story at Thanksgiving dinner and my mom got pissed off at both of them. She said, "Why am I just hearing this now?" I said, "Are you kidding? They said if I told you, they'd throw me back in!" My oldest brother laughed and said, "You're just lucky bamboo didn't grow in Wisconsin." Now that I think about it, I probably am. I used to stand up against the side of the garage and let Bob and Dick shoot arrows and throw knives around me, and I was probably 16 or 17 before it dawned on me that they might not have been missing on purpose.
Cassell: *It sounds like you had a colorful childhood.*
Grell: Yeah, it was great. Around town I was known as Tarzan.
Cassell: *Really?*
Grell: Yes, absolutely. I had a series of ropes and platforms strung in all the trees in the neighborhood, outside of town, up in the

Previous page: Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest in action by Mike Grell. **Top inset:** Mike Grell meets Robin (actor Burt Ward) in a photo appearing in *The Amazing World of DC Comics* #12 [July 1976].

Aquaman

Among the heroes in the DC universe, Aquaman frequently garners the least respect. Perhaps it's the orange and green outfit or maybe the part about talking to fish, but until Aquaman recently made it onto the silver screen, he had a serious PR problem. However, Mike Grell always liked the King of the Seven Seas. So, it seems somehow fitting that it was with Aquaman that Mike Grell first dipped his toe into the world of professional comic books.

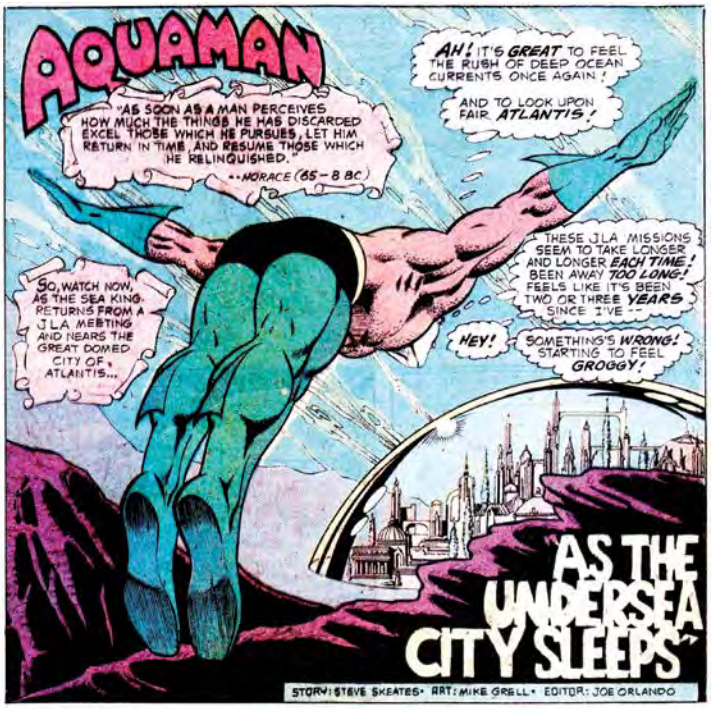
Cassell: *How did you get your start at DC Comics?*
Grell: When I was in Saigon in 1970, a guy by the name of Ed Savage came from back in the States carrying a small stack of his favorite comic books with him. In his pile Ed had *Tomb of Dracula* and *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* and *Daredevil*, and holy crap, I was blown away. I had stopped reading comics when Batman still had a square jaw and a chest shaped like a barrel. Maybe not quite that bad, but the stories were all bug-eyed monsters and super-villains and stuff that didn't hold a lot of appeal to me, but with *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, here was terrific artwork by Neal Adams and Dick Giordano and some amazing stories by Denny O'Neil that dealt with real-world issues. And I went, "Ah, this is it for me. This is the kind of work that I want to do." But I still was aiming at comic strips, not comic books.

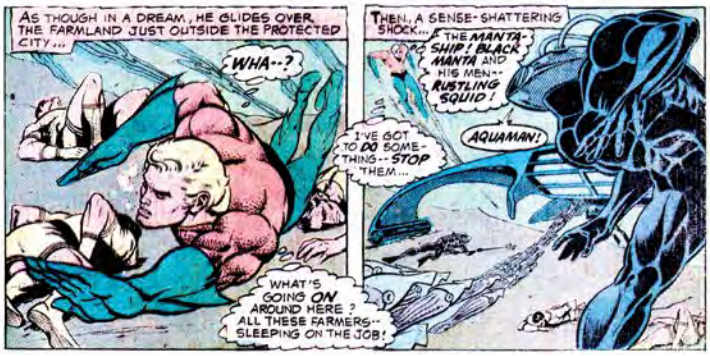
That all fell apart when I took my samples to New York, in 1973. I attended the New York Comic Con, but part of my purpose was to sell my stuff to newspaper strip editors. I couldn't even get an appointment. I couldn't even get my foot in the door. As soon as they found out that I had an action/adventure strip, they just hung up the phone or slammed the door in my face, so that was it. But at the Comic Con, I met two guys from DC Comics who told me in no uncertain terms to get my carcass up to Julie Schwartz's office and show him my stuff. One of the guys was Allan Asherman and the other was Irv Novick.

Irv would always say, "Tell them Irv sent you." I had no idea Irv was a Batman artist. There was one other guy there who was reviewing portfolios, Sol Harrison, and I left a copy of my comic strip with him. It was called *Savage Empire* and it dealt with an archaeologist who was transported back in time and winds up in Atlantis before it sank. I had six weeks' worth of Sundays and two weeks' worth of dailies in my bag, and I had the entire storyline all written out, and I showed that to Sol and never thought anything about it at all for years afterward.

So I get on up to DC Comics and I go in there with my prepared encyclopedia salesman speech, which goes: "Good afternoon, Mr. Schwartz. Could I interest you in this deluxe 37-volume set of *Encyclopedia Britannica* complete with annual calendar?" And if you get interrupted anywhere along the line, you have to go all the way back to "Mr. Schwartz…" Well, that's exactly as far as I got when Julie said, "What the hell makes you think you can draw comics?" And I unzipped my portfolio, put it on his desk, and said, "Take a look and you tell me." He flipped through the pages, called Joe Orlando in from next door, and they put their heads together and I walked out a half-hour later with my first script in hand.

Right: Tightly cropped vertical splash panel by DC newcomer Mike Grell in his Aquaman assignment for *Adventure Comics* #437 [Jan.–Feb. 1975].





Cassell: *What was your first comic book assignment for DC?*
Grell: Aquaman. I did a seven-page Aquaman back-up story in *Adventure Comics* #435. It was entitled "As the Undersea City Sleeps," written by Steve Skeates, who was obviously heavily into the letter "S" at the time. That was courtesy of Joe Orlando, who could always be relied upon. Joe had a number of books that he was editing, and, back in those days, you had the main feature and then you had a back-up story, and the back-ups were always good for making sure that you had enough extra work to hand out to whoever might need it at the time, and to give young guys like me a break. And that paid off, certainly for me.

I did a couple of Aquaman stories back-to-back—three, I think—and turned in my first batch of pencils. Joe used to mentor me and give tips, sometimes correct my drawings on a sheet of tracing paper over the top of my drawing to show where I had made a mistake. And the very first page he opened up, he shook his head and said, "I know you can do this. What's wrong?" Without even thinking about it, I had drawn Aquaman mooning the audience. He said, "I'll try and get this through, but just be aware that the Code may bounce it back at us." "Aw, maaan." It actually went through as is, but I did do a correction on one of the pages where it has Aquaman sitting on a stylized sort of chair, not really a throne, but a chair of some sort. And I hadn't accounted for how far his butt would sag down below the chair, so it looked like he was sitting on a toilet. For months I was known as the guy who drew Aquaman on the toilet.

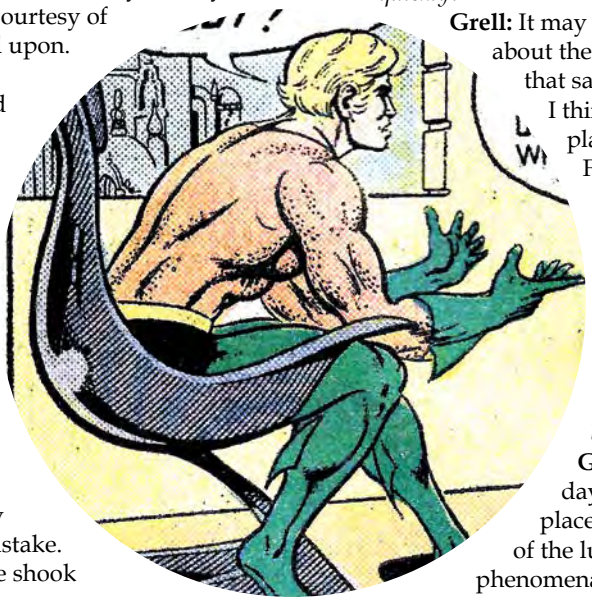
Cassell: *So, other than that, did you enjoy drawing Aquaman?*
Grell: Oh, yeah, quite a bit. Number one, I was very excited to have a job in comics. Number two, I was always a huge fan of Jacques Cousteau and TV series like *Sea Hunt* and the old movies, anything that dealt with underwater stuff. My brother Dick and I were in the lake all the time. When I was in school I could actually swim five-and-a-half lengths in an Olympic-sized pool underwater.

Cassell: *Wow!*
Grell: Yeah, that was a bunch. I just loved everything about it. I still do. I love to snorkel. Diving on the reefs and stuff like that has been very exciting for me, getting to see some of the undersea life first-hand. I guess it goes along with the dreams and fantasies of a kid who grows up in the north woods of Wisconsin, two things I wanted to do were dive in the oceans and climb mountains.

Cassell: *And have you had a chance to do both?*
Grell: Well, I've climbed on mountains. I've never climbed a mountain, but I have snorkeled in the ocean, and just really enjoyed it. If I had grown up somewhere near the coast, I probably would have gotten into a field having something to do with oceanography.

Cassell: *I think that would be a fun thing to do for a career.*
Grell: I would think so. The only thing that put me off of trying to become a crew member on the Calypso, Jacques Cousteau's ship, was that you had to be fluent in French. Of course, you can learn French just like you can learn so much of anything else.

Cassell: *I've noticed that after you started drawing Aquaman, then it seems like very quickly, you got an opportunity to also draw some covers. For example, you drew a couple of covers for* Justice League of America. *Was that unusual, to have the opportunity to do covers so quickly?*



Grell: It may have been. I don't know. We're talking about the bumblebee who never read the book that says he can't fly. Part of it in those days, I think, was the luck of being in the right place at the right time. If I came in on a Friday and delivered pages and they had a cover that needed to be done and delivered by Monday, I would drop into Carmine's office and go over the cover design, then take it home and do it. Sometimes it would be overnight.

Cassell: *I'm sure that they appreciated having somebody they could count on to be able to turn stuff around quickly.*
Grell: That was a lot of it back in the day. The simple fact of being in the right place at the right time has always been part of the luck of the draw for me. I've just been phenomenally lucky that way. Being on the scene

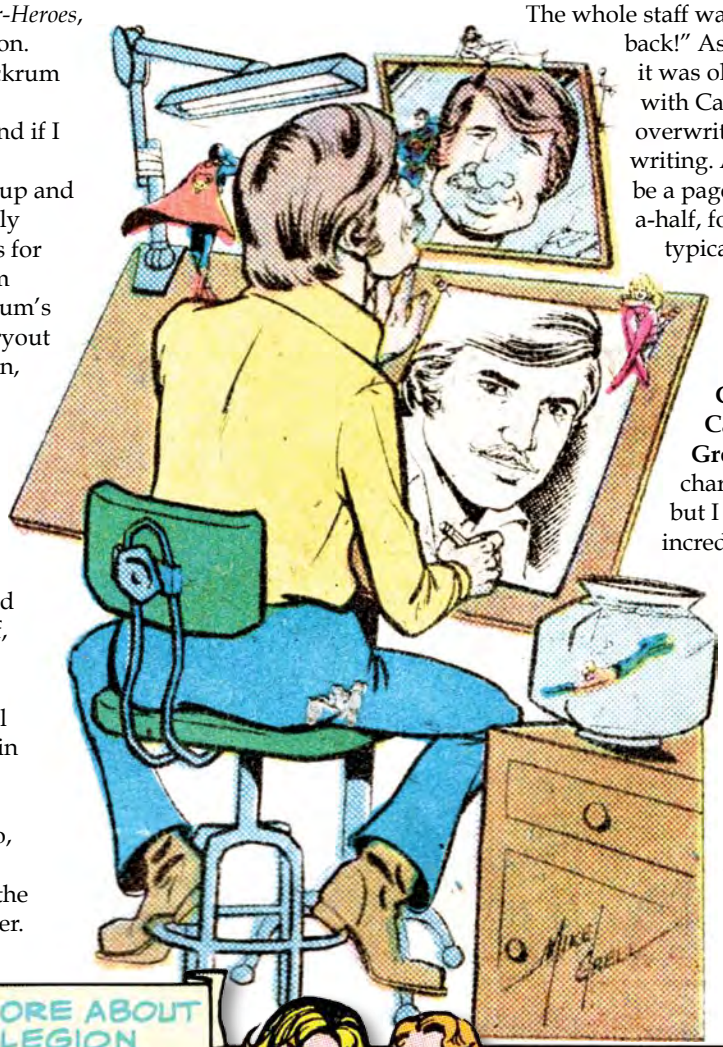
Top left: Mike Grell's "mooning" opening panel image of Aquaman, *Adventure Comics* #435 [Sept.–Oct. 1974]. **Above:** "Commode" panel from same.

The Legion

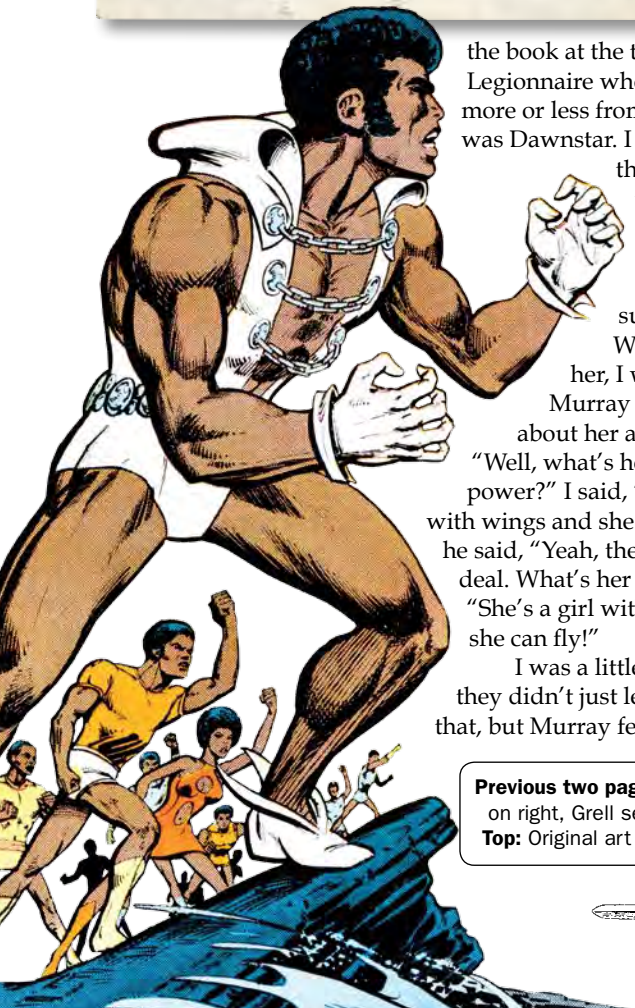
The Legion of Super-Heroes is a team of super-powered teenagers from the 30th century, defenders of the United Planets. Their adventures began in 1958 and grew in popularity, thanks to the creative talents of artists like Curt Swan and Dave Cockrum and writers like Otto Binder and 14-year old Jim Shooter. While not perhaps as iconic as Superman, Batman, or Wonder Woman, the Legion has always had a loyal fan following, fueled by an ever-changing roster of characters, each with a unique ability. How then did this priceless property of DC Comics get entrusted to newcomer Mike Grell?

Cassell: *How did you get started on the Legion of Super-Heroes?*
Grell: I picked up my second script from Joe Orlando and was headed back to my studio. When I got there the phone was ringing, and Joe was on the line. Murray Boltinoff was the editor on *Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes*, and Joe said, "Murray's on vacation. He doesn't know it, but Dave Cockrum just walked off the book and he's minus an artist. So would you mind if I recommended you for the job?"

Would I mind? I had packed up and moved to New York, so I was really grateful for the opportunity, that's for sure. I got a seven-page story from Murray to ink. It was Dave Cockrum's pencils, and it was basically my tryout for the book. When I turned that in, Murray said, "Okay, there's good news and bad news. Good news, you got the job. Bad news, you can expect to get hate mail." I hadn't even done anything yet! He said, "It doesn't matter. For starters, you're replacing the most popular artist we've ever had on the book. And to top things off, we're going to kill off one of their favorite characters in your first story." And he was right. The mail that came in was mostly of the vein of "Grell, you suck."
Cassell: *Oh, that's great.*
Grell: Yeah. Not much you can do, though. I stuck with it, and I was working with Cary Bates first on the book, and later on with Jim Shooter.



Cassell: *How was it working with Cary?*
Grell: It was great, especially on a killer book like *The Legion*, because Cary's a very visual writer. He would think things through and stage the action so well in his script that it saved a lot of time. If he felt there should be a close shot with certain action going on in the background, he would explain it to you. He would give it to you in the nuts and bolts. And it was pretty easy to work with Cary.
Cassell: *So then you find yourself working with Jim Shooter. Jim's got a tremendous amount of history on the book. How was that?*
Grell: Yeah, he had worked on the book from the time he was about 12 years old until he was 16, and then he retired. I had no idea who he was, and I had never read that book, even though he was on it. Everybody was very excited that he was coming back. The whole staff was all in a tizzy, "Shooter's coming back!" As far as working together goes, it was okay. It wasn't as much fun as with Cary because Jim has a tendency to overwrite and sort of micro-manage in his writing. A typical Cary Bates script would be a page, sometimes maybe a page-and-a-half, for every page in the book, and a typical Jim Shooter script was the New York telephone book. I would say that Jim probably averaged 90-100 pages on a 25-page book.
Cassell: *You're kidding!*
Grell: Nope.
Cassell: *Every month?*
Grell: Every month. Let me be charitable and say 60–90 pages, but I would say 60 pages would be incredibly light for him. He would generally write a half-a-page per panel.
Cassell: *Holy cow. Did that include thumbnails, because I know he used to do that, right?*
Grell: Ah, yeah. He'd do that. He sent them early on, but once he found out that I was ignoring them…
Cassell: *So, during your tenure, in addition to killing off a Legionnaire, you actually created a couple of Legionnaires, didn't you?*
Grell: I did. Well, I get credit for co-creating several, mostly because I was the artist on



the book at the time. The only Legionnaire who I created more or less from whole cloth was Dawnstar. I came up with the idea for the character, and basically everything except for her super-power. When I designed her, I was telling Murray Boltinoff all about her and he says, "Well, what's her super-power?" I said, "She's a girl with wings and she can fly." And he said, "Yeah, they all fly, big deal. What's her power?" I said, "She's a girl with wings and she can fly!"

I was a little put out that they didn't just leave her at that, but Murray felt very strongly that every one of the Legionnaires had to have one special power that made them completely unique, even if nobody else on their planet had any kind of super-powers, or even if they were all super-powered, there had to be something that set her apart. So I'm pretty sure that the power to track anything across space was Murray's idea, kind of a mandate from on high. And I would give Paul Levitz at least part credit on the name, because I gave him a list of six that I liked, and I told him that the one I liked best was Dawnstar, but to take his pick if there was anything else that struck his fancy. And he said, "No, Dawnstar is good."

In order to come up with that name, what I did was I created a grid. Basically, you write down nouns in a vertical column and adjectives on the horizontal and you go through and combine them as you go. So if you have six of each to start, you will end up with 36 possible names. Out of those 36, I picked the half-dozen I liked the best. I mean, some of them were utter crap. Some of them come up kinda cool.

Cassell: *That's a great idea. Is that how you normally would approach coming up with a new character name?*

Grell: Normally. Sometimes the character is named because of their circumstances or the superpower that they have.

Cassell: *You created (or co-created) another Legion character, right? Tyroc: How did that come about?*

Grell: I tried to do the design work on Tyroc but I didn't create

Previous two pages: On left, Mike Grell's cover graces *The Amazing World of DC Comics* #12 [July 1976]. Inset on right, Grell self-caricature from *Superboy* #205 [Nov.–Dec. 1974], and, on bottom, cover detail from same. **Top:** Original art from *All-New Collectors' Edition* #C-55 ['78]. **Left:** Grell cover detail, *Superboy* #216 [Apr. '76].

The Warlord

After breathing new life into established DC characters, Grell brought his creativity to bear in a new, original sword-&-sorcery story that proved to be the longest-running title of his career.

The key to a good fantasy or science fiction story is the ability to get readers to suspend their disbelief, to set aside what they know (or think they know) and entertain a new, more fantastic vision of what is possible. We all learn in school that the earth is made up of several layers of rock and sediment, in between which lie reservoirs of oil and natural gas, and beneath which lie pockets of magma that give rise to volcanoes.

So, when Travis Morgan is flying his Air Force plane over the North Pole and finds himself pulled into a world within our own, a land of perpetual sunlight filled with dinosaurs and sorcerers and shape-shifters, we don't challenge it based on what we know. Thanks to the gifted writing and artistry of Mike Grell, we simply suspend our disbelief and enter "the lost world of the Warlord."

But the origin of the defender of Skartaris was not a smooth or simple one, as Grell explains in the following interview.

Cassell: *How did you come up with the idea for The Warlord?*
Grell: I was working on developing *Savage Empire* and I took it to New York, hoping to take the town by storm, only to find out that the storm hatches were all securely battened and I wasn't let in the door. But all's well that ends well, because, eventually, after I had been at DC for a while and had a few other things under my belt, I got wind that a company called Atlas Comics was firing up, and they were looking to woo away a lot of the artists from the major companies. To that end, they were offering $100 a page versus DC Comics, which had I think, $65, $70 a page top rate at the time. They were also promising that you'd own the copyright on all your material. You could own your own property. Now, the $100 a page was an honest promise, but the ownership of the properties was a bold-faced lie, because Atlas ended up owning virtually every single thing when the smoke cleared away. But I went over to Atlas Comics carrying my *Savage Empire* strip, and I showed it to Jeff Rovin, who was editor at the time. Jeff took a look and he really liked it, and he said, "Okay, yeah, we'll do this." I asked him to just, "Please keep it under your hat until I get the first two issues completed because, number one, I have assignments at DC that I have to finish off. Number two, I don't want to just walk out the door and alienate these guys. I want to maintain that relationship." He said, "No problem."

So I walked from Atlas Comics across town to DC Comics' office, 20 minutes, and when I walked in the door, Carmine Infantino was waiting for me. Jeff Rovin had picked up the phone as soon as I walked out of his office, called Carmine, and said, "I got your boy Grell tied up." And Carmine was pretty darned upset. He said, "Why didn't you bring it to me first?" Carmine pretty much regarded himself as somewhere between the Pope and Don Corleone, except with the Pope, you only had to kiss his ring. Carmine took things like that very personally. And I said, "Well, honestly"—and I was honest about it—I said, "For starters, DC Comics hasn't had much luck with sword-&-sorcery kind of action books, so I didn't think you would be interested, and, number two, they're offering $100 a page and creator ownership." And he said, "Well, I can't give you creator ownership, but I can give you our top rate," which was better than what I was getting at the moment, "and I will give you a year guaranteed if I like it. Why don't you show it to me, let me be the judge."

So, as we were walking into his office, the telephone was ringing. He excused himself for a couple of minutes to take the call, and at that moment my brain engaged and said, "Dummy. If he buys it, you lose it!" So, in two or three minutes, I jettisoned almost everything except a basic framework from the story, changed everything around, and when he said, "Okay, tell me your story," I said, "It's about an SR-71 spy pilot who's flying over Russia, his plane gets damaged, and it winds up entering the opening at the North Pole that leads to the world at the center of the Earth." He said, "What's it called?" I said, "Skartaris." Skartaris is actually the name of the mountain peak that points to the correct path to the center of the Earth in Jules Verne's book,

Previous page: Mixed-media painting, with oil on illustration board, from 2008 by Mike Grell depicting The Warlord riding a winged horse named Firewing. **Above:** Commission art of Travis Morgan by Grell.

Journey to the Center of the Earth. I pulled that one out of my hat because I had just finished reading the book *The Hollow Earth* the week before. And *Journey to the Center of the Earth* was one of my favorite movies as a kid, probably tied for first with *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. I think we saw it in the theater maybe 20 times back in the day, which is not as exorbitant as you might think. Twenty times at 10¢ is $2.00. At any rate, we loved that movie as kids, and I had read the book, I think, eight times when I was in high school. So I drew on that. And I'd always been a fan of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Pellucidar* series.

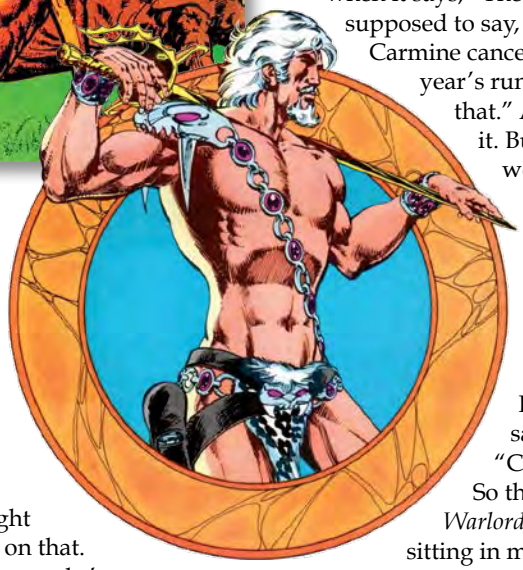
So in creating the world out of my BS, I went, "Okay, here is this world, and it's inhabited by the survivors of sunken Atlantis"—I got my Atlantis thing in there—"and because there's never been an Ice Age down there, dinosaurs still wander the world. And magic or science fiction works. You can do any kind of story that you want at any place. Plus, there is no means of measuring the passage of time, so all the characters are basically locked in the moment. They have no concept that time is passing."

Top left: *1st Issue Special* #8 [Nov. 1975], debut of The Warlord. **Center inset:** Cover detail, *Warlord* #51 [Nov. '81]. **Next page:** A page from The Warlord's introduction, in *1st Issue Special* #8.

I changed the name of the character from Jason Cord to Travis Morgan and threw out all of the names [from *Savage Empire*] except Deimos, because I could not think of a better name than Deimos. And Carmine said, "Well, take this to Joe Orlando, and if Joe likes it, I'll give you one year guaranteed." That was about what Atlas was offering in my book, and I made the right choice, because Atlas did pay the initial guys the fabled $100 a page, but they pitched them off the books after three or four issues and hired foreign artists who were working for $30 a page. And all the guys who had taken their properties over to Atlas wound up losing those properties to Atlas.

So I walked into Joe's office and he gave me the one question that I hadn't been prepared for. Joe said, "What's this guy's name?" I said, "Ummm, Morgan." He said, "Morgan what?" I said, "Morgan the Raider, you know, like the pirate, Henry Morgan?" He said, "Well, what's his first name?" I said, "Henry." And Joe said, "You can't do that. There are two actors by the name of Henry Morgan. That would have been Harry Morgan from *M*A*S*H*, and Henry Morgan, who was a comedian on *What's My Line*, I think. So I delved into the back of my brain, and my brother had just had a baby boy and named him Travis, so I pulled that one out. And Joe says, "Travis?" I said, "Yeah, you know, like at the Alamo?" And he went, "Oh, yeah, that could work! There you go."

So I started writing and drawing my new feature, Warlord. It began in *1st Issue Special* #8 and was the only feature that began in one of the *1st Issue* books that actually went on to its own series. But with issue #3 of the *Warlord* title, I came in to look at the pages, pick them up, and take them home to ink. I'm proofreading them as I go, and as I come to the last page, imagine my surprise when it says, "The end." I said, "Joe, this isn't the end. It's supposed to say, 'next issue.'" And Joe says, "Yeah, I know. Carmine canceled the book." I said, "He promised me a year's run." And Joe says, "Yeah, he lied. He does that." And there was no talking him down from it. But, fortunately, within just a couple of weeks, Jenette Kahn walked in the door and canceled Carmine Infantino.



Jenette was a very astute cookie who knew not just the publishing business but the DC publishing lineup like the back of her hand, and she asked to see the publishing schedule, and glanced through it and said, "Where's *Warlord*?" It turns out it was her favorite book. They said, "Carmine canceled it." And she said, "Carmine's not here any more. Put it back." So the kicker and the upshot of the whole *Warlord* thing is that, several years later, I was sitting in my studio back at Wisconsin at the time, and through the mail slot drops this big package with a return address from DC Comics, and I couldn't figure out what it was. I opened it up and there is my *Savage Empire* portfolio, complete with a form letter rejection slip from DC Comics that read, "Dear artist, thank you for your submission. However, it does not meet DC's current publishing needs. DC Comics." It was hysterical because at that moment *Warlord*, which was the revised *Savage Empire*, was DC's number one-selling title. Waste not, want not.

Cassell: *What was your inspiration for the character Shakira, the shapeshifter?*

Grell: I was inspired by an episode of *Star Trek*, the Gary Seven episode ["Assignment: Earth"]. I don't know if you remember that.

Cassell: *Sure.*

Grell: There was a guy from the future who has a companion who, when you look at her, one moment she's a cat, and another moment she's a woman. I was just fascinated by that, and so I came up with Shakira. As I was writing that story, I was watching *The Man Who Would Be King*, and the girl who ultimately becomes the downfall of Sean Connery's character because he can't keep his hands off of her is a woman who married Michael Caine. They met, I think, during that production, and he married her, and her name is Shakira Caine. So it was sort of inspired by her exotic beauty and I loved the name right off the bat.

I have resisted all attempts to pry the secret out of me of whether she's a woman who turns into a cat or a cat who turns into a woman. I know the answer, but I'm not saying. The other funny part about Shakira is if you take a look at her costume or lack thereof, she's got this huge cutout in the center of her cleavage, and it's basically some little fur strips that barely covers much of anything. And, for the longest time, the DC production department would fill that in with black. So if you saw Shakira after the production department got hold of it, you'd see that her cleavage was covered up, despite the fact that Power Girl has got a huge boob window. I would argue with them all the time. "Oh, no, it's a bit too much." Still, though, they never caught onto the fact that her bottom is nothing but pubic hair. Really! It's nothing but pubic hair with strings attached. Because you can bet that there's almost always strings attached.

Cassell: *Oh, that's great.*

Grell: When Chad Hardin and I worked on the *Warlord* revival together two years ago, Chad first drew it as a long flap like a loincloth, and I explained it to him, and he laughed. He got the joke, and went, "Okay." So he changed it and it went back to pubic hair.

Cassell: *I found it interesting; first that you chose that his companion would be a woman, and second that there would be no romantic thing. There's some interplay there, but he still pines for Tara.*

Grell: That's really the gist of it. I've had more women friends in my life than men friends, and some of them are astonishingly beautiful, and I have no interest in having a romantic relationship with them, but I also catch that sort of catlike feature with Shakira where, without saying that they have ever slept together, it's entirely possible, because of her nature, not of his nature. You know what I'm saying?

Cassell: *Sure.*

Grell: She's very catlike. She's just as likely to spot a handsome tomcat in an alley and off she goes. She actually did that in one issue. Coming into town, there's a big, orange, fluffy cat down an alley, and she turns into a cat and off she goes. She's just that way. And I did a lot of catlike things with her. In one of the issues Morgan is asleep, and he's sleeping in the nude, with Shakira in cat form curled up on his crotch. Because, I don't know if you've ever had a cat, but they are drawn to the warmest spot in the room, and they have a tendency to want to sleep on your crotch. That's just a cat for you. And when I wrapped the series, I very much did a handoff to Morgan's son, and just like I handed off the mantle of the Warlord, Shakira basically goes with him. And Tinder's got a woman in his life, but she still goes off with him, and it's going to be that same kind of a relationship.

Cassell: *So what about the Warlord's costume? It changed over time.*

Grell: Oh, yes. Initially, I don't know what in the world I was thinking. Well, actually, I do know what I was thinking. I was inspired by Kirk Douglas's costume for part of the movie *Spartacus*, where he was addressing his troops in the camp. He's got that dark wool cloak and a jerkin with a broad leather belt that's strapped around it, and that was really the initial inspiration. But, as I said before, I had modeled *Warlord* on my

comic strip, *Savage Empire*. Well, *Savage Empire*, being a comic strip, it didn't matter if there was nothing evenly remotely related, so I didn't have to worry about costumes being a little on the close side, and I wasn't looking at the likelihood that anybody would compare a comic strip character to Green Arrow. So he even had yellow hair like Green Arrow had. Well, when I turned in the first ad drawing to Joe Orlando, that night I watched a made-for-TV show called *The Count of Monte Cristo* with Richard Chamberlain, and at the end of that movie, Chamberlain has silver hair, and he wears nothing but black and silver. And I corralled Joe as soon as I got to the office the next day and said, "I'm changing everything. He's going to have silver hair like Richard Chamberlain did, and everything about him is going to be black and white. And Joe went for it big time. As time went on, I made him a little bit more barbaric, and I went with the skull pauldron on his arm and the chain across his chest, and keeping that black and white theme, got him a snow leopard loincloth. Just because.

Cassell: *Well, it was always hot there in Skartaris.*

Grell: Yeah, although the first story he wears that in has to do with an abominable snowman. So he's in the snow, but he's got a cloak. But, yeah, it was going to be mostly in a tropical world where a minimum amount of clothing made sense … Which gave me an excuse to keep the ladies as naked as possible. There was a young lady who showed up at a convention in Ottawa, I think it was being held over Halloween weekend, and she was wearing Tara's costume.

Cassell: *Oh, really?*

Savage Empire

As Mike Grell explained earlier, Savage Empire was the story he originally planned to pitch to Carmine Infantino at DC Comics, changing his mind at the last minute and pitching the Warlord instead, which allowed him to retain ownership of Savage Empire.

In Back Issue #46 *(TwoMorrows, 2011), Mike Grell summarized his original comic strip idea, "Savage Empire is the story of archaeologist Jason Cord, who, while exploring the ruins of the ancient city of Akrotiri buried for thousands of years under volcanic ash, stumbles on a portal to the past and is cast back in time to the lost continent of Atlantis. It has all the elements of high adventure: lost cities, dangerous jungles, strange beasts of myth and legend, beautiful warrior women, evil wizards, and a modern-day protagonist trying to survive in a savage, primitive world." It's clear from Mike's remarks below, you can't keep a good idea down.*

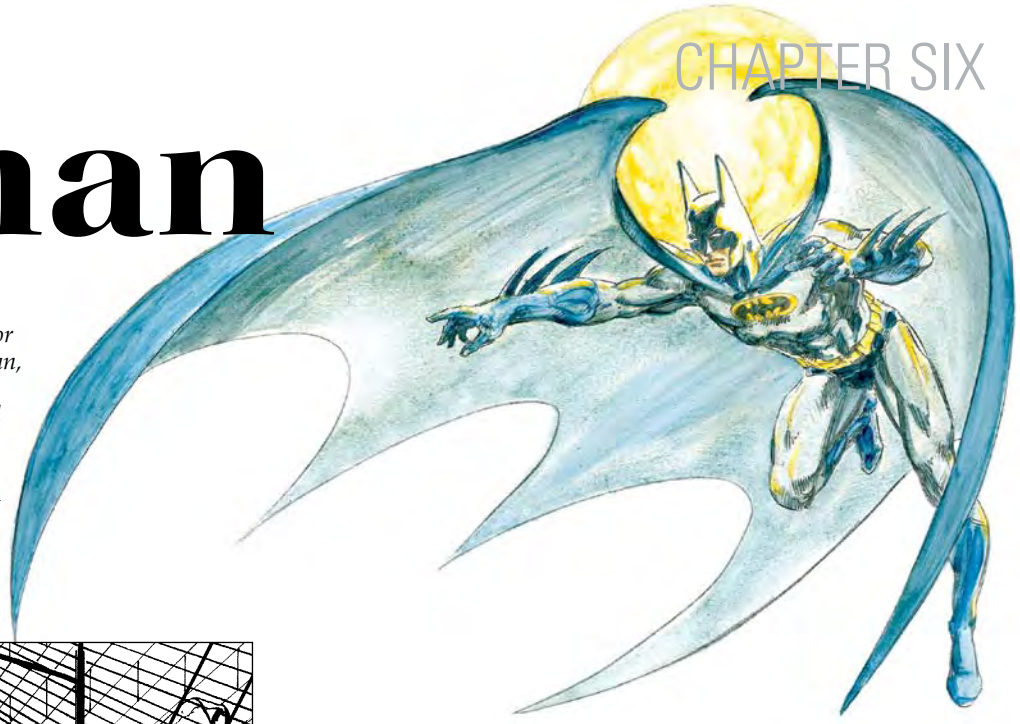
Cassell: *There was a Mike Grell portfolio called* Warriors *published in 1980. How did that come about?*

Grell: That was done by a kid whose dad was an entrepreneur. I don't remember the young man's name, but he was a high school kid, and obviously had money to invest and a specific idea in mind, and we got together and did it.

Cassell: *It had five color plates, and it was deliberately not any*

This and next two pages: The Warlord's origins date back to the early 1970s, when Mike Grell, fresh from a stint as Dale Messick's assistant on her newspaper comic strip, *Brenda Starr*, created his own property, *Savage Empire*, replete with daily and Sunday samples, which are reproduced on these pages. Alas, the effort was met with syndicate indifference, as they had no interest in adventure continuities. Undaunted, Grell put some of his *Savage Empire* concepts to profitable use when he successfully pitched The Warlord to DC Comics.

Batman



When you think of DC Comics, three major characters come immediately to mind: Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman. They are the legendary crown jewels of DC. It was a coveted role to illustrate these icons of comics, the kind of opportunity that could make (or potentially break) an artist. The same month that Warlord *debuted in his own title, the first Grell Batman story appeared in* Detective Comics. *But the ride with the caped crusader was not an altogether smooth one.*

Top right: Evocative Batman commission by Mike Grell. **Above:** A clandestine meeting between the Dark Knight and Catwoman, drawn by Grell in 2010. Though the artist's delineations of the exploits of Batman have been somewhat rare, Grell's work is always memorable.

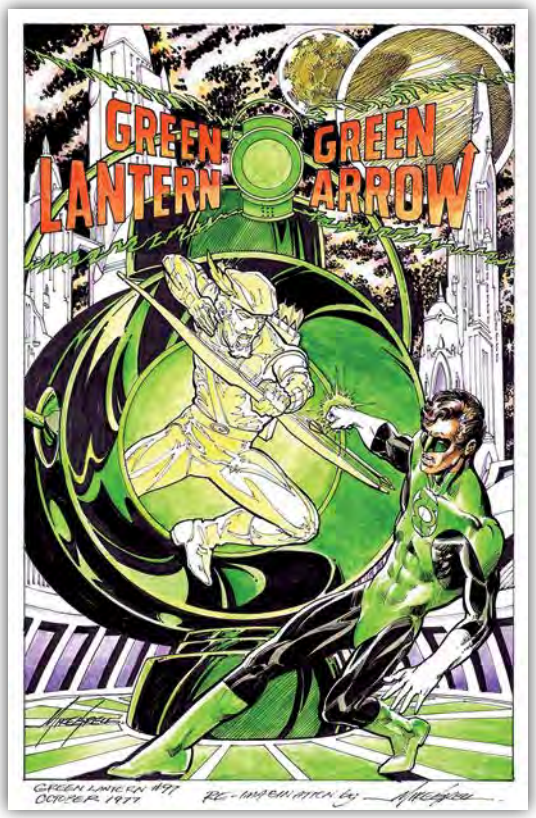
Cassell: *We haven't talked yet about your work on Batman.*
Grell: Probably for a good reason. I always felt that I had done kind of a crappy job on Batman while I was on the book. There was one particular story that had to do with a vampire ["Heart of a Vampire," Detective Comics #455], and that one was probably the best of my Batman in the 1970s, but I can't really take credit for it because the story had been plotted and broken down by Bernie Wrightson. Bernie had drawn thumbnails of every page, and by thumbnails I mean serious thumbnails. They were maybe two inches wide by three inches high, something like that, but so clearly drawn and the story told so beautifully in those tiny little panels that really all I had to do was re-pencil his thumbnails and do the finishes over the top. I followed his layouts on virtually every panel, and I got credit for it and Bernie didn't, which I thought really stank. What was kind of funny was the vampire that I used. I was a big fan of Christopher Lee as Dracula. The first monster movie that I had seen since I was a kid that actually scared me was Christopher Lee's Dracula. He was just such a commanding presence, and seemed like he had the power and the evil to go with it. So I did a bunch of research and found many reference photos so I could model the vampire after Christopher Lee. I got just as close as I could to the likeness, and took the pencils in to [DC editor] Julie Schwartz, and Julie said, "Well, it's good except for one thing." I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Your vampire looks just like Christopher Lee." I went, "That's the point!" He said, "Yeah, no, you've gotta change that." So I was upset. He said, "Why don't you give him longer hair, like your hairstyle, instead of having it brushed back. Why don't you give him a broken nose like yours, and maybe a scar." I was like, "Oh, God." So, in order to please my editor, I made those changes, but it came off looking like I was ripping off Christopher Lee instead of making an homage to Christopher Lee, which I had intended it to be. Sometimes it jumps up and bites you, you know. It doesn't always come off the way you hoped it would.
Cassell: *What was it in general that made you unhappy with your work on Batman?*
Grell: Well, at that given time I think every single book I ever published I always felt like I could have done better. And on such an iconic title as Batman, I felt like I fell short, so I always

CHAPTER SEVEN

Green Lantern/ Green Arrow

Although Mike Grell got an early opportunity to draw The Legion of Super-Heroes, like most new artists, he also did his fair share of back-up stories featuring characters like Aquaman, Green Lantern, and Green Arrow. He drew a half dozen Green Lantern back-up stories in The Flash *and almost a dozen Green Arrow and Black Canary stories that appeared in* Action Comics. *For other artists, it might have just been paying your dues. For Grell, it proved to be paving the way for a new golden – or should we say emerald? – opportunity.*

Cassell: *At what point did you get involved with Green Lantern/Green Arrow?*
Grell: I had done back-up stories featuring both Green Lantern and Green Arrow, separately, but never together. As luck would have it, I just happened to be in the office the day that Denny O'Neil announced that he was going to resurrect the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* title, and since that was the title that got me interested in working in that genre in the first place, I went straight to Denny's office and said, "Okay, who do I have to kill?" And he basically said, "Hey, if you want the job that bad, put the gun down. The job is yours." I was at the right place at exactly the right moment.
Cassell: *Was there any trepidation about doing* Green Lantern/Green Arrow? *The previous guy on the title, admittedly several years before, had been Neal Adams.*
Grell: Well, that's just it. Neal's run on the book had been several years before and, in the meantime, I had worked on both of those characters, so I actually had some history with them, and the fans were accustomed to seeing my work associated with both Green Lantern and Green Arrow, so I think I had an easier transition than I might have had.
Cassell: *Did you enjoy having an opportunity to do that book?*
Grell: Oh, absolutely. In terms of comics, to me that was the gold standard.
Cassell: *I agree. In fact, when I was a kid, my favorite comic book character was Green Lantern.*
Grell: And mine was Green Arrow.



Previous page: In resurrecting the legendary *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* title, editor Julius Schwartz chose Mike Grell to succeed the legendary Neal Adams as artist. Here's the cover of #90 [Aug.–Sept. 1976]. **Above inset:** Grell recreation of his *GL/GA* #97 cover.

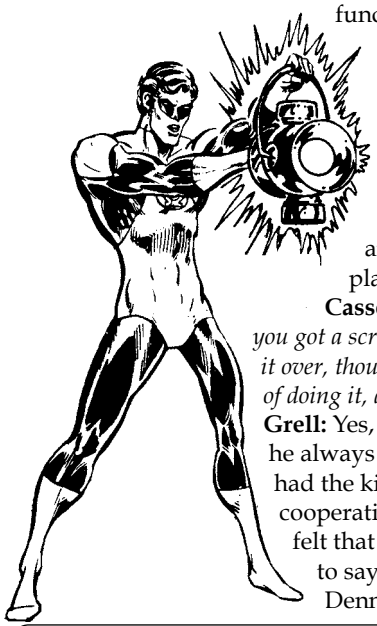
Cassell: *Was it really?*
Grell: Yup. Green Lantern, I liked well enough, but it took me forever to figure out that the ring wasn't just dragging him around. I thought, "This guy's gotta have the strongest finger in the world." Of course, it didn't dawn on me that the ring makes him fly; the ring doesn't just drag him from place to place.
Cassell: *When you were drawing* Green Lantern/Green Arrow, *did you have a favorite villain that you liked to pit them against?*
Grell: No, I was just so excited to be working with Denny O'Neil, it didn't matter.
Cassell: *What was it like working with Denny?*
Grell: It was great. I learned more about good writing from working as the artist for Denny than anything else. I learned not to be so damned verbose. I learned the difference between text and subtext. Denny had hard and fast rules that he broke all the time, but knowing what the rules are allows you the freedom to break them. And his rules were no more than 12 words in a balloon, no more than 100 words on a page. Denny had a natural gift for breaking down dialogue as you would in normal conversation. It's the difference between a natural speech pattern and one that just crams as many words as possible into a balloon. For instance, take a phrase, "I loved a woman who promised she'd never leave me; she died," or, "I loved a woman who promised she'd never leave me." Beat, or space, a new balloon. "She died." That beat in between, that second balloon, creates that pause in the dialogue that adds meaning to it.

The other thing that Denny taught me was never, ever have the characters talk about the action that's going on in the panel. It's two different things. One of my best bad examples of that was a *Conan* book. I don't remember when or where I came across it, but it was an old one. Conan is standing on the deck of a ship, and there's a tidal wave about to smash down upon him, and Conan's dialogue is, "Lo, yon mighty wave doth raise above the deck like the very hand of Crom itself!" Really? People just don't talk like that. It's a waste. There's no point in doing that. Good acting, bad acting, text and subtext. A great example of that would be the scene in *Pulp Fiction* where Sam Jackson and John Travolta are getting ready to go visit the college kids. They're talking

about something other than what they're doing. They're getting their guns ready. They're getting ready to go into this room and shoot some people. But that's not what they're talking about. They're talking about Marcellus Wallace's wife and how he had a guy thrown out of a fourth-story window through a glass greenhouse or whatever it is just because the guy touched his wife's seat. The real intent of the dialogue is to let you know later on just how much trouble Vincent Vega is in for having taken Mrs. Wallace out and provided the drugs she O.D.'d on.

So Denny's ability to tell a story was just fantastic and working with him was so good because he would give you the bare bones framework and leave the rest up to you. He would say things like "CU2" shot (close-up two-shot) and leave the artist to his own imagination to figure out how to frame that panel. If he had something specific in mind, he would write it, but for the most part, he left, I would say, 50% to the interpretation of the artist. That gave you a lot of freedom to experiment with different layouts and different types of visual storytelling. He understood that the visual part of the storytelling was my job, and the verbal part was his side.

Earlier we talked about the difference between Cary Bates and Jim Shooter writing *The Legion of Super-Heroes*. A Denny O'Neil script generally ran about a half-page to maybe one page for every page in the book. And if it was talking heads, it was short and sweet and to-the-point. Rarely more than one page. It was very much a cooperative effort. I felt like I was part of a functioning team with Denny, and that mutual respect that we had for each other continues to this day. I think he's tied for first place among the best comic writers that ever sat at a typewriter. I rank him dead even with Archie Goodwin, and everybody else is in second place.



Cassell: *Was there ever any time when you got a script from Denny and after reading it over, thought there was maybe a better way of doing it, and approached him about that?*
Grell: Yes, absolutely. And, to his credit, he always considered my suggestions. We had the kind of mutually respectful and cooperative relationship that I always felt that he was considering what I had to say. The thing of it is that, because Denny was the writer and the editor, Denny was the boss. If we had a disagreement on something, I always had the feeling that if I could talk him into my point of view, he was willing to go along with it, and if not, we did it his way, because, hey, he's the boss, right? That's the way it should be.
Cassell: *Back in that time period, were you doing prelims for* Green Lantern/Green Arrow *and giving them to him to review?*
Grell: No, I just did pencils.
Cassell: *Did the script include the dialogue?*
Grell: Yes. It was full script, but he was very Spartan in what he wrote, and in that way it was very much like a good screenwriter, things that I didn't learn until years later. Sometimes it's as important what you don't put on the page as what you do put on the page.

If you read screenplays much at all, you'll see that some screenwriters are very visual in their writing without being heavy-handed. They can conjure an image with their words well enough that the director would have to be something of a moron not to be able to understand what it is that they had in mind.

Like the best screenwriters and their relationship with directors, a comic writer is very much like a screenwriter, and the artist is the director, and it's up to the artist to interpret what the writer has to say. The better the writer, the closer the final result is going to be to what the writer had in mind. You don't have to write volumes in order to be descriptive. You can write a few words that describe the emotion and the effect.
Cassell: *You stayed on* Green Lantern/Green Arrow *for about 22 issues. Do you recall why you stopped doing it?*
Grell: Well, the simple answer is that, if my memory serves me, I had several things going on at the same time. I was doing *Starslayer*, I was doing the *Warlord*, and I had just begun drawing the Sunday *Tarzan* comic strip.
Cassell: *I think* Warlord *went monthly right at that time.*
Grell: Right. Once you're dealing with a monthly book I was writing and drawing, it's a tough nut to crack.

Evidence of the lasting impact of Grell's run on Green Lantern/Green Arrow *can be found in popular culture, when years later on the hit television series,* The Big Bang Theory, *the character Sheldon Cooper wore a t-shirt featuring the cover to* Green Lantern/Green Arrow *#90. However, this wasn't the last time that Grell would draw the adventures of the Emerald Archer. The best, in fact, was yet to come.*

Top inset: Grell's sketch studies for his cover and printed cover to *DC Special* #17 [Summer '75]. **Bottom insets:** The Green heroes, drawn by Mike Grell and appearing in *The Amazing World of DC Comics* #12 [July '76]. **Next page:** Original art for Grell's splash page in *The Flash* #242 [June '76].

Tarzan

Tarzan is arguably one of the most recognized literary characters of all time. He was created by Edgar Rice Burroughs and first appeared in the novel Tarzan of the Apes, *published in 1912. Burroughs wrote two dozen novels starring Tarzan and the character has been adapted on radio, film, and television, as well as in comic books and newspaper comic strips.*

The Tarzan *comic strip debuted in newspapers in 1929 and continues today (albeit currently as reprints in limited circulation). Some of the stories that appeared in the strip were based on the Burroughs novels, but others were original. Hal Foster was the first artist to draw the* Tarzan *strip and many others have followed.*

At the time Grell began on Tarzan, *it was a Sunday only strip and Gil Kane had finished his run six months earlier. As noted previously, Grell originally began his drawing career with hopes of having his own strip, but if you couldn't sell your own idea to a syndicate, landing a classic adventure strip like* Tarzan *was the next best thing, especially for a fan of the Lord of the Jungle.*

Grell's artistic style was well suited to Tarzan, *but not all of his comic strip stories met with universal acclaim – some diehard fans did not appreciate seeing Tarzan in Wisconsin – but others applauded the idea of Jane fighting against drug smugglers to protect an injured Tarzan. And Grell used his understanding of how Sunday newspaper strips are printed to produce some very creative layouts, including large sweeping panels and narrow vertical panels that enhanced the storytelling, as he describes in the interview below.*

Cassell: *Let's talk about* Tarzan. *I know you were a big fan of the character from when you were a kid.*

Grell: Absolutely. One of the first movies I remember seeing was Johnny Weissmuller's *Tarzan the Ape Man*. When he did the Tarzan yell, he scared the crap out of me. It was just an amazing character, the imagination that lay behind it. Edgar Rice Burroughs came up with the concept and he created the Ape/English language.

I had a buddy who was like me. We were really original nerds, which means we were just weird. And we could speak Ape/English back and forth to each other. At some point I realized that there was really just a small difference between reality and fantasy, but it never stopped me from continuing to be a huge Tarzan fan. I just enjoy the character, saw all the movies at least once, read all the books probably three or four times each.

Cassell: *You were reading the comics, too, right?*

Grell: Yes. The *Tarzan* comics were being done by… First it was Jesse Marsh back in the early days, and then it was taken over by Russ Manning. Russ Manning's art was actually the first guy I learned to look for in a comic book. If something was drawn by Russ Manning I would pick it up, which of course led to the *Magnus: Robot Fighter*. Originally Russ Manning was doing *Brothers of the Spear*, and that was a back-up in the *Tarzan* book.

My real moment as a *Tarzan* artist came when I was at San Diego Comicon and I got to meet Russ Manning and Doug Wildey, who followed Russ on the *Tarzan* comics. I had met them on a Thursday or Friday, and later on, during the weekend, I was sitting doing a commission sketch of *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*, and Russ Manning walks up, looks over my shoulder, and goes, "Hey, Wildey! Come over here! Take a look at this! See this? That's how you draw a lion. See how he's doing that? Your lions look like hairy dogs." And they proceeded to hover over my shoulders like a pair of vultures, and every line I put down they would comment on. I got so flustered I broke into a flop sweat, and a big bead of sweat rolled off the tip of my nose and dropped right into the middle of the page, and they laughed their asses off. About three years later I told that story to Dodie Manning, Russ's wife, and Dodie says, "Russell! Were you being mean to this poor boy?" I said, "Yeah, mom, they're pickin' on me!" And Russ said, "Yeah, well, later on we're going to take you out in the alley and kick the sh*t out of you, you little brat!"

Cassell: *So obviously Tarzan has meant a lot to you ever since you were a kid. How did you get the assignment to draw Tarzan in the newspaper?*

Grell: Archie Goodwin and Gil Kane had been doing the *Tarzan* comic strip, and they were leaving it to take over *Star Wars*. Archie knew that I was a huge *Tarzan* fan, and not wanting to simply walk away from the strip and abandon the syndicate with nobody to take it over, Archie phoned me one day, and it was the second time in my career that someone phoned me up and asked me if I would mind them recommending me for a job. Of course, would I mind? Comic strips had been my dream in the first place when I became a cartoonist, and it was a Tarzan comic strip.

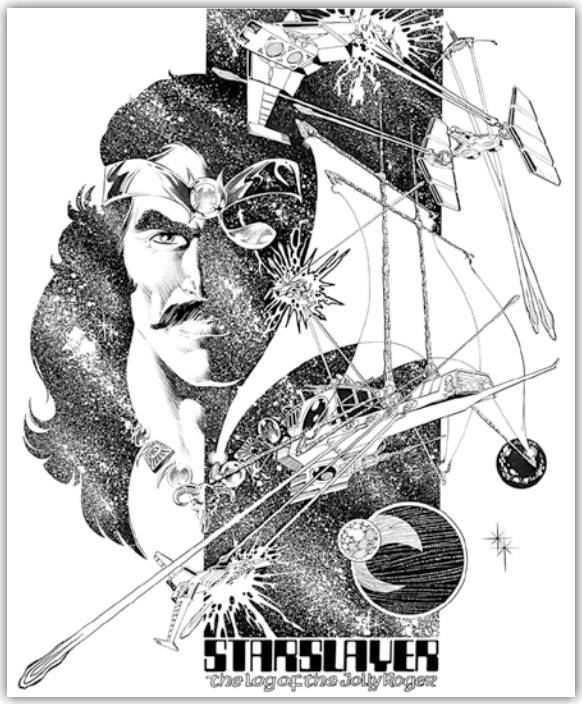
The only strip in my estimation that is the equal to the Tarzan strip, of course, would be *Prince Valiant*. So I took over. I had all the background that I needed, so there was no question about whether I was the right guy for the job, but it just happened to fall into my hands at that right exact moment. I wrote it and

Previous page: Reproduced from a black-&-white printing, Mike Grell's second and third *Tarzan* Sunday comic strip (respectively, July 26, Aug. 2, 1981, #2606–07). **Above inset:** Detail from Grell's artwork gracing the May 9, 1982 *Tarzan* Sunday strip, #2647.

Starslayer

Mike Grell has always been prolifically creative, so it is not surprising that his creativity would ultimately exceed the capacity of a traditional comic book company like DC Comics. However, it was DC that unintentionally gave Grell the impetus to seek other pastures when it came to a "Celtic barbarian in the far-flung future."

On the inside front cover of the premiere issue of Starslayer*:* The Log of the Jolly Roger, *Grell explains how it started: "Starslayer began as everything does, with an idea… Then came the task of creating an entire world, a universe of sparkling cities and distant planets, populated by heroes and villains to delight the imagination, an endless progression of model sheets and character studies, spaceship and weapons designs, scrawled on envelopes and paper bags until everything worked and the characters became more than two-dimensional and began to live." According to Grell, that creative process took three-and-a-half years.*



Cassell: *You mentioned that* Starslayer: The Log of the Jolly Roger *and* Jon Sable *came about at roughly the same time. Which came first?*
Grell: *Starslayer* was first.
Cassell: *What was the genesis of* Starslayer*?*
Grell: *Starslayer* originated as a concept that I pitched to DC Comics. It was intended as a direct counterpart to *Warlord*. With the Warlord, I had a modern man in a very primitive society, and with Starslayer, I had a primitive man in an ultra-futuristic world. He's a Celtic chieftain who gets transported basically into the middle of *Star Wars*, if you will. A shorthand description would be *Braveheart* meets *Star Wars*. And it was actually on DC's schedule when the Implosion hit in the '70s and it got shelved. That's how I was able to get it back.
Cassell: *What did you do then?*
Grell: When Pacific Comics was getting ready to launch their lineup, [publisher] Bill Schanes knew that I had *Starslayer* and he contacted me and asked me if I was up for it, and I said, "Sure."
Cassell: Starslayer *actually started with a limited edition portfolio of six black-&-white plates, right? How did that come about?*
Grell: It was the lead-off for Pacific Comics. Back in those days, before they got into the actual comic book business, they were publishing portfolios. It was fairly lucrative. In fact, it may have inspired the nature of the independent publishing business as it ultimately developed, because portfolios were generally low budget. The expense to the publisher was minimal, and the potential for gain was pretty darned high.
Cassell: *It was a nice portfolio and I understand it sold out. And you hand-signed all 1,200 copies?*
Grell: It sure felt like it. Yeah, every copy of the portfolio was signed.
Cassell: *So Starslayer was your first creator-owned project?*
Grell: Yes. I was the first artist to sign with Pacific Comics. Jack Kirby was second, and I think Neal Adams was third. Jack's book came out ahead of mine because Jack could probably write and draw a page while we've been talking here. I can't really tell you when Neal's came out, or what the success of it was. I just know that Pacific Comics tanked.
Cassell: *After how long was it?*
Grell: I got six issues' worth of *Starslayer* out of the deal.
Cassell: *But you retained the rights?*
Grell: Yes.
Cassell: *So what happened when Pacific Comics folded?*
Grell: That's what enabled me to take it over to First Comics. I was already doing *Sable* with First Comics, so we relaunched *Starslayer* over at First.
Cassell: *I know you wrote two issues at First Comics and then handed it over to John Ostrander, who worked with several artists, including Tim Truman. Do you still own the rights to* Starslayer*?*
Grell: Yes, I do. I have since written a screen treatment for it, and who knows? If the world turns exactly right and God's holding his mouth right one day, maybe I'll get a movie or TV show out of it.
Cassell: *Starslayer also had backup stories with other characters, right?*
Grell: Yep. If you look at Starslayer, you'll find the origin of the Rocketeer. Dave Stevens' Rocketeer premiered in the back of Starslayer #2.

Starslayer *served as a forum for several characters that appeared in back-up stories. In addition to the debut of the Rocketeer in #2, #5 featured the second appearance of Sergio Aragones' Groo and #10 featured the first Grimjack by John Ostrander and Tim Truman.*

When Starslayer *moved to First Comics, the numbering continued with #7 and 8 written and laid out by Grell with finished art by Lenin Delsol. Ostrander took over writing the title with #9, collaborating with a series of artists including Delsol, Tim Truman, Hilary Barta, and Tom Sutton. The title ended in 1985 after a total run of 34 issues.*

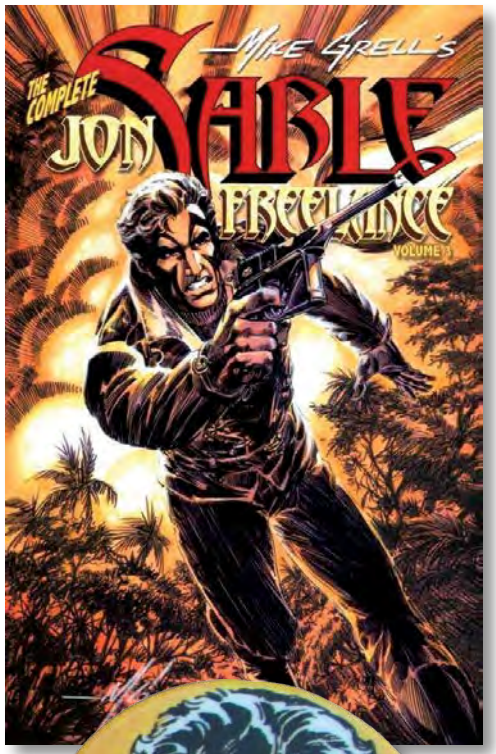
In 1995, Windjammer/Valiant published a "Director's Cut" of the original Pacific Comics Starslayer*, expanded over eight issues. The first and last issues featured new art and all eight featured new covers. A trade paperback collection was published by Dark Horse in 2017, comprising the Valiant series. A signed-and-numbered limited edition* Starslayer *poster was produced at the same time to promote the book.*

Starslayer *proved to be a valuable learning experience for Grell, since his foray in creator-owned comics was just beginning.*

Pages 70 & 71: On left is Mike Grell's colored illustration of his *Starslayer* characters, which was used for the cover of a 2017 IDW omnibus collection of the Acclaim/Valiant "director's cut" version. On the inset right: promotional illustration from 1981 for Grell's creator-owned series (also used as a plate for the *Starslayer* portfolio).
Previous page: Top is the final two-page spread by Grell from *Starslayer* #1 [Feb. 1982]. Bottom is another two-page spread from the same issue.
This page: Clockwise from above is Starslayer (with S.A.M.) commission drawing; Grell 1981 promotional illustration; and color art commission of Tamara, Starslayer's bodacious ally.

Jon Sable

The year 2018 marks the 35th anniversary of the first appearance of Jon Sable. In a post on his website, Mike Grell credited the late "great white hunter" Harry Selby with inspiring his creation, calling him the "real Jon Sable." Sable is arguably the best of Mike Grell's creator-owned projects, and certainly the most enduring. Over the years, it has been a comic book in various formats and multiple publishers, a prose novel, and an ill-fated television show. Grell's level of involvement in each of those permutations has varied, but it remains the character closest to his heart. And if Mike has anything to say about it, Sable isn't done yet.



Cassell: *How did you come up with the idea for Jon Sable?*
Grell: Oh, that was actually easy. I wanted to do something that would bring out the best in me, and I combined my love of the outdoors with my love of Africa and wrote the kind of stories that I wanted to do. I was a big fan of detective fiction. Mickey Spillane was my hero when I was a kid, and I wanted to do that kind of a story. It was a labor of love right from the start. My overall concept for Sable was really simple. Sable is the opposite of Batman.
Messer: *Right.*
Grell: He doesn't work for the greater good or the common man. He works for money. It doesn't matter who you are or what you are, if he's working for you, you've got to pay up. That's all there is to it. He's a former African professional hunter, game warden, a mercenary, whose family was slaughtered by butchers in a reprisal raid. He goes off his nut, tracks them down mercilessly wherever they are, and slaughters these guys in some really bloody, violent methods. And if all you have left to live for is vengeance, what do you do when your vengeance is done? Sable becomes a drunk. And then he falls in with a pack of mercenaries, and is used and abused, cast aside, and winds up in jail. They threw him out of the country. He was deported back to the United States, where he becomes, basically, a bum on the street until an old friend picks him up, stands him back on his two legs, and he actually tries to rebuild his life, and becomes a children's author, of all things. His deep, dark secret is that he writes children's books about a troop of leprechauns living in a fairy mound in Central Park. The only time he ever wears a disguise is when he has to appear at a comic convention or a bookstore signing, and then he puts on a pair of nerd glasses, and a Harpo Marx wig, and a fake mustache, and a tweed jacket, and goes by the name B. B. Flemm. When you look at it written out it doesn't look bad, but when you say it, it's that stuff that you hock out of your throat when you have a nasty cold. And it was a lot of fun.
Cassell: *Other than making the character the opposite of Batman, were there other inspirations in creating Sable?*
Grell: You're always inspired by the things around you, at least in my estimation. It's just impossible to live on the planet and not be affected by something or other. I did stories that were similar to the approach that I took later on with *The Longbow Hunters* and *Green Arrow*, which was I drew heavily on the headlines. One of the things that *Sable* did for me, though, was it gave me the freedom to do just about any kind of story that I wanted. I had the high action/high adventure stuff, the African hunter in the urban jungle, and I could do mysteries, murder mysteries. I did one called "The Hard Way," and I found I had written myself into a corner. Honestly, I was working on part two of a two-part story and I still hadn't figured out how I was going to solve it. And one day, as I'm sitting there, it was almost as if Agatha Christie had leaned over and whispered in my ear because all of a sudden, there it was. I had the solution. And it was pretty cool.

One of the key things that I always did in any of my stories is that, with the exception of one time—okay, maybe two times—I always gave the reader all the information they were going to need. I didn't spring any surprises on them. There was the one story that I did where Sable is helping out a girl who's hiding out, working as a stripper. As the bad guy is trying to kill her, she pulls out a gun and shoots the guy right in the face. And Sable asks the question, "Okay, where did you keep the gun?" Because she's just standing on the stage with her clothes off.

One other time Sable has this plush townhouse and he's fighting with a bad guy and they fall off a balcony on the third floor, land in the swimming pool, and as Sable is being shot at, he dives into the swimming pool and he comes up with an Uzi submachine gun. Where does he get it? While he's under water he opens his Acme underwater gun safe. I think everybody went, "Oh, okay. We get it." Where is he going to get a gun underwater?

Previous page: Jon Sable in his "battlemask," rendered by creator Mike Grell. **Top:** *The Complete Jon Sable* #3 ['05] cover. **Above inset:** Sable button.

burglar, almost a straight rip-off from Maggie the Cat.

Cassell: *Oh, wow.*

Grell: But such things happen.

Cassell: *I think Tom Selleck would have been a good Sable.*

Grell: He would have been, but things like that happen in Hollywood on a regular basis. When Pierce Brosnan was all set to sign for James Bond, somehow word got out that he was going to do that, and with less than 24 hours left to go on his contract, NBC found out and they immediately renewed his contract for [TV drama] *Remington Steele* thinking that they'd be able to cash in on him playing James Bond. But when the movie studio found out, they dumped him. They gave it to Timothy Dalton, and Brosnan had to wait another seven years to play the role.

Messer: *Are you working on future projects with Jon Sable? Is there a second novel coming?*

Grell: Yes. I have a second novel in the works, and I have interest in a few other things. I'm not going to give up. Not by a long shot.

When Grell left Jon Sable, Freelance *after 56 issues, First Comics relaunched the book with the title* Sable*, using a new creative team, and it ran for 27 issues.*

The Sable *novel was published by Forge in 2000. The synopsis on the back cover reads: "Jon Sable had it all, including a lovely wife and family – until poachers took it all away from him, killing those he loved and leaving him for dead. But only the civilized part of him died, and a savage instinct and hunger for vengeance survived. Now Jon Sable is ready to even the score … and then some." The paperback edition bore the additional caption on the front cover, "Soon to be a Major Motion Picture."*

Top inset: Top is one of a set of promotional pin-back buttons produced by First Comics during the '80s. **Above:** Action-packed double-page spread from *Jon Sable*, *Freelance* #6 [Nov. 1983], drawn (naturally) by *Sable* creator Mike Grell.

The Longbow Hunters

On more than one occasion over the course of his career, Mike Grell was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time, to be given an opportunity to do something different, unusual, extraordinary. And he took advantage of that opportunity to change the landscape of the comics medium, setting a new standard for generations to come, and cementing his place in comics history. The penultimate example of that good fortune for Grell was The Longbow Hunters.

Cassell: *How did* The Longbow Hunters *come about?*
Grell: Well, from the time that I left DC Comics, I had done *Starslayer* at Pacific Comics, and then when Pacific Comics tanked, another company called First Comics was established. They were based in Chicago, and the editor at First Comics was Mike Gold. Mike and I worked together on *Sable*, and I also brought *Starslayer* over to First Comics. I had been doing *Sable* for several years over there, until the relationship deteriorated with the publisher.

Mike Gold then left First Comics, and he phoned me up and said, "Look. Is there anything over at DC Comics that you like well enough to bury the hatchet and come back to work over here? Any character that you like well enough?" I said, "Well, I always felt that I had done such a crappy job on Batman in the '70s that I'd like to have another crack at it." But I had just run into Frank Miller the week before and, over dinner, Frank told me his entire plot for *The Dark Knight Returns*, and he had just finished writing, I think, the first issue. And I said, "I know Frank's working on *The Dark Knight Returns*, and when he's done with this, you can put a period at

Previous page: Grell redesigns for the Green Arrow, 1986. **Right:** Green Arrow (and just plain Arrow) through the ages.

the end of the Batman sentence for the next 20 years." Well, I'm off by, what is it, 10 years now? I mean, we're 30 years from *The Dark Knight Returns*. But I was right about that.

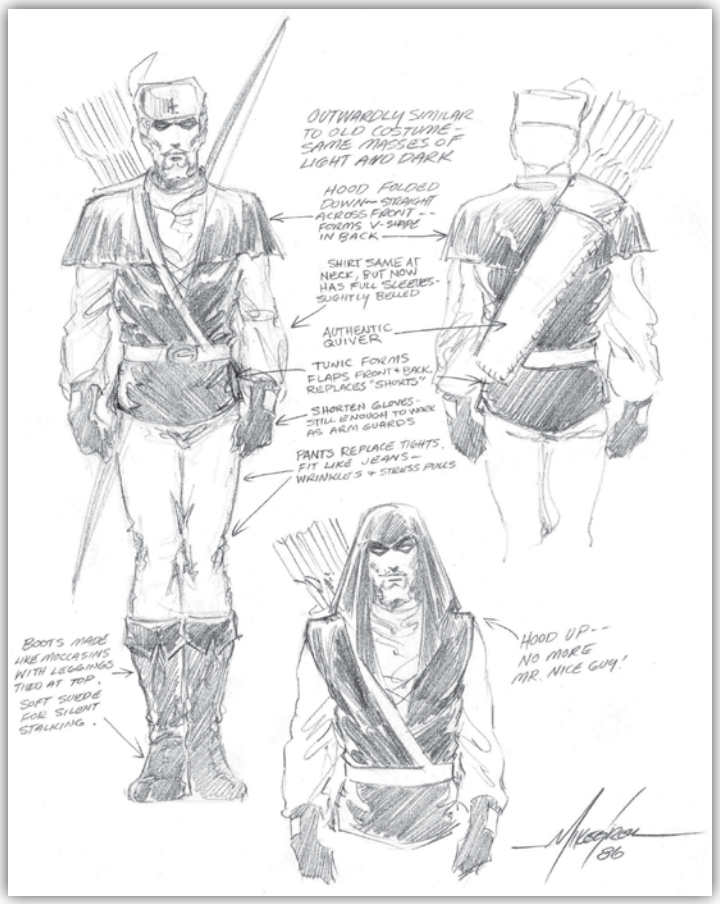
Gold said, "What about Green Arrow?" And I said, "Well, Green Arrow was always my favorite comic book character, and still is." And he said, "Think about this: Green Arrow as an urban hunter." Six words: Green Arrow as an urban hunter. And that is the entire basis for *The Longbow Hunters* and the continuing *Green Arrow* series. It was inspirational.

I had done a story for Julie Schwartz, a spec plot for a Green Arrow story years before that involved a female counterpart to Green Arrow. I was going to call her the Black Arrow for lack of anything better. The character was a survivor of the Holocaust, and she was basically going around tracking down Nazi war criminals. She had been a child in one of the camps. You've got to remember, at the time it was probably 1974, so it wasn't that far beyond World War II. So it was entirely possible that a woman 35 years old could be a Holocaust survivor. And Julie was in a rather heavy-handed mood that day, or so I felt, and said, "No, I've got another idea. What it is, it's not a girl. It's a young boy. And he's not using a bow and arrow. He's using a sling, and he's a reincarnation of King David." I kind of shook my head and said, "Look. If that's the story you want to tell, get somebody else to write it, but I don't want to write that story."

So I put my story in a file drawer, and after my conversation with Mike Gold about coming back to DC and doing Green Arrow, I pulled it out and revised it. And that became the source and inspiration for the Shado character in *The Longbow Hunters*. Updated, changed around to create a character who fit into the times, and that worked out pretty well. The rest of the story I based on news events and stories that were in local newspapers. I made a bunch of changes to the Green Arrow character. For starters, I removed him out of the mythical Star City and into Seattle, Washington. The reason for that was twofold: one was that I wanted to put him in a real world city so that people could read my stories and think that it was something that was happening in the real world instead of something that happens on Planet Mongo.

I had an ongoing discussion with people at DC when they were all flummoxed with the idea that my continuity didn't fit into any of the standard DC Comics continuity. There were no bug-eyed monsters, no space aliens, no super-powers in *The Longbow Hunters* or *Green Arrow*. When Hal Jordan appeared, it was as Hal Jordan, not as Green Lantern. The friendship and the relationship were still exactly the same, but there was no mention of him being Green Lantern, having this magical, powerful ring. I kept everything as rooted in the real world as possible, which then brought about a couple of other changes. But, the choice to make it Seattle instead of someplace else was actually pretty simple.

I was born and raised in a tiny little town in northern Wisconsin, 100 miles north of Green Bay, population, I think we had about maybe 1,200 or 1,500 people in that county. So the only cities that I was familiar with were New York, where I had worked, and Chicago, where I had gone to art school. I had already done New York as the backdrop for *Sable*. I didn't feel like I wanted to do it again. Chicago? I'm going to say it's just not as exciting, even though it's an international port of call, it doesn't have all the elements that Seattle has. Seattle is on the coast. It's surrounded by mountains. It's got the ocean. It's got everything you can possibly imagine. It's close to Canada, an international port of call, and everything else, plus it's got a really

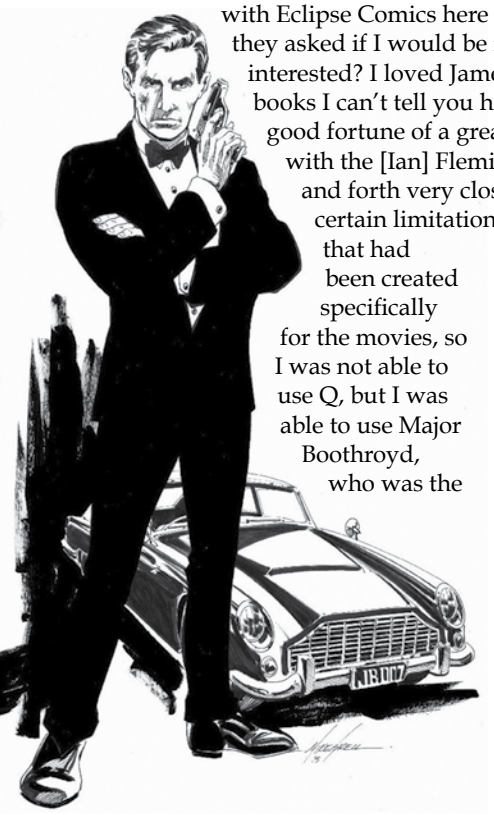


This page: More costume redesigns by Mike Grell produced as he was preparing the mini-series *Green Arrow: The Longbow Hunters* [1987].

James Bond

Few intellectual properties have enjoyed the universal and enduring success of James Bond. Ian Fleming wrote 12 novels and two collections of short stories about Bond. The character has been adapted for television, radio, newspaper comic strips, comic books, video games, and film. The Bond movies are the longest-running series of all time and have grossed over $7 billion. Mike Grell has long been a fan of Bond, having based his character Sable in part on the Fleming creation. So, no one had to twist Grell's arm when an opportunity presented itself to draw Agent 007.

Cassell: *I know you're a James Bond fan. Who is your favorite actor in the role? Mine would be Sean Connery and Pierce Brosnan.*
Grell: Yeah, me, too. If there was a guy who was born to play James Bond, you've got Sean Connery and Pierce Brosnan.
Cassell: *We discussed Brosnan earlier. It's a shame he had to wait so long to play Bond.*
Grell: Actually, I think he did great at the time that he came to the role. I think having a little bit more age to him gave him a bit of believability. We were accustomed to Bond being in his 40s at any rate, as opposed to in his early 30s.
Cassell: *How did you get involved with James Bond in comics?*
Grell: I got a phone call from a publisher in England. I'm sure that it was due to my work on *Sable* as much as anything else. They wanted to do a graphic novel, a joint publication with Eclipse Comics here in the United States. And they asked if I would be interested. Would I be interested? I loved James Bond. I had read all the books I can't tell you how many times. I had the good fortune of a great cooperative relationship with the [Ian] Fleming people. We worked back and forth very closely, and I was only given certain limitations regarding some characters that had been created specifically for the movies, so I was not able to use Q, but I was able to use Major Boothroyd, who was the quartermaster in the James Bond novels. Anything that was in the novels was fair game, and, for the most part, anything from the movies that wasn't specifically created by the movie people I could use. I managed to sneak in the Aston Martin in tribute to various scenes from the films like *Dr. No* and *From Russia with Love* and *Goldfinger*.



I had the greatest compliment paid to me by Raymond Benson, who is the author of *The James Bond Bedside Companion*. Raymond took over writing the James Bond novels somewhere in the 2000s, and I can't tell you how many of those he wrote. I think it's upwards of five. But, at any rate, Raymond described my James Bond graphic novel, *Permission to Die*, as—and this is a quote—"The best James Bond movie I ever read."
Cassell: *Oh, that's great.*
Grell: So, if it can be a movie is anybody's guess, but there you go. I incorporated a lot of the standard stuff that you expect to see in a James Bond film. I managed to work a lot of that in there. The curious and oddball thing that came about was that, because Eclipse was having some issues with their printers, they were having difficulty finding anybody who would print their books any more. Whatever the relationship was, whatever happened, I'm not privy to it, so I can't say with any kind of authority that it was a financial issue or maybe they just did not get along. But the third issue of *Permission to Die* stayed in the can long after it was finished. I think it was in the can for more than six months before the final issue came out. The end result was that, while the story dealt with a character who is trying to escape from behind the Iron Curtain, by the time the book actually came out, the Iron Curtain had fallen. So we actually had to write a little something in there at the end of the book to account for the fact that, once again, the world had changed. Like Sable in *Shaman's Tears*, you

Previous and this page: Renditions by Mike Grell of Ian Fleming's legendary British "double 0" MI6 espionage agent, James Bond. The artist illustrated an Eclipse Comics adaptation of *Licence to Kill* and wrote and drew the three-part Eclipse mini-series, *James Bond: Permission to Die* ['89–91].

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Shaman's Tears

By the 1990s, Mike Grell's reputation in the comic book industry was well established, having set a new standard on existing series like The Legion of Super-Heroes *and defining a whole new world with* Warlord. *With the success of* Sable, *Grell became known for creator-owned projects, too. So, it is not a surprise that Grell would be sought out by a publisher like Image Comics to make that magic happen again. This time around, the magic takes the form of* Shaman's Tears.

Cassell: *Let's talk about* Shaman's Tears. *First, is it pronounced SHAH-man's Tears, or SHAY-man's Tears?*
Grell: You know, I've looked it up in the dictionary, and Webster said, "Fight it out amongst yourselves." It's either/or.
Cassell: *What do you prefer?*
Grell: I say SHAH-man's Tears, but other people are happy with SHAY-man's Tears. It doesn't matter to me.
Cassell: *So how did it come about?*
Grell: I was approached by Todd McFarlane to do a project for Image Comics. They had done their initial release with the original founders of the company, and they were looking to branch out from there.

Shaman's Tears was based on a lot of different things, including a lifelong passion I have for Native American culture. Where I grew up in Northern Wisconsin, anybody around there who wasn't German, or Polish, or Italian, was one of the Midwestern Indian tribes. I wanted to be an Indian so bad when I was a little kid. I saw the John Wayne movie *Hondo*, which has a scene where Hondo is an army scout who finds himself standing between a mother and her half-growed young'un. The Apaches were raiding in the area, and something early on passes between the Apache chief and this young boy. The boy impresses the chief with his courage, so the chief takes up his knife, he puts their thumbs together and cuts them, and the blood runs down and makes them blood brothers. And the next day, every little boy in town had a Band-Aid on his thumb. I've still got a little crease of a scar from mine. And I was disappointed because I thought that would actually make me an Indian, but that blood brother thing's as close as I've ever gotten.

I was always fascinated by our Native American culture, and used to speculate what America would be like if it hadn't been invaded by the Europeans. When it was time to create a comic book to be published at Image, there's no question that the hottest properties at that time were super-heroes, and I didn't really want to do a muscle-bound super-hero, but I found a way to get my head around it and satisfy that sort of industry requirement of the times. I made this character, he's a half-breed who grew up on the reservation in the Dakotas and hated it. He was never Indian enough for his Indian friends and family, and he was never white enough for his white friends. And so, at the age of 16, he runs off and leaves the reservation, leaving behind a pregnant girlfriend. When he comes back 12 years later, he now has an 11-year-old son and his girlfriend is married to his best friend, and his arrival back on the scene causes all kinds of trouble in the family unit.

But instead of having super-powers, I went for mystical powers. He is tasked by his mother, who is dying, to undergo the ceremony of the sun dance, during which he is given a vision of the earth spirit woman, and he is bestowed with the powers of the animals and the earth. He can fly like a hawk, he has the strength of a grizzly, he can run as fast as an antelope, and he can also command the powers of nature. But the kicker is that he can't just summon up these powers any time he wants. There's a line in there that says, "You don't call the power; the power calls you." And when the power calls to him, three red tears flow down his face, which symbolize the three red stripes that the Lakota shaman paints on his face when he does the sun dance ceremony. The tears flow down from his right eye, and they turn red as they go, and he actually transforms into the physical embodiment of this great Indian warrior called Stalking Wolf.

It's the kind of story that I enjoyed doing because I was

Previous page: Opening page to Mike Grell's creator-owned contribution to the early years of Image Comics, *Shaman's Tears*, featuring lead character Joshua Brand, otherwise known as the mystical powered Stalking Wolf. **Inset above:** *Wizard* #24 [Aug. 1993] featured a *Shaman's Tears* trading card.

point, I believe, was selling about 8,000 copies a month, and it would have been canceled except that "DC" stands for *Detective Comics*. It's the flagship of their line, and they weren't going to cancel it. It would be like Ford announcing that they're only going to make Lincolns from now on.

So the sales on *Shaman's Tears* started as high as it was ever going to get, and it dropped rapidly from that point on. The first book sold maybe 595,000 copies. The second issue was a quarter of a million. By the time the third issue came out, those numbers were down to about 80,000, which was right about where *Green Arrow* had been selling when I was writing it. And, interestingly enough, about 15,000 copies below what *Sable* had been selling at when I was doing it over at First Comics in the early '80s. And it just dropped and dropped until it was evident that something had to change, and the change was in the form of *Maggie the Cat*.

The why of it was real simple. Girl books were selling like gangbusters. When everybody else was scraping the bottom of the barrel, the sexy babes were selling like hotcakes, or at least selling better. So I dropped *Shaman's Tears* in favor of *Maggie the Cat*. We brought out two issues of *Maggie the Cat* before I got a look at the books and discovered that we had been losing $4,000 a month for the last two issues of *Shaman's Tears* and those two issues of *Maggie the Cat* were negative $4,000 a month, so I pulled the pin. I couldn't afford a $4,000 a month hobby, not when I was paying everybody else a salary, that's for sure. That's why *Maggie the Cat* has never been finished.

I have a screenplay that I've written for *Maggie*, and it's started to get some fairly serious action in Hollywood, and I'm crossing my fingers and toes. Grandma said, "Spit in one hand and wish in the other and see which one fills up the fastest." (Grandma cleaned it up for us kids.)

But hope springs eternal, and if this goes through and I'm able to get a deal on it, I am definitely going to finish out the graphic novel for *Maggie*. It's undetermined at this point whether those first two issues will be reissued as a monthly comic and then continue on from there or if I'll just go ahead and finish out the entire thing as a complete graphic novel and release it all at once.

Cassell: *Well, that sounds great. Do you have any thoughts on who you'd like to see play the lead?*

Grell: Well, I've got all kinds of thoughts, but they're all ridiculous, or ridiculously expensive. At one point early on I would have chosen Connie Nielsen, who was the co-star with Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*. She had that kind of quality that I was looking for, of maturity and elegance, and, let's face it, she's an amazingly beautiful woman. Nicole Kidman. If money is no object, sure, why not? But reality has to rear its ugly head somewhere along the line, and somewhere we'll find a young lady who is appropriate for the role and is hungry enough to make it into a possible franchise.

Cassell: *I hope that comes to pass for you. Is there anything else about* Shaman's Tears *that we haven't touched on?*

Grell: There was one thing about the guest-shot with Sable. The crossover with Sable was issues #5–8 of *Shaman's Tears*. I drew a cover [#7] that I had so much fun with. It has Sable and Stalking Wolf in full battle gear creeping down an alleyway, and looming over them in the background is this strange-looking, weird monster with kind of buck teeth and bulging muscles and everything else, and you look at it close and it's a giant rabbit. And the caption that I put to it was, "Be vewwy quiet. We're hunting rabids." The creatures in the sewers are called rabids.

In 1993, Wizard, The Comics Magazine #24 *included a Shaman's Tears promotional trading card featuring a great rendition of the lead character by Grell. In addition to* Maggie the Cat, *Grell did a* Bar Sinister *series in 1995 that lasted four issues.* Shaman's Tears *was collected in an omnibus edition in 2011 by IDW. Mike also did some additional work for Image, which is discussed in the chapter "Other Stuff."*

Inset top: Two of the four *Shaman's Tears* issues to guest-star Jon Sable, #6 and 7 [Feb., May 1995]. **Inset bottom:** *Maggie the Cat* #1 [Jan. 1996] cover. **Next page:** Evocative full-page panel from *Shaman's Tears* #7.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Marvel Comics

Between DC and newspaper strips and licensed properties and creator-owned projects, Mike Grell managed a long, successful run working in comics, which explains why it wasn't until 2002 that Grell found his way to the "House of Ideas." But necessity is the mother of invention. So it was that Tony Stark found himself given the Grell treatment.

Cassell: *After working with DC for years and then doing your creator-owned characters, how did you end up doing work for Marvel?*

Grell: That was real simple. I needed a job. It sometimes is as easy as that. I wound up writing and occasionally drawing *Iron Man* for a couple of years, and had some fun with that. Tom Brevoort approached me in the mid-'90s and asked me to do a revamp of *Spider-Man*, and we went back and forth on that for about five months. Unfortunately, I did it without getting a contract upfront, and when Marvel tanked, that project also tanked, and I wound up not ever being paid a penny for five months' worth of development work. It was just one of those things.

But I think that was in the back of a lot of people's minds when it was time to look around for a new *Iron Man* writer, and I think that's how it came to me. For what it's worth, a lot of what was done in the *Spider-Man* movie and ensuing storylines is pretty similar to what my approach was to be. We got a bit bogged down because the canon of *Spider-Man* is sort of fixed, and I was told that if there's new material or changes that are made, you can only do it in between the panels. Anything that happened off-screen or off-panel was fair game, but anything that had already been published, you pretty much had to leave it alone. So certain things had to stay as they were. Of course, that's changed dramatically these days because every time you turn around, somebody's rebooting something or other. They're either killing off a character or resurrecting him, somebody else is putting on the mask or they're getting bit by another radioactive spider.

I know Tom, himself, was a bit surprised to discover that I had never been paid anything for the development work that I did on *Spider-Man*. But all of it did pay off. When I was given the opportunity on *Iron Man*, I think they were looking at my past history and record, and knew full well that I was going to bring them something that was different from what had been done up until that point. The first thing that I did was I changed Tony Stark physically. The suit, the Iron Man armor, had become so all-powerful that he was basically a mechanical version of Superman. Undefeatable. You could not beat him, you couldn't touch him, inside that armor. So one of the first things I did was I changed that part of it. I made the armor less powerful than it was, and changed Tony Stark physically.

Stark himself had become, physically, a more muscular version of Arnold Schwarzenegger. If you can picture Arnold Schwarzenegger on steroids. Now, wait a minute, that's an oxymoron. But, basically, you had a physical portrayal of Tony Stark as a big, muscle-bound guy. He had gigantic, broad shoulders. He had a head the size of his fist, and a neck that tapered from his shoulders up to the point of his head. He was built like a football player. And that's not Tony Stark. That's one of the reasons that I loved the casting of Robert Downey Jr. as Tony Stark. It was much more to the point. I concentrated on the man inside the iron. That was my approach. And I returned to the original concept that Stark had to recharge his batteries, literally, every 24 hours or it could run down and he could die.

But I also added something else in there, which was that it was possible for him to expend all of his energy, including his heart battery power, through the armor in the case of dire need or emergency, which added a potential for self-sacrifice that I felt was important for the character. It's one thing if the worst that's going to happen is he's going to get a bloody nose. Well, big deal. Nobody cares. The world has bloody noses all the time. But a man who can go from being inside this more or less impenetrable, invulnerable suit, but he still has an inherent weakness I thought was much more interesting, so I tried to make the stories as

Previous page: Mike Grell's awesome pencil work for the *Iron Man* #60 [Dec. 2002] cover. **Above inset:** Grell's cover art for *Iron Man* #54 [June '02].

Mike Grell Gallery of Art