AMERICAN

COMIC BOOK

CHRONICLES

THE 1950s

1950–1959

by BILL SCHELLY

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Variety on the Newsstand

The debut of Siegel and Shuster's Superman in mid-1938 was the shot in the arm that set the fledgling comic book industry on its feet. The Man of Tomorrow was a distinctly different kind of hero, uniquely suited to the brash four-color booklets that had so recently become a recognizable presence on American newsstands. When the word got out that National Allied Publications' *Action Comics* was a sales skyrocket, imitators followed, and an industry took hold.

In 1950, the types of comic books on the racks demonstrated how far the industry had come from its roots, as it adapted to changing public tastes after the end of World War II. While costumed heroes dominated the field during the war—partly out of a need for optimistic, powerful heroes, and partly because other forms simply hadn't been developed yet—the post-war era registered a significant drop-off in the public's interest in such fare.

Comic books as a medium lost some overall sales for a while, with demobilization and the reduction of readers in the armed services—virtually a captive audience during the war—but by then, the comic book as a mode of entertainment had gained acceptance. The readers were out there, and it remained for publishers to provide them with the kind of material that they found attractive and interesting. Publishers experimented with other kinds of subject matter, and by the decade's end, newsstands offered a great diversity of genres: Westerns, romance comics, teenage humor, funny animal antics, crime comics, and newspaper reprints, each type, in turn, having sub-genres.

National Comics in 1950

As 1950 began, **National Comics Publications Inc.**, now DC Comics (called National throughout this book), remained a sales leader for three principal reasons: employment of many of the most talented artists and writers in comics, conservative stewardship, and a program of prudent diversification.

Unlike many of its competitors, National's core super heroes hadn't succumbed. **Superman** was still going strong in his solo title as well as in *Action Comics* and *World's Finest Comics*. **Superboy** seemed to be gaining momentum, appearing regularly in *Adventure Comics* and his own self-titled book. (Lana Lang made her debut in *Superboy* #10, cover dated Sept.-Oct. 1950.) **Batman** and **Robin**, too, held firm in their own title plus *Detective Comics* and *World's Finest*. Robin was still appearing in solo adventures in *Star Spangled Comics*, though not for much longer. **Wonder Woman** would soon drop out of *Sensation Comics*, but the Amazon princess continued to dominate the world of men in her own book. And the **Justice Society of America**—the only remaining vehicle for the Flash, Green Lantern, Hawk-

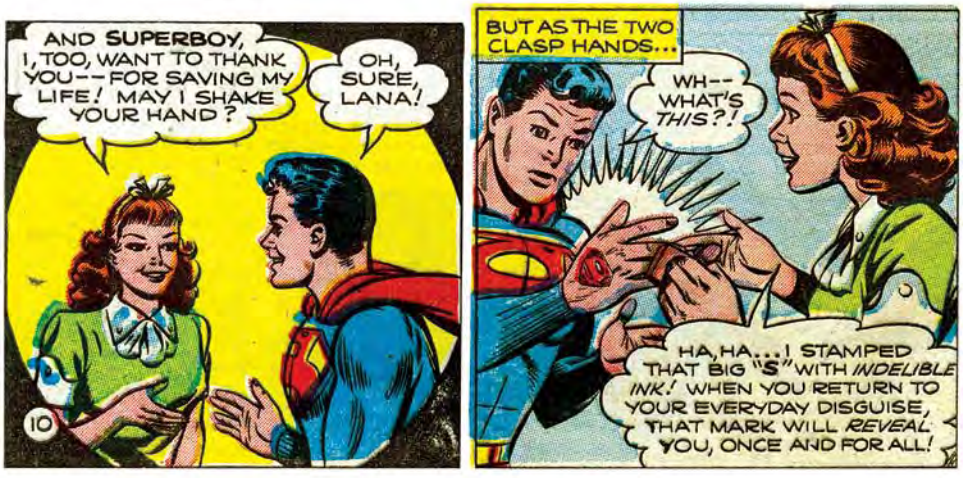
man, and the other All-American heroes—hung on in *All-Star Comics*. Second tier hero **Aquaman** continued in his slot in *Adventure Comics*, and **Green Arrow** was in both *World's Finest* and *Adventure*. All these National heroes would run unabated through the decade except for the JSA, whose *All-Star Comics* dropped them to usher in a format change to *All-Star Western* in 1951.

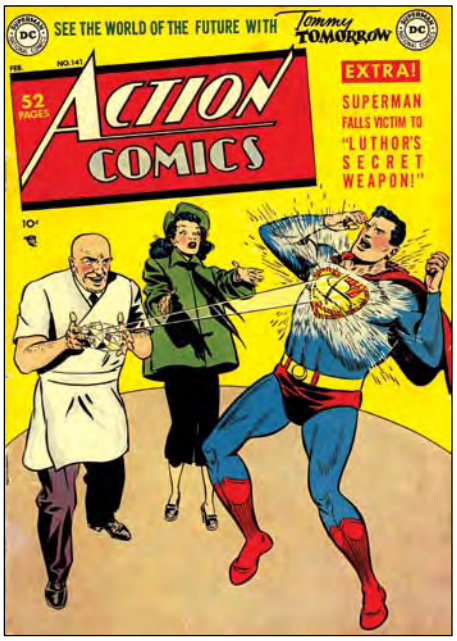
The creative direction of National was being steered by the urbane, hard-drinking **Whitney Ellsworth**, whose career with the firm began as an assistant editor with Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's National Allied Publications in 1934. As such, he pre-dated Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz with National, staying aboard when their machinations squeezed Wheeler-Nicholson out in 1938. That same year, Ellsworth rose to Associate Editor, producing cover roughs for several years (he was a cartoonist of some ability), and soon he was promoted to Editorial Director, the position he held in 1950.

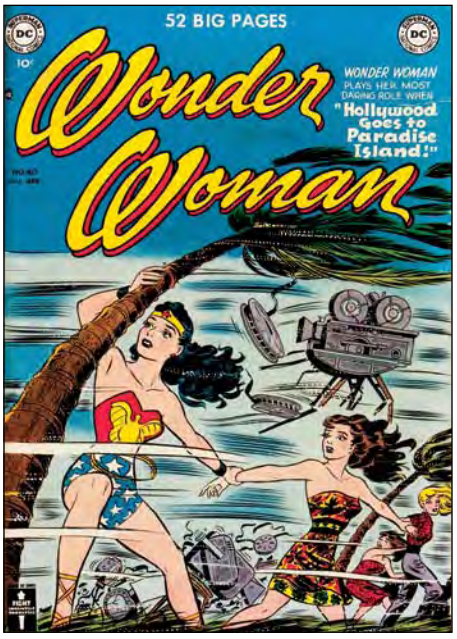
While Ellsworth provided general guidance, after consulting sales figures produced by the co-owned Independent News distribution company, he delegated most of the creative decisions to a staff of able editors, each handling a slate of titles. As Ellsworth became more involved in the development of the firm's properties in movies and television in the late 1940s and early 1950s, these nominal "assistant editors" gained considerable autonomy. **Mort Weisinger** was perhaps first among equals, entrusted with the stewardship of the flagship Superman titles. **Jack Schiff** steered the Batman books. **Julius Schwartz** (known as "Julie" by his friends) handled *All-Star* and a variety of genres. **Robert Kanigher** edited *Wonder Woman* and romance comics. Bernie Breslauer served in an editorial capacity on the humor titles; when he suffered a heart attack, he was replaced by Larry Nadle. George Kashdan was a story editor who rose to edit a number of titles in the new decade.

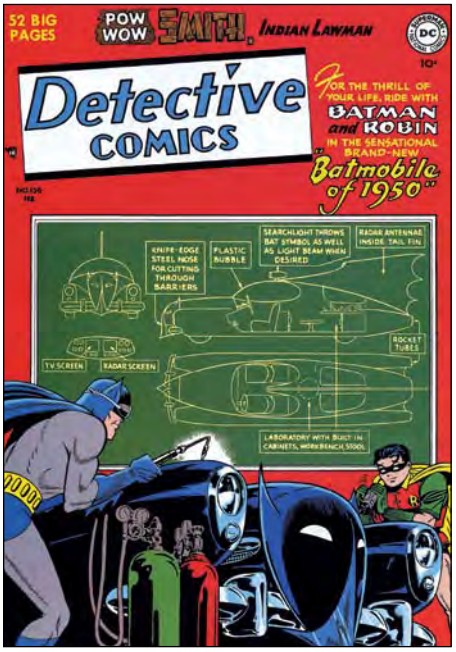
One of the key differences between comic books of the early-to-mid 1940s and those of the 1950s was the page count. The traditional 10-cent book during World War II contained 68 pages including covers, at least until 1943 when paper rationing forced reductions (to counts ranging from 36 to 60 pages). After the war, the maximum page count to be found for 10 cents was, with few exceptions, 52 pages. By 1950, many more had dropped down to 36 pages. National held firm for the time being at 52, though it was clear that they would soon have to slim down. (The dimensions of a typical comic book at this time were 7" wide by 10¼" high.) Most 52-page comics had five or six stories, which was generally reduced to three or four stories in books that fell back to 36 pages.

If National's output of super hero comics filled pages in only 11 titles by 1950, what made up the rest of its lineup?









Lana Lang met the Boy of Steel for the first time in Superboy *#10 (September-October 1950). Even though super heroes had lost a great deal of their popular appeal by the beginning of the decade, National's top heroes remained relatively healthy. Right:* Action Comics *#141 (February 1950),* Wonder Woman *#40 (March-April 1950), and* Detective Comics *#156 (February 1950).* Superman, Superboy, Wonder Woman, Batman, and Robin TM and © DC Comics

TIMELINE: 1950

A compilation of the year's notable comic book history events alongside some of the year's most significant popular culture and historical events. (On sale dates are approximations.)

February: *Vault of Horror* #12 & *Crypt of Terror* #17, the first EC "New Trend" horror comic books, hit newsstands. They would spawn one of the two genres that especially distinguished comic book history from 1950 through 1954.

March: *Haunt of Fear* #15, *Weird Science* #12, *Weird Fantasy* #13 appear on newsstands, completing the horror and SF "New Trend" roster at EC.

June 25: North Korean forces cross the 38th parallel and invade South Korea, marking the start of the Korean War. The conflict would end over three years later when an armistice is signed on July 27, 1953.

JANUARY | FEBRUARY | MARCH | APRIL | MAY | JUNE

February 9: In a speech in West Virginia, Senator Joseph McCarthy claims to have a list of 205 people working in the U.S. State Department who were members of the Communist Party. While never proving his claims, the speech nonetheless thrusts McCarthy into the national spotlight as the foremost voice expressing fear that Communist spies have infiltrated the government.

February 25: The comedy-variety program *Your Show of Shows*, starring Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, and Carl Reiner, debuts on the NBC television network.

March 19: Edgar Rice Burroughs, sci-fi author and the creator of Tarzan, dies at the age of 74 of a heart attack.

June 30: National publishes *Strange Adventures* #1 with an adaptation of *Destination Moon*, the film based on Robert A. Heinlein's book that would reach theaters in August.

While Superman and Batman reigned supreme in the opening story in *Action* and *Detective* respectively, the backup features reflected the times. *Action Comics* #140 (January 1950) followed the Man of Steel with Tommy Tomorrow, Tales of the Texas Rangers, Congo Bill, and Vigilante. *Detective Comics* #155 (January 1950) backed the Dynamic Duo with Pow-Wow Smith and Roy Raymond, TV Detective (first billed as "Impossible – but True"). *World's Finest Comics* #43 (January 1950) did offer Green Arrow and Zatara, but also the Wyoming Kid and Full Steam Foley.

Much of National's line was made up of humorous comics of various types, in titles such as *Comic Cavalcade* (with the Fox and the Crow), Sheldon Mayer's *Scribbly* (which would soon be retired), *Funny Folks, Leading Comics,* and *Animal Antics*. For teenage Archie-like humor, National published *Buzzy*, *Leave it to Binky* and *A Date with Judy*. It also produced the romance books *Secret Hearts* and *Girls' Love Stories*, which were joined in 1950 by *Girls' Romances*. *All American Comics* had been converted *to All American Western*, replacing Green Lantern with the cowboy Johnny Thunder, and *Western Comics, Jimmy Wakely,* and *Dale Evans* filled out National's Western roster.

In summary, the thirty-nine titles published by National in mid-1950 broke down as follows: eleven super hero titles (often with non-super backups), seven funny animal/juvenile, six Westerns, four teen-age, four romances, three adventure, two crime, and two straight humor. Sales in 1950 averaged 7,791,402 copies per month, or about 93 million total copies for the year. That meant the average sales per book, most of them bi-monthly, was about 400,000-450,000 copies (Tolworthy).

With owner Harry Donenfeld having moved into the background, Jack Liebowitz ruled the offices at 480 Lexington Avenue. Given his background in accounting and finance, Liebowitz was not surprisingly a conservative man, and his personality was apparent in National's publishing output. Yet if new titles were needed, Liebowitz's answer wasn't simply to publish four or five more romance and Western books; he wanted Ellsworth to try new things, albeit with all due caution. Thus, he was receptive when Ellsworth had proposed licensing a Dale Evans book starting in 1948, a result of the editor-in-chief's role as National's contact in Hollywood.

After supervising *Atom Man vs. Superman*, the second Superman serial, which was released in July 1950, Whitney Ellsworth continued by overseeing *Superman and the Mole Men*. For this Lippert Films project, a new actor was hired to play the Man of Steel, a handsome B-movie actor named George Reeves. While in California, Ellsworth lined up more licensed properties for comic book

Before the Storm

In 1951, the new United Nations building in New York City officially opened, even as the testing of nuclear explosions occurred with greater frequency, both in the Nevada desert and on an atoll in the Marshall Islands. J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* saw print, and *I Love Lucy* made its television debut on CBS. Transcontinental television began.

The public's interest in **science fiction** was even more pronounced than in 1950, evident in the release of a number of popular films with SF themes, chief among them *Man from Planet X*, *The Thing from Another World*, *When Worlds Collide*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* and *Flight to Mars*. It was only natural that comic books followed suit with science fiction comics.

Bill Gaines contributed creatively to EC comics by virtue of plotting many of the stories with his right hand man, **Al Feldstein**. He also hired the artists and, again in concert with Feldstein, decided who would draw each particular script. Nevertheless, he focused much of his time on business management, such as analyzing sales information as it came in from his distributor, Leader News. "Bill used to have this system for charting sales which I always watched in wonder, but I never quite understood," Harvey Kurtzman recalled. "He'd keep little piles of thumb-nail papers that would fit into the palm of your hand, and he would sit there with a slide rule and he'd make little marks on the papers, and he'd look at his slide rule and make more little marks on his papers. At any given moment he knew what was selling" (Benson 83). Monitoring sales and keeping on top of popular trends was *de rigueur*.

Three genres had come to the fore as sales softened for romance and crime books: war, science fiction, and horror. As the year began, it seemed clear that of the three, horror comics were selling best, with sales continuing to climb even as the objections to violence and sex in comics grew louder. One could see dark clouds on the horizon, but Bill Gaines wasn't worried. Complaints from a minority of cranks and do-gooders (as he saw them) weren't going to stop him from publishing comics that were flying off the newsstands and generating a growing number of fan letters.

Horror was hot, but EC's science fiction comics engendered their own special excitement, offering imaginative scripts and art by the best young artists in the business. As Gaines' comics would soon trumpet, "We're proudest of our science fiction titles!" SF was busting out on the racks, and EC comics led the pack from a creative and, very likely, sales standpoint.

The Thing from Another World *was released on April 29th, 1951. It was loosely adapted from John W. Campbell Jr.'s story "Who Goes There?"* The Thing From Another World TM and © Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc.

In 1951, EC published six issues each of ***Weird Science*** (#5-10) and ***Weird Fantasy*** (#17, then #6-10 when the title changed its numbering system). Al Feldstein drew all the *Weird Science* covers except for the last two of that year's run, which were handled by Wally Wood. Feldstein scripted the interior stories this year, other than those written and drawn by Kurtzman. (Wally Wood did some plotting and possible scripting on "Deadlock!" in *WF* #17, January-February 1951.) The artwork was mainly by Feldstein, Wally Wood, Harvey Kurtzman, and Jack Kamen.

For script ideas, Gaines and Feldstein looked to previously published prose stories from the SF pulps and magazines, but they never credited their sources. In 1950 and 1951, *Weird Science* and *Weird Fantasy* based stories to one degree or another on works by Henry Hasse, Edmond Hamilton, Roald Dahl, Donald Wandrei, Anthony Boucher, Murray Leinster, and Fritz Lieber, among others. The same was true of the horror comics.

Because he was dieting to lose weight, Bill Gaines was taking Dexedrine, a drug that had an effect like amphetamine ("speed"). As a result, he had trouble getting to sleep. So he read SF and horror stories late into the night (and early morning). As he did this, he jotted down ideas for what he and Feldstein called "springboards," story gimmicks that served as the basis for Feldstein's finished scripts. A single story often suggested several springboards, and a certain number of the EC science fiction strips came directly from the original prose stories.

The first **Ray Bradbury** tale to be "adapted" in this fashion was "The Handler," which was re-done in *Haunt of Fear* #6 (March-April 1951) with the title "A Strange Undertaking...," drawn by Graham Ingels. The first of these unauthorized Bradbury adaptations to appear in an SF title was "Home to Stay!" in *Weird Fantasy* #13 (May-June 1952), a combination of the author's "Kaleidoscope" and "The Rocket Man." When Gaines received a letter from Bradbury asking when he would receive royalty payments for EC's adaptations, Gaines quickly sent him a check, and they hammered out an arrangement for further adaptations. Henceforth, these adaptations appeared under Bradbury's name and original story titles. (Gaines subsequently curtailed unauthorized adaptations of other writers' works.)

Wally Wood was already developing into the star artist of EC's science fiction titles. Born in Menahga, Minnesota, in 1927, Wood was a slender, diffident young man who came alive at the drawing board. His chief influences were Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* and Roy Crane's *Wash Tubbs*. He loved drawing rocket ships and alien planets, and had a style that was highly detailed and attractive. The only thing Wood liked better than drawing rocket ships was drawing sexy women; his were some of the sexiest to appear in any comic book. He produced a story in all twelve of EC's 1951 SF comics, such as the aforementioned "Deadlock!," often involving menaces from other planets ("The Aliens!"in *Weird Science* #7, May-June 1951). Each was a gem, and each showed incremental improvement. His work kept getting better and better. Wood's artistic

Weird Science *#7 (May-June 1951) with cover by Al Feldstein. Above: images by Wally Wood from the splash panel of "The Maidens Cried" in* Weird Science *#10.* TM and © William M. Gaines, Agent, Inc.

Expansion

If the 1950s was "the best of times, the worst of times" for American comic books, 1952 was a year that exemplified the "best of times." It was a year of industry expansion, both of the number of high quality titles and the imitative also-rans. New genres established in the prior years proliferated, crowding newsstands with new horror, war, and romance titles. Uncle Scrooge's star was ascendant, and a sensational new type of comic book from EC came out of left field.

A horror comics boom comprised a large part of the expansion. Nearly all of the horror titles published in 1951 by AGC, EC, Atlas, Harvey, and others continued into 1952, having met with robust sales and profits sufficient to warm any publisher's heart. The word was out, and everyone wanted to grab a piece of the action.

Exactly how did others find out what was "hot"? By the time the letter column in *Vault of Horror* #25 (June-July 1952) revealed that EC's sales were 1,500,000 copies a month, the cat was out of the bag. Distributors were supposed to keep sales figures confidential, but publishers also had relationships with wholesalers who could—and did—talk freely about what was and wasn't selling. What's more, writers and artists usually worked for more than one firm, facilitating a flow of information along the industry grapevine. Besides, when the larger publishers began increasing the number of titles in any given genre, the evidence of a best seller was right there on the stands.

A plethora of new horror titles appeared in 1952. As horror comics became a national craze, every publisher jumped on the band wagon:

American Comics Group introduced *Out of the Night* and *Skeleton Hand*. **Ajax-Farrell** published *Haunted Thrills*, *Strange Fantasy,* and *Voodoo*. **Atlas** added *Adventures into Weird Worlds*, *Amazing Detective Cases* (now all-horror), *Journey into Mystery*, *Mystery Tales*, *Spellbound,* and *Uncanny Tales*. **Avon** rolled out *City of the Living Dead*, *The Dead Who Walk*, *Diary of Horror*, *Phantom Witch Doctor,* and *Witchcraft*.

Charlton jumped in with *The Thing*, and **Comic Media** introduced *Horrific* and *Weird Terror*. **Fawcett** published *Beware Terror Tales*, *Strange Stories from Another World*, *Strange Suspense Stories*, *Unknown Worlds,* and *Worlds of Fear*. **Gilmor** brought out *Weird Mysteries*. **Harvey** introduced *Tomb of Terror*. **Hillman** added *Monster Crime Comics*.

Tame **National** had ended 1951 with the introduction of *House of Mystery*, and converted *Sensation Comics* to "horror," dropping Wonder Woman from its pages. (She still had her solo book.) A few months later, *Sensation Comics* was renamed *Sensation Mystery,* and then one month after that, *The Phantom Stranger* began.

Prize brought back *Frankenstein* and introduced Simon and Kirby's *Strange World of Your Dreams* in 1952. **Quality** published *Web of Evil*. **Standard** contributed *Adventures into Darkness*, *Out of the Shadows* and *The Unseen*. **Stanley Morse** had *Weird Tales of the Future*. **Star** put out *Startling Terror Tales*. **St. John** got into the act with *Strange Terrors* and *Weird Horrors*. **Toby** had *Tales of Horror* and *Tales of Terror*. **Youthful** put out *Beware* and *Chilling Tales*. **Ziff-Davis** added *Nightmare*.

As for the horror comics leader, **Entertaining Comics**, Bill Gaines launched one more book with a connection to the genre: *Shock SuspenStories* #1 (February-March 1952). The Al Feldstein-drawn cover appropriately featured a shot of a man in an electric chair. It was initially conceived as a "sampler" book of all the genres EC offered: horror, SF, even war. In the first issue, Gaines and Feldstein wrote,

> We've tried to satisfy every one of you readers who have written us insisting that EC increase its output! Many of you wanted another science-fiction mag... you horror fans wanted another horror book... and you suspense readers wanted a companion mag to *Crime SuspenStories*! We decided, therefore, to make this new mag an "EC Sampler" ...and to include in it an S-F yarn, a horror tale, a Crime SuspenStory, and... for you readers of *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*... a war story! Although there was a wide variance in the types of mags requested, all of you fans seemed to agree on one thing: all of you wanted the stories to have the usual EC shock endings! So what could be more natural than to call the magazine *Shock SuspenStories*?

The interior stories were illustrated by Jack Kamen, Jack Davis, Joe Orlando and Graham Ingels, and all were scripted by Feldstein. *Shock SuspenStories* can be considered the last "New Trend" horror book, though it seems clear that Gaines and Feld-

Some of the horror comics that proliferated on newsstands in 1952, including St. John's Strange Terrors *#4 with an odd William Ekgren cover (in the center of row 2).*

Character TM and © DC Comics.

CHAPTER FOUR

EC Soars, Fawcett Crashes

1953 was a year of extremes in the American political and social scene. At one end of the spectrum, Dwight David Eisenhower was sworn into office as President of the United States on January 20, his persona emanating a sense of benevolence and security to his electorate. At the other end of the spectrum, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin whipped his anti-communist witch-hunt into a frenzy during the same year that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sent to the electric chair after being convicted of passing atomic bomb secrets to the Soviet Union. And with the announcement that the Soviets had an atomic bomb, fear of annihilation ran beneath the "carefree" surface of American life.

In 1953, overall comic book sales were flattening out, with some publishers (like Atlas) experiencing declines and others (like Dell) on the upswing. The number of individual titles was up. Over 300 issues appeared on the stands in September, almost three times as many as had appeared in the same month in 1943.

For Superman, 1953 was a very good year. ***The Adventures of Superman*** television series debuted coast-to-coast on February 9, bringing the Man of Steel's exploits into millions of homes. The show benefited from the fortuitous casting of George Reeves as Superman and brought a great deal of attention to the Man of Steel's supporting characters. Lois Lane had been an integral part of Superman's stories since the super hero's first appearance in 1938's *Action Comics* #1. Editor Perry White and cub reporter Jimmy Olsen, however, had both been introduced later and in a somewhat desultory manner. Now, partly due to the necessity of focusing most of the television show on non-super heroic activity, these secondary characters were elevated and would from this point forward be more important in the Superman comics.

For the television show, John Hamilton portrayed Perry White while Jack Larson played Jimmy Olsen. The role of Lois Lane was at first filled by Phyllis Coates, an attractive young actress of serials and low budget features. She took other employment after completing the first Superman season. (The show's first year was filmed in 1951, but broadcast was delayed.) Subsequently, Noel Neill—the Lois from the Superman serials—was cast as the female reporter. Robert Maxwell, who supervised the Superman radio program, produced the first season, putting all the key elements in place. The stirring Superman theme music, the opening ("Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane!," carried over from the radio show), and the fa-

Atomic Fear in Comics

On January 7th, 1953, outgoing President Harry S. Truman announced that the United States had developed a hydrogen bomb. The government was conducting ongoing nuclear tests at a site in southern Nevada. With that, fear of atomic annihilation reached a kind of crescendo and was felt in many aspects of American life.

In the film *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (released June 13, 1953), an atomic bomb test in the Arctic Circle thawed out a hibernating dinosaur (animated by Ray Harryhausen). This was one of a number of movies that unleashed giant monsters on mankind, often a result of a nuclear accident or mutation. Atomic fear permeated movies, the news, TV, and, inevitably, comic books.

When John W. Campbell became editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1937, he exhibited a propensity for stories about atomic power and nuclear disasters. Urging Bill Gaines to publish a science f iction comic back in 1949, Wally Wood and Harry Harrison gave him copies of *Astounding* so the publisher would see the kind of stories they had in mind. Thus, some of the earliest issues of EC's *Weird Science* and *Weird Fantasy* carried atomic-themed stories. There were "Cosmic Ray Bomb Explosion!" in *Weird Fantasy* #14 (July-August 1950) and "Radioactive Child!" in *Weird Science* #15 (November-December 1950). The cover of *Weird Science* #5 blared: "See the Earth 500,000 years after the first Atomic War!"

In 1953, EC published two masterful, disturbing stories about atomic warfare and its aftermath. In *Weird Fantasy* #17, Al Feldstein adapted Ray Bradbury's poetic story "There Will Come Soft Rains" about a "smart house" whose gadgets keep doing their jobs after its human occupants were decimated by an atomic explosion. And in *Two-Fisted Stories* #33, Harvey Kurtzman tackled the subject with "Atomic Bomb!," showing the effects of the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan ,on the city's denizens. Wally Wood was at his EC peak when he drew both of these classic stories.

Youthful's Atomic Attack *#5 (January 1953), Ace Magazines'* Atomic War! *#1 (November 1952), and Gilberton's* Picture Parade *#1 (1953).*

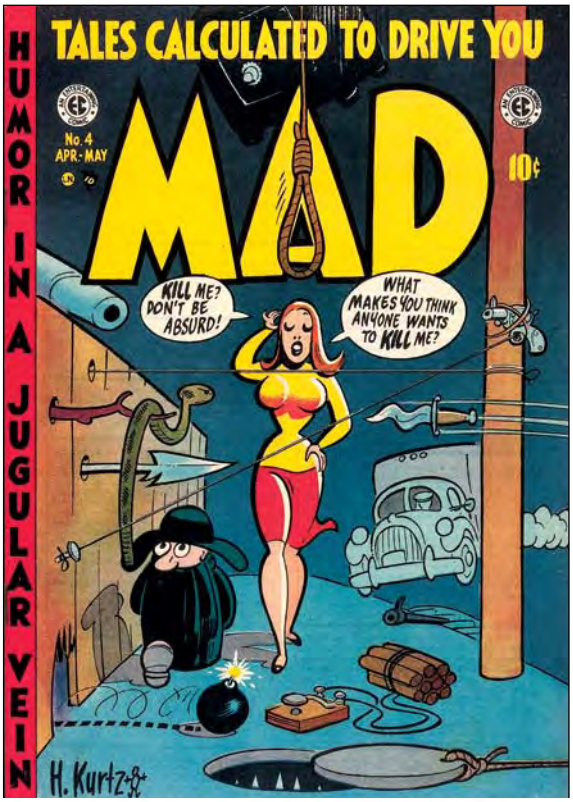
Although EC's product was relatively literate, the atomic-themed comics of its competitors predictably veered into the realm of exploitation. For instance, the cover of Ace Publications' *Atomic War!* #1 (November 1952) showed New York City being destroyed by an atomic explosion, and the covers of subsequent issues were equally alarmist. Youthful's *Atomic Attack* #5 (January 1953) sported a garish mushroom cloud cover and a World War III story with the unsettling title, "Tomorrow's War."

Amid the blossoming atomic fear came Gilberton's *Picture Parade* #1 (September 1953), a title that attempted to explain the positive uses of nuclear energy. *Picture Parade* was an educational series conceived and written by Eleanor Lidofsky, a college-educated Brooklynite hired by publisher Albert Kanter to work on publicity and press releases, and to write incidental material for *Classics Illustrated*. "I wrote the things in the inside of the front and back covers," Lidofsky recalled in an interview for this book. "Then Mr. Kantor asked me to come up with an idea for an educational comic book. All anyone thought about atomic energy was the bombs that had been dropped on Japan. My husband was a professor of nuclear science at Columbia University, and he gave me the information about the good things that nuclear power could bring. I wrote 'Andy's Atomic Adventure' in that first issue, naming Andy after Mr. Kanter's grandson. *Picture Parade* sold very well. It was geared to a fourth grade reading level." Lidofsky wrote more issues of *Picture Parade*, then left at the end of 1954 to have her first child. Well-intentioned as that "boy and his dog" cover was, to modern eyes there's something absurd about Andy comforting his canine friend while a nuclear explosion occurs nearby. The cover seemed to suggest that an atomic war wouldn't disturb life as we know it.

Some comics fans and historians have referred to the period from the end of World War II to the start of the Silver Age of comics in 1956 as "the Atom Age of comics." Despite being used in Bob Overstreet's influential *Comic Book Price Guide*, the phrase hasn't yet gained widespread acceptance.

ics historian John Benson concluded that the steep increase in the print orders probably began with *Mad* #7 and went sharply upward with issues #8 and #9, which appeared in the second half of 1953 (though issue #9 bore a 1954 cover date). Did the print run reach a million? It may have continued to increase, but 750,000 is the top figure Benson could find (Benson, "Start-Up Data for Mad's Imitators" 12).

Since *Mad* wasn't advertised other than in announcements in the other EC titles, the cause of the explosive sales increase could only have been due to good word-of-mouth. What then inspired such positive buzz? *Mad* #4 (April-May 1953) featured the Kurtzman-written/Wally Wood-drawn parody **"Superduperman!"** Not only is "Superduperman!" one of the best-known and highly regarded stories in *Mad* history, it's credited as the story that propelled *Mad* into profitability. In a 1983 interview, Gaines stated without equivocation, "*Mad* was a loser until 'Superduperman' came out" (Decker 75). (Two other stories in *Mad* #4, "Robin Hood!" illustrated by John Severin and "Shadow!" featuring the artwork of Bill Elder, also parodied familiar popular culture figures, and probably contributed to the success of that pivotal issue.) By the time *Mad*'s fifth issue was released, more readers were snatching it off newsstands. *Mad*'s future was secured.



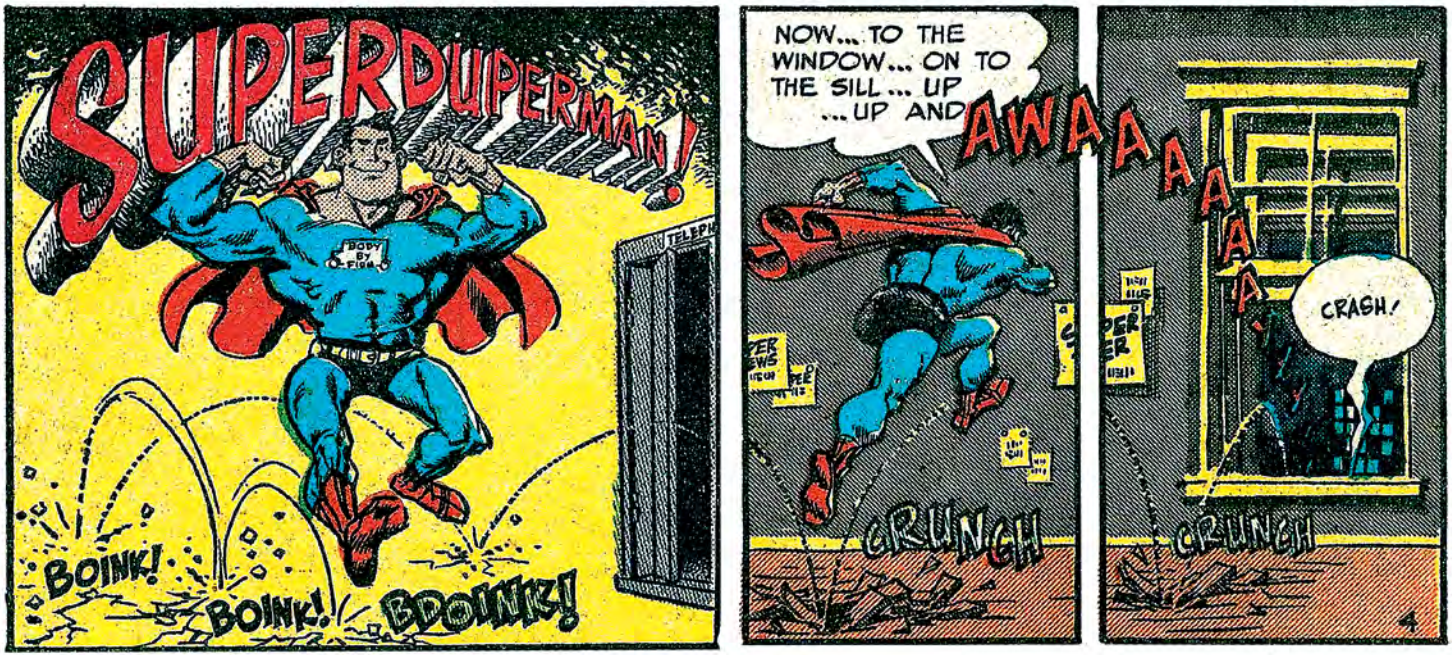
Mad #5 featured another comic book parody by the Kurtzman-Wood team, "Black and Blue Hawks!," as well as "Miltie of the Mounties!," satirizing the popular "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon" radio show, with art by Severin. "Outer Sanctum" spoofed the "Inner Sanctum" radio program, making it the third of four parodies of widely-known popular culture subjects. This was followed by *Mad* #6 with three more comics and movie satires (*Terry and the Pirates*, *Tarzan of the Apes,* and *King Kong*).

Mad #5 is also of historical importance for its inclusion of a one page humorous "biography" of Bill Gaines, a *Mad* version of the profiles of its creative personnel in other EC books. It likened Gaines to a Communist and child-molester, pretty strong stuff. When the facetious manner of the biography went unrecognized (or unappreciated) by parents and wholesalers, a major flap ensued. Gaines was quick to apologize, but it didn't help EC's reputation with the all-important wholesalers.

Nonetheless, *Mad*'s prosperity inspired numerous imitations that tried to capture the same lightning in a bottle. Some were better than others, but none came close. They were often produced by able practitioners of comic art, but none had the creative genius of Harvey Kurtzman or his crew of wonderfully talented cartoonists.

The first imitator, however, was produced before *Mad*'s sales shot up. At St. John, Joe Kubert and Norman Maurer produced *Whack* #1, cover-dated October 1953, a month after *Mad* #6 appeared, and a full two months before the next attempt to clone *Mad*.

Kurtzman/Wood's "Superduperman!" in Mad *#4 was the story that connected with readers in a big way, causing sales to soar.* TM and © DC Comics.



1954

CHAPTER FIVE

Comics in Crisis

The 3-D comics that offered such promise and excitement in 1953 turned out to be a short-lived fad. The form's technical limitations and the smaller publishers' shoddy product hastened the fad's demise. Joe Kubert suggested another reason for its early death. "The publishers thought the gimmick would last forever so everybody tried to use the gimmick on everything," he later opined. "When the market was saturated with 3-D, it was so common, readers began to ask, 'Hey, what about the story? What about the content?' The lack of content is what I think really caused the death of 3-D" (Groth 83). Also, 3-D was used on too many comics with stories that didn't lend themselves to the process. Just seeing characters talking in a panel on two or three levels added nothing, even if the story was good.

Two books that Kubert's comments clearly didn't apply to were *Three Dimensional EC Classics* #1 and #2, both dated Spring 1954. Each had four new, re-drawn versions of earlier EC stories from the same scripts (with a few minor changes). Most were re-drawn by different artists, allowing readers to experience a different visual interpretation of the (mostly) Gaines/Feldstein stories. "The Monster From the Fourth Dimension!" in *Weird Science* #7 (May-June 1951) was initially drawn by Al Feldstein. The 3-D version was handled by Bernard Krigstein. "Mr. Biddy ... Killer!" in *Crime SuspenStories* #5 (June-July 1951) had been illustrated by Jack Davis. Now readers had the chance to savor the same story drawn in the much different style of "Ghastly" Graham Ingels.

Even when the same artist drew the new version, changes were made. Harvey Kurtzman and Wally Wood reworked "V-Vampires!" from *Mad* #3 (February-March 1953), expanding it from six to eight pages. The original splash panel was enlarged to a full page, and the opening sequence of the girl being stalked in the London fog was extended by several panels. Wood had used the CraftTint painted-shading process in the first version, but his use of that subtle shading technique was greatly expanded, perhaps partly to make up for the lack of color in 3-D. This re-worked, extended version of one of the finest Kurtzman-Wood collaborations in *Mad* is a treasure.

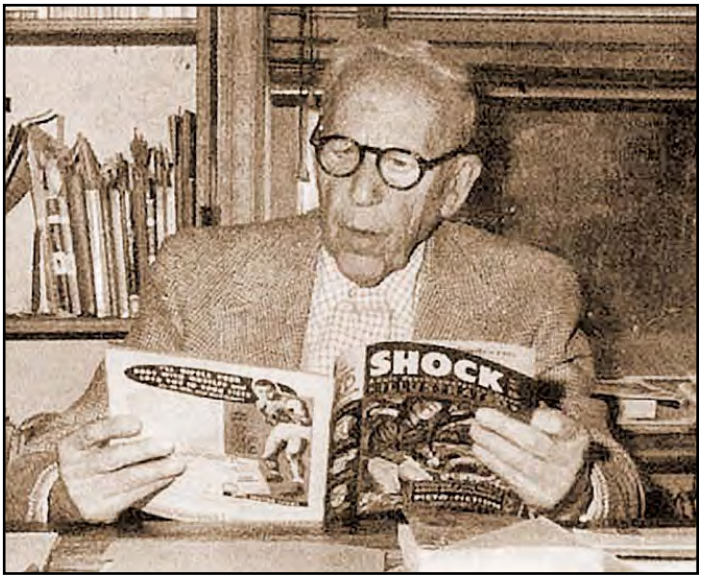
EC planned a third issue of *Three Dimensional EC Classics* using six levels of 3-D depth as opposed to the four levels the first two issues had. When the 3-D bubble burst, however, Bill Gaines had no choice but to cancel its publication. (The four stories prepared for *Three Dimensional EC Classics* #3 were eventually printed in Wally Wood's *witzend* #6 in 1969, in Jerry Weist's *Squa Tront* #4 in 1970, and in Jerry Weist's and John Benson's *Squa Tront* #5 in 1974.) EC's two 3-D comics were among the dozen or so 3-D books published with 1954 cover dates.

Jack Kirby's Captain America had been an authentic superstar of the Golden Age, garnering sales that approached those of Superman and Captain Marvel. The Torch and Sub-Mariner had also been top sellers. Martin Goodman ordered the revival of Timely's top triumvirate, presumably to see if they would sell to the millions of viewers of *The Adventures of Superman* TV show. It was typical of Goodman to test those waters in late 1953 and into 1954, publishing the first of a boomlet of costumed hero books that appeared this year and into 1955. Goodman's secondary motive was to see if he could generate interest in a TV series starring one or all of his heroes. That required the characters to be currently in print.

***Young Men* #24** bore a December 1953 cover date and hit the stands on August 19th, just six months after George Reeves began bending steel with his bare hands on national television. **Stan Lee** selected the artists who handled the revivals of the three heroes. The character with the lead feature, who received most of the space on the cover, was the super-powered Human Torch. (Indeed, the cover had a banner above the title that read "The Human Torch Returns.") He was drawn by his creator **Carl Burgos**; inside, the Torch was handled by Russ Heath. Captain America appeared next, drawn by **John Romita**. The Sub-Mariner, in the third position, was penciled and inked by his creator **Bill Everett**.

The writers of the issue are unknown, but John Romita recalled that at least some of the Captain America revival scripts bore Stan Lee's name. (Lee doesn't remember.) Undoubtedly, it was Lee who decided that each of these stories would explain where the hero had been while out of the public eye. Villains had sprayed the Torch with X-R solution and buried him underground near Yucca Flat, Nevada. His junior partner Toro had been captured and brainwashed by the Communists. Captain America, feeling his work as a costumed hero

Human Torch *#36*, Sub-Mariner *#33*, Men's Adventures *#27 and* Captain America *#78*. TM and © Marvel Characters Inc.

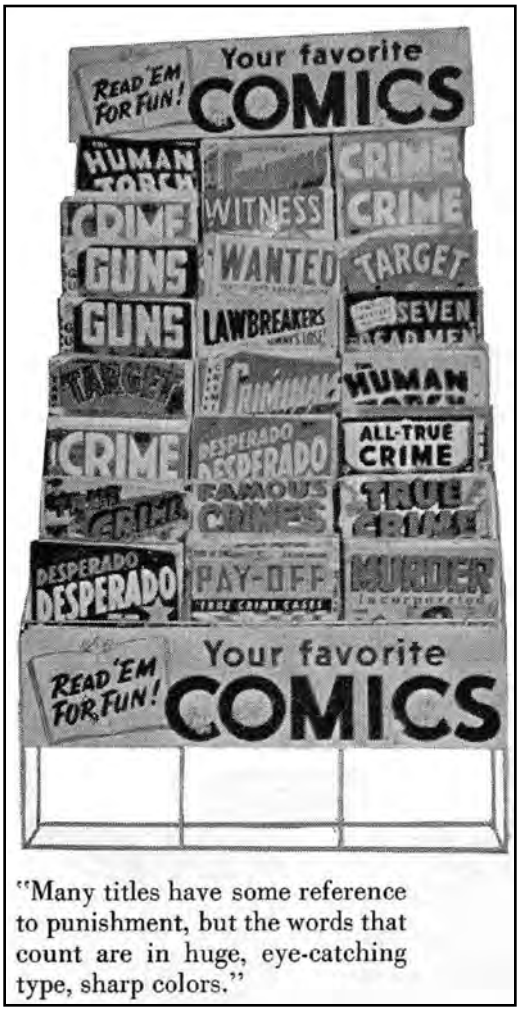


Dr. Fredric Wertham, leader of the anti-comic book crusade. © copyright holder.

> Wertham manipulated, overstated, compromised, and fabricated evidence—especially that evidence he attributed to personal clinical research with young people—for rhetorical gain. I argue that Wertham privileged his interests in the cultural elements of social psychiatry and mental hygiene at the expense of systematic and verifiable science, an action that ultimately serves to discredit him and the claims he made about comics. (Tilley 386)

At the end of her lengthy, scholarly article published in *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* from the University of Texas Press, Tilley quoted Wertham himself giving "a clear indication that rhetoric must trump evidence" in the pages of *SOTI* itself (Tilley 407). When a colleague told him that she wished to remain neutral on whether comics were good or bad, Wertham wrote, "Neutrality—especially when hidden under the cloak of scientific objectivity—that is the devil's ally" (Wertham 351).

The publication date of *SOTI* (April 19, 1954) was set to benefit from the negative publicity about comic books that would accompany the nationally-televised hearings of the U.S. Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency that would begin two days later. Other quasi-acolytes of Dr. Wertham got on the bandwagon, such as T. E. Murphy, columnist and editorial writer for the Hartford, Connecticut, *Courant*, whose paper conducted a campaign in Hartford to get comic book "filth" off its newsstands. Murphy proudly wrote of this campaign in "For the Kiddies to Read," a four-page article that appeared in *Readers Digest*.



A comic rack shown in Seduction of the Innocent, *clearly stacked with the right titles to prove Wertham's point.* © copyright holder.

Some of the book reviewers fully accepted Wertham's contentions. On April 25, 1954, *The New York Times* published a review titled "Nothing To Laugh At" by C. Wright Mills, Associate Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. Mills wrote, "Dr. Wertham's ... careful observations and his sober reflections about the American child in a world of comic violence and unfunny filth testify to a most commendable use of the professional mind in the service of the public" (Mills, BR 20). Many of the reviews reprinted inflammatory images from the book.

But at the time of its publication, *Seduction of the Innocent* had its fair share of detractors too. Some criticized the book for the way it presented its arguments, for its lack of documentation, et al. Some accused Wertham of outright distortion. It wasn't as if there was unanimity of support for the idea that violent comic books caused juvenile delinquency and juvenile violence.

One of the most articulate dissenters was Robert S. Warshow, a writer for *Commentary* magazine. His 11-year-old son Paul was a member of the EC Fan-Addict Club, and Warshow found himself on the horns of a dilemma. Should he allow his son to read those comic books? He disliked them mainly because he felt they were junk literature, and thought children should be reading more high-toned matter. But Warshow looked into the issue, and *SOTI*, with a depth that few others accorded the subject. In his article "The Study of Man: Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," Robert Warshow finally concluded that his son wasn't being damaged in any detectable way by reading EC comics. While Warshow felt comic books presented a slanted, simplistic view of the world to children, he also saw a similarly simplistic quality to Wertham's book. Warshow wrote:

> Dr. Wertham's world, like the world of the comic books, is one where the logic of personal interest is inexorable, and *Seduction of the Innocent* is a kind of crime comic book for parents, as its lurid title alone would lead one to expect. There is the same simple conception of motives, the same sense of overhanging doom, the same melodramatic emphasis on pathology, the same direct and immediate relation between cause and effect. If a juvenile criminal is found in possession of comic books, the comic books produced the crime. If a publisher of comic books, alarmed by at-

CHAPTER SIX

Censored!

Judge Charles Murphy moved quickly to get the Comics Code approval process up and running. Time was of the essence. The publishers, who were paying for the service, wanted speedy action. The sooner Code-approved books appeared on newsstands, the better.

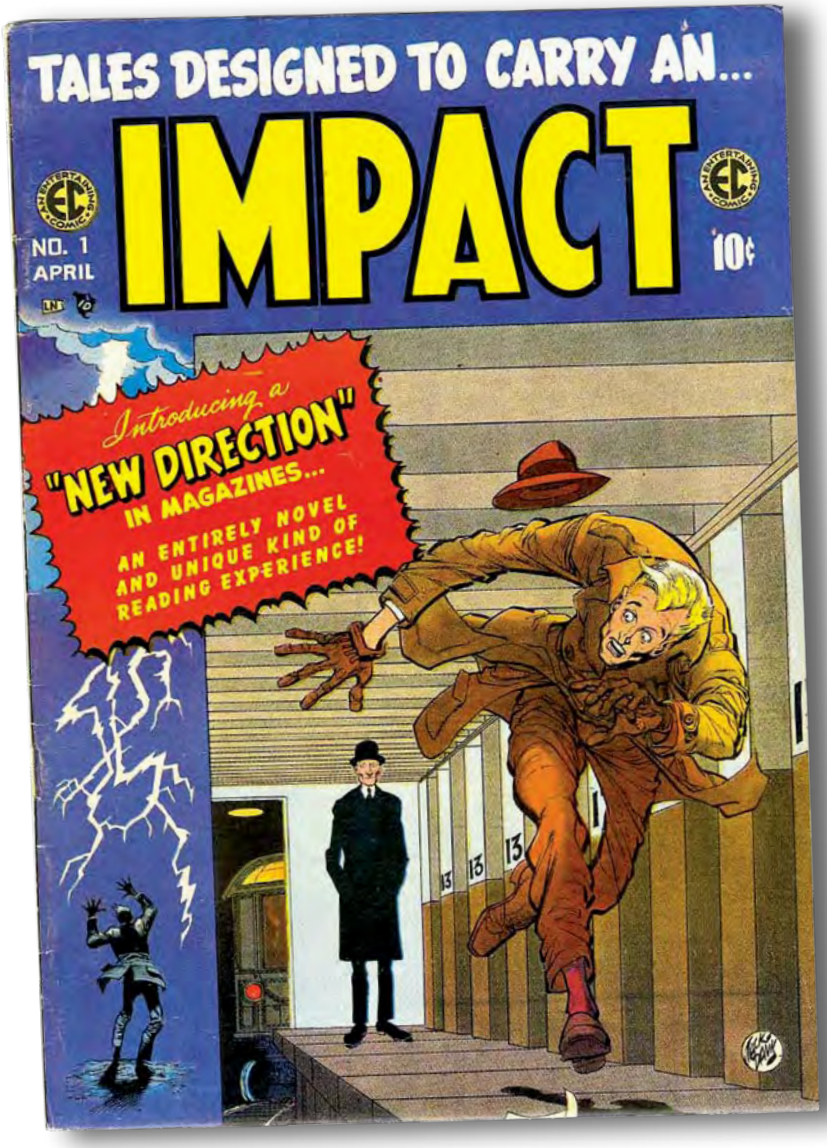
Murphy hired a staff (a librarian, a college professor, a Voice of America publicist, a social worker, and an MGM story department editor), all women because he felt that female reviewers wouldn't be steeped in the habits and traditions of comic book stories, and would bring a fresh eye to the material. They would review the entire contents of every issue, including advertisements and prose matter.

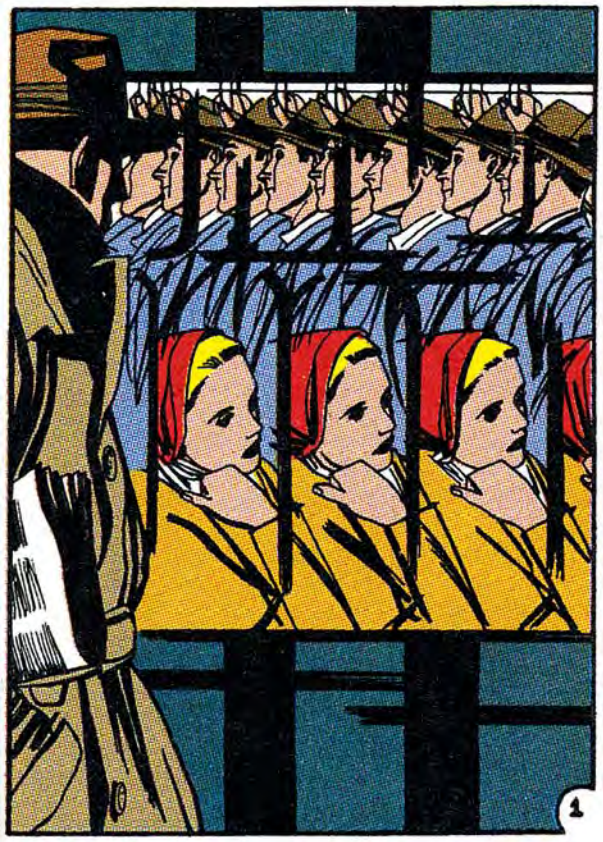
Sol Harrison of National Comics designed the Code's **seal of approval** (or so he claimed in later years, though it's never been confirmed). The seal was made to look like a "stamp" to give the appearance of official approval. The word "authority" in its verbiage—"Approved by the Comics Code Authority"— conveyed the idea that this code would have teeth. Murphy insisted that it should always appear in black and white, not colored over, because its visibility was an essential part of the CMAA's public relations campaign.

Then the pre-publication review process began. While signing up publishers, Judge Murphy had given some of them the impression that he was "on their side" and would exercise his authority to reject only the most egregious material. However, it soon became apparent that the administrator was applying the Code strictly and aggressively. In December 1954, Murphy held a press conference as a sort of progress report. He told reporters that his staff had rejected 5,656 panels and 126 complete stories in the several weeks the Code had been in effect. More than a quarter of these changes involved making "feminine curves" more "natural" and women's clothing more modest. (If a woman had any sort of décolletage, a line indicating the shape of the upper breasts in the exposed area was *verboten*.) Both Charles Murphy and John Goldwater (CMAA President) launched a public relations blitz, traveling the country to address dozens of civic, church, and parents groups to demonstrate how the Code was working.

One reason for Murphy's strict policy was his awareness that the critics of comic books were taking a "wait and see" attitude. Senator Kefauver told the administrator that the Code was a step in the right direction, but he wanted to convene another round of hearings to look into the matter more fully.

Other government entities were also watching. In early 1955, the State of New York Legislature—one of the most zealous public bodies on this issue—conducted another hearing to take more testimony. Judge Murphy appeared before this Joint Legislative Committee on February 4 to give a presentation and answer questions. He showed them changes the Code had required: weapons had been eliminated, faces made less grotesque, clothing made more





Impact *#1 and panel from page 1 of "Master Race!" Opposite and next page: Pages 7 and 8 of "Master Race!." Bernard Krigstein's page and panel designs were like nothing seen before in comic books.* TM and © Estate of William M. Gaines.

story, but Krigstein saw such potential in it that he expanded it (over Gaines' objections) to eight pages, and he introduced innovative panel sequences and designs unlike any comic book story drawn before. The use of multiple panels to create the impression of figures in slow motion was just one of the artist's techniques to make the narrative more vivid. "Master Race!" was the best story produced in all of EC's "New Direction" books. In fact, it's a masterwork of comic art that ranks among the greatest comics stories of all time. This may be partly due to the power of the subject matter itself, so loaded with emotion, tragedy and revulsion, as it unflinchingly portrayed Nazi atrocities. Still, Krigstein was obviously on fire creatively and showed himself a true visionary of the field. Probably more words have been written about "Master Race!" than any other single EC story. Even those who generally dislike Krigstein's artwork fall under its spell. From a historical perspective, it influenced many future practitioners of comic art.

Because EC's "New Direction" titles contained a great deal of beautiful artwork, they retain a certain popularity among comics fans of later generations. *Valor* was colorful and boasted wonderful visuals by Williamson, Ingels, Davis, Orlando, Wood and Crandall. *Extra!* had lots of Johnny Craig work and continuing characters for added appeal. On the other hand, *MD* and *Psychoanalysis* were rather dull, as was much of *Impact*.

Lackluster work was the least of Bill Gaines' problems. As he would soon learn, the newsstand dealers and distributors were out to make Gaines pay for the turmoil they felt his comics brought onto the industry. "I put out the six first issues, six bimonthlies, and they sold ten, 15 percent," Gaines stated. "You can't believe how horrendous the sales were. And I later found out that it was because the word was passed by the wholesalers, 'Get 'em!' So they got me" (Decker 78). Lacking the Code seal, and with the EC logo featured prominently on the covers, many of these books never made it onto newsstands. In fact, many bundles of EC comics never even left the distributor's warehouse.

Gaines had no choice but to swallow his pride and sign on to the Comics Code. Unfortunately, that move didn't reverse his fortunes. As Gaines recounted in a 1983 *Comics Journal* interview, once EC comics carried the Comics Code seal, sales figures doubled, from 10 percent to 20 percent. A twenty percent sell-through rate was still, in Gaines' own words, "disastrous" (Decker 78).

Not only did joining the Association *not* improve EC's sales much, it also meant Gaines now had to contend with Judge Murphy's (sometimes baffling, sometimes maddening) revision stipulations. As expected, Gaines and Murphy didn't see eye-to-eye on matters. Their attitudes about censorship were incompatible, to say the very least. Inevitably, Gaines battled Murphy over revisions the latter's office was requiring.

Gaines' last battle with the CMAA was over the contents of the final comic book EC published: *Incredible Science Fic-*

Birth of the Silver Age

Reverberations from the anti-comics crusades and the adoption of the Comics Code continued to be felt in the industry in 1956. Stanley P. Morse, a publisher who had depended heavily on horror comics, shut down all four of his publishing companies: Aragon, Gilmor, Key Publications and Stanmor Publications. Other publishers who succumbed or dropped their comics lines this year were Ace Publications, Avon Publications, Lev Gleason, Premier Magazines and Superior Comics (a Canadian firm). At the year's end, Comic Magazines, Inc.—better known as Quality Comics—ceased operations. Perhaps the most telling fact of 1956 was that no new publisher entered the comics field.

National's Next Moves

Of course, that didn't mean that no new comics *titles* were published. National debuted several of them in the early months of the year, and all of them were successful.

House of Mystery, National's lone "weird" anthology book, was selling well. As that title approached its 50th issue, a companion title called ***Tales of the Unexpected*** was added (sporting a February 1956 cover date). Editor Jack Schiff had access to some superb artists, including John Prentice and Leonard Starr (both of whom would go on to careers as syndicated comic strip cartoonists). Sales of *Tales* were sufficient to spur the launch of a third title in the genre. ***House of Secrets*** (#1, October 1956) completed National's trilogy of comic books with the same type of material.

Just after the publication of the first issue of *Tales of the Unexpected*, National released ***Showcase*** #1 (March-April 1956), a vehicle for the company to try out new ideas and see if they generated sufficient sales to earn their own titles. According to Irwin Donenfeld, who originated *Showcase*'s format, the book's name was inspired by the *Producer's Showcase* TV show (1954-1957) that aired a variety of 90 minute special programs every four weeks. (*Peter Pan* was one of its offerings; another was a new version of the film *The Petrified Forest* with Humphrey Bogart reprising the role that made him a star.) *Showcase* was one of the last titles launched before Whitney Ellsworth relinquished his remaining editorial duties.

National had found its greatest success with super heroes, and sales of its Superman family of books were still good. The editors knew that young readers would always be attracted to heroes, which is why knights, Vikings and gladiators were being featured in *The Brave and the Bold*. The expressed purpose of *Showcase* was to test other ideas.

Showcase *#4, one of the most significant comic books of all time.* Flash TM and © DC Comics.

was in the final Justice Society of America story in *All-Star Comics* #57 (February-March 1951). Schwartz recalled, "I had been the last editor of the original Flash, so everybody looked at me" (Kupperberg 5). Donenfeld selected the idea and gave the job to Schwartz, who then had to both develop the concept as well as pick the writers and artists who would work on it.

Schwartz decided the character should be a new Flash, with just the name and the super-speed carried forward. Julie said the new Flash's secret identity of Barry Allen was a combination of two show business personalities he was fond of in those days, radio talk-show host Barry Gray and humorist Steve Allen. From this point, accounts about what happened next differ slightly. Schwartz stated that he asked **Bob Kanigher** to write the first script for a new Flash because they shared an office and he knew Kanigher could write the script quickly. Julie claimed they plotted the story together. Kanigher, however, mentioned nothing about input from Schwartz. Instead, Kanigher gave the impression that he was essentially working from scratch.

In *Robin Snyder's History of the Comics*, Kanigher wrote, "Come 1956 and all I needed to know about the new assignment was that he was the fastest man alive. I left the rest to my inner self. What name to give the new Flash? I was too impatient to waste time to think up one. You really can get hung up on the simplest things. My task was to bring him alive. What could be more natural than to call him Flash, and pretend that he was inspired by an old comic? And Jay Garrick was changed into Barry Allen, who was the new Flash" (Kanigher 59-60). Schwartz maintained that the two decided to tie in the origin with lightning, which caused the chemical lab accident, and the fact that Allen would be a police scientist. Kanigher didn't directly dispute this, but essentially asserted that everything in the story originated with him—except for one thing: Flash's ring.

Kanigher admitted that "the Flash's ring was sheer plagiarism [based on the pulp character] the Crimson Clown.... When he wanted to switch from his civvies, he pressed a spring on a ring on his finger. The clown costume erupted out and expanded to life-size. Many years later, I stole that gimmick" (Kanigher, 59-60).

Then it was time to select the artist. In an interview with Will Murray in *Alter Ego*, Julie Schwartz recalled, "I liked Carmine Infantino's work, and he said he would do a quick job" (Murray 11). The choice had a nice symmetry since Kanigher and Infantino had worked together on the Jay Garrick-Flash solo story in the last issue of *Flash Comics*, back in 1949.

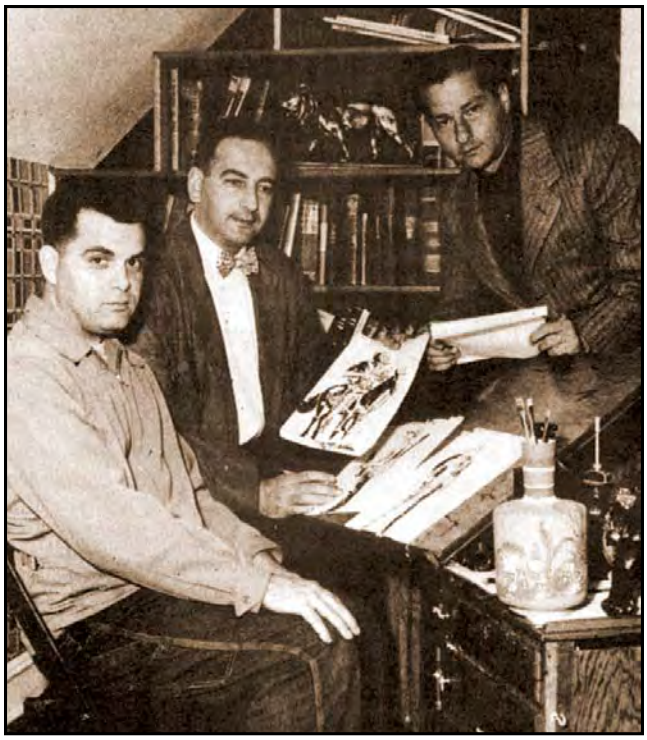
In *History of the Comics*, Infantino remembered it this way: "On one day [when] I was delivering my work, Julie told me we were going to try the Flash. He said it was decided at an editorial meeting. He gave me a script by Kanigher. (I know Kanigher had a lot of input. It was in his style.) I was told to design a costume. I chose a stark bland one with a lightning bolt across. I always kept him slim, like a runner; wiry, too. The cover idea for the first issue was Kanigher's – this I do remember" (Infantino 101).

When Infantino finished penciling the story's pages, Schwartz then needed to find an inker. He recalled, "It so happened Joe Kubert was in the office and I said, 'Joe, how would you like to

> ... and the delighted roar of our laughter rivaled the roar of the presses. (Hefner 5)

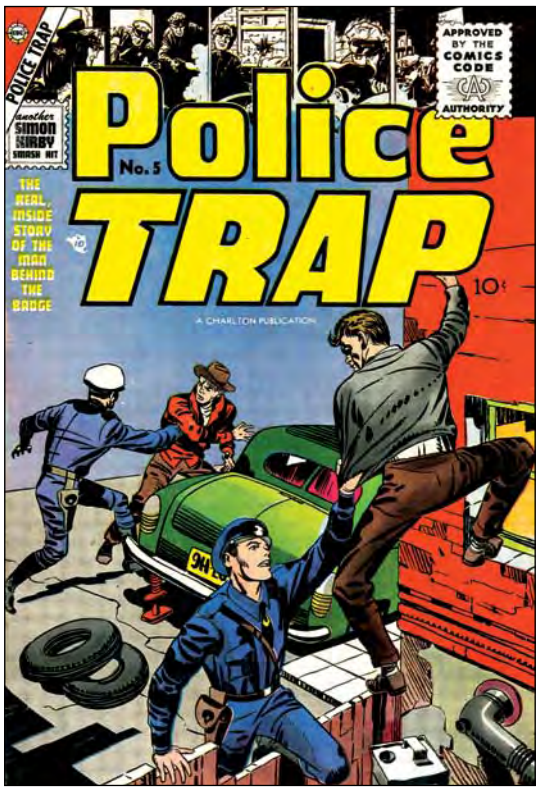
Hefner was sympathetic to Kurtzman's complaints about EC and working for Gaines, and at some point the idea of a new magazine was discussed. Kurtzman recalled in a later interview:

> I felt I had developed something really hot with *Mad*... I felt that there was a great future in the idea. I felt I had built it, but I had built it for somebody else. Professionally, I was completely unhappy. I was feeling pretty low. Hefner was in town—this was early in his own career, too—and we went out to lunch together. I was impressed with him. He came on with all that gusto and optimism he was putting into his own book, and we just talked back and forth. His high opinion of my work did much for my ego at that lunch, and put me into just the right mood to go ask my publisher for a substantial piece of the magazine as an alternative to my leaving. (James 46)



Jack Kirby, Joe Simon and Jack Oleck in what appears to be Kirby's attic studio. From The Comic Book Makers by Joe and Jim Simon, copyrighted and used with permission.

Sometime in April, Kurtzman demanded an ownership position in *Mad* magazine. Gaines offered 10 percent. Kurtzman came back asking for 51 percent. This, he claimed, was so that he could authorize higher payments for outside writers, but in all likelihood, Kurtzman's outrageous demand was probably just a way to get fired. And that's what happened. Gaines responded, "Goodbye, Harvey." Kurtzman's last issue of *Mad* was issue #28 (July 1956).



Harvey Kurtzman accepted Hugh Hefner's offer to create a slick, sophisticated humor magazine, which was eventually named ***Trump***. Some of *Mad*'s contributors—Jack Davis, Willy Elder—left Gaines to appear in Kurtzman's new magazine. *Trump* #1 bore a January 1957 cover date. It sold well, but because of a complex mix of reasons (partially because Hefner had expanded too quickly), Hefner pulled the plug with its second issue. Suddenly Kurtzman was out in the cold. Feldstein was editing *Mad* and its sales continued to climb. For the rest of his life, Harvey Kurtzman wondered how different his life would have been had he stuck with *Mad*, even for just a few more years. (Gaines sold the magazine for $5,000,000 in the early 1960s. Had Kurtzman accepted Gaines' 10 percent offer, he would have gotten $500,000.)

Simon and Kirby Break Up

In the 1940s, the team of **Joe Simon** and **Jack Kirby** seemed unstoppable. Having created Captain America at Timely, the Boy Commandos and Newsboy Legion at National, and *Young Romance* at Prize, they had a reputation for producing trend-setting, top-selling comic books. Joe Simon was the canny businessman while Jack Kirby was the master storyteller.

In the 1950s, Simon and Kirby were no longer invincible. *Black Magic*—which the pair had created for Prize—was a solid seller, and many of their other crime and romance titles did well, but there were no more breakout, nova-like, trend-setting hits. It wasn't a lack of inspiration that caused the team's breakup, though. After the introduction of the Comics Code, a time of great turbulence in the comics industry, Simon and Kirby had started their own publishing company. Before long, they were cut off at the knees by a distribution disaster.

In late 1955, payments slowed from their distributor Leader News, just as they had for EC. In *The Comic-Book Makers*, Joe Simon explained, "Our Mainline comics ... had been showing fairly good sales with clean, wholesome material, but payments from Leader News Company, our distributor, were slowing down alarmingly. The sudden demise of EC comics had put Leader News in a financial crisis and they soon folded their tents, leaving us holding an empty sack. Mainline Publications became insolvent, an innocent casualty in the final victory by 'The People' against the vile forces of Horror Comics" (Simon 162). In sum, Mainline published five issues of *Bulls Eye* and four of the other three titles. The remaining two issues of each (*Foxhole* had three), already prepared, were sold to Charlton to recoup something for the effort. With that, the Simon and Kirby studio came to a sad ending in 1956.

Turbulence and Transition

When National Comics offered **Jack Kirby** freelance work, **Joe Simon** encouraged Jack to take it. Kirby didn't want to break with Simon, but his bills were piling up and National paid well. The two men, who were neighbors, remained friends and worked together again before the decade's end. Now Jack Kirby embarked on a new stage in his career, one where he would have to steer his own course.

There was a problem: in 1957, Jack Kirby was no longer a good fit for National. Without Joe Simon to handle the business side and company relations, Kirby was unable to manage National's conservative "suits" who considered his artwork crude and his figure drawing too exaggerated. As Kirby later explained, "They kept showing me their other books—books that weren't selling—and saying, 'This is what a comic book ought to be.' I couldn't communicate with those people" (Evanier 101).

Kirby began work on a new feature that came to be called **Challengers of the Unknown**. It was one of the last concepts he and Joe Simon thought up together: a team of daredevils who survived an airplane crash, then decided to take further risks because they were "living on borrowed time." With Jack Schiff acting as his editor, Kirby provided the plots and writer Dave Wood wrote the finished scripts. It was yet another S & K team book, but in keeping with the times and the still widely held perception that costumed characters were out, these heroes wore uniforms that resembled "normal" clothes: identical purple shirts and slacks that weren't skin tight. (Kirby brought the idea of a team of heroes clad in non-descript, identical costumes to the Fantastic Four, almost five years later.) *Showcase* #6 (January-February 1957) presented the origin story "The Secret of the Sorcerer's Box!," a book-length tale divided into four chapters.

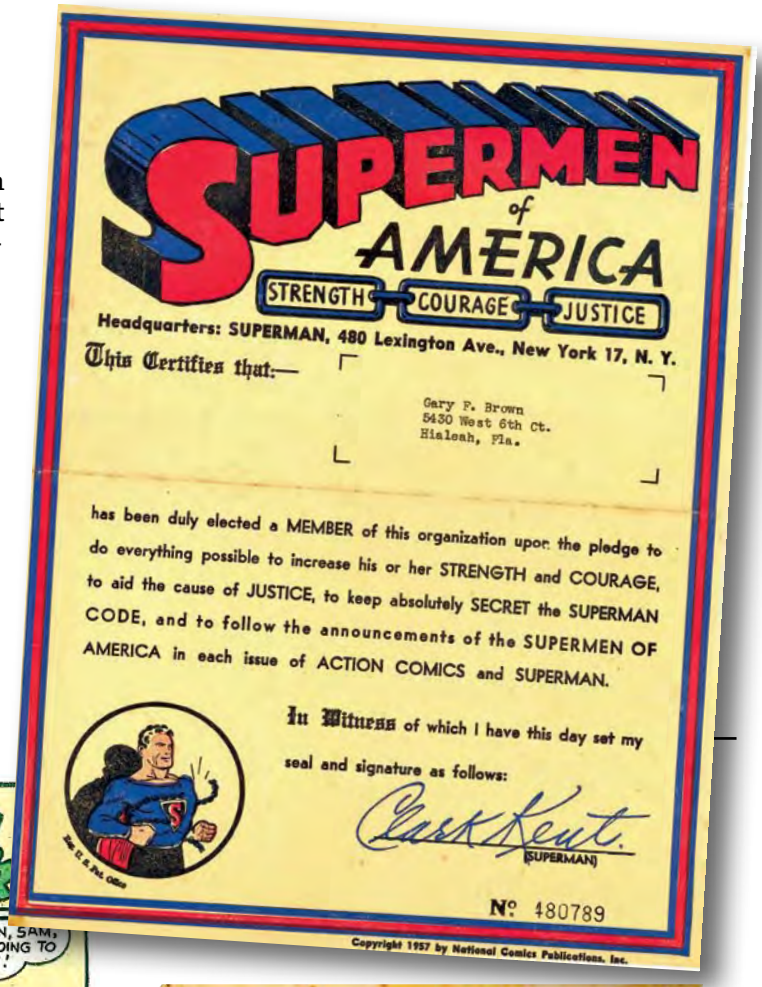
The book-length story, little-used at National at this time, was perhaps made more acceptable because the chapter divisions looked like separate stories to the casual browser. Before Max Gaines sold All-American Comics to National in 1945, there were book-length stories in the likes of *Wonder Woman*, *Green Lantern* and *All-Flash*. All-American editor Sheldon Mayer also had several such humorous tales in his short-lived original run of *Scribbly* in 1948-1950. Similarly, in the 1950s National ran book-length stories in certain humor books (*The Adventures of Bob Hope* and *The Adventures of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis*), but when it came to their "serious" titles, National preferred multiple stories until the Challengers broke the mold.

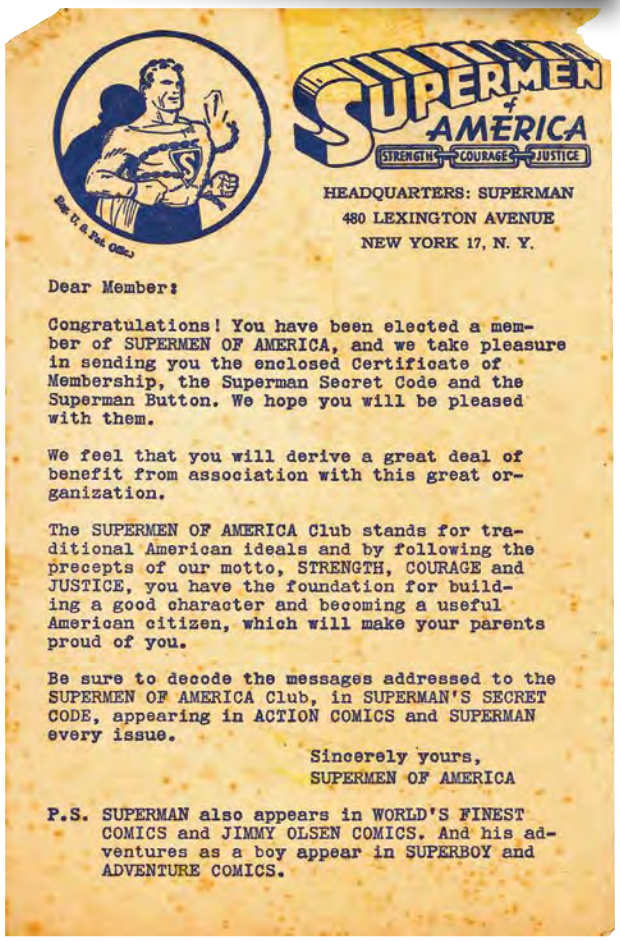
After their debut in "Sorcerer's Box," the Challengers returned in the next issue of *Showcase* (#7, March-April 1957)

strength and courage, to aid the cause of justice, to keep absolutely secret the Superman Code, and to follow the announcements of the Supermen of America in each issue of *Action Comics* and *Superman*.

For those truly seeking physical strength, the ad pages often included full-page offers for bodybuilding courses. The most famous were Charles Atlas' "Hey Skinny!" ads. Another frequent advertiser was the "Jowett Institute of Physical Training," which offered George Jowett's *Photo Book of Strong Men* and his *How to become a Mighty HE-MAN* booklet, available for a mere 10 cents. In a balloon next to a grainy photo of Jowett ("Champion of Champions"), he exhorted, "Let's go, young fellow! Now YOU give me 10 pleasant minutes a day in your home ... I don't care how skinny or flabby you are. I'll make you over by the same method I turned myself from a wreck to the strongest of the strong." Maybe a kid couldn't be super-powered like the Man of Steel, but he could have muscles to help him approximate the look of his hero. The ads played on the power fantasies of many a pimple-faced youth.

Also, for readers' consideration, were promotions for the Palisades Amusement Park in Bergen County, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from New York City. Founded in





Public service pages such as the one above (from Adventure *#240, September 1957) were the special project of editor Jack Schiff. Art by Ruben Moreira. Right: Thanks to Gary Brown for providing his Supermen of America certificate, as shown.* Superman TM and © DC Comics.

National Takes the Lead

By 1958, the dust had settled from the war on comic books. Senator Estes Kefauver's political ambitions ended when Adlai Stevenson won the Democratic Party's nomination for President in 1956. Dr. Fredric Wertham moved on to focus on violence in television. The ladies clubs and other civic watchdog groups were, for the most part, sufficiently mollified by the effect of the industry's self-censorship. Adults passed by the comics racks to examine the latest crop of paperback offerings.

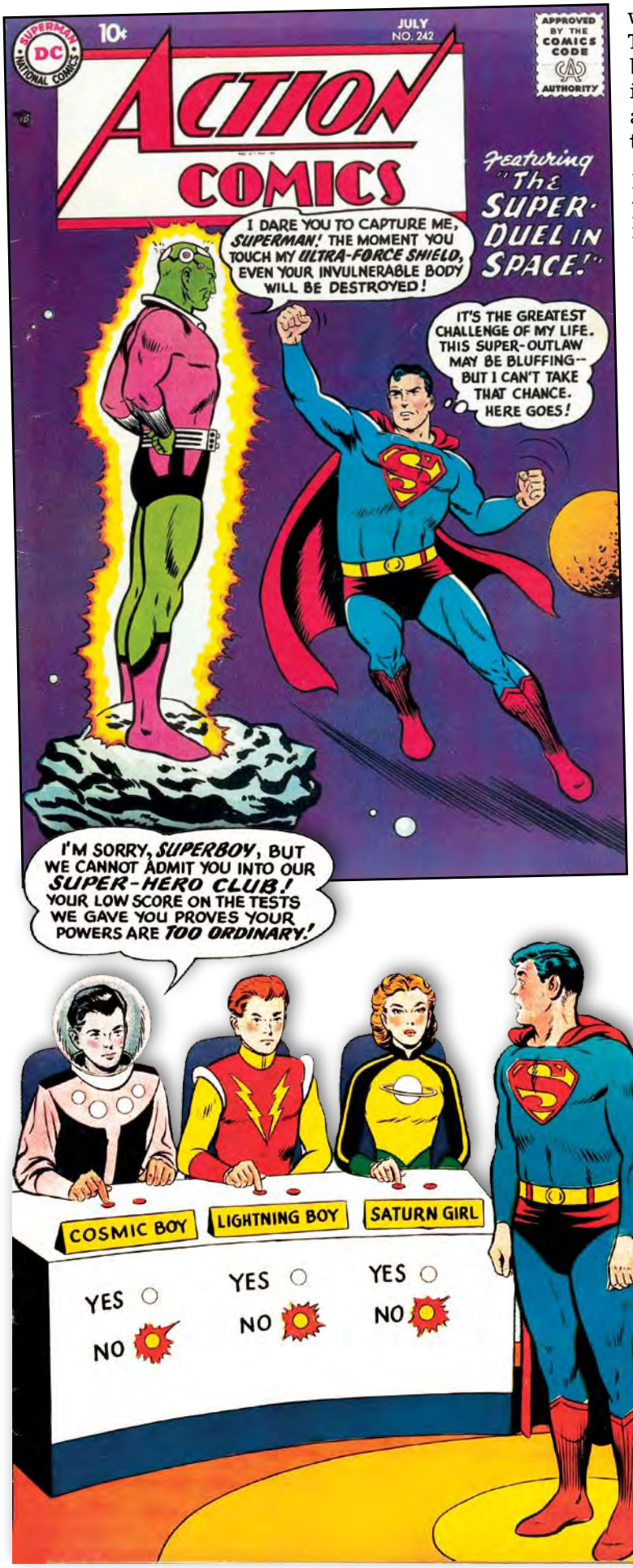
Publishers had adapted to the new reality. Comic book companies either picked up the pieces or gave up. St. John and Magazine Enterprises (ME), both of whom had been important players, would issue their last comics this year, leaving just six major comic book publishers standing: Dell, National, Harvey, Charlton, Goodman and Archie. All had their roots in the Golden Age of comics, but then, so did the small firms that were still hanging on.

American Comics Group (ACG) continued with *Adventures into the Unknown* and a few other titles (including their lucrative commercial comics). Prize was still around with *Black Magic* and others. (Its *Young Romance* and *Young Love* would be purchased by National in 1963.) Gilberton rolled along with its educational titles, and Catechetical Guild kept producing *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact*. But that was it. No publishers who started comic book lines in the 1950s stayed with them through the decade's end.

National's "Full Court Press"

After the winnowing out of publishers, National found its dominance of the field greater than ever. Though Dell sold more comic books, the publisher with the DC insignia on its covers had crushed Fawcett, decimated Goodman's line and purchased the properties of Quality. With dominance came the realization that National held the future of the comic book industry in its hands. Or, as a certain wall-crawler from another company later learned, "With great power comes great responsibility."

National had to find a way to inject new vitality into mass-market comic books if the medium was to have a real resurgence and compete with television. The publisher began seriously marshalling its forces for a major push. The re-tooled Flash was promising as were the Challengers of the Unknown, but those were only a beginning. The Silver Age would not come to pass with the revival of a solitary Golden Age hero, or with a new Jack Kirby-created hero team. In 1958, National's leadership, editors, and creative staff began a "full court press" to improve their product and find new things to appeal to readers, and in so doing, shepherd the industry to a full recovery.



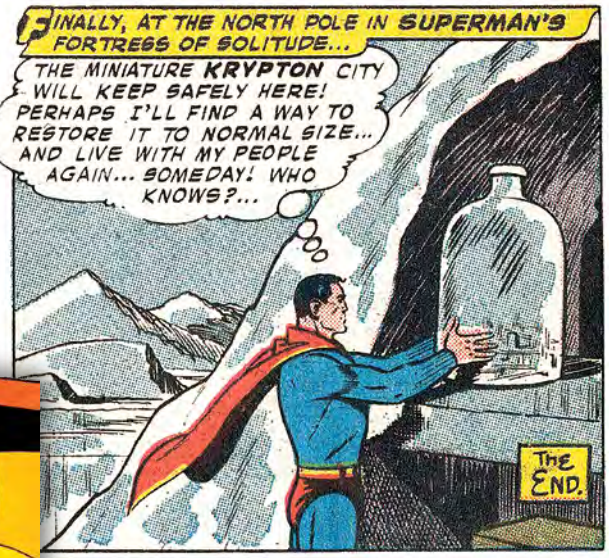
wishes. One was to create a companion for Superman. This magically-created Super-Girl (who appeared on the book's cover) didn't survive the end of the story, except insofar as Weisinger found that there was a bump in sales and presumed it was because browsers were attracted by the depiction of a Girl of Steel.

Even though Otto and Mort had been friends for over 20 years, Binder found dealing with Weisinger difficult, and it took a toll on the genial writer. Weisinger was one of the toughest editors in comics to work for, and became more so as time went on. Freed from the supervisory eye of Whitney Ellsworth, close with Jack Liebowitz, and editor of National's top-selling books, Mort felt more at liberty to launch into angry tirades at the drop of a hat, play writers against each other, and lord it over his colleagues at National. Otto recalled:

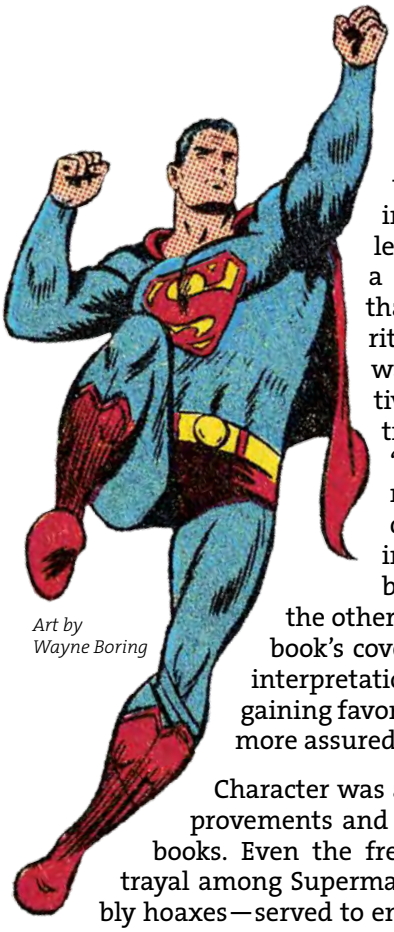
> One day [Mort] went up to Julie [Schwartz] and said, "You can't have Otto anymore." He didn't ask me whether I wanted to write for Julie, and of course, I wanted to because Julie was easier to work for. He could be finicky, but there was a good back-and-forth exchange with him. But no, Mort had to have his way. It was a quarrel. Julie said, "For Christ's sake, Mort, how can you just take him away? That isn't right. You can't do that!" So when I went to Julie the following week, he said, "You can't write for me. Mort will make trouble." Mort was that kind of a guy. Crazy, crazy. He was a madman. It's a wonder *I* didn't go mad!" (Schelly 143)

In his notes, Binder wrote, "My last science-fiction scripts for DC were in January 1959, at which time Mort Weisinger 'commandeered' me wholly for his Superman group of comics, paying me higher rates."

Despite the unpleasantness of writing for Weisinger, Binder's work was better than ever. He wrote the first story in comic books featuring **Bizarro**, the imperfect artificial copy of Superboy created by a scientific experiment gone awry. While writer Alvin Schwartz created



Brainiac, the Legion of Super-Heroes and the bottled city Kandor were additions to the Superman mythos introduced in stories written by Otto Binder. Characters TM and © DC Comics.



Art by Wayne Boring

elaborate birthday gift from Batman, though Superman figured it out and turned the tables on the Caped Crusader in the final pages. The harmless joke nevertheless revealed a great deal and opened up that kind of psychological territory for the future, though it was seldom explored as effectively. Wayne Boring's visual treatment greatly enhanced "The Super-Key to Fort Superman." It would have been so different, and so much less intriguing, had it been drawn by a different artist such as the otherwise able Al Plastino. Yet the book's cover was by Curt Swan, whose interpretation of the Man of Steel was gaining favor with Weisinger as it became more assured and confident.

Character was at the heart of the year's improvements and new ideas in the Superman books. Even the frequent stories involving betrayal among Superman, Lois and Jimmy—inevitably hoaxes—served to emphasize the bonds between them. Their search for personal happiness, their satisfaction at their jobs, the way they looked to each other for support — all made the center of the stories more human. The Superman-Lois-Lana triangle exposed readers to romance comic book tropes. *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* was a unique hybrid of romance and super hero adventure. Boys who would never be caught buying a romance comic book bought Lois Lane's book because, well, it was also a Superman comic book. There was a kind of family feeling among the Daily Planet crew, something that made the stories relatable to younger readers whose lives weren't yet reaching far beyond their own family milieu.

Another important development occurred in *Superman* #124 (September 1958): the first letter column as a regular feature in National's comics of this era (aside from *Sugar & Spike* which had been running one since its third issue in 1956). **"Metropolis Mailbag"** was a way for editor Weisinger to judge reader reaction to the changes and new ideas, as well as make the readers part of Superman's world. In that first column, Weisinger wrote, "We welcome your suggestions and comments regarding America's favorite action

hero, SUPERMAN." To protect the presumably young letter-writers, their full addresses weren't printed. Everyone who wrote received a postcard with a boiler-plate "thank you" for writing.

With Lois Lane in her own title, the development of the Silver Age Fortress of Solitude, the creation of the Legion of Super-Heroes, and the addition of Brainiac, Kandor and Bizarro—as well as a stronger emphasis on characterization—editor Mort Weisinger and his staff made major strides in 1958 in laying the groundwork for a more interesting and coherent "Superman Universe." The appeal of that universe, which continued to develop in the ensuing years, contributed a great deal to the growing momentum of the Silver Age alongside the developments overseen by Julie Schwartz, and produced many highly entertaining comic books.

National's new Science Fiction Heroes

The U.S.S.R.'s launch of its **Sputnik satellite** on October 4, 1957 was a wake-up call to the American space program. Suddenly, a "space race" was underway between the United States and the Soviet Union. It became a topic of national concern, consequently impacting various aspects of American life. For instance, public education nationwide

The letter column "Metropolis Mailbag" gave readers a sense of participation. Gradually, such columns were introduced in other titles, eventually becoming an expected adjunct to most Silver Age books from National/DC (and many of their rivals).

CHAPTER TEN

The Silver Age Gains Traction

According to the 1960 *N. W. Ayer & Sons Directory* (an annual publication that provided data for advertisers), the monthly circulation totals of the major surviving comic book publishers in 1959 were:

Dell – 9,686,424 (37%)
National – 6,653,485 (25%)
Harvey – 2,514,879 (9.5%)
Charlton – 2,500,000 est. (9.5%)
Goodman – 2,253,112 (9%)
Archie – 1,608,489 (6%)
ACG – 975,000 (4%)

The top two publishers accounted for an incredible 62% of the comics sold in 1959, with Dell decidedly outselling National (Miller).

This list makes clear how disastrous the "Atlas implosion" was for Martin Goodman's comic book line. In 1950, National Comics' monthly sales were 7,791,402, but Goodman was right up there with 5,783,231 (Tolworthy). By decade's end, National's monthly sales were 85% of what they had been 10 years earlier, not bad considering that television had become all-pervasive by 1959, and that children watched much more TV than adults. Sales of Martin Goodman's line, however, were just 39% of what they had been in 1950.

When comparing sales figures, one must take into account the number of issues each company published. Archie published 100 issues in 1959 while National published 382. Therefore, Archie comics were selling about as well as National's on an issue-by-issue basis. On the other hand, Charlton released 289 issues, nearly triple Archie's production, yet only represented 9.5 percent of the industry's revenues.

The number of issues published provides a picture of how crowded newsstands were, and the number of choices readers had. The decade's peak year was 1952, when 3,150 issues were published. According to historians Michelle Nolan and Dan Stevenson, those numbers (not including giveaways or religious comics, rounded off to the nearest 50) in the middle and later years of the decade were:

1954 – Slightly more than 2,700
1955 – Slightly less than 2,350
1956 – Slightly more than 2,000
1957 – Slightly more than 1,900
1958 – Slightly more than 1,850
1959 – Slightly more than 1,500

would drastically alter his artistic style: he re-enrolled in art school. "There came a point where I felt I had to get back to school," Infantino recalled in his book *The Amazing World of Carmine Infantino*. "I just felt there was something missing" (42). Infantino took classes at the Art Students' League, and then at the School of Visual Arts with teacher Jack Potter. "What Jack taught me about design was monumental, and I went through a metamorphosis working with him. My work started to grow by leaps and bounds. I was achieving individuality in my work that wasn't there before. I threw all the basics of cartooning out the window and focused on pure design" (Infantino 54). Infantino's work took on a dynamic quality that directed the readers' eye to each panel's foreground elements (rather than to the background details). It was an abstract, spare, modern-looking approach that fit perfectly with the times and was startlingly different than anything else in comics. He continued to refine his style over the next few years. Since his teenage years, Infantino had always been a very good penciler, but the artistic metamorphosis he underwent in his mid-30s made him one of the greatest artists in comic book history.

Infantino's early Adam Strange artwork was inked variously by Bernard Sachs, Joe Giella and Murphy Anderson. The scripts, however, had certain weaknesses: lack of character, emotion and humor. Though writer Gardner Fox had scripted comic books for nearly 20 years, he had the sensibility of a writer of pulp magazines, a medium where character was sublimated almost entirely to plot and atmosphere. Yes, Adam and Alanna were in love, but their relationship acted more as a device to explain Adam's continual desire to defend Rann than anything resembling a real life relationship, even the jokey relationship Barry Allen had with Iris West. While it's true the Adam Strange feature only ran nine pages for its first two years, its weaknesses were just as apparent when the stories became longer. As with pulp readers, many comic book readers overlooked these flaws, but some did not, limiting the appeal of Adam Strange's adventures in *Mystery in Space*.

The Space Age Green Lantern

In 1959, Julie Schwartz got the opportunity to reinvent another one of National's Golden Age costumed heroes. One month after *Mystery in Space* #53 appeared on newsstands, *Showcase* #22 (September-October 1959) featured a new version of the **Green Lantern**. National clearly had high hopes for the revival as *Showcase* #23 and #24 also featured the character. All three *Showcase* covers displayed a large, eye-catching Green Lantern logo (created by Ira Schnapp) that was big enough to read from across a room.

Green Lantern as he appeared in the 1940s, and the new version introduced in Showcase *#22. Art by Gil Kane.* Green Lantern TM and © DC Comics.

Showcase #22 came nineteen years after the debut of the original Green Lantern in *All-American Comics* #16 (July 1940), ten years after the cancellation of that character's eponymous series (with *Green Lantern* #38, May-June 1949), and eight and a half years after his last appearance in *All-Star Comics* #57 (February-March 1951). Schwartz selected his Flash writer, **John Broome**, to script the adventures of the new Emerald Gladiator. Finding an artist, however, wasn't a repeat of the process with the Flash, when the artist who drew the Golden Age feature was given the nod. Most of the Green Lantern stories of the late 1940s were drawn by Alex Toth and Irwin Hasen, but neither of those artists was available for Schwartz's use. Even if Toth hadn't been working in California at this time, his estrangement from Schwartz would most likely have ruled him out as penciler. Hasen, on the other hand, was busy drawing his newspaper strip *Dondi*. In any case, Schwartz wanted an artist who could bring a fresh, modern approach to the visuals. He chose **Gil Kane**, one of the regular artists in his stable, to design and illustrate the new Green Lantern.