TWO MORROWS

AMERICAN COMIC BOOK CHRONICLES

THE 1990s

1990–1999

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and KEITH DALLAS

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1990

CHAPTER ONE

Swing Time

For many comic book publishers, creators and retailers, the dawn of the 1990s was the best of times. Fully recovered from the black-and-white boom and bust of the late 1980s, the comic book industry was experiencing a renaissance: of sales, of critical attention and of diverse, quality material. Fueling it all was the ever-expanding Direct Market of comic book shops which definitively proved itself a profitable alternative to the antiquated—and corrupt—newsstand system. Meanwhile, the runaway success of Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film, starring Jack Nicholson and Michael Keaton, promised a new link between Hollywood and the comics industry, just as a new generation of comic book celebrities became affixed to some of the most popular series of the time.

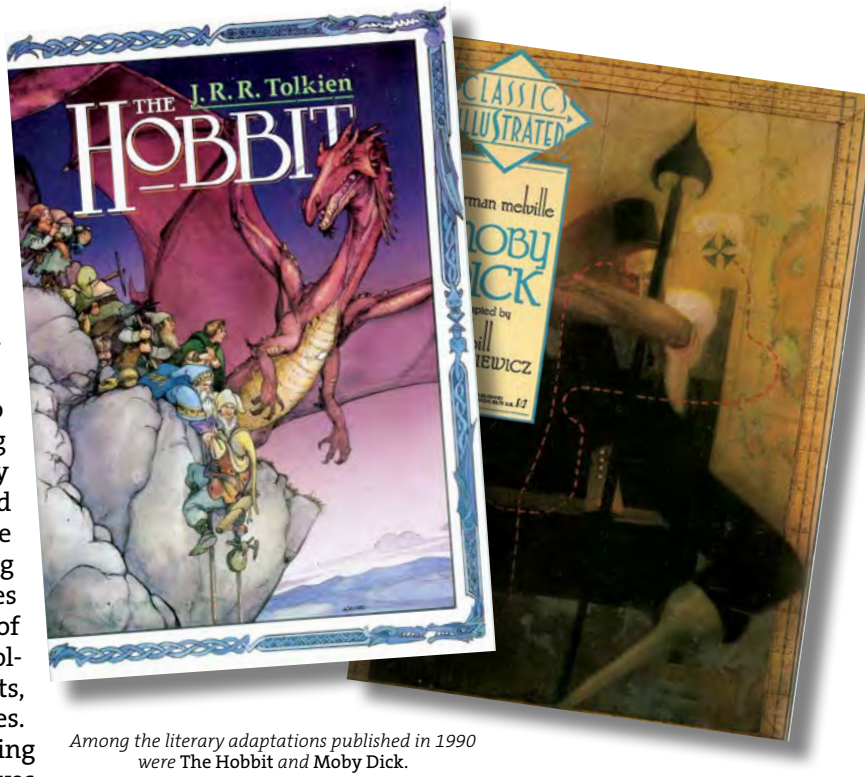
As the decade began, most newsstand-distributed comic books—from publishers like Archie, DC, Harvey and Marvel—cost $1, but overall, the price points ran the gamut. DC's Superman titles (*Action Comics*, *Adventures of Superman* and *Superman*) were cover-priced at 75¢. Deluxe-format comics cost twice as much or more. The Batman-featured *Legends of the Dark Knight* and Marvel's *Marc Spector: Moon Knight* cost $1.50 while *Legion of Super-Heroes* cost $1.75. Above that, DC and Marvel charged $3.95 (and sometimes $4.95) for their squarebound books. Direct Market-exclusive publishers strove to keep their price points competitive: Eclipse sold *Miracleman* for $1.50 while *Mike Grell's Sable* (published by First) cost $1.75. Innovation Publishing's *Justice Machine* had a $1.95 price point.

For kid-friendly publishers who were out of favor in the Direct Market, the newsstand was still a vital source of revenue. While **Archie Comics** refreshed its line with titles like *Explorers of the Unknown* and *Riverdale High* as well as a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles/Archie crossover, **Harvey Comics** struck a deal with the pop music group New Kids On the Block and published 44 issues starring the teen idols between 1990 and 1991. Unseen in comic books since the Whitman line ended in 1984, the Warner Bros. line of cartoon characters made a tentative return in 1990, as well. In the same time frame as the year's merger of Warner Communications and Time, Inc., DC published Bugs Bunny for the first time in a three-issue mini-series and the short-lived *Looney Tunes Magazine* and *Tiny Toons Adventures Magazine*.

A growing number of comic book publishers aggressively courted the bookstore market with new graphic novels and reprint collections. Matching the *Marvel Masterworks* line of hardcovers, which premiered in 1987, DC began producing *DC Archives* in 1989 with inaugural volumes

that reprinted the very earliest Batman and Superman stories from the late 1930s and early 1940s. More recent material, like Frank Miller's *Daredevil* and Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V For Vendetta* received the trade paperback treatment. Eclipse released an adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* by David Wenzel, and First Comics revived *Classics Illustrated*, last seen in 1969, with new adaptations of such literary works as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (by Bill Sienkiewicz), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (by Michael Ploog), and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (by Joe Staton), among others, for $3.75 each. Each of these projects was an attempt to gain a foothold in the bookstore marketplace to varying degrees of success.

Despite the industry's overall bullish disposition, some creators lamented the limited opportunities offered to them. The black-and-white bust of two years left lingering scars but did little to diminish the number of comic book publishers operating in 1990: *Amazing Heroes* #179 (May 1990) listed comics from 73 different companies. The reality, however, was that very few publishers could offer creators gainful employment. As one commentator noted at the time, Comico was facing bankruptcy and First and Eclipse were "abandoning monthly titles for the sake of albums, anthologies, reprints, and sundries. The resulting vacuum leaves the Big Two [i.e. DC and Marvel] looking more and more like the lone reliable places for a big paycheck" (Kreiner 3).



Among the literary adaptations published in 1990 were The Hobbit *and* Moby Dick.

But at least the decade began with more than a dozen distributors servicing the comics business, including not only the far-reaching Diamond, Heroes World and Capital City but also smaller operators like Comics Hawaii, New Jersey's Superhero Enterprises and Portland, Oregon's Second Genesis. Retailers in most parts of the country tended to order the latest comic books from the distributor nearest them since most distributors relatively carried the same material as their competitors.

As sales surged at the beginning of the decade and money was made, new publishers joined the field and new creators became stars. Much of the industry was euphoric, a mood that would last several years... until hubris and inattention brought an end to the party.

Self-mocking cover by Todd McFarlane from the fanzine Amazing Heroes. Spider-Man TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

The Big Business of Marvel Comics

In 1990, **Marvel Comics** had one of the biggest years in its history. Shipping over 115 million copies of comics and magazines, Marvel also moved strongly into publishing squarebound comics and softcover and hardcover graphic novels (Humphrey 15).

Marvel boasted one of the most diverse lines in comics, publishing not just super-hero comics but also war titles (*The 'Nam*), humor (*Groo*) and science fiction (Marvel's Epic line was filled with science fiction adventure titles such as *Alien Legion*, *Interface*, *Open Space* and *Stalkers*). What's more, Marvel offered several comics directed at kids. As much as 10% of Marvel's output in a given month were "entry-level comics" including *Camp Candy*, *ALF* (adapting the popular TV sitcom character), *Brute Force*, *Heathcliff*, and *Police Academy*, among others. In 1991 Marvel would expand that line, including a comic version of the rappers Kid 'n Play and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Comic Book*, following on the heels of an adaptation of *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, written and illustrated by indie comics darling Evan Dorkin.

Marvel's owner was Revlon chairman **Ronald O. Perelman**, who purchased the company in early 1989 for $82.5 million, outbidding a group that included former Marvel editor-in-chief Jim Shooter. In an autumn 1990

TIMELINE: 1990

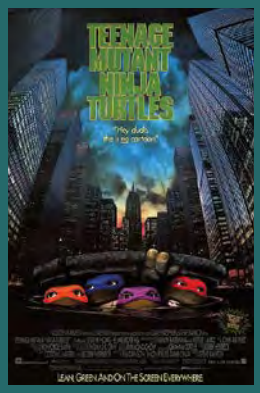
A compilation of the year's notable comic book history events alongside some of the year's most significant popular culture and historical events. (On sale dates are approximations.)

January 9: Written by Louise Simonson and drawn by Rob Liefeld, *New Mutants* #87 introduces Cable, a gun-toting mutant soon to become one of Marvel's most popular characters of the decade.

January 18: The mayor of Washington D.C., Marion Barry, is arrested for possession of crack cocaine during an FBI sting operation. He is subsequently sentenced to six months in prison.

February 11: After 27 years of captivity as a political prisoner opposing Apartheid, Nelson Mandela is released from a South African prison.

March 18: Disguised as policemen, two men steal art from a museum in Boston, including masterpieces by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Degas and an ancient Chinese bronze beaker valued at $300 million.



March 30: A big-screen version of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* arrives in movie theaters. The film would gross more than $201 million worldwide.

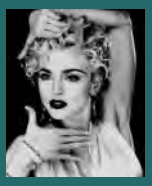
April 8: *Twin Peaks*—a murder mystery co-created by David Lynch—premieres on the ABC television network. Soon the entire country will be asking, "Who Killed Laura Palmer?"

April 24: A symbol of the 1980s era of Wall Street greed, "junk bond" financier Michael Milken pleads guilty to six felonies in connection with the largest securities fraud case in history.

April 24: The space shuttle Discovery blasts off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, carrying the $1.5 billion Hubble Space Telescope. Once in orbit, Hubble broadcasts images of deep space that revolutionize man's understanding of the universe.

April 8: Ryan White—who gained national attention when he was expelled from school after contracting the AIDS virus—dies at the age of 18 from complications of the disease. After his death, Congress passes the "Ryan White CARE Act" which funds health care for uninsured AIDS patients.

May 19: Madonna's dance-pop single "Vogue" becomes the #1 song on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 chart.



June 15: A feature film version of *Dick Tracy*—based on Chester Gould's comic strip detective—arrives in movie theaters. Despite tremendous publicity and fanfare, along with the star power of such actors as Warren Beatty, Al Pacino and Madonna, the film proves to be a disappointment at the box office.

June 19: Over two million copies of the debut issue of *Spider-Man*—written and drawn by Todd McFarlane—are distributed to comic book stores and newsstands. In a sign of things to come, Marvel offers multiple variations of the issue including polybagged copies and gold-tinted and silver-tinted covers.

June 26: President George Bush—who ran for office in 1988 on a pledge of "no new taxes"—publicly concedes that increased taxes need to be combined with spending cuts in order to reduce the national deficit.

JANUARY FEBRUARY MARCH APRIL MAY JUNE

New Mutants and Spider-Man TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles TM and © Viacom International Inc. Swamp Thing and Flash TM and © DC Comics.

article, *Forbes* magazine ranked 47-year-old Perelman as the third-richest American through his investments in cosmetics, camping gear, an artificial sweetener company and a drug company. Marvel staffers, though, privately referred to their new Revlon Cosmetics boss by a different name: "the lipstick guy" (Howe 313).

Many doubted Perelman had any genuine interest in—or affection for—comic books. The new owner, though, clearly grasped the profitable potential of his new possession. He referred to Marvel Comics as "a mini-Disney" whose fictional characters could be lucratively branded and marketed (Raviv 12). To that end, Perelman pushed for the production of more crossover "event comics," beginning with 1989's "Inferno," a multi-part story that ran through *Uncanny X-Men*, *New Mutants* and *X-Factor*, with circulation-boosting tie-ins with other comics including *Daredevil* and *Fantastic Four*. Perelman also encouraged the promotion of Marvel's most popular creators. The immediate result was that Marvel's sales surged dramatically and net income doubled.

Marvel's editor-in-chief **Tom DeFalco** supervised a large crew of editors that included Craig Anderson, Bobbie Chase, Dan Chichester, Don Daley, Bob Harras, Terry Kavanagh, Ralph Macchio, Howard Mackie, Carl Potts and Jim Salicrup. Together, that team was responsible for releasing approximately 70 comics a month. DeFalco drew less attention to himself than his outspoken editor-in-chief predecessor. Unlike Jim Shooter, who always seemed to have his tall frame in front of the comics media, DeFalco was more of a behind-the-scenes presence, making sure his editors received his full support. The last thing DeFalco wanted was a continuation of the poor office morale that plagued the end of Shooter's tenure. At the same time, DeFalco held his editors responsible for maintaining the integrity of Marvel's characters, and now his subordinates were monetarily incentivized: like writers and artists, editors received bonus payments for best-selling books (Howe 314).

Marvel's core super-hero line had seldom been stronger than it was in 1990. The company dominated the Direct Market with a juggernaut group of titles that was steadily accumulating new series, and Marvel's most talked-about comic book of the year starred its most iconic super-hero and its most popular artist.

The Adjectiveless Spider-Man

By 1990, ***Amazing Spider-Man*** had turned into one of Marvel's best-selling comics, with an average monthly circulation of 334,893 – the highest the title had achieved since 1969. Much of the success could be attributed to artist **Todd McFarlane**, a 28-year-old Canadian who entered the comics field through a back-up

July 25: Sam Grainger—an inker best known for his Marvel Comics work during the 1960s and 1970s on titles like *Avengers*, *Incredible Hulk* and *X-Men*—dies at the age of 60 due to diabetes-related complications.

August 2: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invades the neighboring nation of Kuwait on the pretense that Kuwait is stealing oil that rightfully belongs to Iraq. Within two days, Kuwait is completely conquered. The invasion—and subsequent annexation—of Kuwait is condemned internationally, setting up a historic military operation the following year.

September 5: Jerry Iger—a cartoonist who partnered with Will Eisner to become one of the earliest comic book "packagers" in the 1930s—dies at the age of 87.

September 13: *Law & Order*—a police procedural and courtroom drama created by Dick Wolf—premieres on the NBC television network. The show would last 20 seasons, winning numerous awards along the way.

October 4: *Beverly Hills, 90210*—a drama starring Jason Priestley and Shannon Doherty as two teenagers from Minneapolis who move with their family to Beverly Hills, California—debuts on the FOX television network. The show eventually becomes the most watched program on television, spawning various spin-offs and imitations.

October 9: David Souter is sworn in as a U.S. Supreme Court judge, filling the seat vacated by William Brennan.

November 27: British Conservative John Major succeeds Margaret Thatcher as Great Britain's Prime Minister.

December 26: According to the 1990 census, over 249 million people are living in the United States, an increase of 23 million people since 1980.

JULY AUGUST SEPTEMBER OCTOBER NOVEMBER DECEMBER

July 27: The first episode of *Swamp Thing*—starring Dick Durock as DC Comics' heroic muck monster—debuts on the USA cable television network. The show would last three seasons and a total of 72 episodes.

September 20: The first episode of *The Flash*—starring John Wesley Shipp as DC Comics' Fastest Man Alive—debuts on the CBS television network. Airing in the same Thursday night time slot as NBC's *The Cosby Show* and FOX's *The Simpsons*, *The Flash* is canceled after one season.

November 15: The producer of the pop music band Milli Vanilli publicly confirms rumors that the lead duo had not performed the actual singing on any part of their debut album, *Girl You Know It's True*. Milli Vanilli are subsequently stripped of the Grammy Award they received in 1989 for "Best New Artist."

December 22: Trade-union activist Lech Walesa becomes Poland's first popularly elected president.

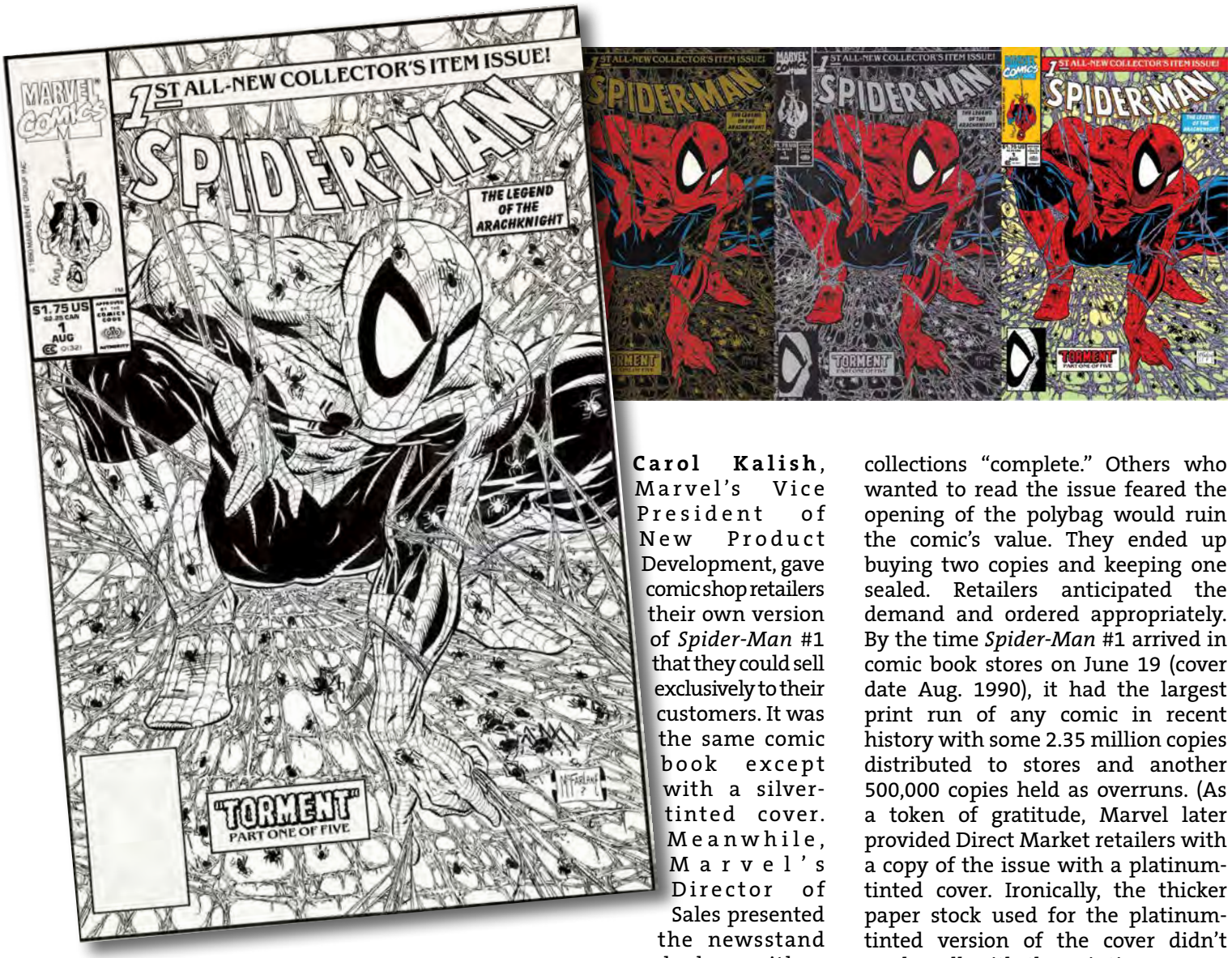
feature in Epic Comics' *Coyote* #11 (March 1985) before moving on to draw 24 issues of DC's *Infinity Inc.* and three parts of the "Batman: Year Two" story arc in *Detective Comics*. He then began a memorable long run on *Incredible Hulk* with writer Peter David that garnered both men some major accolades, including a "Best Artist" Eisner Award nomination for McFarlane in 1988.

When McFarlane took over *Amazing Spider-Man* with issue #298 (March 1988), his depictions of the web-slinger and his cast deviated radically from everything that had come before. Spider-Man's costume had enormous white eyes, and the hero contorted in anatomically impossible poses. Some readers—and Marvel staffers—were aghast, but many more were captivated by the dynamic vividness of McFarlane's depictions.

McFarlane became a bona fide star... but one with a stick in his craw. The problem was that while McFarlane's vivid work was driving *Amazing Spider-Man*'s success, the artist didn't have total creative control. David Michelinie remained the title's writer. As McFarlane explained later in the year, "I guess I was getting a little restless on the *Amazing Spider-Man* book. I figured the only way I could have control over what I wanted to draw was to write the book. It was not so much that I wanted to be a writer, but I wanted to have more freedom on the writing side of it" (Sanderson 18).

So with issue #328 (Jan. 1990)—featuring a knock-down, drag-out battle between Spider-Man and the Hulk (and a cover in which a punch from Spider-Man causes the Hulk to smash through the comic logo)—McFarlane quit *Amazing Spider-Man* and told his editor, Jim Salicrup, to attach him to a title he could both write and draw. (Erik Larsen, fresh off a five-issue stint on *The Punisher* and soon to be an important figure in McFarlane's life, became the new artist on *Amazing Spider-Man*.) Considering his inexperience as a writer, McFarlane expected Salicrup to assign him to an under-performing series where he could prove himself (Howe 319). Little did McFarlane know that the Marvel editors had been talking for some time about starting a fourth new Spider-Man series (to join *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Spectacular Spider-Man* and *Web of Spider-Man*) and that became the book McFarlane was offered to write and draw. McFarlane admitted at the time, "It wouldn't have been my choice to bring in a fourth Spider-Man book, but I wasn't fool enough to say no to it" (Wong 25).

With this new Spider-Man series, McFarlane wanted to pay homage to the history of the character while at the same time update him for a modern audience. He figured the best way to do that was renovate one of the villains originally created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko. Unfortunately,



Promoted as an "Issue #1 Collector's Item," Spider-Man *#1 was published in multiple versions, which helped spur sales of some 2.35 million copies.* TM and © Marvel Characters. Inc.

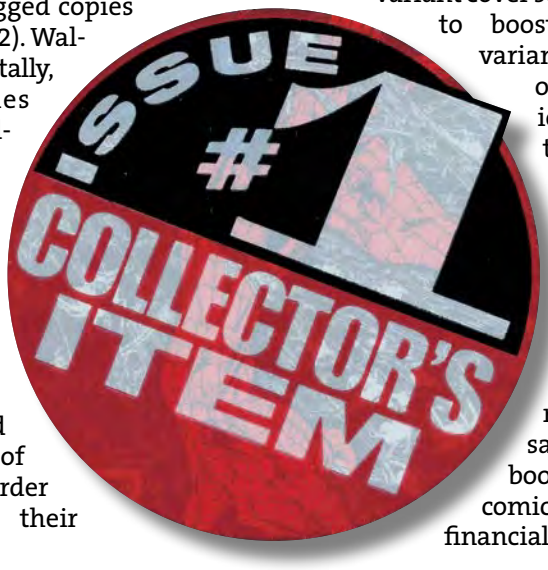
McFarlane soon discovered that all of the villains he wanted to use were already allocated for the other Spider-Man books—one of the pitfalls of having so many series devoted to one character. So McFarlane instead settled for a villain he last drew in *Amazing Spider-Man* #313 (March 1989): the Lizard.

The first issue of ***Spider-Man*** (or as some clever fans called it, "The Adjectiveless Spider-Man") launched a five issue story arc titled "Torment" that prominently features the Lizard. As the story progresses, however, readers soon learn that a mysterious femme fatale, someone who hadn't been seen in a Spider-Man comic book in over eight years, has been secretly manipulating the Lizard for her own nefarious ends.

Carol Kalish, Marvel's Vice President of New Product Development, gave comic shop retailers their own version of *Spider-Man* #1 that they could sell exclusively to their customers. It was the same comic book except with a silver-tinted cover. Meanwhile, Marvel's Director of Sales presented the newsstand dealers with a version of the comic book that came wrapped in a polybag (stamped with a banner that reads "Marvel Collector's Item—Issue #1"). Upon learning this, the Direct Market retailers demanded that they receive polybagged copies too (Howe 321-2). Wal-Mart, coincidentally, received copies that had a gold-tinted cover.

The multiple versions of *Spider-Man* #1 created a challenge for the consumers who wanted every one of them in order to make their collections "complete." Others who wanted to read the issue feared the opening of the polybag would ruin the comic's value. They ended up buying two copies and keeping one sealed. Retailers anticipated the demand and ordered appropriately. By the time *Spider-Man* #1 arrived in comic book stores on June 19 (cover date Aug. 1990), it had the largest print run of any comic in recent history with some 2.35 million copies distributed to stores and another 500,000 copies held as overruns. (As a token of gratitude, Marvel later provided Direct Market retailers with a copy of the issue with a platinum-tinted cover. Ironically, the thicker paper stock used for the platinum-tinted version of the cover didn't work well with the printing process as the color broke all along the spine of the comic.)

The massive sales guaranteed the setting of an industry trend. Soon, not only Marvel but many other comic book publishers would employ the variant cover strategy as a means to boost sales. Indeed, variant covers became one of the most iconic aspects of the 1990s comic book industry.



As some might have expected, sales of *Spider-Man* #1 were so huge that they caused a small recession in the sales of other comic books. Since most comic shops had limited financial resources, and

X-Year

Impressed by the sales revenue generated in 1990, the executives at **Marvel Comics** delivered a mandate to their editor-in-chief for 1991: don't just match the previous year's performance; do better. With Marvel about to become a publicly traded company on the New York Stock Exchange, potential investors needed assurances of sales growth. Nonetheless, **Tom DeFalco** felt he was in a bind as he cried to his editors, "How the hell are we gonna do better than that?" (Howe 325).

The problem wasn't going to be whether Marvel would continue to dominate comic book market share. Indeed, Marvel's share grew dramatically in 1991, peaking at 68.38% of all comics sold in July 1991. The same month, DC's sales comprised 19.8% of the market, which meant that all other publishers combined accounted for less than 12% of the market (Humphrey 11). The company with the third largest share for the month was Dark Horse Comics with a mere 2.3% of the market. For the entire year Marvel published 91 of the top 100 best-selling comics. The only non-Marvel books to crack the top 50 bestsellers were all four issues of DC's *Robin II* mini-series.

For Marvel, dominating market share was *fait accompli*... but also something that was no longer good enough for Marvel's executives. They wanted more, and they looked at 1990's *Spider-Man* #1 as the standard: every year going forward, Marvel needed comic books that sold millions of copies. Nothing less than annual record-breaking sales events would suffice. With that expectation hanging over him, DeFalco turned to the one Marvel property he knew could deliver the results his superiors wanted: the **X-Men**.

X Marks the Top

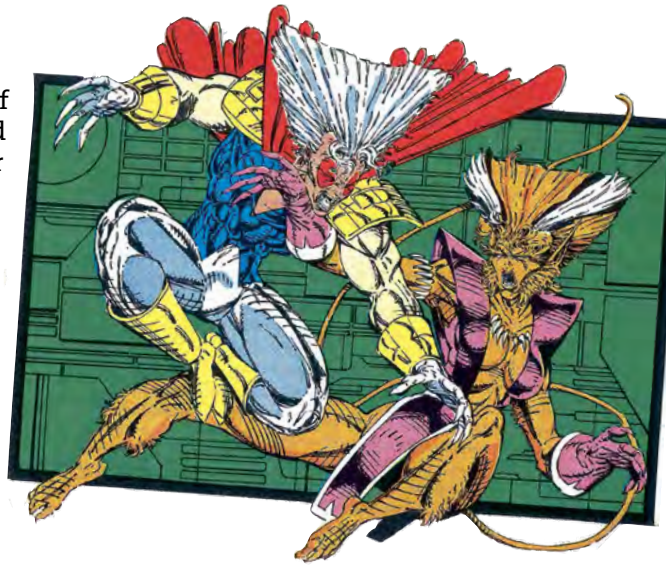
DeFalco ordered the creation of a new X-Men comic book. While editor **Bob Harras** initially had concerns that the marketplace wouldn't support yet another Marvel mutant title (to go along with *Uncanny X-Men*, *Wolverine*, *X-Factor*, *Excalibur* and *New Mutants*), he eventually realized a new X-Men book gave him the opportunity to make some big changes that he felt were long overdue.

Harras started with *New Mutants*, which had been suffering a creative schism for nearly a year. Writer **Louise Simonson** and artist **Rob Liefeld** had incompatible approaches to the series. Liefeld's layouts emphasized action-packed violence, foiling Simonson's attempts to keep *New Mutants* focused on young characters struggling with both their powers and immaturity. Increasingly frustrated with the fact that her dialogue and plots would be frequently changed without her approval (or even her consultation), Simonson finally faced facts: Harras had cast his lot with Liefeld, and it was time for her to move on. After ten years working at Marvel, first as an editor and then as a writer, Louise Simonson abandoned *New Mutants* (and her other longtime assignment, *X-Factor*) and figuratively walked across the street to DC Comics where she helmed a new

New Mutants *#98 introduced a trio of new characters, including Deadpool.* TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

Superman title, *Superman: the Man of Steel*, starting in May.

Liefeld's handpicked replacement for Simonson, **Fabian Nicieza**, took over *New Mutants* with #98 (Feb. 1991), an issue which introduced three more action-oriented characters: Domino, Gideon and the motor-mouthed, psychotic mercenary Deadpool. With Simonson gone, *New Mutants* finally became the book that Liefeld always wanted it to be. The young artist, though, had ambitions beyond creative control; Liefeld wanted to turn *New Mutants* into one of Marvel's tentpole titles. Backed by Nicieza and Marvel's Director of Marketing Sven Larsen, Liefeld approached DeFalco about cancelling *New Mutants* and relaunching it as a new series. Liefeld even promised his editor-in-chief that the rebrand would be a huge hit. That confidence was music to DeFalco's ears, and he and Harras approved the plan (Howe 326).



With issue #100 (April 1991) the *New Mutants* series ended with a jawdropping cliffhanger: on the final page, Stryfe removes his helmet to reveal he looks exactly like his arch-nemesis Cable. (Readers would have to wait a few years to learn that Stryfe is Cable's clone.) The story continued four months later in the debut issue of a new series titled ***X-Force***, the new name for the Cable-led team whose membership consisted of Boom Boom, Domino, Feral, Shatterstar, Warpath and the final holdout from 1982's original *New Mutants* cast, Cannonball. X-Force moves into a new base of operations to continue its battle against Stryfe's Mutant Liberation Front. With that, Marvel had a mutant group for the 1990s, one completely divorced from the X-Men's decades-old purpose of mutants seeking peaceful co-existence with the humans who fear and hate them. Liefeld and Nicieza turned that premise on its head; Cable's pro-active militancy had *X-Force* fighting a war where they attacked—and sometimes killed—the enemies who sought to destroy them.

Liefeld's forceful artistry perfectly suited *X-Force*'s displays of violence, and the new series cemented his status as one of Marvel's most popular artists. At the same time, however, Liefeld acquired more detractors than seemingly any other creator in the comic book industry. In nearly every comic book fanzine, a debate about Liefeld raged on. Many commentators complained that his work was too undisciplined and too reliant on splash pages. One writer encapsulated the debate well by saying "[Liefeld's] style remains controversial in its flaunting of traditional pacing, proportion and perspective" (McCallum 57). The worst accusation directed at Liefeld was that he often copied other artists' work. For instance, a two-page spread in *New Mutants* #100 shows Shatterstar thrusting his sword behind him

Spinning out of The New Mutants, *the first issue of Rob Liefeld and Fabian Nicieza's* X-Force *sold over four million copies.* TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

TIMELINE: 1991

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.)

January 16: With Iraq refusing to withdraw its forces from Kuwait, Operation Desert Storm commences. Coalition forces—led by the United States and Great Britain—begin bombing Iraqi targets.

January 17: Iraq launches Scud missiles into Israel. U.S. Patriot surface-to-air missiles soon protect Israel (and Saudia Arabia) from further Scud attacks.

February 14: *Silence of the Lambs*—starring Jodie Foster as a rookie FBI agent and Anthony Hopkins as serial killer Hannibal Lecter—arrives in movie theaters. The film will win five Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

February 24: Coalition forces, led by U.S. General Norman Schwarzkopf, launch a ground assault against Iraqi troops. Four days later, President Bush declares that "Kuwait is liberated, Iraq's army is defeated."

March 3: After a high-speed car chase, four Los Angeles police officers pummel Rodney King with batons when he resists arrest, even after he has been subdued. A local resident records the assault on video, which is soon broadcast around the country. The police officers are subsequently charged with use of excessive force.

March 11: The second Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie, *The Secret of the Ooze*, arrives in movie theaters. It earns over $78 million at the box office.

April 4: Graham Ingels—the comic book artist most famous for drawing EC's horror titles of the 1950s (*Tales from the Crypt*, *The Haunt of Fear* and *The Vault of Horror*)—dies of cancer at the age of 75.

April 26: The U.S. government reports the nation has sunk deeper into recession as the gross national product shrinks to 2.8 percent.

June 25: A civil war erupts in Eastern Europe when Croatia and Slovenia proclaim independence from Yugoslavia.

June 21: *The Rocketeer*—based on Dave Steven's 1980s comic book—premieres as Walt Disney's latest feature film. Starring Billy Campbell, Jennifer Connelly and Timothy Dalton, and written by the *Flash* television show's executive producers Danny Bilson and Paul De Meo, the movie earns over $46 million at the box office.

JANUARY FEBRUARY MARCH APRIL MAY JUNE

X-Men TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles TM and © Viacom International Inc. Rocketeer TM and © The Rocketeer Trust.

to impale his attacker. The same spread—identical in perspective, character stance and panel placement—can be found in Frank Miller's 1983 mini-series *Ronin*.

Regardless, *X-Force* #1 was essentially "critic proof," especially since it came polybagged with one of five different X-Force trading cards inside. In order to obtain a complete set of cards, collectors had to purchase five copies of the issue (and many purchased a sixth copy so as to be able read the issue while keeping the other five copies sealed in the polybag). Comic shop retailers ordered the issue by the case load, and as a result, over four million copies of *X-Force* #1 were distributed to stores, outperforming 1990's *Spider-Man* #1 by more than a million copies. Tom DeFalco had his first blockbuster hit of the year. He didn't have to wait long for his second.

The "X-Tinction Agenda" crossover event of 1990 began the reset of the X-Men franchise by reuniting the founding members with the current team. The issues that followed presented the return of Professor Xavier from outer space, culminating with *Uncanny X-Men* #280 (Sept. 1991) in which Xavier defeats a psychic monster known as the Shadow King at the cost of the use of his own legs. Once again confined to a wheelchair, Xavier resumes his role as mutantkind's mentor, just in time for the debut of the X-Men's new monthly book, which was simply titled ***X-Men***.

Marvel promoted the new *X-Men* title many months before the release of its first issue, and it became the most eagerly anticipated new comic book of the year. Even *Marvel Age* #104, Marvel's in-house hype fanzine that spotlighted the new series, sold out at several retailers (Chun 75). When the first issue finally arrived at stores in August (cover date October), Marvel adopted a similar publishing strategy that it did with *Spider-Man* #1 and *X-Force* #1: entice collectors to buy multiple copies. To that end, *X-Men* #1 had four versions of the same issue, each with a different cover. Put together, the four interlocking covers form an homage to Jack Kirby's 1963 cover to the original *X-Men* #1 which shows the team attacking its longtime archenemy Magneto *en masse*. Those four covers were released individually over four consecutive weeks, from August 13 to September 3. Marvel then issued a deluxe version of *X-Men* #1 on September 10, with a foldout that included all four covers in one expanded image. Printed on glossy paper, the deluxe edition retailed for $3.95 and outsold all the other versions (which cost $1.50 each) by a wide margin.

Ultimately, an unprecedented 8.1 million copies of *X-Men* #1 were distributed to newsstands and comic shops, a figure exceeding the rest of Marvel's Direct Sales circulation for that month combined, and one-third of Diamond Distribution's entire comics business for August 1991 ("From Hither and Yon..."). However, retailers dramatically

Nirvana

The tremendous fan appeal of artists like Jim Lee, Rob Liefeld and Todd McFarlane led comic books into an unprecedented era, a time when creators were treated like rock stars and their comics sold as many copies each month as popular rock albums sold in a year. Just as grunge rockers Nirvana's album *Nevermind* and its feature single "Smells Like Teen Spirit" dominated radio play and record sales with a fresh sound for the 1990s, the new comic book artists presented a furiously energetic spirit that many fans considered revolutionary.

According to John Davis, co-owner of Capital City Distribution, total industry sales for 1992 were up at least 25% from 1991, a continuation of several years of rapid growth. In fact, the comics industry cumulatively generated more than $500 million in total sales, the first time that milestone was achieved. Marvel continued to lead the market with a share of around 45%, but that percentage was down significantly from its high of 68.38% for comics sold in July 1991. DC's overall sales in 1992 dropped 6.5% from the previous year, but DC had perhaps the greatest impact on the market. This led to a feeling of diversity in the medium – at least among publishers who produced mainstream material. The fastest growing publishers were the "middle three" companies Malibu, Valiant and Dark Horse (which Capital jointly named Publisher of the Year). A new imprint boosted the sales of the formerly small Malibu Comics to over 19% of the market in September 1992. Speculator and fan interest raised Valiant's market share from 0.64% to 4.11% while Dark Horse's sales, fueled by its growing line of licensed comics, increased a proportionally smaller amount, from 3.71% in 1991 to 5.55% in 1992.

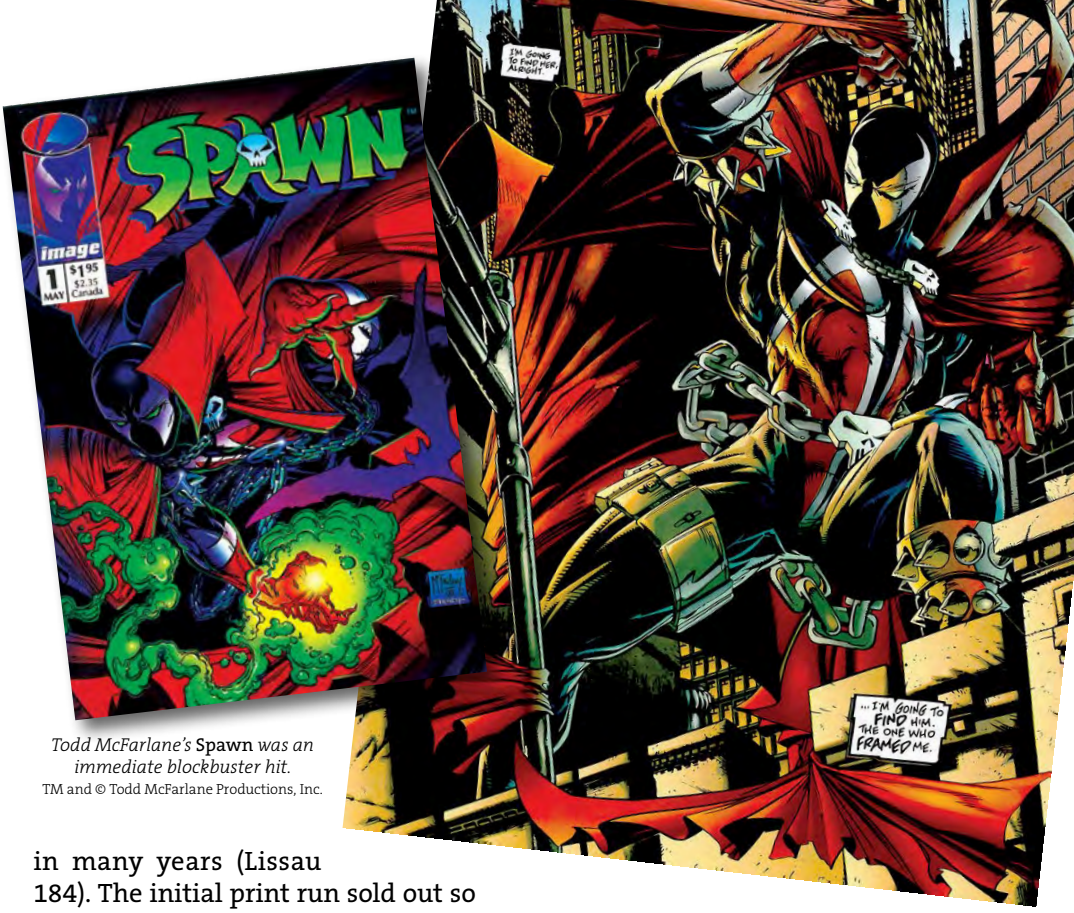
A few naysayers, though, warned that the industry's growth resembled an inflated balloon that was about to pop. These detractors foretold the comic book industry would suffer the same fate as the oversaturated collectible sports card business which, as 1992 dawned, was beginning to crash. For several years, both Marvel and DC Comics tapped into the lucrative card business by releasing their own popular collectible card sets (like a 1991 X-Men set that included cards autographed by Jim Lee). Now the shoe was on the other foot: sports card shop owners began selling comic books to turn their foundering finances around. The foreboding reality, however, was that both the comic book and sports card businesses utilized similar sales strategies. Like sports card companies, comic book publishers grew their readership by promoting the "collectability" of their releases (i.e. polybagged issues, exclusive covers). For their part, an increasing number of consumers bought into the speculation frenzy, allowing an emphasis on the resale value of a comic book to outweigh considerations of its quality. Collectors routinely bought stacks of copies of the latest mega-hyped comic with dreams of flipping it a few months later for big money without ever even opening the book. "One to read, one to bag" was the mantra of the day.

characters that Liefeld had intended on using in his aborted *Team Titans* mini-series. Shaft, Vogue and Bedrock were derivatives of Speedy, Harlequin and Blok respectively. In addition, Liefeld originally conceived Combat as a Kh'undian warrior and Die Hard as a S.T.A.R. Labs android (Walko).

Youngblood #1 displayed the kind of non-stop action that made Liefeld such a popular comic book artist in the first place, but years later the creator expressed disappointment with the quality of his work:

"The first issue of *Youngblood*. I wasn't aware. I was completely just not aware of the importance that book would hold in the scheme of things. It should have been a lot better than it was. And it could have been. And I think I was just thoroughly distracted, and caught up in the hype, and caught up in... I was kind of confused. I had never started my own business, and hiring people. I just... I let the deadline creep up on me and then it got the best of me, and I didn't perform well and as a result, it's an awful piece." (Fisher 28)

Regardless, *Youngblood* #1 sold extremely well. At 930,000 copies, it was the best-selling comic book that wasn't published by Marvel or DC



Todd McFarlane's Spawn *was an immediate blockbuster hit.*
TM and © Todd McFarlane Productions, Inc.

in many years (Lissau 184). The initial print run sold out so quickly that a second printing was ordered almost immediately (the second printing had a gold border in order to differentiate it from the first printing and also to ensure readers that it was valuable and special). Golden Apple Comics in Los Angeles held a signing with Liefeld on *Youngblood*'s debut night. The media attention was remarkable. "We had three TV news crews, two radio stations, newspapers, and sold 3000 comics during a seven-hour period," said Golden Apple owner Bill Leibowitz. Golden Apple only sold one copy of *Youngblood* #1 per customer but distributed other free comics for everybody in line, which Leibowitz described as "a very Guns 'n Roses crowd," many of whom later returned to shop in his store (Sodaro 71-72).

Each of the Image founders had his own characters ready to go when the line debuted, but none was more prepared than Todd McFarlane. Debuting in May 1992, ***Spawn*** is the story of Al Simmons, a former U.S. Marine turned CIA operative who is murdered and sent to Hell. Once there, he makes a deal with a devil named Malebolgia to be resurrected so he can see his wife, Wanda, one last time. Upon returning to the land of the living, however, Simmons finds himself horribly disfigured and worse, five years have passed since his death. In that time, Wanda has re-married—to Simmons' former best friend—and given birth to a baby girl. Simmons is then confronted by the Violator, a demon who disguises himself as an obese clown. The Violator was sent to Earth to prepare Simmons for service in Hell's army, but Simmons rebels against his Hellbound masters. Residing in the alleys of "Rat City" with the homeless, Simmons uses the awesome powers given to him by Malebolgia to battle street gangs and organized crime. As Spawn, Simmons employs brutal crime-fighting methods, even going so far as to mutilate a pedophile.

Early promotional ad for Spawn.
TM and © Todd McFarlane Productions, Inc.

Spawn #1 had a print run of 1.7 million copies, and because he owned the entire intellectual property, McFarlane earned more money from that comic than he did from his work on *Spider-Man* #1, which sold nearly twice as many copies. McFarlane re-emerged from his parental leave with one of the earliest and most popular Image series, and with a character that he had conceived years previously. McFarlane created Spawn in the late 1970s, during his fandom days. Though some readers didn't like the violence or Satanic elements of the series, *Spawn* was consistently one of

the top ten best-selling comic books during the entire decade of the 1990s.

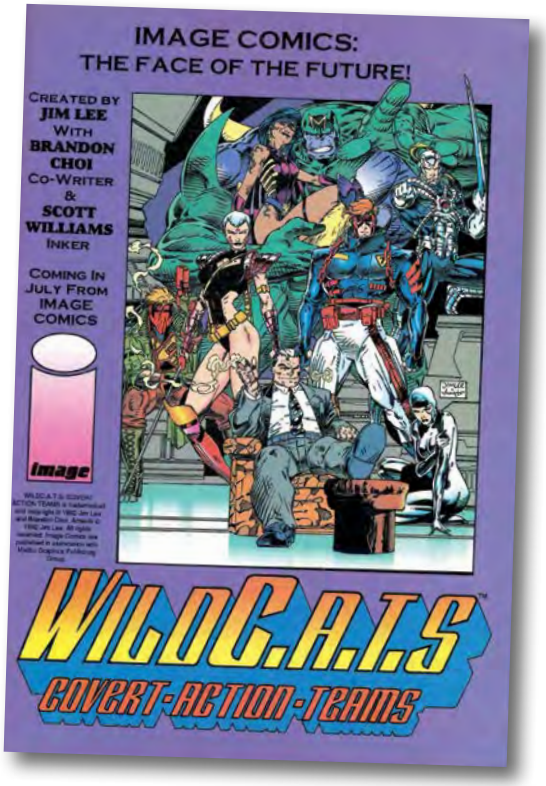
The next Image release was the three-issue mini-series ***Savage Dragon*** by Erik Larsen. The first issue (cover-dated July 1992) shows a powerfully built green man with a fin on his head lying naked in the middle of a burning field in Illinois. Upon waking in a hospital, this man confesses to having no memories of who he is or where he came from. Chicago Police Department Lieutenant Frank Darling nicknames him "Dragon" and gets him employed at his cousin's shipyard warehouse. What Darling really needs, though, is the Dragon on the police force, especially since Chicago is being overrun by super-powered mobsters and maniacs. Initially reluctant, the Dragon becomes an officer after the murder of his employer.

While McFarlane created Spawn when he was 16, Larsen created the Dragon when he was only 10 years old. Ten years later, in 1982, the Dragon made his first appearance in a fanzine titled *Graphic Fantasy* that Larsen and two friends self-published. Shortly thereafter, Larsen began his professional comic book career, contributing to several of Bill Black's AC titles. The Dragon wasn't completely abandoned, however, as Larsen managed to insert him into two 1985 issues of Gary Carlson's *Megaton* comic book. From there Larsen took on bigger and better projects, drawing *DNAgents* for Eclipse in 1986-7 and *Doom Patrol* for DC Comics in 1988. After a five issue run on *The Punisher*, Larsen took over *Amazing Spider-Man* when McFarlane left the series in 1989 and surprisingly found that sales went up with him performing the artistic chores.

In his earliest incarnation, the Dragon wore a dragon-faced mask and a Captain Marvel-like cape. Later, Larsen humorously had the cape rip whenever the Dragon walked through a door. By 1992, Larsen had spent significant time away from the Dragon, which gave him the opportunity to revamp the character for his own Image series (Mason, "Interview with Erik Larsen"). *Savage Dragon* was an unapologetic "old school" super-hero romp, and Larsen delighted in presenting a seemingly endless parade of oddball heroes and villains, many of whom were revived from his childhood days.

Erik Larsen's Savage Dragon *stars a green-skinned powerhouse who joins the Chicago police department.* TM and © Erik Larsen.

Jim Lee's final work on *X-Men* appeared in issue #11, released in June. Two months later, his new Image comic book debuted. ***WildC.A.T.s*** offered a very different super-hero team than the one Lee just finished working on for Marvel. As Lee



Jim Lee's debut Image series was WildC.A.T.s.
TM and © WildStorm Publications, an imprint of DC Comics.

commented, "I immediately started thinking about a concept of how I could get a team together who don't want to be celebrities. So I knew right away that it would be a covert team, a team with a hidden agenda. I always liked the concept of a team that had something to prove, or who did something that not everybody knew about" (McCallum 29). The Covert Action Team (C.A.T.) is a secretive group of super humans fighting to save the world against a cabal of Daemonites. Led by the dwarfish Jacob Marlowe, a.k.a the Lord Emp, the WildC.A.T.s consist of Void, an enigmatic woman who can bend space and time; Spartan, an artificial man with enhanced strength, speed and agility; Zealot, a Zen weapons master; Voodoo, a tempstress who can project an aura of "animal attraction"; Maul, a strong man who can enlarge himself at the expense of his intelligence; Grifter, a loner gunman; and Warblade, who can alter the many metal parts of his body. *WildC.A.T.s* #1 was the best-selling comic of its release month with over one million copies distributed to stores. (*X-Men*, on the other hand, was the fourth best-selling book on Diamond Comics Distributors' sales charts that month).

Counting Down to Zero

The comic book crash of 1993 became an out-and-out catastrophe the following year. As swiftly as sales boomed in early 1993, they plummeted even faster in early 1994. The same speculators who believed "The Death of Superman," pre-*Unity* Valiant and early Image comics would make them rich learned by 1994 that nearly all their investments had not paid off. As investors moved to the next fad (in this case, non-sports cards and pogs), thousands of former fans followed them. Because of that attrition, thousands of comic shops nationwide closed their doors forever. As Fantagraphics Publisher Gary Groth reported, "I was told by Capital City Distribution that 2,000 of their retailers went out of business in a nine-month period. (Extrapolating from Capital's market share, we may estimate conservatively that 4,000 or more retailers have disappeared in the same period)" (Groth 13). In 1993 there were over 9,000 comic book retailers nationwide. One year later 40% of them were gone.

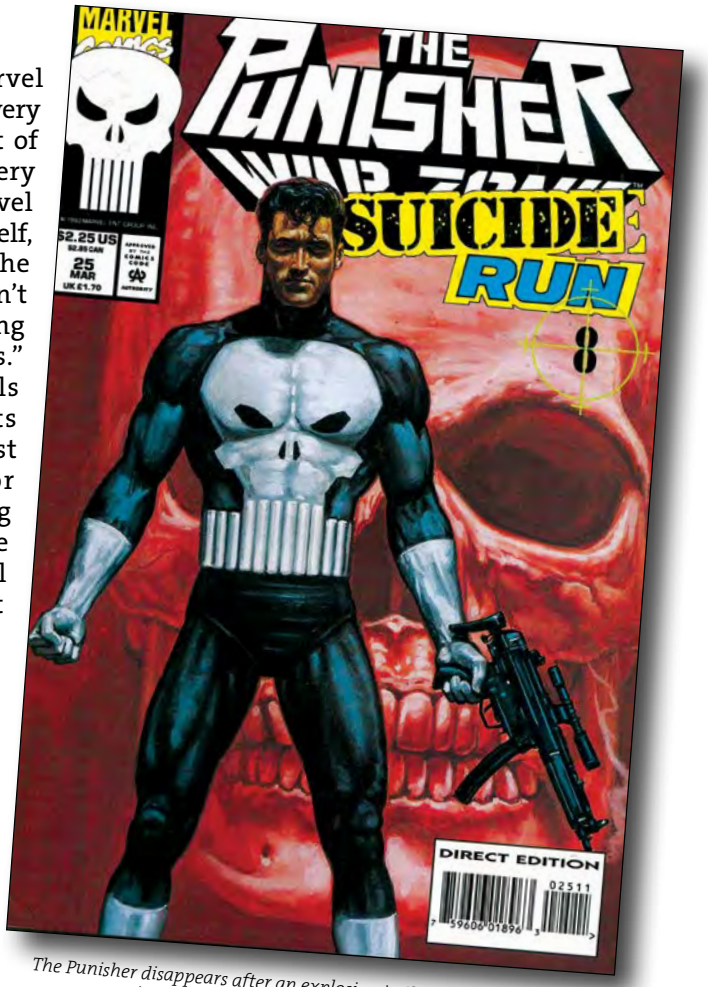
Milton Griepp of Capital City Distribution cited five reasons why sales were down: (1) speculators left the market, (2) popular franchises such as the X-Men were over-exploited, (3) there were too many new titles, (4) gimmicks and crossovers made it too complicated to follow a favorite character, and (5) late books made all these problems worse. Valiant Comics' Director of Marketing Marty Stever provided two more reasons for the sales crisis. He asserted that publishers released countless mediocre books because there weren't enough qualified creators. Stever also noted that books hyped as sure-fire investments became sales disasters (Grant 78). A retailer from Rochester, New York concurred with that assertion: "there's too much mediocre product on the market that is overpriced by publishers and that imitates each other's thrust" (Funk 22-4). Part of the problem was the sheer number of publications being released each month. *Wizard* counted the deluge as over 1,100 new issues per month, and as a result, "retailers are gunshy, under-ordering new releases to ensure they don't get stuck with unsold books" ("Wizard Market Watch" 141). The decimation of retailers then hurt publishers as well. At Marvel, line-wide sales fell 36% in the first six months of 1994 versus the last six months of 1993 (Howe 361).

Matters did not improve during the usually profitable summer months. According to Diamond Comic Distributors, industrywide sales during August "[have] not brought any release from the summer doldrums... We'd love to see a sign that the negative trends of the last few months have been reversed, but such is not the case" (Davis 55). Later in the year *Hero Illustrated* added, "the slowdown this Autumn was the most severe in several years" (Funk 22).

of Cooper's 1978 concept album "Welcome to My Nightmare" about his stay at a New York sanitarium to treat his alcoholism. Michael Zulli, a frequent collaborator of Gaiman's and a big fan of Cooper, agreed to deliver the art for Marvel's three-issue mini-series, the first issue of which was included with the album (Grant 43).

The Last Temptation kicked off **Marvel Music**, an imprint edited by the former editor-in-chief of *Cracked* magazine and a man with an extensive background in both alternative comics and punk rock music, **Mort Todd**. Terry Stewart directed Todd to expand the scope of the imprint beyond "skinny white boys in black jeans" (Grossman). To that end, Marvel Music's offerings ran the gamut of music styles to include rap (*Break the Chain*, Kyle Baker's one-shot about the life of rapper KRS-One which came bagged with a free cassette tape), country (*Marty Stuart* and *Billy Ray Cyrus*, both of which were written by the prolific Paul S. Newman) and reggae (*Bob Marley: Tale of the Tuff Gong*). Marvel Music also released a collector's edition souvenir book for Woodstock '94 as well as Dave McKean's interpretation of the Rolling Stones' 1994 album, *Voodoo Lounge*.

Unfortunately, the Marvel Music imprint didn't last very long and for the simplest of reasons: it didn't sell very well. Todd believes Marvel had no one to blame but itself, "they just didn't have the marketing down. They didn't know how to sell anything that wasn't superheroes." Stewart, however, feels that the music artists themselves were at least partly responsible for Marvel Music not reaching its intended audience, "We tried getting artists to sell the books at shows, but that didn't work" (Grossman). Disgusted by the situation, Mort Todd didn't renew his contract, and by the end of 1995, Marvel Music was no more.



The Punisher disappears after an explosion in the World Trade Center in "Suicide Run." TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

The Punisher Meets… Him? Really?!

Due to the success of Frank Miller and John Romita Jr.'s *Daredevil: The Man Without Fear*, Marvel put another origin story on its schedule, *Punisher: Year One* (first issue cover-dated Dec. 1994). Written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, drawn by Dale Eaglesham and printed on glossy paper, the four-issue mini-series retells Frank Castle's transformation from Vietnam War veteran trying to raise a family to costumed vigilante waging a one-man war on crime.

Earlier in the year, **the Punisher** faced a "Suicide Run" in an eleven-issue story arc spanning all three of the character's on-going titles (*Punisher*, *Punisher War Journal* and *Punisher War Zone*). In the eventful tale, the Punisher's greatest surviving enemies come together to unleash a plan to crush the man they despise. The villains try to exploit Castle's greatest weaknesses: his hatred for criminals and his obsessive need to save innocents. In chapter one of the storyline, the Punisher is forced to bring a trigger that would explode a building resembling New York's World Trade Center. After the bomb goes off but doesn't destroy the towers, the Punisher disappears. Several other people then throw on the skull emblazoned shirt to take their turn at being the Punisher. Among them are a mentally ill man, a Yuppie who wants to kill off his business rivals, a good cop gone bad, a British motorcyclist named "Outlaw," and a mob hitman. Eventually, Frank Castle becomes the Punisher again, but not before driving away all his erstwhile rivals and gaining his own revenge.

As momentous as "Suicide Run" was, nothing could top a different Punisher story from 1994, arguably the most bizarre intercompany crossover ever published in the history of comic books: ***The Punisher Meets Archie***. Written by Batton Lash and drawn (in the Archie style) by Stan Goldberg and (in the Marvel style) by John Buscema, this oddball story begins with a notorious drug dealer on the run. That man's nickname is "Red," and he has some frightening problems: the mob is angry at him and the federal government is trying to arrest him.

In the most bizarre crossover in the history of comics, the Punisher travels to Riverdale to meet Archie.
The Punisher TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc. Archie and related characters TM and © Archie Comics Publications, Inc.

Worst of all for Red, the Punisher is hot on his heels, looking to turn him over to the FBI in exchange for a pardon. To escape the Punisher, Red flees to Riverdale, the wholesome town that is home to all-American teenager Archie Andrews. Unfortunately for Archie, he bears an uncanny resemblance to the red-headed fugitive criminal, so much so that the Punisher soon confuses the two, making Archie a target of Marvel's gun-toting vigilante.

The Punisher Meets Archie fits comfortably in both publishers' universes, with healthy doses of humor mixed with grim and gritty action. Perhaps as a concession to younger fans, though, there is less gunplay than was generally presented in Punisher stories. The concept for this wacky one-shot spawned from a dinner conversation between Tom DeFalco (then still Marvel's Editor-in-Chief) and Victor Gorelick (Archie Comics' Executive Editor) and several other longtime friends. Gorelick lamented to DeFalco that Archie didn't sell well in the Direct Market. As the discussion progressed, one of the men suggested a crossover with Marvel to help increase exposure. When someone proposed Archie meet the Punisher, the dinner table erupted in laughter. Several months later, while Lash and Gorelick were sharing a meal at a convention, Gorelick mentioned the Punisher/Archie idea. After considering the concept for a few days, Lash came up with an intriguing hook for a one-time meeting between the characters: "[The Punisher] goes to this town, which is a little more light-hearted than he's used to, and he enjoys it" (Johnson 47). Gorelick passed Lash's proposal on to Marvel whose executives approved the project. Marvel and Archie both released their own versions of the comic book on June 14, 1994. Marvel's had a cardboard die-cut cover with the title *The Punisher Meets Archie* and cost $3.95. Archie's standard-format edition with the title *Archie Meets The Punisher* cost $2.95.

In a pair of one-shot crossovers, the Punisher met both the Bruce Wayne and Jean-Paul Valley version of the Batman. The Punisher TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc. Batman TM and © DC Comics.

The Bat and the Bullets

The Punisher visited several surprising places in 1994. Along with Riverdale, Marvel's gun-toting vigilante also travelled to Gotham City where he teamed up with **Batman** in a pair of one-shot adventures proposed by someone who had extensive experience with both characters, **Chuck Dixon**. During the time he was writing several Batman and Punisher titles, Dixon approached his Marvel editor Don Daley and his **DC Comics** editor **Denny O'Neil** about an intercompany crossover involving both heroes. After conferring with their respective publishers, the two editors got the green light to produce the first DC/Marvel collaboration since 1982's *The Uncanny X-Men and the New Teen Titans*.

On the same day that *The Punisher Meets Archie* arrived in stores, DC released *Batman/Punisher: Lake of Fire*, written by O'Neil and illustrated by Barry Kitson and James Pascoe. In the 48-page Prestige format comic the Punisher forms an uneasy alliance with the new Batman (a.k.a. Jean-Paul Valley) in order to stop the mobster Jigsaw from poisoning Gotham City's water supply. In the end, Jigsaw escapes imprisonment thanks to his new ally, the Joker, who wants Jigsaw to help him take control of the city's gangs. The story continues two months later in the Marvel-published *Punisher/Batman: Deadly Knights*, written by Chuck Dixon and drawn by John Romita Jr., and Klaus Janson, in which the Punisher returns to Gotham City to find Jigsaw. The Punisher finds himself at odds with Bruce Wayne, who unlike Valley, doesn't share his extreme crime-fighting methods.

Given how Frank Castle and Bruce Wayne both witnessed the deaths of their families, and how they both used their loss as their reason to combat crime, a Punisher/Batman team-up seemed not only natural but practically predestined. As O'Neil admitted at the time, "Punisher fits very, very comfortably into the Batman mythos" (Ringgenberg 75). Indeed, while most intercompany crossovers are considered inconsequential and having no bearing on the characters' personal histories (in other words, like exhibition baseball games, they don't really "count"), O'Neil actually incorporated *Lake of Fire* within Batman continuity, just in time for a crucial development in the Caped Crusader's life.

The Tick, *based on Ben Edlund's comic book, was an oddball hit with kids and adults on FOX Kids.* TM and © Ben Edlund.

strip" (Fritz, "Big Plans" 47). Rubenstein would go on to co-found a Big new publisher.

Other publishers used computer technology in a different way. Voyager Company, a CD-ROM manufacturer unaffiliated with Valiant Comics, released three CD-ROMs of interest to fans of sequential art: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, musicians The Residents' *Freak Show,* and the documentary film *Comic Book Confidential*. Malibu released CD-ROM versions of Ultraverse heroes such as Prime and Prototype.

Spoooon!

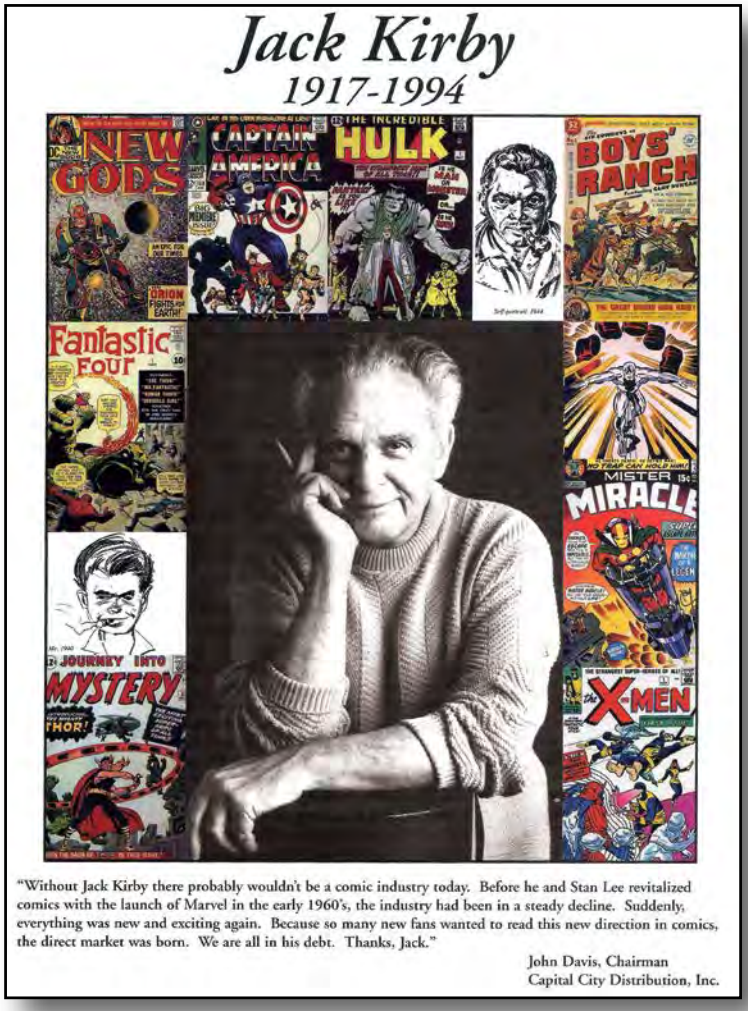
One of the most unexpected and best-loved shows of the 1994 fall TV season appeared on Saturday mornings with **Fox Kids'** ***The Tick***. The animated series starred a buffoonish but lovable burly hero in a skin-tight blue suit with wiggling antennae on his head. Voiced by Townsend Coleman, the Tick teamed up with his sidekick, the bunny-suited Arthur (voiced by Rob Paulsen) to combat such absurd villains as The Breadmaster, Omnipotus (similar to Galactus), Professor Chromedome and the evil Chairface Chippendale, a villain with the head of a Chippendale chair who tries to carve his name onto the moon. A ridiculous and wacky alternative to some of the other super-hero cartoons on the airwaves, *The Tick* gained an immediate following among both kids and adults for its manic but benign humor. The series also showed the influence of super-heroes published by companies other than Marvel and DC as *The Tick* was based on the black-and-white series created by Ben Edlund and published by New England Comics (NEC). After meeting some Fox executives, Edlund jumped at the opportunity to put his series on the small screen, and he ended up writing or co-writing nearly all the scripts for the series, giving the show a consistently wacky tone which reflected the energy of his NEC comic.

The wacky *Tick* joined other comic book-oriented cartoons on Fox Kids Saturday mornings. The fledgling TV network continued to air *X-Men* and added *Spider-Man* to its 1994 lineup. Like *X-Men*, *Spider-Man* was true to its title character's history, quickly attracting fan attention by featuring some of the web-slinger's most dastardly villains (such as the Lizard, the Scorpion, and the Kingpin) and his closest friends. Co-creator Stan Lee claimed he was hands-on with every aspect of the production's formulation, "In the beginning I checked every premise, every outline, every script, every model sheet, every storyboard, everything to do with putting the show together" (Lee 8).

The King is Dead

The turbulence of 1994 was presaged early in the year by a terrible event. On February 6, 1994, one of the greatest creators of all time passed away. **Jack Kirby**, the King of Comics, died of a heart attack at the age of 76. One of the undisputed titans of the industry, Kirby was beloved for his co-creation of the Marvel Universe and was a constant force for joy and happiness among fans. Many met Kirby during his annual pilgrimage to the San Diego Comic Con where they enjoyed Kirby's ebullient and generous personality. Though his health was failing for a long time, Kirby's passing hit the comics community hard. After his death, tributes came in torrents from thousands across the world, including people with no direct connection to comics.

Jack Kirby's death cast a sober shadow over an often challenging year. If 1994 was the year the comics industry counted down to zero, the "distributor wars" of 1995 would bring on an age of apocalypse.



The death of Jack Kirby on February 6, 1994, was mourned by comic creators and fans worldwide.

The Exclusivity Wars

As 1995 began, retailers could only reminisce about the comic book boom of a few years earlier. The downward sales slide that began in 1993 continued unabated two years later as consumers seemingly abandoned comic books for good in favor of other diversions, like video games or the ever-growing World Wide Web. In 1993, 9,400 comics specialty shops operated in the United States. By 1995, only 4,200 of them remained in business (Gray 26). If anything, comic sales were even worse than those grim numbers reflected. Series such as *WildC.A.T.s* and *Bloodshot*, which frequently sold close to 500,000 copies per issue when they premiered, struggled to sell a fraction of that number. Only the mighty X-Men and Spider-Man series maintained strong sales.

Many observers saw this prolonged drop in sales as a sign of the apocalypse for the entire industry. A common lament placed the blame for a "lost generation" of fans on the speculator boom of the early 1990s. As Capital City Distribution co-owner Milton Griepp testified,

> I've heard more than one retailer use the phrase "We've lost a generation" to describe what has happened. This lost generation seems to have come into specialty stores in huge numbers in '92 and '93, attracted by the publicity surrounding the death of Superman and the excitement around the new Image and Valiant lines. Unfortunately, much of their interest was related to the lottery ticket aspect of comic collecting – "How much will this be worth next month?" This interest dissipated as quickly as the presses could be cranked up to print more copies of the book with the "hot" designation. (Griepp 56)

A major paper shortage exacerbated the problem. Over the course of a few months, the cost of high-grade paper rose from under $400 to over $700 per metric ton. Several publishers passed that expense on to their consumers. DC raised its prices in April and May, with $1.50 series increasing to $1.75. (Superman and Batman titles were bumped up even higher, to $1.95.) Fantagraphics and Warp Graphics also raised their prices by a quarter per copy. The higher price points depressed sales even further because even the most devoted fans only had so much money in their wallets to spend on comic books, and as one Atlanta retailer explained, the mid-range selling titles were most severely hurt by the price increases: "Readers of those books seem to be subconsciously looking for a reason to drop the titles, and a price hike is a very good reason" (O'Neill 131).

Maximum Clonage *features hundreds of Spider-Man clones. The event ends with Peter Parker and Ben Reilly deciding which one of them should become the one, true Spider-Man.* TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

That revelation sets the stage for the **"Maximum Clonage"** storyline, which spanned all August 1995 cover-dated Spider-Man titles plus special *Alpha* and *Omega* one-shots. In this six part tale, the Jackal creates hundreds of Spider-Man clones who then attack our heroes. As Ben valiantly fights to defeat all the clones, Kaine is apparently killed by another evil clone named Spidercide. The story concludes with the Jackal plunging off a tall building. The arch-nemesis and clone creator is finally dead, and as *Maximum Clonage Omega* wraps up, Peter and Ben decide there must be a Spider-Man but they're not sure who should wear the mask. The next crossover, "Exiled," resolves the dilemma. Mary Jane declares she wants to stay in New York, so Ben jumps on his motorcycle to head out of town. Perhaps fighting a subconscious battle in his own head, Ben crashes the cycle and remains in New York. Using his time to resurrect some of his previous memories (and fight the Vulture), Ben also changes his mind and decides he wants to stay in New York to fight crime. *Spectacular Spider-Man* #229 (Oct. 1995) resolves the question of who should wear the spider-suit once and for all. This double-sized issue, the concluding chapter of "The Greatest Responsibility" storyline, sets Peter and Ben against the new female Doctor Octopus, whose presence shakes Peter to his bones. He can't stop worrying about his life, or about leaving his unborn child an orphan. "Mary Jane... I've come to a decision!," he declares. "I have decided to quit being Spider-Man! I'm hanging up my webs forever." Handing the costume to his clone, Peter is finally ready to give up crime-fighting and become a fulltime dad. Peter and Mary Jane move to Portland, Oregon where the four-issue *Spider-Man: The Final Adventure* gives Peter one last escapade before his powers become inert in an accident and he is once again human. The course was clear for Ben Reilly to put on the blue and red costume and officially become Spider-Man. *The Final Adventure* was originally plotted to have Mary Jane have a miscarriage in the final issue. However, editor Tom Brevoort refused to greenlight that story because he didn't want to be the person who killed Peter Parker's baby. Regardless, there would be much more conflict around Peter and Mary Jane's baby in Marvel's offices in 1996.

With Peter Parker 3000 miles away from New York, Ben Reilly was ready to become the official wall-crawler. Due to the massive success of "Age of Apocalypse," Marvel's marketing team mandated the November and December issues of the four main Spider-Man series be renamed to include "Scarlet Spider" in their title. Thus, readers could buy *Scarlet Spider*, *Web of Scarlet Spider*, *Spectacular Scarlet Spider* and *Amazing Scarlet Spider*. The initial four-parter presented "Virtual Morality," in which Ben battles cyber-criminals. The second tale, "Cyberwar," completes that adventure. The *Scarlet Spider* issues led to "Rebirth," released with January 1996 cover dates, with

a new Spider-Man series and with Ben in a new version of the spider-suit. *Web of Scarlet Spider* continued for two additional issues before its brief run concluded.

By the end of 1995, many fans expressed their dissatisfaction with the seemingly never-ending clone saga. The revelation that Peter Parker was a clone, in particular, was not well received. In an interview for *Wizard* magazine at the time, Spider-Man group editor Bob Budiansky admitted, "We got a fair amount of negative reaction to the Clonage storyline. But the bottom line is Spider-Man is hot. Sales are way up and fan mail on the Spider-Man books is up ten-fold" (Griffen 132). Years later, former Marvel editor Glenn Greenwald similarly stated, "Despite popular belief, the clone saga significantly boosted sales on the Spider-Man books. At a time when the comics industry was starting to head downward, with sales dropping across the board on every title, the Spider-Man line was bucking the trend, with sales holding steady and even increasing each month" (Goletz).

Another Marvel hero saw a long storyline end and a new creative team take over in 1995.

Operation Rebirth

As 1994 ended, the very serum which gave **Captain America** his powers was now killing him. In *Captain America* #443 (Sept. 1995) writer **Mark Gruenwald** and artists Dave Hoover and Danny Bulandi chronicle the final day of Cap's life. Culminating Gruenwald's eleven-year-run on the title, the issue begins with the star-spangled Avenger lying in a grimy alley after being beaten by a mediocre villain named Nefarious. As Cap lies prone in his exoskeleton, weak and forlorn, mysterious hero Black Crow swoops down and declares, "24 hours from now, your super soldier serum's deterioration will stop your heart... and you will die." Crow then flies away. Cap quickly decides to forego fighting Nefarious, allowing the Avengers to handle the villain. Instead Cap goes about putting his affairs in order. In a tearful visit, he says goodbye to his allies at his Brooklyn Heights staging area. Next, he has a final visit with his arch-enemy Crossbones in prison before looking in on his former girlfriend Bernie Rosenthal, his childhood friend Arnie Roth, and his longtime partner the Falcon. A tearful visit with his young friend and admirer Ram Riddley reminds Captain America that even a super-hero has his limits. That makes Cap choose to wander to Avengers Mansion to relax. While at the Mansion, the star-spangled Avenger has an unexpected encounter with the rogue Batroc. Instead of fighting, the two men drink tea and have a long conversation about life philosophy before Cap decides to go to his room and lie down. As the issue concludes, the Avengers look in on their friend but discover the hero's body is gone with only his exoskeleton left behind. Readers could only wonder what happened to the hero, but many also admired the elegiac approach Gruenwald took to his final issue on the iconic character. In fact, Gruenwald's story can be read as a meditation on the difficulty of creating traditional comics storytelling in an increasingly hectic world.

With the following issue, *Captain America* #444, a decidedly different era premiered as scripter **Mark Waid** and artist **Ron Garney** assumed creative chores. The issue centers around a group of villains who take hostages at the Jefferson Memorial and demand Captain America be brought to them. But following on the events Gruenwald chronicled, Cap is missing and presumed dead. The Avengers must step in and solve the crisis without their ally. As the issue ends, readers discover Captain America's body has been encased in ice and held by a mysterious cabal. *Captain America* #445 begins with the hero's funeral, but the "Operation: Rebirth" story arc truly starts with the hero breaking out of his ice prison. Once awakened, he meets up with his old S.H.I.E.L.D. associate and lover Sharon Carter, miraculously revealed to be alive despite her supposed death in 1979. Cap and Carter join an unexpected ally, the Red Skull, on a mission to save all reality from the Cosmic Cube. In Waid and Garney's second arc, titled "Man Without a Country", Captain America is framed for murder and goes on the run to find Machinesmith, the evil cyborg who framed him. Cap and Sharon Carter must track down the cyborg in an action-adventure tale that evokes—and modernizes—classic Stan Lee storytelling. With its emphasis on slick, cinematic action, along with a modern new logo, Waid and Garney's run presented a patriotic hero that fit the zeitgeist of the mid-1990s.

In 1995, Captain America *received a new artist, Ron Garney.* TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

Captain America was just one of several titles in which Marvel tried sweeping change to drive readership. In ***Fantastic Four***, for instance, writer Tom DeFalco and artist Paul Ryan resurrected Doctor Doom and Reed Richards, which created some complicated team dynamics. Reed felt traumatized by his two-year imprisonment and became emotionally volatile. While Reed was gone, his wife Sue rekindled her relationship with the Sub-Mariner. New creative teams brought major changes to some of Marvel's other long-running series. Starting with issue #111 (Dec. 1995), ***Silver Surfer*** set the Fantastic Four's ally on his own

CHAPTER TEN

No Man's Land

If the story of the comics industry in the late 1990s was low sales, then 1999 represents the nadir of that tale. The grim truth was that monthly comics sales in America were at their lowest levels in decades. As one anonymous publisher reported at the beginning of the year, "My 1999 publishing plans are literally on hold at the moment while

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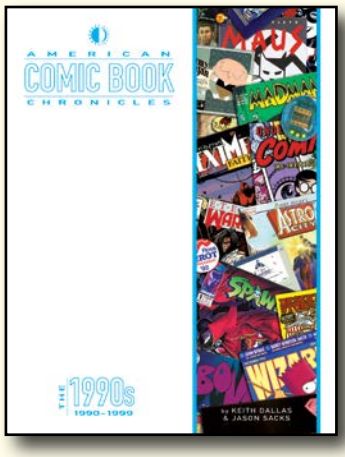

The 1990s was the decade when **Marvel Comics** sold **8.1 million copies** of an issue of the **X-Men**, saw its superstar creators form their own company, **cloned Spider-Man**, and **went bankrupt**. The 1990s was when **Superman died**, **Batman** had his **back broken**, and the runaway success of **Neil Gaiman's Sandman** led to DC Comics' **Vertigo** line of adult comic books. It was the decade of **gimmicky covers, skimpy costumes,** and **mega-crossovers**. But most of all, the 1990s was the decade when companies like **Image, Valiant** and **Malibu** published million-selling comic books before the industry experienced a shocking and rapid collapse. **American Comic Book Chronicles: The 1990s** is a year-by-year account of the comic book industry during the Bill Clinton years. This full-color hardcover volume documents the comic book industry's most significant publications, most notable creators, and most impactful trends from that decade. Written by **Keith Dallas** and **Jason Sacks**.

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another way by **DC Comics** editor Jordan Gorfinkel, "If any one character can lift this industry out of its doldrums, it's Batman" (Morrisard 43).

Batman: No Man's Land

Gotham City had suffered cataclysms in its long history, but nothing prepared the citizens of Batman's home town for the earthquake that struck in 1998. Even worse was the quake's aftermath. As described in the *No Man's Land* one-shot (March 1999), by writer Bob Gale and artist Alex Maleev, the formerly civilized city gave way to anarchy. Prior to this storyline, Bruce Wayne failed to persuade the U.S. Congress to fund the restoration of his beloved city. Instead, the federal government chose to cordon off Gotham, forbidding anybody from entering or leaving it. To do so, the government blew up all the bridges and tunnels into the city and made Gotham a true "No Man's Land." As the epic storyline kicks off, the military has surrounded Gotham's perimeter. The city has no fresh food, no clean water supply and no working police department, other than a rogue team of police officers. Gotham's only inhabitants are the poor, those who were too stubborn to abandon their homes, and the criminals. Batman has