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National College of Art & Design

Faculty of Craft Design

Contemporary Mainstream Comics:  
Evolution & Dissolution

by

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Bachelor of Design

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fig 0.1  
Superman from *Kingdom Come* 1996  
from Fan, Aug 1996





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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the development of contemporary mainstream comics. I will principally examine the comics of the three largest publishers in the American market. They represent the mainstream - the commercial and popular face of the medium. Together occupying 90% of the marketplace, they are Marvel and DC, the two giants of the industry, and Image (established in 1992). These publishers and their comics are the most popular and biggest selling in the English-speaking world.

My interest in comics stems from my childhood when I found them to be visually captivating and a dynamic and exciting entertainment form. After abandoning comics in my adolescence I was once again attracted to the medium several years later by the growing sophistication of contemporary mainstream comics. The contemporary comics period stretches from the the mid-'eighties. The beginning of this period is most clearly symbolised by the publication of the radical and superhero revisionist series *Dark Knight Returns*.

The Thesis attempts to offer a study of contemporary mainstream comics by building upon information and research from books, magazines, comics and video. Many books offer a history of the medium (dating as far back as the turn of the century) yet provide only general analysis of modern mainstream comics. While several books and magazines have examined, in depth, contemporary adult comics, the majority of comics they consider are outside the realm of mainstream publishing. As the largest element of the comics medium, mainstream comics warrant further examination, which is the purpose of this thesis.

The comics themselves act as direct evidence, books offer chronological and factual information, and magazine articles provide detailed opinion and insight. By examining the comics themselves I hope to point directly to influential, good, or even



poor examples of quality, style and subject. Visual illustrations include several panels or sometimes just a single panel as examples of art, storyline or atmosphere. To build upon information gathered from books and my own knowledge of the subject I have looked to magazine publications which provide the most current and sometimes rare views of writers, artists, critics and enthusiasts on contemporary comics and their creators.

The thesis will begin by examining *Dark Knight Returns*, published in 1986. The series gained the medium favourable publicity and was inspirational in directing the mainstream to new creative heights in the areas of characterization, subject, style and the aspects of format, presentation and marketing. It will then look at the development of traditional mainstream comics: their growing sophistication and expanding appeal. Focus will be on the Batman character - the epitome of the contemporary superhero.

The changing face of mainstream comics will be examined in the first half of the 1990s. The influences on comics from 1990-97 will include the formation of Image Comics and new methods of selling and marketing. The thesis will conclude with a study of the 'nineties style male and female superhero characters and their role in the on-going public perception of comics and this will be considered in the context of the Comics Code, regulation and ratings.





## CHAPTER ONE

### *Dark Knight Returns: Catalyst for Change*

Throughout 1986 the comics medium generated media attention with the publication of *Dark Knight Returns*, which was both hugely popular and primarily directed at an adult audience. The series challenged traditional views of what a comic is and who it is for. *Dark Knight Returns*, (fig 1.1) published by DC, the second largest publisher in the American market, was adopted as the primary ambassador for contemporary adult comics and more relevantly, was inspirational in influencing the direction of mainstream comics publishing.

The most prevalent genre and lifeblood of mainstream comics - the superhero - featured in stories aimed principally at children and regulated for that audience. However with the publication of *Dark Knight Returns* the world of the superhero, the Batman no less, was presented as realistically violent and depressive. The series was set in the near future but reflected the concerns of mid-'eighties America: escalating violent crime, the nuclear threat and overt media influence and brought them to their worst conclusions. The story, unreservedly directed at adult readers, featured graphic violence, subject matter and language alien to mainstream comics. It was ground-breaking in many aspects of comics and gained much media attention because of this.

The media response and critical acclaim that followed the first issue's publication was led by the respected entertainment magazines *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, along with a host of other press publications that had rarely given attention to comics. *Rolling Stone* said of *Dark Knight Returns* and its creator:

In Miller's hands Batman is bigger than a comics icon: he is a violent symbol of American dissolution and American idealism.  
(Schumer, 1988, p.119)





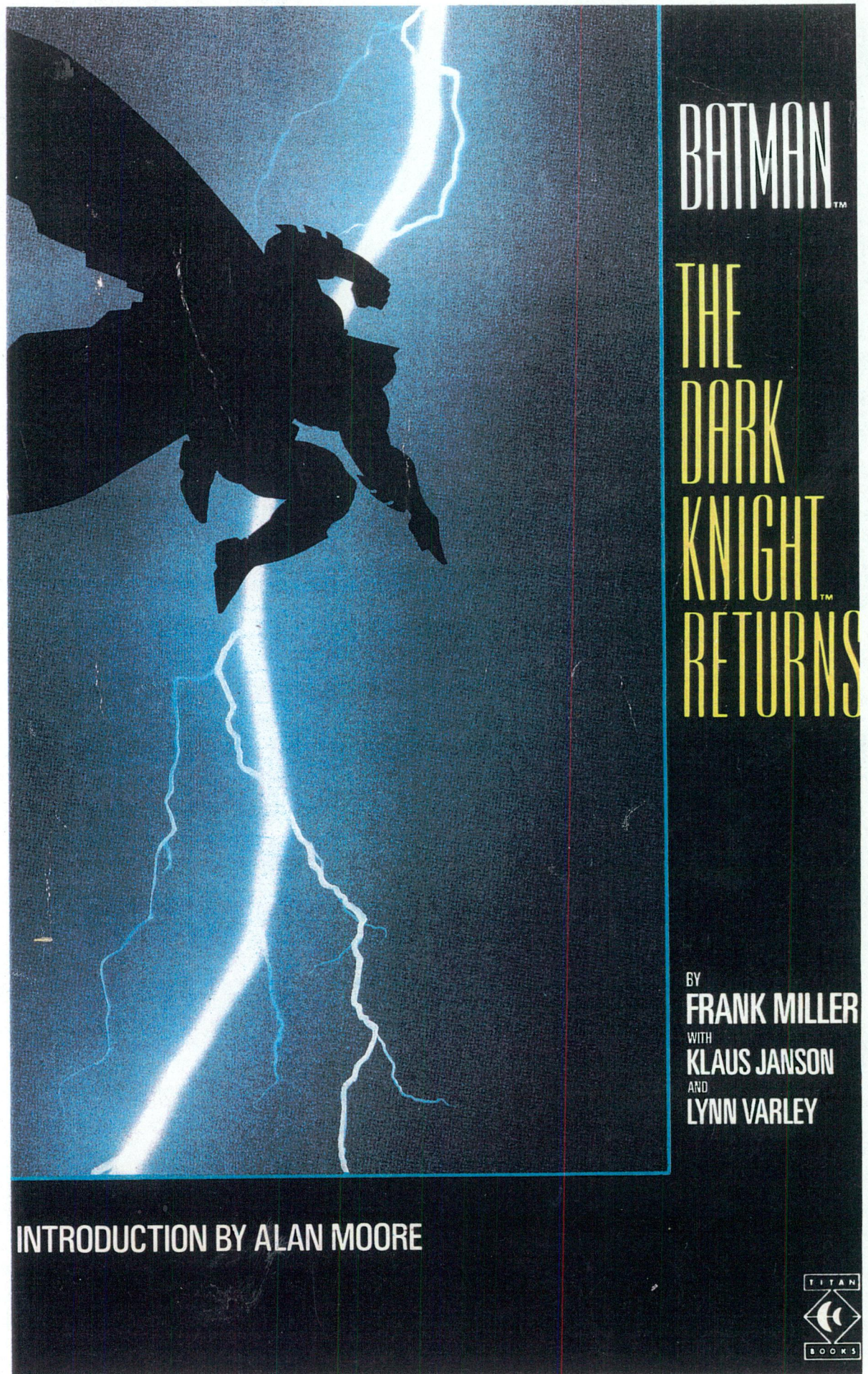


fig 1.1 *Dark Knight Returns* cover 1986 from original copy





*Dark Knight Returns* presented a different facet of the medium, supported by a further two series aimed at adult readers: *Watchmen* and *Maus*. *Watchmen* (fig 1.2) was a second superhero series published one year after *Dark Knight Returns*. It presented a group of aging, socially dejected and sometimes psychotic superheroes (fig 1.3) in a world where super beings really do exist. *Maus* (fig 1.4) was the one of the three that stood apart from the superhero genre. It was a sincere testament to the Jewish suffering in the concentration camps of the Second World War and the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize. These comics seemed to transcend the medium's limited public expectations and stirred new enthusiasm for comics on both sides of the Atlantic.

The activity in the pages of the art, music and newspaper press was matched only by the excitement felt in the comics world. The medium's fans, creators and critics all saw new possibilities in comics. Fans, many of whom were adults and older teenagers, looked forward to high profile, widely distributed comics with adult themes, subjects and characterization. Creators looked forward to the opportunity to create comics that would find a substantially mature audience and were also financially viable. Critics saw the possibility of a new respectability for the medium:

. . . . the new awareness of the possibilities of serious criticism did have an impact and was undoubtedly to the good in terms of rising standards in comics generally.

(Sabin, 1993, p.55)

*Dark Knight Returns* proved comics to be capable of appealing to both universal and exclusive audiences, like the media of books and film. It opened the way for the acceptance of other sophisticated series. This was not the first time comics began to be looked upon as a medium for all ages. The earliest American comics were established in the mid-1930s and made no distinction between child and adult readers. Throughout the War years comics thrived and were especially popular with





fig 1.2 *Watchmen* cover 1987 from original copy

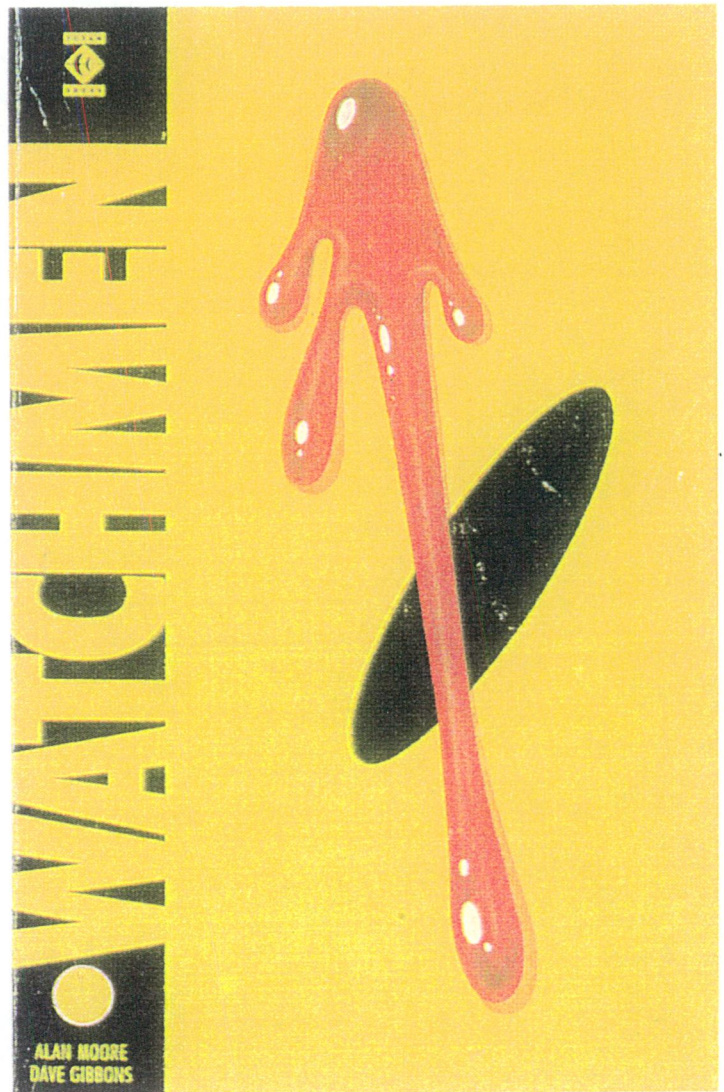
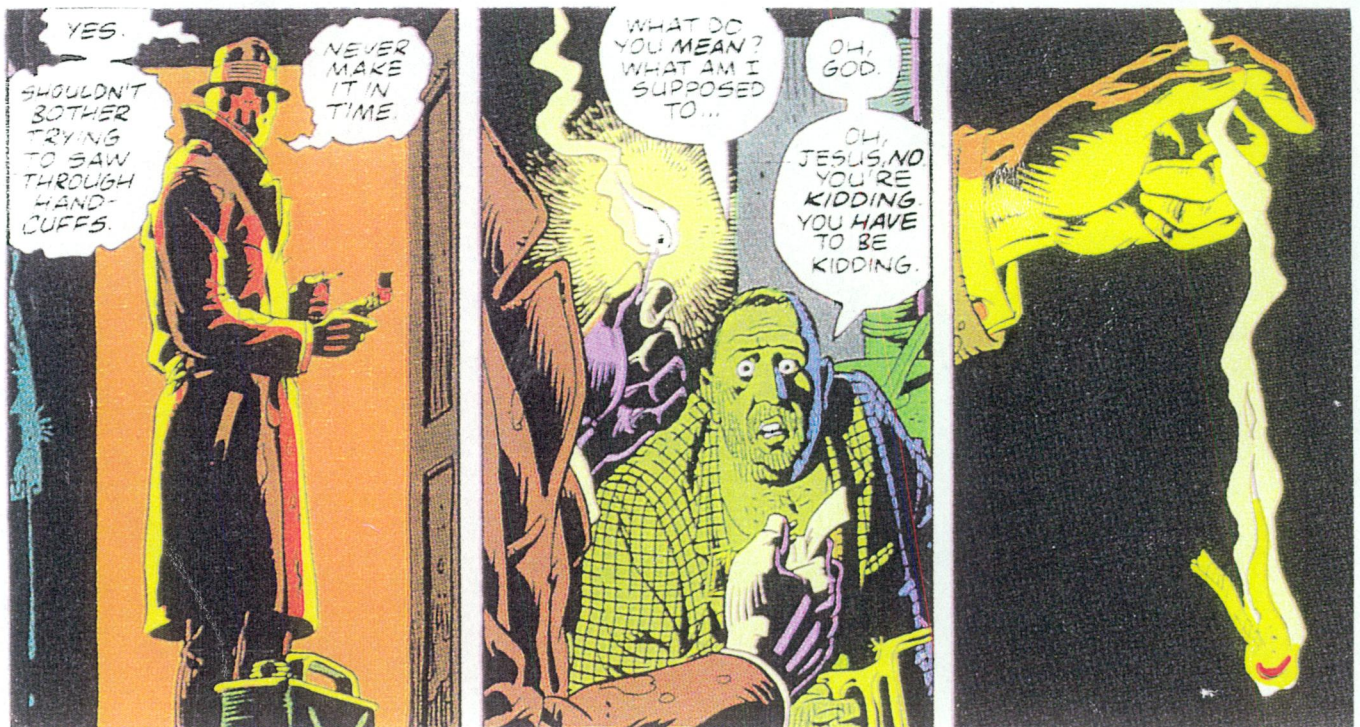


fig 1.3 *Watchmen* selected panels 1987 from original copy







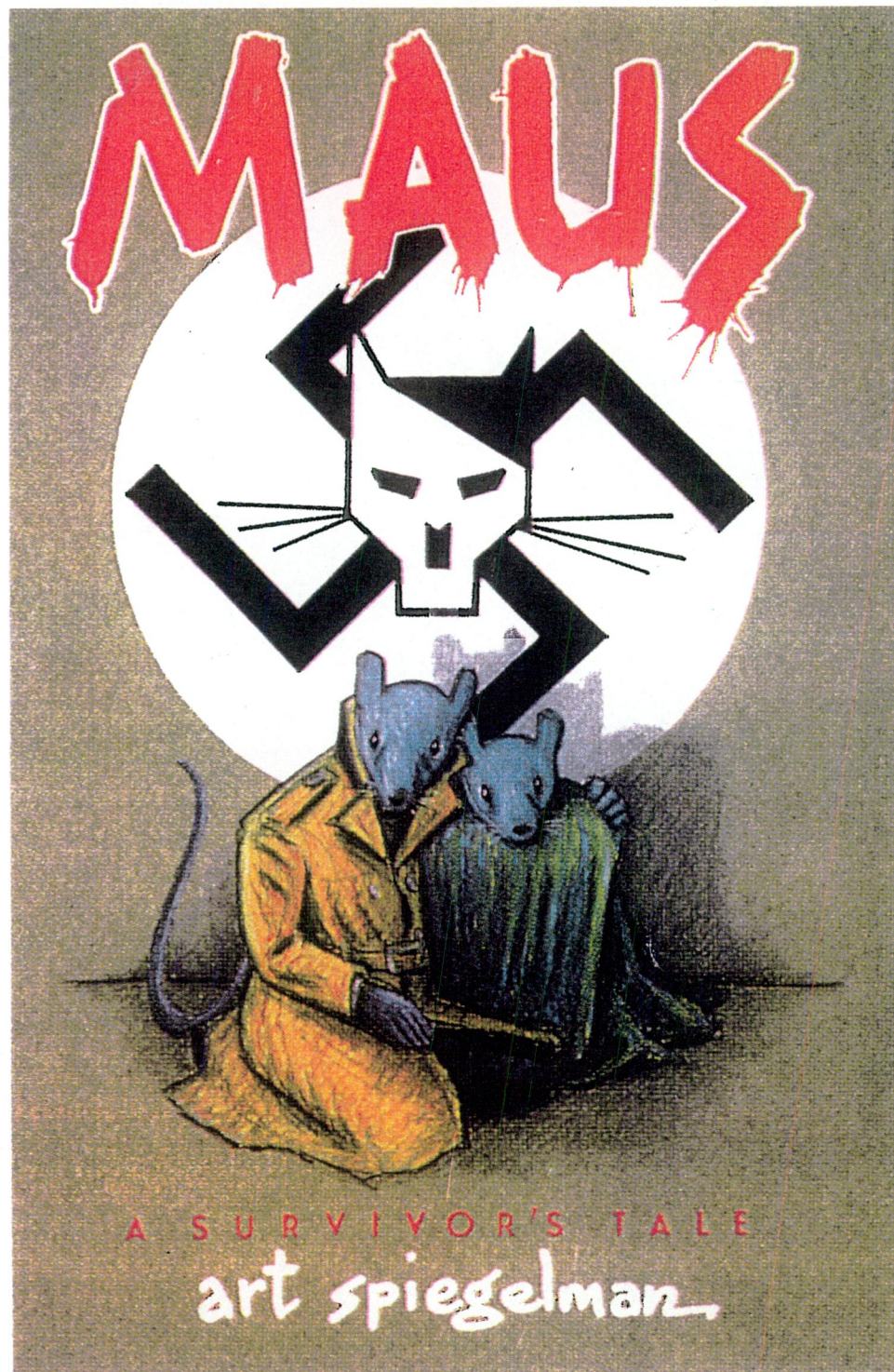


fig 1.4  
Maus cover 1986  
from original copy





U.S. troops serving in Europe. Comics offered patriotic tales of bravery and heroics in the face of Nazi tyranny:

For the young World War Two G.I.s . . . fighting either a fierce enemy in the field or unrelenting malaise in the barracks Superman and his clones had a bracing effect.

(Heller, 1989, p.143)

Superheroes lost popularity after the War and other genres blossomed. By 1950 readers of all ages were enjoying comics based on humour, romance, crime and horror. Sales were at an all time high and collective comic sales were estimated at up to 150 million per month. (Stevens, 1988, p.60). EC Comics was the pioneer and most successful publisher of crime and horror comics. Al Feldstien, the writer of many of the company's comics which were based on outrageous scenarios, violent themes and graphic artwork, noted the reasons for the huge appeal of their comics:

We were writing up to our readers . . . . I was aware after having come out of the services of the great number of adults that were reading comics back in civilian life . . . . don't forget this was before the impact of Television.

(Mann, 1989)

Despite their success, comics were a relatively new medium and a susceptible target for pressure groups and by 1954 the medium suffered a backlash, putting a stop to its rapid rise, causing a 50% decline in sales and succeeding in isolating comics' adult readership. The crime and horror comics especially alarmed fundamentalist groups. They regularly featured images of rotted bodies, graphic killings, mutilations and decapitation (fig 1.5). It was undeniable that comics were a huge entertainment form among children but political and parental groups refused to recognize that they also had a wider audience. However the extreme content of EC and their competitors' comics gave cause to their persecutors:

These traits while acceptable, even desirable in formats designed for mature readers, were certainly objectionable in a popular medium overwhelmingly aimed at children.





(Horn, 1976, P.26)

The major offensive against comics came in the form of Dr Frederic Wertham's hugely influential book *Seduction of the Innocent* (fig 1.6), published in 1954, in which Wertham claimed juvenile delinquency was linked to comics reading. He maintained comics undermined morals, glorified violence and were sexually aggressive in an abnormal way. (Daniels, 1996, p.114)

America was gripped by anti-comic book fever. Comics were subject to mass burnings on bonfires; newspapers reported items such as "Mothers Enforce Clean-Up of Comics" and "Six State Bills Seek Comic Book Curb", (Mann 1989) and anti-comics campaigns culminated with an investigation by the McCarthy Senate Sub-committees of the mid 1950s.

The 1954 U.S. Senate Committees supported Wertham's claims and comics faced the prospect of being banned or censored by the Government. In order to avoid either eventuality, in the following year, comics publishers moved to establish the Comics Code Authority (CCA) with the purpose of ensuring comics were suitable for children and, ironically, only children. The CCA began by outlawing the words "horror", "terror", "hell", etc from comic covers, essentially nullifying most of EC's line of titles. It also set down strict guide-lines concerning subject matter, language and imagery<sup>1</sup>. The CCA also had the power to alter any aspects of the comics it deemed inappropriate for a childish audience. The CCA symbol of approval (fig 1.7) now appeared on all comic covers and today continues to be used by the major publishers Marvel and DC. Fig 1.8 shows the Code seal on a contemporary comic cover.

The Comics Code prevented production of adult comics, hindered creativity and destroyed genres: 'comic content was sanitised, homogenized and essentially juvenilised.' (Sabin, 1993, p.36). Creators left the field and the number of titles dropped from 630 in 1952, to 250 in 1956. (Stevens, 1988,

<sup>1</sup> An abridged list of the original 1954 Comic Code Authority Guidelines appears in the Appendix



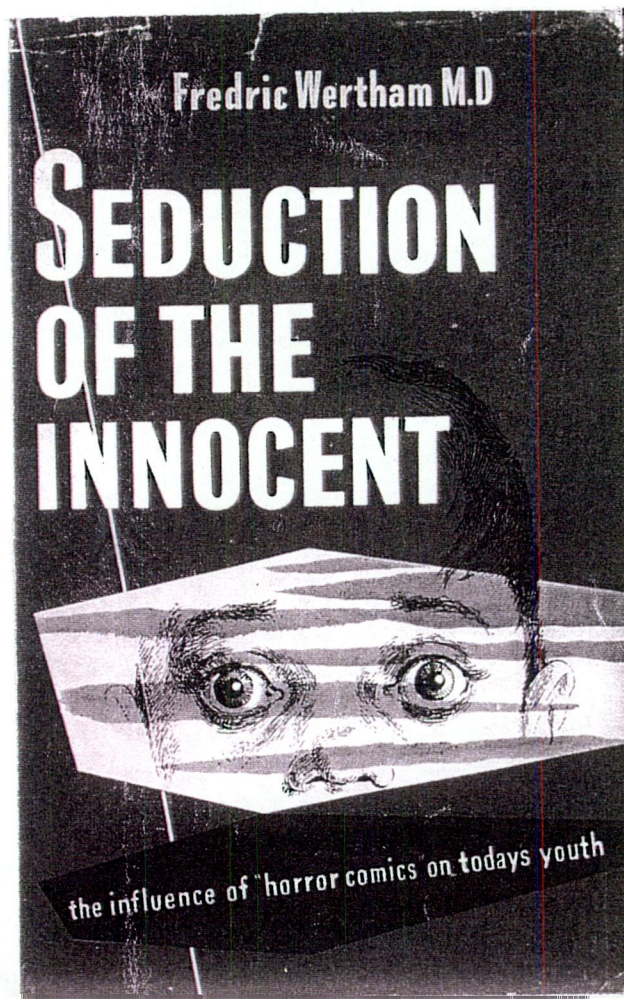


fig 1.5  
*Crime Suspense Stories*  
 cover 1954  
 from DC: Sixty Years, 1995



12

fig 1.6  
*Seduction of the Innocent*  
 dust jacket 1954  
 from Adult Comics, 1993



"This is a valuable  
 and timely Book!"  
 RANDOLPH S. CHURCHILL

HERE is a book of vital importance to every parent today. It is an account of the gradual and relentless perversion of a whole generation of children through the medium of "horror comic" magazines—publications which to the consternation of all enlightened people are still being purveyed widely in this country. In these "horror comics", as a glance at the illustrations will show, vice is glorified, sad encouraged, and murder and rape extolled in the most appalling and deliberate fashion—all in the guise of "entertainment" for children. The direct result of this, as Dr. Wertham conclusively demonstrates, is that children are committing crimes almost unknown to juvenile court a generation ago, and being taught not that crime does not pay but that the only crime is to be caught.

The children dealt with in this book are American . . . but the same terrible diet is being fed to British children. If they are not going the same way as their counterparts in the U.S.A., it is high time that all responsible parents—and parents above all—should be made fully aware of the extent and danger of this insidious menace which is causing much of the evil violence among young people today.

No one, probably, is better qualified than Dr. Wertham to write this book; he has devoted seven years to studying every aspect of the subject, and is himself an eminent psychiatrist specialising in the treatment of children.

ILLUSTRATED





fig 1.7  
Comics Code Authority  
seal of approval

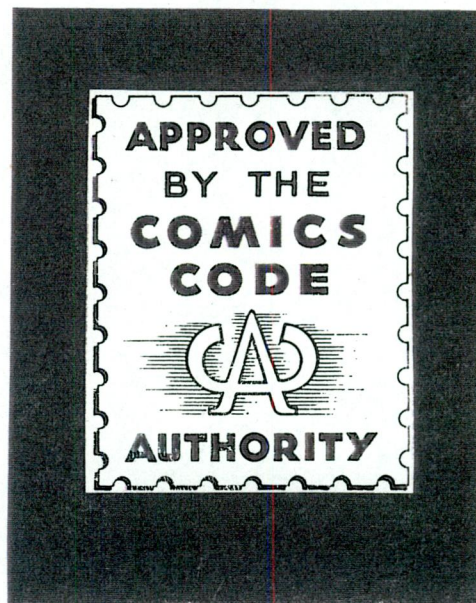
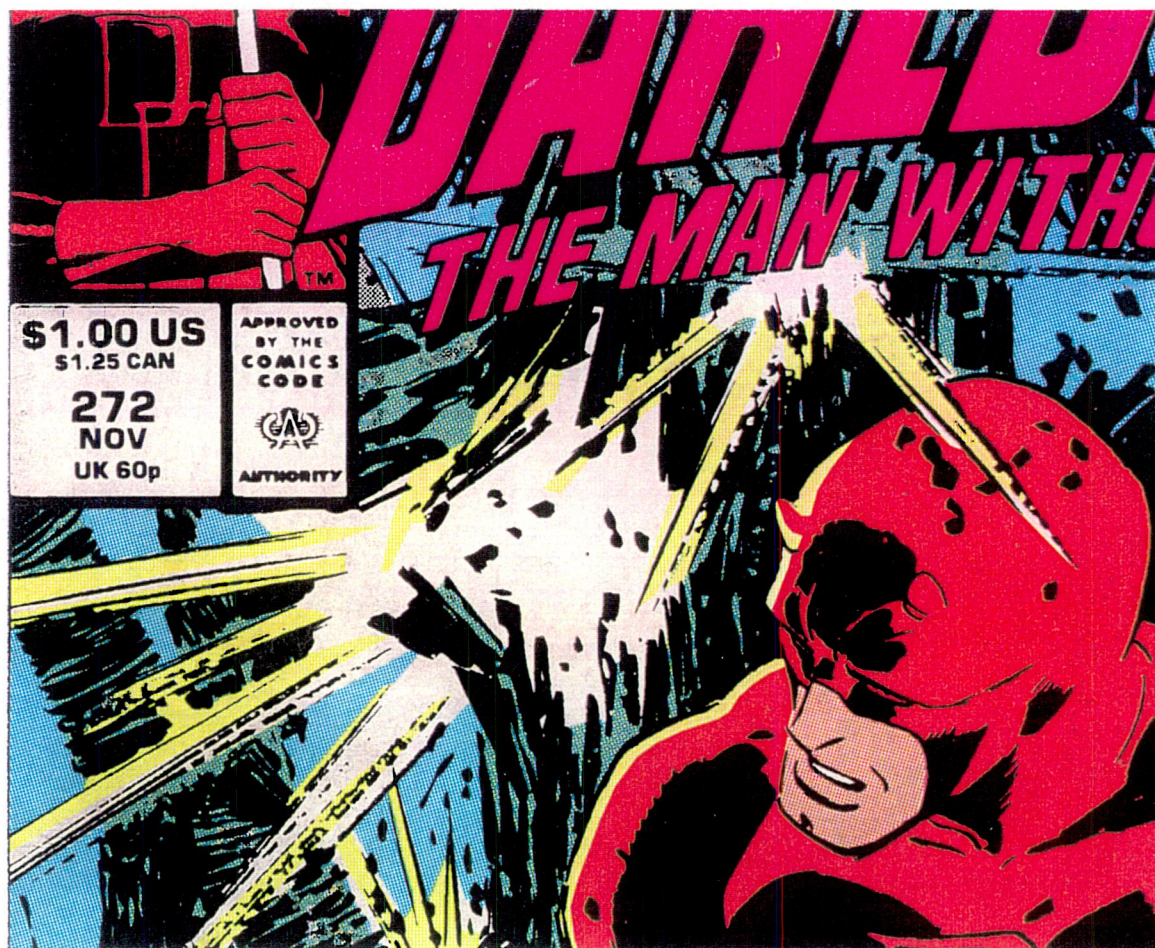


fig 1.8  
Marvel comic featuring the CCA seal 1989  
from original copy







p.60). 'Juvenile Delinquency, of course, did not decline'. (Daniels, 1996, P.53).

After the firm induction of the comics code into the creative and commercial process it proved unwise for publishers to engage in experimentation. In the post-1954 period the superhero genre underwent a revival after the decline of the other comic genres. Superheroes became financially successful once more and the substantially adolescent audience now seemed to demand or desire little else.

Commercial considerations have always conspired to limit the thematic range of the comics. Commercially the comics are a mass medium, and their authors must give the public something immediately and easily recognizable. (Horn, 1976. p.89)

Since the latter half of the 1950s the superhero genre essentially became the comics medium. They had provided continued interest in comics and supported the industry for the following decades. However outside the mainstream various writers and artists experimented in the production of different types of comics of different genres, art styles and subject matter. Underground Comix (the 'x' in 'comix' denotes x-rated) were the most notable non-mainstream comics of the 1960s.

These comics were based on 'hippie' culture, aimed at adults and a response to what some cartoonists saw as the domination of adolescent orientated superhero comics in a medium capable of catering for all ages. The comix were humorous and satirical and drawn in a 'disneyesque' style. They dealt with the subject and images of sex, social politics and, most controversially, drug use. Fig 1.9 is a page from *Whiteman* by the Underground's most prolific creator Robert Crumb. The strip is an example of the character's, and creator's, pre-occupation with sex.

Underground comics were deliberately outrageous and determinedly oppositional . . .





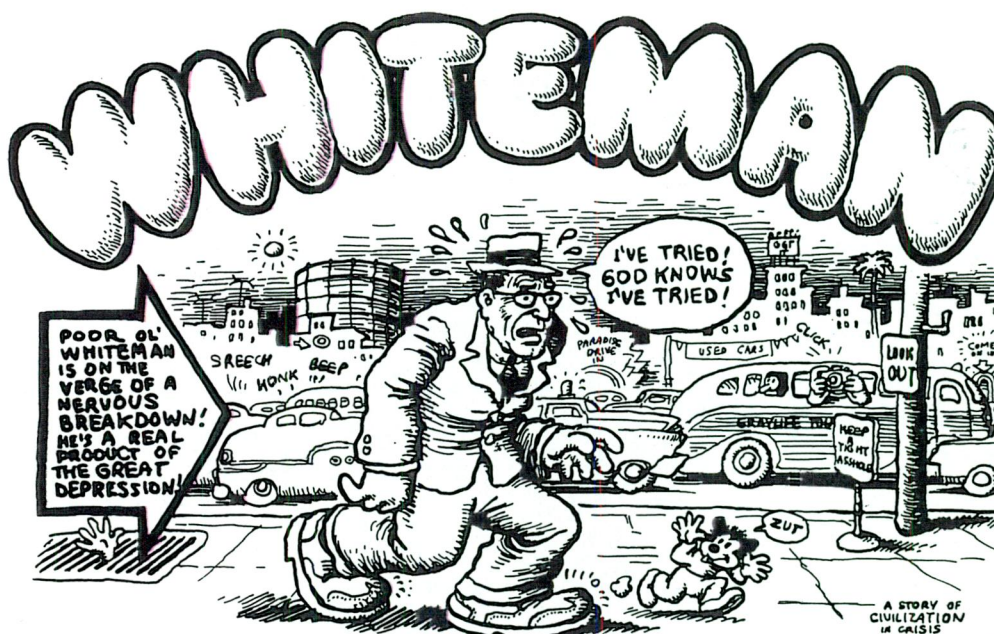


fig 1.9 *Whiteman*, selected panels, from *Zap* 1968  
from *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, 1996





their provocative stance and graphic illustration of sex, etc. led to frequent seizures, court actions and destruction orders. Their attackers damned them as "offensive", "disgusting" and "perverted". (Barker, 1989, p.44)

However, Underground comix had little influence on the mainstream or effect on sales. Mainstream comics were steeped in the superhero genre and a major influence in its direction came, appropriately, in the form of the radical superhero series *Dark Knight Returns*.

### A New Influence

Style, format, presentation and marketing were all essential ingredients in the success of the *Dark Knight Returns* series and were each fundamental in shaping contemporary comics. Batman is not only a comics figurehead but a pop-culture icon - widely recognized by people unfamiliar with comics. It was this notoriety and the radical treatment of the character in the series that played a huge part in attracting media attention and adult readers. Miller observed: 'I think it was the fact I was using such an old revered superhero that got it so much publicity.' (Shutt, 1996, p.63)

Coupled with exemplary art and story the series was a huge success both critically and financially. Set in the near future, it presents an aged Bruce Wayne, alias Batman, at fifty and retired from crime fighting for ten years. Rising crime - violent theft, rape, murder and gang activity - spurs the Batman from his troubled retirement and what emerges is an obsessive and excessively brutal vigilante but with all the mythic qualities of the character intact.

[Miller has] managed to dramatically re-define that character without contradicting one jot of the character's mythology. (Moore, 1986, p.3)

The series thoroughly explores the, long since established, elements of the Batman, including his grave motivation, re-presented through the recurring slow motion murder sequence



of his parents. The fanaticism of his crusade in that he is willing to put a child in danger, the latest Robin (a teenage girl), to achieve his goals. This is shown to best effect in a scene where Robin nearly falls to her death only to catch Batman's cape (fig 1.10). The subsequent scenes also display Batman's affection for his "assistant".

Despite the series' adult prerogative it was popular with all ages of reader and displayed, both literally and visually, a new depth of sophistication in storytelling. The fabric of Gotham City society is captured through television screens interspersed throughout the story and are used as a means to convey information, set a scene and capture social attitudes (fig 1.11 shows the public's reaction to Batman's return). The relationship between Batman and his arch nemesis The Joker is given a new dimension; by continually having him call Batman "Darling" and "My Sweet", Miller underlines the fact that The Joker is perversely in love with him. The imagery, too, depicts a level of violence perpetrated by the Batman which sees him cripple, maim and murder. Fig 1.13 shows Batman and The Joker slumped together after Batman cripples him. The Joker then breaks his own neck to frame Batman. The page ends with the two slumped together like lovers.

*Dark Knight Returns* became the yardstick against which future projects would be measured. On one level it stands as an example of quality to inspire both writers and artists. On another level, an influence that would be copied directly from the portrayal of obsessed hero to the use of television screens in the comics narrative. Fig 1.11 and fig 1.12 contrast TV panels from *Dark Knight Returns* and those used to lesser effect in *Spawn* number one in 1992. Miller notes:

It must have been influential considering how many people are still ripping it off . . . . I just hope people do good work if its going to inspire them. I just wish I hadn't gotten everyone doing so dawn many heroes with gritted teeth.

(Shutt, 1996, p.63)





fig 1.10 *Dark Knight Returns* selected panels 1986  
from original copy







fig 1.11  
Dark Knight Returns  
selected panels 1986  
from original copy

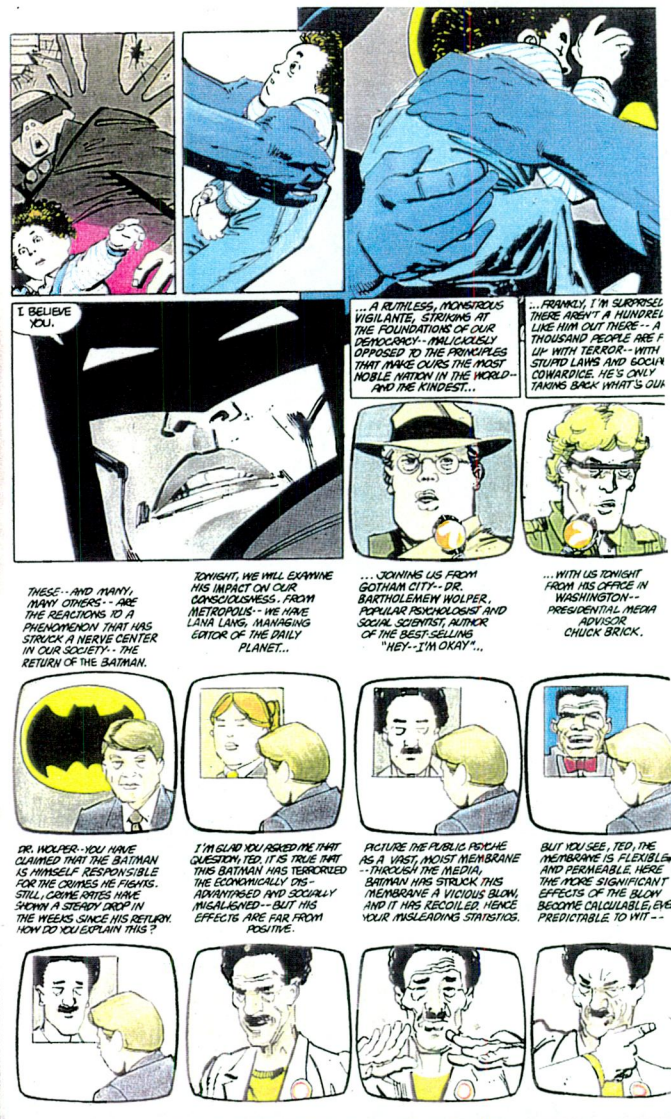
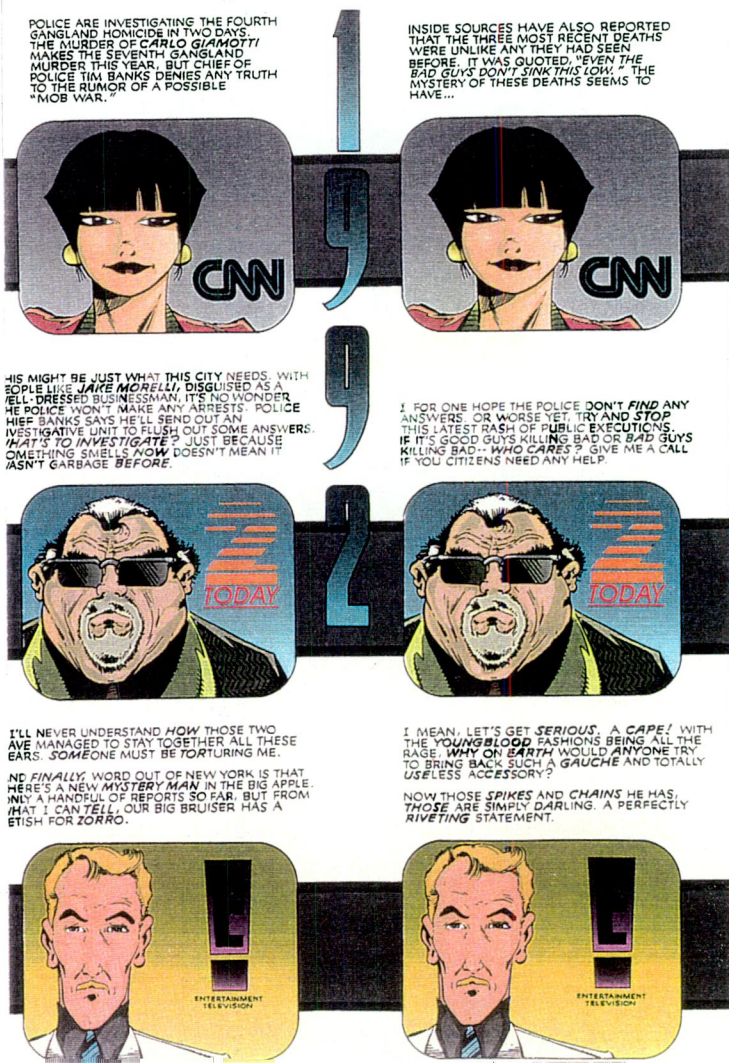


fig 1.12  
Spawn  
selected panels 1992  
from original copy













## Format and Presentation

*Dark Knight Returns* played a further role in the influence of comics. Through its release in a "prestige" square bound format it helped to promote the new Graphic Novel format and through higher levels of presentation comics developed greater standards of colour re-production.

Presentation in comics includes the areas of art, lettering and colouring. Miller's art style was dynamic, atmospheric and contemporary. The artwork was an important factor in the success of his earlier work on Marvel's *Daredevil* title (dealt with in further detail in chapter two). The use of sound effect lettering and speech and narrative texts were also used to optimum effect. As opposed to the standard "bubble" word balloons and lettering, those used in *Dark Knight Returns* reflected the speaking character's mood, situation or condition. They also blend subtly with the artwork rather than imposing upon it. In fig 1.13 the shaky lettering of The Joker's speech and the dark, sombre colour of the word balloons reflect his sudden and violent incapacitation. Fig 1.13 also illustrates the cracking of The Joker's spine. His manic laughter and "kracking" sounds flow across the panels, creating a sense of twisting, retching movement.

It was the area of colouring that had the greatest influence on subsequent mainstream comics. Before the publication of *Dark Knight Returns* the colouring of comic books was rudimentary, with single tone colours, often manifested in dots and prone to bleed into one another. *Dark Knight Returns* was subtly painted in watercolours and reproduced through higher cost production methods to fully capture the depths of colour.

Dark Knight demonstrated that it was possible to have colour work by an honest-to-God painter in an adventure story and not have the work turn into a piece of proto fine art. (Shutt, 1996, p.63)

Fig 1.14 shows a close up panel from *Dark Knight Returns*. In a single colour, blue, several varying shades are clear. Light falls





from the top right hand corner from which the colour gradually deepens. The limited background is also subtly blended. Fig 1.15 is a panel from Miller's earlier work on *Daredevil*, in 1982. The difference in colour quality is striking. The bleeding colours and dotted surfaces in the latter point to the clear differences between the two examples. With the colour developments of recent years fig 1.16 illustrates one of the most recent examples of colour quality - highly defined, bright and toned.

The colour quality of *Dark Knight Returns* spurred greater advances in the area of colouring comic books. Developments have been so rapid that many mainstream comics are now coloured using computers creating great depth and shade and effects impossible only a decade previously. The combined aspects of higher production helped move comics to levels of better colour re-production, higher quality paper and attractive cover lamination and binding.

In 1986 *Dark Knight Returns* was one of the first and most popular series to be collected into the new graphic novel format. The Graphic Novel is a prestige, square bound, hard cover format and was created in the early 1980s. They usually contained the same amount of material as several comics. *Dark Knight Returns* was collected together as a graphic novel after initial publication in four comic book parts. The series was now readily available to readers who had missed the first publications. *Dark Knight Returns* was a forerunner of the fledgling Graphic Novel format; the continued high sales of the series in that format meant that other popular series were soon repackaged into this new form of comic art. Publishers did not fail to recognize the huge marketing tool that was emerging.

With the emergence of specialist comic shops towards the end of the 1970s fans had outlets to both buy and sell back issues and with the advent of the eighties the specialist shops also became stockists of the very latest comic publications. The





fig 1.14 *Dark Knight Returns* selected panel 1986 from original

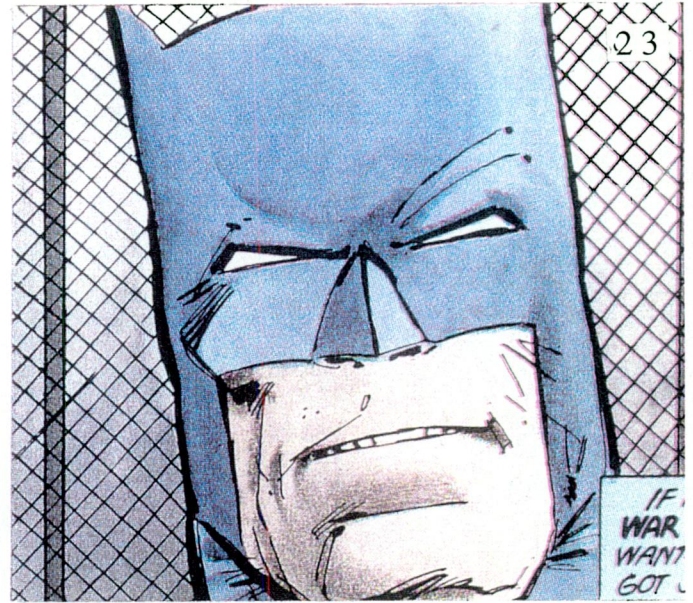


fig 1.15 *Daredevil* selected panel 1982 from original copy

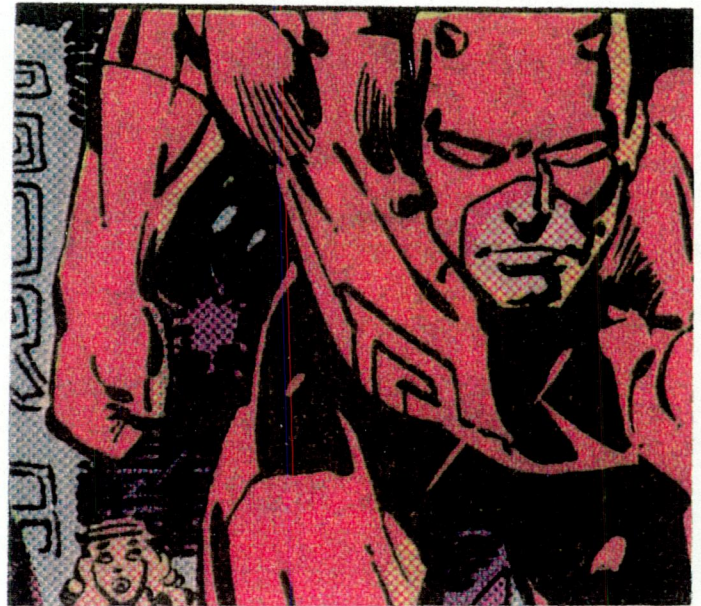
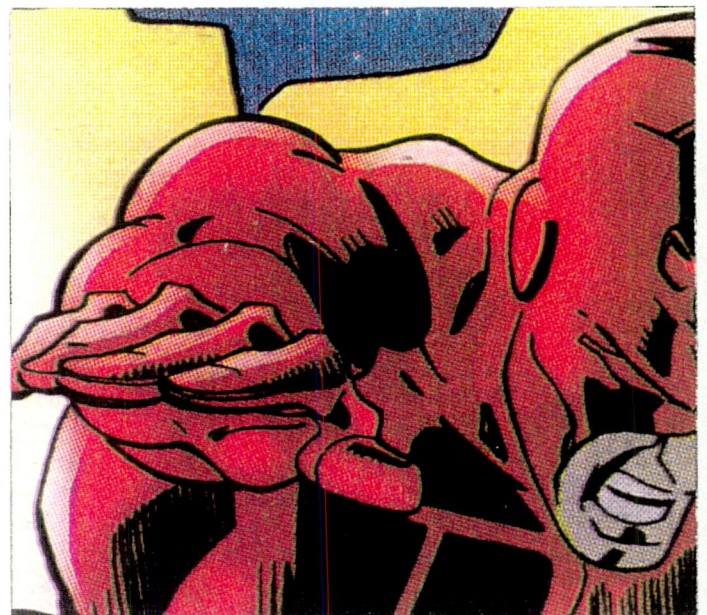


fig 1.16 *Daredevil* selected panel 1997 from original copy







obvious outlet for Graphic Novels were the ever expanding number of comic shops. They also acted as a respectable package to occupy the shelves alongside literary novels. The term itself - "Graphic Novel" had the specific purpose of adding prestige to the comic strip. 'Graphics are respectable, novels are respectable, so double respectability'. (Sabin, 1993, p.110)

Graphic Novels acted as a fresh face for a medium people traditionally looked upon with disdain and were an excellent introduction, for both children and adults, to the world of comics. Igor Goldkind, a P.R. consultant with the job of promoting graphic novels noted:

Now there was a possibility of reaching readers with no pre-conceptions about comics, who hadn't read twenty years of Marvel and DC output. From a publishing point of view, we could now attempt to sell something a little bit more sophisticated than knock 'em down violence.  
(Sabin, 1993, p.76)

Through growing popularity and successful marketing (fig 1.17) production of graphic novels boomed over the following years and were the perfect vehicles for a huge reservoir of material from Europe and Japan, especially translated and re-packaged, along with the best series of the previous years and new stories commissioned after 1986.

*Dark Knight Returns*, along with its contemporary high profile series *Watchmen* and *Maus*, were all packaged into the graphic novel format after serial publication. Sales figures are a testament to the success of the graphic novel: *Dark Knight Returns* sold 50,000 in the United Kingdom alone and remained on the *Sunday Times* best seller list for 40 weeks. It was followed by *Watchmen* selling 40,000 and *Maus* with 20,000 (Schumer, 1988. p.114).

*Dark Knight Returns* was a catalyst for change in all areas of comics. From style and quality to the areas of production and marketing. The following chapters examine the development





# INTRODUCING THE FUTURE OF COMICS: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

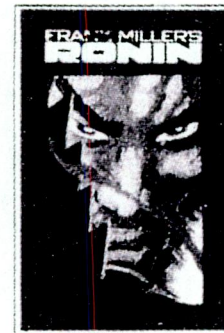
A publishing revolution has begun in England. For the first time a complete range of adult oriented comics in trade size paperback formats are available to the general public. Similar in style and sophistication to the French *Bande Dessinee*, graphic novels have already captured the imaginations of thousands of readers. *Halo Jones*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Swamp Thing*, *Love and Rockets*, *Ronin* and *Judge Dredd* are the cream of English language comics and are now available in a bookshop near you.



**BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS**  
Now over four months on the Sunday Times Best Seller list



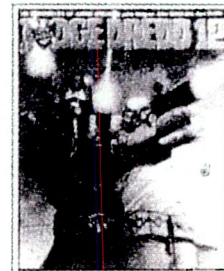
**SWAMP THING** A masterpiece of horror in the tradition of Mary Shelley. One so far



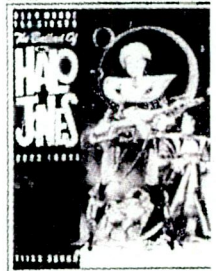
**RONIN** High-tech sensual epic set in the distant future. (July publication)



**LOVE AND ROCKETS** Post punk romance a nuclear age. The first in a series of street comics



**JUDGE DREDD** Britain's most popular SF crime character. Twenty six books so far



**THE BALLAD OF HALO JONES** Book One The adventures of a futuristic heroine confronting social disorder

fig 1.17 Advertisement for Graphic Novels 1987  
from Adult Comics, 1993



of the mainstream in the wake of Dark Knight Returns. Examining the elements that subsequently directed the mainstream in the areas of style, subject, and characterization.





## CHAPTER TWO

### The Evolving Traditional Superhero Character

By the mid 'eighties favourable publicity, ground breaking new comic series, such as *Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*, and the graphic novel format had contributed to the change in the widespread perception of mainstream comics. The intelligence of the reader, whether adolescent or adult, was more respected, which led to a wide abandonment of the basic formula many writers had mindlessly employed over the past decades. Of course the superhero genre remained the backbone of the industry but the major publishers, Marvel Comics and DC Comics, made a determined effort to re-interpret their traditional comics and characters for a late '80s audience. Readers demanded a new level of sophistication from comics: new themes, insights and dramatic characterization.

An important aspect in modernisation was the relaxation of the Comics Code. The moral concerns that had created it were outdated and creatively restrictive.

We tried to make the Code more flexible . . . . we wanted to give writers and artists more freedom to be creative for today's reader.<sup>2</sup>

(Shutt, 1996, p.74)

The submission of work to the CCA was no longer a legal obligation but the major publishers still availed of the option which insured their comics were acceptable for all ages and provided a defense from out-cries from zealous social or political groupings. With the relaxing of the Code and growing creativity, the face of the superhero genre was changing. This was epitomized by the growth and popularity of Marvel's *X-men* and *Daredevil*, and the re-interpretation of the primary superheroes, Superman and Batman.

By 1986 *X-men* (fig 2.1), after several years of evolution at the hands of writer Chris Claremont, had entered a period of

<sup>2</sup> A list of the current Comics Code Authority Guidelines appears in the Appendix.





fig 2.1 *X-Men* cover 1985 from original copy







critical acclaim. Over the years several top rated artists had contributed to the popular image of the X-men but it was Claremont who continued to add new themes and dimensions to the characters and their situations. The X-men are a gathering of young adults with natural super-powered abilities, that alienate them from ordinary mankind. The X-men team chose to protect mankind from super-powered threats but are "thanked" with hatred, prejudice and mistrust. The concept behind *X-men* was created by Marvel's "founding father" Stan Lee in the mid 1960s and was intended as a metaphor for minorities in society and the prejudices and persecution they face from the majority: the gay community, blacks etc. Of the underlying theme Claremont observes:

Any time we do a story about their relationships  
it is something that has resonances to the  
situation in the United States or South Africa.

(McCarthy, 1989, p.11)

The series was appealing to children and adolescents and, especially, adults by way of its intricate plots, extensive characterization and original characters. Events in a particular issue had an impact on the characters' lives and were built upon in the following issues. As with any series whether literary, cinematic or televised readers invested time and interest in the comics. 'Comics were no longer just throwaway literature for children' (Stevens, 1988, p.59).

By 1986 the series *Daredevil* had been revitalised by *Dark Knight Returns* creator Frank Miller. Previously the Daredevil character was a rather standard vigilante hero created in the 1960s. He was essentially a fighter and an athlete, blinded as a child by chemicals which, however, also heightened his remaining senses to superhuman keenness. Miller was responsible for transforming the title from a poorly-selling, mediocre comic into one of Marvel's strongest sellers, attaching a gritty feel to the character and his surroundings and setting a style for the comic from then on.

Miller's formula for success included placing the character in a realistic context. Instead of focusing on ridiculous super-





powered villains, Miller placed the non-super powered Daredevil in the underworld of New York City in tales of corruption and criminality. His history was also embellished and enriched with martial arts lore. Miller's storylines set a precedent; they were intricate and powerful, far removed from the standard formulaic superhero stories of the time, and explored issues such as drug abuse, political corruption and suicide. His artwork was as important in breaking standard story convention as the subject matter he explored. 'His reliance on artwork to carry much of the story without dialogue or caption served only to emphasize the grim violent world he created' (fig 2.2). (McCue & Bloom, 1993, p.103)

Miller left the series in 1985 but returned the following year as writer for seven issues to produce the acclaimed *Born Again* story-line with artist David Mazzuchelli. The story chronicles the fall of the hero, or rather his alter-ego Matt Murdock, socially, mentally and physically, after the crime Kingpin of New York discovers his enemy's real identity. Through his extensive influence the Kingpin instigates a conspiracy against Murdock that sees him disbarred from his career as a lawyer, alienated from his friends, and his home destroyed.

Written shortly after the release of *Dark Knight Returns*, Miller's intense characterization coupled with Mazzuchelli's cinematic and detailed artwork conveyed Murdock's mental collapse with a clarity rarely attempted in mainstream comics. Fig 2.3 illustrates Murdock's ensuing paranoia and ultimate breakdown. The series stands as an example of sophistication in mainstream comics, even under the regulations of the Comics Code and with the absence of gratuitous sex, language and violence.

The characterization and story developments in comics such as *X-Men* and *Daredevil* added a new dimension to mainstream comics for the enjoyment of all ages of reader, especially the continually expanding adult audience.







fig 2.2 *Daredevil* selected panels 1982 from original copy





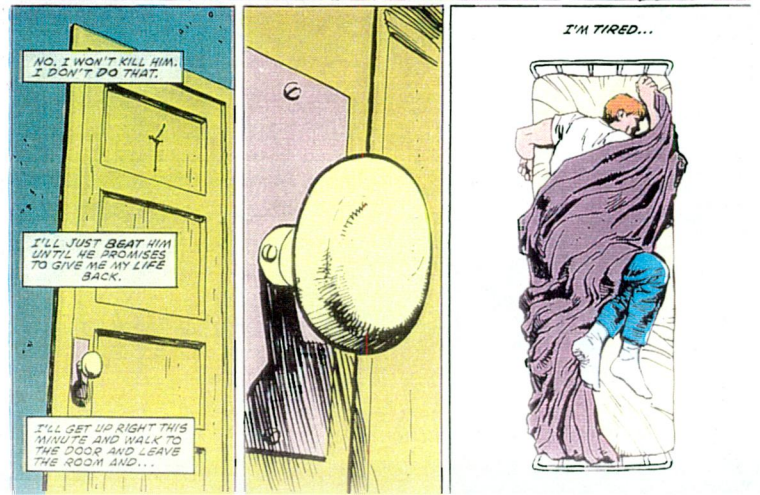
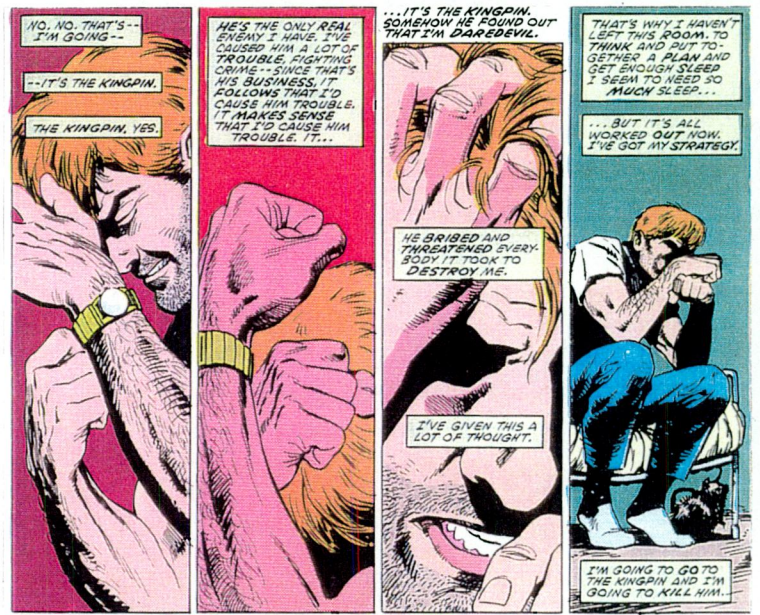
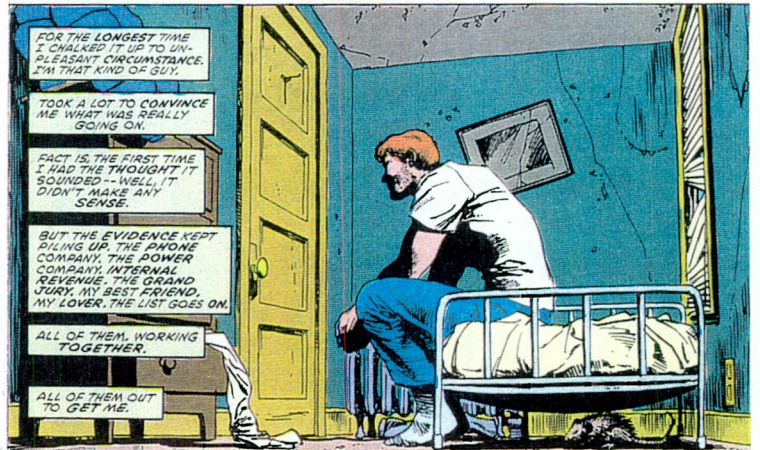
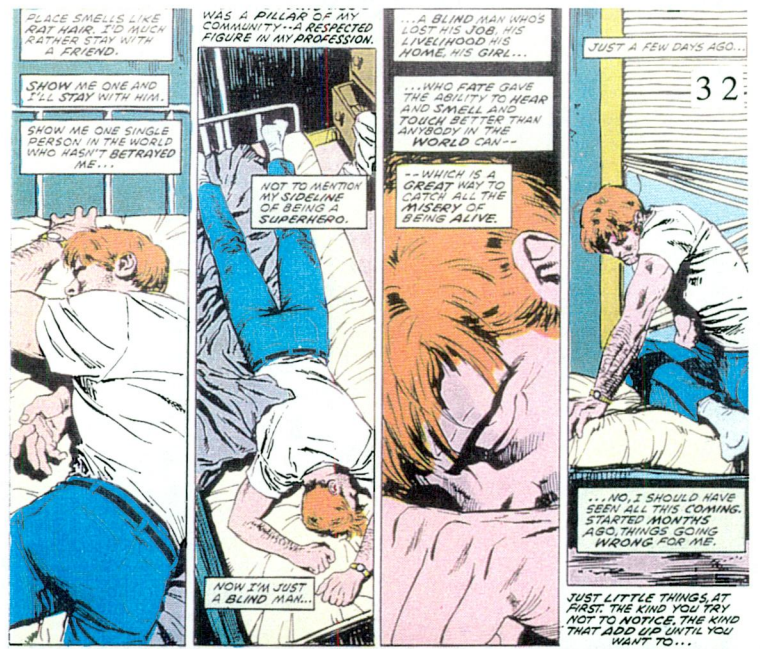


fig 2.3  
Daredevil: Born Again 1986  
from original copy





These comics appealed to the ever increasing pool of post adolescents who no doubt felt a little embarrassed about continuing to buy *X-Men* and *Spider-man*, but were reluctant to give up the genre they loved. Thus giving a sophisticated kink to a familiar formula proved the perfect answer. (Sabin,1993, p.211)

While these series represented a continued trend in evolving mainstream comics, Superman and Batman comics were revamped as a direct result of the medium's new sophistication in 1986. The two characters epitomize the two extremes of the superhero genre, one light the other dark. Superman continues to closely represent the traditional superhero character while the Batman is altogether a much darker hero and ultimately more endearing to the modern readership.

Superman embodies all that is powerful, clear and bright; Batman all that is subtle, obscure and dark. Their primal, complimentary qualities have given rise to the entire field and arguably define its parameters. (Gibbons, 1990, p.2)

The revised origin of Superman, just two years shy of his fiftieth birthday, was necessary to both stimulate poor sales on the character's titles as well as to re-introduce him to the changing contemporary audience. The revision of Superman's origin was presented in the limited series (6 issues) *Man of Steel* (fig 2.4), by high profile writer/artist John Byrne.

The series re-established the character's most essential aspects while attempting to remove the Man of Steel's "coat of rust" acquired after running continuously over 48 years, riddled with irrelevant and absurd stories and story contradictions which were increasingly of no interest to the modern reader.

The corner candy store where kids used to buy comics has largely disappeared, the kids have grown older. Today's buyers average about twenty years old and are apt to be science students. (Friedrich, 1988, p.48)





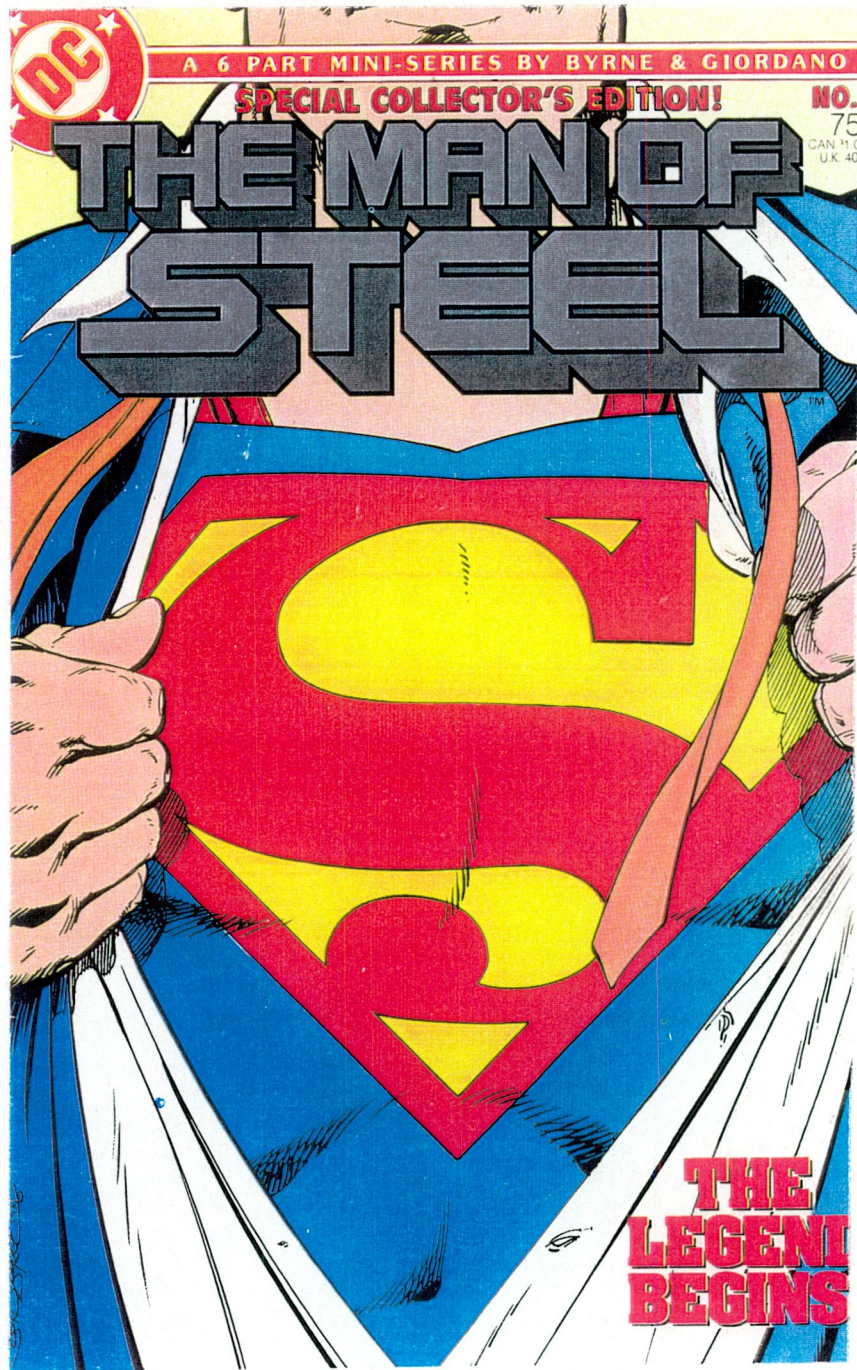


fig 2.4 *Man of Steel* cover 1986 from original copy





Banished from the new mythos, for example, were the many "Super" pets amassed over the years including Kryto the Super Dog, Streaky the Super Cat, and Comet the Super Horse. Also scrapped were the imaginary stories of Superman's marriage to Lois Lane and the multi-coloured rocks of Kryptonite, which had such absurd and varying effects that exposure to a particular colour could cause him to die or grow super fat!

The character's fundamentals were retained: his background from the planet Krypton, his formative years growing up in rural middle America, and his motives for becoming Superman. However, sweeping changes added credibility to the character in contemporary publications. The latter-day Lois Lane was more assertive and capable of taking care of herself and "no longer the pest of bygone days" (Daniels, 1995, p.58). Fig 2.5 and fig 2.6 contrast the two very different portrayals of Lois. Lex Luthor was re-established as the wealthiest man in Metropolis, although he remained corrupt. He assumed a more convincing and deadlier role in which he could carry out his subversive plans under the guise of respectability. Most radically of all, Superman was now less powerful. Previously described as an 'Earth bound God' (Moore, 1986, p.4), the Man of Steel was now more easily challenged and therefore of more interest to the contemporary readership. 'The modern audience now wants a superhero who sweats, grunts and goes to the bathroom.' (Friedrich, 1988, p.48)

### The Continuing Role of The Batman

With *Batman: Dark Knight Returns*, Frank Miller not only set a precedent for modern comics but its success spurred considerable renewed interest in the character. The contemporary audience desired more Batman stories in the "Dark Knight" style. As with Superman, DC saw the opportunity to re-establish the character's origin, re-introducing him to old and new readers and setting the 'grim 'n' gritty' style for years to come.





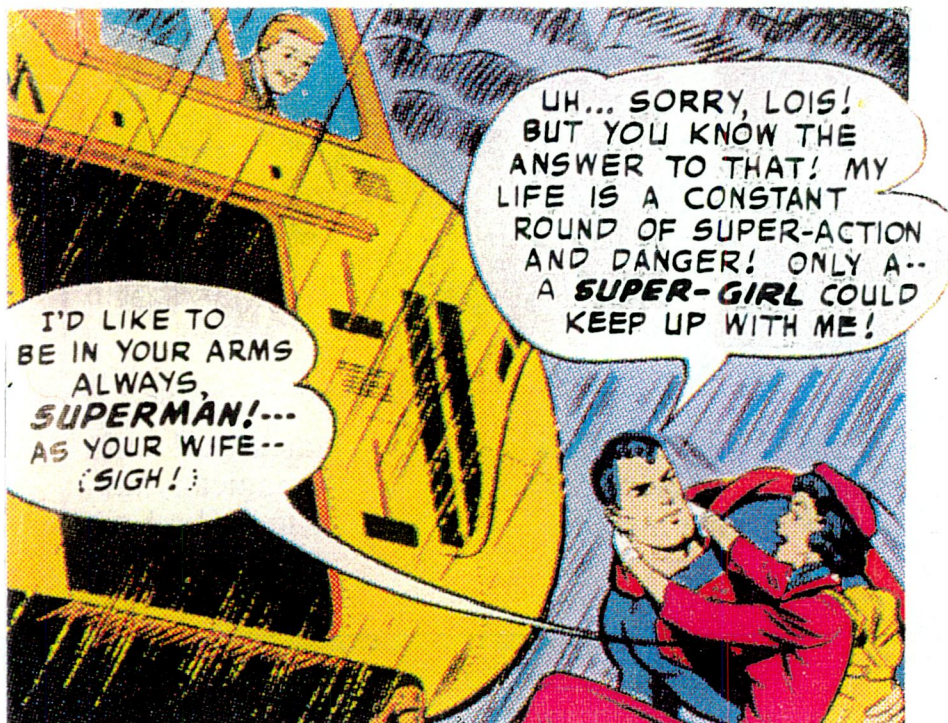


fig 2.5 *Superman* selected panel 1954  
from *DC: Sixty Years*, 1995



fig 2.6 *Superman*  
selected panel 1987  
from original copy





Appropriately DC commissioned Frank Miller to elaborate upon the Batman's basic origin in a four issue story entitled *Year One*. Written by Miller and illustrated by David Mazzuchelli, the story presents the hero's motivation to wage war on crime after the childhood murder of his parents, his inspiration to become a bat, (figs 2.7 and 2.8 juxtapose the original scene of a bat flying through a window alongside the new expanded intense sequence), and the first months of his crusade against the crime and corruption in Gotham City.

The story is heavily influenced by Miller's love of detective stories and the art is reminiscent of Film Noir. The characters and their surroundings are heavily inked with large bold lines creating heavy shadows which, along with sombre colouring, convey the city and story's grim atmosphere.

It was with this story-line that the no-nonsense  
'Millerized' Batman found its way into the  
regular continuity. (Cunningham, 1993, p.26)

Batman had now been seen to shake off his grinning, cheerful pop-culture image epitomized for the greater public by the 1960's television show. To the distaste of many true fans of the 'Dark Avenger', the TV character was a "camp" crusader as opposed to the caped variety.

Just as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* was the ambassador for contemporary adult comics, the Batman character was the prototype for the contemporary mainstream comic hero. Two Marvel characters particularly benefitted from the 'Dark Knight' treatment of the superhero: The Punisher and Wolverine. Both characters were created in the mid-70s. The Punisher (fig 2.9) was a vigilante waging war on gangsters with an arsenal of guns and weaponry. Up until 1986 the character had only featured briefly in titles such as *Spider-man* and *Daredevil* (fig 2.2) but with the growing appeal of grim 'n' gritty comic heroes, in 1988, the character was given his own on-going monthly series. The questionable issue of his use of guns and the murder of criminals, which had previously placed him in opposition to other heroes and the readers



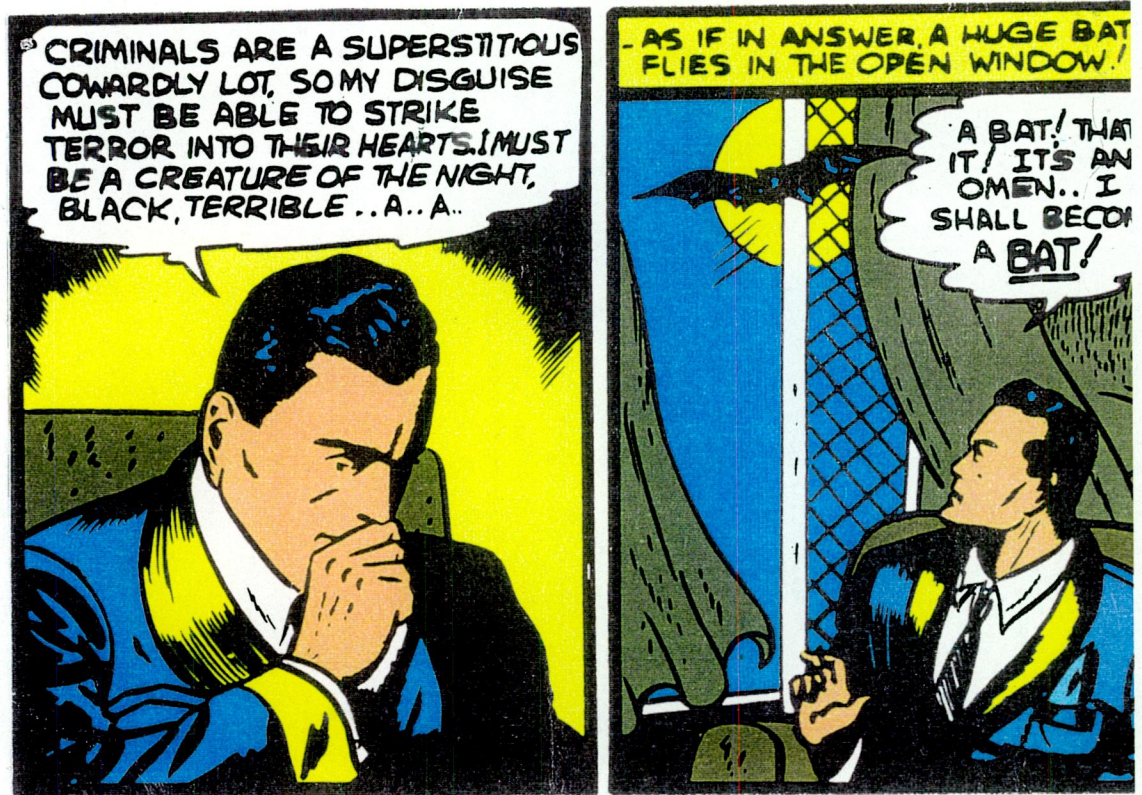


fig 2.7 *Batman* selected panels 1940  
from *DC: Sixty Years*, 1995







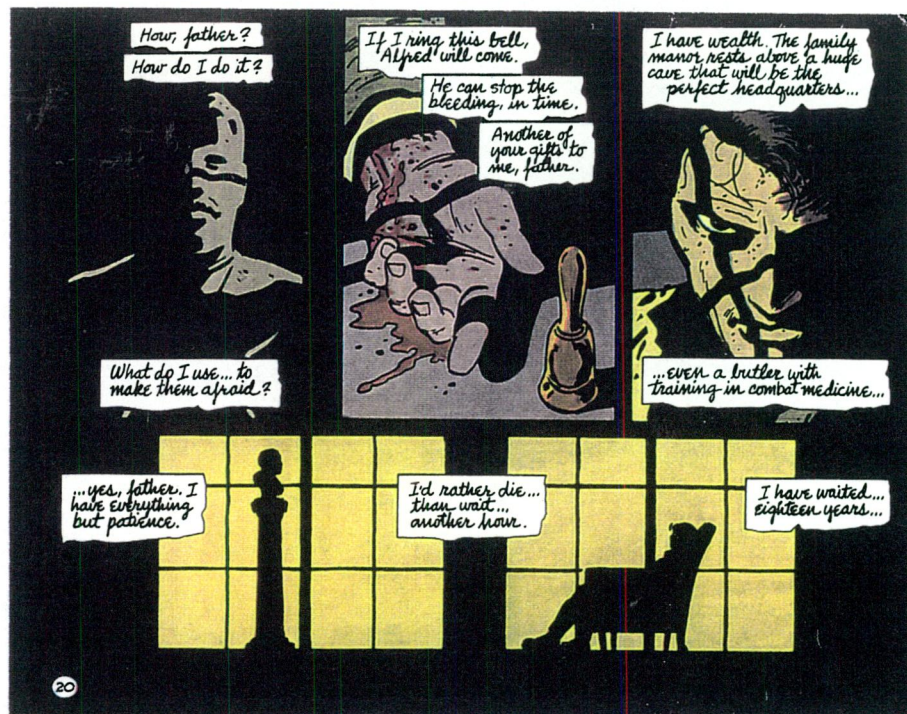


fig 2.8

Batman: Year One  
selected panels 1987  
from original copy









themselves, was now acceptable. Contemporary readers, particularly adolescents, enjoyed the radical direction of The Punisher who would come to feature in three individual titles.

The Wolverine character (fig 2.10), was a member of the X-Men and was growing in popularity along with the comic. However, his feral, aggressive nature and razor sharp metal claws marked him as suitable for further exposure in the current climate of grim 'n' gritty heroes. Wolverine, like the Punisher, could be murderous and had to battle continuously with his darker nature. The primal, clawed Wolverine was the most popular of contemporary superheroes. His striking appearance, mysterious past and violent disposition earned him his own title in 1986. Wolverine is the most popular Marvel character of the last decade - a testament to the huge appeal of this new breed of comic book hero.

Throughout the mid-'eighties dark and intense characterization was also used in many long-running series such as the three Spider-man titles, *Thor* and *Swamp Thing*. With the darker portrayal of these characters came darker storylines. A story running throughout the title *The Spectacular Spider-man* featured a serial killer, the Sin-Eater who murdered with a sawn-off shot gun. The story had religious overtones and was particularly intense. Fig 2.11 illustrates this intensity through the final panels of part one. The art and text create the build up to a murder which concludes with the blast from the killer's gun. The story featured the murder of Spider-man's friend, Police Captain Jean De Wolff. This event epitomized the change in the very fabric of traditional mainstream comics. In previous issues Captain De Wolff and her Police Squad had appeared at the end of the story to arrest the captured "Bad Guys". Now however this formulaic plot device had been violently and permanently removed.

With the influence of adult directed series such as *Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* and the re-interpretation of traditional







fig 2.9  
*Punisher*  
selected panel 1  
from original copy

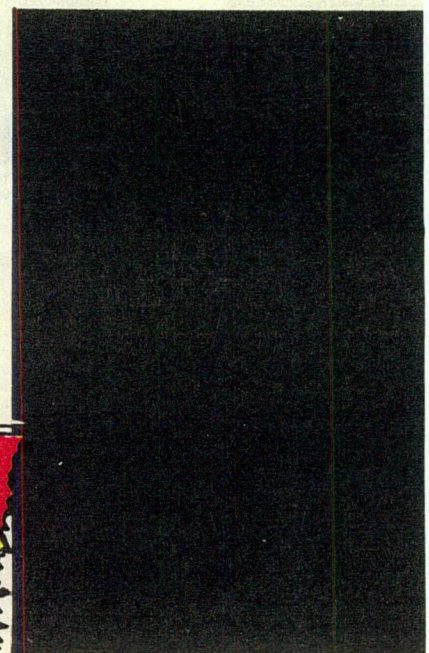
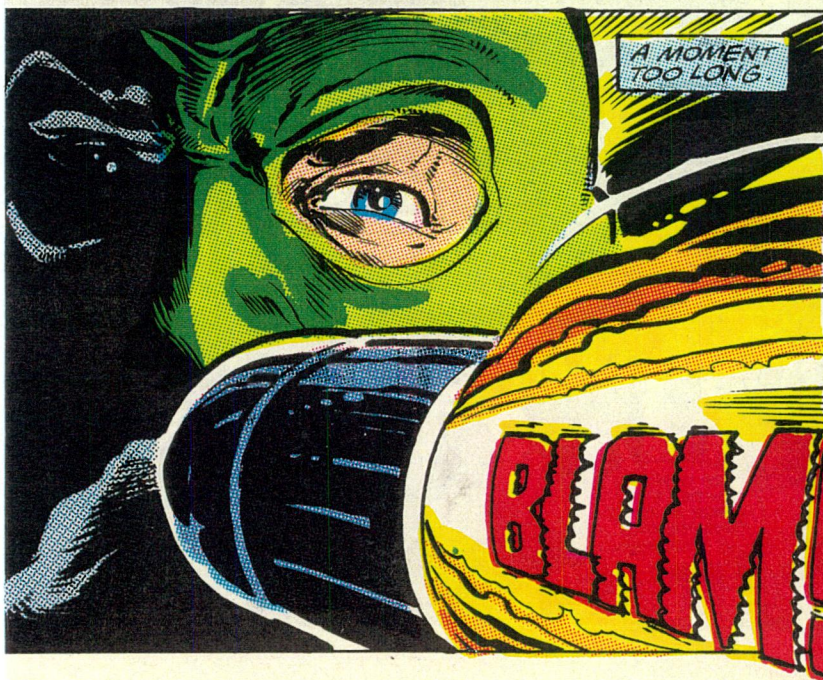
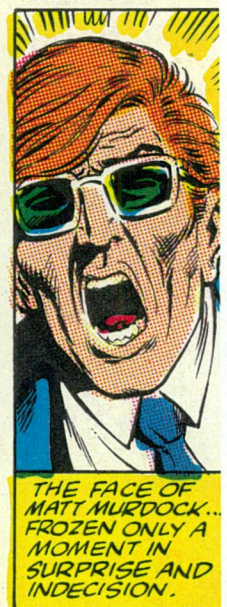
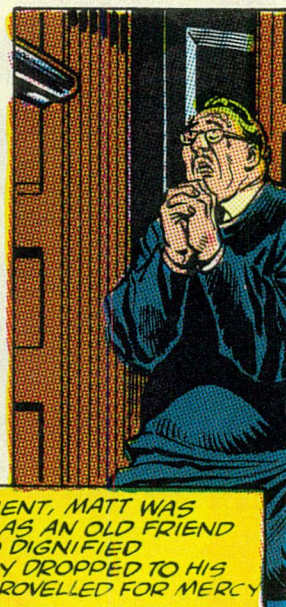
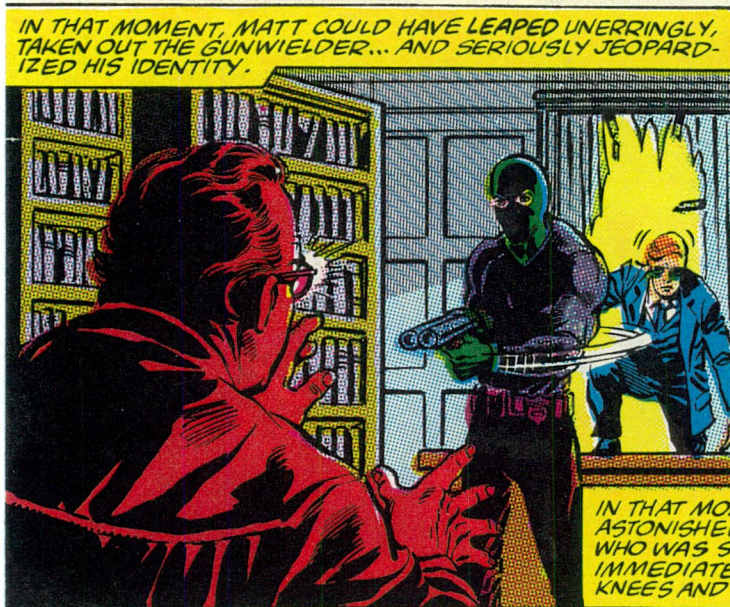
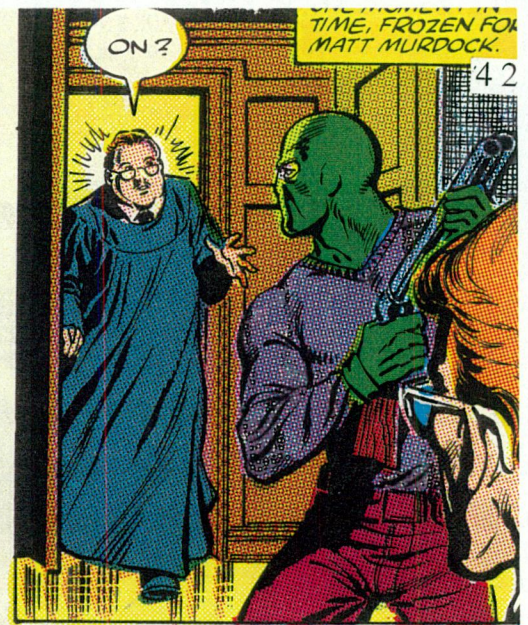
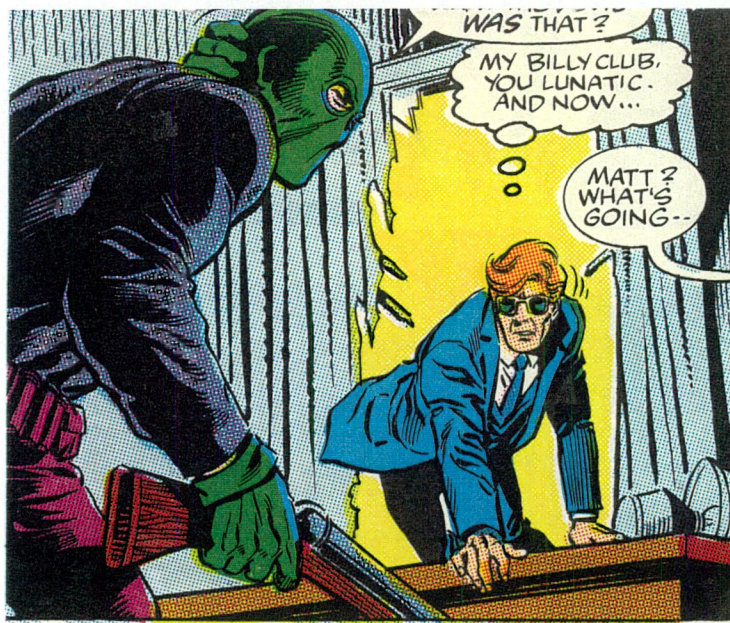


fig 2.10  
*Wolverine*  
promotional art 1  
from Marvel Age  
March 1992









Next▷ Another day . . . another DEATH

fig 2.11 Spectacular Spider-man selected panels 1986 from original copy







superheroes such as Daredevil and Superman, the comic hero was evolving into a 'grim 'n' gritty' breed for the last decade of the twentieth century and no other hero epitomized this more than the Batman.

The use of the Batman character in adult comic series did not end with *Dark Knight Returns*. As it was popular with both adult and adolescent readers, the character was a lucrative commodity which DC fully exploited. From 1986 Batman featured in many adult series, most of which were presented in the Graphic Novel format: *The Killing Joke*, *Arkham Asylum* and *Night Cries*. None of these series featured Robin, the Boy Wonder. He was a colourful infringement on the Batman's dark presence, so in 1988 readers were offered the unique opportunity to remove the character.

This was the second Robin to be featured in the Batman comics and many readers saw him as a whining usurper in the wake of the original's departure after having 'grown-up'. In the story, entitled *A Death in the Family*, Robin is severely beaten by the Joker (fig 2.12) and caught in a bomb explosion. Readers were then allowed to determine his fate between intervening issues by means of a phone vote (fig 2.13). By a narrow majority, 5,343 in favour of death to 5,271 against it, the sentence was passed and Robin never survived his ordeals.

The readership and DC Comics had dispensed with the garishly coloured youth, "always intended as a child audience identifier," (Deer, 1989, p.34). Batman's solo status was re-established in time for the following year's motion picture release. The film owed much to the comics of recent years: its atmosphere and mood was inspired by *Dark Knight Returns*; the Joker's origin was based on *The Killing Joke*; and the removal of the Robin character from the current Batman mythos suited the producers and director who feared the character would infringe upon the dark mood of the film.





fig 2.11 *Batman: A Death in the Family* 1988  
from original copy

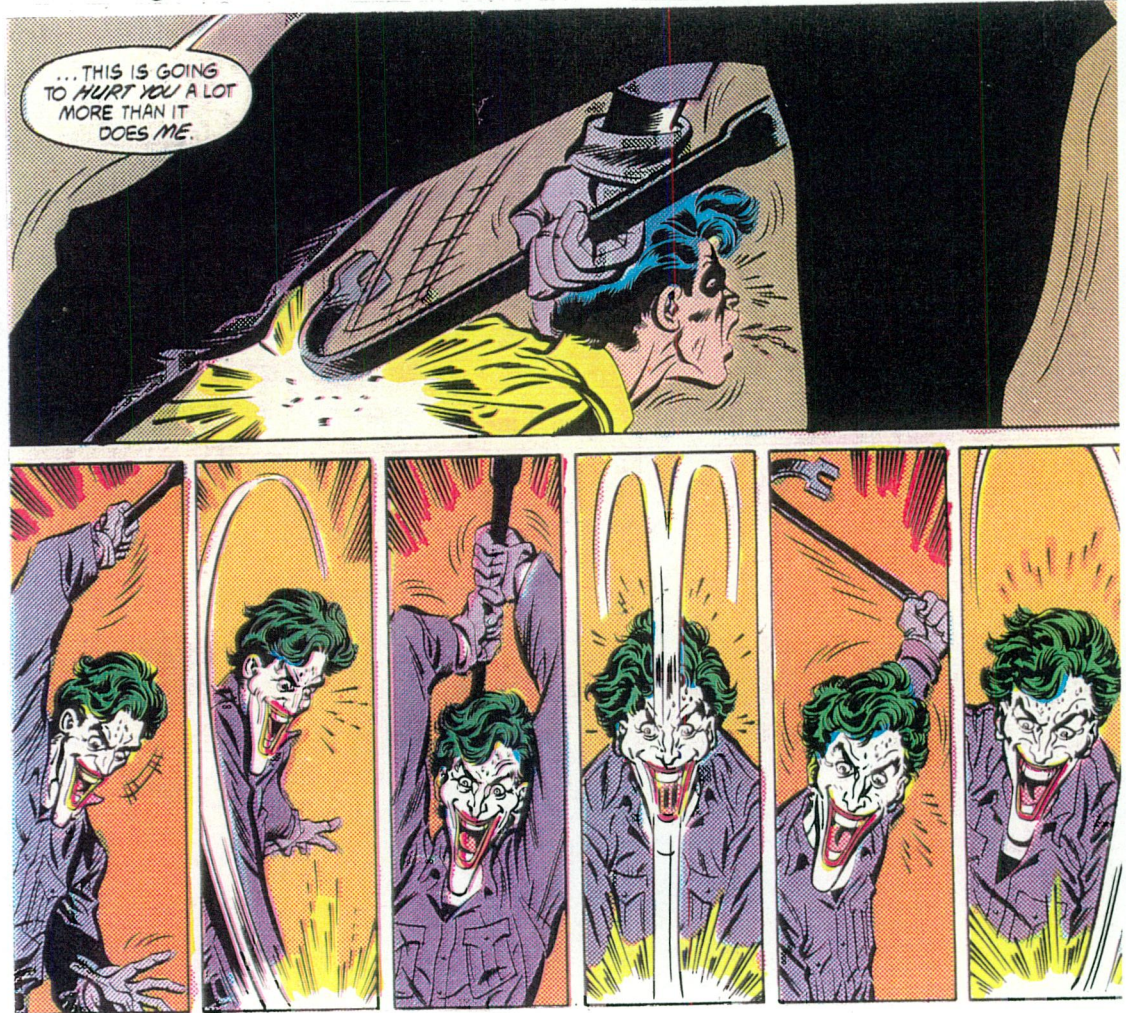


fig 2.12 *Batman: A Death in the Family* promotional art 1988  
from original copy





With the enormous success of the film, interest in the Batman was at an all time high. The influence of the film and adult series now manifested themselves throughout mainstream comics and created a new enthusiasm for converting comic characters to the cinema screen. The X-men, Daredevil and Spider-man characters had all been at their most popular with dark and sophisticated styles suitable for success in the media of film. (However, so far legal wranglings have kept each from film production).

With the influence of the film and adult series the Batman mainstream titles boomed. Batman was now a pillar in comics publishing, standing as an example of a character able to transcend reader boundaries of age, and marking the Batman comics and graphic novels as important and widely recognised contributions to the range of contemporary comics and popular culture.

The last days of the decade had ended promisingly. With the arrival of the 'nineties the medium was to enter a boom period but at the price of innovation and continued sophistication in the mainstream.





## CHAPTER THREE

### The Creation of Image

As mainstream comics entered the 1990s a new style of comic was born. Since the 1960s the publishers Marvel and DC were the giants of mainstream comics, at their height controlling 90% of comics output. However in 1992 Image Comics was formed which brought the evolution of the superhero to a new level with their own style of comics and characters. In so doing, they rapidly became the third largest publisher in the medium.

Image Comics was created by a number of artists and writers who left Marvel at the height of their popularity. These creators were the most popular of recent years and had been responsible for record breaking sales of recent Marvel comics. Their dynamic art style, characterization and story-telling set some of the highest standards ever in comics. They were as popular as the comics they worked on, such as *Spider-man* and *X-men*; many had become millionaires and their names alone were capable of selling comics - this was the "Cult of the Creator".

The Image artists and writers believed Marvel and DC held the monopoly on comics publishing. They were unhappy over creative rights - the characters and concepts they created were owned by the company. Despite the huge fees and royalties they received for their contribution to outstanding sales, many decided their future lay with their own company.

The founders of Image released several new comics with lead characters similar to those they had worked on at Marvel. These new comics were an instant success: the artistic talent and fan popularity of the creators generated yet more record breaking sales. However, on these new titles they held complete creative control.



The characters and comics published by Image were part of the superhero genre and the new characters such as *Spawn* (fig 3.1) and Wildcats found instant popularity on a par with such established characters as the X-men and Batman. However the Image superheroes more closely reflected the trends of the 1990s readership and were in effect a new breed in the genre.

The style of this new breed of superheroes was uninfluenced by the CCA: Image creators chose not submit their comics for scrutiny or for the seal of approval (fig1.7), the guarantee of suitability for child readers. However, because they recognised that the majority of their readers were adolescents, Image comics never featured nudity or overly gratuitous violence; they were more reflective of contemporary teenage behaviour. Dialogue, for example, was more realistic. As Marvel and DC continued to acknowledge the Comics code, DC writer Ron Marz observed, "most of our characters have cleaner vocabularies than most of our younger readers". (Shutt, 1996, p,26)

The sales successes that Image Comics enjoyed in their formative years were fuelled by the boom the entire Comics Industry was experiencing since the advent of the 'nineties.

### The Comics Boom

The huge comics sales boom began in 1990 and peaked in 1993. The boom started with a series of record breaking publications from Marvel and fuelled by the new trend of "investment buying". Investment buying involved customers purchasing huge quantities of a particular comic in anticipation of it becoming valuable and so could be sold at a later date for a substantial profit.

Investment Buying initially took off with the launch of a new Spider-man title in 1990. The title was intended as a vehicle for the hugely talented and popular young artist Todd McFarlane and was simply entitled *Spider-man*. It was















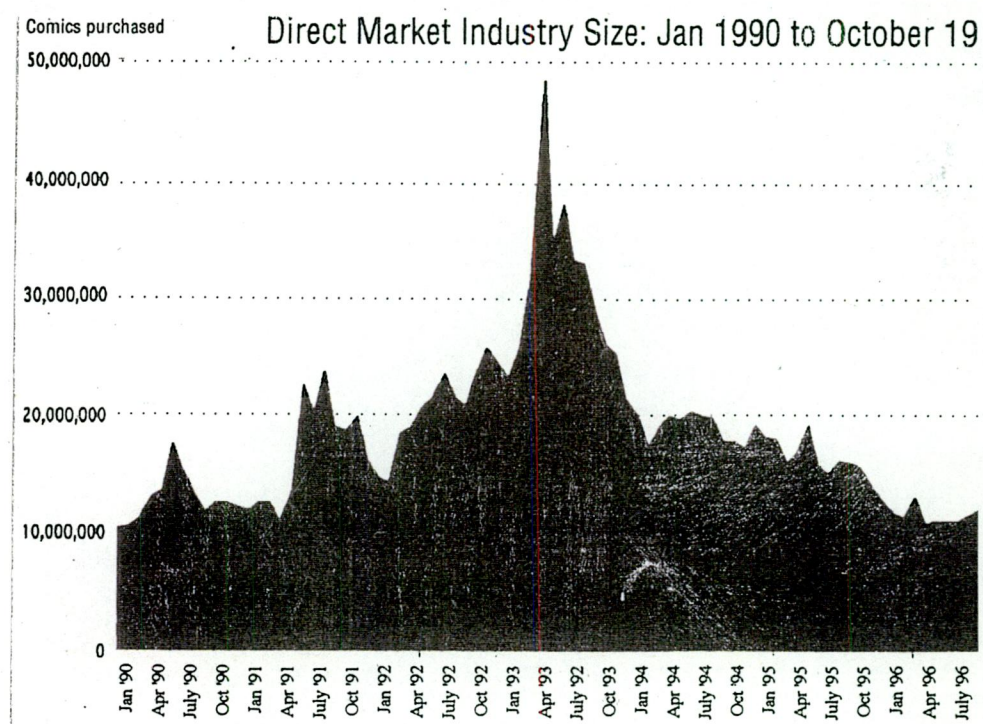


fig 3.2

Graph of Direct Market Industry Size Jan '90 - Oct '96  
from Comics International Dec 1996



extremely highly hyped by Marvel's Marketing Department and the pre-publication attention it received stirred enough excitement within the medium to create, not only a sales success, but record breaking sales of 2.5 million. Large ordering from the specialist shops and investment buying were largely responsible:

While it is impossible to speculate on the amount of investment buying included in its total sales, *Spider-man* number one has created a new approach to boosting sales. (Rogers, 1990, p.3)

The initial print run for the issue was over 2,500,000 copies and it returned to press for second and third printings, identified by gold and platinum colour covers. The change in cover colouring and their lower print runs was in itself a method for increasing demand and therefore boosting sales.

The boom in the medium was further fuelled a year later, in 1991, with the release of *X-Force* number one (in June) breaking the newly set record with 3.5 million sales. In turn this was broken in October by *X-Men* (vol. 2) number one (fig 3.3), with combined sales to distributors and retailers of 8.2 million copies. Sales were boosted on this issue with five different covers for only that one issue. Each different cover of the same issue depicted different members of the X-Men. The formation of Image in 1992 their subsequent publication of a flood of new superhero comics continued to create and maintain high levels of sales.

A new aspect of comics collecting emerged at this time - "adolescent trends". The collecting of "gimmick" covers was the first of these trends. Fig 3.4 shows a front and back cover comic, two reverse covers and stories. There were many "gimmick" issues which included covers of embossed card, holograms, or with trading cards attached. Both Marvel and Image began marketing their product to exploit new trends, which grew out of what is often referred to as the "Fan-Boy" mentality. For example, they engaged in story-lines running throughout various titles - cross-overs - as a method of







fig 3.3 *X-Men* cover 1991 from original copy





fig 3.4 *Youngblood* cover 1991 from original copy







encouraging fans to buy all the related comics in order to understand and own the entire story. Marvel and Image also realised how sellable first issues were which led to a glut of new titles which the average fan was led to believe would become valuable.

Image Comics continued to flourish with a crop of mediocre and formulaic comics. The Image creators, many of whom were initially artists were often poor writers. Their art styles were often copied, usually with their encouragement in order to consolidate their "house" style, but with poor results. Fig 3.5 shows the cover of *Wildcats* number one alongside fig 3.6, a parody of the issue. It illustrates the points of criticism that Image was subject to: their similarity to Marvel in art and characters (note: the book proclaiming "How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way"); and their financial greed (note: the sack of money held aloft) through the exploitation of popular art and characters. The comics generally lacked sophistication:

. . . . the stories were often second rate and the characters were almost interchangeable rip-offs of Marvel's. The art also grew increasingly bizarre, with endless splash pages full of anatomical impossibilities . . . . in particular the ridiculously endowed, disproportioned female characters. (Skinny Melink, 1996, p.87)

Marvel had built their expanded number of titles around the now huge popularity of the X-men. However, the departure of writer Chris Claremont and over-exploitation served to dull the unique style and acclaim the title had achieved throughout the 1980s. Image characters were extremely similar to the most popular *X-men*, using the appeal of these superheroes as a base for their own success.

DC Comics were less inclined to produce comics in the "X-men" style and subsequently their market share had fallen to just 27% by 1994. Instead, DC produced comics to target all sectors of the readership such as Afro-Americans, with a number of black superhero titles under the Milestone Imprint (fig 3.7)





fig 3.5  
*Wildcats* cover 1992  
 from original copy



fig 3.6  
*Wildbrats* cover 1993  
 from original copy





and adult readers with the Vertigo Imprint (fig 3.8). The latter is one of the finest collections of adult titles to be produced in contemporary comics. For both younger and older readers the flagship Superman and Batman titles remained the backbone of the company.

To its credit, DC never exploited its characters to the ridiculous extent Image and Marvel did. Despite several titles each Superman and Batman have essentially maintained their integrity.  
(Skinny Melink, 1996, p.87)

After sales had peaked in mid-1993 they in turn began to experience a decline (fig 3.2). Comics consumers began to abandon trends. For example Investment buying was beginning to prove unrewarding. *X-Men* number one had such a high print run that copies were easily and inexpensively available. Generally many mainstream comics were of poor quality compared with many of the comics produced in the previous decade. Marvel and Image chose to concentrate on producing comics of high gloss and little sophistication continuing the saturation of adolescent superhero comics in the marketplace and leaving little room for potential growth in sophistication.

Superheroes are becoming their own worst enemy in the marketplace . . . . they're crowded each other out, and any human interest type of material. Obviously, if superheroes are what sells . . . . . every comic company is incredibly short term in their thinking, their marketing.  
(Woodward, 1996, p.40)

The 'nineties breed of superheroes grew in popularity during the Comics Boom as many were subject to several titles each. New characters were being continually produced as publishers made further bids for success. The images of popular Superheroes were the most attractive aspect of comics to the 'nineties adolescent reader. The superficial images of these new heroes grew increasingly worst as the decade progressed.





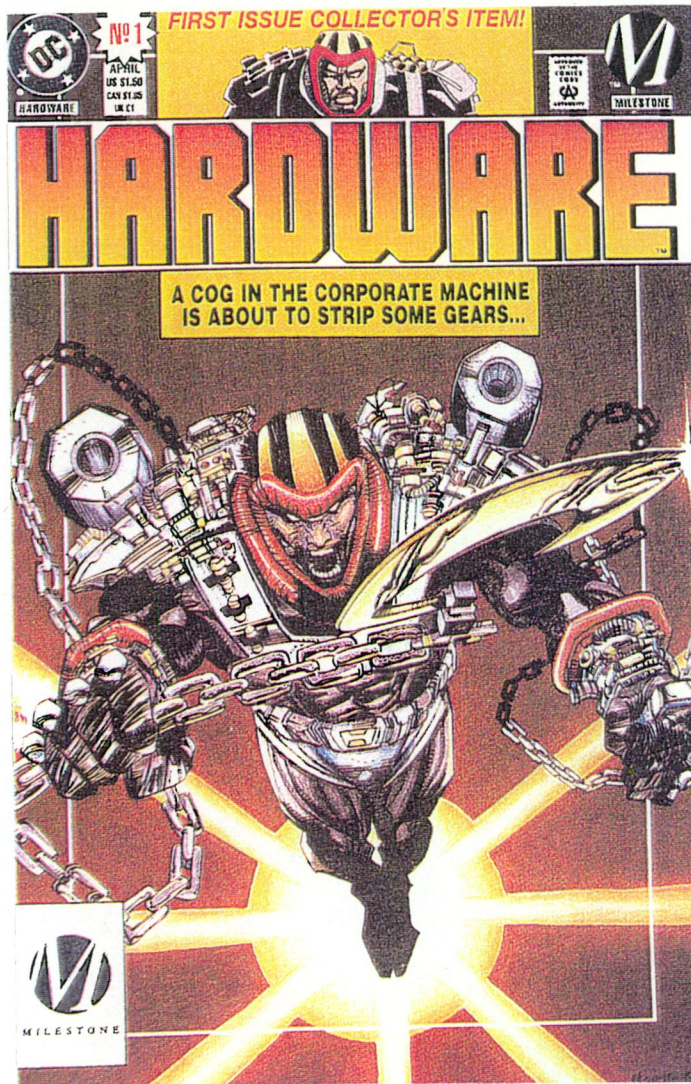


fig 3.7  
Milestone -  
*Hardware* cover 1993  
from original copy

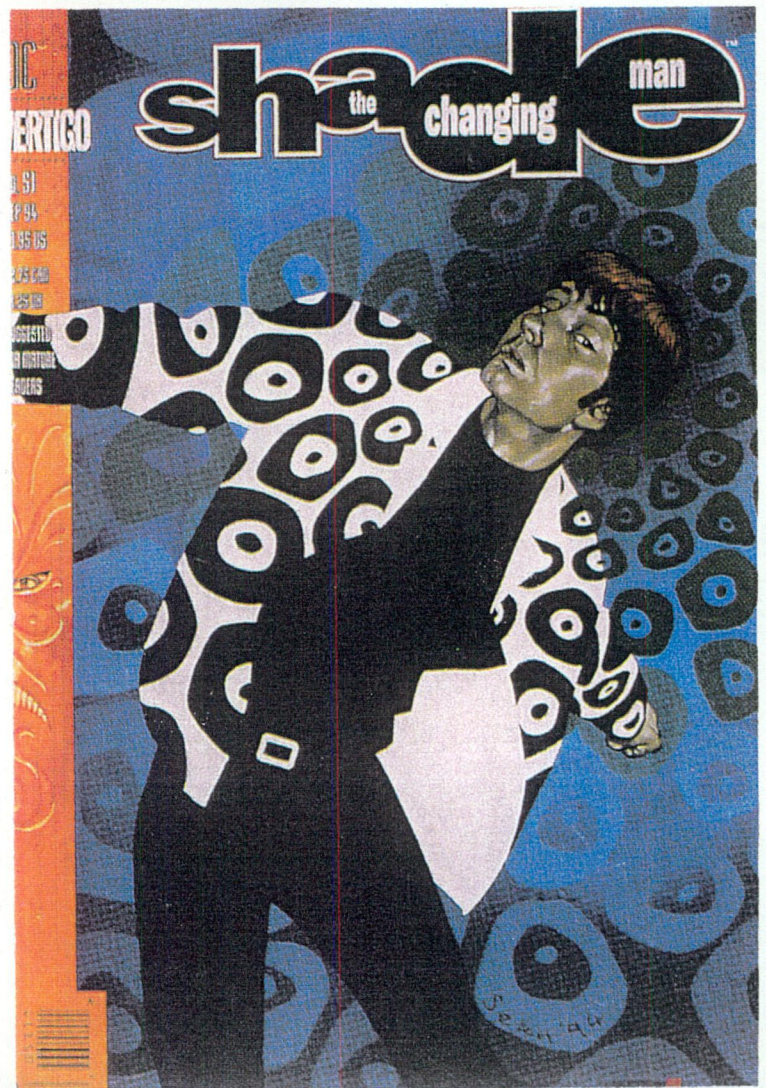


fig 3.8  
Vertigo -  
*Shade* cover 1994  
from original copy





### The 'Nineties Breed of Superhero

The new breed of superheroes, both new and re-invented characters, followed stereotypical guide-lines. The men were extremely "grim 'n' gritty", often complete with high-tech armour and pseudo futuristic weaponry. Fig 3.9 is an example of such characters. This illustration for the Image series *CyberForce*, published in 1993, displays the most popular aspects of the 'nineties superhero. The first character is primal with razor sharp metal claws (two popular traits of the X-Men's Wolverine). The second character models high-tech armour and guns. They both have long hair in pony tails (the most popular style of the time) and come complete with gritted teeth.

Portrayals of women suffered alongside their male counterparts. The new widespread representations and characterizations of women were not only stereotypical but they damaged advances in female gender portrayal made in recent years.

The difference between a woman's character and a man's is that in the case of the woman's the cliches are a bit more deeply ingrained. (Rimmels, 1993, p.32)

The new popular women characters were spawned by the "Bad Girl Craze". "Bad Girl" was a phrase originally coined in the 1960s and was derived from what was known as "Good Girl Art" - comics containing drawings of attractive, leggy, busty women. Fig 3.10 is an example of "Good Girl Art" from 1941. The character, The Black Cat, fights crime in the risqué costume the period would allow. The modern "Bad Girls" are pin-up characters with super powers, pseudo feminist attitudes and skimpy costumes.

After the comics backlash of the 1950s female characters emerged as wholesome and harmless. They served a purpose as girlfriend and hostages, to be rescued by the male heroes. (Fig 2.5 shows Lois Lane and Superman after the obligatory rescue). Even the female superheroes were un-threatening.





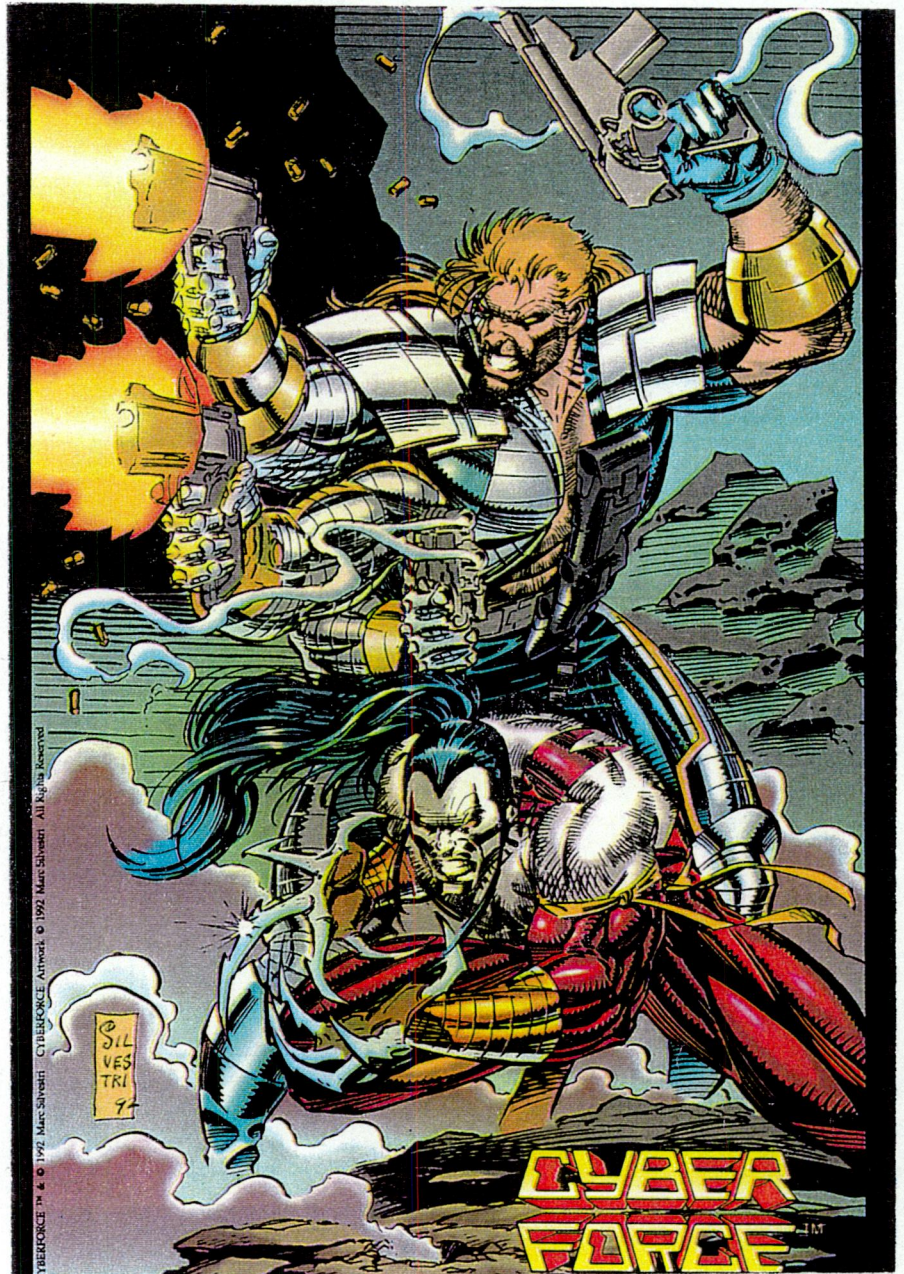


fig 3.9

*Cyberforce* promotional art 1992 from  
*Spawn* No. 1







fig 3.10 *Black Cat* cover 1941  
 from The World Encyclopedia of Comics, 1976





Batgirl was one such "superheroine". As opposed to Batman's crime fighting gadgets, such as climbing devices, smoke pellets and lock picks, Batgirl's red shoulder bag "utility case" contained tear gas perfume, a periscope lipstick and a powder puff smoke screen.

Throughout the '60s and '70s portrayals of women developed little. Even though more women began working within the comics field they were largely not in a position to influence characterization. Women employed by the major publishers Marvel and DC worked at the lower end of the creative process as colourists and letterers. The very few who worked in editorial positions rarely rose above assistant editor. Due to the limitations of working in the mainstream many women creators chose to work for the independent small scale publishers with greater creative freedom and control.

As a whole they were not catering to the fan market, so were under no obligation to be self referencing to American comics traditions.  
(Sabin, 1993, p.230)

The 1980s finally brought major mainstream development in the representation of female gender. Several major female characters became more three-dimensional: credible, assertive and capable of taking a leading role. These characters, who were not always superheroes, included Lois Lane (fig 2.6 features the new "take charge" Lois), Catwoman (a woman of crime yet with a strong moral code) and The Invisible Woman. The latter was previously the "mom" of The Fantastic Four super team but by 1986 she was revealed as the most powerful member of the team and its one time leader.

With the advent of the 'nineties these characters and continued gender development was eclipsed by the new breed of "Bad Girl" characters. The huge popularity of these characters grew for two reasons: the substantial male adolescent readership were content with scantily clad "Bad Girl" stereotypes and in turn many writers aggravated the problem. *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont observed:





You have more average writers than good writers and a lot of these people find it easier to go for the cliché and just produce what everyone expects rather than what might be interesting or different. (Rimmels, 1995, p.35)

The popularity of the "Bad Girls" among the male teenage readership had a further worrying dimension. The female characters appear visually thrilling to the male adolescent. In this, "the *Baywatch* Generation", images of sex and sexuality run throughout media and advertising and in the area of comics, story content often comes second to imagery. The imagery, or artwork, is exploitative in the rendering of poses, attire and anatomy.

There are some comics that simply pander.....  
in some areas all women look like models, wear skin-tight suits have breasts bigger than their heads, and wear spiked heels while running around doing battle. (Rimmels, 1995, p.36)

Fig 3.11 illustrates such a character - Lady Death. In the artist's attempt to make the character as sexy as possible he has even rendered her bikini style costume complete with suspenders. The anatomical renderings of these characters' is their most extravagant attribute: 'the current crop of books feature female characters with bodies a *Penthouse* Pet would envy' (Rimmels, 1995, p.35). In the true *Baywatch* tradition both Marvel and Image have produced swimsuit editions of their comics featuring their most popular females characters scantily dressed in exotic locations (fig 3.12).

A magazine such as *Penthouse* is largely unavailable to adolescent comics readers yet comics' artwork provides teenage titillation and is readily available. 'The sexuality is domesticated yet remains exceptionally erotic'. (Reynolds, 1992, p.115). Fig 3.13 is an example of titillation while fig 3.14 directly places the reader in the position of voyeur.

The testosterone laden male characters along with the sexually charged poses and attire of the female characters present a damning face for the comics medium. Popular mid-'nineties





fig 3.11

*Lady Death* selected panel 1995  
from Wizard, Aug 1995









fig 3.12  
*Gamorra Swimsuit Special*  
selected panel 1996  
from Comics International, Oct 1996





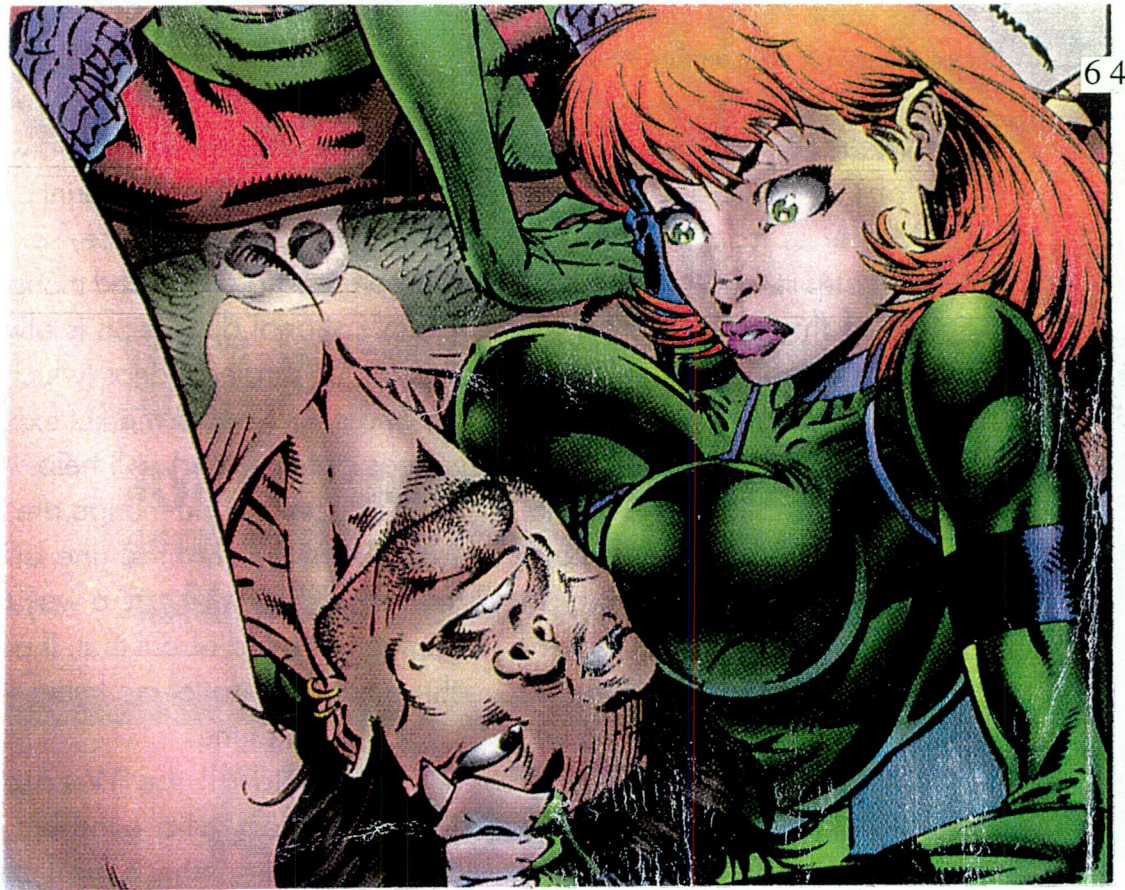


fig 3.13 *Gen 13* selected panel 1994 from original copy

fig 3.14 *Gen 13* selected panel 1996 from Wizard, Aug 1996







mainstream comic characters appear aggressive, sexual and lacking in sophistication. *Watchmen* writer Alan Moore observes the more negative influence of series such as *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns* on contemporary character portrayal.

Obviously, we're to some extent, doomed the mainstream comics medium to a parade of violent, depressing, post modern superheroes, a lot of whom, in addition to those faults, are incredibly pretentious. I stand accused.

(Reynolds, 1992, p.75)

Series such as *Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* provided favourable publicity for comics, in 1986, but after ten years media reporting on the subject of comics is, at best for novelty factor and at worst reminiscent of 1954. The crop of shallow and superficial superheroes add fuel to negative media reporting. When comics are featured in modern news stories: 'TV "journalists" move their steadycams across shots of snarling superheroes or busty babes in G-strings'. (Miller, 1996, p.76). These images are seized upon by political and moral groups that seek to control and censor media and entertainment output.

### The Ratings Issue

The issues of censorship and regulation have been an integral part of the Comics Medium since the 1950s Backlash. Now, in the 1990s, only Marvel and DC still submit their comics for approval from the Comics Code Authority. The Code has been relaxed twice since its inception in 1954: the first time in 1971 and again in 1994. It now places very few restrictions on creativity and exists essentially to regulate language and images that may prove too graphic or suggestive, either of sex or violence. The Comics Code Authority has little power over today's comic production. Submission of comics to the CCA is purely voluntary. The third largest publisher in the marketplace, Image Comics, have chosen not to submit their





comics to the Authority and have not suffered any loss of popularity or financial success.

Although the Comic Code Authority holds no power over comics it has not been invited to scrutinize and is virtually unknown in the independent publishing sector, the spectre of political interference and possible censorship against the medium is once more a threat and seizures and prosecutions a reality. Since 1990 several independent small scale published comics have been seized by police and customs on both sides of the Atlantic. These comics include *Cherry Anthology*, *Dark Tales* and *Boiled Angel* (Comic Book Legal Defense Information, 1997). All of these were intended for adult readers and were not being offered for sale to children.

Mainstream comics are not above scrutiny by the "Moral Majority". With the continued relaxation of the comics code writers and artists recognize that, with the increased creative freedom they now hold, the code is little defense from criticism levelled at mainstream comics. Former *Spectacular Spider-man* writer Peter David observes:

If a storm of criticism fell upon the Comics Industry the Comics Code Authority would provide only the most tattered umbrellas of protection. (Shutt, 1996, p.78)

The CCA symbol continues to shrink on the cover of contemporary comics along with the public's awareness of the seal's meaning and relevance. Superman writer and artist Dan Jurgens observes:

society in general seemingly has advanced so far beyond the code that it doesn't play a part anymore. But by the same token I don't think the code is an inhibitor of good work. We have to acknowledge that alot of great stories have been written under the code. (Shutt, 1996, p.74).

A viable alternative to the Comics Code is ratings.

Within the comics medium writers, artists and critics have looked to the possibility of instigating a ratings system, similar to that used for films. Ratings would have the aim of clearly





identifying comics for adult readers and protecting comics, both inside and outside the mainstream. Most mainstream comics would receive an age rating of 10-13 (or possibly a "PG" in cinematic terms). Either way these comics would be recognized as suitable for children and adolescents and would, ideally, not require censorship or controls.

Currently many comics for adults have cover advisories: "suggested for mature readers" or "mature readers only". *Dark Knight Returns* creator Frank Miller refers to such labels as 'little apologies printed on comic book covers' (Miller, 1996, p.76) and maintains that the instigation of a comprehensive ratings system throughout all comics would be the first step on a road to new censorship. In opposition to this view, *Superman: Man of Steel* writer/artist John Byrne would welcome a ratings system that would send a clear message to the public that comics aren't just for kids anymore: 'they are intended for various audiences looking for different types of material' (Shutt, 1996,p.72)

The issue of rating comics continues to be controversial. Advances in comics in the 'eighties have shown mainstream comics can appeal to all ages but if a particular comic has a rating of "suitable for 10-13 year olds" would an adult feel comfortable buying it? And this would surely further discourage the development of mainstream comics into entertainment sophisticated enough for all ages.



## CONCLUSION

The innovations brought to the comics medium with *Dark Knight Returns*, in 1986, showed tremendous potential for the quantitative and qualitative growth of mainstream comics. The *Dark Knight Returns* series stood as an example of the high quality that could be achieved in comics. It helped to pioneer advances in characterization, subject and art. The marketing of the series was important in reaching all ages of reader and contributed to the popularity and production of the new Graphic Novel format.

Along with *Dark Knight Returns* several other mid-'eighties series, such as the evolving *Daredevil* and *X-Men* titles, and the re-interpretation of Batman and Superman, promoted new levels of sophistication within mainstream comics. These comics brought fresh potential to the medium in the close of the 'eighties decade.

As comics entered the 1990s sales rose to record breaking levels. With the formation of Image Comics the mainstream publishers concentrated on releasing greater numbers of new comic titles in a bid to expand the comics market and create a hugely successful entertainment form and a strong financial commodity. However, the glut of poor quality comics and characters that fuelled the boom signalled Marvel and Images new pre-occupation with shallow and superficial product for the adolescent "Baywatch" generation of readers.

With the publication of *Dark Knight Returns* Miller's extreme, obsessive vigilante superhero brought a fresh approach to characterization following lighter portrayals of the 'sixties and 'seventies decades. This new darker characterization was used throughout the mainstream towards the end of the 'eighties. However publishers, writers and artists became over zealous in their use of these characters and they soon began to lose their unique appeal.





The next step in the evolution of the contemporary comic hero was in the direction of stereotyping. Male characters became completely serious, aggressive and violent, often using guns and murdering without remorse. Female character portrayals equally suffered from stereotyping. Exaggerated anatomical assets and revealing and impractical attire were the traits that contributed to the rather damning image of women superheroines.

As the comic market became flooded with superhero titles, superhero characters became over exploited (in 1993 Spider-man featured in seven titles per month). In recent years the graphic novel format has also been over-exposed and over-exploited.

Virtually everything was now published in or re-packaged into the graphic novel format . . . . borrowing the terminology merely as a useful way of selling old product. (Sabin, 1993, p.146)

When sales rapidly plummeted, from mid-1993, production suffered; titles were cancelled: Marvel, Image and DC all had to down size their monthly output, at the cost of Marvel's mature readers imprint, Epic Comics, and any possible experimentation that may have occurred through new titles. Sales figures settled at the lowest point in over a decade at a pre-1986 level.

The glut of mediocre comics and the characters they have spawned are poor ambassadors for the medium. They present the most damning aspect of the events of recent years - public perception of the medium. Comics continue to be looked upon with disdain as images of comic art overwhelmingly reflect the power and sexual fantasies of their adolescent readership.

The average perception of what a comic is hasn't changed. That's where our problems come from. The perception is that comic books are still throwaway literature for children. (McCue & Bloom, 1993, p.87)

This is unfortunate twelve years after the potential emerged to bring a widespread and permanent sophistication to the





mainstream and create a respectability for comics, something the medium has always sought but still eludes it.



## APPENDIX

### Comics Code Authority Guidelines 1954 (Abridged)

In every instance, good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.

Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions.

Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and, wherever possible, good grammar should be employed.

Females shall be drawn realistically without undue emphasis on any physical quality.

If crime is depicted, it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.

Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with, walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism are prohibited.

Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.

All lurid, unsavoury or gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.

The letters of the word 'crime' shall never be appreciably greater in dimension than the other words contained in the title. The word 'crime' shall never appear alone on a cover.

No comic magazine shall use the word 'horror' or 'terror' in its title.





All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency, shall be prohibited.





## Comics Code Authority Guidelines 1994

### Institutions

In general, recognizable national, social, political, cultural, ethnic and religious groups, religious institutions and law enforcement authorities will be portrayed in a positive light. These include the government on the national, state, and municipal levels, including all of its numerous departments, agencies and services; law enforcement such as the state and municipal police, and the FBI, the Secret Service, the CIA, etc., the military, both United States and foreign; known religious organisations; ethnic advancement organisations; foreign leaders and representatives of other governments and national groups; and social groups identifiable by lifestyle, such as homosexuals, the economically disadvantaged, the economically privileged, the homeless, senior citizens, minors, etc.

Socially responsible attitudes will be favourable depicted and reinforced. Socially inappropriate, irresponsible, or illegal behaviour will be shown to be specific actions of a specific individual or group of individuals, and not meant to reflect the routine activity of any general group of real persons.

If, for dramatic purposes, it is necessary to portray, such a group of individuals in a negative manner, the name of the group and its individual members will be fictitious, and its activities will not be clearly identifiable with the routine activities of any real group.

Stereotyped images and activities will not be used to degrade specific national, ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic groups.

### Language

The language in a comic book will be appropriate for a mass audience that includes children. Good grammar and spelling will be encouraged. Publishers will exercise good taste and a responsible attitude as to the use of language in their comics.



Obscene and profane words, symbols and gestures are prohibited.

References to physical handicaps, illnesses, ethnic background, sexual preferences, religious beliefs and race, when presented in a derogatory manner for dramatic purposes, will be shown to be unacceptable.

## Violence

Violent actions or scenes are acceptable within the context of a comic book story when dramatically appropriate. Violent behaviour will not be shown as acceptable. If it is presented in a realistic manner, care should be taken to present the natural repercussions of such actions. Publishers should avoid excessive levels of violence, excessively graphic depictions of violence, and excessive bloodshed or gore. Publishers will not present detailed information instructing readers how to engage in imitable violent actions.

## Characterizations

Character will be carefully crafted and show sensitivity to national, ethnic, religious, sexual, political, and socioeconomic orientations. If it is dramatically appropriate for one character to demean another because of his or her sex, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, political orientation, socioeconomic status, or disabilities, the demeaning words or actions will be clearly shown to be wrong or ignorant in the course of the story. Stories depicting characters subject to physical, mental, or emotional problems or with economic disadvantages should never assign ultimate responsibility for these conditions to the character themselves. Heroes should be role models and should reflect the prevailing social attitudes.

## Substance Abuse

Healthy, wholesome lifestyles will be presented as desirable. However the use and abuse of controlled substances, legal and





illicit, are facts of modern existence, and may be portrayed when dramatically appropriate.

The consumption of alcohol, narcotics, pharmaceuticals, and tobacco will not be depicted in a glamorous way. When the line between the normal, responsible consumption of legal substances and the abuse of these substances is crossed, the distinction will be made clear and the adverse consequences of such abuse will be noted.

Substance abuse is defined as the use of illicit drugs and the self-destructive use of such products as tobacco (including chewing tobacco), alcohol, prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, etc.

Use of dangerous substances both legal and illegal should be shown with restraint as necessary to the context of the story. However, storylines should be detailed to the point of serving as instruction manuals for substance abuse. In each story, the abuser will be shown to pay the physical, mental, and/or social penalty for his or her abuse.

## Crime

While crimes and criminals may be portrayed for dramatic purposes, crimes will never be presented in such a way as to inspire readers with a desire to imitate them nor will criminals be portrayed in such a manner as to inspire readers to emulate them. Stories will not present unique imitable techniques or methods of committing crimes.

## Attire and Sexuality

Costumes in a comic book will be considered to be acceptable if they fall within the scope of contemporary styles and fashions.

Scenes and dialogue involving adult relationships will be presented with good taste, sensitivity, and in a manner which will be considered acceptable by a mass audience. Primary human sexual characteristics will never be shown. Graphic sexual activity will never be depicted.





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