

THE RETRO COMICS EXPERIENCE!

# BACKISSUE!

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WORLD  
JULY 2012  
NO. 57  
\$8.95

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INDEX

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An in-depth interview  
with former DC Comics  
president and publisher  
**JENETTE KAHN**

**ALSO:**  
The birth of  
DC's VERTIGO  
imprint



IF  
BAT  
HAS  
TO  
SAY  
SUPER  
-THEN  
BY  
HEAVEN-  
"I'LL  
EAT  
IT!"

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

Volume 1,  
Number 57  
July 2012

**Celebrating  
the Best  
Comics of  
the '70s, '80s,  
'90s, and Beyond!**

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**BACKISSUE**

The Retro Comics Experience!

# Exploring the Career of **JENETTE KAHN**



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**BACK SEAT DRIVER: Editorial by Michael Eury** .....2

**INTERVIEW: The Path of Kahn** .....3  
*A step-by-step survey of the storied career of Jenette Kahn, former DC Comics president and publisher, with interviewer Bob Greenberger*

**FLASHBACK: Dollar Comics** .....39  
*This four-quarter, four-color funfest produced many unforgettable late-'70s DCs*

**PRINCE STREET NEWS: Implosion Happy Hour** .....42  
*Ever wonder how the canceled characters reacted to the DC Implosion? Karl Heitmueller bellies up to the bar with them to find out*

**GREATEST STORIES NEVER TOLD: The Lost DC Kids Line** .....45  
*Sugar & Spike, Thunder and Bludd, and the Oddballs were part of DC's axed juvie imprint*

**BACKSTAGE PASS: A Heroine History of the Wonder Woman Foundation** .....48  
*The first Amazonian charity and its honoring of real-life wonder women*

**FLASHBACK: In Search of Social Issues: The Real and Fictional Heroes of DC Comics** ..56  
*Comic-book characters as rescue-rangers in "real world" dangers*

**BEYOND CAPES: From Such Great Heights: The Birth of Vertigo Comics** .....61  
*The evolution of DC's cutting-edge imprint. With Karen Berger*

**INTERVIEW: Wayne's Manner** .....75  
*A conversation with Bob Wayne, comics retailer-turned-DC Comics executive*

**TRIBUTE: Remembering Eduardo Barreto** .....78  
*The New Teen Titans and Judge Parker artist has died at 57*

**BACK TALK** .....80  
*Reader feedback*

**BACK ISSUE™** is published 8 times a year by TwoMorrows Publishing, 10407 Bedfordtown Drive, Raleigh, NC 27614. Michael Eury, Editor-in-Chief. John Morrow, Publisher. Editorial Office: **BACK ISSUE**, c/o Michael Eury, Editor, 118 Edgewood Avenue NE, Concord, NC 28025. Email: euryman@gmail.com. Six-issue subscriptions: \$60 Standard US, \$85 Canada, \$107 Surface International. **Please send subscription orders and funds to TwoMorrows, NOT to the editorial office.** Cover design by Michael Kronenberg. Cover characters are TM & © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved. All characters are © their respective companies. All material © their creators unless otherwise noted. All editorial matter © 2012 Michael Eury and TwoMorrows Publishing. **BACK ISSUE** is a TM of TwoMorrows Publishing. ISSN 1932-6904. Printed in China. **FIRST PRINTING.**

# THE PATH OF

# Kahn

by **Robert Greenberger**

Transcribed by Brian K. Morris. Conducted over a period of weeks beginning May 13, 2011 through September 16, 2011. Interview edited by Greenberger and Kahn, with thanks to Paul Levitz.

*The comics field had never seen anything like Jenette Kahn when she was announced as DC Comics' new publisher, replacing the acclaimed artist Carmine Infantino. She came from "outside" comics and was young, pretty, and most of all, a woman. DC Comics had been experimenting with content in what felt to us readers as a haphazard approach, and the line lacked a distinct identity. Within a year of Jenette's arrival, that began to change, and the company laid out a plan and tried one thing after another to goose sales and regain lost readers. It also embraced licensing in a way heretofore unseen by a comics publisher, creating a division to oversee the content creation for merchandisers and increasing oversight of quality. Creators began to notice they were being better treated, getting not only their art back but also reprint fees and a few years later, genuine royalties. Comics' themes and stories were allowed to mature here and there, and ideas were solicited from the talent for perhaps the first time since Jack Liebowitz asked for a companion hero in the wake of Superman's success.*

*DC Comics became a haven for creators and creativity, coming at a time when the direct-sales channel became increasingly important to the bottom line. DC built up its sales force and aimed titles at this audience while embracing its golden anniversary with a status-quo altering event that became the template for company events ever since. In the wake of that celebration, Jenette guided DC into becoming a publisher of imprints aimed at different audiences, blazing the trail of collected editions and original graphic novels going into bookstores.*

*What readers didn't see was the Jenette in the halls, always stylishly attired, knowing everyone's names and pausing to say hello. She fostered a feeling of corporate family and allowed for morale events from Easter Egg hunts to communal Thanksgiving luncheons. She championed bonuses for everyone when the company had a good year. The thinking was that the company's success was a result of everyone's effort, from the highest-ranking employee to the lowest.*

*The company was stable under Jenette's tenure as president, and it prospered. Sure, there were mistakes made and bumps in the road, but the DC Comics she left a decade ago was larger and more successful than how she found it. While not usually one for introspection, Jenette kindly agreed to speak about her time at DC over the summer of 2011. We spoke at length and for that, she has my utmost appreciation.*

– Robert Greenberger

## **The First Lady of DC Comics**

Portrait of former DC Comics publisher and president Jenette Kahn, from *Portraits of the Creators Sketchbook*. Illustration by Michael Netzer.



## Kids' Stuff

Kahn's first magazine creation, *Kids Magazine*, is extremely hard to find in today's collectors' market.

Kids © the respective copyright holder. Sesame Street TM & © Sesame Workshop.

### THE YOUNG PUBLISHER

**KAHN:** It was such a gift. It was so amazing that a professor would say that and believe that and support me. So when I was floundering and thinking that the solution to supporting myself might lie in a PhD. I thought I could call Professor Rosenfeld and he'd welcome me back at Harvard with open arms.

But when I phoned, he said, "Oh, I that is the worst idea I have ever heard. PhDs are so narrow and boring." [chuckles] I said, "Professor Rosenfeld, you have a PhD. You're not that bad." And he replied, "You should have seen me before my PhD." After I pressed him further, he finally said, "Look, I will grudgingly accept your application, but this is mid-year. We don't take anybody mid-year. You'd have to wait until September."

I was so eager to find a place to land that I applied to B.U. [Boston University], and even though it was mid-year, they accepted me. But truthfully, Professor Rosenfeld was right, and going to school was not what I really wanted to do. Professor Rosenfeld had also advised me, "Your sweep is much larger. If you insist on being in the art world, be a culture critic, but don't be a professor, don't be just an art historian."

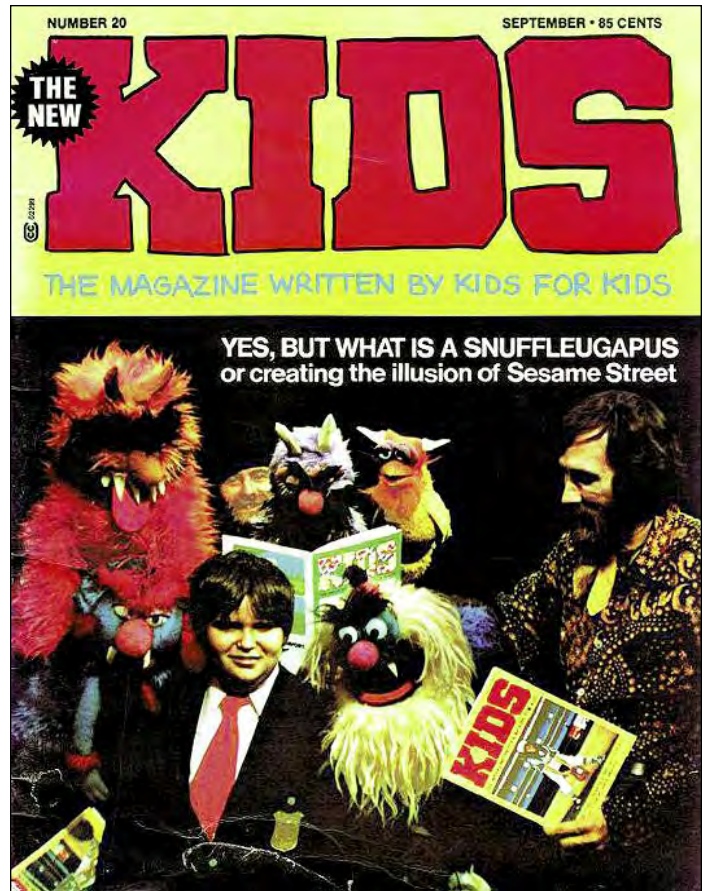
And again, I'm so grateful to him. When the Modern's fellowships came up, he said something completely out-of-the-box to me. [chuckles] And now, for a second time, he was saying something else that was completely out-of-the-box. Professor Rosenfeld saw something in me that I hadn't yet seen in myself, a love of something bigger, of making something happen on a larger canvas. But I had yet to understand that. I was still in school pursuing a PhD, although not very seriously at all.

At the same time, a friend of mine, James Robinson, was at the Harvard Ed. School where, as part of the curriculum, he was student teaching. James loved the whole process of publishing—choosing the typeface, the paper stock, the end papers—and he was printing the work of aspiring writers in the Cambridge area. When he encountered the work of his kids in his classroom, he wanted to publish that, too. James' idea was to print a series of books called *Young Words and Pictures* that would be entirely written and illustrated by kids for each other.

We were just chatting, so I volunteered, "That's a great idea. But just because I like Jim Robinson's books doesn't mean I'm going to like Jenette Kahn's books. That means every time you publish a new book, you'll have to spend a large amount of money to promote and market it. But if this were a magazine with surprises to keep it fresh and with ongoing features that kids would look forward to, you'd have a built-in audience. From a business point of view, I think that that would be more successful." Suddenly I, who knew absolutely nothing about business, was an expert! And James said, "Well, great. Write a prospectus." [Bob chuckles]

I didn't even know what a prospectus was, and whatever I wrote was surely not a prospectus, but I typed up something about the magazine. My own art style peaked at ten, so I was able to make reasonably faithful reproductions of the kids' art and paste them into a ridiculously crude dummy to accompany my [chuckles] pseudo-prospectus. *Young Words and Pictures* sounded a little stuffy, so we changed the title of the magazine to *Kids*.

James and I were able to persuade two Boston businessmen, Charlie Rheault and Steve Alpert, to come on board, and they, in turn, were able to get us a \$15,000 loan from the First National Bank of Boston. One of them knew a large printer in Lowell, Massachusetts, called Courier Color. Some karma was at work here, because many years before, when my father was a boy, he'd sold Courier Color newspapers on the street corners of Lowell. There was a lovely man at Courier Color named Dale Bowman, who was the foreman of the plant. He fell in love with the idea of *Kids* and generously arranged for us to print it on credit.



Everything in the magazine was written and illustrated by kids and we had kids as editors, too. And in advance of publication, we had put together an advisory board of the vanguard educators of the time: Dr. Robert Coles, John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, Kenneth Koch, the poet; Betty Blayton Taylor of the Children's Art Carnival in Harlem.

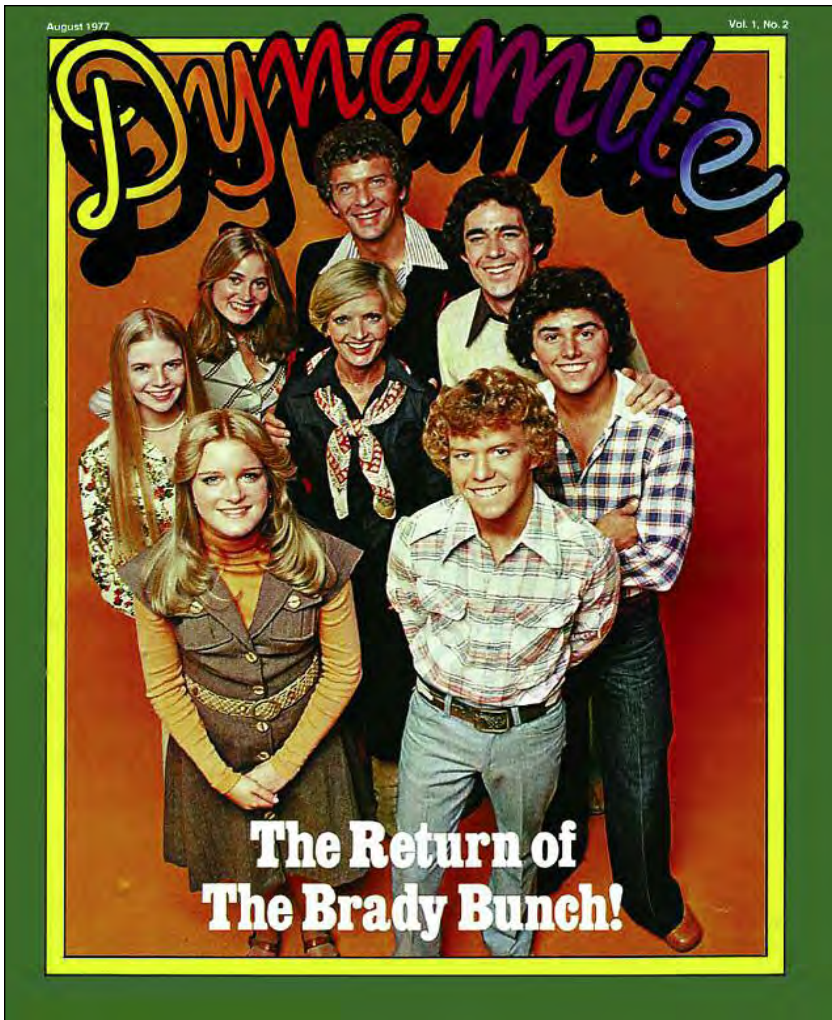
Eventually, the magazine generated its own submissions, but in the beginning we went to schools in Boston and New York to find the first paintings, stories, poems, and photographs we would publish. Our advisory board gave us credibility and we were aided by a sea change in educational thinking. Teachers across the country were realizing that their young students had tremendous creative potential and believed that potential should be validated and nurtured. The time was right for *Kids*.

There was a three-week gap between the time that *Kids* was printed and its distribution on the newsstand. With printed copies in hand, I used that gap to garner publicity for the magazine.

There was a wonderful columnist for *The New York Times* named Joseph Lelyveld. He went on to become the *Times*' executive editor, but at that time he was writing the most compelling series of articles about a 4th grade class in a school on the borderline of Harlem and the Upper East Side. Joe's stories were often revelatory, always moving, and sometimes very funny. Because of the immense humanity in his articles and his clear respect for the students whose classroom adventures he detailed every week, I thought Joe might respond to *Kids* and consider writing about it.

My father and Joe's father had both been college campus rabbis with the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation, and on the strength of that, I got in touch with Joe. "Would he meet with me?" I asked and Joe graciously said yes. A few days later we had coffee in the *New York Times* cafeteria and I showed him the magazine.

"I don't think the *Times* would write about this," said Joe, "but if it did write about *Kids*, I would not be the person. Again, I don't think that this is for the *Times*, but I will give the magazine to the appropriate people." I expected nothing to come from the meeting, but two weeks later, on a Sunday morning in the fall [November 15, 1970], I woke up and there were some five columns about *Kids Magazine* in *The New York Times*.



**Marcia, Marcia, Marcia...**  
 ...and the rest of the Brady Bunch (with Geri Reischl as a fill-in Jan) made the cover of *Dynamite* #2, promoting the short-lived 1976 TV series, *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour*. (right) Thor's origin is revealed to *Dynamite* readers in a "Super-Heroes Confidential."

Dynamite © Scholastic.  
 Brady Bunch TM & © Paramount.  
 Thor TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc.

On the same trip I made to New York to see Joe, I also met with Pat Carbine at *Look Magazine*. Not long after, *Look* published an article featuring our very young editors and artwork from *Kids*, and then *Time* magazine followed suit with an article of its own. After that, it was a series of falling dominoes as media across the country seized upon the story. Not only did dozens of newspapers cover *Kids*, but our editors were on *The David Frost Show* and I was even the real Jenette Kahn on *To Tell the Truth*. Everybody guessed me, but I consoled myself by saying if someone else were a better Jenette Kahn than I, I would be severely depressed. [mutual chuckling]

And that was how *Kids* was launched. It was an extraordinary critical success and an equally large financial disaster. Neither I nor James Robinson knew anything about business and we had no money to fund the magazine. But *Kids* continued to publish because we had Dale Bowman, our incredible printer who believed in us and believed in *Kids* and kept extending us credit. But at issue #6, he could no longer afford to do that. I was 23 years old, owed a hundred thousand dollars, and knew everything about Chapter Ten versus Chapter Eleven bankruptcy. But even with this catastrophe, publishing was in my blood. [laughs]  
**GREENBERGER:** *Oh, God! So it went from Kids and based on all that, you learned your lesson and got into Dynamite?*

**KAHN:** Unfortunately, I ended up on the wrong side of a creditor's table, settling for 20 cents on the dollar, and we sold *Kids* to another company. But as I said,

## SUPER-HEROES CONFIDENTIAL

Intimate Pix and Fax of Comic Stars' Pasts  
 This Month: Thor Gets the Third Degree

While vacationing in Norway, Dr. Don Blake chances upon a crew of weird aliens, the Stone Men from Saturn. These hard-hearted creatures had hoped to invade the Earth, but a look like their plans may be on the rocks for the present. As fate would have it, Dr. Blake is about to stumble upon a thun-

derous discovery. Hoping to escape the deadly weapons of the Stone Men, he scrambles into a dark cave. Let's join him and get the whole story on the blast from the past that rocked the doc, turning him into that hammering hero, The Mighty Thor.



publishing was in my blood and I wanted to create a second magazine. Even though *Kids* was a financial calamity, it had gotten a huge amount of attention and was very highly thought of. Executives at Scholastic were acutely aware of *Kids* and asked if I would conceive another magazine for them. It was just what I wanted to do.

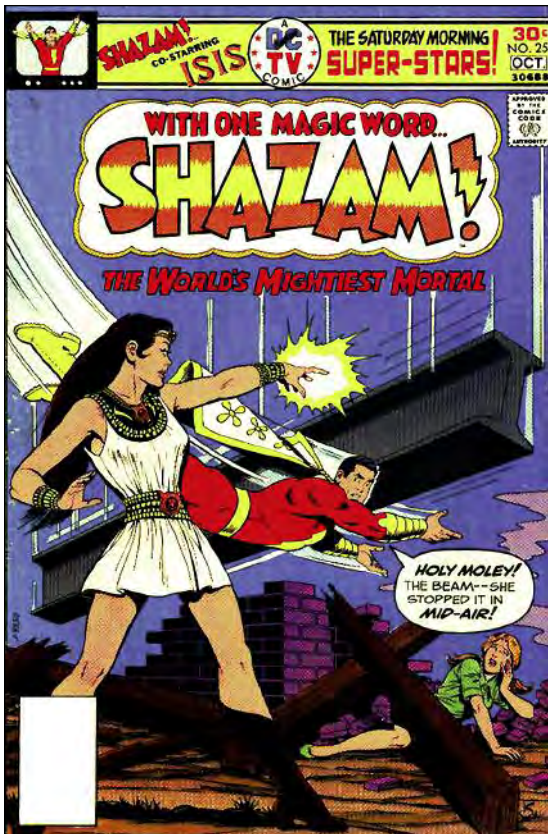
I named the magazine *Dynamite* and presented the concept to Dick Robinson, who was the head of the company. *Dynamite* was a departure for Scholastic and Dick wasn't ready to make a full commitment, but he decided to publish three issues and judge its success or failure from them.

One of our many mistakes with *Kids* was putting it on the newsstand. Magazines suffered on the newsstands where millions of magazines were returned, many of them without ever being displayed. Compounding this, children didn't frequent newsstands and their parents who did were looking for *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Forbes*, not magazines for their kids. We were lucky if we sold 20 percent of our press run.

But *Dynamite* wasn't sold on the newsstand but through the Scholastic Book Clubs, an equivalent to the direct market in comic books. Using teachers as their middlemen, Scholastic would send brochures to a classroom with small capsule write-ups of the books of that month. The students would check off the books they wanted to read and return with money from their parents to purchase them. The teachers would collect the money and send it back to Scholastic. With this system, Scholastic was able to tally in advance the number of requests for each book and print each title to order. Unlike the newsstand, it was an enviable business, a business of no returns.

Despite Dick Robinson's initial tentativeness, *Dynamite* changed the fortunes of Scholastic, becoming the bestselling publication of its 32 magazines and the most successful publication in its history. Although I didn't benefit financially from *Dynamite's* enormous success, it changed my fortunes, too, opening up new career paths for me.

**GREENBERGER:** *During the first year of Dynamite, there was a three-page feature called "Super-Heroes Confidential," where you had excerpts, featuring origins*



Did you have to do much recruiting to convince them that you had a better house?

**KAHN:** Again, I can't really say. I remember their coming, I remember Len and Marv proposing the revamp of *Teen Titans*. We certainly wanted them to come, but how hard it was to get them, I don't really remember.

**GREENBERGER:** Fair enough. One of your more serendipitous hires—and we'll move on from hiring after this—was also in 1980, in the spring of 1980, you decided you needed someone to help you plan for Wonder Woman's anniversary. You hired a kid out of college named Andy Helfer [Jenette laughs], and he started to work with you on the anniversary but before you knew it, he was working with Joe in what was becoming the special projects department. And that was the summer I was there briefly, you know. Do you remember hiring Andy and then the energy he brought?

**KAHN:** I do remember hiring Andy that May, just for the summer, I think. But he had so much energy and such great ideas. He was very smart and I was just delighted to have him come on staff. But I think the joke of the office is that Paul would regularly fire Andy and I would just as regularly rehire him.

**GREENBERGER:** Yes, because you responded well to all of Andy's creativity while Paul reacted poorly to all of Andy's anarchy.

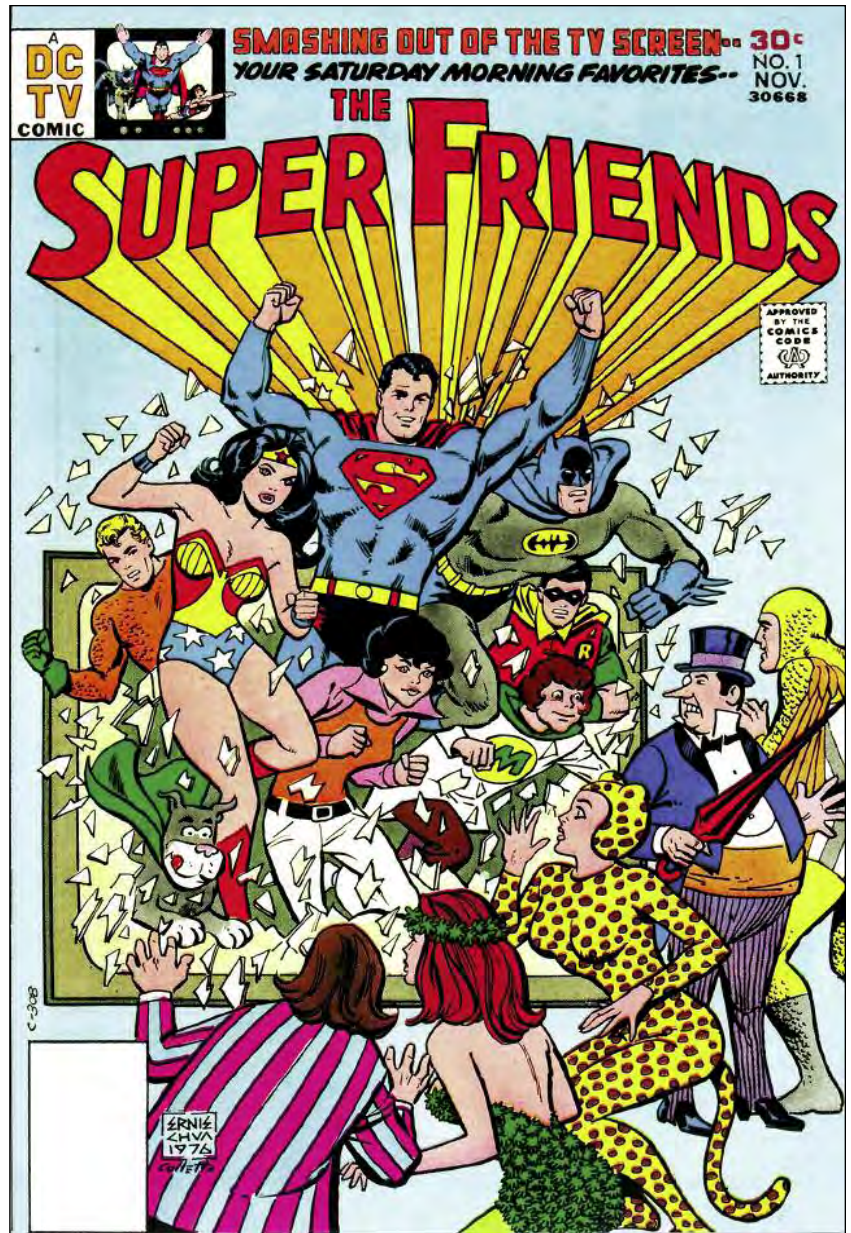
**KAHN:** [laughs] I'd say that's pretty accurate.

**GREENBERGER:** And you know, it was that creativity where Joe and Andy really clicked. I mean, time and again, that summer, the two of them were sitting there, making each other laugh while getting a tremendous amounts of work done.

**KAHN:** They were soul mates.

**GREENBERGER:** Yeah, it was pretty amazing.

**KAHN:** It was wonderful. And I think each of them held the other in his heart to the end of days.



**GREENBERGER:** Oh, absolutely. So, moving on, one of the things you talked about in one of your early *Publishorials* was the fact that you were very surprised DC was not doing comic books based on the *Super Friends* cartoon show or even the live-action *Shazam!* Saturday morning show, and you started those books. Did you think those were successes in reaching different audiences or tying the comics to the television series?

**KAHN:** You know, Bobby, it seemed like the logical thing to do since we had, in a sense, this built-in marketing on television. But I don't know that the comics were actually that successful. We started publishing them at a time when we were moving into the collectors stores where the audience, the average age of the buyer, was 16 years old. And *Super Friends* and *Shazam!* on Saturday morning were not of interest to them.

Go back to the Judy Fireman hire, though. That was a very early attempt to see how we could leverage our characters in other directions. Ultimately, that was the very, very beginning of what turned into, over the years, a great book-publishing arm for DC Comics. I was very

## Saturday Morning Heroes

(left) *Shazam!* became part of the company's DC/TV line. Cover to *Shazam!* #25 (Sept.–Oct. 1976) by Kurt Schaffenberger. (right) The Ernie Chua/Vince Colletta cover to *Super Friends* #1 (Nov. 1976).

Shazam! and Super Friends  
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glad I hired her because it started us on that track.

**GREENBERGER:** *Absolutely. Now, yes, you did the Super Friends comic and Shazam! and all, but you also did Welcome Back, Kotter, which felt like out of left field since it wasn't based on any comic stuff. Was that an attempt to try the old licensing gambit that used to work so well?*

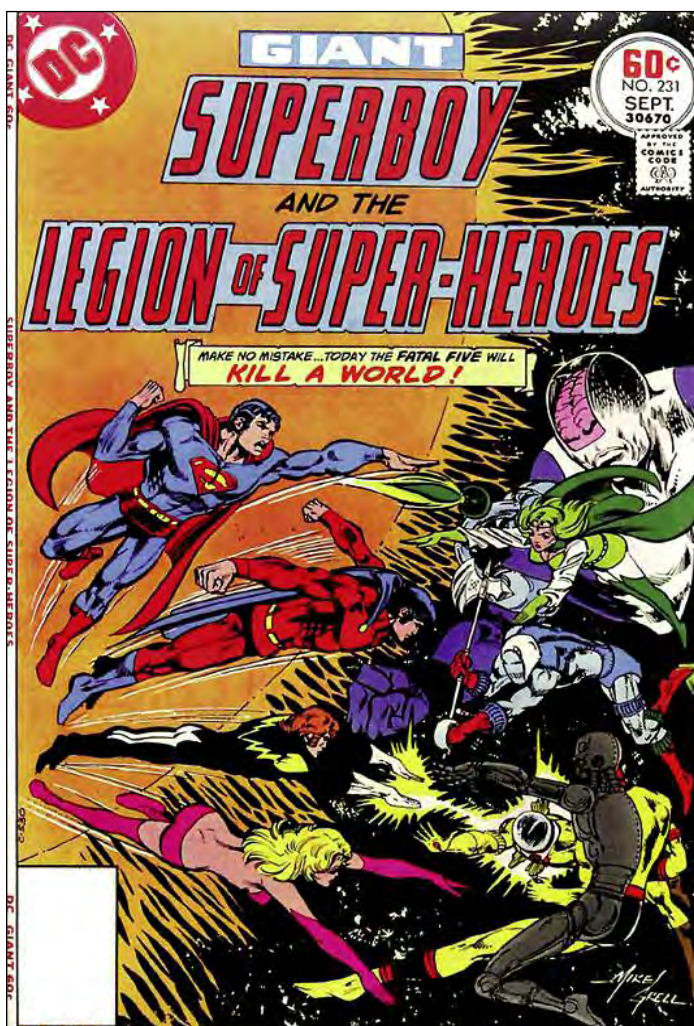
**KAHN:** Again, I don't remember why we did that.

**GREENBERGER:** *Fair enough. Meantime, there was the success of the Wonder Woman live-action show with the wonderful Lynda Carter. You know, apparently it was Marty Pasko who suggested taking the book he was writing and turning it into a World War II book to mirror the TV show. Were you at all involved in the TV show or the comics adaptation?*

**KAHN:** No, I wasn't involved at all with the TV show because that had been sold by another Warner Communications executive, Ed Blier, quite independent of us.

**GREENBERGER:** *But apparently, you did have input in the comics because of the success of the TV show, you took a look at the comic which at the time was being written by Marty and drawn by Jose Delbo and said, "Jose isn't a strong enough artist for this important a property," and you insisted he be replaced. Do you remember doing those sorts of creative decisions?*

**KAHN:** I don't remember that particular one, but I often had creative input into the comics in terms of talent and ideas. And ideas would be pitched to me. I remember Len and Marv coming in, pitching *Teen Titans*, and at first, I was thinking, "*Teen Titans?* What a lame comic. Who cares about these teenage imitations?" But Len and Marv had a terrific pitch that reflected the new sensibility we were fostering and, I'm totally delighted to say, they convinced me. [chuckles] But the specific decision to remove a *Wonder Woman* artist, that I don't remember.



## TRYING OUT NEW FORMATS

**GREENBERGER:** *The other thing is the comics at the time were cutting back on page count because of the economics. DC was down to, like, 17 pages of story around the time you arrived and one of the things you were definitely playing with in those first four or five years was format. There were the original stories in the tabloids, better choices of the reprint material, you took the Legion and you took the Justice League and you bumped them up to 48 pages with twice the story page count. Do you remember playing with all of this stuff and then working with the editors to figure out what was going to work?*

**KAHN:** What I remember was just trying to give more—give more value to the readers and find a way to justify raising the price. Not to raise the price without giving value, but to find a way to add value and then raise the price so that the economics of comics would be better.

**GREENBERGER:** *And then, of course, there were the Dollar Comics, which really felt like you were getting your money's worth.*

**KAHN:** The ill-fated Dollar Comics. I think ultimately, you didn't get your money's worth, even though, based strictly on the page counts, you did. But because—I remember it only had one lead story of new material and the rest was reprint. Is that correct, Bobby? You know better than I.

**GREENBERGER:** *Well, no. No, those were the 50-cent, 100-page Super Spectaculars that were there at the very beginning. But when you gave us in '77, '78, the Dollar Comics. They were 80 pages of new material.*

**KAHN:** Eighty pages of new material. I guess, then, it was in the quality. Perhaps because we were trying to do so much material at once, it wasn't as strong as it might have been. Neal Adams did the covers...

**GREENBERGER:** *He did a lot of the first covers, yeah.*

**KAHN:** But then you had him on the cover, but you didn't have him on the inside. I think Dollar Comics were a good concept but they weren't executed as well as they might have been and they might have been a little early.

[Editor's note: For more on Dollar Comics, see the article beginning on page 39.]

**GREENBERGER:** *Speaking of the new material in the tabloids, how involved were you in making the Superman/Muhammad Ali book a reality?*

**KAHN:** Strangely, even though Don King, who was a big boxing promoter and still had a strong relationship with Muhammad Ali, even though he came first to Sol's office and that was the kind of thing that Sol usually was excited about, he handed it off to me. I was tremendously involved in the comic and it was an exciting experience because I got to work with Ali's team and with Ali himself, and I wrote about it in the introduction to the recent reissue of *Superman/Muhammad Ali*.

And, of course, I was also responsible for one of the colossal challenges/catastrophes [chuckles] of the *Superman/Muhammad Ali* book. I had what I thought was an inspired idea. I said, "We have a huge double cover with no ad in the back and with Supes and Ali in the ring together. And who comes to boxing matches? All the glitterati. So let's fill the entire audience with famous people," and we proceeded to do just that. And Neal drew all these famous people in the stands. It was only after they were drawn that we learned that if we were using their likenesses, their images were aiding in the sale of the comic book, and we needed their permission to use them. Needless to say, we didn't have it.

I had to travel the country to try to convince the people who were already on the cover to allow us to use their likenesses. And when they wouldn't give us permission, we had to draw somebody else with a similar physiognomy in their place. So George C. Scott, for instance, became Kurt Vonnegut. If I looked at the cover, I could

## More for Your Money

*JLA* and *Legion* got page count boosts in a Kahn decision. Cover to *Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes* #231 (Sept. 1977) by Mike Grell.

TM & © DC Comics.



tell you who else became who else. [chuckles] That was a novice's mistake that expended a lot of time and energy, but luckily, in the end, we still had a population of celebrities at ringside.

**GREENBERGER:** *Wow, pretty impressive. One of the things that is credited to you is that you took the anthology titles of Our Army at War and Star Spangled War Stories and decided since they were pretty much featuring the characters of Sgt. Rock and the Unknown Soldier, you just had their titles changed. You weren't as interested in maintaining these legacy names. Did you have strong feelings about this sort of stuff? Or were you going with your gut?*

**KAHN:** Well, I remember with *Jonah Hex*, it just seemed that he was more important than the traditional title [*Weird Western Tales*], that the intellectual property was not so much in the title, but was really in the character. And to brand something with a character meant more than branding with a title.

**GREENBERGER:** *During these early years, were you reading everything that was being published by DC? And did you sit down with editors to provide feedback with what you thought worked and what didn't work?*

**KAHN:** I'd like to say I read every book, but I didn't. We were publishing 80 titles a month and I actually had my favorites and always read them first. When I had a little extra time, I would dip into the other books, but I wouldn't read them as carefully or regularly as I did the ones I cared most about.

And yes, I did give feedback. Making the comics as good as possible was one of my goals and there were so many ways to go about that. One was to seek out artists and writers who were already doing excellent work. I tried to ground myself at DC and give myself an education in our talent, so I went back into the past and read some of the comics that were outstanding. And that included, of course, the Denny O'Neil/Neal Adams *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series...

**GREENBERGER:** *Oh, sure.*

**KAHN:** ...and also Denny and Neal's *Batman* series, [and] Bernie Wrightson and Len Wein's *Swamp Thing*. I wanted to see where we had risen to some heights prior to my coming to DC, to see who was doing really good work in comics, not just at DC but over at Marvel, too, and to try to bring that talent to us. It was important to me to create an environment in which artists and writers felt that they would be recognized, have great working conditions, and be justly rewarded for their efforts. Another way to improve our books was to take the existing material and just try to make it better. I always said that Paul was the one who excelled at taking mediocre material and putting a floor under it and I had a knack for taking material that was very good and raising the ceiling.

**GREENBERGER:** *Ah, cool. In previous interviews you have identified Mike Grell's Warlord and Jonah Hex by Mike Fleisher, and then Captain Carrot, as three of your favorite titles. Do you remember what the appeal was for you?*

**KAHN:** I think the reason that I liked Mike Grell's *Warlord* is, it seemed to have a modern feel, even though, of course, it didn't take place in modern times. Mike's art style pointed a bit at the future. It was very early on and we were not doing that many exciting books at the time, but *Warlord* had an energy, a look about it that was a harbinger of many things to come.

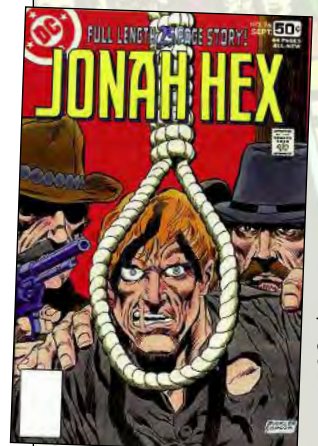
And Mike Fleisher's *Jonah Hex* I enjoyed tremendously because of the intelligence with which it was written and its comingling of fiction with history. Mike wove Suffragettes and itinerant Shakespearean actors into his stories, all based on research and fact. The comic embraced traditional Western mythology, but the stories were deeply human, and because of that, I found them very compelling.

*Captain Carrot* was just silly and fun. And you know, it was just sort of a—it was a very enjoyable comic relief.

## Head Games

Neal Adams' astounding cover art (working from a Joe Kubert cover design) to *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* (which will be featured in *BI #61*, our "Tabloids and Treasuries" issue), and (inset) celebrity likeness sketches by Adams.

Superman TM & © DC Comics.  
Muhammad Ali TM & ©  
Muhammad Ali Enterprises.



TM & © DC Comics.





## BATMAN'S LONG ROAD TO THE SCREEN

**GREENBERGER:** So there we are in 1980 at the July 4th convention. We're handing out Batman pins because you had cut a deal with Michael Uslan and Ben Melniker for a Batman movie. And then it took nine years.

**KAHN:** [chuckles] Well, I wish I could say that I cut the deal, but Ben Melniker and Michael Uslan went direct to Bill Sarnoff on that.

**GREENBERGER:** Oh, okay.

I mean, Uslan cut that deal and Swamp Thing almost simultaneously because at least he understood the stuff could adapt well. He had the passion and he has continued to find these properties. That's been his career.

**KAHN:** Oh, you know, Michael's been great at that, and he has a complete passion for comics.

**GREENBERGER:** Rather. So in either case, once the deal was signed, were you at all involved in looking at the scripts or casting or anything for Swamp Thing or Batman?

**KAHN:** Not with Swamp Thing, but I was intimately involved with Batman.

**GREENBERGER:** What were the struggles to get this up and running between the time the deal was cut in 1980 and the time Tim Burton was signed in around '87 or so.

**KAHN:** Let me see if I can remember this correctly. By this time, Michael and Ben Melniker had brought Batman to Jon Peters and Peter Guber when they were at—

**GREENBERGER:** They were at Columbia.

**KAHN:** No, they weren't.

**GREENBERGER:** Oh, this is pre-Columbia, then.

**KAHN:** It's after. Let's see, what was their company's name? [hums while trying to remember] Polygram!

Jon and Peter had their own production company and Ben and Michael brought Batman to them and they took over the rights. When Warner Bros.



brought Jon and Peter into the studio with major producing deals, they brought Batman with them—I should back up a little.

When Ben Melniker and Michael first got Batman from Bill, they brought it to Warner Bros. The first two Superman movies were out by that time and they had been the most successful movies to date in Warner Bros. history. Despite that, Warner Bros. turned down Batman. So Ben and Michael shopped the property and ultimately brought it to Peter and Jon.

We would have lost Batman altogether, at least in terms of the studio and Time Warner, except that Warner Bros. brought Jon and Peter into the Warner Bros. fold. They brought Batman with them and that gave Warner Bros. the chance to make Batman again. Mark Canton was the young exec on Batman and he brought in Tom Mankiewicz to write the script.

**GREENBERGER:** Right.

**KAHN:** And Mark said to me, "Jenette, please come to this meeting to hear Tom pitch his ideas. Jon Peters is going to be there and Jon Peters can be really out of control and I'm afraid of what he might say or do. I hope that you'll step in and, you know, help me out here."

So Tom Mankiewicz comes in and Jon is there. Tom is incredibly hostile and the film he pitches sounds more like a James Bond movie, quite frankly, than a Batman movie. I made a few comments and Tom went ballistic. And Jon Peters, a person Mark was worried might lose control, Jon is this amazing peacemaker. "Tom, Tom," he says, "you know Jenette's not criticizing you. She's just talking about who Batman is and what he's meant over these many years. I'm fascinated by what she's saying. Why don't we just sit and listen to her?" And the meeting took a very different turn.

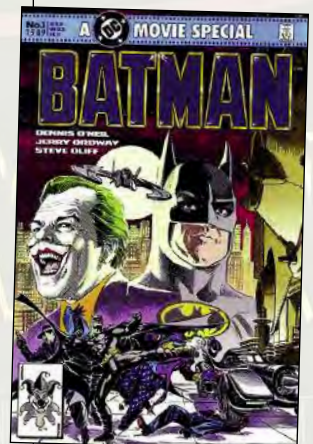
But ultimately, we believed Tom was the wrong writer. He didn't really grasp what was unique about Batman and Warner Bros. moved on. It was Jenny Lee, another young executive at Warner Bros., who had seen a Tim Burton short and thought he might be a great director. That was a huge leap because Tim hadn't yet done a feature film, but he was an enormously creative young talent. At Jenny's urging, Warner Bros. became very interested in Tim and they decided to give him Pee-wee's Big Adventure. And they gave him another project, too, so that he would have a bigger movie under his belt before he tackled Batman.

## Hollywood Bound

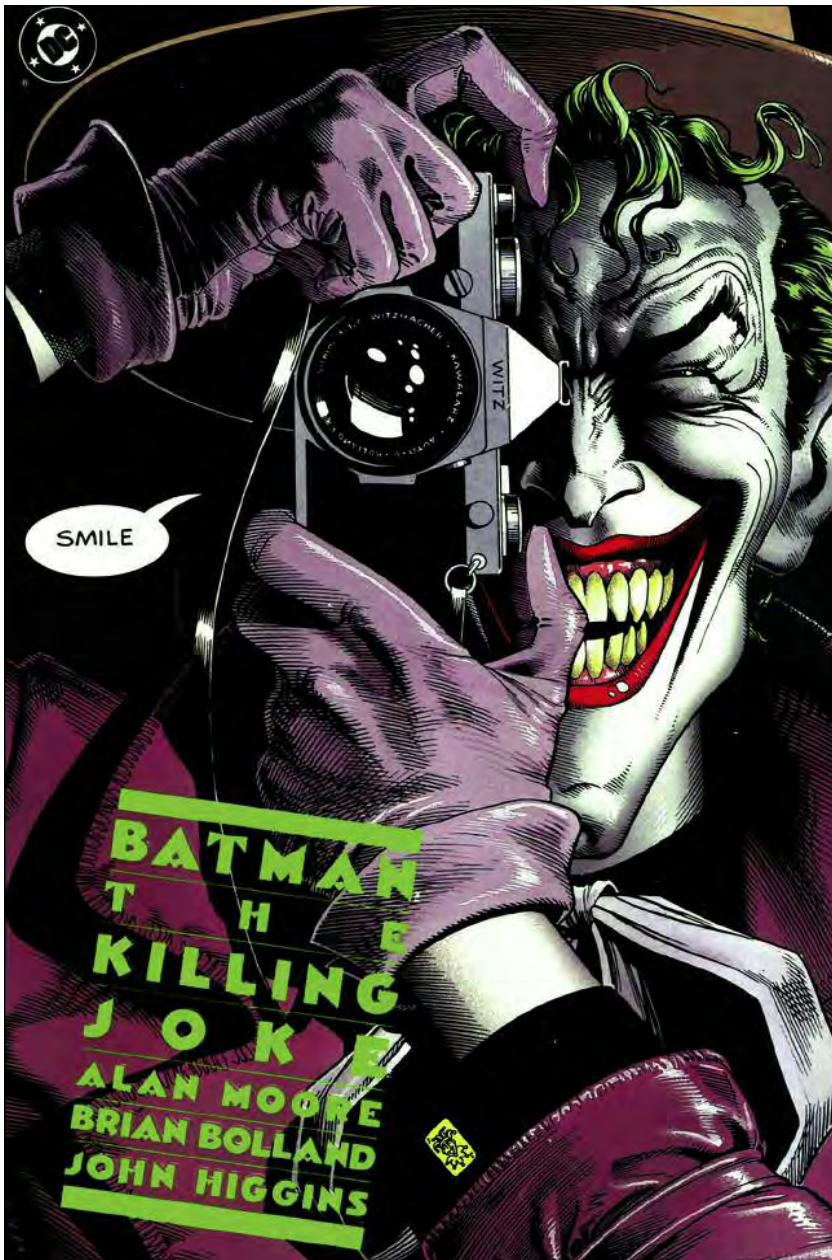
(left) The 1982 Swamp Thing movie poster courtesy of Heritage (www.ha.com).

(right) From the Batman Returns set, director Tim Burton. (below) DC's adaptation of the first Batman movie. Art by Jerry Ordway.

TM & © DC Comics.  
Photo © 1992 Warner Bros.



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## No Laughing Matter

*Batman: The Killing Joke*, by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, not only influenced DC's Bat-lore for years to come but imprinted Tim Burton's vision of the Joker. (inset) A rare promo pin for the Sgt. Rock movie that never happened, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

TM & © DC Comics.

**GREENBERGER:** *Oh, Beetlejuice. He went from Pee-wee's Big Adventure to Beetlejuice to Batman.*

**KAHN:** Right, right, thank you. So Tim was earning his chops, starting with something that was closer to the shorts he'd done at Disney, the very successful feature *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, then moving on to *Beetlejuice*, which had a bigger budget and was closer in spirit to *Batman* with some dark passages and special effects. And then Tim did *Batman*. I have to give real credit to Warner Bros., because they entrusted a franchise character to a young and up-and-coming talent. Tim proved to be a visionary when it came to *Batman* and Warner Bros. made the same kind of exciting choice when they selected Christopher Nolan for the *Batman* reboot.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, we were publishing very exciting *Batman* material.

**GREENBERGER:** *Oh, sure.*

**KAHN:** Not just *The Dark Knight*, but *The Killing Joke*, too. Tim would hold up *The Killing Joke* at meetings with the studio and potential licensees and say, "This is what I want my movie to look like."

**GREENBERGER:** *Mm-mm, which is exciting.*

**KAHN:** It was very exciting.

**GREENBERGER:** *Very exciting, because he paid attention to the source material.*

**KAHN:** It was the first time that somebody really looked at what we were doing and was inspired by it and faithful to its spirit. Tim's *Batman* had its own imaginative leaps, but he understood that there were exciting things happening in the comics that could be drawn upon.

## CASTING THE DARK KNIGHT

**GREENBERGER:** *Were you among those who were concerned when Burton cast Michael Keaton?*

**KAHN:** Mark Canton called me up and said, "Jenette, I really have to talk to you." And I said, "What about?" And Mark said, "Well, we're thinking of casting Michael Keaton as Batman." And I said, "Oh, Mark, you must be kidding." [chuckles] He said, "Look, look, I understand your reaction. That was exactly my reaction when it was first proposed." I guess it must have been Tim, coming off of *Beetlejuice*, who proposed it, since Michael Keaton had starred in that.

We had approval on the casting of *Batman*, so Mark had to convince me. "But you know, we'd give him great hair and build up his costume and I think he would be believable." Mark was tremendously passionate and I finally said, "All right." In the end, Michael Keaton was, I think, the best *Batman* of them all. He conveyed the conflict of a man who was sufficiently troubled that he could put on a costume and go out and fight crime.

**GREENBERGER:** *Mm-mm, okay. And when it switched from Michael Keaton to Val Kilmer for the third film, I thought physically, he seemed fine. I'm not sure how you felt about his casting.*

**KAHN:** For me, Michael Keaton was the right *Batman*. Even though I enjoyed Val Kilmer and George Clooney's work as *Batman*, I didn't think either one was nearly as successful as Michael. But then again, we had different directors, and the scripts were—the scripts were faltering.

**GREENBERGER:** *Right.*

**KAHN:** I was in an ongoing argument with the studio, because even though Tim Burton trusted the source material, the studio execs did not. They didn't believe audiences would turn out if you had just one villain, as you had the Joker in the first *Batman* movie. They always had at least two and ran through, or I should say burned through, villains like Two-Face who could have been thrilling if they'd been explored in depth rather than used as decorative add-ons to make the movie seem bigger and brassier.

**GREENBERGER:** *Oh, absolutely.*

**KAHN:** Needless to say, I never succeeded. [chuckles] But it was always something I would bring to the studio and try to explain why more was less.

My arguments fell on deaf ears.

**GREENBERGER:** *Mm, pity that.*

*And there was Batman and the sequels through the 1980s, there was the two Swamp Thing movies followed by the Swamp Thing TV series, and a lot of development on things like Plastic Man and Sgt. Rock that never went anywhere. How frustrating was it for you to try to get Hollywood interested in the comics material for either film or television?*



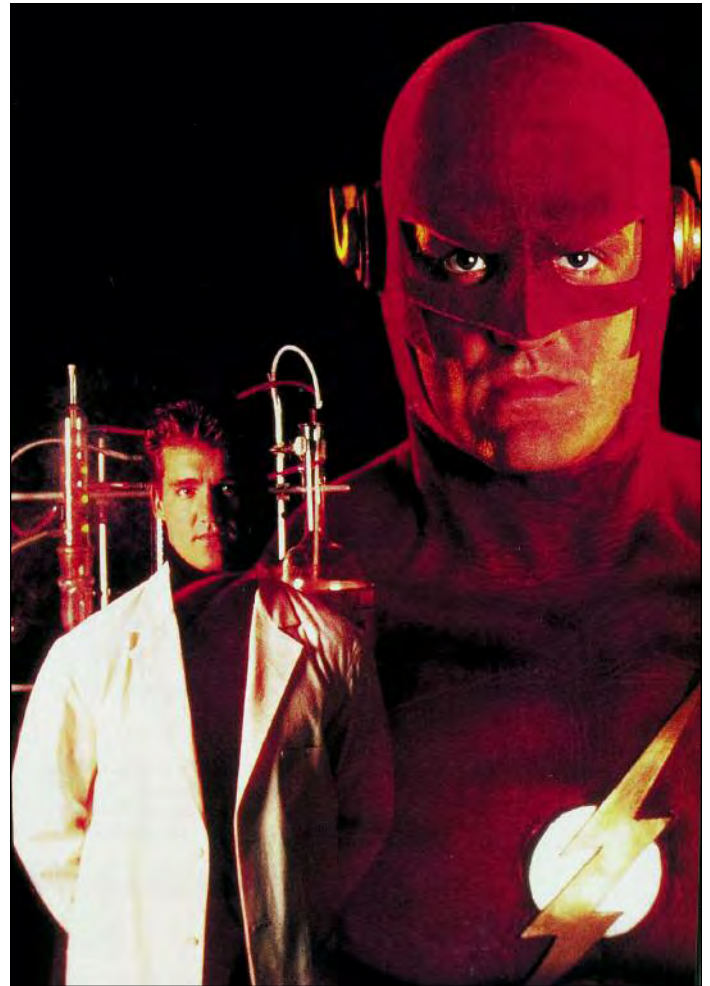


### Burton's Bat-Cast

(above) Jenette admits to an initial resistance to the casting of Michael Keaton as Batman, but now regards him as her favorite of the movie *Batmen*. Jack Nicholson and Michael Keaton in a publicity still from director Tim Burton's *Batman*.

(right) John Wesley Shipp as TV's Flash.

TM & © DC Comics.



### WORKING WITH THE CREATORS

**GREENBERGER:** *But it all came from the source material, and the '80s was a really interesting decade because you could feel momentum building as DC embraced the direct-sales market and started to produce material specifically for the market, things like Camelot 3000 and then Ronin, and playing around with the paper stock and the packaging. And the British Invasion and how important that was. But by this point, you and Paul had also introduced the royalties system. And what do you think the royalties did for DC's ability to attract talent?*

**KAHN:** Well, it wasn't just the royalties. One of the things that was so patently clear when I came to DC Comics was that creators did not have rights. I knew that was totally unjust and they should have rights, whether there was a union pressing for them or not. I felt this keenly because I had been a creator myself and wasn't allowed to participate in the enormous success of my own creations.

**GREENBERGER:** *Right.*

**KAHN:** And so I knew what it was to be on that side of the desk and not to be treated fairly and I wanted—with all my heart, really—to make that change at DC. Royalties were just one aspect of that comprehensive change to ensure that the artists and writers were guaranteed credits in the comics, that they were guaranteed the return of their artwork, that if we in any way damaged or lost their artwork, we would compensate them for that, that they would have a share of ancillary income that came out of their characters and their creations. And we were determined that when we could afford to give royalties, we would do that, too. Comics were losing money when I came to DC, so we couldn't enact a royalty program right away. But as soon as our comics were in the black, we initiated the royalty plan as well.

**GREENBERGER:** *That reminds me that, one of the things that you guys really didn't get enough credit for was when you cut the Kenner deal for*

**KAHN:** It was tremendously frustrating, because those of us who were involved with comics understood that they lent themselves to totally engrossing, thrilling, and entertaining movies. Yet despite the record-making successes of the Superman and Batman movies, Warner Bros. was not persuaded to move on our other characters. There was a lot of development, but I don't think that the execs at Warner Bros. had confidence in comics or in the characters that sprang from them. And it wasn't really until Marvel started making movies, and some of them quite exceptional superhero movies, that Warner Bros. realized it was sitting on a treasure trove.

**GREENBERGER:** *Right. Now the other success, thanks to Tim Burton and Batman, was, of course, in the early '90s, the Flash show on CBS. This really seemed to get Les Moonves and the people over at CBS kind of excited about this stuff, because I remember you had editorial working with you to produce a fair number of quickie bibles to try and push different properties. And yet The Flash only lasted for a season.*

**KAHN:** Sadly, *The Flash* was a flash in the pan.

**GREENBERGER:** *Yeah, but I don't recall, were you involved much with that show?*

**KAHN:** I was involved with that at the very beginning with the two writers.

**GREENBERGER:** *Bilson and DeMeo.*

**KAHN:** Paul DeMeo?

**GREENBERGER:** *Yes. And Danny Bilson.*

**KAHN:** Like Tim, Danny and Paul also had respect for our comics and we were producing bibles in which we'd extracted our best stories. We couldn't ask them to wade through four decades of superhero comics, especially when there were so many bad stories along with the good. So we tried to give Danny and Paul what we felt were some of the better and more interesting stories that might lend themselves to TV.

the Super Powers figures, you actually hired Jack Kirby to do some design work to help qualify for some creator participation in his Fourth World characters, which was a really generous thing for DC to do.

**KAHN:** Well, even though we enacted all these rights, they only dated from the time that I came to DC. I came in '76, and unfortunately, we couldn't give ancillary income retrospectively because we weren't there and couldn't say exactly who did what. To our great regret, older creators who had worked in the trenches and produced some of our most memorable characters and storylines weren't going to be rewarded for the work that they had done. Jack was one of those venerated, amazing talents and we just wanted to find a way that we could recognize, financially, his enormous contributions, and we used the Kenner deal to do that.

**GREENBERGER:** Which is fabulous. Like I said, there was this momentum building up. You were doing great things for the creators, you were reaching out to new talent, you were trying new packages. And then, layered over all that, the company was expanding. I got hired then, along with many people, the licensing department was growing, Joe's special projects group was growing, and so on. Do you recall that you were feeling as this momentum was growing and the company was expanding?

**KAHN:** Oh, absolutely. The last time when we spoke, I think I said it was a bit of an Elizabethan Era in terms of how fecund the creativity was. We were getting exceptional work from extraordinary creators, people like Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, Frank Miller, Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman, Dave McKean—I don't want to truncate the list. I could go on and on and on.

We felt it first on the creative side, and I think it was probably most exhilarating of all to feel it there. But we were able to spin out the momentum we were gaining in the comics to other areas of the company. We managed to stop the hemorrhaging of comic sales and built a new outlet for them that continued to grow. There were a number of us involved in implementing these changes, and we all felt that we were working shoulder-to-shoulder and creating a new era in comics.

**GREENBERGER:** It didn't all work, because in the early '80s, you were banking heavily on the Atari comics, based on the games. And you brought Dick [Giordano] on board in October 1980 and you were really gearing up to do a ton of that material. And then it all vanished overnight, seemingly. Do you recall that?

**KAHN:** [laughs] Well, we never looked at Atari comics as a huge profit center. We would have loved to have built it into that, but we were not relying on those comics as one of the pillars of our profitability. But we saw it as a tremendous opportunity—Atari was a sister company and one of the first new technology companies—and it was enjoying

unprecedented success. We forged a relationship with Atari in the hope of expanding our customer base by inserting comics into their game cartridges. But I didn't bring Dick on because of Atari.

**GREENBERGER:** Oh, I was mistaken.

**KAHN:** No, we knew we could use another editor and we brought Dick on because he was an incredible talent and someone who had the respect of the creative community. It was a leap, because hiring Dick meant a radical change in our salary structure. Dick was earning so much money freelancing that to match it would have exceeded the pay scale that we had at DC. But I believed in Dick so much that I went to Bill Sarnoff, the chairman of our division, and made a very strong case for him. Making a strong case for Dick meant that we had to raise salaries proportionately for everyone else, and that wasn't something Bill was eager to do, but somehow we got it through. We brought Dick on and he was a terrific contributor to our success at DC.

**GREENBERGER:** Now it had been you, Joe, and Paul, and then Dick comes on board and very quickly, the trio becomes a quartet. How was that group dynamic back then?

**KAHN:** As I remember, we moved Joe into special projects and Dick took over the comic-book line.

**GREENBERGER:** Right.

**KAHN:** No one stepped on anybody's toes because each person had a discrete area. In addition, we had a tremendous sense of purpose and were together at an incredibly exciting time. We not only worked hard to change the business, but we managed to enjoy it, too.

And we had fun together. Paul continued to be the person who would say no to me and I always respected that because his negativity made me better. [chuckles] When he said no to an idea, I worked all the harder to prove to him how just what a good idea it was. I used to walk into Paul's office and say, "Oh, I have another idea." And Paul would say, "You know you've had too many ideas today. I have a little folder here where I'm putting your ideas and we can take some of these out later." [mutual laughter]

**GREENBERGER:** Oh, that sounds like him.

**KAHN:** I had nothing but the greatest respect and affection for both Dick and Joe, but Paul and I had a dynamic that lasted through all those years and continues even now that we're both out of DC Comics. I was the positive one and he was the skeptic. Paul always said that I saw around corners. But Paul loved detail and understood how to make things happen. If I saw something around the corner, Paul knew how to implement it. We were a wonderful team. I cherish that relationship to this day as I do the relationship I had with Dick and with Joe.

**GREENBERGER:** [sighs] I miss those guys.

**KAHN:** Yes.

## Not Quite a Game Changer

Detail from the back cover original art of *Atari Force #5*, the last issue of a mini-comics run produced for video games which preceded the ongoing *Atari Force* title. Art by Gil Kane and Dick Giordano.

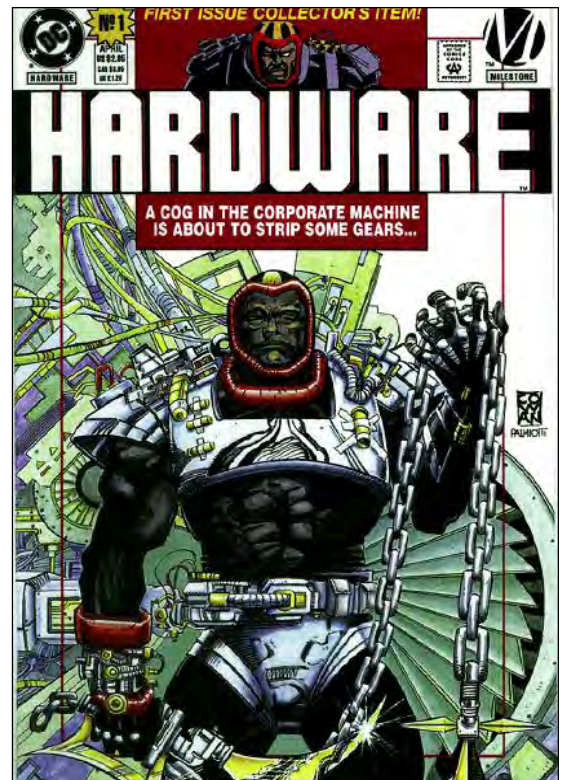
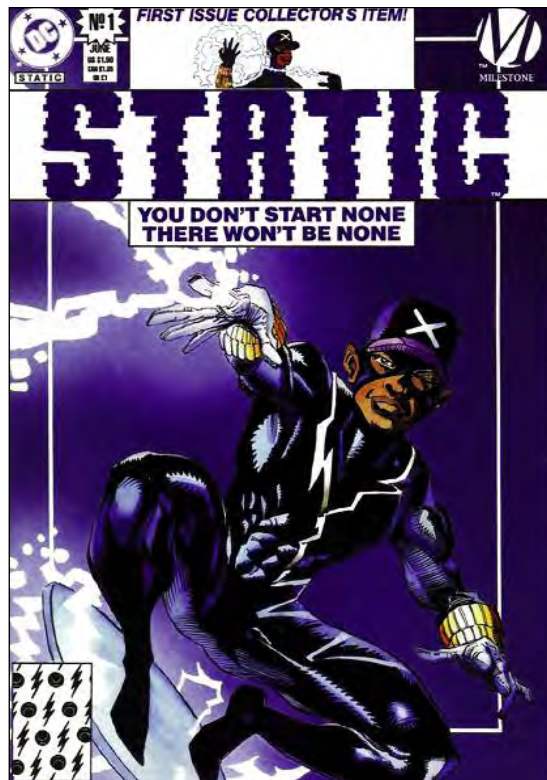
© 1983 Atari.



## Milestone Forever

Initially short-lived, DC's Milestone imprint introduced characters that have returned to comics and animation. Alternate covers for (left) *Static* #1 (June 1993) and (right) *Hardware* #1 (Apr. 1993), both penciled by Denys Cowan and inked by Jimmy Palmiotti.

TM & © DC Comics.



## MILESTONE EVENTS

**GREENBERGER:** *There were a couple things that happened in publishing at much the same time I wanted to ask about. One was, were you at all involved in Dick acquiring the license to the Archie superhero characters that became the Impact line?*

**KAHN:** I don't remember who the point person was in that deal, but that was not something that I was involved with. I would have said, "Fine, go ahead and do it," but it wasn't anything for which I had a passion.

**GREENBERGER:** *What about working with Derek Dingle in building Milestone?*

**KAHN:** I was a tremendous champion of Milestone and intimately involved in its formation. The founders—Derek, Dwayne McDuffie, and Denys Cowan—were passionate about creating a line of diverse, multiethnic superheroes. Even though we had been trying to include more gay and multiethnic characters in our comics, we didn't have nearly enough diversity within the DC line. But Milestone's entire imprint was devoted to that. And not only were the staff and artists and writers enormously talented, but they were ethnically diverse themselves.

On the principle that diversity is critical and that our readers, all our readers, should be able to see themselves in our comics, Milestone was a venture I ardently supported. Just as importantly, Milestone turned out top-notch comics, so on an artistic level, I was able to support it wholeheartedly, too.

**GREENBERGER:** *And why do you think the line ultimately did not find the audience it was intended to find?*

**KAHN:** I think one of the issues that made it so difficult for Milestone to find its audience was the pattern of comic-book selling. By the time Milestone premiered, the vast majority of comics were being sold through comic-book collector stores. But just as women often didn't feel welcome in these collectors stores that were considered "guys clubs," few people of color frequented them, thinking that the stories and characters in the books they sold had little relevance to their lives.

Nor did the stores market to that audience. No one was rolling out a sign that said, "Come, you're welcome, and you'll find comics you can relate to." It was extremely hard to generate a sufficient critical mass at the collectors stores to make Milestone a success.

We hoped to boost awareness of Milestone through television and movies and managed to get *Static* onto the WB as an animated

show. But when it came to movies based on the Milestone characters, we had no luck. Studios doubted that a superhero of color would find a large audience and the high cost of superhero movies discouraged them from trying. We wanted these characters to succeed, we wanted Milestone to succeed, and it was a tremendous disappointment to have to shut it down.

**GREENBERGER:** *Also in '92, interestingly enough, the guys who formed Image Comics came to DC and met to talk about whether or not DC would want to publish what became Image. Were you at all involved in those conversations?*

**KAHN:** I don't remember that, Bobby.

**GREENBERGER:** *Okay, it may not have gotten to you.*

**KAHN:** It sounds like something that would have been very worthwhile and that we would have pursued. And if it didn't come to pass, it probably had to do with deal terms because the idea itself is a good one.

**GREENBERGER:** *Oh, absolutely. And then, from a publishing standpoint, or as the editor-in-chief in '92, you had to sign off on killing Superman.*

**KAHN:** I was actually in those meetings. We had four Superman titles at the time with one coming out every week and we were striving for tremendous continuity among the different titles. Mike Carlin was the editor of the Superman books at that time and he had put together a tremendous team for each of the four books. To brainstorm ideas, ensure continuity, and ward off possible contradictions, we'd have retreats where we'd plan out storylines months in advance. I always felt our job description was to torture our readers, and there's no better way to torture your readers than to torture your characters.

So when Dan Jurgens piped up and said, "Well, why don't we kill Superman?" I remember saying, "That's a terrific idea." It's not that we hadn't killed Superman in the past. I think he'd been bumped off some 14 times before, but he was always resurrected in the next issue and we weren't talking about doing that. We were talking about killing Superman and turning it into an event of such proportions that our readers would feel that Superman was irretrievably gone from the DC Universe.

**GREENBERGER:** *Right. Now, some of that was also because the original plan was to marry Superman at that point, but because of Lois & Clark, that had to be put on hold.*

**KAHN:** The marriage also came out of the Superman retreats, but killing him was the first really big idea.

## ADAPTING LOIS & CLARK

**GREENBERGER:** As I understand it from Paul, you spent years pushing to get Warner Bros. to regain the Superman television rights back from Ilya and Alexander Salkind. You prevailed, which led to the Lois & Clark series. What was your relationship with Deborah Joy Levine and the production team?

**KAHN:** We were the ones who had put together the bible that sold the show, so we had input in the beginning. It was called "Lois Lane's Daily Planet," but Deborah renamed it "Lois & Clark," a pithier, wittier title. We pitched it to ... was it CBS...?

**GREENBERGER:** No, ABC picked it up.

**KAHN:** ABC. My memory is so faulty, a sign of age here. But I thought it would be great to do—oh, I'm sorry, let me back up. You had asked me earlier, was there a resistance to making television shows and movies of DC properties because of the cost? That was always a factor, and in television, even more so than movies, because special effects boost TV budgets well beyond the norm.

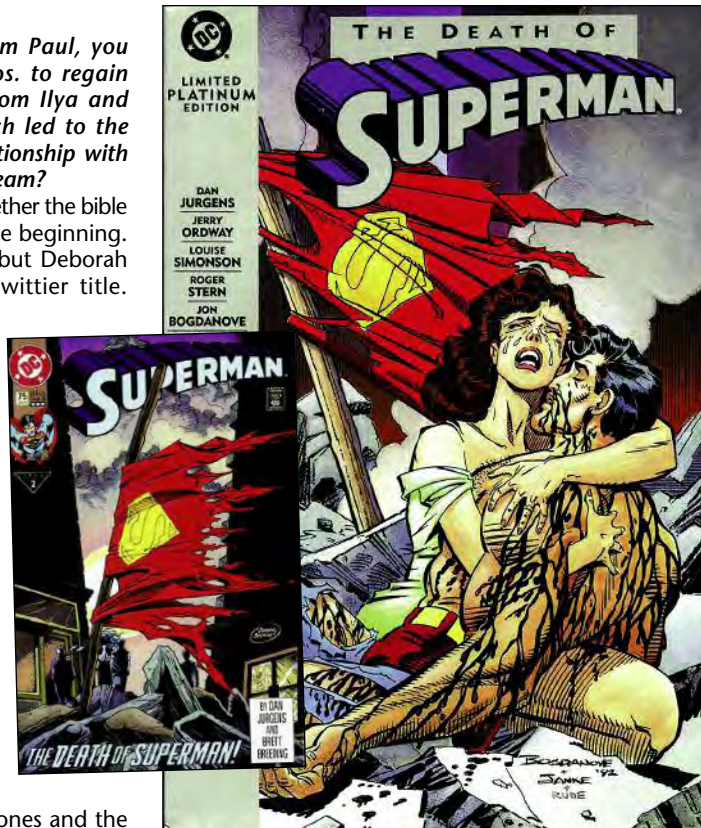
In our Superman titles, we were publishing wonderful and very human stories, not just about Superman, but about the people who inhabited his world. To circumvent the cost of special effects, I thought we could do a show where we'd spend most of the time with Clark Kent and all the people, the good ones and the bad, who frequented his life. Superman himself would be limited to cameo appearances and most of the show would play like a traditional TV drama.

To pitch that idea, I worked with Mike Carlin and we created a bible called "Lois Lane's Daily Planet." It took sequential panels out of our comics that showed the kind of characters who could people the show and the kinds of stories we could tell. We not only had a new and fascinating interpretation of Luthor, but many characters that Hollywood was unaware of, like Morgan Edge, a seriously bad guy, but a complex and charismatic one. And then there was Cat [Grant], who became Lois' rival, both as a reporter and a vie for Clark's affections.

Tony Jonas was the #2 at Warner Bros. Television at the time and we had a meeting at ABC. I said to Tony, "You know, we could pitch them Superman." Tony gaped in disbelief. "Do we even have the rights to pursue a show?" But I had investigated and knew that we had. Tony said, "You're kidding." [chuckles] And I said, "No, no, we really do." And I told him what I was thinking of and he said, "That's great. Let's pitch it."

And we did pitch it and ABC loved it and what started as a bible called "Lois Lane's Daily Planet" became *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. Warner Bros. brought on Deborah Joy Levine as the showrunner, and in the beginning, when everything was new, we had some respect as the people who had conceptualized the show. But as time went on, I think the traditional prejudices against comics and comic-book people came into play and it became, [mockingly] "Oh, we know television, you know comics. We'll run with the show." Where once there had been a back and forth, we began to lose our input.

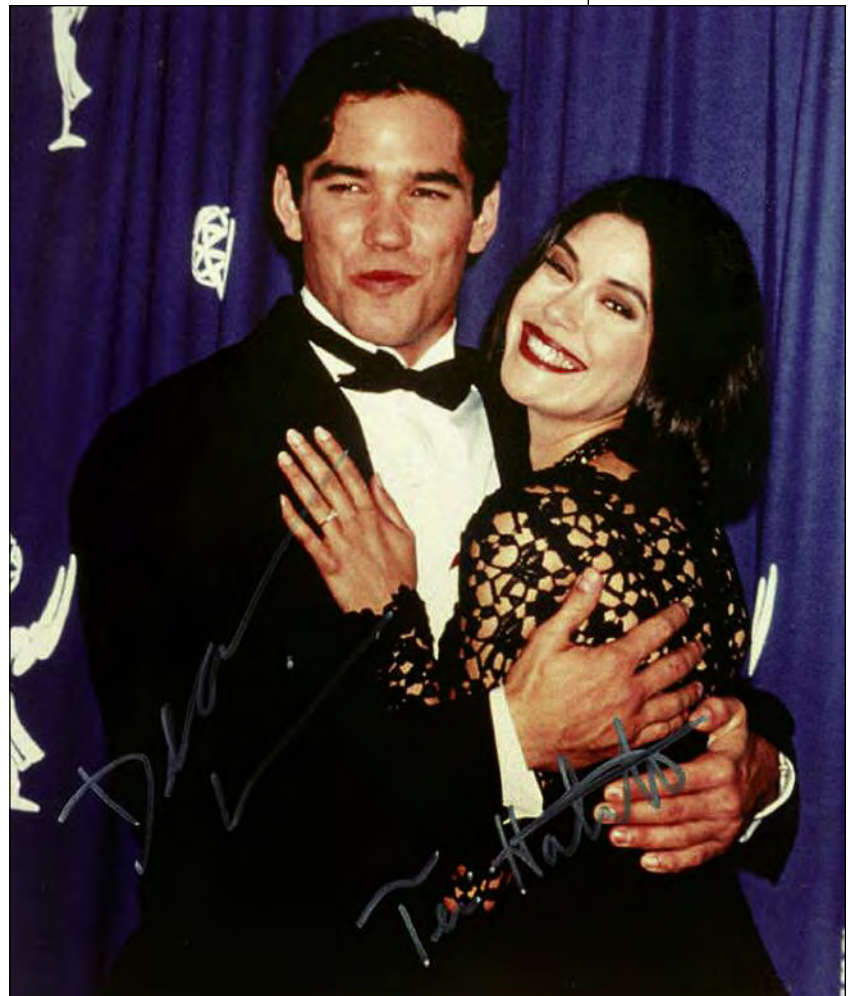
Deborah didn't last that long on the show herself, but when we think of the different showrunners on *Lois & Clark*, she was the one who seemed to understand the characters best.



## Death and Resurrection

*The Death of Superman* generated big bucks and media exposure for DC in 1992, but before long, the Man of Steel was back in comics and on live-action television in *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (1993–1997). (below) A signed still of *Lois & Clark* stars Dean Cain and Terri Hatcher, courtesy of Heritage.

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# I'LL BUY THAT FOR A DOLLAR!

## DC COMICS' Dollar Comics

by Max Romero

FlashBack!

In 1977, as the United States was wrestling with a flagging economy and DC Comics was on the unavoidable verge of raising cover prices to 35 cents, DC publisher Jenette Kahn had an idea: Charge readers a dollar instead.

Before the rise of the now-dominant direct market, news vendors were the most common place to buy a comic book. They were an all-important link to the reading—and paying—public, something publishers wanted to be sure was maintained and fostered. At the time, the average comic came in at about 32 pages total, with 17 of those being story pages. Comic books had a relatively low cover price, and when compared to the higher cost of other magazines on the newsstand it was becoming clear that DC had to do something to make sure retailers still saw the value in carrying its titles.

Kahn was ready to make a splash herself. At 28 years old, and after cofounding three highly successful magazines for young people, she had been named publisher of DC Comics just the year before and seemed ready to bring innovation to a company that—some were arguing—needed it.

“When I came to DC in 1976, one of the first things that struck me was how underpriced comics were in comparison to other comparable items whose purchase price had kept pace with inflation and changing times,” Kahn says. “This observation was echoed by retailers and wholesalers who said we were suffering staggering returns because comics—priced then at 30 cents—weren’t treated with the respect of magazines with their higher cover prices.

“To preserve some semblance of profit margins over the years, comic-book companies kept trimming their page counts while holding fast to low prices, but that was a losing strategy for both reader and publisher,” she adds. “I had hoped that Dollar Comics would enable us to give value to our readers and a significant boost to our comic books’ price.”

The Dollar Comics line was exactly what it sounds like, and more: comic books that offered readers an average of 64 pages of story for \$1, while at the same time standing a full quarter-inch taller than the average comic (just to make sure they stood out on the newsstand racks). And while the actual page count would fluctuate over the years—some issues would boast as many as 80 pages—readers would generally get the equivalent of four comic books’ worth of stories for the price of three. As Kahn wrote in her July–Aug. 1977 “Publishorial” column (printed in every DC comic) warning readers of the inevitable rise in price to 35 cents an issue, it was “what Dollar Comics are all about. With a Dollar Comic you can count on getting four comics’ worth of new material for four quarters for a long time to come.”

Kahn wasn’t far off. After launching the line in 1977, Dollar Comics went on to encompass familiar titles, special issues and annuals, and even two original series over the next six years.

It all began with *House of Mystery* #251 and *Superman Family* #182, which hit the stands with March



### Biggest Bargain in Comics

Behind our title: A hodgepodge of Dollar Comics releases.

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# THE LOST DC KIDS LINE

Greatest Stories NEVER TOLD

by John Wells



One of the great talking points in the comics press of the early 1980s was the fact that comic books aimed at younger children were rapidly fading away. The overall content of superhero comics was skewing toward teenagers and adults, while kid-friendly titles like Fawcett's *Dennis the Menace*, Whitman's *Walt Disney's Comics & Stories*, and *Looney Tunes* were simply going away.

"People don't suddenly pick up comics," DC Comics editor Nicola Cuti observed in *Amazing Heroes* #39 (January 15, 1984). "They've been reading comics all along, ever since they were kids. It's a habit that goes from one step to the next. But now there are no comics around for children and we're going to find ourselves without an audience in about 20 years if we don't start very early with children."

The 1982 collapse of Harvey Comics (home of *Casper the Friendly Ghost* and *Richie Rich*) became the flashpoint that forced the two major superhero publishers to take action and explore entry-level comics of their own. Failing in a bid to acquire Casper and company, Marvel Comics instead hired some of Harvey's talent to create the nucleus of a children's imprint dubbed Star Comics. As news of its rival's plans spread through the industry, DC recognized the need for a kids line of its own. DC's initial plan of publishing comics featuring Warner Bros.' Bugs Bunny and his Looney Tunes brethren was stymied by Whitman still holding the license.

In 1979, DC had begun publishing reprint-packed digest comics with the hope of capitalizing on the diverse clientele that frequented checkout lanes. Belatedly, the company decided to test the market for kid humor comics, rolling out issues of *The Best of DC* spotlighting Sugar and Spike (toddlers who communicated in baby-talk) and *Funny Stuff* (featuring funny animal tales from the 1950s). A report in *The Comic Reader* #215 (Dec. 1983) revealed that those editions sold well "and actually outsell the Superman issues of that digest."

### Look Who's Talking!

You'd almost think that Sugar—one half of Shelly Mayer's "talking" baby duo Sugar and Spike—was summing up DC's kids-comic experiment of the early 1980s in this unused back cover to *Best of DC Digest* #47 (Apr. 1984). Original art scan courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions ([www.ha.com](http://www.ha.com)).

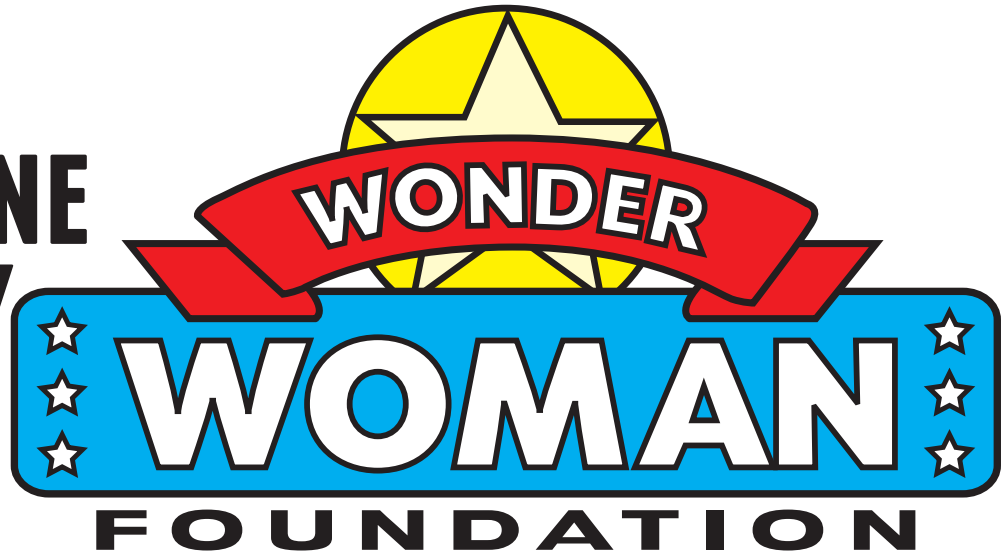
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# THE FIRST AMAZONIAN CHARITY:

## A HEROINE HISTORY OF THE



by *Andy Mangels*

*The planet's most famous superheroine has been closely tied to many ideals since her inception.* A golden eagle had adorned Wonder Woman's chest since her debut in *All Star Comics* #8 (Dec. 1941), and her star-spangled costume was known worldwide thanks to comics, licensing, a popular TV series, and animated appearances on *Super Friends*. Wonder Woman's costume had gone through a few minor redesigns over the decades—and she had forsaken her traditional look entirely for a few years—but a major change was about to hit the *Amazing Amazon* for her 40th birthday in 1982. Her iconic emblem was going to be replaced by a new, clearly licensable logo, and at the same time, be used as the symbol for a new foundation dedicated to recognizing important women of the 20th century!

The new Wonder Woman costume design appeared first in press materials sent out by DC to comics fanzines such as *The Comics Reader* and *Amazing Heroes* (July 1981). A piece of Style Guide art came with the information, with penciler Jose Delbo and inker Dick Giordano illustrating what the new costume's bodice would look like in action. At the time, DC was clear that its purposes were to create an emblem for Wonder Woman that would be a strong licensing component in the same style as the Superman "S" shield and the Batman oval chest symbol. The press info also revealed that the costume change would take place in a 16-page insert comic within *DC Comics Presents* #41, which would also showcase the new creative team of writer Roy Thomas, penciler Gene Colan (recently defected from Marvel), and inker Romeo Tanghal, under editor Len Wein.

The costume would appear in the *Amazing Amazon's* own title beginning with *Wonder Woman* #288.

The newly designed bodice was originally going to be given to Wonder Woman as part of a "battle trophy or promotion," according to an article in *Comics Feature* #12/13 (Sept.–Oct. 1981). On the bodice and the book's logo was a stylized "double W" symbol, which still slightly resembled an eagle, but was also clearly an icon. Letterer Todd Klein recalled on his online blog (<http://kleinletters.com>) that Milton Glaser designed the new icon (though whether he personally designed it or if it was someone in his large studio is in question). Klein himself then redesigned the Wonder Woman comic-book logo, incorporating the Glaser symbol. "I tried to emulate the classic simplicity of the emblem with classic block letters running out from the two W[']s, and added a wing tip to the N to help tie it together," Klein wrote. Because this new logo obscured part of the new icon design, a secondary logo was designed for licensing—probably by Glaser's studio—and used as part of DC's new Style Guide and on later issues of the comic.

Echoing comments from Gene Colan (in an interview in *BACK ISSUE* #41), past DC editor and writer Andrew Helfer recalls that Glaser's redesign of the logo was a difficulty for artists to utilize initially, especially "how difficult it was to make the damn thing wrap around the character's 'bodice.' I recall it was delivered 'flat' by Glaser—just another bullet-style logo to him—and the stacked Ws were uniformly hated by artists and editors, none of whom could figure out how it worked (look at some of the early appearances to see the results)." Helfer recalls today that it may have been "Ernie Colón, working with Joe Orlando, [who] finally figured out how it worked."

### ANNOUNCING THE FOUNDATION

By October 1981, the comics press was reporting even more interesting news: As part of Wonder Woman's 40th anniversary year, DC had hired Karen Lippert, the former director of special projects at *Ms. Magazine*, to coordinate a series of celebratory activities. Planned were a film festival, a TV special, and the debut of the Wonder Woman Foundation. The nonprofit organization, as press materials promised, was created, "expressly to advance principles of equality for women in American society."

### Iconographic Makeover

Legendary designer Milton Glaser's "WW" insignia was incorporated into this sleek new logo by letterer supreme Todd Klein in 1981.

Courtesy of Andy Mangels.

TM & © DC Comics.



"W" DESIGN BY MILTON GLASER, FULL LOGO BY TODD KLEIN FOR DC COMICS, INC. 1981

## FlashBack!

The company that became DC Comics has addressed social issues almost from the start, certainly from the time it began publishing original material other than straight humor and adventure. With the arrival of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman in *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938), fighting social ills became the young men's focus. Whether challenging errors in the legal system, spousal abuse, or political corruption in that first issue, a tone was set. It wasn't long before Jerry and Joe's publishers and early editors followed suit, using comic-book covers to show their heroes' patriotism as World War II approached and overtook this country. Victory gardens were planted, paper drives were instigated, and War Bonds were sold due to these images. In the final two years of conflict, six giveaway issues of *Superman* were commissioned by the Navy to improve the literacy of its servicemen. After the war, the publishers continued their efforts ("Superman and the Cleveland Fire," a four-page special issue that helped raise money for the city's Hospital Fund) while enlisting child psychologists and others to prove their books were wholesome and not harmful to kids. This, because in spite of the positive feelings held by some, storm clouds had gathered. The resultant lightning would lead to comic-book bonfires and to people like psychologist Frederic Wertham, who would attack comics content in the late 1940s and well into the next decade.

### DC's PSAs

Sometimes it's more important to note when the right thing is done than to question the motive behind it. Regardless of the reason why, in 1949 National (DC) earmarked space in its various titles for public service announcements, also known as public service ads, or PSAs. Editor Jack Schiff's passion for the project was evident. He donated his time for free to write roughly one PSA per month in association with the National Social Welfare Assembly. In each of the single-pagers, various stars of the DC line of titles swooped in to lecture everyday kids after they committed some minor infraction or spoke hurtfully to their peers.

Social problems that were relevant but not controversial were occasionally granted full-story status. Superman family editor Mort Weisinger, who by the 1960s was also vice-president of public relations for the company, had his writers include real celebrities in certain scripts. Even USA President John F. Kennedy sometimes participated, most notably when co-writers Bill Finger and E. Nelson Bridwell challenged America's flabby youth to get in shape via the President's Physical Fitness Program (*Superman* #170, July 1964).

Next, a time-traveling Man of Steel helped a man named Henry Bergh bring a scoundrel to justice for mistreating animals. Turns out Bergh was the man who founded the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) in 1866. Though animal cruelty is a serious issue, Weisinger and his story writer (possibly Leo Dorfman) chose to lighten the impact by having the villain attempt to injure some superpowered "pets" brought from the present. Therefore, no animal was really hurt (*Superman* #176, Apr. 1965).

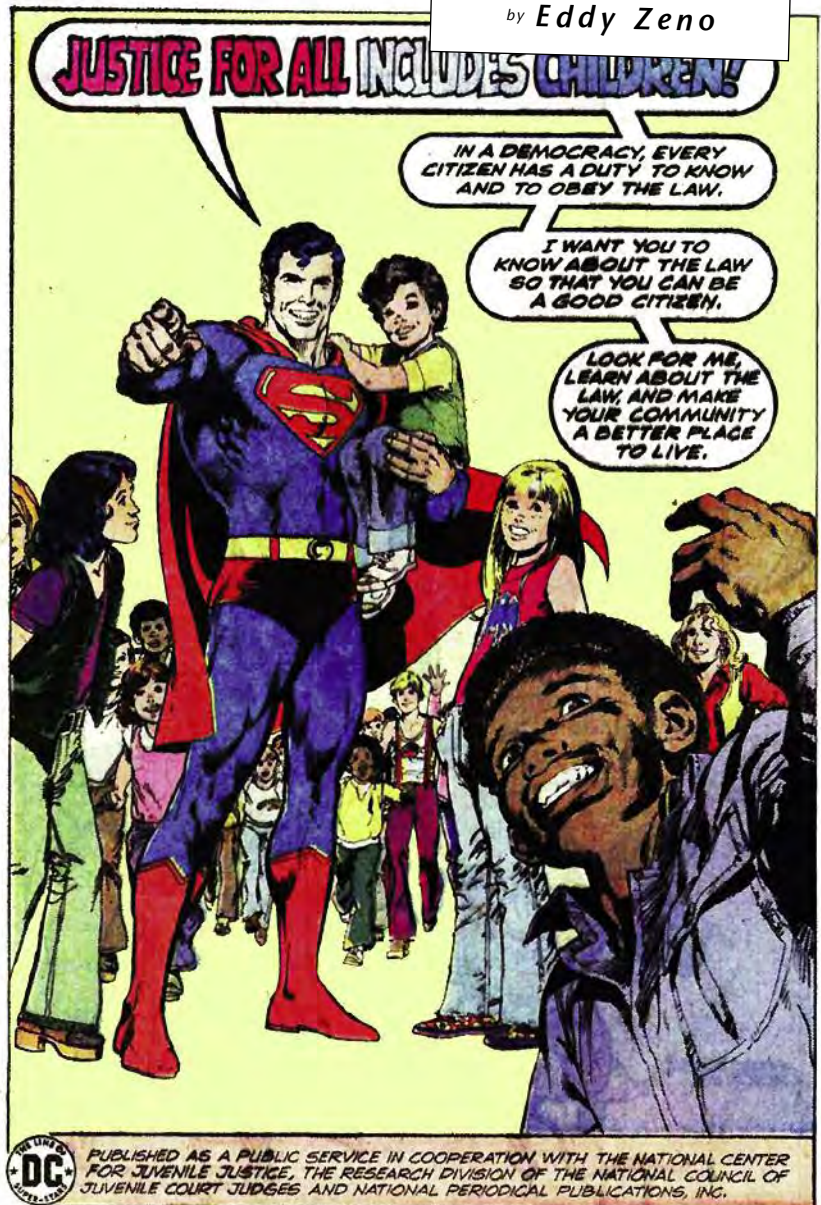
### Cry ... Justice!

Gorgeous Neal Adams art graced this house ad touting the PSAs "Justice for All Includes Children."

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# IN SEARCH OF SOCIAL ISSUES THE REAL AND FICTIONAL HEROES OF DC COMICS

by Eddy Zeno



# From Such Great Heights:



# The Birth of VERTIGO Comics

by Alex Boney

By any objective measure, 1993 was a boom year for the comics industry. Comic-book companies were being launched left and right. Individual issues of comics were selling in the millions—the first time sales had reached that level since the Golden Age of the late '30s and early '40s. Thousands of direct-market comics-specialty shops were springing up all over the United States. Comics news and “events” such as the “Death of Superman” were making national headlines, and comics writers and artists were becoming pop-culture superstars. We all know how this story ends, of course. As the speculators who drove the boom lost interest and moved on, the industry contracted severely less than two years later, pulling the rug out from under retailers and exposing the deep flaws that existed in the economic model the comics industry had embraced.

But despite all the handwringing of the mid-'90s, not everything that emerged in 1993 was toxic or doomed to failure. The story of DC Comics' Vertigo imprint, which launched that year, is instead one of endurance, perseverance, and artistic integrity. Greenlighted by Jenette Kahn and Paul Levitz and spearheaded by line editor Karen Berger, Vertigo remains one of the most successful and respected ventures in the history of comics publishing. Nearly 20 years after its launch, Vertigo continues to produce innovative material while nurturing some of the best new talent in the industry. It's a company that probably shouldn't have survived—especially during the '90s, when surface and image seemed to trump depth and substance. But because Vertigo was defined both by the financial backing of DC and by a commitment to creativity, the company was able to weather the wild fluctuations of the market and endure as a model of adult publishing in a medium that was listing hard toward the juvenile.

## ANATOMY LESSON

Although Vertigo was officially launched in 1993, the imprint is the result of a convergence of events (and people) stretching back to the late 1970s. Many of the things Vertigo came to be known for—creator ownership, mature-reader appeal, and alt-comix sensibilities—actually had been pioneered by earlier companies and creators. In 1977 brothers Jan and Dean Mullaney founded Eclipse Comics, a company that placed a heavy emphasis on artists' and writers' ownership over the material they created. Eclipse also favored the creation of original, full-length graphic novels and spearheaded the direct-market model for comics distribution. In 1978, Eclipse published Don McGregor and Paul Gulacy's *Sabre: Slow Fade of an Endangered Species*—the first original graphic novel sold

### You'll Meet Her One Day

An undated Dave McKean painting of the breakout character from *Sandman*, Death. Courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions ([www.ha.com](http://www.ha.com)).

TM & © DC Comics.

through the direct market at comic-book specialty shops. Eclipse went on to publish a number of key creator-owned titles throughout the '80s, including Max Allan Collins and Terry Beatty's *Ms. Tree* and Steve Gerber's *Destroyer Duck* (1982), Scott McCloud's *Zot!* (1984), and Tim Truman's *Scout* (1985).

Eclipse wasn't the only company to steer the trend toward creator ownership and experimental publishing in the '80s. The direct-market model had put smaller comics companies on more even footing with publishing giants DC and Marvel, and most of these smaller companies were operating without the constraints of the Comics Code Authority (CCA). As a result, a steady stream of diverse and genre-bending material began streaming into comics stores throughout the decade. Capital Comics, founded in 1981, was the early home of Steve Rude and Mike Baron's *Nexus* and Baron's *The Badger*. While Capital's comics venture was short-lived, startup First Comics recruited many of Capital's creators under the editorial leadership of Mike Gold in 1983 and went on to launch high-profile projects such as Howard Chaykin's *American Flag!* and Mike Grell's *Jon Sable, Freelance*. Based in San Diego, Bill and Steve Schanes founded Pacific Comics in 1981 and jump-started both Dave Stevens' *Rocketeer* and Sergio Aragonés' *Groo the Wanderer*. Comico, founded a year later, was the home of Matt Wagner's *Mage* and *Grendel*. Dave Sim had experienced early underground success with *Cerebus* (1977), but Fantagraphics and Mirage Comics initiated the more widespread black-and-white indie comics boom with Los Bros. Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* (1982) and Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984).

In short, the comics industry looked much different in 1985 than it had just five years earlier. But as rapidly as the scene had changed in the first half of the decade, the evolution of the industry throughout the rest of the '80s relied predominantly on the creative and editorial direction of someone who got her start at one of the Big Two at the beginning of the decade.

## NATURAL CONSEQUENCES

Karen Berger, who majored in English and minored in journalism and art history at Brooklyn College in the late '70s, was hired by DC Comics as an editorial assistant to Paul Levitz in 1979. DC had experienced a fair amount of turmoil in the years leading up to Berger's appointment. Publisher Jenette Kahn had guided the company through both an explosion and an implosion in 1977–1978, and DC was trying to figure out its place in the new direct market that threatened to disperse sales and reduce readership. Berger entered the industry at a time of enormous flux, and her first assignments were instrumental in guiding the trajectory of her career.

After working with Levitz for two years, Berger was given her own books to edit in 1981. When Joe Orlando stepped down as editor of DC's



long-running horror/suspense anthology book *House of Mystery*, Berger took over editorial duties (#292, May 1981). According to Berger, the assignment was both a perfect fit and a testing ground: "I didn't read comics as a kid, and like many women, I was not in tune with the superhero genre that totally dominated comics. Back then, DC was still (thankfully) publishing the last vestiges of the once-popular horror/mystery titles of the early '70s. And it was on *House of Mystery*, an anthology title of memorable and unmemorable stories alike, that I began to work on what many people call the 'weird' stuff: stories that probe into the complex and oftentimes dark facets of human nature, tales of ordinary people in extraordinary situations, and other odd things" (Vertigo "On the Ledge" column, Jan. 1993).

Though *House of Mystery* was rooted in the darker, edgier side of DC's publication history, Berger's early work at DC was also tied firmly to the company's predominant genre: superheroes. Berger was appointed editor of *Legion of Super-Heroes* shortly after Paul Levitz, her mentor, returned to write the title with #284 (Feb. 1982). She would go on to edit a vast array of Legion-related series and miniseries (some of the most complicated and continuity-dense superhero comics in the history of the medium) throughout the rest of the decade. Berger also inherited

editorial control of the fantasy and science fiction titles, which were written by the likes of Jack Kirby and Archie Colón. She was appointed editor of *Wonder Woman* in 1987 (and into the '90s), and she was instrumental in the development of the character's modern incarnation. She also worked on *Swamp Thing*, *Green Arrow*, and *Blue Beetle* (and into the '90s). She was also instrumental in the development of the character's modern incarnation. She also worked on *Swamp Thing*, *Green Arrow*, and *Blue Beetle* (and into the '90s).

## SWAMP THING

Because the character was so obscure, it had a need to adjust to the new market. Berger launched its first issue in 1981, and it earned the CCA seal of approval. It was her editorial direction that helped the literary and artistic quality of the title rise. She was instrumental in the development of the character's modern incarnation. She also worked on *Swamp Thing*, *Green Arrow*, and *Blue Beetle* (and into the '90s).

Epic continued to publish trailblazing work by new and experimental artists throughout the '80s and into the '90s. DeMatteis teamed with artist Kent Williams to create *Blood: A Tale* in 1987, while Pat Mills and Kevin O'Neill produced the scathing and outrageous political satire *Marshal Law*. In 1988, Epic released Bill Sienkiewicz's *Stray Toasters* as it was beginning to translate, color, and publish Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*.



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**BACK ISSUE #57**  
 JENETTE KAHN interviewed by ROBERT GREENBERGER, DC's Dollar Comics and unrealized kids' line (featuring an aborted Sugar and Spike revival), the Wonder Woman Foundation, and the early days of the Vertigo imprint. Exploring the talents of ROSS ANDRU, KAREN BERGER, STEVE BISSETTE, JIM ENGEL, GARTH ENNIS, NEIL GAIMAN, SHELLY MAYER, ALAN MOORE, GRANT MORRISON, and more!

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## The Big '80s

DC Comics' Dick Giordano and Karen Berger.  
 Courtesy of DC Comics.