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**DEAD HEROES ISSUE: Captain Marvel • Deadman
Elektra • Flash • Jason Todd Robin • & more**

BACKISSUE!

Featuring a **CAREER-SPANNING**
interview with
JIM STARLIN!



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STARLIN

Volume 1,
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**Celebrating
the Best
Comics of
the '70s,
'80s, and Beyond!**

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BUT I STILL EXIST!

DEADMAN

AFTER ADAMS

by John Wells



FlashBack!

From a commercial viewpoint, *Deadman* was a dead-end. For two golden years, the DC Comics series had earned critical raves from a devoted core of comics fans but never managed to expand that passion into mainstream appeal. And yet it was, to a great degree, those fans that refused to allow the ghost of Boston Brand to fade away.

THE EARLY "LIFE" OF DEADMAN

Created in 1967 by writer Arnold Drake, "*Deadman*" was an unusually adult series about a cynical aerialist named Boston Brand who risked his life nightly for the cash-strapped Hill Brothers Circus. Dressed in a red-and-white costume with a skull-like head mask when he performed as Deadman, Brand inadvertently made himself a target. Shot and killed by a mysterious sniper with a steel claw for a right hand, Deadman survived as a spirit that could magically inhabit and control the bodies of other human beings. According to circus fortune teller Vashnu, Brand had found favor in the eyes of goddess Rama Kushna, and that Eastern deity promised Deadman that his supernatural second life would continue until he found his killer. Boston Brand's anger over his fate helped define the series and set Deadman apart from DC's more even-tempered heroes.

Published in *Strange Adventures* #205 (Oct. 1967), Drake's first installment of *Deadman* was a tour de force complemented by one of artist Carmine Infantino's greatest art jobs. The assignment coincided with Infantino's ascension to a new post as DC's art director, and the illustrator tapped a newcomer to succeed him in #206. His name was Neal Adams. Bringing a hyper-realistic style to the series, Adams quickly made the series his own, eventually becoming both writer and artist on the feature in #212.

Much of the series revolved around the circus cast, notably owner Lorna Hill, slow-witted strongman Tiny, and Rama Kushna's disciple Vashnu. Boston's estranged twin brother Cleveland entered the series in #211, subsequently posing as his sibling in the hope that a revival of the *Deadman* circus act would draw out the killer who'd been dubbed "the Hook."

With the blessing of incoming editor Dick Giordano, Adams resolved *Deadman's* pursuit of his killer in a climactic two-parter in *Strange Adventures* #215–216. In short, the Hook's execution of Boston Brand had been nothing more than an initiation exercise to win membership in an international Society of Assassins. Duped by Cleveland Brand's impersonation, the Society's leader—an aged martial artist called the Sensei—judged the Hook a failure and personally vowed to kill him in a death duel.

Horrified that he was going to be cheated of his vengeance, *Deadman* attempted to intervene and was stunned when he couldn't possess the Sensei's body as he did others. Now the Hook was dead and Boston Brand

Breaking the Barrier

Detail from the cover to *Deadman* (the miniseries) #3 (May 1986). Art by one of the post-Adams artists most associated with the character, José Luis García-López.

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Prince of Wails

An anguished Deadman, as rendered (and written) by Neal Adams on page 19 of *Strange Adventures* #212 (May–June 1968). From the original art, courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com). Adams' cover art graced the Deadman appearances in (above) *Challengers* #74 and (bottom right) *JLA* #94.

TM & © DC Comics.

raged at Rama Kushna over the hollow victory. And why had he not ascended to the afterlife? Why did he still exist? Traveling to the secret Himalayan city of Nanda Parbat, Deadman discovered that he once again had a human body within its confines and struck a deal with the goddess. He'd continue to fight evil until finding the fulfillment he'd failed to achieve through his killer's demise.

The new direction came too late for the series, but Deadman found a refuge of sorts in *The Brave and the Bold*. Several months earlier in #79, the ghostly hero had met Batman in a memorable story by Bob Haney and Adams. With the relationship established, a second team-up seemed appropriate in #86 to tie up loose ends from *Strange Adventures*. In a novel touch, Adams created further Deadman short stories in 1970's *Aquaman* #50–52 and *Challengers of the Unknown* #74 that were linked to the lead features in each issue. [Editor's note: See *BACK ISSUE* #45 for an article about the odd-couple team-up of Aquaman and Deadman.]

The last such exercise took place in *Justice League of America* #94 (Nov. 1971), where Adams illustrated four pages featuring the Sensei and Deadman in a story written by Mike Friedrich. The episode focused on the Sensei assigning the assassin Merlyn to kill Green Arrow, but it held greater significance in its ingenious dovetailing of separate strands of DC Comics lore.

Longtime DC fans associate the League of Assassins with the Sensei and major Batman adversary Ra's al Ghul, and yet neither was affiliated with the group in 1971. The Sensei had overseen the *Society of Assassins* and Denny O'Neil's Ra's, while the leader of a vast, vaguely defined organization, would seem to be, on the face of it, an *adversary* of the League since it was they (at the command of Doctor Darrk) who kidnapped his daughter Talia in the recent *Detective Comics* #411. In *JLA* #94, Friedrich established that all the villains were part of the same global network and that the treacherous Sensei and his killers were ostensibly protecting Ra's.



NEAL ADAMS

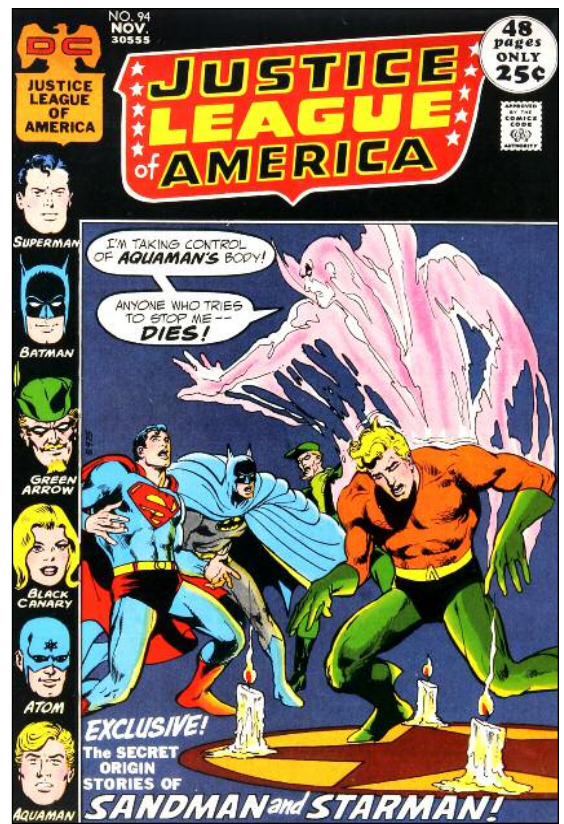
DEADMAN'S NEW GENESIS

DC continuity may have taken one step forward thanks to *JLA* #94, but Deadman's personal history took two steps back in *Forever People* #9 (June–July 1972). Mystified as to why he hadn't gone on to his eternal rest and seemingly no longer capable of possessing bodies, Boston Brand had to rely on former circus charlatan Trixie Magruder to reestablish his link with the mortal plane via a séance. In the process, she revealed that Deadman was still tied to Earth because the Hook had not been his killer. "The hook was on his *left* hand," she intoned. "The man who killed Boston Brand had a hook on his *right* hand!"

The Forever People, youthful visitors from the advanced world of New Genesis, were moved by Deadman's plight and used their godly technology to create an artificial body for the hero in issue #10. Described as a Follower, the human shell absorbed bullets and seemed, in its limited usage, to be immune to harm. The new Deadman was now, incongruously, a hero that couldn't die!

By the early 1970s, there were two approaches to creating comic books that fans held in higher esteem than any other. One was the bombastic exaggeration and energy exemplified by Jack Kirby at Marvel. The other was the more naturalistic perspective of Neal Adams. In *Forever People*, two worlds collided and Kirby—its writer/artist—bore the brunt of the criticism.

Kirby had left Marvel for DC in 1970 to create a new series of interrelated books including *New Gods*. His wish to develop original characters occasionally came into conflict with DC's desire—through president



FlashBack!

The Many Deaths (and Returns) of Aunt May

One of the most controversial storylines in recent years has been Spider-Man's "One More Day." Reeling from the consequences of exposing his true identity to the world during the Civil War storyline, Peter Parker had to go on the run with his family. While hiding out, his beloved Aunt May was shot by a bullet that was meant for Spider-Man. I won't bore you with too many more details about this story, except to say that Aunt May would have surely died had Peter and his wife, Mary Jane, not literally struck a deal with the Devil (or Marvel's supervillain counterpart, Mephisto) to save Aunt May's life.

Part of the uproar over this storyline was over Marvel's attempt to undo twenty years of continuity and wipe out the marriage of Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson-Parker. But it also got fans wondering about the choice that Peter made in sacrificing his own happiness to save the life of his aged aunt, a woman who had already lived a full life and who surely would have never wanted her nephew to give up anything as precious as his marriage for her sake. The storyline had some fans wondering if perhaps it wasn't time for Aunt May to finally go into that long goodnight, once and for all. On the other hand, it had other fans realizing just what a vital role the character played in the Spider-Man mythos. When you get down to the heart of the matter, Aunt May is one of those characters that is simply divisive.

One thing is for certain—had Aunt May died at the end of this story arc, there is no rule that says she couldn't come back. It isn't like Aunt May hasn't managed to elude the cold, icy grasp of the Grim Reaper before. Indeed, I would wager that she has managed to escape certain death almost as many times as her web-slinging nephew!

Aunt May's shaky health has always been a matter of concern for Peter. Her first serious brush with death came all the way back in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #9 (Feb. 1964), and the only thing that saved her life at that time was a blood transfusion from her nephew. While the initial results were positive, the transfusion of Peter's radioactive spider-blood proved near-disastrous, as was recounted in *Amazing Spider-Man* #31–33 (Dec. 1965–Feb. 1966), and once again, May Parker found herself at death's door. In the end, Aunt May pulled through once again, never caring for herself, but always worrying about her nephew.

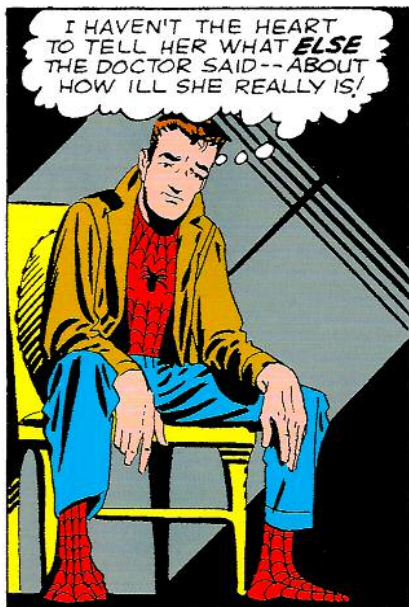
Poor Aunt May...!

Detail from the cover to *The Amazing Spider-Man* #178 (Mar. 1978), one of many depictions of Peter Parker's mother-figure on death's bed. Art by Ross Andru and Joe Sinnott.

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by Dan Johnson





Mayday!!

(left) Aunt May's first flirtation with the Grim Reaper happened way back in *Amazing Spider-Man* #9 (Feb. 1964).

Story by Stan Lee, art by Steve Ditko.

(below) For a brief moment, Aunt May was targeted for death for the landmark *Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (June 1973).

Cover by John Romita, Sr.

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GWEN STACY DRAWS THE SHORT STRAW

The first times that May Parker's life were at risk were nail-biters to be sure, but fans knew that Aunt May would be around for some time to come. After all, there was a time when killing off a major character in a comic book—especially a successful one like *The Amazing Spider-Man*—was unheard of. But then came one of the greatest game-changers in comics, *Amazing Spider-Man* #121–122 (June–July 1973), which marked the deaths of Gwen Stacy and the Green Goblin. As it turns out, when Gerry Conway, Gil Kane, and John Romita, Sr. wanted to shake up things a bit in Spidey's world, the initial thought was to kill off Aunt May instead of Gwen Stacy. But that was an idea didn't last too long. "The conversation I had with John [Romita] about killing off Aunt May lasted maybe ten seconds," says Gerry Conway, former writer on *The Amazing Spider-Man*. "[It went] along the lines of, John: 'We could always kill off Aunt May.' Gerry: 'Let's kill Gwen Stacy instead.'" When asked about the decision that might have radically altered Spider-Man's entire history as we know it, John Romita remembers being on board with sparing Aunt May. "The thought [of killing her off] was Stan's or Roy's," recalls Romita. "I told Gerry that if we want to shake up the readers, we'd need to have Mary Jane or Gwen killed. Since Gwen was Peter Parker's girl at the time, it would be more shocking."

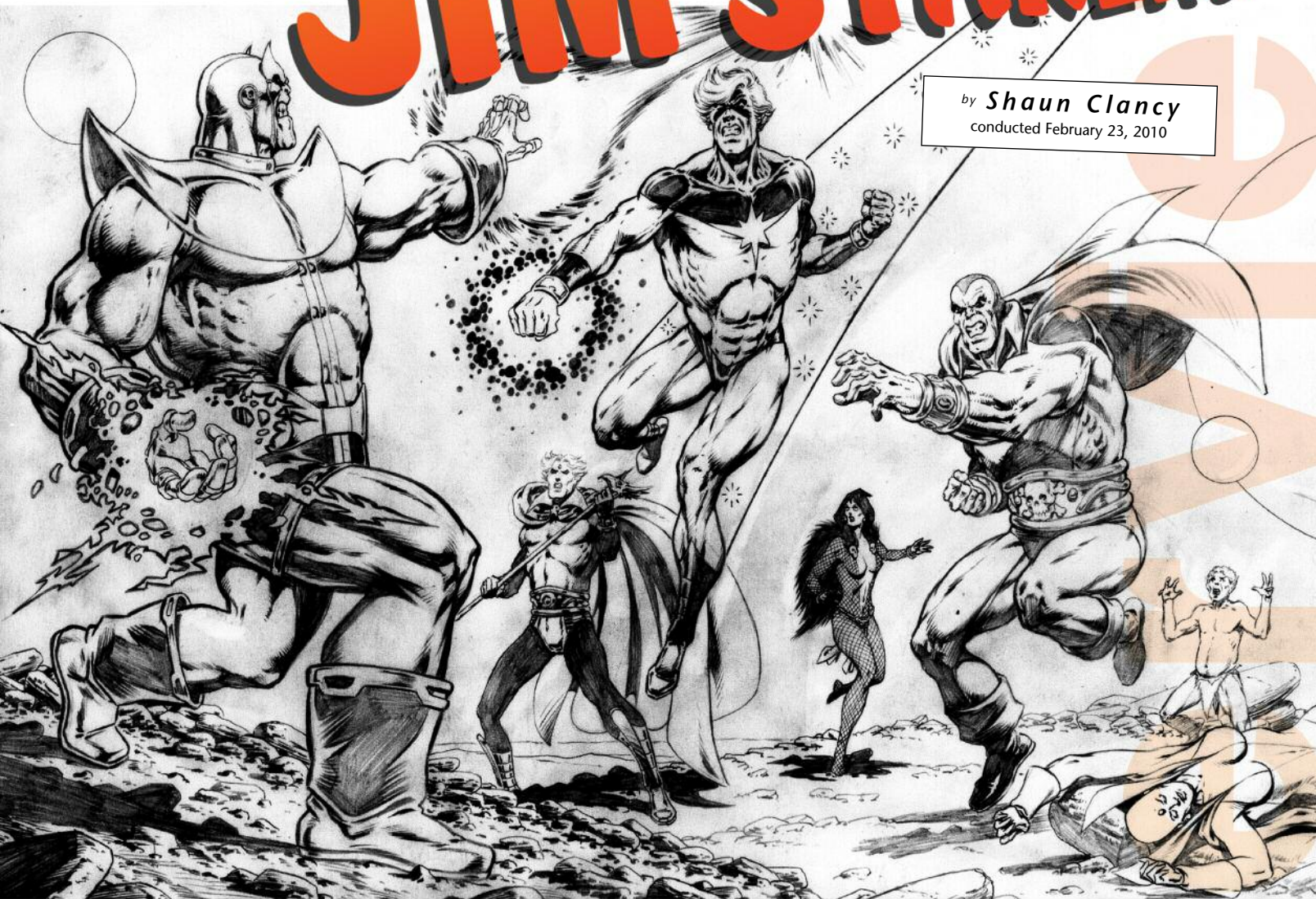
Conway adds, "To my mind, Aunt May was integral to the dynamic that made Spider-Man a successful superhero character. She was his connection to reality, the living reminder that 'With great power comes great responsibility.' While her character certainly became a cliché over the years, Aunt May fulfilled an important and fundamental role in the Spider-Man mythos, a role that's not easy to replace. Clichés become clichés for a reason: they represent truths that have become so familiar they no longer need to be stated, and when they are stated, the fact of their familiarity undercuts the value of the truth they represent. People recognize the cliché and ignore the truth behind it. Because Aunt May's character became a cliché, readers and creators forgot the truth she represented: Spider-Man's human connections, his agonizing link to the people in his life, and his need to take responsibility for their happiness, are what separates him from other superheroes. Rather than



a chat
with

JIM STARLIN

by *Shaun Clancy*
conducted February 23, 2010



Like most BACK ISSUE readers, my nostalgia for comic books centers on what comics I first read as a child. One of those very first issues was Captain Marvel #25 (Mar. 1973), and since then, I've been a Jim Starlin fan. Even at the age of nine, I could tell differences in the art styles of comics and Jim Starlin's artwork stood out among the rest.

In 1976, comics could mostly be bought at local convenience stores, and in my case, that was a local shop called Store 24 in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Since Mr. Starlin was not working on Captain Marvel in 1976, I was forced to collect back issues from used bookstores, of which there was only one in town. Riding my bike five miles to buy back issues at the age of nine left me open to being harassed and even having my bike stolen on several occasions. Trying to find a back issue with Jim Starlin art was worth the risk, and I managed to find all the issues he did in the Captain Marvel series.

It wasn't until 1995 in Seattle, Washington that I finally was able to meet the man who inspired me as a child.

To me, meeting Jim Starlin in person was like meeting the president of the United States... and I am sure I had come across as one of those crazy, awkward fans that everyone hates to be behind in the autograph lines. Stumbling with speech, I introduced myself to Mr. Starlin, and he quickly brought me back to reality by taking extra time in retelling the history behind the making of a Captain Marvel story.

Since that day, I have stayed in touch with Mr. Starlin on and off for 15 years with fan letters and requests for autographs and commissions. Every time I contacted Mr. Starlin, I would always receive a response. This cannot be said for a large portion of other comics talent I had also tried to remain in contact with. Mr. Starlin knows what it is like to be a fan and treats his fans the same way he would want to be treated himself, and this shows in this interview. I am very proud to have met and talked with Mr. Starlin, and every time I read a Jim Starlin comic or book, I feel like that nine-year-old child back in Lawrence.

— Shaun Clancy

Cruel and the Gang

Jim Starlin's most famous villain, Thanos, is confronted by the artist's signature Marvel heroes in this commissioned pencil illustration contributed by interviewer Shaun Clancy.

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INFINITY GAUNTLET

CLANCY: *Switching back to Marvel—when you did the Infinity Gauntlet three-volume series [Infinity Gauntlet in 1991, Infinity War in 1992, and Infinity Crusade in 1993], did you know how big a hit you had?*

STARLIN: *Silver Surfer was doing well, and I had been brought back to write that. That just led into the Infinity Gauntlet series, and the storyline just kept growing and growing.*

CLANCY: *Did they ask you to do it or did you approach them?*

STARLIN: *I probably said, "Let's do another one."*

We got a lot of editorial resistance. The other editors didn't like the books at all. [Executive editor] Mark Gruenwald in particular was very adamant that [Marvel] shouldn't be allowing me to do one of these books every year, even though they were selling really well. In fact, the last one, Infinity Crusade, they hid the fact from Mark that they were printing it! [laughter] They made up a "future projects list" that went around to the editors and made a point of it to remove [Infinity Crusade] from his copy. I didn't know this so one day I came into the office and [Gruenwald] went, "What are you doing these days now that you're not doing these [Infinity] things?" And I went, "Well ... I'll find something." Then I went, "What is he talking about?" Then Ralph Macchio explained to me that they were hiding the fact that book was coming out. I thought it was hilarious.

CLANCY: *It was always my contention that Silver Surfer #50 (June 1991) was what kicked off the foil-cover gimmick frenzy. Do you remember that raised-foil cover?*

STARLIN: *I think there had been a couple of others out there first, on X-Men.*

CLANCY: *Issue #50 was also the issue where the Surfer tried to come to terms with the killing of the people on the planets he had provided to Galactus.*

STARLIN: *Yeah ... they'd never touched on the fact that he aided and abetted a mass-murderer before.*

CLANCY: *And then you brought back Warlock...*

STARLIN: *Well, actually, there was another writer who was gonna bring him back, and I freaked out when I heard it. That's when I brought him into the Infinity Gauntlet series. I couldn't imagine anyone else handling him the way I would. I enjoyed it, but if I had to do over again I wouldn't have brought him back.*

CLANCY: *Was there a lot of pressure to bring Captain Marvel back?*

STARLIN: *No. For the longest time, when Jim Shooter was the editor-in-chief, he said, "We're never gonna bring him back." That was a good story and the Death of Captain Marvel graphic novel was still selling. It was only after my blowout with [later editor-in-chief] Joe Quesada that they decided to bring him back.*

CLANCY: *They tried to have Mar-Vell's son Legacy take over the role.*

STARLIN: *That was something Marvel pushed on Ron Marz.*

CLANCY: *Do you keep in touch with Ron?*

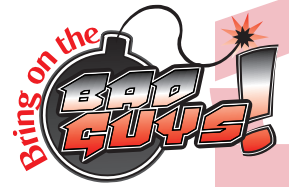
STARLIN: *Yes. He lives about an hour north of me, and we don't see each as much as we used to but we still chat occasionally. Actually, he's the one who set me up to do the book on my art with Desperado.*

To Infinity and Beyond!

(opposite) A Starlin/Milgrom 2005 commission colored by its contributor, Derek Muthart. (right) Starlin's Infinity Gauntlet poster from 1991.

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ASSASSIN'S REDEMPTION: THE ARRIVAL, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION

OF ELEKTRA

by Adam Besenyodi

When writer/artist Frank Miller and editor Denny O'Neil joined inker Klaus Janson on *Daredevil* in 1980, the title shifted from colorfully clad villains and guest stars to a grittier take on the character's world. This raised the book up from the depths of Marvel's second tier and set the table for the emotionally rich stories which followed with the introduction of Matt (Daredevil) Murdock's original love.

Elektra Natchios arrived fully formed in the Marvel Universe on the pages of *Daredevil* in late 1980. Miller offered no typical backstory or origin tale, just a bounty hunter in search of a murder witness being protected by the underworld. But over the course of the next 24 months, Elektra would be revealed as a skilled ninja assassin and Murdock's first love, his "girl." She would die a violent death, one without mercy. And she would be resurrected. Even though she wasn't initially around for very long, her impact still felt important and epic, like it mattered.

The First Cut is the Deepest

Detail from the page 8 splash of the miniseries *Elektra: Assassin* issue #8 (Mar. 1987), painted by Bill Sienkiewicz.

Courtesy of Kelvin Mao.

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Making Her Mark

(right) The cover to *Daredevil* #168 (Jan. 1981) misspelled the new character's name. (below) Elektra displays her proficiency on this original-art page from *DD* #175 (Oct. 1981). Script and breakdowns by Frank Miller, finishes by Klaus Janson.

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TANGLED ROOTS

Though her name was oddly misspelled on the cover of her debut appearance as "Elektra"—O'Neil jokingly suspects "the editor needed an editor"—there are no missteps. Elektra emerges just four pages into *Daredevil* #168 (Jan. 1981), perched on a guywire and unnoticed by Daredevil below. She is accompanied by four thought balloons—the one and only time over her 13-issue arc from introduction to death to resurrection that we are given direct access to her thoughts. It's what O'Neil refers to as "pure comic-book storytelling." It's an approach that could end up a hindrance in another writer's hands, but in Miller's it's a subtle technique to get the reader to invest in the character.

Turn the page, and the butt of Elektra's sai, a trident-like dagger, is knocking Daredevil into near-unconsciousness as the assassin attempts to procure the same information Daredevil was after moments before. Hearing her voice before blacking out, Daredevil exclaims, "That voice—Elektra?!"

Although we are never given a straightforward origin tale for Elektra in these early appearances, Miller does spend the next seven pages chronicling the year-long love story between Murdock, the pre-*Daredevil* Columbia law student, and Elektra, the Greek ambassador's daughter-cum-political science student, and their relationship's tragic end.

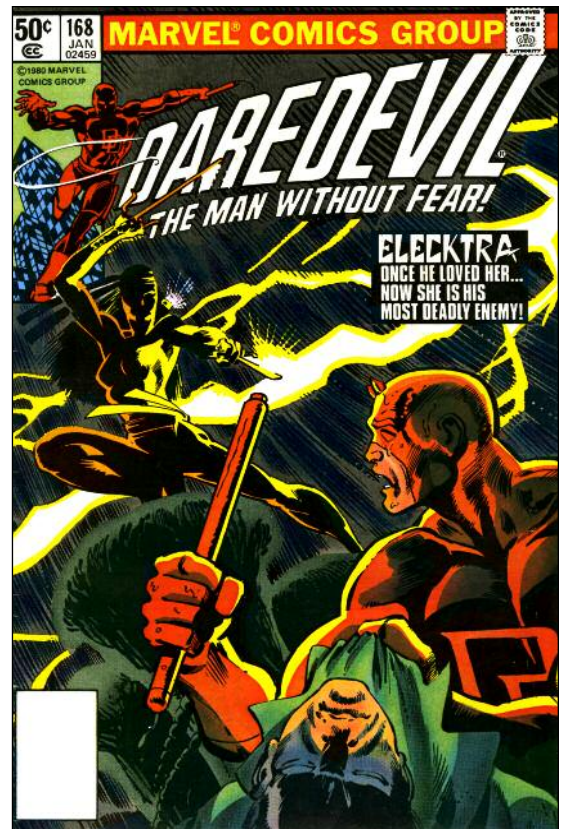
En route to meeting Elektra for her birthday, Murdock learns that terrorists have taken hostages in the administration building. Realizing his girl and her diplomat father are the likely targets, Murdock dons a red scarf originally intended as a birthday gift as his disguise and incapacitates the hostage takers with Elektra's help, but a miscalculation sends one of the attackers out of an upper-floor window.

Unfortunately, the cops misinterpret the terrorist's fall as a hostage execution. Determined to take out the next terrorist in sight, a police sniper puts three bullets in Elektra's father when he stands in front of a window.

Bridging the death scene and the graveside images are two closeup panels that show us that Elektra has changed. We are told "she never cries" over the loss of her father. But the seeds of the future assassin are planted.

In Greek mythology, Elektra is the daughter of King Agamemnon and Queen Clytemnestra. She encourages her brother, Orestes, to avenge the murder of their father. She also lends her name to modern psychology's theory that a daughter develops a sexual attachment to her father, called the Elektra complex. In a November 1981 interview with Peter Sanderson for *FantaCo's Chronicles Series #3*, "The *Daredevil* Chronicles," Miller confessed that Elektra "was designed around her name," drawing a straight line from daddy issues to the pages of *Daredevil*.

Miller explicitly laid out what is so delicately nuanced on the pages of the comic when he explained that Elektra "was a young woman who





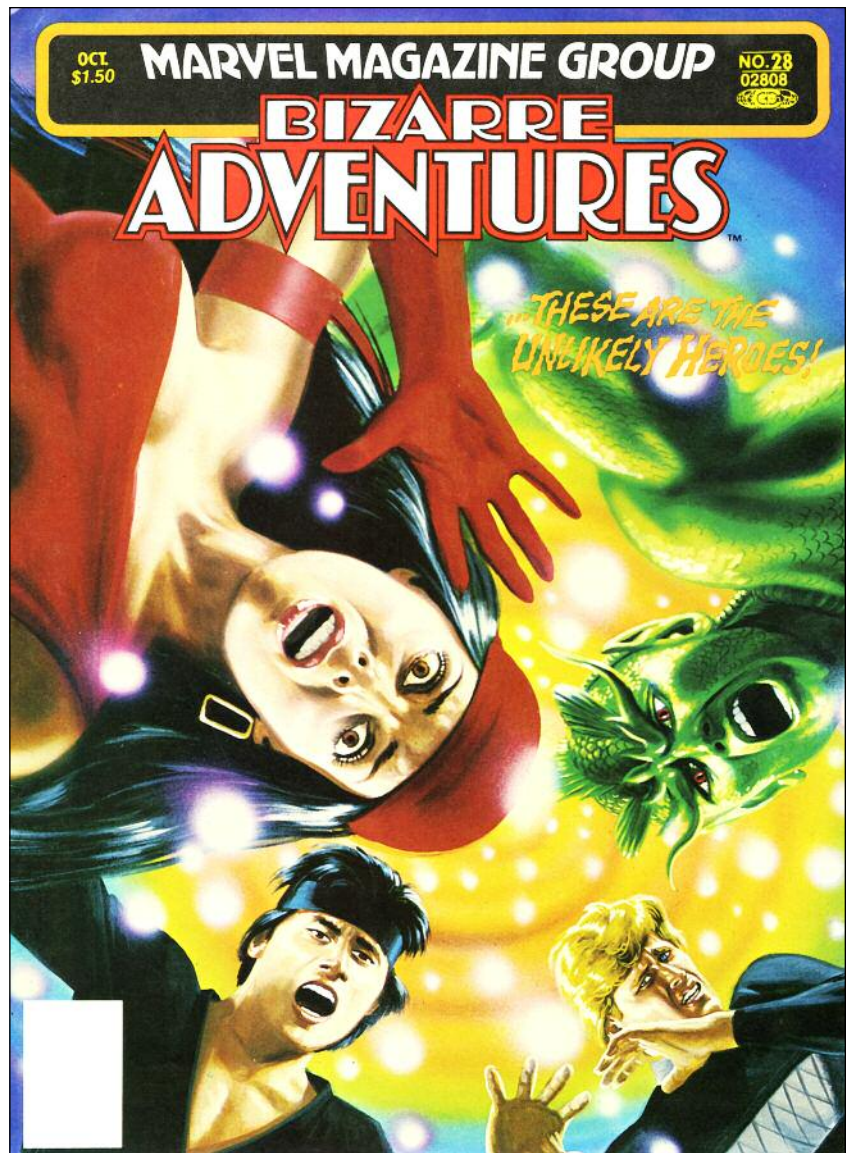
had her sexual interest centered on her father, and just as she was transferring this to another man, her father is killed." That sexual interest is not necessarily physical, but psychosexual.

The backstory ends with an emotionally damaged Elektra leaving Murdock to return to Europe, and Daredevil in the present day coming to alone on the ground in a pouring rain. We learn she bandaged his hurt shoulder before fleeing the scene, and Daredevil tells us the first woman he ever loved couldn't survive without a purpose.

Later, we see the "ruthless bounty hunter" defeat a trio of nunchuck-, chain-, and knife-wielding attackers with the subtlest hint of a smile on her lips and a swaggering "Next?" when she's done. She's ultimately subdued and Daredevil saves her, employing the same unique instructions as all those years earlier against the terrorists at college. In the aftermath, they kiss, and as Daredevil walks away, leaving her in the rain, Elektra is finally able to cry.

That was the last we would see of Elektra in the Marvel Universe until six months and five issues later, except for a single-page appearance in the subsequent issue (#169, Mar. 1981) which further establishes Elektra's emotional disturbance. She breaks into Murdock's brownstone and, finding an inscribed tchotchke from his current girlfriend Heather Glenn, she shatters it against the wall.

Though Elektra is visually based on Lisa Lyon, who became the first female bodybuilding champion in 1979, Miller clarified in the Sanderson interview that she "doesn't have Lisa Lyon's skeleton, she's larger, but she does have the detail of a body builder." Physically provocative, dark-haired, and brown-eyed, Elektra is overtly sexual, dressed in crimson and showing a lot of exposed skin. The red scarf she wears on her head suggests a tangible link to Murdock and the day her father died.



INVESTING IN A KILLER

Just as Elektra was returning to the pages of *Daredevil*, she could also be found in a ten-page stand-alone tale in the black-and-white comics magazine *Bizarre Adventures* #28 (Oct. 1981). This window into what makes Elektra tick was written and illustrated by Miller (and edited by O'Neil) in what he referred to as "an exercise in short-hand" in a 1982 interview with Dwight R. Decker for *The Comics Journal*. It's a story that could have taken place virtually any time before or between her appearances in the *Daredevil* ongoing, and cracks open the door on this complex character just a little bit further.

Elektra is hired by von Eisenbluth to eliminate a would-be assassin. When her path crosses with the man she is contracted to murder, Elektra learns that her employer might be a Nazi war criminal. How she reacts helps further define who she is to the reader. When she ultimately makes the decision to kill her employer after confirming his past sins, is it outrage at von Eisenbluth's hubris or disgust at her own moral fortitude interfering with her mercenary aspirations that we see in her eyes? "If a woman character is tough and assertive, you're castigated for portraying women as too tough," Miller told Decker. Conversely, "if you do a Heather Glenn or a Sue Storm, you're castigated for perpetuating

Stretching from Daredevil

(left) Bodybuilder Lisa Lyon, upon whom Miller based Elektra's look. (above) Cover of the B&W magazine *Bizarre Adventures* #28 (Oct. 1981), featuring an Elektra solo tale.

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THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF

THE FLASH™

FlashBack!

by Brett Weiss



Barry "the Flash" Allen died in 1985, in a story called "A Flash of the Lightning" appearing in issue #8 of the popular, game-changing mega-series, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Apr. 1985–Mar. 1986). He died a hero's death back when death in the comics actually meant something, back when fans still mourned such long-dead characters as Bucky Barnes and Gwen Stacy.

Before delving further into the famous death of Barry Allen, it behooves me to first discuss his even more famous birth (or at least his first appearance), which occurred in the now-classic *Showcase* #4 (Oct. 1956), in a story titled "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt!"

THE BIRTH

Emblazoned with an iconic cover penciled by Carmine Infantino and inked by Joe Kubert, in which Flash is running from frame to frame through and then bursting out of a strip of film, *Showcase* #4 introduced Barry as a police scientist on his lunch break, flipping through an old issue of *Flash Comics*, which starred the original Flash, Jay Garrick. (Barry has since been described as a comics fan several times, including in the 1997 graphic novel *The Life Story of The Flash* and in 2010's *The Flash Secret Files and Origins* #1.)

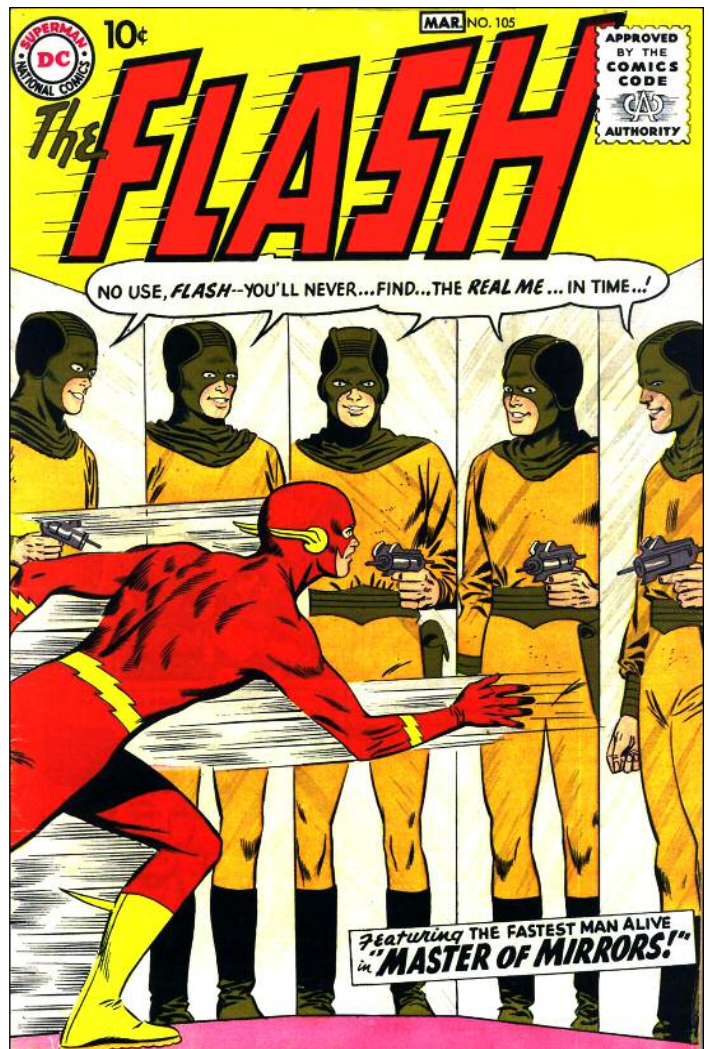
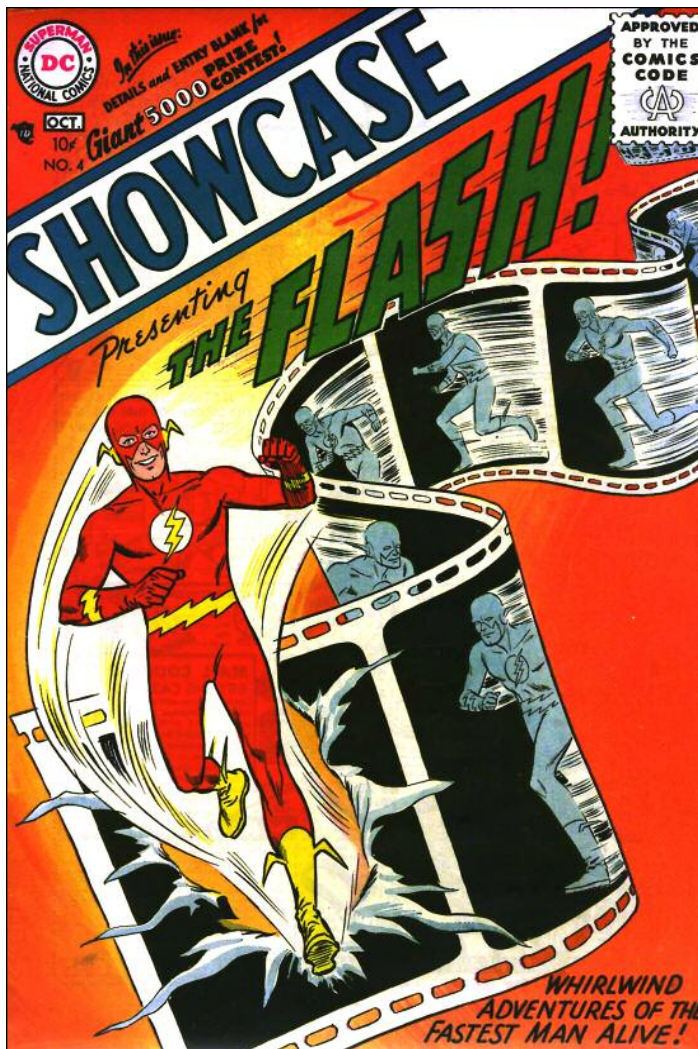
Barry returns to his work station shortly after lunch, and, as luck and coincidence would have it, a bolt of lightning streaks in through a nearby window, dousing him with chemicals, giving him super-speed. Inspired by the original Flash, Barry quickly designs a costume and gets about the business of fighting crime (this was long before deconstructionism, decompressed storytelling, and the advent of the reluctant hero).

Barry's first foe was the Turtle, who was known as "the Slowest Man on Earth." During the Silver Age of Comics, entertaining as many of the stories were,

The Last Mile

Detail from the cover of *The Flash* #331 (Mar. 1984); art by Carmine Infantino and Dick Giordano. At this time, the series was on its last leg, with *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and cancellation looming.

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Beginning a Long Run

(left) Barry Allen zipped onto the scene in the classic *Showcase* #4 (Oct. 1956), from editor Julius Schwartz. Cover by Infantino and Joe Kubert.

(right) The Silver Age *Flash* "#1" resumed the Golden Age series' numbering. Cover by Infantino and Joe Giella.

TM & © DC Comics.

this was the type of thing that passed for irony (along with such contrivances as Lois Lane loving Superman, but not Clark Kent).

"Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt!" was written by Robert Kanigher, with art by Infantino and Kubert. The backup feature was a John Broome story called "The Man Who Broke the Time Barrier," also illustrated by Infantino and Kubert.

Despite its now-dated use of sheer coincidence as a literary device, *Showcase* #4 is one of the most important comic books in the history of the medium, helping kick-start the Silver Age. Not only that, it brought to life one of DC's most endearing and, despite his eventual death, most enduring heroes.

In his autobiography, *Man of Two Worlds* (Harper Collins, 2000), legendary editor Julius Schwartz recalled coming up with the idea for revamping the Golden Age heroes for a new audience. "The first three *Showcases* flopped," Schwartz said, "and we were at an editorial meeting trying to decide what to do in number four when I suggested that we try to revive the Flash, who had died [figuratively speaking] with the demise of the other superhero titles (with the exception of *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Wonder Woman*)."

When asked by his coworkers, who were initially less than thrilled with the idea, why he thought a revived Flash could fly (metaphorically speaking, of course), Schwartz displayed his typical brilliance. "I pointed out

that the average comic book reader started reading them at the age of eight and gave them up at the age of twelve," Schwartz said. "And since more than four years had already passed, there was a whole new audience out there who really didn't know that the Flash had flopped, and maybe they might give it a try."

Editorial director Irwin Donenfeld wisely approved the project, and the rest is comic-book history. Flash appeared in three more issues of *Showcase* (#8, 13, and 14) and was given his own series in 1959. Instead of beginning with issue #1, as would be customary nowadays, the Silver Age *Flash* series began with #105 (Mar. 1959), picking up the numbering where the original Golden Age *Flash* series left off.

According to Schwartz, Donenfeld insisted on #105 as a starting point since readers would be more confident in the quality of a long-running title than they would an untried newbie (this was years before the days of collectors and speculators clamoring for #1 issues).

The *Showcase* comics starring the Flash sold extremely well, as did the fledgling new series, prompting Schwartz and company to update such classic characters as Green Lantern, Hawkman, and the Atom.

The Flash ran (so to speak) from issue #105 through its cancellation with issue #350 (Oct. 1985). During his proverbial day in the sun, Barry (the Flash) Allen battled a variety of colorful rogues, worked his

day job as a police scientist, acted as chairman of the original Justice League (as seen in *The Brave and the Bold* #28, Mar. 1960), married his beloved Iris West, and in general lived the life of a noble, almost perfect superhero. His only flaw, it seemed, was his uncanny knack for always running late (again, more Silver Age irony).

The Flash #350 was a double-sized wrap-up to an infamously long storyline featuring Flash on trial for the murder of the Reverse-Flash (a.k.a. Professor Zoom). Written by Cary Bates, penciled by Carmine Infantino, and inked by Frank McLaughlin, the issue ends with Flash and Iris reconnecting in the 30th Century and living "happily ever after ... for awhile."

That cryptic dénouement foreshadowed the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, in which Flash, a mere month after the reunion with Iris, died saving the multiverse.

Like Superman, Green Lantern, and other Silver Age heroes of the DCU (DC Universe), Flash was a paragon of virtue, a whitebread hero with an interchangeable personality, a virtual Boy Scout in tights. His foes—which included such pranksters as Captain Cold, Mirror Master, and Captain Boomerang—robbed banks, knocked over jewelry stores, and committed other such relatively tame crimes. Their primary motive, it seemed, was the sheer fun of trying to outwit the Flash.

Despite some melodramatic stories by Robert Kanigher during the early 1970s such as issue #201 (Nov. 1970), in which Flash blames himself for the crippling of a boy, and despite the death of the supervillain the Top in issue #243 (Aug. 1976), most of the Julius Schwartz-edited Flash adventures were relatively lighthearted. *The Flash* was a fun, oftentimes ingenious, plot-driven comic book, but it wasn't exactly Shakespearean in nature.



TROUBLE ON THE HORIZON

Beginning with *The Flash* #270 (Feb. 1979), former *Flash* artist Ross Andru took over as editor, portending of darker things to come. The cover blurb on #270 claimed the following: "Starting with this issue—Flash's life begins to change ... and it will never be the same again!!"

Cary Bates, with whom I conversed with via email, was writing *The Flash* when Andru came on board. "Ross played a big part in the radical new direction and tone of the book," Bates says. "Though I wasn't privy to any discussions he had prior to being assigned the editorial reins, I got the feeling he had been told to 'shake things up' a bit."

While Bates was intrigued with the notion of an extreme *Flash* makeover, the editorial transition wasn't entirely seamless. "It took some doing on my part to adjust to his style of working (he insisted on even going over the panel breakdowns with me)," Bates says, "but because I could see we were venturing into some exciting and unexplored territory with the new approach, I thought it was worth the extra effort."

In *The Flash* #275 (June 1979), in a story called "The Last Dance," darkness of a particularly nasty kind did

Under My Thumb

(left) Despite its whimsy, the blurb on the Rich Buckler/Dick Giordano cover of *Flash* #270 (Feb. 1979) warned of impending doom. (below) Giordano's cover to issue #275 hinted at the shock awaiting readers inside.

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DEAD ON DEMAND:

by Chris Franklin



FlashBack!

JASON TODD, THE SECOND ROBIN®

Juvenile delinquent.
Boy Wonder.
Murder victim.
Villain.

All of these describe the character of Jason Todd, the second Robin, the Boy Wonder. Jason was a controversial character from his introduction—from his criminal past, to his brash actions, to his death at the hands of not only the Joker, but also real-world fans that voted for him to perish. Recently, he returned, a shocking move that divided fans on its merits.

But Jason wasn't always such a roguish character. Once upon a time, he was a nice, young, circus aerialist, very similar to his predecessor, Dick Grayson. The Jason Todd who died and rose again to bedevil Batman and comics fans was not the same character that originally wore the red, green, and gold of the second Robin.

These were two very different takes on the same character, created within just four years of each another—an odd occurrence, even for the ever-evolving world of comics. The real-world origins of Jason Todd are perhaps even more compelling than the diverse fictional versions.

THE DYNAMIC DUO RETURNS

In the early 1980s, under writer Gerry Conway and editor Dick Giordano, everything old was new again in DC Comics' Batman titles. Long-forgotten elements of Batman lore were brought back for new readers to experience. The vampiric Monk, the Dirigible of Doom, and Vicki Vale were just some of the concepts revived by Conway in tales that spread across *Batman* and *Detective Comics*, essentially making one biweekly Batman comic. Amidst this revival was a reunited Dynamic Duo, separated for more than a decade when Robin, a.k.a. Dick Grayson, was sent off to college. Things weren't quite the same as before, with tensions arising between Bruce (Batman) Wayne and his ward for the first time. These tensions were also picked up on in Robin's other regular berth, the mega-popular *New Teen Titans*, by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez.

Boy Wonder, Six Feet Under

Detail from Mike Mignola's cover to Book Three of the 1988 DC Comics shocker, "A Death in the Family," from *Batman* #428.

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First Encounter

Dick Grayson spies circus aerialist Jason Todd for the first time on page 10 of *Batman* #357 (Mar. 1983), by the Gerry Conway/Don Newton/Alfredo Alcala team.

TM & © DC Comics.

There was no denying the popularity of *The New Teen Titans*. It was DC's number-one seller at the time. But Dick Grayson, the team leader, the very lynchpin of the group, was not completely Wolfman's and Pérez's to explore. As the Titans grew in popularity, a call upstairs into senior management brought an end to Dick Giordano's brief tenure as Bat-editor. In a fortuitous move for all involved, the Batman titles came under the stewardship of Len Wein, who was also editing *Titans*.

Conway was no stranger to the frustrations of creators on team books dealing with characters they didn't "own." He had long been the writer of DC's flagship team, the Justice League of America, a team composed mostly of characters with their own titles and respective creative teams.

So Conway suggested a radical solution that would solve the Robin problem: create a new one.

THE FLYING TODDS

Conway believes it was he who initiated the idea of a new Robin for Batman, which would leave Dick Grayson free to fly away fulltime with the Titans.

But was that Conway's plan all along, or did the writer mean to stick to the status quo with Batman and Robin?

"Yes and no," Conway answers. "I'd been a fan of the original [Batman and Robin] team all my life, but I was also aware that Robin had taken on a life of his own in *Teen Titans* that prevented Dick Grayson from being fully engaged in the Batman titles. So I knew there was going to be a structural and creative problem with the Batman/Robin dynamic—so to speak.

"There were two possible solutions, given that *Teen Titans* had become such an important title for DC, and given Dick Grayson's prominent and integral role in that team. Solution One: Drop Robin from the Batman titles as a regularly appearing character. I didn't want to do that because I felt, at the time, that the relationship between Batman and his younger partner was crucial to the appeal and structure of the series. (I don't feel that way now, but this was a different time, before the Frank Miller version of the Dark Knight took ascendancy.) Solution Two: Introduce a new Robin. I went for Solution Two."

When asked if this notion of a new Robin met any resistance from anyone within DC, Conway offers, "Surprisingly little." And what of *Titans* creators Wolfman and Pérez—how did they feel about this proposed solution?

"I think Marv was probably delighted to have Dick Grayson as a fulltime Titan," Conway says. "I know, if our situations had been reversed, I would've been. Though since we're both fanboys at heart, he might've felt Jason Todd was a desecration of the character. Truth is, I was ambivalent about Jason myself, as a fan, but as a writer I did what I needed to do to solve the problem I perceived."

But who would be the new Robin? In *Batman* #357 (Mar. 1983), by Conway, Don Newton, and Alfredo Alcala, Dick reconnects with some of his old circus friends and witnesses a performance by the Flying Todds, consisting of Joseph, Trina, and their fair-haired, 12-year-old son, Jason. Dick wonders, "...why does looking at them send a chill up my spine?"

The Sloan Circus, home to the Todds, is the target of an extortion scheme, engineered by rising crimeboss Killer Croc. Now the setup is complete. The classic origin of Robin was being retold, but this time, with new players.

Dick Conway intend for this obvious connection to the past?

"Absolutely," Conway reveals. "For good or ill, one of the things I like to do when I take over a character on a regular basis is to return him to his origins, if I can. First of all, that's because it's usually the original version of a character that first appealed to me as a reader, and I always try to write what I liked to read when I first discovered comics (hopefully filtered through any mature insights I might've gained along the way). Secondly, I believe comic-book superheroes, at their best, tap into a universal, unconscious iconic set of images, kind of Jungian archetype. If a character is successful over a period of time, it's because the original creators touched something primitive and true. I believe the best way to recapture that original, primitive truth is to return to the source, and try to recreate the original archetype. If only it were that easy, though..."

Over the next few issues, this plot plays out: Batman and Robin pursue Killer Croc, and Trina Todd stumbles on Bruce and Dick's secret identities. She and

