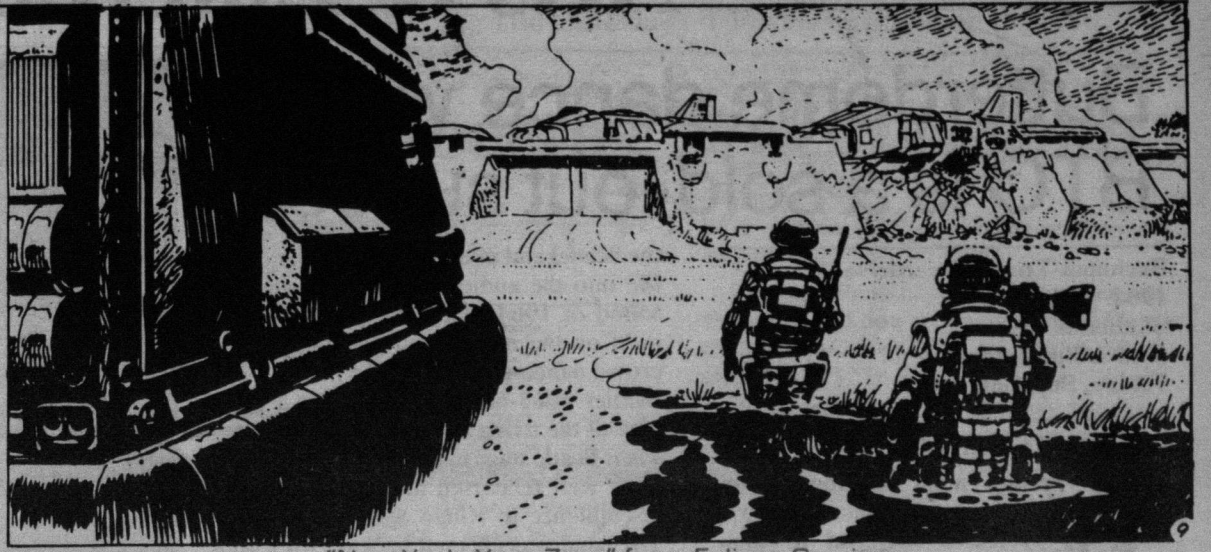


... CHANGED...



"New York: Year Zero" from Eclipse Comics

The Golden Age

The comics industry was stagnant but lucrative through the remainder of the fifties and the sixties. Nazis were replaced with Communists after the war and comics entered the "Golden Age". It was a time of bigger life mythical heroes who could do no wrong. The successful titles spawned hordes of spin-offs and soon comics were inundated with Super-Girl, Bat-Boy, Super-Second-cousin-In-Law, Bat-Dog, and Bat-Batles. Crossovers where one hero helped the other were popular. Also popular were couples and groups of heroes, where a whole bunch of tights-clad super-people teamed up and beat the snot out of similarly minded super-villains. To explain the existence of all these heroes and groups of heroes, DC came up with the plot vehicle of many parallel universes where all these myriads of heroes and Supermen battled crime.



And TV enters the picture in the 70's.

With the seventies and the gradually increasing influence of television, the comics sales slacked off again. A generation of kids grew up who knew The Batman from Burt Ward's campy portrayal on the TV show instead of the pulp pages. The two major comics companies were left with hundreds of titles that were not selling. Marvel quietly trimmed off titles.

DC tried to struggle on. Nevertheless, economic reality was that comics sales would not go up unless something drastic happened. And it did...

The Early Eighties

A clique of wunderkind authors and artists came along. DC was pulled out of its sales slump with a massive crossover series called *Crisis on the Infinite Earths*. The parallel universes DC set up were crushed in a cataclysm. Major superheroes actually died. The Flash and many other childhood icons disappeared. The good guys took staggering losses and it signaled a profound change in comics.

The tone of the new titles was dictated by this change. A script-writer and artist named Frank Miller came up with a new format for comic books. Called *Prestige Format*, this consisted of nicely printed, good quality paper, bound in glossy covers.

The Comics Code Authority and its stifling influence on creativity began to be silently ignored. The "Approved by the Comics Code Authority" badge quietly disappeared from most titles.

The Dark Knight Returns

With his epic story and innovative artwork of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Frank Miller turned the comics world upside down. *Dark Knight* was a brooding, gripping tale of The Batman in the future — a dark Batman... a retired vigilante, brutal and violent. Batman drinks; the world is falling apart in a cyberpunk jumble. The Joker murders people en masse.

The *Dark Knight* series captured the imaginations of readers. It featured adult concepts with a tight, coherent plot and stunning artwork. Its four issues were published together in hard-bound and soft-bound "trade paperback" editions. This started a significant trend when major bookstores began carrying these titles.



Comic Collecting

Thus began the rise of comic collecting. Some hardbound editions of the *Dark Knight* are selling for more than \$1500 these days. Comics publishers began publishing "Limited Series" adult comics with realistic plots. These comics had a fixed number of issues and limited printing runs. They don't appear at convenience stores and are coveted by collectors.

Since these titles have a fixed duration, the characters and plots have room to expand where comics can't go. The heroes aren't necessarily good guys and don't always survive. They often have emotional hangups just like real people. The protagonists can't always knock out the bad guys. They have to kill to survive, but they agonize about the murders.

The villains no longer merely tie up the victims — some of the violence becomes very explicit. In a recent Batman series entitled *The Cult* the reader is privy to explicit scenes of a man having his head blown apart by an Uzi.

The new printing processes have also made possible several comics done in watercolor. One artist, Bill Sienkewicz, stands out for his stunning LSD-nightmarish watercolor art. Many of the serious comics use colors more than art to convey the moods of the story.

Conventional limitations like the frame-by-frame story are disappearing. Full page frames with action leaping from frame to frame are now the norm. Often these new comics borrow from the techniques used in film to convey the action. Blurring pans or slow motion translate amazingly well to the framework of a comic book.

The radical new trend is increasing the acceptability of comic books. The term "graphic novel" has been coined for the bound comics in an attempt to remold their image. The graphic novel is slowly becoming accepted as more than entertainment for the illiterate. Famous artists and authors like Harlan Ellison and Robert Silverberg are having their stories illustrated as graphic novels.

A British writer named Alan Moore has brought macabre, occult, horror stories to the pages of comic books. His masterpiece, *The Watchmen*, about hung-up superheroes who hide behind their tights, is reputed to be seen on the bookshelf of the Dean of English at Oxford.

The new genre of serious comics often hides among the pulpier juvenile titles, but a trip down to a comics store will surprise you. Odds are you won't snicker at people reading comics if you do.



Conan Saga, Marvel Comics



Feature and layout by
Dragos Ruiu