

Farmland fantasy and the DC Universe

by Gilbert Bouchard

Someone asked me the other day "why do you read comics?" The answer is quite simple: I've been reading the suckers ever since my fifth birthday and I have no real conscious memory of ever not reading comics. In other words they've become an intrinsic part of my life, like eating or sleeping, and of course are totally beyond questioning. What one can ask is why that five year old in 1966 was attracted to comic books in the first place.

I'm not sure, but I would probably guess that my upbringing in the rather chaotic world of wilderness and farms of northern Alberta had something to do with it. Where men spend their days crawling about in the muck, mire and dust seeking whatever pitiful living one can. I mean even little kids (particularly little kids) guess mighty quick that life really stinks, or at least a good part of it.

Comics, especially DC, provided a needed escape. Cities with skyscrapers and bustling newspapers instead of Falher and the Smokey River Express - men with ideals, hopes and enough vitality to mold the world, and no the grey, stooped, tired men who were my relatives and friends of my father, to tired and cynical to do much of anything.

DC back then was my fantasy world of choice, heck, Marvel was fine but who the spit wanted more reality? I wanted lies, bigger, better, nicer than life. And DC paid in spades. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman were paragons of virtue, true shining beacons of humanity, what all men should strive to be. In fact, over the years DC began to encompass the whole American Dream into its heroes. Superman is much more the spirit of America than Captain America will ever be, even without wrapping himself up in the flag.

DC has always been the prime comic force, the authority, the father figure, that comic producers have gotten their identities from. Marvel got to be Marvel by recruiting from the DC comic universe. DC has been the thesis for Marvel and all other comic followers (i.e. PC,

First Comics, and other independents).

But in the last year, especially this last year, DC is really easing into (gasp) reality, shucking its super-straight personality and getting its fingernails dirty.

New titles like the Omega Men are questioning men's innocence and the origin of aggression with religion and power struggles tossed in for a little fun (metaphysical, not to mention bloody). And Super-new titles like Triller and Ronin who've introduced protagonists like reincarnated samurai warriors, killer priests, reformed hit-men, and dead ladies.

And older established heroes like Batman, the Flash, and even old stodgy Superman are becoming more human and fallible in their old age. Why, in the last few months alone, we've seen Batman quit the JLA in a tiff over the club's hands-off policy in a European civil war (and Ronnie Reagan style Batman and a group called the Outsiders stage a counter-coup). And, while Superman's been busy beating up Afghan rebels, the Flash actually went out and killed his arch-rival the reverse Flash and is being tried for manslaughter.

Not that I don't like this new trend, heck, DC is producing some of the finer comics probably ever seen.

But what I don't like is that now DC is joining its rebellious rivals, nothing is left to provide the thesis to all the anti-thesis floating about. With all these psycho-heroes facing big problems like acne, BO, love problems, identity crises, where have all the fantasy heroes gone?

The Fantasy, the role models, the idealistic heroes are gone. Maybe because comics are too expensive for the bubble gum set, DC has moved after the baby book wonders who've now hit the lucrative big buck years (18-25 year olds).

To tell the truth, I sort of miss the larger-than-life men in tights - just like I miss the chubby kid with a quarter in one hand and a copy of Action Comics in the other.

