

more funny stuff

quality paper can cost as much as \$3.00 and a graphic novel (a trade paperback) sets you back a cool \$7.00. No wonder younger readers aren't into comic books; most pre-teens have been priced out of the market.

Not only have the new adult readers put demands on the quality and the content of comics, they've forced a restructuring of the marketing of the industry. Not content with the corner convenience store, comic aficionados are patronizing comic specialty stores — the direct sales outlet.

These direct sales outlets either specialize only in comic books or sideline in them in a major way, stocking the hundred or so titles while providing a highly personal level of service. For example the Hobbits has a "file" system where regular "file-holders" can have all the comics they read set aside for them avoiding sell-outs and maximizing shipping convenience. Most stores also provide regular customers with a per cent discount on the cover price of the comics.

Direct sales shops are such an important force in comic book marketing that many comic book titles are only available in direct sales stores. At Marvel 10-25 per cent of their titles are direct sales only, and at DC it's 40-60 per cent depending on the month. "The direct market is a strong and important part of comic retailing," said Saffell.

"The direct sales market, since it reaches that serious reader, offers us an opportunity to print those direct sales only titles on a demand basis," said Saffell. "In other words, we print only as many as we actually need and are requested by the retail outlet and the reader. As such we can run smaller press runs and still have a successful comic book. Direct sales allows us to take the risks involved with printing books for a smaller readership."

The dark side of the recent invention and boom of the direct sale outlet has been the phenomenally high failure rate of many outlets. Already Edmonton has seen the birth and demise of a half dozen specialty comic shops including Dark Star Comics and the Comic Master.

"Shops are opening and closing almost every day," said May.

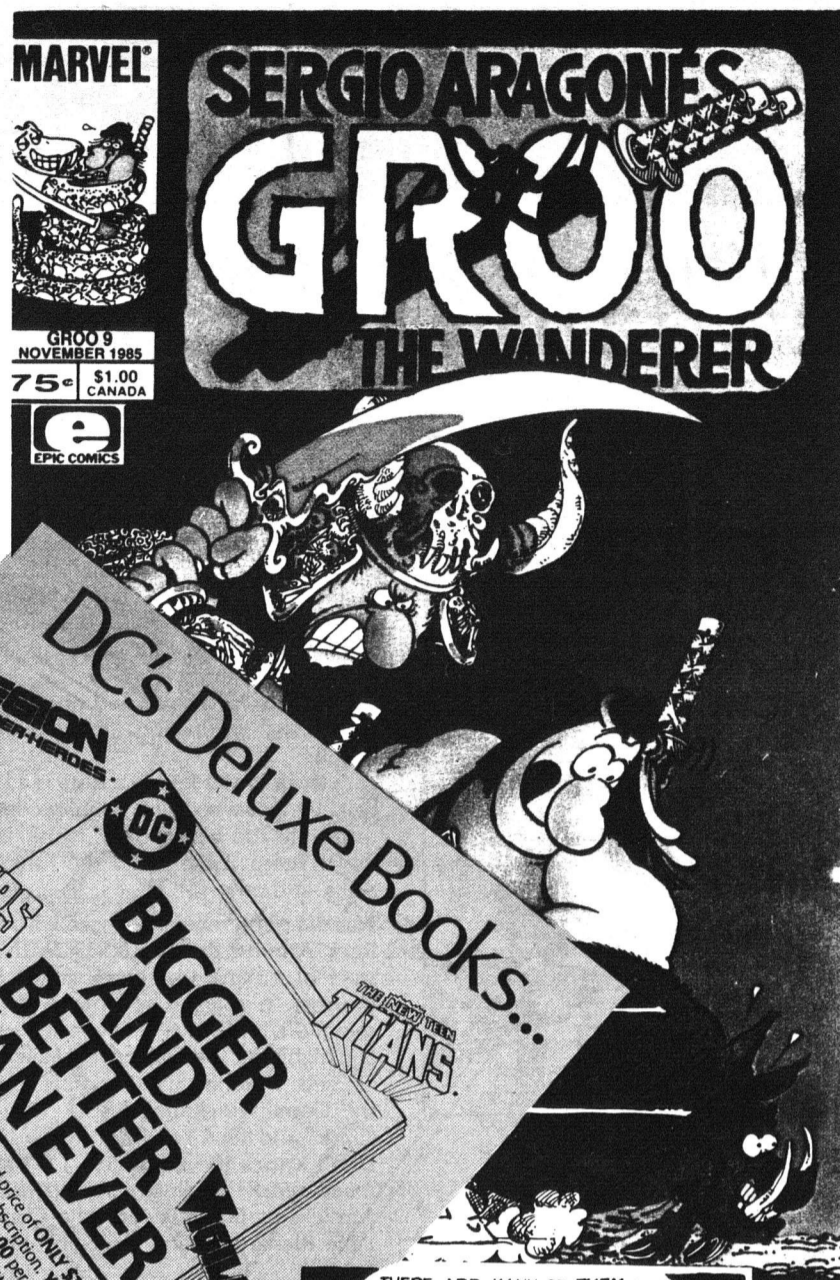
"Originally the direct sales market was comprised of hobbyists, people who were collectors and said 'Why not, I can open a comic book shop', but many of them had no business sense or didn't know how to run a business. These are the shops that are closing."

Vermeer goes even further, adding "I can't see making a living selling comics alone — you have to diversify." Comics are only a grabber for the Hobbits, something to bring

people into the shop. "That's the reason we keep them, it brings people into the shop," said Vermeer. "It's the games that do well for us, and after that it's the books and posters."

"The profit margin is not all that good for comics — you can't over order," he said. Direct sales shops buy all stock on a non-returnable basis, so they cannot get a refund on the stock they don't sell. "The comic market is too fickle, it bounces up and down from month to month. You can't tell where it's going. Ordering comics is a gamble."

The comic industry is an industry in turmoil. It will be a few more years before the market settles down and the dust clears. All that is known for sure is that comics have lost their innocence. The industry is against the wall and there's no room for error.



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