

A haphazard inspection of Winters College's COSMICON IV

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Photos by Peter Hsu

Comic's value rises 7,500 per cent but artist Smith feels "distant to it"

A comic book doesn't have to be old to be worth a mint.

Barry Smith's first issue of Conan the Barbarian, which sold for 20 cents in 1972, was selling for \$15 at Cosmicon IV. And the artist himself, Barry Smith, was at a neighbouring table, selling lithographs and posters, almost oblivious to the fact.

"I'm very distant to it," said Smith, a British ex-patriate in his 20s. "The further away I go from the Conan thing, the further back in my memory it goes.

"When I sign the Conan books, it feels like I'm looking through old photographs."

He expressed some disgust with dealers who charge \$15 for Conan number three because it's rare, while

number 24, which is Smith's own favourite, sells for under \$1. He also mentioned that he left comics to try to make it as a recording artist, but that his demonstration records in New York "were totally disregarded".

He's back into drawing, and hopes to publish some of his work within the year.

"I hope to do things I couldn't do for commercial purposes, something more adult," he said. "This may sound smarmy, but I do feel that what I'm doing now (lithographs) is far above comics."

Then why does he come to conventions like this one?

"It's the only place I can sell my art."



Artist Mike Kaluta crinkles his eyes at Winters College's Cosmic fantasy and art convention, held at York over the weekend.

National Lampoon executive editor P. J. O'Rourke lounged behind a table at the front of the McLaughlin dining hall, twisting a hand-mike.

"I feel like Mick Jagger," he said. "It's great."

He peered past the spotlights at the large audience of kids and post-kids attending Winters College's weekend fantasy convention.

"I like coming to this Con," said O'Rourke. "I don't get to do much travelling to exotic foreign countries — overlake, as we like to call it."

"The con is fantasy and imagination. I know why you invited Mad. They imagine they're funny."

While York English professor Robert Cluett fielded questions from the floor, O'Rourke wondered how much wish fulfilment comic fans could get from Conan the Barbarian ("the guy talks like a Chaucerian graduate"), and talked a bit about "qualus".

"It's a drug that makes you dumb. We took it before we went into Vietnam, and you took it before you picked the pictures that go on the back of your money. I mean, you look on the back of your \$1 bill and there's nothing there but Moose Bend, Saskatchewan."

Somebody asked what had happened to Michael O'Donoghue, the writer who had dreamed up such enlightening Lampoon features as Underwear for the Deaf.

"He got pissed off and left," said O'Rourke. "He's a genius, and geniuses are hard to work with."

Another person asked what the Lampoon thought of Harpoon, a rather hopeless humour magazine which first hit the stands last year. O'Rourke dismissed it as a grab-bag of "badly-montaged photographs and fart jokes", and mentioned that Lampoon had sued the Harpoon over its title.

"It was too close to our name, and readers and newsstand operators were confusing the two. So we went to their offices and said, 'We have a lot of money and you don't, we have big lawyers and you don't, and we're going to ask you politely to change your name, and we'll give you 10 minutes to change it. And they did.'"

During a lull, O'Rourke termed Lampoon "the literary Attila the Hun".

"Our idea of fun is to rush through ideas that people take seriously and burn, pillage and rape."

He also mentioned that the Canadian Corner is written by Sean Kelly and Bruce McCall, both Canadians.

"Canadian Corner has more

Canadian content than Time Canada," remarked Cluett.

The session gradually dwindled into questions like "where did you find the woman in the Foto Funnies pages?" (answer: "In a massage parlour"), and queries on how often the Lampoon got sued (no figures, but Archie Comics sued them for an Archie parody they did, and the treasury department didn't like them burning a \$100 bill on the cover of the self-indulgence issue).

"Lampoon had a bad year in terms of contents about a year ago," concluded O'Rourke, "but I think we're doing good stuff now."

"We thrive on hard times. When prosperity comes around again, our popularity will definitely drop off."



P. J. O'Rourke (right) talks about the National Lampoon, of which he is executive editor, to York English professor Robert Cluett, Saturday afternoon.

Con becoming almost mechanical

Finding helpers "like pulling teeth"

Cosmicon IV roared and fumed as usual over the weekend, but they were hollow roars, and some of the old spark seemed to be missing.

Sure, there were still the same organizers killing themselves to make sure people left the balcony overlooking the Winters College junior common room before the fire marshalls closed the place down.

And the same dealers crammed the Winters dining hall to sell their comics to fantasy addicts at many times their cover price, not caring that a dealer two tables away was selling the same book for a dollar more or less.

But some of the spirit, some of the excitement was gone.

"If I were to recommend anything to the Winters council," said co-organizer Moira Herson sadly, "I would strongly

suggest that they consider not having a Cosmicon next year, and leave it until the year after instead.

"It's become a mechanical thing, and I don't think the council should just automatically say, there'll be a Cosmicon V next year."

The Cosmic fantasy and art convention, an annual Winters College smash since its inception in 1972, is a three-day blitz of films, comics, posters and speeches by big wheels from the fantasy business.

This year there weren't too many wheels, the films (aside from some Star Trek and Twilight Zone shows) were mundane, the scheduling of panel rooms went awry, and nobody in Winters seemed too interested.

Although Winters students Anne Scotton, Ken Ketter, Gord Travers, Howie Hicks and Moira Herson ran around in circles planning the event and oiling the wheels that kept the mammoth convention rolling, finding 140 students willing to guard rooms and check tickets, even for the payment of a weekend's free pass, was murder.

"A lot picked up their passes Friday," said Scotton, "and didn't bother showing up after that."

"Getting people to help out," Herson said simply, "was like pulling teeth."

One complaint was that the convention had become too slick, too commercial, and too geared toward the dealers and kids in the industry. Presumably York students made up a large percentage of the movie crowds, but wherever one went there seemed to be tiny tots hawking Supermans or middle-aged nostalgia victims wandering from the display rooms to the dealers' room.

Captain George Henderson, who runs the Memory Lane comic and poster shop

in the Markham Village, and has operated a vast Whizzbang fan club since 1968, was the fan guest of honour, and brought with him some fascinating displays.

But the sight of six men sitting on a Whizzbang nostalgia panel, talking about Golden Age (1940s) comics as "moments of our past" and speaking in the McLaughlin dining hall to a scant crowd of which few (if any) were York students, was a bit depressing. Especially on the heels of Barry Alan Richmond's Friday talk (see page 11), which didn't impress the audience, or the half-hearted celebrity panels, which didn't do much better.

It wasn't the 1972 address of filmmaker Alain Resnais at the first Con, which had the entire hall buzzing. It wasn't the Will Eisner slide show, which played to a packed house. It wasn't the Vaughn Bode cartoon concert of Cheech Wizard, which last year sent the hall into gales of laughter.

It was a symptom of a Con that has rolled on too long and needs a little rest before it is resurrected.



Captain George Henderson of Memory Lane, with the nostalgia panel.



This dealer was startled when our photographer, wearing a gorilla suit, asked her for pornography for apes.

"Mad has never been a crusader — just a friendly, inoffensive magazine"

His legs were darting back and forth nervously under the table, and his voice had a tremor in it which betrayed itself in the occasional stuttered laugh.

But Mad Magazine associate editor Jerry de Fuccio battled what seemed like a mild case of stage fright to answer a smattering of questions from a small Sunday afternoon Cosmicon gathering.

"The first question I usually get is, what movie parodies are we planning in the future? Well, we have the Towering Inferno, and a musical by Frank Jacobs called What's Entertainment?"

The audience chuckled. De Fuccio relaxed a bit.

"Mad is a little comic bo' that started in 1952, and became a big comic book in 1955," he said. "It's now one of the five best sellers in North America, the darling of the newsstands, and we print three million copies of each issue."

De Fuccio, who wrote war stories for Educational Comic's Two-Fisted Tales in the early 50s, knew that somebody would inevitably ask him what he thought of National Lampoon, and everybody in the audience knew it, and finally somebody asked the question.

"What was the reaction to National Lampoon's parody of Mad a couple of years ago?"

"We wondered what magazine they were parodying."

"No, seriously."

"In some instances it was a personal attack. Dave Berg was personally attacked, and he took it as a compliment."

"They implied that Mad's format was sophomoric and that we were afraid. But Mad has always been a friendly, inoffensive magazine, never crusading. Our back pages always make quite a strong statement on the world, but basically we're out to make money and entertain."

"Lampoon is out to straighten out the

world, and good for them." De Fuccio was asked whether Mad had become a bit raunchier lately, and admitted that might be so.

"But the raunchiest lines come out in our conferences. We roll on the carpet and somersault on the editor's desk. Then we settle down and say, we'll save it for the very last issue of Mad."

The one raunchy idea that got through was a cover drawing of a hand giving the reader "the finger", with the caption, "Number one ECCH magazine!"

"We got a lot of angry letters on that one," he said. "As Bill Gaines said, when we make a mistake, it's a biggie. He wrote a letter to the readers saying, 'We won't violate your hospitality again

in that way'." From that point on talk centred mainly on details. Mort Drucker requires 100 to 200 photographs from a film to do his movie parodies. Norman Mingo, who draws the covers, is a robust 76 years old.

The "E" in Alfred E. Neuman stands for "enigma". And the face first appeared in an early 19th century ad for a painless dentist, with a slogan at the bottom that read, "What me worry? It didn't hurt a bit."

And, remarked De Fuccio, Mad is translated into hundreds of different languages across the world — "including Great Britain, where they translate it into English."



Mad associate editor Jerry De Fuccio calls Mad a "friendly, inoffensive magazine". But it's one of America's five best sellers.

Hoping for a depression

Being a compendium of a few Conversations:

"In bad times," comments free-lance writer Ralph Alfonso, "comic sales rise. We're hoping for a depression."

Successful artists can do what they want. "I don't draw people with blue eyes, because I'm tired of Aryans in comics," explains Howie Chaykin with a slight grin. "I occasionally draw a woman with a pug nose as a panacea for the Aryans in the audience."

On the night-life of comic artists: "Berni (Wrightson) and I live in the same apartment building in Queen's," said Chaykin of New York, "right near an all-

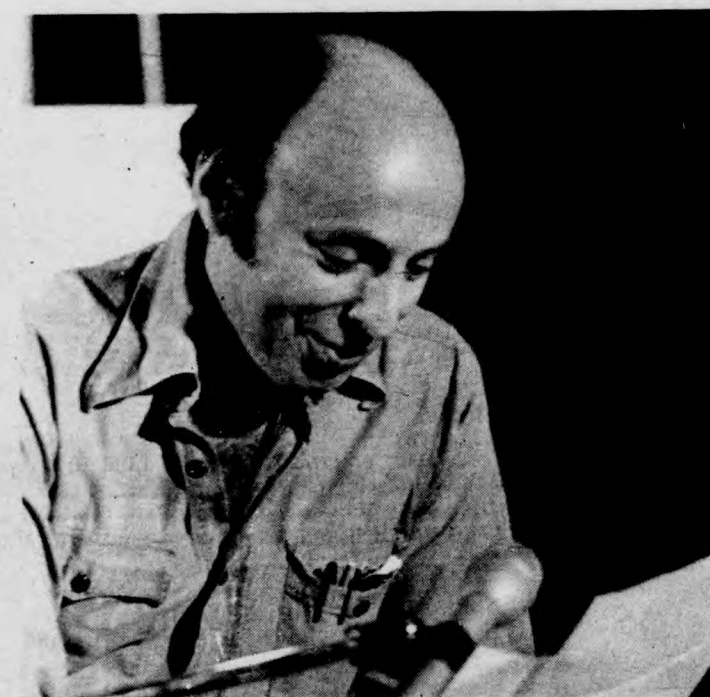
night diner called the Sage. It's great. Everybody there takes qualus, a drug that makes you stupid, and they all have conversations and they leave out sentences."

Berni Wrightson is asked what he thinks of American political cartoonist Oliphant.

"They never forget," he replies.

A theory: "I have a theory," says Marvel editor Gerry Conway, "that all the hard-hats who were beating up kids in the 60s got that way by reading Captain America comics in the 1940s."

A pause. "All the liberals in 1994 are my responsibility."



Harvey Kurtzman, the man who wrote and created the early Mad magazines, reads out a bumbling question from the Cosmicon audience. Playboy cartoon editor Michelle Urry,



Michelle Urry, who says most interviewers ask her whether she likes sex, is gratified to find one that doesn't. Kurtzman threw away most of the questions he was handed.

"Gahan Wilson lives in a web"

Harvey Kurtzman started Mad, started Help, started Trump, and started Little Annie Fanny in Playboy.

His version of Mad collapsed, Help collapsed, and Trump collapsed. But Little Annie Fanny survives, which means that Kurtzman can afford to travel around, teach cartooning courses at Sheridan College downtown, and visit conventions like Cosmicon IV.

He was joined on Saturday by Playboy cartoon editor Michelle Urry, and started the question-and-answer session in the McLaughlin dining hall by handing out scraps of paper. Minutes later, the paper came back, covered with questions.

"If you weren't working for Playboy, what would you do?"

Kurtzman paused. "Collect unemployment insurance," he answered. He tossed away the paper.

"Considering everything you do," read Urry, "how do you tell your parents?"

She threw up her hands. "My parents think I'm a bunny, for God's sake."

Kurtzman added, "My parents think I'm a doctor."

They took a break to discuss underground cartoonist Robert Crumb.

"Crumb has contracted more cases of VD than anyone else I know," said Urry. She added that Playboy refused to buy the comic strip Fritz the Cat when Crumb originally came up with the idea.

"Hefner thought his pussycats were too risqué back then," she said. "I loved it, but it didn't get accepted."

"I printed it," said Kurtzman smugly. "In Help."

The next sheet inquired about Gahan Wilson.

"Gahan Wilson is a nice quiet man," said Kurtzman, "whose only problem is that he lives in a spider's web."

Urry was asked about Buck Brown's little old lady cartoons in Playboy, and said, "It's one way we can get away with salacious material under the guise of geriatrics."

She felt a slight tinge of remorse upon viewing the sea of potential cartoonists in the Con crowd.

"Cartoonists must lead a very lonely existence, huddled over their drawing boards in attics and wondering if their work will be accepted. A cartoon editor leads a parasitic existence. If you don't get talented stuff, you have nothing to edit."

"Some of the stuff we get is so trashy, you can't believe the people who did it are actually out there driving cars."

Kurtzman told a story about Will Elder, the cartoonist who embellishes the Annie Fanny strip.

"A few years ago, he came across a refrigerator car filled with meat at a railway car, and took it all down. Then he tore down some clothes from a clothesline, dressed the meat, and spread it out along the tracks."

"Then the police came." Kurtzman closed off with gossip about the creation of Oui, Playboy's companion magazine, while Urry tried to hush him up.



A Cosmicon browser inspects one of the Memory Lane display rooms