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Drawing on the DARK SIDE

By Joe Queenan: Joe Queenan is a senior editor at Forbes.

THE PROSTITUTE SQUATS IN the shadows, her leather-clad haunches poised atop black leather boots. Her cruel face is encased in a leather mask; in her left hand she clutches a leather whip. She has come for one purpose: to mete out punishment. Is this a dominant mistress working the wharves of Hamburg, a character in a porn film, or a Helmut Newton model?

None of the above. The creature is Batman's legendary rival, the Catwoman, appearing for the first time in her new comic-book role as a vigilante hooker. She has plenty of company on the dark side of the street: a depraved Joker, a murderous Lex Luthor and even an unhinged Batman, who has come apart at the seams now that his beloved Robin has been fiendishly killed. They are all major players in the new world of comic books, an industry that seems determined to dispel any lingering notion that its products are for children.

Recently, the avant-garde art press has been full of praise for the sophisticated graphics, and countless newspaper and magazine articles have cited the topicality of today's comic-book plot lines as a sign of the art form's maturity. Drugs, the greenhouse effect and Libyans pop up with regularity. The Joker surfaces as the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, and is thus accorded diplomatic immunity from prosecution for the beastly murder of Robin.

But what seems to have escaped attention is that over the last decade, comics have forsaken campy repartee and outlandishly byzantine plots for a steady diet of remorseless violence. "Green Arrow" depicts a woman whose eyes have been plucked out by vultures. In "Spider-Man," seven men are ripped to pieces by a wolf. The back page of "Wolverine" shows the hero puffing on a cigarette as blood drips from his lips. In "Superman," a stick of dynamite is ignited in a man's mouth. "Black Orchid" begins with a woman being tied up and set on fire, then moves on to child abuse, a mutant fed live rats, and a jailed hybrid - half woman, half plant - who avoids rape only because her jailers find her too repulsive.

"There seems to be a great market for catharsis, for a 'Nightmare on Elm Street' type story," says George Perez, who draws the substantially less gory "Wonder Woman." "There seems to be a market for the real jugular story."

THERE IS NO BETTER SYMBOL FOR the direction comic books have taken than the devolution of the Joker from the deranged prankster of the 1960's to the homicidal, sexually aberrant monster who beats Robin to a pulp in the enormously popular 1988 Batman series, published by DC comics and now collected in book-size format under the title "A Death in the Family." Robin, betrayed to the Joker by his mother, was ultimately blown to smithereens after DC readers, voting through a 900 hotline, gave their blessing to his savage demise. "Readers feel that life is out of control," explains Jenette Kahn, president and editor in chief of DC Comics. "The Joker embodies the idea."

The Joker's deprivations may be lethal to Robin, but they have had a salutary effect on the nearly \$300 million comic-book industry, which has more than doubled in size in this decade. The industry continues to be dominated by two companies: DC, the home of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman; and Marvel, with the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man and The Incredible Hulk. But it is a host of other superheroes - The X-Men, Wolverine, The Punisher, Daredevil - who, though unknown to the general public, are far more popular within the comic-book subculture than The Man of Steel or the Caped Crusader.

Most offer heavy doses of sex and violence. In a recent issue of "Displaced Paranormals," a comely female mutant bound by her wrists and tail is suspended from the ceiling and tortured. Her male companion is hung above a fire and has two eggs cooked on his back. "Displaced Paranormals," like many other Marvel and DC titles, gets the approval of the Comics Code Authority.

"You wouldn't want to see what doesn't get approved," states Michael Silberkleit, president of the increasingly irrelevant Comics Magazine Association of America, which oversees the Comics Code. He also happens to be chairman and co-publisher of Archie Comic Publications Inc., whose anachronistically wholesome Archie family still manages to earn annual revenues in excess of \$13 million, which makes it the third largest seller in the business, after DC and Marvel. "I keep telling my colleagues: 'You guys are going too far.' "

Although Silberkleit accuses a small group of writers and artists of foisting their own dark vision of the world on their readers, executives and creators claim they are merely satisfying the appetite of their audience. Comic-book reader surveys show a young (ages 13 to 29) and almost entirely male readership. John Davis, a major distributor, comments:

"The readers are teen-aged boys, so what you have is a lot of repressed anger. They're going through puberty, and they like to see characters act out their aggressions. The companies respond to what the readers want." Noting that a recent issue of "Green Arrow" depicts a crucified stripper - graphic enough in its execution that many would consider it pornography - he remarks, "They do like to see the characters sliced and diced."

Another staple of today's comics is titillating sex, with women slapped, bound and generally

mistreated.

They are also frequently drawn from behind and below to accentuate their fish-net stockings, ample thighs and black spike-heeled boots. Skirts and dresses regularly blow up to reveal shapely legs, and the superheroines and villains clearly do not stint on the hosiery budget - nor on uplift bras. Thus, Lois Lane flashes a glimpse of lingerie while kicking a bad guy in the groin, and the hooker Catwoman dons leather because her clients are "freaks." Although there are few women on the creative side of the business, even they get in on the grime and grit: A recent issue of Marvel's "Daredevil," written by Ann Nocenti, shows a dentist being dismembered by his own machines, and "Catwoman," written by Mindy Newell, has an episode in which the heroine's sister - a voluptuous nun - gets tied up by a pimp.

Nuns in bondage notwithstanding, Jenette Kahn argues that things are not as bad as they seem. She cites the new Wonder Woman as a character who is "incredibly humanist and pacific," and notes, "I just sent a batch over to Gloria Steinem." Steinem is a Wonder Woman fan from way back. "I grew up with Wonder Woman, who was the only relief from violence in comic books in the 1940's and the only female hero," she says.

Artist-writer George Perez, one of a handful of comic-book superstars, is responsible for the updated "Wonder Woman." Feminism may ultimately triumph, but women have a hard time of it nevertheless. The back cover of the first issue in the new series depicts a virtually naked Queen Hippolyte kneeling in chains before a leering Heracles. Later, she escapes from prison by inviting her captors to amuse themselves with her. Asked about his risqué material, Perez replies, "We're dealing with a fantastic world, but yes, the majority of the audience is young males, and we are dealing with a more libidinous awareness." But, he adds, "All of our men are well-built, too."

THE VINDICTIVE, SADISTIC TONE OF comics of the 1980's is best exemplified by the work of Alan Moore, author of "Watchmen," which appeared in 1986. This is a well-written and elegantly drawn series that opens with a retired superhero named The Comedian being tossed out of his high-rise apartment building.

The Comedian doesn't elicit much sympathy, however, for we learn in flashbacks that he had previously gunned down his pregnant Vietnamese girlfriend and attempted to rape a superheroine. "Watchmen" also features a boy who laughs when he finds out that his mother committed suicide by drinking Drano, a heroine forced into early retirement because of lesbianism, and a child hacked to pieces and fed to German shepherds. This is all in the service of a sophisticated literary technique called "foreshadowing" that prepares the reader for the riveting climax, in which half of New York City's population gets annihilated. (In the comic-book universe, anything Armageddon-like that takes place in New York is generally viewed as an improvement.) DC labels one particularly lurid line of comic books, whose titles include "Catwoman," as "Suggested for Mature Readers." DC claims that the average reader of this line is 23.9 years old, but there is nothing to prevent younger readers from

buying them. In a good number of shops, the attitude seems to be: If you're tall enough to reach them, you're old enough to buy them.

Thus, on a visit to Manhattan's huge comic-book store, Forbidden Planet, or the local 7-Eleven in Tarrytown, N.Y., you're likely to see everyone from the fresh-faced boy next door to the more morbid Dungeons and Dragons types to the scholarly introverts to the upwardly mobile young adult, (Continued on Page 79) whom DC actively courts. The one thing you're not likely to see are many females.

IN MANY WAYS, THE COMICS industry seems to be playing with the same fire that nearly destroyed it in the early 1950's. Comic books, born in the late 1930's, had a tremendous first five years, with individual titles by DC and others selling several million copies apiece. But when things went into a slump after the Second World War, many publishers turned to sensationalism: bondage, transvestism, severed heads used as baseballs. (The 490-page Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide includes such notations as "spanking panel," "decapitation of girl's head with paper cutter" and "dismemberment" - all of which enhance the value of vintage titles in the eyes of collectors.) Book burnings and Congressional hearings during the McCarthy era forced the imperiled industry to create the Comics Magazine Association of America. It also promised that establishment figures would not be shown in a bad light, and females would dress more chastely. And if the guys were going to play baseball, they would have to use the standard equipment.

By the end of the Eisenhower years, the roster of some 50 publishers had dwindled to 15, mostly putting out cheerful but inane products. Sales had plummeted. DC and its smaller competitors were mired in a creative abyss. Says John Davis, who is an amateur historian of comics, "The letters 'DC' stood for 'Dull Comics'."

In 1961, convinced that there was a market for a less infantile product, Stan Lee, an editor, art director and head writer at Marvel Comics, began to change the editorial direction at his company. DC was famous for its intricate plots, but Marvel shifted the attention to characterization, spawning a family of flawed superheroes. "They had physical shortcomings or they had to work after school, like Spider-Man," explains Davis. Marvel was a big hit with college students. By the early 1970's, thanks in part to the more advantageous terms it offered distributors, the company was outselling DC.

Meanwhile both DC and Marvel were retreating from the mass audience, zeroing in on a cult of perhaps 500,000 dedicated readers who would zealously buy their products month in and month out. The casual fan was shown to the door.

"One of Marvel's innovations was that you had to keep buying the comics to follow what was happening," notes Davis. "Part of the appeal was that it wasn't something your neighbor could pick up and understand."

The average person picking up a Marvel comic for the first time today would have trouble, for instance, sorting out the myriad relationships among the characters in Marvel's "The Uncanny X-Men," the most popular series of the last few years. (Published under six separate titles, the X-Men sell more than 1.5 million copies a month.) "It's hard to get into the X-Men universe," admits the illustrator John Byrne, who drew the series until 1982. "It requires that you read the last 20 or 30 issues."

This series focuses on mutants with strange powers - the X-Men - who become the object of a sort of racist persecution around the planet. There are good mutants, bad mutants, female mutants, mutants that can self-teleport, and mutants who can blast through steel with their heads. None of them are terribly popular in their own world; all of them are tremendously popular with comic-book buyers. Byrne and Davis both feel that the trouble the X-Men have in dealing with an increasingly hostile world explains their appeal to teen-agers, as does the fact that outsiders cannot understand them.

These editorial changes have been paralleled by an equally revolutionary change in the way comic books are sold. By the 1980's, magazine distributors had long since lost interest in the thin profit margins they earned from comics. This encouraged a New Yorker, Phil Seuling, to set up a direct distribution network: selling comic books to specialty shops on a non-returnable basis. Today, at least two-thirds of comic books are sold in 3,500 specialty shops by owners who order three months in advance, and who, unlike newstand and convenience-store operators, must keep every title they buy. The owners are constantly apprised of future plot lines, and are told far in advance who will be writing, drawing and inking stories, all of which are major concerns to comic-book readers and collectors.

Another innovation has been in packaging and pricing. Comic books are no longer cheap. Upscale comics printed on shiny paper run \$1.50 and up. There are also "graphic novels" sold in major bookstore chains, which run between \$3.95 and \$12.95, and collections, which can cost as much as \$24.95. Maggie Thompson, co-editor of the Comic Buyer's Guide, published in Iola, Wis., whose industry surveys chart revenues and sales, says that almost all of the nearly \$300 million in annual revenues comes from circulation, as opposed to advertising, which is negligible. That figure does not include licensing fees for movies, videos and other spinoffs, which are believed to be huge.

DC AND MARVEL ARE EASY leaders in the marketplace as a whole, with Archie a strong third, but as many as 200 independent publishers share the rest of the market. Although a few sell 30,000 copies of their top titles each month, most are mom-and-pop operations run by artists indulging their own creative urges rather than entrepreneurs seeking to build a new comic-book empire.

It is to the independents that one must turn for a respite from the numbing violence. One of the most acclaimed of the alternative comics is by Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez. Their parallel tongue-in-cheek soap operas, published under the title "Love & Rockets," have chronicled, among other stories, the lives and loves of a group of Hispanic robot repairmen and women. Another cult classic is "American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar," the autobiographical ramblings of a Cleveland

hospital file clerk. The archetypal Pekar comic-book story is an account of the writer's real-life appearance on the talk show "Late Night With David Letterman," during which he spent a lot of time beefing about how hard it is to make money as a writer.

Though Paul Levitz, DC's executive vice president and publisher, admires the work of Pekar and "Los Bros Hernandez," and notes that DC has set up something called Piranha Press to attract the work of more offbeat artists, he doesn't see these mavericks as a threat to the comic-book titans.

"How are they doing?" he muses. "They might be doing O.K. by the standards of a couple of guys who live in the same building that they publish comic books in."

Doing much better is Mirage Studios, which has earned millions in toy and television licensing fees from sanitized versions of the wry but brutal "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." Though there are other success stories - there are even houses importing and translating Japanese comics - most of the successful smaller presses practice downscale me-tooism, churning out poorly drawn versions of the major publishers' superheroes. Even among the independents, truly innovative work such as Art Spiegelman's "Maus," a rodent retelling of the Holocaust, is a rarity.

TRADITIONALLY, COMIC books have been art by committee, with the companies calling the shots. Although that has changed to some extent in the last decade, with more and more creators bringing their own projects to the major publishers, most popular comic-book characters still belong to the companies, which exercise tight rein over what the artists can do with the characters. Thus, when DC decided to kill off Robin, or when Marvel decided to marry off Spider-Man, the decisions were not reached haphazardly.

"We are a character-driven company," says Tom DeFalco, Marvel's editor in chief. "A top creative person has got to deal with his editor, and then he's got to deal with me. If there is a major character change, I have to tell my superior."

An editor is often involved from the earliest moment. George Perez, the Queens-based artist who does "Wonder Woman" and "The New Teen Titans" with his partner, the writer Marv Wolfman, says: "A good editor will see the plot before it goes to the artist; he acts as a sort of traffic cop. A lot of editors ask for a six-month overview of what we're going to be doing to make sure similar plot lines aren't used in other books.

"An appearance by a guest character in another story has to be approved by the editor. In fact, sometimes the editor is a third plotter, though he never gets credit, because that's what an editor is supposed to do."

Artists and writers are certainly earning more money than they did in the past. Journeymen artists can now earn \$50,000 a year, while top guns receive \$200,000 to \$300,000. After years of bitter

wrangling, comic-book creators now earn royalties that start once titles pass 75,000 in sales, plus certain copyright privileges. Artists such as Perez receive royalties when another artist draws a character they created. Artists also get back their original drawings, which can be sold to collectors.

"When I first came in there were no creator's rights, no licensing, no participation in reprint rights," remarks Jenette Kahn. "Now there are. We put the artists' names on the cover, because we think they deserve credit. For 35 years, the artists labored in anonymity. It was a medieval industry."

"We're treated better than we used to be; we're not just hired hands," concedes Byrne. In 1986, he helped revamp and simplify the Superman legend. One reason his name is on the cover, he notes, is because a Superman story drawn by John Byrne will sell a lot more copies than one drawn by one of DC's less-gifted artists. "I have my faithful 50," says Byrne. "That's 50,000 people who follow me wherever I go. My name on the cover usually means a 20 percent increase in sales."

But even though comic books have made him affluent and famous, Alan Moore, the co-creator of "Watchmen," has announced that he is through with the majors, whose business practices he described in Comics Interview magazine as "dismal," "grubby," and "antediluvian," perhaps because DC still owns the copyright and trademark to his "Watchmen." Henceforth, he vows, he will go directly to book companies with his projects.

"He's whistling in the dark," says Marvel's president, James E. Galton. "I don't know that book companies are able or willing to deal with the hassle of putting out comic books."

LIKE SCIENCE FICTION and hard rock, comic books have pretensions to be more than just popular art. "We're dealing with substantive themes and philosophical issues," Kahn intones. Moore's characters quote Yeats. A DC title called "The Question" includes on its Recommended Reading List "The Power of Myth," by Joseph Campbell. The interview with Alan Moore in Comics Interview mentions Woyzek, Kant, Schopenhauer, Bosch, Barthes, Derrida, semiotics and William S. Burroughs. Quips Byrne, who is now working on "She-Hulk," which seemingly owes little to semiotic theory or deconstructionism: "I always scan interviews and look for the name Kierkegaard. It's like a first-year college student trying to impress his teacher."

Most of the attention accorded comics as a serious art form, it's worth noting, has been directed at the innovative independents like Spiegelman, the Hernandez brothers and Pekar - not the artists working for Marvel and DC. When the graphic design magazine Print recently devoted an entire issue to the subject of comic books, the highest praise was reserved for comic books far outside the DC-Marvel mainstream.

Comic books within the mainstream, it appears, want to have it both ways, enticing the reader with graphic visual renderings of the very depravity they supposedly deplore.

Consider Alan Moore's latest offering, "V for Vendetta," which is set in the 1990's in a fascist, postnuclear Britain. It kicks off with a mysterious figure blowing up the Houses of Parliament, then moves on to concentration camps, rat-infested prison cells, murdered lesbians and a vicar of Westminster Abbey who fancies grown women in girlish frocks and pigtails. In one episode, a female in ruffled panties laments that she must "crouch like an animal and offer my hindquarters in submission to the world." Does that world not, in fact, include the tens of thousands of "mature readers" who made "V" a success?

Illustrator Byrne says: "In general, I don't like the dark superheroes. I don't mind a dark character in a group, but if your lead character is grim, and the city is grim, and the villains are grim, what do you have left but a grim story?"

"I'm sorry that comics are not the way they used to be when we were young," says Jenette Kahn when asked about all the sex and gore. "I hate to see the passing of the era when comics were part of the joy of being young."

So does Silberkleit. "I'm always afraid that someone's going to come down hard on this industry," he complains. He notes that several comic-book publishers have recently written a letter to DC Comics complaining about the crucifixion scene in "Green Arrow." "Back in the 50's, Kefauver and McCarthy nearly put us out of business."

Silberkleit's frothy Archie and Veronica products are a lonely island of juvenalia in a sea of blood. He laments, "If you fell to Earth from Mars and picked up a comic book, you would be very disillusioned."

Drawings (pg. 33); Photos of comics, 'Wolverine', 'The Punisher war journals', 'X-Men' (pg. 34); John Byrne, illustrator with his dog (Karen Kuehn) (pg. 34)