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In the USA

THE
MAGAZINE
ABOUT
WRITING FOR
COMICS,
ANIMATION,
AND SCIENCE-
FICTION

WRITING
THE
JUSTICE
LEAGUE
SHOW

ERIK
LARSEN
SPEAKS!

MEET THE
WRITER
OF THE
SAMURAI
JACK
LIVE
ACTION
MOVIE

PLUS:
SAMPLE
SCRIPTS

STEP-BY-
STEP
SCRIPTING
ON
SPIDER-
GIRL
& MORE!

INSIDE: 10 RULES FOR COMICS WRITERS!

DANNY FINGEROTH'S

WRITE

Now! #2
MAGAZINE

November
2002



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DANNY FINGEROTH'S **WRITE Now!** MAGAZINE

Issue #2

November 2002

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READ Now!

Message from **Danny Fingeroth**, editor



Welcome to **Write Now!** #2. Thanks for coming back. We've got some more great stuff for you this issue.

First, though, in case you're wondering where the **Denny O'Neil** interview we promised for this issue went...

Denny underwent successful coronary bypass surgery in September. He's recuperating now. We did the interview in August—and Denny had even given me his private notes for some of his “how to write comics” classes that he gives at DC. But I felt that I'd rather wait for him to recover (which he's doing quite nicely, from what I hear) so he can give his final input on the interview and notes. Get well soon, Denny. Comics needs you!

What we *do* have in this issue is some pretty amazing stuff.

In the practical information realm:

- **Steven Grant** tells the ten most important things you need to know to survive as a professional comics writer. Steven's been doing it for over twenty years, so you might want to take note of what he says.
- **Tom DeFalco** shows the “nuts and bolts” that go into plotting and scripting comics stories. Whether as Marvel's editor in chief, or as one of the most accomplished writers in comics, Tom knows how to take an initial inspiration and structure it into a story that an artist can draw and a reader can savor. Here, he pulls back the curtain and shows you the mechanics of story-making.
- **Lee Nordling**, who wears many hats, including that of editor of the **Rugrats** syndicated comic strip, describes what it takes to create a successful syndicated comic strip in his eye-opening *quiz*. See how you do on it!
- **Reviews** of some important **how-to books** on writing.

And in the “lessons disguised as interviews” department, we have:

- **Todd Alcott**. The writer of the upcoming **Samurai Jack** live action feature film, and co-writer of the smash animated film **Antz**, talks about his career and about the writing life in general. The **insights** and **lessons** he offers are invaluable. You'll want to cut them out and put them under your pillow.
- **Stan Berkowitz**. He's written countless episodes of **Batman Beyond**, the 1990s **Spider-Man** Animated Series, **Superman Adventures**, and, currently, the red

hot **Justice League**. Stan was also a writer and producer on the **Superboy** live action series. Here, Mr. B offers a wealth of insights on what being a long term player in the TV animation business is all about.

- **Anne D. Bernstein**. Anne's written many episodes of the MTV **Beavis and Butthead** spinoff, **Daria**, developed MTV's **Downtown** series, and was **Nickelodeon Magazine's** comics editor. Anne talks about her eclectic career, how she maintains it *without* living in LA, and what you need to know to thrive and survive and still have a career—*on your own terms*.
- **Lee Nordling** (wearing a different hat). Lee's career as writer, editor, packager and consultant encompasses comics, movies, syndicated strips, and more. As executive editor of **Platinum Studios comics division**, Lee oversees the creation and development of comics that are on the Hollywood development track as movies and TV series.

Whether it's in step-by-step form, or couched in interviews and articles, I'm striving to make **DFWN!** a place where you can get **practical information**, not just about *how* to write, but about what it's *really like* to have a career as a writer of popular culture, full- or part-time.

Next issue, in **DFWN!** #3, we'll have the **Denny O'Neil** interview, as well as insights into the careers and techniques of **Incredible Hulk's Axel Alonso** and **Bruce Jones**, **Thunderbolts' Fabian Nicieza**, **21 Down's Jimmy Palmiotti**, and **Astro City's Kurt Busiek**.

And issue #4 is going to have the word from **Howard Chaykin**, among other heavy hitters, as well as an incredible new feature I'll tell you more about next time, that will teach you more about comics script writing than you ever thought possible!

Write Away!

DANNY
Danny Fingeroth

PS. On a personal note: My twin sons, **Ethan and Jacob**, were born July 29th. Mother and sons are doing fine so far. Dad, too. I think. This issue of DFWN is dedicated to the boys. Your dad loves you and your mom, guys. It says so right here in print.

Inside the Mind of a Writer/Artist

Interview with Erik Larsen

WRITE Now!

Interview by **Danny Fingeroth** on June 27, 2002

Transcription by **The LongBox.com Staff**

Erik Larsen loves comics.

More specifically, he loves super-hero comics. While he's dabbled in TV and animation, working in them is not of particular interest to him. Erik loves to write and draw stories about spandex-clad characters beating the stuffing out of each other. Not to say he doesn't have other story-telling concerns. He does romance and satire and mystery. He just does it all in the context of spandex punching and hitting.

You know, like Jack Kirby used to do.

Erik's early work as a young kid on a character called *Savage Dragon* led to him to eventually become a comics pro, first as artist on such comics as *Doom Patrol*, *The Outsiders* and *DNAgents*. Erik went on to draw *The Punisher*. He then hit his stride drawing *Amazing Spider-Man*, following Todd McFarlane's landmark run on the series with one of his own. Erik gave Venom the largest mouth ever seen on a non-crocodile in comics.

Turning to writing, Erik wrote and drew a memorable one-shot and then a "hoohah-action-filled," guest-star galore, multi-part arc for me on ("adjectiveless," as we called it) *Spider-Man*, again having the thankless task (Thanks, Erik) of following Todd.

Then the Image Comics thing happened—maybe you heard about it, it was in all the papers—and, luckily, Erik had this *Savage Dragon* character from when he was nine that he pulled out of his hat. He's been writing and drawing *Savage Dragon* for more than ten years now. That's more than 100 CONSECUTIVE issues.

During that decade, Erik's also found time to write *Aquaman*, *Nova*, *Wolverine* and a mess of *Dragon* spin-off mini-series. There was even a *Savage Dragon* animated

series in there somewhere.

And what does he want to do next? Why, write and draw *The Savage Dragon*.

You can learn a lot from Erik Larsen about dedication, consistency, quality—and about spandex-clad characters beating the stuffing out of each other. Read on and see...

DANNY FINGERTH: Tell me the secret origin of Erik Larsen. How did you get started? I know you were always a comics fan.

ERIK LARSEN: My dad bought comics when he was a kid, so we always had them around. There wasn't a period where I wasn't aware of comic books. They weren't necessarily new ones. There'd be old Donald Duck comics and old EC Comics. He had a long run of *Captain Marvel Adventures*. All of them were later passed on to me.

DF: So he didn't buy them for you, he bought them for himself?

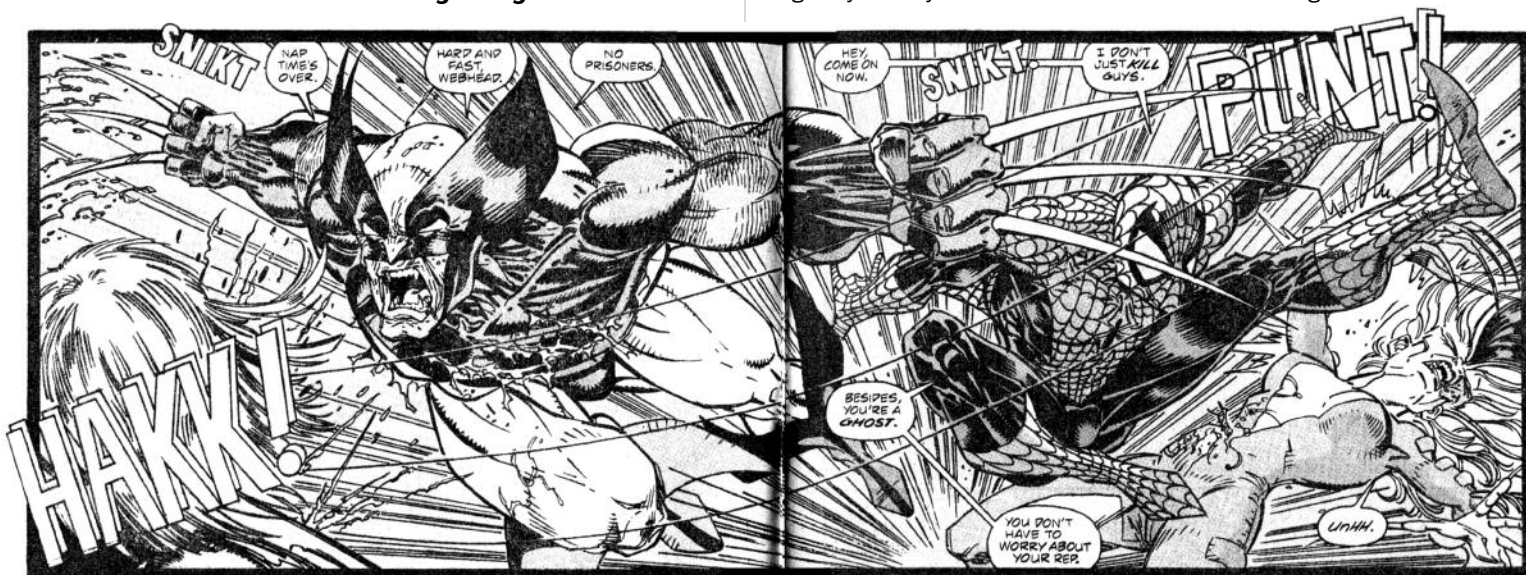
EL: He bought them for himself in the '40s and '50s, and at some point he decided to let his kids read them. These were comics that would later be worth hundreds and thousands of dollars and my brother would wake up with covers wrapped around his face.

DF: If you guys hadn't drooled all over them, they would have been worth hundreds and thousands of dollars.

EL: We probably cut his collection down to a third the size it originally was by the time we were done with it. He gave the



The cover to *Savage Dragon* #1 (regular series) by Erik Larsen. [©2002 Erik Larsen.]



From *Marvel Comics Presents* #5. Script and Pencils by Erik Larsen, inks by Joe Rubinstein. [©2002 Marvel Characters, Inc.]



From *Savage Dragon* #31. Written and drawn by Erik. [©2002 Erik Larsen.]

remains to me and then my house burned down. All the stuff that I hadn't taken care of was gone. [laughter]

DF: From what I read in my research, you moved around a lot, right?

EL: Yeah, for no damn good reason. We weren't wanted by the law and weren't an army family. My dad was a teacher of sorts. I just don't care enough to find out what he actually taught. [laughter]

DF: Is he still alive?

EL: Yeah.

DF: So you could ask him, but you just haven't?

EL: Give me an hour and I could finish up on the phone with you and ask him. It seemed like there were all kinds of drama things going on when I was a kid. People putting on plays and things like that, but I don't know if he was doing other stuff like teaching English too. I don't have any idea. He was teaching college when I was a wee lad, and he got fed up with doing that and decided to strike off on his own. He had enough money saved up that he figured he wouldn't have to work for a little while, so he packed up the kids and got the heck out of there.

DF: How many Larsen siblings were there?

EL: There are four of us. I'm the second. I have an older brother and two younger sisters.

DF: Any of them do anything in a creative venue?

EL: No, not anything like it.

DF: Was your mom artistic in any way?

EL: She was a homemaker and she is currently a reverend. [laughter] She wasn't when we were growing up.

DF: That's interesting, especially since I just read the *Savage Dragon* "Talk with God" story today.

EL: Nothing there. No connection.

DF: What was the thing that made you go from being one of the millions of kids reading and loving comics to saying: "I want to do this"?

EL: What it was, more than anything, is that I just have this love for drawing. When we moved from being up in Washington after my dad quit his college deal, we moved down to California and we had no TV and no electricity. We sort of pulled into a big, empty field and he said, "Well kids we're home." [laughter] We built our own place among the redwoods, and then a few months later we were shipped off to various schools. At that point, there was nothing else to do but draw. [laughter] I don't know... I've always been writing and drawing my own comic book stories. I don't really remember not doing that.

DF: I read that you had a friend that you did it with.

EL: I had other guys that I tried to hoodwink into doing comics, too. Nobody was that enthusiastic about it. [laughter] They'd be like, "Here's my guys," and then draw them in a couple pictures and then that would be it. A friend of mine, Chris Vito, came up with several different characters and he said: "Use these guys, I don't want to do anything with them." I was always trying to get someone else to write my stuff because I would look in the real comics and there were six names in the credits boxes and I needed to have some other names. [laughter] There really wasn't anybody who was that enthusiastic about wanting to do comics, especially not to write stuff for this knucklehead.

DF: Had your friends discovered girls at that point?

EL: No, we were all too young and not paying that much attention to stuff like that. We were in fifth grade. At that age, you can admire girls from afar. I did, in sixth grade, have a friend named Aaron Katz who was more into doing comics than my other pals, and he and I created a comic book together called *The Deadly Duo*. He would do one issue and then I would do one issue, back and forth, and we would tie them together in the weakest, lamest way just to make it seem like it was a legitimate series. In one issue someone would throw a ball, and in the next issue someone would catch it. [laughter]

DF: What's he doing now?

EL: He's a carpenter now. Completely just really didn't go ahead and pursue his artistic stuff. Although every now and then he would say, "I really should get back to that," and he would show me the stuff that he'd been working on, which looked like a sixth grader drew it. There was no learning curve at all. [laughter] You knock off for twenty years and come back to it, what do you expect?

DF: But you kept at it.

EL: I kept doing it, and at one point, when I was 19, I decided that I seriously wanted to break into big-time comics. I had been sending art samples out left and right.

DF: You were 19 in what year?

EL: I don't know. What year would that be? That would be 1982. There you go. That should be simple math, I'm 39 now. It's really not that hard.

DF: You could start from your birth year and add twenty and then subtract one. That's how I would do it, but that's me. I know it sounds like rocket science. [laughter]

EL: Also my birthday is really near the end of the year, so it throws things off.

DF: So around 1982, so you must have felt that you were interested enough and good enough to want to send your art off.

EL: I would send stuff to Jim Shooter (then Marvel editor-in-chief) and he would send me back polite responses. Jim was good at keeping some line of communication open. He would respond to people who would send stuff.

DF: You were submitting art, not writing?

EL: I would be sending in art. Really pursuing the writing end of things hadn't been a big drive of mine, although at one point I had done my own fanzine with a couple of other young men, one of them was 26 and the other was 32. When we did the fanzine, I had written and drawn this story that I had sent to George Wildman over at Charlton Comics, because they were publishing this book called **Charlton Bullseye**. The idea was that whoever was willing to do comics for free, they would publish them as long as they were good enough. I'm thinking: "I'm good enough for that." I'd heard that they had too much material already, but I was hoping that this was going to be so brilliant that it would knock them off their socks. Needless to say, they got in touch with me to say the book had been cancelled, but your stuff was good. So I had this story that was done, so when it came to doing the fanzine, my story was already finished.

DF: Who all worked on the fanzine?

EL: It was me and those two other guys. I ended up inking their stories and saving their asses. They never really went on to fame and fortune. I showed the fanzine to (former Eclipse Comics editor) cat yronwode, and her response was, "You should probably just write and not draw because your writing is far superior to your pathetic artwork." [laughter]

DF: Were you at the time writing stories, screenplays, novels, anything?

EL: My interest has always just been in these guys kicking the crap out of each other in comic books. I'm just a super-hero fan. I've never been a guy who sits there and says, "You know I really have a great story about two cats driving around in a car trying to pick up chicks." [laughter] If I think of a story like that, I'd rather tell it with Peter Parker than with some regular guy. I just like the super-hero element and I think that for all the things you might want to do, super-heroes are the most flexible medium ever. You can tell any kind of story you want within that genre. You can do a romance—really anything.

DF: You just jumped ahead ten questions because that was something that I wanted to talk to you about, but that's okay. You clearly love the super-hero. Much of the mainstream today is super-heroes. There are super-hero westerns and super-hero space opera and super-hero horror stories. There are those who think that's not a good thing, that it alienates readers. Do you think that comics are best suited for super-heroes, which is really what birthed the medium in a way?

EL: As far as I'm concerned, they are. I don't know about the rest of you, but most other comics just don't do it for me.

Other people are publishing entire lines of comics with guys swinging on trees and I don't care. I don't get involved with it.

DF: But you would go to a movie or read a book with a guy swinging on a tree?

EL: Possibly. I guess those are real different media for me.

There's comic book stuff that I have enjoyed that was something else too. I read **Groo the Wanderer** and there are no super-heroes in that. I'm just saying that me, as a creator, that since there is nothing that I can't do within the realm of super-heroes, and I have all these characters that I love, why not do that?

DF: It makes sense. So you kept sending stuff in and, was it Shooter who gave you your first break?

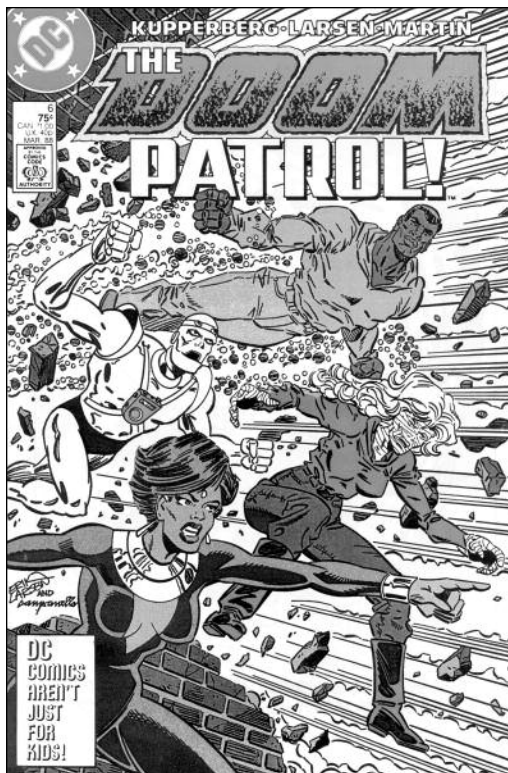
EL: Shooter gave me a break at one point, but I'd gotten in a very small way before that. There a guy who was publishing a black-and-white super-hero comic called **Megaton** that was getting a bunch of pros and semi-pros to work on his stuff, and he put together a decent little mag. The first issue had me and Gene Day and Jackson Guice.

DF: That wasn't **Megaton Man**—it was something else?

EL: **Megaton Man** came around later and



Erik Larsen art from **Megaton** (1985) and the return of the character Vanguard ten years later in **Savage Dragon** #14. [Art & Savage Dragon ©2002 Erik Larsen; Vanguard ©2002 Erik Larsen & Gary Carlson.]



The cover to Erik Larsen's first issue of *The Doom Patrol* #6 (March 1988). [©2002 DC Comics.]

just confused the hell out of everybody. I've spent my life saying I worked on **Megaton** not **Megaton Man**.
DF: I'm glad I could continue the tradition.
EL: Not Neal Adams's **Megalith**, either. [laughter]
DF: So the first thing was in an anthology?
EL: I did that for him, and again it was super-hero stuff, and I was paid real money. I was 19 years old and my stuff was inked by a real inker, Sam DeLarosa. He inked my very first funny book job and Sam Grainger inked the

second one and then we ran out of Sams, so I had to start inking my own stuff. [laughter]

DF: I guess Sam Hill had to ink a few issues. [laughter] Did that open the door to make you a true professional, one people would give work to?

EL: Yes. And then it was matter of networking, and working your way from doing the first job to doing something else that you might want to do even more. I would send out samples to everybody, and then I would get little bites here and there. I did some stuff for Americomics for about a year. Just jumping around doing a book here and there, **Sentinels of Justice** and what have you.

DF: Who published that, Americomics?

EL: Americomics actually is the publisher. They often go by AC Comics. They published a number of books. The most notable was **Femforce**. The women characters in that book basically pushed their breasts around in wheelbarrows.

DF: They were ahead of their time. And then Shooter gave you a **Thor** job as I recall.

EL: He gave me a **Thor** job and told me it would be in **Marvel Fanfare** because it was an inventory story. I didn't know anything. I heard the name "Fanfare" and thought: first thing out of the gate and I'm a fan favorite. [laughter] It didn't quite work out that way, but in retrospect it was cool, because he had Stan Lee script it and Vince Colletta ink it. So I felt as if I was sort of filling in for Jack Kirby. Jack's last Stan job. Shooter and I plotted it together at a Chicago convention. We talked through the major points of where things needed to turn and stuff like that. It was essentially what everyone complains about when an artist is his own writer, which is an issue-long fight scene.

DF: Was that the first official professional writing that you did?

EL: Yes, but I didn't vouch for it. I didn't get paid for plotting it at all. There was no written plot. It was just me and Jim

talking it through.

DF: Where did that eventually see print?

EL: It eventually saw print in **Thor** #385 with a Ron Frenz/Al Milgrom cover. Thor versus the Hulk.

DF: That's **Thor volume 1** #385.

EL: Yes **Thor volume 1**, thank you. I don't think anyone's going out and looking for **Thor** #385 from volume 2. [laughter]

DF: That will be out in 2020.

EL: If they don't renumber it again.

DF: The **Megaton** stuff—you didn't write it, or did you?

EL: Actually, I did. It was a co-plotting thing to begin with, and then I took over writing it and doing the whole thing. The first issue I co-plotted and scribbled notes on, and the second one the same thing, but by the third one I was completely writing it, and completely penciling, inking, and lettering it. The whole thing was mine by that point.

DF: You've been messing around with the **Savage Dragon** in one form or another since you were a kid, right?

EL: Yes. That just went through a number of changes over the years because, you start off just saying, "I want to draw something like this guy." So Dragon was a knockoff of Batman, which surprises most people. Imagine the green part on his head is a mask and there's a cut-out part where he would have flesh, and then you have a big, green cape. But Dragon always wore bluejeans and he drove Speed Racer's car.

DF: What is it about the character that made you keep coming back to it?

EL: I don't have any idea. Because I kept changing him as time went on, and every time I changed him, it would be because I thought that the older version was really dumb. Just corny and dumb and I didn't want anything to do with it. [laughter]

DF: But you still called the character the **Savage Dragon**?



Pencils from Larsen's work on Americomics' **Sentinels of Justice** (circa 1985-86). [©2002 Americomics.]

The Ten Rules of Surviving Comics

by STEVEN GRANT

Steven Grant has been a professional comics writer for 25 years. Check your comics from 1978, 1988, 1998 and today, and you'll likely as not find Steven's name in the credits of a bunch of them. There are just a handful of people working today who you can say that about. Steven's had his years of superstardom, when he and Mike Zeck told memorable stories of the **Punisher** for Marvel, and made his independent mark with **Whisper** and other properties. He's written **X-Man** and **Spider-Man**—and adventures of WWF wrestlers.



Steven's also been quite adept—and ahead of the pack—in terms of being a proponent for creators' rights, his own and that of others. He published the influential 'prozone' **Wap!** with Frank Miller. He was one of the first to make use of the Internet as a way to connect with readers and pros. His **Permanent Damage** column is a weekly highlight at the **Comic Book Resources** website. Steven has kept writing and surviving in an industry notorious for being fickle and forgetting those who help it flourish. His upcoming projects include: a western graphic novel, **Red Sunset**; a crime graphic novel, **Videoactive**; the return of his heroine **Whisper** in **DAY X** (all from AiT/PlanetLar Books); **X-Men Unlimited** stories starring Lockheed, with art by Paul Smith, and Sabretooth, drawn by David Finch; an issue of **Birds Of Prey**; a trade paperback of **Damned**, with Mike Zeck, from Cyberosia; the mini-series **My Flesh Is Cool** and **Sacrilege** from Avatar Press; and a collection of his Internet column, **Master Of The Obvious**.

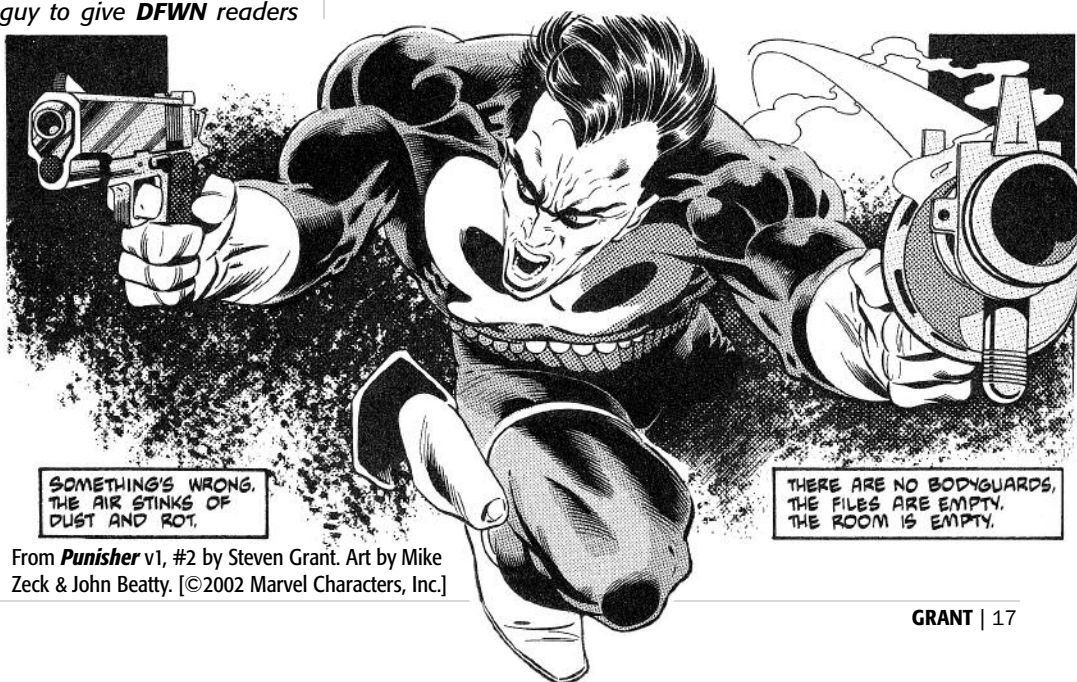
Steven's not on **Wizard's** top ten list—which is not to say he's any less talented than the folks who are, or that he won't be on it next month—but he's also not waiting tables. He's a talented, working writer who—through good, bad, and middling times—keeps writing and getting paid for it. I thought that he'd be a perfect guy to give **DFWN** readers some idea of what it takes to do that. Take it away, Steven...

For almost 25 years I've been making a living, more or less, writing comic books. While I've produced some top-tier work, I doubt I've often been considered a top-tier writer, or a particularly popular one. I've been saddled, at times, with the rep of having an attitude, which is probably true, and I've irritated my share of editors and publishers. (You could charitably call me outspoken; you could as accurately say I have a big

mouth.) Writing comics isn't even something I purposely set out to do, originally. I sort of fell into it, enjoyed it, and stayed.

Despite all that, I've kept working, through times of great change and upheaval in the comics business. When I began, in 1978, there were only a handful of comics publishers, and only a couple—Marvel and DC, in that order—were generally considered worth working for. (Thanks to my acquaintance with then-editor Roger Stern, I landed at Marvel but didn't manage to sell anything to DC for another 12 years.) By the mid-'80s, the new direct sales market had created a publisher boom, as well as more demand at "the majors" for new material. The initiation of royalty plans at DC and Marvel in the 1980s made it possible for comics talent to not only earn a living but to also get rich. The first group to do so bought houses and planes. The second wave, who made extraordinary royalties in the booming early '90s, put their money into publishing their own work. This became the "Image revolution," which triggered an even greater boom, combining with the ripple effect from the first **Batman** movie and the media event that was the "**Death of Superman**" storyline, to draw strong media interest to the field. You could make a lot of money writing comics.

This was followed by the bursting bubble in '94, plunging the business into "the great depression," with the collapse of dozens of companies, the strangulation of distribution, and the closing of hordes of comics shops. Over the past couple of years, the business has finally shown signs of crawling out of that ever-deepening hole. But that depression also triggered new markets, new formats and new possibilities, and changed the economic structure of comics.



From **Punisher** v1, #2 by Steven Grant. Art by Mike Zeck & John Beatty. [©2002 Marvel Characters, Inc.]



Cover to Steven's *Badlands* #3. Art by Vince Giarrano. [©2002 Steven Grant & Vincent Giarrano.]

Through it all, I worked (there were slumps; there are always slumps) while other writers didn't. I'm not saying that to brag. It's just the way it worked out. Writing is a complicated business, and no one can guarantee anyone (except maybe Stephen King) constant work, or even survival. Talent means something, of course, but never as much as we wish it would. We all know of talented people who've fallen by the wayside while much lesser talents have become huge stars, and we all know of hugely talented people who've become big successes. Which brings us to one dictum of comics: if you can captivate a large audience

with your work, you will have a career. But often, success in comics is tied to specific characters, and you can't guarantee your audience will migrate with you to other projects.

Which brings us to a contrary dictum in comics, repeating what was said above: no one can guarantee you a career. Even if you're the greatest writer who ever set foot in the medium. Your art will only get you so far, and then you have to recognize this is also a business and you're a businessman. **There are rules to coping with comics as a business.** I can't guarantee they'll help you maintain a career, but they'll help minimize the odds of *not* having one. **Here they are:**

1. Understand Freelancing

Unless you sign an exclusivity contract with a comics publisher, making you a paid employee of the company, you are a freelancer. Comics companies frequently take a paternalistic attitude toward the talent they work with, and they're often not keen on sharing. (In the mid-'80s, one very popular freelancer came back from lunch with a high-ranking editor who told him the company's priorities for giving out assignments: first to the people on staff, then to the talent on contract, then to those not on contract but who only work for the company, and last to "the scum who'll work for anyone.") But a freelancer is an independent contractor. You don't work for any company. You work with them.

The choice is yours. You can deal with one company exclusively if you choose. You can deal with as many as you wish. There have been a couple of times when I've ended up working with one company more or less to the exclusion of others, only to have the company change directions, cut back or close down, leaving me (temporarily, fortunately) high and dry. Successful freelancing means exploring, creating and maintaining as many simultaneous markets as possible, so that the elimination of any one of them can't significantly hurt you. It pays to have as many buffers as possible.

2. Know What You Want

I once met an artist who wanted to draw for Marvel but was only interested in drawing characters Marvel didn't publish. It didn't compute, and until he found a more serious direction he floundered. Simply put, he didn't know what he wanted.



From *Badlands* #5. Art by Vince Giarrano. [©2002 Steven Grant & Vincent Giarrano.]

Start your career this way: watch a football game. Now me, I hate watching football, but it's not the game you should be watching. It's the coach. Coaches have a simple attitude toward winning: every game is a big game. Think a coach goes into a big game without a game plan? This is your big game. Figure out a game plan first.

This is where your tastes, desires, ambitions and artistic vision come in. It's a simple question with a complicated answer: what do you want?

What's your specific reason for wanting to write comic books? To pay the rent? To get that one great idea published? To mold the future of a favorite character you grew up reading? As a stepping stone to some other writing field, like novels or movies? Do you love the idea of having great artists visualize your ideas and bring them to life? Do you just love the medium and its potential for expression? Are you comfortable writing work-for-hire, or is it your ambition to create and control your own stable of properties?

There are no wrong answers. Any one of the above (and many more) are perfectly valid reasons for wanting to write comics. Regularly reassess not only your short term desires but your long term goals, because both will change over time.

The answer is the foundation of your game plan.

Examples: If you have a lifelong dream of writing *Spider-Man*, that will aim you at Marvel. If you're trying to get that one great

[Note to artist: The Punisher has three facial expressions: cold (and pensive), savage, and merciless. He never ever uses any other expression, no matter what the circumstances.]

[Note to letterer and editorial hands: there are no bolded words in the Punisher's speech or captions. Everything he says or thinks is flat monotone, a complete disconnection from emotion.]

PAGE 1

OPEN ON:

EXT. CATHEDRAL - DAY

VERY LONG SHOT, ESTABLISHING SHOT The Cathedral, standing out amid the other buildings in the neighborhood, most of which are office buildings. Some are taller than the Cathedral, but the spire stands distinctively apart from it all. [Base it on St. Patrick's Cathedral, though this isn't St. Patrick's.]

CAPTION

The sun bakes down on the rancid city. I've been here for eight days.

CLOSER IN, ALMOST OVERHEAD so we get the layout of not only the spire but the entire church, including steps leading up to the cathedral, the attached rectory, the church grounds. The place is very clean, very bright, not new architecturally (probably built around the turn of the century) but very well kept up.

CAPTION

My target is on vacation.
No reason to chase him.

CAPTION

He's no trouble where he is. He's resting, waiting to cause trouble back here.

MORE OR LESS EYE-LEVEL VIEW of the front of the Cathedral, OLD WOMEN coming down the steps, the front doors open to allow easy access, the spire now towering awesomely above us. And glaring savagely down at the church and at "us" is the symbolic figure of The Punisher, M-16, in his symbolic hands, like a ghost whose vengeance is at hand.

CAPTION

His operations are here.
Numbers, and arson.
Graft. Murder for hire.

CAPTION

He'll be back. I'll be here.

CAPTION

Everything comes back.

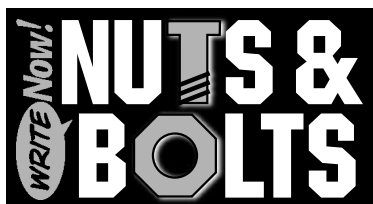
TITLE

LAST CONFESSION

CREDITS

Steven Grant, writer
_____, penciller
_____, inker
_____, letterer
_____, colorist
Don Daley, editor

Here, the first two pages of Steven's full script for **The Punisher #80**. In addition to the art descriptions, note Steven's instructions to artist Dave Hoover and letterer Ken Lopez. They help establish the mood and tone he's going for. In full script, if the artist for whatever reason doesn't convey the story the writer had in mind, the writer may not know about it until the comic is on sale.
[©2002 Marvel Characters, Inc.]



The STAN BERKOWITZ Interview

Interview by **Danny Fingeroth** on July 9, 2002

Edited by **Danny Fingeroth** / Copy-edited by **Stan Berkowitz**

Los Angeles born Stan Berkowitz has been a TV writer, story editor and producer for 18 years. Currently a story editor on Cartoon Network's **Justice League**, he's been at Warners Animation since January of 1996 (except for a brief stint at Universal in 97-98 to write and produce "Players.") Besides **Justice League**, he's worked on **Batman**, **Superman**, **Batman Beyond** and **Static Shock**, and shows he's written for have received seven Daytime Emmy nominations in the category of Outstanding Special Class Animation. (Two have won Emmys, **The New Batman/Superman Adventures** in 1998 and **Batman Beyond** in 2001.)

From '94 to '96, Stan was at Marvel Studios, where he was a staff writer for **Spider-Man**. In 1993, he co-wrote a feature called **Street Corner Justice**. In '90 and '91 he was a producer and head writer on the live action **Adventures of Superboy**. In '89 and '90, he wrote several scripts for **The New Adam-12** and **Dragnet: the '90s**.

From '84 to '88, he was at Columbia Pictures, writing for **TJ Hooker**, **Mike Hammer** and **Houston Knights**.

From '77-'84, Stan was an entertainment journalist, writing for the likes of **Esquire**, the **LA Times**, the **NY Daily News**, **Los Angeles Magazine** and many others. He went to UCLA, and has a bachelor's degree in film production and a masters in screenwriting.

And, he just finished writing a **Justice League Adventures** comic for DC.

DANNY FINGEROTH: I want to go through the evolution of how a TV and movie writer works and how you got started. Was your family in the TV or movie industries or anything like that?

SB: No, and that might be why it took me until I was 35 to get in. My father was from Massachusetts and my mother was from New York. My dad was in the Army Air Force in War World II and he trained here in Culver City, in the old Hal Roach

Studios, to be a combat cameraman. He enjoyed the time he spent in Hollywood, and he made friends with some celebrities, particularly Harpo Marx. My father wanted to be an on-set still photographer for the movies, but Harpo Marx aside, he didn't have any ins into that heavy-unionized profession.

DF: So it wasn't one of those 'you went to high school with Dennis Hopper' deals or anything like that?

SB: The high school down the road from my house had guys like Michael Ovitz and a few other future industry bigwigs going to it. I had a choice of going there or to another high school and I made the wrong choice. [laughter]

DF: Nobody famous from your high school?

SB: The rock critic for the LA Times, Robert Hillburn went to Reseda High School a few years before I did. We also had a **Playboy** centerfold, Donna Michelle, and Hal Bedsole, who played football for the Vikings.

DF: Were you writing in school and as a teenager?

SB: No, but my father maintained his interest in cameras and made sure that I was well-supplied with movie cameras, starting at the age of 12. So instead of putting pen to paper, I was off making movies and learning how to do stop-motion animation.

DF: Did you know from the beginning of college that you were going to be a film major?

SB: No, it took about two years before I could figure out what I was going to do.

DF: The films that you made there, are they anything like what you're doing now?

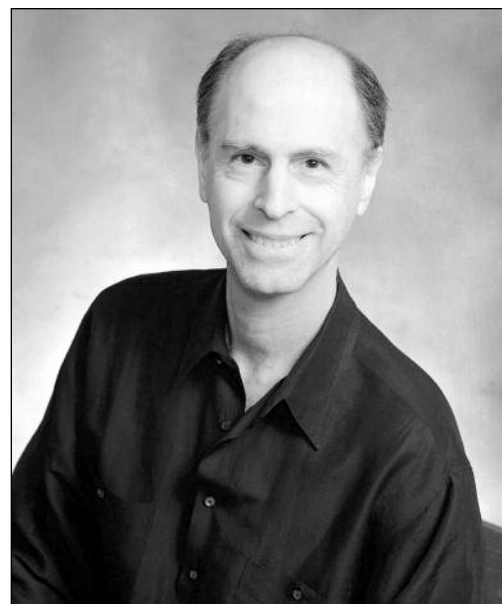
SB: No, the ones I did there didn't have any animation in them at all.

DF: Did you write the films that you made at UCLA?

SB: Yes, but the writing wasn't in script form. It was basically a shot list. We didn't have much access to sound equipment.

DF: Even at UCLA?

SB: Only on my final film, did they let me use their Nagra [professional quality tape recorder.—Ed.] and Eclair [pro movie camera.—Ed] set-up, so I could make a 16 mm talking film.



Unfortunately, that particular camera was so bad, it scratched the negatives.

DF: *That's scary. I went to college in upstate New York and was a film major and it sounds like in our state college we had better equipment than UCLA.*

SB: I think you went to college in a more recent and enlightened time than I did.

DF: *That's true. You got your Masters at UCLA, too, right? In screenwriting?*

SB: At UCLA they let you produce any movie you wanted—as long as you paid for it. I only had so much money from my Bar Mitzvah, and I used it all as an undergraduate. It's very demoralizing when you're 20 and you're spending those last few dollars and you have no idea how they're going to be replaced.

DF: *So you decided that writing would be a cheaper way to go?*

SB: Yeah. All it requires is a notepad and a Bic pen.

DF: *They have these computers now. I don't know if you've seen them.*

SB: You don't really need a computer.

DF: *That's true. It's a bonus. Did you have a Master's thesis screenplay?*

SB: I did. It was a *film noir* titled **The Courier**.

DF: *Anybody you went to college with go on to fame or fortune?*

SB: Penelope Spheeris, David S. Ward—who did the **Major League** movies—Colin Higgins, who wrote the movie **Foul Play** and then died young. Bill Norton, who's written and directed lots of stuff. He and I worked on a couple of scripts many years after film school. A great guy. Then there was Greg Nava, who directed the **Selena** story and several other movies. He's got a series on PBS now.

DF: *Now Penelope Spheeris, I know that name.*

SB: Her first big film was **The Decline of the Western Civilization**. Then she moved onto comedies like **The Beverly Hillbillies**.

DF: *Did she do the Wayne's World movies, or am I thinking of somebody else?*

SB: It's hard to keep track. I was a film critic for UCLA's school paper, and if you had asked me a question like that back then, I would have known.

DF: *It says in your bio that you were an entertainment journalist. Was that the next step after college?*

SB: During college, I started writing movie reviews for a small local magazine called **Coast F.M. and Fine Arts** for \$15 apiece.

DF: *That was when \$15 was \$15.*

SB: Yeah, but not enough to live on. So soon after I graduated, I got a job working for Russ Meyer on one of his film crews.

DF: *Did you answer an ad or did you know somebody?*

SB: I'd met Russ a few years before, when I was writing for my college paper, and I kept in touch with him. As I was finishing my thesis, he said, "I'm going to start a new film and I need people to help out on the crew."

DF: *What did you do on the crew?*

SB: Lifted stuff [laughter]. The credit I got was "grip," but basically, I just moved things around for him.

DF: *Did you start writing for him?*

SB: No. But he was pretty generous in terms of allowing suggestions to come from the crew and the actors. People could throw him a line of dialogue or suggest a shot. The few times I offered things, he took them seriously. That's not to imply that he was anything but a one-man show. Of all the people I've heard of in the film business, he is the one who



Batman, Robin & Harley Quinn from **Batman: The Animated Series**.
[©2002 DC Comics.]

came closest to doing everything himself, from conceiving the film to distributing it. He was even the guy who, if you ordered a video-cassette of one of his movies, would personally mail it to you. It was inspiring.

DF: *He was famous for softcore porn. Which films of his did you work on?*

SB: He never did cross the hardcore line. I worked on just one, **The Supervixens**.

DF: *That's a famous movie and—it's a precursor of things to come with the word 'super' in the title. [laughs]*

SB: I also appear in it.

DF: *Was it a speaking part?*

SB: No. Russ asked me to think of a line to say, and oddly enough, I couldn't. So I said, "Russ, what if I just don't have any pants on?" There was a long pause at the end of the line, and then he started laughing. I figured I just sold my first bit to a movie. [laughter] I play a flasher who drives a car.

DF: *Maybe we'll rent that and blow the still up for the interview.*

SB: Not if you want people to buy your magazine.

DF: *Did that start you on the road to professional writing?*

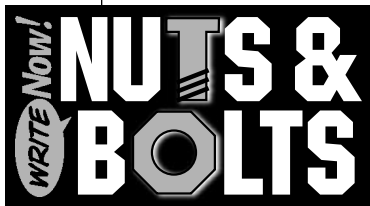
SB: No. Back in those times, it seemed like no one in Hollywood wanted to hire film students. Mr. Spielberg's success would change all that a few years later, but for me, at the time, there was no work other than film crew blue-collar labor. Which was a career path I didn't particularly want to take.

DF: *What was the first writing that you got to do and how did that come about? Writing for pay, that is.*

SB: I had agents ever since film school, so I would go out to occasional meetings and maybe get an option on a spec script for a few hundred dollars. The first sale occurred because I was writing with a partner named David Lees, and he knew a guy starting a film company. We were all from the same college class, and this guy told David he was looking for a screenplay. So we sent over two things that we had written, a very long treatment and a screenplay. David's friend got back to us rather quickly saying that he and his partners loved the screenplay, but it would cost too much to produce. Then he added, "We think your outline is crap, but we may be able to do business with you on it." And that's exactly the way it worked out.

DF: *And that was what project?*

SB: A movie called **Acapulco Gold**, produced in 1976. It was about marijuana.



Pages from Stan's script for the **Batman Beyond** "April Moon" episode.
[©2002 DC Comics.]

BATMAN BEYOND

"April Moon"

(Script)

###-###

Story by:

Stan Berkowitz
and
James Tucker

Script by:

Stan Berkowitz
July 15, 1999

WARNER BROS. ANIMATION

"April Moon"

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

EXT. GOTHAM CITY STREET - NIGHT

Buildings stand tall on both sides of this boulevard, which is deserted because of the late hour. A hovercar now glides down and parks at the curb. Through its front passenger window, we see HAROLD, mid-twenties, obviously filled with enthusiasm. He looks off to:

A NEARBY BUILDING

Its sign says "Gotham Jewelry Mart."

BACK TO HAROLD

He smiles confidently, then opens his door. But he doesn't get out; he's sensed something wrong in the back. He looks over his shoulder to a tall kid we'll call KNUX. He hasn't opened his door yet. Harold looks concerned.

HAROLD

Opening night jitters?

Uncomfortable, Knux doesn't respond. The kid next to him, KNEEJERK, leans in.

KNEEJERK

He's scared, Harold. That's what it is.

HAROLD

Shut up.

(to Knux)

We got no reason to be scared.

We're not punk kids any more.

We're special.

(beat)

We're gonna own this city... and here are the keys...

He holds up his hands, palms out, so Knux can see them.

Where each hand meets wrist, there is a small but bright metallic glint. It's too dark to tell exactly what they are.

WIDER

Knux brightens, now reassured. The driver, TERRAPIN, a thickly built kid, is fully pumped.

TERRAPIN
Wooh! Yeah!

EXT. THE STREET

Harold gets out of the hovercar and so do the others. As they start toward the jewelry mart:

KNUX
(confidentially)
Yo. Thanks, Harold.

Harold stops.

HAROLD
You know, I never liked that name.
I need something more appropriate
now. Like... Bullwhip.

As he says the word, a metal whip shoots out of the spot where his right hand meets his wrist. (What we saw earlier was the tip of the whip.)

ON AN ALARM BOX

It's several feet off the ground. Near it is an old-style alarm bell. The whip hits the box and cracks it open. Sparks fly.

TERRAPIN

watches.

TERRAPIN
Wooh!

Bullwhip now steps in next to him, retracting the whip.

BULLWHIP
You're up.

Terrapin takes off his trenchcoat; Bullwhip helps him. We see that a thick band of metal covers the small of Terrapin's bare back. Suddenly the metal moves, and we realize that the band is actually a stack of metal plates, which now expand to cover Terrapin's back like a tortoise's shell. The last piece of metal comes forward, covering Terrapin's head, turtle-like.

Terrapin then charges the thick metal door of the jewelry mart, knocking it down.

INT. JEWELRY MART (CONTINUOUS)

Terrapin stumbles in. Bullwhip, Kneejerk and Knux follow. Bullwhip turns to Knux.

BULLWHIP
You keep watch.

Knux nods. Thick metal implants now expand from his wrists to cover his fists.

He takes a position by the door, looking out toward the street. Meanwhile:

ON THE VAULT DOOR

A huge thing. Kneejerk steps in front of it and rolls up his sleeves.

CLOSER

Kneejerk lifts his elbows so they are pointed forward. From fleshy slots in each elbow, small circular saw blades emerge and begin to spin. PAN DOWN to Kneejerk's knees, which are exposed by his shorts. There are blades here, too.

WIDER

Kneejerk steps up to the vault door. Moving gracefully, almost like a dancer, he uses all four buzz saws to carve deep grooves into the metal.

ON KNUX

At the entrance, but watching Kneejerk. A shadow from the street briefly passes over him; he doesn't notice.

The Astonishing Antz Man

WRITE Now!

Interview with **TODD ALCOTT**

Interview via e-mail by **Danny Fingerroth** September 9, 2002
Copy-edited by **Todd Alcott**

Todd Alcott co-authored the film **Antz**, wrote a script for the in-development **Wonder Woman** movie, and is currently working on the script for the live action **Samurai Jack** movie for New Line.

He was born in 1961, and grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. He moved to New York in 1983 to pursue a career as a playwright. He developed a series of monologues to introduce himself into the downtown New York theater world and began staging his plays at spaces like **Nada** and **Home** for Contemporary Theater and Art. He performed his monologue shows at many different downtown venues and on PBS, culminating in the solo show "Living in Flames" at the Public and the John Houseman Theater. He contributed to three seasons of Cucaracha Theater's **Underground Soap** and had his first off-Broadway production of his play "One Neck" at the Atlantic Theater in 1992. The success of that show garnered the interest of television and film producers, and in recent years he has split his time between staging his own work in downtown spaces and writing screenplays for Hollywood concerns. Plays you may have heard of include **High Strangeness**, **The Users Waltz**, **Tulpa**, **A Pound of Flesh** and **Helsinki**.

Todd was interviewed via e-mail on September 9, 2002, with a few follow-ups on September 18th. I think that this interview is as good a primer as you're going to get anywhere about what it takes to become a professional writer and what that life is like, with information you'll find valuable whether you're just starting out or have been at it for years.

OVERVIEW:

DANNY FINGERROTH: You've got an extremely diverse career. There's the downtown, avant-garde theater guy and then there's the pop culture, Hollywood guy. For those readers who aren't familiar with you (though they probably know your work), can you list some of the things you've done. (You can attach a resume or bio if that's easier.)

How did you come to have these two (or more) incarnations?

TODD ALCOTT: The short answer is "money."

Downtown theater is a blast and hugely rewarding creatively, but does not pay the bills. I always knew, from the very beginning, that if I was to make a living in this business, I would ultimately need to write movies.

There are many schisms in the work I do, and the

Downtown/Hollywood schism is only one. I spend a great deal of time trying to mend these schisms, but it's a very long, difficult process, with many obstacles. Half the time I feel like I'm a huge success, and half the time I feel like I'm a colossal failure.

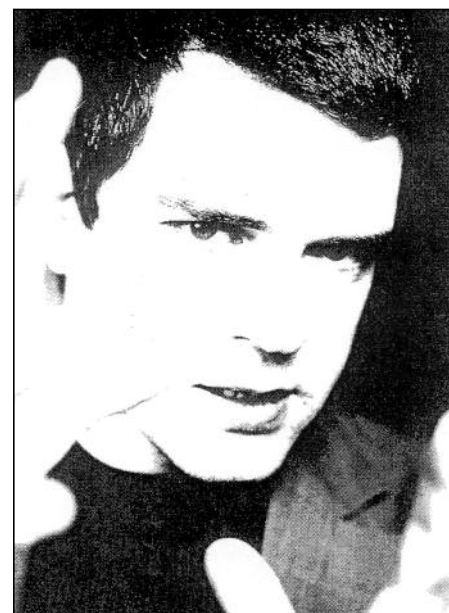
DF: Which is the "real" you?

TA: It would be easy to say that the Downtown stuff is the real me and the Hollywood stuff is all a load of hooey, but that's not true, and this points to another great schism in my work, that of Art vs. Craft. Downtown theater is very much about Art and screenwriting is very much about Craft. I love the artistic fulfillment of hearing my dialogue spoken in the theater exactly as I wrote it. But there is also a part of me that takes pride in being a skilled craftsman, someone who can take input from a team of executives and turn it into an exciting story that will appeal to a large number of people. And while it is true that Hollywood rarely wants eclectic innovation, it is also true that Downtown theater rarely wants a finely polished story.

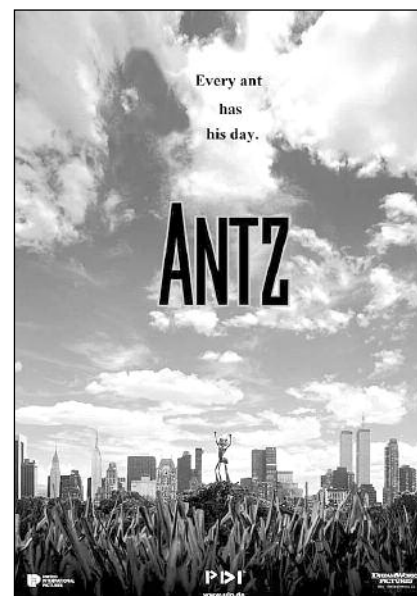
DF: What appeals to you about the small, esoteric material that you don't get from the Hollywood stuff, and vice versa?

TA: I never considered my plays to be small or esoteric. I always strove from the very beginning to make them big and commercial. I mean heck, I once wrote a musical based on the life of Elvis Presley. You can't get much more commercial than that.

Besides, I personally don't see a schism between esoteric and commercial. As far as I'm concerned, a commercial writer is an esoteric writer who has strong storytelling skills. Some of the biggest hits of all time have the most ridiculously esoteric subject matter. Before **Silence of the Lambs**, serial murder was not a subject fit for polite conversation, much less



Samurai Jack is looking at you.
[©2002 Cartoon Network.]



[©2002 Dreamworks Pictures.]

Hannibal Lecter, eat your heart out.



HOME at The Atlantic Theatre, 336 W. 20th St. (between 8th & 9th Aves.)
Monday-Friday at 8, Saturday at 7 & 10 Hit-Tix: (212) 564-8038 Box Office: (212) 845-1242

A card from one of the first readings of Todd's *One Neck*. Camryn Manheim was in this reading. Allison Janney ended up playing the role in the final production.
[©2002 Todd Alcott.]

mainstream entertainment. Same thing with UFOs, or the ability to see dead people. Umberto Eco writes about *semiotics*, for heaven's sake, but he is considered a commercial writer because he has extremely strong storytelling skills. **DF:** Since you started as a NY off-off-Broadway guy, how did that lead to the Hollywood stuff? **TA:** Just work. Work, work, work. All the time. For ten years I made sure I had a show going on all the time, solo shows and variety shows and plays and all manner of hybrids. In 1988, I had been living in NYC

for about five years, and my playwriting career was going absolutely nowhere, just dead in the water, just me alone in my apartment late at night writing obscure little things, with no contact with the marketplace whatsoever. I had no contacts, I knew no people, I had paralyzing shyness. I thought: okay, I need to think of a way to get my work seen that involves no actors, no director, no producer, no set, no lights, no sound cues. And the answer, for me, was monologues. I had a stack of plays sitting around that had never seen the light of day, and each one had at least one good stand-alone monologue in it.

So I typed up a bunch of those monologues and memorized them. And in New York at the time, there were a bunch of new performance venues opening up, and most of them had some kind of late-night variety show, where everybody got five minutes to do whatever they wanted, songs or mime or juggling or slide-shows or performance art or what have you. And no one got any money. The spaces like shows like that, because the performers all work for free and the sheer number of people on the bill guarantees a full house.

So I would go to those shows and see what was usually an avalanche of pointless crap with a few diamonds in the rough tossed in, and it just wasn't hard for me to say "my material is certainly better than this." And so I would find out who was in charge of booking the show and talk to them. Sometimes they would want to hear a tape, or read the material. Sometimes, if they were very picky and highly principled, they would want to come see you perform somewhere else first. But often, I just had to ask and they'd say yes, and put me on a list of performers. If you have twenty acts on a bill, you need a lot of acts to keep a series running. At five minutes per act, it's not

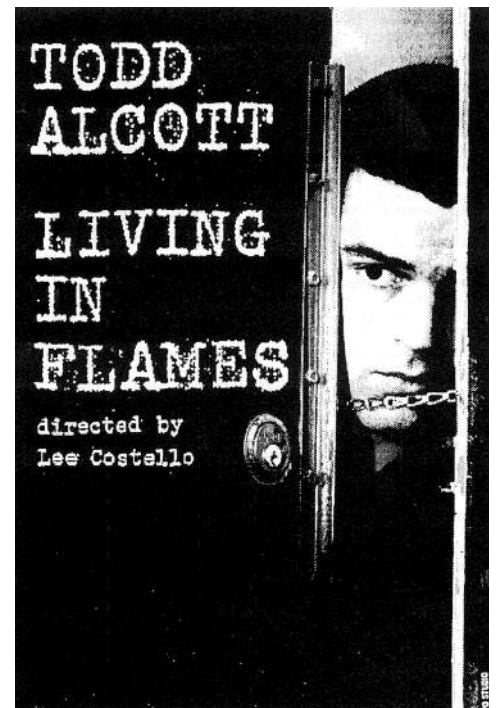
hard to book someone blind.

There was one space called Funambules, where I got booked because I volunteered to run the concessions for a night. The artistic director of the space needed someone to sell beer before the show, and I said I would. Then, the night I showed up to do so, there was a huge blizzard and no one came to see the show. So I ended up hanging out with the artistic director for an hour-and-a-half, and that was enough there to get a booking.

So I started doing these monologues, one at a time, during late-night variety shows, once a month or so at various venues, for no money. And then it was once every two weeks, and then once a week, and then sometimes two or three shows a week. At every show I'd run into somebody else who had another show somewhere, or knew someone with a show somewhere, and I'd go to see that show, and I kept meeting the same people at every show, and so a "scene" started to develop.

Here's a good story: I was in a record store one day in 1988, and they were playing a Randy Newman song called "Land of Dreams." And I thought the song was really good, but I completely misheard the title. He was singing "Land of Dreams" but what I heard was "Living in Flames." And I thought that was an arresting sort of a title, and it stuck in my head, because that was how I felt at the time, like I was living in flames, like I was unable to relax, to sit still, to just be. I was working a full-time job and I was trying to get my writing out to the public and I was trying to manage my screwed-up love life and I was recovering from something very much like a nervous breakdown, and I just always felt like I had to be moving sixty miles an hour. And I left the record store and got in the subway to get to my job, and this title, "Living in Flames," was just percolating along in the back of my head. And by the time I had gotten to my job, I had written, in my head, this monologue that I just knew was going to connect with an audience, because I knew that I had just hit the nail right on the head. This monologue was such a pure distillation of everything I had been feeling for the past few years. I talked

about how I had to be doing two things at once at all times, because if I only did one thing at a time I felt like I was falling behind. I said things like "If I make a date, and she's five minutes late, she'd better not show up at all, because I'm just going to be pissed off for the rest of the night anyway." Just this spewing of angst and impatience and nervous energy. And the following Friday night, I was booked at a variety show called No Shame, which was at a theater on Walker Street called HOME. And the house was



Poster design for Todd's solo show *Living In Flames*.
[©2002 Todd Alcott.]

Tom DeFalco
SPIDER-GIRL #44
 "Cry Uncle!"
 Plot for 22 pages
 Submitted: October 19, 2001



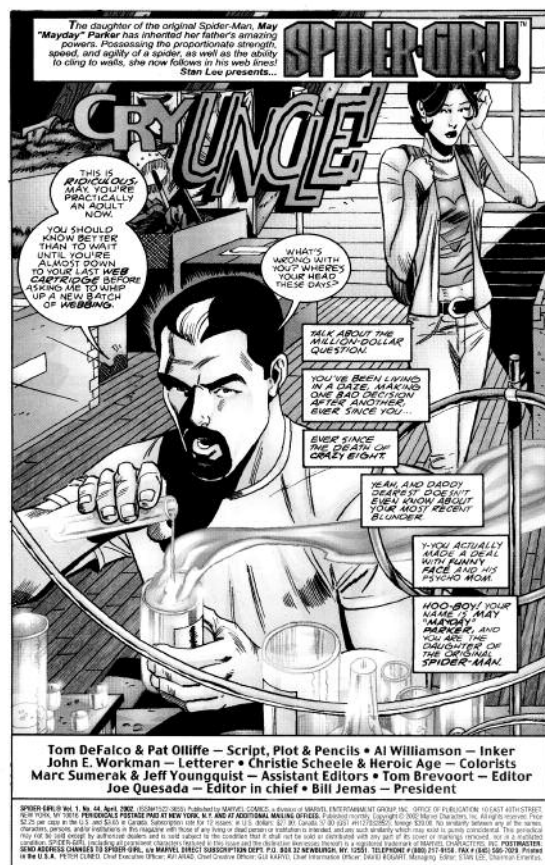
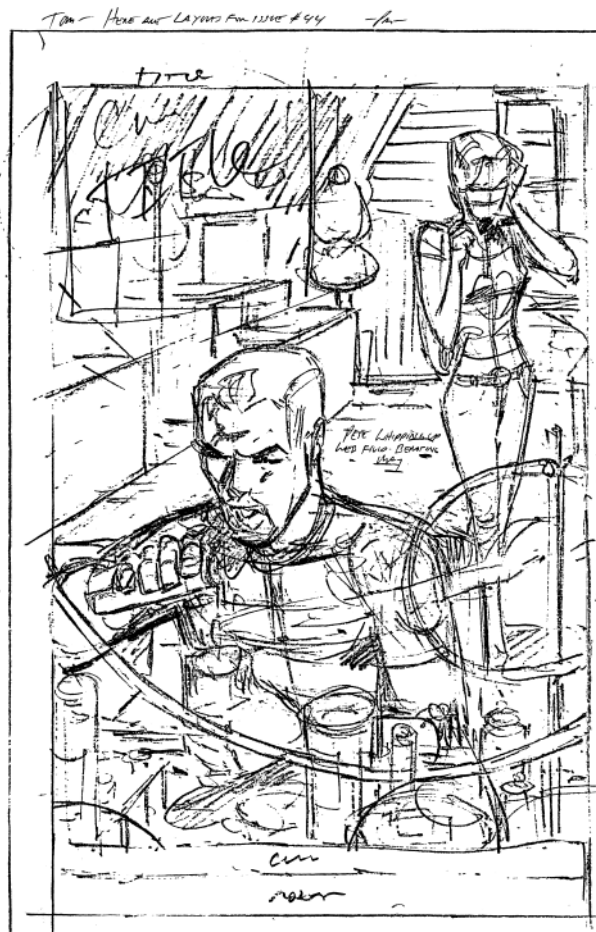
SOLICIT: Ben Reilly returns (kind'a, sort'a) as **Peter Parker** finally tells his daughter about his own origin and *her* Uncle Ben—including cameos of the **Scarlet Spider**, **Kaine**, **Carnage** and the original **Green Goblin**. Plus, a guest appearance of the **MC-2** version of the **New Warriors**, and **Spider-Girl** confronts a brand new super-threat. **A complete one-issue story that will make a great jumping-on point!**

Page 1

(Stan Lee presents--Story Title--Credits--Indicia) We open this story inside the attic of the **Parker home**. A very annoyed **Peter** is in the middle of whipping up a batch of web fluid for an embarrassed **Mayday** who stands behind him. (Peter is in lecture mode--not only did Mayday make a deal with Angel Face & Funny Face last issue, but she also waited until the very last minute to ask her dad to whip of some more webbing. Though she stands by last's issue's decision, May has no excuse for almost running out of webbing.)

These pages, from **Spider-Girl #44**, show the step-by-step process of how a "Marvel style" (plot first) comic is created.

It starts with the writer (Tom DeFalco)'s plot (including potential "solicit copy" for promotional uses) which goes to penciler Pat Olliffe. Pat's thumbnail sketches are his first step before he does the pencil art. The writer then indicates balloon placement on photocopies of the pencils, which show the letterer where captions, balloons, title and sound effect lettering should be put. After it's lettered, the comics pages are inked (in this case by Al Williamson) and colored. The final result is the printed comics page seen here as well. [©2002 Marvel Characters, Inc.]



"When Does He Sleep?"

Interview with

LEE NORDLING

Interview by **Danny Fingeroth** via e-mail September 4, 2002
Copy edited by **Lee Nordling** September 22, 2002

Ever wondered how someone puts together an amalgam creative career? No—not your dentist (little filling joke, there)—but someone who works successfully for a variety of clients/employers in a variety of roles, and enjoys the freedom, self-expression—and sometime anxiety—of that lifestyle. Here's a guy who does it, and can tell you about what that life is like. Lee Nordling is a writer, editor, packager and more. Hope you enjoy this interview with him, as well as his **Pop Quiz** for aspiring comic strip creators elsewhere in this issue.



From Platinum Studios' **Cowboys & Aliens**. Art by Ian Richardson.
[© & TM Platinum Studios, LLC]

WRITE Now!



LEE'S BIO:

As Executive Editor of the Platinum Studios Comic Book Department, Lee Nordling works with creators to develop their projects for publication, reviews previously published material for acquisition of film, TV and additional licensing rights, and works closely with Platinum's development team on the in-house creation of comics, film and TV-related projects.

Prior to his tenure at Platinum, Nordling's impressive career has centered on publishing and the entertainment industries. A creative force, with experience as creative director, writer, editor, artist, and art director, Nordling's worked successfully in the comic book and comic strip industries, book publishing, magazines, newspapers, toys, and advertising. He is the author of **Your Career in the Comics**, a first of its kind, definitive work on the business of newspaper comic strip syndication. He has written for Marvel Comics, Acclaim Comics, Disney Comics, **Disney Adventures**, **Rugrats Magazine**, and Penguin Publishing. In 1998, Nordling spearheaded a team of writers and artists to revitalize the flagging **Rugrats** comic strip for Nickelodeon and Creators Syndicate.

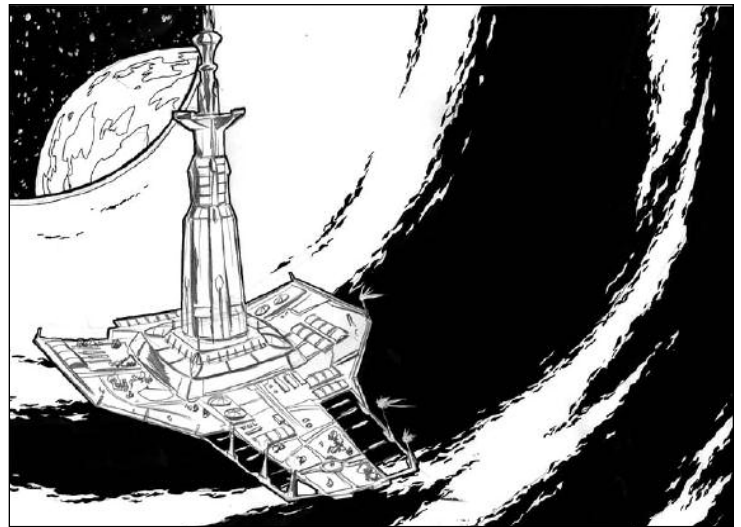
As Group Editor of Creative Services at DC Comics, Nordling represented the corporate aesthetic and acted as liaison for Editorial with Marketing, Production, Advertising, Licensing and Licensed Publishing. As project supervisor for the Walt Disney Company, Nordling created and oversaw the development of such properties as Space Mickey and Poor, Poor Donald. Prior to his tenure at Disney, Nordling assembled and supervised teams of artists to produce comic books, comic strips, packaging art, and new character designs for Mattel Toys, Inc. He ran **The Los Angeles Times** Syndicate art department, and assisted in the development of new features. He has worked in a creative capacity with the world's leading character-related properties, including Rugrats, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny, Superman, Batman, Young Indiana Jones, Star Wars, and E.T.

Former Creative Director for book packager, Innovative! USA, Inc., Lee lives in Long Pond, Pennsylvania with his wife, Cheri.

PART ONE: THE COMIC STRIP INDUSTRY

DANNY FINGEROTH: Lee, can you speak about the comic strip industry in general. How is it different from the comic book industry? How is it similar?

LEE NORDLING: Wow! I could write a book on parts of this



Three pieces from Platinum's *Age of Kings*. Art by Russell Hossain.
[© & TM Platinum Studios, LLC]

question—oh, wait, I did!

In short, comic strips and comic books are different beasts because they're produced at different lengths or sizes and distributed to different markets. The former is an issue of space, the latter one of market or readership.

In a nutshell, in a 1990s Sunday newspapers survey, it was estimated that over eighty-six million readers read the Sunday newspaper comics. With whatever dwindling has occurred in readership between then and now, it's still an extremely large readership, what is referred to as a mass audience. In order for material to be tailored for this audience (or for segments of this audience), it needs to have a very broad-based appeal. Most people need to be able to "get it." This is why you see so many variations on family and pet strips, because these settings connect most directly to people's lives. It's what the comic strip creators do *within* these confines that separates them from each other. You never hear anybody complain, "Oh, crap, that *Mutts* is just too close to *Get Fuzzy*."

The traditional comic book industry—where DC and Marvel are its leading publishers—is a specialty shop market, a niche market, and the more successful publishers need to produce books that appeal directly to the people who are willing to walk into a comic book shop... which is about as un-mass market

as a store could get. The bulk of the editorial content—not the characters, the monthly output—produced by these niche-market publishers has very little mass appeal. The importance of continuity, as it exists in the comic book market, is an alien concept to a mass market... except as afternoon soap operas (and they don't even recognize that as "continuity"). Its preeminent genre, heroic fantasy/super-hero-as-soap-opera, has limited mass appeal. A mass audience requires their Batman and Spider-Man in smaller and more accessible doses than a comic book reader. Even though Marvel, DC, and other publishers produce some number of books that are targeted for outreach into wider markets (such as bookstores), this material is also not tailored to a large mass readership/audience... nor should it be. I could generalize further about the different types of editorial produced for the comics/specialty shop market, including my own work with Platinum Studios to develop comics for the purpose of adapting them to film and TV... but basically there's very little besides *Hero-Bear* that automatically says, "Yeah, some large portion of eighty-six million readers could tune into that!"

Those are the markets, now let's talk about the industries.

By and large, newspaper syndicates are distributors, and comic book companies are publishers. In short, the former's clients are newspaper editors, and the latter's clients are readers, so, in addition to producing a differently sized product with a differently intended readership, they also serve two completely different types of masters.

What they have in common are the fundamental storytelling tools of comics—the printed page, panels, written dialogue, left-to-right storytelling, etc. Unfortunately, the inbred nature of the comics culture has introduced many new, more learned and less intuitive storytelling tools... which, when used, make the books completely inaccessible to the mainstream reader. Comic strips and comic books remain blood relations, but they're becoming increasingly distant.

DF: How has the strip industry changed over the years?

LN: Briefly, with the continuing decline of newspapers and newspaper readers, papers have become less competitive in the larger cities. For this and other reasons, the comics pages across the country have become more similar... which makes it increasingly more difficult for new strips to get onto the page... and carve out a readership for themselves.

The plight of syndicates increasingly resembles the plight of book publishing, where the best selling authors thrive... and

the mid-level writers struggle to find book contracts. Comparatively, to find and keep a place on the comics page would be comparable to discovering your book has become a bestseller (without the income).

DF: *In the era of fast-paced entertainment, how does the slow-paced comic strip form survive?*

LN: To paraphrase, Mort Walker once said (or wrote) that it takes a reader eight seconds to read a comic strip... and that's a lot faster than a movie or video game (unless you play video games as badly as I do). That's the glib answer.

In reality, the only way reading competes with other forms of entertainment is in its battle for the consumer's dollar, and the comic strip only does that for the collected editions and licensed product of the most popular features.

It's apples to oranges to compare a form based on reading to forms based on viewing and interactivity, but nothing will replace a reader's ability to review the material at his or her own pace.

DF: *How has it and how will it evolve?*

TA: How has it evolved? Okay, the **Reader's Digest** answer is: As more strips have been crowded onto the page, the strip has gotten significantly smaller and cartoonists have had to develop more shorthand techniques to convey a day's concept.

Also, as people don't necessarily read newspapers and follow the strips on a daily basis—certainly not like they used to—the once-popular continuity strips have all but died... except for those with aging-but-loyal audiences... and a syndicate editor would likely be lynched by his salesmen for trying to launch a new continuity strip without an extremely powerful marketing hook. Now, they might be able to sell and successfully launch something like **Harry Potter: The Comic Strip**, but it would take a dozen consecutive such successes to get enough young readers back to the pages on a daily basis and set up a situation where a syndicate could successfully launch a continuity strip with original characters. This, of course, is pure pie in the sky... and it's never going to happen... though the Harry Potter idea isn't bad. Hmmm...

Now, where will comic strips evolve? If I knew that, I'd be a rich man... but let me guess, and we can get together in ten years and make fun of my predictions.

Two years ago, I predicted that the internet would be the future of the newspaper and the comic strip... where people would get the same material to review in the morning, including local news, sports, etc., only electronically instead of on paper.

I still think that's so... but I don't know where the revenue stream is going to come from... and if I knew that, I'd be a *really* rich man.

Two years ago, I also predicted that paper would die as a mass medium of communication. I know that there's some juicy electronic ink technology that's being perfected that will allow readers to load images or type onto something that is texturally paper-like... and it will read on the page just like type... but the type (or whatever image was loaded) can be replaced by the

NORDLING continues on page 58

“What It Takes To Sell Your Comic Strip”

A pop-quiz by Lee Nordling

[Note: The following quiz was used as the structure for a workshop at the 2002 Pro/Con that ran during the San Diego Comic-Con. I was joined by panelists, Gordon Kent (writer of the **Rugrats** comic strip, and co-creator of the **Pink Panther** comic strip) and Stuart Rees (cartoonist and legal counsel specializing in the comic strip medium), and we discussed how a cartoonist can put him-or-herself into that upper echelon of comic strip creators who actually get considered for newspaper syndication. The version you're about to read distills the general consensus of answers that were arrived at by the panel, but by no means represents the opinions of all the panelists.—L.N.]

This “pop quiz” is designed to test your awareness of the challenges facing somebody who tries to become a syndicated cartoonist.

The purpose of this test is not to tell a cartoonist how to create, write or draw... but to make him/her aware of the possible repercussions he/she faces when making the numerous creative decisions that are involved in creating and selling a comic strip.

Good luck with the test... and with your career!

PART 1: The “formula for success”

■ How many *major* comic strip syndicates are there?
(Circle the correct number)

4 5 8 10 20

A: Five. Alphabetically, they are: Creators Syndicate, King Features Syndicate, Tribune Media Services, United Media, Universal Press Syndicate.

Please note that Copley News Service and Washington Post Writers Group and others may be major distributors of columnists and editorial cartoons, they don't release a lot of comic strips.

■ How many submissions do the major syndicates get per year?
(Circle the approximate amount)

1,000 2,000 5,000 8,000 10,000
More than 15,000

A: 5,000... but that doesn't mean your odds ARE one-in-5,000... because we haven't determined how many strips each major syndicate releases per year.

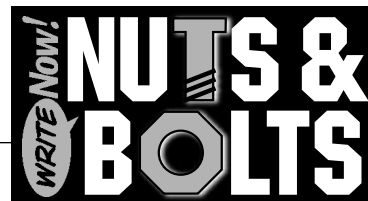
■ On average, how many strips does a major syndicate attempt to release each year? (Please circle the approximate amount)
1 2 4 8 12 (meaning they release one new strip per month)

A: 4... meaning that major syndicates attempt to release approximately twenty comic strips per year... which means twenty in 5,000 get syndicated, giving you a one-in-250 chance... but you can still do better than that.

POP QUIZ continues on page 59

THE PHANTOM
"The Valley Of Golden Men"
Proposal for Moonstone Comics
Submitted by Tom DeFalco
December 11, 2001

Here's a step-by-step exploration of a full script created comic. In full script, the writer provides a panel-by-panel description of the story, including the dialogue, captions, and sound effects that go into each panel.



For those who came in late, we open with a brief recap of the Phantom's origin, and then immediately cut to **Jungle Patrol Headquarters**. It is a dark and stormy night. Inside the headquarters **Colonel Worobu**, the Patrol's CO, stands with a **young radio operator** who is in touch with an emergency relief plane.

Diana Palmer-Walker (a director of the UN Human Rights Division and wife of the current Phantom) and **Captain Mel Horton** (a doctor and former rival for Diana's affections) are inside the hydroplane. A Small Pox epidemic has broken out among some of tribes that border the Bengalia jungle. Carrying a desperately needed vaccine, Horton and Diana had embarked on their flight, hoping to beat the storm.

The plane is battered by the storm as it flies over a mountainous region. Struck by lightning, Horton loses one of his engines and realizes that he's got to set down. In the distance, Diana spots the mouth of a mountain lake that leads into a mist-covered valley. As Diana relays their coordinates, Horton fights the controls as the hydroplane nears the lake. As the plane pierces the mists, Horton is startled to discover that the lake is full of jungle trees. He doesn't have room to land properly, but it's too late to turn back. Steering like a madman, Horton tries to bring his plane down in one piece, but his left wing shatters against a protruding tree and the plane crashes. (Note: Somewhere during the course of this story we will explain that the cold air from the mountains and the warm air from the lake combine to keep this area constantly shrouded by a thin fog.)

In Jungle Patrol headquarters, Worobu and the radio operator are stunned as the transmission is suddenly cut short.

In the nearby jungle estate of **Torn Singh**, **another radio operator** informs his master of tragedy. **Torn Singh**, an egotistical popinjay, immediately realizes that the small pox vaccine could be worth a small fortune on the black market. He has his men pull out some old maps to see if they can locate the coordinates where the plane went down. On an old map he

discovers that the region is known only as "the valley of golden men", and he becomes even more determined to mount an expedition.

And he isn't the only one!

In his tree house "castle in the air", the Phantom is informed of his wife's disappearance. Turning the twins over to their nanny, he immediately begins studying Diana's last known coordinates, but there is something about that area that sparks a memory and he quickly heads for the Chronicles.

Meanwhile, back at the crash site, Diana awakens to find that Horton has broken his leg and that the plane is precariously balanced on some felled trees. She manages to pull Horton from the wreckage instants before the plane begins to sink. After depositing him on the shore, she dives to the bottom of the lake to recover the vaccine, which is locked within a special airtight container. Exhausted, never noticing a pair of bestial eyes that have been watching her every move, she collapses on the ground.

In this **Phantom** story for Moonstone comics, writer Tom DeFalco begins the process with a story proposal. This allows the editor to know what story Tom intends to tell.

Revised script
Tom DeFalco
THE PHANTOM
"The Valley Of Golden Men"
Script for 48 pages
REVISED June 7, 2002

PAGE 1
Full Page Splash Panel

ACTION: In the panel's foreground, we have a dramatic shot of the Phantom as he stares at the readers with both guns blazing. In the panel's background, a series of ghost-images tell the legend of the Phantom...

IMAGE #1: Armed with swords, pirates attack a British merchant ship.

CAPTION #1: **For those who came in late:** Over four hundred years ago, pirates attacked a British merchant ship off the coast of Bengalla.

IMAGE #2: Bandar pygmies find an unconscious figure face down on a sandy beach.

CAPTION #2: The sole survivor was the captain's son who was found by Bandar pygmies and nursed back to health.

IMAGE #3: His back to the readers, the survivor holds up a skull and makes the oath of the Phantom.

CAPTION #3: One fateful day, the young man stumbled upon the corpse of his father's killer and swore an oath on the dead pirate's skull...

FIRST PHANTOM: I swear to devote my life to the destruction of piracy, greed, cruelty and injustice--and my sons and their sons shall follow me.

IMAGE #4: The image on the Phantom's death's head ring.

CAPTION #4: Thus began a sacred tradition that has been passed down through the centuries and from generation to generation. The legacy of the man who cannot die...the ghost who walks...the **Phantom**!



But, as often happens, things that seemed to work in proposal may not come together in the actual script. For example, as you can see, the art (by Lou Manna) was done from a **Revised Script**.

Truth or *Daria*!

WRITE Now!

The ANNE D. BERNSTEIN Interview

Interview by **Danny Fingeroth** 8/15/02

Copy-edited by **Anne D. Bernstein**

Transcription by **The LongBox.com Staff**

Anne D. Bernstein has been a fixture on the downtown/underground New York writing, cartooning, and comedy scenes. Her eclectic interests and accomplishments led her to the work she's best known for, her stint as a regular writer on MTV's animated *Daria* series. Sending up both mainstream culture and well as the foibles of those who would sit in judgement of it, *Daria* was in many ways the perfect outlet for Anne's dry humor and distinctive take on life. She was also instrumental in the creation of the acclaimed MTV *Downtown* series.

Anne's an animation writer who doesn't live in LA. While New York isn't exactly out of the way, it isn't where conventional wisdom says a TV writer should live. How does she maintain a career in what's (a) a demanding atmosphere and (b) a notorious boys' club? In the following interview, Anne tells us just how she traveled her particular road, and what she's learned along the way.

DANNY FINGEROTH: I'm here with Anne D. Bernstein, don't forget the D.

ANNE D. BERNSTEIN: It's Anne-D, not A-N-D-Y.

DF: The readers of *Write Now!* no doubt know her work if not her name. She is most well known as one of the writers and story editors for *Daria*.

ADB: I was not the story editor.

DF: But you've been a story editor of other shows, right?

ADB: Yes, I have been a story editor. [laughter] I've given notes many a time, and I've taken notes many a time.

DF: She's even been a development executive.

ADB: I've been part of a development team.

DF: She's been part of a development team. Anne is a zany, downtown New York creative person who has worked in comedy, animation, and comics, although not the super-hero stuff that *Write Now!* generally focuses on...

ADB: What am I doing in this magazine?

DF: *Write Now!*—if you read the subtitle—is “about

writing in comics, animation and science fiction.” I know two of them are media and the other is a genre, but no need to get technical. But there's nothing there that says non-super-hero stuff would not be in *Write Now!* magazine.

ADB: You deal with that world of alternative/underground people sometimes.

DF: Sometimes. Some of my best friends are in that alternative area. Actually, these days there is a lot of crossover that seems to be happening. One of the tactics that the mainstream companies are using is raiding talent from the so-called alternative side. Anne is here, so let's get down to it. You've written all sorts of stuff. Do you see a thread between all the things you do?

ADB: It's hard to make sense of my career because it's so



The eponymous star MTV's *Daria* series.

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WRITE NOW! #2

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