



GERRY CONWAY AND JOHN ROMITA, SR.

The DISCUSS

GREEN GOBLIN'S LAST STAND!

by **Dan Johnson**
conducted March 23, 2006

From the time the Green Goblin was introduced in the pages of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #14 (July 1964), his and Spider-Man's destinies were intertwined in a manner readers had never seen before. Their relationship went beyond the standard "good guy versus bad guy" dynamic, as Spider-Man and the Green Goblin were more than just adversaries. They were mortal foes that were engaged on a personal level, both in and out of their masks.

After all, Peter Parker was a close friend of Harry Osborn, Norman (the Green Goblin) Osborn's son. Indeed, when Norman was in his right mind, he was a friend to young Parker. But when under the influence of his darker persona, Osborn, as the Green Goblin, knew all of Spider-Man's secrets, including his true identity, and he knew how to best strike at the Wall-Crawler.

In *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121 and 122 (June and July 1973, respectively), the conflict between these two characters came to a head when the Green Goblin committed his ultimate sin, one so terrible it sealed the fate of one of Marvel's most memorable menaces, and also marked a major turning point for Spider-Man.

—Dan Johnson

DAN JOHNSON: Before we discuss the death of the Green Goblin, I think we have to first touch on the death of Gwen Stacy. How did the decision come about to kill these characters off?

GERRY CONWAY: [Killing Gwen and then the Green Goblin] were two separate decisions. As I remember, John, I think it was originally your idea to kill Gwen Stacy....

JOHN ROMITA, SR.: Well, we had decided we were going to kill somebody. The original thought that was brought to us was that Aunt May would die. I remember telling Gerry that Aunt May was too important to Peter's secret identity for us to kill her. I know she was a pain in the neck to a lot of readers, but she was a good foil and as long as Aunt May was around, Peter was going to be a kid. I suggested that if we were going

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to kill somebody, it should be Gwen or Mary Jane. [This was] based on Milton Caniff's trick. Caniff used to take very important female characters in *Terry and the Pirates* and knock them off regularly every four or five years. As a young kid, I was very much into *Terry and the Pirates* and I remember when Pat Ryan, who was the main hero, lost his girlfriend, there were people on the street the next day talking about how Raven Sherman had died. I thought,

"This can't be! I thought I was the only guy who thought of these characters as real people!" It stuck in my mind that if you're going to kill somebody, kill somebody very important, make it a real shock.

CONWAY: Make it count.

ROMITA: That was the only suggestion I made to Gerry when we were plotting this. I thought if somebody was going to die, it should be Gwen. I thought she was so important, [the readers] imagined she would never die. I think it bears out, because 35 years later we're still talking about it!

JOHNSON: *Gwen's death was a major turning point for Spider-Man. Until her death, the driving force for Spidey had been, "With great power comes great responsibility": When Peter had the power to act, but chose not to do, so he lost Uncle Ben. Now, all of a sudden, Peter does everything he can and yet still fails to save the woman he loves.*

ROMITA: We were counting on that.

CONWAY: That was the idea. This was a more mature Spider-Man, a more realistic Spider-Man.

JOHNSON: *A lot of people see Gwen's death as the end of the Silver Age.*

ROMITA: I don't think that was expected or planned, was it, Gerry?

CONWAY: Oh, no. We were just trying to tell an interesting story, something that mattered. I guess we succeeded.

ROMITA: I don't know if we anticipated that we might have to kill the Green Goblin until after the reaction to Gwen's death ... that is, after everyone in the office realized what we had done.

CONWAY: I think it was part of the plan because it was a two-part story. We were going to end up [killing the Green Goblin]. I don't think we thought any further about the repercussions, like what would these deaths mean.

JOHNSON: *How did you decide that the Green Goblin would be Gwen's murderer?*

ROMITA: Spider-Man was in the middle of a confrontation with Norman Osborn and the Green Goblin anyway. I think he was a natural character to use because of all the intermeshed lives [of the Spider-Man cast].

CONWAY: I don't think there was any ulterior motive. This was Spider-Man's main villain and his main girl. For Gwen's death to have consequence, it had to be tied to Spider-Man's most potent enemy. For the Green Goblin's death, it has to be tied to a crime that's unforgivable.

Like Father, Like Son

John Romita, Sr.'s original cover artwork to *Amazing Spider-Man* #136 (Sept. 1974). This issue, written by Gerry Conway, featured Harry Osborn taking on his "late" father's guise.

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JOHNSON: *I believe this was the first time that a major Stan Lee-and-Steve Ditko-created character was going to be killed off. What were your thoughts as you plotted the Goblin's final battle with Spider-Man?*

CONWAY: I can only speak for myself, but I was, at that time, maybe 20 years old, and I don't think I had a great sense of history or anything. We were just going to do this and see what happened. It did have some consequences, but I don't think it was something where we sat down and thought it all the way through. That's one of the reasons Stan later said that nobody talked to him about it. We talked about it, and it did seem like a big deal, but not like it was a major, life changing event.

ROMITA: Supposedly, Stan and Roy discussed this. Stan claimed that he never expected the Green Goblin to be done away with.

CONWAY: Well, that was Stan's memory.

ROMITA: Which we know has its faults.



W R I T E R /
E D I T O R

BACKISSUE!

DATA CARD

Beginnings:

"Aaron Philips' Photo Finish" from *House of Secrets* #81 (Sept. 1969)

Milestones:

Writer (comics): *The Amazing Spider-Man* / *Atari Force* / *Daredevil* / *Fantastic Four* / *Firestorm* / *The Incredible Hulk* / *Iron Man* / *Justice League of America* / *Metal Men* / *Sun Devils* / *Superman* / *Werewolf by Night*; **Writer (film and television):** co-writer of *Conan the Destroyer*; **Editorial:** creator or co-creator of *Atari Force*, *Firestorm*, *Man-Thing*, the *Punisher*, *Power Girl*, *Steel*, and *Werewolf by Night*; former DC Comics editor and Marvel Comics editor-in-chief



Photo courtesy of Gerry Conway.

Works in Progress:

Writer and Co-Executive Producer of TV's *Law and Order Criminal Intent*

Cyberspace:

<http://homepage.mac.com/gconway/Sites/blog/Blog.html>

GERRY
CONWAY

A R T I S T /
A R T
D I R E C T O R

BACKISSUE!

DATA CARD

Beginnings:

Various stories for *Famous Funnies*

Milestones:

Artist: *Young Love* / *Young Romance* / *The Amazing Spider-Man* / *The Avengers* / *Daredevil* / *Captain America* / numerous Marvel covers; **Editorial:** former Marvel Comics art director / **Character designer** of the *Black Widow*, the *Kingpin*, *Luke Cage*, *Ms. Marvel*, the *Prowler*, the *Punisher*, the *Rhino*, *Sentry*, the *Shocker*, and *Wolverine*



Photo courtesy of Scoop.

Works in Progress:

Retired

Cyberspace:

www.romitamam.com

JOHN
ROMITA, SR.

CONWAY: The reality was, none of us were going to do anything that affected those characters without Stan's okay. It would have been like killing off one of Milton Caniff's girlfriends without talking to Caniff. You just can't do that. We're just the fill-in people here. Not to be cavalier about it, but I don't think we saw it as major as it actually was.

ROMITA: I don't know about you, Gerry, but my impression was that in five years, I didn't think anyone was going to remember. We always thought we were just one slump away from [comics going out of business for good]. I didn't think we would be discussing this in five years, let alone 35 years!

CONWAY: This was a disposable media. The characters, while we valued them, I don't think we thought of them as immortal figures. Thirty-five years later though, people are still talking about the story. It's very flattering, but it's also like, "Wow! How did that happen?"

ROMITA: It's a tribute to how much we put into the characters. I know if I didn't think of the characters as real people, I couldn't have drawn them as well. If you ever heard a story conference up at Marvel in those days, we talked about the characters as if they were alive. I always thought of them as real people, and I always said that we could never make them do something that was out of character. I always told Stan, [when he requested something of the characters that didn't seem right], "I can't make the characters do some of the things that you ask for because it is just not like them." One time Stan asked me to make Gwen as goofy and glamorous as Mary Jane, and I had a hell of a time with it. [Gwen] was supposed to be a different kind of character, and I couldn't make her act the way Mary Jane acted. I remember when I first started doing Peter Parker as a character in 1966, my son, John, Jr., was eight years old. John, Jr., after watching me put Peter Parker through his paces for a few months, said, "Why don't you give Peter Parker a break and give him a good issue where he doesn't have a lot of troubles?" Here's a kid, who knew this was just something on paper, but he thought of Peter Parker as a member of the family. In fact, he still feels that way to this day.

CONWAY: Well, these characters do matter. It's just we don't necessarily know how much they matter to the readers until something like this happens.

JOHNSON: *What was the initial fan response to this story? What kind of mail did you get when you killed Gwen and then offed the Green Goblin in the next issue?*

CONWAY: I couldn't go to conventions for about ten years. I got a lot of heat on that.

JOHNSON: *In the issue where Gwen died, I still remember the last page, and the trick you guys used where you didn't reveal the title of the story until the very end. Also, that final image, with Spider-Man holding Gwen and raging at the Green Goblin, for anyone who had fallen in love with Gwen through Peter, seeing that image was sheer agony.*

ROMITA: I never told you this in person, Gerry, but I've mentioned it several times in interviews, "The Death of Gwen Stacy" was one of three times that I had been touched very closely as a reader. When I read the second-to-the-last page, where Spider-Man is saying to Gwen, "You can't be dead, kid ... I saved you. Don't you remember? I saved you," that brought up tears. For the same reason I was puzzled about my son's reaction, I get touched every once and a while. Something in a story reaches me and gets me practically to tears, and that was one of them. The first time that happened was when Captain Stacy died, when Stan wrote it. Then J. M. DeMatteis did a story which showed [Peter



Itsy Bitsy Spidey

(left) The Spider-Man/Green Goblin grudge match also spilled over into the pages of Marvel's kid-friendly *Spidey Super Stories* series.

This Romita cover preliminary for issue #23 (June 1977) comes to us courtesy of Brian Boggs.

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and Gwen's] last date in one of the annuals. Between the drawing and the writing, [Gwen's death] certainly grew in stature in my mind.

JOHNSON: *Gerry, when you were getting ready to write the second part of this story, the retribution part, what did you imagine was going through Peter's mind?*

CONWAY: I think there was the notion that revenge doesn't solve anything. At the end of the day, Gwen's still dead. Spider-Man wasn't able to save her. It was sort of a bookend to the Uncle Ben story, in the sense that all those years, in his mind, Peter could have saved Uncle Ben. But the reality is maybe he *couldn't* have. Maybe Peter had been beating himself up, and taking the rap for something for many, many years. Revenge can be emotionally satisfying in the moment that you take it, but then afterwards, where are you? That's what we tried to show.

JOHNSON: *I first read this story as a reprint in the mid-1980s, around the time that comics were starting to get very dark. Many readers then thought that if a "hero" killed a bad guy, that was justice. This story for me was a striking contrast to the current material being published because here was Spider-Man, who had more justification than most to kill his arch-enemy, but he knew there was a line he didn't have the right to cross. This story said to me that villains can commit murder. Heroes do not. The real justice was that the Green Goblin was killed by the trap he intended for Spider-Man.*

CONWAY: Because revenge doesn't do it. It didn't make us feel any better that the Goblin was dead.

JOHNSON: *There is a huge difference between the Peter Parker we saw in [Spider-Man's debut in] Amazing Fantasy #15 who ran off blindly into the night to find the burglar who killed his uncle and the Peter Parker who chooses to spare the man who murdered the woman he loved. It speaks volumes about Spider-Man that he made the choice not to kill. Gwen's death marked an end of innocence for Peter, but choosing not to kill her murderer was a huge step into adulthood for him, too.*

CONWAY: It was a mature response to tragedy. When something comes out of a character flaw in the hero, that's what creates tragedy. To an extent, it means Spider-Man's hubris and his sense of responsibility is kind of what got Gwen killed. He was going out there and being Spider-Man, being the hero, and then all of those powers couldn't save her, which is reality. And that's the tragedy he was left with. But what are you going to do? Again, not to make light of it, but it was a story. We were just trying to do something that would have an impact. The kind of impact it ended up having was far beyond anything we could have imagined.

JOHNSON: *Marie Severin had a very interesting take on her work at Marvel that rings true for most folks who worked in the business during those early years: "No one knew we were making history."*

ROMITA: No, absolutely. We were fighting a deadline and we wanted to make it as exciting as possible and whenever we could ratchet up the emotions, we would do that. I just wanted to get my work done and get a little bit of sleep. Gerry had the same thing, right? He's knocking [his scripts] out, but the point is he puts emotion into the script because that's something he feels he has to bring to it.

CONWAY: We were also doing something we loved, so that affection for the material empowers it, too. Then again, in the early 1970s, comics were on their last legs to an extent. They were already starting to lose some of the readership that they had.

There was no ancillary market for this stuff. This was before the first *Superman* movie and the live-action *Spider-Man* television show. It was fun, and we certainly took it seriously, but at the same time none of us imagined we were creating something that was going to last a long time. Also, in 1972, [the character of] Spider-Man was only ten years old. [We thought] this could have gone away at any minute, and who would have known? Now here he is, Spider-Man is over 40 years old, and now he is as much of an icon as Superman was at that time.

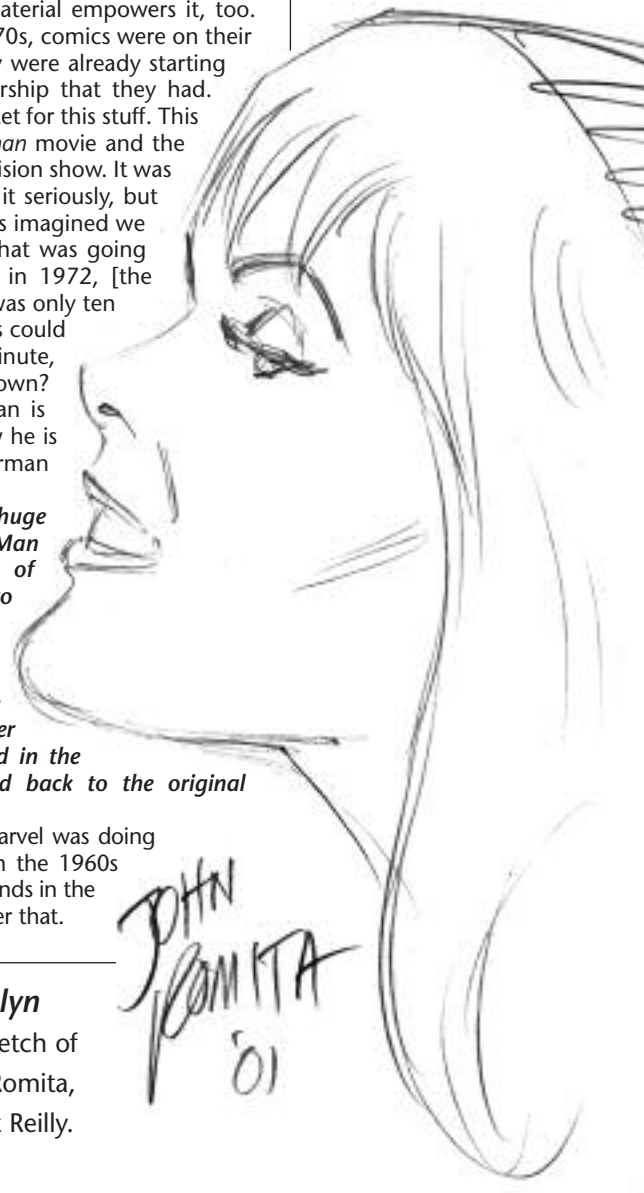
JOHNSON: *This had a huge impact on future Spider-Man stories. With the death of Norman Osborn, you got to explore how that affected Harry Osborn and show how he became the second Green Goblin. Plus, the Hobgoblin stories that Roger Stern and Tom DeFalco did in the early 1980s can be traced back to the original Goblin's death.*

ROMITA: That's the way Marvel was doing things. We planted seeds in the 1960s that ended up paying dividends in the 1970s and every decade after that.

Gorgeous Gwendolyn

A 2001 convention sketch of Gwen Stacy by John Romita, contributed by Robert Reilly.

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CONWAY: There's also a reason, Dan, why the first two Spider-Man movies are [based on] this material. It's the material that starts the ball rolling for a lot of stories that came after it.

JOHNSON: *The first Spider-Man film owes a lot to the work you gentlemen did. In the scenes at the bridge and the final confrontation, I could see Gerry's work in there, and your work, John—*

ROMITA: —and Gil Kane's.

CONWAY: You know, we can reveal this now. There is one aspect of that second Green Goblin story where John's contribution is so crucial. In the original art Gil did, the entire battle was done on one page. John had to take it and extend it into a two page sequence so it had some impact. Gil's one major flaw as a storyteller was that he tended to fill-up the beginning part of the story with a lot of great panels and interesting scenes, but he'd forget to tell the story until the last five pages.

ROMITA: That was the Jack Kirby infection. Jack used to do that, too. Another thing, before we forget, on the last page of the second issue, Mary Jane comes to Peter, which is another interesting ramification.

CONWAY: And it is also her moment of rebirth.

ROMITA: Mary Jane could have walked out the door and just gone to a party [but she stayed with Peter]. She became a responsible citizen in that last page. That was one of the things that Stan and I planned when we first introduced her, she was going to be an airhead and then slowly, but surely, mature.

JOHNSON: *Considering all that came out of these two deaths, I think you managed to prevent Spider-Man from getting into a potential rut as he entered his second decade.*

ROMITA: We felt like we needed to shake up the readers to keep that from happening. We were thinking that we were going to start repeating ourselves quite a bit, and I think that's what we were asked to do. We wanted to prove that everyone is not 100% safe, and it worked.

JOHNSON: *As important as some characters are for merchandising, I doubt you could do that with today's comics. For example, you could never have a truly final battle between Superman and Lex Luthor, or Batman and the Joker.*

CONWAY: Again, Spider-Man was only ten years old, and there wasn't that much of a sense of permanence. You could kill the Joker off, and I think they did in the early Batman stories, but they would always bring him back and that was sort of where we were.

ROMITA: We were a little freer. We were able to do more than people who had 50 years behind them.

CONWAY: Nowadays, creators are so tied to the history of the material and to the expectations of the readers, they don't have that kind of freedom anymore. Lucky us.

ROMITA: We were lucky. And also, probably, we had the lack of wisdom which allowed us to be crazy.

CONWAY: Naiveté. We were naive, but in a good sense.

JOHNSON: *I still think it took chutzpah to kill off Spider-Man's arch-enemy. I mean, what would happen to Superman if Lex Luthor was killed off for good?*

CONWAY: It would be incredibly liberating. I think DC would finally get back to some serious sales. Part of the problem with Superman and the older heroes, and also with the ones now, is that there doesn't seem to be a sense of consequence to their stories. They're just stories.

JOHNSON: *If you hadn't killed the Green Goblin off when you did, and say another writer and artist proposed doing the same thing 15 or 20 years later, do you think they would have been allowed to pull the trigger?*

ROMITA: [They would have said, "No,] there are movies coming out."

CONWAY: One of the reasons we brought back the Goblin was because there was a hole in the dynamic. The perfect replacement was having the new Goblin be Harry.

JOHNSON: *What did you gentlemen think about the fact that Norman Osborn was reintroduced to the Marvel Universe a few years ago, and the revelation that his death was just part of a bigger plan to keep striking at Spider-Man and his loved ones?*

ROMITA: I never read any of those. My gut impression of it was that it was a mistake. I also understand what problems they're up against because when you're the guy making decisions on future plots, you've got your hands full. You don't want to do repetitious stuff, you want to do something new, something that looks like it was done in the 21st century, not the middle of the 20th century. You've got to try and come up with something spectacular, but sometimes you overdo it.

This Gal Makes You Go AH!

Fans are still talking about Gwen 35 years later, and fans-turned-pro like Adam Hughes are *drawing* her. Art courtesy of Robert Reilly.

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