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DANNY FINGEROTH'S

WRITE Now! MAGAZINE

#7
May 2004

$5.95 In the USA

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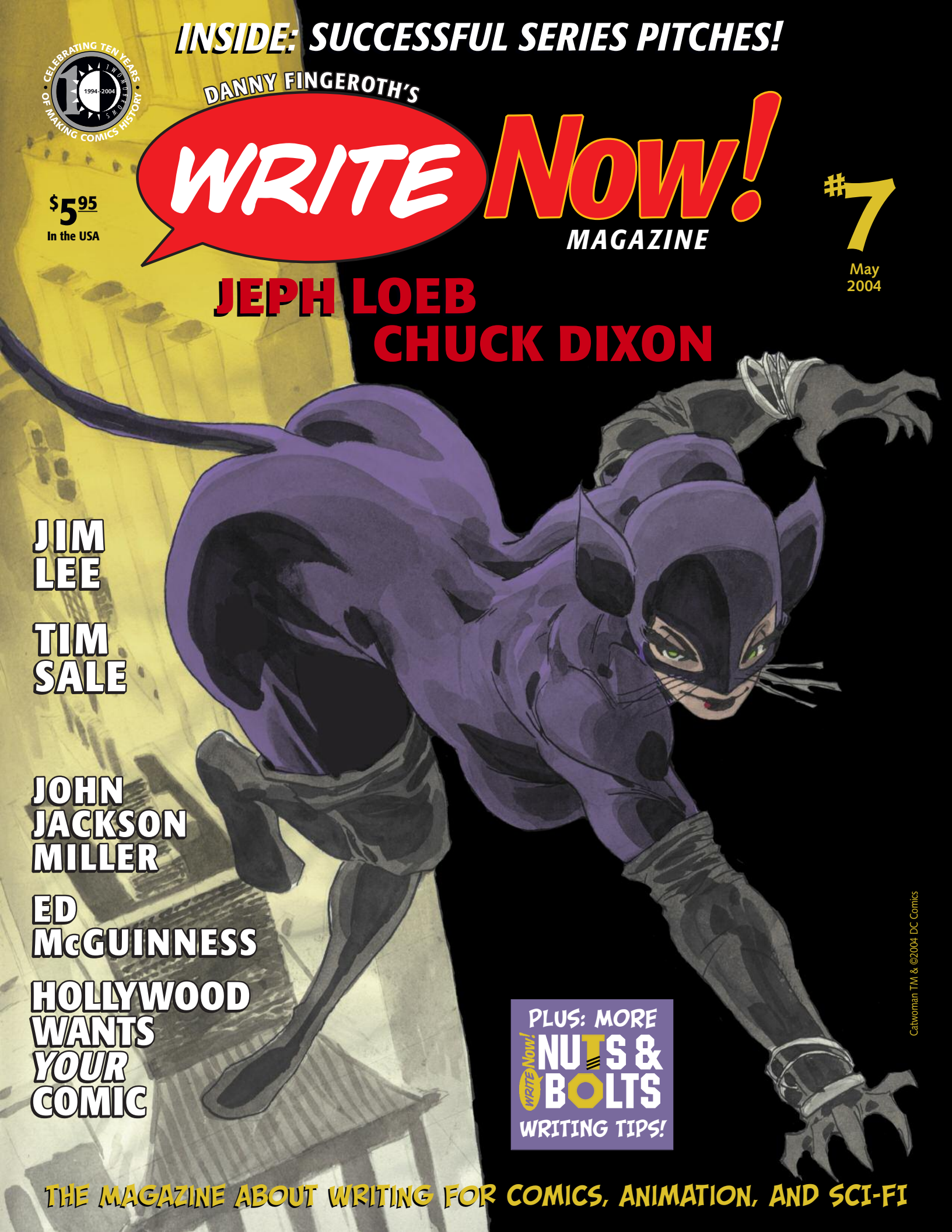

THE MAGAZINE ABOUT WRITING FOR COMICS, ANIMATION, AND SCI-FI

DANNY FINGEROTH'S WRITE Now! MAGAZINE

Issue #7 *May 2004*

Nuts & Bolts Department

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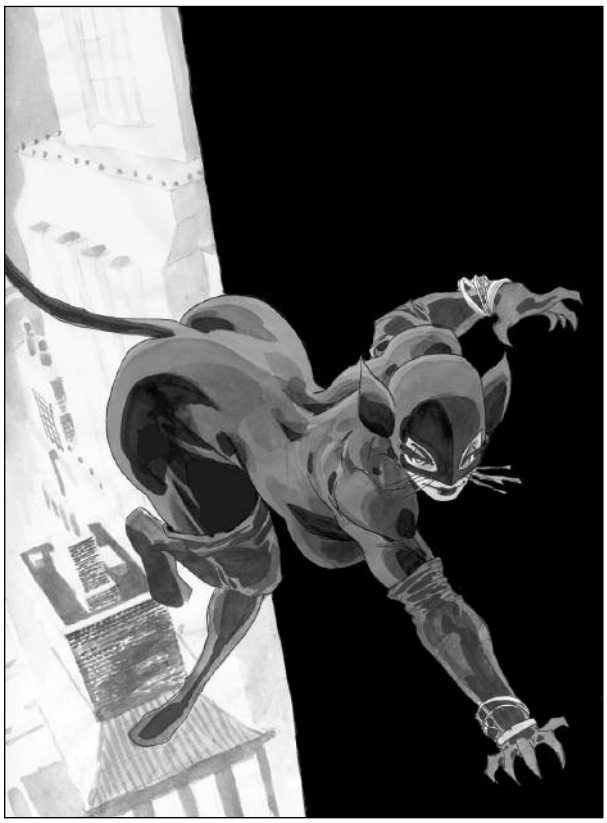

This issue is dedicated to the memory of **JULIUS SCHWARTZ**, 1915–2004

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Danny Fingeroth's Write Now! is published 4 times a year by TwoMorrows Publishing, 10407 Bedfordtown Drive, Raleigh, NC 27614, USA. Phone: (919) 449-0344. Fax: (919) 449-0327. Danny Fingeroth, Editor. John Morrow, Publisher. **Write Now!** E-mail address: *WriteNowDF@aol.com*. Single issues: $8 Postpaid in the US ($10 Canada, $11 elsewhere). Four-issue subscriptions: $20 US ($40 Canada, $44 elsewhere). Order online at: *www.twomorrows.com* or e-mail to: *twomorrow@aol.com* All characters are TM & © their respective companies. All material © their creators unless otherwise noted. All editorial matter © the respective authors. Editorial package is ©2004 Danny Fingeroth and TwoMorrows Publishing. **Write Now!** is a shared trademark of Danny Fingeroth and TwoMorrows Publishing. Printed in Canada. FIRST PRINTING.

READ Now!

Message from ***Danny Fingeroth***, Editor in Chief

After last issue's ***Write Now! In Depth***, focusing on ***Powers***, I was wondering how we could top it. But, you know, I think we just might have. How?

Well, to begin with, this issue's interviews. Check out the roster:

- **Jeph Loeb**, who's writing some of the best and highest-selling comics of recent times, including ***Batman: Hush*** and ***Superman/Batman***. And the guy is also on the writing staff of the ***Smallville*** TV series. You can't help but learn things from him.
- **John Jackson Miller**, who tells us about his path from comics industry journalist to regular writer of ***Iron Man***. JJM was the winner of the "Epic experiment," but his experiences are relevant to anybody trying to put an idea across to an editor or publisher.
- **Chuck Dixon** is another guy who writes an extraordinary quantity of high quality material. From ***Batman*** to ***El Cazador***, Chuck gives us insight into just how he's able to do it. You want to know about professional attitude? This is the guy to ask.
- **Yvette Kaplan** has worked many different jobs in animation, ranging from Head of Story on ***Ice Age***, to director on ***Beavis and Butthead***. Only recently has she taken on the official mantle of "writer." In this interview, Yvette shows how animation is truly collaborative when it comes to crafting story. It's an eye-opener.

And we have another great first-person "making of" article. **Mark Wheatley** came up with an idea and ran with it. The result is the ***Frankenstein Mobster*** series. Mark tells us how his imagination worked overtime to bring the character to life.

The straight-on ***Nuts & Bolts*** are pretty awesome this issue, too:

- We get to see **John Jackson Miller**'s proposal that ended up becoming the Marvel series ***Crimson Dynamo***. Both in terms of structure and content, this is one that made the grade. Worth a careful read.
- Much the same could be said for **Mark Wheatley**'s exploration of the creative journey that ended up with ***Frankenstein Mobster***. You want to sell a series? Read this.
- We also explore how **Mr. Loeb** works with a variety of artistic collaborators, including **Tim Sale**, **Jim Lee** and **Ed McGuinness**. We get to see just how Jeph modifies a script even after it's drawn from one of his full scripts. (And apologies for any misunderstanding when we printed some other pages from ***Batman: Hush*** in ***DFWN*** #5. We only had access to the dialogue aspect of Jeph's script, leaving it ambiguous as to who plotted the story. Jeph is indeed the plotter as well as scripter of those pages.)
- We have some of **Chuck Dixon**'s scripting style for ***Brath*** and the smash hit ***El Cazador***. Again, we see how two different artists (**Steve Epting** and **Alcatena**) interpret Chuck's scripts, resulting in stories of vastly different moods.
- **JJ Miller**'s action-packed ***Iron Man*** script is powerfully interpreted by **Jorge Lucas**.
- Platinum Studio's **Lee Nordling** and **Aaron Severson** pull the curtain back and give some extremely valuable advice on how to react should Hollywood want to make a movie or TV series out of *your* comics property.
- And **Dennis O'Neil** is back with more of his comics storytelling lesson. This is the real deal, straight from the source, folks.

And you have to be back next issue! That's the big ***Write Now!/Draw! Crossover***. My old ***Darkhawk*** collaborator, and ***Draw! Magazine*** Editor-in-Chief, **Mike Manley**, and I are combining forces to create a brand new character! That's right—***Nuts & Bolts*** is indeed going wild again! We'll start the process in ***DFWN*** #8 and finish it in ***Draw!*** #9, both due out this summer. ***Draw!*** will even have a **pullout color comics insert** *featuring the debut adventure of our new character*.

As if that isn't enough, ***Write Now*** #8 will also have the long-awaited **Don McGregor** interview, an interview with **Stuart Moore**, more great ***Nuts and Bolts***, and of course, the usual surprises!

SHAMELESS PLUG DEPARTMENT:

My book, ***Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society*** (published by Continuum) is on sale now. It's gotten some great reviews in ***Publishers Weekly*** and ***Library Journal***, among other places. It's available at your local comics shop, as well as Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and finer bookstores everywhere.

And I'll be teaching my *Writing Comics and Graphic Novels* course at **New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies** in their summer session. Many of the students in my first two semesters teaching it are ***Write Now!*** readers, which is very gratifying. People seem to enjoy it, if just for the guest speakers who show up regularly. So far we've had **Dennis O'Neil**, **Axel Alonso**, and **Mike Mignola**, among other luminaries. You can go to the NYU website (***www.scps.nyu.edu***) for more info.

Now that I've kept you so long with the hype, please, tarry no longer. Go forth and enjoy this very issue!

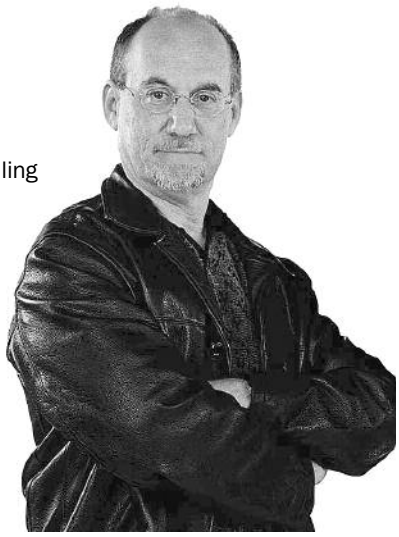
Write Away!

Danny Fingeroth

Challenger of the Unknown

The JEPH LOEB Interview

Conducted via e-mail January 4, 2004
Edited by ***Danny Fingeroth*** / Copy-edited by ***Jeph Loeb***



Jeph Loeb is a guy who can't be pigeon-holed. He writes comics, he writes and produces television, he writes and produces movies, he writes and produces animation. He does material like ***Batman: Hush*** *that's as current as current gets as well as things like* ***Superman: For All Seasons*** *that mine the past for neglected gems. From his days at Columbia University film school, where he studied with the likes of Paul Schrader (writer of* ***Taxi Driver*** *and* ***Raging Bull****, and writer/director of* ***American Gigolo*** *and* ***Affliction****) and Milos Forman (director of* ***Amadeus*** *and* ***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest****), to his work in Hollywood with people like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael J. Fox, to his current gig of putting words in Tom Welling's WB-heartthrob mouth, Loeb has worked constantly since leaving film school. The fact that in addition to his screen work, his comics work, both in quality and quantity, rivals that of anyone who has ever worked in the industry is simply astonishing.* ***The X-Men****,* ***The Avengers****,* ***Superman: For All Seasons****,* ***Spider-Man: Blue****, the sales record-setting* ***Batman: Hush*** *and his latest hit series* ***Superman/Batman*** *are just part of his comics resumé. Tim Sale, Jim Lee, Ed McGuinness and Michael Turner are just some of the superstar artists he has been paired with.*

Clearly a creator who does not like to put all his eggs in one basket, Jeph has devised a career for himself where he has a variety of options in a variety of media, which for a working writer is the best of all possible worlds. Here, he tells us some of the things he's learned along the way to that position.

—DF

DANNY FINGEROTH: *Did you always write, from the time you were a kid?*
JEPH LOEB: I'm not sure it was writing as much as storytelling. I would love to make up things, big tales that I would tell my friends. Sometimes they were amalgamations of movies I'd seen or books I'd read. I remember once retelling ***The Wizard of Oz*** to my entire high school cafeteria, essentially playing all the roles, but beefing up the comedy. The writing was an extension of that. I did start a novel in 3rd grade called ***Me and The Chimp*** about a veterinarian who rescued a chimpanzee and hilarity ensued. I got about four pages in. I still have it. I guess I couldn't meet a deadline then either... [*laughs*]

DF: *When did you first think writing would be something you could do for a living?*
JL: I'm not sure. I never really thought I *couldn't* make a living at it. In 10th grade I had an English teacher who said I could write professionally. I don't think I did anything other than agree with him! [*laughs*] Look, I've been very lucky and I don't take anything for granted. But, I work hard and never stop writing. Even now. I'm writing this interview!
DF: *What and who were your early influences in life?*
JL: Well, first it would be my Dad. He loved to tell stories, make up characters. He could make going to the Post Office sound like an Indiana Jones movie. My parents got divorced when I was 10 years old and it had a profound effect on how I looked at the world. There was no center to hold onto. That makes a difference.
DF: *What and who were your early influences in writing?*
JL: I watched a lot of movies. Particularly the Warner Bros. movies from the '30s & '40s. Bogart, Raft, Cagney, Robinson—I watched them all—and it wasn't just gangster stuff. They made musicals and comedies and even a few awful westerns—you haven't seen bad until you've Bogart in a cowboy hat. Mostly it was watching and

Lois & Clark go for their first flight together in issue #2 of Jeph Loeb & Tim Sale's ***Superman For All Seasons*** mini-series. [©2004 DC Comics.]

Art from Loeb's creator-owned mini-series ***The Witching Hour***. Script by Jeph Loeb; art by Chris Bachalo & Art Thibert. [©2004 Jeph Loeb & Chris Bachalo.]

learning how to tell a story. Even then, I was aware of the writer. I read a ton of comics. Stan Lee and Roy Thomas certainly were influences, because they wrote so much of what Marvel produced and that's what I read.

DF: *What was the influence of DC Comics writer Elliot S! Maggin on your career decision?*

JL: Elliot was at Brandeis University where my stepfather worked, in the town next to mine. He was the first comics professional that I ever knew. He was really cool about showing me what a script looked like, listening to ideas, and generally dealing with a teenager who wanted to know about this business. For someone who had read comics most of his life, I knew very little about how they were made. Elliot helped with a lot of that—even though he's a very charming but cynical bastard who I adore. It wasn't like he made comics out to be the party of the century.

DF: *Since your step-dad was in academia, did that give you any hesitation about working in pop culture?*

JL: My parents never had any impact on what I did except—and it's a *huge* exception—they supported whatever I wanted to do. It's hard when you're a kid and your parents think you're making a mistake. Mine just pushed me to do the best and see what happens. I'm very grateful for that kind of understanding and support.

DF: *You have an MA in film from Columbia University. What was that course of study like? Did it prepare you for your current career?*

JL: I went to Columbia Undergrad and then got into the film school a year early, so I got my BA and MFA in five years, not six. The most valuable thing I learned was how to live in New York City. It's an amazing place, probably my favorite city. I miss it—the energy, the people. Secondly, I met my former writing partner there, Matthew Weisman, who was older than me and a much more talented writer. We really had a lot of fun and moved out to L.A. together to find fame and fortune. I think we found fortune cookies… [*laughs*]

DF: *Any specific inspiration that came from your teachers at Columbia, Milos Forman and Paul Schrader?*

JL: The way Milos thought about scene construction and dialogue was fascinating. He's Czech, so just how he saw America was different. I can't really put it into words, but ***Cuckoo's Nest*** gives you a fair idea. I worked on ***Ragtime***, that was the first film set I'd ever been on. Schrader was completely different. He hadn't ever taught a class and he was in pre-production on ***Cat People***, so he was much more HOLLYWOOD than anyone I'd ever met. He got me my first agent and taught me the lessons of what it is like to be a screenwriter—which is different than writing. You need to understand the business to survive and Paul was the first person to open that door of knowledge.

DF: *Is film school good prep for a writer?*

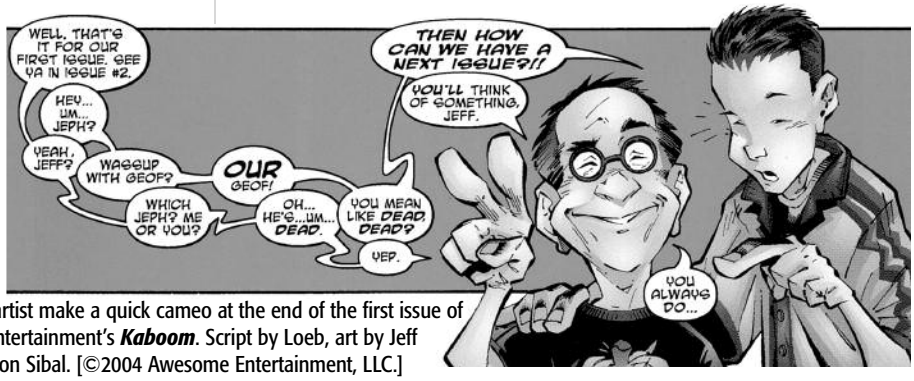
JL: You have to do it if you want to work in movies or television. It's part of the training. Would you want a physicist who hadn't taken physics? Are there guys who have jumped film school and moved right onto making film? Sure. But, I can't see how it's done without learning the basics. And at a place like USC [University of Southern California] or the AFI [The American Film Institute], the contacts you make are invaluable.

DF: *How do you approach a comics script as opposed to a movie or TV script?*

JL: Actually, very much the same way. I write an outline for the scenes, I even work on the same format as a TV or Movie script. I use a software program called "Final Draft" that conforms my writing to look like a screenplay. I tend to think of the artist as the director/cinematographer—I often refer to panels as "shots" or in camera terms. It just helps me to keep thinking in a direct line.

DF: *You seem to do most of your comics work on established characters. Do you do any creator-owned material?*

JL: I have. The stuff we did at Awesome—***Kaboom***, ***Coven***, that stuff which was realizing the characters for Jeff Matsuda and Ian Churchill respectively. ***The Witching Hour*** I own with Chris Bachalo. Part of the problem with writing creator-owned stuff is that it doesn't pay very well and it takes a long time. That's time I could spend writing a screenplay that fortunately or unfortunately pays a jillion times better. But, the real reason is that I spend all day writing television or movies, so writing



Writer and artist make a quick cameo at the end of the first issue of Awesome Entertainment's ***Kaboom***. Script by Loeb, art by Jeff Matsuda & Jon Sibal. [©2004 Awesome Entertainment, LLC.]

comics has to be *fun* for me and working with the characters of my childhood is a blast.

DF: *Have you done any material that's not action-adventure? If so, what was/is it? If not, would you like to?*

JL: Again, ***The Witching Hour*** covered a lot of that ground. Chris drew it beautifully—and many people think it's my best work. Someday, I'd like to do a true-crime *noir* story with Tim Sale and Richard Starkings. I think Tim would draw it with such passion, I don't know how we *can't* get to that.

DF: *Is there an equivalent in comics to the 44-minute format (a.k.a. the one hour show) of dramatic TV? Or are comics evolving to a story arc model, the way TV often does?*

JL: Every story has it's own merits. I don't think in equivalents… If I'm writing comics I *do* think what it would look like as a movie or a television show, but that's just how my brain works. As to lengths of arcs, it's often what the story dictates… I like doing the longer tales so you can slow things down and have some fun with the characters. Every script I write is too long. It's then about editing and making it move.

DF: *Is there any difference in approach to the way you handle Marvel versus DC characters?*

JL: None. I write the best story I can and hope folks like it.

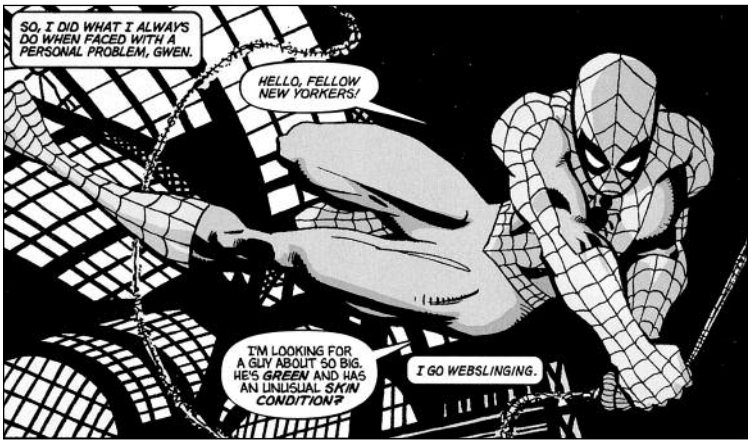
Betty Ross confronts the Hulk for the first time in Loeb & Sale's ***Hulk: Gray*** #2. [©2004 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

DF: *Do you work full script or Marvel-style [plot first] ? Why?*

JL: I guess it's a full script—needless to say, it's a script in the sense of a screenplay with description of every panel, every scene, all the dialogue. But, I go through the artwork as it comes in and often change the dialogue to better suit the artwork. Again, it's all about who is drawing, i.e., directing, the script. I conform to their strengths… at least, that's the plan!

DF: *Is there a quick fallback recipe for plotting a story when you run up against a deadline or (God forbid) writer's block?*

JL: I've never really had writer's block. I may not have the best idea on hand, but there's always something to work from. Part of that is including the artist in the collaborative process. If I can get Michael Turner, for example, excited about the scene he is going to draw, it's going to be a better scene. Is there a secret? Get really talented friends. I share an office with Geoff Johns and we just inspire each other to do better work. The staff at ***Smallville*** are some of the best writers working in Television. Mostly, you can't stop. If you stop, you get run over. And nobody likes that!



Peter Parker goes webslinging in the third issue of Jeph Loeb & Tim Sale's second Marvel "color" series ***Spider-Man: Blue***. [©2004 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

DF: *What's the best way to learn to write comics?*

JL: By writing them. Every day. Tell different stories. Tell stories with minor characters. An interesting story about Alfred the Butler is worth much more than a Batman story when you're starting out since Batman is going to be written by known writers. Start small—think big. Go for the emotional beats of the story, not the action beats. Anybody can do a big fight. Tell a scene between Peter Parker and Aunt May that nobody has ever done. Think like that…

DF: *What are effective ways to break in to comics these days?*

JL: I get asked this all the time. There is no right way, but getting to know editors always helps, and you can best achieve that through letter writing and attending conventions. San Diego Comic-Con and Wizard World Chicago are two musts, simply because the most people attend those. You can actually put a face to your name and since there are hundreds of people vying for your job, you want the editor to recognize you. I believe that talent always wins. Write for anyone. Do independent comics—since the best thing to do is show someone your work. If you want to tell superhero stories, do that, and do it the best you can.

DF: *Into TV?*

JL: That's a little clearer, just far more difficult. Find a great show and spec (write for free) a script that has the look, feel and sound of that show. Use that to get an agent and an entertainment lawyer. They will send you out to meet the buyers—the studios, the networks. But, it's about your talent and your drive.

DF: *Into movies?*

[**LOEB** *continues on page 8.*]

Write Now! NUTS & BOLTS

S/B SECRET FILES:

"WHEN CLARK MET BRUCE."

Eddie:

Here's that 2 page story we talked about.

Enjoy,

Loeb

P.S. As usual, I've sent a copy to Tim Sale simultaneously, but will address your notes before he begins!

S/B SECRET FILES #1
"WHEN CLARK MET BRUCE."
SCRIPT BY JEPH LOEB 08-02-03
IN STORES SEPTEMBER 2003

Two pages.

PAGE 1 - KENT FARM - 20 YEARS AGO - DAY

SEVEN HORIZONTAL BARS.

Panel one

PETE ROSS, 11, blonde hair, blue eyes, looking like a young Robert Redford in THE NATURAL winds up for a pitch in a field playing baseball on the Kent Farm.

SUPERMAN
NARRATION BOX #1
I wonder if he even remembers.

BATMAN
NARRATION BOX #2
It is a day I will never forget.

PETE
DIALOGUE BALLOON #3
Ready, Kent? I'm bringin' the heat!

Panel two

(Not really a panel, but leave a thin horizontal space for Richard to do some very simple, within the borde credits and titles)

TITLE #4
"WHEN CLARK MET BRUCE"

Panel three

CLARK KENT, 11, not quite as big as he is in FOR ALL SEASONS, because he's only 11 at this point, SWINGS at the pitch, sending the ball sailing.

SUPERMAN
NARRATION BOX #5
It was a beautiful day in Smallville.

BATMAN
NARRATION BOX #6
Kansas is not something you easily forget.

CLARK
DIALOGUE BALLOON #7
Pete. You throw like a girl.

Panel four

Same thin horizontal empty panel as two.

CREDIT BOX #8
A TALE FROM THE DAYS OF SMALLVILLE
JEPH LOEB & TIM SALE
STORY TELLERS
Superman Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster
Batman Created by Bob Kane

Panel five

Widen out to see the entire field, and Pete and Clark both watching the ball sail out to the edge of the property.

PETE
DIALOGUE BALLOON #9
I'm not gettin' it. I got the last three.

CLARK
DIALOGUE BALLOON #10
C'mon. I'll help you look for it.

Panel six

Same thin horizontal empty panel as two.

CREDITS #11
RICHARD STARKINGS * LETTERS
MARK CHIARELLO * COLORS
TOM PALMER, JR. * ASSOCIATE EDITOR
EDDIE BERGANZA * EDITOR

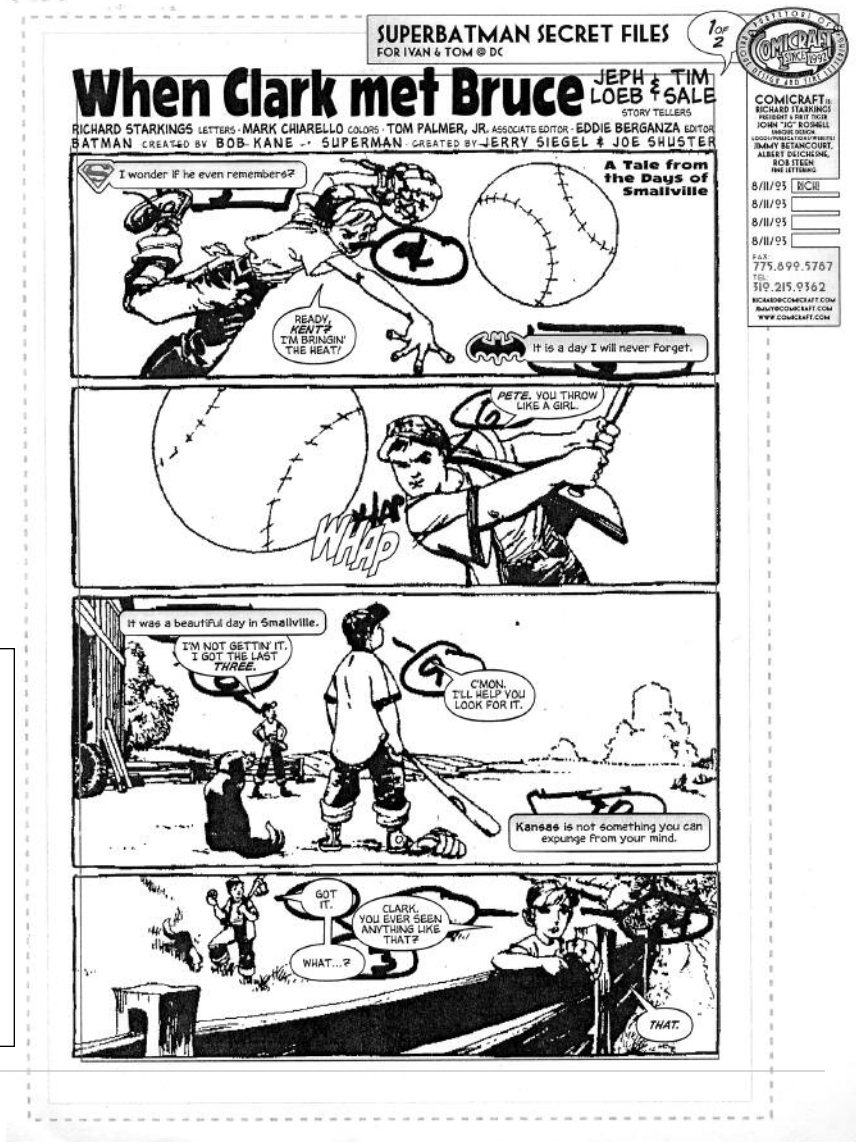
Panel seven

At the edge of the property, near the split rail fence, Clark stoops down to pick up the ball. Pete is transfixed by something OFF PANEL out on the road before them.

CLARK
DIALOGUE BALLOON #12
Got it.

PETE
DIALOGUE BALLOON #13
Clark. You ever seen anything like that?

CLARK
DIALOGUE BALLOON #14
What...?



In this and the rest of Jeph's ***Nuts & Bolts*** this issue, we have the writer's own comments on the work showcased.

Note that Jeph's scripting method involves writing a full script (all panel descriptions and copy is supplied before the artist gets the script) but that, after the penciling is done, Jeph will often rework the dialogue. For these ***Nuts & Bolts***, we print both versions of his scripts so you can see how things change. The reasons for the changes can include that the art inspired Jeph to modify something, or that Jeph just had a better idea in the time since he handed in the script.

This *very* short story appeared in ***Superman/Batman Secret Files*** #1. The narration captions were colored differently for each character. [©2004 DC Comics.]

CHUCK DIXON: Who He Is And How He Came To Be

Conducted via telephone September 2003 by ***Scott E. Hileman***
Edited by ***Danny Fingeroth*** / Copy-edited by ***Chuck Dixon***

Chuck Dixon says this about himself:

"I was born in Philadelphia the same year that Elvis recorded his first single. After an uneventful childhood and string of meaningless jobs I stumbled into comics where I have had the extraordinary fortune of working with the best in the business.

"I wrote long runs on Marvel's ***Savage Sword of Conan***, ***Moon Knight***, ***The 'Nam*** and ***The Punisher***. At DC I worked on ***Detective Comics***, ***Robin***, ***Nightwing***, ***Birds of Prey***, ***Green Arrow*** and many, many side projects.

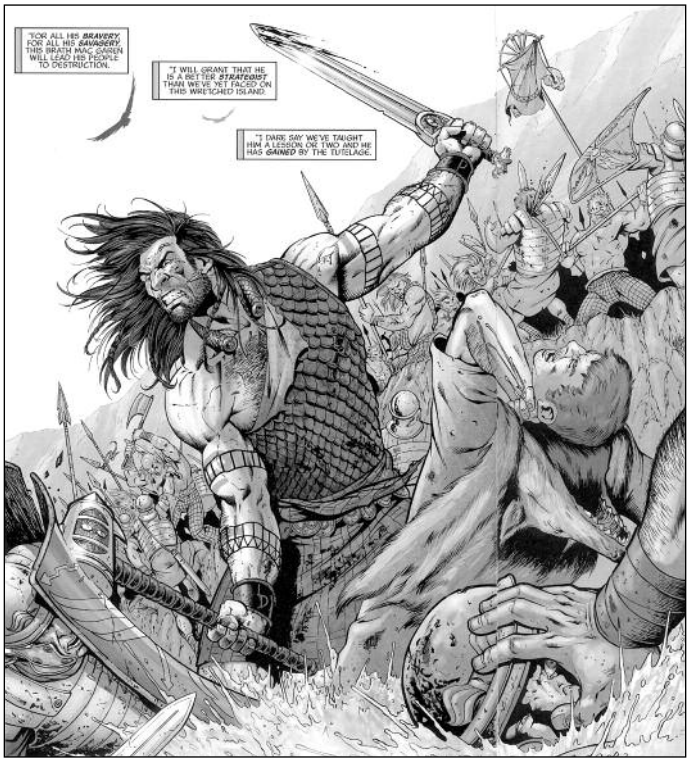
"I currently write three titles for CrossGen: ***Way of the Rat***, ***Brath*** and ***El Cazador***, as well as the upcoming ***Richard Dragon*** with DC and frequent contributions to ***The Simpsons Comics***."

Scott E. Hileman caught up with Chuck and asked him a whole bunch of questions. Wait'll you read the answers!

—DF

SCOTT E. HILEMAN: *When did you first decide you wanted to write?*

CHUCK DIXON: When I realized I could never draw well enough to work in comics as a penciler. My idol growing up was Steve Ditko. By the time I was thirteen I came to the conclusion that I didn't have the talent or the discipline to pencil the kind of comics I wanted to. So, I turned to writing.



Action from ***Brath*** #5, one the titles Chuck Dixon writes for CrossGen. Art by Andrew Di Vito and Roland Paris. [©2004 CrossGen Intellectual Property, LLC.]

SEH: *Did you immediately want to write for comics, or were there other things you wanted to write?"*

CD: Comics. Comics. Comics. Everything was aimed at that single goal. It's the medium that I was most attracted to and that I felt I had the greatest understanding of.

SEH: *But, what was your actual age? When did it go from being a childhood wish to* this *is what you want to do?*

CD: My only deviation from wanting to work in comics was a brief time when I was six. I had decided that being either a milkman or a priest might be cool.

Milkmen only work until noon. I didn't know they got up at two in the morning to begin their rounds. And priests seemed like the coolest guys in the world to me, at least at my parish where they were all Irish tough guys.

SEH: *When you made that decision to write, how long was it before you actually wrote something and sent it to an editor or publisher?*

CD: I was submitting to publishers while still in elementary school. But don't go looking for any Silver Age Chuck Dixon stories.

SEH: *Even at that young age, were you sending in fully-scripted stories? Were you pretty "with it," thinking of subplots, characterization bits, etc? I guess I'm wondering if you were a comic writing prodigy.*

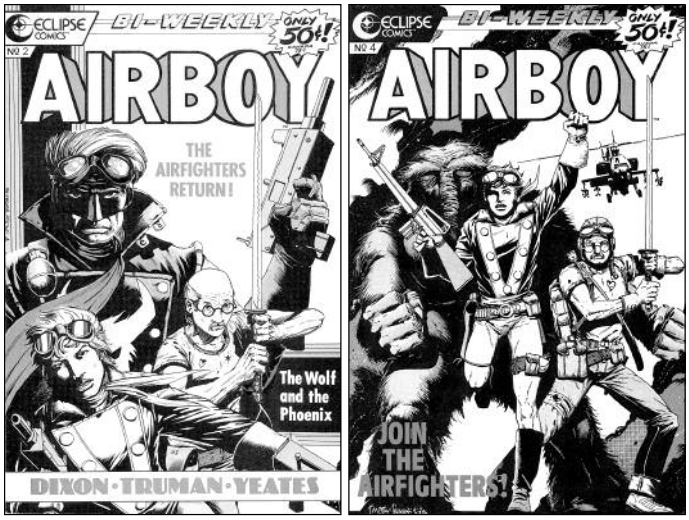
CD: My earliest submissions were done Harvey Kurtzman style. I'd sketch the story out with the dialogue in the balloons. I had no way of knowing what a script looked like. I was not "with it." My early stories were probably very lame. Make that certainly very lame. Pastiches of comics stories I'd read. No prodigies here.

SEH: *What was the response?*

CD: If I was *lucky*, I got a form letter.

SEH: *At some point, though, did you get something that wasn't a form letter? It might have still been a "no thanks, kid," but there was something there that was encouraging?*

CD: Nope. For most of the time trying to break in, it was the impersonal form letter. DC in the '70s had a kind of "in-person form letter." They'd schedule interviews for the same time every week, and you'd stand with a group of other hopefuls and get told there was no chance in hell you'd ever get a job in comics. I remember that I worked up the nerve to call for an interview



Covers from the run of ***Airboy*** Chuck Dixon wrote for Eclipse Comics in the 1980s. ***Airboy*** #2 & 4 cover art by Timothy Truman. [©2004 the Respective Copyright Holders.]

and they gave me one mid-week and mid-morning. I was living in Philly at the time so it was an easy train ride up to DC.

A bunch of us sat in the reception area. Guys with portfolios, guys with manila envelopes. I had nothing. None of us were aware that we were all here for the same appointment. Bob Rozakis and Jack C. Harris, then DC associate editors, came out from the bowels of DC and called us all over to the corner of the reception area. We didn't even get to go inside!

They told us about the *implosion* [*a sudden cutback in the DC line in the late 1970s.* **—DF**] and the layoffs and that there were no jobs in the business and that the medium was, for all intents and purposes, dead. They answered a few questions and introduced us all to the harsh realities of comics publishing. It was over inside of ten minutes.

It was a crushing experience. But I bounced back after a few months and was sending submissions to Marvel and Warren. Anyone remember Warren Publishing? [*If you do, or even if you don't, be sure to check out the TwoMorrows* Warren Companion. **—DF**]

SEH: *When you started, what was your writing schedule? Did you write in the morning? Evening? What did you sacrifice? TV? Movies? Hanging with friends?*

CD: I broke into comics fulltime following a divorce. I had a security job and lots of time on my hands. Every spare waking hour was spent writing. I cranked out proposals and outlines and springboards and sent them to everyone. When I did finally get assignments I'd sit and write six or seven stories in a row and submit them. Pure, high-octane enthusiasm.

SEH: *Sorry to hear about the divorce, but this is when you broke in, right? What about before? What was your method before that breaking in? Did you tell your buddies "Sorry, can't go out for hoagies tonight. I gotta write."*

CD: My schedule wasn't that heavy before my concerted effort to get into comics. I'd feverishly work up a bunch of stuff in a concentrated period and take a run at one or both of the majors.

SEH: *What kind of support did you get from family and friends when you said "I want to write comics for a living"? Did they look at you with raised eyebrows and open mouths?*

CD: My parents were very supportive. They never tried to dissuade me from working in comics. I think they had in mind that I might one day work in newspaper strips. It must have been hard for them because, to outsiders, I looked like an aimless bum. Never went to college. Worked a long string of meaningless "donkey" jobs. My Dad lived long enough to see me successful, and for that I'm very grateful.

SEH: *Did you write longhand? Typewriter? Speak into a tape recorder?*

CD: Longhand, and a typist typed it up. Then she quit on me, and I had to learn how to word process in two days. I walked into an office supply store and asked for a word processor I could use without reading the manual. I was scripting that afternoon. I still type by hunt-and-peck method.

SEH: *Hunt-and-peck? Good grief! And you're the most prolific writer in comics! Your forefingers must be worn down to nubs. [*laughter*] Shoot, if I had known that, I would have applied as your typist. I used to type other people's papers in college.*

CD: I'm the fastest hunt-and-peck typist I know. Stephen King types that way, and he seems to keep up all right. But had you been there at the right time, you'd have had a job, friend!

SEH: *Did you set minor goals to accomplish your major goals? For example, did you try to write at least an hour a day until a story was finished?*

CD: My problem was *stopping* writing. My major goal was to be writing full time within two years. For me, that meant a hundred pages a month, which meant the equivalent of four monthlies.

SEH: *And did you reach that goal? Did you actually start writing full time within two years?*

CD: Once I got the lead feature on ***Savage Sword of Conan*** assignment, I was fulltime.

SEH: *Were there setbacks?*

CD: There were no real setbacks once the jobs started coming. Just a steady building of page count until I had enough regular monthly work. I proved my reliability and my *flexibility*. I was willing to make changes to stories and make them rapidly. I still am.

SEH: *In pursuing your goal of writing full time in two years, were you concentrating on coming up with new characters, or were you writing established characters? Did Eclipse come to you about* ***Airboy*** *or did you go to them?*

CD: Eclipse came to me with it by way of Tim Truman. They first approached Tim and he campaigned to get me on as writer of the title. I already knew the character well. The only Golden Age comics I owned at the time were ***Airboy***. It was kind of weird that this old character I had an affinity for would be my first major color comics work. The fact is that, in addition to the old ***Airboy*** stories being great fun, they were also the *cheapest* Golden Age books you could buy. So I had a dozen or so I'd picked up for a buck or two at conventions in the '70s.

SEH: *When you started, what was your ultimate goal? What were thesteps you were taking to reach that goal?*

CD: My goal was to maintain gainful employment in comics until the day I died.

SEH: *To help with the reliability area, did you have a file cabinet of stories, plots, etc. to repackage and send off? Or did you just do it off the cuff?*

CD: I had years of daydreaming and a filing cabinet in my head that was crammed with gags, hooks, character ideas and loose plots. My first sale to Marvel was a western I'd written when I was 22. I rewrote it almost ten years later for ***Savage Tales***. John Severin drew it. I still draw on those years occasionally. I'm doing a two-part arc in ***Sigil*** right now that is based on a story idea I had over twenty years ago.

An Epic Saga

The John Jackson Miller Interview

Conducted by ***Danny Fingeroth*** via e-mail January 25, 2004
Edited by ***Danny Fingeroth*** / Copy-edited by ***John Jackson MIller***

*What happens if your mother never throws your comics books away? Then you, too, can spend your career strip-mining your childhood for fun and profit. That's what happened to John Jackson Miller, writer of comics and games and books about comic books and games. Since 1993, he's been at Krause Publications, where he produces books and magazines as editorial director of the comics and games division. His comics work ranges from umpteen small-press ventures to such titles as Marvel Comics' **Iron Man**. With a master's in comparative politics from Louisiana State University, he's sought to play on international and political elements in his fiction and games. In nonfiction, his research specialties include studies into online collectible auctions and comic book circulation history. Analysis of both topics appear in the massive (no lie, it weighs six pounds) **Standard Catalog of Comic Books**.*

DANNY FINGEROTH: *Talk a bit about your background. What were your interests as a kid?*
JOHN JACKSON MILLER: Comics, of course. I got my first ***Uncle Scrooge***, my first Harveys, at age six—and began drawing my own comics right about the same time. I had an entire "line" with a "universe" before I ever picked up my first Marvel or DC comic book, and recall being tearful at nine when I couldn't sell my comics to the little girl next door—because, after all, I'd spent "a third of my life" in comics by then!
DF: *You have Journalism undergrad degree and a Poli Sci M.A. Were they helpful in what you do now?*
JJM: Oh, yes, and in different ways. Journalism taught deadlines and how to write on demand. Just being able to write isn't enough, though—you need something to write about. So grad school gave me a lot of ideas I've been able to mine for ***Crimson Dynamo***, ***Iron Man***, and my other projects.
DF: *Talk about your influences/inspirations: Friends, family, teachers, etc?*
JJM: My mother certainly contributed to what I'm doing today; a grade school librarian, she not only didn't throw my comics away, she made me get them organized. By my teen years I had a huge "accession list" in a big notebook, which is probably my precursor to today's ***Standard Catalog of Comic Books*** (which is ironically about the same size).

Meanwhile, my dad, who'd taught electronics in the Marines, gave me a good grounding in applied science to offset the unreality of comics. More importantly, when I went to work for his repair business as a teenager, he didn't mind (too much) that I read comics on the job.

And my sister, who's a few years older than I am, introduced me to a lot of what was going on in pop culture—so I often feel like I've "been around" longer than I have. I got to experience a lot of the 1960s and 1970s vicariously, giving me some more to write about.

I also had one of those teachers in junior high and high school who was pivotal. Ellen "Burnzy" Burns, who'd been a nun, a flower child, and a comics collector is her past lives, taught English with verve. It was sort of like having Shirley Maclaine as your creative writing guru. Knowing that I understood the fundamentals of grammar and writing, she agreed to let me turn in several essays in comics form. I'd discuss "The Fall of the House of Usher" as assigned—only do it in the context of a "little theater" production my characters put on in a comic.

I think, at the time, I thought I was "getting away" with something—but, of course, we know doing the work in comics form took far longer than it would have as a simple essay. Clearly, that helped support my learning to communicate through comics—and I appreciate it to this day. She moved to San Diego years ago, and I was happy to see her drop by my first Comic-Con.
DF: *Can you talk about writers and other creators who influenced you?*
JJM: In fiction, it's a mixed bag—from Arthur C. Clarke and Hal Clement in the science fiction end to Tom Clancy and C.S. Forester in the "military procedural" end. I devour P.G. Wodehouse, and accidentally slip into a style

Iron Man takes flight in ***Iron Man*** V. 3 #74 written by John Jackson Miller with art by Jorge Lucas. [©2004 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

aping his when I'm writing too fast.

Comics is a longer list, simply because I've read more. Carl Barks and Charles Schulz were my earliest favorite comics writers, and remain on the short list.

Others, I admire for various reasons. David Michelinie, in ***Iron Man*** and Marvel's ***Star Wars***, taught me to build a supporting cast readers might care about, despite the fact that they bought the books to see the stars. Jim Starlin told suspenseful, layered stories, and really showed how to plant elements to string out a mystery—in ***Dreadstar***, you didn't feel silly poring over two-year-old issues for clues, because you knew they'd be there. Roger Stern—and later Kurt Busiek—I admire for their handling of continuity, which can be so much of a challenge that some writers avoid it altogether. And Chris Claremont always has great ideas and interesting dialogue, though I always preferred his smaller self-contained stories to the ones that sprawled.

One of Miller's recent book projects, ***The Standard Catalog of Comic Books***. [©2004 Krause Publications.]

And before taking on the role as editor of ***Comics Retailer***, I feel I had a pretty good grounding in the business of comics simply from reading Dave Sim, whose essays in the back of ***Cerebus***—for which he never charged more, it should be remembered—often had a lot to say about the subject. I'm pleased that in my editorial role I was able to call on him to share his thoughts on business in our magazines.

The advice of Michael Stackpole, a novelist (and the comics writer who married off Luke Skywalker at Dark Horse) has been greatly helpful over the years in preparing me for what to expect in the freelance realm. And just about everything else I needed to know seems to have come from the Thompsons, Maggie and the late Don, editors of the ***Comics Buyer's Guide***.

DF: *What were your favorite comics as a kid? In your teens and twenties?*

JJM: Maggie Thompson says "the Golden Age of Comics is 12." Mine was 14, when comics were momentarily cool with all the kids in school and I could "come out of the comics closet." In those days, I was principally into Marvel—***Avengers***, ***Star Wars***, ***Iron Man***, ***Uncanny X-Men***, ***Defenders***, ***Master of Kung Fu***—and was just beginning my entree into DC with ***New Teen Titans***.

Later, the comics-reading clique nearly vanished, all at once—something about girls and beer—but I kept on with it, becoming the "early-adopter" in what was left of our set. I discovered ***Comics Buyer's Guide*** which swung the doors open to ***Dreadstar***, ***Cerebus***, ***Watchmen***, ***normalman***, and what would wind up being a raft of indies, the more eclectic the better: ***Vietnam Journal***, ***Open Season***, ***To Be Announced***, just to name a few.

In college, with the black-and-white boom fizzling out, I really just worked to consolidate my existing collection, filling out runs as far back as I could afford. (You know, that thing we had to do before trade paperbacks.)

DF: *What are your faves today?*

JJM: These days, I have less time to read comics than ever before. My "to-read" comics pile toppled so many times it now has a separate room. When I do slow down to read something new, it's as likely as not to be a comic book which itself offers an escape from comics—such as Kenzer's ***Knights of the Dinner Table***, which is all about the gaming hobby.

No, much of my spare-time reading today is nonfiction, partially books that I was supposed to have read in college but skimmed in order to have more time to read comics or work on comics of my own. I tend toward the monstrous books that'd put shivers into the spine of a student with a deadline — last year it was ***The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich***; this year it's Churchill's history of World War II.

DF: *You worked on what you call "minicomics"? What were they, where were they seen?*

JJM: Minicomics are comics-as-fanzines, basically—generally called "mini" because most had pages a quarter the size of a sheet of paper. Some were smaller, some larger. They flourished in the 1980s as sort of a descendant of the undergrounds, which now could get full access to comics shops through the direct market, and the Amateur Press Associations, which saw a lot of their talent moving on to self-publish. They were much more grassroots, the simplest being photocopies.

They were distributed through mail-order channels—***Comics Buyer's Guide*** had not only a classified section for them, but also a column, "FPO," by former Marvel employee Paul Curtis. Fanzines such as Tim Corrigan's ***Small Press Comics Explosion*** networked for their producers, allowing people to find interested readers. Almost every minicomics reader also produced them, so there was this nice little community.

Matt Feazell, whose stick-figure "Cynicalman" typifies the minimalist nature of minicomics, saw some wider exposure, and Eclipse published four issues of ***Giant-Size MiniComics*** during the black-and-white explosion.

In high school, and for a while after, I self-published my own minis; contributed often to ***Misc!***, one of the larger anthologies; and also published with Neil Dorsett under the label, Chapter Eleven Productions. (Our motto: "If we've made a profit, we've made a mistake!") We did the photocopying at his dad's biological antigens factory—I sure hope we didn't kill any of our customers.

DF: *Were they a good training ground?*

JJM: Anything that makes a writer think in panels, I feel, helps. It's part of why I approach writing comics today as if I were doing the breakdowns—as if I were going to, God forbid, draw them myself.

In the long run, dabbling in the art really kept me from creating more than I did. I was a far faster writer than an artist, and I never could find a collaborator who could rescue me from my weak drafting skills—thus my output wasn't what it could have been.

DF: *What's the equivalent of minicomics now? How would someone get into doing them?*

JJM: Very clearly, webcomics are the minicomics of today, because distribution is wrapped up right in the format. That was always my undoing—and the undoing of anyone I ever worked with: writing and drawing is interesting, but paste-up and printing and advertising and fulfilling orders is less so.

If you walk around artists' alley at any major comics

convention, you'll see there are still a lot of minicomics producers around, too. You don't even need a copy machine any more to publish them—just a computer and a printer. That'll always be part of their charm.

There were more than 2,000 links for "minicomics" on Yahoo, last I checked.

DF: *What was your comic* ***Faraway Looks****? Was it a mini-comic?*

JJM: A lifetime ago, ***Faraway Looks*** began as a humor comic strip I did back in my minicomics days. The characters went through several incarnations as my style changed—they actually started as funny animals—but their personalities stayed constant. The current incarnation, which bears resemblance to what began, is a college humor strip featuring three losers who never leave the front of their dorm room TV set—whence comes a mass of snide observations about life, popular culture, academia, etc.

In 2000, taking a cue from the ultra-minimalist ***Knights of the Dinner Table***, I put some of my scripts to paper using computer "cels" for the characters—allowing me to basically "draw" as fast as I could write. This resulted in a self-published sample press run of a collected edition in 2002. I was considering the future of this material when the Marvel offer came up, at which point it was shelved. However, an established humor artist has shown interest in putting (much better!) pictures to my words, so this may well be something that will see wider distribution one day, should I ever have the time to return to it.

DF: *You come from a journalistic background. What led to your interest in that?*

JJM: Nearly failing calculus!

That's true—more on that later. Actually, in my life I've found myself repeatedly coming back to rely on the skills I've learned from being a fan of comics.

Why did I wind up editor on my high-school paper? I'd like to say it was because I was a budding **Woodward** or **Bernstein** in training. But the fact is, I sought to be the paper's cartoonist first—and then, since this was the paste-up era, realized that I had developed all the skills to run the paper while publishing my little comics-and-SF fanzine, ***Tripe***—reporting, editing, layout.

Same story in college. Despite my best efforts to find a higher-paying vocation at the University of Tennessee, I drifted back into the newsroom and wound up as editor of the daily. And, finally, after an attempt to escape into a life of academia in grad school, I wound up in publishing's web a third time—at which point I said, "The hell with it—going blind in front of a computer terminal is my destiny. Guild scale is the best I can hope for."

DF: *How is your journalism background helpful to your comics writing?*

JJM: In journalism, you usually don't write a word without knowing that it's going to be published—and that it's got to be done by a certain day. Fiction on spec doesn't come with a destination and a timetable built in, and as such I used to get distracted easily from my fiction.

But now that I do have deadlines and a venue, everything's changed. I've had to rewire my creative process to get things done—bringing in my work habits from the non-fiction side of things. That's allowed me to turn in 17 scripts in 12 months—not much in comparison with guys who do this full time, but for someone with a day job, it's a dizzying trip from zero to 60.

DF: *You're known as a member of the fan press, but focused more on the retailer and business angle than on the character and creator angle, yes? How did you end up doing that?*

A sample of Miller's cartooning in his strip ***Faraway Looks***. [©2004 John Jackson Miller.]

JJM: I was editing a line of lumber trade magazines in Tennessee in 1993 when Don Butler, editor of what was then known as ***Comics Retailer***, was hired away by Sendai, which was then publishing ***Hero Illustrated***, a competitor to ***Wizard***. Their intention was to publish a competing magazine, ***Comic Book Business***, with him at the helm.

Don was, himself, ***Comics Retailer***'s second editor in its two-year existence—K.C. Carlson having been pinched by DC. Putting out the mag in the interim fell to Don and Maggie Thompson, the editors of ***Comics Buyer's Guide***, which it had spun off from. Don's heart problems resurfaced around this time, and Krause Publications was willing to take a chance to fill the ***CR*** job—moving me up from Memphis to icy central Wisconsin. I got the gig from answering an ad in the classifieds in ***CBG***—so, yes, Virginia, those ads do work.

I didn't know it then—not many people did—but things were about to get icier, still. Sendai's retailer magazine lasted only nine issues, and ***Wizard***'s competing retail magazine, ***Entertainment Retailing***, was gone after 17. ***Comics Retailer*** might have followed—had I and the ad staff not leapt upon what happened to be my other hobby, games. And games happened to be exploding at the time, with the release of ***Magic: The Gathering***. Today, we've just sent the 144th issue of what is now ***Comics & Games Retailer*** to press, and it's

[**MILLER** *continues on page 39.*]

BUILDING A MONSTER
How I Created the Frankenstein Mobster
by MARK WHEATLEY

Mark Wheatley is an award-winning creator of radical comic books. Preferring the title "Comic Book Maker," he is known internationally as an artist, writer, editor, publisher and inventor. Noted for comics with heart and integrity, he holds the Inkpot, Mucker and Speakeasy Awards and his projects have been nominated for the Harvey Award and the Ignatz Award. His work has been included in the ***Spectrum*** *selection of fantastic art and has appeared in private gallery shows as well as the Library of Congress where several of his originals are in the LoC permanent collection. His comic book creations include* ***Mars****,* ***Breathtaker****,* ***Black Hood****,* ***Prince Nightmare****,* ***Hammer of the Gods****,* ***Blood of the Innocent****,* ***Frankenstein Mobster*** *and* ***Titanic Tales****. His interpretations of established characters such as* ***Tarzan the Warrior****,* ***The Adventures of Baron Munchausen****,* ***Jonny Quest****,* ***Dr. Strange****,* ***The Flash****,* ***Argus*** *and* ***The Spider*** *have brought them to life for a new generation of readers. Not content to simply create the contents of comics, Mark has worked as an editor and art director for a number of publishers and is the inventor of color production technology for comics. He established the highly respected Insight Studios in 1978 as a home base for a team of talented comic creators. Insight Studios is the subject of an "insightful" coffee table style art book,* ***IS ART: the Art of Insight Studios****. In other fields, he has written a number of episodes for* ***Troll Tales*** *a new television show being produced in Denmark, illustrated elaborate hardback novels, designed pioneering role-playing games and was an early innovator of the on-line daily comic strip form. Currently two of Mark's creations,* ***Hammer of the Gods*** *and* ***Breathtaker*** *are under active option by major Hollywood producers and studios.*

In this enlightening piece, Mark tells the story of how his creation, ***Frankenstein Mobster****, came to be. It's a terrific insight into the conceptual work that goes into creating a fictional universe and its characters.*

—DF

They call a pun the lowest form of humor. This gem of wisdom *obviously* came from someone who couldn't come up with puns. I don't have that problem.

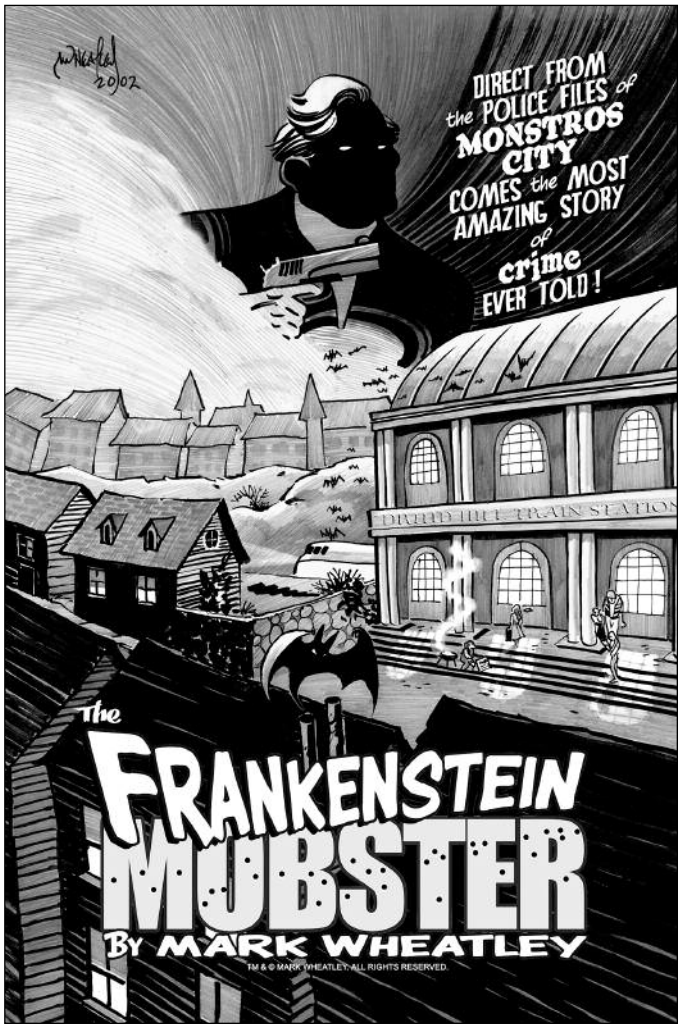
When I'm listening to people talk, reading, watching a movie, driving down the road, my mind is constantly scrolling through a possible list of synonyms, analogs and tenuous relationships between associated subjects. What can I say? I never metaphor that I didn't like.

In my creative process, often it is a pun, word-based or visual, that provides the seed of an idea. All I need is an element that puts an unexpected spin on the ordinary. That's how I got myself into writing and drawing a comic book series about a tough cop in a city of Monsters and Mobsters; the ***Frankenstein Mobster***.

Frankenstein Mobster is equal parts the mood and menace of James Whale and Boris Karloff's ***Frankenstein***, crossed with the energy and sudden violence of an old Warner Brothers gangster epic, and I draw it with exaggeration and touches of humor.

There's a rich backstory of a family devoted to law and order set against the backdrop of a mob-owned city that has it's own spooky history dating back to the American Revolution.

From Mad Scientist, Witch and Warlock, to bank jobs, fixed



Promotional art by Mark Wheatley. [©2004 Mark Wheatley.]

sporting events and crooked politicians, ***Frankenstein Mobster*** is a series that has recognizable icons and situations to attract an audience while it sews together the old parts in new ways.

The Time: Now.

The World: A familiar place with one exception: MONSTERS ARE REAL!

The Place: A city that is run by Mobsters and is home to Monsters.

The Setting: Monstros City

I spent a great deal of time planning the background of Monstros City. Not only did this place need to justify its strange history, but it also had to offer enough conflict and mystery to support a long-running series of stories. So I made it a coastal, sea port city of commerce. Monstros City became a real melting pot of races including long time natives, immigrants fresh off the boat and every kind of spook and monster. This is a place where the lower classes are mostly monsters; zombies, mummies, the unwashed and undead. The living human population has it pretty good with the extensive resource of monsters for a labor force. The lower class of the living is a bit pissed that monsters are taking their jobs and this has precipitated a number of clashes between the poor and the undead. It has gotten to the point where most cab drivers are either mummies or zombies. The sanitation engineers are largely ghouls and the few remaining living humans in that line are really disgusted by the ghoulish habit of snacking on the garbage. The monsters live in a rundown section once known as Druid Hill but now uniformly referred to as the Dead End of town.

This didn't just happen. Monstros City has a long history of spooks and goblins. Goes way back to pre-Revolutionary days. While Salem gets all the reputation for witches, that's only because those people killed their magic makers. Around Monstros City, the magic crowd managed to play it smart and stayed alive. At the inception of Druid Hill there was an organized league of Druids who helped settle Monstros. They came over on the ships like the Pilgrims did. Searching for religious freedom. But the way this worked out, they ended up on one side of the Sticks River and the good Christian souls took the other side. It was really two separate towns until a little before the Civil War. Druid Hill on one side of the river and Hydes on the other. But everyone pulled together during the War Between the States. As might be imagined, Druids were real helpful in the fighting.

The problem came from the pirates. The folks of the town of Hydes made a deal with these Pirates. Druid Hill and Hydes were big on shipping, their shared bay is a natural seaport. So Hydes decided to offer a pardon to any Pirates who would help form a navy and defend the harbor from the Yankee ships. The guy who was heading the Pirates at that time was Lucas Monstros. Funny how people can remember a name, but forget just where it came from.

The good news was: Lucas Monstros was a natural leader of men. And his outsider status gave him an unusual sympathy for the magic crowd and the monsters. After he successfully defended the two towns, he quickly put these places back on their feet. After the war he was able to bring the towns together under one city government. Folks around here were so grateful —they had seen what the Yankees and their carpetbaggers were doing to the rest of the South—so grateful that they not only elected Lucas Monstros as the first mayor of the combined burg, but they also voted to name the place Monstros City.

Some of the citizens of Monstros City, as seen in ***FM*** #0. [©2004 Mark Wheatley.]

By the time of the First World War, Monstros City was a bustling sea port of entry for the Mid-Atlantic States. The city was an "off the books" kind of place. Essentially a mob-run town. And while the Hydes family currently runs the Mobs and the city, they are acting out the legacy of Lucas Monstros. No one should have been surprised. Elect a crook and a crooked government is what you get.

Monstros City is an American town, located on the East Coast just slightly south of Ocean City in Maryland. Today the place is still run by the mobs. And the mobsters have a nasty dislike for the monsters. Like East St. Louis, Monstros City has managed to survive as an isolated capsule of crime into the new century. But unlike East St. Louis, Monstros City doesn't look like it will be making changes any time soon. The reason most of us have managed to go through life without hearing about the place is the work of a magic spell that has wiped the memory and knowledge of Monstros City from the world. The spell has also had some interesting effect on the city itself. There is very little modern technology. Monstros City is stalled somewhere between the late 1940s and early 1950s in its fashions and gear. You won't be seeing any computers or cell phones here. And when you do see a family well off enough to afford a black-and-white television set, the TV shows are all somehow warped versions of what we know in the rest of the world. Apparently, the magic spell takes a modern show like ***Dawson's Creek*** and turns it into ***Peyton Place***.

When I began developing the Frankenstein Mobster and his world it was the direct result of requests from publishers. In the early 1990s I had conversations with several large publishing houses, some who published comic books and some who were thinking it was time to start publishing comic books. The conversations were the natural result of my knowing and having worked for these people. The odd thing was that in each conversation, it was the other guy who suggested that I should create a whole line of comic books, a shared universe of Mark Wheatley creations. After about the third suggestion I started to actually take the idea seriously. And there my troubles began.

With the seeds of an impending collapse of the direct comic book market already planted but beyond my personal radar, I set about bringing nearly 70 characters to life. Never one to do

[**WHEATLEY** *continues on page 53.*]

Mark Wheatley's script, thumbnails and finished art for pages of ***Frankenstein Mobster*** #1.

PAGE 1 (inside front cover)

BLACK PANEL fade down to CITY below.

HOLD just long enough for the SOUND of thunder to roll by. Then comes the patter of rain drops striking pavement.

FRANKENSTEIN MOBSTER (V.O.)
None of us ever know who we are. We try - I tried all my life to figure it out and I died still not knowing. But I was somebody.
(Uncertain)
I - I know this place. And the storm. It's a regular thing around here. Yeah. That's a clue. I'm good with clues. I've seen it before. Storms. They blow in from the sea and hit - ah - HELL! What is the name of this place - ah -
(Now sure of this one thing)
The city is called - MONSTRO!

With lightning and thunder the darkness lifts.

PAGE 2

EXT. MONSTRO CITY - NIGHT

BIRD'S EYE view high over the sea, facing the skyline of the city. Through the rain appear the city lights, glistening like fire flies. Huge mounds of storm clouds tower into the sky.

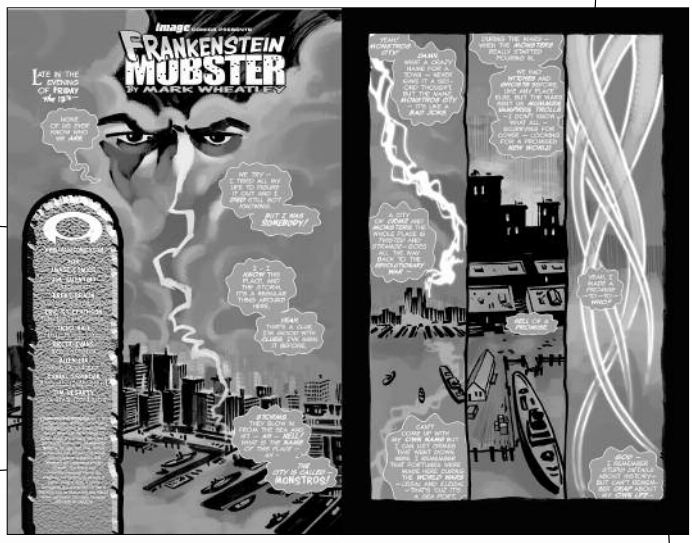
FRANKENSTEIN MOBSTER (V.O.)
Yeah! Monstro City! Damn. What a crazy name for a town. It never hit me before. I lived my whole life here so I never questioned it - never gave it a second thought. But the name, Monstro City - it's like a bad joke. What a name for a city of crime and monsters. The whole pace is twisted and strange - and that goes all the way back to the Revolutionary War - when the place thrived. Funny what I can remember about this place - can't come up with my own name but I can tell you what kind of crimes went down here during the Civil War. I remember that fortunes were made here during the World Wars - legal and illegal - that's 'cuz it's a sea port. During the wars - that's when the Monsters really started pouring into the place.

MOVE IN on the waterfront where lightning strikes a spot, over and over. The sky is chill, full of the moist scent of the sea.

FRANKENSTEIN MOBSTER (V.O.)
I mean, we had witches and ghosts before the wars, like any place else. But that's what sent us Mummies, Vampires, Trolls - I don't know what all - scurrying for cover - they'd been told this was a promised new world. Hell of a promise.

MOVE IN CLOSER to see man-sized but faint threads of vapor spiraling into the sky, being gathered in as strands from all over the city to a central column, ever rising. The lightning flashes and thunder cracks again and again.

FRANKENSTEIN MOBSTER (V.O.)
Yeah. I made a promise - to - to - who? God - I remember stupid details about history - but can't remember crap about my own life -



As his own writer and artist, Mark can modify script and art as he goes along, until he comes up with the total effect he's looking for.

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PAN around a mad doctor's laboratory. Shadows dance and jerk as the light from the electrified table pulses and flashes, throwing everything into high contrast.

There are Mobsters and bodyguards, two lab assistants and DOCTOR SOLVA. All are intent on the writhing body. There is fear on the faces of the mobsters. The lab assistants are apprehensive but precise in their labors.

And DOCTOR SOLVA makes notations in a blue covered notebook. She is excited, but attempts to maintain a professional attitude.

DOCTOR SOLVA
(while writing in notebook)
Four dead men! I stitched them together - and now look!

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CLOSE ON FRANKIE as he roars and screams. His massive jaw strains against the wrapped gauze, popping the thin stuff and some shreds fall away. We begin to see an incomplete vision of this monster. Pale flesh, the rotten nose, the brooding eyes.

DOCTOR SOLVA
See? He moves! Look! He breathes!

An Animated Career
The YVETTE KAPLAN Interview

Conducted by ***Danny Fingeroth*** December 19, 2003 / Transcribed by ***Steven Tice***
Edited by ***Danny Fingeroth*** / Copy-edited by ***Yvette Kaplan***

Yvette Kaplan tells stories with animation. I think that makes her a writer. But in the world of animation, the collaborative process is such that things are not so clear cut, as this interview will show. Yvette's titles over the years have included: artist, animator, animation director, producer and much more. She also teaches animation at the School of Visual Arts. Her credits list includes ***Beavis and Butthead****,* ***Doug,*** *and* ***Ice Age****. All her work involves crafting scenes and bits into a bigger picture. Recently, Yvette has officially added the title "writer" to her resumé, as she develops her own concepts into animation. However you parse it out, she tells stories. And her stories of her life and career are well worth reading. So… read on…*

—DF

DANNY FINGEROTH: *I'm here with Yvette Kaplan, who is an animation director and writer... I think. A lot of my questions deal with defining what you do, so let's say, to start, you're an animation director. Is that correct?*

YVETTE KAPLAN: Yes, I'm an animation director, and a story consultant, story development person, show creator. Just overall animation consultant/director person. Producer. [*laughter*] Writing is part of what I do in every aspect of my work. Even years and years ago, when I was an animator, I say that I wrote. But I've never been a *credited* writer on anything. My writing input is through my directing.

DF: *Okay. What is an "animator"? Is that a specific description of a job title, or a general way of saying that you're in animation?*

YK: An animator is the person who actually does the drawings. It's a skill, it's a craft, it's a wonderful ability, to put life into drawings. The animator sits and does drawing after drawing after drawing, creating the movement, bringing that character to life. So the animator is the artist. The animator has the pencil, or the animator has the paint, the animator is the sculptor—if they're working with stop-motion, and the animator is the person at the computer doing ***Toy Story*** or ***Ice Age***. So the animator is the *hands* through which it actually becomes real.

DF: *And have you done that?*

YK: Yes. But years ago. When I went to college, I majored in animation. At five years old, I wanted to be an animator. Because I drew. That was when drawing was my whole life. And I created characters, and all I wanted was one day to see them move. So I went to the School of Visual Arts and majored in Animation. It was amazing, seeing my **first** character running around the screen. From that moment on, I was an animator. And I pursued working in New York, in the industry. And I animated for... it must have been about ten years.

DF: *So you were an artist first, and by inclination, as a kid. What were your favorite cartoons and influences as a kid and as a teenager?*

YK: Max Fleischer cartoons, definitely. Unlike most animators, it wasn't Disney. At least, not that I'm not aware of. I'm sure the Disney TV series ***Wonderful World of Color*** influenced me tremendously. In fact, that's where I might first have seen what an animator was. I'm sure it was the Disney show. But, for some reason—my family, we didn't get to many movies—so I didn't see an awful lot of Disney features until later. Weird. But I lived by TV. It was the old Max Fleischer ***Color Classics***, the ***Betty Boop*** cartoons, ***Popeye***, but really the ***Color Classics***. Some odd, dark films. One's called ***Greedy Humpty Dumpty***. Then there was ***Dancing on the Moon***. Oh, and ***Gulliver's Travels***. That was Fleischer's wannabe Disney feature and it really hooked me. Probably if I had seen ***Snow White*** in the theaters, that would have been it for me. But the best I got was ***Gulliver***, and I loved it. I saw that movie every time it was on. That was it.

DF: *The Hanna-Barbera stuff and the Jay Ward stuff, was that significant?*

YK: Oh, I watched everything. But I don't think they were around in my formative years. It was entertainment, but by then my sensibilities were already locked into the kind of thing I wanted to do. Yes, I loved the Hanna-Barbera and Jay Ward material, but I never worked on that type of really gag-oriented cartoon. I'm known for comedy because of my association with ***Beavis and Butthead***, but all my influences were more poetic or surreal, I'd say.

DF: *Was there anybody in your family, group of friends, the people you went to school with, who had similar interests? Or this is something that just came to you individually?*

YK: My mother drew when she was young, but she never did it in front of me. I was totally encouraged to do so, but it was really a way of survival for me. I was kind of a lonely kid, very inner-world oriented, when I was young. I didn't come out into my own until maybe my pre-teen years. Then I was out and social as can be, but in my early years, especially four, five six, I would just sit and draw, draw, draw. I'd pretend that I made my friends on my pieces of paper. I wrote little stories. Little sequential art things.

DF: *This was in Brooklyn?*

YK: In Brooklyn, in my little apartment building, sitting at the coffee table cross-legged, drawing on loose leaf paper because that's all we had.

DF: *Your parents encouraged your drawing? Discouraged it?*

YK: Encouraged. My father was my biggest fan. He used to play cards down in the park on the weekend, because we lived right next to a big park. That was my backyard. And he'd come

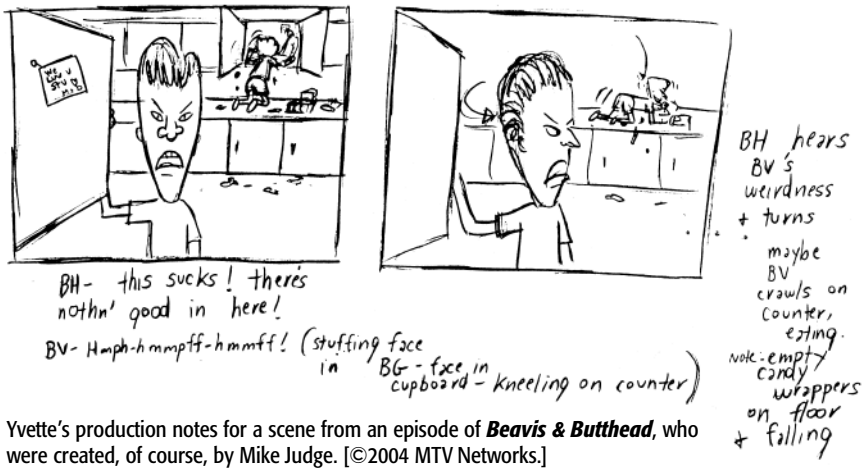
upstairs for lunch or something and see what I drew and go, "Ooh, ooh, ooh! I don't believe it!" And he'd take all my drawings and run downstairs to show his friends.

DF: *That's good positive reinforcement.*

YK: Definitely.

DF: *Was there an art club or animation club in school or anything like that?*

YK: No, but there were a couple of art teachers at Lafayette, my high school, that really did champion me, and they got me into an art course on the weekend, a scholarship to the Brooklyn Museum. It was an advertising graphics course. So that might have been a really big part of my shift to thinking and solving problems artistically, thinking in a different way, getting a little writing in there too, because it was concept-oriented. There were two, Mr. Levitt and Mrs. Holden. I want to thank them. David Levitt. I think he's still there, a wonderful guy. And Mrs. Holden was the head of the art department. And they did champion me.



Yvette's production notes for a scene from an episode of ***Beavis & Butthead***, who were created, of course, by Mike Judge. [©2004 MTV Networks.]

DF: *Were you into comic books at all?*

YK: Yes! ***Betty and Veronica***, ***Archie***. I have an older brother, thirteen years older. He moved out and got married when I was seven. But he was a big comic collector, and there were some of his old ***Superman*** comics that were left in the apartment. Most of them were missing the front covers and a few pages. I'd start in the middle of a story, because that's all there was for me. I read them over and over. That was it, he didn't have any of the other characters, he was a Superman fan. Then I started to buy the love comics, like ***Patsy and Hedy*** and ***Millie the Model***. I was constantly in the corner luncheonette looking through comics. I must have bought a comic every day.

But my favorite, once I discovered it, became this more obscure comic called ***Thirteen Going On Eighteen***, done by John Stanley. It was the funniest thing, full of amazing comic timing in the panels, and I'd swear now that it taught me that, timing, which is the heart of animation. I still have my collection. I still have my collection. Oh, and also ***Sugar and Spike***, by Sheldon Mayer. I loved those.

DF: *So did you ever think of going into comics? Or was the animation, the stuff that moved, always more appealing?*

YK: In college I did some comics, but animation was always the thing. I've said many times that I let a five-year-old decide my life. Somehow, making that statement in my own mind when I was five, and making it real by telling people, "I'm going to be an animator, I'm going to be an animator," was important for me. I didn't vary from that goal.

DF: *Now, you said you went to SVA. Was that the only choice for you? Did you have other colleges you were thinking of, or other directions?*

YK: College in my family and in my group meant either Brooklyn College or, in my particular case, my brother went to the Fashion Institute of Technology so that was where I would have gone, because that's all I knew. But there was a college fair one day at Lafayette, and representatives from different colleges came to speak, and one of them was David Rhodes, who spoke about the School of Visual Arts. He's the chairman of the School of Visual Arts. Now he is. At the time, Silas Rhodes, his father was. But now David Rhodes is the chairman.

DF: *Of a department, or the whole school?*

YK: The whole school. So when he came to speak at my high school and he mentioned the word "animation," that was it. I knew that was where I was going to go. And I got a full scholarship to SVA through the School Art League. I don't know if it's still around. It was a private group of patrons who took care of young art students who couldn't afford to go to school. It was portfolio and need-based. I thank them too.

DF: *When you were at SVA, was there anybody we would have heard of who either were your teachers or your classmates there?*

YK: Tom Sito was a classmate. In fact, I just got a really nice Christmas e-mail from him last night. And he's from Brooklyn, too! After SVA, he went off to L.A. and worked at Disney, animating on ***The Little Mermaid***, ***Beauty and The Beast***, ***Aladdin***. Then he was prominent in Story on ***Pocahontas***, and on ***Shrek*** at DreamWorks. And tons of other things. And he was co-director of ***Osmosis Jones***. That's the usual progression—animator, story, director. Now I believe he just started his own company, with some other L.A. artists.

DF: *Was the animation department a boy's club?*

YK: No. It was wonderful. I had great, inspiring teachers. Everyone was as supportive as hell. No competition between the students. Everyone helped each other out. I'm still close with a lot of the people.

DF: *You said the professional progression in the animation business is usually...*

YK: Animator, story, director. Job titles and duties are very confusing, because there're so many hands. Animated films are such compilations of different people's work. So it's very hard to prove who did what. A writer has a script, "this is my script." If your name is the main name on something, you pretty much assume you are responsible for it, but an animator is such a behind-the-scenes kind of part. But perhaps if I explain in one little tiny moment, my transition from animator to director, I think you'll see how in some ways an animator is always writing, because they're always making decisions about *characters*. The decisions are moving-based, but they're also acting-based. That's what's always said: "an animator is an actor with a pencil."

DF: *And what about a director? Do your progression.*

YK: I was an animator on the Nickelodeon show ***Doug***. Before ***Doug*** was a show, a pilot was produced here in New York directed by Tony Eastman. Tony is a good friend of mine, and the person I credit with being very responsible for my career. I wouldn't have worked on ***Beavis*** if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have worked on ***Doug***. He always took me under his wing, and I

COMICS INTO FILM:
A Cautionary Tale
by LEE NORDLING

Why is Hollywood paying attention to such comics as ***American Splendor***, ***Ghost World*** and ***Road To Perdition***, when they don't have any costumed characters with unique abilities or a penchant for fighting crime? None of these were concept-driven or well-known properties that fit the public perception of a "comic book movie," so why did Hollywood choose to adapt them into films?

Let's start by demolishing some stereotypes that usually end up with newspaper, magazine and television writers putting "pow" and "bam" into their reviews.

If you asked most non-comics fans to name some films and TV shows that were adapted from comic books, they might mention ***Superman***, ***Batman***, ***Men In Black***, ***X-Men***, ***Spider-Man***, ***Daredevil***, ***Hulk***, and any number of sequels and live-action and animated superhero TV series based on Marvel and DC Comics characters.

These people might also guess ***The Matrix***, ***Darkman***, ***Robocop*** and ***Star Wars***, and, of course, none of these was adapted from a comic.

What is it about this last group of films that reinforce a stereotypical expectation of comics? Each is in the superhero/heroic fantasy genre and involves good vs. evil storytelling, and for decades the general public has confused this genre with the comics medium, and treated the two synonymously.

A "comic book movie" is now understood to be a film that's simpleminded and filled with action, but this pejorative doesn't accurately define the content of a comic book, nor is Hollywood's tendency toward simple storytelling the reason they've pounced on the comic book industry for editorial source material.

If it were true, why would they continue to make such films and shows as ***American Splendor***, ***Ghost World***, ***Road To Perdition***, ***From Hell***, ***Blade***, ***Bulletproof Monk***, ***Judge Dredd***, ***Jeremiah***, ***The Crow***, ***Josie and the Pussycats***, ***The Mask***, ***The Rocketeer***, ***Swamp Thing***, ***Sabrina the Teenage Witch***, ***Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles***, ***League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*** and ***Hellboy***?

There are several reasons, some fairly obvious, some not so obvious at all.

First, let's tackle the obvious ones.

Comics and film share the trait of being visual storytelling media, so it's easier for production and studio executives to see how the story will unfold.

Comics make an easy-to-read sales tool, and, since Hollywood executives have a notoriously short amount of time to read, comics make a convenient alternative to a 300-page novel.

Now, let's move on to the reasons that are not so obvious, and may provide additional insight into Hollywood's decision-making process.

It's important to understand that making movies is a numbers game, for studios, production companies, and creators. To clarify, this means that there is a weeding-out process that begins with whatever gets submitted, and ends with whatever gets released. Everything else gets weeded out for one reason or another. So, if you're a production company looking for a studio to "green light" a project, you put as many properties as you can handle into the pipeline, thereby increasing your odds for getting something released.

Yes, people win the lottery with one ticket, but the odds are ten times better with ten tickets.

And double-yes, it's important for a production company to have passion for the properties they control, but getting something made is still a numbers game.

Let's explore those properties that *don't* get made "for one reason or another."

When the studios had writers, actors, and directors (and everybody else) under contract, there were no legal issues about who controlled what.

They controlled it all, and could do whatever they wanted with it, and did.

With the collapse of the studio contract system, that all changed, and decades later, with the rise of the Hollywood package deal, it changed even more, and perhaps for good.

The package deal works like this:

Someone—could be an actor, director, writer, or producer—has a concept, treatment, or script that they like. Their goal is now to put together the right combination of talent to get this property set up at a studio. This combination of talent, along with whatever they decide they want to do, is "the package."

Each person attached to the property has likely contributed

American Splendor, a recent non-superhero comics-to-film success. Paul Giamatti embodies Harvey Pekar. [©2004 New Line Productions, Inc.]

their own two cents worth about what form the story should take, and each owns a piece of that pie.

There's one thing about this pie, though. It can be divided, but it can't be separated. Nobody can take their twenty percent of the pie and go home without ruining the other eighty percent.

And I mean ruining it for good.

Literally, that's how the pie crumbles.

Getting a film set up, in the best of circumstances, is a complicated business, which is why you often read how long it takes for some films to get made, sometimes years.

And often, they never get set up at all, all too often, in fact.

That's the big downside to the Hollywood package system. Too much time, effort, and energy goes down the drain.

The upside is that participants get a much bigger slice of that pie than they ever would have in the old studio system.

An example of a comic where the title is the concept. Art from ***Cowboys & Aliens***. Written by Fred Van Lente with art by Ian Richardson. [© & TM Platinum Studios, LLC.]

Now let's move on to comics, why they're perceived as bankable, and what advantage they may have over a bunch of movie stars, screenwriters, directors and producers sitting around and figuring out what kind of package they can put together.

Let's say you're a producer, and you control the rights to a comic. You still have to put a package together for the studios, and everybody still gets their same two cents worth about how the film should be developed, and it could still take the same number of months or years to find a studio that's interested in bankrolling this particular package, but if the deal falls apart, and the pie crumbles around it, there's still one piece of the pie remaining.

The comic.

With the comic in hand, you, the producer can begin again, making certain that any new participants in the package are only familiar with the comic, and not any incarnation of the comic that was ever developed.

Controlling an original intellectual property, such as a comic, is like having disaster insurance for unforeseen events, and don't we all want that?

Now that we've established why the comics medium makes an attractive sales tool, what concerns might a studio have about a comic that it's interested in acquiring?

Basically, there's always a concern about how well a story can be adapted from one medium to another. Story structure paradigms in comics and movies/TV are different, storytelling tools are different, and the manner in which they're perceived by the two audiences/markets—reading vs. watching—is different.

It's true for novels, and it's true for comics.

Any translation can lose the power of the original piece, and there's no way to determine how well something's going to come out, until it's been attempted.

This is the major reason so many films based on comics properties or novels end up so crappy. Because of their costs, movies and TV are the two media where you can't easily afford to rethink all your decisions and go back to the keyboard to start over.

So, if a studio is concerned about how well the adaptation from one medium to the other is going to be handled, and you don't already control a property as popular as Spider-Man, then what kind of comics property is Hollywood more likely to be interested in?

Properties are divided into four basic categories:

- Concept-driven
- Execution-driven
- Character-driven
- Market-driven.

The potential for the success of your property is driven by at least one of these. Some exceptional properties will have elements from two or more of these categories, but most new concepts will only have one or two.

Concept-driven. This idea, upon concept, is immediately compelling or evokes a similar response from numerous people, and it can usually be stated in a few words or with a title.

For example: "This is a story about a psychiatrist who works with a boy who claims to see ghosts, only for the psychiatrist to discover that *he's* one of the ghosts the boy sees." Another example, where the title *is* the concept, is the upcoming Platinum Studios production, ***Cowboys & Aliens***. With each of these, a film executive "gets it," so, even if the initial attempt to flesh it out doesn't meet expectations, people aren't likely to lose faith in the initial cool concept, (though the screenwriter is likely to be looking for different work).

Execution-driven. This is the antithesis of the concept-driven project. The success of execution-driven projects is based solely by how well familiar, complex, or esoteric material is handled. Examples of this are ***American Splendor***, ***Ghost World***, and ***Road To Perdition***. It takes vision and the right combination of talent to shepherd an execution-driven project into becoming a successful adaptation.

Character-driven. These are properties created around a character or group of characters, where the interaction between the characters in the environment produces a wide range of potential for stories, as opposed to one quintessential story. Because of the periodical nature of their titles, most superheroes fall into this category, as do ***Judge Dredd***, ***Jeremiah***, ***The Crow***, ***Josie and the Pussycats***, ***The Rocketeer***, ***Swamp Thing***, ***Sabrina the Teenage Witch***, ***Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles***, and ***Hellboy***. Since Hollywood's needs are for a quintessential story about one protagonist or group of protagonists—at least for a pilot or first film—that means the tough part of adapting one of these properties into a film is *finding* that quintessential story. And if it can't be found, then it has to be created, which usually

The Double-Edged Sword of Hollywood's Love of Comics

by AARON SEVERSON

One of the most important reasons Hollywood considers comics bankable as a source for films is also the simplest—and has the most potential to become a pitfall as well as an advantage.

Consider the position of the studio executive hearing a pitch for a film. Most pitches are original concepts with no life outside the limbo of potential movie projects. There is a finite number of places to take a movie pitch, and if the execs at all of those venues say no, the pitch is dead. In the terminology of Hollywood, it's "been shopped," and its potential is exhausted. In most cases it will die without the general public ever even hearing of it. The executive, then, knows that he or she is in a position of power: they can make or break your idea.

If your pitch is based on a published intellectual property like a comic book, however, that balance of power changes. Now the executive is looking at something that's already out before the public, even if it's an independent comic with a readership that barely hits four digits. The actual sales figures are not that important: many of the most successful comics-to-film adaptations have been based on fairly obscure comics (e.g., ***Men in Black***, ***The Crow***, ***The Mask***). Studios buy rights to prose novels all the time, and the readership for a novel that's not on the ***New York Times*** best-seller list is not that much bigger than that for an independent comic.

The important thing is that it's out there **where someone else might buy it**. It may end up on some other executive's desk six months or six years from now and end up as the next ***Men in Black***. It's easier (and often safer) for executives to say no to a project than to say yes, but everyone in Hollywood knows the stories of the people who passed on properties that became lucrative franchises, and nobody wants to be the butt of future jokes.

So how is that a double-edged sword? Just because a studio may be motivated to option something **out of fear** that someone else will, that doesn't mean that they have the faintest idea what to ***do*** with a project. How often do you hear that a studio has optioned a comic... and then nothing ever comes of it? Often, the reason is that the studio optioned it **preemptively**. They're taking it off the market while they decide what to do with it.

The key here is the term "optioned" rather than "purchased" or "acquired." In the days of the old studio system, the studios routinely bought the film rights to novels and plays outright, often for substantial sums. Today they typically buy (for a nominal fee) the *option* to acquire the rights rather than buying the rights up front. An option agreement gives a studio "the exclusive and irrevocable option to purchase and acquire all of the rights in and to the property," which the studio does not have to do until shortly before the project actually goes into production... if it ever does.

During the option period (which may be a few months or a few years) the project is passed from desk to desk as the studio decides whether to commit the millions of dollars necessary to actually produce a major motion picture. The studio may spend a few dollars on story outlines or concept art

Love Bytes, from Platinum's *Macrov*
comedy about a love triangle betwee
and a computer. Written by Joshua El
Art by L. Frank Weber.
[LOVE BYTES is TM & © Platinum Stu