

CLASSIFIED
TV/COMICS

THE REAL GOLDEN AGE VS. THE REAL GOLDEN AGE

ART, SCHMART, I SAY! I'M TALKING SOUL.

By IRENE HEATH
Journal staff writer

Yesterday's comics were greatest! Holy moley, I should know! Why, I remember back to the days when Superman was born.

I didn't let on about Superman, though. That would mean confessing I was sneaking into my brother Jack's room when he wasn't home.

Like most of his pals, Jack would come home from school, grab a loaf of Wonder bread and jar of peanut butter, and disappear into his bedroom for a snort of printer's ink. His narcotic was comic books; they formed a giant hill at the foot of his bed.

With a fierce snarl, he forbade the rest of us kids in the family to touch his treasures, and for good reason. Among young traders a book with a cover was worth twice the value of one without.

Jack — and everyone else in the neighborhood old enough to pick up cash running errands — invested every cent of their earnings on comic books. They cost a whopping dime. Remember, a dime represented admission to a double feature at the movie house and millions of them were spent on comics in the late '30s and early '40s.

We were unaware we were living in a golden age, but if someone had told me I wouldn't have been surprised. Every child savored each zippy picture, each balloon-framed word. In some cities, delivery trucks were mobbed as soon as the books arrived at the corner store. Comic books were for kids alone (today most fans are young adults who spend an average of \$30 a month on comics). No grownup would openly admit to reading the "trash."

From the day Superman — created by teenagers Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster — debuted in Action Comics in 1938, we fashioned capes out of crepe paper and leaped out of trees for days. No sooner had the novelty worn thin when a procession of new heroes followed, each more inventive than the last. Seldom in the history of publications was such a concentration of long-lasting fictitious characters dreamed up in such a short time span. The Flash. Batman. Plastic Man. The Human Torch. Sub-Mariner. Captain Marvel.

A favorite of mine was The Flash, (created by writer Gardner Fox and illustrated by Harry Lampert) who swirled about so speedily he became invisible. All the while he'd toss off swell one-liners ("Wheee! What a ride!") He was really Jay Garrick who became the fastest man on earth when he was bathed in hard-water fumes. Some comics buffs say the quality of art has improved in recent decades. Art, schmartz, I say. I'm talking soul. Most illustrations were in roaring colors — clean, clear, uncluttered, just like the storylines. There were few shaded characters — only good or bad. That's the way it was supposed to be. We were raised on white hats and black hats.

But even so, our hearts were won by the one exception: Batman (or millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne), introduced in Detective Comics in 1939. He started out as a mysterious vigilante, bent on avenging the murder of his parents. (A bit of trivia: Orson Welles was influenced by artist Bob Kane's style in his camera shots for "Citizen Kane.")

Contrary to the golly-whizz climate of the times, Batman's bad guys held great appeal. Who would have dreamed a lineup of villains would come along that could pose a threat to Dick Tracy's Mole, Blank, The Brow and Prune Face? Enter the clown

Please see OLD, B3

By JOHN GREENWALD
Journal staff writer

This is the Golden Age of Comics. Today your sons (and even your daughters) are reading comics that are better

written and better drawn than ever before.

Your kids have an amazing choice of amazing heroes, from Amethyst, the girl gem who battles evil Jade, to the X-Men, mutants on the march against malevolence.

The industry has exploded to include more than 250 titles published by almost 20 companies. With that variety has come new levels of imagination and story-telling skill.

A surprising number of comics are good, escapist reading (the flip Spider-man books, for example); many set high standards of story and style (the brooding Batman); and a few are classics of the form (Frank Miller's evocative "Ronin" mini-series).

In the best tradition of legends and fairy tales, today's comics deal richly with themes of love and fear, trust and abandonment, power and evil. The best stories can be complicated and dark, echoing childhood's most powerful emotions.

As always, comics serve up super-powered superheroes battling almost equally super-powered villains (all dressed in gaudy costumes). However, dozens of today's specialized superheroes and villains have become incredibly baroque, embroiled in plots combining endless epic quests with soap opera complications.

The books' major theme is that super-powers are not all encompassing and alone cannot make superheroes super-happy.

Recently, Superman wasn't super enough to save both his college roommate and the inhabitants of a Pacific island (the same time roomie was trapped in a fire the natives were threatened by a tidal wave). The friend died, Superman cried.

The comic world has grown because the business has grown. A decade ago most comics were printed in the hundreds of thousands and sold nationally in convenience stores and supermarkets. This meant comics were a high volume, mass marketed, sometime lowest-common-denominator product.

Since then a new market has opened up, direct sales stores. Some may have started as used book and magazine shops, or science fiction book stores. Today they are a major — but not a mass — market.

Publishers supply direct sales stores without middleman wholesalers. This means they can make adequate profits on fewer copies sold. They can experiment, take risks, try out new characters, new formats.

Now, in addition to the 65-cent monthly comic book printed on cheap, yellow newsprint, comic book stores sell 12-issue "maxi-series" printed on high quality, white text paper (\$1.25 per copy) and six-issue mini-series printed on glossy magazine paper for \$2.50 each.

Besides the two major publishers — DC (Superman, etc.), Marvel (Spider-man, etc.) — there now are a dozen others, with names like Eclipse, First, Aardvark-Vanaheim.

Rules are broken regularly by writers. Superman fails, Batman loses Robin, Spider-man reveals his secret identity. Ditto, the artists. One, Gene Colon, flamboyantly orchestrates entire pages. He replaces the familiar comic book grid of panels with drawings flying off the page, or bunched up like movie quick-cuts.

Fans of other "Golden Ages of Comics" may think my opinions presumptuous. But the original Golden Age — the 1930s and 1940s — really was the First Age of Comics in which mediocre artists and pulp writers developed the form.

Today there is a wide range of top quality stuff, the best ever, from which I've culled the list below. It includes some of the titles, good and bad, that make this the Golden Age.

■ **The Batman and Detective Comics** star the familiar Darknight Detective, but without the 1960's camp.

These are moody, sour nights now for Batman. In the last two years, he's battled an unpromising fate (he loses Robin, twice) and self-destructive emotions (he falls in love with a criminal).

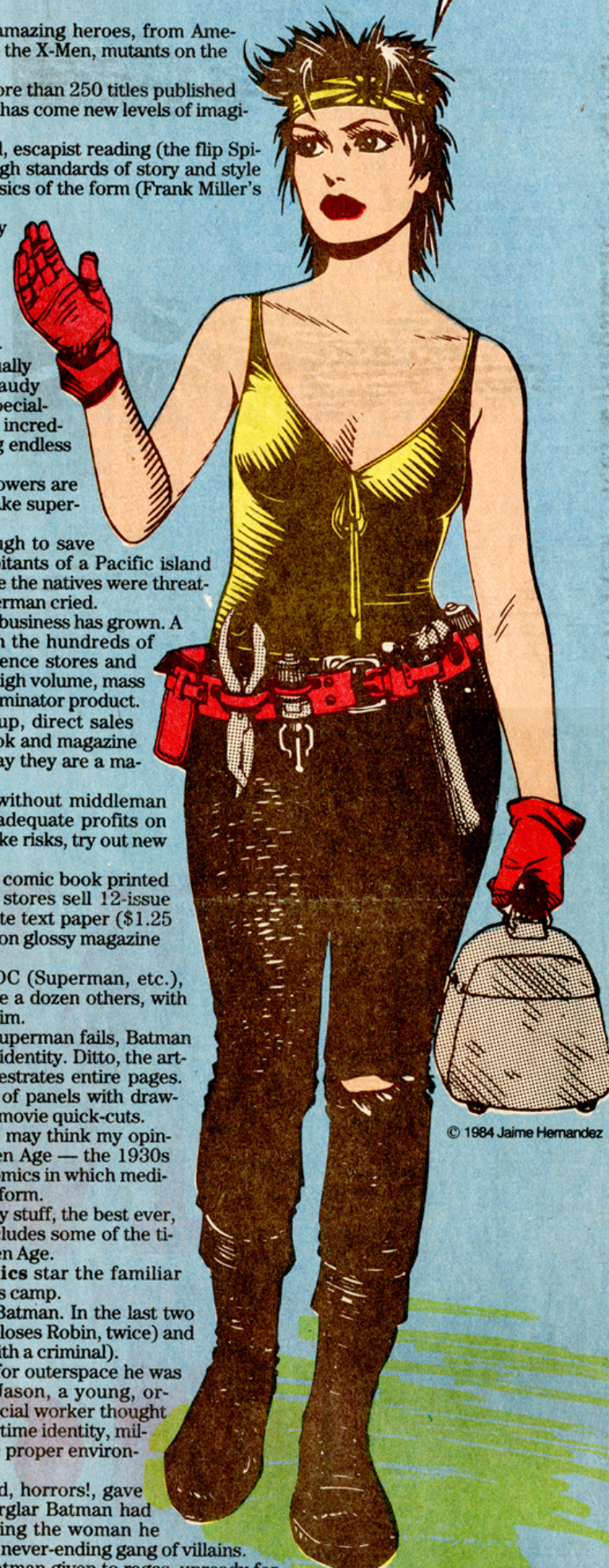
When the original, grown-up Robin left for outer space he was replaced, after a lonely interlude, with Jason, a young, orphaned circus acrobat. But a misguided social worker thought the Wayne mansion (home of Batman's daytime identity, millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne) was not the proper environment for a boy.

So she took him away from Batman and, horrors!, gave him to Nocturna, the moon-loving cat burglar Batman had fallen for. Batman went a little crazy loving the woman he should hate, all the while fighting the usual, never-ending gang of villains.

Writer Doug Moench has a vision of a Batman given to rages, unready for love, almost powerless against the seduction of the night, a danger to himself as well as villains.

Please see NEW, B3

COME OFF IT, PAPERHEAD. YOUR CREATOR WAS A PULP WRITER.



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ZOWIE! Old comic books make super profits

By JAYNE BLANCHARD
Journal staff writer

It was the red and blue-suited splendor of Superman that eventually hooked Gayle Huey into the comic book convention business. "I was a tomboy and liked the superheroes — Superman was my favorite. He was heroic. He could fly."

"Of course," she confesses with a sly smile, "there was Batman. Maybe it was the cape . . . maybe it was the mask. There sure was something intriguing there . . ." The voice of the Fort Washington, Md., resident trails off as she remembers those long-ago days hunkering down to the latest from DC and Marvel.

Today, comics are big business to Huey, who heads Jubilee Enterprises, a firm holding comic book conventions all over the East Coast. The four-year-old company books conventions in 22 different cities, locally in Crystal City, Va., Silver Spring, Md., and the D.C. Armory and as distanced as Pittsburgh and Connecticut. "Every three months is a rotation back to a location," says Huey.

These conventions feature between 40 and 50 dealers in the pulp superhero trade, guest artists from the DC and Marvel comic book publishing

houses, movies, games and contests. Trading and bartering for comics is encouraged. As president of the company, Huey attends every weekend convention. "I like traveling and meeting people."

And the hundreds of visitors to these conventions are not only children momentarily coming unglued from MTV to bury themselves in the current X-Men or Teen Titan installment. "It's become a good family activity," Huey says. "It's strange. Parents once frowned upon kids reading comics. But now, they encourage their kids to buy and trade them. They can put their kids through college with the money collected."

Huey herself was a product of a mother sympathetic to the bright colors and zingy action of comic books. "Before I got into the comic book convention business, I was a dealer. I had between 10,000 and 20,000 books. I had collected them as a child and my mother never threw them away."

After seeing an ad in a local newspaper for a person wanting comics, Huey sold two from her collection for \$50. Then, a friend took her to a convention at the University of Maryland and she made \$185. "I

INSIDE: A listing of comic book stores, B3

thought, hey, this is a great way to make money on the weekend."

More conventions followed until Huey learned that an acquaintance of hers wished to get out of sponsoring comic book shows. "So I got in. I was in computers at the time and wanted a job where I could be my own boss and play golf."

These days find Huey out from behind a computer terminal and operating Jubilee Enterprises out of her home, leaving the weekdays between conventions open for sinking a putt here and there.

But she's bullish on Batman. And other heroes

Please see HUEY, B3

Gayle Huey has collected comic books since childhood. Now they're paying off.

Journal photo by Cyrena Chang



Page design by Robert St. John

B3: Three Cheers

Fond farewell to a construction boss



B11: 'Til it hurts

Jock Bubba Smith joins exercise craze



Tomorrow:

Sing yo, ho, ho and a sweet made of rum