
WHO SENT THE SENTINELS?
AN ASLANFOURTEEN PRODUCTION


MAKE MINE
MARVEL

The Sacred Store

It is 1973. I am climbing a hill with my mummy and my baby sister. We live in the Village. There are two paper-shops in the Village. Mr. McKinnon and Mr. Kempton. Near my school is the Sweet Shop. At the top of the hill is Whetstone. Whetstone is exciting and exotic because it has a Woolworths.

It is 2009. I am drinking a cup of coffee, tall, filter, Ecuador, with room for milk. I start to type into my laptop.

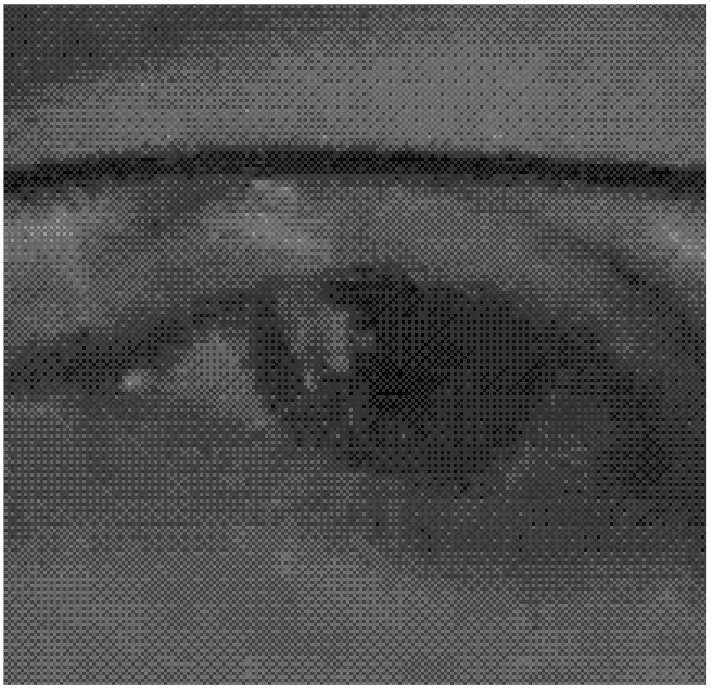
It is three hours in the future. The coffee cup is empty. I am typing three slightly embarrassing confessions.

It is 1973. I am climbing a hill.

It is 1981. I am in a shop near Totteridge and Whetstone. The stack of comic books is shiny and uncreased. There is a rubber band around them. The pages stick together when you open them for the first time. They smell of comics. They have the kind of advertisements which comics will always have: toy soldiers, correspondence courses, Sea Monkeys. I choose the comics which are most superheroey: Avengers, Defenders, Marvel Two-in- One. I am in love with the idea of superheroes. I hardly notice the actual story. There is a British magazine called Rampage. It contains reprints of the Uncanny X-Men which I know that I must try very hard to like. I have to go to Mr McKinnon, Mr Kempton,Totteridge and Whetstone,The Sweet Shop and High Barnet to find all the superheroes I need. This is how I spend my Saturday afternoons. High Barnet is next to Totteridge and Whetstone on the underground. Going on the underground makes me think of Dostoevsky and Orpheus.

Once, Mummy bought me a bag of peanuts from Woolworths which I ate until I was sick. Once she bought me a spinning top with a friction motor that didn't work. Today she will buy me a comic. It was purple and green.

My coffee is getting cold. I am pretending that when I was fifteen, travelling on the London Underground made me think of Notes from the Underground and Orpheus in the Underworld. There was a piece of popular music called Going Underground which was obliquely connected with a strip called Nemesis the Warlock which was an item in 2000AD which also published some

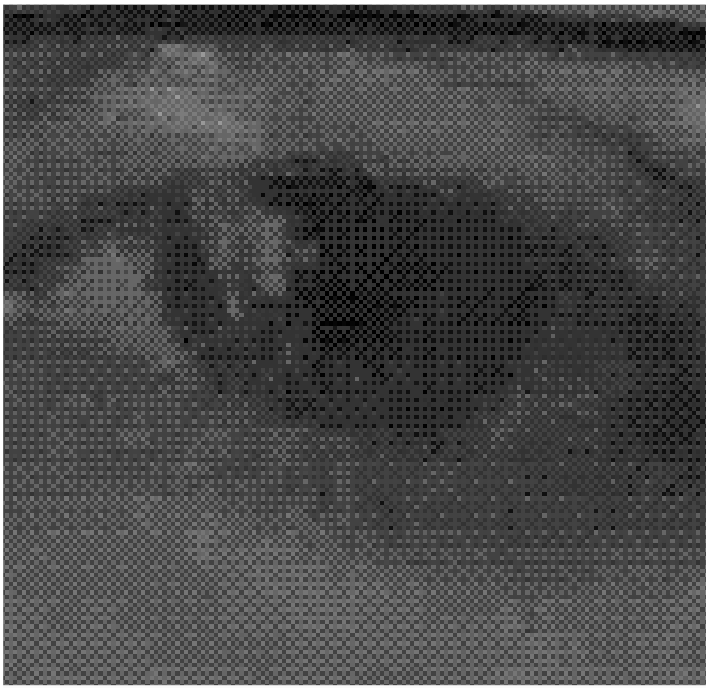


early, undistinguished work by Alan Moore.

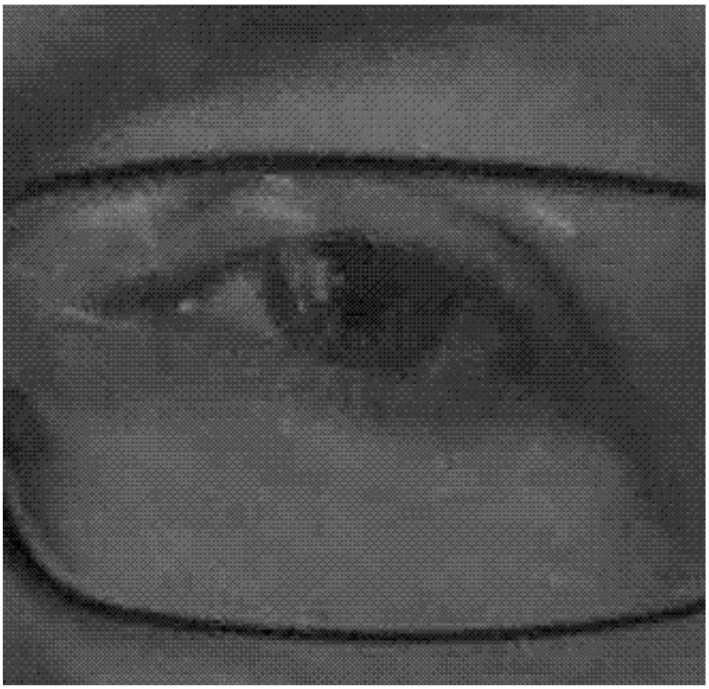
It is three weeks in the future and someone from a faraway continent of which I know little is writing me an e-mail denying that Halo Jones is undistinguished.

I am climbing a hill.

It is 1980. I am standing in the Royal Horticultural Hall. There is a full-sized replica of a Snowspeeder. Maybe an actual prop from the actual film. I am trying to love the Snowspeeder in the same way that I loved X-Wings, three years ago when I was a little kid. Someone is reading out the results of the Eagle Awards. Best writer, Claremont. Best artist, Byrne. Best team, X-Men. Best comic, X-Men. Best character, Wolverine. Best villain, Magneto. I do not read the X-Men, although I remember when the X-Men appeared in the back of Superheroes Starring the Silver Surfer. They were not very good. I am just a little kid among these mature sophisticated comic book readers who appreciate X-Men. I prefer Rom: Spaceknight. Somewhere in the same hall, a man named Steve who writes comics is introducing a man named Dave who draws comics to his friend Alan who also writes comics.



It is 1983. Underneath the copy of Rampage featuring the New X-Men and Hulk is a new magazine. There is a robot and his girl-friend on the cover. I am not sure what makes me pick it up. I still feel a slight sense of treachery when I pick up something which is not a Marvel comic, although I occasionally make an exception for Green Lantern. Perhaps the sidebar saying that it will re-introduce a famous character from the past intrigues me.



It is an hour later. Mike Moran is remembering that “atomic” is “Kimota” backwards and the whole definition of comic books changes.

I dreamt I met Alan Moore. He was halfway across Clifton Suspension bridge. I don't know if he saw me or recognised me. I ran towards him to talk to him. I wanted to tell him everything his comic books meant to me. But as I ran, the bridge disappeared. Alan Moore carried on walking as if nothing had happened, but I couldn't walk on empty air.

It is 1987. I am sitting in a lecture theatre. Someone is reading out the results of the Eagle Awards. Best writer, Alan Moore. Best comic, Watchmen. Character most worthy of own title, Rorschach. Alan Moore is sitting in the back row. He has to walk forwards four or five times. Slightly breathless the fifth time, he says "It would serve you all right if I just collapsed and died of a heart attack." There is that slight sadness you feel when a writer becomes popular and is no longer your own private secret. I cannot bring myself to love Watchmen as much as I love Marvelman and V for

Vendetta and even Swamp Thing. After the awards, Alan Moore overhears two comic book fans talking. People talk about Alan Moore as if he is God, they say, but when you think about it, he is. He never goes to another comic book convention after that.

It is 1974. Stan Lee is giving a talk to promote Origins of Marvel Comics at the Roundhouse in Camden Town. Me and Andrew Xavier and Andrew Xavier's Dad have gone to hear him. As we make our way to our seat, Stan ther Man walks right past us. Right past us. I want to tell him everything Spider-Man means to me. But all I manage to say is "Is that him?" and then he is gone. In his talk, he says there will be a Silver Surfer movie any day now, probably a musical.

It is 1990. Me and Richard and Louise and Chris and Jonathan are drinking beer at SF and F discussion group. Richard is wearing a smiley face badge with a small splatter of blood on it. It is six months since the penultimate issue of Miracleman, and we doubt if the final part will ever appear. We are discussing which Watchmen character we most identify with. Louise says Ozymandias and I say Nite Owl.

It is 2009. Me and Richard and Louise and Jonathan are drinking beer in a pub in Reading. We think that the movie of Watchmen has worked, on the whole. We discuss which character we most identify with. Louise and I both say “Rorschach.”

It is March 17th, 1973. American soldiers are leaving The Atnam. Me and Mummy and Daddy and my baby sister and Grandad are drinking tea and eating literally eating crumpets with Marmite. Each week, grandad brings me and my baby sister a comic. My baby sister's is called Mandy or Tammy or Misty or Something. Mine is called Spider-Man Comics Weekly. Grandad chose Spider-Man Comics Weekly because he thought it had a free gift. It didn't have a free gift, but a coupon towards a free gift. On the cover, it said "Inside: your most important free gift clue." The free gift was a poster. I never collected all the coupons.

It is 1973. A man named Dave is sitting in an office in London. He has a scalpel and a drawing pen. He is cutting words out of Spider-Man and carefully writing in

new words. Where it says "Color" he writes "Colour. " When it says "Thru" he writes "Through. " When it says "Betting on football is illegal," he thinks for a moment and writes "Betting on football is a waste of money. " It is boring, exacting work and he doesn't even get a credit, but it is a foot in the door. One day, he hopes to be a famous comic book artist himself.

When Grandad has gone I read the comic. The pages stick together. It smells of comics. The carpet in my bedroom is yellow. It has strange foreign printing that is black and white with splodges of colour. There is a poster of Noah's Ark on the wall. The story lasts for 26 pages instead of 1 page. My Gollywog is sitting on my bed. The artwork looks weird and alien where English comics art looks crude and functional. I am in Miss Walker's class and hate learning my tables. The characters are clever handsome realistic American grown ups instead of grotesque naughty English children. My headmaster is Mr. Muir who paints pictures and sometimes smacks people. Mysterio makes it look as if Spider-Man is a villain and Spider-Man ends up thinking he has gone mad. My best friend Andrew Xavier and me sometimes think of starting an exclusive club for all the people in our class called Andrew. This is not what is exciting. There is a letter from a man with a moustache and sunglasses, a real American who talks in a sophisticated American slang and works in a place called the bullpen and writes comics, and treats me as a grown up unlike the people in the other comics who sign themselves "your chum". This is not what is exciting. There is a club to join with poster and stickers and a gold card which would become your proudest possession (I still have it) but even that was not what was exciting. The most exciting part was that when Spider-Man used a spider-tracer to chase Mysterio, there was the first footnote that I had ever seen in my whole life, written by the same man with the moustache who wrote the letter, saying that it was the same kind of gimmick that he had used to follow Doctor Octopus's car in issue #2. Everyone in the world apart from me knew who Doctor Octopus was, why Spider-Man was chasing him and what kind of tracer gimmick he has used. I was an outsider. If I collected these comics I would never be an outsider again.

My cup is empty. They re-printed the New X-Men in the Marvel Essential format a few years ago so I finally got to read the story where Storm visits some poor black kids in the ghetto and wins an Eagle award. I still prefer Rom: Spaceknight.

It is 1972 am at the top of the hill. We are in the newsagent. There are two comics. Two new comics. New comics have free gifts in them as sure as breakfast cereal. One comic has a set of stickers. The other has a press-out

cardboard figure of one of the characters. I wonder if it is worth begging Mummy for two comics this week?

I am 42 and a few months. I am leaving the coffee shop. On my I-Pod is The Adventures of Superman. Clark Kent, weakened by Kryptonite, is being starved to death by the Nazi Atom Man. I enjoy this much more than I enjoyed the Watchmen movie which everyone is talking about, even people who have never heard of Rom: Spaceknight. Jonathan has lent me graphic novels by Mark Waid and Grant Morrison in which Superman thinks in square boxes and people swear. They are quite good. I do not enjoy them nearly as much as the Adventures of Superman sponsored by the makers of Kellogs Pep (the super-delicious cereal.) Because I hear them on my headphones, and they follow me to the gym, on train rides, and on my way to work and because hardly anyone else has listened to them in sixty years they seem like a private, secret I cannot quite admit to. When the announcer advises me to persuade “Mom” to buy some more packages of cereal so I can complete my collection of military insignia buttons, I find myself wishing almost unbearably to have been part of that safe, circumscribed world lived around the wireless when Dad went to work and Mom made breakfast. I know that I would not, in fact, have been part of “the gang”, and that adds to the piquancy.

The stickers were of Betty Brant and Peter Parker and the Spider Signal. They were unfamiliar characters, in a strange, cheap, almost illicit art-style that seemed adult and forbidden and dirty? The cut out figure is square and unconvincing, a character from an English children's TV show based on an

old English children's radio show. It does not slot together well. If you wrap sellotape around it it looks like a square unconvincing figure with sellotape wrapped around it. If I had not chosen the cut-out figure instead of the stickers, then, three weeks later I would have known what kind of gimmick Spider-Man had used to pursue Doc Ock's car. But at the top of the hill I chose Larry the Lamb instead of Spider-Man Comics Weekly #2.

My cup is empty.

I am climbing down the hill.

"I went down to the sacred store,
Where I'd heard the music years before,
But the man there said the music wouldn't play."

American Pie

Not a comic book villain

"I'm not a comic book villain!" exclaims Ozymandias, having just explained his master-plan to Rorschach and Nite Owl.

It's that joke again: another example of a comic book character who has to tell us that he doesn't like comic books before we're prepared to read about him in a comic book.

But this time, the joke doesn't quite work. In the world of Watchmen there are no comic book villains. Superman was very briefly popular nearly 40 years ago, but superhero comics disappeared once the real costumed vigilantes came along. Children read pirate comics. To Ozymandias, a comic book villain would be one who makes you walk the plank.

Which is why Ozymandias doesn't say “I'm not a comic book villain.” He actually says "I'm not a republic serial villain." The line was changed for the movie because only a particular kind of film buff is likely to know what "republic serials" were. There may also be a meta-joke in that the comic book character denied that he was in a movie, but the movie character denies that he's in a comic.

But we get the point. The scene in which the villain explains his plans - thus ensuring that they will be foiled at the last moment - is one that we recognize from dozens of comics, serials and Bond movies. We are being asked to believe that this time, in the Watchmen universe, it is Really Happening.

In the text appendix to issue I, the first Nite Owl explains how costumed heroes came to be. (When Dave Sim incorporates prose into his comics, he's short-changing the reader, but when Alan Moore does it, he's a genius.)It seems that during the brief period when superheroes were popular a vigilante named "Hooded Justice" started fighting crime in a comic book inspired costume. Hollis Mason admits that he used to read comics and imagine that he could leap tall buildings like Superman, but:

"My fantasies were to remain as fantasies until I opened a newspaper in the autumn of that same year and found that the superheroes had escaped from their four colour world and invaded the plain, factual, black and white of the headlines."

So: we're back with the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner and President Roosevelt and Captain America and indeed Miracleman. Superheroes are once again getting out of the comics and coming to life.

Alan Moore's game is a lot like the one which Stan Lee had played a quarter-century before. Take the tropes of a traditional superhero – the tights, the mask, the secret identity – and try to imagine what it would be like for someone to live like that. Stan Lee worried about whether a superhero had pockets in his costume, where he left his street clothes when prancing about in his underwear, whether he could sign a cheque in his superhero name, and what he did when his costume needed washing. Alan Moore goes rather further – one feels that he must have made a check-list that included "how do men in tights go to the loo?", "isn't the whole idea of

dressing up a bit kinky?", "isn't the whole idea of heroes who endlessly punish villains a bit kinky?", "what if Bruce Wayne could only get an erection in his Batsuit?", "why do the police put up with civilians who take the law into their own hands?" You only need to add "Batman, he's, like, a grown man and he, lives, with like a young boy" and you've got the set.

But it's all done with a light touch; people say "superheroes, what a silly idea" and "it's okay, this isn't one of those dreadful funny books" so often that many of us accept without question that Watchmen is "realistic".

But the comic contains the seeds of it's own deconstruction.

A superhero can't invade the plain, factual black and white of the headlines without becoming plain, factual and black and white. But the reason we liked superheroes to begin with was because they were bright and colourful.

"Where's that scene where the giant squid beams into New York?"

John Byrne, asked why his comics weren't as realistic as Watchmen

Giant Size Man Thing

Something has to be done very well before you miss the fact that it's being done at all.

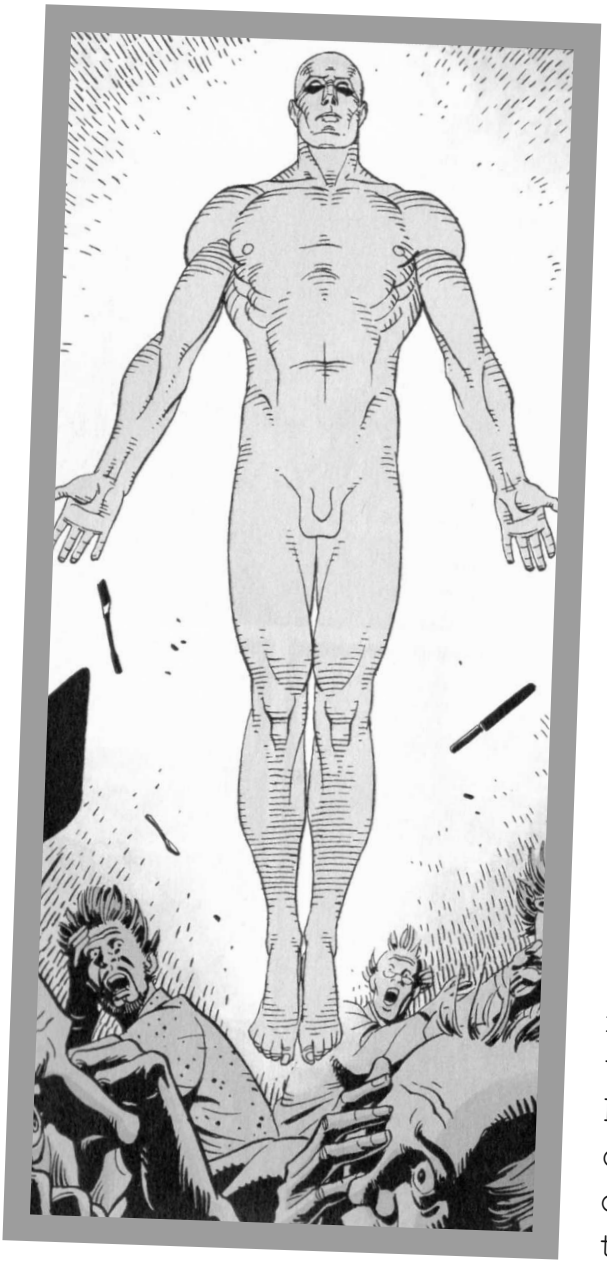
The first time I saw The Two Towers I thought that someone had done a very good make-up job on Andy Serkis - or else that we were looking at an emaciated body double.

The first time I saw Watchmen, I found myself wondering whether, if I were a famous actor, I would find it more embarrassing to appear in front of millions of people with it painted blue than with it au naturale and whether the make up girl put the paint on, or let him do it for himself, and whether it smudged if he, you know...

I now know that the Two Towers featured a virtual Gollum; a Gollum constructed polygon by polygon and pixel by pixel by a cohort of geeks with high-end Apple Macs. And the relevant question about Dr. Manhattan is whether a computer generated willy is more like a painting of a willy in an art gallery (which is quite innocent and not corrupting at all, even for quite young children) or more like a photo of a willy on the internet (which is so dirty and obscene that we all need identity cards to stop it from happening). And did the Apple Mac people model it from memory; or did one of the geeks have to take his knickers down in the motion capture studio? And if so, is it less embarrassing for millions of people to stare at a model of your willy (attached to someone else's midriff) than for you simply to be photographed with nothing on? And were there any girl geeks present at the time?

Alan Moore has very sensibly reasoned that if Dr. Manhattan were a real person he would be completely invulnerable and completely detached from normal human feelings. He would therefore have no need of warmth or protection and would not experience vanity or modesty. So there would be no reason on Earth or indeed Mars for him to him to wear clothes.

It's also very good joke - and by “very good joke” I mean “one which it has taken me twenty years to spot” - that in a story about costumed heroes, the only one with any actual superpowers is the one who doesn't wear any costume at all.



It's hard enough to take seriously those 70s films in which people are marooned for twenty years on desert islands but always seem to have an endless supply of clean, decent underpants. The idea of an indestructible man all alone on the planet Mars retaining a fig-leaf would have been too stupid for words. And filming from the waist up simply draws attention to that which you are attempting to conceal.

In the comic, Manhattan's cosmic private parts are represented by a little Action Man symbol, which makes the point "here's a guy who goes naked and everyone's got used to it" without forcing less mature readers to think "Bloke with his cock out! Bloke with his cock out!" David Gibbons doesn't draw a naked man: he draws an icon which indicates that the man is naked. A conceptual penis; a symbol for penis-hood.

But the film has to show (or not show) one penis in particular; a penis of a particular size, a particular colour, a particular religious persuasion. A lot of people find this funny, or embarrassing; find that instead of saying "Wow! A giant glass watch floating through a canyon on Mars" they say "Wow. A willy!"

And this applies to every other image in the film as well.

In issue VI, we see the imprisoned Rorschach throw hot cooking fat in another inmate's face. This scene takes three panels. In the first, we see Rorschach reaching for the fat, and the cook saying "Don't touch that." In the second, we see the shocked reaction of other people in the canteen; the victim's legs buckling; and his face surrounded by a purely iconic - and indeed cartoony - representation of heat, which envelops and obscures his face. The third panel shows the psychiatrist writing his journal, telling us what happened: "According to the deputy warden, his burns were horrific. Hot cooking fat, I don't like to think about it."

In the movie, we see Rorschach throw the oil, and we see a graphic, if not necessarily realistic, representation of the effects of severe burning. The inmate's skin starts to blister as we watch, to the extent that some members of the audience look away from the screen.

Moore shows us people being shocked: Snyder shocks us.

This is not a criticism Snyder's film-making. It's a fact about what film-making always and necessarily involves. Whether we're talking about first degree burns or naked men, movies can't leave things to our imagination: they have, by their nature, to spell them out.

Any fool can see that the most important bits of Watchmen are the bits which Alan Moore left to our imagination. So why did anyone think turning it into a film was such a good idea?

Superfriends

The single funnybook I enjoyed most in 2008 was ‘Superboy meets Supergirl’ - first published in Superboy #80 (1960) but reprinted as part of Showcase Presents: Supergirl vol 1. The story could hardly be simpler - which shows how terribly foolish it is to confuse ‘simplicity’ with ‘lack of sophistication’.

Supergirl is 14 or 15, but, for reasons which can’t be explained without reciting the entire mythos from the start, a contemporary of the adult Superman. She travels back in time and visits Superman in Smallville when he was a similar age. Superboy and Supergirl play together and foil an alien invasion, but then Supergirl returns to the present and leaves Superboy with no memory that her visit ever happened. The end.

The comic is constructed as a kind of conceptual pyramid. Start with the three-word title:‘Superboy meets Supergirl’. Superboy first appeared as far back as 1945 but Supergirl had only been around for twelve months prior to this story. The idea that Superman first donned the red cloak when he was still living in his parents loft is something we’ve long accepted: the idea of a gurl with Superman’s powers is fresh, and surprising.

A law of diminishing returns started to set in around this point: the answer to the question ‘What could possibly be more exciting than a child, or a baby, or a dog, or a girl, or a villain with Superman’s powers?’ can too easily turn out to be ‘A horse, or a cat, or a monkey, or a giant bunny rabbit. ’ But if you’ve read the story of Kal El’s escape from a dying planet a hundred times or more, the image of a teenage gurl in Superman’s livery emerging from a second Kryptonian space rocket packs an undeniable punch.

So, what could possibly be more exciting than a teenage girl with Superman’s powers? Why - the teenage girl meeting Superman when he was a teenage boy! Two superchildren is twice as fun as one! More self-conscious comic books would have asked the question ‘what would happen if’ Superboy met Supergirl? What would follow from it? Would having had a friend of his own age have made Superman a happier grown-up, or does his nobility partly depend on his superloneliness?' This one simply isn’t interested in those kinds of question. That the teens of steel are meeting each other is quite exciting enough.

Next, look at the cover. It doesn’t offer a teaser to the story; or point forward to the first cliff hanger; or introduce the story in media res; or any of the things which more self-aware comic cover might do. It tells you the entire story in a single image – a joyful image in which Superboy and Supergirl are playing games like any normal kids. ‘For the first time in my life, I’ve got a super-playmate!’ exclaims Superboy. But Supergirl’s thought balloon adds an element of poignancy: ‘Poor Superboy! In a few days I must return to the future!’ But this is wholly implicit in the premise:

Supergirl can't stay in the past because that would change the set-up for at least three comics. The status-quo must be restored by the end of the episode.

Open the comic, and on the first panel of the first page you are presented with the same story-idea yet again. This time, it's a sci-fi scene: Superboy and Supergirl are in space with the moon behind them and an asteroid in between them. But they aren't rushing to save the world from some new Supermenace: they're playing hide and seek. The Superman universe is controlled by a set of rules which have never made much sense in terms of cold logic, but which are endlessly useful in generating narratives. One of these rules is that Superman cannot see through lead. This rule, usually used to give villains a fighting chance of hiding from a man with X-Ray eyes, is here logically applied to a childish game. How would you play hide-and-seek with Superboy? Why, by hiding behind a leaden asteroid!

The idea of two children playing tag in the asteroid belt has a real poetry to it: part J. M Barrie part William Blake. Alan Moore could probably have rattled off several overwritten pages on the idea. Neil Gaiman probably has. Here, it is given away with a sense that the writers haven't noticed how resonant it is.

Having told us three times what story is going to be told, the comic now has to spend nine pages actually telling it. But what's it about? There can't be any tension: we already know the ending. The Rules say that Supergirl will have to leave Superboy and restore the status quo. If she had inadvertently created a new future in which Lex Luther defeated Superboy and conquered the world, the cover and splash pages would have told us. The page 1 caption reveals the narrative strategy: 'Superboy's secret desire is to have a human pal possessing superpowers equal to his, so that the two can superromp' yes, that is what it says: 'superromp' 'superomp together. . . Is this hope destined never to come true? Yes. . . and no. In order for you to understand how, see what happens when through an amazing set of circumstances, Superboy meets Supergirl."

The key word is 'understand'. The comic book will explain, rather than develop, the story we've already been told. We know that Supergirl goes to the past and that she will return to future: we must read the comic to understand why.

So. Supergirl, in the 'present', is playing with Superman - building a forty foot tall snowman outside the Fortress of Solitude. (History does not record where they obtained the giant carrot.) This causes Superman to remember something unhappy about his own childhood. He regrets (as we've already been told, twice) that he didn't have a 'superplaymate' when he was growing up. Supergirl identifies with her grown-up cousin's regrets: she too, because of her superpowers 'dare not play with anyone her own age. '

(As a matter of fact, Superboy did have a Superpeergroup: since 1958, he had regularly commuted to the future to hang out with the Legion of Superheroes. If you are sufficiently geeky – and worrying about the ins and outs of the silver age Superman universe is about as geeky as it gets – you can assume that Supergirl has encountered Superboy at a point before he met the Legion. This is supported by the fact that Kara seems to encounter a relatively juvenile Kal-El. Not many 1960s teens would have played 'catch' with their cousins, or described them as 'playmates'.)

Supergirl has the bright idea of going backwards in time and meeting up with Superboy. In these comics, high science fiction concepts like Time Travel have been domesticated to the point of mundanity: travelling to the past is no more surprising and difficult than a trip to Gotham City. And there is no sense that Smallville really is in the past: the manners and clothes and cars of (say) 1945 are no different from those of 1960. (It certainly doesn't feel as if there's a war on.)

Naturally, when Supergirl arrives in Smallville, Superboy is feeling a bit sad because he can't play baseball with the other kids – 'games requiring ordinary skill don't thrill me. ' The first thing that Supergirl does is recite the entire mythos from the beginning, partly for the benefit of her cousin, but mostly for the benefit of all the punters who buy Superboy but not Action Comics. In a more self-aware comic, Superboy would want to know all sorts of facts about the future - what sort of hero does he grow up to be; is Lex Luthur defeated, are his parents still alive? In this one, he describes the revelation that he is not, as he had believed, the only survivor of a doomed civilisation but that he has at least one living relative as 'swell' and starts to think up games that he and the only other Kryptonian in the universe can play together.

Over the next six pages they throw super strong darts at each other's invulnerable bodies. They race through space to an alien planet; they play 'catch' with lunar satellites; they play leap frog over asteroids - and they play hide and seek. This time, Supergirl hides from her cousin in the heart of the sun: the lead asteroid motif from the splash page doesn't occur in the actual story. They fly to an ocean world to cool off, and are captured and escape from Mermen who mistake them for fish and intend to have them for dinner. This takes three panels. They return home, just in time to defeat an invasion by evil robots (five panels).

At this point, Supergirl announces that she's 'goofed'. The problem is not that she has violated the Laws of Time. She isn't worried that throwing asteroids around and destroying alien spaceships may have irrevocably changed the history of the galaxy. No: the goof is that she's revealed her existence to Superboy - having promised Superman

that she would keep her presence on Earth a secret. Revealing herself to Superboy is OK in itself – Superboy is, or will be, Superman so she's kept to the letter of her promise. But she's failed to take into account the possibility that, under the influence of Kryptonite or mind control, Superboy might pass the information on to someone else, and spoil the plan for Supergirl to be Superman's 'secret weapon.' Throughout this sequence, Superman is treated as a third party: Superboy says that he doesn't want Superman to be angry with Supergirl when she returns to the future and tells him of her blunder: there is no sense of a 14 year old saying 'Twenty years from now, I may be angry with you' or even 'When I'm older, I may be angry with myself. '

Supergirl's blunder is in fact a blunder against the rules of the comic book: 'Supergirl's existence is a secret' is a rule, in the same way that 'Kryptonite robs Superman of his powers' or 'Lois Lane can never discover that Superman is Clark Kent' are rules. On page 1, we were asked the question: 'We know that the rules of the comic say that Supergirl must return to the future – but what will cause her to do so?' The final page replies 'She returns to the future because she realises that the rules of the comic says she must. ' It's is a closed system, derived entirely from its own premises. So Superboy flies off to an alien planet where he can sniff special amnesia flowers, and it's as if the whole thing never happened. Since there's no issue-to-issue continuity and every episode ends with the restoration of the status quo, it's always as if the whole thing had never happened.

So: why did I enjoy this story so much?

Well, for geeky reasons, of course. Because ephemeral material of this kind acquires a magical aura when it's forty years old. Because it's fun to finally be able to work my way through vast swathes of 'Silver Age' material which I have always known by reputation, but never actually read. Because of the sheer volume of ever accreting back story – bottled cities, superpets, the Bizarro world and fifty seven varieties of Kryptonite – the fun of losing yourself in a worldful of pointless facts.

The word 'camp' is often applied to this kind of material. Look at the Planet Krypton. It resembles what people who don't read science fiction imagine that science fiction must be like: fire breathing dinosaurs and super-science laboratories and an art style poised somewhere between the 1950s and Ancient Greece: Flash Gordon, in other words. But there's no sense that the artists are lovingly evoking memories of Alex Raymond's cartoon strip or wryly parodying the B-movies that were based on it. They draw Krypton in that way because that's the way alien planets have always been drawn. The English comics which I forswore when Spider-Man Comics Weekly came into my life depicted a world of steam trains, horse-drawn milk-floats and teachers with canes: but there was no sense of their being set in the past, and no-one – except possibly the national union of teachers – ever complained that they were anachronistic. Cartoonists drew

teachers and policemen in a particular way because that was the accepted way of drawing teachers and policemen. Any good fanboy can reel off a hundred facts about the Kryptonians (they drive on the left hand side of the road, like the English and aren't allowed to marry their cousins.) But Krypton isn't really a particular planet with a particular culture: it's a transparent symbol for Alien Planetness.

Camp? Maybe. But if there was any sense that it was intended to be funny – that, indeed, the artist had thought about it at all - then the whole pleasure would evaporate. I feel a certain joy at reading a comic in which spaceships are unselfconsciously phallic because that's the correct shape for a spaceship to be.

Gosh! //choke// How un-ironic!

'Superboy Meets Supergirl' is one of the most joyful comics ever published. Six months later came one of the bleakest. In 'The Old Man of Metropolis', Superman goes forward in time to the Metropolis of the future to meet Supergirl when she's grown up to be Superwoman. In this future, Superman is an old man who's starting to have senior moments. Does old age have its compensations? Is the Man of Steel

experiencing a satisfied retirement having passed the torch on to his successor? Not quite. 'I'm an old, broken down has-been' he says. The story relentlessly, sadistically punches him in the gut: Perry White is dead, Clark Kent has been retired, Luther has been pardoned, the married Jimmy Olsen has no time for his old friend, and everyone else has forgotten that Superman even existed. Supergirl has moved Superman's trophies to the basement of the Fortress of Solitude, where they are gathering dust; Krypto is taken to the dog-pound and the final kick in the teeth comes when we catch up with Lois: she's an 'old maid' who has wasted her whole life waiting for Superman. The message is that the future will be as grim and cynical as the past was idyllic and happy. You really don't want to grow up if you can possibly help it.

Of course, that's not really how the story ends: the whole thing turns out to have been a dream, created by Clark's subconscious because he overheard Supergirl speculating about what she will do when she grows up. There's even a kind of moral: Superman resolves to be slightly kinder to Lois in future. But the dream explanation is not really the point: it's a piece of machinery which let's the writers hold the idea of 'Old Superman' in front of us for a few pages. Once they've shown you everything they can think of in the 'future Metropolis', they let it evaporate as quickly as possible and restore the status quo.

Four months later, we find Superman and Supergirl tinkering with an alien machine in the Fortress of Solitude. They carelessly allow it to blow up. The explosion is rather large. 'Oh no! No! Gasp!' says Superman 'I've accidentally blown up the world!' 'It's exploding, just the way Krypton, the

planet we originally came from, did.' exposits Supergirl. 'Choke! Earth destroyed!' adds Krypto, a trifle redundantly. 'This is awful' understates Superman a few panels later 'It can't be real. If only it were a ghastly illusion induced by Red Kryponite.' And astonishingly, three pages later, it turns out that...

If we had focussed on this explanation, it would be a tremendous cop-out: showing a terrible catastrophe and suddenly revealing that it didn't happen after all. But the explanation is quite irrelevant. We are interested in seeing our heroes in the situation of being 'orphans of space' and learning what they would do in that situation. 'Red kryptonite' is one more device which allows us to shake up the comic's basic premise but return to the point of origin before the final page. The comics very rapidly stopped bothering with dreams, hallucinations or amnesia as a means of rebooting the story. They simply stated on page one that 'this is an imaginary story which may never happen but then again might.'

Stan Lee brought me up to believe that these 'imaginary stories' were an example of how contemptible DC comics were compared with Marvel. Who on earth wanted to read about events which didn't happen? But isn't 'events which didn't happen' precisely what the word 'story' means? If a balladeer sings a song in which Robin Hood blows himself and the city of Nottingham up using greek fire, it would be really, really strange for his audience to say 'You can't sing that song - you're not allowed to - because a different singer once sang a song in which he was poisoned by an evil nun. '

Another 1960s story shows Bizarro (the alien 'imperfect copy' of Superman) coming home from a day's mischief to find that his wife, ('Bizarro Lois') has a quote thrilling surprise unquote for him. 'Lois!' he cries 'You had baby while me was gone! Oh, me happy father now!' There is, of course, no sense that babies come from anywhere: or that a married woman actually does anything in the house all day; or of what the life of an office worker or newspaper reporter is actually like. These aren't adults, not even super-powered adults or imperfect copies of super-powered adults. These are children playing at being adults: playing house, playing alien invasions, playing cops and robbers.

And that, I think, is why I find myself enjoying these old, old stories so much. They're for children and about children and they depict about as well as anybody ever has, the state of being a child. Or maybe I should say 'the idea of being a child' - an idea which can really only exist in the mind of an adult. Maybe it's even something more mystical like 'timelessness' or 'eternity'. Supergirl and Superboy's romp through the universe - endless, but all too short - enables us momentarily to get back inside the state called 'always'.

They are full of incident. Planets blow up and other planets are saved. People meet their dead parents, fall in and out of love, capture criminals and overthrow tyrants. But nothing ever happens. Nothing can happen. Supergirl is in the orphanage, lying on her tummy, head propped up in her hands. Superman is her big brother who lives, like Father Christmas, at the North Pole. Superboy is in his Mum's attic. Lex Luther has just escaped from prison. Luther has always just escaped from prison. Everything will be the same for ever and ever.

Three hundred and twenty issues after Supergirl met Superboy, DC comics decided to reboot the DC universe. It wasn't called a reboot, because it was 1986 and no-one had ever heard of Microsoft Windows. And they hadn't noticed that in the olden days, they quite happily rebooted the universe at the end of every single episode. They wanted to wipe the slate clean and start again with a new version of Superman, true to the original concept (last survivor from a doomed planet, newspaper reporter, wears underpants outside tights) but without the baggage of Comet the Superhorse and the Bottled City of Kandor. Editor Julius Schwartz mused that it would be fun to do one final issue in the Old Style; and to present it as if it really was the last episode of Superman, tying up all the loose ends and bringing the 25 year story to a satisfactory conclusion. According to a widely disseminated oral tradition, an up-and-coming English writer overheard him, and said 'If you let anyone but me write that story, I am going to kill you.' As everyone knows, that story, the last and final Superman story began by posing a question: "This is an imaginary story" it asked "Aren't they all?" In the same month which it was published, the same English writer published the first issue of a twelve issue limited series in which he would answer his own question.

Hindsight is always fifty fifty. Man of Steel was the second Superman I ever loved, and it would be unfair to demonize John Byrne because I have acquired a taste for the older material.

But, oh, how could anyone ever have thought that taking this heroic child-man out of the dream-time in which he endlessly played at being a hero and plonking him into a waking, grown-up reality was a good idea?

"Who told thee that thou was naked? Hast thou eaten of that tree, wherof I commanded the that thou shouldst not eat?"

Genesis 3:11

Look and Feel

A lot of people have said that Watchmen the movie is a very faithful adaptation of Watchmen the comic book.

They are wrong.

The movie is certainly very faithful to the look and feel of the comic. It reproduces the famous opening almost frame by frame and deliberately casts B-List actors in the main roles so that no-one thinks "Oh, look, there's Christian Bale in a Nite Owl suit".

But it doesn't follow that anyone involved in the movie has understood what the comic's about. If they had they wouldn't have tried to make it in the first place.

Yes, everybody knows that they changed the ending and yes, everyone can see why they made the change and yes the movie ending is in the same ball park as the book ending. "Make everyone believe that Dr. Manhattan has turned evil" serves a similar function as "make everyone believe that the earth is being invaded by aliens". If the only point of Watchmen is that humans would stop fighting among themselves if they had a big enemy to unite against then one holocaust is as good as another.

But Moore's text is so densely structured that this change sends out ripples which effect everything else in the story. It completely changes the Comedian's character, for one thing, and the fact that you could easily watch the film a couple of times without spotting this makes the change much harder to forgive. (Book-Comedian stumbles on Ozymandias's plot and is killed to stop him going public. Movie-Comedian

is part of Ozymandias's plot, and is killed for threatening to betray it. It is completely impossible to believe that movie-Comedian would ever have worked for Ozymandias, particularly not movie-Ozymandias, the effete uber-liberal.)

But there are a lot of other, trivial changes. In the comic Dreiberg keeps his Owl equipment in the cellar of his house. His costume is hanging in a fairly ordinary cupboard: it could be a filing cabinet. There is some play with the idea that cloaks are not at all efficient or practical - an off-stage character died when his got caught up in a revolving door. In the film, Nite Owl has a cloak, and displays his costumes in one of those tubes that Bruce has been keeping his Batsuits in since at least Dark Knight Returns. When Owl and Silk Spectre become heroes again, there is much dramatic music and we see them putting on their costumes much as Batman did in the first wave of Batman movies. The ears on the Owl suit have also grown, in case any slow kid in the back row of the Odeon hasn't spotted what's happening. And Dr. Manhattan's lab has gone from being a few large lumps of machinery in a room to a full-fledged Bond set.

In the comic, Dan uses his Owl Ship's sonic blast to knock out everyone in the prison. He and Laurie are wearing earplugs. They spring Rorschach without striking a blow. In the film, they fight their way in. The scene goes to some lengths to feel like a computer game: people walking down a corridor exaggeratedly punching out drones. And there's lots and lots of that slow-motion that became irritating twenty minutes after you first saw The Matrix.

On the one hand, this is all perfectly legitimate. It's drawing filmgoers' attention to the tropes which the Watchpeople are trying and failing to live up to. They have to be more like cinematic superheroes, because that's the kind of superheroes that cinema audiences know about. On the other hand, it represents a fatal shift in the story.

Alan Moore's characters, with the exception of Dr. Manhattan, are ordinary people pretending to be superheroes and not pretending very well. The comic asks "If there were superheroes in the real world, what would they be like?" and replies "Not very much like superheroes." But the film which brings these superheroes from a comic about a world where superheroes come to life to life manages to turn them back into comic book heroes.

Or at any rate, computer game avatars. They may not have super-powers, but they can achieve things which no-one else could possibly manage. A middle-aged man who's been living on his memories in a bachelor pad can punch out dozens of younger, fitter prison officers. It's a superhero movie innit?

"Stan Lee went from one dimensional characters whose only characteristic was they dressed up in costumes and did good.....and had this huge break through of two-dimensional characters."

Alan Moore

But I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now

A Guardian writer asks if Bob Dylan owes his cult status to baby boomers being unable to grow away from the pop culture they grew up with.

To which the answer is, "Duh. Of course he does."

But children of he sixties are hardly the first people to have committed this sin. When I was growing up, it was taken for granted that throughout human history, Arthur Askey and Very Lynne had always been on the wireless. All this modern "TV" stuff was a temporary blip and things would soon get back to normal. The Daily Mail still occasionally wonders why the BBC got rid of the Potters Wheel. (Something to do with political correctness, I shouldn't wonder.)

I myself turned away from the British comics which made me feel that I was out of time because I had never played on a bomb site or fired a catapult at the milkman's horse and fell in love with American comics which very rapidly made me feel out of time because I had never been a member of the Merry Marvel Marching Society or bought War Bonds. I still don't really believe that any comic which doesn't have a logo of Spidey or the Hulk reading a comic in the top left hand corner, or at the very least an advert for Sea Monkeys or Super Moose can possibly be a real comic. And I don't be holding with this newfangle idea of putting

things between hard covers. Give me black and white artwork, blotting paper covers and plastic guns which fire small pieces of potato up to three feet.

The character of Nite Owl represents the nostalgia of the comic book fanboy. He has a basement full of Nite Owl memorabilia which he never looks at at but won't get rid of. He admits that his weekly chats about the old days with Hollis Mason are the only thing which keeps him going. But he can only justify hanging on to his collection by pretending that he doesn't care for it any more:

"Maybe it used to seem like that to me once but these day it's sort of an embarrassment. Looking back it all seems so, well, childish I guess. Just a school kid's fantasy that got out of hand. That's, y'know with hindsight.... on reflection."

Just as Ben Grimm has to deny that he's a comic book monster before we have permission to believe in him, so we have to listen to Dan, the Everygeek, admitting that his desire to be a superhero was ridiculous and is now a mere nostalgic indulgence before we're allowed to see him get out all his old toys and play with them again.

Alan, very sensibly, let's Dan and Laurie have two pretty successful heroic jaunts - saving the kids from the fire and springing Rorschach from jail - before confronting them with the really heavy stuff. They get to play at being super one last time before having to deal with the grown-up world.

On the surface, Dan is a vicious caricature of superheroes and the people who love them. But he's actually a very reassuring figure. Oh, he claims that he's outgrown comics but we can see right through him. By the end of the episode, he's unashamedly enjoying the hero business (with a

lady, no less.) He represents the idea that, any day now, we'll get the band back together and it will be just like old times.

Dan may have based too much of his life around his fond memories of what he and the boys used to do. Rorschach never stopped doing it. When Dan meets Rorschach, he is suddenly unashamedly nostalgic. Dan implies that it was inevitable for the old days to pass into the past. Rorschach regards Dan's consigning of the past to the past as a conscious choice. You quit. With the clear implication: you didn't have to.

So is it better to be Dan, pathetically remembering the past and pretending that you don't miss it? Or is it better to be Rorschach, obstinately insisting on living the way you always lived, long after the joy has gone out of it? Is "never compromise" an inspiring credo, or a pathetic one? Aren't we all a bit like Captain Carnage for even reading this stuff?

"We sent off for our MMMS membership packs and erected firey crosses in the gardens of people suspected of reading DC comics...We were wide eyed fanatic to rival the loopiest thuggee cultist or member of the Manson family. We were True Believers."

Alan Moore

Improbable Fiction

In Fantastic Four # 4 (May 1962) Johnny Storm finds himself leafing through an old comic book. The hero is an un-naturally strong pointy eared fish-man called the Sub-Mariner. Sub-Mariner Comics ceased publication in 1955, only eight years in the past. However, the cover of the comic-within-a-comic seems to depict a battleship, suggesting it's actually from the 1940s. The Sub-Mariner is a character from the Olden Days - someone your dad used to read about.

Shortly after putting down the comic, Johnny is introduced to an elderly hobo who seems to be unnaturally strong. On an impulse, Johnny shaves off the hobo's beard and discovers that he is, in fact Namor, lost prince of Atlantis - popularly known as, yes, the Sub-Mariner. Alan Moore describes this as one of the most electrifying scenes in comic book history.

If the Sub-Mariner had been an actual historical person there might still be Sub-Mariner comic books. Davy Crockett and Jesse James appeared in popular fiction in their own lifetimes. But it's a bit of a stretch to believe that Johnny should stumble on the real life Namor five seconds after finding a comic in which he featured. (Fan theologians can, and for all I know have, claimed that the amnesiac prince had been carrying a copy of the old comic around with him because he knew it contained a clue to his real identity. Marvel's version of the Frankenstein monster used to carry a copy of Mary Shelly in his breast pocket.) However, we're prepared to overlook this logical lapse because what has happened to Johnny is exactly what every single comic book fan wishes would happen to them. A character in a much loved funnybook has turned out to be really, really real. The Sub-Mariner has, in effect, stepped out of the comic and come to life.

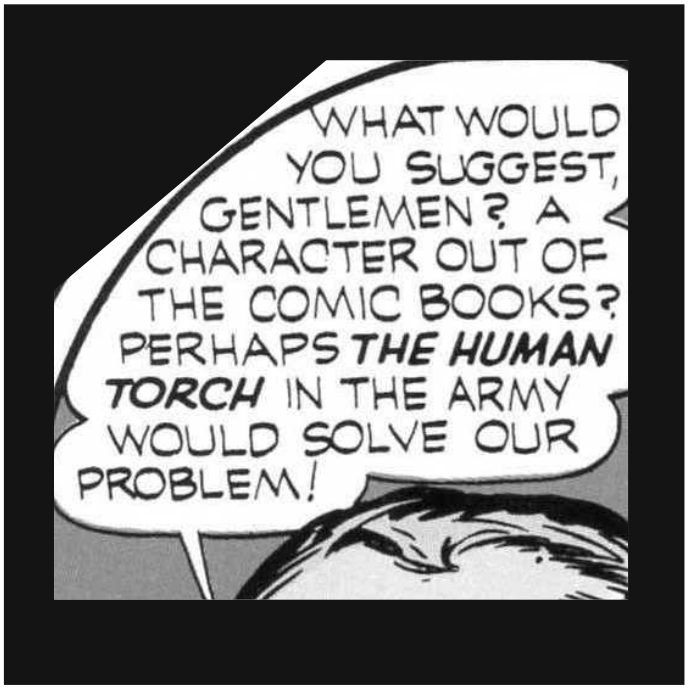
In the next issue, (July 1962) Johnny Storm is again discovered reading a comicbook. This time, it's not a 1940s collectors items but a hot-off-the-press copy of The Incredible Hulk #1. He notices that the big strong green (or possibly grey) guy in the comic has more than a passing similarity to the big strong orange guy sitting next to him. His partner, Ben Grimm, The Thing, is not amused: "Gimmee that mag, squirt" he explains "I'll teach ya to compare me to a comic book monster. "

This is a very old joke. Shakespeare made it. So did Chaucer. No sci-fi B-movie is complete without a dumb blonde saying “Gee, professor, this is stranger than one of those crazy sci-fi B-movies. ” Emotionally, it's not that far from Johnny's encounter in the seaman's hostel. We desperately want Johnny and Ben to be real: and somehow, reminding us that the Hulk is not real makes them for that moment, realer (A few issues later, the F. F are asked by the U. S military to catch a monster known as the Hulk, and the idea that he was “only” a comic book character is discreetly disregarded.)

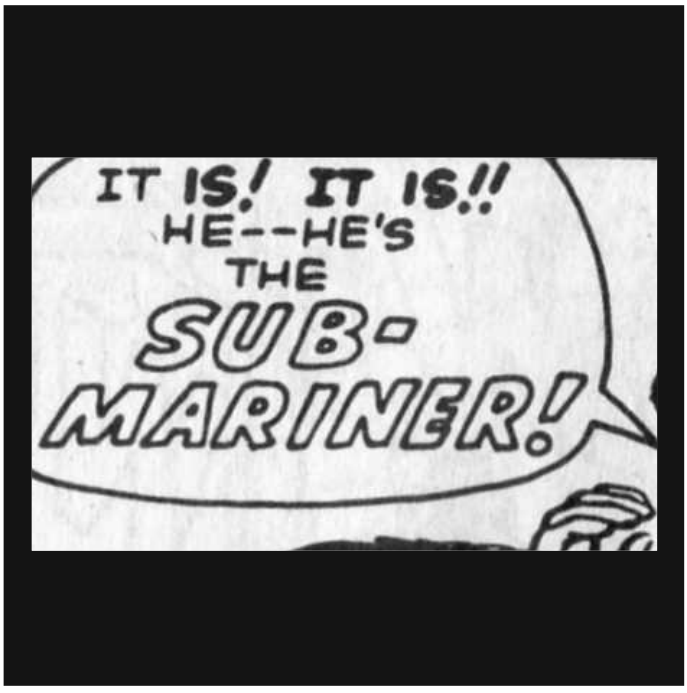
Stan Lee is the writer who first brought realism to comic-books. His characters spoke like real people, not like comic characters. They wore normal clothes – or, if they didn't, normal people were surprised by their outlandish costumes. Johnny Storm and Peter Parker were the same age as their readers and the silly comic book convention which said that adult heroes had to have a teenage mini-me called Robin or Bucky or Speedy or Spider-Lad was banished forever. Marvel heroes had flaws and Marvel villains had plausible human motivations (like “needing to eat planets” and “wanting to conquer the universe”) unlike in those awful funnybooks where goodies were good and villains were bad and no-one ever went into the whys and the wherefores.

Well, up to a point. There may have actually been a story in which Spider-Man caught a cold, but the line about the generality of Marvel super-heroes suffering from allergies is quite hard to sustain. I struggle to think of a single issue to which the claim that the heroes don't always win could be applied: I don't, in fact, think that the Comics Code would have allowed it. Spider-Man may have occasionally ripped his costume; but he wasn't so “realistic” that he couldn't capture a Russian spy in issue 1 or foil an alien invasion in issue 2. But it is certainly true that Stan Lee made some decent stabs at treating his characters with a pinch of naturalism and that he used speech bubbles for "dialogue" rather than "exposition". While Ben Grimm was saying “You don't have to make a speech about it, bigshot, we understand – we gotta use our powers to help mankind, right?”, Lex Luther was still saying “Ha! Ha! How simple it was to outwit you!"

So it's not surprising that Lee should have been attracted to scenes in which the “real” Fantastic Four are compared with “unreal” funnybook characters; or in which a funnybook character seems to come to life. He is always seeking to create a sense of distance between the realism of Marvel comics and the lack of realism of other comics – those published in the bad old days before the Marvel age, and those still being published by Marvel's "distinguished competition". This is not only advertising spiel for his company: it also informs the internal dynamics of the comics



themselves. Without the idea of bad funny books from the bad old days, Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four make no sense. When Peter Parker finds he can't cash a cheque in the name of Spider-Man or can't fight villains because he's got detention for not paying attention in class, we aren't suppose to just think: "Gosh! How realistic!" We're supposed to think "Gosh! How much more realistic than all those Other, Bad comics!" This kind of thing would never happen to Superman! Sometimes, the text of the comic itself points out the contrast, in case you hadn't spotted it. "We admit it" says the end-caption for Spider-Man # 7 "This isn't a typical ending for a typical super-hero tale! But we never said Spider-Man was a typical superhero!" "Ever see a comic-mag super-hero take is troubles to a psychiatrist? You will now!" asks the cover of issue #13. "If this were a movie, I'd gasp in shock and say "good heavens, the butler" says Spider-Man after unmasking Electro in issue #10. The very first words in the very first Spider-Man story ask us to pay attention to the distance between this character and all the other characters we've ever read: "Like costumed heroes?



Confidentially we in the comic mag business refer to them as "long underwear characters" and as you know, they're a dime a dozen. But we think you may find our Spider-Man just a bit. . . different." (Note, by the way, that the word "superhero" was not current in August 1962 but that by December 1963 it had become so.)

It doesn't matter whether you have read these "other comics" in which the heroes had it easy. It doesn't actually matter whether any such comics really exist. All that matters is that your read Spidey and the Eff-Eff with Other Comics in your mind, and be amused and delighted by the difference.

About the time I was first reading Spider-Man Comics Weekly, Sally James started to show episodes of the old Batman TV show on Saturday Scene. ("Old" is a relative term. They were exactly eight years old: the same as me.) Adam West himself turned up in costume - and in character - to sponsor a competition and, I assume, promote a book. Miss James dressed up in a Robin costume to make him feel at home. The real Robin couldn't appear on the show because he'd been grounded. For ungentlemanly conduct towards Batgirl, since you ask. I am the only person on earth who remembers this stuff.

Although I watched and I assume enjoyed Batman, it very rapidly came to stand for Other Comics - what funnyboks had been like before Stan Lee came down from heaven and redeemed us: silly dialogue, silly traps, action which ostentatiously failed to make sense, and what bothered me most, villains who consciously knew that they were villains. I can hardly describe how cross it made me that our heroes slid down the "bat pole" as Bruce and Dick but reached the bottom as Batman and Robin. One

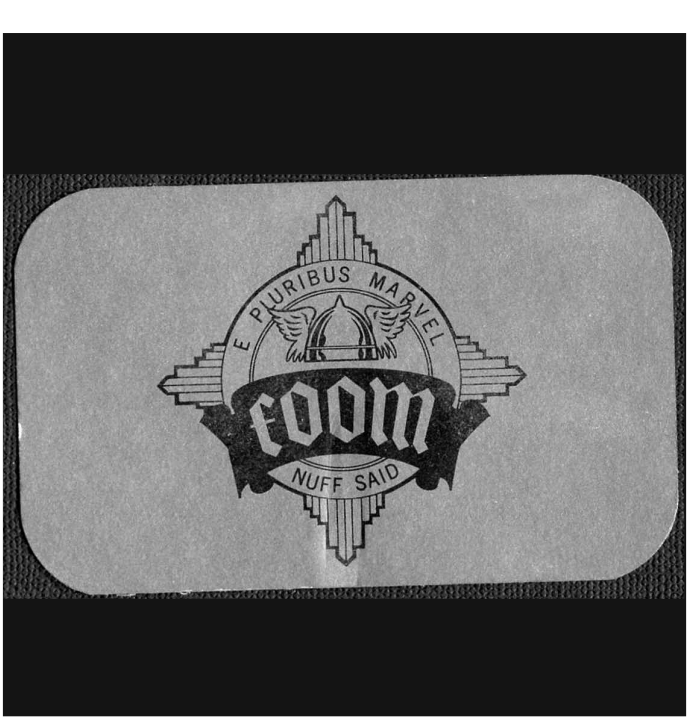
week, they returned to Wayne Manor by sliding up the pole. This ruined my whole weekend.

Maybe if I watched this stuff now, I would find it funny. Everybody else seems to. The church of Stan anathematized the Earth-1 Superman comics; now I've read them, they've turned out to be sophisticated and powerful. Maybe dana-dana-danadana/ dana-dana-dana-dana-Batman would turn out to be clever and witty if I gave it another chance. But I don't quite see why people apply the word "camp" to both kinds of writng. Batman knew precisely what it was doing. Supergirl wasn't doing anything, except telling a story. In Batman you are in on the joke. In Supergirl, there is no joke. You may laugh with Supergirl but you laugh at Batman.

Or else at the people who watch Batman. Even at the age of 8, I half-suspected that I was the butt of the joke. Some day I'll show them. Some day they'll be sorry. Sorry they laughed at me. But I can now see that I needed the idea of Batman in order to properly enjoy Spider-Man

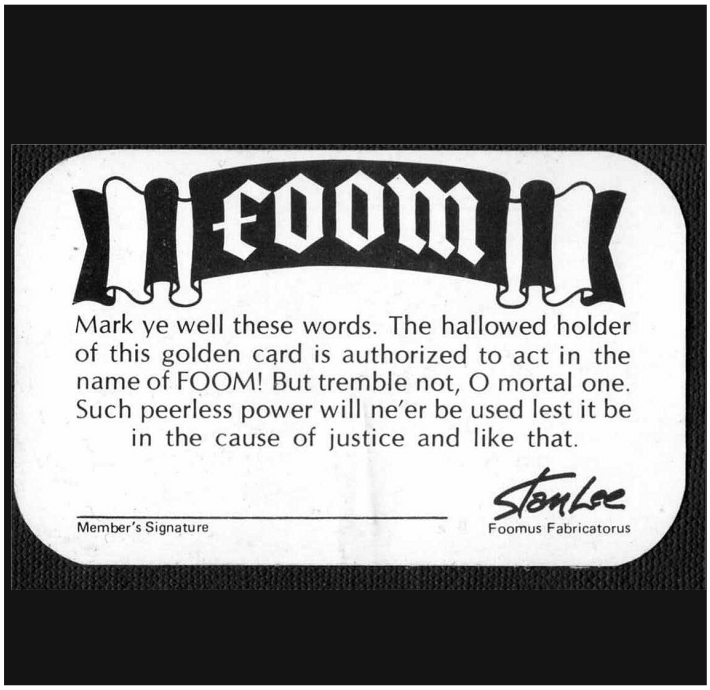
From the very beginning, comic books have engaged in this kind of self-flagellation. Over and over again, readers have been told that comic books are bad or shameful, but that it's okay to like this one, because this comic book isn't really a comic book.

Some twenty years before the Fantastic Four – when Stan Lee was still the office boy – Jack Kirby and Joe Simon had created the mighty Captain America. It was 1941 and there was a war on. The radio Superman had started to fight villains from non-specific European dictatorships. One of the villains was called "Dr. Deutsch" (his henchmen was named "Hans") so it is



possible that some listeners were able to see through the disguise, but, still, the words "Germany", "Nazi" and "Hitler" were studiously avoided. Captain America had no such scruples, delivering a firm right hook to the the jaw of the fuhrer a full nine months before Peal Harbour. ("Smashing through" screams the cover "CAPTAIN AMERICA came face to face with Hitler!")

On page 2 of Captain America #1 (March, 1941), the President - not some generic patriarchal figure, it's clearly the actual President Roosevelt - meets with his generals. They complain that they can't act against Nazi saboteurs because the U. S army itself is spotted with German spies. "What would you suggest, gentleman?" asks Prez "A character out of the comic books? Perhaps The Human Torch in the army would solve our problem! But seriously, gentlemen..." In order to give ourselves permission to believe in a serum which transforms a skinny recruit into a "super-agent" we have to hear the actual honest-to-god President telling us that superheroes are silly – but seriously, folks, this guy in a red, white and blue costume and mask with a teenaged sidekick called Bucky isn't a superhero.

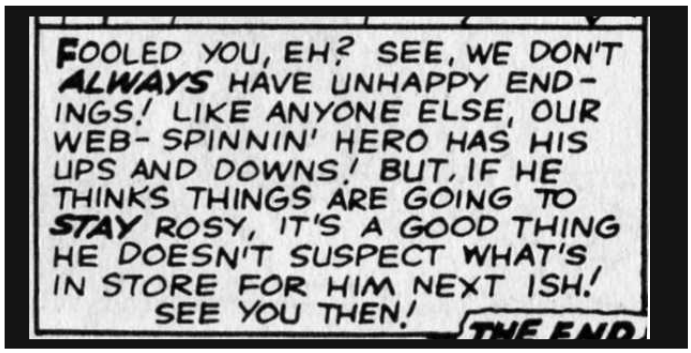


Heck, the very first superhero comic ever kept on telling us that if we wanted to be like Superman, we ought to take exercise, get a good night's sleep and, er, read lots of good books.

It's open to question whether Stan Lee really brought realistic dialogue, flawed heroes and sympathetic villains to superhero comics. But there's one thing he really did do, which no-one had done before him, and which no-one since him has managed, or even really attempted. Yet it's the one thing he's oddly reluctant to claim credit for.

Stan Lee's didn't merely break down the fourth wall. He also demolished the first and second walls, and made a fairly substantial hole in the third one. The voice which speaks to us through the captions and the footnotes, the voice which tells you to go and check issue 2 if you want to find out how the Spider-tracer works is the same voice which warns you from the house ads about the dire consequences of missing this months Nick Fury Agent of SHIELD, and which looks out at you from the front cover of FOOM magazine. It introduces each story, partly as creator, partly as salesman but mostly as fellow fan - but it also addresses you directly from the letter column, thanking you for being a loyal reader or taking mock offence at criticism. Before long, the same voice is writing you a letter each month, talking about love and peace and why you don't want to miss this month's Daredevil. We hear the man who types the words gently kidding around with the man who copies the words into the speech bubbles and the man who draws the pictures. And he's not above gently mocking his own material, which makes the over-wrought melodrama much more bearable. When God, in the form of a big purple alien with a G, on his chest emerges from a space-ship and announces the imminence of Judgement Day, the voice of Stan Lee winks to you from the closing caption. ("Next issue, prepare for. . . the greatest, grandest adventure thrill of all. You dare not miss it! So speak Stan and Jack! 'Nuff said!") When Doctor Doom comes up with a genuinely frightening masterplan and exclaims "Nothing can stop me now!" Stan Lee is on hand to ask "Who says this isn't the Marvel age of cliches?"

The Stan Lee persona is continually drawing attention to the degree to which what you are reading is artificial. "We've done it" he cried from the cover of Spider-Man #13 "We've created the greatest villain ever for old Spidey – but who or what is he?" As an eight year old, this took me some time to get to grips with: who is speaking? Some mad scientist or villain whose objective was to make monsters for the heroes to fight? But gradually we realised we were being admitted into the club-house where a group of actually quite elderly men in shabby suits with cigars kidded around with each other while trying to out do themselves in coming up with the greatest story of all time. "The Bullpen",



Lee called it, a baseball term that was and is completely unintelligible to the English. (I take it to mean "pavilion" or "changing room" or "tea-room".) We now know that it was largely mythical, based on Stan Lee's memories of what the comic book industry had been like in the 50s, not the realities of early 60s freelancing and homeworking. But the complete disjuncture between the smoky, almost sleazy mundanity of “the Bullpen” and the glamour of the Marvel Universe was, I think, a very significant part of the frisson of early Marvel.

And wasn't this a very, very strange thing for Stan Lee to have done? The whole point of Marvel Comics was that we could believe in Spider-Man and Reed Richards and the others. That they had, like Namor, stepped out of a comic book and become really, really, real. Yet at every moment, Stan Lee is drawing attention to their unreality. They aren't real people at all. They're something which someone has made. Something which even their maker doesn't take entirely seriously: imaginary stories.

Playwrights tend to be attracted to the kinds of stories which work best on the stage. That means stories which are

dialogue driven and which represent two or three hours of real time. The story of the last two or three hours of someone's life; and therefore, of someone who died under interesting circumstances suit this brief rather well. Stories in which you follow a character around while nothing much happens to them, witness twenty years of their life, and gradually come to understand what makes them tick work better in hundred-thousand word prose works than, say, haiku; and stories of action and spectacle but little subtlety lend themselves to being projected on fifty foot screens with budgets of hundreds of millions of dollars. If you read a lot of books, the chances are that you like the kind of stories which fit into books, and if you go to the cinema a lot, then you probably like the sorts of stories which go well into a filums. But it's really, really not sensible to think you are doing There Will Be Blood a favour by saying that it's "almost novelistic" or blame Moby-Dick for not being paced like a movie.

When everyone thought The Legitimate Theatre was the highest form of art, they were inclined to use "Tragedy" as a synonym for Good Play and say "tragedarian" when what they meant was "actor". When civilized people were reading long prose works, then The Novel became a term of praise. (People were inclined to say that long sci-fi stories in prose were Not Really Novels.) Now everyone goes to the movies, the best books are the ones which read like movie scripts and the best comics are the ones which look like storyboards. So no-one could understand why Alan Moore didn't jump for joy at the thought of seeing his graphic novel turned into a filum. We didn't get that he wrote a comic book because a comic book fitted the kind of

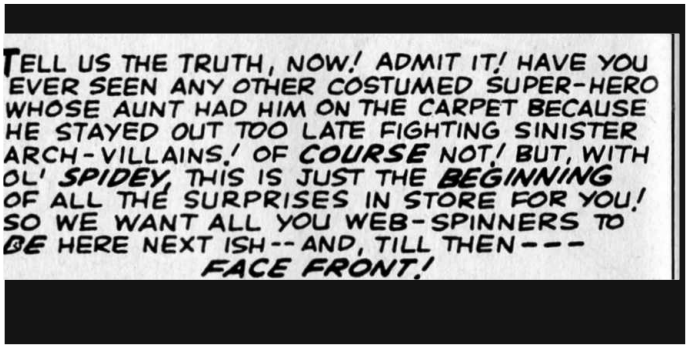
thing he wanted to write. If he'd wanted to write a screenplay, he presumably could have done so.

Ah but we fans, we people with piles and piles of funnybooks on our bedroom floors, we people who know the date of the last golden age appearance of the Sub-Mariner and the effect of Red Kryponite. Never mind that the Incredible Hulk was a big disappointment and that Rise of the Silver Surfer turned Kirby's most iconic villain into a cloud of purple gas and we can't even bring ourselves to go and see Wolverine. We fans. This time it will be different. They are turning Thor into a movie! Turning. Thor. Into. A. Movie. And in the last ten seconds, Samuel L Jackson will tantalize us with the possibility that after Captain America (2011) and Iron Man II (2012) there will be an Avengers movie with Thor and Captain America and Iron Man and Hulk and there will be an Avengers movie and this time it will be different.

Brian Blessed! Kenneth Branagh!

Fans.

Partly it's more self flagellation. However many times we say "graphic novel" and however many people admit that Neil and Alan can write a bit and even when we've accepted that most of Hollywood and all of Nintendo is the bastard offspring of Siegel and Shuster we're still just like Ben Grimm and President Roosevelt. Funnybooks are silly and we hate ourselves for reading them. (That's why Manga is so popular. Never mind that no English reader ever called Asterix or Tintin *bande dessinée* and that the word manga – "whimsical pictures" - literally means "funnybooks". They're not comic books and you read them backwards and it's all right for the cool kids to like them, okay?) English schools tend to draw a clear distinction between sport and academic pursuits, leading to

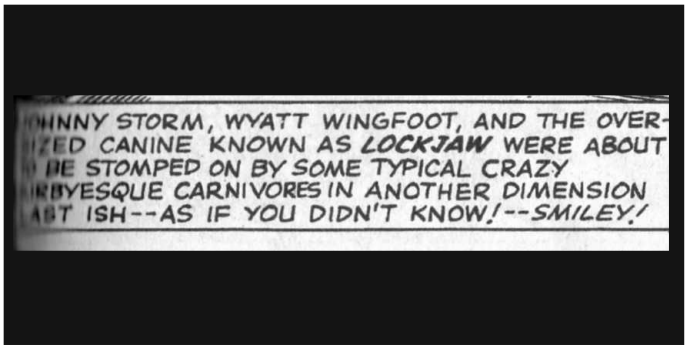


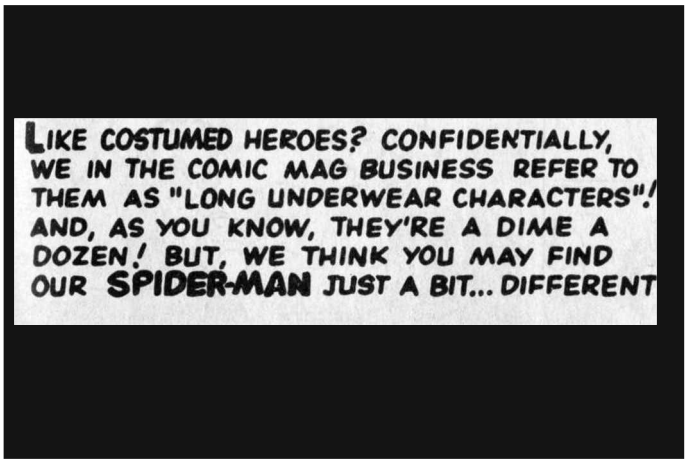
a deeply engrained belief that "sport" equates to "masculinity" and "sexual virility", while "reading" equates to "effeminacy", and therefore only wanking neuters could possibly want to stay in and read Rom: Spaceknight when they could be out having hard balls thrown at their heads in the sunshine. We've also been told to associate illustrated stories with illiteracy, so the only reason for reading Spider-Man is that you can't understand proper books. Many of us grew up being told that our liking for Spider-Man Comics Weekly was just a phase and that we'd eventually turn into normal little boys. Many of us never did.

So, we want there to be superhero movies because all those people who laughed at Spider-Man comics might go and see a Spider-Man filum. We want there to be superhero movies so normal, healthy people will see our characters and understand what we see in them and feel sorry that they were so horrid to us in Miss Walker's class.

This doesn't work.

We also want to see our favourite characters on a Gurt Big Screen. Comic books are static. That's quite odd, when you think about it. Stan said over and





over again that his comics would be packed with “action” (by which he meant “fights”) but “action” is the one thing that a comic can't ever contain. It can only show sequences of frozen moment and hope that the reader infers action from them. Until I first saw the Spider-Man cartoon, I really had no notion of how Spider-Man's web-swinging was supposed to work. So seeing Toby McGuire really, really, web-swinging in really, real New York is a thrilling prospect. This doesn't work, either. In the funnybook, web-swinging is exciting precisely because we only ever see Spider-Man caught in mid-manoeuvre. Ditko shows us Spidey contorted into weird shapes which we can look at for as long as we like. In the filum, each “swing” lasts only for a split second. You've seen much better trapeze acts at the circus.

Of course it's exciting to see a character that you've always liked on the printed page being realised in three dimensions. However many comic books I own, I still go “wow” when I see a Galactus action figure in Forbidden Planet. So naturally I was excited by the thought that I. L. M or somebody was going to create a moving Galactus action figure and put him into a movie. It's a bit like, well, seeing your favourite character coming to life.

And it doesn't work. Superhero costumes came about because they can be drawn quickly and printed easily on cheap paper. Try to put one on the screen, and you end up with an adult male in spandex, which rarely looks good, or else you re-design the costume as, say, bullet proof battle armour and end up with something that makes some kind of sense but doesn't look like Batman. (“Would you prefer yellow spandex?” says Cyclops to Wolverine after issuing him with an X-Men uniform: which is, being interpreted: it’s okay, this movie is nothing like one of those awful funnybooks.) We like super-heroes because they are comicbooky. We want to see realistic versions of them. But in order to make them realistic, we have to remove the comicbooky quality which is the one thing which attracted us to them to begin with.

When the Human Torch encountered the Sub-Mariner he was not, in fact, a character in a comic. He was in fact, a character in a comic in a comic. And when Stan did his Pygmalion thing, he didn't really become real. He merely moved up a level, and became the only thing he ever was or could be: a character in a comic.

"If this were played upon a stage, I should condemn it as improbable fiction."

Twelfth Night

Well then, it's not SF

I've never stopped being surprised that something as geeky as Watchmen is so popular with people who are not geeks. How can a book which is so full of superhero in-jokes be so much admired by people who have never read a superhero story – by people who purport to dislike super-hero stories – by people who sometimes end up denying that Watchmen has got any superheroes in it at all.

If Watchmen had been the comic Alan Moore originally set out to write, it would never have been read outside the comic book community. Everyone knows the story: DC had acquired the rights to a set of defunct superheroes which had belonged to a defunct company called Charlton. 'Cap-tain Atom' was a big blue superguy with an atomic insignia on his chest; 'The Question' was a masked vigilante in a long coat and hat; 'The Blue Beetle' was an easy-going crime fighter with a cool ship and lots of high tech gad-gets - he'd taken over the role when the previous incum-bent retired. They occasionally banded together and fought crime as 'The Sentinels' and they hadn't been seen since they ceased publication in the mid-80s.

Alan Moore's notion was to show these characters' final adventure. They would have 'retired' at about the times their comics were cancelled, but were coming out of retire-ment to find out who killed 'The Peacemaker', another de-funct Charlton hero ("he loves peace so much, he's prepared to fight for it.") In the process of solving the murder, we would gradually learn that these rather inno-cent and naïve heroes had all sorts of hidden depths and dark secrets.

DC liked the idea, but they didn't want to 'use up' the Charlton characters in single graphic novel. Alan Moore could tell his tale about retired heroes trying to track down a 'mask killer' – but only if he came up with some new characters to bring out of retirement.

Alan Moore's original concept would have relied very heavily on readers' perceiving the incongruity between the source material and the new graphic novel: you would have been expected to read Who Killed the Peacemaker? with the old Charlton comics very firmly in your head. When 'Cap-tain Atom' dsplays his cock and 'The Question' burns a pae-dophile alive, you would have been shocked because this was so unlike the wholesome characters of yore - or else smiled with recognition and thought that in a funny way,

that was exactly what those characters had always been like.

While we comic book fans were being held spellbound by Watchmen, everyone else was reading a British comic called Viz. Viz depended almost entirely on this kind of double vision. If you grew up with The Beano, then a character who looked like Dennis the Menace, but told his father to fuck off was incredibly funny (I'm told). If you don't have the folk memory of Dennis and Gnasher, then it was impenetrable. (I've heard that when copies found their way to America, people there really genuinely found 'Black Bag the Faithful Border Bin-liner' unintelligible.)

Unless. Unless the writers of English comics like Beano were writing within a tradition (one hesitates to say 'archetype') of stories about naughty children and the writers of Viz were sending up that tradition, rather than any particular iteration of it. It's comically incongruous for a mischievous little tyke to call the school teacher a cunt even if you didn't know which particular mischievous child the writers and artists had in mind.

It now appears that there had been an even earlier proposal for Watchmen based on an even more obscure and even more defunct set of characters - 'The Mighty Crusaders' published by Archie Comics. I remember them being briefly revived in the early 80s when I would still uncritically devour anything with superheroes in it. It was clear to me even then that these were the kinds of superheroes who would have been invented by someone who didn't really read superhero comics: the kinds of heroes you might find on cereal packets or sliced bread. In a way, this made them more superheroey - they all wore spandex and had special cars and secret bases. It took a couple of issues for the defamiliarization effect to wear off.

So perhaps the source material for Watchmen was always meant to be campy, generic characters. The Fly or The Blue Beetle are to a great extent, copies of Batman, and as much copied from the TV show as from any fan-revered comic. So it was quite a small jump to replace them with with Nite Owl - a copy of a copy of a copy. The more times you copy something, the less you can see the details and the more you can see the general shape. The Batman who Alan Moore wanted his readers to have in mind when reading about Nite Owl was not the character who appeared in last months Detective Comics, but Batman as he is imagined by

people who haven't read a Batman comic in thirty years. Batman, not as he is in the comic, but as he is in the popular consciousness. The Batman, as the Later Alan Moore would put it, who exists in Idea Space.

Maybe. I myself had never heard of The Question when I first read Watchmen: but it was clear enough that Rorschach was the sort of character who Steve Ditko might have created. I now understand that Rorschach's moral absolutism – there is black, and there is white, and there is nothing in between – reflects the beliefs of another Ditko creation, Mr. A, which were based on Ditko's own beliefs, which were based on the teachings of a crazy lady who no one in the UK reads. But I always 'got' that Rorschach's beliefs are very much the kinds of beliefs that comic book crime-fighters with names like The Punisher and The Vigilante have always had. Didn't ther-Batman once say that he didn't care about the law, only about what was right? So proper geeks read Watchmen and say "Ah yes, he's the Blue Beetle; he's a bit like the Punisher..." but normal people can read it and say "He's a gentleman adventurer with a collection of gadgets" and "He's a vigilante who's a law unto himself."

Maybe. Vigilantes and gadgeteer adventurers are hardly universal archetypes in the way that naughty school boys and long-suffering teachers are. And the comic has quite a high density of in-jokes which are surely only comprehensible to fans. The original Nite Owl seems to have been a fairly dark creature of the night; but his replacement is a lighter character with lots of high tech weaponry, goggles and a utility belt. He has a base underneath his house which he calls 'The Owls Eyrie' dresses up as a character which only comes out at night and is aware that that's a little bit silly. If you know comics you see that this represents the contrast between the 'golden age' and 'silver age' versions of Batman. If you don't, you don't. Does it matter?.

So I am still, to a degree, puzzled. Maybe Watchmen manages to generate its ironic double-vision internally: the text itself tells you both what superheroes are meant to be like, and what these superheroes are actually like, and it would do so even if there had never been another superhero comic in the world. (Many of us 'get' the joke in Don Quixote, even though our knowledge of medieval Spanish literature is quite limited.) Maybe the idea of the superhero has seeped sufficiently into the mainstream that even a person

who has never read even a single issue of Rom: Spaceknight has got a general idea of what superheroes are like. Or maybe the people who were so enthusiastic about Watchmen were unaware of the idea of superheroes, and read the story simply as a story - with an un-ironic single vision.

In which case they'd be reading a different comic to me and it wouldn't be surprising if they assessed it differently.

"Is he the character who's like Mr. A, only mad?"

Steve Ditko, asked if he'd heard of Rorschach.

Crisis on Multiple Earths

One of the more disconcerting things about Watchmen is the way in which the action jumps between different plots and, indeed, different types of plot. This is particularly jarring in the movie: how many films cut away from a naked blue guy on Mars to a film noire tec in 80s New York?

But superhero comics were always a bit like this: it was one of the reasons we liked them. Daredevil's battles with corrupt boxing promoters in Hell's Kitchen somehow gain piquancy if you believed that a short bus ride away, Mr Fantastic was shutting the gates and trapping Annihilus in the Negative Zone. I loved the way Thor used to exclaim "Summons the Avengers!" when things got desperate, although I don't think they ever turned up.

But, like so much else, the Marvel Universe existed much more in the minds of comic book readers than it did in the actual comics. If there wasn't a heavily trailed pulse-pounding guest star, there was no real expectation that this months Spider-Man would dovetale with next months Avengers. In my little head, I would often imagine that Spider-Man could solve a personal crisis by dropping in on Dr. Strange, or that Thor should be helping the F.F thwart this weeks alien invasion - but even at eight I 'got' that comics didn't work like that. Not til Stan retired, other little Marvelites started writing the stories

and the whole thing turned into fan fiction. Alan Moore, by giving us a single comic about half a dozen different superheroes whose separate adventures add up to one huge story reflects what the experience of reading half a dozen superhero comics was like. What it ought to have been like; what it was like in the minds of some fans. If you were never a fan, then the idea of a spotlight which moves from Dr. Manhattan to Rorschach and back again is new and fresh and surprising. If you were, then you think "Yes! That's just what Marvel Two-in-One should have been like."

About fourteen

The first superhero comic was published in June 1938. Over the next decade, a quite ludicrous number of superheroes were created. Steranko lists 40 direct copies of Captain America alone. But in the 50s, everyone decided that they had had too much of a good thing, and superheros went out of fashion. (For a while Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman were the only such characters on the newsstands.) Some times around 1960, DC comics re-launched The Justice League, Stan Lee's boss said "that's a good idea"and the whole thing started up again.

The 1940s are therefore called the 'Golden Age' of comics, and the 1960s the 'Silver Age'. So far as I can make out, we are currently coming out of the Tin Age and moving into the Copper one.

As we've seen, in 1962, the Human Torch discovered the Golden Age Sub-Mariner in a hostel. The Sub-Mariner later discovered the Golden Age Captain America in the freezer, and defrosted him. Since then we've all totally accepted that Golden Age is not merely a term used by collectors and publishers, but an historical period in the imaginary world where the stories happen. Spider-Man was a 1960s teenager who could look back on a 'Golden Age', slightly before he was born, when Captain America had fought the Nazis. (Nowadays Spider-Man is also a 21st century teenager, which causes all sorts of complicated narrative paradoxes which we don't need to worry about.)

I don't think we notice what a very strange device this is. I don't think that there is any other genre in which Tinky-Winky might walk past a boarded up shop and say "Yes: that's where Bagpuss used to live" or where an old copper on Albert Square might go and put some flowers on

the grave of George Dixon. Stories are stories: they don't tend to flow into each other and they certainly don't acquire histories.

Watchmen is set in the 1980s; but during the funeral of the Comedian we see events which occurred at the first meeting of the Minutemen in 1939. The costumes of these 'Minutemen' are designed in a style which is intended to remind us of the art style of golden age comic books. If you're a fan, you see the 'joke'. In fact, you see it so clearly that you probably don't notice that a joke is what it is. The original Nite Owl retired in the 1950s - at about the time when most of the 'golden age' chaacters ceased publication. The new Nite Owl went into action in the mid 1960s - about the time when the popularity of superhero comics revived. The Keene Act band super-heroes in 1976 - roughly the time that Charlton publishing went out of business. We comic book fans don't consciously spot this. The idea that there were lots of superheroes in the 40s but that they looked different, and that the late 50s and early 60s were a relatively superhero free era is one that we simply take for granted. It's how things are. The history of the Marvel Universe is derived from the accidental publishing history of Marvel Comics. Alan Moore has based the history of the Watchmen universe on the publication history of a comic book publisher which never existed.

Non comic book readers don't get the joke either. They are encountering the idea of the Golden Age - of a world where Superman fought gangsters in the 30s, Nazis in the 40s and commies in the 50s and where it's part of the natural order that the Justice League succeeds the Justice Society - for the first time. They simply experience the same kind of excitement that we comic book readers felt when we first realised that Spider-Man lived in a world with depth as well as width.

Alan Moore isn't, in that sense, creating anything new. He's taken superhero comics not as they were, but as they are in the minds and memories of fans, and reflected them back at us. Geeks love it because he's reminding us of what it felt like to be a nine year old comic book fan experiencing all this for the first time. Non geeks love it because they really are experiencing it for the first time. Watchmen is a comic book about comic books and about reading comic books.

The Princess and the Prince

Everyone agrees that the Bible consists of sixty six books.

Except the Catholic Church who think that it contains seventy three. And the Eastern Orthodox who make it seventy eight. And the Mormons, who have an Even Newer Testament of their own. Let's not go there.

The seventy or so books of the Bible are grandly called "the Canon of Scripture". There is also an informal "canon" of English literature, meaning "a list of books that are pretty universally admired." When I was doing my Eng Lit degree, the term "canon" (along with "Leavisite", but that's another place we don't need to go) was only ever used as a term of abuse. The feeling was that you could only have a list of Great Books if you had a committee of Great Professors to pick the Great Books, and Great Professors tend to be White, Upper Class, Males who naturally selected Great Books which suited the White, Upper Class, Male definition of Greatness. The word "patriarchy" came up a lot, as well.

There was a perhaps valid suspicion of any process which started to treat books as a kind secular scripture. If you must study Shakespeare, went the argument, study him as jobbing playwright in the commercial theatre of early-Jacobian London, not as a creator of Holy Writ. But why write another essay on Hamlet when you could be dusting down some brown spined edition of a smutty sixteenth century play that no-one has read in fifty years and applying words like "transgressive" and "subversive" to it? Non-canonical works are more fun. I wrote my short thesis Chaucerian fan fiction.

Due to sterling work by Dan Brown and other illiterates this attitude has found its way into the discourse about the original "canon" of scripture. Late, esoteric texts with name like The Apocryphal Apocalypse of the Apostle Apollonius are felt to have a special, superior authority just because they aren't regarded as "canonical". The very fact that the Committee of Great Bishops put the Epistle of Jude on their reading-list renders it, on this view, deeply suspect.

Not that there ever was a committee of Great Bishops or indeed Great Professors. No-one had a meeting and said that as of next Tuesday, Hamlet would be on the list and the Revenger's Tragedy off it. Rather the reverse: Hamlet got put on the little list because it was demonstrably true that theatre managers and play-goers thought of it as a great play. The Gospel of John went on the Bishops' list of books to be read by Christians because John was one of the books that Christians were, in fact, reading.

But once a list has been drawn up, it certainly does become conservative and self-reinforcing: a book which was put on the list because people thought it was great becomes thought of as great because it's on the list. This is even truer when Belief is involved: John is a part of the Bible because it's a book which the

Very Early Christians read out at their meetings; but Very Early Groups were defined as Christians partly by virtue of the fact that at their meetings they read from John. The Comic Book Price Guide listed Wolverine #1 as being worth £100 because that's what fans were paying for it; but comic book shops started to charge £100 for Wolverine #1 because that's what the Price guide says it's worth. Does anyone actually like Citizen Kane?

Harold Bloom, who is certainly great and arguably a professor wrote a book called The Western Canon in which he proved to absolutely no-one's satisfaction that those sections of the book of Genesis in which God is named "YHWH" were written by Solomon's mother Bathsheba. One of the these "Y" texts is the story of Abraham and Isaac.

(Weak link. Bang side of pulpit.)

You remember how it goes? God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; Abraham is on the point of killing his son; but at the last moment, God changes his mind and tells him to kill a ram instead.

The meaning of this story is very obvious. It represents the idea that you must trust God absolutely – even if he's telling you to do something Bad, it will turn out Good.

Or, it represents the fact that if the Jews want to be God's special favourites, they have to accept that they are sacrifices, as well.

Or, it's an 'origin' story to explain why the Jews stopped practising human sacrifice and started slaughtering animals, instead.

St Paul thinks it's an illustration of the concept of "faith". Mr Richard Dawkins thinks that it proves that God's a bastard, Christians are stupid and theists are worse that paedophiles. Kierkergaad says "teleogical suspension of the

ethical" a lot. Barak Obama – a clever man who I think may go far - uses it to illustrate how the boundaries between the public and religious spheres should be drawn:

"If any of us saw a twenty first century Abraham raising the knife on the roof of his apartment building, we would call the police. . . We would do so because God doesn't reveal himself or his angels to all of us in a single moment. We do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be. So the best we can do is act in accordance with those things that are possible for all of us to know, understanding that a part of what we know to be true – as individuals or communities of faith – will be true for us alone."

Several centuries ago, I was involved in performing the medieval mystery play based on the story of Isaac in a church in York. Where the Bible tells us nothing at all about how Abraham felt about killing his son, and almost nothing about how Isaac felt about being killed, the play drools over the idea of child murder for rather longer than one feels is strictly necessary.

"Syth I must needs be dead
Of one thing I wold you praye,
Since I must die the death this daye,
use as few strokes as you may
when you smyte off my head"

I remember the Vicar saying after the performance: "It really is fascinating in a very real sense to see how people all those so many in a very real sense years ago imagined these so very familiar stories happening?" And isn't that the point? The Y writer doesn't tell us how God told Abraham what he wanted (Angel? Big booming voice?) or why he decided to test him or where Abraham was at the time or what they told the child's mother or (apart from one line) what they talked about on the way or if they were in fact anywhere near Highway 61. We have to imagine it. Religious stories are intended to be "open": they lack context, they contain gaps which the pious have to fill in. Fundamentalists and biologists think that the texts say what they say and that closes the matter. Everyone else sees that they are there to be interpreted. To be used. They have, as the fellow said, "hermeneutic potential. "

No-one – no-one apart from Carl Jung – no-one apart from Carl Jung and Philip K Dick – thinks that the I-Ching actually contains information. I strongly doubt if Confucius cared very much about whether the superior man continued posting to his blog or took time out to compose a more developed series of essays about comic books. No-one except a biologist would attempt to read the book from cover to cover and then complain that it was disjointed and that they couldn't follow the argument. That's not how the book is supposed to be used. You are meant to take two paragraphs at random and then use your imagination or insight to see how they might apply to your current situation. If you find that useful it's because you find that process - of creating your own meaning in the space between the two randomly-selected hexagrams valuable. I don't, but I can see how someone could.

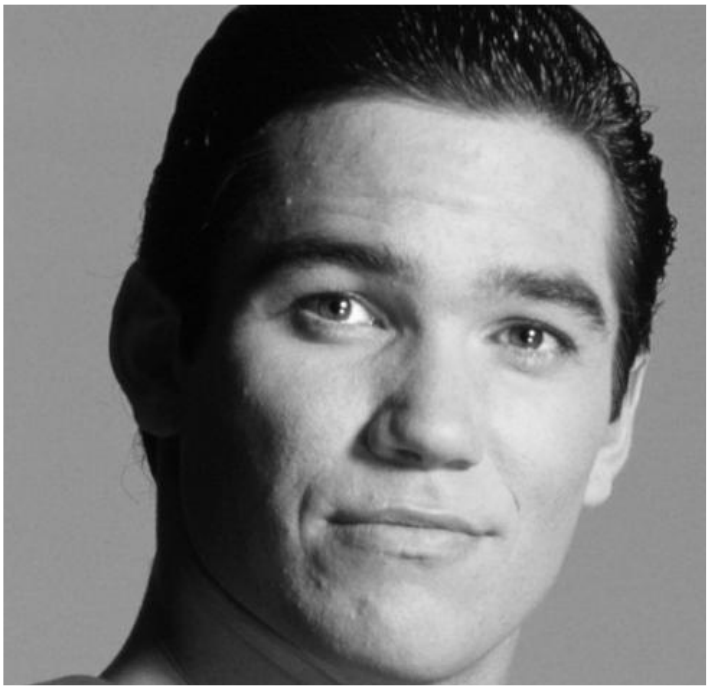
Comic book fans sometimes use the word "canon" to talk about their favourite books. They certainly make lists of the writers and artists who they think should be the most highly regarded; and there's certainly a self reinforcing conservatism about those kinds of lists. Any list of the Hundred Greatest Comics is likely to include the first appearance of Galactus and there probably hasn't been a month since 1966 when it wouldn't have been possible to pick up reprints of Fantastic Four 48, 49 and 50 for a couple of dollars. If you'd wanted to read some other comic published at the same time you'd have had to spend £50 and keep it out of the light between sheets of acid free cardboard. I'm only able to talk pretentiously about silver age Superman because DC has decided to make 6,000 pages of the stuff available in cheap editions.

Comics were originally intended to be read once and then swapped with your friends, left out for the dustman, or

used to wipe your bottom. Once they've become canon, we start to read them – to use them – in different ways. People remember The Beano with a huge amount of affection but they don't, on the whole, have learned discussions about which episode of Dennis the Menace contained the funniest prank, or what was Dad's most inventive punishment. The material isn't available to that extent so people have never used it in that way. I own the Ditko-Lee Spider-Man comics in at least four formats. (British Marvel reprints; Marvel Pocket Book reprints; Marvel Tales reprints; Marvel Essential reprints) but was still filled with joy when my copy of the Spider-Man Omnibus arrived. It's quite thrilling to be able to pick up a big, Bible-shaped hardback and know that I have every good episode of Spider-Man in my hands. I am sure that the sheer weight of the book makes me approach the material with a certain kind of reverence.

But when a fan talks about canon, he's not necessarily trying to decide what should be on the list of Great Funnybooks. He's more likely to be discussing the status of individual stories. He's trying to decide, not which ones are Really Good, but which ones Really Happened.

It's not that silly a question. There are hundreds of thousands of pages of Superman comics and thousands of hours of cartoons and movies out there. They can't all have happened to one character. The radio serial about Atom Man may be doggone swell but Lois Lane can't be both a 21st century gal and have been kidnapped by ex-Nazis in 1946. If you are reading – let alone writing - a 21st century Superman story, you have to regard radio version as "non-canonical", however fun it might be. Lois and Clark and Smallville may both have been jolly enjoyable TV takes on the Superman mythos, but they can't both be true.



This distinction takes on a particular importance if you start to use the stories in a particularly fannish way. No-one approaches a Tom and Jerry cartoon as a fragment of an ongoing history of a house with a pest problem. ("Why are they using mouse traps again? They must know it didn't work on the last eleven occasions. Are they in a jurisdiction which prohibits the domestic use of rat poison. . . yeah, that must be it.") The cartoons don't lend themselves to that approach. But fanboys and fangirls read comic books in this way without even spotting that it's not the normal way of reading.

If anyone wants to say "treating obviously fictitious and fantastic stories as if they really happened is also the way religious people approach the Bible" now would probably be the appropriate time to do so.

Sherlock Holmes fans seem to have been the first to do it. They refer to the four novels and fifty six short stories as "the canon" to distinguish them from the dozens of plays and films into which Conan Doyle had no input. This is a necessary ground rule for the kind of

absurdest game which they're going to play with the texts - treating the Holmes stories as if they were the actual memoirs of an actual John Watson, and interpreting them as such – allowing for the fact that Watson may make mistakes or even put deliberate untruths into his write-ups. If you are playing the game, you focus on what are quite clearly accidental contradictions and lacunae which worked their way into a set of stories that were written over decades and try to make sense of them as the literal truth. The more far-fetched the explanation, the more it is in the spirit of the game. What about that pet dog which Watson warned Holmes about when they were arranging their flatshare, but never mentioned again? Was it the one that Holmes poisoned later in the story? Did he sell it to Sir Henry Baskerville? Was "to keep a bulldog" nineteenth century slang for "I have a bit of a bad temper?" The one answer that would be no fun would be "Doyle forgot all about it because it didn't matter. "

It would be possible to play this game with almost any set of fictitious characters. There has recently been a certain amount of speculation in the media as to whether "softie" was playground slang for "gay" - if so, Dennis the Menace may not merely have been a bully, but a homophobe as well. In itself this is only marginally less constructive than wondering if Holmes and Watson got up to anything untoward when they went to saunas together. But The Beano doesn't invite this approach: the Sherlock Holmes stories seem to.

The comic-books which acquire the most devoted fan-following are not necessarily the best written or the best drawn. They're the ones which can be used to play these kinds of games. The one's with great gaping holes and contradictions which invite speculative explanations or fan fiction. The ones in which sex and sexuality are never mentioned, allowing readers to fantasize about what's going on behind closed doors. The ones with labyrinthine back-stories – five superpets, a substitute Legion, all the Green Lanterns you can eat and more Jedi councillors than you can shake a glowy stick at. The ones which leave narrative spaces in which you can write "I wonder if Element Lad is gay?" or "In addition to Superman, how many Kryptonian survivors were alive at the time of the first Crisis?" The ones which have, well, geek potential.

"And the princess and the prince debate
What's real and what is not
It doesn't matter outside the gates of Eden"

Bob Dylan

Everything's connected

We're often told that Watchmen brought proper, grown-up characterisation to the comic books. The dialogue is certainly very good. The characters speak in wisecracks ("You know that sort of cancer you eventually get better from? Well, that ain't the sort of cancer I've got.") They speak in aphorisms and pomes. ("Was offered Swedish love and French love, but not American love. American love: Like coke in green glass bottles. They don't make it any more.") They deliver political and philosophical speeches.("Death wasn't morbid to the ancient Egyptians. They saw it as launching on a voyage of spiritual discover. Don't you find that a comforting thought?") They tell their life stories to anyone prepared to listen. But only occasionally do they say the kinds of things which human beings actually say to other human beings. There have been comic book characters who are also believable human beings. You meet people like Howard the Duck every day of the week, only with fewer feathers. You can imagine Jesse Custer having a beer in your local. You can't really imagine Rorschach and Ozymandias doing anything except soliloquising about retribution and the fundamental interconnectedness of things.

You can type this wit, Alan, but you can't say it.

This isn't necessarily a Bad Thing. Good writing isn't synonymous with fully rounded characters of the Aspects of the Novel kind - whatever your Eng Lit teacher might have told you. Proper Grown Up Novels do contain characters who seem realistic, but make no actual sense(like Don Quixote) or who represent an idea or a state of mind but don't even pretend to be believable (like Captain Ahab). But we should be careful of screaming 'realistic' the first time we hear big words coming out of the mouths of men in coloured tights.

The Dr. Manhattan episode shows both the strengths and the limits of Moore's approach. The story of Jon Osterman is a standard issue superhero origin. A geeky scientist gets trapped in an 'intrinsic field generator' and disintegrated - but somehow manages to reassemble his body atom by atom in a new form which is bright blue and capable of mucking around with the laws of physics. He gains omnipotence but loses his humanity, his lover and his underpants.

Moore pumps the tale full of symbolism. Osterman's father made watches. The young Osterman (who is going to be disintegrated and re-assembled) passes the time taking watches apart and putting them back together again. When the bombs fall on Hiroshima, his father decides that watch-making is an obsolete trade. Osterman goes into the field generator to retrieve the watch he was fixing for his lover. He can't get out because of a time lock. Einstein said if he'd known the theory of relativity would lead to atomic bombs, he would have become a watchmaker. If evolution is true then the universe is like a watch without a watchmaker.

And it goes on: although the heroes are never referred to as 'watchmen' people who don't like superheroes scrawl 'who watches the watchmen?' on walls, and the comic begins with the hands of the atomic clock being moved to 12 minutes to midnight; and the blood stain on the smiley badge which Rorschach retrieves from the Comedian is in the same position as the minute hand; and the golden age superheroes were called 'minutemen' and Kovacs is first seen with a placard reading 'The End is Nigh' which is exactly what the clock is saying...

All jolly clever, of course - but it isn't clear how it it illuminates anything in Jon Osterman's origin story. Or anything else at all.

Dr. Manhattan has watches instead of psychology. Rorschach has women's clothing. The central idea is that he became a psychotic vigilante because of sexual repression, which is a little pop psychological, even for a comic book. Although Rorschach is overtly disgusted by 'bad' sexuality, particularly prostitution and paedophilia, it's clear that he's actually disgusted by the whole idea of copulation. Moore has a notion the watchpeople dressed up because of their sexual hang-ups: Rorschach hates sex, Nite Owl can't can't get it up without putting on his Owl suit, and the Comedian is, well, basically not very nice. The first Nite Owl - in another of those crucial marginalia - says that Superman was a big step forward after the pulps because the world of The Shadow was full of sexuality, but the world of Superman was sexually innocent.

So: Rorschach is like Pinkie Brown, Larkined up because he once caught his mother having sex with a client. But then Alan Moore goes back and puts in the symbolism:

* First job after leaving foster care - in a women's dressmakers.

*Stole the material which was intended as a dress for an Italian woman film star.

*Turned stolen material into a mask after the woman who the dress was intended for was raped and murdered.

*Discovers fragments of the dress of a little girl whose abduction he's investigating.

*Abductor hiding out in disused dressmakers

*When burning abductor alive, thinks of the tailors dummies, not the human beings.

But what does it mean? Does life ever fit into such a straightforward pattern? And if it did what would it signify?

In issue II, during the flashback to the police strike, Nite Owl remarks that Rorschach has gone mad since "that kidnapping." Four issues issues later Rorschach relates to his psychiatrist a gruesome account of the event that turned him from "Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach" into Rorschach - the investigation of the murder and kidnapping of the little girl in the dress shop.

This isn't pointed out. It isn't very important. I don't think that when you hear Nite Owl refer to "that kidnapping" you think "what kidnapping?" I don't even think that when you get to issue VI you think "Aha, that must have been the kidnapping that Dan was referring to." I think that you only spot the connection the second or third time you read the comic. And that the pleasure and the point simply comes from having spotted it.

And this, it must be said, is a very geeky thing to do: read and re-read disposable material and look for connections, secret meanings, and special significances which aren't there. But in Watchmen they are there, because Alan has put them there. The 'geek potential' is written in from the start. The dense, over-elaborated structure doesn't merely allow the comic to be used in a fannish way: it demands it. To read Watchmen is to become a geek.

It is worth trying to list the various kinds of connections which Moore puts into the comic.

1: There are temporal connections. Moore makes great use of non-linear narrative: we are continually shown events out of sequence, and asked to infer a line from effect to cause. When we first see the Comedian, he is said to have a scar on his face: two issues later, in a flash-

back, we see his Vietnamese lover smash a bottle in his face. By the end of the comic book, we have pieced together a 'time line' from the non-sequential fragments we've been given.

2: There are recurrent visual motifs as when we see that the ketchup stain on Seymour's shirt resembles the blood stain on the Comedian's badge and that there is a huge smiley-face on the surface of the planet Mars.

3: There are thematic juxtapositions, when we jump from the action taking place in one part of the story to see that something similar is happening in a different part of the story. Episode X begins with 'cars one and two' driving towards the presidential War Room and ends with Nite Owl and Rorschach driving towards Ozymandias' lair in two ski pods. (During that same episode, two Jehovah's Witnesses warn Bernard that the world will soon end and try to sell him a copy of a magazine called Watchtower; which is juxtaposed with a scene from Tales of the Black Freighter in which the sailor steals two horses. The episode is titled Two Riders Were Approaching which is probably an allusion to the first two horseman of the apocalypse, and also a line from Bob Dylan's All Along the Watchtower.

4: There is actual synchronicity - where two connected events are shown together because that's how they happened. The two cops happen to be wondering what ever became of Rorschach just as the red-headed sandwich board man walks past. They don't see the significance: we do. (Or at any rate, we do the second time we read the book.)

5: There are verbal juxtapositionings, when a line which is spoken at the end of one scene has some kind of ironic connection with an event in the next scene: as when Laurie assures her mother that a cigarette has been 'extinguished', and the next panel shows a picture of the comedians coffin; or when Rorschach says that there are so many people he wants to kill and so little time, and we cut to Dan and Laurie having dinner and noticing that it's pretty late.

There are connections like this in every panel. Why are they there? There's no special significance in Laurie saying the word 'extinguished' just as the Comedian is being put in the ground: she's talking about fags and he's dead and we don't learn anything about their relationship from the coincidence of the two words. And presumably it would be possible to go through anyone's life, point out every occurrence of some object - a watch, a dress, an egg sandwich

– and imply that that object was somehow significant. And no-one in the story is hearing the Dylan lyrics at all: they are merely being quoted by the author in order to point out – what? That two of his characters are riding somewhere, and that this is ironic because some one once wrote a song in which two other people rode somewhere else? That it's jolly clever of him to start and finish an episode with two people going somewhere? That two people in vehicles are always somehow associated with the apocalypse?

Does any of this stuff signify anything at all?

Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias are all seeking for meanings and patterns in their world. Rorschach thinks there is no pattern; Dr. Manhattan thinks that there is only pattern but that it doesn't have any meaning; and Ozymandias is trying to create a pattern and thinks that any meaning has to be teased out in esoteric ways.

In fact, their world consists of nothing but patterns. On Mars, Dr. Manhattan and Laurie use oblique, obscure inferences to work out the secret of Laurie's birth. They don't notice that the actual landscape is literally yelling "It was the Comedian, dammit!" at them. At the same moment that he's wondering whether Rorschach's diary is worth reading, Seymour's actual clothing is telling him that this document contains the secret of the Comedian's death.

Some years ago there was a series of mobile phone adverts on UK TV. Each advert was a parody of the X-Files (with Kyle MacLachlan in the David Duchovny role.) In each sketch, the investigator would confidently declare that therewas no such thing as UFOs or Abominable Snowmen while not noticing the huge flying saucer or hairy monster that was right under his nose. (The very last time Mr. Jon Pertwee appeared on film he was locking up an old phone box just after the investigator had declared time travel impossible.) It strikes me that Watchmen keeps on making a very similar joke.

“Any self-respecting listener knows that the Archers are real – there is no cast. When you have been listening day in day out for perhaps as long as 50 years or so, it can be deeply upsetting suddenly to be presented by some ludicrous photograph purporting to be one of Ambridge’s residents.”

Website of “The Archers Anarchists”

Emergent World View

In issue XI Ozymandias is discovered staring at a bank of TV screens, which are flicking between channels. (This was before the internet.) He believes that by looking at all this information "an emergent world-view becomes gradually discernible amidst the media white noise". This, he says, is like William Burroughs 'cut-up' technique: "rearranging words and images to evade rational analysis, allowing subliminal units of the future to leak through".

In 1986, TV remote controls were still relatively new devices. People made jokes about fat Americans who couldn't be bothered to get out of their armchairs. (This was before The Simpsons). The term 'channel hopping' is first recorded in the same month that Watchmen III was published. But still channel-hopping is what Ozymandias is unmistakably doing; and channel-hopping is what reading Watchmen, with its endless jumps between seemingly unrelated stories often feels like.

Moore wants us to compare the connections which Ozymandias is trying to draw between the fragmented media with the connections that we readers have to draw between the multiple fragmentary narratives in Watchmen itself. When we read the comic, we are seeing the world as Ozymandias sees it. The rows of TV sets on his wall resemble the panels on a a comic-book page.

In issue IV we learn what it would be like to be Dr. Manhattan. Manhattan perceives the world non-temporally: events in the future and events in the past are, from his point of view, all happening simultaneously. (St Augustine or C.S Lewis or someone said that that there is no such things as divine 'foreknowledge': God sees every moment as a present moment.) Manhattan can therefore see connections between things that happened a long time ago and things that haven't happened yet. His atemporal perception is very much like what Ozymandias is trying to achieve with his TV sets. At the climax of episode IX – arguably the climax of the whole graphic novel – a series of events from different time periods are juxtaposed in such a way as to force Laurie to the realisation that the Comedian – who she knows tried to rape her mother – is in fact her father.

So: perhaps the very non-linearity in Watchmen represents Dr. Manhattan's view of the world. Perhaps each jump – from Laurie's cigarette to the Comedian's funeral to the

song lyric – represents the kind of thing you'd perceive if you were Dr Manhattan, or God, or Alan Moore. Every event really is connected to every other event: but because we're not omnipotent, we can only be shown one connection at a time.

A comic book is pretty much the only narrative form in which two events from two different times can – indeed have to be – placed side by side. On a comic page, every event really is taking place at once. So reading the comic is like being Doctor Manhattan.

Or again. Much of the story is told from Rorschach's point of view. Some people have made the mistake of thinking that he is the hero of the story. Rorschach is a detective: a detective's job is to look at apparently random events and see how they could fit together into a story which makes sense. Rorschach sees the death of the Comedian, the discrediting of Manhattan, and the attempt on Ozymandias's life and draws a connection: that someone is trying to wipe out all the surviving superheroes. This is a wholly convincing and satisfying story: one that just happens to be wrong. (Meanwhile, the two crackpots at the New Frontiersman magazine have spotted a different series of random events – the disappearance of writer, a painter an architect, and the theft of a body from a morgue – and correctly inferred that they must be connected.) The irony is that Rorschach, a pattern hunter by profession believes that existence is random and has no pattern of its own.

So. Because we read the fragmentary narrative and try to find the pattern – the true story – which makes sense of it, reading the Watchmen is like seeing the world from Rorschach's point of view.

Because we see events simultaneously and non linearly and are forced to see connections and parallels between them, reading Watchmen is like seeing the world from Dr. Manhattan's point of view.

And because we keep jumping between viewpoints and trying to perceive meaning in the spaces in between, reading Watchmen is like seeing the world from Ozymandias's point of view.

But in fact, the process of trying to find an overarching story which makes all the fragments make sense; the habit of looking for connections where perhaps none exist, the finding of meaning in the spaces between the images, rather than in the images themselves – this is pretty much

the way the dedicated geek has always read everything. Indeed, looking for the meaning in the space between the panels is pretty much what 'reading' a comic means.

So. The real point of Watchmen is not that we read it as Rorschach and Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan perceive their world. The point of Watchmen is that Rorschach and Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan perceive their world as if it was a comic book. Which it is.

“Yes, novels! For I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances to the number of which they are themselves adding - join with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally takes up a novel is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronised by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard!”

Jane Austen

My name's Bernie

On page 23 of the Watchmen XI, the news-vendor who has been acting as a sort of 'chorus' since issue 3 asks the young lad who has been reading his comics without paying for them what his name is.

"My name's Bernie," says the boy.

"Bernie? Short for Bernard. Well I'll be horsewhipped. That's my name!"

"So?" replies the boy "Ain't no big deal. Lotta people called Bernard, man. Don't signify nothing."

Five pages later they are vaporized.

When we first see the news vendor, he's expounding his personal philosophy, as people are in Watchmen are wont to do.

"I see every goddam front page in the world.” he says“I absorb information. I miss nothing. F'rinstance, the more

disasters happen the more papers I sell. Explain that. See everything's connected."

Shortly after this the red-headed man with the sandwich board attempts to buy a paper. The news-vendor claims that, because he sees so many papers, he can spot 'the signs' that there's finally going to be a nuclear war. The prophet of doom is looking for signs in a much more traditional way: he believe the world will end the next day because: "the National Examiner reported a two headed cat born in Queens".(The man who carries a sign is looking for signs. Only just spotted that one.)

The conversation takes place in front of a building called 'The Institute for Transpatial Studies' - one of the organisations which it will turn out that Ozymandias controls. Kovac's is holding a copy of a fascist newspaper with the headline 'writer missing!' on the front page: it will turn out that the writer has been kidnapped by Ozymandias. Kovacs sandwich board reads "The End of the World is Nigh". If he could see the connection between the missing artist and the building, he'd know just how nigh the end of the world is. And the missing writer wrote the comic which little Bernard is reading.

Big Bernard is right: everything is connected.

Bernard's belief that he can discern "the big picture" from newspaper headlines is essentially the same as Ozymandias's idea that he can discern meaning by looking at endlessly shifting TV screens. But Ozymandias also admits that what he's doing is a bit like a shaman trying to foretell the future by looking in the entrails of a dead animal; which is a lot like trying to discern meaning in...say...an ink-blot. But Rorschach - whose very name and face represents the discerment of meaning in patterns - thinks there is no pattern - in the ink-blot, or anywhere else.

So, pretty much the whole argument in Watchmen is summed up by the two Bernards: the one who sees connections everywhere and thinks he can get through them to the big picture; and the one who thinks that, even if everything is connected, it don't signify nothing. And in the end, they die in each other's arms.

Little Bernard's function in the story is to read a pirate comic called Tales of the Black Freighter. The story of a sailor who returns home from a shipwreck by making a raft out of the bodies of his dead shipmates - and finds the horror has cost him his humanity - ironically mirrors Ozymandias' plan to save the world from one horror by creating an

even worse one. Over and over again, some individual scene in the pirate comic seems to 'synchronise' with what's going on in the world outside: while big Bernard is saying that people's apathy "makes him sick", the protagonist in the comic is vomiting violently after attempted to eat seagull.

Watchmen is a very long comic, and Mr. Snyder had to cut something if the film was going to come in at under twelve hours, and I can see how you might have thought that the comic and the news-stand were bloody clever but peripheral to the story. In fact all the key points of Watchmen converge in a sort of Gordian knot around the pirate comic. Cut it, and the whole comic unravels.

Issue V contains an excerpt from a comic book fanzine. If we read this carefully, we will learn that Tales of the Black Freighter is widely regarded as the best comic by writer Max Shea. This essay mentions that Shea has vanished; he is the writer whose disappearance was alluded to on the cover New Frontiersman in issue III; and will be again in the text section of issues VIII - which also mentions that four other creative artists have gone missing. (If you've skipped this stuff, then when Shea and Hira Manish first appear in issue VIII you are likely to exclaim "Who the hell are they?")

In our world, kids read comics about superheroes and wish that they were real. In the world of Watchmen, superheroes are real, so kids read about pirates instead. Hollis Mason described the emergence of superheroes as being like characters escaping from comics and coming to life. The idea of Superman was so powerful that it caused real superheroes to come into being. In order to create his squid monster Ozymandias kidnaps the man who wrote the most frightening comic of all time, gets him to imagine the most frightening monster possible, and persuades everyone on earth to believe that it is real. Like Hooded Justice, the Squid has escaped from comics - from the realm of ideas - into the black and white factual world of newspaper headlines.

Watchmen is about the power of stories, of ideas, of comic books. Bernard, the comic book reader, is it’s hero. He has in his hands the grand key to the whole story, and he couldn't care less. In the middle of this great insane complicated game the comic book fan is the voice which debunks the whole exercise.

“Lotta people called Bernard, man. Don't signify nothing."

Watchmen

movie review
by Captain Andrew

We'll we've waited a long time for this.

Watchmen is about as close to Holy Writ as comic books get and there was no way that this film was ever going to satisfy everyone. The novella is long, complex and densely structured. Change everything round and make it 'cinematic' (fewer words, fewer ideas, more fights) and everyone will yell 'sacrilege'. Stick slavishly to the book and the fickle multitude is just as likely to say that there was no point making a movie.

This film feels reverential. A plod through a sacred tome. If a film director wanted to tell you about a character's childhood, he'd find a cinematic way of doing it. He wouldn't give you a series of flashbacks with a voice over. But Snyder leaves the prison scene (where Rorschach tells the doctor the story of his life) and the Mars scene (where Dr. Manhattan's tells himself the story of his life) pretty much as spoken narratives, in which the static illustrations from the comic happen to have been replaced with moving ones.

Naturally, it's at its best as a movie when it's least like the comic. Moore allows us to pick up the pseudo history from 1940-85 through 50 or 60 pages of text features; Snyder creates a montage of key moments and rolls the credits over them. Not subtle, perhaps, but he's using the language of film to say the same thing which Moore said in the language of comic books. (Moore quotes two lines from Bob Dylan as an epigram; Snyder has two minutes of Jimmi Hendrix blaring out on the sound track. This is also not subtle.)

A very large amount of Moore's dialogue makes it through to the movie, which serves to show Moore's limits as a script writer. Both Manhattan and Ozymandias find that a detached, slow paced delivery is the only way to deal with that peculiar sing song poetry that Moore brings to every line of dialogue he writes.

The film doesn't dot every nuance of the comic's Byzantine story line, but it does make a pretty good stab at telling you that a very complicated plot is going on somewhere. It chops out the story's core, but leaves the surface feeling admirably complex and fiddly.

The characters have been cinematized: Nite Owl is more

like the Batroach and there's a whiff of Leonard Nimmoy hovering around Dr Manhattan. The violence is ratcheted up several notches: scenes which Moore leaves to our imagination (Rorschach killing the crook in the prison toilet) are spelled out; and some scenes are changed to make them nastier (in the comic, Rorschach forces the gangster to kill his henchmen to get to his cell; in the film, his forces him to cut the henchmen's hands off.) The fight scenes are all pointedly superheroic, where in the comic, they are pointedly not.

It looks a huge amount like the comic. We only see the news-stand on the street corner for a few seconds, but it had obviously been built in obsessively loving detail. (The Two Bernard's and the pirate comic are, of course, excised, which puts one in mind of Eric and Ernie's remake of Romeo and Juliet, which cut the balcony scene because it never got a laugh.)

So, is there any point in making the film if all you are going to do is treat the comic as a storyboard?

Some point, I should say. I listen to the Radio 4 adaptation of Lord of the Rings from time to time because it allows me to have a Tolkien injection in 13 hours, rather than, say, 50 - and because I like hearing Michael Horden reading out Gandalf's lines. ("...and it is, I fear, the merest thread TUM TUM TUM TUM-TI-TUM.") The movie of Watchmen gives me an Alan Moore "hit" in three hours rather than twelve; and I like the way Bill Crudup reads out Dr. Manhattan's lines. And I like seeing a full size Owl Ship actually flying and I like seeing the splodges on Rorschach's face moving around. And some of the funny lines are funnier when people speak them ("he pulled it on Rorschach and Rorschach dropped him down an elevator shaft.")

But this is neither Alan Moore's Watchmen translated onto the screen (like, say, the Harry Potter films), nor is it Snyder holding up a mirror up to Watchmen and telling us something about that we didn't know before (like say, Batman: The Dark Knight) nor is it a cartoon that's all but unrelated to the text but pretty enjoyable in it's own right (like Jackson's Lord of the Rings.)

It's more like an edited highlights sampler disc, the best bit of Watchmen, Watchmen's greatest hits.

With a shitty punk version of my favourite Bob Dylan song over the end credits.

Nothing Ever Ends

I adored Marvelman because a four coloured hero came into the real world while remaining a four coloured hero. The realism of the fight between Marvelman and Kid Marvelman made superheroes seem, for that moment, more superheroey than they ever had before. And I liked Supreme because you can only parody something you really and truly love. And No One Escapes The Fury! channelled Stan Lee and Steve Ditko so perfectly that I cried actual tears.

It bothers me that children read books of nursery rhymes in which the three little pigs amusingly pull out guns like gangsters and kill the big bad wolf and encounter Caspar the Friendly Ghost and Scooby Doo before they have been scared witless by an actual ghost story and see Shrek without having heard the original fairy tales read to them and that their first encounter with the Daleks is on the shelf of a toyshop, not a corridor on Skaro and that practically everyone reads Winnie the Pooh through the lens of Disney's desecration.

It took me thirty six years to overcome the damage inflicted on me by Stan Lee and become sophisticated enough to understand Supergirl. It bothers me that so many people read Alan Moore's conceptual meta-comic before they've read any actual funny books.

I admire the bollocks off Watchmen, but I still can’t really persuade myself to love it.

“Of the fate of Ungoliant, no tale tells. Yet some have said that she ended long ago, when in her uttermost famine she devoured herself at last.” The Silmarillion

Version 1.2 (Minor typos fixed.)

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For other thrilling adventures of Superman, see your local paper.