LEAPING TALL BUILDINGS

The Origins of American Comics

CHRISTOPHER IRVING *words*
SETH KUSHNER *pictures*

LEAPING TALL BUILDINGS:
The Origins of American Comics

Photographs by Seth Kushner
Text and interviews by Christopher Irving

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Walter Simonson's art table, 2009

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ERIC SKILLMAN *design* **TOM DE HAVEN** *foreword*

Kim Deitch's work space, NYC, 2008

powerHouse Books
Brooklyn, NY

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Jeffrey Brown drawing Change-Bots, Chicago, IL, 2011

Frank Miller at work, NYC, 2010

FOREWORD *by Tom De Haven*

My heroes have always been cartoonists. Growing up in the late 1950s, early '60s, I couldn't have told you who pitched for the Cubs or the Yankees or named the original seven astronauts, but I sure could've told you who drew every single comic strip (even the ones I didn't like or follow) in the daily newspaper and named the creators of virtually every comic book jammed into drugstore spinner racks—or at least I could've for those comic books that actually included credits. When I was about ten, my mother told a friend of hers, "Tom wants to be Chester Gould when he grows up!" No, Mom! I didn't want to *be* Chester Gould—what did she think I was, an idiot?—I wanted to draw comics *like* Chester Gould: I wanted to be a cartoonist. Never happened, but my obsession with the profession of cartooning and with those who follow the calling has never left me. Never.

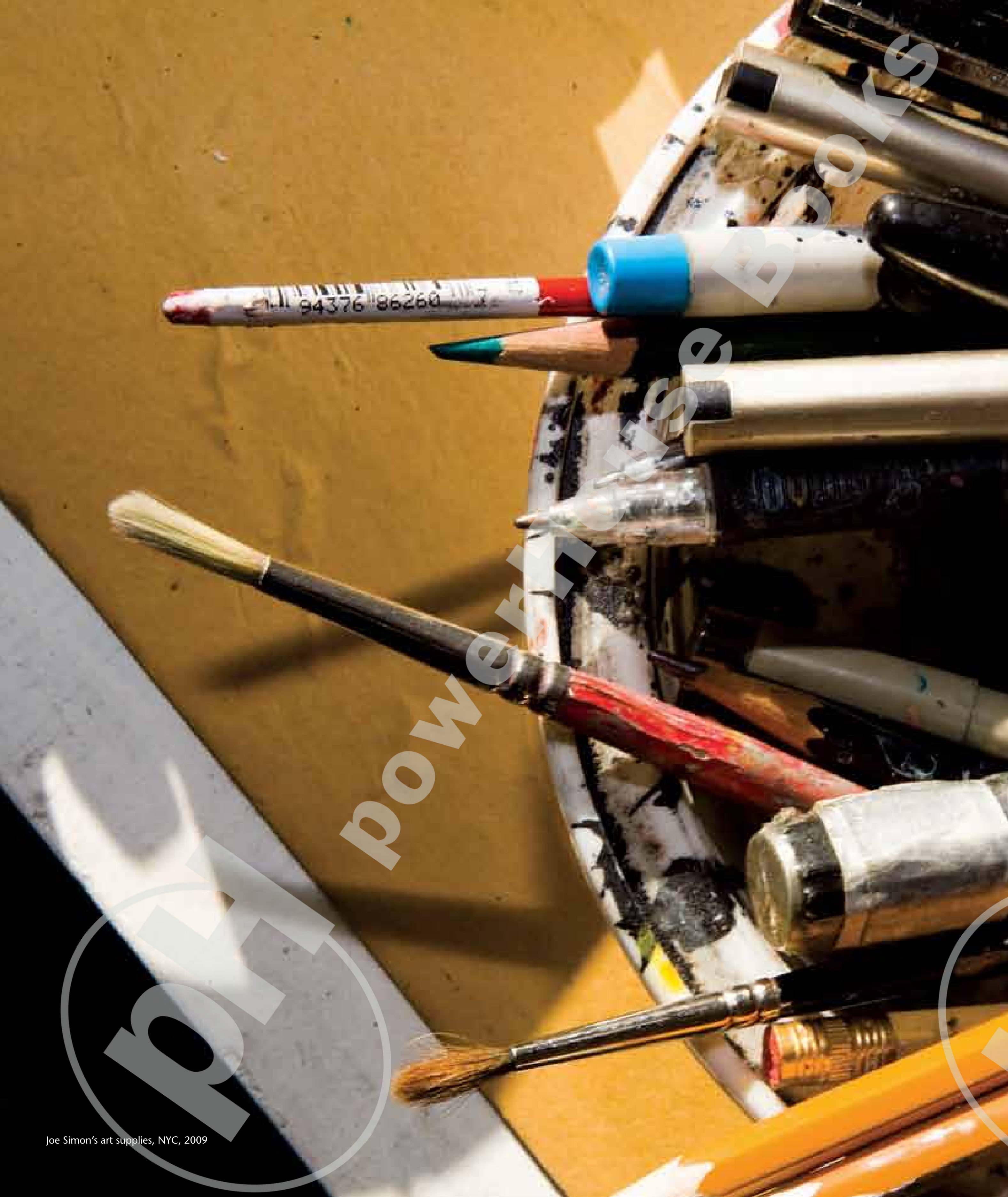
Over the years I've been fortunate to have met and talked with a good number of cartoonists, even chatting briefly on the telephone, twice, with Gould himself during the last year or two of his life; he was very ill at that time, and a bit confused, but by God did the man ever come to voluble life the moment I mentioned his creation of the two-way wrist radio! (When I met Art Spiegelman in May of 1985, the first thing he said to me, even as we were shaking hands, was "Did you hear that Chester Gould died yesterday?" and instantly I knew we were going to hit it off just fine.) Point is, I love hearing cartoonists talk about what they do and how they do it, telling (or better yet, *swapping*) stories about themselves and their careers, their predecessors, their collaborators and peers, their friendships, feuds and vendettas, and, of course, their "business," the business that can lead its practitioners to veneration or obscurity, splendid studios in cliffside mansions, or an early, boozer's grave.

If you really want to know what it's like to make comics day after day, year after year, either follow the calling yourself (good luck!) or else clear your calendar for the next several months and arrange to sit down with, oh, 50 or so of the very best working cartoonists in the world and just…listen. Closely. You can do that or you can just turn the page: because Christopher Irving has done the careful listening for you, and Seth Kushner—what a photographer!—has created a stunning album of accompanying portraits. I've pored over my fair share of books about comics and their makers, but I've never seen one quite like *Leaping Tall Buildings*.

Despite its subtitle, this isn't just another book about the "origins" of American comics, although it certainly covers that, as well as the maturation and various branchings of the art clear through to the digital age. Really, and most valuably, this is a book (and a gorgeously designed one, I might add) about the myriad sorts of concentrated and specialized *thinking* that goes into the creation of comics, thinking that is articulated throughout with vitality, humor and unfettered personality by dozens of consummate professionals.

Now go, hang out with some heroes.

Tom De Haven is the author of eighteen books including the Derby Dugan Trilogy of novels, *It's Superman!*, and *Our Hero: Superman on Earth.*



Joe Simon's art supplies, NYC, 2009

The 1930s were the turbulent decade that redefined American culture, as the country was thrust into the Great Depression. Sparked by the stock market crash of October 1929, many Americans found themselves jobless, homeless, and hopeless. Because of the social strife, a new popular culture emerged that looked to the future with the optimism hard for America's citizens to find in their everyday lives of poverty and social turmoil. Escapism was the only medicine that Americans could afford; because of this, desire for fantastic stories, film, radio, and comic strips thrived.

The daily comic strips (printed in large, black-and-white tiles during the week, and in vibrant color on Sundays) became the nation's uniting form of entertainment, reflecting the harsh life of the Great Depression's landscape in the socially relevant *Little Orphan Annie*, or depicting a more glorious tomorrow in *Buck Rogers.* As early as the 1920s, comic strip story lines were printed and bound between two covers as collections, and by the early '30s, there were a couple of attempts at packaging original comic strip material. This new hybrid form, the comic book, quickly took root on the newsstands as cheap entertainment for kids.

Publishers cropped up left and right, some in offices that were literally old broom closets, a few with bona fide offices, and many from dubious backgrounds. The publishers had no problem with disappearing before paying, nor did they usually care about the quality or content—what they did care about, however, was ownership of the characters and strips and making a fast buck.

The talent creating these new comic book stories were either high school kids or washed-up illustrators. Soon, these legions of young comic book artists, feeling out their growth in the industry's own awkward puberty, began grouping up in studios designed to solely package material for publishers or finding spots in assembly-line styled "bull pens."

But the real success behind the comic book, the one thing that arguably saved the industry, time and time again (and has bogged it down just as many times) debuted in 1938, on the cover of DC's *Action Comics* #1. Clad in blue with red trunks, boots, and cape, stood Superman, hoisting a car over his head as if it were made of papier-mâché.

The superhero was born, and his blend of pulp and comic strip action would quickly dominate this developing four-color storytelling medium. Other genres would emerge alongside it, as this bastard medium of junk culture would eventually grow up and become an art form without parallel.

These are the pioneers of the medium and their stories, both tragic and triumphant, starting with two dreamers in Cleveland, Ohio…

Superman didn't work just because of Jerry Siegel's clever writing, or Joe Shuster's awkward art style.

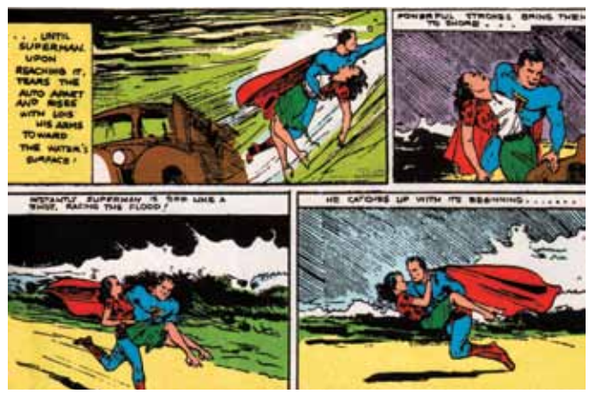
The frenetic and contagious energy of those early stories and their inclusion of the reader as Superman's pal—in on the dual identity gag as Lois shuns milksop Clark Kent, not knowing (like we do) that underneath his suit lies the Man of Steel's distinctive costume.

Introduced by Jerry's cousin in Cleveland, Ohio, the two bonded over their mutual love of science fiction and comic strips. Together, they created their own pulp stories and strips, including two stabs at a "Superman"—one a villain, the other an adventurer. Then, there's Jerry's grand tale of Superman's 1934 genesis: the story Jerry told time and again was of waking up in the middle of the night, writing all night, and then rushing to Joe's house in the morning to create Superman.

They sold the strip idea for $130 as a comic book and signed away all rights. When *Action Comics* #1 came out in 1938, Superman was the cover boy, holding an auto over his head as panicked onlookers fled away towards the viewer. Superman's success put the costumed hero in charge of the comic book medium, and Jerry and Joe found themselves busier than ever, having to hire out assistants in Cleveland to produce enough Superman stories to keep National happy.

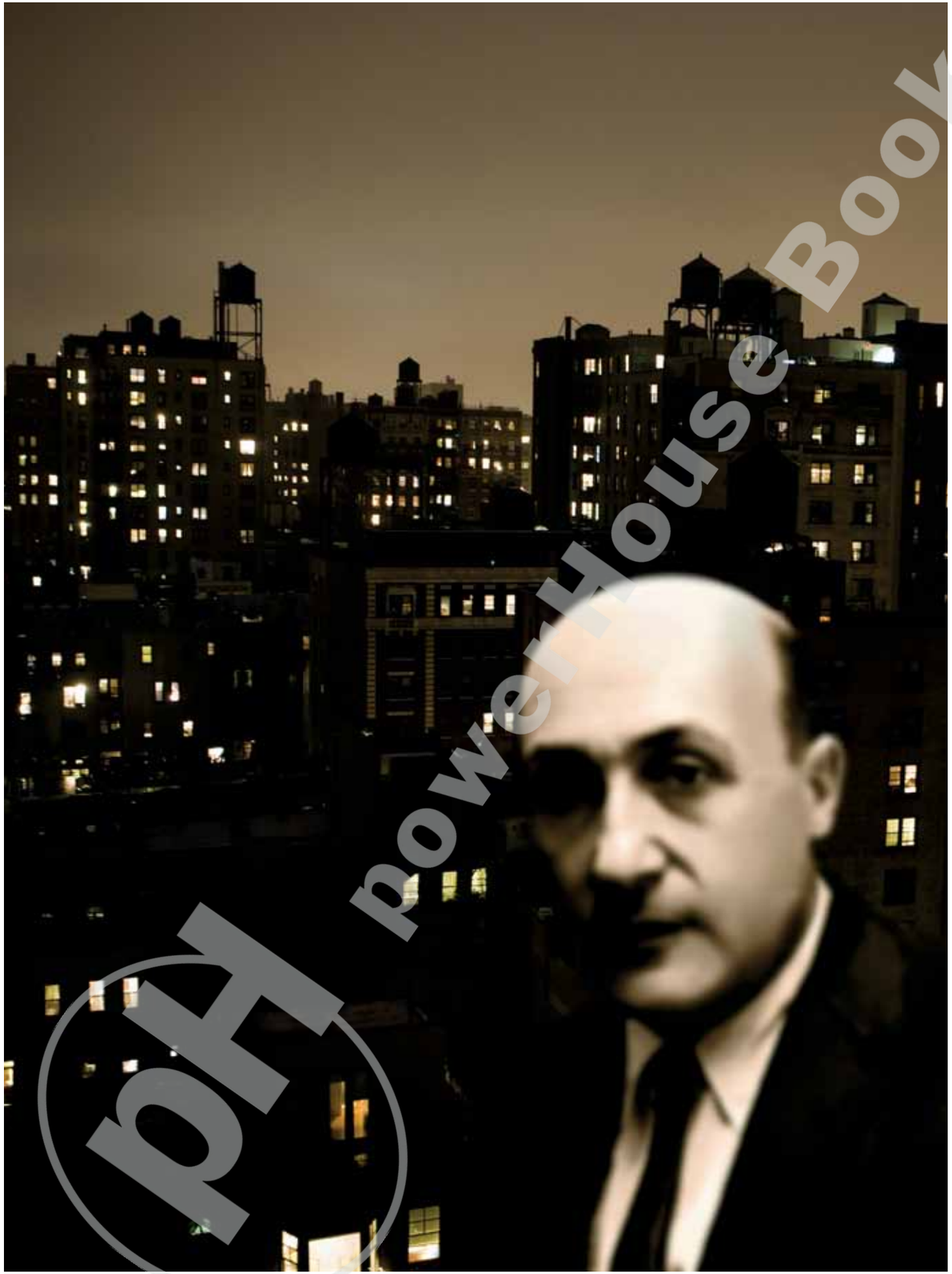
As Superman continued to succeed for National, Siegel became more and more frustrated in feeling they weren't receiving their fair cut of the profits. In 1947, they sued National for $5 million and ownership of Superman, a court case that ended in a $100,000 settlement if the pair agreed to cease pursuing all rights. National removed the pair's credit from all Superman items and blackballed them from the company.

Joe soon disappeared into obscurity, while Jerry had a short return to writing Superman in the '50s; but it was short-lived, as editor Mort Weisinger's tyrannical nature became unbearable, and he migrated to Archie Comics in 1964. A year later, he challenged National's copyright renewal on Superman. It was denied in court, but Siegel and Shuster weren't done with their apparently never-ending battle.



LEFT
The Jerry Siegel House in Cleveland, Ohio, where Siegel first conceived of Superman one sleepless night in his attic bedroom.

BELOW
Superman rescues Lois Lane—before it becomes too much of a habit. This art from *Action Comics* #5 (Oct. 1938) showcases Shuster's early, more detailed style. ©2012 DC Entertainment.



"I don't like to go back," **Will Eisner** once admitted. "I'm constantly in a forward momentum, looking to explore.

"I just don't have time to think about, or wish I could go back to do something I've done before." In 1936, Eisner (then going by Bill) bumped into his high school classmate Robert Kahn, a flamboyant cartoonist with aspirations of the trappings afforded the star comic strip cartoonists—assistants to do all of the work, money, and celebrity. (When he co-created Batman three years later, he was at least on his way to two of those.) Kahn referred Bill to a new comics magazine looking for contributors: *Wow, What a Magazine!*

Bill arrived at the *Wow* editor Jerry Iger's office—situated in a shirt factory—to find Iger on the phone with the printer experiencing a hang-up printing the new *Wow*. Bill tagged along to the printer's with Iger and quickly removed problematic burrs on the printing plates, salvaging the print job and earning himself a position as Iger's production man. Like many comics rags at the time, *Wow* didn't make it beyond a fourth issue, and both Eisner and Iger were without work. Eisner borrowed money from his father to start a new business with Iger, one that would cater to the burgeoning comic book industry.

"When *Wow* magazine died, two issues after I started with it, I formed a company called Eisner and Iger, and we would produce content for comic book publishers coming into the field," Will explained. "One of the things we did was daily strips for small newspapers, and so forth. What was happening at that time is that the pulp magazines were dying, and the publishers who were publishing them were looking around for other things to publish within that genre, and that was how we got them interested in comic books."

At first, it was just Will pushing a pencil and snapping a brush under countless *nom de plumes*, but eventually, they gained a small staff that included two future comics superstars: Eisner's old friend Kahn (now signing as the less Jewish sounding Bob Kane), and a tough young scrapper named Jacob Kurtzberg, a few years shy of changing his name to Jack Kirby. They packaged material for any publisher who'd pay, creating new characters of all flavors.

In 1939, Quality Comics publisher "Busy" Arnold and the Des Moines Register and Tribune Syndicate approached Will about creating a comics insert for Sunday newspapers. Selling out his half of Eisner and Iger, Eisner saw a chance to break out of the expectations of the juvenile world of the comic book by taking the format into the Sunday newspapers. Eisner wanted to go beyond the costumed "mystery man"

LEFT
Original Will Eisner photo
© Will Eisner Studios, Inc.
Photo illustration by
Seth Kushner

newly rampant in the young medium of comic books, so much that he found an interesting compromise to his publisher's demand for one: He would garb his pulp-like crime fighter, Denny Colt, in a mask and gloves and call him the Spirit.

"I'm sorry I did the mask," Eisner admitted. "It got in my way over the years, it didn't help the story, and interfered with what I considered the reality. When you draw a character walking down the subway wearing a mask and a blue suit, and being ignored or accepted by the people in the subway seemed a little far-fetched."

The Spirit quickly evolved from being the central protagonist of action-driven stories, to eventually becoming the catalyst in *other* characters' stories, sometimes walking on for a mere panel or two, yet still affecting the lives of antagonist and protagonist alike. He went from a formulaic mystery man to a unique, driving narrative force.

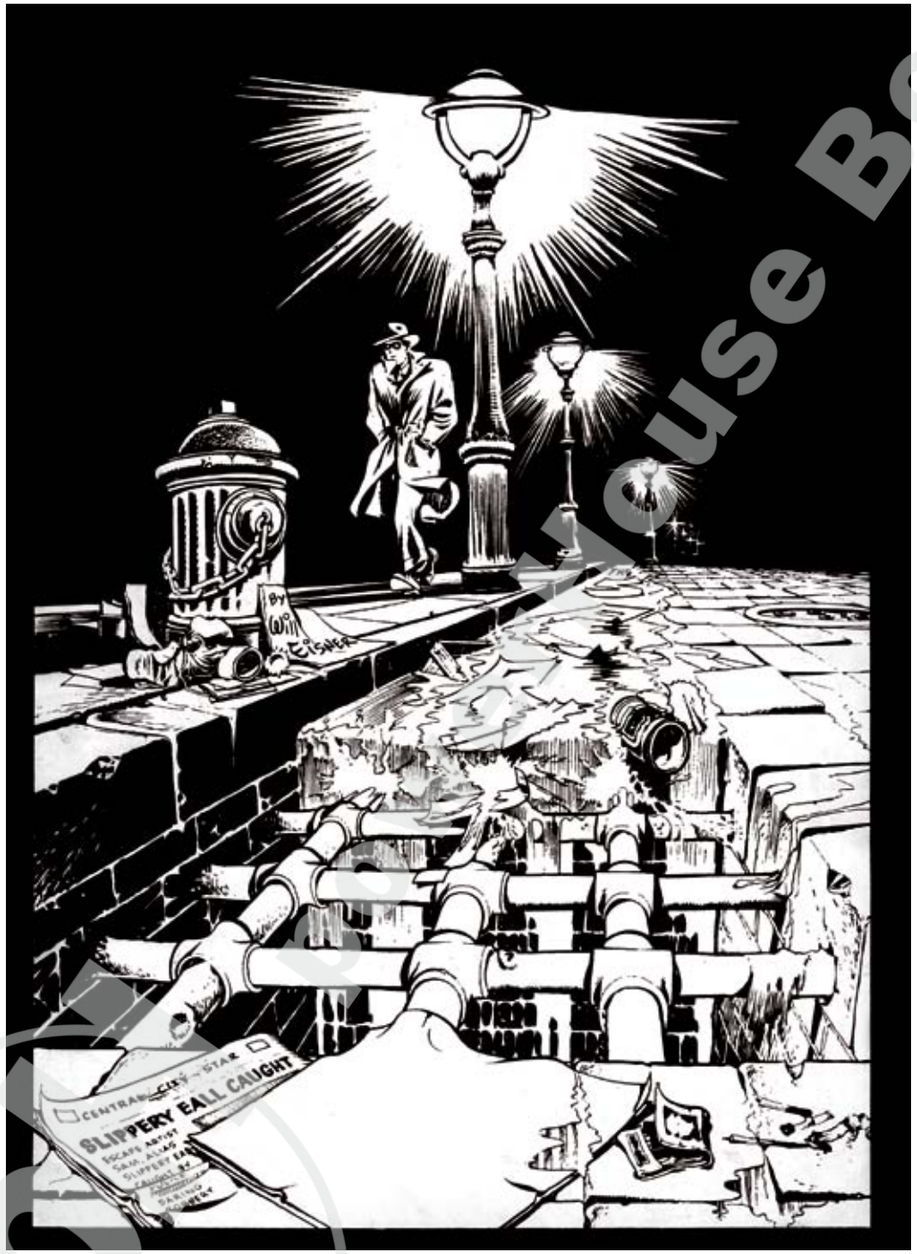
Even the surroundings went beyond set pieces and became characters unto themselves: logos became immersed in architecture or pieces of paper blowing in the wind, rain fell in thick sheets, buildings swayed like living things, and shadows wrapped around and dramatically embraced their darkness around everything. The opening splash page that opened each story was a cross between a movie poster and a first narrative panel; the Spirit logo was worked into the cityscape's buildings, or the front page of a newspaper, becoming as much a part of the environment as the story itself.

The regrettable mask became grafted onto the Spirit's face, conforming to the ridges of his brow; whether he was surprised, shocked, or angry, it became his trademark. Eisner and his crew embraced the absurdity of the Spirit and his world and, in doing so, were able to give the contrasting drama a greater punch.

"I was merely trying to develop or expand the human realistic quality of *The Spirit* for the most part," Eisner pointed out. "I was dealing in realism. The Spirit himself, as a superhero character was not terribly important to me. Many people don't understand that the Spirit character was a peg on which to hang the whole thing."

The Spirit continued his fight on crime until 1952, when Eisner left the then-flailing comic book industry proper to pursue packaging educational comic book material, as well as editing *PS Magazine* for the Army.

Maybe it's best that Will Eisner did leave when he did: the market was becoming too restrictive for the experimentation that was his trademark. But, when those restrictions were blown to Hell, Eisner would come back.



LEFT AND FAR LEFT
The Spirit's world and story seeped into the title splash page, as these examples from the '40s show. THE SPIRIT trademark is owned by Will Eisner Studios, Inc. and is registered ® in the U. S. Patent and Trademark Office. © 2012 Will Eisner Studios, Inc.

JOE SIMON
NYC, 2009

"I was the sacrificial lamb," **Joe Simon** says of his first job, at fly-by-night publisher Fox Comics in 1940. "I came in, and we had no staff and I had to do all the covers. I didn't have a letterer, I didn't have a writer, I didn't have an artist. I knew nothing about comics.

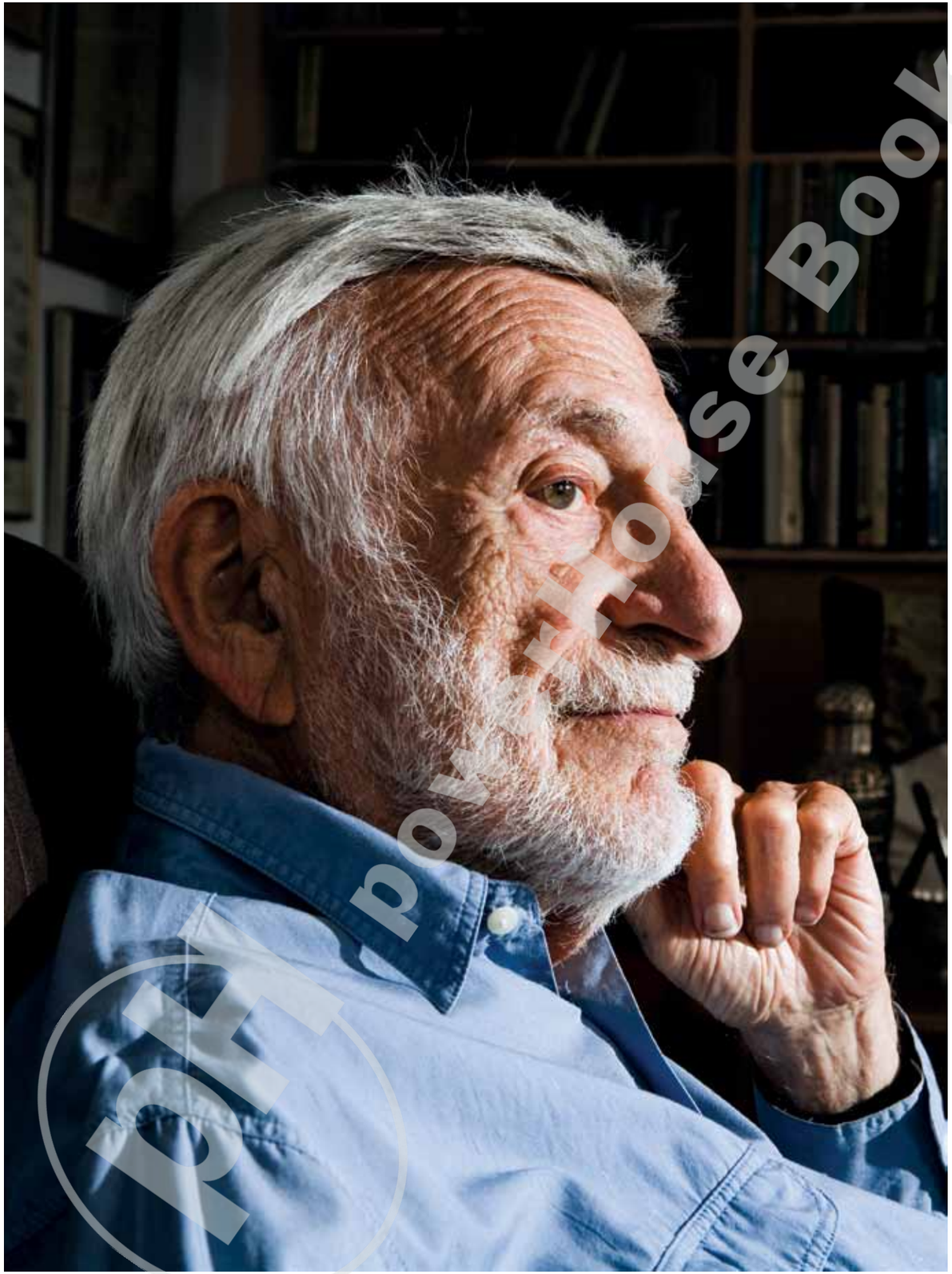
"Hardly anybody did those days, anyhow, except the guys that came out of newspapers or feature syndicates." It didn't take long for the enterprising Joe to start moonlighting for other companies. After a short while, he brought in a partner in Jacob Kurtzberg, who was pushing a pencil as one of Fox's staff. After a bevy of other pseudonyms, Kurtzberg settled on a new moniker—Jack Kirby—and the Simon and Kirby team was officially born.

They were an unlikely pair: Joe was tall and lanky, while Jack was short and barrel-chested; Joe a talker, while Jack was quiet. Where Joe was raised in Rochester, Jack grew up in the tough streets of the Lower East Side (as illustrated by Jack in his 1983 autobio comic: *Street Code*). Their personalities complimented one another, a balancing act of Simon's business savvy with Kirby's intensity.

The Simon and Kirby style developed into their trademark melee of action on the page: punches were thrown with arms wide and feet four feet apart, characters broke the dimensional wall of panel borders with a leg or an arm breaching into another panel, and panels weren't relegated to mere boxes, but sometimes circles and odd shapes of the artists' own invention.

Despite who did what, the duo worked together in a seamless and synergistic manner, to the point where it's often tough to pick apart who contributed what. The build-up of their moonlighting work burst out in a red, white, and blue explosion on the cover of Timely Comics' *Captain America Comics* #1, dated March, 1941 but out the December before. Slugging Hitler, the flag-emblazoned super patriot was the first superhero to premiere in his own title (as opposed to in the pages of an anthology), and the first to openly battle the Nazis in comics.

RIGHT
Note the diagonal left-to-right flow of this early *Captain America Comics* splash, starting with Cap at bat, and ending with the yellow-weighted villainous pitcher. From #7 (Oct. 1941) © 2012 Marvel Entertainment.



"When I was 17, I was selling ice cream to have money for my first semester [of college]," Jerry Robinson says.

"I had a cart full of ice cream that I had to haul, that summer of '39, to my territory in the suburbs. I had to pedal the whole time, and by the end of the summer my mother thought I wouldn't last: I was down to 78 pounds. She persuaded me to take $25 from my hard-earned royalties from selling popsicles, to go to the mountains to fatten up so I could survive the first semester of college…

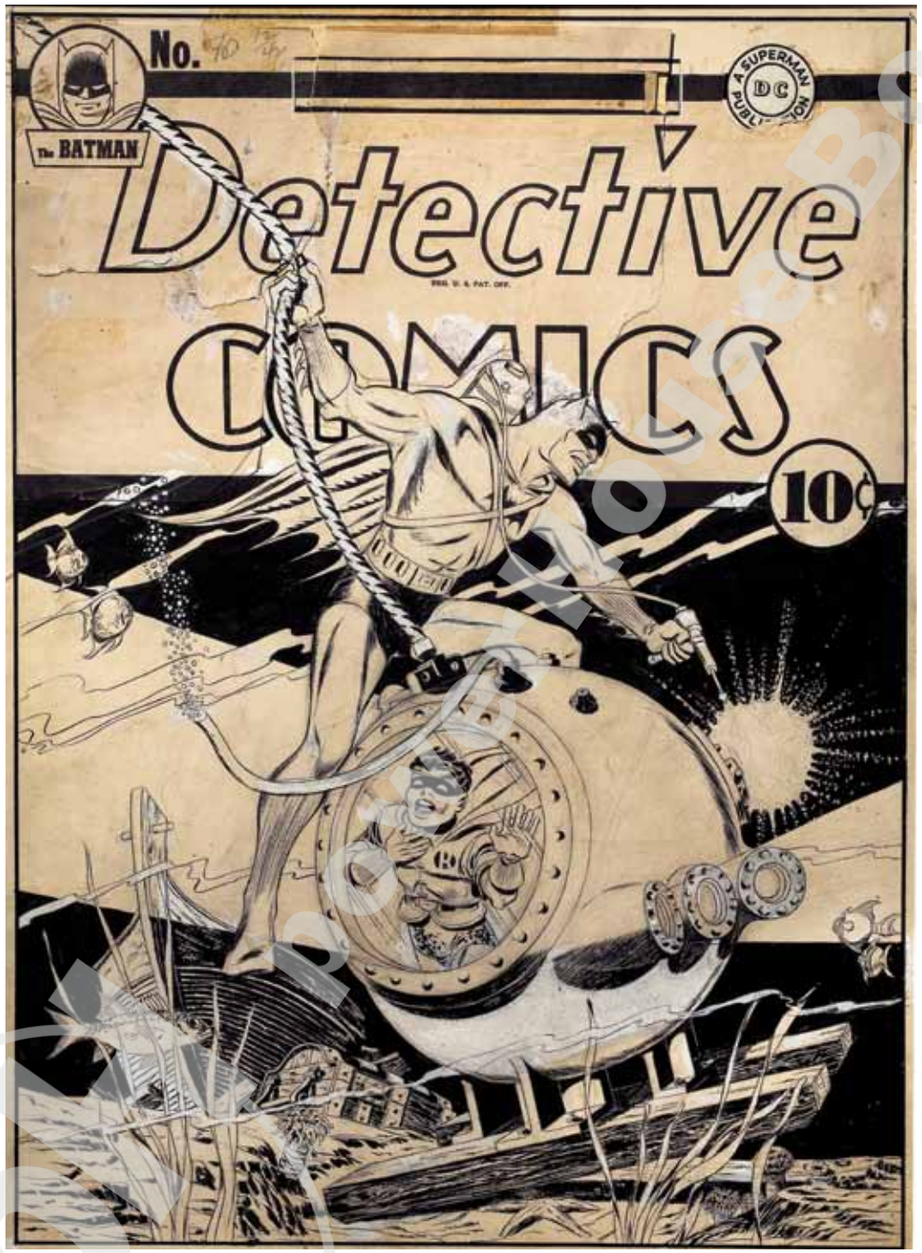
"The fad was to decorate a painter's jacket with drawings. It was made of white linen, and I used it as a warm-up jacket for tennis. I was at the courts and I felt a tap on my shoulder and [someone] asked if I did the drawing. The voice said, 'Those are pretty good.' It was Bob Kane.

"I had applied to Columbia, Syracuse, and Penn and was accepted at all three; I couldn't decide on where to go, and finally decided on Syracuse, which was more of a college town. Kane said, 'Oh, it's too bad, because if you'd come to New York, you could work on this comic book with me.' I'd never read comic books."

Following the success of Siegel and Shuster's *Superman*, artist Bob Kane took National Comics' editor Vin Sullivan's challenge to create a new superhero over the weekend. Kane's first version of his crime fighter Bird-Man soon changed to Bat-Man; he wore a red bodysuit, domino mask, and had stiff bird wings coming off his back. When he recruited writer-collaborator Bill Finger, Finger recommended a distinctive bat-eared cowl and a change from stiff wings to a long cape. The resulting black and gray-clad figure, The Bat-Man, swung over a city at night, with a thug captured in an awkward headlock as two other thugs on a rooftop look on in awe. The impressive image was swiped by Kane from an Alex Raymond *Flash Gordon* strip, but Sullivan either didn't care or know, and the image graced the cover of May, 1939's *Detective Comics* #27. Even though Finger arguably contributed as much as Kane, Kane received sole credit as the creator of Batman.

Still holding onto dreams of becoming a journalist, Robinson started working for Kane as a job meant to just put him through school at Columbia University, where he finally attended. Robinson's touch is first seen and felt in *Batman* in the third story, as Kane's crude pencils gained the added dimension of Robinson's heavy shadows. Finger and Kane

LEFT
Jerry Robinson, NYC, 2009



may have defined *Batman*, but Robinson helped to cement *Batman* as living in a world of long and sinister silhouettes. For Robinson, it was a time to absorb and filter out new influences, all introduced through *Batman* scribe and friend Bill Finger.

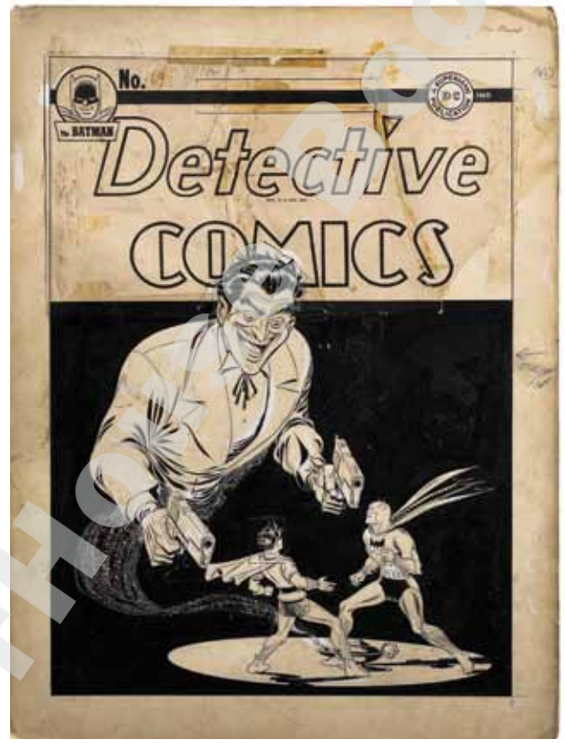
"Bob may have been a fine talent," Robinson laughs. "But Bill became my friend, and my culture mentor. I was a really young kid, 17, just out of high school and in New York for the first time. I just really knew how to get from the Bronx to Columbia and back. He took me, for the first time, to the Met, to MoMA, to foreign films, to the Village. That was exciting. I was a sponge that soaked everything up."

Robinson's two major contributions to *Batman*? The sidekick Robin the Boy Wonder, who soon inspired a legion of kid sidekicks, and the dark clown the Joker. Robinson's early Joker lacked a sense of humor. Clad in dark purple with black bags under his somber eyes, the Joker was an ironically-named character, more somber than Batman despite the bright clown makeup on his face. His look was lifted from the 1928 silent film *The Man Who Laughs*, starring Conrad Veidt, while Robin's costume is identical to one worn by Flash Gordon's girlfriend Dale Arden in a 1937 story line (ironically the same one that Kane swiped his first *Batman* cover image from).

Robinson remained with Kane for a brief time, soon jumping over to work directly for National, and also partnering up with friend Mort Meskin on several other comic book accounts.

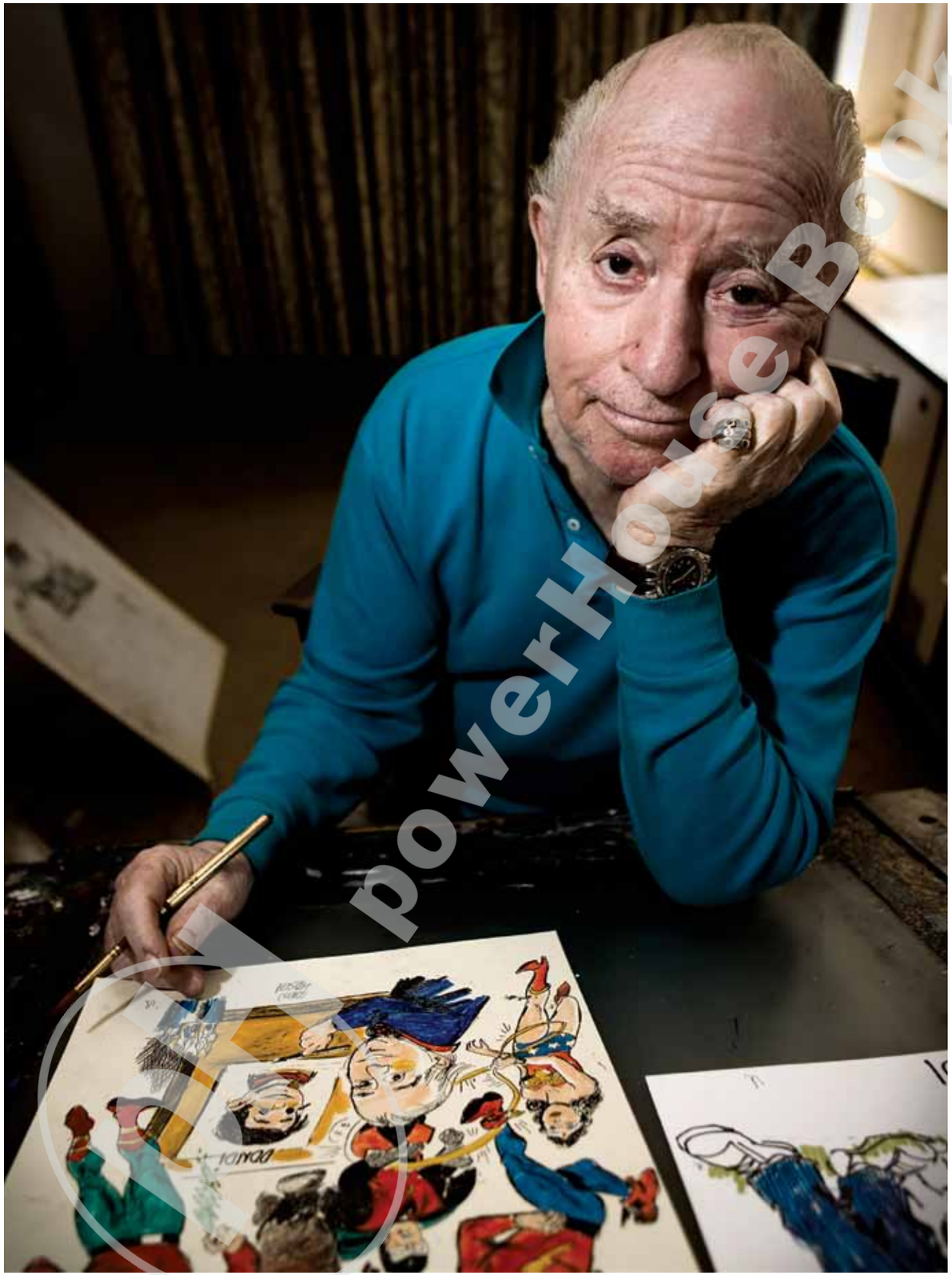
Jerry Robinson eventually left comics and found success as a newspaper cartoonist, through his science fiction strip *Jet Powers* from 1953–55, in *The New York Daily News*, with his strip *True Classroom Flubs and Fluff* from the 1960s–80s, and even became president of the New York Cartoonists Society in 1967.

Robinson came back to the comic book industry in the '70s, when two old friends needed him the most. His actions would further cement the legacy he left behind after his death on December 7, 2011.



LEFT
Robinson's scene of Robin the Boy Wonder trapped in a bathysphere evokes a mood of claustrophobia. From *Detective Comics* #70 (Dec. 1942) © 2012 DC Entertainment.

ABOVE
Robinson's Joker wouldn't have a "bang" flag come out of the barrel, but hot lead. From *Detective Comics* #69 (Nov. 1942) © 2012 DC Entertainment.



"In those days, there were no stars," **Irwin Hasen** says. "There were just plain guys working out of the Depression, trying to make a living as cartoonists. We never thought of making star-quality characters, we just did our work.

"The syndicated newspaper strip was secretly the dream of the young cartoonists; they wanted to get the hell out of comic books. They worked hard in comics, but I was always on the cusp of wanting to have my own comic strip. It happened."

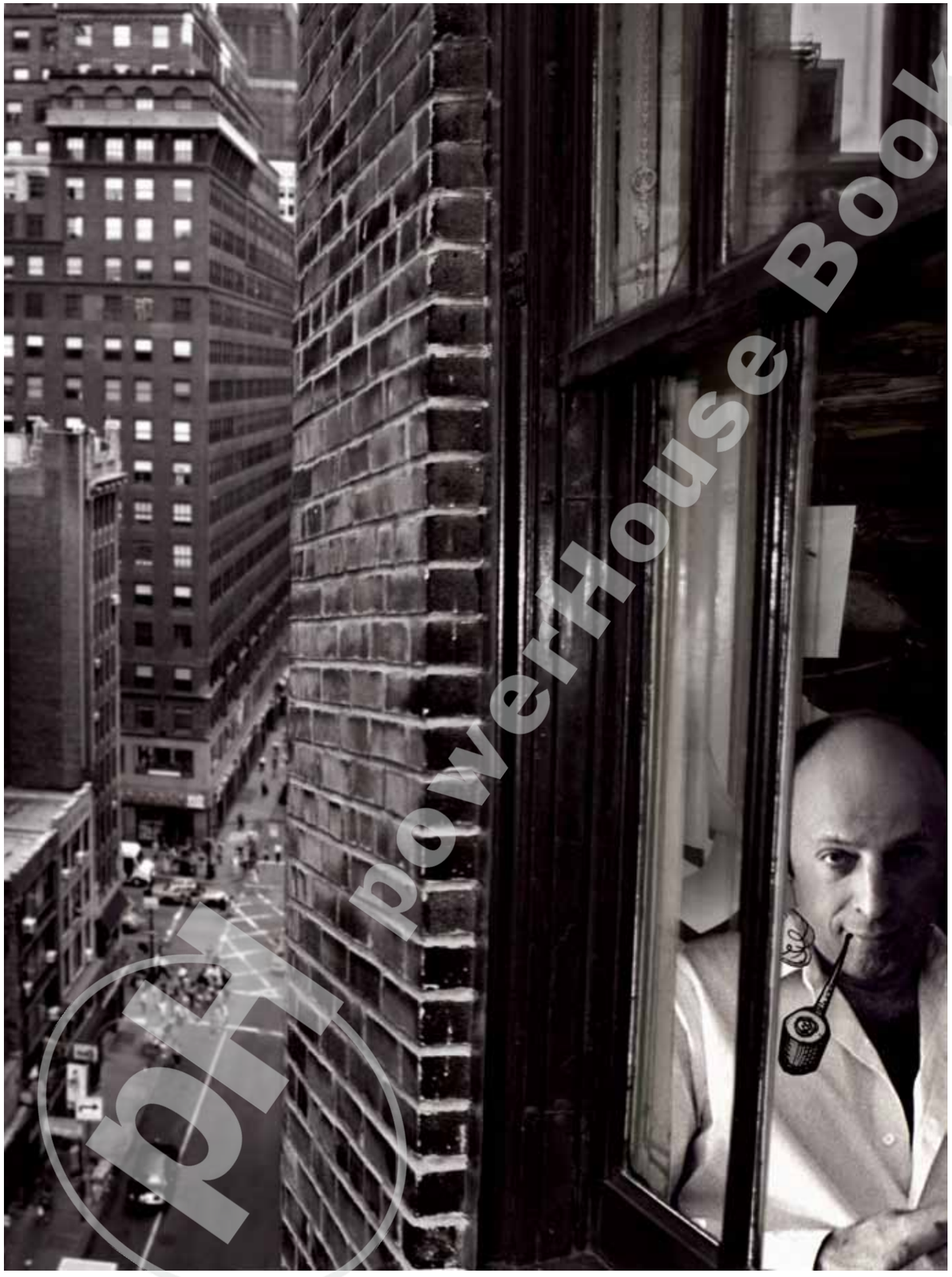
Hasen's earliest work, in its crudest form, included the first appearance of obscure character Catman: a superhero donning a leopard-print toga, mask, and paw-like gloves. Irwin was later the second artist to draw *Green Lantern* for publisher All-American Comics, and also co-created boxing superhero Wildcat in *Sensation Comics* with writer Bill Finger in 1942.

Finger, devoid of a byline on *Batman* was given one on both *Green Lantern* (with original artist Martin Nodell) and *Wildcat* with Hasen. Finger embodied the sensitive and tortured creative type who lacked the ability to handle himself in the cutthroat industry of 1940s comics. While both characters enjoyed the normal shelf-life of a 1940s superhero, neither came close to attaining the popularity of his most beloved creation, Batman.

"Bill was a very delicate guy, and I don't use that word in a pejorative sense," Irwin notes. "He was a very good-looking, handsome, little guy…a short man. I'm 5'2" and he was maybe 5'4". He was a very elegant dressed man, erudite and tragic. I use that word in a very sad sense, because Bill was always behind on his work, he was always behind the eight ball, and always late on his deadlines, always in debt, but the sweetest, gentlest guy you'd want to meet, and such a creative guy.

"He was always late and always needed money," Irwin notes. "It was his bane his whole life. He died broke, of course. That's the only story I can tell you about

LEFT
Irwin Hasen, NYC, 2008



Harvey Kurtzman was a nut, a self-described madman of a cartoonist, a control freak, a humorist with a satirical overbite, and an enemy of the establishment's cozy post-World War II Americana.

His work looked deceptively spontaneous but was laid down with the precision of a craftsman. From his anti-war war comics to his satire, Kurtzman fooled us all into crying or laughing when we least expected to.

Kurtzman's EC Comics titles *Two-Fisted Tales* in 1950, and war comic *Frontline Combat* the following year, were injected with a visceral realism that sometimes ended in tragedy for the protagonists. *Two-Fisted* offered a more psychological take on mens' adventure stories. *Frontline Combat* took a psychological and tragic look at war, eschewing the glorification displayed in other war comics. They were a stark contrast to the publisher's more gratuitous horror books like *Tales from the Crypt.*

Kurtzman later approached EC Publisher William Gaines with a new title that would require less energy to produce than the research-intensive war stories. Branded as "Humor in a Jugular Vein," Kurtzman's new comic book *MAD* would feature parodies, pastiches, and flat-out humor stories. Using the same stable of artists as the war books—Wally Wood, Johnny Craig, childhood pal Will Elder, and John Severin—*MAD* parodied everything from other comic books to pop culture, and redefined satire for a new generation.

In May 1954, comics were in trouble, thanks to television-ready crusading Senator Estes Kefauver. Teaming up with psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent*—a "medical study" on the supposed cause-and-effect of comic books to juvenile delinquency—Kefauver held televised Senate hearings aimed at censoring the comic book industry.

Gaines was the only publisher to appear on the stand, hoping his presence would either galvanize the industry, or take the wind out of Kefauver's sails. Neither happened—hopped up on Benzedrine, Gaines was confronted by Wertham on national television. Kefauver now had something for the media to latch on to with interest, and it became a

LEFT
Original Harvey Kurtzman photo: © 2012 Hewetson & © 2012 Harvey Kurtzman Estate. Photo illustration by Seth Kushner.

FOLLOWING PAGE, TOP
Kurtzman's *Hey, Look!* one-page comics for Stan Lee at Timely are bite-sized pieces of cartoon brilliance. © 2012 Harvey Kurtzman Estate.

FOLLOWING PAGE, BOTTOM
Appearing prior to *Mad,* Kurtzman created the cowboy spoof *Pot-Shot Pete* in 1950. © 2012 Harvey Kurtzman Estate.

media circus that painted comic books as an evil corrupting post-War America's children, with Gaines the "worst" of the publishers.

Several publishers joined up and created a new Comics Code Authority, a self-censoring board with a set of guidelines to maintain "decency" in comics. The Code practically neutered EC Comics by banning any and all violence or luridness in comic books.

Meanwhile, *MAD* continued to sell as well as a comic book (in sales of near 750,000), despite the killing of the crime and horror lines. Kurtzman had always dreamt of producing a magazine and he got his wish when *MAD* went from full-color comic to black and white magazine with 1955's issue #24. Harvey's run on the new *MAD* only lasted five issues, after Gaines refused to give him more control in the only profitable publication EC had left.

Playboy publisher Hugh Hefner came to the rescue with an apparently unlimited budget and offered a new magazine to Kurtzman. Titled *Trump* by Hugh, Kurtzman's new magazine was produced by himself and a small army of *MAD* alums—Jack Davis, Al Jaffee, Wally Wood, Will Elder, Russ Heath—and new recruits Irving Geis and Arnold Roth. Produced in slick color, *Trump* hit newsstands in '57, but was quickly killed at the second issue due to the collapse of *Playboy*'s newsstand distributor, a high budget, and *Playboy*'s move from New York City to Chicago.

Kurtzman, Roth, Jaffee, Davis, and Elder then joined forces on an independent creative venture—a new magazine where each would take a financial stake, with Davis opting in creatively but not financially. Hefner, as a gesture of good will over the loss of *Trump*, gave the *Humbug* staff rent-free use of new offices.

Humbug was Kurtzman and his gang finally having 100% creative freedom, a trade-off for being buried in debt. *Humbug* only lasted eleven issues.

• • •

Reduced to living on unemployment, Harvey's post-*Humbug* days were spent scurrying for freelance work to pay the bills

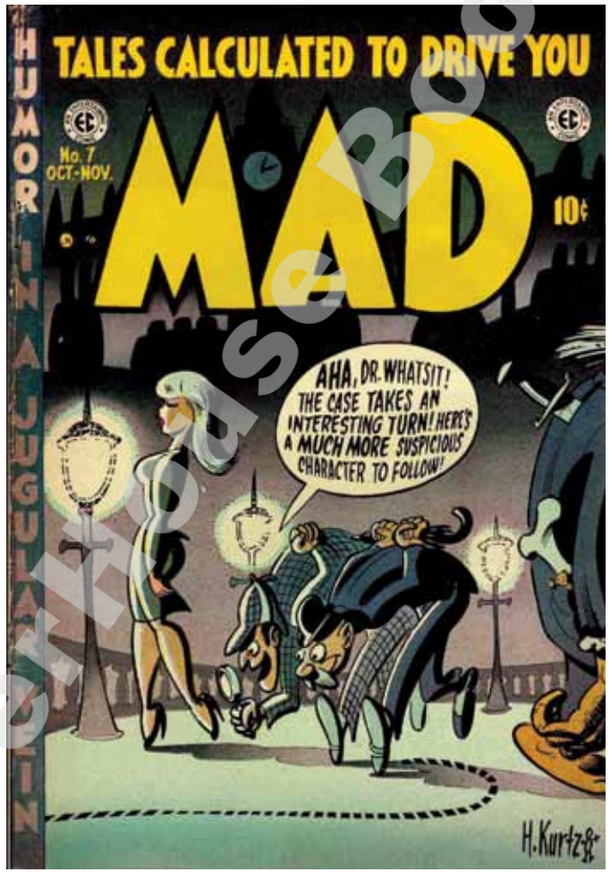
and support his family. Harvey created a paperback of original comic stories, *The Jungle Book,* which was a critical accomplishment and early progenitor of the graphic novel format but not commercially successful.

If Kurtzman's *MAD* sparked the Underground Comix movement of the mid to late '60s, his next magazine *Help!* was not only further encouragement for the likes of young *MAD*-inspired cartoonists Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton, but an aggregator for that new generation.

Two years into *Help!*'s run, Hefner came back into the picture, offering Kurtzman a new strip for *Playboy*. *Little Annie Fanny* took the Kurtzman satire and placed a shapely blonde dead in the center. By the time *Help!* wrapped with 1965's #26, Kurtzman was ready to pursue the cheesecake cartoon more freely.

The confounding thing about *Annie* is that, technically it was Kurtzman's greatest (and longest-running) achievement. Paired back up with lifelong friend Elder, *Little Annie Fanny* was painstakingly written, laid-out, designed, and painted at a rate of fifteen pages a year and a staggering $3,000 a page. Each page alone involved several stages of development, as well as several layers of paint (including watercolor and tempera, as applied by Elder). Both Hefner and Kurtzman were incredible perfectionists, and the strips were in a constant state of revision.

Annie ran until 1988, as Elder's sight began to fail him and Kurtzman began to succumb to Parkinson's disease. He passed away on February 21, 1993, having not only changed the course of pop culture, but also inspired comic books to go beyond juvenilia and become something greater.



ABOVE
MAD #7 (Oct.–Nov. 1953) features Kurtzman's parody of Sherlock Holmes (aka Shermlock Shomes). Like many Kurtzman heroes, they're oblivious to the world around them. © 2012 DC Entertainment.

STAN LEE
NYC, 2007

"I was ready to be a media star when I was twelve years old," **Stan Lee** says with his usual gusto. "It just took all this time for the world to discover me."

Stan Lee is more than just a comic book visionary. The first self-made man of the comic book industry, whose chutzpah sometimes eclipses his earlier struggles in the unforgiving comics world of the 1950s, Stanley Lieber started working as an office boy at Timely Comics at age eighteen and fresh out of high school.

"There really was no one to teach me," Stan says of the early days. "I had to pick up everything by myself…There really wasn't too much to learn, because none of the books were too good in those days," he admits.

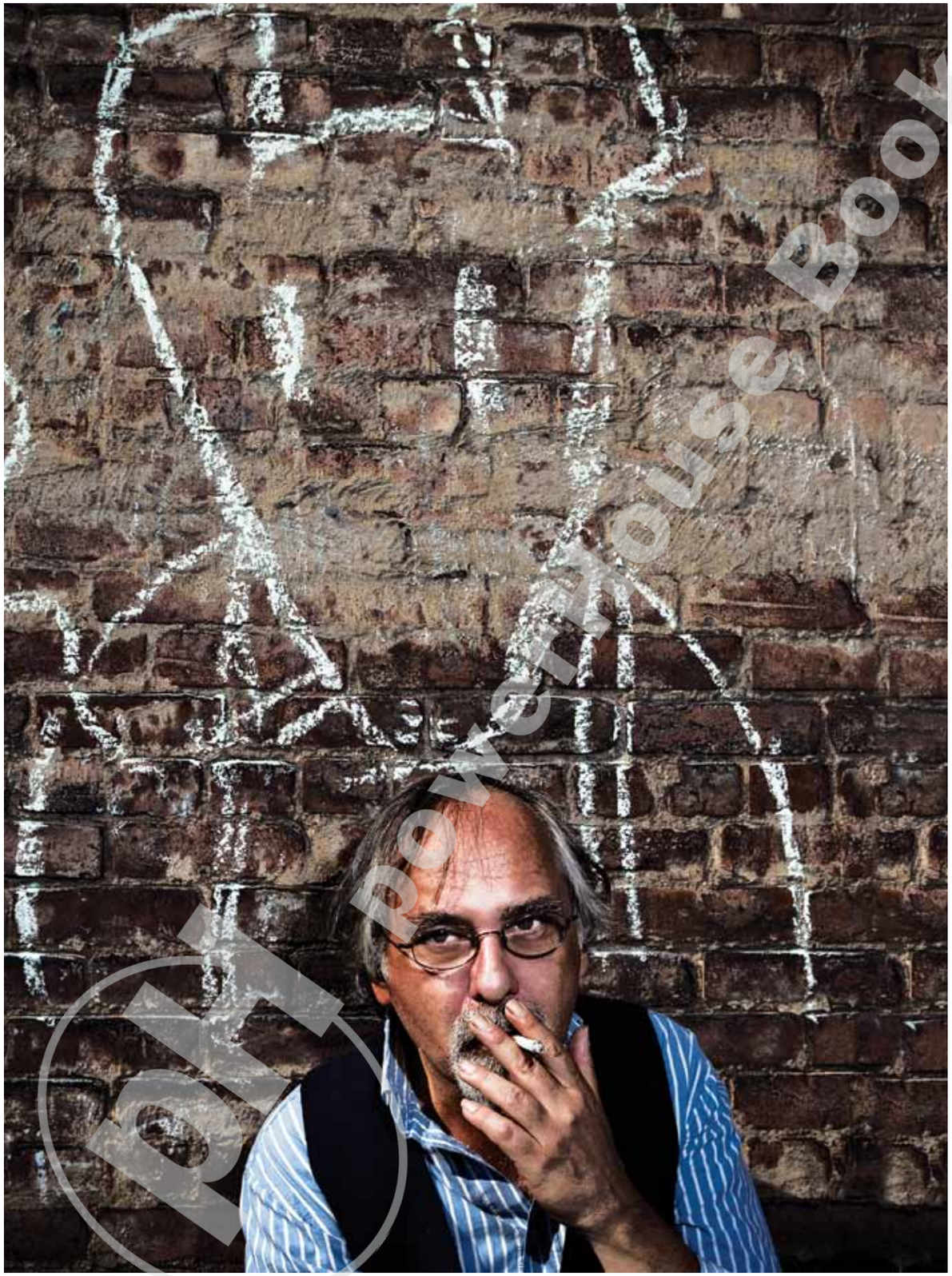
Even though he was "Stan Lee" as far back as the '40s, he was yet to grow into Stan "The Man" Lee, the spokesperson for comics. That changed when publisher Martin Goodman, inspired by National's success with super-team *Justice League of America*, prompted Stan to create their own superhero team. It was 1961, and it was time for Stan to make lemons out of lemonade.

"The launch of the *Fantastic Four* was when I finally did a book the way I wanted to," Stan reveals. "Up until then, Martin was totally convinced that comic books were read by very young children or semi-literate adults…It was a job, and I wanted to keep my job, so I did what he said. But it was with the *Fantastic Four* that I decided to do books the way I thought they ought to be done."

Jack Kirby, twenty years after falling out with Goodman over *Captain America*, was back with Marvel. When Lee collaborated with him on FF, the duo produced the first superhero team as rife with infighting as with combatting monsters and villains. Exactly a year later, Stan and artist Steve Ditko plugged a teenage superhero into the cover and pages of a dying anthology title called *Amazing Fantasy*'s last issue.

Spider-Man was a success, marrying Lee's conversational narration with Ditko's spooky artwork. Where most superhero strips were colorful, Spider-Man managed to be both colorful yet wrapped in inky blacks; even the theme of the story—"with great power comes great responsibility"—is driven in with the murder of Spider-Man's

RIGHT
Lee and Steve Ditko's *Amazing Spider-Man* is comics' first coming-of-age superhero tale. From #19 (Dec. 1964). © 2012 Marvel Entertainment.



"One thing that's irritating is that I never thought of what I was making as a 'graphic novel;' It wasn't a phrase in my head," **Art Spiegelman** says about his Pulitzer-Prize-winning comic book *Maus*.

"I was aware of what Will Eisner had done with *A Contract with God*, or even Harvey Kurtzman's *Jungle Book* (which was something I loved). I was trying to make something different, a structured long work with a beginning, middle, and end—not a collection of short stories. It was an outlined work and (to that degree) novelistic. I wanted it to have the density to withstand, even demand, rereading… I was making a long comic book but I knew I didn't want it to *look* like a comic book. So, I guess it meets the parameters of what is now called a graphic novel."

The story of his parents' survival in the concentration camps of the Second World War, *Maus* is Spiegelman's heartfelt and honest chronicle of a Holocaust survivor—and what it means to be the child of one. One of *Maus*' greatest strengths isn't just in his parents' story, but in the story of Art's dysfunctional relationship with his neurotic father, giving the reader a framing sequence that provokes a personal investment in Art's own plight living with a Holocaust survivor. The irony of *Maus*' success is that it has burned Spiegelman out on his deeply personal story. After being the subject of numerous articles and academic treatises, he feels the work has been completely "talked out."

Art grew up in Queens, New York, around the homogenized post-Comics Code comics, the sugary sweet and bland era of National Comics and Dell Comics, where the stories were "harmless" and vanilla. An encounter with *MAD Magazine* at age seven, and a subsequent introduction to old EC crime and horror books, energized him. On top of that, the young Art was researching old comic strips at the local library on his own.

It was into the experimental world of the underground comix that Art Spiegelman dropped out of art school and launched himself years later. His most intense early work, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," recalls his mother Anja's suicide in 1968. Arguably his most significant early autobiographical piece, "Hell Planet" was far from being his last.

LEFT
Art Spiegelman, NYC, 2008

CHRIS CLAREMONT
Brooklyn, NY, 2011

"You may have noticed (as a parenthetical aside)," Chris Claremont says in the middle of a thought, "I talk as I write, which is by the word."

Claremont is synonymous with his blockbuster comic book work as writer of the *X-Men* for near two decades. But Claremont's influential career didn't start with *X-Men*: it started with asking *MAD Magazine* mastermind (and family friend) Al Jaffee about an internship.

"He said, 'I'm friends with Stan Lee. Would you be willing to work for Marvel?' And I said, 'Hell, yes.'"

The Marvel books were creatively in their heyday in 1968, but still a small company with a small staff of about 20 people. Claremont joined Marvel as the second generation was coming into play.

After college, Chris returned to Marvel as Assistant Editor of the black-and-white magazines during a hectic time, as Marvel held onto the same editorial structure that had worked for Stan years earlier, but with several more titles each month.

In 1975, writer Len Wein and artist Dave Cockrum introduced the "All New, All Different" X-Men in *Giant-Size X-Men* #1. Claremont followed the departing Wein and ventured into one of the most influential runs had by any writer on a comic book. The book became a runaway success, as the team took the mutants into new territory, with the stories' heavy focus on characterization.

"When you commit to your project and your characters, they're the center of your creative focus and universe," Chris notes. "Your vision is the right one and you don't want anyone mucking about with it."

And this is where it becomes apparently clear: Chris Claremont is *still* the X-Men's biggest fan, often going into asides and talking about the mutant superheroes as if they were real people. For someone who defined them, directed their lives with rotating artists, and lived with them for close to two decades—they are real.

. . .

"I'd been doing the book for seventeen years, and had made it the most successful comic in modern comics history," Chris says of *Uncanny X-Men*. "We were scoring numbers that were very breathtaking. I figured that I had earned a level of stature and respect, and I was wrong."

As 1991 approached, Claremont had been masterminding *X-Men* for a record run, and the book consistently sold in high numbers as Marvel touted *X-Men* superstar artist Jim Lee.

Despite Claremont's keeping *X-Men* a long-running success for Marvel, and despite the first story line of the new *X-Men* book setting the Guinness World Record for highest single-issue comic book sales to this day (clocking in at 8.1 million copies), Claremont left the X-Men behind.

"Jim and I did our story with #1, and it blew the lid off of things and created a world record," Claremont notes. "I walked because what was happening was [editor] Bob Harras and Jim were the point men on getting the book back to basics. They wanted Magneto back as a villain. I think Jim wanted a chance to draw the stuff he'd bonded with as a kid, and I was saying, 'Been there, done that, at least three times. Let's do something new.'"

Claremont ultimately came back to Marvel and X-Men, serving as an editorial resource and writing offshoot titles like *X-Treme X-Men* and *X-Men Forever*.

But no matter what else he does, or how many other writers take on the main X-Men titles, Claremont is still as synonymous with the X-Men as the term "mutant."

RIGHT
Chris Claremont and John Byrne's "Dark Phoenix Saga" elevated the superhero book. Inks by Terry Austin, from *Uncanny X-Men* #132 (top) and #135 (bottom). © 2012 Marvel Entertainment.

"I don't call myself an artist: that's an appellation, and not a job title. [I consider myself] a drawer," **Larry Hama** laughs.

"It's like people who call themselves poets who are possibly a little presumptuous. 'Writer' is so innocuous a term that I don't really think of myself as a writer. I'm still the guy who draws the stuff, but I just draw it in my head now and describe the pictures with words."

Shortly after working as an assistant to EC Comics legend Wally Wood, Larry moved to Neal Adams' famous Continuity Associates.

"[One of the] most important things ever told to me about the comics process was from Neal Adams. He was looking at something I was drawing…He'd just stand behind you and look at what you do, and then suck crumbs out from between his teeth. One day he said, 'You're settling for that.'

"I said, 'What do you mean?'

"'You're drawing something you've drawn a hundred times, because you know that you can do it. For this particular thing that you're trying to draw, you can probably see this thing in your head that's probably a thousand times better and more dynamic, more dramatic, or more whatever. But there's something inside of you saying, 'I don't think I can get away with that,' or, 'If I do it, it's going to suck.' So you settle, and every time you settle, you push your dial back one notch. Each time you try to do that thing that's the next thing you've never done, it might suck, but then it might not, or at least you'll know not to do it that way. If you're not always pushing it that way, then all you're doing is just tracing stencils.'

"[*G.I. Joe*] was despised. It sold really well, and the company loved it," Larry points out with a laugh. "Marvel loved it, Hasbro loved it, and it made lots of bucks for everybody. Everybody was happy with the checks and numbers for a long time. But critically? It was considered garbage, because it was toy book prejudice. There was that weird pretentious elitism that says, 'If it sells a lot, it can't be any good.'

"At the same time, I was making inroads at creating this underground fan base that would outnumber those people."

LEFT
Larry Hama, NYC, 2010

When toy company Hasbro brought their soldier doll back as a series of *Star Wars*-sized action figures in 1982, they approached Marvel Comics to develop the characters and story lines. Jim Shooter approached Larry, who had developed a spy pitch called *Fury Force*, to retool his pitch to fit the developing action figure line they'd just licensed. The result: an entire series of action figures developed by Larry and given life in a new comic book and animated series. Marvel did all of the character and creative development for this new line of action figures, and Hasbro offered cross advertising with Marvel.

With pencils by longtime Marvel Comics staff artist Herb Trimpe and inks by Bob McLeod, *G.I. Joe* #1 came out in June of 1982. The series was also advertised in animated TV commercials, a corresponding cartoon, and the release of the small line of action figures in toy stores the nation over. Thanks to the multimedia ad campaign, *G.I. Joe* got a lot of kids who wouldn't normally buy comics but loved the toys and cartoons to follow it each issue.

"After I plotted the first *Joe*, I remembered sitting there thinking, 'What the heck am I going to do now?'" Larry confesses. "It was one of those moments of panic, but I'd have those moments of panic every month. The whole thing is to push them over the cliff right at the beginning, and have a situation to get it rolling, and then follow that snowball down the hill. The action is secondary. The action and the plot are there as a framework to support the characters. The characters are the only thing to make people come back. This is primary, and something that publishers and editors don't seem to understand. They don't get it."

In an attempt to keep readers guessing, Larry kept himself guessing as well. Writing on the fly? Possibly, but it was a formula that grabbed the interest of new readers and kept them coming back. "I didn't know what was going to happen," Larry admits. "Knowing what the end was and then intricately plotting out towards that end never really worked for me. It doesn't work for me when I'm reading it in other people's stuff, either. If I get to page three and can figure out what's going to happen, it doesn't work for me."

Hama also, due to a deadline issue, wrote and drew a "silent" issue; the wordless (save for sound effects) story not only became recurring in *Joe*, but also promoted a cinematic, image-based form of storytelling.

Despite *G.I. Joe*'s longevity and success, though, it was still considered a substandard comic:

"You had to understand that, the entire time I did *G.I. Joe*, I never got a single review or write-up," Larry points out. "None exists, because it was considered below serious critical radar, because it was a toy book. I was never a fan favorite, and I wasn't taken seriously as any kind of creator. It gave me a lot of freedom. I never got invited to a convention, and never even made it to B status. Toy books are C status."

Joe ran for over a decade, with Larry writing most every issue. It was a phenomenon that began in 1982 and died a gradual death well into the next decade.

Throughout his run on *G.I. Joe*, Hama also wrote *Wolverine* and the short-lived *Nth Man*. Perhaps his greatest contribution as an editor is the critically-acclaimed series *The 'Nam*, initially drawn by Michael Golden and written by fellow Vietnam vet Doug Murray. *The 'Nam* showed the Vietnam War through the eyes of the average American soldier, and was a sharp contrast to the bright comic book action of *G.I. Joe*. Larry returned to *Joe* years later, picking up the old numbering of the book that helped him raise a new army of comics readers.

"In doing this stuff, you always bear that in mind about what is really important, and then you don't get bogged down in inconsequentialities and these weird tangents that nobody cares about.

"It's all about the character, what the character feels, or how the character relates to other characters."

RIGHT
Hama's "silent issue" of *G.I. Joe* was a deadline fix that became a cult classic. Finishes by Steve Leialoha, from *G.I. Joe* #21 (Mar. 1984). G.I. Joe® & ©2011 Hasbro, Inc. Used with permission.

"I just looked him up in the phone book and he was there. That was back when artists were much more accessible," **Frank Miller** recalls as he lights another cigarette.

The subject is Neal Adams. "He was my hero and I found his name in the phone book."

It's 1976, and Frank has just arrived in New York, armed with a portfolio Frankensteined together out of polyester, cardboard, and bailing twine.

"I had a big portfolio of artwork that I wanted to show him. I almost broke his nose with it when I opened it up. He looked over my artwork and said, 'You're from where?' I said, 'Vermont.' 'You should go back there and pump gas. You're never going to be good.'" For Adams, it's a way to find out just how serious an aspiring artist really is: if they want to work in comics that badly, then they'll overcome their ego and *actually* become better.

"The women in my life would tell you, I'm very persistent," Miller says with a smile. "I kept coming back until finally Neal, at one point, said, 'He knows he can't draw. I already told him that, but the storytelling is ballsy,' and he got me my first job."

Frank would soon go on to the bigger pasture of DC Comics before making the move to Marvel. Frank Miller, young and lanky and determined, was about to hit his first defining moment as a cartoonist.

"I had done a couple issues of *Spectacular Spider-Man* and I looked at Daredevil, [who] was blind. All of a sudden I realized that I could do all my crime stories through this character," Frank states.

Daredevil had been the poor man's Spider-Man, but when Miller eventually took over the writing chores on *Daredevil* as well, he pitted the minor league superhero against major league villains like Kingpin and Bullseye. New York City itself, in Miller's *Daredevil*, became as much a character as the shadowy crime fighter—the stories often taking place on the rooftop level. The bold inks of Klaus Janson complemented Miller's style, giving *Daredevil* that final noir look.

Miller infused crime fiction with ninja action, throwing Matt Murdock/Daredevil's *femme fatale*

LEFT
Frank Miller, NYC, 2010

Elektra into the mix. At the end of his first year, Miller had Kingpin's assassin Bullseye viciously run Elektra through with her own sai—an unprecedented, unexpected death of a major character.

By the time Miller wrapped up his first run on *Daredevil*, with 1983's #191, the character had gone from a predictable superhero archetype to a tortured (and very human) hero struggling to stay on the side of the angels. What Miller created in Daredevil wasn't necessarily an antihero, but a hero who was never too far from becoming a villain himself.

While working on the Elektra saga, Miller was invited to join Upstart Studio in the Garment District of New York, working alongside other cartoonists including Howard Chaykin and Walter Simonson, where Frank was exposed to new influences that took a firm hold of him for his next project.

"Both Walt Simonson, and particularly Howard Chaykin, introduced me to the European comics. Then, through a girlfriend, Laurie Sutton, I discovered the Japanese comics," Frank reveals. "That all gave birth to *Ronin*."

Miller's 1983 futuristic tale merges samurai adventure with cybernetics, corporate America, and social dystopia. *Ronin* starts off looking like the *Daredevil* Frank Miller with a slightly different inking style, and organically merges different European and Japanese storytelling and inking techniques as it goes.

Miller got reacquainted with Daredevil in 1986's *Born Again*, this time with artist David Mazzuchelli, and turned the hero's life even more upside down. *Born Again* follows the hero's complete nervous breakdown and subsequent rebuilding, a postmodernist deconstruction and *re*construction from ground up. By literally stripping the superhero of his identity, Miller deconstructs Murdock/Daredevil and forces a narrative redefining of the character.

Miller helped define "postmodernism" in comics with 1986's *The Dark Knight Returns.* With story and pencils by Frank, inks by Klaus Janson, and watercolors by Lynn Varley, *Dark Knight* takes place in a future world, where Batman is considered nothing more than an urban myth whispered amongst the cracked pavement and foundations of Gotham City. Pushed back to the edge, Batman rises up again and fights enemies new and old, while suffering the strains of middle age and the media-riddled social climate.

ABOVE
Elektra was Miller's love letter to Will Eisner's Sand Saref. Inks by Klaus Janson, from *Daredevil* #175 (Oct. 1981). ©Marvel Entertainment.

By finally facing his mortality, this Batman becomes seemingly immortal and more true to the urban myth whispered about on the news and the streets of this future world. *The Dark Knight Returns* doesn't just distill Batman to his primal elements; it also encapsulates the 1980s political climate and the waning days of the Cold War.

The next year, Frank looked to the other end of Batman's timeline with *Batman: Year One*, a new origin story, again with Mazzuchelli on art. Just as he redefined Daredevil's New York years earlier, Miller makes Gotham City a cracked metropolis, dangerous and downtrodden enough to justify the need for a Caped Crusader. Mazzuchelli brings an urban modernity to a classic style, as heavy shadows dramatically wrap themselves around the characters, and long shadows are cast upon buildings.

Miller then came back with the graphic novel *Elektra Lives Again*, his final word on the Greek assassin. *Elektra Lives Again* isn't a Daredevil story, rather a noir one focusing on a grieving Matt Murdock. When he stands in a trench coat, bandages pasted across his face at the end, it's a taste of things to come in Frank's next iconic, creator-driven work.

"I just said, 'I don't give a damn. I'm going to do exactly the comic that I want to do,'" Frank admits. "I didn't care whether it succeeded or not, and it succeeded way beyond my expectations."

And so began crime comic *Sin City*. When it starts, it feels like the old Frank, with some of the same line work, but with heavier blacks and longer shadows. When the antisocial Marv jumps out of a window, he resembles Batman, substituting a long trench coat for a cape.

As *Sin City* progresses—it seems like it should be printed on crappy paper between cheap card stock covers. Miller clearly loves seeing how much he can get away with each story, and we love it for being so damn dirty and subversive. Where *The Dark Knight Returns* launched a wave of violent superhero comics, *Sin City* brought crime back as a formidable genre.

ABOVE
Miller's Batman and Robin don't swing like mortals—but soar like demigods. Inks by Klaus Janson, from *Dark Knight* #3 (1986). ©DC Entertainment.

Sin City made it to movie screens on April 1, 2005, directed by both Miller and cult filmmaker Robert Rodriguez. With a motley cast—boasting Bruce Willis, Clive Owen, Jessica Alba, Mickey Rourke, Brittany Murphy, Rosario Dawson, and Benicio Del Toro—a handful of the *Sin City* stories were brought to celluloid life. *Sin City* the film showed us Miller's absurdist, noir tendencies in motion, while making the creator-owned comic book a household name. It also gave Miller the last laugh, placing him in the director's chair on his own terms.

• • •

How does Miller himself define a hero?

"Got a week? It's somebody who is defined by his virtue. He might be tortured, might hate himself, but he always does the right thing."

Frank celebrated the hero in his retelling of *The 300 Spartans* in the aptly named *300*, a panoramic graphic novel with lush watercolors by Lynn Varley. The style was still distinctly Frank's, but enhanced with Varley's watercolors, grounding his art in a muted and faded reality. *300* was easily Frank Miller's most ambitious work to date, and spawned its own Zack Snyder-directed blockbuster film in 2006.

ABOVE
Marv's conflicted inner monologue makes him the ultimate Miller antihero for the '90s. From *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* (1991). © 2012 Frank Miller.

The Dark Knight Strikes Again, the 2002 sequel to *The Dark Knight Returns*, was jarring when it came out. It's entirely different in tone and flavor than the predecessor, trading grim seriousness for pastiche. For Miller, it wasn't just a celebration of the superhero, but a reaction to the gritted teeth and gun-toting knockoffs that *Returns* inspired.

"I wanted to go back to what was really fun about these things," Frank admits.

The irony of *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* is that it's arguably *more* post-modern than the first one, with more narrative fragmentation and a tendency for more pastiche of old comic books and the current state of the "media." Miller's art style was more pared down, with a thicker contour line on his figures, simpler backgrounds, and more bold shapes in the design.

"I wanted to recapture the feeling of DC Comics from when I was growing up. I deliberately did a very crude line and did my best to capture that," Frank admits.

• • •

When Will Eisner died in 2005, it was a blow to comics, but especially one to Miller, who was given the chance to honor Will's legacy in a film version of *The Spirit*.

"With Will, I couldn't ignore the sacred trust," Frank says, clearly affected. "He was my mentor, and meant the most in the world to me. I took it, and I looked at it, and said, 'This isn't a movie, but this needs to be changed to be turned into a movie, and I want to put his spirit into it.'"

The end result was a film that was a hybrid of Miller's sensibilities with Eisner's own, using the green screen techniques of *Sin City* to create a world atmospherically linked to Eisner's newsprint one through Miller's high contrast lens. *The Spirit* clearly isn't meant to be a straight action or crime film—not even a superhero one—but something aware of its own absurdity. Given *The Spirit*'s blend of pastiche with unapologetic comic-book action, it has the underpinnings of a cult classic.

The most striking thing about Frank Miller's career choices are that he hasn't hit a level of developmental stagnation. Frank has reinvented his style at least three or four times and still refuses to keep doing the same schtick each project.

ABOVE
Miho's thin ink line emits lightness and grace against the heaviness of *Sin City*'s world. From *Family Values* (1997). © 2012 Frank Miller.

"When I was growing up, I wanted to write comics and I remember reading some letters page in a DC Comic," the soft-spoken **Neil Gaiman** says. "Someone asked the question 'How do you get into writing comics?'

"The replier, who I think was [editor] Denny O'Neil, said 'Most of our writers are writers—some of our guys come from journalism and some from other places. You don't just start out writing comics.' I became a journalist, because the idea of writing comics seemed impossible. I was a kid in England, and no one in England wrote American comics. Then I saw Alan Moore's work; he was from *Warrior* and [was then] writing *Swamp Thing*."

Neil Gaiman is comics' first rock star, a member of the British invasion that energized American comics, primarily with his landmark fantasy/horror series *Sandman*. But when Neil Gaiman was just an opening act—it was to no less than writer Alan Moore who showed him the nuts and bolts of Comic Writing 101.

And write Neil did, his work gracing a series of British graphic novels with multi-media artist (sculptor/painter/photographer) Dave McKean and occasional issues at DC Comics. He and McKean teamed up in 1988 for the three-issue miniseries *Black Orchid*, which reinvented a '70s superhero for an adult audience. The collaboration prompted Gaiman's writing a monthly series for DC Comics, and *Sandman* was born.

"With *Black Orchid*, I was trying to change the world and do something big and important and say big, important things, about ecology and pacifism," Neil reflects. "*Sandman*, I was just trying to write a monthly comic, every month."

Sandman was a character that had gone through a series of iterations, from a gas masked pulp hero to a superhero, and then a helmeted dreamland protector (via Jack Kirby and Joe Simon). When Gaiman took the name, he reinvented him not as another muscular hero-type, but as tall and gangly dream god Morpheus who had otherworldly pale skin, jet black hair, and piercing eyes. With art by Sam Kieth and inker Mike Dringenberg, *The Sandman* #1 came out in 1989. The first seven issues had the title character emerging out of a decades-long entrapment to put his kingdom back in order. The comic book itself would affect not only the perceptions of the

LEFT
Neil Gaiman, NYC, 2008

comic book, but eventually the format of comic book storytelling.

"My plan with the first seven issues was basically to try and do each issue as a different kind of horror," Neil reveals. "They were absolutely horror comics and stories, and the first in my head was a Dennis Wheatley-esque/English/M.R. James-ey horror story; two, I was doing EC comics and old DC horror comics; three, I wanted to do something more like Clive Barker; four was sort of *Unknown Worlds*/1940s magical horror. By eight, I'd done that initial agenda of doing a bunch of different horror stories.

"I think I'd learned what this thing was and who these characters were. It really did feel like me, it didn't feel like me trying to do anybody."

Neil fully emerged with the eighth issue of *Sandman*, "The Sound of Her Wings," which introduces Morpheus' sister Death, who is the Grim Reaper recast as a perky goth girl (and the series' breakout supporting character). As *Sandman* progressed, Gaiman introduced Dream's other siblings, the Endless, each a different facet of the human experience: Destruction, Desire, Destiny, Delirium, and Despair.

Early into *Sandman*'s run, Gaiman's tendency to write in story lines that ran several issues helped define a new format for comics, one then just saved for special projects like *Watchmen* or *The Dark Knight Returns*: the trade paperback. Media notice for *Sandman* in *Rolling Stone* urged DC's marketing person Bruce Bristow to package *Sandman* for the mass market.

"We were up to issue fourteen and a half at that point, and got a note to collect *Doll's House,* which hadn't even come out yet. *The Doll's House* trade paperback was thrown together within a week, and came on sale as issue #16 came on sale. It came into existence simply in order to be advertised in *Rolling Stone*…He'd created *Sandman* trade paperbacks, and it was the first time someone had started doing trade paperbacks of an ongoing series."

More than anything, *Sandman* was ultimately about stories—Shakespeare performs

ABOVE
Gaiman's Morpheus elaborates on his personal evolution, from *Sandman* #67 (February 1995). Art by Marc Hempel.

A Midsummer Night's Dream for the actual faeries it's about; a writer who rapes a muse is deluged with too many brilliant ideas; visitors at a cross-dimensional tavern exchange yarns *Canterbury Tales* style—stories mixing myth and folklore with contemporary fantasy, told through rotating creative teams every arc. It allowed for Gaiman to constantly experiment through the series' run, providing a variety of narrative flavor in a breakout book that snagged the cool kids into reading comics. The trade paperback presence in mainstream bookstores, as well as Dave McKean's illustrative, fine art covers, made *Sandman* a hybrid book that combined the tenets of folklore and literature in an adult comic book.

Sandman wrapped up with #81, a premeditated end by Gaiman, as Morpheus sacrificed himself in payment for crimes committed through his earlier acts of hubris, while another aspect of him is resurrected in a new form (the pale white-haired Dream). Just as a new chapter is set up for the world of *Sandman* and his world of the Dreaming, Gaiman closed the back cover and left his audience wanting more.

Gaiman spent his first decade in the comic book industry elevating the medium to that of classic fantasy literature, and creating a series that reached out beyond the established tried-and-true comic book fans. In a time when the industry wasn't widely friendly to non-superhero fans or even females, *Sandman* extended a pale and welcoming hand to that overlooked demographic.

Neil comes back to comics every once in a while, whether to revisit *Sandman*, take on Jack Kirby's *The Eternals*, or even to write the ultimate, final *Batman* story. No matter how many novels or screenplays Gaiman writes, he always comes back to his first storytelling medium.

ABOVE
The introduction of Death in *Sandman* #8 (August, 1989) provided the title character more humanity, and gave the series its most popular supporting character. Art by Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III.

ALEX ROSS
Chicago, IL, 2011

"There's absolute artistic fulfillment that I get from comic books," Alex Ross says. "This is what I've wanted to do since I was four, and I don't have regrets on the career path that I took."

Alex Ross' success is unprecedented in an industry whose painters ignored the superhero, primarily for less fantastic genres. Before the superheroes became movie stars, Ross was making them real on the comic book page.

Ross's first big splash was with *Marvels*, a fully painted, four-issue comic book series with writer Kurt Busiek, about photographer Phil Sheldon, an everyman who witnessed the birth of the Marvel Comics characters from the late '30s through the '70s. In Sheldon, Busiek and Ross created an accessible, fallible, and believable proxy hero for the audience—a man struggling with a constantly threatened and ever-changing world populated by god-like beings. Sheldon is there from the beginning, and Busiek and Ross revisited key events straight from the Marvel Comics canon. Sheldon's own skepticism and love-hate relationship with the "Marvels," combined with Ross' photorealistic art, keeps *Marvels* balanced on the fine line between accessibility and reverence. It was, perhaps, the most sincere and least pretentious of the self-aware superhero comics.

In that first issue, Ross' figures looked like they came straight out of an Edward Hopper painting—stiff and somewhat alien in places, but even more realistic in others. There seemed something almost posed about them, a quality that gave way to a naturalistic and softer look by the second issue, where he began to look like the Alex Ross we know today, combining real people with iconic and classic versions of superheroes. Ross began crafting an even larger project with writer Mark Waid while working on *Marvels*, a futuristic epic that featured all of DC Comics' biggest characters, called *Kingdom Come*.

Kingdom Come's future is one rife with urban warfare between factions of misguided superheroes, a world where collateral damage in America is as common as a war zone. After Superman goes into self-imposed banishment, other heroes follow, allowing a grim and gritty new breed to take over and push the world into chaos. The turning point of *Kingdom Come* is Superman's return, inspiring other original superheroes to follow his lead, to set the current generation down correct path. By dressing them in costumes similar to their original versions, Ross makes the commentary that the originals are always the better version, with prototypical design elements running on everyone from Superman to the most obscure classic DC character.

LEFT
Ross balances realism and the fantastic in this 1999 limited edition Legion of Super-Heroes print. © 2012 DC Entertainment.

While *Marvels* was an unassuming, postmodernist take on the superhero, *Kingdom Come* felt like a postmodern commentary on postmodern comics: the "good guys" could only really function when returned to their visual roots, and the "bad guy" superheroes were based off of the "grim and gritty" superheroes running rampant in 1990s comics. Considering coauthor Mark Waid's love of the classic material, as well as his return to traditional superheroics at a time that comics were "dark," it should come as no surprise. Ross has only wandered out of the superhero realm a few times in his over-20-year career. He doesn't dismiss going into other genres, but plans on sticking with what's fun for him. It's apparent that superheroes are where his heart is; he talks just as much about his love and thoughts on specific characters and comic books as he does the business end of comics.

"I've got to throw a mask or cape in there somewhere, because otherwise it's just a bunch of human beings. A staple of my work is to try to humanize things, but I need a touch of the fantastic to keep it interesting.

"It's all very open to negotiation, but in trying to represent the fantastic combined with the human, I had been holding myself back from doing more of the fantastic, because I feel like I've had to eat my vegetables before enjoying dessert. Now I feel like, 'You know what? I've eaten enough goddamn vegetables. I want all candy.' I've been in more of an all-candy phase," he laughs.

DWAYNE McDUFFIE
NYC, 2011

"I want to write stories about people," Dwayne McDuffie said.

"Things happen to people. I think my disappointment with the current superhero comics is that, mostly, they don't have supporting casts; superheroes only interact with other superheroes and supervillians; and they don't seem to have lives outside of their work. It's hard for me to connect, as a reader, to people who go out and save lives every week but don't have lives or have anything in common with me."

The irony of his career is that while comic books chewed him up and spit him out, he kept one foot in that world while distilling the superhero's essence down in several animation projects—something he didn't see coming back in the late '80s, when he entered as an assistant at Marvel Comics and grew into becoming a successful writer, teaming up with artist Denys Cowan.

"There had been a lot of conversations, generally in the industry, about controlling the stories and owning your characters," Dwayne reflected. "Another part of it was Denys and I both had an interest in doing multicultural characters, which was not a priority at Marvel. They didn't care if you did them or not, and wouldn't say no to it. Denys will tell you that, when he was an intern, the older black artists had talked about doing that fifteen years before. It just so happened that there was a window because (one) the industry was exploding and there was a need for more product, and (two) there was this general sense in the air that if you didn't work for Marvel and DC, you could go off and make a living doing your own.

"We got this gigantic royalty check for *Deathlok*, and I was like, 'Denys, I think we can afford to do this.' He called up Michael Davis and Derek Dingle, who is the unsung genius of the thing, because without his business knowledge we wouldn't have lasted more than a few months (like many other groups of artists who got together to come up with their own stuff). Derek's publishing experience comes from *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *Black Enterprise* magazine. He knew how to run a magazine and publication and taught us a bunch of things."

With McDuffie's editorial experience, Cowan's narrative power, Davis' roster of up-and-coming talent cultivated through his Bad Boys Studio, and Dingle's business acumen, Milestone's inaugural titles were *Icon*, about a Superman-like alien hero who landed in America during times of slavery, and was prodded into becoming a symbol by his teenage sidekick; *Hardware*, a man in a suit of armor built at the expense of the crooked

RIGHT
McDuffie's Hardware was, in the end, a frustrated creator like his writer.

Top: Art by J.J. Birch and Jason Minor, from *Hardware* #8 (Oct. 1993).

Bottom: Art by Denys Cowan and Jimmy Palmiotti, from *Hardware* #1 (Apr. 1993).

employer he was contractually shackled to; and *Static*, a teenager with electrical powers who fought gangs in his schoolyard.

"Denys was a big fan of DC and had a good relationship with them. Jenette Kahn, particularly, wanted to do different kinds of comics. Derek was attracted to DC because they were a Time Warner company, and he saw synergistic possibilities."

Where Dwayne's Marvel work was all well-crafted and competent, it was with Milestone that his distinct voice really developed, his personal investment in characters that weren't being signed off to a major company shone through.

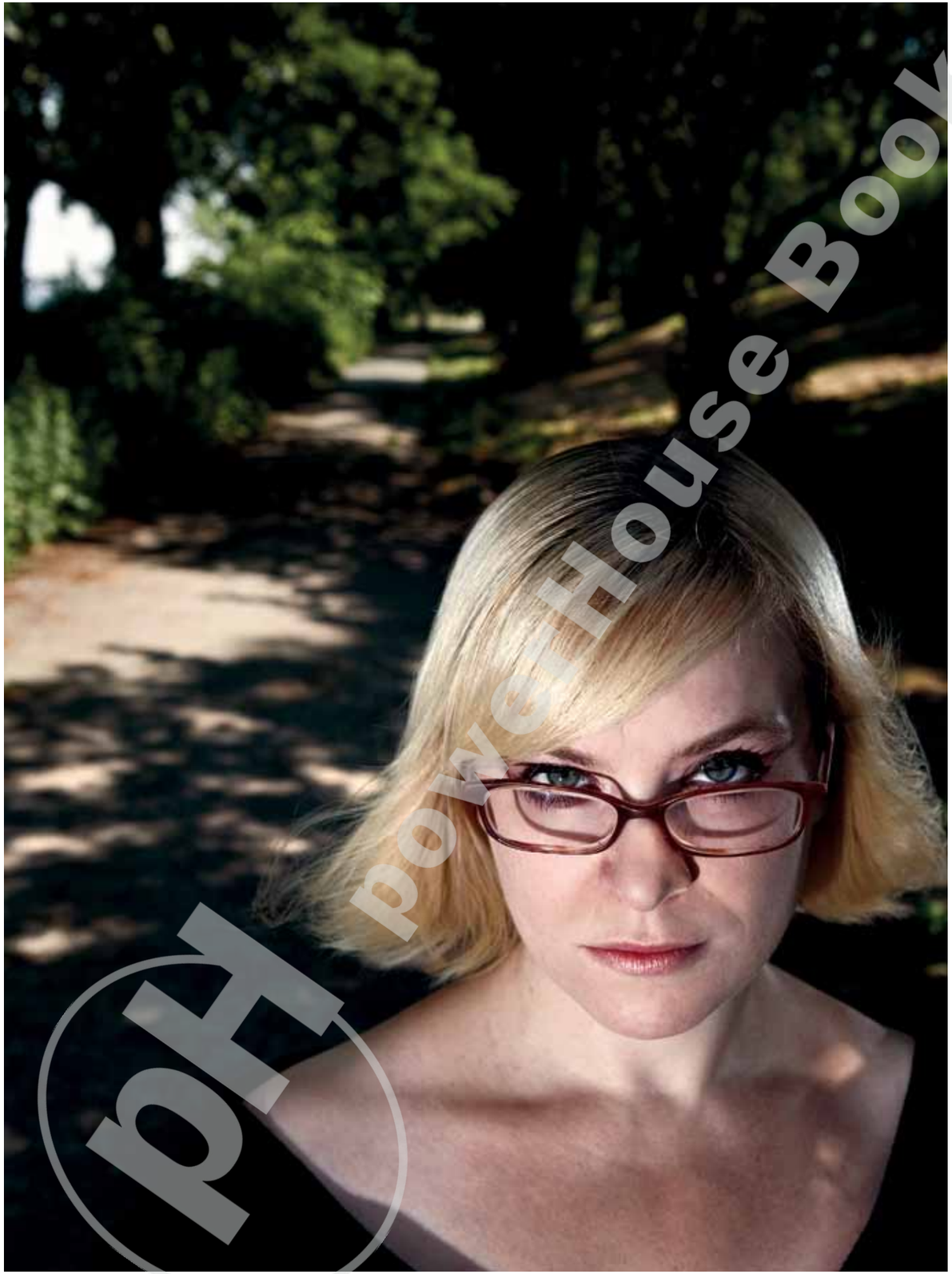
An unexpected collapse of the comic book market in the early '90s brought an end to Milestone, as well as several other smaller publishers, as comic book stores were closing down and the newsstand was diminished.

"Basically, we figured out the month when we would no longer be in profit, and gave the artists and writers that much time to finish up the stories. DC's feelings were hurt, and we turned all those books in and they were never published."

With the last bunch of Milestone issues still unpublished and sitting in a hypothetical desk somewhere, the dream seemed to be over. Or was it? Alan Burnett, a successful animation producer, sold Milestone character Static as a weekly cartoon to Warner Brothers.

Static Shock! already had the involvement of Denys Cowan as producer and it was inevitable that McDuffie come on board as writer. *Static Shock!* was his first foray into animation, after the disappointment of the dying comic book industry. The show not only aired for four years, but Dwayne won a Humanitas Award, and the show received four Emmy nominations (winning one for music). While it ironically didn't result in a job for McDuffie, it did lead him to one with the Cartoon Network's *Justice League* cartoon, a stint that redefined his career as an animation writer.

The vibrant McDuffie died unexpectedly on February 21, 2011 of complications from heart surgery.



"I wasn't sure what I was going to do in college," **Becky Cloonan** admits.

"I thought I was going to be an animator, but then I dropped out. I started making mini-comics and bringing them to conventions. One of the first people I gave a mini to was David Mack. He read it, and thanked me for it. I was floored, here was a professional creator who I looked up to, and who thought my comic was worthwhile even though it was photocopied. It was great to feel like you're part of a community where everyone is pretty cool."

Cloonan has since gone beyond being just a Xeroxed ashcan cartoonist, and proven her diverse artistic chops with the successful 2003 comic book miniseries *Demo*. The series showcases Becky's special ability to mimic different stylistic approaches each issue, giving the impression of a different artist each story.

"I think the styles are the same, but the techniques that I use are different," she modestly says. "When we first talked about *Demo*, I knew it was twelve issues, and I knew there wasn't any way I could draw 300 pages consistently, so I went with different approaches to each story. I think Brian wrote each story with a different sensibility, so I approached the stories individually, as well."

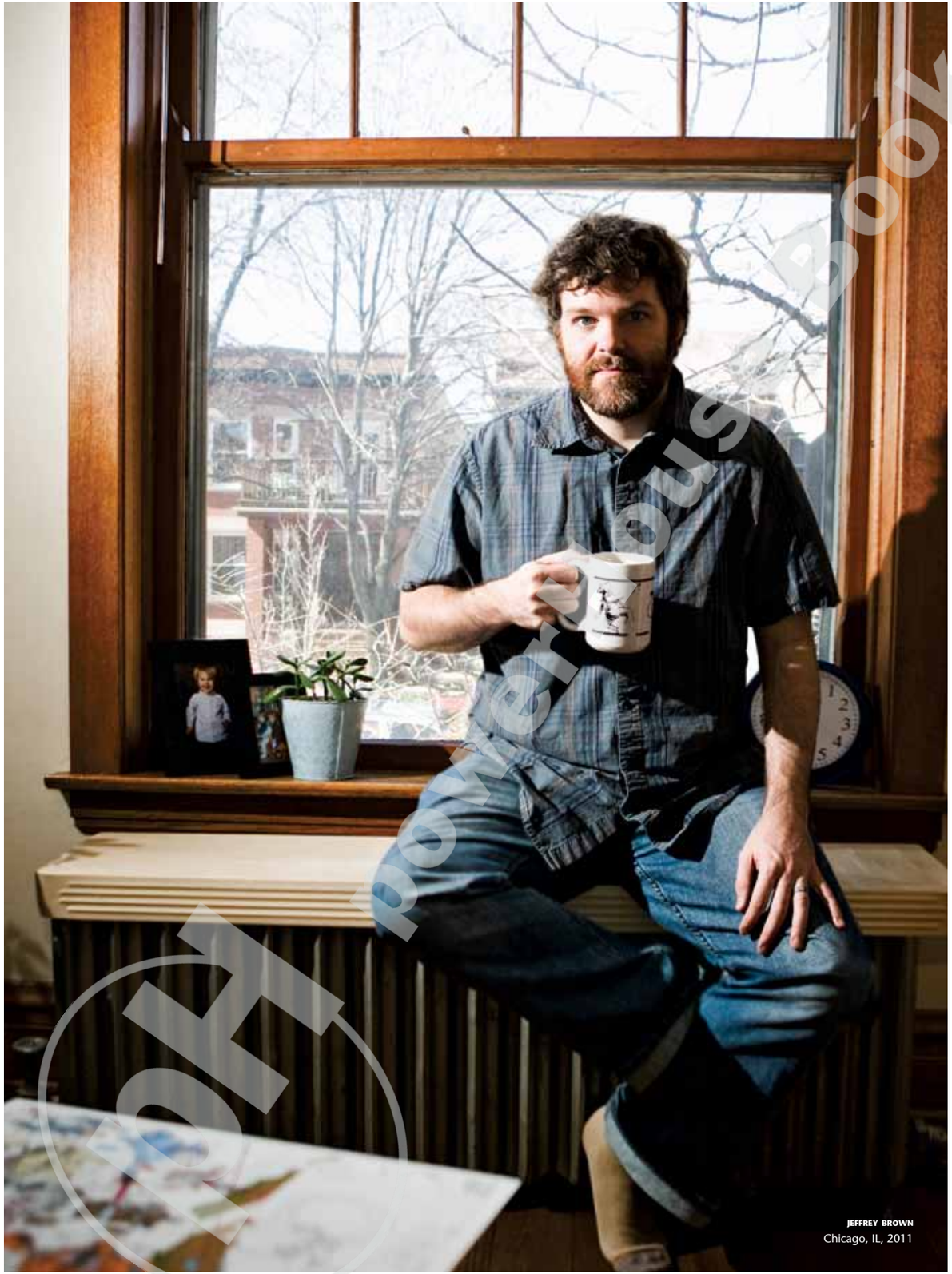
LEFT
Becky Cloonan, Brooklyn, NY, 2008

BELOW
A page from Cloonan's self-published *Wolves* (2011). © 2012 Becky Cloonan.

The stories range from horror to drama to humor, and Cloonan's diverse hand works well with Wood's varying narrative voices.

Where some comic book artists tend to come across as one-trick ponies who are slaves to their set style, Cloonan has an arsenal of styles that come out per project. Her mini-comics may have started as a chance to get her work out there in the closeness of the comics community; as she started to gain work, however, she continued to do them as an exercise in form and sequential storytelling—for comics' sake.

Another noticeable thing about Cloonan is her natural cartooning ability. While many train themselves to illustrate comics, her work is intuitive and natural, with her focus on the narrative and directorial approach. Every year, she continues to explore new techniques and approaches in her mini-comics, despite the heavy workload of comics coming her way.



JEFFREY BROWN
Chicago, IL, 2011

"At this point, the biggest factor in what I reveal now is in being aware of how many people are reading things," Jeffrey Brown says.

"My wariness of that is so much more heightened that I don't have any more ways to trick myself left. Before, I was doing it for myself and then happening to publish it. Now, I can't get that kind of distance. When I'm drawing it, I'm hyper-aware that at some point someone is going to see it."

Jeffrey Brown is deceptively talented: his comics work possesses the charm of a high schooler doodling his life experiences (or robot battles) in a ruled notebook, but he has a strong foundation in the fine arts. The pacing and foundation of his autobiographical or humorous comics are disarming in their seeming innocence.

"What it came out of was just being at art school and having all this build-up of everything I've learned and everything everyone else was doing—this whole big world was starting to weigh down on the actual making of art. Art wasn't fun anymore, and the most fun art was from when I was drawing comics as a kid. I was trying to get back to that," he says of his autobio work.

An encounter with fellow Chicago cartoonist Chris Ware at a book signing gave him the artistic direction he needed. Ware, particularly through his work in his own *Acme Novelty Library*, was redefining comic book storytelling, and developing a linguistic graphic connection between both words and pictures.

"He was looking at my paintings and looking at my sketchbook, and seeing things in my sketchbook and pointing out things that I was doing (that I knew I was doing) from a different perspective," Jeffrey says. "I think he saw, even though I wasn't drawing comics per se in my sketchbooks, that there was all that influence there. The things he was responding to in my sketchbook, I realized 'Oh, that's the type of stuff I love doing.'"

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