

The Drink Tank 422



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Editors

Chris Garcia - Alissa McKersie - Chuck Surface

Page 3 Art by Robin Stevenson

Page 4—The Marlboro Man Lied to You: An Editorial by Chuck Surface

Page 6—The Boss, The Muscle, The Girl, & The Kid by Julian West

Page 12—The Lesser Justice Leaguers by Chris Garcia

Page 14—Death and Disembowelment with Canada's Hard-Luck
Heroes, Alpha Flight by Helena Nash

Page 21—Doom Patrol: How a Bunch of Broken, Cast-Off, Foul-Mouthed
Superheroes Captured My Heart. A Review by John Purcell

Page 25—“We Who Are About to Die!” Strikeforce: Morituri by Helena
Nash

Page 30—Venditti and Barrows's *Freedom Fighters: Rise of a Nation*
A Review by Chuck Surface

Page 34—Considerations by Helena Nash

I. D.P.7: The New Universe's Fugitive Non-Team

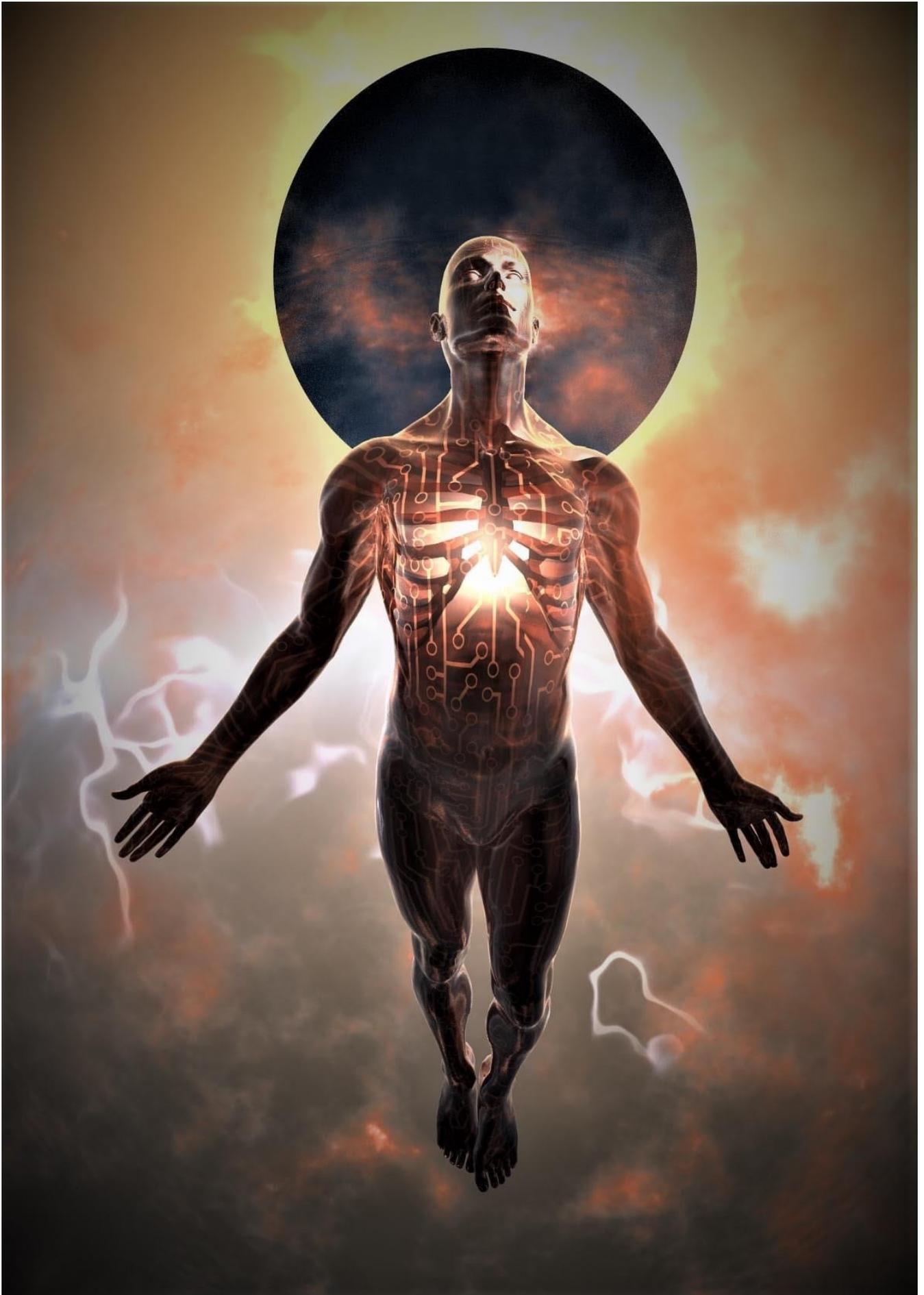
II. Fantastic Four: Byrne Victims

III. Teen Titans: The Judas Contract

IV. Squadron Supreme: The Utopia Program

V. Avengers: Under Siege

Page 42—**WORD SEARCH** by Alissa McKersie-Wales



The Marlboro Man Lied to You

An Editorial by Chuck Serface



While discussing this issue dedicated to superhero groups, Chris and I began naming teams off the top of our heads. This list compiled in just under two minutes, which is by no means exhaustive, includes:

The Justice League of America, the Justice Society of America, the Seven Soldiers of Victory, the Avengers, the Teen Titans, the Defenders, the Champions, the Authority, the Legion of Superheroes, the Inferior Five, the Doom Patrol, the X-Men, X-Force, X-Factor, Strikeforce Moritoni, Alpha Flight, the Omega Men, the Young Allies, the Invaders, the Freedom Fighters, the All-Star Squadron, the Crusaders, the Invisibles, the New Mutants, the Challengers of the Unknown, the Fantastic Four, Avengers West Coast, D.P.7, the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents, the All-Winners Squad, Justice League Dark, the Outsiders, Big Hero 6, the Incredibles, the Runaways, the Misfits, Young Justice, Top-10, the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, the Honor Guard, the First Family, the Metal Men, the Newsboy Legion, the Boy Commandos . . .

We kept going, surely missing many others could remember. Even villains congregate, whether they, as with their heroic counterparts, combine by choice or are created to be teams:

The Secret Society of Super-Villains, the Legion of Doom, the Lethal Legion, the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, the Brotherhood of Evil, the Injustice League, the Injustice Society, the Secret Six, the Injustice Gang, the Sinister Six, the Frightful Four, the Legion of Super-Villains, the Exterminators, the Crime Syndicate, the Masters of Evil, the Fatal Five, the Nuclear Family, the Gas

Gang, the Thunderbolts, the Fearsome Five, the Hellfire Club, the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Omega Flight, the Dark Avengers . . .

Even lone-wolf antiheroes have been getting into the act. Recently, Elektra, the Punisher, Wolverine, Venom, Doctor Voodoo, and . . . Conan the Barbarian (?) have become the Savage Avengers. Yes, Wolverine and Doctor Voodoo were joiners of a sort already, but the others? Outsiders all the way.

Finally, the Defenders, with no charter or unified mission statement, has over time been comprised of core members that really seem to like hanging out together. In fact the Avengers, Marvel's preeminent "official team," has changed rosters as much as the world's favorite non-team.

What about the image of the rugged individualist, that myth best exemplified through the Marlboro Man: alone against the world, needing no one or no thing to get the job done? Bump that. If anything, we get by with a little help from our friends.

Face it, fans. The Marlboro Man lied to you.



A Note from Chris Garcia

Most of you have probably heard that I've been evacuated. The CZU August Lightning Complex Fire is roaring through the Santa Cruz Mountains, specifically towards my hometown of Boulder Creek. It's scary, and we were told that our neighborhood was destroyed, that we almost certainly lost our house. This wasn't hearsay from some local, but instead it was a report told by a firefighter.

We were unamused.

We've been bouncing through hotels, the first week with the Boys. The first two were the San Jose DoubleTree Hotel, where I'd been to for so many conventions over the decades. The second site was the Hyatt Place in downtown San Jose, and we tend to stay there during Cinequest. It was nice to have familiar surroundings.

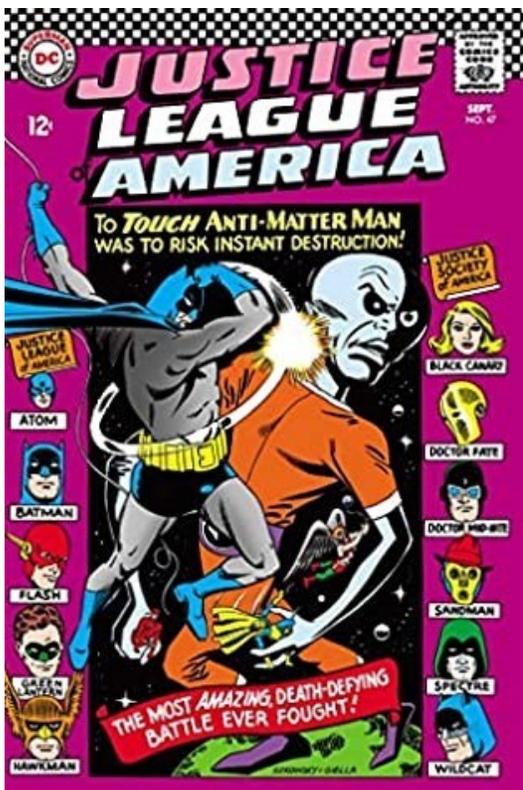
Then we moved to Larkspur Landing, which is perfect. Kitchen, sitting room, bedroom, big ol' desk. It's much nicer, it's in Sunnyvale, just across the way from my old apartment when I lived in these parts. We're comfy, still worried about our house, but knowing that conditions are improving is helping us.

Plus, free hotel from Red Cross and Free Hobee's Breakfast!

I wanna thank everyone for all the good wishes, and to Chuck and Alissa, and of course James Bacon, for lookin' out for us!



The Boss, the Muscle, the Girl, and the Kid by Julian West



There have been many articles linking superheroes to the gods and heroes of antiquity. To some extent, this is rereading familiar ground. The route from *Gilgamesh* to *Gladiator* to *Superman* is well known now. So, with the proviso that I might not be saying anything new, I'd like to give a personal investigation into the appeal of the team book. Just why do we want to read stories with a whole bunch of heroes, all of them with different capabilities? Why not just find our favorite, and read about them?

When Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series became successful, he published a brief essay describing his initial encounter with the character. It was a particular Justice League/Justice Society comic, where the two teams joined forces to prevent their two Earths colliding. I remember this particularly because when I was a similar age, I remember reading that very same comic, borrowed from a neighbour. It might well have been the first American comic I ever read.

I was instantly taken with the idea of the team as the basis for a story. Though it was a while before I began to seriously collect comics, I was always inclined to go for those which featured teams. I had a particular liking for *Justice League* and *The Legion of Superheroes*.

Quite what the attraction is, is not immediately obvious. To some extent, one gets more value from a story that includes more people, but there is a cost. When you have a vast cast like the Legion, then each character tends to be a cipher. There wasn't a great deal to differentiate the various precocious children of the Legion, personality-wise. The Justice League were even more restricted. Most of the characters had their own series, which meant that there was no scope for anything to happen to them. They would have to be handed back to their original books, intact and unchanged. (To be fair, in this era nothing happened to the characters in their original books either, but the point remains.) Kurt Busiek has said (on Twitter) that Gardner Fox was a poor writer. That's objectively true, but just looking at the words "Roll Call" on a cover gave me a thrill that I don't get now from almost anything else. But why? It's clearly not just me.

In fact, it's something the appeal of which goes back a long way. Whoever wrote the story of *Jason and the Argonauts* clearly had the same kind of brainwave as Gardner Fox when he put the Justice League together. If the story of Jason going to find the Golden Fleece is exciting, wouldn't it be twice as good if Orpheus and Heracles were on the Argo as well? Well, yes, apparently it struck a chord. Which is what Orpheus did when they passed the Sirens – playing so beautifully that the crew escaped unscathed. This might be the first time that a writer devised an encounter specifically to make use of the abilities of one of the team who otherwise might not have anything to do – also known as the "Aquaman Problem." We also have Atalanta – the token women Argonaut, the Wonder Woman of the team.



Jason was the first big team story of Greek mythology. The next, even more popular, was the Siege of Troy. The participants in that story differ from the Argonauts in that they're original to the story. Thus, more Legion than League. We have another common theme of a team story – pulling the team together. We have to have a cause – in this case, someone's wife has run off. We have to get Achilles on board, so let's find him among the women.

And when the team get to start their adventure, we get something that didn't appear much in comics until the Marvel era – the intra-team quarrel. *The Iliad* is based around the fight between Achilles and Agamemnon. This is something we've seen over and over. Civil War is always interesting.

But it's even more fundamental. The pantheon of the Greek gods is almost deliberately echoed in the mythology of the League. The original Flash is modeled on Hermes, because the gods, as a team, reflect something about us. Olympus and Asgard, a thousand years after anyone believed in their literal truth, probably more meaningful than ever. Even though we don't think that the thunder and the earthquake and the sun and moon are controlled by people like us, the anthropomorphic representation of fundamental elements of our life.

We like to see groups of powerful people working together. It triggers an elemental response. Whether or not Gardner Fox was a good writer is almost entirely irrelevant. We set up powerful figures, we watch them interact, and it gives a sense of structure in the universe. The tribes of Israel came from a team of brothers. When Jesus started a religion that would dominate the world, the first thing he did was assemble a team – with a little story associated with each recruitment.

Then there developed a different kind of superhero team, which connects with us in a different way. In 1961, we first encountered the Fantastic Four. This wasn't the first superhero team made up of characters who didn't operate outside the confines of this one book. The Legion, apart from Superboy, was self-contained, for example.

The Fantastic Four, however, were not archetypes, not representations of fundamentals. They were a family group. This led to quite a different kind of feel to the stories. These were not a group who got together to fight foes too powerful for anyone else to face. They weren't a police force, or vigilantes or part of some master plan. They were a family.

As such, the roots of the FF lie elsewhere than myth. There's a tradition of children's stories featuring the interaction of family members. In the USA there are the March sisters in *Little Women*, and in the UK E. Nesbit's Bastables or Arthur Ransome's Walkers. It became a template familiar enough that it served as an immediate basis for the Narnia books, for example. In comics, they're quite often the misfits, the outcasts, the not-quite-humans, such as the Doom Patrol, the Metal Men, the X-Men.

The family structure need not always be an actual family. The school story tradition often deals with teenagers who live together continually, who rely on each other, who go on adventures together. And sometimes, they quarrel. This is the theme which kept Frank Richards's stories in the *Magnet* and *Gem* popular with many generations of children - according to 1920's political correctness, a group of five friends had to have one Asian.

The general structure of the family team, as opposed to the mythical team, seems clear. Fewer people, who are tied to each other all the time. And then I saw *The Incredibles*. Any comics fan who enjoyed *The Incredibles* did so knowing that it was lifted wholesale from *Fantastic Four*, and instead of being an implied family, it was an actual family. Reed Richards was now a woman, married to the Thing.

I vaguely noticed that we had a structure to the relationships. Violet was the girl. Elastigirl was the boss. Mr. Incredible was the big guy. Dash was the annoying kid. Well, it's what one would expect from the Fantastic Four film. It's the same characters, sort of.



And then I saw a children's show called *The Tweenies*. It wasn't that it was the kind of thing I would watch myself, but when you have pre-school children you see a lot of stuff. The characters were Milo, who liked to stomp around and break things; Bella, who told everyone what to do; Jake, who was slightly younger and more childish; and Fizz, who liked dressing up and looking pretty. They were pre-school children, whose adventures never strayed from the day care centre, with nothing more at stake than a broken toy and a tantrum. The Fantastic Four were adults, involved in the literal fate of the entire Earth. None of the FF were remotely like any of the Tweenies.

But . . . they were the same team. Ask anyone who's seen the Tweenies and knows the FF to match them up – and everyone would pair them in the same way. The characters are entirely unlike, but the relationship framework is identical.



It's the kind of annoying insight which can stop you just watching stuff. Once I saw the Tweenies/FF connection, I started looking at all four-person teams, trying to find the boss, the muscle, the girl and the kid.

The earliest example was with D'Artagnan and the three musketeers. I'm sure there are earlier versions, but that's the first one I can identify. And the same roles are in the same relationship

And of course, sometimes the girl isn't a girl. Sometimes the boss is a woman. Sometimes they're all men. The descriptions will always be vague, because the people involved are totally different. But we know that Aramis and Paul McCartney are in the girl position in the team.

Not every foursome has this structure. Yes, Obi-Wan, Leia, Luke and Han are a pretty good fit, but Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion don't match up. If you can't see instantly which person matches which role, the structure isn't there.



But if the four people are in that fixed relationship, then the story can go any way it wants. I couldn't find the muscle in the Morpheus/Neo/Trinity setup, until I realised – sometimes the muscle is the heavy. Agent Smith fills out the foursome. We can lose Gandalf halfway through, but the framework is still there – and the plot, the characters, the environment and theme can all hang from it. It's Gandalf's plan, it's Aragorn who kills the bad guys, it's Sam providing emotional support, and it's Frodo as the innocent abroad who grows into his role.

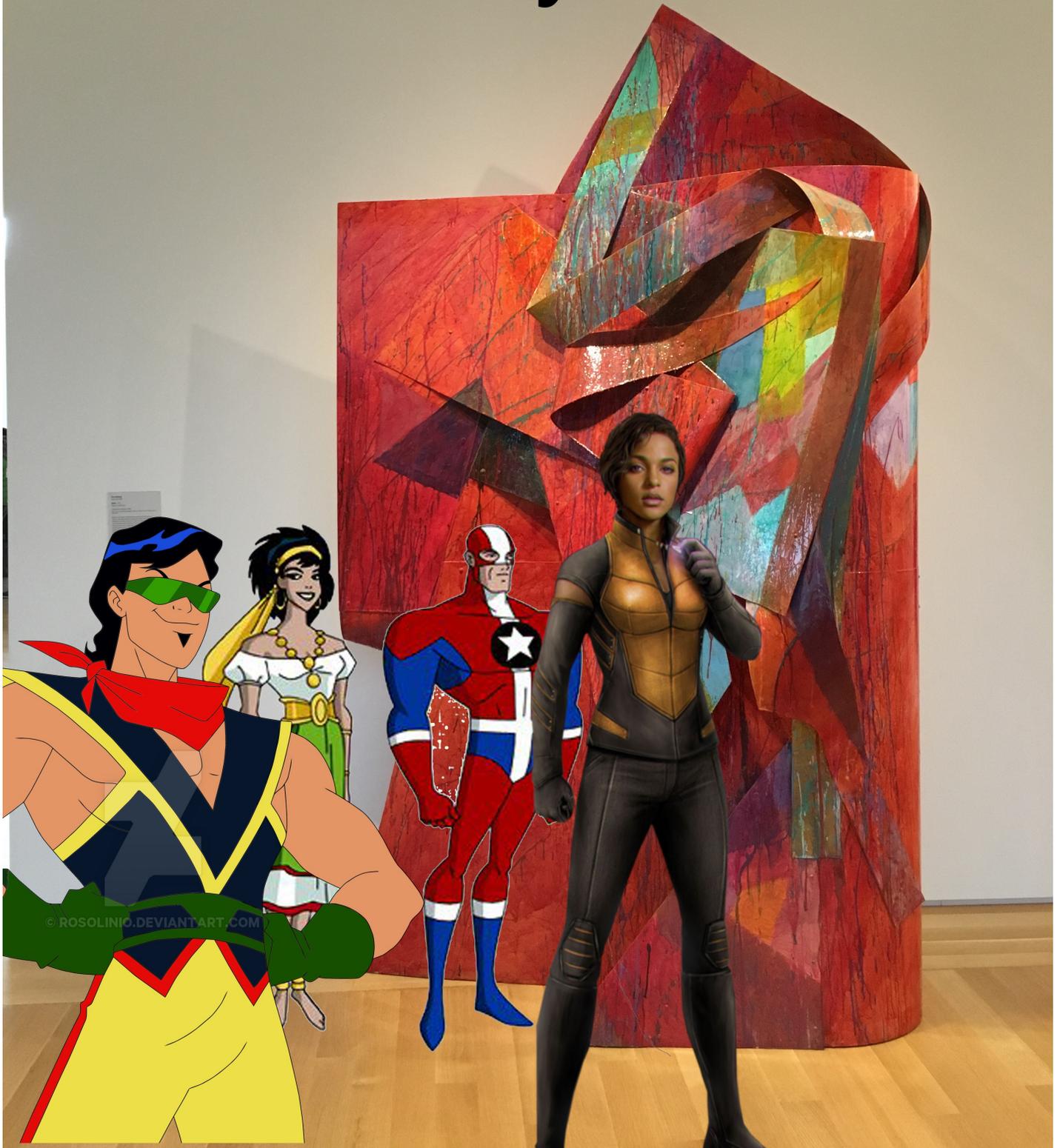
The muscle can be the heavy, but doesn't have to be tough. Ron is quite wimpy, but he's the person who knows the world to which Harry is a novice. But he's emotionally immature, and it's Hermione who's supportive, while Dumbledore is the plotter.

Is the framework sexist? It *can* be. But the girl doesn't have to be a girl, and the whole crew can be women. Little Women, even. It's value-neutral. Gender-wise, I would say that if there's only one girl in the group, she'll be the Girl – but there might be counter-examples out there.

So, once I found this pattern in so many places, what can I do with it? Once you consciously know how the team of four works, does it add another dimension, or is it just an annoying distraction from just enjoying the story? Can it be used to consciously construct stories? Is it even a real thing, or am I just shoehorning a lot of different things together?

I'd love to know.

The Lesser Justice Leaguers by Chris Garcia



I grew up in the 1980s, the time of trying to make comics relevant. Re-inventions were everywhere. Writers and artists who had made their names in the 1970s, Alan Moore and so many others from the pages of *2000 AD*, were actively changing comics on the fringes. They weren't given *Superman* or *JLA*, they were given *Swamp Thing* or new creations. And thus, it was up to the writers of the various major titles, like the *Justice League of America*, to try and freshen up the frontline.

Now, you can look at titles like *Batman and the Outsiders* as attempts to make teams for the 1980s, but that didn't quite nail a hipper demographic. The Justice League of America had done a decent job of bringing in new blood in the 1970s with the Elongated Man, Zatanna, Red Tornado, Firestorm, and Hawkgirl. Those were good additions, and then the 1980s came, and they felt like they needed to reach for the demos again, and move younger, hipper, cooler! They basically tossed the big names, no more Batman or Superman or Wonder Woman, or Flash, or Green Lantern. Instead, Aquaman basically future-endavored any part-timers (i.e., anyone who had their own title!) and kept a core team of the Martian Manhunter, Zatanna, and the Elongated Man while bringing on four new members.

Vixen, Vibe, Gypsy, and Steel.

The idea was that there was a connection to the classic era in Aquaman and Martian Manhunter, and the second era with Zatanna and Elongated Man, but these four, fully half the team, were younger, and thus would attract all those dollars from the youth! As time went by, they weren't taken seriously, and eventually Steel and Vibe were murdered, and the team rearranged and then 1986 happened, and there was a lot of fun to be had from the team that lasted through the 1990s.

But those four were my jam.

You see, as a twelve-year old, I was spending all my quarters on comics. Usually they sat on the big shelves for three months at Brian's Books, and then they went to the quarter bin, which is where I got them before biking home to devour them.

How could a kid not love Vibe, a teen who had the power to vibrate things? Or Steel, the great commander who fought valiantly and with great umph! Or the two sides of every young boy's attractions; Vixen, aptly named, and Gypsy (sorry, I know, but it was her name!) who represented that sort of girl we all knew and secretly had a massive crush on. I loved them, and even after I stopped buying comics in the late 1980s, when I turned those hard-found quarters toward baseball cards and wrestling magazines instead -- I still pictured that Justice League as My Justice League, just as those who grew up with Batman, Wonder Woman, Superman, Green Lantern, Flash, Aquaman, and Martian Manhunter would consider them their JLA. I came back during Grant Morrison's run, but it never quite felt right. In fact, it wasn't until the really weird Week 24 of 52 when Firestorm re-formed the League with Bulleteer, Super Chief (The Big Chief!) and Ambush Bug that I caught back on and was along for the ride . . .

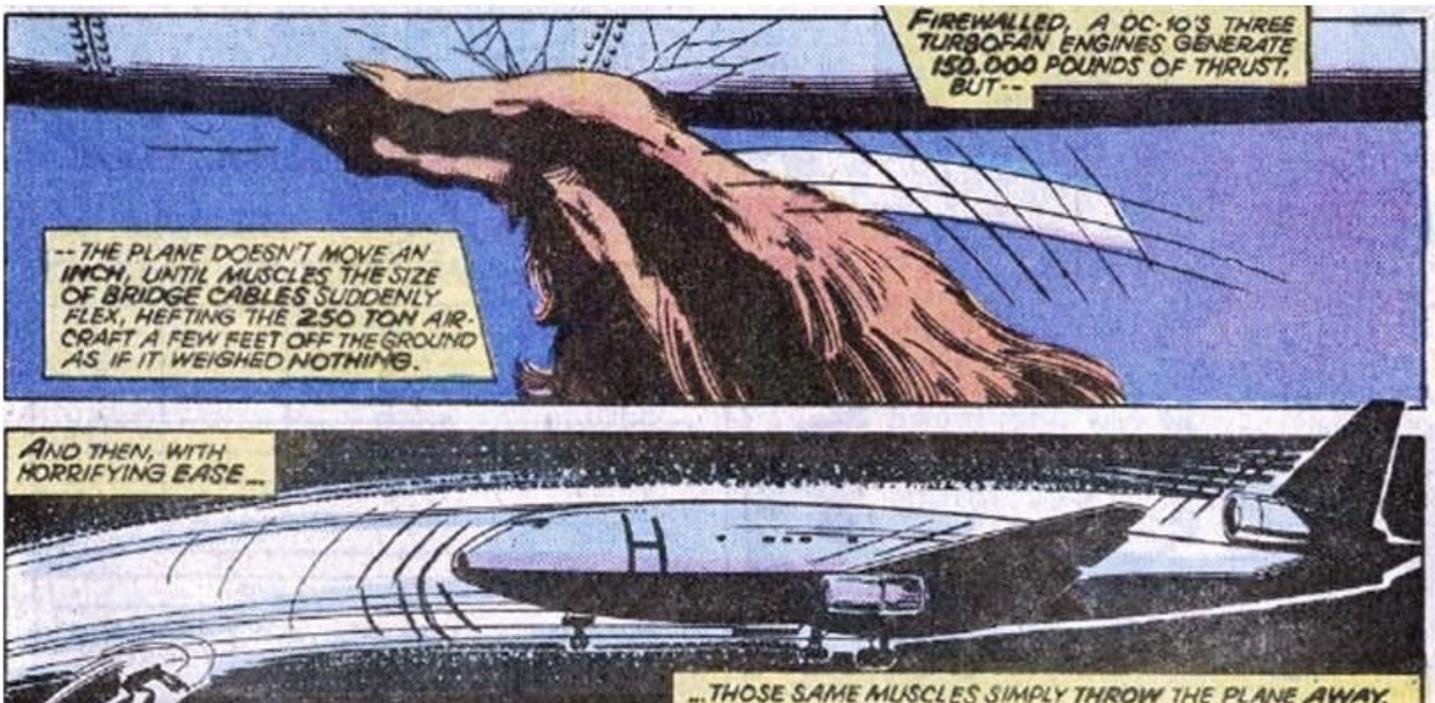
. . . at least as often as I bought comics.

You always remember your first, and there will never be another first Justice League for me. When I introduced my little JP to the League, it was the Silver Age team, the classic. He liked them a lot, especially the Flash. Since he has trouble running, not nearly as fast as his little brother, JP likes the speedsters, and will tear around the house, unsteady but free, screaming "Look, I'm the Flash, and I have to meet Superman and Wonder Woman to fight Starro!" That's his League, and while that is all my fault, it's not like I didn't go around the house pretending I could make all the molecules vibrate.

Death and Disembowelment with Canada's Hard-Luck Heroes, Alpha Flight by Helena Nash



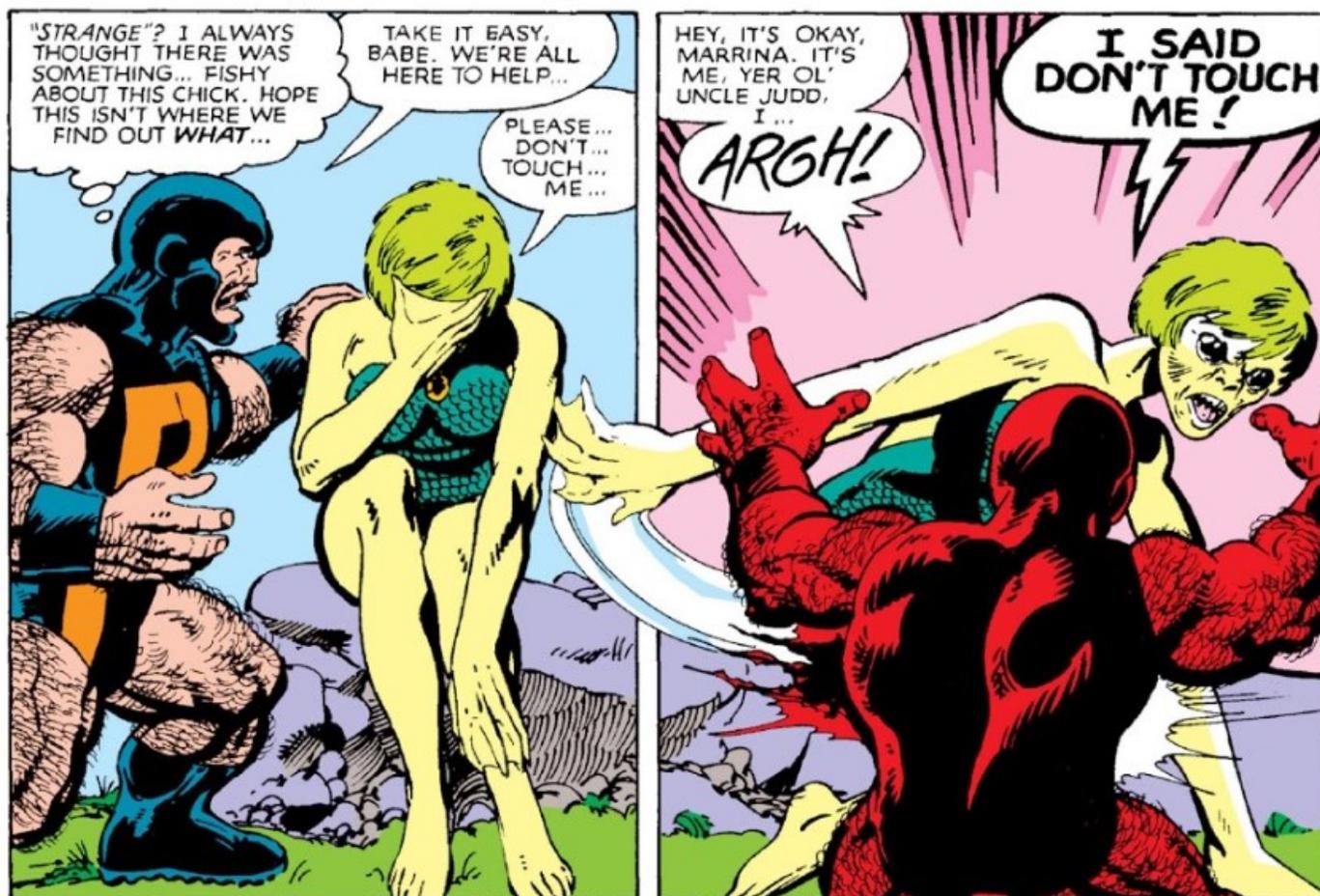
Alpha Flight was Marvel's Canadian super-team book, created by the 1980s *X-Men* dream team of writer Chris Claremont and artist John Byrne, himself a British-born Canadian. The team, tasked with forcibly retrieving errant "Department H" super operative Wolverine, premiered in an issue of *X-Men* (#120, April 1979, "Wanted! Wolverine: Dead or Alive!") during Byrne and Claremont's golden period on that title. We'd already seen Alpha Flight's team leader and maple-leaf flag/battle-suit wearing leader Vindicator in a previous *X-Men* issue (#109, February 1978, "Home are the Heroes!"), under the name Weapon Alpha, and now he was joined by the rest of the team: shapeshifting native demigoddess Snowbird, mutant flying supers-speedster twins Aurora and Northstar, medicine man Shaman (originally to be called Chinook) and his magic pouch of mystic items, and best of all, the towering, hairy, orange bigfoot called Sasquatch – as strong as the Hulk but smarter. The first thing we see Sasquatch do, and really we just see a close-up of two big hairy hands, is chuck a DC-10 aircraft full of X-Men into a hanger. Awesome.



Alpha Flight went on to guest star in other Marvel titles, a *Machine Man* here, a *Contest of Champions* there, and it wasn't long before Byrne was given the chance to write them in their own ongoing title. For myself, in the throes of teenage Marvelmania, I couldn't have been happier. As far as I was concerned, Marvel was the tops and DC, in its pre-Crisis, pre-*Dark Knight*, pre-*Watchmen* doldrums, was the pits (apart from *Teen Titans*). And Marvel team books were the tip of the tops – Claremont and artist Paul Smith were on *X-Men* doing the memorable Brood storyline, Roger Stern was just settling into a long run on *Avengers* that would reach its peak with artist John Buscema and the Masters of Evil saga and Byrne himself was producing an incredible run of mind-blowing adventures over on *Fantastic Four*. So, with Alpha Flight I was kind of expecting Avengers-level threats to “Canada and the world!” mixed in with X-Men/FF-style personal dramas and internal squabbling.

We got both those ingredients in issue #1 (August 1983, “Tundra!”), with the team uniting to battle a mile-high monster made of, well, tundra lumbering out of the Northwest Territories, interspersed with little touches of personal drama (team leader Vindicator, now named Guardian, has just been sacked by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, diminutive team member Puck is underestimated by idiot barflies and team members alike, Northstar gets on everyone's tits and so on). But with issue #2 (September 1983, “Shadows of the Past”), *Alpha Flight* started down a grimmer path strewn with death, disembowelment and outright horror that would never have been giving airplay over on the more popular titles. Sure, in *X-Men* we'd had the death of Phoenix, the parasitic mutant Proteus draining his victims' life forces and people transforming into insectoid Brood, but that sort of trauma was “comic horror.” Over on *Alpha Flight* we got real, actual injuries that put our heroes in hospital, and that wasn't the worst of it.

In issue #2, new team member Puck, a short guy with absolutely no superpowers, magical abilities or funky battle suit, gets his guts torn out by fellow new member Marrina, a sort of big-eyed sea lady. They'd both only been in the team for less than one issue and now one was raking out the other's stomach with heretofore unseen claws and an 'orrible fangy grimace on her now-feral face. We didn't actually



see the intestines and guts spilling out, but it was more than adequately conveyed in the dialogue and faces of their horrified teammates. So that was Puck, disemboweled and in hospital for many issues, while Marrina swam off to rendezvous with the Roger Delgado-like Master of the World, an immortal mastermind living at the North Pole who, we later discovered, had his head surgically fused to his cybernetic control helmet, a fact brought home in all its meaty glory when Puck later ripped the Master's helmet off, effectively scalping him.

The team effectively broke up at this point, or at least failed to get together again for many issues. Which kind of made sense, since they didn't have a base apart from Guardian and wife Heather's house, didn't have any means of jetting around (Sasquatch had to cadge a lift off one of his flying teammates)

and were scattered all over Canada. Well at least they knew where to find Puck . . .



Then there was Deadly Ernest in issue #7 (February 1984, "The Importance of Being Deadly"), a former WWI soldier who'd rejected Death's touch in the mustard gas-soaked trenches and been cursed/blessed with his own touch of death, which he proceeded to use on Northstar's old friend/mentor/lover Raymonde, while perviving over Northstar's multiple personality-disordered sister Aurora. Ernest notably and graphically met his end in the next issue by being sliced up into about a dozen segments – in a single panel – by the masked vigilante Nemesis, whose face was so horrific that we never got to see it, though Northstar's shocked reaction was enough.

In issue #7's back-up story, we learnt that Snowbird, perhaps the most powerful member of the team, was the child of a northern

native goddess and a hapless archaeologist who'd been "spirited away" for a night of celestial lovin', a night which turned out to be nine years long. In a clever stroke of time-jumping, it transpired that Snowbird's unwitting baby-father had already been seen in *Alpha Flight's* very first issue, wizened and quite insane, proving that a night of passion with a goddess ain't all it's cracked up to be. Snowbird herself had problems, not the least of which was her tendency to go native whenever she shapeshifted to some animal form like a wolverine or polar bear, necessitating someone to hastily talk her down with a bit of shapeshifter mindfulness therapy.

Issue #9 (April 1984, "Things Aren't What They Always Seem") gave us a Sasquatch solo story in a remote research station, where scientists were beaten, burnt and strangled to death in a spooky stalk-and-slasher that had echoes of John Carpenter's *The Thing*, which is ironic as it seemed a lot like the Fantastic Four's Thing might be responsible for the murders. Or was the killer the Human Torch, or Mr. Fantastic? I won't spoil the big reveal, but dedicated Marvelmaniacs should be able to guess the answer.



With issue #23 (June 1985, “Night of the Beast”), we got another hero death. This time John Byrne yanked the carpet out from under our feet by pulling an “everything you know about this hero is wrong” move by forcing us to look again at their origin and asking a very basic question which I won't reveal here, but is something to do with the color green, or the lack thereof. In flipping this character from hero to villain, Byrne's artwork cleverly morphs their face into a terrible, savage grin, transforming a well-loved (by me anyway) cuddly Chewbacca of a hero into a bestial, hairy horror. Okay, it was Sasquatch.

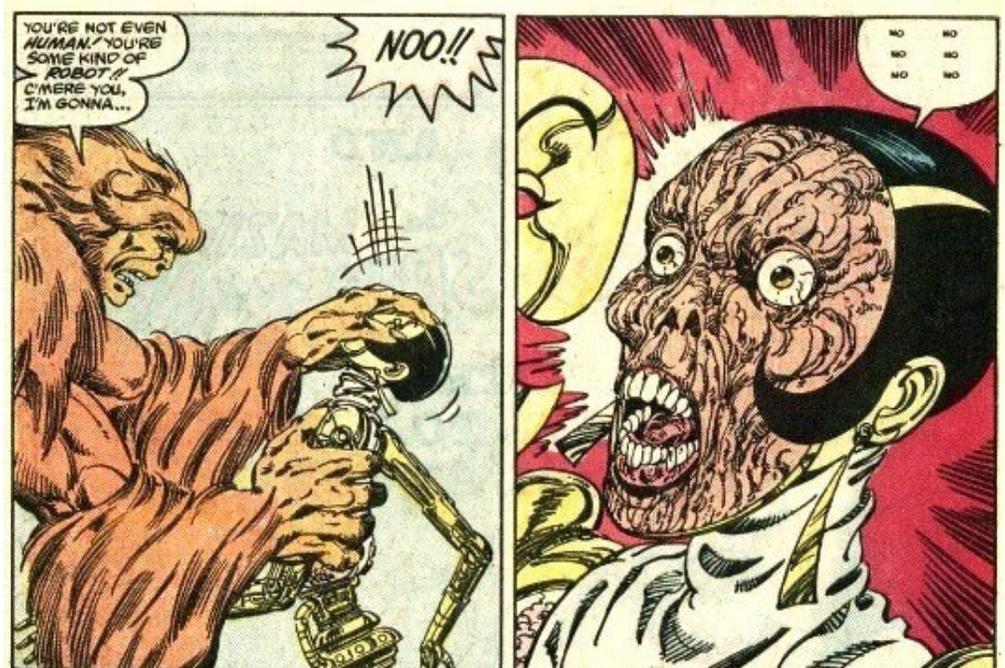
And do they rescue him? No, of course not, this is Alpha Flight. Snowbird turns into a white Sasquatch and tears his heart out. Fortunately, after a mind-bending trip in issue #24 (July 1985, “Final Conflict”) to the other dimensional realm of the Great Beasts (a fantastically visualized pantheon of indigenous Canadian elder gods), Sasquatch's soul is handily transplanted into the vacant Box battle suit, a bulky suit of armor built by paraplegic inventor and onetime Omega Flight member Roger Bochs (get it? Told you we'd get back to him). Hurrah, Sasquatch is saved! Except he's not really. He's now trapped in – as – a suit of armor and can't feel anything, which proves to be something of a passion-killer for his high-maintenance lady friend, Aurora.

But we have no time to ponder the horrific consequences of being a human intelligence consigned to life inside a machine before Byrne pulls another shock revelation on the readers in the very next issue (*Alpha Flight* #25, August 1985). Remember team leader Guardian who was killed so ignominiously back in issue #12? Well, he's back! And it turns out that, in an amazing twist, he wasn't blown up at all, but rather thrown through time and space and rescued by kindly aliens. This couldn't have been a more clichéd way of undoing something as major as a hero's death, and while I'd been initially upset by Guardian's demise, I had come to accept it over the last year. So, this new 'miraculous reappearance' development felt cheap, and lazy and . . . wrong. But I shouldn't have been worried; there was more to the hero's return than initially met the eye. Byrne knew what he was doing and was clearly as contemptuous of such facile twists as his readers. I won't spoil it, but it's a good one.



Back to Sasquatch-now-Box, who'd been emotionally blackmailed by Aurora to seek out a proper flesh and blood body so they could get back to having intimate relationships. This prompted a final 28th issue from John Byrne where Sasquatch's soul gets sent off to an interdimensional crossroads to possess the large, powerful and all but mindless body that they've located. It turns out to be the rampaging Hulk, who proceeds to tear the Box armor limb from limb and kick the team's collective bottoms. Oh, and Sasquatch's soul? It just drifted off into the interdimensional ether. Hey, it's *Alpha Flight*.

This is where John Byrne's all-too brief run on *Alpha Flight* ended as he traded art and writing roles with the team currently working on *The Incredible Hulk*, writer Bill Mantlo and soon-to-be *Hellboy* superstar Mike Mignola. The series would continue well into the 1990s under a variety of writers and artists, notably penciller Jim Lee before he set the comics world alight with his art on *X-Men* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. And while there would be plenty more death and destruction for Canada's greatest heroes, they would



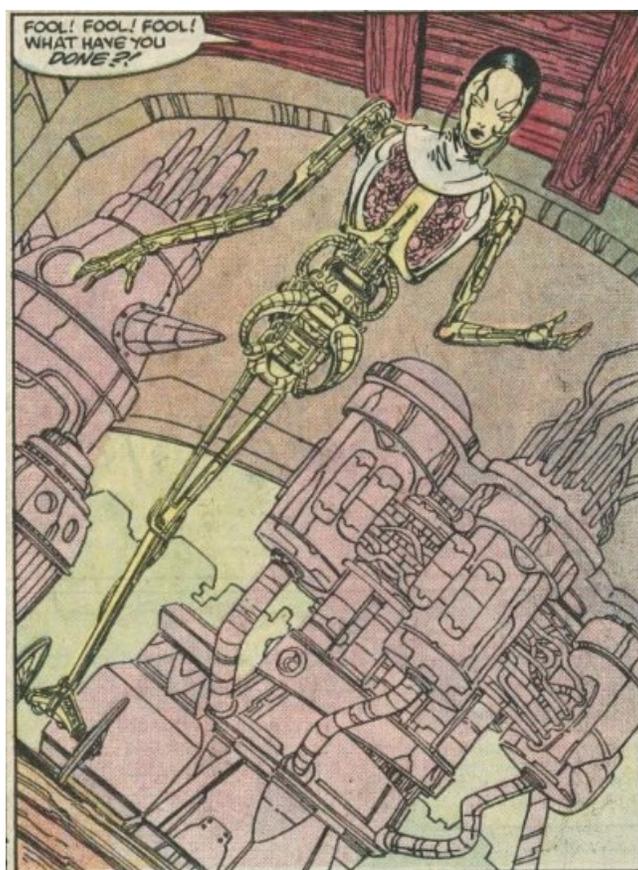
never reach the heights of that first run. Many of the later creators seemed to have failed to grasp the lessons of the earlier issues, and lacking Byrne's originality and drive to undercut comic tropes, undid his good work bit by bit . . .

Puck, it turned out, wasn't just a heroic adventurer who overcame the daily physical pain of being born with dwarfism, but was in fact a six-foot tall near immortal with an Arabian sorcerer imprisoned inside his own body. And remember how Guardian had died in issue #12 and then came back but didn't really in issue #25? Well, now he really was back, and Byrne's purposely subversive "saved by aliens" cover story turned out to be "true after all." Tch.

You thought Aurora and Northstar were good old-fashioned mutants? Nah, now they were apparently fairies all along. Actual Asgardian fairies which, it was somewhat problematically suggested, was the real reason for Aurora's multiple personality disorder (rather than the original reason that she was being abused by nuns as a child), while Northstar's (strongly hinted at HIV-positive) health problems turned out to be his fairy (fairy, get it?) body being incompatible with the mortal plane. Oh, and Heather Hudson, Guardian's wife, eventually got her very own battle suit, despite having signaled fairly convincingly in the Byrne-era that no way would she ever dress up in the flag and fly around punching bad guys. Because as every comic troper knows, you hang around with superheroes long enough, eventually you get powers of your own (see Rick Jones, sidekick and partner of the Hulk, Captain America, Captain Marvel, and – ahem – ROM the Space Knight).

I'll always wonder what John Byrne might have gone on to do with Alpha Flight if he'd stuck around, but maybe he'd told all the stories he'd wanted to tell and thought it best to move on before he got stale.

Suggested Reading: X-Men volume 1, #109, #120 and Alpha Flight volume 1, #1-28.





***Doom Patrol*: How a Bunch of Broken, Cast-Off, Foul-Mouthed Superheroes Captured My Heart. A Review by John Purcell**

Okay . I completely understand and accept that I have come late to the *Doom Patrol* party, since the series started in 2019 and recently finished its second season as I write this. Lots of my science-fiction friends have been raving about this show, so shortly after finally buying a large-screen television – a Vizio 50” HD TV with loads of shows available through HBOMax, Amazon Prime, and so on down the line – this past June, Valerie and I spent an afternoon skimming movie and show titles both new and old to load into our watch list. Lo and behold, *Doom Patrol* was listed as available for free on HBOMax, so we dutifully added it to the list. We didn’t get around to start watching it until late July 2020, well into our coronavirus self-isolation period (which is still ongoing, duh!), and immediately began to understand why our raving lunatic friends were raving over the lunacy of the show.

This is because *Doom Patrol* has taken the comic-book superhero trope and warped it completely out of recognition while still enabling the audience to not only pull for these characters, but personally identify with each of them as individuals. The way I look at it, the *Doom Patrol* team is essentially DC’s counterpunch to the Marvel Comic Universe’s very popular X-Men superhero team. The *Doom Patrol* could be described as a very wrong, seriously damaged, X-Men parody superhero team. While the individual X-Men have some bad personal issues, each member of the *Doom Patrol* has ratcheted up the “issues” dial and buried the needle at 11 to the power of 10. They are, one and all, truly fucked-up individuals. In fact, everybody in the *Doom Patrol* has an attitude problem, especially Jane, who has 64 of them. Perhaps the best way to meet these . . . er, um . . . “superheroes” is to run through brief character descriptions of each of the primary characters. Maybe then it will be apparent why *Doom Patrol* the series works so well. [After each description is the name of the actor who plays that character.]

Niles Caulder/Chief: Dr. Xavier on a budget or limited access to necessary materials, Niles is a brilliant scientist and inventor, a fatherly figure to these accidental creations of his, but is literally a real father figure to the most unlikely child superhero of all time, his daughter Dorothy. The parallels to Dr. Xavier are obvious, but Niles Caulder is not exactly the benevolent leader and teacher of this Doom Patrol group that he appears to be; this group reluctantly bonds together because they are all the not-too-successful results of experiments to find immortality by Dr. Caulder. The back story of Caulder is lengthy and complex, and as one watches the show, each episode reveals more intriguing information that explains why Niles Caulder exists in terms of how, why, and when he is who he is. Niles Caulder is an extraordinarily well-developed character central to the ongoing storyline, and an unwilling, unexpected foible for all his creations. [Timothy Dalton]

Dorothy Spinner /Caulder: Introduced toward the end of the first season, Dorothy is Niles's daughter from literally a cave woman who saved Niles from death in the frozen Yukon in the late nineteenth century (watch the first few episodes to get the full story). Dorothy's character is fascinating to watch develop. In my view, she is far and away the best character in this series. While Cliff Steele seems to dominate each episode – well, when you're a massive robot that tends to happen – the others are strong in their own ways, perhaps none of them are as unique as Dorothy. She may be a child, but she is growing up before everybody's eyes, and it is a revelation to realize Dorothy's humanness despite her hybridness. If you have ever been a parent to a young girl maturing into young womanhood, you should understand what I mean. At least I hope you do. This is a great character. [Abigail Shapiro]

Cliff Steele/Robotman: Cliff is an aging, fat, and classless stock car race driver with all sorts of problems: besides his attitude, which sucks, he's crass, crude, often clueless, and killed his family – or so he thinks – in a car accident (of all things). Cliff's vocabulary consists of using a certain four-letter word a LOT, in addition to other assorted colorful metaphors. At first this character remains static and aloof, much in character with his being a formerly famous race driver's brain stuck in a gigantic metallic robot body. During the second season, viewers begin to see Cliff as the father figure he has always wanted to be and actually wishes he could have been if he hadn't been such a jerk. Again, his backstory drives this character's development. In this way Cliff identifies with Crazy Jane a lot because he sees himself as a father to her, and also to Niles' daughter, Dorothy. Then when his own daughter Claire comes into the scene . . . quite the plot development. [Brendan Fraser and Riley Shanahan]

Crazy Jane/ Kay, et al: This young lady has the most issues of any of these characters, and thus has a serious attitude problem – 64 strong mental/emotional attitudes, to be exact, and each one has a specific superpower. Let me start by stating Jane is not this person's real name: that's Kay, and this is the genesis of Crazy Jane. As a child, Kay was brutally abused by her asshole father, forcing her to survive by inventing a plethora of alternate identities with powers in order to cope with specific traumas Kay experienced while growing up under this man's heels. One of these is Crazy Jane. Jane is definitely my favorite character of *Doom Patrol* because of the extraordinary depth of this character, and how these multiple levels of pain plus accommodation are displayed by all the background actresses who portray all of these tormented inner beings. By far, the lead actress for Crazy Jane has to be incredibly detailed and nuanced, especially in dealing with Cliff's attempts at being a father figure to her; Jane's instinct is to rebel and repulse those attempts, besides not allowing Cliff or anybody else to get emotionally close to her. The inner awakenings of Crazy Jane as the episodes progress are amazing to watch. This actress deserves awards. Many of them. [Diane Guerrero]

Victor Stone/Cyborg: Victor Stone is a traditional superhero named Cyborg, built not by Niles Caulder, but surgically saved from death by Victor's mega-brilliant computer scientist father, Silas Stone, who was a former colleague of Niles Caulder at the Ant Farm, a super-secret, underground national security agency. This, by the way, is yet another backstory that provides a lot of angst/revenge/bad karma vibes between Niles and Silas, which creates a convoluted paternal conflict for Victor. On top of that, Victor's

internal conflict is that he is the cause of the lab accident that killed his mother and resulted in his own serious injuries. Silas physically rebuilds his son as Cyborg out of “love,” but with literally built-in caveats that can control Victor’s behavior, which adds still another level to the traditional father-son conflict. The angst is so strong in Victor that he becomes a *real* superhero who saves normal people in danger thanks to the enhanced cyborg abilities his father surgically implanted in Victor’s body. The upshot is that here we have a twenty-something young man with severe personal and parental problems, and then Victor falls in love with a young ex-black ops woman named Roni, whose own backstory is painful and worthy of a more major role in the show. Victor/Cyborg is a solid character whose slow development in the show’s first season needs to be pushed more strongly in the third season. Based on what happens in season two between Roni and Victor, this would be a welcome addition to an already strong storyline. So what if Roni is dead? That hasn’t stopped anybody else in this show! [Joivan Wade]

Rita Farr/Elasti-Girl: Rita is an ageless cinema star of the classic 1940s to early 1950s mold. And brother, is her backstory a doozy! Her beauty is maintained by keeping in check her hideous transformation into a massive amorphous blob. When in control of this blob, Rita is essentially a version of the Elastic Woman – and by the way, Rita drinks a lot of martinis. How all this came about is shown over the course of the first half-dozen season one episodes, and when viewers finally get to the actual reason why Rita’s self-doubt exist, and her incessant need to be loved as the center of attention drives off her compatriots, all is understood. Rita’s inner demon is her own sense of self-worth. I think everybody goes through a stretch of life where they constantly seek acceptance for who they really are and self-medicate through excessive drinking. Rita Farr’s desire is to be on stage and screen, remembered as an undying late-night movie queen whose ageless beauty is rerun every week. Even though she is constantly embroiled in an internal war with her mother, Rita begins to open up about it to others, mostly Larry and Cliff, even tries to be a mother-figure for Dorothy, all the while trying to remain faithful to Niles. But the key relationship in her new life is the horribly disfigured Larry Trainor. That should not be surprising since his disfigurement is physically caused, and Rita’s is internally generated. Sort of. Watch season one to find out what I mean. [April Bowlby]

Larry Trainor/Negative Man: In the early 1960s, Larry Trainor is the US Air Force’s number one X-15 test pilot destined to join the Mercury astronaut team, who is not quite killed in a horrific crash of the X-15 when in 1961 he flew the plane into an energy being floating just outside of earth’s atmosphere. This energy being inhabited Captain Trainor’s body at that precise moment, causing the X-15 to plummet earthward in a fiery crash, but miraculously Larry Trainor survived because of this alien energy being cohabiting his body. Burned and irradiated beyond recognition, Trainor is classified as “deceased” to keep secret the reality that he is confined to this secret base – does the name Ant Farm sound familiar? - where this extraterrestrial radiation being is being “examined” for possible use as a weapon. Compounding this military secret is a personal secret that Trainor has been hiding from his superiors and family (he’s married with children) because he is a national hero, let alone the fact that he wants to



be an astronaut in the worst way: he's gay. His male lover is actually on Trainor's support team that outfits the X-15. The knowledge of their homosexuality in 1961 would have blown everybody's future up in flames. The crash of the X-15 is a brutal metaphor for the complete destruction of the man known as Larry Trainor. This extensive backstory lays the groundwork for some brilliant future episodes in the series: his personal battle to come to grips with his sexuality, dealing with his surviving family, acknowledging and accepting his old Air Force lover, John Bowers, as a crucial piece of his life . . . and so on. I see Trainor as perhaps the most emotionally complex member of the Doom Patrol. Amazingly, while dealing with all of these issues with Rita Farr's companionship and empathy guiding him, Larry and Rita form a unique relationship that constantly grows stronger, which adds even more complexity to an already emotional roller coaster ride of a show. The scenes where Trainor faces his aged surviving son and confesses his homosexuality to him is a powerful television moment. [Matt Bomer]

Mr. Nobody/Eric Morden: Let's face it: there cannot be a superhero show without a super villain. For *Doom Patrol*, that is Mr. Nobody. This is the primary nemesis of the first season, masterfully portrayed by Alan Tudyk (you might remember him as Wash, the smart-mouthed pilot of the spaceship *Serenity* in *Firefly*) in an eccentric over-the-top performance. Tudyk obviously had a lot of fun playing this role. He is not a very deep character at first glance, but as the show goes along it becomes apparent that all he has ever craved in life is acceptance not only for his intellect, but as a man. Yes, there is emotional damage he deals with on a personal level not only from his wife, but his boss as well. This comes out in the first few episodes of season one, so do start watching the show from the beginning. One final comment about Mr. Nobody: he has a grudging admiration for Niles Caulder, and – not surprisingly – as the show progresses, Morden and Caulder begin to recognize each other's abilities. Well, why not play around with archetypes? All the other characters in this show are messed up, so the show's creators and writers might as well mess up the antagonist. [Alan Tudyk]

No program is complete without secondary characters. In the majority of television series that have aired over the years, most secondary characters seem crafted out of cardboard and sheetrock to be painted up and displayed as simple background for the primary characters. Not so with *Doom Patrol*. These secondary characters – notably Claire Steele (Cliff's daughter), Silas Stone, then there's a character called the Mesmerizer, plus Flex Mentallo (this guy has to be seen to be believed), Willoughby Kipling (a drunk Merlin figure), and Danny the Street and its (his?) citizens – are as complex, interesting, and entertaining as the main cast. There are literally levels upon levels of things going on all over the place in *Doom Patrol* that keeps the show interesting with unexpected developments and twists. The writers and producers of this show have so much material to work with that they could keep the show running for ten more years. There are times when I suspect a group writing session goes something like this:

Writer 1: "What would happen if a robot got high on ecstasy?"

Writer 2: "I don't know, but why not? We could do that!"

Producer: "Then do it!"

Brandon Fraser: "Say what?"

Overall, the chemistry between every single actor involved in this series is phenomenal, and as a viewer, I get the distinct feeling that all of these people have developed a serious affection not only for their characters, but for each other as colleagues, and this rapport shows. The result is a stupendously entertaining show, and viewers are having a difficult time waiting for the third season to air: the release date has not been announced, and the COVID-19 pandemic has likely put the kibosh on production. If we are lucky, maybe late summer 2021 is the earliest possible release date.

It will take a superhuman effort to endure the wait. Until then, we are all doomed. At least we can re-watch the first two seasons to refresh our memories. That will be fun.



"We Who Are About to Die!" Strikeforce: Morituri

by Helena Nash

It wasn't easy to find out about - or even be aware of - new comics if you were a teenager in the 80s. The local newsagents round my way generally stocked only one copy of the most popular Marvel and DC titles, so best of luck of to you if someone else had got there first and swiped the only *West Coast Avengers* or *Justice League of America*; the newsagent was no place to discover the more obscure new comics. For that, you needed an actual specialist comic shop or comic mart, a well-informed fanzine, or a mail-order service. UK magazines like Dez Skinn's *Comics International* weren't published until 1990, and classy American comics mag *Wizard* didn't hit these shores until 1991. So, there was a lot of potluck involved in discovering a new comic, especially if it was outside the mainstream and unlikely to appear in the newsagent alongside *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Detective Comics*. By the mid-80s I'd started getting some comics sent to me once a month by a mail order company; it was the only way to guarantee getting the slightly less popular (or direct market only) comics that I was into at the time like Marvel's *Alpha Flight*, *Ka-Zar the Savage* and the New Universe's *D.P. 7*.

A bit like getting an Amazon parcel today, there was a certain minor thrill about receiving an anonymous, slim cardboard package in the post, and not being quite sure what might be inside (I could never guarantee that what I'd ordered the previous month, typed out painstakingly on my dad's old Hermes typewriter, would actually appear in the subsequent parcel). And alongside the individually bagged comics, they would also send a crudely photocopied black-and-white catalog (read: stapled together pamphlet) of forthcoming titles from across the spectrum of American publishers: Marvel, DC, First, Pacific, Dark Horse, and so on, which the mail order folks must have cribbed from preview publications like *Marvel Age* or Diamond Comic Distributor's *Previews*. The catalog consisted of short, tantalizing summaries of individual issues, much like a TV listing, very rarely accompanied by a small blobby reproduction of the comic cover. Without the full-color, read-the-first-few-pages, download-the-first-issue-for-free easy access of today's online publishing world, the catalog was all very mysterious. There was just enough to tempt, but really all you had to go on was the short promotional blurb. And so it was that I came across the precis for *Strikeforce: Morituri*:

"The planet has been invaded by a race of marauding space-faring nomads who have settled in the Southern hemisphere and are callously milking Earth dry . . . a super-powered team of champions appears, and in a heroic self-sacrificing battle delivers the aliens their first major defeat! . . . The fame and glory that is theirs can also be yours! . . . But there is a price for such a decision, and that price is your life. Twelve months after you acquire your superpowers, you will die." (*Marvel Age* #45, December 1986)

I didn't know what "Morituri" meant, but it sounded Japanese, so at first I figured that they might be some sort of super samurai ninja types. But that wasn't what hooked me – it was the bit about them being about to die, that they'd chosen to trade their lives for superpowers. That was something new to me. I mean sure, I'd read about heroes laying down their lives before (most recently both Supergirl and the Flash in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*) in the line of duty, and of course landmark deaths earlier in the 80s like *The Death of Captain Marvel* and *X-Men's Dark Phoenix Saga*. But people who knew, absolutely 100% knew, that by getting superpowers they were going to die? Within a year? Wow. I added *Strikeforce: Morituri* to my mail order list and some weeks later issue #2 arrived in the post. In that issue, the neophyte volunteers manifest their powers for the first time, not in battle with the alien enemy but in a "danger room with the safety features disabled" called the Garden, which nearly kills them all. I was hooked and managed to track down issue #1 by rifling through second-hand boxes at the Westminster Comic Mart.

So, we have the story's premise: In the near future, a defenseless planet Earth has been invaded by savage aliens. A handful of young volunteers become superheroes to drive them off, only in doing so they are doomed to die within the year. What a great hook.

Just to be clear – the so-called called Morituri process, which grants superpowers and turns our barely-out-of-their-teens central characters into planet-wide celebrities, doesn't kill them after twelve months. It kills them within twelve months of getting their powers. It's that "uncertainty within the certainty" that adds a terrific, nail-biting sense of jeopardy to every issue of *Strikeforce: Morituri*. The heroes and the readers never know when somebody's time is up.

As the reader soon discovers (in issue #4, as it happens), some of them don't even get to the halfway point, and we later discover that two of the original guinea pigs for the process didn't even make it out of the Garden alive. One later volunteer doesn't survive his first mission before melting in front of his teammates' eyes. Well, it is called the Morituri process, tellingly taken from the oath reputedly worn by Roman gladiators before fighting to their deaths: "*Ave Caesar Morituri te salutant*", or "Hail Caesar, we who are about to die salute you".



Over the next thirty-one issues, the reader follows an everchanging cast of characters as they fight and die standing against the alien Horde, each facing their imminent mortality in their own way.

So, while on the surface *Strikeforce: Morituri* looks like a superhero comic, it's really not; this is a war story. And unlike many ongoing superhero comics of the time, the Morituri characters evolve emotionally in response to the extreme situations they are placed in, growing and developing in what might now be called their personal journeys (much like another 1980s Marvel war series, *The 'Nam*). Though in keeping with the comic's premise that anyone could die at any time, many never reach a neat conclusion to their individual arcs, instead often expiring messily with matters left unresolved, just as in the real world.

There are shockingly untimely deaths, heroic sacrifices, and blossoming romances. We meet the second, third, and fourth generations of Morituri, each signing on to replace their ultimately doomed predecessors. We see the monstrous results of what happens when the Morituri process goes wrong, and what lengths some heroes and villains will go to achieve their ends. It's a story as much about hope and love as it is about courage in the face of death. For me, that's what makes it a comic that rises above the depressing concept of "everybody dies in the end."

One of the unique aspects of *Strikeforce: Morituri* is how each character faces their impending death, which rarely falls back on simplistic cliché. Some accept their fate with equanimity, committing their hopes and fears to diary entries or trusting in their religious beliefs. Others transform from shy nerds into grim death commandos who seem to lose their humanity as their powers increase and their life ex-

pectancy decreases, simply intent on selling their lives for the greatest possibly damage inflicted on the enemy (one dying hero spectacularly bows out by blowing himself - and an orbiting alien mothership - to smithereens). Still others never stop fighting to find a way to cheat death.



A bit like violent hyper-sport stories in *The Running Man*, *The Hunger Games*, and 2000 AD's *Harlem Heroes*, the volunteers' heroically brief lives are celebrated by the general populace: they're gladiators, rock stars, and Hollywood darlings all in one. Their *raison d'être* is as much about being figureheads and propaganda tools as it is about being living superweapons. In one issue, they meet the actors who portray the Strikeforce on TV in fictionalized drama-soaps, thus the series anticipates the real world's reality TV shows by a couple of decades.

One great aspect of the comic is the care and attention that writer Peter B. Gillis and artist Brent Anderson lavished on their antagonists, the rapacious Horde. Several issues spotlight the internal tensions in their feudal, brutal society, often following the machinations and rise to power of a cunning Horde advisor, the brilliantly named Gentle Inquirer: an alien Cardinal Richelieu not above engaging in psychological warfare and low-down dirty trickery to get what he wants. We also discover that the Horde's transition into a feared space-going race was a result of them brutally slaughtering the peaceful explorers who once visited their planet and then stealing their spaceships, figuring out how they work (more or less) and taking off into space to nick more stuff from other planets, like Vikings coming across a flying saucer.

The Horde can't be bothered with actually invading and occupying Earth; that's too much like hard work. Instead they repeatedly swoop down out of orbit, slaughter and pillage with gay abandon and then take off again, leaving mass destruction in their wake, chopping off heads, throwing live captives out into low-orbit space to burn up in re-entry, and generally behaving abominably. Tall, gangly bipeds with distressingly testicular throat-sacs, each individual member of the Horde is physically more powerful than your average human, and collectively display a bloody *joie-de vivre* when it comes to blasting innocent humans to bits. With their love of wearing worthless Earth trinkets like Mickey Mouse ears and "Death from Above" badges, there's a darkly comic 2000 AD-like feel to the bombastic Horde. They're loud, violent, and literally trashy.

To drive home the point that they "are not like us," the Horde speech balloons have their own angular typeface, a little reminiscent of the hieroglyphs used in contemporary 'alien invasion' TV show *V*, which translated into distinctively Horde-English language, as seen in issue #11:

Hordian: So, the hunting pack comes for your spawners in your weird bad attachment to them and so peril your pack's fulsomeness!



I still use “weird bad” to describe something both unusual and self-detrimental.

Writer Peter B Gillis had already worked on several of Marvel's less-popular ongoing series like the final issues of *New Defenders* Volume 1 and *Micronauts* Volume 2, both of which were somewhat downbeat affairs (especially *New Defenders*, which ended in issue #152 with half the team turned to ash). *Strikeforce: Morituri* was an original creation of Gillis', alongside artist Brent Anderson, who had earlier worked on *Ka-Zar the Savage* and the graphic novel *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*.

Gillis' writing style shared similarities with more well-known Marvel scribes. Like the X-Men's Chris Claremont, he excelled at world-building and developing emotionally rich characters from all walks of life and corners of the globe, with an admirable gender balance in his cast. And like 80s workhorse Bill Mantlo (*Micronauts*, *Alpha Flight*, *Hulk*, *ROM: Spaceknight*, etc), he often spiced up his stories with elements of body horror, the mortality of main characters and heroic sacrifice.

Anderson's artistic strength lies in his ability to draw realistic, distinctive characters with a range of body language and facial expressions, something which the house style at Marvel, for all its reassuringly clean lines and bombastic dynamism, sometimes lacked. The Morituri and their supporting human cast had big noses and flat chests, weak chins, and worried brows, while individual Hordians could seem pompous, submissive, or sly.

The artwork wasn't all that great though. Anderson couldn't draw second-generation Morituri Toxyn's curly blonde hair to save his life, and the Strikeforce costumes were generally forgettable affairs, lacking the simplicity and strong colors of mainstream superhero outfits. There were lots of epaulets and bits of braid, puffy slashed sleeves, and secondary colors. Once again, Toxyn comes out particularly bad in this, with a fussy green and brown outfit which is instantly forgettable. Only Radian with his simple black-and-white outfit, the forearms flaring out into striking cones to facilitate his energy powers, has a strong individual look. That and his Tom Selleck mustache.

Much like Marvel's top-selling *X-Men* at the time, *Strikeforce: Morituri* placed great emphasis on equality, steering well clear of the gender bias prevalent in many other comics. Three of the six original Morituri heroes were women, and while that first group seemed predominantly white and American, later generations of heroes

were far more international in origin, as befitted a united-Earth milieu. The actual process of creating a varied cast for the series isn't clear, but there's a great tongue-in-cheek short feature in issue #13 called "How Peter & Brent Create (And Destroy) Strikeforce Morituri," which depicts both writer and artist throwing darts at random cards on the wall of their offices to determine a new character's nationality and superpowers. A poster on Gillis's wall depicts celebrated *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont in an Uncle Sam pose with the admirable slogan "Claremont Sez: Is There Any Reason It Can't Be a Woman?."

Gillis and Anderson leave the series with #20 story ". . . Salute You!," a lovely coda which goes right back to one of the comic's first generation of heroes and his diary entries, whilst also saying goodbye to the last surviving member of that first group. It ends on a hopeful note, with a couple of the series' supporting non-Morituri characters mourning the loss of the heroes they've known and lost as they send an SOS signal into deep space.

Arguably, the series should have ended with the departure of its creators, but instead *Strikeforce: Morituri* was handed over to writer James D. Hudnall and a succession of new artists (including later *Ultimate Spider-Man* penciller Mark Bagley) from #21 to the final issue #31. It was a different comic under Hudnall, who chose to tell a story of world-government corruption rather than the struggle for survival against the Horde. He casually introduced a couple of alien *deus ex machinae* to deal both with the threat of the Horde and the Morituri process's in-built mortality limitation, which undercut two of the series' fundamental concepts. After the series ended, he and Bagley followed their run with the five-issue prestige format *Strikeforce: Morituri Electric Undertow*, which moved the story forward ten years (and gave one of the surviving characters an unfortunate Ned Flanders moustache). It was more cyberpunk-with-superpowers than anything, and probably reads better as a standalone story divorced of its markedly different origins in the Gillis/Anderson era.

There's a lot to love about *Strikeforce: Morituri*. The originality of the concept, the rich future world that the creators built, the emotional depth, the constant fear that your favourite character might buy it in the next issue, possibly not even in battle but just (to use an actual example) sitting in a stolen shuttlecraft as the heroes launch into space), and above all the theme of heroic sacrifice with no chance of last minute saves, imaginary stories, clones or acts of cosmic gods to spare the protagonists from their imminent and irrevocable deaths.

It was something of a sleeper series at the time, and in those pre-Internet days, I was quite unaware of anyone else who'd read it, though I've later come across a few fellow *Morituri* fans (*Scarred for Life's* Stephen Brotherstone for one). Ironically, *Strikeforce: Morituri* was the only comic series I never lent to my usual comic-reading friends, the reason being that it was such a great concept for a tabletop role-playing game, and I didn't want to spoil any of the surprises when I got them to roll up their own characters and random superpowers. I still think it's a great idea for a game, and an even better one for an ongoing TV show, but although plans were made for a TV series in 2003 (the SyFy Channel's intended *A Thousand Days*) and a movie in 2011 (produced by Waterman Entertainment), a conflict of rights to the characters between Gillis and Marvel have continued to stymie all attempts to produce a live-action *Morituri* adaptation. A pity, but with the ascendance of high concept 'anyone can die' shows like HBO's *Game of Thrones*, the *Strikeforce* may yet make it onto our screens.

Of all of Marvel's standalone settings, the world of *Strikeforce: Morituri* remains sadly unvisited in the years since. There is a brief mention in 2014's *X-Force* #4, but that's it. Brent Anderson would go on in the 1990s and 21st century to pencil nearly every issue of the acclaimed superhero series *Astro City*, while Peter B. Gillis would arguably never do better than the first twenty issues of *Strikeforce: Morituri*.

Suggested Reading: *Strikeforce: Morituri* #1-20 or as collected as the trade paperbacks *Strikeforce: Morituri* Volumes 1-2.



Venditti and Barrows's *Freedom Fighters: Rise of a Nation*

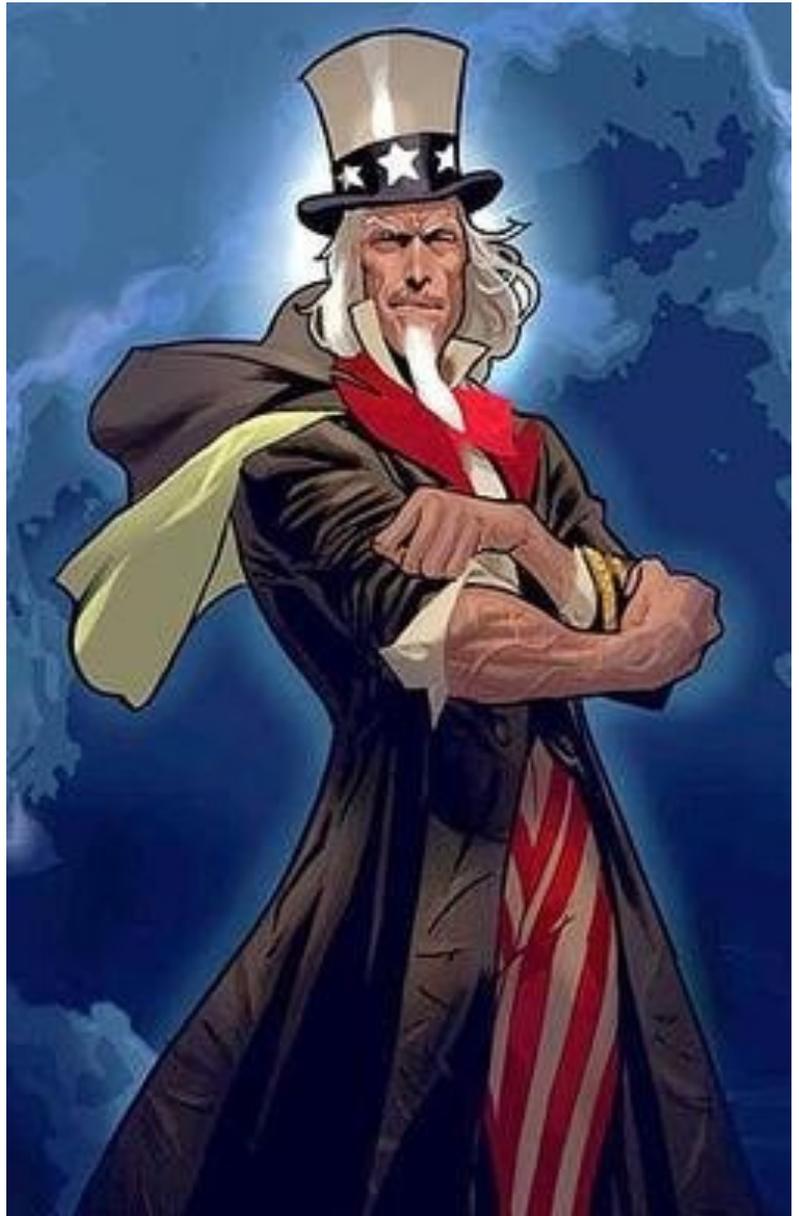
A Review by Chuck Serface

Every few months, certain images cluster on my Facebook newsfeed. You've seen them, of course: memes featuring Captain America, Wonder Woman, and other red-white-and-blue clad figures modeling for us the proper way to punch Nazis. Lean into it! Aim beyond the jaw to maintain your motion! You're representing freedom and democracy, so don't hold back! These heroes rose to prominence during the Golden Age of comics, when the United States was neck-deep in World War II. In 2018, Yoe Books released *Super Patriotic Heroes*, a collection of stories from that time starring these flag-draped figures, and, boy, were there many. The Shield, the Patriot, Major Victory, the Defender, Miss America, and others exploded off the page, each delivering the old one-two to Nazis or any fascists threatening our blessings of liberty.

Most adept at the art of punching, arguably more so than Captain America, is Will Eisner's Uncle Sam who first appeared in *National Comics* #1 (July 1940). My Zeus, when Sam rolled up his sleeves, readers knew it was going to hit the fan for the Third Reich. He's *that* Uncle Sam, the very image seen on US Army recruitment posters, not an imitator cosplaying Uncle Sam, but the real Uncle Sam who appears when his country needs him most. In this sense, he's a blend of King Arthur and Tinkerbell, because not only does he rise during national crises, but additionally our collective belief in democracy and freedom, our hope, fuels his powers and keeps him active, from fading back into the Realm of Ideas. Sam, quite literally, is nothing without the power of the people, much in the way Tinkerbell needs audience participation to stay bright.

Eisner created Uncle Sam and other characters for Quality Comics. Jack Cole's Plastic Man was in this company's stable as well. In 1956, Quality closed shop and sold most of its properties to National Periodicals, now DC. Years later, Len Wein and Dick Dillin reintroduced Uncle Sam and select heroes as the Freedom Fighters for *Justice League of America* #107 (October 1973), making them inhabitants of Earth X, an alternate reality where the Nazis had won World War II. The team included the Human Bomb, the Black Condor, the Phantom Lady, Doll Man, and, yes, their leader – Uncle Sam. Remember those wonderful annual Justice League-Justice Society team-ups during the Silver and Bronze Ages? Those years before *Crisis on Infinite Earths* when multiple Earths existed on different vibrational frequencies? Recently, DC has returned to portraying multiverses, but the concept was truly magnificent back then. Earth 1 was the Justice League's home turf, Earth 2 featured the Justice Society, and the Crime Syndicate reigned over Earth 3. Some Earths were home to heroes from companies DC had purchased, like Earth X (Quality Comics) and Earth S (Fawcett Publications, that brought us the Shazam Family). Complicated but fun!

The Freedom Fighters have morphed through various retcons and reiterations since



1973, including the CW's crossover "Crisis on Earth X," part of their Arrowverse television shows (2017). But now writer Robert Venditti and artist Eddy Barrows have brought the team home, not only physically but thematically, more cleanly so than the Arrowverse presentation, with *Freedom Fighters: Rise of a Nation* (2019-2020). You'd better not bring your kids. Venditti and Barrows pull out all stops with grim imagery, executions, torture, everything you'd expect from a United States firmly ruled by Nazis. Venditti credits Germany's victory to Overman, a superpowered alien whose ship had crash-landed in 1930s Czechoslovakia. Then decades later, the Reich would execute one version of the Freedom Fighters. Then decades later, the Reich would execute one version of the Freedom Fighters. Today, their heirs – the Human Bomb, Doll Woman, the Black Condor, and the Phantom Lady -- commit acts of resistance to fire up the populace, to reignite the hope needed to waken Uncle Sam, who'd slipped back into the Realm of Ideas when German conquest had birthed nationwide despair.



The Fighters inspire people a bit more with each victory, defying the repressive and genocidal regime, at the head of which sit Adolf Hitler's descendants, both reprehensible reflections of their dynastic founder. And, yes, the Fighters get right down to the business of punching Nazis. A shadow of Plastic Man, that other famous Quality product, enters the narrative as well. The terrifying "PlasStic Men" (SS . . . get it?). This is not just a story about punching Nazis, but about punching Nazis to wake up the citizens, to get them working together, hungry for democracy. Uncle Sam, then, represents those hopes and ideals, but he can't manifest the dream alone. He needs us all to fight and sacrifice as well.



While reading this twelve-issue mini-series, I thought about groups operating within the real America, such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and others empowering underrepresented populations. Especially, I considered the Squad: Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressly, and Rashida Tlaib, that bloc within the House of Representatives who have been punching Nazis one way or the other since before their elections. Uncle Sam represents our ideals. So do they. Uncle Sam has risen when his nation needed him the most. So have they. Our united dedication sustains Uncle Sam. Such dedication sustains the Squad and other resisting entities too. These are Venditti's themes, and these are our goals. And you know what? I believe.



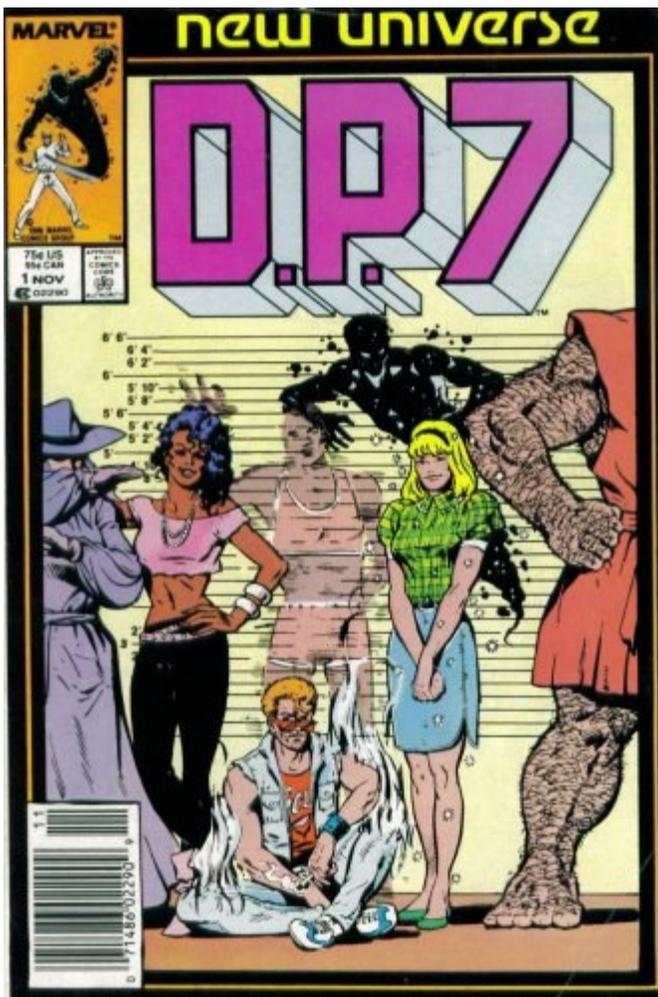


Considerations by Helena Nash

I. D.P.7: The New Universe's Fugitive Non-Team

The D and P in *D.P.7* stands for “Displaced Paranormals,” paranormal being New Universe-speak for person with superpowers. I loved *D.P.7*. It makes a virtue of how very ordinary the main characters are, despite their strange new powers. Everyone comes from low-fi occupations like 'cheese factory worker' and 'fast food manager' and there is a nice nod toward real-life biology and physics with regard to how everyone's powers work. The speedster Blur for example needs to consume an astonishing amount of food to stop his accelerated metabolism from lapsing into a coma (a trope adopted by DC's relaunched Wally West incarnation of *Flash* around the same time), while the hulking strongman Mastodon suffers painful muscle cramps as his hirsute physique develops.

The series tends to favour and spotlight everyman medical student Randy “Antibody” O'Brien, the closest the series has to the stereotype of a blandly handsome, white male lead, and insecure strongman Dave “Mastodon” Landers, for whom increased size and strength is more a curse than a blessing. But individual issues touch on the problems of the other characters, especially mouthy, acid-skinned teenager Scuzz, who can't get intimate with anyone without (literally) scarring them for life, and retired teacher Lenore “Twilight” Fenzl who is both repelled and turned on by the revitalising vampiric effect of her glowing body.



D.P.7 was developed by Marvel's writer/artist team of Mark Gruenwald and Paul Ryan, fresh from their twelve-issue run on *Squadron Supreme*. The first thing they do with the titular septet is send them out on the road for the first 12 issues as they flee from the sinister Clinic for Paranormal Research. Things get both better and more complicated for the DPs by issue #13, with the sinister Clinic director ousted and the paranormals themselves in charge of the day to day running of the place. Like an American high school drama, the residents of the Clinic start to splinter into cliques defined by age, race and gender, eventually spilling out into bloody gang war. Gruenwald and Ryan seemed to thrive on juggling a score or more main and supporting characters every issue.

With the New Universe-wide disaster called the Pitt (see *Star Brand*) upping the stakes and trimming the cast down, the story moves up a couple of gears. This coincides with the title switching to better quality paper as of *D.P.7* #19 and Paul Ryan's artwork really leaps off the page from then on. Events conspire to split the core cast up thereafter, but the individual adventures of the male characters (forcibly drafted into a paranormal platoon of the U.S. Army) and the female characters (assembled into a clandestine CIA unit) continue to entertain and intrigue until the final issue in *D.P.7* #32.

Suggested Reading: *D.P.7* Volume 1 #12-32, though #19 is where the artwork really begins to shine. Sadly, only #1-9 have so far been collected, in the trade paperback *D.P.7 Classic* Volume 1, but individual issues can be tracked down on eBay.

“New Universe was basically a slow-motion train wreck. While each month’s issues were planned to be a snapshot of that month in real time, Gruenwald’s *D.P. 7*’s first 13 issues were a compressed half-year, with a time-jump to catch up with the rest of the storyline.”

[You Don't Read Comics](#)

II. Fantastic Four: Byrne Victims

John Byrne's classic stint as writer/artist of the World's Greatest Comic Magazine was a delightful, inventive romp for Marvel's original super-team. But as demonstrated in Byrne's other title of the time *Alpha Flight*, that didn't mean he wasn't afraid to experiment and push the envelope of what was traditionally considered "acceptable comic fare."

After an extended voyage of exploration through the Negative Zone (including a cool landscape format issue in *Fantastic Four* #252), Sue Richards the Invisible Girl discovers that she is pregnant with her and husband Reed's second child. And like the first time with baby Franklin, the pregnancy does not go well, with Sue suffering painful spasms of negative radiation sickness (health warning: don't get pregnant in the Negative Zone). Reed calls in all of Marvel's big brains in matters atomic (even nasally-challenged Morbius the Living Vampire, and the deranged Dr Octopus). But he's just too late, and Sue loses the baby (*Fantastic Four* #267 "A Small Loss").

Sometime after, the manipulative Hatemonger takes advantage of Sue's grief and brainwashes her into the incredibly powerful, bondage-gear wearing Malice (one of two hero-turned-villain Malices running around the Marvel universe at the time), who almost destroys the rest of the FF before Reed snaps her out of it with some dubious emotional abuse to break the Hatemonger's control. The villain behind the villain is revealed to be the extradimensional Psycho-Man, who the team track to his sub-atomic lair where Sue takes her revenge on him in an off-panel scene accompanied only by the villain's blood-curdling screams. Her innocence forever stolen, she announces that she is no longer the Invisible Girl, but the Invisible Woman (*Fantastic Four* Volume 1 #284).

In the very next issue, Sue's brother the Human Torch meets thirteen-year old super-fan Tommy Hansen, who so wanted to be like his flaming superhero idol that he doused himself in gasoline and set himself on fire. Johnny speaks to the tiny bandaged figure in his hospital bed just before he dies, in a tragic tale of hero worship, loneliness and unintended consequences (*Fantastic Four* Volume 1 #285 "Hero").

Suggested Reading: *Fantastic Four* Volume 1 #267 for "A Small Loss", *Fantastic Four* Volume 1 #280-284 for the Hatemonger/Male/Psycho Man storyline, and *Fantastic Four* Volume 1 #285 for "Hero." But really the entire John Byrne run on FF as writer and artist is essential reading. Start at *Fantastic Four* Volume 1 #232 "Back To The Basics" and work through to #293 "Central City Does Not Answer!." Alternatively, completists with money to spare can get the whole run, plus Byrne-FF appearances in other comics, in *Fantastic Four by John Byrne Omnibus* Volumes 1 and 2.



III. *Teen Titans: The Judas Contract*

The Wolfman/Perez run on *The New Teen Titans* rivals that of the contemporaneous Chris Claremont/John Byrne stint over on *X-Men* for critical praise and reader popularity, mixing far-out comic concepts like their ongoing struggles against the church of Brother Blood with contemporary social issues (drugs, homelessness) and the interpersonal angst of the cast of teen heroes.

Each character has with their emotional baggage to overcome. Cyborg for example frequently broods about the accident that led to his father replacing his missing body parts with cold, unfeeling machinery, even to the point of wanting to die. There's a great scene in *New Teen Titans* #8 where Cyborg meets some young children with prosthetic limbs, who declare his shiny, metallic body parts to be neat. Green-skinned shapeshifter Changeling is haunted by the death of his adoptive mother Rita Farr (Elasti-Girl of the Doom Patrol). Raven constantly struggles to suppress the monstrous half of her nature that she has inherited from her father, the otherworldly demon Trigon. Even happy-go-lucky Starfire (a bronzed bombshell with bubble breasts and enough hair to stuff a settee) has been exiled from her home-world Tamaran. As for team leader Robin, the almost-adult Dick Grayson is kept busy looking out for his damaged teammates, managing a burgeoning romance with Starfire and attempting to somehow get out from under Batman's long shadow.

The single best storyline comes in *Tales of the Teen Titans* #42–44 and *Tales of the Teen Titans Annual* #3 with 'The Judas Contract'. Wolfman and Perez have spent several months introducing new team member Terra, a wide-eyed, bucktoothed young woman with earth moving powers, who is nurtured by the more mature team members and comes to gain the Titans' complete trust. But all is not as it seems, and Terra is revealed to the readers to be a mole, infiltrating the team on the orders of long-time Titans foe Deathstroke the Terminator. Not only is she a spy and a traitor, but she has a worryingly sexual relationship with the ageing Deathstroke, anger management issues and a foul mouth, as this dialogue from *Tales of the Teen Titans* #39 shows:

Terra: Damn them, Terminator. They're sanctimonious do-gooders. I just wanna *kill* 'em all. How much longer do I hafta play this game?

Deathstroke: Until I know all their secrets. By the way kid -- ixnay on the make-up. Cute girl superheroes aren't caught dead in it.

Terra: Yeah. An' damn all cute girl superheroes too.

As well as being psychopathic jailbait, she smokes too. Soon, she and Deathstroke strike, capturing all the Titans apart from Robin (clearly the Wolverine of the team) and hand them over to robed not-Hydra criminals the H.I.V.E. Robin graduates to long pants and adopts the Nightwing identity, coming to the rescue with the help of a new Titan, Jericho (he of the blond perm, sideburns, and puffy sleeves). But in the ensuing battle Terra, falling victim to her own rage and madness, is buried under tons of earth. A heartbroken Changeling, still believing that there's good in her deep down, is left kneeling over her broken, lifeless body.

Suggested Reading: *Tales of the Teen Titans* Volume 1 #42-44 and Annual #3 or trade paperback *New Teen Titans Omnibus* Volume 3 for "The Judas Contract." See also "Who Is Donna Troy?" in *Tales of the Teen Titans* Volume 1 #38 or trade paperback *New Teen Titans Omnibus* Volume 2. And anything drawn by George Perez.



WHY ARE YOU TALKING LIKE THAT, TARA? WHAT DID THE TERMINATOR DO TO YOU?

C'MON, DON'T LET HIM CONTROL YOU. YOU CAN FIGHT HIM!



LISSEN, SCUM-BREATH -- NO ONE CONTROLS ME. NOT SLADE AND CERTAINLY NOT YOU.

I DO WHAT I WANNA DO--



--AN' RIGHT NOW I WANNA WATCH YOU DAMN DO-GOODERS DIE... REAL SLOW AND REAL PAINFUL. GOD, YOU PEOPLE MAKE ME SICK.

YOU GOT ALL THOSE POWERS AND YOU ACT LIKE IT'S YOUR JOB TO HELP EVERY STINKIN' MESSOT WHO'S GOT TROUBLES.

IV. *Squadron Supreme: The Utopia Program*

Squadron Supreme was a twelve-issue Marvel limited series that came out in 1985-1986, predating *Watchmen* by about a year. Written by Mark Gruenwald and (toward the end of its run) drawn by Paul Ryan, it had none of Alan Moore's multi-layered storytelling nor Dave Gibbons' beautifully clean draughtsmanship. But it did ask a few of the same questions, like: Is it safe to hang around superhumans who are in effect walking nuclear reactors? When superhumans fight in most comics, how come nobody gets seriously injured or even dies? What if superheroes really affected the world and how society works? What if some of them decided that leaving ordinary human governments to run the planet just wasn't working out?

The Squadron's origins begin back in *Avengers* #85 in 1971, as both an alternate-Earth version of the villainous Squadron Sinister and as a pastiche of DC's flagship Justice League of America, with alien powerhouse Hyperion modelled on Superman, caped crimefighter Nighthawk on Batman, Doctor Spectrum on Green Lantern and so on. As they sporadically guested in various Marvel titles, more Squadron members would be added to parallel the JLA's evolving line-up. Thus, we had Arcanna for Zatanna, Nuke for Firestorm and so forth. Prior to the limited series, the Squadron's Earth (or at least the USA; like many American comics at the time they rarely made a distinction) had been devastated by an alien super-intelligence (*Defenders* #112-114), leaving society in a very sorry state.

In an ongoing "Marvel Earth" comic (stories set on the world shared by Spider-Man, the Avengers, the X-Men etc), that sort of devastation would have been hand-waved by the start of the next storyline; perhaps an opening page or two showing the heroes clearing up rubble and reporting that the President is back in charge, and then onto the next plot. But given that *Squadron Supreme* is set on an alternate Earth, writer Gruenwald had the opportunity to pretty much do what he wanted with the planet and its greatest heroes over the next twelve issues. And that's just what he does, examining the questions posed earlier as the Squadron look at the world, with its war, crime, disease and death, and decide to use their great powers and resources to make actual, world-changing differences with their so-called "Utopia Program."



Assuming control of the United States, they outlaw guns, get to work on a cure for cancer, institute behavioural modification on criminals and introduce cryogenic 'hibernaculum' chambers for those with incurable conditions. At first, the Utopia Program is a success, even if some of the Squadron's members don't seem to be fully on board with the 'benevolent dictatorship' approach that they have imposed on society. Things go bad when one of the team uses the behaviour modification device to 'fix' the attitude of his romantic partner after a disagreement, turning her into a clingy, lovelorn puppy. Another discovers that his nuclear powers have had life-changing effects on his close family, while others quit the team in disillusionment and disgust.

Things come to a head in the final issue when former teammate Nighthawk and his Redeemers (a scratch band of renegade heroes, untried newbies and desperate villains) confront the Squadron, demanding that they step down and dismantle the quasi-fascistic "utopia." A calm and civilised discussion does *not* ensue. Instead the most lethal super-team battle in the history of comics to date takes place in what is effectively a model for the famous 'airport fight' in the movie *Captain America: Civil War*. Hearts are stopped, heads are caved in, backs are broken and chests are impaled. By the end of the issue seven major characters are dead and the dream of a utopian society has died with them. It's a brutal and brilliantly tragic finale to the series.

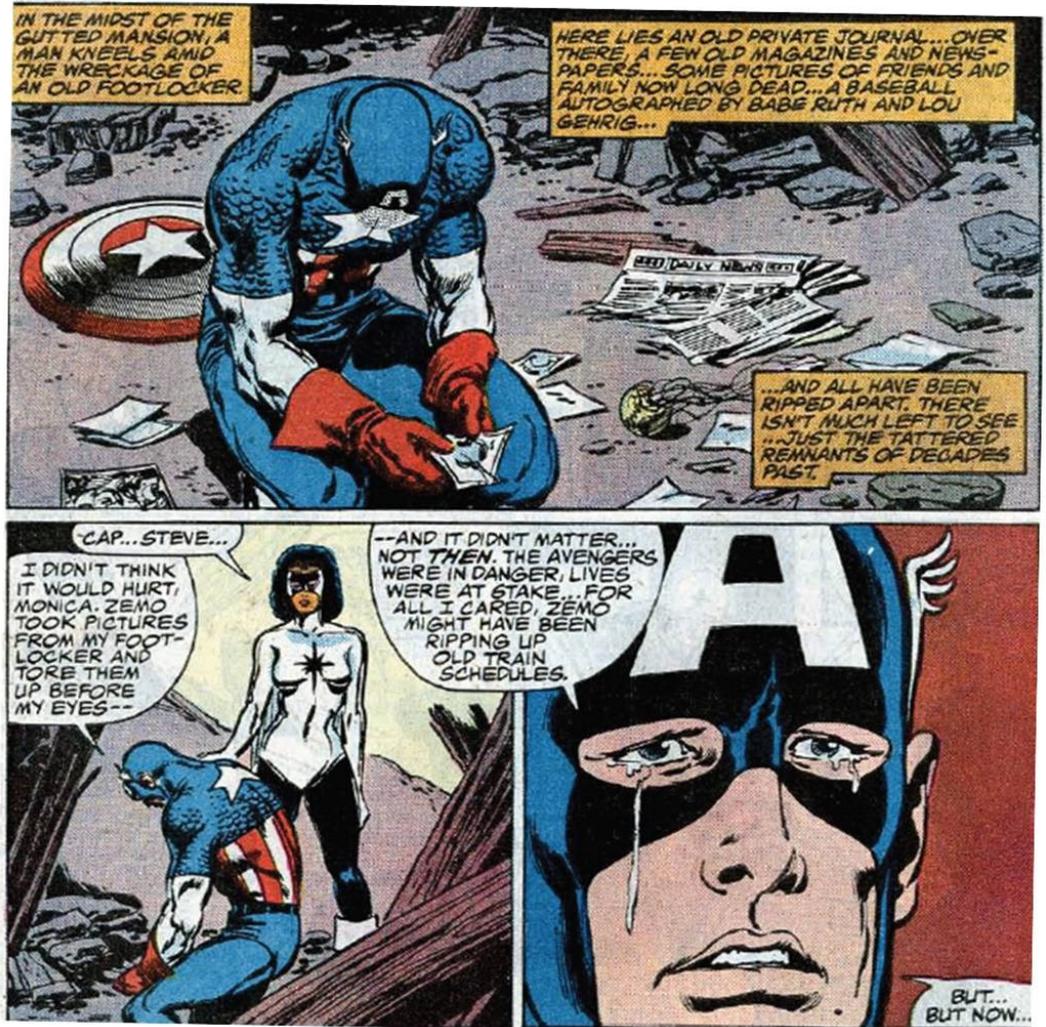
Squadron Supreme gets a follow-up shortly after in the shiny graphic novel *Squadron Supreme: Death of a Universe*, in which the survivors of both teams must work together to hastily combat a spatial anomaly which threatens to engulf the sun itself. The body count rises again, with some heroes failing to even survive the launch of their space rocket, while another fatally underestimates the simple physics of retarding the growth of a sun-sized entity (the subsequent purple smear effect is quite disturbing). Oh, and somebody's head explodes. The Squadron survives after a fashion, and goes on to guest star in mainstream "Marvel Earth" comics, but they never reach the high and lows of the Gruenwald/Ryan era.

A curious epilogue to this tale is that when Mark Gruenwald died unexpectedly young from a heart attack (like one of the main characters in *Squadron Supreme*) in 1996, his will mandated that he be cremated and his ashes mixed in with the ink of the book he was most proud of. It was the trade paperback collection of *Squadron Supreme* #1-12. You could say that he loved comics so much that he wanted to part of them forever.

Suggested Reading: *Squadron Supreme* Volume 1 #12 or trade paperback *Squadron Supreme*. The follow-up graphic novel *Squadron Supreme: Death of a Universe* #1.

V. *Avengers: Under Siege*

Probably wondering why nobody has done it before, the second Baron Zemo (who, like his father, has also managed to suffer a life-changing facial disfigurement) assembles a veritable army of supervillains as his incarnation of the Masters of Evil, who storm Avengers Mansion en masse and take several of Earth's Mightiest Heroes hostage. Hercules, drunk as several lords and sick of taking order from Avengers chairwoman Wasp, staggers into the mansion in a stupor and gets his sexist ass beaten to a pulp by the Wrecking Crew, Mr Hyde, Tiger Shark and the evil Goliath (*Avengers* #274), putting him into a hospital-bound coma for several months, leaving the Wasp in the Wolverine-like role of last hero standing.



Meanwhile inside the mansion, sadistic bruiser Mr Hyde takes the award for Most Evil Bastard in the Marvel Universe by first crushing Captain America's original shield and then beating defenseless butler Edwin Jarvis nearly to death in front of the captive Cap and Black Knight, while he grins from ear to ear and cackles.

Hyde: Louder, old fool! I want the captain to hear your pain!

What an absolute git. Oddly though, the most movingly human moment in the whole “Avengers Under Siege” saga comes right at the end (*Avengers* #277), where Captain America kneels in the wreckage of the mansion clutching the crumpled remains of the only photograph of his long-dead mother, now torn in half by the heartless Baron Zemo. He weeps for things lost and the high price paid for victory.

Suggested Reading: *Avengers* Volume 1 #270-277 or the trade paperback *Avengers: Under Siege*. But really the entire Roger Stern/John Buscema/Tom Palmer run is a joy to read, so start with *Avengers* Volume 1 #255 “The Legacy of Thanos” and work through to *Avengers* Volume 1 #287 “Invasion!” for the full experience.



Superheroes

Done

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AVENGERS
 BATMAN AND ROBIN
 BIRDS OF PREY
 FANTASTIC FOUR
 GHOSTBUSTERS
 GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY
 JEDI KNIGHTS
 JUSTICE LEAGUE
 LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN
 MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE
 POWER PUFF GIRLS

SHERLOCK AND WATSON
 SHIELD
 SUPER FRIENDS
 TEEN TITANS
 TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES
 THUNDERCATS
 TRANSFORMERS
 WATCHMEN
 XMEN

