

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE GUESTS OF 24

# BETWEEN THE LINES

MAY 2024

ISSUE 1

## CONAN

The art of Dan Panosian has inspired a look at the history of Conan in comics

### FEATURES:

#### INTERVIEW WITH GIGI CAVENAGO

The artist of Magic Order and Batman/Dylan Dog on his life in the comics business

#### BOBBY JOSEPH COMICS LAUREATE

Our new Comics Laureate with an in-depth history of diversity in comics

#### BRITISH COMICS NOW

Mollie Ray and Isabel Greenberg talk about their exciting new graphic novels which will soon be appearing in bookshops near you

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## EDITOR'S LETTER

Apparently Lady Gaga is in the next Joker film (Folie à Deux)! And there's singing! Looks intriguing. How do I know this? Through a short teaser on YouTube, of course. There can't be many films released without them.

Learning how to advertise and inform is a powerful tool. When Stan Lee gave Marvel a shot in the arm in 1961, he learned a lot of lessons from EC Comic's Bill Gaines. Like Bill, Stan would let his readers into the lives of the artists and writers. He would tease their new comics. He encouraged readers to write in - even pointing out mistakes - so that you actually felt part of Marvel. There was a Marvel Marching song, there were badges, t-shirts... Long before the MCU, Marvelites felt a personal connection to the company.

Between the Lines does not aspire to be another EC or Marvel. Our aims are simpler, if similar.

A friend of mine recently had no idea what I was referring to when I mentioned LICA. People arrive in Windermere and suddenly realise there are creators from, maybe, 23 countries and a packed programme of events. How do you decide what to go to, who to see, what books or prints to get signed? This magazine will build up to the festival with:

**Interviews** (for example, with this year's creator of our poster, Gigi Cavenago)

**Articles** (especially on comics and Graphic Novels which are being published this year and will be available at the festival)

**Nuggets of comics lore** (very useful at pub quizzes!)

**News about our Comics Laureate** and other relevant events

**And any other goodies** which we have in the works.

**John McShane**

## BTL MEETS...

# GIGI CAVENAGO



If you haven't already purchased the comics event of the year, the team up of the Dark Knight with one of Europe's best known characters, then put down this article until you have visited your local comic shop or done a search online for **Batman/Dylan Dog** (DC Comics and Sergio Bonelli Editore). The gripping script by Roberto Recchioni and wonderful art by Gigi Cavenago, Werther Dell'Edera, and Giovanna Niro has produced a comics masterpiece.

Gigi Cavenago is probably best known in the UK and America for his art on Mark Millar's **Magic Order**, but he has done far more than that. He took time out from his busy schedule to talk to BTL about his career.

"I started reading comics very early," says Gigi. "My father owned books by Dino Battaglia, Hugo Pratt, Franco Caprioli and Gianni De Luca! My cousin, on the other hand, who lived upstairs, was an avid reader of everything that was produced by Sergio Bonelli Editore, series like **Tex**, **Nathan Never** and of course **Dylan Dog**. So, since I was little I read everything and, apart from **Asterix** and a few other things, they were all Italian productions."







Image from The Magic Circle Vol3, issue 1

Gigi studied for a while at the "Scuola di Fumetto di Milano" ("Milan's school of comics"):

"I did a couple of years there to study realistic comics, while the other course was for humorous comics. I had a good time with it but I quickly understood that to make comics you must above all work constantly and produce in a continuous cycle. As in sports and other arts, after an initial theoretical approach, consistency and practice are needed."

He then did a six-month professional course at Rizzoli:

"It was targeted for graphic designers, people who would work in advertising, and it helped me to approach the use of software and digital graphics. I went to comics school more than twenty years ago now, and at the time digital drawing and colouring in comics was just starting, so at that time schools like that weren't equipped to teach us drawing software."

For the two years that I attended comics school, my classmates and I worked the old fashioned way, with brushes, tempera ink and paper. Now at Rizzoli I was drawing on a tablet and coloring with photoshop!"

In Italy, it was not unusual to be on a commuter train and see that almost everyone was reading **Dylan Dog** on their way to work:

"Yes, Dylan was a real cult phenomenon in the nineties! I was only four years old at the time it came out, but I was about ten when the phenomenon exploded. In some ways Dylan was a new hero, who aligned perfectly with the youth of the time. There were those who approached the series for the horror content, which was very strong especially in the first issues (at the time horror was a very fashionable genre, it was everywhere: in cinema, in heavy metal...), but also for its romantic sensitivity. He is a very real character because his creator, Tiziano Sclavi, as well as being a very effective writer, poured his own personality, fears and melancholy into the character."

"And then **Dylan Dog**, on top of all this, was also funny. Sometimes it was like a grotesque comedy and then a poignant tragedy in the same story. Maybe **Sandman** would be a good comparison in this sense. The authors of the past knew how to manage these register changes better. They pushed all the way without fear of being cloying, silly or too melodramatic."



Batman and Dylan Dog

**BATMAN:** I work alone.

**DYLAN DOG:** What about Robin?

**BATMAN:** He's a soldier. You're a civilian.

**DYLAN DOG:** I'll take that as a compliment! I can't stand the military.

**BATMAN:** And I hate amateurs.



## DID YOU KNOW....

In 1957, in Argentina, Hugo Pratt briefly taught a drawing course at l'Escuela Panamericana de Arte. One of the founders was proud to tell Pratt that the students' work had been overseen by Alex Raymond (Flash Gordon, Rip Kirby) until his tragic death in a car crash in 1956.

Pasquale Ruja started in comics in 1995 with **Dylan Dog** and then went on to create **Cassidy**, another character that Gigi was to work on:

"The previous year I had done tests to join another Bonelli series, **Dampyr**. It took me two months to do those tests as best as I could but I wasn't taken. But thanks to this failed opportunity, the guys at Bonelli had seen my stuff and so, a year later, they asked me to test for this new series about bandits and robbers, set in 1970s America. It was the summer of 2008 when they called me: "You're in". I was so happy and scared at the same time!

Gigi has won a number of awards, including at Lucca.

"In Italy, Lucca Comics&games is essential, I think I've gone to all the editions of the last twenty years. There are many beautiful realities, each with its own specific identity. Since Covid I have attended a little less, but more for work commitments. The news is that recently the world of international conventions such as LICAF and CCXP in Brazil has also opened up to me. I have also received invitations to conventions in the United Arab Emirates, Greece and other places that I hope to be able to visit soon."

How did he get to work with Mark Millar on **The Magic Order**?:

"It all started with a friend request on Facebook from Mark Millar. As soon as I gave it to him, he immediately wrote to me proposing that we do something together! At that moment I was already busy with the **Batman/Dylan Dog** crossover and I had to wait a couple of years to get to **The Magic Order**. It was a very nice experience, Mark had clearly had a lot of fun writing it and I had the same time drawing it."

*Continues in the next issue of Between the Lines...*



# BRITISH COMICS NOW

EACH ISSUE WE'LL SHINE A SPOTLIGHT ON NEW COMICS FROM BRITISH CREATORS WHICH WILL FEATURE AT LICAF.

Leading the charge are two extraordinary creators who excel in storytelling using their distinctive art styles. Both have major new comics published this Spring by the giants of U.K. publishing: *Faber & Faber* and *Penguin Random House*. *Young Hag* by **Isabel Greenberg** is an irresistible twist on the classic Arthurian legend which will "win legions of fans" according to one critic. **Mollie Ray's** *Giant* is her debut graphic novel and tackles a deeply personal family trauma with a wordless comic which *Broken Frontier* describes as "sumptuous and intriguing".

We asked Isabel and Mollie to talk about their new books, their work and inspirations.



British Comics  
**NOW**  
The New Generation



Isabel Greenberg

**Isabel, can you tell readers a little bit more about your inspiration behind this project?**

I've always had a love of myths, legends and folktales, and growing up was especially keen on Arthurian stories. Rosemary Sutcliffe, TH White, Michael Morpurgo all wrote adaptations of the material that I loved. I also have a lasting fondness for a BBC adaptation starring Sam Neill! The stories been played with and adapted so many times, the characters reworked and reappraised for new audiences, and I always wanted to have a go myself. **Young Hag** is my homage to all the fantasy epics I loved to read as a child.

**Where did the idea for *Young Hag* come from?**

**Young Hag** takes familiar Arthurian legends and characters, and wraps them up in a new narrative. The titular character, Young Hag, is a witch on a coming-of-age quest, trying to find out who she is and where she comes from. The story takes place a generation after King Arthur, and Young Hag is being told the tales by her Grandmother, who turns out to have been a key player in the narrative herself.

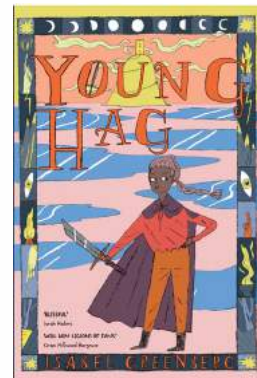
**What are you working on next?**

I'm working on a couple of things. I'm illustrating a graphic biography of Jane Austen, written by a renowned Austen scholar called Janine Barchus. It'll be out in 2025. I'm also starting to work out a new graphic novel. But it's too early to talk much about that at the moment.

**Can you say a bit about your influences and inspirations in the comic art field? Up to 3 creators who have made an impact upon your work and why? If easier which 3 comics would you take to a desert island?**

In terms of influential comics in my life, I'd have to say **Epileptic** by David B, as it was probably the graphic novel I read that most made me want to write and make my own. I read it as a teenager and it was a revelation to me at the time.

**Heimat** by Nora Krug is another. I read it a few years ago and was blown away by it. And finally I would say **Important Artifacts**... by Leanne Shapton. This is technically not a comic, but it's definitely storytelling through images so I think it counts. It's a brilliant book about the breakdown of a couples' relationship told entirely through an auction catalogue selling off every object that connected them.





Mollie Ray

**Mollie, can you tell readers a little bit more about your inspiration behind your project?**

The idea for **Giant** started with a sketch that I drew during my brother's treatment for cancer, depicting our family sat around eating dinner, but one of us is a giant. For me this summed up how I was feeling at the time, the experience of cancer generally drags out so long that you have to try and keep a routine and a sense of normality, despite the massive elephant in the room.

After writing the first draft, I showed it to my brother who said rather eloquently, that it would be a "literal bookend to a traumatic event". With my brother's support, and the rest of my family too, it felt like an opportunity to create something that would contain these memories, but also help to process

them, and had the potential to be relatable and comforting to someone else going through the same thing. I wanted to create **Giant** for the same purpose, I hope that it will help readers to explain or understand what cannot be put into words for themselves.

**When did you start and finish it and what was the experience of producing it like?**

It wasn't until after my brother had finished chemotherapy months later, that I revisited that first sketch. It was during the pandemic. I started to process everything that had happened, and I wanted to create something with all these feelings I didn't know what to do with.

To begin with it was like tidying up my brain and sorting through the rubble of the past year, but it was therapeutic to reframe these memories as pieces of a story. I began working on sketches, thumbnails, timelines – I was fixed on it from the moment I woke up till I'd go to bed.



Once it became really real: I met the lovely James, my agent, who pitched the first chapter to publishers. I signed a deal with Faber (and then grinned uncontrollably for several weeks), I got into a happy rhythm of working on **Giant** alongside my part time work as a chef and youth workshop leader, and trundled on with it for 2 years. I was in my element! I finished **Giant** in May 2023, just over a year to publication.

**Why did you choose a wordless comic?**

The main reason I chose to make **Giant** a silent comic, was that that was how it started for me. I couldn't explain in words what I was feeling, but I could draw it. The benefit of this then was that the story becomes more relatable to the reader, as it is easier to project your own experiences onto it. This is also why the characters have simple faces and generic character accessories. The landscapes and buildings are also very simple in outline. I wanted to make it as easy as possible to relate to for those who have experienced the reality of a life-threatening illness, to themselves or a loved one, whilst still being true to my family's story.

**Can you say a bit about your influences and inspirations in the comic art field? Up to 3 creators who have made an impact upon your work and why?**

Katie Green is a huge inspiration for me, both creatively and emotionally. Her vulnerability in **Lighter Than My Shadow** helped me to recognise my own illness, but also inspired me to be open and honest in my own work. If you haven't read it, I couldn't recommend it enough – it is an extraordinary example of why stories are important.

Another major influence for me is Shaun Tan. **The Arrival** was the first silent graphic novel I had ever seen, and it knocked me sideways. I put a lot of what I have learned about the medium to reading and analysing this book. Stylistically, it is Tan's whimsy combined with tragedy, soft characters and landscapes combined with immense detail that really captured my mind, and inspired my work in big ways.



## DID YOU KNOW....

In 1971, more than 100 million Americans read comic strips in the newspapers. In the 1940s Will Eisner's *The Spirit* had a circulation of 15m per month! Glory days!



One of the first films Stan Lee wanted made for Marvel was *Ant Man*. No one was interested. Total box office for the eventually made *Ant Man* films: \$1142m!!



Joe Colquhoun, most famous as the artist on *Charlie's War*, wrote and drew *Roy of the Rovers* in *Tiger* from 1954 to 1959.



## EXCLUSIVE TO BTL

BTL is delighted to present an exclusive strip from those wonderful VIZ guys.





# THE BEAUTY IN BARBARITY: A CHRONICLE OF CONAN IN COMICS

## THIEF. WARRIOR. GLADIATOR. KING. BARBARIAN.

By Finn Miles

Through a variety of stories across a vast array of media spanning over what is now nearing a century, the Cimmerian warrior known to many simply by the name Conan has more than earned all of these titles, carving his way through the mythical prehistoric Hyborean age from page to panel to screen.

And yet it is perhaps out of the confines of his own lore that Conan earns his most important and prestigious title, one now often under recognised in a time of superhero blockbusters, planet hopping space operas, and the thralls of more conventional and largely medieval fantasies; That of a pop cultural icon instructionally instrumental not only in redefining much of fantasy but fiction in general, forming the modern backbone of a fundamental literary archetype.





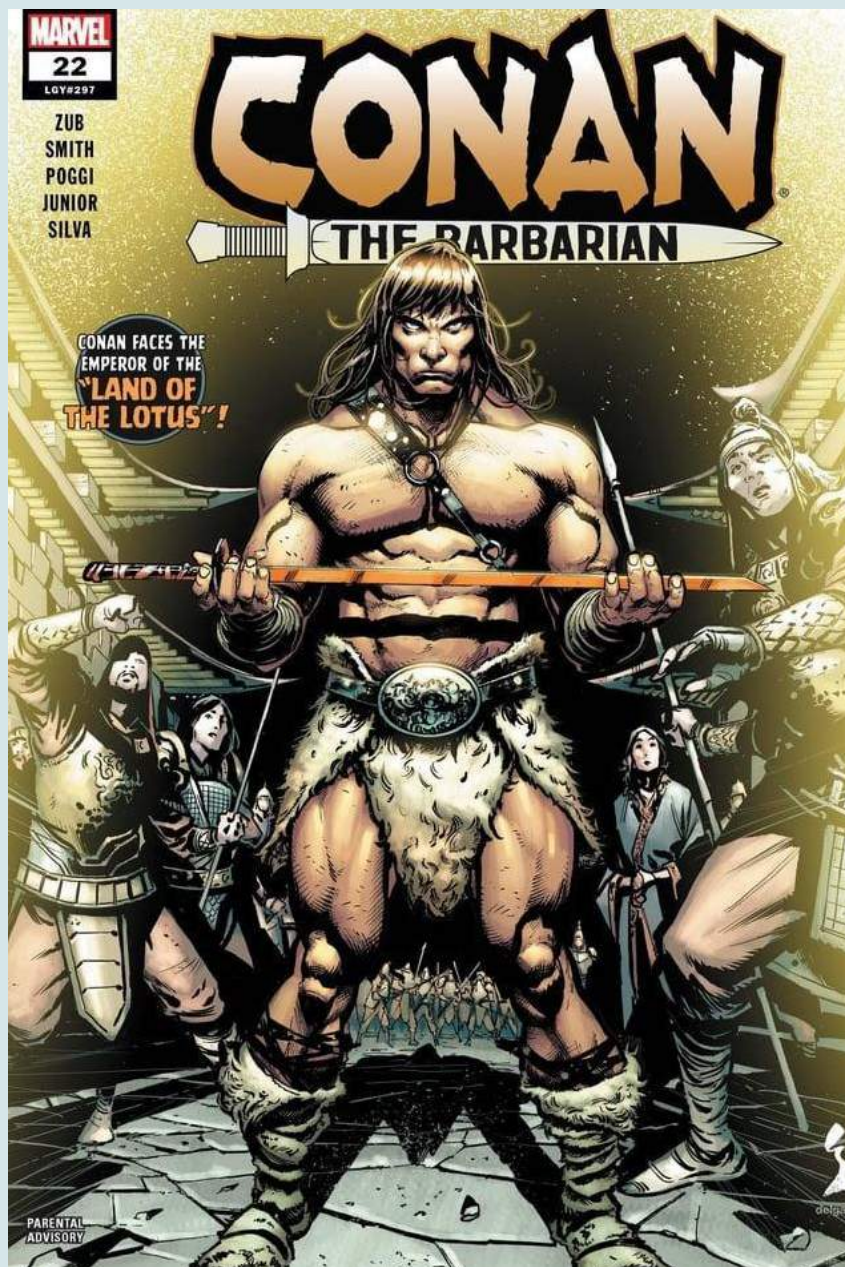


The first Conan comic

Alas it was not always known that the famed Barbarian would come to define his namesake all the way from his inception to the modern era. Originally a product of the aftermath of the great depression, Conan was the product of a sense of acute cynicism towards man's proposed distance from the edge of Barbarism and the very notion of civilisation, with fear and anxiety surrounding its potential collapse pervading the sociopolitical and literary atmosphere of the time.

It was from this very seed alongside a fascination with violence and history that Robert E. Howard fleshed out one of the finer examples of a developed and defined and sprawling modern fantasy world that transcended his stories, doing so decades before Tolkien's **Lord of the Rings**. In doing so he not only invented the modern image of the Barbarian in his prehistoric chiselled and hypermasculine form, with bulging biceps and greatsword in hand but would influence numerous literary genres. Unfortunately, Howard never got to oversee the true extents of this influence, as he committed suicide in 1936 at just 30 years of age, following his mother's death.

Thus it becomes only more imperative that one must not forget that without Conan, we might not have **He-Man** or the Barbarian class in DnD or even manga like Kentaro Miura's beloved **Berserk** nor numerous characters across genres that have drawn from the Barbarian template.



Conan was back home at Marvel in 2018

However, for those of us who love comics, without the fabled Cimmerian we would be left without a significant part of the heritage of the sequential arts, with Conan having featured prominently in the legendarium of comic book history both directly and indirectly. In more direct terms, Conan began his run in comics during the tail end of the medium's golden age, with the first translation into the art form coming by way of Mexico in 1952 in the form of **La Reina de la Costa Negra**, an adaption of Howard's seminal **Queen of the Black Coast**

which featured in *Cuentos de Abuelito* issue 8, an anthology first published by Corporacion Editorial Mexicana, SA.

The character wouldn't have his true start in comics, however, until he made his way into the annals of the most popular titles of the 1970s, doing so by way of Marvel in the first year of the decade via the simply titled **Conan The Barbarian**, written initially by Roy Thomas with art by Barry Windsor-Smith of Wolverine fame who was later succeeded by the legendary Eisner winning John Buscema, known for his work on **The Avengers** and **Silver**



**Surfer**, who would draw over 200 stories featuring the character.

Marvel's initial experience with the Conan IP would constitute somewhat of a homerun, with the title becoming one of their most popular titles in the 1970s.

This initial period of stewardship at Marvel would come to form part of what some have called "the first Marvel wave" of the character's comic book career, the first true chapter following his initial introduction to the format, which would last from 1970 until 1993. It was the

success of this period that catapulted the character onto the silver screen with Arnold Schwarzenegger's **Conan The Barbarian** hitting theatres in 1982, just over half way into Marvel's initial run of the character.

Unfortunately for the famed Cimmerian, the 1990s would see a fall in popularity for fantasy, including the prehistoric barbarian sub genre, putting the Conan licence into a decade long state of limbo. It was not until 2003 that the property would be revived by Dark

Horse, one of the major alternatives to DC and Marvel known for its focus on licensed comics, kickstarting the company's own era with the character. This Dark Horse era lasted for 15 years between 2003 and 2018, becoming synonymous with the character's 21st century presence in the comic book industry. It was this rendition of the titular barbarian that went for a darker and primal take on the character, being initially written by Kurt Busiek and drawn by Cary Nord, before migrating to a litany of other creative teams, largely adapting the original material whilst filling in gaps in the general mythos and chronology with original narratives.

The Dark Horse Era would come to a close with the reacquisition of the



Red Sonja artwork  
by Dan Panosian



licence by Marvel, igniting the second Marvel age in 2018. This time, however, the property's tenure at the famed "House of Ideas" would come to an abrupt end, being cut short in 2022 due to a lack of popularity, in spite of attempts to revitalise their grip on the IP by integrating him with the mainstream Marvel universe in the appropriately titled **Savage Avengers**.

Even an integration into the Marvelverse via **Savage Avengers** couldn't save and revitalise Conan's short lived 2nd stint at the House of Ideas

This already strange period would also have the unique status of sharing some time in spotlight with the simultaneous "The Cimmerian run" on the character by Ablaze comics, who would win legal rights to adapt European stories related to the franchise, forming a sort of side era that would span from 2020 to 2022.

All of which brings us to the current Titan Era, which began 2023 with an "Issue 0" by Jim Zub and Roberto De La Torre, who had worked on Marvel's 2nd Conan era, beginning with a battle worn Conan returning to Cimmeria. As the series has continued it has received wide praise and featured a series of acclaimed creatives, such as Dan Panosian of DC, Marvel and Dark Horse fame who provided variant cover art for the title, including the cover used for its first paperback volume, which currently sits at a rating of just over 4 out of 5 stars on Good Reads and a 9/10 average critic reception on the review aggregate site Comic Book Roundup, with the series garnering wide acclaim.

Thus the Conan franchise now finds itself in the midst of somewhat of a revival. Of course such is not entirely unexpected, after all, civilisation in a way casts the shadow of its own absence, lingering in the collective unconscious. Or perhaps civilisation was always just a shadow in the light of man's own inner barbarity, one which we are at all times at risk of once again succumbing to. Whether Conan's popularity makes a return to the highest annals of popular culture once more, only time will tell. What is known is that Conan will in a

sense always be with us, not only through the many works he has inspired and continues to inspire but within the very region of man's nature to which he so eternally appeals. To Robert E. Howard barbarism was but the natural state of humanity. And where nature goes, man ultimately follows.



## Festival Guest 2024

# Dan Panosian

We are delighted to announce that over the LICAF weekend, 27th to 29th September, Dan Panosian will be paying a rare visit to the UK and even doing a live draw! Don't miss out!



## TOP 10 COMICS

# A MILLION MILES FROM MARVEL

BY PETER KESSLER

People study comics at university.

Post-graduates doing research on everything from Holocaust literature to the influence of Gothic texts on teenage girls pore over the ever-expanding world of graphic literature, and get PhDs for it. Some universities will even give you a degree in comics. Others let students study specific texts as part of their courses.

Acknowledged masterpieces like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* are no longer seen as wacky, marginal choices, but works of both art and literature which invite and reward deep, analytical study.

So here's a list of ten of my favourite graphic novels, all of which are both great art and great fun. Some are pretty obscure. Some are internationally-feted classics. Some are challengingly visceral. All are unique and brilliant.

### 1. THE ADVENTURES OF LUTHER ARKWRIGHT - VOLUME 1

Bryan Talbot, 1982 onwards

The debate about which was the first-ever graphic novel will rumble on forever. But as far as the British comics scene goes, **Luther Arkwright** was there when it all began, and author/artist Bryan Talbot revolutionised the genre with this sci-fi steampunk epic. The plot is complex and elusive; the theme is revolutionary, anti-authoritarian, death of Empire. And the art is, well, staggering, with black-and-white etching closer to Hogarth than Homer Simpson. Talbot's story-telling techniques are thrillingly experimental – there's a sequence of pages that takes place essentially inside Arkwright's head while he's being tortured, and that ends in pure, white, empty space. Legendary comics maestro Alan Moore described Arkwright as "a crucial stepping-stone between where comics were and where they are now". I'd go further, and say Arkwright set the template for today's adult graphic fiction.

### 2. THIS ONE SUMMER

Jillian and Mariko Tamaki, 2014

Superficially this is a coming-of-age story about two teenage friends, Rose and Windy, who meet up every summer in a remote little beach town in the USA. Over **This One Summer** they begin to explore their sexuality, and are forced to grapple with traumatic family secrets, mental health problems, unwanted pregnancies, and the prospect that their innocent world will never be the same again. Jillian Tamaki's drawings somehow capture that sense of a developmental cusp: monochromatic and sketchy, with hints of subtle detail and a gentle wash of cool, reflective blue. You can almost hear the lap of waves, the crunch of twigs, and you can sense the nostalgic warmth that signals the end of summer. If Arkwright's plot is fundamental and obscure, **This One Summer's** is almost incidental and evanescent... until the shattering finale.





### 3. DRAGMAN

Steven Appleby, 2020

Steven Appleby is probably best known as a prolific cartoonist for various British and European newspapers. But she is a lot more than that. Her work in animation, cartoon, graphic novel and even hospital mural captures, again and again, a sense of turmoil, self-doubt and fear that lurks beneath our respectable exteriors. And her humour lies in the fact she recognises and illustrates the absurdity of that hidden paranoia. For me, *Dragman* is the masterpiece of Steven's career. It's a hilarious (but at the same time deeply moving) story of an innocuous everyman called Augustus Crimp. Augustus gets super powers when he puts on women's clothing. In that state he can fulfil his potential and save the world – while enduring mockery from other super-heroes. The metaphorical link with Steven's own life is so naked and sincere, it completely charms you.

At one point Augustus, complaining about the sobriquet *Dragman*, says. "Dragman? That's wrong. I dress as a woman, but I'm not doing drag. If anything, I'm trans... I think. I'm really just trying to be myself. Um." The awkwardness and honesty are reflected in the shaky lines of Appleby's art. It's taken forty years, but this is one individual who has finally found themselves.

### 4. EC COMICS - THREE STORIES FROM THE 1950s

*The Master Race*, Al Feldstein, Bernie Krigstein, 1955

*The Guilty*, Al Feldstein, Wallace Wood, 1952

*The Whipping*, Al Feldstein, Wallace Wood, 1954

If you don't know about EC (standing for 'Educational' and later 'Entertaining' Comics) they were a publishing house that flourished in the late 1940s and 50s, issuing a broad range of titles, with lots of crime, horror, science-fiction and war stories. What distinguished them however was the morally principled and (in those days) extremely minority view they held on matters such as equality, racism and political honesty. Their stories came out before the murder of Emmett Till, and before Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, when 96% of Americans believed mixed-race marriage was wrong. EC challenged widely-held beliefs about interracial intimacy by calling upon readers to question their own prejudices. For his trouble, EC publisher William Gaines was cross-examined by the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, and ultimately EC were forced to tone down their output by the creation of the Comics Code. But they inspired a generation of counter-cultural young Americans. *The Master Race* is one of the first comic-book stories to deal with the Holocaust, as a former Nazi death camp commandant living in New York sees his victims all around him. *The Guilty* is a contemporary story of police brutality (and its accompanying cover-up) against black teenagers. And *The Whipping* is a superb morality tale of a group of white supremacists whose fear of Mexican boys going out with their daughters leads them to acts of horrific violence. Unforgettable and, for its time, astonishingly courageous.

### 5. FLEEP

Jason Shiga, 2002

There isn't anyone working in comics quite like Jason Shiga. A Maths major when he was at university, he is obsessed with patterns, solutions, puzzles and logic. People? Not so much. In fact, the main character in almost all his books is identical, and is normally called Jimmy – not because it's the same person, but because identity and appearance for Shiga are simply not that important. They are secondary to the mathematical deduction processes channelled through the minds of his deceptively simple drawings. Shiga has created a number of astonishingly complex interactive comics (*Meanwhile* is an amazing experience, simultaneously puzzle and existential nightmare). But the one I'm choosing is *Fleep*, a comparatively simple story that takes place with just one character, set entirely in a phone box that is completely encased in concrete. That description illustrates that, yes, it is once more a form of puzzle, as Jimmy (it's him again) tries to figure out where and who he is, as well as why he is in this predicament. What I love about *Fleep* is that, despite Shiga's determinedly emotionless outlook, ultimately a heart-filled truth struggles out of the story. And the minimalist restrictions of the scenario are a fantastic challenge to the artist. Best of all, *Fleep* is free to read online. Search, and you shall find.

*Continues in the next issue of Between the Lines...*

Peter Kessler is Chair of the Lakes International Comic Art Festival and Founder of the Oxford Comics Network, which promotes the study of comics and graphic novels at Oxford University.





# A HISTORY OF BLACK AND ETHNIC REPRESENTATION IN COMICS

## FROM THE 20TH CENTURY ONWARDS!

with Bobby Joseph

In America, representation has had a fraught history with regards to race and representation, especially when it comes to American comic books. In American comic books there is good representation, there's some bad, and then there's some, we just shouldn't talk about AT ALL – but we will today.

Now, just to clarify, this article will be a potted history of ethnic diversity in American comic books and not the total history (so there is stuff I will miss).

Are you sitting comfortably? Then let us begin...

Throughout history, we can safely say that literature and especially the comic book medium has reflected the **political** attitudes of society. This includes comic book publishers, editors, their writers and even their readers.

Winsor McKay's, **Little Nemo in Slumberland** started in 1905 and was featured in the American newspaper – the **New York Herald**. If you wanted to read comic strips at the time then newspapers were the only outlets.



Bobby Joseph

**Little Nemo in Slumberland** is one of the most respected comic strips in the history of the medium. It is probably one of the very first examples of how the comic book genre could be considered a legit art form. Though sequentially beautiful with the experiment of form and panel-structure, there is a slight flaw in this almost perfect diamond. Like many authors of the time, Winsor McCay used ethnic stereotyping throughout his work. We had the slightly ill-tempered, fighting Irishman called Flip, and then there is the nearly-mute African, Impie, a prime example of how society saw African Americans at the time - dim-witted, lazy, and clownish, and the comic book equivalents continued this horrendous stereotype built on a history of slavery and colonialism. This also included exaggerated features such as big lips, and characters speaking with broken English. Invariably, people of colour were

sidekicks, savages, or domestics, only appearing in newspaper strips to aid the main lead, who were predominantly white characters.

In the 1930s, in American newspapers, we were introduced to a new type of Black character in comic strips. This guy didn't follow the traditional Black and White Minstrel interpretation of a Black person as was shown in other comic strips. This was a guy called **Lothar - Prince of the Seven Nations**.

A side note: The Seven nations were a federation of African jungle tribes. Lothar was an extraordinary strongman, and turned down becoming king of his people to fight crime as a subservient servant with **Mandrake the Magician!** Now, as a writer (and taking out racist, colonial attitudes), I have problems with this scenario. Why would a character like Lothar turn down being king to become a manservant? Why? Why would you do



it? Give up your birthright? Someone recently tried to justify it to me. "Well, Bobby, wouldn't Lothar be exactly in the same position if he were a real person – think of the time period? Stop being so ignorant, Mr Joseph!" Side eye apparent – I did not engage in argument as clearly, my bottom jaw would explode from the hinges. Looking at the dialogue from Lothar:

"Her so pretty, makes a fella happy to see."

Maybe yours truly is wrong. Maybe this African Prince, a figure of royalty's life path was always destined to be Mandrake's servant.



But then, Lothar was created by Lee Falk, whose colonial leanings also created **The Phantom** – a White guy dressed in a skin tight, bright purple suit, who rode a horse in Africa and fought crime. In Africa!! He was also in charge of the Bandar pygmy tribe. The Phantom's word was law with regards to the Bandar tribe. They did what he said. Out of respect. Nothing else. No one knew why! If I was part of that tribe, I would at least pitch a few questions.

By 1933 comic books were finally published. Comic strips were no longer restricted to newspapers. However, prejudices, xenophobia and racism continued in this new art form.

In 1941 **The Young Allies** was published by Timely Comics (which later became Marvel Comics). The Allies were a team of children led by Bucky and Toro, the sidekicks of Captain America and the

Human Torch. Another member of **The Young Allies** was Whitewash Jones, a harmonica-playing, watermelon-eating character. Whitewash, was the comic relief via racist caricature, and unfortunately, he was also the first African American hero in superhero comics.

In the forties, Fawcett Comics came up with the comic strip **Captain Marvel** (or **Shazam** as he's now known). Little Billy Batson said a magical word and turned into a superhero. This orphaned, alter-ego of Captain Marvel owned a slave called Steamboat. Now hold on, Billy Batson owned a slave? Now my history knowledge is not the best at times, but I am sure that in the 1940s, slavery was abolished by that point? And how is it that a child, and an orphaned one at that, could possibly have the financial means and the legal entitlement to owning a grown man. Sure, comics dealt with the fantastical. But isn't this a step too far? Call me a cynic, but I suspect DC Comics will avoid reprinting any Steamboat comics as well.

Ebony White, a creation of Will Eisner conflicts me. Eisner's narrative work in comics is unrivalled, a master of the form. However, when I see Ebony White, the Spirit's sidekick – I cringe every, single, time. In later years, Eisner admitted regret in creating the character. But it is still a hard thing to resolve in my head when reading **The Spirit**.

**All-Negro Comics #1**, published in 1947, was the first known comic book written and drawn solely by African-American writers and artists. Its lead character was Ace Harlem and it had other characters like Lion Man, and Bubba whose purpose was to inspire pride in African-Americans with their African heritage. Created by Orrin Crowell Evans, a respected Black journalist of the time, it was a triumph for diversity. Unfortunately, All-Negro Comics didn't get to a second issue, due to the lack of distribution.

Asian comic characters were presented as horrible buck-toothed villains, trying to take over the world. This was probably the potential reason why the early issues of Detective Comics were pulled from a DC reprint collection list. Probably best to add the first appearances of Egg Fu and Chop-Chop to that list too!



In Fifties' America, the Comics Code Authority believed that certain subject matter represented in comic books at the time could "morally corrupt" the youth of America. The comic code banned relationships, horror and crime and comics dealing with racial prejudice. Now, one can look at that ban in two ways: the positive being that it eliminated negative racial stereotypes and caricatures which were used in comic books up until that point. But - and it is a big but, there were next to no Black or ethnic characters in comic books.

An example of this was when the comic code wanted to ban an EC comic book story about prejudice called **Judgement Day (Weird Fantasy #18)**, where the twist in the tale was that the main character, the astronaut, was revealed to be a Black man in the last panel. The Comics code refused to pass the comic strip because it featured a Black character with beads of sweat on his forehead. Beads of sweat? Clearly, American kids need protecting from beads of sweat! I suspect there was a sweating epidemic that threatened to engulf the moral stance of the youth of America during that time. Luckily, the strip went ahead due to the Code being threatened with a lawsuit.

By the 1960s, Jack Kirby – the co-author of Marvel Comics realised that he didn't have any Black character in his comics, and wanted to create a character for his Black readers. He came up with the Coal



Tiger – the blueprint of the Black Panther character. With Stan Lee's suggestion, the character morphed into **The Black Panther** – the first Black superhero in mainstream comic books – which in hindsight I prefer, as the name, Coal Tiger, does not age well. Yay.

It was a slow process but finally we saw black characters pop up in comics once again when Blaxploitation happened. We had **Luke Cage**. We had **Black Goliath**. We had **Black Lightning**. One of the main themes that ran through the Blaxploitation comic strips from the seventies besides the majority beginning with the word black (Black Panther/Goliath/Lightning/Mariah), were that most of the characters started out as criminals.

Storm was a thief. Cyborg joined a street gang – even though he was from a well-off middle-class family and was a college football star. The Falcon was a street hustler! Then there was the language, broken English gave way to jive lingo!

There was also a Kung Fu phase in the seventies, where Kung Fu was all the rage and that launched **Shang Chi – Master of Kung Fu**. By the end of the 70s, Blaxploitation and the Kung Fu phase wound down. Bar the odd exception (the Black Panther on-going by Jack Kirby), ethnic characters were back to being sidekicks or teammates.

In the **X-men** we may have had Storm, but there was also Sunfire, a somewhat angry Japanese character, who quickly left the X-men. We had Thunderbird whose carelessness almost killed his teammates – Then he died a few issues later. Carelessness!

Now in the early eighties. We were introduced to **Love and Rockets**. An independent, alternative comic book published by Fantagraphics Comics and written and illustrated by Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez. Their comic strips delved into their own Latin-American roots. Gilbert dealt with stories in Palomar, while Jaime focused on the relationship of Maggie and Hopsy and their on/off Lesbian relationship in Hoppers. **Love and Rockets** is probably one of the greatest sequential comic strip anthologies! As the characters aged in

real time, and dealt with human dramas while using magic realism. **Love and Rockets** is the prime example of well-written, well-illustrated diversity.



Back to mainstream comics of the eighties. We had a Black Iron Man, (which I loved and collected monthly), a Black Green Lantern (I collected that too) and a Black Captain Marvel from Marvel Comics (side note: no appearance of Steamboat). By the nineties, comics were in a boom again. The speculation market made sure comics were selling millions of copies. Todd McFarlane introduced **Spawn**. A Black character, but not really a black character as there were no cultural references to give you any indication that he was a black character bar his and his family's skin colour in flashbacks.

In 1993 a coalition of African-American artists and writers, led by Dwayne McDuffie created **Milestone Media** for DC comics. The founders believed that minorities were severely underrepresented in American comics, and wished to address this. They had **Hardware, Icon, Static and Blood Syndicate**. It carried on for a few years, and then it wound down in 1997 due to low sales, and also the imploding speculative comic book market.

Diversity flittered in the noughties with next to no appearances.

Around 2014/15, the big comic book companies realised that they needed to cater to their ever-changing audiences. They suddenly realised that their audience, some of them, maybe a lot of them, came from diverse ethnic

backgrounds. And lo and behold, the big American publishing companies decided to include diversity by changing up their well-established characters. However, it was still White writers and editors in charge of delivering the narrative with characters from diverse backgrounds.

An example of this failed diversity push was when DC comics tried to change the ethnicity of Wally West, to a guilt-ridden, angsty, stereotypical Black teenager. At this point I had had enough of seeing cosmetic changes to comic book characters with little or no substance. It wasn't about change. To me, it was about the appearance of change. I personally, do not have any problem with White writers writing characters of colour. However, good writing should always come from an authentic place and never descend into lazy stereotyping.

With all the pressure of mainstream media criticism of the lack of diverse voices, it forced the hands of the big comic book publishers. They had to search for diverse creators to work in comics (that were not just restricted to just drawing comics). Comic characters were now written, edited and illustrated by people of colour. Yaay!

We had **Ms Marvel**, a Muslim superhero created by Sana Amanat. We have **Black** by Kwanza Osajyefo (which has been optioned for a movie). Ta-Nehisi Coates came in. We have a new batch of comic creators like Micheline Hess, John Jennings, Felipe Smith, Juni Ba and Nalo Hopkinson making waves in comics. Comics were finally being reflective!

Now, as we look at the history of representation in comics, a few people have stated to me that the controversial racist imagery of comics from the past should be banned! Now, I can see the argument for it. I truly can. But then, there is the flipside. By taking it away, that says it did not exist. It did. It REALLY DID.

Regardless, before we can make progress in comics, we have to know what came before, and what we can leave behind. So let it be there – for all to see!

Let it be a record of what was, but not what is.



# DESERT ISLAND COMICS

## WITH ANDY OLIVER

BANISHED TO A DESERT ISLAND AND ALLOWED JUST 5 COMICS AND 1 LUXURY ITEM AS YOUR COMPANIONS? IF YOU WERE FACED WITH THIS DILEMMA WHAT WOULD YOU CHOOSE TO TAKE?



Andy Oliver

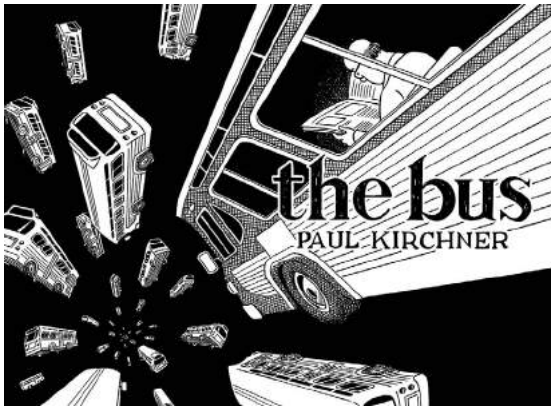
To give you some food for thought each issue we will be asking well-known figures from the comics world to tell us what they would choose and why. We kick off with **Andy Oliver** of *Broken Frontier* fame.

In deciding what my Desert Island Comics would be I chose work that would encapsulate what the medium has meant to me over the years. Including a favourite writer, artist and publisher in the mix was an obvious consideration, but I also wanted to select comics that do things only comics can, that explore its visual language to its fullest, and that use comics' unique storytelling tools to form an intimate relationship between reader and creator. These are my picks!



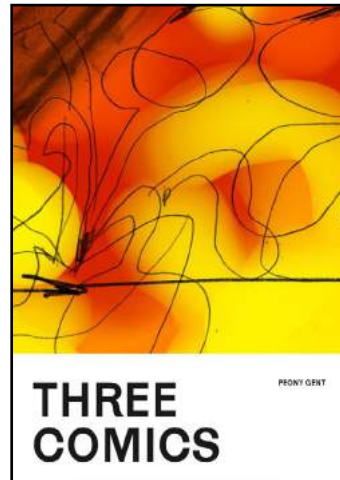
**Howard the Duck** – Writer Steve Gerber was a genius and the often blistering satire of *Howard the Duck* is him at his fiercest, uncompromising best. These misadventures of a talking alien duck stuck on Earth – “trapped in a world he never made” – provide comics social commentary at its comedically bleakest.





**The Bus** – At least one choice here needs to be about the pure language of the medium and, in that regard, Paul Kirchner's *The Bus* (originally published in *Heavy Metal*) is probably the comics masterpiece you've never heard of before. One-page strips that ingeniously play with the mechanics of comics to put ever more surreal twists on one man's repeated, daily commute.

**The Roles We Play** – The way comics can bring us into the lived experiences of others with such clarity and empathy is remarkable. Sabba Khan's graphic memoir powerfully explores themes of identity and self as a second generation Muslim migrant, as she deftly exploits the full potential of the canvas of the page to connect with the reader.



**Three Comics** – Anything from artist Peony Gent would be a must to represent the untapped potential of the form and we get triple the value here. Gent's haunting, abstract, visual poetry has been taking comics into genuinely unexplored territory over the last few years. Groundbreaking work.

**Maleficium** – EdieOP is my favourite cartoonist and Avery Hill are my favourite publishers, so *Maleficium* ticks two boxes. This is an all-ages, supernatural adventure that showcases EdieOP's delightful signature blend of the dark and the deceptively cutesy as a schoolboy defends his family from the evil presence in their house. A great desert island reminder of how AHP changed the landscape of UK indie



**Luxury item** – The space spinner given away free with 2000 AD #1 as a reminder of how much the Galaxy's Greatest Comic meant to me as a kid.

Andy Oliver is the Editor-in-Chief of the comics culture website Broken Frontier (<https://www.brokenfrontier.com/>) and has been involved in comics as a commentator, speaker, self-publisher, moderator, curator and activist for more decades than he cares to remember.





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