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# HEROES UNLIMITED



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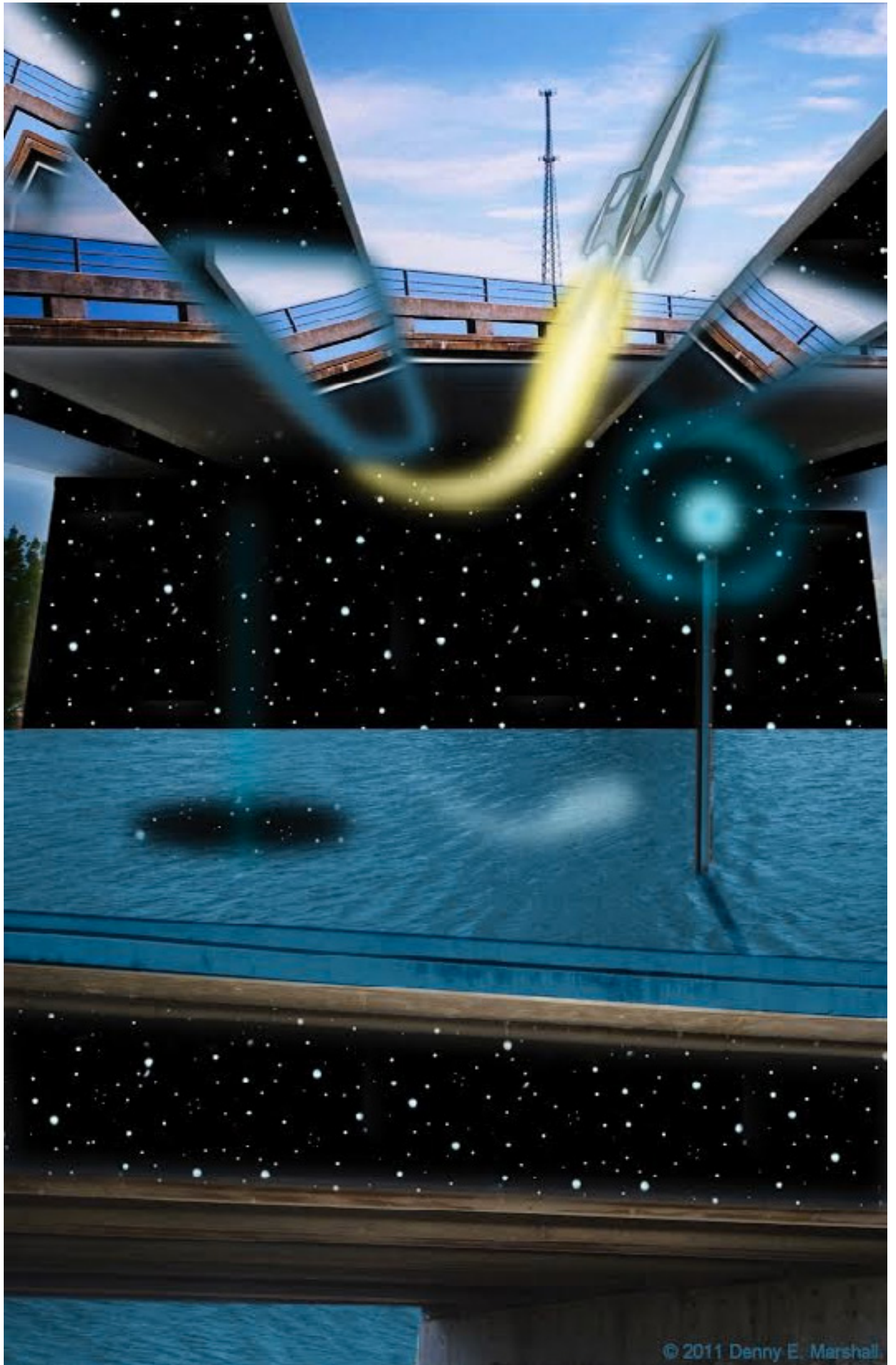
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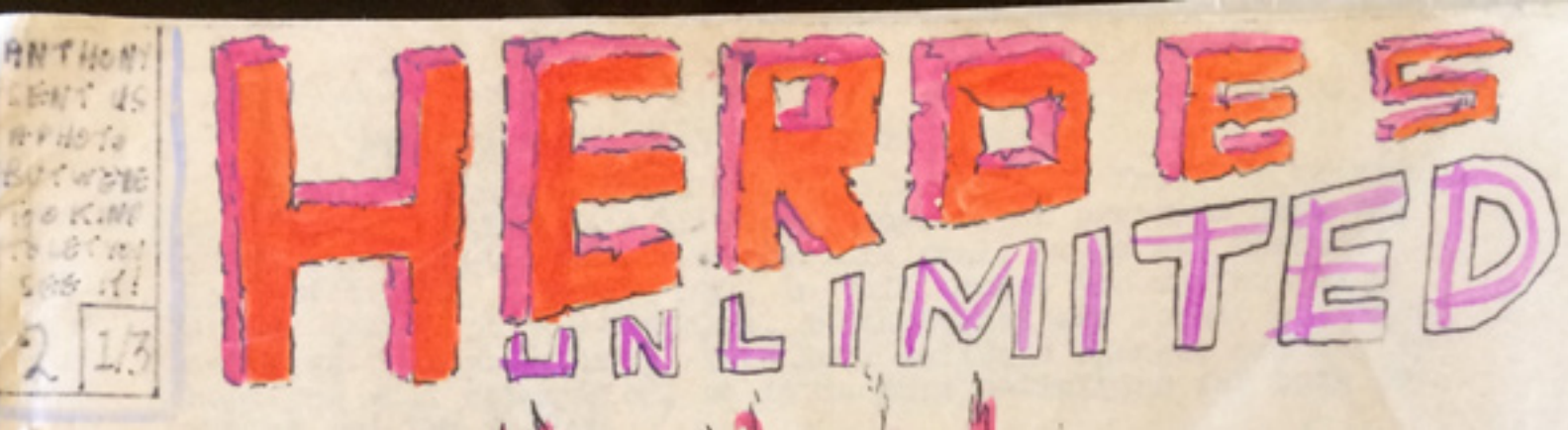
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**James Bacon, Chris Garcia, Pádraig Ó Méalóid**  
**~Editors~**







# Searching for Tony by James Bacon

*Zine Scene* was a two episode radio programme by Jarvis Cocker for BBC Radio 4 looking at zines. It was broadcast in 2008 and I happened to hear it, sitting in my kitchen in Croydon. I expected that there would be mention of science fiction zines that I knew, but was taken aback when Cocker made mention of Paul Neary doing artwork for an Irish Comic Fanzine in the 1960's. I was fascinated, this was a revelation and I wanted to learn and know more.

Ireland has always had somewhat of a trailblazing reputation when it comes to fan activities, Walt Willis, his Hugo winning *Slant* and subsequent *Hyphen*, *The Enchanted Duplicator* are all seminal works in the world science fiction fanzines. To hear that the first comic fanzine was Irish, was a huge thing.

Anyone I made mention of it to, just wasn't aware or knowledgeable about it. Perplexing I had no real leads. In 2010 I tried to make contact with Paul Neary, but I was going through an intermediary, and it did not really work, well, I didn't get to make contact.

I again attempted to make contact with Paul in 2012, and this time, I made contact, and Pádraig helped me. I asked Paul about the situation, as I was at the time writing about *Heroes Unlimited* and *Merry Marvel Fanzine for Journey Planet*.

Paul said: 'I have to say that I cannot remember how I became involved with Tony Roche (from Dublin, as you say) while he was putting together issue two of his *Heroes Unlimited* fanzine.'

'I do remember drawing a bunch of disembodied heads for the second issue cover in 1967 or so .... which was printed by a method so primitive that it needed to be copied onto a new stencil every few issues.... so several different variations of that cover exist...all 'inked' by a certain fan helper...the name Ges Cleaver sticks in my mind....he was from the English Midlands around Birmingham, as I recall.'

'I drew for five or six issues of *Heroes Unlimited* and some of this has been posted on the internet... principally a Captain Remus episode from issue 7...'

I was so pleased, yet Tony seemed very very illusive still. Paul had no contact with him at that stage, yet I had affirmed what information I had. The zine came and went.

Last year I found Harry McAvinchey's webpage – *Paddy Kool 2*, where there was a whole article and indeed, scans of *Merry Marvel Fanzines #2* online. <https://paddykool2.wordpress.com/comics-comix-and-fandom/> This allowed me to expand my knowledge somewhat but also I rewrote my piece with a link to this as part of another project I was working on, Dublin 2019. <http://dublin2019.com/3927-2/> Tony also engaged on the blog's comments page, so I knew he existed! Yet I had no email. I should have contacted Harry, but I never got to it.

Then at Octocon, in Dublin, in October 2016, Dr Anthony Roche walked in, and came to the Dublin 2019 table and asked for me by name. It became clear who he was and indeed, he had brought all his fanzines in with him. Unbeknownst to me, Tony had been at Shamrokon in 2014, but now standing in front of me, numbers were exchanged, plots hatched and others involved.

Pádraig Ó Méalóid and I went out to The Royal Marine Hotel, to meet Tony, and initiate the interview process and capture images of his zines and now here the history is told as part of this fanzine.

It's been a bit of a fun journey, but one that is definitely worth it.





# An Introduction to Irish Comics from Pádraig Ó Méalóid

The Irish have some odd connections to comics, from early on.

Here's three Irishmen: Samuel Sidney McClure, born in Antrim in 1857; Alfred Harmsworth, born in Chapelizod in Dublin in 1865; and Jack Butler Yeats, born in London in 1871 but, other than that unfortunate geographical anomaly (which could happen to anyone), he was as Irish an Irishman as myself, or those other two.

Irish artist Jack B Yeats had the distinction of having won the brand-new Irish Free State's first Olympic Medal<sup>1</sup> at the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris, when his painting *The Liffey Swim* won a silver medal in the Arts and Culture section of the Games<sup>2</sup> - back when they still had an Arts and Culture category<sup>3</sup>. Before all that, though, he had worked as an illustrator for British story papers, including *The Boy's Own Paper*, and for a number of British comics, and created the first comic strip parody of Sherlock Holmes, called *Chubb-Lock Homes*, which made its debut in *Comic Cuts* on 16 June 1894<sup>4</sup>.

*Comic Cuts* itself was a very early British comic book created in 1890 by Dublin man Alfred Harmsworth. He founded Amalgamated Press, which went through umpteen corporate name changes and spawned Fleetway Publications, one of the two biggest publishers of British comics at one point, launching the ground-breaking and still extant *2000 AD* in 1977. Harmsworth would eventually become the 1st Viscount Northcliffe, and also publish the right-wing *Daily Mail*, but the less said about that the better.

The oldest of the three gentlemen, Samuel McClure from Antrim, emigrated to America, where he established the McClure Newspaper Syndicate, the first of its kind there, which marketed, amongst other things, comics strips. Some of these comic strips were used in *Funnies on Parade* in 1933, an immediate precursor to 1934's *Famous Funnies*, generally considered the first true American comic book. McClure would also distribute comic strip versions of Superman and Batman, progenitors of all superhero comics today.

So the Irish have been doing interesting and useful things around the periphery of comics for quite some time. And this is all without even mentioning how first generation Irish Catholic emigrants to Britain helped shape a new wave of British comics in the 1970s and 1980s, in much the same way they did with punk rock and new wave music<sup>5</sup>. All this, though, is only by way of leading towards another individual who, entirely unbeknownst to himself, was breaking new ground in a way that would cast a very long shadow indeed.

Tony Roche, between the end of 1966 - fifty years ago this month, as I write this - and the middle of 1969, created two comics fanzines, *The Merry Marvel Fanzine* and *Heroes Unlimited*, stealing a march on Phil Clarke and Steve Moore's *Ka-Pow*, which didn't appear until July 1967. James Bacon has covered how it came about that I ended up interviewing Tony, but the day the three of us met for the first time, to discuss it, was absolutely thrilling. Over the years I've had my issues with US superhero comics, but to hear Tony talk about how, as a teenager, he ended up meeting someone like Stan Lee, back in the days when everything was both more innocent and more exciting, is something I shall never forget. To have someone from the ground zero days of comics fandom turn up like this would be fascinating at any time, but to have the person be from my own old hometown of Dun Laoghaire was unbelievable.

But less about me, and more about Tony. I hope this interview rouses interest in him and his work, and leads to bigger and better things for him and his until-now-untold story of the Irish involvement in the development of comics fandom.



## ENDNOTES

1 - Jack's older brother, the Irish poet WB Yeats, had won the Nobel Prize for Literature the previous year, 1923, the first of four - so far - Irish recipients of the award. One can only imagine there must have been a certain amount of one-upmanship at Yeats family gatherings...

2 - There was another Irish cultural medal winner that year, in the person of the writer, surgeon, politician and athlete Oliver St. John Gogarty, whose *Ode to the Tailteann Games* won the bronze medal in the mixed literature category.

3 - The Arts and Culture category was changed from a medal-winning part of the games to a non-medal-winning 'Cultural Olympiad' between the 1948 games in London and the 1952 games in Helsinki, thus depriving Irish artist Micheál Ó Nualláin - younger brother of writer Brian Ó Nualláin, better known as Flann O'Brien - from winning one when he displayed a work that year.

4 - The 16<sup>th</sup> of June is celebrated in Ireland as Bloomsday, the day on which all the action in James Joyce's *Ulysses* takes place.

5 - Pat Mills and Kevin O'Neill, in the first instance, and John Lydon and Elvis Costello in the second, amongst many others, in both cases.

# An Oral History of Tony Roche

**Pádraig Ó Méalóid:** To start right at the beginning - because I want to get a clear picture of the times - what were the circumstances of your life? When and where were you born, and what was your family doing at the time?

**Tony Roche:** My name is Anthony Valentine Roche. I was born on 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1951, in the city of Dublin in the County of Dublin in the Republic of Ireland. When people notice the date of my birth, they assume that I was given the second name of Valentine because I was born on St. Valentine's Day. But in fact my parents had chosen my name well in advance of my birth: Anthony (because I assume my mother had a particular devotion to St. Anthony) and Valentine because it was a family name on my father's side. My paternal grandfather was named Valentine Henry Roche, known to one and all as 'Harry;' my great-grandfather on the same side was Valentine James; and one of them (I don't know which) was born on St. Valentine's Day. I don't know how my parents contrived it, but I arrived two hours into St. Valentine's Day and tended to interpret it as something magical and lucky. For one thing, it meant that relatives and my parents' friends had no trouble remembering when my birthday was.

My father's name was Noel Brice Roche and my mother's Bernadette McLaughlin. I reckon my parents were in their late twenties when I was born in 1951, the eldest of four sons. My parents' background was interesting because it was quite mixed, in a way unusual for Ireland at the time. My father's father was Irish and Catholic, his mother English and Protestant (Alice Englefield, Anglicised from the German 'Englefeld'). My father was one of four children, and they were raised in the religion of the relative parent: my father and his brother Terence ('Terry') as Catholics, his two sisters (Nancy and June) as Protestants in the Church of Ireland. So my father was in the RAF during the war, for example, as a mechanic on Allied planes in North Africa. My father was so bad at things mechanical that I can only imagine how the poor planes fared that he worked on; I always referred to him as 'Rommel's secret weapon.' After the war, he went into the family business, the Dublin Woollen Company, beside the Ha'penny Bridge on the River Liffey, which had been founded by a Roche ancestor in 1888. At the time I was growing up, it sold mainly lengths of tweed from which clothes could be made; though as trade in that area declined in the late 1960s it diversified into areas like Aran sweaters. I worked in the shop as a teenager during certain summers; for example, in 1969, when I earned the money to go and see Bob Dylan and The Band at the Isle of Wight.

My mother, Bernadette McLaughlin, was born in County Donegal, in the peninsula of Inishowen, just outside the city of Derry (which was of course across the border in Northern Ireland). She was one of eight children, seven of them girls, the eldest (like myself). My grandfather Charles McLaughlin worked in a clothes shop in Carndonagh and was determined not to emigrate (unlike the rest of his siblings, most of whom were in Boston). He also loved acting and won several prizes for his performances around Inishowen in amateur productions of Irish plays; his signature role was Professor Tim in George Shiels's play. My grandmother had a particular love of poetry, which she passed on to many of her grandchildren, myself included. The McLaughlins were Donegal Catholics who moved to Dublin when my mother was fourteen and opened a clothes factory in Lower Abbey Street. I remember as a boy being measured for a suit in the Dublin Woollen Co. where the lengths of tweed were cut and then being sent around to Grandad's factory, where they were made up into a new suit. My mother was an accomplished singer who performed regularly on Irish radio and in concerts throughout the 1940s. Great things were predicted for her when television arrived in Ireland; instead she married and I and my three brothers arrived and put an end to her singing



career, though there was a piano in the drawing room on which she would play and sing most days. But her life from 1950 was looking after the home, her husband and the children, as was the way in those days.

I always thought my parents' marriage was extraordinary, since both of them leaped the wall effectively to marry their partner. Apparently, my mother kept the fact of Noel Roche well hidden until they announced their engagement, causing one of her friends to remark: 'Well, aren't you the dark horse?' We were all baptized and raised as Catholics; but with my father's background and my mother's choice of him as partner, there was a certain liberalism in my upbringing which would have been unusual at the time.

We lived in the suburbs of south county Dublin, in a semi-detached house on a cul-de-sac with nine others. The full address was 2, St. John's Park, Mounttown, Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin. I was initially sent to the Christian Brothers' College at the end of our road; but I was miserable there. The regime of corporal punishment was still in place, and whole classes of young boys were regularly beaten (with a leather<sup>1</sup>) for a transgression performed by one of them (such as smoking in the toilets.) I apparently discussed it with my maternal Grannie, who (I found out later) intervened and told my parents to get me out of a school where I was so miserable. My father was very involved in rugby and knew a former referee who was running a school called St. Conleth's College closer to town in Ballsbridge. And so I was brought to meet headmaster Kevin D. Kelleher one fateful night in November (when I was nine) and by January 1961 I was in the new school. Conleth's was Catholic but was run by lay teachers, not by priests or a religious order; its atmosphere was liberal (the only teacher who had a leather was Mr. Kelleher) and I thrived, delighted not to have had to go to boarding school.

**PÓM: Could you give a brief description of Ireland as you were growing up through your teens? And maybe a general idea of what was available for someone like you to read at the time?**

**TR:** I enjoyed growing up in Dublin. The place was becoming less narrow and more open in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Catholic Church was loosening its grip, and there was an emergent youth culture. I loved living by the sea, and always have: smelling the fresh breeze, walking the shore and swimming – both at the Forty Foot and in Dun Laoghaire and Blackrock baths. I wasn't much into contact sports so the swimming and cycling were important. Monkstown/Mounttown was a fascinating, rather bohemian place to grow up in, with a good mix of Catholics and Protestants of various stripes (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker). There was ready access to the city centre (on the bus or the train) in just under half an hour. It amazes me, in retrospect, that I was free to roam around town from an early age. Dublin, even then, was a great movie-going capital; and there were plenty of cinemas. My own tastes ran to John Wayne westerns, English comedies (especially those with Peter Sellers) and Alfred Hitchcock thrillers. I was especially keen on horror films, both the Terence Fisher Hammers and the Roger Corman Edgar Allen Poe adaptations with Vincent Price. Amazingly (and mysteriously), these films were not restricted in Ireland, whereas in England they carried the 'X' certificate which kept out anyone under eighteen. So I got to see *The Brides of Dracula* with Peter Cushing in 1960 at the age of ten!

I loved music from the very beginning. The only place it was available then was on 208 Radio Luxembourg on the transistor radio at night under the bedclothes. My younger brother Bernard (a fine songwriter, singer and instrumentalist) first told me of the Beatles: 'There's this group, Anthony, called the Beatles. You'll love their music – and wait till you see the length of their hair!' This was 1962, I was 11 to Bernard's 9, and the Beatles' hair was nothing to what it became; but he was right. As a recent TG4 documentary on The Beatles and Ireland put it, they made you feel that anything was possible. I went to concerts in the Adelphi Cinema in Dublin: Cliff Richard and the Shadows; Roy Orbison; the Ronettes and the Rolling Stones (the last courtesy of the Monkstown altar boys and the Christmas outing; our choice, needless to say, but supported by the wonderful Father Larry Redmond). I didn't go to the Beatles because I knew I wouldn't hear a note of their music with all of the screaming female fans. Now of course I wish I had, if only to have seen them in the flesh. The most important place for fostering my love of music was Murray's Record Centre in George's Street in Dun Laoghaire, one of two record shops run by a great pair of brothers, George and Jimmy Murray (the other shop was in town). This was a gathering place for myself and kindred spirits to listen to the latest Beatles LP, to be in our own company and to chat. I remember Bob Geldof and Pete Briquette, later of the Boomtown Rats, hanging out there at the time.

Dublin was well supplied with bookshops. Most of my reading wasn't that different from an English public schoolboy. All phases of Enid Blyton – Noddy and Big Ears through the Secret Seven to the Famous Five. I built a clubhouse modelled on that belonging to the Seven but could





only find two others to be in the secret society; and somehow the Secret Three didn't sound as impressive. I read all of the Biggles books by Captain W.E. Johns and wanted to be a pilot when I grew up – until short-sightedness at seven meant I had to wear glasses (still do) and put paid to that ambition. The local newsagents stocked all the English comics, and I read my way up from *The Beano* and *The Dandy* (which were read by every Dublin child) to *Valiant*, *Hotspur* and *Tiger*, with Roy of the Rovers. I liked soccer, followed Manchester United and was thrilled when (allegedly) Jack and Bobby Charlton wrote Roy of the Rovers; I also won a beautiful brown leather football in a competition. The best English comic, though, was *Eagle*, with not only Frank Hampson's Dan Dare but Frank Bellamy's extraordinary rendering of Heros the Spartan. The American comics, which were to become so important to me, were stocked by some, but not all, of the local newsagents and grocers' shops. They were apparently sent over as ballast in the ships; which meant they arrived three months' late and occasionally missed a month; but the supply was plentiful and their condition good.

The tastes I have outlined so are all for English and American fare ('foreign trash', as the cultural guardians would have categorised it). But there was a strand of Irishness in what I viewed. A monthly magazine called *Our Boys* was sold in the schools; and awarded half a crown (two shillings and sixpence) for limericks they published. Here's mine:

There was a lady from Ealing  
So light she flew to the ceiling.  
The rent man cried: 'Hey,  
Where's my weekly pay?'  
Which showed *he* hadn't much feeling.

What I remember making an impact from *Our Boys* were the stories of Victor O.D. Power, based on Irish folk narratives and centred on a wise old Irishwoman called Kitty the Hare who told traditional (usually ghostly) tales. And there was an Irish language writer called Cathal Ó Sándair who wrote an incredibly exciting series of detective stories set in Dublin featuring Réics Carló, going in mad pursuit of criminals around Baile Átha Cliath like it was downtown Chicago. (I only found out recently that O Sándair also wrote science-fiction stories in Irish – wish I'd known that at the time.) And there was the great Irish comic actor Jimmy O'Dea (in glorious partnership with a young Maureen Potter) every Christmas in pantomime (he's King Brian in Walt Disney's 1959 *Darby O'Gill and the Little People*). I also met with Northsiders and so bridged the great Dublin divide through my membership of Uncle Bill's Heraldites Club (which met in town) and the Irish Elvis Presley Fan Club. Dublin and Irish society were opening up and I reaped the benefits.

**PÓM: Tell me about the American comics. Firstly, what do you remember about finding them, originally?**

**TR:** Well, while the British comics were perfectly enjoyable to read, they were to my mind surpassed by American comics from the late 1950s and particularly from the arrival of Marvel in 1962. For one thing, they were in colour and, once the printing standards improved in the mid-1960s, displayed a really beautiful range of colours (this was something that the much-maligned *Batman* TV series got right). I can understand why, for a short while, Marvel added the term 'Pop Art' to their title (before angry fans put paid to that pretension). Second, rather than one or two pages and multiple strips, American comics increasingly featured one story of twenty-plus pages with the benefit of more fully developed plots and characterization. The artwork was for the most part simply stunning, like futuristic architectural designs. If Ireland (and England) still largely inhabited the past, in terms of the physical and mental environment in which we lived, this was the future – something America very much represented in those days: bright, brash, colourful and confident, brimming with energy and invention. It was also a form of adolescent escapism for nerds like me: wearing glasses and socially awkward, we could fantasise about owning a secret identity in which we became confident, successful and attractive. Superman, with his Clark Kent persona, was obviously the grand original; but Stan Lee and Steve Ditko absolutely aced the formula with the complex dynamic between Peter Parker and Spider-Man.

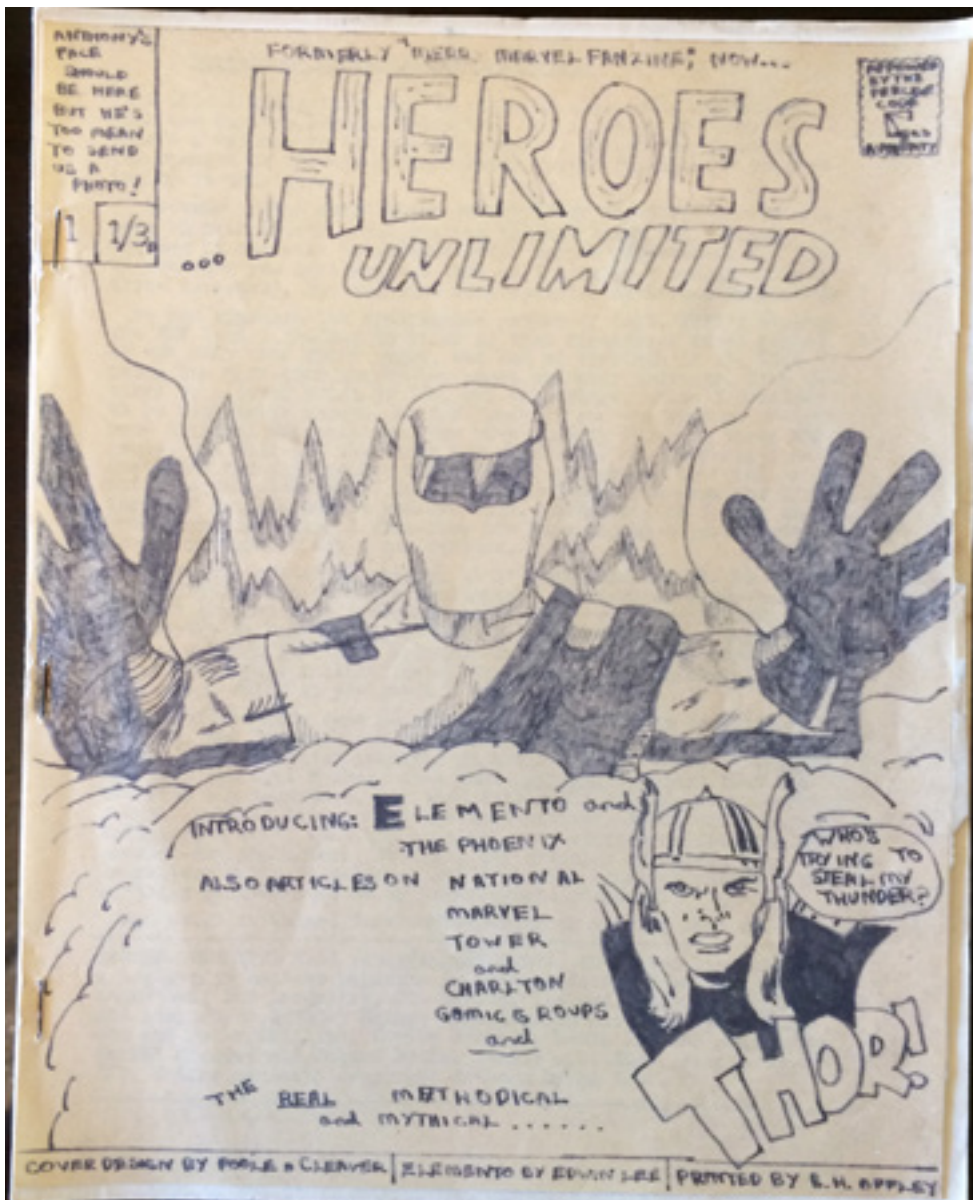


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# HEROES UNLIMITED







The first American comics I read were published by DC/National in the late 1950s. As with the Beatles, I'm even gladder that my growing up intersected so seamlessly with the emergence of the Silver Age of American comics. The Superman and Batman range had carried on through from the 1940s; but I found neither of them particularly interesting (though I read them all, of course). The problem with Superman was that his creators had made him all-powerful from the start and then had to devise green kryptonite to weaken him and red kryptonite to give them free range with its unpredictability. Superman had good artists, though; Wayne Boring with his muscular and mythical superhero and Curt Swan with a more low-key and realistic approach. The one Superman feature I liked was the weird and surreal offshoot, Bizarro, with its Frankenstein-like damaged versions of the originals and an extraordinary pathos. The Batman titles didn't interest me until editor

Julius Schwartz took over in the 1960s and unleashed writers Gardner Fox and John Broome and artists Carmine Infantino and Gil Kane on the series. The real development in DC was the arrival of other superheroes at the end of the 1950s, though the first title I remember buying was *Mystery in Space* with Adam Strange, which appealed to the nascent science-fiction fan within. I still remember the beautiful Infantino cover with Adam Strange ascending into the sky. But the real breakthrough was the arrival of the Flash [in *Showcase #4*], with its hyperkinetic Infantino cover, quickly followed by Green Lantern and the Atom and the athletic, almost balletic artistry of Gil Kane. Murphy Anderson did a wonderfully detailed job on Hawkman. The Justice League was I thought most notable for the scripts of Gardner Fox, which were of a dizzying complexity as they spanned a wide range of characters and (frequently) dimensions. I thought my greatest intellectual achievement of those years was when I was able to 'crack' and fully understand a JLA plot by Fox! So by the early 1960s I was enjoyably immersed in the DC comics edited by Julius Schwartz, with their classical approach to the form, serious-minded, restrained and beautifully achieved.

Then in the middle of all this, in May of 1962, the Hulk arrived. The Hulk had many of the features of the usual super-hero comic but with an unparalleled originality in their development. Yes, there were super villains to combat (an indispensable core component of the genre). But the chief focus was on the struggle within the central character, the Jekyll and Hyde relationship between the rational scientist Bruce Banner and his rampaging alter-ego, the Hulk. There was a psychological complexity here beyond anything at DC. And that complexity meant it was no longer possible to wrap everything up within the one issue. The continuity between the issues, the way the overall narrative developed from one to the next, even if the individual villain got defeated, meant that the reader was hooked. Certainly, this one was. And the artwork had a raw power, a visceral immediacy beyond the classical restraint of DC, directly confronting the reader in a way that scarcely could be contained within the confines of the panels. And, then, almost a year to the day after the Hulk appeared, he disappeared – without trace or warning. It was only later I



learned that the title was cancelled after six issues, owing to poor sales. I didn't know this at the time; and given the uncertain and haphazard distribution of American comics in Ireland, it was always possible that *The Incredible Hulk* was still appearing in the US but for whatever reason was no longer being shipped across the Atlantic.

So I continued to keep my eye out for the Hulk, while lamenting his disappearance. Then, almost exactly another year later in April of 1964, my patience was rewarded when I saw the name reappear in the following blurb on the cover of a comic book called *Fantastic Four*: 'This is the Big One! *The Incredible Hulk versus the Thing!*' I couldn't care less who the Fantastic Four were; but the Hulk was back. I bought the title, took it home and read it. The cover had claimed rather hyperbolically that this was 'The World's Greatest Comic Magazine!' and by the time I finished reading, I was inclined to agree with them. This was the occasion of my Pauline conversion to Marvel Comics, one that would have profound consequences in the years ahead. I had just turned 13 in April of 1964 and was at the age where most boys of my acquaintance stopped reading comics. I might have followed; but instead I went in deep, thanks to *Fantastic Four* # 25. It was clear that the FF had the same writer and artist team as the Hulk, now clearly identified and heralded as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. The two elements



the writing contained that DC lacked were emotional complexity and wit. The former I was already familiar with from the Hulk; this was equally evident in the FF in the often fractious relationship between various members of the group. Just one example of the title's originality within the super-hero genre was the way Stan Lee took the cliché of the teenage sidekick and in the figure of Johnny Storm created a more developed character who kept trying to assert his independence and whose hot-headedness (ha!) made it difficult to contain him with the dynamics of the group. But the thing I valued most in Stan Lee and his writing was his humour. It's best exemplified for me in a Spider-Man story which starts with Peter Parker trying to wield a needle and thread to sew the rents in his costume and his wryly wondering whether other super-heroes have to deal with the same problem. Jack Kirby's art was even more developed in the FF; it now had an epic quality in the staging of the encounter between the Hulk and the Thing across a recognisable New York.

Unlike the cover of *The Incredible Hulk*, the cover of *Fantastic Four* now revealed that this was a product of the Marvel Comics Group. In case the reader didn't get the message, two of the cover's five blurbs expanded on it: 'A *Marvel Super-Spectacular!*' and 'Bringing the *Marvel Age of Comics to a Lofty New Pinnacle of Greatness!*' This reader got the message and rapidly sought out the other Marvel titles in my local newsagent. There were eight others: *Spider-Man*, *The Avengers*, *Daredevil*, *The X-Men*, *Thor*, *Strange Tales*, *Tales to Astonish*, *Tales of Suspense* and *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos*. Over half of the nine titles, extraordinarily, were produced by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (the Lennon-McCartney of the comics era). And it's clear from looking at the titles published in April 1964 just how much of a roll Marvel were on. There was the extraordinary Steve Ditko on *Spider-Man* and (buried in the back of *Strange Tales*) Dr. Strange. *Avengers* #4 that month promised the resurrection of the World War II Captain America from an iceberg (and a guest appearance by another 1940s revenant, Sub-Mariner). *X-Men* #4 not only supplied Magneto but the twin debut of Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch (as villains). There was a new title that same month, of a blind super-hero called *Daredevil*. And so on.

Over the next few years I avidly followed Marvel Comics as its consistent and interrelated universe continued to expand. (I still kept up with DC.) The letters' pages had been personalized so that the more formal 'Dear Editor' was replaced with a first-person address to the comics' prime creators: 'Dear Stan and Jack.' And those readers' letters drew personalized and witty responses from Stan himself (or so we were led to believe). I was dying to join in the conversation. There was only

one problem. Marvel Comics appeared in Ireland three months after the US. Any letter I sent (quite apart from the issue of its quality) would be regarded as out of date and hence passed over. I began to consider subscribing - but the cost was exorbitant. In the end, I managed to scrape together the shekels to subscribe to *Fantastic Four*, now firmly established as my favourite Marvel title. In due course, back came the first issue of my subscription. I still remember taking off the wrapper and beholding *Fantastic Four #45* (December 1965), 'Among Us Hide... the Inhumans!': not only a fine issue in its own right but the opening of an extraordinary run of unparalleled creativity by Lee and Kirby that began with the Inhumans, brought back Galactus to destroy the earth, introduced a major new character in his envoy, the philosophizing Silver Surfer, and concluded by introducing the Black Panther, the first black super-hero. And I was guaranteed not to miss a single issue of this magnificent unfolding sequence, since I had subscribed. The pressure was on. At almost exactly the same time, someone turned out the lights and Marvel Comics (for a time, at least) stopped being distributed in Ireland. There was nothing for it. I took my Post Office Savings Book, to which my grandparents had contributed a considerable sum, withdrew the entire amount and used it to subscribe to the remaining nine Marvel titles. My parents found out a short time later and I thought I'd be murdered. I must have made a good case and impressed them with my love of comics, however, because they not only forgave me but actively encouraged my interest. And I could now start sending in letters of comment to the various titles.

**PÓM:** Just to backtrack a bit here - I didn't even know that American comics were available for sale in Ireland on any sort of regular basis, but it sounds like this was definitely the case where you were, is that right? How early do you remember buying these - what age were you when you started reading them, I mean?

**TR:** Yes, American comics were always available for sale in Ireland when I was growing up. I remember them from the late 1950s, when I began buying the Superman and Batman titles. I would have been six or seven. The earliest actual title I remember buying was a *Mystery in Space* with Adam Strange on the cover. Then I got each of the Julius Schwartz edited new super-hero titles as they debuted, first the Flash and Green Lantern, then the Atom, Hawkman, JLA, etc. There was a newsagents in Monkstown entitled Hewett's (it's still there, opposite the Catholic church) where I bought the British weeklies. The British war comics were hard to get - your best bet were the little boxy newsstands in railway stations, where the monthly war comics were used to wallpaper the glass walls, covers outward. What a collage that was! The regular newsagents did not appear to stock the American comics. I got them from a shop called The Mart, which was just around the corner from our house, on 72 Mounttown Road Upper (Monkstown, Dun Laoghaire) - there's a Cartridge Stop shop there now, where I buy the ink cartridges for my computer. The Mart was one of a little constellation of shops near the 46A bus stop - which included McMurroughs' Chemist, McCormacks' pub and The Mart, which was run by a very nice lady called Mrs. Grier. All of these shops were neighbourhood shops run by families, where in each case we would know the families and so got treated very personably when we went in. The Mart was more in the nature of a local grocery shop - I remember fresh vegetables and a large fridge full of ice creams. But just inside the door, on the left hand side, against the wall, was an elaborate rack filled with American comics. They were replaced on a monthly basis, and the date on the cover pages happened to coincide with the month in which they were sold (which meant they had come out three months earlier in the States). The price was approximate to what was on the cover - 10 cents was 9 pence, 12 cents a shilling, and so forth.

As their popularity grew, some of the comics had clearly been printed in the UK rather than the US and had the sterling prices printed on the cover. The Mart stocked all of the American titles, to the best of my knowledge. I sporadically bought from among the six Superman titles - *Superman*, *Superboy*, *Action Comics*, *Adventure Comics*, *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen*, and *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* - and the two or three Batman titles. Later on I bought (but did not save) other DC super-hero titles - *Blackhawk*, *Metal Men*, J'onn J'onzz, *Metamorpho*, and one war comic, *Sgt. Rock*, drawn by the great Joe Kubert. The first comics I started saving were the Julius Schwartz edited titles in the late 1950s and generally there were no gaps. The first Marvel title I bought was *The Incredible Hulk*, which came out bi-monthly from May 1962 to March 1963; but there was as yet no 'Marvel Comics Group' logo on the cover to identify it as part of a wider range of super-hero comics, only an utterly gnomic 'MC' in a small box. (The Marvel logo was added in late 1963, just after the demise of *The Incredible Hulk* title.) I do not know for sure whether the other Marvel titles were on sale in The Mart at this time, but I think it is safe to assume they were. After all, *Fantastic Four #25* was on The Mart's comics racks in early 1964 to draw my eye with its reference to the Hulk. I can see from the cover of *The Incredible Hulk #5*, which has him breaking through the walls of a cell, that Kirby's graphic covers for the title reached out and grabbed me.

At this distance in time, I'm surprised I didn't sample the ever-growing number of super-hero titles from Marvel; but I didn't. That would have required an outlay of cash on an unknown title that might disappoint, and funds were limited. Throughout the 1960s the odd title would go missing for a month. I remember the artist, Jim Fitzpatrick, telling me in 1969 that the first issue of Marvel's *The Silver Surfer*, a double-size issue written by Stan Lee and drawn by John Buscema, had not appeared in Ireland; by that stage, US collectors were snapping up first issues, so there may well have been no surplus copies to send to Ireland. And there was that 'lights out' period in late 1965 when all of the Marvels disappeared from the racks (the DCs may have continued). They returned after a number of months, but by that stage I was taking no more chances and had subscribed to all ten titles.

### **PÓM: What happened once you started writing letters? Were any of them published?**

**TR:** That, of course, was the question: now that I could send in Letters of Comment to the various Marvel letters pages, would any of them be considered good or interesting enough to publish? I had no idea. There was only one way to find out, so I started writing. In the end, I was successful in having five of my letters published, which I regard as a pretty good number. The first was in *The Avengers* #36 (January 1967), an analysis of #32, 'The Sign of the Serpent!', a strong anti-racism story written by Stan Lee and drawn by Don Heck. In the main, since I was a word person, my comments tended to concentrate on Stan's scripts, but there were always appreciative comments on the artwork also. Another letter was in *Strange Tales* #151 that very same month (December 1966). In it, I noted that other writers had been coming on board in recent months (Roy Thomas, Gary Friedrich and Denny O'Neil – 'a fine Irish name' – among them) and that increasingly less of the stories were written by Stan. Was he, I queried, going to retire? The response was emphatic: 'Our Leader' may get run out of town on a rail, he may do this, he may do that, but no way is he going to retire. But more and more writers arrived and four or five years later Stan would give up writing comics and hand over as editor to Roy Thomas. During 1967 I had three more letters published – two in *Sgt. Fury* (I no longer have the issues so don't know in which issues they appeared) and one in *Not Brand Echh!* #6 (February 1968). I don't remember at this stage whether I was particularly targeting their more marginal comics (Nick Fury, rather than *The Fantastic Four* or *Spider-Man*) to increase the chances of getting my letters published; or whether I wrote ten such letters a month and they picked their favorites. The latter seems a virtually impossible task, even for an enthusiast like me; so I'd say it was probably only two or three. On each occasion, I received an air-mailed yellow postcard which read: 'Congratulations! Your letter has been chosen and will appear in *Strange Tales* #151 [or whatever]. Stan and the Gang.' The last, and my favorite, was the letter which was published in *Not Brand Echh!* # 6. *NBE* was Marvel's satire mag, in which they spoofed their own heroes and those of Brand Echh (as they referred to DC/National). The letter is the only one I still have; I like the letter's efforts to be funny and I love the way the response by Stan (or whoever) really plays up to my Irishness. Here it is:

Dear Stan,

Recently a weapon was unleashed in the United States which was more deadly than an H-Bomb. This scourge has made its presence felt and so I decided that, in the interest of humanity, I would make a full investigation of this horrendous malefactor which hides its true identity under the guise of a magazine called *NOT BRAND ECHH* which, in effect, is subtly brainwashing the American people. Taking my portable tape recorder into the streets, I asked different comic fans their reaction to this new menace. Melvin T. Schnook fanzine editor: 'Aaargh! What is it?' Dr. Freddy F. Bales: 'This is truly a masterpiece of literature and is a good example of the heights to which graphic art can attain. It plumbs a pseudo-theological world and plunges the reader into a phantasmagoria of mind-staggering memorabilia.' Then I told him it was supposed to be funny! I learned that Stan Glee had been promptly kicked out of a comicon when the fans had read *BRECHH*, and Zack Kurvy had been unceremoniously dismissed from the Cartoonists' Union. My comments on *NBE*? Marvel has done it again!

And the reply,

But done *what* again? From the tone of your multiloquent missive, Tony, we kinda get the idea that, if merry Marvel went out of business, you'd want the newspapers to carry the story in the "Civic Improvements" section! C'mon, pal – admit you're just puttin' us on from way over there in County Dublin! Otherwise, we're just liable to go off the deep end and take our vengeance in the one way it'd really hurt – namely, we won't let the Hulk march in the next St. Patrick's Day Parade! (Or, who says this isn't the Marvel Age of Rollickin' Revenge?)



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# AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!

SEND YOUR LETTERS TO: THE MARVEL COMICS GROUP, SECOND FLOOR, 625 MADISON AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y. 10022

Dear Stan, Roy, and Don,

I would like to say that in AVENGERS #32, "Sign of the Serpent", you have the best issue of this magazine you've ever published! In fact, it's one of the best Marvel stories I've ever read. Why? Well, here are the reasons. First, I must compliment Don on his incredible penciling and inking. He gives the males that rugged look, and the females (especially Jan) are the most beautiful I've seen in any mag. Congrats on a great job, Don! As for the story, this ish proves that Stan the Man is one of the best contemporary writers of the century. This story incorporated so many good features that I can only mention a few. Most important was the portrayal of the bigotry that unfortunately exists. The wonderful handling of this was enough to place the story in the extra-special category, but with such great touches as Goliath's regaining some of his old confidence, Cap and Hawkeye acting human toward each other, Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch regaining their powers, and Henry and his wife ignoring the Sons of the Serpent beating up a foreigner, the story became a classic at which people will look back in years to come and say, "This was what made the Marvel Age of Comics so great!" Also, Artie Simsek's sound effects were sensational as well. Face front, y'all!

Anthony Roche, 2 St. John's Park, Mounttown  
Dun Laoire, Co. Dublin, Ireland

We can't, Tony boy! On account'a you, we're all too busy dodging Artie, who's running all around the place telling us we've gotta give him a bigger credit line!

Dear Stan, Roy, and Don,

To quote Charlie Brown from the cartoon strip "Peanuts", "I hate it—I just hate it!" What do I hate? Continued stories! As an example, in the magazines I buy regularly, only SPIDER-MAN #41 and F.F. #55 were not continued. I beg you, please stop printing continued stories or I'll tell everyone in Muncie (Population: 68,568) not to buy Marvel Comics. How does that grab you? Also, what are you trying to do—kill off Goliath for good? First you take away his own monthly story and then you try to get Sub-Mariner to kill him, then you put him back in the Avengers (good—new name, new uniform), but then you get him stuck as a ten-foot freak—what next? Finally, kill off pushy old Aunt May in SPIDER-MAN, and have Iron Man reveal his identity to the world. Bring back the Green Goblin—when you got rid of him, you got rid of all the interest in Spidey. Also, thank you for printing your magazines. David Cox, 206 E. Highland  
Muncie, Ind. 47302

You're welcome, Davey—although, from the way you started your letter, we'd expect you to be even more grateful if we stopped printing 'em! We're gonna try to tone down on the continued yarns from now on—but don't hold it against us if one or two (would you believe a dozen?) happen to slip thru? After all, you know how hard it is to break a habit! As for the rest of your suggestions, we can't comment upon them until all of Marvel-dom has had its say! (Which is the sneakiest way we know to get out from under!)

Dear Stan, Roy, and Don,

In AVENGERS #32 on page 16 you made a technical error when Captain America referred to the Sons of the Serpent as super-patriots. To quote Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, "a patriot is a person who loves and loyally or zealously supports his own country". Super-nationalist is the correct replacement. Nationalism in relation to patriotism is "excessive, narrow, or jingoist patriotism". It was nationalism, not patriotism, that was the root of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany. And it was nationalism, not patriotism, which under Napoleon made France for years the scourge of Europe. On the other hand, it was patriotism, not nationalism, that George Washington, Patrick Henry, Paul Revere and other great leaders of our revolution had. And it was patriotism, not nationalism, which inspired the brave Hungarians only a few years ago. Also, you use super-patriotism like a dirty word or something. Was Joan of Arc merely a patriot when she gave her life for God and country and brought an end to the Hundred Years War and unified France? Or would super-patriotism better describe her extreme unselfishness? I hope this will persuade you to refrain from using super-patriots incorrectly in the future.

Bruce Walker, 3320 S. Darlington  
Tulsa, Okla.

Okay, Bruce, okay! We're persuaded! We're persuaded! Whew! We've never knocked patriotism, frantic one—in fact, we'll yield to no one in our love for this wonderful nation of ours. Our only point was that we must beware the fanatic who tries to deprive us of our hard-won liberties—who tries to pit one class against another—one race against another—one man against another—and dares to do it in the name of patriotism! No man who preaches the gospel of hate in this, a nation founded on brotherly love—can call himself a patriot! At least—not an American patriot! We've probably strayed from your original point, Bruce, but that's what always happens—put a type-writer in front of us, and we go wild!

Dear Stan, Roy, and Don,

Embarrassed MMMS #27544 reporting in! My flushed face perceptibly whitens, having just blushed the known spectrum in pigmentary splendor. My reason—AVENGERS #33! Noteworthy both in art and manuscript, this issue, so powerful a concluding sequel, gave full rein to the idealistic principle of "Everlasting Marvel Goodness Over Badness Everywhere!" But yea, the perfect diamond is rare. One glance at the cover is enough. There, gallivanting hither and yon, engaged in derring-do, is our misplaced Scarlet Witch. You "wanda" what she's doing there, don't you, seeing that she's noticeably absent inside! "My favorite character, finally back in her rightful place!" I thought. But nay, snatched away before my very eyes. I do forgive you! Please consider this—Wanda used her replenished hex powers on the cover artist and got her

The fact that my first two letters were printed in the very same month I started a fanzine, *The Merry Marvel Fanzine*, does not seem to me a coincidence. I obviously wanted to air my views on Marvel comics, and doubt that I would have done so in a fanzine without this show of confidence and support for a fifteen-year-old from the folks at Marvel.

**PÓM:** What made you decide to publish a fanzine, do you remember? I know that the *Merry Marvel Fanzine* was the first comics fanzine on this side of the Atlantic, so you were obviously breaking new ground doing this, rather than picking up the idea from anyone you knew, for instance. How did you decide on what you were going to include in it, without any sort of template to guide you?

**TR:** There was no one I knew to get the idea from. Whereas I shared my interest in rock music with a number of friends, there was no one I knew in Dublin who shared my interest in American comics. And there were no comics fanzines coming out at the time in either Ireland or England. But they were coming out in the US and I subscribed to several of them. The best, and my inspiration, was the first American comics fanzine, aptly entitled *Alter-Ego*. The first issue I got was #4, dated 1964, an impressive 40 pages long. It was edited by Roy Thomas, still a school teacher in St. Louis, MO, but soon to become a writer for Marvel in New York. *Alter-Ego* had been founded by an academic called Jerry Bails, who was always identified himself as Jerry G. Bails, Ph.D. [I spoofed him as Dr Freddy F. Bales in my *Not Brand Echh!* letter]. I know Dave Gibbons connected with Dr Bails in the early 1960s. But by the time I got to *Alter-Ego*, it was Roy Thomas, whose articles, editorials, etc, were extremely well written. The fanzine contained a mixture of articles, interviews, original comic strips, letters, etc, and this was the template I followed. Or rather I developed a similar template over time as the various members of the editorial team assembled or were recruited. Originally, the *Merry Marvel Fanzine* was more like the shorter, simpler versions put out by dealers who wanted to trade back issues – just a few stapled together pages made up mainly of lists of titles for sale. The *MMF* began as one of these while aspiring to be and eventually evolving into a proper comics fanzine like *Alter-Ego* (it took *Heroes Unlimited* for this to be achieved). Another incentive was the fact that there was office equipment I could use to physically produce the mag. At the top of the Dublin Woollen Company, above my father's office, was a small room containing a Gestetner duplicator and supplies of carbon typing sheets, ink, reams of paper and the other necessary materials. My father gave his permission for me to use these and even more his support: he provided the supplies to enable me to produce the fanzine and they were posted from the shop. The Dublin Woollen Company is now a restaurant at the Ha'penny Bridge; they have preserved the original nineteenth-century structure of the building and you can still see the little window at the top giving on the room where I produced the *Merry Marvel Fanzine* (no plaque up yet).

There might well have been only one issue of the *MMF*. It was only a few pages stapled together and it only had 5 or 6 readers (pen pals of mine from the UK, acquired through buying and selling back issues of comics). I had ambitions for it to expand, but it lacked the one necessary essential, readers. Accordingly, I wrote a long letter to one of the British black and white comics that was including republished Marvel strips. In it, I of course first praised *POW!* Magazine to its editor, Alf Wallace, and then went on to talk up the *Merry Marvel Fanzine*. *POW!* offered a Thing sweater as a prize for the outstanding letter and I said that, if I won it (oh, the presumption), I would offer it as first prize in the regular competitions held in the fanzine. Well, I did win it, since they printed the letter (in the issue of February 26th 1967); but what was even more key, they printed my full address, since the main purpose was to acquire readers for the *MMF* and encourage fans to write to me. The readers' letters in these English comics only usually printed your name and town – e.g. Anthony Roche, Dublin – whereas the Marvel comics always printed the full, lengthy address: Anthony Roche, 2 St. John's Park, Mounttown, Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin, Ireland. On this occasion, so did *POW!* – in full italics, line by line in the body of my letter, so it really stood out. (I learned recently that I have Steve Moore to thank for this, who was working for Alf Wallace at the time; Steve and Phil Clarke would produce their comics fanzine *Ka-Pow* in July of the same year). The result of their publishing my letter was that 30 (!) people wrote to me, becoming subscribers to the 'zine and valued comics correspondents. One of these was Harry McAvinchey from Armagh in Northern Ireland; at last, another Irish fan! Without this boost, the thing wouldn't have gone forward. With it we ran to three issues of the *Merry Marvel Fanzine*, expanding all the time. The best thing we ran, in my view, were two articles by Peter Simpson comparing Stan Lee, first to Shakespeare, then to Charles Dickens, in a convincing and learned way. Volstagg from Thor's Asgard and Shakespeare's Falstaff were compared as cowardly braggarts, and so forth. Marvel in general, and Stan in particular, loved these; I had a letter from Flo Steinberg (his Girl Friday) asking



for an extra copy of both to go in Stan's special scrapbook.

By the end of issue number three (in May 1967; it was published bi-monthly), I felt it was time to expand and broaden the remit of the fanzine, to cover all of the American comics companies and not just Marvel. Pete Simpson and Peter C. Phillips were two excellent writers who could also serve as consulting editors. Artists were submitting their portfolios all the time; I was sure one or two good ones would emerge. In other words, we had a team, a team who now needed a more ambitious vehicle for trying out new ideas; and an ever-growing readership. What was really going on here, as I became more aware over these months, was the development of fandom.

**PÓM: You mentioned assembling your editorial team. Who was involved?**

**TR:** Well, Pete Simpson from Wirral in Cheshire was really the catalyst. He and I were in detailed and regular correspondence about American comics from very early on. Pete was our resident intellectual; loved his comics but was *au fait* with world literature: the articles comparing Stan Lee as writer to Shakespeare and Dickens, already mentioned; the mythological origins of Thor; references to Tolstoy (with the Russian spelling), you name it. His articles were very well written and usually presented a sophisticated argument. Pete was a few years older than I was and went to college (the University of Swansea) while he was still writing for the 'zine. Other contributors came to me through Pete Simpson – certainly Paul Neary the artist and I'm pretty sure Pete Phillips. PCP was from Oldham in Lancashire and provided a nice contrast to PS with his more meat-and-potatoes approach to the subject. But PCP prided himself as a scholar and his articles were always very well researched. Both served as consulting editors and their critical responses to the individual issues spared no one, least of all themselves. (The bombastic side of my writing came in for most criticism, deservedly.) But what shines out from all three of us is the determination to make *HU* as good as we could.

There were other important figures, too – a kind of half-a-dozen core fans. Gerald Cleaver and Robert Poole from Leamington Spa in Warwickshire (self-styled as 'Ges' and 'Perce') were involved from early on. They produced the covers of *MMF* 3 and *HU* 1 and 2 from artwork supplied. Ges was an amazing correspondent, opinionated, widely knowledgeable and very funny; we had an amazing shouting match in one of the early letters pages where he urged me to refrain from being so opinionated in the 'zine (the pot calling the kettle black). It was Ges who came up with the title of '*Heroes Unlimited*.' I had proposed, in the editorial to *MMF* 3, calling the new fanzine '*Comic Book Culture*,' Ges came up with *HU*; so I put it to a readers' vote and



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Benj. J. Grimm

GRAND MARSHAL, (pro tem)



*HU* was a clear winner. (I agreed; *CBC* seemed to me, by contrast, rather a pretentious title.) Another amazing correspondent was Derek G 'Dez' Skinn, even more of a ranter than Ges, who was a dynamic and central figure in early British comics fandom. I love what Dez wrote about me and *HU* in his blog, which I've only come across recently: 'The king of 1960s comic fanzines on this side of the Atlantic was without doubt Dun Laoghaire's Anthony Roche. I had the Avis Rent-a-Car position: I tried harder.' Two of Dez's characteristics in this: his humour and his honesty. Many more fans I could mention, I'm sure, but I mustn't leave out the exotic figure of Derek Stokes, aka Ygor and 'Bram' (after Bram Stoker). He co-edited *Gothique*, a UK horror fanzine with Stan Nicholls, who also edited a sci-fi fanzine called *Stardock*. So there wasn't an entire fanzine vacuum over here; there just weren't any on comics. I learned a lot from both of these. But Bram's main claim to fame was that in the late 1960s he opened one of the very first fantasy bookshops, *Dark They Were and Golden-Eyed*, deep in the heart of London's Soho on Berwick Street. This was stocked to the gills with not just comic books and related material but an extraordinary range of horror, sci-fi and fantasy, to boot. It even stocked fanzines, including my own. *Dark They Were* was a place to go hang out when I was in London, just as Murray's Record Centre in Dun Laoghaire had been earlier.

The Irish side of fandom was not completely unrepresented. Harry McAvinchey from Northern Ireland was a crucial presence from *MMF* 2 on. His lovely and informed letters were a central part of the process by which the fanzine evolved. I went north to visit him on my Honda Fifty scooter in 1967 and arrived several hours late in the pouring rain. I think his mother may have saved my life by wrapping me in blankets, putting me in from of a roaring fire and filling me with tea and sandwiches. There was a subscriber from Northern Ireland called Eugene Murray, about whom I know nothing; there was a guy of the same name involved in student politics a few years later when I was attending Trinity College; I wonder was he one and the same? And there was my one lone subscriber from the Republic, Damian Nolan from 142 Stella Gardens, Irishtown, in Dublin, who sent a detailed and largely positive letter after every issue from *HU* 1 on.

### **PÓM: What were you trying to do with *Heroes Unlimited*?**

**TR:** The main aim of the new fanzine was to extend the scope to all of the American comic book companies, to go beyond the exclusive attention on Marvel. This was wearing thin after three issues, anyway, and I wanted the fanzine to be more ambitious. This meant for one thing that it should be a whole lot longer, something I felt we could carry off with three writers, Pete Simpson, Pete Phillips and myself. Each issue of the *MMF* was longer than the one before, eventually reaching 25 pages with #3. But the first issue of *HU* saw a quantum leap to 38 pages. I would like to discuss the fanzine in two sections: first, by concentrating on the first four issues, which I think consolidated the approach and aims; then, to look at issues #5 through to #7, which expanded and diversified in interesting ways. The page lengths of the first four issues were as follows: #1 (38 pages); #2 (40 pages); #3 (40 pages); #4 (48 pages, an increase of ten). The bi-monthly publication was sustained through the first two issues, then it became quarterly (more or less!); the four issues covered July/August 1967 through to March 1968; and by #4 the price had increased from one shilling and three pence (15 cents) to two shillings (24 cents). The printing was taken on by a school friend of mine, David Clifton, who printed it in his parents' garage. With issue #3 Ges and Perce were replaced on the cover by lithographic reproduction.

I might have contributed a bit more, but the written articles were fairly evenly divided between the three of us. Looking over what was covered, it's fairly clear that Pete Simpson and I favoured Marvel where Pete Phillips favoured DC. The articles were longer, more detailed, and frequently ran to two (or even three) issues. Pete Simpson has a great three-parter (in #2, #3, and #4) on the tortured love lives of Marvel heroes. He was great at detecting patterns, such as the hero who pines inwardly and keeps silent because he 'refuses to believe that the girl of his dreams would see anything in him' – classically, Ben Grimm/the Thing towards the blind Alicia but also Matt Murdock/Daredevil towards Karen Page and Scott Summers/Cyclops towards Jean Grey/Marvel Girl. My favorite witty Simpson generalisation is Pete's of Jane Foster in *Thor* as 'the most-kidnap prone girl in comics!' Pete Phillips did a lot on Golden Age DC titles, with a two-parter on the *Justice Society of America* and one on *Hawkman*, both of which made meaningful connections with the return of the characters under editor Julius Schwartz in the 1960s Silver Age. (I frequently misspelled Schwartz's name in *HU*, apparently defeated by four consonants in a row!). Despite the fact that our scope now included DC as well as Marvel (we also ran articles on Batman and Superman), I never heard a word from National about *Heroes Unlimited*. Marvel, on the other hand, continued to stay in touch. *HU* #1 had a letter from Gary Friedrich, new writer and editorial assistant:

Stan asked me to send his regards and thanks from the entire Bullpen for the copies of the *MMF*! We found it very interesting and entertaining, and hope that you'll keep up the good work!

*HU #2* had a letter from Roy Thomas responding to my article in *HU #1* on Marvel's Avengers, explaining that he had not plotted the first two issues he wrote (both of which I disliked) and regretting I did not discuss the Red Guardian issue, which he thought was his best so far. I was happy to agree and was secretly chuffed that the professionals were directly engaging with our work. The scope went beyond Marvel and DC to consider what looked like a burgeoning comics scene in 1967: Charlton, Tower, the American Comics Group. ACG were the weakest, but Tower had the great Wally Wood both writing and drawing several titles. Charlton, under the dynamic editorship of Dick Giordano and the inspired contributions of a post-Marvel Steve Ditko, was the best. This was borne out by the results of our first Comics Poll in *HU #4*, where Marvel did predictably well, but where Dick Giordano challenged Julius Schwartz for second place as editor and Steve Ditko's *Blue Beetle* came number three to *Spider-Man* and *Thor* in the 'Best mag with hero's name as title' section. Within six months, there was a huge downturn in comics sales and all of the smaller companies were gone; the articles we printed were more like epitaphs.

The other substantial content of the first four issues of *HU* were original comic strips. In retrospect, this seems like a mistake since none of them were very good. Initially, signs seemed more promising. My prose story on a hero called The Phoenix and a comic strip called Elemento were both well received by readers. The Phoenix was an extraordinary mélange of different elements of British popular culture: Hammer's version of the Mummy feeds into the origin story of a reincarnated pharaoh; the story starts like an episode of the Patrick MacNee and Diana Rigg TV series *The Avengers*, with people who take out large insurance policies dying in a train crash the following week. Halfway through the story it mutates weirdly (and unconvincingly) into a James Bond movie, with a megalomaniac villain threatening world destruction with an atomic bomb. That villain, when the Phoenix finally confronts him, speaks like P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster: 'What ho, old chap!' Go figure. Elemento had a good secret power – the ability to control and direct all four of the basic elements, earth, fire, air and water – and the unusual distinction of being Chinese. My stories did nothing to develop the potential of any of these promising ingredients; they were deficient in plot and character and relied on sub-Marvel fights with a succession of petty criminals and a succession of wise-cracks. 'Crane on Ramoon,' another prose story, was a loving pastiche of the Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars and Pellucidar novels with some interesting plot developments. But *HU* readers were having none of it and called for its removal. I gave Pete Phillips a shot in *HU #4* with a sci-fi prose story called 'Obliteration.' Its hero, Virgil Palmer, was a poor man's Philip Marlowe; the story was no better written than mine and fared no better with readers. By #5, all four were gone – and the way was cleared for the arrival of the extraordinary and wonderful 'Captain Remus and the Phosphor.'

The third (and final) element to discuss about the first four issues of *HU* is the important question of original art. All three issues of the *MMF* were comprised of text and no visuals (though #3 managed to acquire a cover). This was something all three of us on the editorial board were concerned about. I was being sent scads of fan art, most of it excruciatingly poor (where Marvel had praised the writing in the *MMF* as 'frequently of a professional standard'). There was a six-page Elemento strip in *HU #1*; but the art in it remained amateurish and anatomically challenged. Then Pete Simpson mentioned he had a friend who aspired to be a comic book artist. My response? 'Send it along.' And, in place of the overwrought and overstuffed portfolios from young hopefuls that I usually received, I was sent this one medium-size page with two postage stamp heads and a full-length figure. I still remember my excitement at my first glimpse of the art of Paul Neary, by far the best fan art I had ever - or was ever - to see. (And I still have the original page he sent.) It somewhat resembled Carmine Infantino's work - on Adam Strange, in particular - with his aesthetically thin and long heroes with their aquiline noses; and it was extremely finely detailed (something which immediately urged me to improve our printing). But Paul Neary had his own style, as rapidly became apparent. I immediately sent him an Elemento script, which Paul rendered beautifully and returned; it appeared in *HU #2*, for which he also supplied a JSA cover to accompany Pete Phillips' article. With *HU #3*, he did another cover, plus an extremely imaginative full-pager to illustrate the title of my article on artificial life in comics, 'The Child is Father to the Man' and a full page on the Phoenix. In *HU #4*, Paul contributed an original and imaginative sci-fi cover, some more brilliant full-pagers to accompany various articles, and he inked the latest Elemento strip. Paul wrote me that he did not think my Elemento scripts were particularly good (neither did I, at this stage) and felt he could do better himself, on his own strip. I immediately gave him the go-ahead and Captain Remus was born.

Paul wasn't our only artist. Another important contributor was Ken Simpson. Ken was older than the rest of us and had already made an important contribution to British fanzines such as Phil Clarke and Steve Moore's *Ka-Pow*. He must have sent me a portfolio but for once the usual

strictures did not apply since his work was outstanding, so Ken became the other major contributing artist to the 'zine. His style was very different from Neary's: brawny, muscular heroes, who clearly downed several steaks a day, beautiful damsels in distress and a clear, confident style that stressed the heroic with its bold lines. They were a formidable team whose styles contrasted nicely: Simpson's muscle men and Neary's fine-boned aesthetes. They were most alike in that both drew extraordinarily beautiful women.

### **POM:** You referred to further developments with *Heroes Unlimited*. What were these?

**TR:** There were three. The first occurred in *HU* #5 (Summer 1968) with the disappearance of all of the other original super-hero stories and the debut of Paul Neary's 'Captain Remus and the Phosphor' strip. As I wrote in that issue's Editorial, it's 'one of the best strips I've ever seen, either by professional or amateur standards' for its 'imaginative story and beautiful art.' The printing standards were now such that Paul's finely detailed work was reproduced without any blurring. The artwork was incredible, the realistic and 'live' feel of the figure drawing on the three main characters, Captain Remus, head of the space ship Moebius, and his crew of two, Brian and the 'groovy' Andra (very '60s!). The panels varied from a whole page in which Remus was subjected to a psychological battering to a complex series of panels which had numbers and arrows to help you negotiate them. The story had the Moebius landing on an alien planet on which the gravity was increasing; the only way to escape was for the ship to increase in density, sink through the planet and float off into space at the other end. But the really interesting aspect of the story was that Moebius was a computer as well as a space ship and a sentient, thinking being who felt emotions. The original Captain Remus, the ship's valued human companion, had died and been replaced with a robot. In order for Moebius to regain full power, the robot Remus had to merge back into the ship's central banks from which he had been created. What then, what then? Well, we the readers and I the editor never found out, because by late 1969 Paul's strip had run through three issues (the first two episodes were six pages each, the third a mighty fourteen) and would need at least one more to finish. I wonder whether Paul ever wrote and drew that never-published fourth episode?

*HU* #5 otherwise kept to the original template of articles by the two Peters and myself about characters from the various comics companies (including my first on a DC series, the relatively unknown but outstanding series from the early 1960s entitled *The Atomic Knights*, written by Gardner Fox and drawn by Murphy Anderson). It also ran a feature on Dan Dare, since I was now concerned to include British strips also. But a significant element added to *HU* #6 and #7 was lengthy interviews with comic book professionals.



This only became possible in 1968 because I spent that summer, once I had finished my Leaving Certificate exams, in New York. I attended the SCARP<sup>2</sup> Comics Convention in the Statler Hilton over the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. At the comicon, I met an extraordinary range of comic book professionals. I had my first meeting with Stan Lee, introduced by Roy Thomas when he and I were talking ('Stan! Come over here and meet Tony – he's from Ireland!'). No Kirby, alas. I got pally with a group of American fans, several of whom were about to become professional: Marv Wolfman, Len Wein, Mike Friedrich. I also became pally with two professionals: Dick Giordano, who had just moved from Charlton to become an editor at DC and inaugurate a new run of titles; and Al Williamson, who had drawn for EC in the '50s, had recently done a Flash Gordon comic in the style of his beloved Alex Raymond and was currently drawing the Secret Agent X-9 strip scripted by Archie Goodwin. I interviewed Giordano for hours in the DC-National offices; the resulting eleven pages ran in *HU* #6 that November. Al Williamson invited me to come stay with him and his wife, Arlene (who lettered X-9), for several weekends over the summer in their



home in the Catskill Mountains. It was there I conducted the interview with Al that ran for eight pages in *HU* #7 (Summer 1969). The interview featured some original Williamson artwork. The most of the wonderful accompanying illustrations for both interviews were provided by Ken Simpson, who took on the lion's share of the artwork for *HU* now that Paul was absorbed in and by the Captain Remus strip.

Thirdly, and finally, the last two issues of *HU* now expanded beyond super-hero comics into other areas of fantasy such as gothic horror (an article on Edgar Allen Poe), sci fi (the Neary strip) and (gasp!) progressive music, which mainly seems to have been an excuse for me to gas on about the Moody Blues. This showed an admirable broadening of interest, from one point of view, and was largely welcomed by readers. But it lost the purity of intention that the single-minded concentration on comics maintained and signaled that the end was nigh (as did the ever- diminishing frequency of publication).

### **PÓM: Did you have any encounter with UK fandom in terms of the actual flesh?**

**TR:** Yes, principally through my attending the first British Comics Convention. It was held in Birmingham from August 30th to September 2nd 1968 and was organized by Phil Clarke, Steve Moore and Mike Higgs. Phil and Steve were the co-editors of the British comics fanzine, *Ka-Pow*, and Mike was a fan turned professional artist. Annoyingly, my name is not on the list of those who attended, but I paid my fee and was there, as my coverage of the con in *HU* #6 will attest. When I arrived at Birmingham's Midland Hotel on Thursday August 30th, I did so staggering under a load of original artwork which I had been given when I visited the DC-National offices in July, the week after the SCARP Comicon. On that occasion, my friend Wayne deWald (a US fanzine editor from Florida) and I were waiting in the outer office when Carmine Infantino appeared, wonderful artist of Adam Strange and the Flash and recently appointed editorial director at DC. When he heard that Wayne was from Florida and that I had come all the way from Ireland, he insisted on taking us around himself, breaking up conferences, etc., to introduce us to everyone. The expected quarter-hour visit ended up being two and a half hours long! I had told Mr. Infantino about the forthcoming first UK Comicon in Birmingham and, at the end of my visit, he loaded me up with original art to distribute at the event. (It was only later I became aware of the serious ethical issues involved in the company rather than the artist retaining original art.) The pages were almost all from titles edited by Dick Giordano (who appeared late in the visit to encourage and enable the distribution). I do remember there was pages from Steve Ditko's *The Hawk and the Dove* and from Jim Aparo's *Aquaman* (all I have for myself still is a two page single panel Aparo which shows a giant whale crashing into the walls of Atlantis and Aquaman carrying a body from the wreckage). Phil Clarke was still protesting when we met up again in 2014 that he did not end up with a page of the Ditko, to which I could only respond with: 'Phil, neither did I!' They ended up being distributed in various ways at the British Con, for example as prizes for the winners in the Fancy Dress Competition, in which six courageous souls dressed as their favorite characters. The original artwork also provided the visual focus for the TV cameras when Phil Clarke and I were interviewed live about this first British Comicon as part of a programme on topical events, *ATV Today*. The Birmingham Con was very different from that in New York. There was a complete absence of attending professionals, something that needed to be amended, and was, at subsequent British Comicons, with both British and visiting American professionals guest-starring. But this absence was more than compensated for by the genuine friendly feeling among the fifty or sixty fans that attended. In fact, the Con was more a social event than anything else, particularly as it was the first. Announced panels never took place, promised films never showed up; but we met, often for the first time, and chatted way into the night. (Some drink may also have been involved.) I met for the first time in the flesh almost all of the key contributors to the success of *HU*: Pete Simpson, Pete Phillips (with whom I shared a hotel room), and Paul Neary. Unfortunately, at the last minute, Ken Simpson was unable to attend owing to a bad asthma attack. I finally met the redoubtable duo of Ges and Perce, Gerald Cleaver and Robert Poole (both of whom were occasionally contributing to *HU* at this point); Ges was a particularly fetching Red Skull in the Fancy Dress Competition. I also met Phil and Steve and Derek 'Bram' Stokes, he of the long, flowing locks, beard and eccentric manner, with whom I had a series of interesting conversations over the weekend. After the Con, I had many subsequent meetings with Paul Neary (who came to visit me in Dublin in January 1969) and Bram Stokes, whose Soho shop remained a London refuge well into the 1970s. I think this first Comicon laid the foundation stone for the development of British comics fandom. A year later, it was held in London and over a hundred attended; but by then I was gone.

## **PÓM: How did *Heroes Unlimited* come to an end?**

**TR:** It ended in the summer of 1969. While I was in New York the previous summer, my parents phoned me one evening with the (good) news that I had been awarded 5 Honours in my Leaving Certificate, which meant I could go to university. I wanted to go to Trinity College, Dublin, and take the four-year degree in English Language and Literature. Instead, I ended up going (for a year) to University College Dublin to study Business and Economics, in which I had no interest. Why had I done this? Because I wanted to please my father, who wanted me (as the eldest son) to join him in the family business, the Dublin Woollen Company. So I did the Economics degree for the year and was miserable. *Heroes Unlimited* provided a lifeline and I poured everything I had into it. I passed my exams okay in Economics but during the summer I had a crisis over continuing in college with this subject rather than English. Then, one sunny day, walking around in a field weighing my dilemma, words that had been spoken to me by Dick Giordano during our interview the previous summer floated into my head. I had said to him, by way of an ice-breaker:

What's a nice guy like you doing in a business like this (the comics industry)?

Dick replied as follows:

Ha! Ha! Ha! That's really a more valid question than you think. The question is: what is anybody doing in a business like this? There really are many things in this business that leave a great deal to be desired by way of security, longevity of employment, etc. I considered all these things while I was in the business and, four or five years ago, the great revelation came that I'm enjoying what I'm doing and the fact that I can't make as much money at this as I could in some other business (such as advertising), or that I will not be treated as well as I would in some other field, became less and less important. I just accepted the fact that I enjoy doing comics and ignored the rest. Since I consider the most important thing to be that a man enjoy his work, I've forgotten about channelling my energy in other directions. I'm happy doing what I'm doing, and I'm going to continue this way as long as I can.

I had never heard a single person in Ireland, in all of my 17 years, claim that work and enjoyment were in any way connected. And yet Dick Giordano was articulating something I actively if inchoately believed. With his words ringing deep within, I approached my father, said that I had given the year in Economics my best shot but that I was deeply unhappy about the prospect of continuing since what I dearly wanted to do was English at Trinity. Dad asked for 24 hours to think about it and then replied that I was obviously serious about this and had thought long and hard about it and that, yes, he would support me in starting over in a four-year degree in English. But, he added, there was one requisite, one condition: I had to do very well. I applied for and was accepted into the Honours English degree in Trinity to start in October in 1969. It was time to put away the comics and concentrate on literature.

I had one more meeting with Stan Lee that's relevant to the clear distinction I was drawing in 1969 between literature and comics. I graduated (with a First in English) in 1973 from Trinity and the following year I went to live in the US and took an MA and PhD in English at the University of California at Santa Barbara (selling my entire comic book collection to the great Irish artist, Jim Fitzpatrick, on my departure). In 1980, Stan Lee visited Santa Barbara from LA (to which he had just moved) to carry out a book signing session of *Son of Origins*. When I went along and reintroduced myself, he didn't remember me – why should he, given all of the people he's met? After the official proceedings were over, five or six of us hung out with Stan to shoot the breeze. He and I were deep in conversation about something or other when suddenly a dawning look of recognition appeared in his face: 'Wait a minute – wait a minute! I remember you – you're the guy from Dublin. You used to write to us ALL the time! What are you doing in Santa Barbara, Tony?' So I told Stan that I was at UCSB finishing a PhD in English: 'You see, Stan, I was determined to get to the US, whether through comics or literature.' Quick as a flash, Stan shot back: 'Tony, ya mean there's a difference?'

I completed my PhD in 1984 and returned to Ireland in 1987 to teach English at University College Dublin. In February of 2016, I retired as Professor of English Literature at University College Dublin and currently spend a lot of my time reading American super-hero comic books.

(Endnotes)

1 'Soon I was to get to know the instrument known as 'the leather.' It is now, as one would imagine, a strap of the kind used on bags. It is a number of such straps sewn together to form a thing of great thickness this id nearly as rigid as a club but just sufficiently flexible to prevent the breaking of the bones of the hand. Blows of it, particularly if directed (as often they deliberately were) to the top of the thumb or wrist, conferred immediate paralysis followed by agony as the blood tried to get back to the afflicted part.'

*The Poor Mouth*, Flann O'Brien, MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1961

2 Society for Comic Art Research and Preservation, Inc.

# SEDUCTION OF THE NOT SO INNOCENT

by ANTHONY ROCHE.

If children were all as impressionable as Dr. Frederic Wertham would have us believe, and mimicked everything they saw depicted around them in the mass media, then instead of writing this, I would be serving a life-sentence for cutting up several people to bits (I lapped up the film "The Pit and the Pendulum" at the tender age of ten!), I would possibly not be alive today, having foolishly thrown myself off a cliff in imitation of my favorite super-hero (I graduated to "Superman" at nine years!) and you would not be reading this magazine, as my collection of comics would have been transmitted their illiteracy to me. The fact that this has not happened to me, or indeed to any of my "chronic comic-book reader" friends of mine, merely shows up some of the flaws evident upon first reading of Dr. Wertham's "Seduction of the Innocent."

You see, we have been normal (well, near normal!) intelligent children like the majority of preadolescence, where as Dr. Wertham was dealing with mentally unstable children. Although he states at the beginning of his book that he has also talk to many normal children, he falls back on the actions of the slightly sick kids to demonstrate the baleful affects of comics.

From reading Ges Cleavers preceding article, one would gather that the much maligned, misjudged Dr. Wertham was merely attacking the crime comic books of the 50s, which were indeed as bad, if not worse, then he claimed them to be. But this is a false impression. Dr. Wertham's definition of a crime comic-book is as follows: "they are comic-books that depict crime, whether the setting is urban, Western, science-fiction, jungle, adventure or the realm of Superman, or "super natural beings." In other words, Wertham was attacking every single aspect of the comics industry and, despite what the previous article stated, he has it in for superheroes almost as much as for the conventional crime comic. In fact when one of his many attempts to present the facts about comic books was stifled, summed it up thus: "it seemed that Superman had to got the better of me."

In the beginning, the only aspect of the medium he spares from his blistering attack is the "funny-animal" variety of comic books. But several hundred pages later, he goes completely off the deep end and starts laying into Bugs Bunny and others of his ilk. In toto, therefore, Dr. Frederick Wertham hated with a passion every single comic book ever printed, and his losing extended to the paper, advertisements and the people in comics, even to the very form they took. A blending of pictures and words was conducive to illiteracy, quoth he. Although it is true that he admitted that the people in the industry had talent which was merely channeled in the wrong direction, as Pete Simpson has already stated, this is only so at the beginning of the book. I've already given you an example of how Dr. Wertham got completely carried away with himself towards the finale of his opus, when he became rather punchdrunk, making even more irrational statements and contradicting himself left, right and center. The previous example was in the case of the "funny-animal" comic books, this one concerns the talent of the people working in the industry. Although admitting this at first, he later condemns the entire industry by dismissing all of its artists and writers as "hacks". He is committing the same act of self-contradiction that accused the defenders of the comic book industry to be guilty of. This is evident throughout the book one can only conclude that with 400 pages (and man! It wasn't half a dragon wading through that amount of histrionics!) to write, he had little time to check over his facts.

His accusations that Batman and Robin are homosexuals and that Wonder Woman is a lesbian have already been refuted, but they serve as a good example of how Wertham get carried away with his arguments and therefore renders them invalid. This is also shown when, in the second last chapter, he leaves the comics temporarily and starts attacking television, literature and the other forms of mass media particularly connected with children. Perhaps by this time, he regretted for an instant, devoting so much space to the pestilence that is the comic book and not concentrating equally

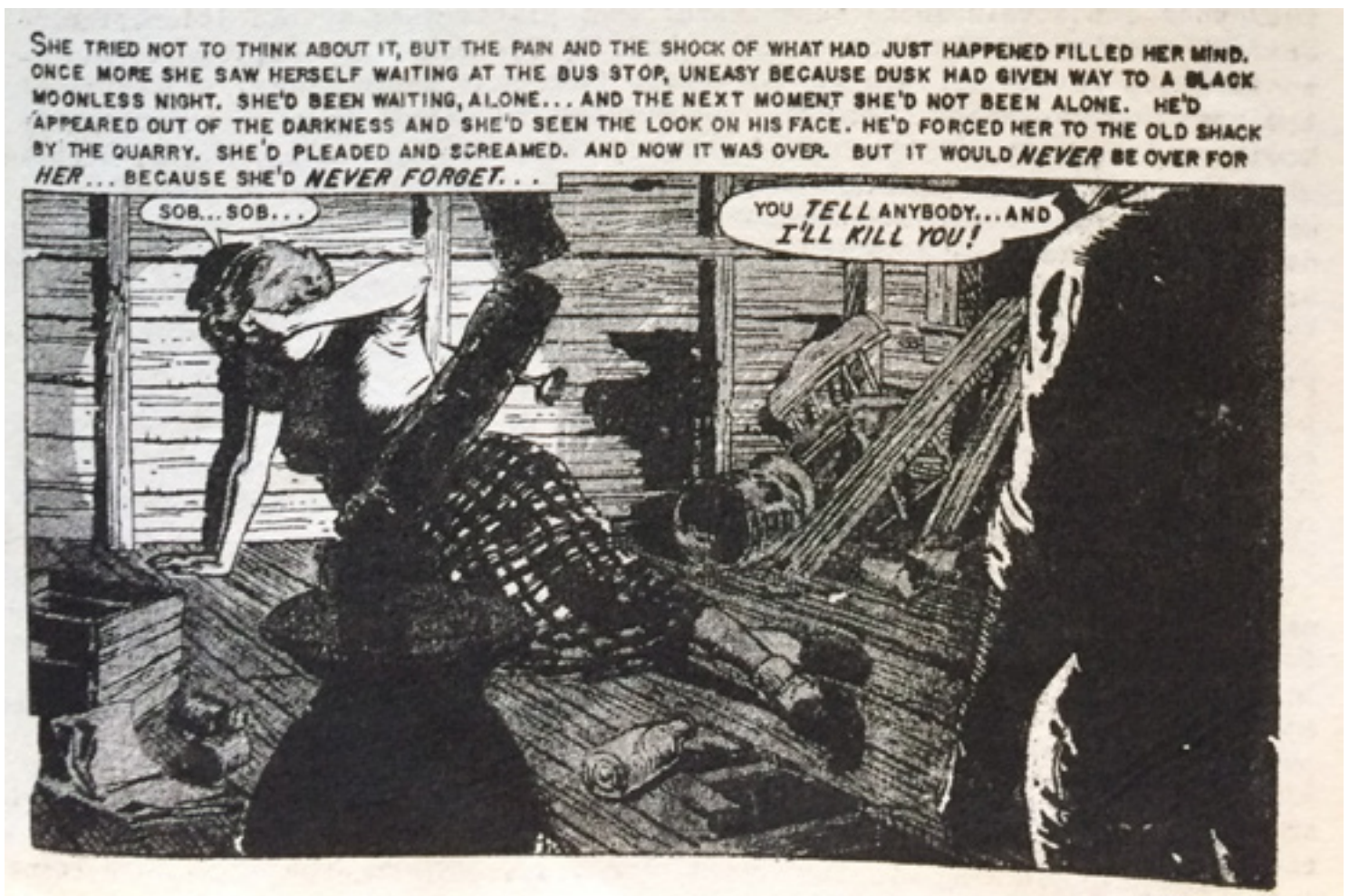


on television, etc. doubtless, he has another book "The Rape of Youth" in preparation on just such a theme. He is not sidetracked for long, however, in concluding that the pernicious effects of the mass media on youth derives from comic books anyway, he concludes his book with a two-year inspiring, heart-string jerking, phony anecdote that would have done Richard Nixon proud.

Thus concludes "Seduction of The Innocent", a book we have spent some time discussing in depth. As Dr. Wertham was kind enough to devote 397 pages to prove his case, the least we could do is to allow some space to giving other opinions on the subject and answering some of his arguments. This final part of what is really one large article by three different writers will serve to present my own views on Dr. Wertham and his book, to refute some of his more outlandish arguments, to correct some of the impressions given by Pete and Ges, to look at the whole thing in retrospect and to examine the below, a panel showing a teenager who has just suffered a "fate worse than death" – rape, although never mentioned by name was a common topic at the time.

#### Further activities of Dr. Wertham

Firstly, however, I must put the record straight on one score. I feel that Dr. Wertham was 100% justified, and indeed to be commended, for attacking the God-awful crime comic-books which were so prevalent in the early 50s. Some of them were crude in the extreme, both in their manner of presentation and their subject matter. He refuses to concede is that there could be a good comic-book, and that the really bad ones were the products of shady, fly-by-night publishers, a type which unfortunately can be found in any medium, whether aimed at adults or children, or both. The impression his book, and Pete's article, leaves is that gratuitous sex and sadism were the predominant features in nine out of 10 stories, that most advertisements working at either building up your body or blasting it to bits, that the attitude to Negroes was always one of discrimination, etc., etc. But this just isn't so. What about all those beautiful E.C. science-fiction stories? The



tales vehemently criticizing racial prejudice, such as “In Gratitude” in *Shock Suspense* number 17? The many DC titles which maintained their high standards through thick and thin? No mention of these makes its way into Dr. Wertham’s book because if it did, it might considerably weaken the force of his arguments. It was not the introduction of a rigid comics code he wanted, but rather the complete removal of the comics industry. Wertham could not concede that the situations he particularly deplored could be improved, that really good comic-books could be produced and that the industry would submit to a Code. Doubtless, his criticisms of the deplorable side of the comics industry at that time are justified, but since his argument is totally negative in every aspect and provocative of panic, I maintain that “Seduction of the Innocent” did more harm than good in revealing what comics are “really” like to parents.

It’s no good merely discussing the contents of the book without the situation in perspective, discussing the environment in which it was published and developments since then. In the aftermath of the Second World War and the tense situation brought about the McCarthy era, the attitude to violence in the 50s was different from what it is today. It was rather a dismal decade in many respects, apart from the situation of the comic book industry during it. It was a time for sensible balanced arguments at a time when the nation was on the verge of panic. Instead of this, Dr. Wertham offered histrionics, one-sided arguments and inaccurate logic. If one were to believe everything he said, the majority of people concerned with psychiatry, law, etc. were incompetent since they did not possess the degree of “insight” that he had; most children who read comics then would have turned out as a gun-wielding, drug-taking, and woman-molesting criminals or would have killed themselves by attempting to fly like Superman. Any mother who gave any credence to these arguments of a psychiatrist would be in need of psychiatry herself! If she sat down and reasoned it out, she would see the flaws in many of his arguments, flaws which I intend discussing, as well as one or two cleaners dropped by my co-writers.

Dr. Wertham replied to those psychiatrist who said that the juvenile delinquency could not be attributed to comic books but, for example, to a squalid environment by saying: “yeah but what about those children who come from well-to-do family and still turn to petty crime?” Because one or two of these individuals read crime comic-books, the reason for the delinquency could be clearly attributable to comics and there was no need to look for a deeper motive that did not exist. Completely ignoring any internal emotional strain, the company the boy might have kept or any of the other major causes for delinquency recognized as being such today, this eminent psychiatrist could state with certainty that crime comics were one of the prime factors in causing delinquency! It was such a major factor, then surely the fact that a full generation has grown up without any crime comics seduce them would mean a decrease in juvenile delinquency, at least a leveling off. But such is by no means the case. Delinquency has increased both in the number of people involved in it and in its savageness, in retrospect, we are able to see that Dr. Wertham’s contention was by and large a false one and I would imagine that any mention of the comics to the young savages in Glasgow would be met with hoots of derision.

According to Dr. Wertham and Pete Simpson, the glamorized station of and sympathy for criminals comes possibly as a direct result from crime comics. Bunk! Have they never heard of the legends surrounding the glamorized story of a robber, a violent criminal who deliberately flouted justice and is treated as hero in many romanticized accounts of his life is to mark I am not referring to Al Capone or any similar crime comic-book character, to Robin Hood predates the latter characters by a century or two. It has always been human nature to sympathize with criminals instead of with unglamorous forces of law. History and mythology are full of such “heroes” – from Robin Hood, through Billy the Kid ( one of the most famous examples) to The Fugitive. And we are asked to believe that this is a recent feature, a manifestation of crime comic-books. Please, gentlemen – –!

Pressure from many sources, some impelled to act by Dr. Wertham’s arguments, brought about a “clean-up comics” campaign which resulted in the formation of the Comics Code Authority. My personal contention is that criticism from parents would have resulted ultimately in a more sensible Code, but that Wertham’s book and its formation by causing the parents to balk at what they were led to believe appear in every comic book caused a more rigid code than was necessary to be formed. Unfortunate, we will never know exactly what would’ve happened if things had been otherwise...

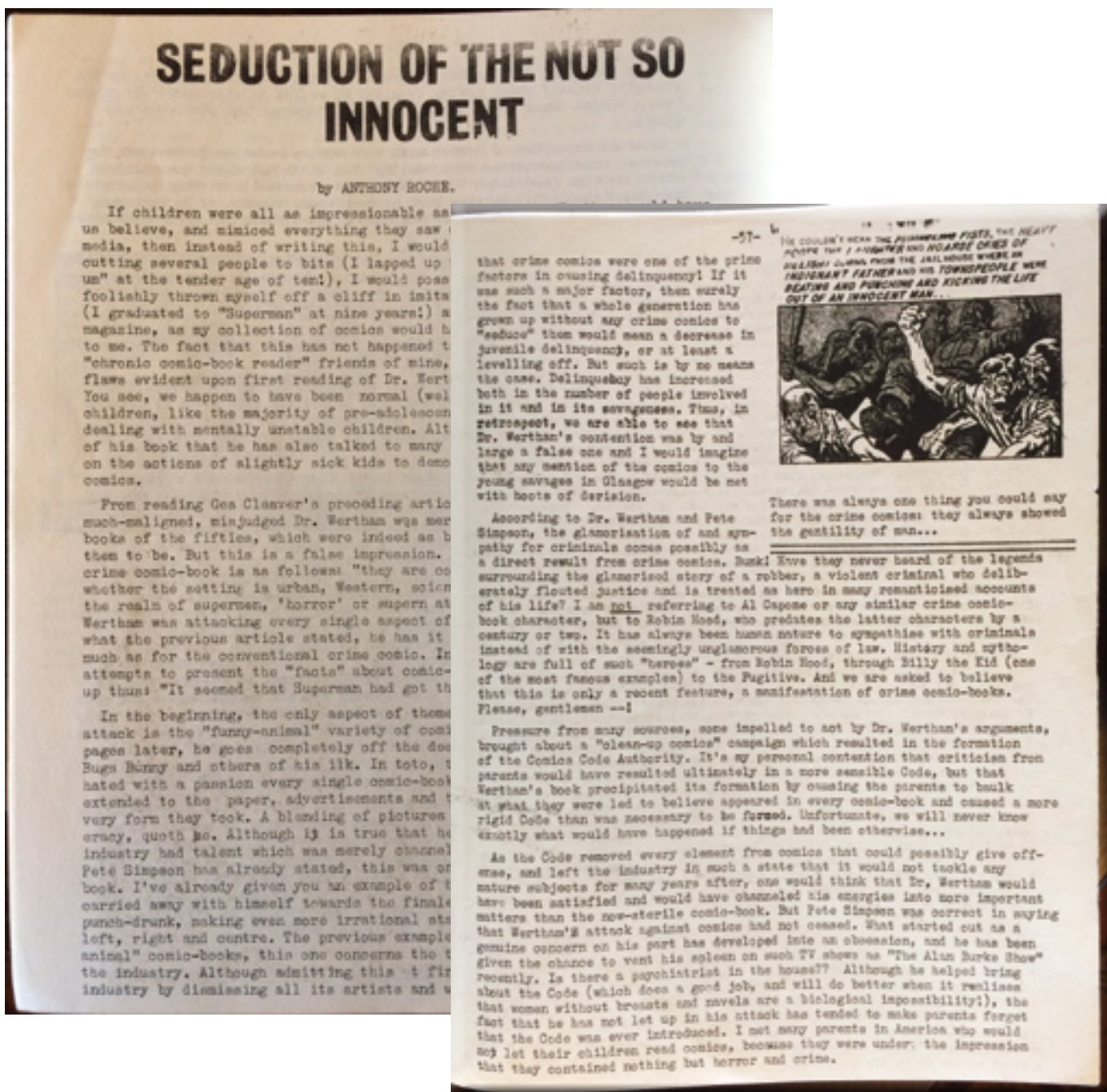
As the Code removed every element from comics that could possibly give offense, and left the industry in such a state that it would not tackle any mature subjects for many years after, one would think that Dr. Wertham would have been satisfied and would have channeled his energies into more important matters than the now-sterile comic-book. But Pete Simpson was correct in saying that Wertham’s attack against comics had not ceased. What started out as a genuine concern on his part has developed into an obsession, and he has been given the chance to vent his spleen on



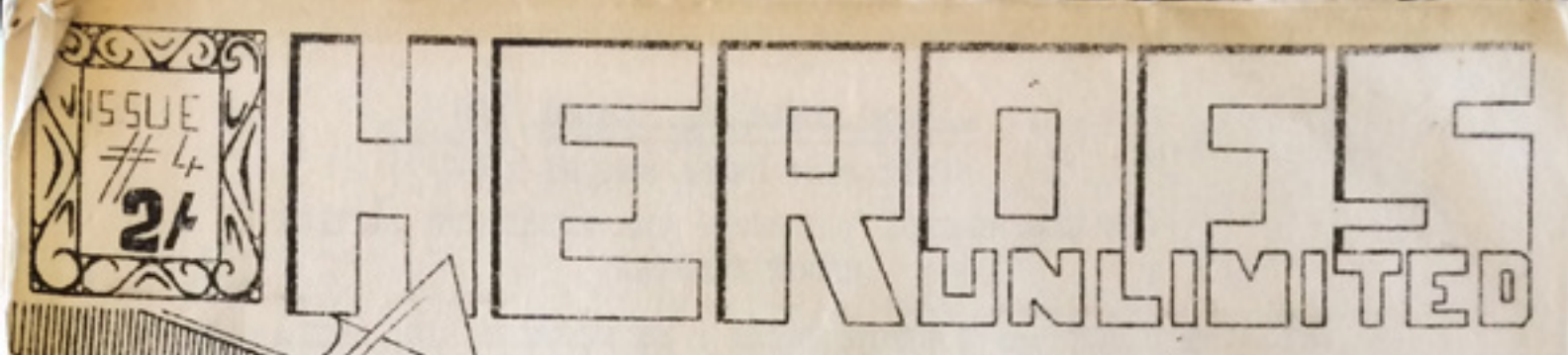
such TV shows as the Alan Burke Show recently. Is there a psychiatrist in the house? Although he helped bring about the code (which does a good job, and will do better when it realizes that women without breasts and navels are a biological impossibility!), the fact that he has not let up in his attack has tended to make parents forget that the Code was ever introduced. I met many parents in America who would not let their children read comics because they were under the impression that they contained nothing but horror and crime

We conclude then, Dr. Wertham had several good points to make in "Seduction of the Innocent" but he overrated his arguments. Because of this and his refusal to let up in his attack despite the fact that the comics industry has acquiesced to all his original criticisms, I feel that the good Dr. Wertham did more harm than good by seducing the adults into believing that comics should be wiped from the face of the Earth.

I rest my case, m'lud!







# Dez Skinn on Tony Roche

Maybe it's all so easy now that it's taken for granted. While each generation probably says life was tougher when they were kids, that's certainly true of small press publishing, or fanzines as they were called back when graphic novels were albums and trade paperbacks were simply collections.

Words like electronic stencils and spirit duplicator mean absolutely nothing to people raised in a computer generation. Trade names like Letraset, Banda and Gestetner have all but faded from memory.

But for some of us these terms conjure up a time far simpler yet somehow more complex, an era when blood sweat and tears was more than the name of a 1970s rock band, when frustration and enthusiasm were measured in somewhat equal proportions.

By 1966, Tony Roche was a 15-year old schoolboy with a passion for Americana, specifically their publishing niche market of contemporary godlike creations who inhabited the pages of basic four colour letterpress titles... super-heroes (with or without the hyphen, depending on your views on copyright infringement!).

One interesting side effect of reading these larger-than-life escapist fantasies was how they fired the imagination, how they inspired. It's hard to imagine any schoolboy looking for escapism (usually those not built for sport) who didn't create their own characters and fill blank pages in school exercise books with their doodles. And how easy to transform a school gabardine coat into a superhero cape, simply by fastening the top button only and letting it glide behind them as they pursued imaginary villains.

But for some, like pioneer Tony Roche, a more creative outlet was needed for his newly-acquired sense of wonder... a vehicle for his passion, to rally like-minded souls from hither and yon (usually yon, it was a small and far-spread niche market).

And so he braved the world of stencils, pink and purple foul-smelling printing alcohols and table-top printing machines in his mission to sing the praises of The Incredible Hulk, The Fantastic Four and all their stablemates with his hand-collated magazine about American comics... *The Merry Marvel Fanzine*.

Note: Consolidating his position as a pioneer in the forefront of comics journalism, Tony wisely and fortunately retitled it pretty quickly as the far more worthy *Heroes Unlimited*.

*... Dez Skinn (a mere understudy who wisely and fortunately retitled his own similar effort, from the Derinn Comicollector to Eureka, but remained in awe of Tony's publishing achievements until the day that Tony gave the whole thing up so he could take centre stage!*

*Pádraig adds: And Dez is the man responsible for Warrior, which launched Alan Moore's Marvelman and V for Vendetta on an unsuspecting world, and changed my life forever!*



# THE AVENGERS

## Assembling Antics



## or an assessment of the Avengers

by Anthony Roche

This article is not meant to reveal any startling, previously unknown fact about Marvel's Avengers. Rather it is simply meant to turn the spotlight on the group's progress, see what has been achieved and in what direction the magazine is currently headed.

Sooner or later, every comics company gets around to the brilliant idea of placing all, or most, of their super-powered characters in one magazine, based on the premise that they will gain the combined readership of most of the other comics. So it was inevitable that, in the summer of 1963, Marvel brought out the Avengers, and featured in it all their costumed characters, with the exception of the loner, Spiderman. This mag also featured the return of the whole who had gone into literary limbo since the demise of his strip. Is it any wonder that "The Hulk" folded? The original concept of a Jekyll-Hyde character stalking the land and striking fear into the hearts of the populace was one that promised much in the way of a storyline. But how did it end? In dismal mediocrity, with the Hulk lecturing to the Teen Brigade and sounding like a second rate Ben Grimm. Luckily the whole who appeared in Avengers number one was more his brutish self, while yet retaining a spark of the humanity of Bruce Banner. Realizing that it would take more than just a host of heroes to make the mag endure, Lee and Kirby pulled out all the stops to give us an excellent tale. The idea of The Hulk's supposed rampage bringing all the heroes together was a good one, but two things spoiled the story for me. First, there was the ridiculous spectacle of the Hulk done up as a clown, and then there was the contrived ending of Loki's capture. But this was a great first issue, and gave promise of better things to come.

This promise was fulfilled when the rebellious Hulk quit the group and joined forces with the Sub-Mariner. Then came Avengers number four, which heralded the long-awaited return of Capt. America. This was the best issue so far, and it was obvious that no future effort would ever top this one, whether in script or art. And this became evident from the following issues. While I admit Capt. America to be my favorite hero, even I cannot deny that Stan Lee devoted far too much space to him in every story, the whole plot being built around him as a means by which he could display his agility, while the other members played second fiddle to the returned super-hero. As time wore on, favorite characters fighting together wore off. Iron Man was too overbearing, Thor was too pompous, Giant-Man and The Wasp were too colorless and Cap hogged too much of the limelight. The art, too, had taken a dive, for this was around the time when Kirby turned most of his strips over to other artists. The Avengers felt to Dawn, though one mean artist, was no Jack Kirby and who suffered from a spate of bad anchors.

Then, in Avengers number 16, after they had defeated a horde of villains, and Zemo had been killed by a vengeful Cap, Stan did something that had never before been attempted. He disbanded the original group, and left Cap to control a bunch of three headstrong, reformed youths, who wished to fight on the side of law and order. Lee realized from the outset that this was daring development would receive more than its share of criticism from some of the fans, and he was correct. Letters poured in praising the new group, while others condemned Lee for replacing the old members with Hawkeye, Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch. But Stan stuck to his guns and continued with the new members. The reason he gave was that each of the former members had their own strips, and that it was confusing to have them appear in two different places at the same time. While this undoubtedly played its part in the decision, I am of the opinion that he also realized the feature was growing stale and needed some new blood in it. For the first time, Capt. America justified his Avengers membership, because he was the only one with the necessary ability and experience to keep the hot tempered group together. Right from the start, Captain America

realized the tremendous task he was faced with. Would they be able to survive without the raw power they no longer possessed? Would others resent his being leader? In their following battles, they proved themselves more than a match for the varied foes they fought, but he met with fierce opposition from the other three, all of whom saw themselves as potential leaders of the avengers, especially the short tempered Hawkeye. At times, the future of the group seemed precarious, especially when they were declared public menaces and had to split up. It was the uncertainty of their future and the friction between members that made the new avengers superior to the old, and one of the stormiest but liveliest features in the Marvel line-up, and I for one applaud the change.

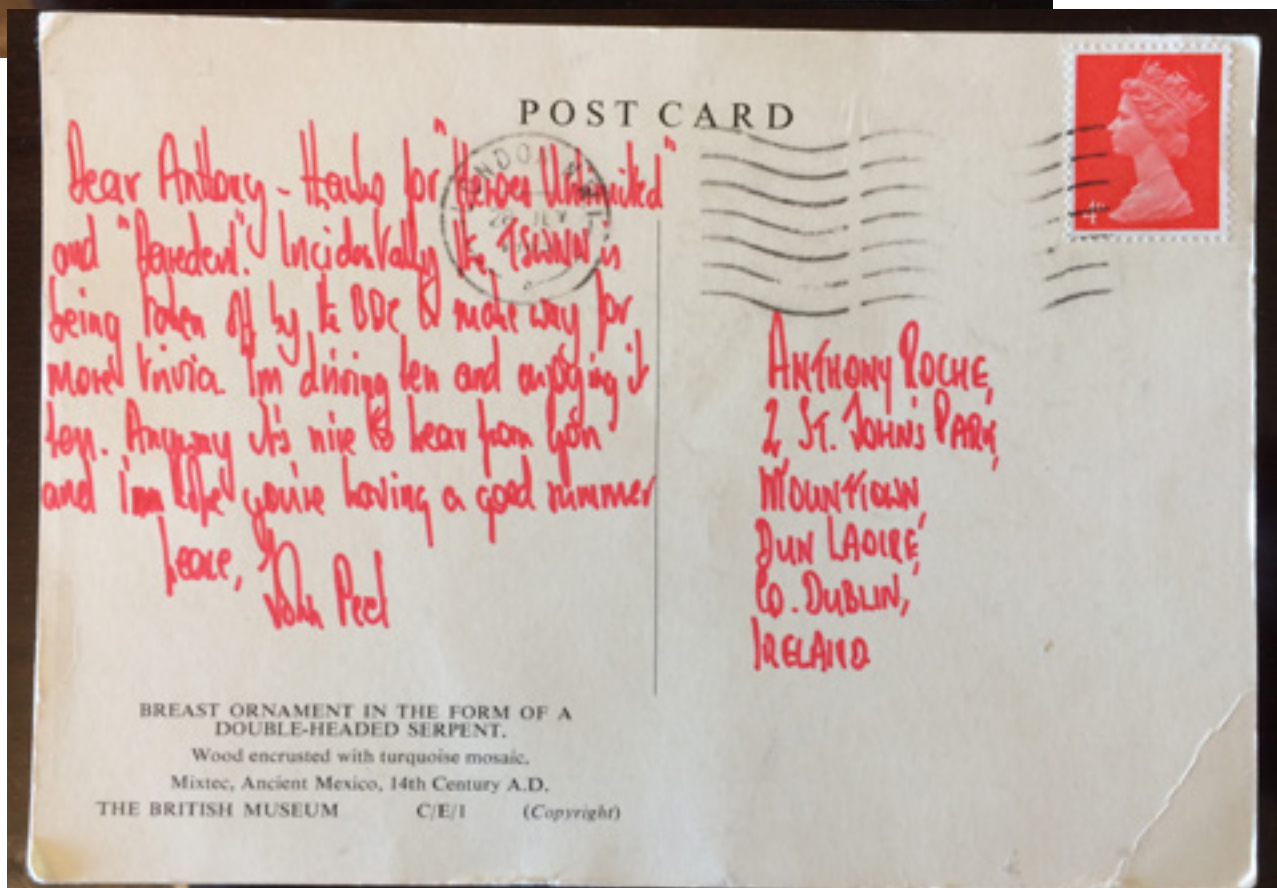
In Avengers number 29, one of the original members rejoined to give the group the necessary raw power still needed. When Harry Pym heard that his fiancée, Janet van Dyne, had been captured as The Wasp, he returned to the avengers in order to enlist their aid in regaining his loved one. But right from the start, Giant-Man, or Goliath as he was now called, was aware of the resentment the group bore him. "I always hoped Methusaleh would some day retire, and then I might be The Avengers leader, but now, with Goliath here, I'm just another also-ran. What a crummy break!" Was the way Hawkeye summed it up. After he had rescued the wasp, Pym was told that he would remain 10 feet tall for the rest of his life. This was the crushing blow for Goliath, and it took all of Steve Rogers' efforts to prevent the towering Titan from indulging in self-pity over his plight. Around this time, the long-standing feud between Cap and Hawkeye was resolved, while two members were given a temporary leave of absence from the group to fully regain their powers. Lee obviously realized the overcrowding that would take place, so he decided to temporarily drop Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch, another reason being that they were the two least popular members. In number 32,, Hawkeye, Elias and the wasp fought an enemy far more deadly than any costumed villain, the menace of bigotry and racial prejudice. The expert handling of this touchy subject offered further proof, as I stated in number 36, that Stan Lee is one of today's greatest contemporary writers.

In number 35, Roy Thomas took over from Stan in the scripting, and did not make a very auspicious start in his wrap up of the Laser tail. Although Thomas is a good writer, it always takes him a few issues to get the feel of his characters, and the only notable aspect of this tale was the fact that Goliath regained the ability to change to any size at will. The readers had done a complete turnabout, and now demanded the return of Pietro and Wanda. Roy bowed to their commands, and in number 36, the avengers set out on a rescue mission, accompanied by the now reformed Black widow. Once more their ranks were beset by interior strife. Hawkeyes wish that Natasha become a member was fiercely contested by Goliath, who maintained that "as one of the original Avengers, I don't care to see it turn into a rest home for reformed super-villains!" After they had successfully rescued their two members from the Ultroids (Roy, you never did explain how Hawkeye knew the Bergomeister was Ixar!), They were ready to consider the Black Widow's application for membership when they learned that, for no apparent reason, she had defected little did the group know that the delectable Natasha was now an agent of SHIELD, and on a special mission for them behind the Bamboo Curtain.

While Roy Thomas writes an entertaining story, he has not continued the development of the group that Lee was shaping. For example, before Thomas took over, the members had all shared the limelight, with slightly more space being given to Goliath and Cap. Now, however, Goliath hogs all the action and the other members are lucky to even make an appearance. To make matters worse, Cap was disposed of for four issues, and I thought for a moment that he was going to be given a permanent leave of absence. Although I welcomed the return of Hercules, I am now thoroughly sick of the Olympian braggart, after being subjected to a five-issue dose of him, in which he did most of the groups fighting for them. "The feature might as well be called "Hercules and Goliath" for all the action the other members get. Thankfully, Roy's stories are not without their good points. The characterization has been well handled, especially the antagonism between Goliath and Hawkeye; Hercules bitterness at being exiled from Olympus; Hawkeye's brooding over Natasha's apparent desertion. In making these criticisms, I'm not trying to slam Roy, who does a faultless job on all the other features he handles; it's just that I think Lee did a much better job, and I'd like to see him tackle it again now that he is doing less scripting. Don Heck, who always does a first-class art job, has taken a two issue leave of absence in order to concentrate on next summer's special. His place is been taken by John Buscema, who really surprised me with the quality of his artwork, and I hope he does more work for Marvel. Unfortunately, there is a fly in the ointment, in the form of George Bell, who turns in the most smudgy, mediocre inking I have ever seen. Whatever happened to Frank Giacoia.

There you have it. One of Marvel's best mags once, that is currently going through a bad spell which I hope it recovers from. Of course, I don't expect all of you to agree with these opinions, but it cannot be denied that the full potential of the Avengers is being sinfully neglected.





**Postcard to Tony from Legendary Radio 1  
presenter John Peel**

**30**

Peck Area.

Dear Anthony,

Thanks for the letter and "Heroes Unlimited". I must admit I read a lot of comics myself - Doctor Strange, Thor and Spiderman being my favourites. Perhaps because there seem more international than the mass of super-heroes who seem to rather be rather "American" and I really believe that Americans (very generally speaking) are the scourge of the Universe. (powerful).

Call me at WEL 5847 while you're in London anyway I doubt if I could organize myself to the extent of writing something but I'd like to talk to you anyway,

love and peace,

John Peel



# The Anthony Roche Chronology

Chronology of Ten Fanzines Produced and Edited by Anthony Roche  
in Dublin between December 1966 and June 1969

## MERRY MARVEL FANZINE

## COVER DATE

MERRY MARVEL FANZINE #1	(January-February 1967)
MERRY MARVEL FANZINE #2	(March-April 1967)
MERRY MARVEL FANZINE #3	(May-June 1967)

## HEROES UNLIMITED

## COVER DATE

HEROES UNLIMITED #1	(July/August 1967) 38 pages
HEROES UNLIMITED #2	(September/October 1967) 40 pages
HEROES UNLIMITED #3	(November 1967) 40 pages
HEROES UNLIMITED #4	(March 1968) 48 pages
HEROES UNLIMITED #5	(Summer 1968) 42 pages
HEROES UNLIMITED #6	(November 1968) 58 pages
HEROES UNLIMITED #7	(Summer 1969) 50 pages

An eighth issue was announced but never published.





# THE NAME'S THE SAME

The title of HEROES UNLIMITED hasn't changed, but everything else has - for the better. Now almost two years' old, Britain's first fanzine devoted to the world of super-heroes has gone from strength to strength, thanks to the efforts of all contributors and fans like yourself. Publishing a fanzine is not an easy task, and the interest shown by other fans in our efforts is our only reward. We genuinely believe that in HEROES UNLIMITED, we are offering the discriminating comics reader the best British fandom can provide; a publication that will not insult your intelligence but will rather prove a highly enjoyable experience. Naturally, we don't pretend we are producing a 100% perfect \*zine but this is what we are aiming for, and if we fall short of the mark, it won't be for want of trying.

Perhaps you've seen a copy in the past, but have failed to order one recently, then you really should because, no matter what issue you got and no matter how good (or bad) you thought it was, I can assure you that it has reached a new high in quality lately; as this opinion has been voiced by nearly every reader, I figure there must be some truth in it. If you've been putting off ordering HEROES UNLIMITED for a while, now is your opportunity to take up where you left off.

If you have never seen a copy and are unsure what your reaction to it would be, all I can say is that if you enjoy super-heroes, be they MARVEL, DC or Brands Echhs, Y and Z, and have a taste for fantasy in general, then 3/- invested in a copy of HEROES UNLIMITED will place you in the same reading group as the top professionals and fans. The former not only read the 'zine, but contribute to it in the form of interviews and artwork. Articles, interviews, features, news, ads,

# A Letter of Comment to Heroes Unlimited #6 by Alan Moore

**Alan Moore**  
**17 St. Andrews Rd**  
**Northampton**  
**NN1 2SD**

Dear Tony;

Enclosed is 1/- payment on the last H.U and 3/- for the next.

I like the new format H.U, and don't think you need have any worries about 'losing old readers by the wayside' simply because you are extending your field. The Change, I think, is a long awaited and much needed one.

However (I betcha knew that was coming) I think your propose inclusion of pop, science fiction/fantasy and films should be thought about, before you enter into it. I've got a few suggestions on how you should develop these particular fields.

First, [pop music! I'm all in favour of you reviewing the latest L.P's, singles etc; but it should be done in an informative way. There's no sense in running around like a certain well known BBC1 personality (6.25 on Monday, if you hadn't guessed) shouting "groovy, fantastic, great, fab," at the drop of a platter. You should list the tracks on a particular L.P/single giving a bit of info on each - if you stuck to that pattern you couldn't go far wrong - except in the arguments about who's going to shell out the two quid for the next L.P for review!

Secondly, fantasy/fiction books. Since Ray Bradbury, J.R.R Tolkien, Brian Aldiss and Eric Frank Russel, among others seem to be the nations darlings at the moment you have my vote here as well. It would be nice to see a review of the new, and even old, science fiction/fantasy books. It would be even nicer to see Neary's and Simpson's interpretations pf Conan, Elric, Frodo, John Carter etc.

Thirdly, as regards films, all I could say is that I should stick to science fiction/fantasy and horror and to illustrate the reviews, either use (dont ask me how!) clear stills, ordinary illos or nothing at all- please, no more of the messy stills we had in H.U. 6

As regards your other new feature, the controversy spot (incidentally the Wertham argument was groovy, fantastic, great, etc) I like it, and for further features you could enter into the D.C/Marvel feud, or discuss the merits of the Golden Age comics, as opposed to todays mags.

One more thing (can I hear sighs of relief?) why not have an article or two on the newspaper strips, British and American. I think it would probably be even better than the other idea I was going to propose: "Captain Remus Discovers the Alan Moore!" No? Oh well!

Looking forward to issue 7

Alan Moore **X** (his mark)



ALAN MOORE  
17 ST. ANDREWS R.D.  
NORTHAMPTON  
NN1 2SD

DEAR TONY;

ENCLOSED IS 1/- PAYMENT ON THE LAST H.U.  
AND 3/- FOR THE NEXT.

I LIKE THE NEW FORMAT H.U. AND DONT THINK YOU NEED  
HAVE ANY WORRIES ABOUT 'LOSING OLD READERS BY THE  
WAYSIDE' SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU ARE EXTENDING YOUR FIELD.  
THE CHANGE, I THINK, IS A LONG AWAITED AND MUCH NEEDED ONE.  
HOWEVER, (I BETCHA KNEW THAT WAS COMING) I THINK YOUR PROPOSED  
INCLUSION OF POP SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY AND FILMS SHOULD  
BE THOUGHT ABOUT, BEFORE YOU ENTER INTO IT. I'VE GOT A FEW  
SUGGESTIONS ON HOW YOU SHOULD DEVELOP THESE PARTICULAR  
FIELDS.

FIRST, POP MUSIC! I'M ALL IN FAVOUR OF YOU REVIEWING THE  
LATEST LP'S, SINGLES ETC, BUT IT SHOULD BE DONE IN AN INFORMATIVE  
WAY. THERES NO SENSE IN RUNNING AROUND LIKE A CERTAIN WELL KNOWN  
BBC 1 PERSONALTY (6.25 ON MONDAY, IF YOU HADN'T GUESSED) SHOUTING  
"GROOVY, FANTASTIC, GREAT, FAB," AT THE DROP OF A PLATTER.  
YOU SHOULD LIST THE TRACKS ON THE PARTICULAR L.P./SINGLE  
GIVING A BIT OF INFO ON EACH - IF YOU STUCK TO THAT PATTERN  
YOU COULDN'T GO FAR WRONG - EXCEPT IN THE ARGUMENTS  
ABOUT WHO'S GOING TO SHELL OUT THE TWO QUID FOR THE  
NEXT L.P FOR REVIEW!

SECONDLY, FANTASY/FICTION BOOKS. SINCE RAY BRADBURY, J.R.R  
TOLKIEN, BRIAN ALDISS AND ERIC FRANK RUSSEL, AMONG OTHERS  
SEEM TO BE THE NATIONS DARLINGS AT THE MOMENT YOU  
HAVE MY VOTE HERE AS WELL. IT WOULD BE NICE TO SEE  
A REVIEW OF THE NEW, AND EVEN OLD, SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY  
BOOKS. IT WOULD BE EVEN NICER TO SEE NEARY'S AND SIMPSON'S  
INTERPRETATIONS OF CONAN, ELRIC, FRODO, JOHN CARTER ETC.

THIRDLY, AS REGARDS FILMS, ALL I COULD SAY IS THAT I SHOULD  
STICK TO SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY AND HORROR. AND TO  
ILLUSTRATE THE REVIEWS, EITHER USE (DONT ASK ME HOW!)  
CLEAR STILLS, ORDINARY ILLS OR NOTHING AT ALL - PLEASE, NO  
MORE OF THE MESSY STILLS WE HAD IN H.U.6

P.T.O.



AS REGARDS YOUR OTHER NEW FEATURE, THE CONTROVERSY SPOT (INCIDENTALLY THE WERTHAM ARGUMENT WAS GROOVY, FANTASTIC, GREAT, ETC.) I LIKE IT, AND FOR FURTHER FEATURES YOU COULD ENTER INTO THE DC/MARVEL FEUD, OR DISCUSS THE MERITS OF THE GOLDEN AGE COMICS AS OPPOSED TO TODAY'S MAGS.

ONE MORE THING, (CAN I HEAR SIGNS OF RELIEF) WHY NOT HAVE AN ARTICLE OR TWO ON THE NEWSPAPER STRIPS, BRITISH AND AMERICAN. I THINK IT WOULD PROBABLY BE EVEN BETTER THAN THE OTHER IDEA I WAS GOING TO PROPOSE: "CAPTAIN REMUS DISCOVERS THE ALAN MOORE!" NO? OH WELL!

LOOKING FORWARD TO ISSUE 7

ALAN MOORE X (HIS MARK)