

Chapter 20



CHAPTER 20

THE VISIONARIES

As in other forms of popular entertainment, mystical and mythological themes have never been more prominent and explicit in comic books as they are today. But this is simply a matter of degree. Given the magical history of superheroes and comic books, it's no accident that some of the most influential comics creators have had a strong interest in mythology and the occult. In fact, there is a definite evolution at work in the process by which the comics incorporated the occult. It starts with a naïve fascination (Jerry Siegel), gives way to intentional mythologizing (Jack Kirby), develops into a systematic understanding (Alan Moore), and finally evolves into a new kind of religion best exemplified by Alex Ross. Many others have participated in this process, but these are the main players.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Mine is, of course, a subjective analysis. Many other writers injected elements of occultism into superhero stories, but in my view the creators included here made the most crucial contributions.

JACK KIRBY

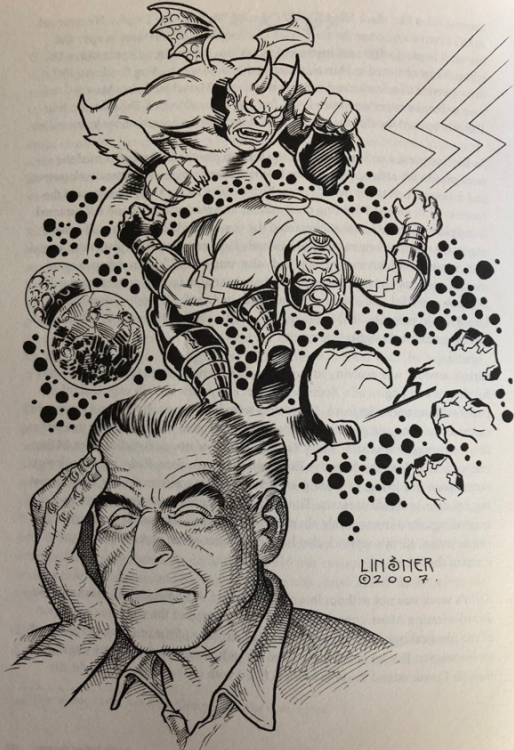
It is impossible to talk about the modern superhero without talking about Jack Kirby. No single individual—not even Stan Lee—is more crucial to the development of the superhero and its influence on the culture at large than Kirby. No other writer—not even Alan Moore—has infused into superheroes even a fraction of the mythological resonance that Kirby did. Kirby is far and away the most influential creator within the superhero comic-book world, and nearly every important artist and writer in the field in the past forty years cites him as a major inspiration for their own work. Ultimately, it is Kirby who is most responsible for turning superheroes into gods.

Kirby was born Jacob Kurtzberg in 1917 on New York's Lower East Side. His first experience with the spirit world came early. As a child, he was stricken with pneumonia (a very serious disease before antibiotics), and a group of rabbis were called in to perform an exorcism in a last-ditch effort to save his life. They chanted the names of the offending demons in Hebrew, which, according to tradition, would give the rabbis control over them. Happily, Kirby recovered—whether by virtue of the ritual or the resilience of youth—and the experience had a major influence on his art. In the words of one biographer: "Kirby's life was filled with the mysticism of faith and superstition."¹⁴⁴

Kirby spent his youth in a cramped apartment in a bad neighborhood, where he spent much of his time defending himself against hostile ethnic gangs. He entertained himself by collecting discarded newspaper strips and pulp magazines, and taught himself to draw by copying his favorite artists' work. Eventually, he sought work as an artist in Manhattan. With the advent of comic books, Kirby saw his chance, and hooked up with writer/editor Joe Simon in what would be a long and fruitful partnership. The team created Captain America for Marvel, then moved over to DC before starting their own company. But first Kirby was drafted into the army and sent to Europe as an infantryman. He was eventually sent home with a serious case of frostbite, and his outlook on life was considerably darkened by his experience on the frontlines.

Kirby often injected occult and mythological themes into his stories. He and Simon took a different approach during the 1950s horror boom, releasing more

¹⁴⁴ Roy Wyman, *Art of Jack Kirby* (Orange, CA: Blue Rose, 1992).



esoteric titles like *Black Magic* and *The Strange World of Your Dreams*. He returned to DC to write and draw the team book *Challengers of the Unknown* in 1957 and his work began to drift into mythological realms. Following a dispute with a DC editor, Kirby returned to Marvel, which at that time was circling the drain. Kirby drew a series of monster and western titles, until Marvel publisher Martin Goodman ordered a superhero team book. Lee and Kirby delivered *The Fantastic Four*. The title opened the floodgates and Marvel became the behemoth we know today.

As the line grew, Lee found himself too busy to plot the books and turned the work over to his artists, leaving him free to concentrate on character development and dialogue. Left to his own devices, Kirby's titles took a sharp turn toward the esoteric. Thor stopped fighting communists and mad scientists and encountered living planets, monsters that contained the power of a billion souls, and genetic engineers creating new races. The Fantastic Four encountered a planet-eating god, alien sentries, hidden super-races, and other universes. Captain America spent most of his time struggling against a whole host of nefarious secret societies like HYDRA and AIM that set mutated telepaths and artificial intelligences against him. His old nemesis, Red Skull, now wielded a kind of Philosopher's Stone that transformed his thoughts into reality.

Kirby's artwork was evolving as well. His characters began to take on the powerful shapes and angles of a Rodin sculpture. His panels literally exploded off the paper with unrelenting force. Characters were in constant motion and every panel radiated violence and power. Every page was crammed with his arcane machinery, flames, motion lines, and "Kirby Krackle"—his trademark depiction of pulsating energy fields. With the Negative Zone and the Microverse, Kirby began to depict outer space as a living, breathing organism, bursting with exploding stars, pulsating nebulae, and infinite stars. The greatest designer the genre has ever seen, he created legions of memorable characters that are still used today in top-selling comic books. Kirby's artwork also heavily influenced the psychedelic art movement of the time.

Kirby's work was not without its critics, however. Art Spiegelman, creator of the award-winning *Maus*, complained that "the triumph of the will, the celebration of the physicality of the human body at the expense of the intellect, is very much an impulse in Fascist art. It has a lot to do with the motor for Kirby's work, even though I understand that his work is filled with characters who fought the

Fascists."¹⁴⁵ What Spiegelman and others don't understand is Kirby's work is hardly fascist; it is *fundamentally* psychedelic and intrinsically pagan. It springs from the same impulse that inspired the Art Deco movement, as well as the superheroes themselves. The fascists merely appropriated these symbols for their own nefarious reasons.

Kirby's own writing is totally lacking in the sunny liberalism of Stan Lee. The violence of his youth, his experiences in the war, and his early struggles in the penny-ante funny-book racket all colored his outlook and prompted him to tap into the deepest recesses of human creativity. Artist Jim Woodring, who worked with Kirby on animations in the 1980s, noted that he was "hermetically sealed in his own imagination, and was like a fountainhead when it came to generating ideas and designs and concepts." Writer Jonathan Lethem opined that Kirby's work is essentially about "glancing at the raw face of infinity, which is not particularly kind to the small affairs of human beings. There's a sense that you're watching mythology enacted in masks."¹⁴⁶

Aside from the enduring popularity of his comics, Kirby's influence has seeped into the mainstream by way of blockbuster films made by the fans who grew up with his work. In fact, his influence is so pervasive that it's hard to catalog. George Lucas was especially inspired by him. The four principal heroes of the original *Star Wars* film arguably have archetypal parallels with the Fantastic Four: Han Solo is an arrogant, overconfident leader (Mr. Fantastic), his future paramour, Princess Leia, makes her first appearance as a translucent hologram (Invisible Girl), Luke is a restless young Turk (the Human Torch), and Chewbacca, the brawn of the outfit, is like the misshapen Thing. And even if you find those comparisons forced, you can't deny that Darth Vader is essentially the same character as the Fantastic Four's primary villain, Doctor Doom. Both are hideously scarred men encased in armored suits—promising young mystics haunted by the deaths of their mothers who both became tyrants.

Kirby's influence on Lucas went far deeper than a similarity between the heroes and villains of *Star Wars* and *The Fantastic Four*. The cosmic struggle that drives *Star Wars* may be as old as time, but Lucas almost certainly first encountered it, not in Joseph Campbell's obscure academic works, but in Jack Kirby's landmark

¹⁴⁵ Art Spiegelman, interviewed by Gary Groth, excerpted from *The Comics Journal* # 180.

¹⁴⁶ Excerpted from "Kirby in the 80s," *Jack Kirby Collector* #30, Nov. 2000; "Interview with Jonathan Lethem" *JKC* #47, November 2006.

comic-book series, *The New Gods*. DC hired Kirby away from Marvel in 1971. One of his first DC titles was *Spirit World*, an anthology that dealt with occult phenomena like the prophecies of Nostradamus, astrology, and ESP. DC also let Kirby create an entire line of new titles—*The New Gods*, *The Forever People*, and *Mister Miracle*—which Kirby collectively named *The Fourth World*.

The Fourth World was unprecedented in its scope. These characters were extra-dimensional gods, superhuman beings who traveled to Earth with the use of the "Boom Tube," a sort of Stargate that bridged dimensions. The god of *The New Gods* was "the Source," an omnipotent energy field that plays the exact same role in the *Fourth World* comics that the Force plays in *Star Wars*.

Just as in *Star Wars*, *The Fourth World* is divided into two opposing, Manichaean factions—the followers of Highfather on the Utopian world of New Genesis, and the subjects of Darkseid (pronounced "Dark Side") on the slave planet Apokolips. In the past, Apokolips and New Genesis had fought to the brink of mutual destruction, but a truce is sealed by the exchange of Highfather's and Darkseid's first-born sons ("The Pact", *New Gods* #7). Darkseid's feral son, Orion, is raised on New Genesis and becomes its mightiest warrior. Highfather's son, Scott Free, is raised on Apokolips, but escapes and becomes the "super escape-artist," Mister Miracle. Orion becomes the sworn enemy of his father and Scott Free is tutored in the ways of The Source by an Obi-Wan-like character named Himon (*Mister Miracle* #8). Darkseid is more a spiritual version of Darth Vader, but his henchman, DeSaad, is the absolute spitting image of Emperor Palpatine in *Return of the Jedi*.

While Kirby produced a mind-boggling array of characters, monsters, and machinery for *The Fourth World* comics, his fertile imagination eventually overwhelmed his narrative skills. The stories bogged down under the weight of Kirby's endless parade of concepts, and lackluster sales caused DC to cancel the entire line in 1973. Hardcore fans like Lucas, however, loved *The Fourth World* books, and the characters remain a vital part of the DC Universe to this day. Another hardcore fan, Bruce Timm, eventually became the producer of the hugely popular *Superman* and *Justice League* cartoons, and introduced the new gods to an entirely new generation of fans.

After the cancellation of *The Fourth World* titles in 1972, Kirby dove headfirst into the supernatural with *The Demon*, an occult-themed title featuring Merlin's pet demon, Etrigan, who is summoned in the last days of Camelot. Etrigan also

has an human alter ego, occult detective Jason Blood. Kirby pitted The Demon against foes like Morgaine Le Fey and Klarion the Witch Boy. In addition to a smattering of stories dealing with witchcraft, Jack used *The Demon* to pay tribute to the classic horror stories of his youth, including *Frankenstein*, *The Wolfman*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The cancelation of *The Fourth World* books led Kirby back to Marvel in 1975. He took over *Captain America* and set to work on a storyline plucked directly from the fevered rantings of Seventies right-wing conspiracy theorists. The "Madbomb Saga" (*Captain America* #193–200) set the Captain and Falcon against a secret society of Royalists, ancestors of pre-Revolutionary British loyalists working to reclaim America for the Crown. To this end, they genetically engineer a slave race and develop a massive mind-control weapon that can cripple the entire population of the United States on its Bicentennial. The Cap had battled secret societies before, but none as explicit or seemingly well-researched as this. Kirby revisited the theme of secret societies in his run on *Black Panther* in 1977, where he introduced the Collectors, a secretive band of plutocrats who search for ancient artifacts that contain supernatural power.

Kirby returned to the Vril-ya for his 1976 Marvel series, *The Eternals*. His main focus here was to explore the themes of ancient alien visitation laid out in Erick Von Daniken's 1971 blockbuster *Chariots of the Gods*. Like Von Daniken, Kirby proposed that the ancient gods of mythology were actually extraterrestrial visitors. The first three issues of *The Eternals* presented wild theories of alien genetic engineering and races created by the gods: humankind, the demonic Deviants who lived in the undersea ruins of Atlantis, and the aloof, superhuman Eternals who lived on Mount Olympus. Kirby himself describes *The Eternals* as "the place where I started being mystic, dealing with what I sincerely think is moving in the root cores of all of us."¹⁴⁷

In 1976, Kirby wrote and drew an adaptation of 2001: *A Space Odyssey* for Marvel, using it as a vehicle for his psychedelic bent. The series revealed Kirby's obsession with the Star Child transformation theme. Kirby claimed in his introduction to the series that "the Monolith is a fictional element in a very real process," i.e., the extraterrestrial transformation of the human species, which Kirby felt the aliens

¹⁴⁷ James Van Hise, "Superheroes: A Talk with Jack Kirby," *Comics Feature*, December 1984.

"were doing for purposes beyond our understanding."¹⁴⁸ The book soon became a vehicle for a new character called Machine Man, signaling Kirby's conclusion that cybernetics was the ultimate destiny of the species. "We're not Star Children," Kirby said, "we are headed towards the age in which machines will do all the things for us. That's why HAL is perfectly correct in killing these guys (the crew in the 2001 film) because he can do the job better."¹⁴⁹

Kirby's influence on sci-fi film was by no means limited to *Star Wars*. His 1981 series *Captain Victory and the Galactic Rangers* concerned a crack military unit of space marines, led by the androgynous Victory, who travel the galaxy in pursuit of a race of giant aliens called the Insectons. Seemingly invulnerable, the Insectons invade planets and build underground hives where they entomb living humans and use their "life fluid" in incubators for their young. Kirby recycled the Insectons from *The New Gods*, intending Captain Victory to be the son of Orion. Since *Captain Victory* was created for another publisher, Kirby was unable to incorporate the *The New Gods* character names.

If the story of an androgynous warrior and a band of elite Space Marines fighting an army of vicious, insectoid aliens seems strangely familiar, you may have seen what is essentially the *de facto* Hollywood adaptation of *Captain Victory's* first six issues in James Cameron's 1986 *Aliens*. Though there are significant differences (Kirby's stories are extremely odd), Cameron's film has so much in common with *Captain Victory* that it's hard to believe the similarities are coincidental.

Many of the most powerful scenes in *Aliens* have direct antecedents in *Captain Victory*. The Galactic Rangers engage the Insectons in a series of subterranean tunnels, just as the Marines do in *Aliens*. There is a horrifying alien hive in both stories. The climax of *Aliens*, in which the androgynous Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) defeats the alien queen while manning an enormous, anthropomorphic robot, has a direct parallel in the androgynous Captain Victory's destruction of the Insecton hive while manning an enormous, anthropomorphic robot (*Captain Victory*, #6). It's probably an appropriate time to mention that James Cameron is a big comic-book fan, and that none of these elements were introduced in the first *Alien* film in 1979.

¹⁴⁸ Jack Kirby, editorial in 2001: *A Space Odyssey* #1, December 1976.

¹⁴⁹ James Van Hise, "Superheroes: A Talk with Jack Kirby," *Comics Feature*, December 1984.

In Kirby's other major 1980s series, *Silver Star*, we see the Vrilya again, but in a very different form from the X-Men or the Inhumans.¹⁵⁰ Silver Star is one of a new scientifically engineered race *Homo Geneticus*, whose siblings are scattered and unaware of their true identities. Like the Vrilya, Silver Star is blunt about man's future and predicts the coming dominance of *Homo Geneticus*: "I suppose it just happens, Pops. One man makes a *spear*, another counters with a *shield*... and so on, through the ages. They do it *all*! *Bigger, Scarier!* Never realizing how long they've been at it...and that their time has come to clear the stage! No offense, Pop, you're obsolete."¹⁵¹

Much of the six-issue mini-series has Silver Star trying to gather up his genetic kinsmen to protect them from the villain Darius Drumm, who wants to ensure his status as the only post-human.¹⁵² Driven to madness, Drumm becomes a literal Angel of Death, who telekinetically turns everything he flies over into desert. Although *Silver Star* was not a hit series, Kirby's concept has, nonetheless, filtered up to the mass media. The idea of a race of superbeings living anonymously and unconsciously among us has become increasingly popular in the past few years. M. Night Shyamalan used it for his film *Unbreakable*. Two hit TV series, USA's *The 4400* and NBC's *Heroes* have also expanded upon the theme, as has Marvel's recent revival of *The Eternals*.

STEVE ENGLEHART

Long before Alan Moore came along, Steve Englehart was injecting esoteric concepts into superhero stories. And he was doing so at a time when most of his contemporaries were recycling left-wing clichés into their stories in a bid for relevancy. Born in 1947, Englehart left his home in Indiana for New York City, where the occult renaissance outlived the Sixties. Groups like the OTO were very active there in the 1970s, and like-minded esotericists gathered in occult bookshops like the Magickal Child in Chelsea. While the rest of the counterculture movement was being co-opted, these initiates created a counterculture of their own—a close-knit

¹⁵⁰ Curious again that Aleister Crowley's first magical sect after leaving the Golden Dawn was called the Silver Star.

¹⁵¹ "The Super-Normals: Are They God's or Satan's Children?" *Silver Star* #4, August 1983.

¹⁵² A very similar story is being played out on NBC's *Heroes* with the character Sylar in the Drumm role.

community devoted to drugs, sex, and magic. Luminaries like former *Village Voice* writer Alan Cabal, occult writer Peter Levenda, Bonnie Wilfred (then wife of *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont), filmmaker Kenneth Anger, and assorted fans of sci-fi and other genres were all drawn into the scene. This invisible underground had a major influence on sci-fi and fantasy, and, through writers like Steve Englehart, on comics.

Working for Marvel, Englehart enlivened several tired old titles, incorporated Watergate-era conspiracy theory into *Captain America*, and wrote the first eleven issues of the occult-themed *Defenders*, pitting the trio against a host of magical foes with Lovecraftian names like The Nameless One, The Undying Ones, and Necrodamus. The final story in his *Defenders* run even pays tribute to Bulwer-Lytton ("A Dark and Stormy Knight," *Defenders* #11). Englehart also did a four-year stint on *The Avengers*, where he explored esoteric and occult themes, and, in 1974, such as *Astrology*.

Given his occult interests, Englehart was a natural for *Doctor Strange*. He himself explained that "when I took on his solo series, I decided I should learn a little about actual magick—and it led to a continuing interest in the subject."¹⁵³ Working with artist Frank Brunner, he killed off the Ancient One, making Doctor Strange the Sorcerer Supreme, then he set the Doctor into action against a super-powered incarnation of Caligostro, the infamous 18th-century Italian occultist (*Marvel Premiere* #14). In 1976, in his final storyline, Englehart sends Strange back in time to investigate the occult origins of America, including Benjamin Franklin, the Rosicrucians, and the Hellfire Club (*Doctor Strange* #17). Unfortunately, Englehart quit the title before the storyline was resolved.

Englehart moved to DC and penned a classic run on the Batman title *Detective Comics* with frequent collaborator, the late artist Marshall Rogers. He worked briefly on a revival of Kirby's *Mister Miracle* and a 1981 title featuring the occult-oriented *Madame Xanadu*, whose cover pictured the Madame wielding Tarot cards closely modeled on Aleister Crowley's *Book of Thoth* deck. Following a dispute with DC, Englehart decamped to the independent publisher Eclipse, where he reworked the Madame Xanadu concept and renamed her Scorpio Rose, an immortal born at "a time when magick was alive"¹⁵⁴ A more faithful rendering of the *Book of Thoth* was pictured on the cover of *Scorpio Rose* #2. While at Eclipse,

¹⁵³ Steve Englehart, *Doctor Strange I: Marvel Premiere* 9-14, *Doctor Strange* 1-18. steveenglehart.com.

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer Contino, "Englehart Chats Coyote & Scorpio Rose," *PULSE News*, October 10, 2005.

Englehart created the Native American shaman Coyote and set him on a series of occult adventures.

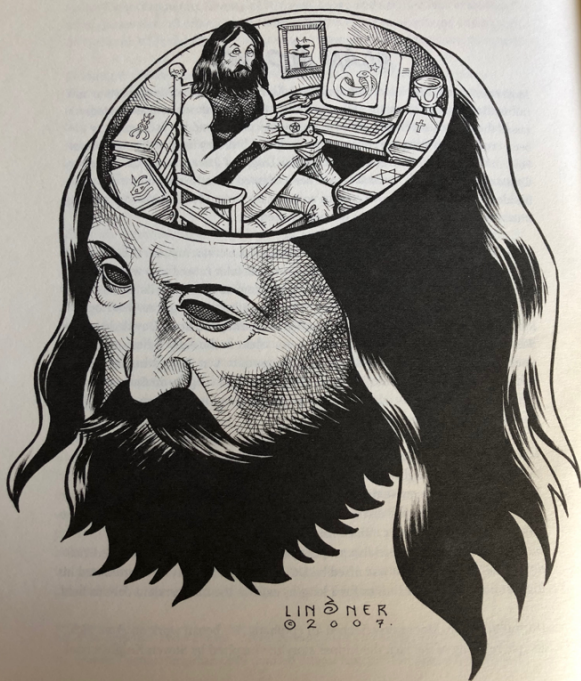
ALAN MOORE

Most comics fans and historians agree that Alan Moore is the most important and influential comic-book writer since Stan Lee. Moore has almost single-handedly raised the level of sophistication of mainstream comics, and his influence has been crucial in shifting the center of power in the industry from artists to writers. Four major motion pictures—*From Hell*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Constantine*, and *V For Vendetta*—have been adapted directly from his creations. Besides being the best-known comics writer of his time, Moore is also a practicing ritual magician and a student of the occult sciences.

Born in England in 1953, Moore began his career as a cartoonist, creating strips for music magazines and underground papers. He later moved into writing, and worked extensively for Britain's small but active comics industry. His initial success came in *Marvelman*, which he wrote for the anthology magazine *Warrior*. Moore also created the dystopian drama *V for Vendetta* with artist David Lloyd. When DC Comics began raiding the U. K. for talent in the early 1980s, Moore caught the attention of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* editor Len Wein, who hired him to help save his faltering title. Moore performed radical surgery on *Swamp Thing*, turning it into an unholy admixture of Lovecraftian horror, Southern Gothic fiction, and ecological speculation.

Moore's success with *Swamp Thing* led to a number of more mainstream assignments. When DC bought the rights to the old Charlton Comics superheroes, Moore was tapped to revive them. The project soon evolved into the *Watchmen* mini-series, an apocalyptic dismantling of the very concept of the superhero. Unrelentingly dark and nihilistic, *Watchmen* changed the face of comics for the next fifteen years. Moore also proposed an even more radical work called *Twilight of the Superheroes* that was nixed by DC brass. That act may have prompted his flight from mainstream comics for a lengthy exile in the independent comics field.

During this exile, Moore experienced an epiphany. He began work on *From Hell*, an epic retelling of the Jack the Ripper storyline inspired by Steven Knight's book



Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution, which claimed that the Ripper killings were actually the work of a Masonic conspiracy. Moore advanced the controversial theory that 72-year-old surgeon Sir William Gull was the real Ripper. The ostensible purpose of the killings, he claimed, was to silence a gaggle of prostitutes who knew that a prince had fathered an illegitimate child with a streetwalker. Gull's real aim, however, was to perform a large-scale magical working that would ensure the future dominance of men over women.

During the writing of *From Hell*, Moore began to question the very nature of reality. He had previously professed a worldview typical of a left-wing British bohemian—nihilistic, materialistic, and reductionist. Now he dove head first into the world of the Tarot, Kabbalah, and ritual magic. Tongue planted firmly in cheek, Moore accepted the ancient sock puppet/snake god Glycon as his personal savior.

Rejuvenated by his occult awakening, Moore reentered the industry mainstream, hijacking Rob Liefeld's Superman-knockoff *Supreme* and turning it into a paean to the innocence of the Silver Age heroes. He followed this with a mini-series that paid tribute to Silver Age called *1963*. Then he devised a comic-book line, America's Best Comics, that toyed with the basic archetypes of comic-book superheroes. *Tom Strong*, Moore's vision of Captain Marvel as pulp hero (complete with his own "family"), incorporated themes from real pulp heroes like Doc Savage. *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* gathered a whole host of Victorian pulp heroes like Captain Nemo, the Invisible Man, and Allen Quatermain into a prototypical superhero team. The anthology *Tomorrow Stories* celebrated Will Eisner's *Spirit* (Greyshirt), Simon and Kirby's *Fighting American* (First American), and Jack Cole's *Plastic Man* (Splash Branigan), and offered a hilarious yet affectionate tribute to boy-wonder heroes like Tom Sawyer (Jack B. Quick).

Moore truly went off into the ether in his Wonder Woman tribute, *Promethea*. *Promethea* is an ancient heroine who materializes into the physical plane whenever someone imagines her doing so. The title started out as an innovative superhero yarn with mystical shading, but abruptly changed into a graphic tutorial on the occult and ritual magic, with entire issues becoming primers on Kabbalah, the Tarot, and other esoteric topics. *Promethea* and her companions simply soak it all up in wide-eyed wonder. Despite falling sales and howling critics, Moore and his art team carried on. Time will tell whether *Promethea* is seen as another Moore breakthrough or simply as an indulgence.

Our Gods Wear Spandex 201

In addition to his comics and fiction writing, Moore has worked as a performance artist, often in collaboration with British musicians David J (of Bauhaus fame) and Tim Perkins. These performances are billed as magical rituals under names like *The Moon and Serpent*, *Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels*, *The Birth Caul*, and *The Highbury Working*. Moore has become a genuine intellectual celebrity, showing an uncanny knack for generating controversy and garnering attention from major media outlets like *The New York Times*. He makes no secret of his dislike of the films adapted from his work; his disavowal of the *V for Vendetta* film became a major news story. He is a frequent guest on BBC radio and television, showcasing his Rasputin-like appearance and porridge-thick Midlands brogue. His ferocious intellect, however, allays any doubts as to his seriousness. He has paradoxically legitimized both comic books and ritual magic by combining them. Perhaps that will be his greatest legacy.

NEIL GAIMAN

One of the first British writers to be hired by DC in Moore's wake was former Duran Duran biographer, Neil Gaiman. Gaiman was the product of a confused religious upbringing: his family is Jewish, but his father is a bigwig in L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology, and Gaiman himself was schooled at Anglican academies. This religious diversity helped Gaiman gain a better understanding of world mythology and religion that served him well throughout his career.

Fascinated by comics, Gaiman took over the reins on *Marvelman* when Alan Moore left the strip. He formed a friendship with illustrator Dave McKean and kicked off a long-running collaboration with him that culminated in two critically acclaimed graphic novels in the late 1980s. Gaiman made a successful pitch to DC editor Karen Berger for a radical revamp of the old Sandman character, whom Gaiman rewrote as essentially a god—one of The Endless, a group of seven siblings who rule over humanity. Sandman rules over a realm called, appropriately, the Dreaming, which Gaiman uses as a repository for every fantasy, mythology, and religious concept imaginable. Gaiman drew on the religious diversity of his childhood to create a series that became the rarest of mythological constructs—a comic book for people who don't read comic books.

Gaiman changed the usual balance of power in comics with *The Sandman*—one of the first "writer's books" in a field that previously relied most heavily on its art-

ists to sell a title. Though the title became one of DC's top sellers, Gaiman chose not to work with the big stars, relying instead on a revolving staff of competent but unremarkable draftsmen who simply told the stories clearly and coherently. This was a major innovation on Gaiman's part, since even Alan Moore and Frank Miller relied on flashy illustrators like Bill Sienkiewicz and David Mazzuchelli to put their work over the top commercially. On *The Sandman*, Gaiman was clearly the unchallenged star attraction.

In 1992, Gaiman created a new character for a mini-series called *The Books of Magic*. Its hero, young wizard Timothy Hunter, is widely cited as an unacknowledged prototype for Harry Potter. Both are young English urchins with tousled brown hair and glasses who inherit great magical powers and stand on the threshold of great destinies. Both use owls as familiars. Gaiman placed Hunter squarely in the DC Universe, using John Constantine, Phantom Stranger, Mister E, and Doctor Occult as his spirit guides in the first storyline. *The Books of Magic* soon became a regular series and ran for six years. Hunter also appeared in two spinoffs, *The Names of Magic* and *Books of Magick: Life During Wartime*.

Gaiman also worked extensively outside of comics, producing several best-selling novels, including the award-winning *American Gods*. This extraordinary book deals with the gods of the old world trying to make their way in the spiritual wasteland of modern America. The plot has Woden using an ex-convict named Shadow Moon to recruit the old gods for a last stand against the new American gods of commerce and the media. As preposterous as that premise may sound, Gaiman handled the material with utter conviction.

After a hiatus from comics, Gaiman returned to create *1602* for Marvel. This mini-series places the characters of the Marvel Universe in Elizabethan England on Her Majesty's Secret Service. The series introduced a new generation of readers to the same sort of Rosicrucian intrigues that Steve Englehart had presented in *Doctor Strange*. In a way, *1602* brought the Marvel heroes full circle, back to their British occultic roots. After *1602*, Gaiman published another award-winning novel, *Anansi Boys*, and in 2005, directed a film in collaboration with Dave McKean and the Jim Henson Company called *Mirrormask*.

Gaiman returned to Marvel in 2006 for a revamp of Kirby's Vril-ya analog, *The Eternals*. Shunning Kirby's grandeur and extreme violence, Gaiman instead mined

Our Gods Wear Spandex 203

the territory explored by the TV series *The 4400* and *Heroes*. In this mini-series, the Eternals live ordinary lives, only vaguely aware of their great potential. As of this writing, he is working on a computer-animated film of the ur-hero of English literature, *Beowulf*.

Even if he never writes another comic book, Gaiman's legacy is assured. More than any other writer, Gaiman rebuilt the once-extensive links between the fantasy audience and the world of the occult through the medium of comics.

GRANT MORRISON

Another Alan Moore acolyte to make an impact on mainstream comic books is Scottish-born Grant Morrison. Like Moore, Morrison began his career as an artist, but soon moved into writing. His big breakthrough came in 1987 with his own superhero deconstruction, *Zenith*, for 2000 A.D. magazine. Morrison sold DC on a revamp of the obscure hero Animal Man, which he turned into a surreal and often deeply personal meditation on themes like animal rights. The book earned a sizable cult audience, and DC set Morrison to work revamping another old title, *The Doom Patrol*.

Morrison's *Doom Patrol* became a nearly unreadable Dadaist parody of the very act of storytelling itself, a conceit that his energy and conviction made appealing to the more pretentious comics fans. Using his cult success as a springboard, Morrison cashed in on Batmania with his best-selling *Arkham Asylum* graphic novel. He cannily hedged his bets with his relatively conventional superhero thriller, *Batman: Gothic*, drawn by Klaus Janson, an explicitly occultic work that tells of a monk who sells his soul to Satan to gain immortality.

In 1994, Morrison created his magnum opus, *The Invisibles*, a Vertigo series that deals with a band of occult superheroes battling an interdimensional ruling-class conspiracy. Well, sort of. The series, which has a revolving cast of regular characters, acted mainly as a vehicle for Morrison to delve into every imaginable fringe idea or Internet conspiracy theory he came across. Morrison took Gaiman's lead and relied on a revolving staff of artists to illustrate the book, making himself the undisputed attraction of *The Invisibles*.

Morrison claimed that *The Invisibles* was actually dictated to him by an alien race he encountered in the Himalayas (shades of Blavatsky!). This alleged extraterres-

trial origin failed to help the series reach a large audience, however, and sales of the title faltered. Morrison's response to this was unprecedented. He used the letters page of the comic to encourage his readers to take part in a worldwide occult ceremony that involved ritual masturbation. Whether through magical intervention or to keep a star writer happy, DC gave the series another chance, this time as a reverse-numbered limited edition meant to count down to January 2000.

For all the excitement generated by Morrison's esoteric foibles, his greatest success by far lies in his work on Marvel and DC's crown-jewel characters. Morrison revamped *The Justice League* in 1996, making it a top seller during a time when comic sales were in free-fall. He leveraged this success to earn himself a fat contract with Marvel, who immediately put him on the faltering *X-Men* series. He also helped revive interest in the *Fantastic Four* with his *Fantastic Four 1234* mini-series. Morrison stunned the industry with a messy split with Marvel in 2004 and went to DC for a number of esoteric projects and a marquee run on *All-Star Superman* with fellow Scot Frank Quitely. In 2006, he began a back-to-basics make over of *Batman* with artist Andy Kubert.

Cynics may say that Grant Morrison is more style than substance; sort of an amalgam of Alan Moore, Timothy Leary, and Sammy Glick. But in a field where the top sellers are still old warhorses like *Batman* and *The X-Men*, Morrison has generated genuine excitement with his occult/situationalist provocations. He has taken ideas and concepts from extremely marginal groups like chaos magicians, Burning Man cyber-hippies, and alternative comics fans and created the illusion of a new breed of comics geek. Although playing to a small audience, Morrison made his fantasy vision of the tuned-in and turned-on cyberpunk superhero seductive to less-adventurous superhero fans, who live vicariously through Morrison's carefully presented interviews and personal appearances. If Alan Moore's magic is basically hermetic in nature, then Morrison's is pure prestidigitation.

MIKE MIGNOLA

Hellboy creator Mike Mignola occupies a space different from that of the other wizards of comicdom. His work is about history—occult history, to be precise—and he uses a Golem-type hero to immerse himself and his readers in the dark corners of our past.

Our Gods Wear Spandex 205

Mignola began his career submitting illustrations to fan magazines like *The Comic Reader*. He eventually turned pro at Marvel, and made his bones with the 1988 mini-series *Cosmic Odyssey*, written by the death-obsessed Jim Starlin. *Odyssey* delved deeply into Kirby's *Fourth World* material and also featured the Justice League. Mignola's eyes were set on the past, however, and his 1989 graphic novel *Gotham by Gaslight*, which featured a Victorian-era version of Batman battling Jack the Ripper, caught the eye of Francis Ford Coppola, who hired the artist as production designer for his 1992 film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Mignola also illustrated a comic-book adaptation of the film. Wading even deeper into occult waters, Mignola was production designer for Disney's 2001 animated opus *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, a production that clearly spoke to Mignola's obsessions.

In 1993, Mignola brought forth his signature creation, *Hellboy* (*San Diego ComicCon Comics* #2), a young demon summoned by a reincarnated Rasputin to work for the Nazis in the closing days of World War II. The demon is taken by the Allies, who train him to be a classic occult detective. In concept, *Hellboy* is little more than a hijacking of Jack Kirby's *Demon*, with a personality on loan from Ben Grimm, but Mignola's elegant and moody artwork, as well as his encyclopedic knowledge of the occult, made *Hellboy* by far the most remarkable superhero of the 1990s. Mignola leavens his stories with heavy doses of humor that, paradoxically, only make them more arcane. He also adds heavy doses of Lovecraftian horror and a morbid ambiance that displays a strong Poe influence.

Mignola's stories are impeccably researched, and his explorations of Nazi occultism are at once remarkable and chilling. Mignola also incorporates horrors like leprechauns and werewolves from old European folktales, and more esoteric beasts like the Homonculus. He makes his comics tantamount to magic spells by decorating his pages with various sigils and icons borrowed from ritual magic. Unfortunately, Mignola's involvement in the *Hellboy* comics has recently diminished and the art work has been handed off to others.

The 2004 *Hellboy* movie, directed by Guillermo Del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*) and starring Ron Perlman (*Beauty and the Beast*), was a serviceable action picture completely devoid of the magical ambiance and creeping dread of Mignola's comics. Mignola's work is about the beauty of decay and the purity of terror—themes that don't always translate well on screen. His best work taps directly into the deepest

recesses of the collective imagination; the deep shadows and dark stares that give his drawing such intensity in print are hard to translate to film.

ALEX ROSS

If Jack Kirby is the prophet of the new gods and Alan Moore the comics' sorcerer supreme, then Alex Ross is the foremost apostle of the new superhero religion. His father was Protestant minister and his mother worked as a successful illustrator. Being a preacher's son put special pressures on Ross, who poured all his youthful energies into his art. After moving with his family from Portland, Oregon to a new home deep in the heart of Texas, Ross sought inspiration in the graceful, idealized heroes of artists like Neal Adams and George Perez, as well as the classic magazine illustrations of Andrew Loomis and Norman Rockwell. By age 12, he was already more talented than most of the Nineties hacks whose work wounded him so deeply.

Ross seems to have latched onto DC's heroes for the same reasons other fans abandoned them in the Sixties and Seventies. The heroes of *The Justice League* were aloof and Olympian; they were better than normal Joes. In other words, they were *gods*. In his monograph, *Mythology: The DC Comics Art of Alex Ross*, he explained this appeal: "As an adolescent you need order in your world, and superheroes have that, a sense of ethics that would never change—they would never be less than perfect, fighting for their ideals," adding "they deal succinctly with moral issues, in a way that religion doesn't. Or rather, religion does, but in a much more complicated and often confusing manner."¹⁵⁵

After a stint in advertising, Ross landed an opportunity to draw a *Terminator* mini-series for Now Comics. In 1993, he got his first job for DC—appropriately enough, a book cover for a novelization of the dying-rising Superman saga entitled *Superman: Doomsday and Beyond*. His work caught the attention of editors at Marvel and, in 1994, he illustrated his graphic love letter to the superheroes of old, *Marvels*. Ross' art electrified fandom and snapped comics out of their cynical 90s decline. All of a sudden, superheroes actually looked *heroic* again. Indeed, looking at Ross' *Marvels* is almost like seeing those characters for the first time. As Chip Kidd said of Ross' later depictions of Superman, "the effect was like finally meeting someone you'd only ever heard about."

¹⁵⁵ Chip Kidd and Geoff Spear, *Mythology* (no pagination).



Ross leveraged his success with *Marvels* to get his hands on the Justice League. DC was floundering at the time, its editors playing a perpetual game of catch-up with Marvel and Image. Ross set out to revitalize the entire line with his epic *Kingdom Come*, in which he sought “to bring a sense of morality back to the comics.”¹⁵⁶ Comics had never seen anything like *Kingdom Come*, which captivated fans and fellow creators alike. Ross was acknowledged as a prophet, shouting down the fatuous corruption of the Chromium Age. No one yet realized it, but when the *Kingdom* came, the New Age had begun.

Kingdom Come was almost a decade in the making. In his original notes for the series, Ross perceptively equated the 40s Superman with Samson and the 60s version with Jesus Christ. “Superman as a fictional character is just as important as if he existed in flesh and blood,” he claimed. “Either way he is inspirational, and that’s what’s relevant” Indeed, Ross wanted to put “Superman in the same role” as Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁷

Ross made his father a star of the show in *Kingdom Come*, renaming him Pastor Norman McCay as a tribute to Winsor McCay. His father proved an excellent model, bearing a strong resemblance to Alec Guinness in *Star Wars*. In the story, Jerry Siegel’s occult hero, the Spectre, appears before McCay and anoints him as a witness to the coming Apocalypse. McCay protests against the Apocalypse using the tepid language of liberal Protestantism, but regains his religious fervor (and his congregation) after helping the gods of the League save humanity.

Ross’ superheroes are the very embodiment of Nietzsche’s *ubermenschen*. Indeed, members of the League are referred to as “gods” throughout the book. Ross depicts Green Lantern in the armor of a Wagnerian knight, and returns the Flash and Hawkman to their original forms. No longer stand-ins for Hermes/Mercury and Horus, they are the exact look-alikes of those gods, their carriage and behavior leaving little doubt that they are their actual incarnations. Ross claimed “Hawkman would become Hawkgod ... he’s become a real birdman now, a new entity, a reincarnated Egyptian prince.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Les Daniels, *DC Comics*, p. 248.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in Les Daniels, *DC Comics*, p. 248.

¹⁵⁸ Chip Kidd and Geoff Spear, *Mythology* (no pagination).

Ross’ Wonder Woman, modeled on Lynda Carter, is a lioness, fierce in battle but tender to her man (*Superman*, in this case). In the book’s final apocalyptic battle, Ross accentuates her divine nature by dressing her in golden eagle armor reminiscent of ancient figurines of the winged Isis and bathing her in sunlight (which he does throughout the entire story). When we first see the reconstituted Justice League descend from heaven, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Hawkgod are most prominent among them, drawing an irresistible parallel to Osiris, Isis, and Horus. The three seem to fly from the heart of the Sun itself.

The mythological tone and sense of majesty of Ross’ *Kingdom Come* hark back to the Neoclassical, Romantic, and Pre-Raphaelite movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Ross’ worshipful sensibility has much more in common with Leyendecker, Waterhouse, or Alma-Tadema than that of even the most elegant cartoonists like Hal Foster or Alex Raymond.

Even the moronic Chromium Age-style heroes that Ross is seeking to exorcise are designed and rendered in a manner infinitely more creative and dignified than the wretched 90s characters that inspired them—although he still has most of them annihilated by a nuclear explosion.

Sprinkled throughout the series are passages from Revelations that underscore the apocalyptic events in the story and the sense of reverence and awe Ross seeks to reintroduce to comics readers, whose sensibilities were ruined by the deluge of Chromium Age garbage. Ross mounts a crusade against superheresy, and responds to the 90s decline with his vision of the one true faith. The cumulative effect of all this nobility, righteousness, and wrath is indistinguishable from that of any of the great ancient religious epics.

Make no mistake, *Kingdom Come* is a fundamentally religious piece of work, and the gods that Ross celebrates in it would easily be recognized by any ancient pagan or polytheist. The symbols and accessories of the ancient gods—whether Egyptian, Greek, Roman, or Norse—and motifs taken from Templarism, Freemasonry, and Neoclassicism are everywhere in *Kingdom Come*. If Ross did not set out intentionally to reintroduce the ancient gods and goddesses to a modern audience, then we must seriously contemplate whether some other supernatural force was working through him to do so.

The impact of *Kingdom Come* and Ross' tabloid-size graphic novellas featuring Superman (*Peace on Earth*), Batman (*War on Crime*), Captain Marvel (*Power of Hope*), Wonder Woman (*Spirit of Truth*), and the Justice League (*Liberty and Justice*) cannot possibly be overstated. It took some time to digest, but soon the better draftsmen in the field began to inject their art with Ross' realism and reverence. Now, most of the top artists at Marvel and DC make heavy use of photo reference and tell stories in a cinematic storytelling style that has come to be known as "widescreen." Artists who draw in the cartoon style of the Eighties or the hyperthyroid style of the Nineties are out of fashion—perhaps forever. *Kingdom Come* heralded the age of the superhero as god, and gods must be awe-inspiring or not exist at all.

THE DREAM LAB: COMICS AND THE FUTURE

The last several years of the comic book industry have been a time of great change. The industry has been hit hard by the economic downturn, and many publishers have been forced to close their doors. However, the industry has also seen a resurgence in popularity, with new readers and a renewed interest in the medium. This is a time of great opportunity for the industry, and it is important to look forward with optimism.

Comic books have always been a part of our culture, and they continue to be a powerful force in the world. As the industry grows and evolves, it is important to remember the values that have made it so successful: creativity, imagination, and the power of the written word.