

# Out of the Closet and into the Comics

## Gays in Comics: The Creations and the Creators Part II

by Andy Mangels

[In the first part of this article, last issue, we broached the question of: are comics fostering a prejudice against gays, and if so, why?

Many first appearances of gays in comics, such as Jim Shooter's 1980 Hulk Magazine story, seemed to be proliferating stereotypes and homophobia, a hatred of gays. Slowly, more realistic gay characters made their way into different casts, as more creators understood that, in order to represent reality in comics, one had to show gays, since statistically, one out of every tenth person is gay.

Some independent publications such as Omaha, the Cat Dancer, Love and Rockets, and Sable, showed the gay characters openly. Others, as with Marvel and the X-titles, which could be a continuing allegory for the struggle for gay acceptance (as well as against all prejudice), the characters stayed "in the closet."

We discussed the possible homosexuality of Northstar in Alpha Flight, and how he might have had AIDS, but how the whole subject was quelled by the then editorial policy of "no gays in Marvel Comics." Present editor-in-chief, Tom DeFalco, stated that there are no rules against having a gay character or an AIDS plotline, as long as it is a "sincere, well-researched, honest story."

In comics, it also seems that two-women/lesbian relationships are more acceptable than male homosexuality; even though they, too, are often portrayed in a less than positive light.

Now, what about DC? What about other independents? And how do gay creators feel about asserting themselves freely in the comics field? These subjects and more are tackled with vim, vigor and pride, below:]

One company in the comic business seems to take umbrage to the notion that lesbians are more acceptable. DC's examples of gays in their comics have almost exclusively been male. No one appears to be complaining though, as DC seems to be doing its level best to portray gays favorably.

### COMING OUT AT DC

"DC Comics is the company who has done the most in projecting positive attitudes towards both gay characters and gay creators," says one gay writer. Interestingly enough, DC was blasted in the fifties by Fredric Wertham in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he stated Batman and Robin had a homosexual relationship, and that *Wonder Woman* was nothing more than lesbian bondage and torture scenes. The statements were, of course, ludicrous. Current DC policy has allowed for a major gay superhero, kind of. Over the last three years, they have had several gay characters, and recently, many stories focusing on those gays characters.

Alan Moore, who had already intimated that one of the *Miracleman* Family was gay (*Miracleman* #12), introduced several gay characters into the *Watchmen* series.

Another British creator, Jamie Delano, has introduced a major supporting character, Ray, in *Hellblazer*. A recent story on prejudice and gay-bashing (*Hellblazer* #6) led to the acknowledgement that Ray was dying of AIDS. The story has so far been handled tactfully and sensitively.

Doug Moench has used gay characters in several of his stories for DC. One appeared in *Lords of the Ultra Realm*, and quite a few appeared in

*Slash Maraud*, a series which also featured the first depiction in mainstream comics of male-to-male physical affection. Moench also included a gay rights/AIDS rally in one of his *Spectre* stories, although as a background to the main story.

"In *Slash Maraud*," says writer Dough Moench, "the story was humanity against the aliens. I wanted to show humanity in all of its aspects, contrasting with the alienness. There were gays, Blacks, lesbians, Hispanics, and many others. I wanted to show a microcosm of humanity against the alien invasion. I wasn't trying to make any kind of statement about sex or homosexuality or anything. Hey, a couple of the good guys just happened to be gay."

"As for the *Spectre* story," continues Moench, "I had planned on doing that story for months, and it just kept getting pushed out. By the time I got around to doing it, I thought every issue of every comic from the big companies was going to be about AIDS. I wanted to contrast in the story some comic-booky plague with something real. I was trying to shock the readers into a little reality." Moench later did a scene in which Corrigan was discussing everything that was wrong with the world, and "one of the things he's complaining about is the idiots who think that AIDS is only a homosexual disease."

"There's a fine line," Moench continues, "between using a character that is a token, and using a character matter-of-factly. By the nature of using a character matter-of-factly, it may seem tokenish, like 'this character didn't have to be gay.' My response is that no, that character didn't, but it stands to reason that someone should be. You don't have to make a big deal



THEY RETURNED HOME AFTER THE INQUEST. THE FLIGHT TO NEW YORK WAS AS SILENT AS DEATH ITSELF.



Many people classified DC's Jericho as gay just because he's a sensitive artist.

out of it. You run the risk of tokenism, but [laughing] if your heart is pure and your motives are true, that can prevent characters from coming off as tokens."

## IS HE OR ISN'T HE?

It must be the blond curly hair or something, because both characters with that hairstyle in the DC Universe have long been the subject of a debate of "is he or isn't he gay?": Star Boy of the *Legion of Super-Heroes* and Jericho of the *New Teen Titans*.

Although it has been largely assumed in *Legion* fandom that Star Boy is gay, creator Paul Levitz apparently felt that none of the 30-plus members of the Legion were gay (even though, statistically, three of them should be). When the rumors about Star Boy were at their highest, Levitz promptly gave him a girlfriend, an idea which met with much disapproval from not only fandom, but the professional community as well.

"Element Lad at this point has a girlfriend," says *Legion* co-plotter/artist Keith Giffen. "I've always contended that he was gay. First of all, I didn't see anything wrong with it.

He's gay, big deal! It's like he's Lutheran or Methodist, big deal. Cosmic Boy's Jewish, so what? They still can grow. I would think that by the 30th Century homophobia is sort of looked back upon as a quaint aberration of human nature. I mean, you're dealing with alien races who don't even have the same equipment! That was one of the theories about Element Lad—no he's not gay, it's just that his equipment won't fit into anything else because he's the last survivor on his planet. That's kind of dodging the issue. It looks like now that he's pretty much heterosexual, although that does disappoint me. Just the fact that people were saying 'Is he gay, isn't he gay?'—just the fact that it was so understated and so naturally done, without holding up the banner and saying 'Gay guy, gay guy, right over here!' If people did gays in comics naturally, there wouldn't be a big brouhaha everytime somebody did a character that might even be remotely intimated as gay. Something that should just be a natural part of a character becomes a controversy."

"I believe Paul was of the 'piece of the equipment not fitting' angle, and thought that was more logical," con-

tinues Giffen. "We never agreed on Element Lad. I've just gotten back on the book, and if we did introduce a gay character it wouldn't be like 'Hi, I'm Mesmer Lad. I'm six-foot-two, blond-haired, blue-eyed, and gay.' It wouldn't be like that. It would just be introduced and played out as part of the character's personality. There'd be no banner, no banging of the drums, and no speeches on how socially aware we are, wink-wink, nudge-nudge. I don't want to introduce a gay character just to prove how liberal I am. I'd like to think if we did it we could do it as well as Element Lad's alleged gayness, so that people do start picking up on it after a while but it doesn't become this shrieking, screaming match."

Marv Wolfman, who created the *Teen Titans* character, Jericho, has set the record straight (ahem) about Jericho's sexuality in various interviews, as well as in the *Teen Titans Spotlight* letters column.

"Jericho is not gay," says Wolfman, "I found it very funny that people thought he was, just because he was a sensitive, artist/poet/musician. If all gays are sensitive in terms of people's emotions and in terms of art and music, then there should not be any problems with gays in this country. I think that's reverse-prejudice; the assumption because someone is artistic or interested in poetry, they have to be gay. I'm sure there are just as many nasty gays who like to beat up people, as there are nasty straights who like to beat up people."

"If there's a reason to have a gay character in a book, there's no reason a writer shouldn't do that," continues Wolfman. "If the reason is just to have a gay character, that's fine. I don't think we need to go through the whole litany of minorities to make sure that every team is composed of two women, one Black, a Chicano, a gay person, an Eskimo, or anything else. You don't do it like that. You do it by what you're interested in."

Wolfman, unlike Levitz, has shown he is not adverse to creating or writing gay characters. He first created the villains Cannon and Sabre in *Vigilante*, and quickly hinted that they were lovers. Then he ran into some trouble.

"Cannon and Sabre were gay, and I purposely made them villains. I was doing that to get away from typical stereotypes: to say that because somebody's gay, they have to be like this. Almost nobody noticed, so it didn't matter," laughs Wolfman. "They were attacked by a gay group for doing it, though. Jenette (Kahn) got a letter which she passed down to me, and she read the book and didn't even spot that they were gay! If you didn't, that



was fine too, because they were villains, period. Nothing else mattered except the fact that they were villains. I think DC said don't use the characters again, so I immediately brought them back. There were no complaints the second time."

One gay writer did not mind the fact that Wolfman used gays as villains in the story. "The use of gays as a villain, and whether that's offensive, depends on whether or not being gay is what drives the villainy or whether it's merely another character trait like red hair."

When Wolfman took over the writing reigns on *Sable* from Mike Grell, he decided to do another, more sensitive story on AIDS. In researching the story, he read a huge amount of material on the disease. "I researched an awful lot on AIDS, most of which never made it into print, but I did it so there wouldn't be any foul-ups. There was only one mistake in the book, essentially an art foul-up, which was that Sable should have been wearing rubber gloves when he pulled the bullet out of the AIDS-infected man. I was trying to write a story about a human being who had personal dignity, and whose sexuality was not the question of the story. This was a person who was dying and wanted to be home. He had his own confidence in himself. The story really wasn't that he was gay or anything, nor what he was dying of. That was important to the character: to play off Sable and his viewpoints, and to help Sable grow to some degree. The story was just about a strong person who happened to be gay, but that was a very minor point in what the emotional plot was. I was very careful not to have the story be exploitive either. I don't like exploitive stories on any level, because it's non-productive, it doesn't make for good drama, and ultimately it will fail *because* it doesn't make for good drama. It's much better to be understated. That's why the

*Sable* story worked as well as it did; it was understated."

The mail on the story ran about 95% positive, according to Wolfman. "Some of the people didn't like gays in comics, but I couldn't care less about them. I was surprised to find that it was one of the first stories about AIDS—I haven't read a lot of comics lately. People were grateful that it was handled straight and non-melodramatically, and that we didn't pander or overdo it or make fun of anything. That's exactly what I wanted. I was pleased with how it turned out. I wish Bill [Jaaska] had been a little stronger with his artwork, but generally, I think the power of the story still comes through."

"I thought it was a very humanitarian story," says a gay inker. "It was done in a very broad context, but within the structure of the book, it worked very well. I was kind of impressed actually—really shocked! Marv was someone who I wasn't really sure would understand. Granted, I would like to find a way to work at changing the situation of helping people to understand, but the question is 'how?' You wonder what the acceptance of that would be."

## A MILLENNIUM OF STEREOTYPES

When the weekly *Millennium* series was first announced, ten "Chosen" were to be picked to start the next evolutionary step for humanity. Writer Steve Englehart stated, "The genesis of Gregorio was fairly straightforward. I was putting together the themes, and figured if I was going to pick ten people from humanity, one of them would be gay. I mixed up various ethnic backgrounds and sexual backgrounds. Common sense dictated that there would be at least one gay in this group. It just ended up randomly that the gay person ended up

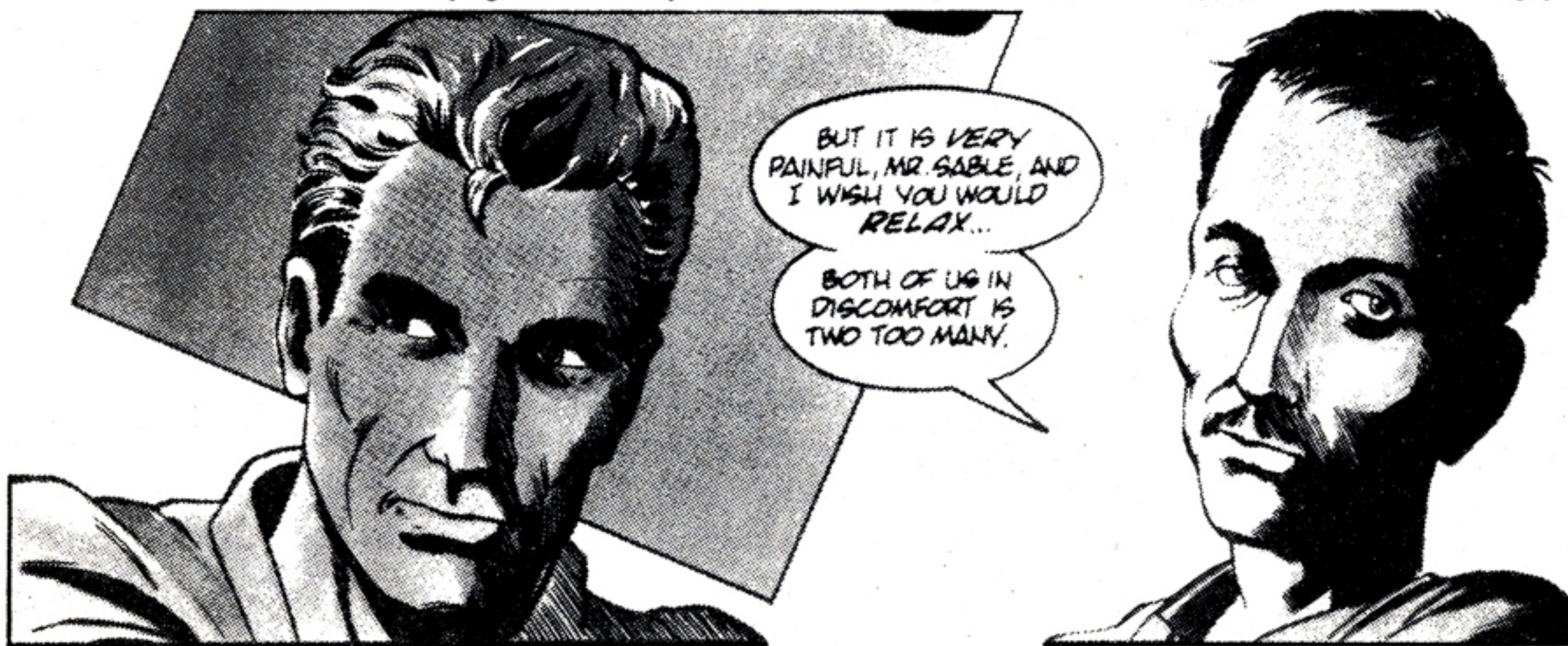
from South America. I knew immediately when I did that that people would think I was stealing the idea of a Latino homosexual from *Kiss of the Spider-Woman*."

Englehart says he did not get much editorial direction on the character, although he did supposedly get some minor editorial interference. "I don't recall a lot of people saying anything about my having a gay man in the group. There were a lot of people who noted it, without any kind of editorial comment. There were some lines changed as they went through Andy Helfer's office. The one that comes so clearly to mind is in the last chapter when Betty's spirit enters Gregorio's body. I originally wrote something like 'I always knew that there was a woman inside of me.' That got changed to 'It's as though she was inside of me.'"

Fan reaction seemed fairly positive to Englehart, although he never did receive any letters regarding *Millennium* from DC. "Since homosexuality is a touchy subject and people don't want to look like bigots, I would guess that there were people who didn't like it, who didn't feel like telling me that. Given that qualifier, I don't recall any negative comments. Most of the comments were editorially neutral, but I had a significant percentage who said that they like it, and probably a zero percent who said that they didn't."

The character in *Millennium* was," says Keith Giffen, "at least to my way of thinking, an absolute atrocity and set the cause of doing gay characters in comics back at least ten years. It was like hitting one on the head with a hammer. It was even offensive to me, and it takes a lot to offend me. I think a gay character should be used if a storyline arises wherein a character like that can be introduced, or a situation exists where that can be—and I hate to use this word—where that can be exploited. Let's face it, that's the hidden part of the business that we're

Marv Wolfman on *Sable* #1: "I was trying to write a story about a human being who had personal dignity. . ." not "that he was gay."





in. But not exploited like it was in *Millennium*. I mean, that character was an abortion. It was horrible. He was almost as bad as Vibe in the old *Justice League*. It was stereotyped, and I think if comics are going to mature we have to get away from stereotypes and start having a richness to the characters."

"I think homosexuality is something everybody has an opinion on," says Englehart, "and my opinion is, 'Who gives a shit?' I was trying to write a credible person who was gay. I've heard third hand that other people have said 'This guy is not representative of all people.' I say 'That's right. He's not supposed to be.' He's just one guy, and he's one guy who happens to be gay. I didn't set out to make him an icon of all homosexual males. On the other hand, I didn't set out to put him 'in the closet,' either. I don't think I was perpetuating a stereotype. There are flamboyant homosexuals. Is doing one perpetuating a stereotype? I reject the argument that he is stereotyped. There are plenty of people like this, and he happens to be one of them. I was just writing a person. Up and down, Gregorio was just a person. He happens to come from Peru. He just happens to be a homosexual. He just happens to have been exposed to AIDS. He just happens to be a good friend of Harbinger. There's a lot more to Gregorio than simply the fact that he was homosexual. On one level, I'm very interested in the reactions to this whole thing. People seem to have trouble understanding he's not some symbol of the 'unknown community.' He's just one character out of ten in

this book, and he has his own life and his own troubles and his own triumphs. Questions like 'Isn't he a stereotype?' or 'Why does he have to have AIDS if he's gay?' seem to be making a false logical connection to me. He's just a guy living in the '80s. Many people are like Gregorio, and many more are not. Many people have been exposed to AIDS, and many more have not. I emphatically reject the concept that he's a stereotype or that he 'has' to do or be something just because he's gay."

Englehart continues. "People bring a lot of their own baggage. Everybody, whether they're pro-homosexual or anti-homosexual, sees images in real life or in the media, and they add their own images to it. Then they say 'Well this guy, he's too good to be homosexual or he's too bad to be homosexual or he should suffer for this or he should always be triumphant.' My point of view is that he ought to just be *him*. I'm very aware though that very few people could be reading about Gregorio and not be adding or subtracting something based on their own feelings on that."

"I wasn't offended by Gregorio," says a gay editor. "I think it's easier for a straight person to be offended by it than it is for a gay person to be offended by it. That is because a straight person may not have had as much contact with individuals like Gregorio. A gay, who has been in the gay world at all, has met enough people like that character to have come to grips with that sort of individual—very effeminate men. Whether that's a trait that is liked or not is beside the

point. It's something you're either used to or not used to. A 'butch' [*exaggeratedly macho*] leatherman wouldn't have been much better. Those are the two polar opposites of the gay community, and thank God most people are in between! Enough people would have thought the butch leatherman was straight, the way comics exist as a macho power fantasy. I don't think that it would have made the point, and the point was that the Chosen represented Earth's diversity. For that point, Englehart can only be praised. It was a good intentioned effort to show that the diversity of Earth includes homosexuals."

One popular artist has ambivalent feelings about Englehart's depiction of Gregorio. "I think the *Millennium* stuff bordered on stereotype and cliché. It didn't say anything to me. Not to say that Steve Englehart is a bad writer, but it just didn't speak to me. It was almost offensive, in the sense that it was a cliché, although, I don't think Steve was trying to be offensive."

The Chosen are to receive their own series from DC this year. It is going to be called *The New Guardians*, and Gregorio (code-named Extrano) is a continuing character. Englehart was going to be the writer, but those plans may be shelved given events which broke as this article was going through final drafts. "I've quit the book," says Englehart."

## DEJA VU?

Englehart ran into problems with the editorial decisions at DC.

"In the fall, I made a very good deal with DC to do *The New Guardians*. I was surprised at the resistance from DC. There was a lot of foot-dragging. I finally talked to Dick (Giordano) and said there were two things I wanted to do with the book. One is that I wanted to continue to use Gregorio and I wanted to specifically do a story about AIDS. The other thing was I wanted to do some political stories. These characters were all very normal, even Third World people, who weren't prepared to become superheroes. All of the sudden they have powers and a destiny to fulfill; even though they aren't even sure what it is! I wanted to do a story about living in the '80s, which, particularly if you've got a gay guy in the story, seems to indicate that there ought to be an AIDS story. Dick said that would be fine. His only caveat would be that there should be some positive information about AIDS represented as well."

Englehart feels "AIDS is a topic which is on a lot of people's mind[s]. It is of interest to people, and as a





writer I was very interested in trying to deal with it. Even though Dick Giordano okayed all that, I ran into editorial stonewalling on Andy Helfer's [the book's editor] part. Andy said to me that he personally didn't like homosexuals, and he didn't want any homosexual in any comic he was editing. I pointed out Gregorio was already there. He said 'I thought Gregorio had been cured at the end of *Millennium* when he became cosmic.' 'Cured' was Andy's term. We went into long arguments over the phone about how 'A': this was not a socially responsible position, and 'B': Dick Giordano had already cleared it."

"Andy kept saying that he didn't want to do this guy anyway, but that this was the first one. This is the one everyone will take as *the* homosexual in comics. I kept saying 'No no, Andy, he's just a guy. He's not an icon.' I had intended to have that in my second script where someone would say 'Gosh, Gregorio has AIDS and that reflects on the whole community.' I was going to have someone else stand up and say 'The fuck it does! It's just him. He's not representing everybody. This is just him.'"

"I didn't think much of Andy's personal biases," continues Englehart, "and the fact that Dick had already cleared it should have solved the problem. Andy said 'It's all right that Dick cleared it, and you'll notice that I never said you can't; it's just that you have to do it within my editorial guidelines.' It became very clear that anything involving homosexuals was going to be a big problem with Andy. He wanted Gregorio to go 'back in the closet.' He didn't want any comments to indicate that Gregorio was gay, and I refused to go in that direction. He really didn't want to do any AIDS stories. He insisted that if we did do AIDS, we should have some of the heterosexuals get AIDS. He told me that 'My...got it from a blood transfusion.' I said 'Andy, this is silly to do an AIDS story with a gay character and not involve the gay character.' People would laugh at us. This went on and on, and I basically said 'I'm not going to pay attention to this,' and went ahead and did the first story. There are plenty of things that distinguish Gregorio, besides the fact that he was exposed to AIDS in my first story. This is my call, and you may disagree with it, but I thought if I were writing a story about a homosexual in 1988 and didn't do a story on AIDS, you're not really doing 1988. That's silly to not have them connect."

Englehart did broaden the story so that Jet and Harbinger were also exposed to the AIDS virus as well as

BASICALLY, MY DARLING ONES, WE'RE HERE TO PASS ALONG OUR NEW D.N.A. -- OR, TO PUT IT ON A MORE PRACTICAL LEVEL--TO HAVE KIDDIES!

OR YOU ARE-- I'M CERTAINLY NOT! I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M HERE FOR!

BUT YOU'RE HERE TO BREED--



Gregorio/Extrano from *The New Guardians* #1—still unsure of his place in the world.

Gregorio, by a South African vampire who has AIDS. "I was going to play it out over time. As far as they know at this point, the mere fact that somebody's exposed to AIDS doesn't mean they'll come down with it. I did plan to have one of the three exposed characters die by the twelfth issue. I had not even decided which one. I had intended to do some serious research on what exactly it's like to die of AIDS and be with people who are dying of AIDS."

Englehart explains why he included the AIDS storyline by saying that his characters were living in 1988, and were as much a part of the world as he could make them. "I think AIDS is of great concern to the homosexual community, and reasonable concern to the heterosexual community. This is like a plague—very much like the Black Plague or any number of things that swept through society in previous eras. All us heterosexuals stand a much lesser risk of contracting AIDS than homosexuals. Hopefully everybody is getting the message about 'Safe Sex.' I wanted to show in the book things that were impacting people's lives in the 80s. I had intended to use the current Presidential and political situation, the South African situation, the Israeli/Palestinian situation, the Columbian drug cartels, and also AIDS. The AIDS storyline comes from a continuous series of things, starting when I decided to use a gay guy in the book."

After the gay problems, Englehart ran into problems including political matter in the book as well. "Finally, I said 'I don't want to do it. I'm really sorry the situation developed the way it did.'" Englehart has plotted the second issue, and may write it to follow the already completed first issue. "That's as far as I'm going. What you see in print is not apparently going to be exactly what I wrote. I assumed that they will continue to do *The New Guardians*, and Gregorio is in there. What happens to him after this point I wouldn't know. I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for an enlightened approach."

We asked Andy Helfer if he wanted to respond to Englehart; he did so via the following statement:

"I am appalled by the malicious accusations made by Steve Englehart in this article. While it is policy not to comment on or recount the details of personal or editorial conversation between freelancers and myself, I must emphatically deny Steve's appraisal of my personal beliefs with regard to the homosexual community and the place of homosexual characters in comics. Throughout the time Steve and I worked together on *Millennium* and *The New Guardians*, I urged him only to present the Gregorio character in what I believed to be a socially responsible manner, taking into account the incredibly diverse ages and backgrounds of the comic book readership. I believe I



acted with honesty and integrity and will continue to do so with Cary Bates, the new writer of the book. My only regret is that Steve, in his self-assumed role as maligned comics creator has failed to distinguished fact from opinion in the matter and has chosen a public forum to preserve his self image and air his version of the 'truth.'"

Also, according to Helfer, Cary Bates will, indeed, be continuing the AIDS storyline that Englehart began, with the other "straight" characters also contracting it to show that none of us are safe from the disease. How it will be handled, remains to be seen.

As to the creator of the other gay super-hero who almost contracted AIDS, he's been busy with more "high-flying" pursuits.

## BYRNED AGAIN?

While revamping the *Superman* books, John Byrne came up with a new character, Maggie Sawyer, who was the Police Captain of Metropolis. "She's always been considered a character whose sexual preferences are not what would be considered normal in a *Superman* comic," says editor Mike Carlin, "although it's been played kind of subtly." In the fifteenth issue of *Superman*, Byrne revealed Maggie was also a mother, and kind of revealed she was a lesbian. Indeed, he implied Maggie had lost custody of her child *because* she was a lesbian.

At first glance, it seems Byrne had been enlightened, and had decided to deal with a gay character in a mature manner. Perhaps it was because he was out from the restrictive control at Marvel, which hadn't allowed him to have an openly gay character. Regardless, Byrne seemed to be making up for his mistakes of the past.

Seemed.

Although *Superman* accepts Maggie for what she is, and actually respects her, Byrne cannot seem to bring one of his characters to say the word *gay* or *lesbian*. One panel (in *Superman* #15) in particular shows Superman flying along, ruminating about the subject. "Funny, finding out that little slice of Maggie Sawyer's life like

that... It must be doubly tough on Maggie, though. With her job, her position in the city, she's being watched, being judged all the time. It certainly seems ridiculous in this day and age that someone as upright as Maggie Sawyer should have to give up her child just because she's—Hold it!"

Just before *Superman* is about to say the "G" word, he is distracted. Editor Mike Carlin has said that if Byrne had wanted to use the word "gay" or "lesbian," he could have. Byrne had decided not to. "I don't know how smart it would be for John to be so blatant," said Carlin. "In the cities it wouldn't be quite the uproar that it might be in the middle American states. We do have to stay aware of who's reading the books, and whose parents might get mad if they see something like that. I'd say he left it out because we were trying to play it subtle and we didn't want to get any of our readers mad."

"It's okay if some people missed the big revelation about Maggie," says Carlin. "Issue #15 was not a story about a gay person. It was a story about a gay person's child being turned into a bat. I think it's good to play things subtle. You're being true to your story, and you're being true to your characters."

Another point as a disfavor in the story was the judge's act of taking young Jamie Sawyer away from her mother, and remanding custody to her father. "Jim's lawyers went after the baby," says Maggie. "They said I wasn't a fit mother. The judge agreed with them. Jim was granted full custody." As *Superman* said earlier, in this day and age (and in a city the size of Metropolis no less!), it is almost an impossibility that Maggie would lose custody of her daughter over her lesbianism—especially when the child is still a baby!

Byrne's later treatment of Maggie has been consistently well-done, as she has faced up to Luthor's blackmail tactics (*Action* #600), and other difficulties. "I think the John Byrne stuff is his way of coming to grips with something which may have been a character flaw in his past," says one anonymous gay editor. Many letters

arrived at the DC offices, commending Byrne for playing things subtle. However, some people's reaction to Byrne's treatment of Maggie's lesbianism is that it is only slightly less harmful than his previous treatment of gay characters.

Maggie is a stereotyped dyke. She is not a bull-dyke (a large mannish woman), but is unusually non-feminine. She smokes what look like cigars (though editor Mike Carlin assures me they're cigarettes), has a masculine haircut, and looks and acts more "butch" than most of Byrne's male characters (whether inked by Bob Layton or not).

While it is true there are lesbians like Maggie, there are also lesbians who pose for *Playboy* and are the most feminine of women one is likely to see.

Writer Mindy Newell sees Maggie's character in totally conflicting ways, because of Byrne's portrayal of her. "On one hand, I say 'This is kind of neat that he's got a gay character,' but on the other hand, look at her. She's cigar-chomping, she's got short hair, she's really tough, she's lost her child because of her sexual preference. It might have been more effective if John had painted her as a 'normal' woman—if he had said, 'Hey, she's lesbian, but that doesn't mean she smokes cigars and all that other stuff.' I guess if I were writing her, I'd just write her as a person. My problem is that the sexual identities of characters should be secondary to the total person that you're trying to paint."

Editor Carlin doesn't see Maggie as a dyke at all. "I don't see her going around hating men or putting down men. Do stereotyped dykes walk around in mini-skirts? A stereotyped dyke would walk around pissing and moaning about how crappy men are. Maggie's had a rough time with one guy, but she doesn't hold that against everybody else. Unfortunately for the medium, it's quicker to deal in stereotypes. Maggie is not a stereotype because it has taken several issues for the story to come out. If she was, she'd be standing there wearing a big T-shirt that said 'Bull-Dyke' on it. That's short and quick and to the point. I

Editor Mike Carlin says *Superman* #15 wasn't "a story about a gay person," but about a gay mother worried about her child.







Maggie from *Superman* #15: "has the same problems as a regular woman . . . she just hugs a different sex when she's upset."

would rather not deal in stereotypes. John was trying to represent a non-stereotypical gay character with problems that so-called normal people have in day-to-day life. She has the same problems a regular woman would have if her kid was turned into a bat. She just hugs a different sex when she's upset."

"John did not set out to gay-bash," Carlin continues. "I know he feels he's been misinterpreted before. I don't think he created Maggie to show anyone, either. He never called me up and said 'Let's do a gay character that shuts them up.'"

Where Byrne's motives become muddy is that although he is presenting a reasonably healthy lesbian character, she still looks like a man, has to hide her private life in public, and has lost her child because of her sexual preference. Why couldn't she be a healthy lesbian character without all of the negative trappings attached? Is Byrne saying that, if you are gay or lesbian, society will hate you? Is he saying you'll lose your family or your job? Or, he is saying some of this *may* happen to you, but you can be strong, fight it out, and go on with your life? Despite her hardships, Maggie is still a well-respected, highly-paid professional, like many openly-gay lesbians in the world.

Byrne has given us—in Maggie Sawyer—his best gay character, and one of his more interesting characters, period. His *motives* are still unclear, however, and the point is rather moot, now that he has left *Superman*. So, I attempted to contact him to find out just what his feelings—and his motives—are on the subject.

"Whatever I say will be misinterpreted anyhow," said Byrne, "so I'd rather let my work speak for itself. I created the first gay super-hero, and certainly the first gay character in

*Superman*. In the future I will use gay characters, and any character from the human stratos, be they Indians, Blacks, Orientals, or Rosecrutians in my work. Let people draw from my work what they will."

## WHEN IS A QUEEN NOT A "QUEEN?"

In the gay culture, a "queen" is what society has come to know as the traditionally stereotyped overtly effeminate man. In comics however, the only queen is Oliver Queen, Green Arrow.

When Mike Grell recently revived the character, he quickly added in the first member of the supporting cast, a lesbian psychologist. Recently, he did a two-part story on gay-bashing, in which Oliver dressed as a leatherman (a gay man who wears leather clothing and acts ultra-masculine) to attract the bashers. Both stories were extremely well-handled, although the genesis of each was different.

An anonymous female comic artist served as the basis for Grell's lesbian psychologist. "He based it fairly loosely on me," she says. "I was badly hurt by a psycho, and I rejected men for a while and [a] large amount of society as well. I turned to women, who tend to be more sympathetic and understanding about things like that in general. I ran with a gay crowd for two years and had both male and female friends who were gay. After a while, I just dropped out of it. I've kept my friends, but I'm now involved in a straight relationship. I still have ladyfriends, and the attraction is still there, but I don't date them. If I was single maybe, but it's like any relationship. You don't go out with straight men when you're in a relationship either. It's kind of funny when you go both ways, though. People are people, you know? What's even weirder are

the heterosexual ladies that expect me to leap upon them in the washroom or something. I mean do heterosexuals do that? Why should homosexuals do that?" [*Shades of Jim Shooter whimper in the background.*]

"For that story," she continues, "he (Mike) took bits from me, and took bits from another female friend of his who had had a bad experience and mixed them up. Part of mine was the doorknob sequence. The most hated doorknob in comics was my doorknob."

"In the 'Gauntlet' story (the gay-bashing one)," says Mike Grell, "I think the gay characters may have been ever-so-slightly stereotyped, but I don't think so. They were put in there for a very specific reason. Gay-bashings in Seattle have been headline news for some time, and it's a very serious problem that I think should be addressed. This is an example of how, as a storyteller, if you omit gays from your stories, you're eliminating an interesting factor of the human population that can contribute very strongly to your storyline."

One popular artist found that, Grell's stories, like *Millennium*, were "well-intentioned." He goes on to say, "Grell's were much more successful than the *Millennium* story. Up to the point where the man was killing gays because he'd been raped in jail and gotten AIDS, I thought it was okay. It didn't work, and I think it's because Mike's not gay. He doesn't understand that it most often takes more than one time up the ass to get AIDS, or more than twice. There was a certain insensitivity towards what this person was saying to people in general . . . to younger kids. The assumption is that you go into jail and you get raped by the mean homosexuals who will give you AIDS. It's insensitive. It's not accurate either."



## GAYS INTO THE FUTURE

Several gay characters and themes have already been planned for some future storylines, in both established and new comics. In *Action Comics Weekly* #624, one of the members of the Secret Six will mourn the loss of his male lover, while Mike Grell will introduce a bisexual woman into the *Blackhawk* serial.

John Ostrander will introduce a new gay supporting character in *Suicide Squad* #19. The new character is a divorced father, who has "come out" after his marital break-up. This issue will also mark the first time the word "gay" will have been used in a newsstand format comic book. Editor Bob Greenberger sees no problem with the use of the word, and has kept it in the script. Ostrander also plans to introduce a gay character into the supporting cast of *Manhunter*, to help the masked bounty hunter out on any missions he has to perform in the gay subculture.

Writer/artist George Perez plans to deal with the sexuality of the Amazons in *Wonder Woman*, although in a cautious and discreet manner. Also, in the *Wonder Woman Annual*, readers will meet the late Myndi Mayer's younger brother, a gay man rejected by the rest of his family. In the upcoming *Superman Annual*, readers will also get to meet Maggie Sawyer's lover, a woman who was first seen in *Superman* #15.

On the independent front, only two series are known to be featuring gay characters. One, the upcoming *Maze Agency* by Mike Barr and Comico,

features a gay male receptionist at the detective agency of the title. The second is *phaze*, a new series by writer/editor Fred Burke and Eclipse. Burke has some reservations about the gay character however, attempting to satisfy not only his straight audience, but a projected gay audience as well.

"I'm worried that the gay readers are going to treat the gay character as something more than he is," admits Burke, "and that disturbs me. I'm very worried that the gay community is not going to like the character, but there's nothing I can do about it. That's how the character came to me, and that's that."

The character, Artemis John, is a 70 year old man in 2036 who has lived a relatively celibate life, as he's been searching for fifty years for his long lost love. When the young man he fell in love with in his youth appears in 2036, still a teenager, Artemis must deal with his many conflicting feelings about him. "I think that his motivations will be clear to straights, and hopefully gays, too; a first love, tragically broken, and held to for too many years.

"*Phaze* is a story about identity and discovering who you are and working to make yourself more of who you are. Each of the characters in *phaze* has their own crisis of who they are and what they're meant to be. They have to come to grips with them. The book is not only about Dr. John by a long shot, but he is one of the main supporting characters."

Burke modelled Dr. John after famed author Quentin Crisp, but worries that his treatment of the character

will be offensive to many. "I treat him like a geek as a young man, and I treat him like a grandmother as an old man. I worry that that is really going to bother some people. I did not mean to create any kind of negative stereotype. I did not put anything in him that didn't cry out to be there. He's a very foppish man... he's Quentin Crisp as a hero."

Crisp is the British humorist who wrote the autobiographical *Naked Civil Servant*. Burke interviewed him once for a college newspaper, coming away from the interview shaken. "I saw him as a very kind person, but also a sad person. Artemis John takes a lot from that. Whether that's a good portrayal of a gay or a bad portrayal of a gay, I don't know. Inasmuch as it's true to Quentin, I think that it is a true portrayal. This is an individual character. If I had another gay character to do, I'd do a different one, but this is this one. He dresses up in drag [*dressing as a woman*], and is that a good thing to do in a comic? It fits him, so I just hope it doesn't anger too many people."

## WRITING AS A DIRE STRAIGHT

Burke, as many writers, perceives that he has a problem effectively writing gay characters. Do straight writers and gay writers have equal success at portraying a gay character?

"I don't have to be gay, to write a gay character," says Mike Grell. "I don't have to expound the gay cause to write a gay character, anymore than I have to become Communist in order to write a story set in Russia. I don't have to be black in order to write a black character, although it would help to be as informed as possible before I did so, because I have so little of my own experience to draw on. I don't have to be an armchair mercenary in order to write *Jon Sable*. All you have to be is as informed as possible, and try to be honest with your readers."

A popular gay comic artist disagrees with Grell's points. "I think straight writers, just by nature of their being heterosexual, cannot portray gay characters adequately, correctly, or with the correct amount of dignity. They just don't know what it's like to be gay in the 1980s. That would be like me trying to portray what it's like to live in South Africa in the 1980s. There's a certain amount of empathy perhaps, or relatedness at best, but it's impossible for them to understand.

"I think that I have a better chance of portraying a straight person more in a fair way, than a straight person would in portraying a gay person. It's sad to say, but most of my life, up to

A real person served as a basis for Mike Grell's lesbian character in *Green Arrow* #2.





this very point, has been spent living with a dual personality. I can always pass for being straight. I know what it's like being straight. I have straight friends, and I can be with straight people and they don't know I'm gay. It's very unusual to hear that straight people have gay friends. It's much more rare than a gay person having straight friends. I think I can pass for straight. I'd better."

"It's not a milieu that I know very well," says writer John Ostrander, "and it's hard to write from what you don't know. Even though I live in a heavily gay neighborhood and have a lot of gay friends, I still don't know it all that well. My wife and I are probably going to play a game of *Gay Monopoly* at a friend's house, and maybe we can learn something from that!"

"Unlike the writers who were trying to write relevant black dialogue in the sixties," says writer Chuck Dixon, "where they were drawing from television a lot, I think writers today can draw from real life when writing a gay character. I don't know where you'd have to live to not associate with people that are gay. I think most people do. It's not like gays live on an island and we never get to visit them. The average comic writer would know more about gays now, than they would have about blacks in the sixties."

A gay inker adds in that he feels only personal contact can help a writer write a good gay character. "Unless they have a friend or a family member, or are struggling to deal with being gay themselves, I don't really think they can understand what it's like completely. When you talk to somebody whose mother died of cancer and you say 'Gee, I know how hard that must be.' You don't. What those words are saying means that you're struggling to conceptualize somebody else's grief. I feel that it's the same way with a straight writer writing a gay character. Unless they're closely involved with someone on a personal basis, it would be really difficult for them to understand what it's like."

Tim Truman agrees, admitting a certain difficulty in conceptualizing some aspects of gay life. "I really don't know that many people who are admittedly gay. The ratio in my day-to-day living that I'm aware are gay makes up a fairly small percentage."

Fred Burke found it extremely difficult writing a gay character, because he was far more worried about everything he had Artemis John do, than he was about any of the other characters. He says this was "strictly because I didn't want to offend anybody. I didn't want to necessarily present him as a role model, but I was



Fred Burke's phaze: Artemis John (lower left), basically, having to deal with a lost love.

trying to present a balanced portrayal. Because 'gay' is such an issue right now, I had to think and worry about it a lot more. Finally, I just decided I had to just not worry about it and go with my feelings. It was hard, though, and I tried to find some gay people to show the manuscript to. One person never got back to me, another one said it was good, so I don't know. It was a concern, and it did make the job of writing the character harder."

Artist Bill Sienkiewicz's point of view belies an understanding of the prejudice some writers and readers may have. "I think the absence of gays in comics really has to do with the creators. If they don't know about it or can't understand it or if it's alien to them, then I think it's not something they're going to write about. You write about stuff you know, although not many writers or artists really know what it's like to leap a tall building in a single bound. The point is, that aspect is seen as an ideal or a positive, whereas being gay is seen as 'heroically' not desirable or a negative. Movies and popular culture used to portray gays as villains or buffoons or even secondary and tertiary characters that never seemed to go beyond their swishing cliches. A lot of the super-hero stuff is so teenage-boy adolescent oriented, and gays are not

seen as the ideal. The readers don't want to identify with a gay hero, especially if they've been portrayed as a cliché. Teenage boys want to identify with Clint Eastwood. They don't want to identify with Quentin Crisp. That narrow-thinking-as-seen-through-stereotypes could be part of the reason some writers don't write gay characters.

"I think a lot of the gay creators in the mainstream keep that separate as well, with the exception of Howard Cruse. You don't see any of his work in the mainstream of comics though. I think that the avenue which gay cartoonists can take is to go to the *American Splendor* and *Raw!* type of book which get away from the superheroes, and delve into urban and real-life areas and use comics as a real medium for expression. I think change is going to come through education for both the creators and the readers, and through an awareness of their own slants and phobias or desires."

One gay writer completely disagrees with some of the straight writers on 'writing what you know.' "I think it's a foolhardy idea. I find it's very simple and easy to write a straight character. All the emotions are the same as the ones I have, except for the recipient of the affection or desire. I think I would find it much





Writing from an insider's view, Howard Cruse in *Gay Comix* #6 "Shopping for Corn Flakes": not repeating the mythical gay image.

more difficult to write a gay character. Straight characters are much more simple to delineate. Coming up with a reason for a gay character would be more difficult to my way of thinking than just having everyone be straight and move the plot along. A good writer might challenge himself to come up with a good gay character. The others are just coasting: taking the easy way out."

A twist on straight characters is brought up by the same gay writer in talking about stereotypes: not of gays, but of straights. "I think there's a stereotyped macho character, and there's an 'enlightened male' stereotype—you know, the Alan Alda-sensitive type? I think that they're easy to do. I think that we've seen a fair amount of diversity in gay characters in the last year. The character in *Millennium* was as swishy as swish can get; on the other hand we've got the gays in *Sable* who are just people, and who are heroic people."

Howard Cruse feels that straight creators can write gay characters well, but not all straight creators. "If someone is observant about life, and has not gotten hang-ups that prevent them from approaching life realistically, they still may have a long way to go, but they can get there. It's sort of like, could I do a comic that really expressed the experience of being a woman or the experience of being black? Probably not. On the other hand, I can try to raise my consciousness to a point where I won't do really stupid things. The things that are universal among people of all types, I can portray in characters that are female or black. Maybe I will have some insights into their culture—the special

experiences—but I know that I will never have a lot of depth in that area. It's always going to be an outsider's point of view. Hopefully a friendly point of view, but an outsider's view nonetheless. I think most straight people who portray gay characters, unless they really delve into getting to know gay people well, are going to write an outsider's view. That doesn't mean that it has to be stereotypical though."

"I think it's a wasted opportunity," Cruse continues, "if an artist or a writer is simply repeating a mythical gay image, or a gay image that has been done to death. While that may represent some gay people's behavior on an exterior level, it represents very few gay people on an interior level, and usually only in a very shallow way. For example, take a very effeminate man, which is usually the first thing a writer will go for. Obviously there are effeminate gay men, and there are effeminate straight men. Effeminate gay men have been the main way that gays have been portrayed for fifty years, if they've been portrayed at all. It's always been the mincing, silly, ineffectual person. Actual gay people are a lot more varied and interesting than that one type. Even someone that you might look at and say 'Aha! There's the stereotype of the effeminate man,' if you got to know them you would find all sorts of things that deviated from the easy categorization and stereotype. People who use that stereotype, even if they don't use it maliciously, are wasting an opportunity, and they're encouraging people to think that they can put all gay people into this type and forget about it. Another

easy one is the menacing gay pervert who might rape you in the showers. When there are so few gay people represented in comics, I think it's reprehensible to leap to that kind of stereotype which was used in *The Hulk* several years ago. That just strengthens readers' feelings that gay people that they encounter are people who are sex-obsessed and liable to do them harm."

## THE ADVOCATE?

Assuming a writer can begin to approach sensitivity towards a gay character, some may still be wracked with a difficult decision. Should they, and do they have to defend or condemn gay characters' actions?

"Writer's don't need to advocate their gay character's action, but they don't need to put them down either," says Doug Moench. "He *can*, because anything is fair game. If a writer wants to write that being gay is bad and terrible, the reader doesn't have to agree, but the writer is free to do that. On the other hand, the writer could also write a story saying there's nothing wrong with being gay. The reader doesn't have to go along with that either."

"I think there's a danger in too much advocacy of characters' actions," says Mark Evanier. "You can deal with gay characters without taking an advocacy position. If you are writing comics, or anything for that matter, there's a certain observation process that goes on about the world around you. You owe it to your readers to depict the world in as honest a fashion, consistent with your observations, as you can. I don't think though that you have to take a strong stand for or against



gay rights. When one takes a stand that gays should have all the rights entitled to everyone else—which is the stand I would assume most people take—unless one has interesting observations on coping with that or how that mirrors our whole world, I don't think that a huge stand should be made...at least in the pages of comic books."

Tim Truman feels that each case of character portrayal should stand on its own, but that creators should face their prejudices and work to change them. "After reading *Sabre*, I had to think about what it was that bothered me about it. I re-examined myself and my own attitudes. At that time, I wanted to have two gay characters in *Grimjack*, but you wouldn't know they were gay. It wouldn't be actively brought out that they were gay—I would know, and when drawing these characters, I'd keep that in mind, and have that relationship in my mind. I'd draw them differently—and I'm not talking about limp wrists—I'd just keep their relationship together in mind. I couldn't ever do the traditional stereotype of limp-wristedness and speaking with a bit of a lisp. If I had a storyline that had gay relationships as a theme, I could tell you that right off the cuff; I would not portray gays in such an overtly stereotypical way."

Writer John Ostrander has absolutely no problem defining whether or not he feels a need to condone a character's actions. "I've written about a mass murderer, and I hope to God that doesn't mean I'm saying that's good!" Concerning the definition of characters, Ostrander goes on to say: "Among the gay friends which I have, I have problems with the ones who define themselves only by their sexuality. Someone who is gay, but that's just a part of who they are—that's the person in whom I'm interested as a friend, and that's the person who I'm interested in as a writer. A gay can be a hero, or a villain, a walk-through character, or anything. If we're going to reflect human life experience, then you need to show that. Besides, you've got all these guys running around in tight clothing, and I'm convinced that some of these guys have got to be gay! Where are the gay super-heroes?"

Picking up on Ostrander's point, Howard Cruse speaks about super-heroes' homoerotic contents in comics. "There's a difference between what's intended and what may be received. The fact that I thought Captain Marvel Jr. was very sexy when I was a kid no doubt had nothing to do with what the artist was intending. Regardless, when you've got a field where the conventions are that everyone runs around in tight clothes, the straight boys are going to look at the women in tight clothes, and the

gay boys are going to look at the men in tight clothes. That's just natural. In that sense, the fact that it's been the tradition for super-heroes to wear tight clothes, I'm sure that many of them are received with homoerotic pleasure by the gay audience. I also think that a gay male artist, who likes drawing male bodies, might well gravitate towards the super-hero field because he gets to draw them a lot. Then again, Mr. Heterosexual Cartoonist who wants to draw in comics is also going to draw men in tight clothes, because that's what the field dictates. Who knows how many are secretly enjoying it, and for how many it's just a job?"

"I don't see 'gay' as something that can be advocated," says a gay editor. "It's a state of being. It's not a choice, it's not an action. It's just something that is. You can't advocate 'gay,' and you can't be against 'gay.' 'Gay' simply is. What you can advocate are attitudes towards 'gay.' When a writer writes a gay character, they are advocating the assimilation of gays into society at large, unless they are portraying those gay characters in a strongly unfavorable light, in which case they are advocating the segregating of gays from society. There are smaller factions mixed in there. The portrayal of a gay character can be seen as for more AIDS funding, or against more AIDS funding, for more legal rights for gays, or against more legal rights for gays. What it comes down to is: does it serve to make gays feel good about themselves and for straights to feel that they understand gays in an enlightened fashion, or does the portrayal make a gay feel bad about themselves and make society look down upon gays. That's really all that a gay depiction can do."

## MISSING IN ACTION

Thus far in this article, the majority of creators have shown a willingness

Hopey "jigs" Maggie in *Love and Rockets* #18: "After all, she's entitled to her turn."



and an openness to creating or writing gay characters. Yet, the number of gay characters in comics, although growing slightly, is minimal. With so much felicitousness towards gays, why are there so few gay characters?

"Too often in comics," says Mark Evanier, "we deal in a world that is not the real world, but is the world that is postulated by other comics from the same company. There are some people who cannot write a story about gay characters because they never saw Gardner Fox do it. It's something very new, and the only thing they can do is make token references to it, which is of very little value in the grand scheme of life! Some writers have nothing to say about gays, other than to make them another persecuted minority, which comics abound in."

"There's also a question of whether or not there's a market for gay comics," continues Evanier. "Howard Cruse has found one, so obviously there's one there, but there's a question of whether there's much of a market beyond that. There's probably a large section of the population that would look on gay-themed comics the same way they look on westerns, i.e. 'I don't care about this.' That's not necessarily a bad attitude. If that were the only problem gays had in this world, they'd be in a lot better shape. Right now, there's very little in comics that wants to deal with heterosexual love, much less homosexual love. There's interest in heavy emotional problems, but not so much on one-to-one relationships. They may not be the time or place to deal with the issue, because of audience indifference, rather than audience hostility."

"I don't think it's a conscious choice to ignore gays," reiterates John Ostrander, "I just think it's something creators haven't attended to. If you've been brought up anywhere near the sixties, then you've got some of that 'raised consciousness' about blacks in society. There's none of that for gays."





Gays in comics may be threatening to creators."

"I probably have—and most heterosexual people I know have—a fear of gays," says artist/writer Tim Truman, "whether they or I admit it or not. By their fear, they have a prejudice. That prejudice might come out in subtle ways in my stuff that I might not be aware of, and it may come out in other creators' material as well."

"There's always a distrust of 'the other side,' or lifestyles that differ from your own. Anytime you're dealing with a culture, or a belief system, or a lifestyle, that differs from your own, there is obviously going to be some discrimination, or you would probably have accepted or be involved in that lifestyle yourself."

"I think there are a lot of prejudices," Truman concludes, "that are fostered by creators, that the creators themselves may not even be aware of. If they examine their own stuff, they might see that they were there."

In his own book, *The Prowler*, for instance, though Truman sees the parallels between the Prowler's relationship with Scott (as well as Batman and Robin's) to an Edwardian gay ideal of having a subservient houseboy (not necessarily for sex), he feels he could or would probably never deal with that in a series. "I'm not particularly afraid of the reaction. If I wanted to do it, I would do it. But I realize there is a lot of overt prejudices against gays and even blacks. There are so many prejudices in comics, that any time you portray blacks or gays or anyone who's been traditionally discriminated against, it's going to hurt your sales. I'm not saying that it should be that way—it shouldn't. I'd be a fool though, to think otherwise. Comics are still supposed to be such a squeaky-clean medium. If I were

doing this in a mainstream work such as a novel or something, and a story presented itself to write about gay people, I would have no qualms whatsoever about doing it. If I felt strongly enough about it in a comic book series, and wanted to have the main character be gay, I'd do it, but I'd have to realize that it probably wouldn't sell too well. You'd probably hate that, and I'd probably hate that, but that's the way it is."

"As an editor at Eclipse," says Fred Burke, "I have not seen any stories about gay characters cross my desk. I don't think that it's because anybody doesn't particularly want to create a gay character or because I wouldn't let a gay character into print. I think that people just aren't creating gay characters. I think that people create characters from their own lives. I met Quentin Crisp and was shaken. Shaken enough that a character came out of it. If other writers meet homosexuals or lesbians that shake them up a bit, or just leap into their minds as fiction, those characters might get created, either good or bad. Like the *Hulk* story years ago, things can happen in a negative way as well. For people to create characters, they have to have an experience to create from. If they don't have that experience, they're either not going to create them or they're going to create one that's an out-and-out fabrication and it's not going to work. Real life is the best source to draw from."

Mike Grell, while not worried about reaction to his work, does acknowledge the possibility that a gay character could conceivably hurt sales. "Personally, I don't give a damn if someone's offended by me doing a gay character in my book. If they're going to be offended, let them not buy the book. The limits that I set are set by *myself*, and they're bound by my

limits of good taste considering the audience, the storyline, and the intent of the story. If someone tells me I can't do this in their book, I'll say 'Go to hell! I'll take the story to someone else.' That's a peculiar privilege I share with few other writer/artists in the medium. If those of us who do enjoy those freedoms can make inroads for the industry to gain acceptance of storylines that are different from what's traditionally done in comics, we almost have a duty to do it. I do think that if maybe the editors, or the publishers, or even the writers have the perception that featuring a gay character in their book would decrease the saleability and marketability of their book in some areas, they would tend to stay away from it. At least in my readership, I haven't had that problem. It may be that my books are reaching a more mature or informed readership, people who are capable of self-directed thought, as opposed to having their opinions influenced by someone else."

"I do think though, that the lack of gays in comics is partly a case of prejudice by omission," continues Grell. "People would rather not face the existence of something or would rather not deal with it, so they don't. They just ignore it, and pretend it doesn't exist at all. Other reasons could be a fear of reprisal from dealers or distributors who won't carry your books, or moms and dads getting up in arms for what they see to be a corruption of their children."

"I think we're deluding ourselves if we think this is a very liberal society," says Howard Cruse. "This is a very homophobic and racist society. It is a society that is very anti-sexual in a strange kind of way. They love to play around with titillating aspects of sex, and show nudity, and do little adolescent takes on sexual innuendo. This

In *The Prowler* creator Tim Truman sees the relationship similar to the Edwardian gay ideal of having a subservient houseboy.





is also a society that is terribly anxious to deny the notion that sex is something healthy and fun. The people who pay the money to publish comics, assuming they're more enlightened and are not sexophobic or homophobic, are afraid they'll get terrible reactions from parents whose kids would see the comics. They're afraid of whether their toys would sell—if their Batman doll would sell if there'd been a comic in which he said nice things about gay people or something. There's just a great tendency for people to play it safe, particularly if there's big money involved. It's no surprise to me that you're not seeing a lot of guts being displayed in terms of cutting out the bullshit and showing the world how it really is."

## SAVING THE CHILDREN

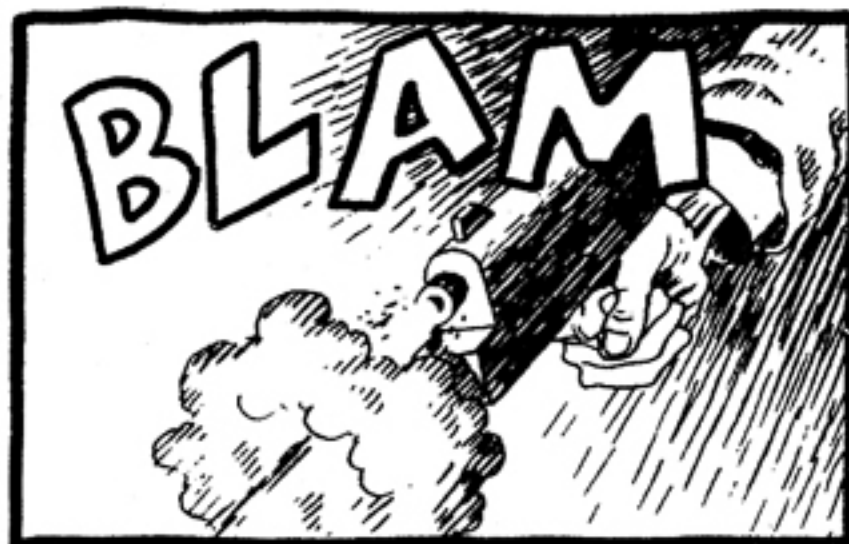
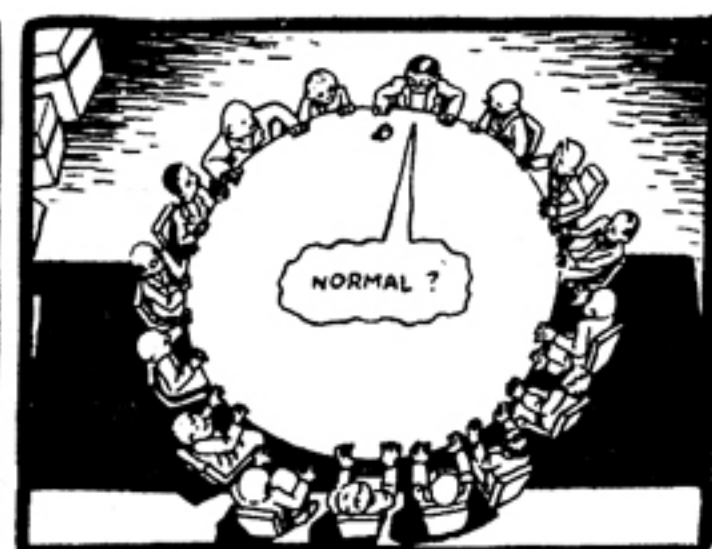
Part of the reason comics seem reluctant to deal with the issue of gays is to "save the children," or at least to save the publishers from the wrath of irate parents. But isn't that attitude a hypocritical excuse for not facing issues? Or is it an honest answer to an image comic publishers have of a portion of their target audience—the young portion?

"It could be argued," says John Ostrander, "that the perceived audience of comics has always been the young, white, middle-class boy. I think the reality of that has changed. If, as most of us would like to see, comics are to be perceived by the outside world as an art form, then we have to reconceptualize the audience we're writing for. Maybe the audience has changed, but our attitudes haven't."

Marv Wolfman agrees, adding "Until recently, comics did not attempt to do anything more than be simple entertainment. You didn't focus on the issue of sexuality in the types of kids' comics that were published until very recently."

"Despite recent striking innovations," says Doug Moench, "the major Code-Approved books are still, at their core, more conservative than real life. Especially with sexual things. I know that being gay is not just sexual, but it's the thing that most springs to mind when you think of gay characters in a comic book. You may have the Code or the traditional values screaming in the back of your mind, and you say 'Whoa, better not touch that.' If you do buck those values, you can do either a crusading, relevant story for gays, or the way I prefer to approach it, which is that they are just a part of life. There they are."

"I think some writers don't even think about doing gay characters, and when they do, they may find that it's too hard to address that fact without



Revealing homophobic fantasies? Panels from *Yummy Fur* #9 by Chester Brown.

running into trouble. It's just easier not to do it. Maybe it hasn't occurred to some of them that they could do a gay character."

"The audience is controlling some writers," says Tim Truman. "We're still supposed to be a squeaky-clean, healthy medium. I'm not saying that homosexual relationships are not healthy. I am saying that's an unfortunate misconception of much of the comics' reading audience, especially as you get into the mainstream fans where it's mostly adolescents. They're growing up with their own whole set of sexual frustrations themselves. Some people just don't outgrow that, whether they're creators or readers. It seems there's a lot that creators and readers don't grow out of. That's part of the magic behind their ability to create all these fantastic characters and worlds. Unfortunately, I think there's a lot of holdovers of things they don't necessarily want to confront, especially sexual stuff."

Taking Truman's point further, a gay art director discusses comics' readership. "In comics, you're pretty much dealing with people who are usually between the ages of eleven and twenty-one, so I think the deck is stacked against gay characters. It's a younger audience, and it's primarily male. If that doesn't sound like there would be a problem towards having gay characters, I don't know what would. That may sound sarcastic, but it's also realistic."

"I think that many writers are just hiding behind the safety of protecting the children," says a gay writer. "They're trying to play it safe, and not offend anybody. You can't please all of the people all of the time, and if you don't do something new or controversial in your story, what's the point of doing a story? Besides, kids know a lot more about gays now than they

ever have before, thanks to AIDS and the media."

Indeed, one positive thing some feel has come out of the AIDS crisis is the factor that just about anyone of any age is aware that there are homosexuals in the world. An adolescent trying to come to grips with their feelings about their own sexuality, at least knows that there are other people out there like him or her. Not only has AIDS broadened the issue, but various other media events concerning gays have become common. After School Specials for kids have dealt with homosexuality, and not a month goes by that the subject of some movie-of-the-week isn't gays. Children call each other "faggot" and "queer," most of them knowing full well what the word means. In today's society, it is next to impossible for school-aged children *not* to know what the word "gay" means.

Thus, it is strange that a medium intended for school-aged children up would be so deeply fearful of introducing concepts of which most children are already aware. More fearful for some than dealing with children or parents however, is the thought of dealing with gay people themselves, especially gay people in the comics industry.

## INDUSTRIAL GAYS

Despite the common misconception that "all gays are more artistic and sensitive," the comic book industry has a relatively small number of gays working in it—at least gays that are willing to be open about it. But does it matter to a writer if the artist is gay, or to an artist if the writer is gay? Do gay colorists use more fuchsia and mauve? Put bluntly, do the straight creators care if their co-workers are gay?



"I don't think it matters if someone's gay, unless it has to do with inner-office politics," says Mike Grell. "If someone in the industry were in a controlling position, and was a narrow-minded, homophobic individual, it's possible that they would eliminate or refuse a job to someone who was gay or perceived to be gay. In terms of the talent in the industry, I don't care who the guy is, or what he is. I don't care if he's a two-headed Chinaman with purple polka-dots. If he can draw or write, he's got the job. In publishing, that should be the only criteria. If a man or woman has talent, then there's no reason for not hiring them."

"I'm not a gay writer, I'm a writer who happens to be gay," says one gay writer (or is that one writer who's gay?). Another writer agrees, but adds, "I don't mind being labelled as a gay writer, as long as that isn't my box, my little home that people can stick me in and tuck away onto a shelf. I never have sex with my scripts, so except for my perceptions, feelings, and thought processes, my gayness does not enter into my writing. There's a lot more to me than gay, but I am that as well."

"I don't mind working with gays," says Keith Giffen. "I don't even mind working with a Jehovah's Witness, but if they start throwing pamphlets at me, that's a different story. It's like you're that way, I'm this way, and he's that way. Everything clear? Okay, let's get down to business."

"I do feel a certain kinship when I

work with other gay creators," says one gay artist, "but I don't feel it's any different than when the creative relationship is going well with a straight creator. There are those familiar chords and thoughts, and something there that works. It's kind of like magic. If it works, it works, and if it doesn't, too bad. On another point, for some reason—and this may be *me* stereotyping—there is a certain amount of identification with the escapism that I find as a familiar chord with gay creators. Especially with the super-hero element, there's a certain amount of wish-fulfillment about being different that I think is identifiable to being homosexual. There's something that keeps you different from society, even though you function within it."

"It wouldn't matter if someone I worked with was gay," says Tim Truman, "as long as they can draw or write or whatever. I couldn't say 'No I won't work with you because you're gay. As a matter of fact, I am working with a gay person right now, but I don't know if that's common knowledge or not. That's for them to decide. I've never heard them say 'By the way, I'm gay,' in a crowd, which I have heard my wife's uncle do. I can't see sexual preference, particularly a healthy sexual preference, as having any particular bearing on whether or not I'd work with someone. I don't consider homosexuality an unhealthy sexual preference. If somebody wants to love someone else, I don't give a shit if it's a man or a woman."

A gay editor was asked the same question as the rest, with a twist. Would he give preference to a gay creator over a straight creator for a job? "I would never choose to hire someone on the basis of whether they were gay or not. I strictly look at the work involved. I will tell you that if someone were outright maliciously homophobic in my presence, they would not work for me again."

A famous gay comic artist answering a similar question, laughed before answering "I don't have any preference in that area. I'm not a heterophobe!"

Marv Wolfman, quoting Stan Lee, says that many people in the industry feel; that a creator's personal life does not influence one's willingness to work with them "Stan Lee always said that he'd work with Adolf Hitler if Hitler could draw well! I sort of practice that. It doesn't really matter. No one's going to come on to me or anything, but if they did I would just say 'No thank you.' It doesn't happen. It doesn't work like that. I don't come on to all the women I work with. I've always had a problem with why people are concerned. There's always that problem with gay male teachers at school; you have to watch out for your son. Well, if you have a heterosexual male teacher, don't you have to watch out for your daughter then? What's the difference? They're ordinary people, they just have a different sexual interest than me. I can't understand what the problem is."

## BUFFOONS, BIGOTS, AND BASHERS

Once again, the creators quoted seem to have no problem with, or working with gay creators. Yet, discrimination has been practiced by some in the industry, at least in terms of gay characters. The question is, is there homophobia within the industry towards its *gay creators*?

"Yeah," says Tim Truman, "I hear my share of gay jokes at conventions. A lot of it is what I think is playful prejudice. It's kind of a playful animosity that is very hurtful, but isn't in keeping with their personalities otherwise. They might be very sensitive people outside of that situation. It's hurtful in the overall scheme of things, but it's not really meant as pure hatred. There's prejudices all over this industry. I've known people within the industry who seem fixated with gays and make a lot of homosexual jokes. One guy in the Kubert School, (now in the industry) had rather fascist tendencies. Remember when the guy went into a gay bar in New York and machine-gunned everybody down? This guy was all for that. I was immediately repulsed. I could see this





PUD AND BUTCH ARE CHECKING OUT THE VERY NEWEST CASTRO STREET BAR....

✓ "THE REAR ENTRY"—  
KIND OF A VULGAR NAME, WOULDN'T YOU SAY?  
IT'S BETTER THAN "DICKS 'N' THINGS"!



Gay Comix #3, "Castroids," by Robert Triptow. Unless they get to know gay people, says Howard Cruse, straight people are going to portray gays from "an outsider's view."

artist, particularly at that age, being one of Hitler's little Brownshirts."

Speaking of a famous World War II figure, one bisexual female artist recently ran into some surprising homophobia at a convention. "I was looking at this new comic that's coming out called *The Desert Peach*. He's the Desert Fox's (Rommel) younger gay brother. It's being done by Donna Barr with Thoughts & Images, and they were showing it around. Most of the people were really supportive, I guess because it's a comedy and they can relax. There were other artists in the industry who actually came up and said that they'd use their influence in the industry to shut that comic down if they could. They found it offensive because it was both gay and Nazi. They were very serious about trying to get them not to publish it!"

The same bisexual female found that comics actually have too much of "an abundance of heterosexuality. I'm fairly reasonable-looking and in my twenties. At the conventions in New York, I've just been drooled over by the other professionals. Especially the Marvel guys. It was amazing. It was enough to make me want to go back to ladies for a while!"

"I've seen some homophobia within the industry," says cat yronwode, "but I see homophobia down at the supermarket, too."

"In the industry, it's only been insofar as certain people who publish comics who take it upon themselves to be the guardian of the morality of youth. I find that out of line. To find it in the comics world is not shocking. I know from personal experience that there is a certain prejudice against gays in the comics industry, similar to any cross-section of workers. I know, for that reason, that there are a lot of comic writers and artists who conceal their sexual identity for the purposes

of getting ahead. This is not much different from the '30s and '40s where the Jews in comics changed their names, such as Jack Kirby. Anybody who comes from a group that is oppressed or despised, has to make what adjustments they can to get a job.

"I thought that comics in the '80s were ready to join the real world until I heard, through a rumor mill, about the quota on gays at Marvel, and about the character in *Alpha Flight* who retroactively didn't die of AIDS. When I heard that rumor, I didn't understand what Marvel had to prove by being so repressive and anti-human in their approach. Surely they must know that a lot of their creators are gay, and that this puts a lot of undue pressure on those people to keep on with a status quo which is harmful to their own best interests. I don't understand it, and it's not my fight in that sense. I'm not gay, but as a woman I've seen the same thing happen, and as a Jew I've seen the same thing happen. From that standpoint at least, I want to say that anybody who feels they need the hand of solidarity extended to them, I'm ready to extend it, and I think everybody here at Eclipse is. What is reported to have happened at Marvel can be overcome if people get together. I don't think that it's necessary for the industry to work under that kind of totalitarian guidelines."

Cat pauses, before adding, "The rumors about Marvel did go back a while. I've not heard anything about that currently. The change in the personnel, which happened when Jim Shooter left, may have caused more sane, more compassionate, and more commercially-oriented people to rethink that policy."

One concrete example of homophobia came when cat yronwode sent in a "Fit to Print" column to *Comics*

*Buyers Guide*, shortly after Alan Light had sold it to Krause Enterprises and Don and Maggie Thompson had taken over as editors. "I had reviewed *Gay Comix* every time an issue came out, and wrote a review when issue #3 came out. I was told that the review would be completely excised because Chester Krause believed homosexuality was 'an abomination in the sight of the Lord.' Don and Maggie were not the ones who did this. They were very shocked as well. I know now that they have changed that policy, and they can mention gays. At that time though, comics by gays with a gay topic were not to be reviewed. I want to make it clear that it was not Don and Maggie's fault, and I'm not angry at Krause, even though it was an insane policy. They've reversed themselves, and in the spirit of forgiveness and cooperation, let bygones be bygones."

"At First Comics," says one gay inker, "there was one man who worked in a business capacity who was openly gay, who's no longer there. With this guy, his acceptance was kind of a fifty-fifty split. Those of us who were gay or those who were straight—hip city people who had lots of gay friends or relatives—were okay with it. On the other hand, I felt that there was kind of a non-acceptance of all things peculiar or different. There were questions as to my sexuality, which was nobody's fucking business as far as I was concerned. The AIDS scare has certainly not helped acceptance of gay people, even though it's not just a gay disease."

"I could have a fear for getting a job if I was fairly open," continues the gay inker. "I wouldn't go out there and say 'Yo, here I am and this is what I do and this is how I am.' My gayness is not an important functioning portion of my job. If I do my job, there should be no questions and no problems."



"I think there's as much homophobia within the comics industry as there is in most industries," says Mark Evanier. "There are people in comics who are notoriously said to not like gays, not want them around, and not want them made into heroes." Marv Wolfman agrees with Evanier, but adds that "Most of the independents don't have any problems with gays. Marvel has, I believe, stated that there are no gays in the Marvel Universe. DC doesn't have any standards of that sort, and they'll do whatever any specific writer they feel is important tells them he wants to do."

Despite Wolfman's assertion, there have been instances of homophobic prejudices in the independent companies. One production manager, who chooses to remain anonymous, of a highly respected comic company related the following incident:

"I don't think homophobia in the comics industry leads to gays being turned down for jobs or fired outright very often," says the production manager. "But I think it can be a contributing factor in certain subtle—and not so subtle—ways."

"We used to have an art director who was a pretty vocal homophobe. We hired an assistant for him, who turned out to be gay. He also turned out to be only marginally competent. It was one of those knives-edge situations: maybe his work would improve to the point where he was worth keeping on, maybe not. I talked it over with the art director, and he decided to fire him."

"Later, after the gay assistant had been fired, the art director confessed to me that his work had in fact shown a marked upswing and he probably could have been kept on—but that he felt uncomfortable working with a gay assistant and had gone through with the firing regardless. I was shocked, of course, but there wasn't much to be done at that point. You know, what do you do—call up the guy and say, 'I'm sorry, we accidentally fired you because you're a homosexual. Can you come back?'"

"Of course, this is the same art director who once told me he didn't want a black sharing a house with him

because, and this is a pretty exact quote, 'I wouldn't want him bringing his big buck friends over all the time.' That art director no longer works for us, but he's still in the industry."

"That's pretty chilling," the production manager concludes, "but let me emphasize that this is an extreme case; I've never come across anything like this before or since. The homophobes are out there, but there aren't that many of them—as far as I know."

Some gay creators do not get work they are eminently qualified for, seemingly by dint of the fact that they're gay, although one gay artist was actually assigned an upcoming series because he drew such beautiful men.

Other artists, like Howard Cruse, have been turned down for assignments. "Controversial cartoonists like myself," says Cruse, "don't get turned to by people who want drawings for their commercial products. There are certain kinds of advertising which, just by my raw skills, I would be perfect to do; yet, I don't get those assignments. There's an awareness that things that happen to cartoonists who are not controversial, don't happen to me. I think that is partially because I'm gay, and partially because I'm an underground cartoonist."

"I think perhaps there's some significance to the fact that I have never been invited to speak or be on a panel in any comic convention in the United States, after having been very much in comics since the early seventies. I'm well aware that most conventions are Marvel and DC-oriented. However, there are other people who are on the outer edges as much as I am, who are regular guests at cons. I think that if I were not gay, or not openly gay, the people who do conventions would not be so timid to say 'Let's put him up on display the way we do art spiegleman or Dan O'Neil or Robert Crumb or anybody else.' Crumb and spiegleman may be bigger stars, but I've been doing work that is just as serious as theirs, and I just think the recognition factor's noticeable by its absence. I can only react by saying 'So what?' I don't want to be invited to any party I'm not wanted at."

"A gay friend of mine who worked for Marvel for a long time," continues Cruse, "would tell me about the office bull sessions where they would sit around and tell fag jokes or AIDS jokes. It's probably no different from any office in any business. When people think there's no one around who's affected, they can let their hair down and have what they consider to be innocent fun. They may not realize that they're saying things that are hurtful to people who may hear them. They might be making an AIDS joke around someone whose best friend just died of AIDS."

One very famous and very popular comic artist, who is gay, has felt homophobia in the halls of Marvel and DC. "That I'm aware of, I've never lost a job or not gotten an assignment because somebody thought I was gay, but people have avoided me on a personal level. I was pretty well established within the industry, before it became general knowledge that I was gay. A lot of people already knew me, so they had some context in which to pigeonhole me when they found out. There's a bunch of homophobic people up at Marvel and a whole bunch of homophobic people at DC, and I imagine other companies too."

"I think that the fact that we are anonymous," continues the gay artist, "and choose to remain anonymous at this time—in this article—is in itself, the strongest indication of where society is at right now, and how homophobic comics and the industry is, and can be. Obviously. If the industry was not homophobic, we would not be thinking twice about remaining anonymous. That is the biggest damnation of the industry, the fact that we still choose to remain anonymous at this time. That says it all."

## OPENING CLOSET DOORS

Indeed, as the above-not-named artist says, the anonymity of gay comic creators is perhaps the most damning statement about the comics industry's

Just an ordinary, average, everyday, dyke biker gang saving the world from aliens in Doug Moench and Paul Gulacy's *Slash Maraud*.







Robby and Rikki, from the book that shows how caring can openly make love: Waller and Worley's *Omaha, the Cat Dancer* (#7).

attitude. Even while working on this article, I had several gay creators refuse to speak with me—even anonymously—for fear of being “found out.”

What has happened to that only openly gay cartoonist? And what is ahead for several other gay creators who are peeking out their own personal closet doors into the expectant eyes of wondering fanboys?

Openly gay creator Howard Cruse's work is mainly seen in underground comics and the “real” publishing industry, although he is still thought of as a comic artist. Although his early work was not openly gay, his later work has made no move to hide his feelings, and in fact, draws on his life experiences. Cruse has become successful in a market which is, as all evidence indicates, is somewhat homophobic.

“Among gay readers, there's a great sense of appreciation of the fact that someone was doing comics about the gay experience from a perspective of someone who is gay, and therefore knows what they're talking about. They're much more personal, and much more based in the real world as opposed to stories about stereotypical gays that are frequently done by non-gay comic creators. Gay people are happy to recognize their world instead of a manufactured stereotypical world, if they're comic fans at all.”

“Among non-gay readers, those who had problems with my work would not contact me about it,” continues Cruse. “Early in the game, other comic artists would bring the subject up very gingerly at parties. You could tell they were feeling out whether this was something I was sensitive about. Once they saw it was a matter of fact, that I was not continu-

ing to play games about reality, they seemed to relax.”

Cruse's situation is not quite mirrored by that of another artist, this one comfortably ensconced in the ‘superstar’ area of art in comics. “I think it all comes down to a question of economics; people don't care if you're gay or straight or black or white, as long as you can pull in readers.

“The interesting question to me that I've wondered about, is, if I were to come out and let it be known to the general public that I'm gay, would Marvel and DC still use me? Would they still headline my name on a particular book? As long as it's kept within the industry, I think the bottom line is economics.”

“I do think they'd pull my name if I came out,” continues the popular artist. “I certainly haven't gotten any notion that Tom DeFalco or Dick Giordano, or whoever happens to be in charge at the moment, would back me. I've never gotten that feeling, so I don't think there's any reason to expect that they would. I think people can be generally very homophobic and I would be a little leery of their reaction. I don't know what their reaction will be. We're going to find out eventually, when I do come out publicly. We'll see what happens then. By that time, I'll probably be able to write my own ticket, and it won't make any difference.”

The fear of losing his job is what makes this artist hide his real self from people. “There's a fear of losing the chance to do something that I really love. I could make a lot more money doing advertisements and book illustrations, and I like doing that, but my first love is storytelling. The fear of losing that opportunity is part of the reason I don't come out. Another

reason is that I don't want to be known as a ‘gay artist.’ I want to be known as a good artist. I don't want to be stereotyped. I don't want to be like Howard Cruse—sorry, Howard—and be known as *just* the gay artist. People immediately draw conclusions and stereotype you.

“I think the problem for me is in the fear of being judged...it's the reaction to the homophobia. If society and if our culture were a little less uptight, people would not have to think twice about having a gay character in a comic book, or in a story. They wouldn't have to worry about including a gay character because ‘Gasp! People might think I'm gay if I did that.’ It's like this guy Michael Chabon who wrote this new book *Mysteries From Pittsburgh*. He was included in a two-page article in *Newsweek* or *Time*, as an up-and-coming young gay writer. Two days later, he's on the *Today Show*, talking about his wife, making sure that everybody knows he's not gay! The reason he has to go on the defensive is because everybody assumes that to write something gay is to mean that you are gay, and that there's something *wrong* with being gay. If society did not put that pressure upon gay people, more people would do articles or stories on gays. I don't think there's a person alive who hasn't had feelings about their own sex at some time. It would be hypocritical of someone to deny that. To not explore your own feelings is one of the biggest sins anybody could commit.”

Does being gay have any influence on this artist's ability and talent? “I don't know how to answer that. Would being a heterosexual artist have any influence on his or her work? It has to. There has to be some kind of a carry-over. What it is and how it



manifests itself, I'm not sure. Can you separate my sexuality from my artist sensibility? I don't know. It has to affect me somewhere, somehow, but that's not all. The fact that I'm male influences my work, as opposed to being female. It's all part of a larger melting pot. As part of that larger picture, my sexuality has to influence my work."

"What I would really like to do in the industry is be able to be open about my life. I'd like to be able to come into the office and say 'Oh shit, I had a really lousy weekend. My boyfriend and I broke up.' Everybody else has that opportunity and that option. To me, that feels like a *luxury*. It is not something that is afforded to me. People are not solicitous because they know that I'm gay. On some level, they're afraid, either because they think I don't want to talk about it or because of their own homophobia. They steer away from me in the offices. Nobody ever asks me, 'How was your weekend?' It's clearly because they don't want to hear about it or because they're not sure what I'm going to say."

"There are a lot of things about the industry that personify the 'adolescence in arrest'—that I think harbor prejudice against homosexuality," says a gay art director, who is only out to certain friends in the industry, even though the people around him claim to be sympathetic. "I wonder what can be done to change that. All I think I can do is to present myself to those people who know about me in the industry as a hard-working positive role-model. Just do my job to the best of my ability, and bring whatever I can to it. If that makes me a positive individual in the industry, I feel it enhances my homosexuality. It will add to my personal mental stability and make me feel like a functioning part of the machine. If there's

something I can do to make it work better, that's what I feel I can do as a gay creator. Set a good example."

On the lighter side, the same art director enjoys some of the stereotypes his job brings him. "Everyone thinks all art directors are gay anyhow, so I really don't have to hide anything, do I? Besides which, I started out as a colorist, and everyone knows gay-boys have a real good aptitude towards color. They like to use tasteful shades of mauve," he laughs.

## STRUGGLES AHEAD

Perhaps what is so threatening about gays in comics, is the fact that many of the readers (and/or creators) may be struggling with their own sexuality. Experimentation and mixed-up feelings are all a part of adolescence, and younger readers may react strongly if they perceive that "gay" is wrong.

The most homophobic people are usually those who cannot admit to themselves or anyone else, the attractions and desires which they have. Thus, they strike out at those who are comfortable and happy with their homosexuality, and they are constantly trying to prove their own (perhaps partially false) heterosexuality.

"Some readers may just need to see a good role model of a gay man or a lesbian, to come to grips with their feelings," says one gay writer. "How easy it would be to 'come out' politically, for instance, if any one of the last three President of the United States' children would admit that they were gay. All three (Ford, Carter, Reagan) have sons who are gay (or at least have been photographed frequenting gay establishments), yet none of them will admit it. If, in comics, Green Lantern admitted he was gay and was accepted by all of his friends, wouldn't that go farther towards building a positive gay role model for

gay youth than veiled pro-gay or blatant homophobic attitudes?"

"Comics with gay characters can really help some adolescents," says a bisexual female artist. "That's when most of attitudes are formed. You're coming out of everything your folks tell you, and coming into the things *you* tell yourself. I think it's fair to have gays in comics, because it's one out of every ten. For God's sake, they're normal, natural people! They just have different lifestyles. I think the world is going to have to get used to it. There's no reason for anyone to hide anymore. It's time to realize people are different. Some people will want to drink, some people won't want to drink, some people will want to go to college, some people won't want to go to college, some people will want members of the opposite sex, some people won't. If they'd just treat gays as part of the population, things would be a lot better for everyone."

"I think that the best thing gay characters [in] comics can do for readers besides broaden some horizons," says a gay art director, "is something I've found as both a former fan and a professional. There are people both reading the books and working in the industry who are struggling with the question themselves—they are homosexual. I feel it would help that individual more than it would help the straight community. If there's a young kid out there who's reading a comic book, who's thinking about themselves and their own homosexuality, and they saw a positive role model, it would help out that individual. I can't speak for someone who's straight. I would hope that it would help them understand something new as well."

"I don't know if a particular type of gay character is needed," says a gay inker. "I just feel that there's an attitude toward the lifestyle that needs

Will it still be some time before you see this scene in a mainstream comic? *Gay Comix* #5 Richard Valley's "Binnie Blinkers."





to be portrayed in a more realistic fashion. It needs to be looked upon as more normal or somewhat more acceptable. I don't think the stereotypes are harmful, but if that's the only manner in which gays exist, it can be damaging. If it causes somebody who is not normally exposed to gays to perceive us as only being 'that way,' it is harmful."

Howard Cruse compares the inclusion of many different types of gay characters to the different types of Italian characters in the movie *Moonstruck* "That was a look at Italian-American culture, but the characters were not all one sort. There were lots of different types of characters. If you had shown any of those characters in another setting besides their home, and mixed them into the world, they would still have been colorful interesting characters. You would not have had to say much about their being Italian. I think that gay people should be recognized as a part of the reality everyone lives in in real life, and thus reflect them into comics."

Cruse continues. "You don't need to say to yourself, 'I'm going to create a gay character, therefore I'm going to do this particular thing.' You just create characters. It's simply a matter of recognizing that statistically one out of every ten people is gay. If you do comics where everybody is straight, you're simply not presenting the world as it is, and you're doing harm by encouraging another generation into thinking that the gay person is extremely rare or unusual, and not their grocer or aunt or uncle or brother or sister or teacher or the guy that fixes their stereo or whatever. You're encouraging people to think that the gay person is this very special, unusual thing that you have to create some specific character for, as opposed to just having some characters in your story be gay. It may not be pertinent to the action scenes, but if you have private scenes, they might be with or dating somebody of their own sex. If you want to explore the gay subculture—the bars, or people taking care of people with AIDS, or a gay biking club—then you're going to obviously bring in more of the particulars and peculiarities of the gay subculture. I think that would be a nice broadening thing to have in comics occasionally, and it would raise readers' consciousness. For the most part, a close examination of the gay culture may not be something that straight readers have a great deal of interest in, just as people who aren't black aren't going to want to know all the ins and outs of the black experience. That doesn't mean that you couldn't do it every now and then



Deadman changes gay-basher's mind. Life isn't so easy. *Spectre* #11: Moench and Morrow.

though, and have some interesting stories."

"Another really important point is that I think that right now, among straight people, there's a great deal of AIDS anxiety going on," says Cruse. "This causes them to need to do something about AIDS, to say the word, to have a character with AIDS. The gay people that I know went through their dose of AIDS anxiety in the early '80s when the nature of the epidemic became apparent and they realized it was really going to affect their lives and kill their friends. At that time, gay people were unable to talk about anything else. Now many gay people have learned how to deal with the fact that a crisis is going on. By now it's become productive. At first, it was just a matter of looking the monster in the eye. I think that the straight world is now doing that."

"By having a character have AIDS, it's a vicarious way of confronting your own mortality and deciding what you're going to do about it and how it'll impact your life. People who write fiction will have a tendency to throw AIDS into the picture, regardless of whether there is any good reason to do so, and frequently regardless of whether they know enough to do so sensitively. Therefore we have to be watchful that we don't soon have a bunch of insensitive or ignorant AIDS stories proliferating."

## FUTURE SOLUTIONS

"There are two sides to this controversy," says Mark Evanier. "You can look at gays as a social issue, or you can look at them as a personal issue. There's the questions of the political

applications of gays in society. I think the social and political issue can be dealt with in comics, and most of the attempts have been on that level. Much work can be done in that area."

"As far as the personal issue of homosexual love, I think probably the industry is even more ill-equipped to deal with that than they are to deal with heterosexual love. I have seen very little in comics in the last fifteen years that has struck me as an honest relationship between a man and a woman. If gay romances are depicted with the same lack of sensitivity, we will have managed to alienate everyone from all forms of sexuality! Learning about love from comic books is a lot like going to the Joan Rivers Charm School. There's a vast gap there of expertise. Maybe we'll see it as just another kind of love story, if DC ever decides to publish *Boy's Romances*."

"I think, for the general inclusion of gay characters," says Mike Grell, "we're seeing the beginning of a trend toward representing people as people are, instead of a stereotypical view of what society is, or a small section of society. I think with stories that are more firmly rooted in the real world, you'll see more gays appear because they are a part of population. I don't think the AIDS problem will necessarily deter the inclusion of gays in comics. In fact, that opens up many interesting storylines."

"To do comics that profess to be rooted in the real world and ignore gays is being false to your readers, and false to yourself. The problem is just as ridiculous as excluding Italians in comics or something. Who is going to be offended if you portray the



character in an honest manner? If you're representing the whole societal group by one character, you'd better be very careful though. If you want to portray the strengths, that's fine. If you want to portray the weaknesses, that's fine too, but there should be a counter-balance. If you do this with only one character, you should try and provide a balance within them—show the pluses and the minuses."

"I feel that the situations with gays in comics will eventually reflect the real world," says one gay writer. "As more and more people come out of the closet in the real world, more and more comic characters will come out. Comics are, in that way, an accurate reflection of reality. Although you're not seeing ten percent of the characters in comics being gay right now, I think you're seeing a handful of openly gay characters in comics."

Another popular gay artist agrees, but thinks "that the place to start with a gay character would be in a group setting. I think it would be a mistake to try and put a book out with a gay character as the sole character. People need to see what gay people are like

in the context of society, and therefore a group would be a metaphor for society. Maybe Steve Englehart is trying to do that with *The New Guardians*, although I don't think it's going to work in his case. In relation to comics, that would be my suggestion."

The same artist pauses thoughtfully for a moment before adding "I think that I should do something, or all the other many Gay Anonymous Artists—these G.A.A.'s should. We could do stories from our personal lives, about what it's like growing up gay, about what it's like to be gay, or what it's like to work in comics and be gay. There are certainly a lot of areas where that could be done. Fantagraphics would certainly do something like that. *Raw!* would publish something like that. There's obviously places where you could get printed."

Perhaps this (unfortunately) unnamed artist is correct in stating that it will be up to the gay creators to make advances for gays in comics. Perhaps also though, it is up to the comic companies themselves, and the editorial departments therein, to create a climate where not only can gay

creators feel comfortable, but any creator can feel comfortable creating gay characters.

In any artistic field, it is unfortunate when creators feel that their creative visions have been stifled for whatever reason. As a representative microcosm of the real world, the comics industry can attempt to excuse away its harmful prejudices, but in the end, they will be just as harmful, and just as prejudiced.

This article is the first major treatise or discussion on gays in comics. As all beginnings, it has started with little. With luck and humanistic understanding, future comic reading generations will be able to look back on the sick and ignorant prejudices the same way most current readers look back at Frederick Wertham's.

It has been stated before that EC Comics, a socially responsible company long before their time, did not do any stories on gays because they were invisible at the time. At that time, much more so than now, gays were hiding out from an intolerant public. Times have changed and many attitudes have, but to damn much of the progress comics have been said to have made, I only need bring up this point; just one single comic creator interviewed in this article felt strongly enough about his own personal freedoms to openly express his homosexuality.

For comics to truly grow, they must become tolerant of all healthy facets of society. For an industry which makes its living detailing the adventures of aliens, psychopaths, mutants, super-"heroes," and mythological characters to ignore homosexuals is ludicrous, and a sad testament of exactly what kind of tolerance for personal freedoms and expressions we really practice.

Our "heroes" strike back against a skewed society, completely different yet too similar to ours. Until we fight back against the oppression and suppression of all minorities, gays included, we will always be shackled by our own skewed society.

None of us are free until all of us are free. ●

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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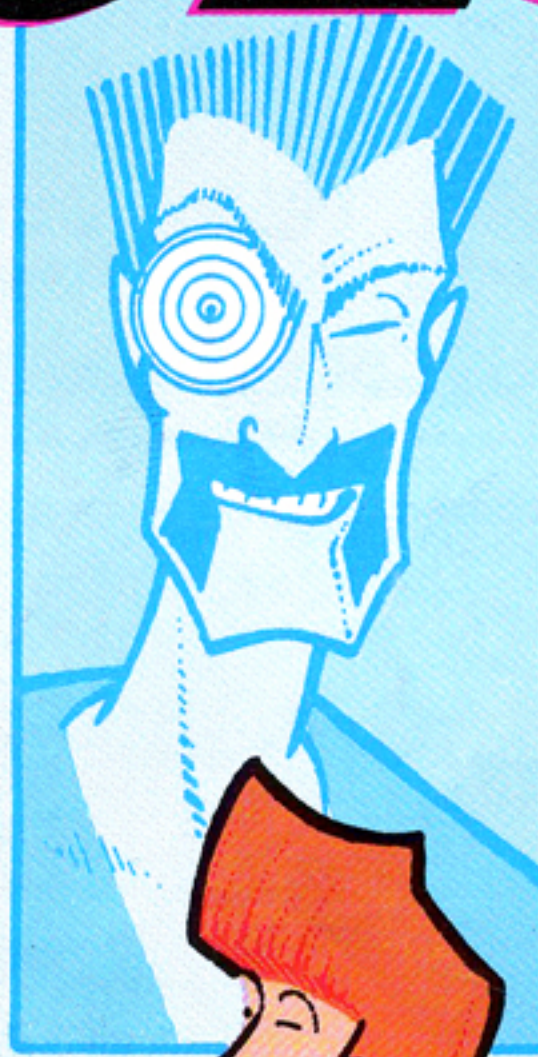
# AMAZING HEROES

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Back to Here:  
An Interview  
With **MATT  
HOWARTH**

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**No. 144      ●      AMAZING HEROES      ●      July 1st**

## POST APOCALYPSE: THE MATT HOWARTH INTERVIEW

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**Our Cover:** © Matt Howarth combines his "realities" even though the connections for the different series are "way down the road."



# STRIP AIDS USA: The Making of a Benefit Book



by Peter Sanderson

In recent years a number of comics and portfolios of comic art have been done to raise money for different causes. The most recent of these is *Strip AIDS USA*, a collection of work by well over one hundred artists dealing with the subject of AIDS, done as a benefit book for the Shanti Foundation, which cares for people afflicted with this terrible and lethal disease.

Co-edited by Trina Robbins, Robert Triptow, and Bill Sienkiewicz and published by Ron Turner of Last Gasp, *Strip AIDS USA* is a 136-page trade paperback book that will be distributed to both direct sales comics stores and to regular bookstores as well. *Strip AIDS USA* was inspired by the original *Strip AIDS*, a collection of work by British cartoonists, most of which deal with the subject of AIDS, that was edited by Don Melia and Lionel Gracey-Whitman and was a benefit book to raise money for the London Lighthouse, a support organi-

zation for people with AIDS. The British *Strip AIDS* book is being distributed in the United States by Last Gasp.

*Strip AIDS USA* will benefit the Shanti Foundation. "We figured there was a lot being done for AIDS research," Trina Robbins explains. "We wanted to do something for people with AIDS right now. And so we picked the Shanti Foundation because they work for people with AIDS one-on-one. They provide food, they provide housing, they provide counseling."

*Strip AIDS USA* originated last September when Trina Robbins and Bill Sienkiewicz attended the United Kingdom Comic Arts Convention in London, at which there was an exhibit of art from the original British *Strip AIDS* book. "I had heard they were going to do a book on AIDS, and then they said the *Strip AIDS* exhibit was up there, and I said, this I've got to see," says Trina. "I had this feeling even before I looked that this was

something that we in America should be doing, too. I went up and looked at it, and I spoke with Don and Lionel, and I was very inspired. I knew that we should do something like this. In fact, I knew we *had* to do it. And I'd learned from doing *Women in the Comics*, that if you really think something should get done, the only way to do it is to do it yourself. It was as simple as that."

Bill Sienkiewicz had contributed a piece of his own for the British *Strip AIDS* book and, he says, "I thought it would be a nice thing to see if there was any way to get American artists to help out in what I thought was a really good cause." Unaware of Trina's own plans, Bill began thinking of organizing an American version of *Strip AIDS* himself.

Trina says, "I knew I had to ask Robert Triptow, who's the editor of *Gay Comix*, to edit it with me. And my first choice of publisher was Ron Turner. Not only was he in San Francisco [where Trina herself is based], but he's been connected with a lot of good causes like Greenpeace, and I knew he was a good guy. So I came back [from Britain] and I asked Robert and Ron and both of them agreed immediately. It was wonderful. I mean, you're asking a publisher to do a project and not make any money at all! So I thought, well, after all, he can only say 'no,' and I won't drop down dead if he says 'no.' But he didn't even give me a minute to breathe and he said 'yes.'"

"So we started planning it, and before we had a chance to get too far, I had to go out of town for a convention." While she was gone, Bill Sienkiewicz came to San Francisco to attend another convention. "At the time I had only thought of trying to get a cover by Bill." But when she got back, she learned that Sienkiewicz was also talking about putting together an American version of *Strip AIDS*. "So I said, aha, now we must consolidate. And I had also been thinking that I didn't really have a lot of connections with Marvel and DC people in New York, and I'd like to get them." Sienkiewicz, she thought, would be able to get more of them than she might. "I called Bill up and asked him if he'd like to be our New York editor, and he said sure."

"The response has just been fantastic," says Trina. "We've gotten people actually thanking us for giving them the opportunity to do something for nothing. Which is really remarkable."

Sienkiewicz is also impressed by the response from cartoonists asked to contribute to the book, but adds that there were "a few no-shows, people who said they'd send things in but never did." There were others who



declined the invitation, especially within the comic book field itself. "There are people in the comic book industry, but not as many as I would have liked to see. I got a lot of reactions from people saying they didn't know what to do with it. I think a lot of people weren't quite sure what the stance was going to be or what they should do." And in a very few cases, Sienkiewicz says, pieces had to be rejected for being inappropriate in attitude. But, he says, about the submissions, "the great ones outweighed the ones we had to dump."

"We have truly some of the best art by some of the best cartoonists in the country. The book is absolutely overwhelming."

"There are four pages by Hal Robins that just completely and utterly knock me out. I didn't dream of asking anyone to do more than a page, although I'd say half the people did two pages, and one other person, Mary Wilshire, did three pages. Hal called up sounding real depressed, and I was sure he was going to say, 'Trina, I just can't do it.' But what he said was, 'Trina, I just can't do it in less than four pages!' And I said, 'Go for it!' And he brought in four of the most fantastic pages I've seen in my life."

The formats that artists chose in working for the book range from single panels to newspaper-style strips to full page comics to two-, three-, and four-page comics stories, as noted above. The tone of the material ranges from drama to ironic humor. Many pieces are educational about AIDS. "We tried to get people not to be too depressing," Trina says. "You can be dramatic without being depressed. What we wanted to stress was compassion. We end the book with an absolutely exquisite two-page piece by Arn Saba that is all about compassion. It's the perfect ending."

The front cover is a mixed media piece by Bill Sienkiewicz incorporating painting and three-dimensional objects. The back cover, colored by Trina, is, in her words, "a very clean and simple cover by Will Eisner with

the Spirit talking about how people with AIDS should be understood and not feared. It's the perfect counterpoint to Bill's."

"What's so amazing about this book," Trina says, "is we have something between 114 and 120 artists, and as many different styles and different ways of talking about AIDS as we have artists."

"I wanted pieces that would be thought-provoking," Sienkiewicz states. "I didn't want everything to be all Care Bears, fluffy and light." He describes many of the pieces as "slices of life, autobiographical or biographical, human interest pieces."

Other pieces are humorous, for example, in making attacks against prejudice against people with AIDS. "Joey Cavalieri's piece was hilarious in poking fun at hypocrisy," Sienkiewicz says. "There are also a couple of pieces that make fun of yuppies, because they're so fond of crying in their soup over the BMW being in the shop" while other people such as those with AIDS have far more serious problems.

"There are people who obviously did some major research" in order to do their contributions, Sienkiewicz observes. Many of the pieces deal in "laying to rest some of the fears and misconceptions" about AIDS, he says. Unlike in the original *Strip AIDS*, in which a minority of the pieces were unrelated to the book's topic, every piece in the American book will have some relationship to the subject of AIDS.

Much of the artwork done for the book will be placed on public exhibition in various milieus. "We're going to have a couple of school shows and a couple of big shows," Trina says. "We're going to have a show at Hi-De-Ho Comics in Santa Monica. We're going to take about about two dozen of the pieces to show at the San Diego Comic Convention. I'm going to take a smaller amount, probably no more than a dozen, to the London convention in September. The guys from the British *Strip AIDS* will be there, and we'll do panels together,

and maybe even show our stuff together. We're talking with a couple of galleries here in San Francisco about doing a much bigger show." Much of the art will be for sale, with proceeds to benefit the Shanti Foundation. Sienkiewicz adds that newspapers have already demonstrated interest in covering *Strip AIDS USA*.

The contributors to this project include writers and artists for DC and Marvel, independent and underground comics, and comic strips, as well as book illustrators. Among others who agreed to *Strip AIDS USA* are Garry Trudeau, Jules Feiffer, Frank Miller, Nicole Hollander, Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario Hernandez, Howard Cruse, Roberta Gregory, Paul Mavrides, Spain Rodriguez, Terry Austin, Bob Boze Bell, Steve Bissette, M.K. Brown, Bob Burden, Stephen DeStefano, Norman Dog, Phil Frank, Keith Giffen, Dick Giordano, Archie Goodwin, Scott and Bo Hampton, Klaus Janson, Steve Leialoha, Cynthia Martin, Ted McKeever, Moebius, Dean Motter, Jon J. Muth, Mindy Newell, Seth, John Totleben, Lynn Varley, Reed Waller, Kate Worley, Tom Yeates, Joyce Brabner, Guy Colwell, Denys Cowan, R. Diggs, Mary Fleener, Al Gordon, Kevin Nowlan, Ann Nocenti, Carl Potts, Joshua Quagmire, Barb Rausch, Pat Redding, Barbara Slate, Rick Veitch, Brad Parker, Leonard Rifas, Kent Williams, Jeff Darrow, Frank Bolle, Gary Fields, Bob Fingerman, and Amanda Conner.

"It makes me feel real good about American cartoonists that there are so many who care," Trina says. On the same subject Bill Sienkiewicz states, "I think people in comics are feeling a little more responsible. They don't just want to hide away and be content to do super-heroes. I think part of art is to give something back to the world and have an effect on it."

Sienkiewicz says that he became involved in *Strip AIDS USA* for two reasons. "First, I wanted to help any way that I could because I felt it was a really important way of getting information across in an interesting way" on the subject of AIDS. "Also, I wanted to show what comics can do as an artform, to show comics aren't just for kids. It's a valid way to editorialize and to get information across." Sienkiewicz compares his feelings on working on *Strip AIDS USA* to those he had on working on Joyce Brabner's *Real War Stories*.

Thus, *Strip AIDS USA* is intended to be a project of major importance. "At this point in my life there are two things I'm proudest of having done," Trina concludes. "One of them is co-editing and co-writing *Women in the Comics* and the other is co-editing this book."



Bob Burden's (previous page—look close) and S. Clay Wilson's (below) entries to *Strip AIDS USA*.