



This week: whole bunches o' new and recent stuff! Including...

Prime Annual # 1

(Malibu Comics)

Writers: Gerard Jones and Len Strazewski
Artist: Norm Breyfogle

Big stuff. Big 50-page story, big blobs of bio-slime, big bloated bad guys, and one mother of a big hero-Prime! Yep, the Captain Marvel derivative with the Stephen Platt physique is getting even bigger in his first-ever annual. Marking the occasion are special guest-star Hardcase, a dramatic new look and direction for the Primester, and the return of fan-favourite artist (and Prime co-creator) Norm Breyfogle.

Prime is both literally and figuratively the biggest star of Malibu's "Ultraverse" comics line. Like classic Fawcett-turned-DC character Captain Marvel (or Shazam!, as he's often mistakenly called), Prime is a scrawny boy (Kevin Green) who can transform into a big super-hero. A really big super-hero. Heck, he's a gargantuan, walking mass of muscle complete with a biologically generated costume. Y'see, "Prime" is a super-body Kevin grows around his own kiddie physique, thanks to experiments performed on Kevin by the evil (drumroll, please) Dr. Gross! Unfortunately, Prime is still a little kid inside, and like so many super-heroes he comes across as a super-powerful adolescent roughneck (although Prime, at least, has an excuse-- he really IS an adolescent).

This annual reunites Prime with his creator, Doc Gross, who abducts the comatose super-heroine Starburst in an attempt to use her and an unwilling Prime as (ugh!) superhuman breeding stock. Unfortunately for Gross, Starburst's devoted boyfriend (ultrahero-turned-actor Hardcase), is understandably upset about Doc Gross making off with his girlfriend-turned-paperweight. Unfortunately for Hardcase, Gross uses the hostage Starburst to make Hardcase do Gross's dirty work: namely, capturing Gross's prodigal "son", Prime. The inevitable super-heroic slugfest ensues, and then our heroes join forces against the warped Dr. Gross and his equally warped genetically engineered servants (like Fifi, the shape-changing poodle from Hell-- you gotta love it).

This annual also reunites Prime with artist Norm Breyfogle, whose fluid, sometimes abstracted and somewhat cartoony sense of design won raves on *Batman*. Breyfogle's atmospheric artwork-- thick, liquid lines, with lots of shadow and amorphous layout-- seems ill-suited to anything other than a specialized atmosphere (not unlike moody Tom Mandrake, who finally found his niche with *The Spectre*), and I've been pessimistic about the post-Batman Breyfogle; however, he seems to work with Prime. The character is grossly exaggerative, and Breyfogle conveys that effectively and still reins himself in sufficiently to credibly draw more "normal" characters like Hardcase. Breyfogle's stuff is particularly well-suited to the slimy Dr. Gross and his minions-- it's the most goop you'll see this side of a "Masters of the Universe" Slime Pit (a horribly dated and terrifying reference, I know-- how about a *Star Wars* trash compactor?).

As for authors Jones and Strazewski, they turn in a solid script here: fast-paced, logical, sometimes witty, and with some interesting character development on the part of Prime. In fact, both Hardcase and Prime come across as believable, likable and engaging personalities. All in all, a worthwhile read.

Hellshock # 1

(Image Comics)

Creator/writer/artist: Jae Lee

After eyeballing Jae Lee's grotesquely distorted takes on such Marvel characters as *Namor* and *Iron Fist*, I winced and tucked them away in my file of Mercifully Forgettable Comic Book Atrocities. So, I checked out *Hellshock # 1* with something best described as morbid curiosity-- especially since advance buzz on the book had Lee's new creation pegged as equal parts demon and angel or something. Well, after reading *Hellshock # 1*, I don't know. I want to like this book; the character design is intriguing, the cover is very cool without resorting to pricey techno-gimmicks, and the story has a compellingly dark, almost hypnotically dreamlike atmosphere. Unfortunately, there's virtually no plot: the sparse, 14-page lead feature consists of two unresolved and as-yet unconnected plot threads: an abused child named Josh who seeks refuge in the streets, and a long-haired stranger discovered at a murder scene in a church. What's it all mean? Not even the Shadow knows. It looks and reads well, but there's just too little here to justify buying the comic (the remaining pages are filled with pin-ups and a rejected early draft of *Hellshock*). *Hellshock* has potential, which subsequent issues may yet tap into successfully, but this first issue was little more than an expensive prologue. It may not be back to the drawing board, but a little more time spent there in the first place would have made all the difference.

Doom's IV

(Image Comics)

Creator/writer: Rob Liefeld

Pencils: Mark Pacella

Oh, the colossal perversity of this thing. I'd give it a critical tongue-lashing of Biblical fire-and-brimstone proportions, but my metaphorical mouth would be number than whichever portion of Rob Liefeld's mind handles his writing chores.

Doom's IV are a team of reluctant adventurers on the run from the Doom's Corporation, an evil corporate giant with advanced technology coming out its ears (literally, in the case of their sinister, melodramatic and sorta disembodied leader, Syber Idol). Our corporate baddies ceaselessly pursue our heroes, three of whom are renegade products of Dooms Corporation technology (Burn, Brick and Slyder). Their leader, Grimm, is a grim (surprise!), battle-hardened, cliché-ridden, high-tech, enigmatic warrior from the future (in other words, yet another recycled version of Liefeld's inexplicable breakthrough character, Cable).

Doom's IV act and sound much like Liefeld's *X-Force*, but what's almost hilarious is the degree to which this book echoes the *Fantastic Four*. The basic concept is a clear derivative, but a detailed

catalogue of the pilfered elements would do nothing more than devour column space and make Jack Kirby do a few more revolutions in his grave. Suffice it to say, this baby's roots are showing.

In *Doom's IV's* defense, the characters' collective plight is interesting, and Brick is a very likable character who successfully fuses a few old elements in an appealing new way: he's sort of like a sensitive 90's, single-father cross between the *Fantastic Four's* Thing and *Marvel's* Sandman, complete with two small kids. Grimm is a bore, Slyder is arrogant and conceptually unoriginal, but Burn is somewhat interesting and believable-- although she too is conceptually weak (her power: she gets hot), and rather whiny and pathetic to boot.

The often melodramatic and frequently unnatural dialogue seldom hits the mark, and the scripting in general seems to be grasping at cliché-ridden straws. Heck, beyond poor writing quality there's even full-blown errors in the dialogue at times. These and other glitches (like a segment in # 2 where Grimm is miscoloured as Slyder) make me wonder if what this and a few other Image books could really use is some good editing. I know half the fun for the Image guys is the opportunity to spread their unfettered creative wings, but there's no shame in having an objective party take a sharp pencil and a critical eye to this stuff. A little polish seldom hurts.

And speaking of polish, Pacella and his assorted inking accomplices don't have it. The exaggerative, hyperactive, sloppy draftsmanship is sadly typical-- subtle nuances of emotion, storytelling and character design are nowhere to be found (my personal favourite snafu is how Burn's hair seems to occasionally change length over the course of the first two issues). This book has potential, but until and unless it improves, *Doom's IV* is best four-gotten. (ARGHH!!! *Horrid puns do assault mine senses!!! --ed.*)

Normalman/Megaton Man Special # 1

(Image Comics)

Writers/Artists: Jim Valentino, Don Simpson and friends

This one-shot is a satirical look at the comic book industry with Jim Valentino's *Normalman* and *Captain Everything*, Don Simpson's *Megaton Man*, Larry Marder's *Mister Spook* and Bob Burden's *Flaming Carrot* as our tour guides. A lot of it is pretty funny and dead-on (I'll always laugh at *Flaming Carrot's* Cable imitation), but a lot of it is also pretty mean-spirited (including some needlessly nasty swipes at John Byrne, *Marvel Comics*, *Malibu Comics* and *Peter David*). It's fun stuff in spots and throws some light on a lot of things wrong with the comics industry, but it didn't have to be quite so venomous. A kinder, gentler touch would have made this a more comfortably entertaining read.

Noteworthy oddity: is it just me, or is the cover to this sucker a take-off on the old *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* special? Just wondering. And finally, a survey of a few post-*Zero Hour* DC Comics series and the "zero issues" that introduced or reintroduced them.

Aquaman is one of DC's most familiar enduring figures, though you mightn't recognize him now: his many misfortunes (including the recent loss of a hand to some greedy piranha) have left him a somewhat nastier character complete with shaggy hair, thick beard, and spear-hand prosthetic-- and he was one of the *Super Friends*? Sheesh.

Nasty new attitude aside, the current series is not Aquaman at his best. No visual or continuity update of the character has equalled his woeful short-lived Pozner-Hamilton incarnation (from the first *Aquaman* mini-series), and prolific writer Peter David is lapsing into hackwork here with characterization often limited to semi-snappy dialogue and smart-aleck humour. It's pretty lightweight scripting, and the artwork even moreso (Egeland and Vancata's stuff is slick but sparse, and Egeland's grasp of anatomy is seriously shaky).

On top of that, the zero issue is a darn poor introduction for readers unfamiliar with Aquaman continuity-- all we can glean from *Aquaman # 0* is that he's a hero from Atlantis: exactly who he is, what he does and how he came to be are touched upon but never truly illuminated. Heck, since I haven't read the latest post-Crisis revamping of Aquaman's history, even I was in the dark as to his parentage and its significance. Confusing and unsatisfying all around (and why didn't *Crisis, Zero Hour*, or even the *Titans Hunt* manage to weed out Aqualad?).

Catwoman # 0, by contrast, is excellent both as reading material and an introduction to the character. Veteran bat-scripter Doug Moench crafts an entirely new origin for *Batman's* larcenous loner interest herein, one which is much more detailed, imaginative and apt than the character's previous incarnation. Moench returns to *Catwoman's* roots in sculpting a character who is criminal but sympathetic (a far cry from the murderous ex-hooker of recent years), shedding considerable light on her personality and what shaped it. Moench even manages to do this in a polished, artfully composed self-contained story that is good reading in itself, with superlative illustration by Jim Balent. *Catwoman # 0* is good stuff, as well as a solid introduction to a good series.

Fate is another story, and a bad one at that. Many readers may remember the enigmatic, golden-helmeted mystic Doctor Fate, one of the most original and enduring characters from the 1940s. Well, the good Doc survived all those years only to fall victim to this inane (and scarily persistent) grim-and-gritty revamping trend: more specifically, Doc is rendered powerless and split into his component parts (Kent and Inza Nelson) during *Zero Hour*. The demystified and rapidly aging Nelsons then turn up in *Fate # 0*, where the new demons of the block zap them dead just as the Nelsons pass their powers and paraphernalia on to the new generation-- nasty mercenary Jared Stevens, who reshapes their totems into weapons (forging *Fate's* helmet into a giant knife, for instance) and sets out to kick supernatural butt in the DC universe as a kind of *Deathstroke/Conan/Dr. Fate* hybrid. Clad in a red body stocking and armed with more golden accessories than Liz Taylor, *Fate* (as Stevens calls

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