

were brand new to an eager reading public. Comics were practically the most successful form of inexpensive mass-entertainment in North America. For a variety of reasons, though, not the least of which was a novel gizmo called television, comics began to slide in popularity. Most of the super heroes vanished, and comics began experimenting with such graphic, sensationalistic material as horror tales (some of which are successfully reprinted for modern gore fans today) and "true crime" stories (a gimmick television has taken to an extreme in recent years). As sex and violence crept into those stories, concerned parents and other activists began protesting comics in the fifties. The fifties were in some ways a rather paranoid time, as upstanding Americans like Senator Joseph McCarthy searched high and low for communist subversives, U.F.O.'s, rebellious youth, and anything else that might threaten the security and moral fibre of America. Eventually, as noted, concerned individuals targeted comics as a potentially corruptive influence on the nation's youth. The anti-comic crusade was led by an eloquent old fanatic by the name of Dr. Frederick Wertham, who wrote a book on the subject with the marvellously objective title: *Seduction of the Innocent*. Admittedly, some comics were deserving of Wertham's scathing scrutiny; after all, the fifties saw many comics filled with bloody violence, as well as comics devoted to what's often referred to as "good girl art", scantily clad heroines like Matt Baker's *Phantom Lady*. As often happens, though, the witch hunt zeroed in on some innocent bystanders in its enthusiasm. Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition, as the Monty Pythom players said on one occasion, and the handful of relatively squeaky-clean heroes who were still limping along in the fifties weren't expecting Wertham either. The good doctor attacked *Wonder Woman*, labelling the secluded society of Amazons she came from as an obvious lesbian fantasy since men were excluded from it. Wertham also said there was an obvious suggestion of a homosexual relationship between Batman and Robin, since they were two males who lived together alone, and Wertham saw a subliminal sign of this in Robin's secret identity: "Dick" Grayson. Doc Wertham must have gotten along swimmingly with the folks who were playing rock and roll backwards to search for satanic messages. Who can argue with deductive reasoning like that?

While Wertham and his cohorts didn't succeed in getting comics banned altogether, they managed to lobby for some pretty severe restrictions on what you could show in a comic book, restrictions to be monitored by the Comics Code Authority. There was

practically nothing left of comics but a few western books, some science fiction, monster tales (including such masterworks as "Fin Fang Foom"), romance and humour books (like "Archie"), and the hardy handful of superheroes who'd managed to survive declining sales and the Wertham Crusade. As any comic fan knows, though, things got better. Later in the fifties and sixties, comic companies began experimenting anew with the concept that had once been their bread and butter: superheroes. Characters like DC's revamped Flash and Green Lantern and Marvel's Fantastic Four and Amazing Spiderman were instant sensations, and comics have been a strongly popular medium again ever since.

So, getting back to modern comics and the question of Northstar, where does that leave comics? On potentially thin ice again. Like movies and television, comics have begun to test the censorship waters, exploring the potential for morally questionable stories in the pursuit of art and/or popularity. The Comics Code Authority is a toothless watchdog these days, and many things it once prohibited are common in comics, though main stream comics under its label do have to conform to some standards of good taste, generally avoiding completely explicit language, full nudity, and severe violence of a graphic nature (though the occasional messy death or naked women might slip by). Those comics who deal with explicit or disturbing subjects, books such as *Sandman*, *Swamp Thing*, and *Hellblazer*, are not in distribution outside of direct sales outlets, and bear a "suggested for mature readers" label. Still, there is a growing number of mature or "adult" subjects slipping into mainstream books, subjects such as extreme violence, promiscuity, and now homosexuality. It's like the experimentation of the nineteen-fifties, only taken to a further extreme. Is censorship on the horizon again? Not necessarily. In the nineteen-fifties we have a more liberal and permissive culture. We still have some standards, though, and there are still some people who have proposed censoring comics, particularly since comics are a medium with a largely young readership. What, then, is the answer? There is probably no perfect solution, but those writers and artists who want to address subjects of a disturbing, adult nature may be well advised to reserve such efforts for books under the "mature readers" label, where such material, theoretically, won't fall into the hands of young readers. This doesn't mean, though, that mainstream comics should never deal with adult subjects. Superheroes are fictional characters, but are usually portrayed in the everyday real world. To maintain some aspect of realism and credibility, the