# ENTERTAINMENT

Hi, folks. Like the title says, this is Panelology, a column dedicated to critical appraisals of comic books and such related illustrative fiction genres as graphic novels, trade paperbacks, and the like (panelology, incidentally, is a word coined by comics historian Dr. Jerry Bails for the study of comic books). As time goes by this space will feature in-depth reviews of current comics projects, but to start the year off we have a few short notes on a variety of ongoing, upcoming, or current books on the market, in no particular order. This random sampling will, I hope, give you a taste of the comics scene and a preview of some of this column's panelological ponderings to come. Enjoy:

**Superman/Adventures of Superman/Action Comics/Superman:the Man of Steel**: *(ongoing monthly comics from DC)*

By the time you read this, the big blue boy scout will be back from the dead...and so are his sales figures. The seemingly endless story of Superman's apparent demise, the subsequent pretenders to his name, and his triumphant (albeit hard to swallow) resurrection is only now wrapping up, but there's still a lot of plot threads to tie up and the super books still hold some promise. Sure, the old "back-from-the-dead" trick is one of comics' hokier numbers, but it was inevitable and the series writers did a good job of chronicling the death, rebirth, and its ramifications for Superman's world in an affecting, comprehensive and genuine manner. Even if Supes himself is still a bit bland, this latest storyline has helped bring out some of the best strengths of the current Superman line: solid, seamlessly integrated continuities and one of the most engaging and colorfully varied supporting casts in comics.

**Bloodlines/Bloodbath:**
*(multi-part story line running through various DC Comics Annuals)*

Yet another umpteen-part, super-colossal crossover extravaganza dominates the DC Comics line of Annuals, the yarn this year being a plague of alien nasties who kill folks to suck their spinal fluid (yum). It's the usual premise of a common threat drawing together the various characters featured in each annual, but the twist this time is that a few of the survivors of the alien attacks find themselves mutating into superhuman beings, some choosing to use their powers for good and others pursuing evil. The end result: a batch of brand-new heroes ("new blood") joining the veteran super-types in a war to vanquish those spinal fluid-sucking beasties once and for all. Reminiscent of Predator, the series is heavy on gory action and about as subtle and thought-provoking as a boot to the head, but it has spat out a few interesting new characters, and they may be the only lasting impact this latest Annual hoopla has, if any.

**Knightfall/Knightquest**
(ongoing storyline running through Batman, Detective Comics, Batman:Shadow of the Bat, Justice League Task Force, Catwoman, Robin, etc.)

By the time you read this, the "Knightfall" storyline running through the Batman titles will have concluded, the end result being Bruce (Batman) Wayne having been crippled by Gotham crimelord Bane and turning the mantle of the Batman over to his new protege Jean-Paul Valley (a.k.a. Azrael), a rather ruthless fellow who becomes a darker, nastier Batman, complete with battle armor, high-tech weaponry, and claws that would make Wolverine cringe. As the recent returns of Superman, Thor, Iron Man, and others from apparent death or retirement show, supposed substitutes like the new Batman never last (the sole major exception being Wally West replacing the late Barry Allen as the Flash back in 1985-86). Besides, Bruce Wayne and his dark but strangely noble pursuit of vengeance and justice are what make the Batman, not a pointy-eared costume. In method and personality, the new Batman is yet another super-thug in the mold of Wolverine, Punisher and their ilk, but his striking appearance and weapons coupled with a few snippets of unique and eccentric character traits make Azrael at least tolerable and at best intriguing, an interesting character in his own right even if he is no Batman. While Azrael/Batman may prove a flash in the pan, two ongoing series spun-off from the Knightfall and Knightquest storylines show much promise and have the potential for longterm staying power: Catwoman (Gotham's master thief and Batman's sometime romantic interest) and Robin (Bruce Wayne's partner, on his own after the new Azrael/Batman decides that real men don't have kid sidekicks).

**Vertigo:** (DC's line of ongoing "mature readers" comics and special projects)

DC has long had a tradition of producing innovative, cutting-edge comics like Sandman, Animal Man, and Doom Patrol. This trend escalated into a full-scale line of comics within the larger DC line, a sub-label called "Vertigo" under whose banner they publish old favorites like Sandman (tales of the otherworldy denizens of the dreamworld and their master, Morpheus the Sandman) and new series like Black Orchid (the perils of a purple plant-person), and Sandman Mystery Theatre (a film noir masterpiece of mood, mystery and the macabre set against the backdrop of 1930's New York. Special projects and mini-series plumb even more bizarre and disturbing depths, whether it be the recent Jonah Hex: Two-Gun Mojo (picture Night of the Living Dead in a wild west setting) or the upcoming Extremist (a disturbing-looking concept that deals with an erotic assassin...attack of the nymphomaniacal ninja, if you will). Some of the books can be mucho bizarro, some more than a little unsettling (the subject matter is often not for the faint-hearted), but gems like Sandman Mystery Theatre and Sandman prove Vertigo's value as an outlet for more offbeat tales that conventional publishers mightn't touch.

**Infinity Crusade:**
(Marvel limited series with innumerable companion crossovers)

The latest (and last) in a trilogy of series based on the recycling of critically acclaimed 70's concepts into meaningless, cast-of-thou-