



By Sean McQuaid

Image, Image everywhere and not a plot to spare...

Okay, I'm being literarily allusive and dismissively catty in the same breath, but I just couldn't resist that opening sentence. This week I'll be getting my recent Image Comics binge out of my system by examining lots of them there Image books. As a well-known Image-basher I should begin by admitting that some of this stuff is definitely worth reading, like...

The Savage Dragon

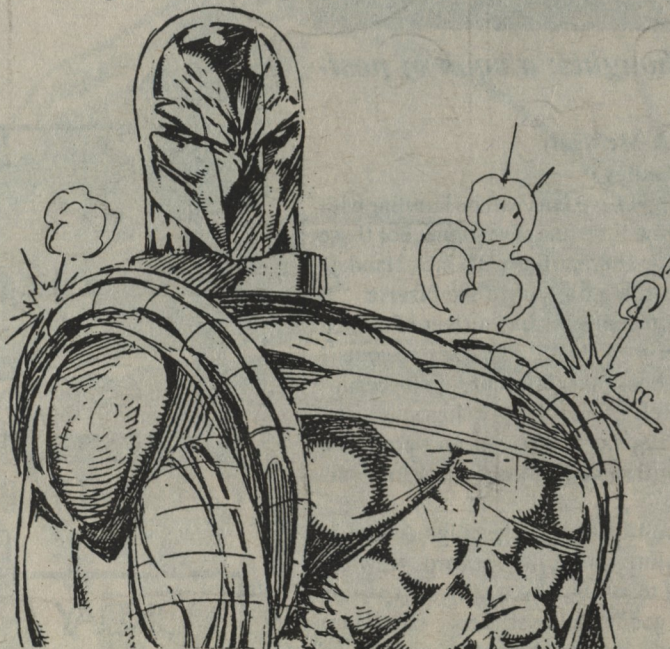
Written and drawn by series creator Erik Larsen, *The Savage Dragon* is an ongoing series whose title character is a super-strong, green-skinned, fin-headed amnesiac who joins the Chicago police to battle everything from organized crime to renegade lobster-men. Weird-looking though he may be, the Dragon is refreshingly upbeat, no-nonsense and down-to-earth-- a very likable and believable character (as well as one of the very few super-heroes to actually join a police force). The supporting cast are similarly accessible and well-developed.

Larsen's drawing is very exaggerative, cartoony stuff, and his plots aren't always the most sophisticated either, but who cares? He's obviously having fun, and it's infectious. Things to watch for (both here and in the Dragon's spin-off title, *Freak Force*) include the shameless (but hilarious) homages to other comics (i.e. Mighty Man, Super-Patriot, She-Dragon, and so on). Sour notes include generous helpings of those perpetual Image standards sex and violence, but the violence is generally pretty cartoony and the sex-- well, you might not want your kid brother reading it, but it doesn't outdo *NYPD Blue* (and Dragon's super-heroic girlfriend, Rapture, isn't too hard on the eyes if you don't mind her being objectified). *Savage Dragon* isn't the intellectual comics find of 1995, but it is more energetic and fun than a lot of books on the stands--and hey, where else are you gonna find a comic book with bad guys like "Jimbo, Da Mighty Lobster"?

Spawn is an ongoing series created by comic book mega-star Todd McFarlane (Canadian, eh!). I have mixed feelings about the Toddster: while his style is unique in its character modelling, design sense and cinematic pacing (things he developed to many readers' pleasure in the late, lamented *Infinity Inc.*), the stardom he achieved as Spider-Man's top artist led him down the path of egotistical self-indulgence. This peaked with his stint as writer and artist on *Spider-Man*, one of the biggest financial successes and creative flops

of all time. Few contemporary mainstream comics match the McFarlane Spider-Man stories for sheer god-awfulness in terms of storytelling.

That being said, I was understandably sceptical when McFarlane resurfaced as the writer-artist of Image's *Spawn*; however, McFarlane seems a born-again writer (though



still no Neil Gaiman). The story of *Spawn*, a decomposed but supernaturally powerful walking dead man who finds acceptance as a champion (and member) of the homeless, is considerably complex (a far cry from McFarlane's minimalist Spidey plots): twists and subplots abound, including *Spawn*'s doomed infatuation with his wife (remarried to his best friend following *Spawn*'s "death"), and *Spawn*'s conflicts with the mob, the cops, the government, and even the rival forces of heaven and hell(!). The storyline is sometimes cluttered and perpetually meandering but has some depth and direction, not to mention some interesting supporting characters: the despicable demon Violator, the ruthless hellspawn-hunter Angela, monstrous mob boss Tony Twist, and police detectives Sam Burke and "Twitch" Williams (the Ren and Stimpy of New York's Finest, as a co-worker referred to them, though Burke seems derived from Batman foil Harvey Bullock). McFarlane is basically an okay writer now (though contrived or attenuated scripting is still a problem for him), and the series has a very inventive sense of visual design.

The least satisfactory element is that violence thing again; like most Image books, *Spawn* relies heavily on gratuitous violence. Since the title character is portrayed as a hero (Image's most popular one), it's disturbing to see his often cavalier, sometimes gleefully sa-

distic disrespect for life and limb. *Spawn* is an interesting character, but certainly no heroic ideal.

The Maxx, on the other hand, defies definition. I've read four issues of this series plotted and drawn by *Maxx* creator Sam Kieth (with scripts by Bill Loeb), and I'll be darned if I know precisely what to make of it. It's one

Probably, but I digress.

Okay, *Youngblood* and *Team Youngblood* are basically two branches of the same organization, a government-sponsored team of super-heroes. As government stooges they don't have the problems with the authorities that most heroes have, but, well, they're government stooges. On the bright side, this eliminates the need for civilian occupations or even secret identities, and the team members are media celebrities.

The fame and power politics are kinda interesting by times (i.e. Badrock's media-courting, Riptide's nude modelling offer, Shaft's insecurity, and the agenda of slimy *Youngblood* director Graves), but like all Liefeld stuff it's usually pretty simplistic. Dialogue is simplistic and often contrived, storylines are simplistic, and even his drawing is nothing to write home about. It surprised me to see amateurish screw-ups in basic perspective rules as I scanned some pages. Less shocking were the wide-open spaces and scratchy lines of his sadly unimaginative, in-your-face layouts, as well as the grimacing countenances, inane accessories, grotesque bobs and overdramatic posturing of his figures. He just can't draw anybody who looks remotely natural, it seems. *Team Youngblood* penciller Chap Yaep is typical Image, but much more refined than Liefeld. Yaep's stuff is generally more substantial than Rob's, though no more naturalistic in its character renderings.

Grumbling aside, this beats Liefeld's *X-Force* pabulum (which easily surpassed even McFarlane's *Spider-Man* in terms of sheer aesthetic bankruptcy). There is some interrelation among the characters (the Masada/Riptide and Cougar/Photon friendships come to mind as interesting, while Die Hard and his relationship with Vogue both have largely untapped story potential). Some of the characters, like Badrock, are at least likable, and *Team Youngblood*'s Sentinel is actually a very complex and engaging individual. Others, like Shaft, come across as typical Liefeld cyphers or rip-offs of old Marvel characters (Knight Sabre=Gambit, Col. Bravo=Cable, and on and on).

Youngblood and *Team Youngblood* are a fairly solid (albeit not particularly original) super-hero team concept, but the execution is lacking. Unlike McFarlane, Liefeld remains an immature talent: big panels, big guns, big biceps, big breasts, big deal. Plus, the ubiquitous cavalier attitude towards lethal violence leaves a bad taste in my mouth (I worry about kids ingesting this stuff in large quantities, which they do). Moral judgements aside, the *Youngblood* books are unremarkable aesthetic fluff.