

COMIC COLUMN

by SEAN McQUAID

*"Superman never made any money
Savin' the world from Solomon Grundy,
And sometimes I despair the world will never see another man
...
Like him."*

Most of you probably recognize the above quote as an excerpt from "The Superman Song", a surprise hit for Canada's Crash Test Dummies a while back (Solomon Grundy, incidentally, is an obscure DC comics villain who dates back to the Forties and usually sparred with the original Green Lantern. Grundy only met Superman once or twice, but I guess his name fit the song neatly). It was a quirky little tune, rather sad in that the Dummies sang it like a requiem, a musical obituary for the Man of Steel. What's even stranger is that it now seems that their tribute was eerily prophetic. This month, with no small amount of media hype, DC Comics killed off the character of Superman.

It's hard to picture comics -- heck, North American pop culture in general -- without the big guy. Superman defined super heroes as we know the concept. The world had never seen anything like him before when, in 1938, a couple of starry-eyed kids names Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster dreamed him up and managed to get his adventures printed in Action Comics #1. It was a big gamble for a financially shaky new publishing company that would later call itself DC Comics; comics were a new field, a spin-off of the popular newspaper strips of the day. The first comics were reprint anthologies of strips like "Mutt & Jeff" and "Bringing Up Father", and printing totally original material was a risky prospect that the fledgling DC group was pursuing in its handful of struggling comics like New Fun, New Comics, and Detective Comics (which would take a chance on featuring a fellow named "Bat-Man" in the following year). Even the original material in these books followed tried-and-true formats: humour cartoons, western heroes, detective stories ... nothing as kinky as some alien strongman in tights who led a double life as mild-mannered reporter and costumed crime fighter. That sort of idea was just too bizarre to accept, too far-fetched; the readers would never swallow it. That's the sort of thing that most of the publishers told Siegel and Shuster when they were trying to sell Superman, but gifted cartoonist Sheldon Mayer saw their stuff and immediately recognized its originality and appeal. Mayer convinced his bosses at DC to buy the character, and so it was that Superman debuted in Action Comics #1, 1938.

The rest is history. Superman was an overnight sensation, and

DC branched him out into his own book and various spinoff titles. He was selling millions of comics, and faster than you can say "reasonable facsimile" there were dozens of other costumed crusaders littering the comic racks. Some characters were original concepts in their own right. Others were shameless imitations of Superman, and a few of Supey's early rivals were exterminated by lawsuits, including the original WonderMan and the original Captain Marvel (a.k.a. Shazam), who was actually a pretty original character but particularly offensive to DC in that he was actually outselling Superman for quite some time. There was no way to stifle imitation entirely, though, and Superman found himself the frontrunner in a huge field of superheroes from DC and other companies. There was a huge, previously untapped appeal in Supes and his contemporaries. We've always been drawn to heroes in our popular stories, people we could aspire to be and marvel at and live vicariously through, but super heroes moved that onto a whole new level. We were dealing with good guys who could fly and burst into flames and such. There was a whole new potential for fantasy on a large scale, a means of escape and diversion for an eager reading public.

Comics and Superman have been through various ups and downs since then, but they're permanently imprinted on our cultural

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memory. Superheroes are currently hugely successful in comics (despite becoming nearly extinct in the Fifties) and through all the decades Superman has been there. With his colleagues Batman and WonderWoman he's one of only three characters who has been in continuous publication since the nineteen-forties, and just about every supertype in the business is based in some way on these three; yet, DC has apparently killed Superman off. Its like seeing Walt Disney knock off Mickey Mouse.

That last comparison may not be as far out as it sounds. Mickey's from the same era as Superman, and became the definitive star of animated cartoons as Superman was of comics; but fame is fickle. When was the last time you actually