

laughed at Mickey (in a nice way)? The Mouse has become a cliché, a merchandising property and publicity figurehead for the Walt Disney Company, languishing in lunchbox land while wild and crazy guys like Donald Duck and Roger Rabbit grab all the laughs. The same thing, unfortunately, has happened to Superman. He had become a cliché. Sure, he's faster than a speeding bullet, but so are the Flash and the new Flash and Quicksilver and Johnny Quick and the Whizzer and Jesse Charbers and Makkari and a few zillion other people; sure, he's more powerful than a locomotive, but so are the Hulk and Captain Marvel and Valor and Thor and WonderMan and most of the rest of the superheroic population; sure, he can leap tall buildings in a single bound, but ... well, everybody flies these days, anyway. Superman isn't all that unique anymore; in fact, he's become what you might call the generic superhero, not exactly a recipe for continued prosperity.

Superman's always been DC's chief character, but he hasn't been the most popular character in comics in decades. Newer characters have been hogging the spotlight, and in these less idealistic days when stories often seek to shock with more extreme characters and situations, a nice guy like Superman seems rather bland, even corny to a lot of comics readers. He's a clean-cut, brightly costumed fighter for truth, justice, and the American Way, a "big blue boy scout" as Lex Luthor once called him. That just doesn't grab attention as well as current fan-faves like Wolverine, an adamantium-clawed, sawed-off psychopath who has no qualms about slicing and dicing his foes, or even Batman, who's no killer but at least has a spooky mystique, a more down-to-earth background, and a slightly nastier style of crime fighting. Superman's old fashioned, and it's often been fashionable to make fun of him in comic book circles as a golden oldie, a has-been. Some would say he's been dying a slow death for years.

So why not put him out of his misery? That would seem to be the reasoning behind the "Doomsday" storyline that recently climaxed in Superman #75 with everyone's favourite Kryptonian buying the farm. The upshot of the Doomsday storyline is pretty simple: cosmically powerful, unstoppable alien psycho named Doomsday rampages across Earth and flattens everything and everyone in his path until Superman sacrifices himself to stop him. Sounds kind of like a Godzilla movie with shorter participants, doesn't it? There's really not much to say about Superman #75 besides it being designed to appeal to bloodthirsty fans (see Superman get beaten to a pulp) and sentimental fans (see Lois Lane and Superman's other near and dear friends cry after he's been beaten to a pulp) ... fun for the whole family. It's the most low-class, cynical, transparently commercial gimmick in comics since DC killed off Jason (Robin II) Todd after giving readers an opportunity to vote on the character's fate by phone. The results of this latest marketing blitz have been sadly

predictable, with millions of fans buying Superman #75, which in its more expensive bagged collector's edition comes with such goodies as commemorative postage stamps, a funeral poster, a trading card, an obituary page, and even a genuine Superman-crest black armband so you can mourn in style. Perhaps it's best that Krypto the Superdog didn't live to see this.

All of this is even more ridiculous when you consider that Superman probably isn't dead, or at least won't remain dead. I mean, really now, you don't think DC is actually deep-sixing their big gun for good, do you? Don't be so naive! Mickey Mouse may be passe but you don't see Walt Disney feeding him to

Garfield. Some characters are too popular, too central to our culture to ever be forgotten, and DC would be both foolish and futile in trying to erase Superman from the face of comics for the sake of progress. Too late now, you say? He's dead, Jim? Pshaw. The plain fact is that death is seldom permanent in comics. Ask WonderMan (dead and buried for over a decade until he revived through the miracle of ionic metamorphosis). Ask Jean Grey (seemingly vaporized years ago but that was only her deadringer, Phoenix). Ask Professor X (silly kids, that wasn't his corpse that's a shape-shifting impostor

who replaced him months ago). Ask most of the X-Men (who've died more times than a gross of red-shirted Star Trek security guards). Ask IronFist (dead? me? no, I was replaced by a plant-person who looked like me). The list goes on and on, but the point is that death in comics can often be about as permanent as a sandcastle at high tide.

What, then, is the point? Besides boosting sales into the stratosphere, this business also provides an opportunity to try and pump up a stale character concept. They did it with Robin. Long before Jason Todd ever took over the Robin identity from his now-adult predecessor Dick Grayson (the original Robin), a lot of fans thought the concept of Robin was silly; a kid crime fighter seemed too stupid a concept, especially attached to a dark and serious fellow like Batman. Why send a kid to fight crime, in cute little green shorts no less? It wasn't surprising when fans voted to kill him off, and most people probably thought that was the last they'd ever see of Robin. They were dead wrong. While DC wasn't tacky enough to revive Jason Todd, they produced a rather respectable story sometime later in which Batman accepted a new kid as his partner, Tim Drake, who became the new Robin: slightly more mature and serious in personality, master detective and martial artist, and sporting a cool new costume that was based on the Robin suit but with new features like a black cape, lots of gadgets, and even long pants. Fans loved it. Robin has branched off into mini-series and annuals and crossovers and attained a popularity that actually rivals that of his mentor, Batman. And all they had to do was kill the guy first.

