

Comic Column

by Sean McQuaid

The year is 1938. While Hitler's Nazi Germany threatens the security of Europe, the continent's other leaders do their best to ignore him with policies of appeasement and promises of "peace in our time". Across the sea America is living in its own dreamworld, the Great Depression supposedly ended though poverty and organized crime persist while the wealthy immerse themselves in the pleasures of the jazz age and newly legalized alcohol. It is a society where people sleep secure in the belief that corruption and suffering happen "somewhere else", in the shadows...but the shadows are lengthening. And as the world grows darker, one man finds his sleep haunted by awareness of the moral decay that surrounds him. Clad in fedora and gasmask, a quiet man named Wesley Dodds stalks the criminals of New York with a bizarre gas-gun, spawning nightmares for the wicked, inspiring dreams for the just, and earning the name by which both mobsters and lawmen alike come to know him...the Sandman.

The Sandman returns to comics this month with the debut of the new ongoing *Sandman Mystery Theatre* series launched by DC Comics as part of its "Vertigo" line of sophisticated comics suggested for mature readers. The book's rather unusual title suggests its tone and subject matter, suspenseful mystery tales that emulate film noir and detective fiction, and the title also avoids confusion with another DC "Vertigo" book: the popular surreal horror-fantasy series entitled *Sandman*. That series deals with Morpheus, the embodiment and master of humankind's dreams, and the latest of many comics characters to go by the name of Sandman. *Mystery Theatre*'s Wesley Dodds is actually the original comic book Sandman, created during the "Golden Age" of comics' earliest days and appearing in *Adventure Comics* as early as 1939, only shortly after the debut of a pointy-eared vigilante named Batman (some sources list a story in the *New York World's Fair Comics* commemorative anthology title as Sandman's first published appearance, but the first Sandman story is generally agreed to be the one published in the fortieth issue of *Adventure Comics*.) Very much a transitional figure, Sandman was more in the mold of radio and pulp magazine detectives like the Shadow and the

Green Hornet than the emerging "super-hero" genre. He had no flashy costume or special powers. Like many early "mystery men" he was simply a bored playboy, albeit one who beat boredom by dressing up in suit, hat, cloak and gasmask to battle weird menaces like the Tarantula, Nightshade, and the Phantom of the World's Fair. He became a starring feature in *Adventure Comics* and was even among the founding members of the Justice Society of America in *All-Star Comics*. He remained one of DC's most popular characters throughout the nineteen-forties, later modifying his appearance with a more super-heroic purple-and-gold bodysuit, even latching onto a kid sidekick by the name of Sandy (the Golden Boy) Hawkins (one suspects there must have been some vaguely Dickensian factory churning out brave orphan lads for super heroes to adopt in those days). Unfortunately, super heroes fell out of fashion by the fifties, and Sandman faded from sight like virtually every other crimebuster on the racks.

While the late fifties saw a resurgence of popularity for super heroes, Wesley Dodds never quite made it big again. He joined the other Justice Society of America members in opting for occasional active duty as semi-retired super heroes, but the JSA's appearances have often been scarce and Sandman has been one of the most frequently overlooked members, especially after a stroke forced him to curtail his crimefighting activities. The new *Mystery Theatre* series is Sandman's first shot at recurring stardom since his glory days in the thirties and forties... and that's very fitting seeing as how the new series is set in the late nineteen-thirties

as Wesley Dodds embarked on his crimefighting career.

As is often the case with DC's character revivals, there have been some changes made in the original; however, these changes consist mostly of additional rather than altered characterization, and *Sandman Mystery Theatre* writer Matt Wagner says that his version of the character is "not as much revisionist as it is...restorational." By that he refers to the emulation of the earliest Sandman stories, which he describes as having "an unusual crime-noir flavor to them...and also a certain dreaminess." Filled with mobsters, New York nightlife and various shadowy figures, *Mystery Theatre*'s setting makes it an intriguing period piece rooted in its reality while dealing with characters and events that sometimes seem unreal, creating an air of mystery and tension that pervades the story as people try to guess at who or what the Sandman is...not to mention the macabre criminals he stalks. Wagner more fully develops the character of the Sandman himself by expanding on his motivation. A studious and intellectual young man, wealthy Wesley Dodds perceives the moral and social decay that others often ignore. His moral outrage and social conscience fuel his bizarre dreams...nightmares that subconsciously prompt him to solve or prevent the strange and terrible crimes that his dreams reveal to him. So it is that Dodds, as the Sandman, prowls the city in search of evil. It's a more solid personality and purpose than the character has had previously while remaining true to the basic original concept (though it does contradict and presumably renders invalid the "secret origin" of the Sandman penned a few



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