

PANEOLOGY



BY SEAN MCQUAID

The Golden Age

(4 issue limited series)

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THE GOLDEN AGE IS A PROJECT FROM DC Comics' "Elseworlds" line; that is, stories set outside of the continuity established for the DC characters featured therein- "what if" tales, like *Gotham by Gaslight* (a story exploring what Batman would be like if he had operated temporary to Jack the Ripper) and *Speeding Bullets* (wherein Kryptonian orphan Kal-el [Superman] was adopted not by the Kents but by the Waynes of Gotham, and with their murder he grew up to become a sort of Super-Batman). *The Golden Age*, though, is a far more ambitious and multi-faceted work than earlier "Elseworlds" (most of which feature novel, one-shot variations on DC's cash cow, Batman). This series revolves around the heroes of DC's "Golden Age" (late 1930's to early 1950's), and explores what their lives might have been like in the postwar patriotism and paranoia of the late 1940's and early 1950's. This lavishly illustrated, byzantine story is a "graphic novel" in the truest sense of that genre.



THE GOLDEN AGE #1

In the "real world", the booming comics industry slumped in the late 1940's and searched for new subjects- so that by the early fifties, only a handful of super heroes remained in the comics market (DC's Superman/Batman/Wonder Woman Big Three, along with some lesser DC stars like Green Arrow, Aquaman, and Johnny Quick). When super heroes returned to popularity for good in the late 1950's, old-time fans demanded the return of the originals, and there have been occasional revivals of "Golden Age" characters ever since. Sometimes, the characters are featured in stories or series that portray them in their original time and place, in their prime (*Sandman Mystery Theatre*, *All-Star Squadron*, etc.). More often, golden-agers appear in present-day stories as curiosities, revealed to be dead, retired, or otherwise incapacitated. A lucky few, like the Spectre, Doctor Fate, The Justice Society, and Marvel Comics' Captain America and Namor, remain active in the modern world by mystical or otherwise improbable means. Regardless, the histories of many Golden Age heroes are a matter of record, in most cases beginning with some sort of retirement in the 1950's, and usually ending in obscurity, death, or, in some cases, a return to activity decades later. This series takes a look at what might have happened to the first generation of super heroes during those lost years in the wake of World War II- how they would have coped with the emerging threat of communism, the "Red Scare" in the States, and the onset of the Cold War, bringing with it their own seeming obsolescence.

In this reality, not all "mystery men" (as super heroes were then called) survived the war-- or their crimefighting careers-- with both soul and body intact. Newswoman Libby (Liberty Belle) Lawrence, divorced from her husband, documentary film-maker John (Johnny Quick) Chambers, seeks solace in the arms of struggling author Johnathan (Tarantula) Law. Archaeologist Carter (Hawkman) Hall became obsessed with the idea that he is a reincarnated pharaoh, losing himself in his work and his journey of self-discovery. Astronomer Ted (Starman) Knight, pushed past the brink of madness by the belief that his discoveries helped create the atom bomb, struggles to recover from a breakdown and immerses himself in research to harness still more of the potentially unlimited

stellar energy he discovered. Television executive Alan (Green Lantern) Scott struggles to deny the responsibility-- and the temptations-- posed by his near-omnipotent power ring, concentrating instead on his efforts to defend his company from anti-communist witch hunts. Lance (Captain Triumph) Gallant seeks a normal life as a prosperous businessman, trying to ignore the presence-- and demands-- of his brother's ghost, with whom Lance would merge to become Captain Triumph before he decided to retire from crimefighting; meanwhile, Lance romantically pursues, despite his dead brother's objections, the reformed villainess Paula (Tigress) Blake. Chemist Rex (Hourman) Tyler, one of the few crimefighters who remains active, struggles with the addictive properties and frightening side-effects of the drug that gives him his powers.

While these and many other crimefighters try to find a place for themselves in their changing worlds, there are darker forces at work in the super-heroic community, revolving around two ex-"mystery men" returning from the war in Europe. One, Tex "Mister America" Thompson, a.k.a. the Americommando, is credited with countless feats of daring-- including the assassination of Hitler himself-- and receives a hero's welcome, quickly becoming a celebrity and, virtually overnight, a major political contender. Strangely aggressive and ambitious, in the years that follow he becomes a Senator and a presidential hopeful, campaigning on a platform of patriotism and anti-communist xenophobia, calling on all of America's "mystery men" to show their allegiance by enlisting in Thompson's governmentally sanctioned group of super-heroes, to be used as a force for American defense and the pursuit of America's interests in the world order. His initial recruits include Bob (Robotman) Crane, whose humanity has by this time joined his human body in death; Al (the Atom) Pratt and Johnny Thunder, young heroes seeking adventure, fame, and fortune; and Daniel (Dyna-Mite) Dunbar, a young ex-crimefighter who was drifting without direction when Thompson recruited him and used atomic science to turn him into a veritable superman of near-immeasurable power. As "Dynamite", Dunbar becomes the clean-cut, super-powerful spokesman for Thompson's ideologies, while secretly trying to fill the emptiness of his new celebrity lifestyle through drugs and devil-worship. For that matter, something seems not-quite-right about Thompson himself-- hints

of ambition, fanaticism, and ruthlessness that lurk beneath the secretive war hero's impeccable public facade.

While Senator Thompson and his entourage seek to impose their vision of the American Dream on the country, another returning veteran from Europe is plagued by nightmares: Paul (Manhunter) Kirk, partly amnesiac, horribly injured and traumatized, creeps back into America remembering little other than the fact that he is being pursued by an indeterminate number of unknown, would-be assassins. Sheltered by Bob (Fatman) Daley, the one-time sidekick of Mister America, Kirk struggles to remember the horrible secrets he carries with him from the war, never dreaming what dark implications they have for his friend, Tex Thompson...and for the world.

A cast-of-thousands epic, *The Golden Age* is fascinating as a period piece in its examination of post-war American society, and almost morbidly compelling in its look at how the first generation of heroes might have fared had fate not been quite so kind to them. The characters range from endearing to genuinely chilling, and the plot progresses at a very natural, organic pace, while maintaining elements of suspense-- the skeletons that come tumbling out of various closets in chapter three are guaranteed to shock, particularly if you're familiar with a certain Golden-Age master criminal who comes into the picture at that point.

Visually, the series is lushly illustrated. Paul Smith's artwork is highly detailed and realistic in its portrayal of a variety of scenes-- ranging from the streets of New York to the surreal worlds of Paul Kirk's nightmarish visions and Hourman's drug-induced hallucinations. Smith draws people with highly individualized and genuinely emotional detail, and is an accomplished though sometimes undynamic storyteller. Colourist Richard Ory, who shares the cover credits, completes the package with his vibrant tones, whether it be the psychedelic crazy-quilt of Hourman's delusions or the familiar shadings of a firelit living room.

The visual appeal extends to the book's production-- it is printed on high quality paper and bound rather than stapled, "bookshelf format", complete with gold foil embossing on the title logo and picture frame of each issue's Martin/Ory cover illustration. All of this contributes to the one major drawback of this book-- price. At \$6.50 an issue, it's darn lucky this series only has four chapters.