

# A Comic Book History

Comic book history has been divided into various "ages," and the proper division of the ages relates to what the "superhero" titles were doing during those periods. These heroic ages coincidentally have followed comic books since the origins of the modern comic book in 1933. A great deal of speculation has taken place as to what books begin (or end) which ages, and regarding why each of the ages begins or ends. My own viewpoint is that the ages are generational -- with each new generation of fans being introduced to characters for the first time. Now, many of the characters have rich histories, but their origin tales continue to be retold and reinterpreted by the authors, artists, and readers of each succeeding age. Therefore, we will follow comics through the various superhero ages, also taking time to reflect on the role comics have had in society.

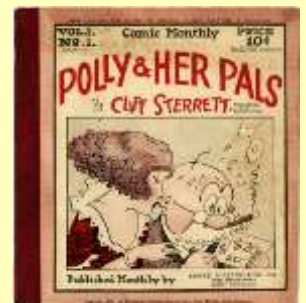


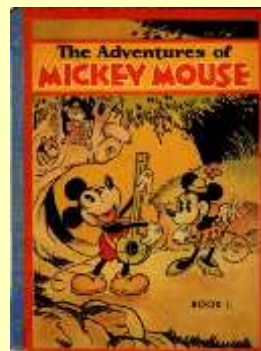
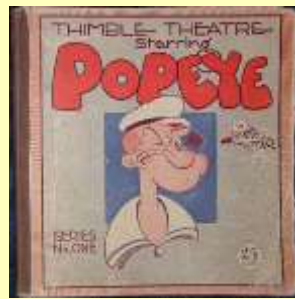
## Pre-Golden-Age up to 1933

**Precursors:** various newspaper weeklies, such as *Harper's Weekly*

**Initial Issue:** *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* (Dillingham's American Authors Library #24) (3/97)

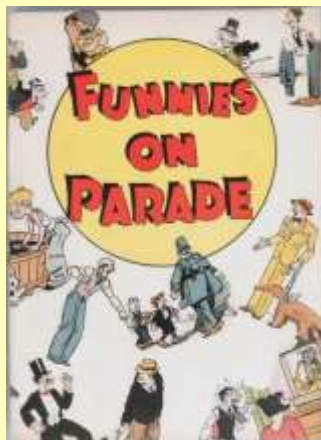
**Important Issues:** *Buster Brown and His Resolutions* (1903); *Katzenjammer Kids* (1903); *The Gumps* #1 (1918); *Comic Monthly* #1, 4 (1922); *Little Orphan Annie* #1 (1926); *Thimble Theatre Starring Popeye* #1 (1931); *The Adventures of Mickey Mouse* #1 (1931)



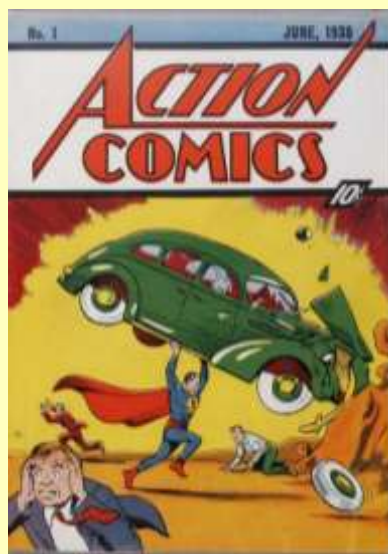


**Characterization:** mostly strip reprints in book form.

People trace the origin of "comic" material back to ancient times. However, during the early period the "comic magazine" as we know it had not yet come about. Nearly all of the material reprints previously published newspaper strips. The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats is centrally important because it was the first book-style reprint of the first "true" comic strip. That format is usually said to have begun on October 25, 1896, although some dispute this. The Yellow Kid became a folk hero, although neither the strip nor the book was distributed universally. The Buster Brown book, also by Outcault, is believed to be the first strip-reprint book to have national distribution. By 1922, demand had increased to the point where Comic Monthly became the first book to reprint strips on a regular basis, choosing a different "star" each month. Issue 4 featured Barney Google's first book appearance. The Thimble Theatre book is important because it ushered in the book appearance of Popeye the Sailor. Unlike Tarzan or Sherlock Holmes, Popeye's spinach gave him super powers, and his first appearance in the comics makes him the first "comic book superhero."



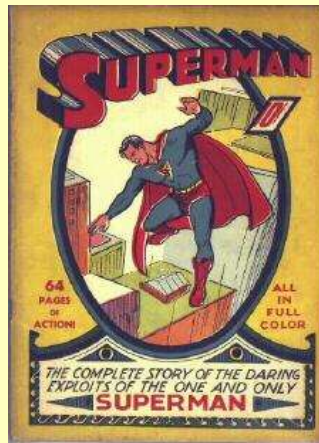
## Golden Age 1938-1949



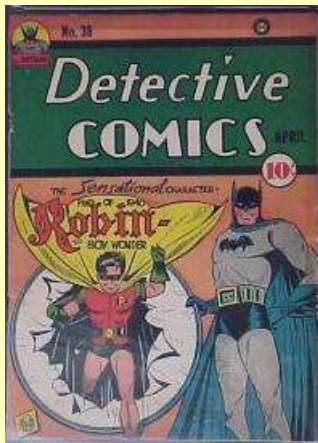
**Precursors:** *Funnies on Parade* #1 (1933); *Famous Funnies* (Series 1) #1 (5/34); *New Fun* #1 (2/35); *Detective Comics* #1 (3/37)

**Initial Issue:** *Action Comics* #1 (6/38)

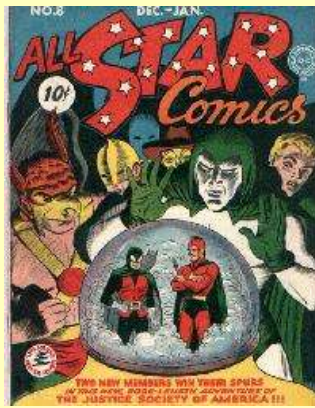
**Important Issues:** *Motion Picture Funnies Weekly* #1 (4/39); *Detective Comics* #27 (5/39); *Superman* #1 (1939); *Whiz Comics* #1 (2/40); *Detective Comics* #38 (4/40); *All Star Comics* #3 (W/40); *Captain America Comics* #1 (3/41); *Captain Marvel Adventures* #1 (3/41); *All Star Comics* #8 (Sp/42)



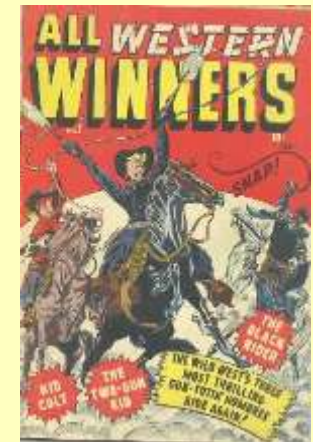
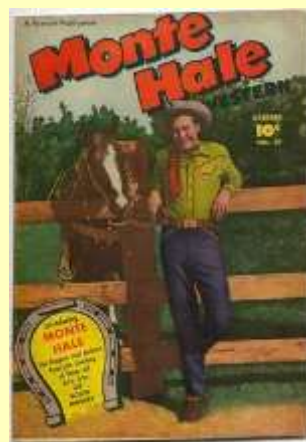
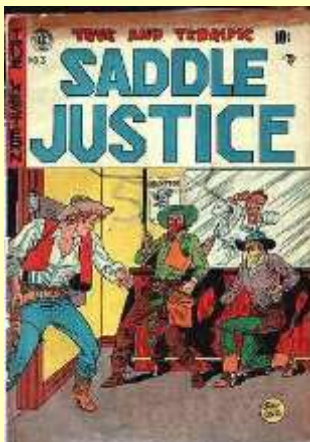
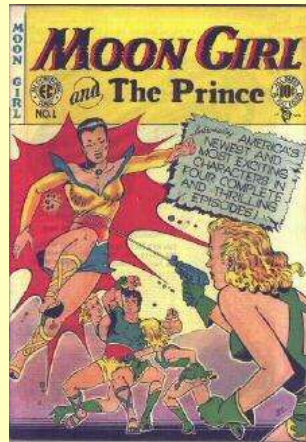
**Characterization:** "Superheroes" vs. Nazis, Japanese, spies, and a few "super villains." Comics basically "fun." Easy to distinguish heroes from villains. Strong pro-American stance in many comics.



The first comic magazine in the usual sense was *Funnies on Parade* #1 in 1933. *Famous Funnies* (Series 1) would take on the traditional form even more closely. *New Fun* #1 was the first book by a major company (National/DC) to publish all-new material, instead of merely strip reprints. While *Detective* #1 was not the first book devoted to a single theme, it was the first such book by what would be one of the major companies in the field.

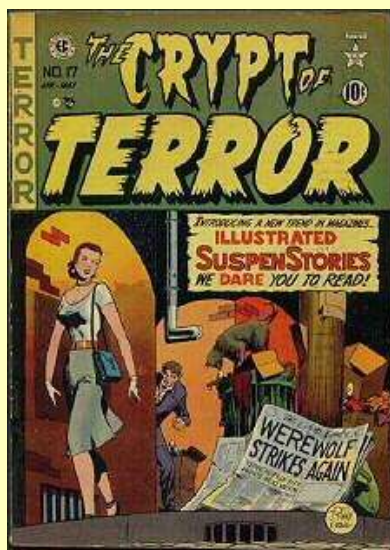


Action #1, with the introduction of **Superman**, launched the Golden Age. Superman was an unbelievable success as the first "recognized" superhero. He quickly got his own magazine, and toys and merchandise were produced to promote the Man of Steel. Timely comics launched the Sub-mariner, first in Motion Picture Funnies Weekly, then in Marvel (Mystery) Comics, and finally in his own magazine. DC continued to exploit the hero market with Batman (in Detective Comics and his own magazine), a masked crimefighter in the Zorro vein. Fawcett Publications brought in Captain Marvel, who became the most popular hero of the Golden Age for a season. DC brought in the first major child hero (Robin), the first female superhero (Wonder Woman), and the first superhero group (the Justice Society). With World War 2 first imminent and then a reality, the superheroes gave the kids of America a way to feel safe in a world populated by Nazi spies and John Dillingers.



## Post-Golden-Age

1949-1955

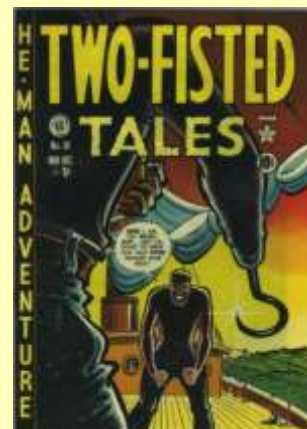
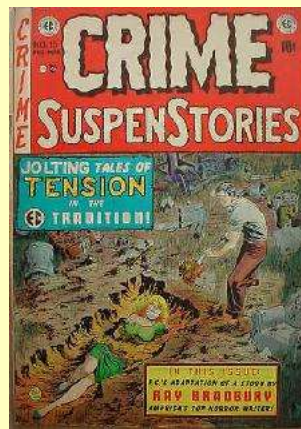


**Precursors:** *Crime Does Not Pay* #22(1) (6/42); *Moon Girl and the Prince* #1 (4/47); *Phantom Lady* #15 (12/47); *Blue Beetle* #52, 54 (1948); *Saddle Justice* #3 (Sp/48); *Monte Hale Western* #29(1) (4/48); *All Western Winners* #2 (W/48-9); *Marvel Tales* #93 (8/49)

**Initial Issues:** *The Crypt of Terror* #17(1); *The Vault of Horror* #12(1) (4-5/50)

**Important Issues:** *Weird Science* #12(1) (5-6/50); *Strange Adventures* #1 (8-9/50); *Crime SuspenStories* #15(1) (10-11/50); *Two-Fisted Tales* #18(1) (11-12/50); *Astonishing* #3 (4/51); *Mystery in Space* #1 (4-5/51); *Strange Tales* #1 (6/51); *Reform School Girl* (1951); *Black Cat Mystery* #30 (8/51); *Mad* #1(10/52); *GI Combat* #1 (10/52); *Funny Animals* #84 (4/54)

**Characterization:** Gore; Funny Animals; Westerns; Space



After World War 2, superheroes were not as necessary, socially, as they had been. A long transition period began, during which Spy Smasher (Fawcett) became Crime Smasher, and superhero comics began to fade out or shift focus. Crime (true and fictional) was now the focus of superhero comics, but the superhero titles were losing popularity. With no more Nazi threat, kids looked elsewhere for enemies.



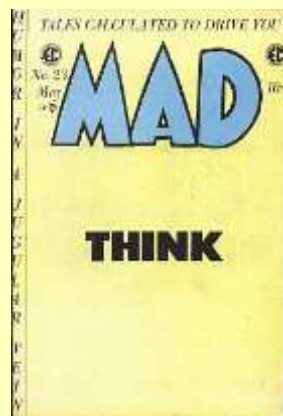
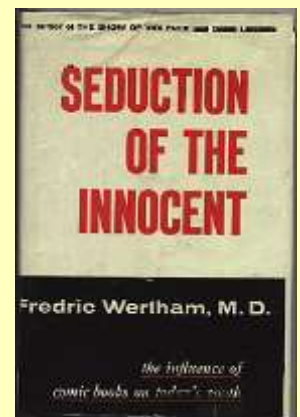
Existing crime comics (like *Crime Does Not Pay*) increased in circulation. Women came to be portrayed more and more as big-breasted, sexy, and in bondage. The level of violence rapidly increased in comics, and comics with prominent gore sold best. Entertaining Comics, now run by William Gaines, switched to a "new trend" of sensationalist comics and was soon leading the pack of competitors. The younger children had westerns and funny animals to read about, while EC's *Suspense* attracted teens. Without any laws about what comics could be sold to minors, many children were exposed in the comics to things that they could not see in films or elsewhere. Many companies followed the trend toward horror, violence, and the unusual. Aliens dominated the new genre of space comics.



### Advent of the Comics Code

In the late 40's and early 50's, there arose a group of people who were opposed to the increasing levels of material in comics that was unsuitable for children. Several magazine articles were published, and a few books. Most notable among the books was Dr. Fredric Wertham's *The Seduction of the Innocent*. Going much further than merely pointing out the inappropriate material, Wertham tried to link the reading of such comic books to juvenile crime. Many parents believed this, and hearings were called in several states regarding the depravity of comic books. Even the superheroes were called to question, as Batman and Wonder Woman were labeled homosexuals.

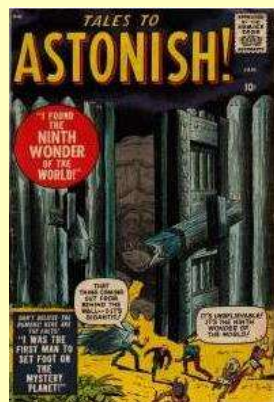
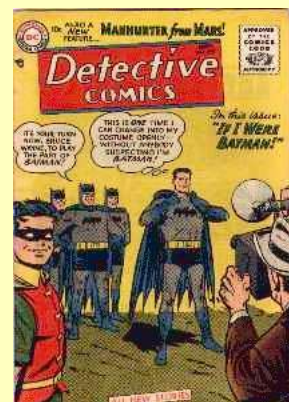
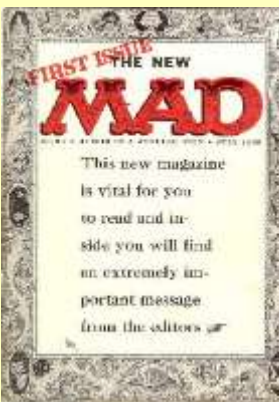
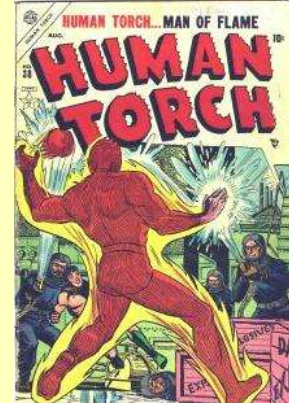
The publication of *SOTI* in 1954 created an uproar, and the comics industry decided it best to monitor itself for offensive material rather than allow the government to step in. A "Comics Code Authority" was formed: its purpose being to ensure the wholesome standards of the earlier books. Good must always triumph over evil. The taking of illegal drugs will never be portrayed positively. Criminals must always die or be captured. No drawings of scantily-clad women, and no more severed heads. The code came into effect in issues dated February of 1955.



The last comic book issue of *Mad*

## Did the comics code create the Silver Age?

In my opinion, it was part of the matter. The Silver Age of superheroes might have been destined because a new "age" commences with every new generation, but the onset of the Code brought a virtual end to publishers (like EC) who relied on lurid material to sell their comics. Other publishers, such as DC and Atlas, simply backed away from the excessive sex and violence found in pre-code comics and began to look for other outlets for selling books. As soon as a code was in the works, publishers began to look toward reviving the superhero comics, which were suffering badly in the market.



**Silver Age**  
1955-1968



**Precursors:** *Batman* #78 (8-9/53); *Marvel Family* #89 (1/54); *Submariner Comics* #33-42 (4/54-55); *Human Torch* #36-8 (4/54); *Captain America Comics* #76-78 (5/54); *World's Finest* #71 (7-8/54); *Mad* #24 (7/55); *Detective Comics* #225 (11/55)

Marvel: *Tales to Astonish!* #1 (1/59); *Tales of Suspense* #1 (1/59); *Amazing Adventures* #1 (6/61)

**Initial Issues:** *Showcase* #4 (DC, 9-10/56); Marvel: *Fantastic Four* #1 (Marvel, 11/61)

**Important Issues:** *Showcase* #22 (9-10/59); *The Brave and the Bold* #28 (2-3/60); *Tales to Astonish* #27 (1/62); *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (5/62); *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (8/62); *Tales of Suspense* #39 (3/63); *X-Men* #1 (1963); *Detective Comics* #327 (5/64)

**Characterization:** Mostly a revival of old heroes, this time vs. supervillains and ordinary criminals. When Marvel entered the scene, their heroes came to be characterized by human flaws and weaknesses.

Looking at the "precursors" list, you can see how crucial the timing was. *Batman* #78 featured the first "manhunter from Mars" in a backup story. Sales were good enough (for 1953) that two years later another Manhunter came to Earth. *Marvel Family* #89 was the last Fawcett issue and the last appearance of Captain Marvel until 1972. They had been fighting DC over copyright issues, but since sales were so poor, they gave up. A few months after Fawcett killed its superhero line, a visionary Stan Lee at Atlas tried reviving theirs. The revived *Submariner* even lasted past the introduction of the Comics Code. Meanwhile, DC was reducing the size of *World's Finest*, putting Superman and Batman in the same story (as part of a regular team-up) for the first time. EC's *Mad* was evading the code by becoming a magazine.





One year following the introduction of the Code (and virtual death of EC), DC Comics tried reviving the Flash. His trial appearances in Showcase were popular enough that he was given his own magazine. This was not the same Flash of the 40's but an updated version for the 50's and 60's. He was soon followed by an updated Green Lantern and Atom, and a Justice League of America, modeled after the old Justice Society. Even Batman got a "new look" in 1964, as a television show was in the works for the Caped Crusader.



The heroes of the 60's proved hipper. Although the style was largely comical, they often had problems like "regular people." This was especially true at the revived Marvel. Marvel/Atlas had distribution problems in 1957 which almost killed the company. In 1959, they were back on their feet, adding titles by Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko that would eventually launch Marvel's Silver Age. DC had successfully revived the Justice League, and Lee and Kirby launched the Fantastic Four--an unorthodox hero group that seemed not to want to be superheroes at all. And Ben Grimm (the Thing) looked more like one of Kirby's monsters! This venture was incredibly successful and was followed by many more "human" superhero types, cooked up by the "Marvel bullpen." Lee's policy was that comics and comic-making should seem fun to everyone involved. The reader should feel like his buddies are making comics just for him, and he should relate to the heroes. Spider-Man proved so successful, despite (or because of) the fact that people hated him, his aunt was either dying or dating a villain, he felt responsible for his uncle's death, and he didn't WANT to be a superhero.



## Bronze Age 1970-1977

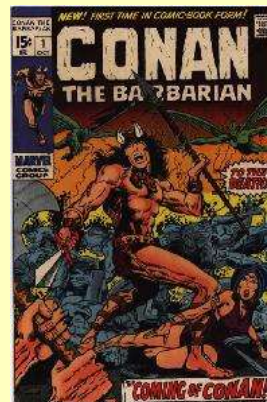


**Precursors:** *Showcase* #73 (3-4/68); *Iron Man* #1 (5/68); *House of Secrets* #81 (9-9/69); *Detective Comics* #395 (1/70)

**Initial Issue:** *Green Lantern* #76 (4/70)

**Important Issues:** *Superman* #233 (8/70); *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* #133 (10/70); *Conan* #1 (10/70); *New Gods* #1 (2-3/71); *Green Lantern* #85-6 (1971); *The Amazing Spider-man* #96-98 (1971); *House of Secrets* #92 (6-7/71); *Giant Size X-Men* #1 (Su/75); *X-Men* #94 (8/75); *The Spectacular Spider-man* #1 (12/76)

**Characterization:** Social Relevance; movement toward artistic realism. In 1975, advancement of Marvel Comics' "mutants."

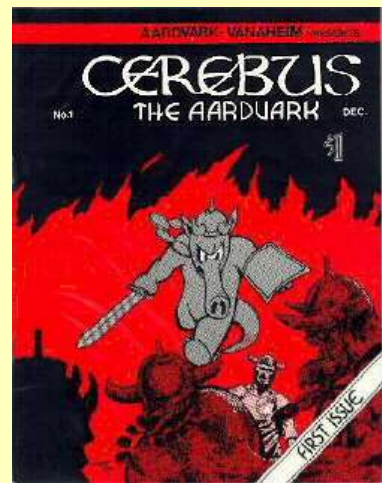


When Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko left Marvel for DC, that event began a period of change for the industry. A trend evolved toward more realistic art, with Neal Adams (formerly drawing Archie) being the artist to imitate. With the initiation of the Green Lantern/Green Arrow series (drawn by Adams), an age of "relevance" in comics began. Comics could be used as forums for looking at issues like the "generation gap" (explored to an extent in Batman in early 1970); women's rights; race relations; drug abuse; and gang violence. Two issues of *Green Lantern* were nearly not code-approved, and three issues of *Amazing Spider-man* were NOT approved, because of their treatment of the





DC also revived Fawcett's Captain Marvel in *Shazam!*, during the Bronze Age. Marvel, meanwhile, took on a social voice and reworked Kirby's popular X-Men (who had been in reprints). The "all-new, all-different" X-Men took Marvel's merry mutants to new heights, and by the end of the age, DC and Marvel were running neck and neck for comic book supremacy, so that Marvel's publication of the movie adaptation of Star Wars in 1977 seemed to give them the edge.



## Pre-Copper-Age

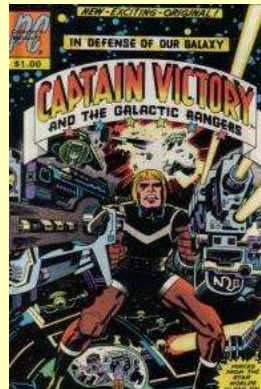
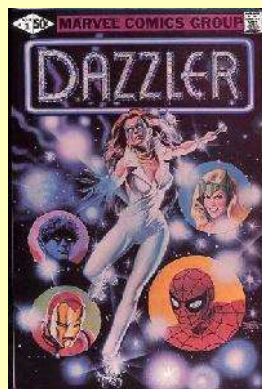
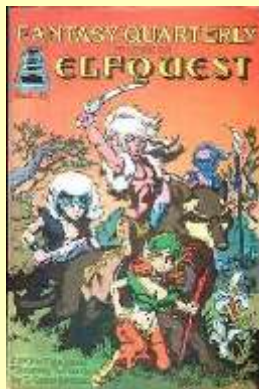
1977-1986

**Precursors:** *Howard the Duck* #1 (1/76)

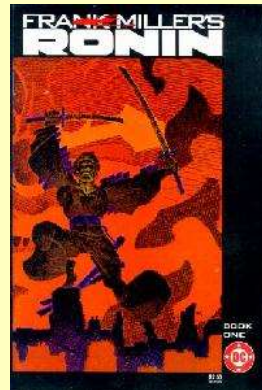
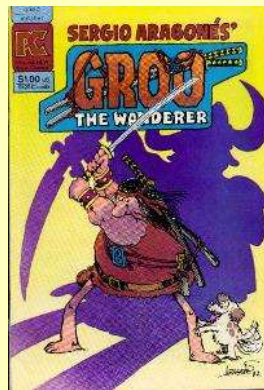
**Initial Issue:** *Cerebus the Aardvark* #1 (12/77)

**Important issues:** *Fantasy Quarterly* #1 (Sp/78); *Dazzler* #1 (3/81); *Captain Victory* #1 (11/81); *Marvel Fanfare* #1 (3/82); *Starslayer* #2 (4/82); *Groo the Wanderer* #1 (12/82); *Ronin* #1 (6/83); *American Flagg* #1 (10/83); *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #1 (Sp/84); *DC Challenge* #1 (11/85)

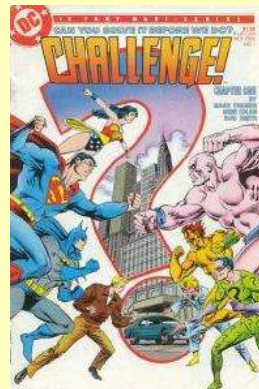
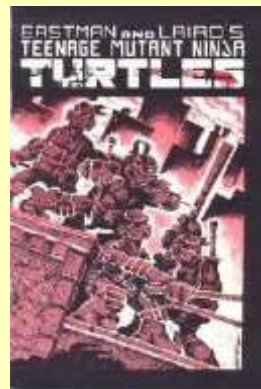
**Characterization:** Writers and artists move away from company-owned product to more creator-controlled work. The early work for this trend begins at small press companies. Comics stores begin to replace newsstands.



Marvel continued to expand their lead over DC (with more mutants and more Spider-Man), but the development among the comic book lives of heroes was not as dramatic. DC had tried several failed maneuvers to get back on top, but Marvel's line, propelled by the *X-Men*, was too strong.

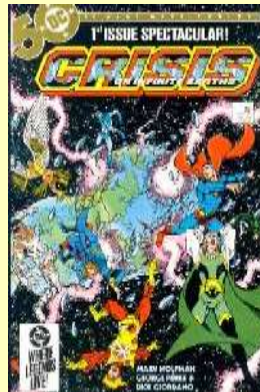
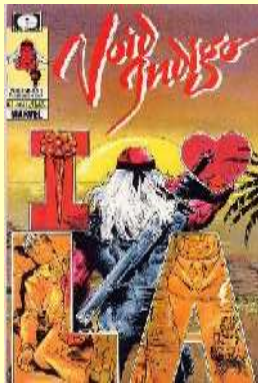


But the most important developments in comicdom during the interim period took place outside of the mainstream. Dave Sim (with *Cerebus*) proved that a small press could sustain a nationally distributed book long enough for it to achieve popularity. Sim's parody of Conan was hot among teenage and adult collectors, with his wit extending to takeoffs on Marvel's Moon Knight and Wolverine (for which he was nearly sued). The following year, along came *Elfquest*, which also became popular, mainly among the fantasy-lovers. Neal Adams, Jack Kirby, Sergio Aragones, and other prominent artists and writers began to defect to the small press companies, where they could creatively control their own material and retain the rights to their creations and their original artwork. This move prompted a good number of well-acclaimed stories and characters to appear in small press magazines, among them the now-mainstream Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, a tongue-in-cheek takeoff of Marvel's mutants (and a whole lot more).



Marvel (and then DC) countered by offering selections expressly to comic book stores. Until this time, there were not many shops specializing in comics, but comics, cards, and role-playing games were becoming a good combination--a combination which caused many stores to pop up around the world. Coupling this concept of "direct sales" with new alternate formats (including the proliferation of the so-called "graphic novel"), Marvel, DC, and the small press companies (who liked to be termed "independents") found themselves able to produce material entirely outside the limitations of what was called a "comic book." By the middle of the decade, the number of small press publishers was rapidly growing--even equaling the number of publishers during the Golden Age.

The superheroes continued to be social crusaders. Feminist, gay, and patriotic heroes surfaced at the various companies, which now included Pacific, Eclipse, First, and a host of smaller companies. Marvel's "Epic" imprint opened up to writers and artists who retained their creator's rights.



## Copper Age

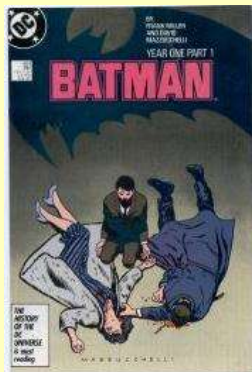
1986-1999

**Precursors:** *Void Indigo* #1 (11/84); *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1 (4/85)

**Initial Issue:** *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* #1 (3/86)

**Important Issues:** *Man of Steel* #1 (6/86); *Batman* #404 (2/87); *The Incredible Hulk* #330 (4/87); *The Amazing Spider-man* #298(3/88); *The Amazing Spider-man* #300 (5/88); *Sandman* #1 (1/89); *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (1989); *Spiderman* #1 (8/90); *Batman/Judge Dredd: Judgment on Gotham* (1991); *Youngblood* #1 (4/92); *Spawn* #1 (5/92); *Batman: Sword of Azrael* #1 (10/92); *Batman* #497 (7/93); *Captain America* #1 (11/96)

**Characterization:** New formats escape the comics code. Return to higher levels of sex and gore; tendencies toward violence and chaos in mainstream comics. Heroes become hard to distinguish from villains. Higher levels of greed and infighting among writer-artists. Major characters (Superman, Batman, Captain America, etc.) re-worked. Lots of gimmicks.



The Code was broken. Now able to sell through different formats and away from newsstands, comics writers and artists made the Comics Code virtually worthless. This is evidenced by the greatly-reduced size of the Authority's stamp on "approved" issues. "Adult comics" began to proliferate, mostly at the smaller press companies. Nudity, sex, graphic violence, and swearing became common. There were few

true "heroes" in the Violent Age, as even most of the older superheroes became virtually indistinguishable from the villains they defeated.

DC's Crisis allowed the rewriting of all of their characters. While some authors ignored the Crisis, people like Frank Miller (known for his stunning art on Marvel's Daredevil) took the opportunity to reshape familiar characters. Along came Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld, and others to create and recreate characters in a more violent image. Azrael, Punisher, Lobo, Spawn, and even Batman: which were heroes and which were villains? Batman was shown having sex, hopped up on drugs/poison, going berserk, and doing virtually everything but detective work. He also had his back broken. Catwoman's origin was changed; instead of a jewel thief, she had been a prostitute.



The comics became more gimmicky, too. Foil and die-cut covers, alternate covers and content, card inserts, and related toys became part of the marketing ploys used to attract more customers. There were many crossover issues, so that the reader interested in the story might have to buy fifteen different issues (often of titles he wasn't already buying) in order to follow the plotline. Marvel tended toward this commercialism, while DC's universe headed into Chaos, with many of the characters becoming less Good. The small press companies blurred the lines between "mainstream" and what was called "underground," justifying every sort of thing to which Wertham had objected (and more) in the name of artistic freedom. Stores were raided by police, and the comics industry's Legal Defense Fund started working seriously to keep sellers in business.



During this period of rapid evolution, Superman married Lois Lane, then died, then was resurrected, then became a completely new character. The Marvel characters were all given new beginnings in 1996, sometimes with only cosmetic resemblance to the characters that Stan Lee (practically in exile) and his compatriots had created. An implosion of "cheesy black and whites" in 1986 had increased DC's and Marvel's stranglehold on the market, but the advent of Image Comics (and then Spawn) reversed that

trend. By 1996, Marvel was the slipping leader, and several other companies were trailing behind, groping for dominance.

**Near death of Marvel Comics.** The so-called "new Marvel" had been driven to the point of bankruptcy. Often the blame is laid only on those at the top, but the uncooperative nature of the writers and artists often led to unfinished or late books, of lower than usual quality. 1997 found Marvel gasping for help, in worse shape than Atlas had been in forty years earlier. And this time, Stan Lee was all but powerless. During the Copper Age, 22 titles were created starting with "Death," far more than in all of the previous ages *combined*. In order to escape their demise, a shakeup at Marvel took place, and Marvel's titles restarted *again*. Liefeld's and McFarlane's Image Comics began to emerge as a comics leader, amidst conflicts that drove the two apart. In fact, restyling Captain America and the Avengers for Marvel had been Liefeld's responsibility. After Marvel's problems, Liefeld started his third small press venture, Awesome Entertainment.



## The Iron Age

### 2000-present?

**Initial Issue:** *Ultimate Spider-Man* #1 (10/2000)

**Important Issues:** *Ultimate X-Men* #1 (02/2001); *Wolverine: the Origin* #1 (11/2001); *Superman/Batman* #1 (10/2003); *The Walking Dead* (10/2003); *Ultimate Fantastic Four* #1 (02/2004); *Identity Crisis* #1 (08/2004); *The OMAC Project* #1 (06/2005); *All Star Batman and Robin* #1 (09/2005); *Infinite Crisis* #1 (12/2005)

Beginning in 2000 as the Copper Age ended, many titles were revamped, with updated versions of familiar heroes and villains hitting the stands. For DC, these included Catwoman, Plastic Man, the Doom Patrol, OMAC, and other second-tier characters.





Marvel's latest restart included Daredevil, Alpha Flight, and even Conan! DC also removed the yellow bat signal logo ("new look") from around the bat on Batman's costume, returning it to pre-1964 style. Not long after, the latest in the Batman movie series was "Batman Begins" -- once again rewriting the origin of the character -- now retold differently than in the 1989 film. The essential novelty here was in the reinterpretations of the stories of familiar characters; the gimmickry present in the Copper Age continued -- although somewhat more restrained.

The big surprise of the Iron Age was the *Walking Dead*. While the book sold reasonably well, it was the fact that it became a highly-popular television series that resulted in immediate collectability for the title. The AMC program spawned zombie programs, television shows, books, and other media -- all in imitation of the popular series.



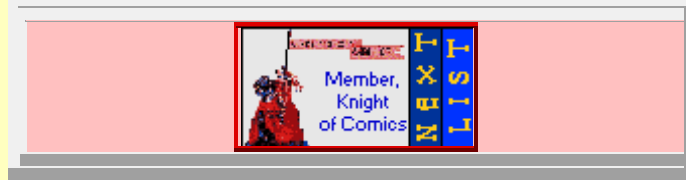
## The Nickel Age 2015??

The regeneration of superhero TV shows and films has resulted in the creation of new comic book series. For Marvel this included Deadpool and Doctor Strange, while DC rose due to the popularity of Supergirl, Arrow, Gotham, and Flash. DC rebooted its titles yet again with "The DC Universe Rebirth." Marvel restarted *The Amazing Spider-Man* and capitalized on Star Wars, and *Civil War II* was a strong seller.

This site is owned by  
[HERO Inc.](#),  
 a knight of the [Knights of Comics](#).

[Previous 5 Sites](#)   [Skip Previous](#)   [Previous](#)  
  
[Next](#)   [Skip Next](#)   [Next 5 Sites](#)  
  
[Random Site](#)   [List Sites](#)





Content © 2000, 2003, 2016 Frank Daniels  
[Back to the Heresy Homepage](#)