The Superhero Book

The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Comic-Book Icons and Hollywood Heroes

Edited by Gina Misiroglu

with David A. Roach

Detroit

Contents

Introduction *xi* Acknowledgments *xviii* Contributors *xix*

AC Comics Heroes 1
Action Girl 2
Adam Strange 3
African-American Heroes 4
Alpha Flight 9
Alternative Futures 11
America's Best Comics Heroes 15
Anime and Manga 18
Ant-Man 23
Anti-drug Series 24
Anti-heroes 26
Aquaman 30
Aquatic Heroes 31
Archie Heroes 34
Astro Boy 36
Astro City 38
The Atom 40
Atomic Heroes 41
The Authority 43
The Avengers 45
Azrael 48

Bad Girl Art 51
The Badger 51
Bartman 53
Batgirl 54
Batman 56
Batman in the Media 61
Batman Villains 68
Batman's Weapons and Gadgets 70
Battle of the Planets 72
Big Bang Heroes 74
Bird Heroes 75
Birds of Prey 78
Black Canary 79
The Black Cat I 80
The Black Cat II 82
Black Condor 83
Black Panther 84
Black Widow 86
Blackhawk 87
Blonde Phantom 90
Blue Beetle 92
Bronze Age of Superheroes (1970–1979) 93
Buffy the Vampire Slayer 96
Bulletman 99

Camp and Comedy Heroes 101
Camp Heroes in the Media 107
Captain Action 110
Captain America 111
Captain America in the Media 114
Captain Atom 116
Captain Britain 119
Captain Canuck 121
Captain Marvel 122
Captain Marvel Jr. 124
Captain Marvel/Shazam! 125

Captain Marvel/Shazam! in the Media ...128
Captain Midnight ...131
Card Captor Sakura ...132
Casshan: Robot Hunter ...134
The Cat ...135
Cat Heroes ...137
Cat-Man ...139
Catwoman ...140
Challengers of the Unknown ...142
Charlton Heroes ...143
Civilian Heroes ...145
Cobra ...147
Comics Code ...151
The Creeper ...152
Cutey Bunny ...154
Cutey Honey ...155
Cyberforce ...157

Daredevil I ...159
Daredevil II ...161
Daredevil in the Media ...165
Dark Horse Heroes ...167
Dazzler ...170
DC Comics ...171
Deadman ...176
The Defenders ...177
"Dial 'H' for Hero" ...179
Doc Savage ...180
Doctor Strange ...182
Do-It-Yourself Heroes ...184
Doll Man ...185
Doom Patrol ...187
Dr. Fate ...188
Dragon Ball ...189

Eclipse Heroes ...193
ElectraWoman and DynaGirl ...194
Elektra ...195
Elementals ...197
Elongated Man ...198
E-Man ...199
Everyday Heroes ...200
Extreme Studios Heroes ...202

Fantastic Four ...205
Fantastic Four in the Media ...208
Femforce ...210
Feminism ...212
Fighting American ...215
Firestorm ...216
The Flash ...218
Funny Animal Heroes ...221

Gen 13 ...225
Ghost Rider ...227
Golden Age of Superheroes (1938–1954) ...228
Good Girl Art ...233
The Greatest American Hero ...234
Green Arrow ...236
Green Hornet ...237
Green Lantern ...239
Guardians of the Galaxy ...241

Hanna-Barbera Heroes ...245
Harvey Heroes ...247
The Hawk and the Dove ...250
Hawkeye ...251
Hawkman ...252
Hellboy ...254
Heroes for Hire ...256
The Hulk ...257
The Hulk in the Media ...263
The Human Torch ...267
The Huntress ...270
Hurricane Polymar ...271

Image Comics Heroes ...273
The Inferior Five ...276
The Inhumans ...277
Insect Heroes ...278
International Heroes ...281
The Invaders ...284
Iron Fist ...286
Iron Man ...288
Isis ...290

Justice League of America ...293
Justice League of America in the Media ...295
Justice Society of America ...298

Kryptonite 303

Lane, Lois 305
Legion of Super-Heroes 307
Lobo 310
Love Interests 313

Madara 321
Madman 322
Mai, the Psychic Girl 324
The Man from Atlantis 326
Manhunter 326
Manimal 328
Martian Manhunter 328
Marvel Boy 330
Marvel Comics 331
Mary Marvel 336
The Mask 337
Master of Kung Fu 338
Metal Men 340
Metamorpho 341
Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers 343
Milestone Heroes 344
Miracleman 346
Miss Fury 348
Modern Age of Superheroes (1980–Present) 349
Moon Knight 353
Ms. Marvel 354
Multiculturalism 355

The New Gods 361
Nick Fury 363
The Night Man 365
Nightwing 365
Northstar 367
Nova 369

Olsen, Jimmy 371
One-Hit Wonders 372
The Outsiders 374

The Phantom 377
The Phantom in the Media 379
Phantom Lady 380
Phantom Stranger 382
Plastic Man 383
Power Man 386
Power Pack 389
The Powerpuff Girls 390
Project A-ko 391
Promethea 394
The Punisher 395

Rising Stars 399
Robin 400
Robotman 403
Rock Superheroes 404
The Rocketeer 406
Ronin Warriors 408

Sailor Moon 411
Sandman 413
The Savage Dragon 415
The Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver 416
The Secret Identity 418
The Sentry 419
The Shadow 420
ShadowHawk 423
The She-Hulk 424
Shi 425
Sidekicks and Protégés 427
Silver Age of Superheroes (1956–1969) 430
The Silver Surfer 435
Space Ghost 437
Space Heroes 439
Spacehawk 442
Spawn 443
The Spectre 446
Speed Racer 447
Spider-Man 449
Spider-Man in the Media 455
Spider-Man Villains 460
Spider-Woman 464
The Spirit 466
Starman 469
Static Shock 471
Steel 472

Stripperella 473
Sub-Mariner 474
Super Friends 477
Super-archers 479
Superboy 481
Superboy in the Media 483
Supercities 485
Supergirl 488
Superhero Cartoon Shows 490
Superhero Confidants 494
Superhero Creators 497
Superhero Headquarters 505
Superhero Movie Serials 508
Superhero Nicknames 509
Superhero Radio Series 511
Superhero Role-Playing Games 512
Superhero Slogans 515
Superhero Vulnerabilities 516
Superheroes and Celebrities 519
Superheroes and the Popular Culture 520
Superheroes in Prose 525
Superheroes with Disabilities 528
Superheroines 531
Superman 538
Superman in the Media 543
Superman Villains 549
Superman's Weapons and Gadgets 552
Supermedia 553
Supernatural Heroes 554
Superpatriots 558
Superpets 561
Superpowers 562
Superteams 566
Supervehicles 571
Supervillains 573
Superweapons 580

Tank Girl 583
Team-ups and Crossovers 584
Teen Titans 590
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 593
Tekkaman 595
Thor 597
T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents 600
The Tick 602

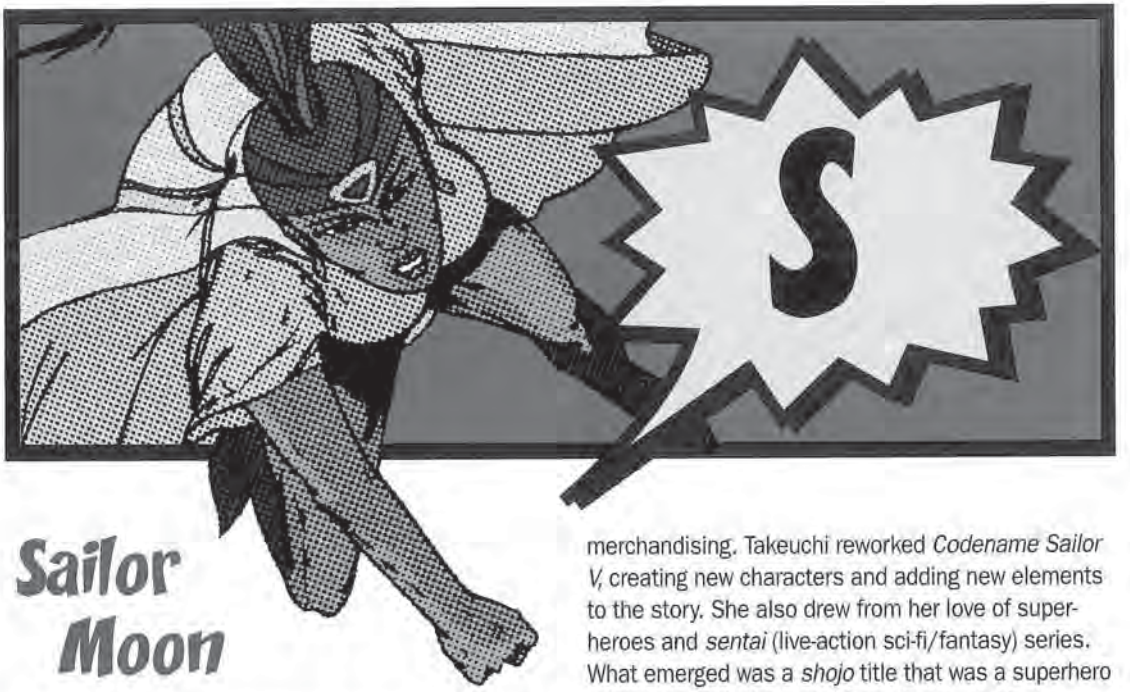
Ultraman 605
Ultraverse Heroes 608

Valiant Heroes 611
Vertigo Heroes 613
The Vigilante 615

The Wasp 617
Watchmen 618
Watson, Mary Jane 620
WildC.A.T.S 622
WildStorm Heroes 623
Wolverine 624
Wonder Warthog 626
Wonder Woman 627
Wonder Woman in the Media 632
World War II and the Superhero 636

X-Men 641
X-Men: Excalibur 645
X-Men: Generation X 647
X-Men: New Mutants 650
X-Men: X-Force/X-Statix 652
X-Men in the Media 654
X-Men Villains 657

Resources 661 Photo and Illustration Credits 665 Index 667

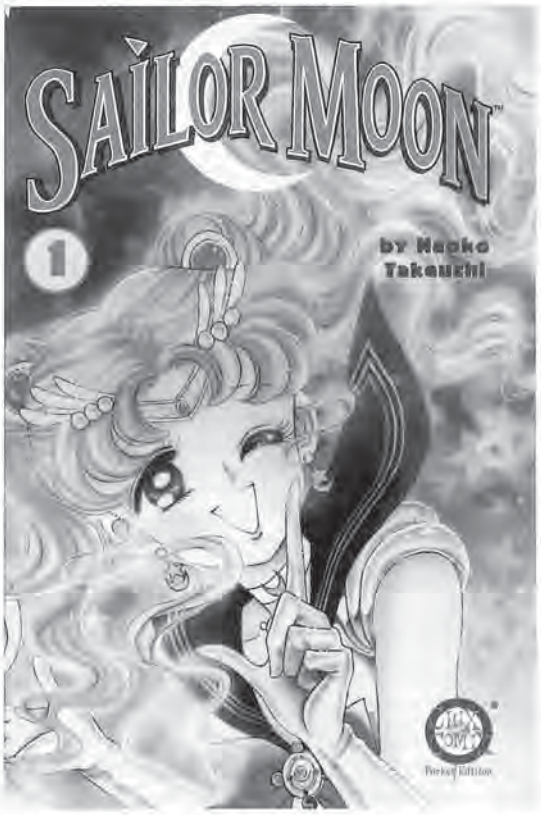


Sailor Moon

In 1972, Tatsunoko Productions' *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman* ushered in a new concept in anime—the five-member superhero team. Since then, that concept has been featured in anime such as *Yoroiden Samurai Troopers* (Ronin Warriors in the United States), *Saint Seiya, Shurato,* and *Golion* (the Voltron Lion Team). Yet the main characters were almost exclusively male; there was only one female member. Twenty years after *Gatchaman,* however, the team concept was changed again, and the result brought an entirely new energy to manga and anime. The series responsible for this change was *Sailor Moon.*

Lovely Soldier Sailor Moon began as a short-lived manga created by Naoko Takeuchi called *Codename Sailor V* in 1991. The main character was a mask-wearing heroine whose costume was modeled after the "sailor suit" uniform worn by Japanese schoolgirls. Yoshio Irie, the new editor of the monthly *shojo* ("girls' comic") magazine *Nakayoshi,* latched onto the possibility of using the manga as the first step in a multimedia franchise—one that could be launched simultaneously in comics, television, and merchandising. Takeuchi reworked *Codename Sailor V,* creating new characters and adding new elements to the story. She also drew from her love of superheroes and *sentai* (live-action sci-fi/fantasy) series. What emerged was a *shojo* title that was a superhero adventure, with the main characters being five teenage girls—something unheard of at the time. In January 1992, *Bishojo Senshi Sailor Moon* began running in *Nakayoshi,* but in February the animated series began airing on Japanese television. Normally, there would be a period of several months, or even years, between the manga's initial run and its anime adaptation. In the case of *Sailor Moon,* the manga and anime were running concurrently, another first in the Japanese pop-culture world.

The staff involved in the production of the *Sailor Moon* animated series included directors Kunihiko Ikuhara and Kazuhisa Takenouchi and character designers Kazuko Tadano and Ikuko Ito, among others. Toei Animation produced the animation for the series in Japan, which would eventually run for more than two hundred episodes over five years. Each season also had a different title; after season one's *Sailor Moon,* there was *Sailor Moon R, Sailor Moon S, Sailor Moon Super S,* and *Sailor Moon Sailor Stars,* the final season, which ended in 1997. The manga's run also ended that year. The popularity of the series led to the production of



Sailor Moon #1 © 1998 Naoko Takeuchi.
COVER ART BY NAOKO TAKEUCHI.

three animated theatrical films that were released in Japan—*Sailor Moon R* (1993), *Sailor Moon S* (1994), and *Sailor Moon Super S* (1995).

The manga and anime followed the adventures of Usagi Tsukino, who by all appearances is a cheerful teenage girl. She is also lazy and a whining crybaby, ignoring her schoolwork and daydreaming. Everything changes when she meets a talking black cat named Luna, who is searching for the reincarnation of the Moon Princess Serenity. Usagi is told that *she* is Princess Serenity, reborn. Using magical items that include a wand and a tiara—plus powers given to her by Luna—Usagi transforms into superheroine Sailor Moon, who becomes the leader of the Sailor Warriors; the remaining four are named after planets: Sailor Mercury (Ami Mizuno), Sailor Mars (Rei Hino), Sailor Jupiter (Makoto Kino), and Sailor Venus (Minako Aino). Each heroine wears a "sailor suit" of a particular color, and each has powers based on the "elements" of fire, water, wood, and love. The team must face a growing threat to the universe in the form of Queen Beryl and her master Queen Metallia. The Sailor Warriors' main allies are Luna, Artemis (a magical white cat), and the mysterious Tuxedo Mask, who is actually the girls' classmate Mamoru Chiba. Mamoru is also the reincarnation of Endymion, Princess Serenity's beloved.

While the manga and anime did have humor and action, both also had strong storylines, well-developed characters, and a strong element of romance. In addition, the five heroines were always victorious when working together—an important component of the "five-member team" anime concept, and one that appealed to a girl audience. To fans, the characters were "real"—they had typical teenager issues; one can easily see parallels with Spider-Man's alter ego, Peter Parker. "The attraction of Sailor Moon is that it enables young girls to fantasize themselves as powerful as their brothers' macho superheroes, without losing any of their femininity," notes Maurice Horn's *The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons* (1999).

True to form, the series did not shy away from killing off major characters—in fact, the first season of the anime series ended with the main cast being killed off during the final assault on Queen Beryl's lair (but they were revived at the episode's end). Even the courageous Tuxedo Mask had to be saved by the Sailor Warriors on several occasions. Usagi accepts her role as the leader of the Sailor Warriors and grows in experience and maturity. Over the next four seasons, more villains would be introduced, but also new Sailor Warriors—Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. One major new character was Chibi Usa, young girl from the future ... who happens to be the future daughter of Usagi and Mamoru. In the course of the series, it is revealed that Usagi and Mamoru become the future rulers of the Silver Mil-

lennium; as Queen Serenity and King Endymion, both rule peacefully over thirtieth-century Earth, where all have eternal life and beauty.

The success of the manga, anime, and merchandising for *Sailor Moon* made it one of the most popular anime franchises of the 1990s. The series had high ratings and drew an audience that was predominately female, but also attracted males. It was inevitable that an American release would soon follow. DiC produced an English-language version of *Sailor Moon* for release on American syndicated television in 1995. Names were changed—Usagi became "Serena," and the Sailor Warriors became the "Sailor Scouts"; a new English-language theme song was created. Unfortunately, the attempt nearly ended as a major failure. Many stations broadcast the series at time slots that were too early in the morning for viewers; others simply did not know the target audience. The triad of manga-series-marketing push that had been successful in Japan was not repeated in the United States. Also, the series was heavily edited to remove elements that were regarded as too mature or sophisticated for children; whole episodes essentially had their stories radically altered. The series was canceled after its first season in 1996—yet all was not lost.

In Canada, the first two seasons were aired successfully on the YTV network. In the United States, an Internet-based movement called S.O.S. —Save Our Sailors—was organized to create petitions and appeal to network executives to bring the series back to television. The campaign was a resounding success; *Sailor Moon* was aired briefly on the USA cable network in 1997, and was picked up by the Cartoon Network in 1998. With a better timeslot and full-fledged promotion, the series became the network's highest-rated show. To the delight of fans, the first four seasons of *Sailor Moon* were aired on television. TOKYOPOP/Mixx Entertainment produced the English translation of the manga; first for the comic magazine *Smile* and then as an ongoing series. The company also released original novels based on the series written by Lianne Sentar. Guardians of Order produced a role-playing game and a collectible card game (CCG) and Irwin Toys of Canada produced toys and dolls. Sailor Moon and her team appeared in books, on apparel, on mugs, and in calendars, just about everywhere that the pop-culture eye roamed. The series was also parodied, most notably by American writer-artist Adam Warren in his 1998 three-issue miniseries *Gen 13: Magical Drama Queen Roxy.*

In 1999, Pioneer began releasing subtitled and dubbed versions of the three *Sailor Moon* movies. The movies were uncut and unedited (although the initial English-language release on VHS was edited for content). ADV Films began releasing the edited English-language version produced by DiC on DVD in 2002, but in 2003 the company released an uncut, subtitled version of *Sailor Moon*'s first season on DVD, with plans to release the entire five seasons in the future.

Sailor Moon triggered a new wave of manga and anime that combined *shojo* and action; among the titles were *Fushigi Yuugi, Magic Knight Rayearth, Card Captor Sakura, Escaflowne,* and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (created by Kunihiko Ikuhara, one of *Sailor Moon*'s directors). Naoko Takeuchi was a guest at the 1998 San Diego Comic-Con International. Even though it ended in 1997, the show is still popular in Japan and around the world. In the United States, the Sailor Scouts are popular "cosplay" characters, in a branch of fandom in which both males and females dress up as members of the team at conventions and other events. —*MM*

Samurai Troopers: *See* Ronin Warriors

Sandman

When he first appeared in the summer of 1939 (in *Adventure Comics* #40) the Sandman was only the fourth superhero in comics history, and the third published by DC Comics (then National Publica-

tions) after Superman and Batman. However, he did not possess any superpowers. Like Batman's alter ego, Bruce Wayne, Wesley Dodd was a millionaire playboy who put on a costume to confront hoodlums and ne'er-do-wells, armed only with his fists and wits—and a rather handy gas-gun. Dodd's costume, such as it was, consisted of a purple cape, a slouch hat, a smart suit, and a gold gas mask (necessary because his modus operandi was to gas his foes into slumber with the pull of his trigger). Unusually for superheroes of the period, the Sandman's elegant society girlfriend, Dian (also Diane) Belmont, knew his secret identity and had a habit of helping him out on assignments, invariably dressed in a diaphanous ball gown.

The men responsible for these early episodes were prolific writer Gardner Fox and the young but talented artist Bert Christman. Sadly, Christman left the strip to seek adventure of his own as one of General Claire Chenault's legendary Flying Tigers, and was later killed while flying over China in the early days of World War II. His replacement was the equally talented Craig Flessel but, despite the strip being one of the best-crafted features of the era, DC decided to spice it up by giving the Sandman a yellow and purple superhero costume and a young sidekick named Sandy Hawkins. A few issues later, the transformation was complete when Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, recently defected from Marvel Comics, took over the creative reins (with issue #72) and turned it into an all-action slugfest.

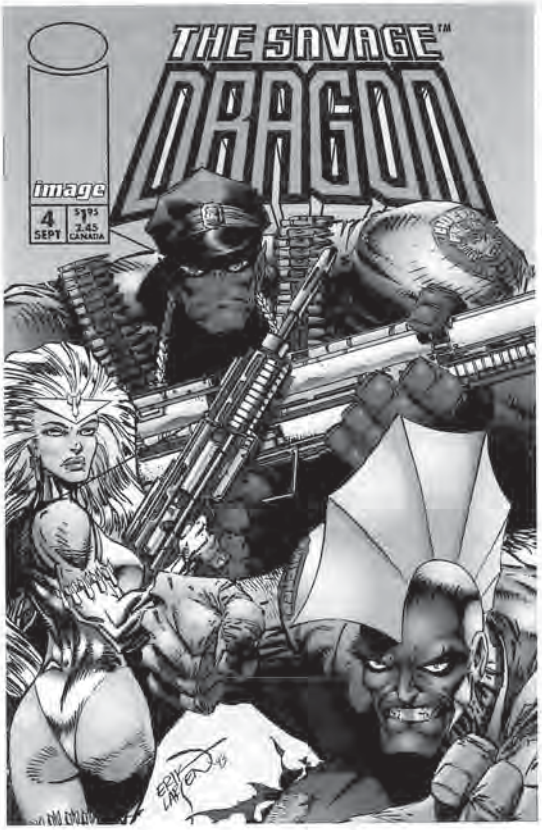
The Simon and Kirby Sandman punched first and thought later, and the strip became a frenetic display of all-out battles and daredevil heroics. Unlike other wartime features, the Sandman and Sandy generally fought organized crime and the occasional Norse god rather than the Third Reich. The strip was the cover feature of *Adventure Comics* throughout the war, but its quality suffered when its creative team was drafted (as creative teams often were at the time) and, in February 1946, it became one of the first casualties of the peacetime comics slump and lost its place to Superboy. At the peak of his popularity in both his guises, the Sandman was featured in comics such as *World's Finest, World's Fair,* and, as a member of the Justice Society of America, in *All Star Comics;* it was the latter group that would prove to be his savior.

While the Silver Age (1956–1969) superhero boom of the 1960s saw a whole range of new characters, it also revived some of the old favorites and, for many years, the Justice Society appeared in an annual crossover with the Justice League of America. Between 1966 and 1974, the Sandman was a frequent member of the Justice Society in those team-ups, though it was always in his earlier, gas-mask costume. The last of those stories revealed, somewhat implausibly, that for many years Sandy had been lurking around, transformed into a giant sand creature. Things got even stranger for our hero when Simon and Kirby created another Sandman (published in January 1974 as the one-shot titled *Sandman* #1 and later picked up as a brief mid-1970s series), a yellow-suited hero who lived "somewhere between heaven and earth" in a secret hideout where he monitored people's dreams. Complete with monstrous assistants, Brute and Glob, this Sandman battled the likes of Dr. Spider, the Sealmen, General Electric, and various frog people. Perhaps inevitably, it was just a short-lived experiment but it served, some years later, as the inspiration for yet another Sandman, who premiered in 1989.

This radical reinvention, written by Neil Gaiman, was a fantasy series starring Morpheus (the Sandman of the title, also known as Dream, the Prince of Stories), an angelic-looking girl named Death, and numerous other characters from the realm of dreams. While Morpheus had little to do with previous incarnations of the Sandman character, the comic's enormous critical and commercial success—*Sandman* #19 won the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story in 1991—rekindled interest in the character. The Sandman comic sold more than 1 million copies per year, and Gaiman was heralded as the creator who reignited a medium, with Norman Mailer proclaiming, "Along with all else, *Sandman* is

a comic strip for intellectuals, and I say it's about time." This excellence of writing, in fact, attracted acclaimed guest-talent, including Clive Barker, Sam Keith, and Todd McFarlane. Ten Sandman short-story collections have appeared as of 2004; and Warner Bros. has optioned Sandman for a movie. Though the series ended in 1996, Gaiman has returned to it for such special events as the hardback collection *Endless Nights* (2003), and a number of spinoffs by other creators have appeared.

In 1993 the original Sandman returned in the *Sandman Mystery Theatre* comic. This *Sandman* spin-off series effectively retold the story of Wesley Dodd and Dian Belmont from their very first adventures, and featured guest stars such as Blackhawk and Hourman. It ran for seventy issues—much longer, ironically, than its 1940s forerunner—and ended in 1999 with Dodd and Belmont heading off for wartorn Europe. As if that wasn't enough, yet another Justice Society revival starred an elderly Dodd, still wearing the gas mask, in modern-day adventures, one of which told of how he died. In the 2000s he has been replaced by "Sand" (actually an incarnation of sidekick Sandy!), a gas-masked hero who can transform into his namesake substance (like the Marvel Comics Spider-Man villain also named Sandman); a sure sign of a concept and character durable enough to withstand the sands of time. *—DAR*



The Savage Dragon #4 © 1993 Erik Larsen.
COVER ART BY ERIK LARSEN.

The Savage Dragon

Discovered naked in a burning empty lot in Chicago, an amnesiac green man with fangs and a fin on his head is taken to the hospital. Named "Dragon" by a nurse, the man bonds with Lieutenant Frank Darling of the Chicago Police Department. Later, when Dragon helps stop some super-criminals at the harbor, Darling tries to get Dragon to join the police force to help fight the rising tide of super "freaks." After surviving a tragedy partially engineered by the criminal gang known as the Vicious Circle, Dragon becomes a Chicago PD officer with a penchant for fighting crime, getting his shirt torn off, and romancing the ladies.

Comic creator Erik Larsen had started in the independent comics trenches, which is where his childhood creation, the Dragon, first saw print (in *Megaton* #3, February 1986). Larsen worked his way up through the comics ranks, eventually becoming a fan favorite on Marvel Comics such as *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Nova*. Larsen left Marvel with six other popular creators to form Image Comics in 1992. *The Savage Dragon* #1 debuted a three-issue miniseries in July 1992, and the regular series has appeared monthly (mostly) ever since its first issue in June 1993. Larsen has written and drawn every

issue to date, though other creators came onboard to create special issues, spin-off miniseries, and crossovers with books as diverse as *Destroyer Duck, Marshal Law, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Superman,* and *Megaton Man.*

The Savage Dragon has incredible strength, and can jump huge distances. He is nearly invulnerable to flame, plasma, explosions, and gunfire, though he has been hurt, cut, and even maimed by maces, knives, and other weapons. His healing power is also advanced; he has regrown entire limbs in the past, after battles with supervillains. The most dangerous villains he faced in the past worked for the OverLord in the Vicious Circle. Villains included SkullFace, Hardware, Abner Cadaver, Arachnid, Clawedd van Damage, Phathead, Stigma, and the waste-spewing Dung. After the death of OverLord, a more charismatic leader named CyberFace took over the Circle, and bedeviled Dragon anew, even succeeding in getting him fired from the police department.

For a time, Dragon worked with a government-sponsored Special Operative Strikeforce, but after facing a personal tragedy on his wedding day, Dragon semi-retired. Some time later, after Dragon killed an infant who would have grown up to be the villain Damien DarkLord, he caused a disruption in the timestream, and discovered he was now living in a new "Savage World," similar to the old Earth, but different enough to be dangerous. He was forced to figure out friend from foe, and deal with the many surprises that this new life threw at him.

During his run, Dragon has teamed up with a variety of heroes—many of whom have had their own spin-off series or miniseries—including star-spangled cyborg SuperPatriot, the funky weirdos known as Freak Force, the squabbling Deadly Duo, gender-switching Mighty Man (whose secret identity is a female), and more. Unmatched in this capacity by most of the other Image creators, Larsen has singularly created a vast universe of characters that have an internal consistency. He has also managed to crossover with other series; besides those in specific titles previously mentioned, and other Image heroes, Savage Dragon has interacted with Hellboy, FemForce, E-Man, Zot, Vampirella, the DNAgents, and others.

Whether fighting crime in Chicago on the Image Earth, or fighting supervillains in the Savage World universe, the Savage Dragon remains popular with fans. In October 1995, USA Network debuted a *Savage Dragon* animated series. The series lasted two seasons, ending in the fall of 1996 after twenty-six episodes. Multiple action figures of Dragon and his friends and enemies have been produced, as well as statues, posters, trading cards, and more. Larsen also has an aggressive trade paperback program, so that fans can read all of the Dragon's adventures even if they can't find the back issues.—*AM*

The Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver

Longstanding Avengers members the Scarlet Witch and her twin brother Quicksilver have gone through as convoluted and protracted an origin as any characters in comics, and have endured many indignities in the process. Despite or perhaps because of this, the Scarlet Witch is one of the longest-lived female supporting characters in the Marvel universe. The twins first appeared as members of Magneto's Brotherhood of Evil Mutants in *X-Men* #4 (in 1964) but were almost from the start reluctant villains. After a year of regular battles with the X-Men, their creators, writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby, evidently felt that the pair deserved a chance at the big time and, after a speedy renunciation of their criminal past, they were duly inducted into the Avengers (*Avengers* #16, 1965).

As Avengers, the twins were a cornerstone of the group's glory years through the 1960s and 1970s, while never quite building up enough of a following to encourage Marvel to launch them into

solo careers. Initially, all that was known about them was that they were mutants. Wanda Maximoff, a.k.a. the Scarlet Witch, possessed a form of magic ("hex power"), while her brother Pietro, known as Quicksilver, was (as his name suggests) a super-speedster with a short-fused temper to match. Their first origin involved them fleeing persecution in their native Transia (one of Marvel's all-purpose Balkan backwaters) into the arms of Magneto, but there was much, much more to come.

In 1975 editors suggested (in *Giant-Size Avengers* #1) that Wanda and Pietro's parents were 1940s heroes the Whizzer and Miss America, who had given birth after a nuclear accident. Miss America died and the Whizzer fled in grief, leaving the twins to be brought up by a highly evolved cow (one of the *Island of Dr. Moreau*–like characters from Marvel's mythical complex called Wundagore). Some years later, however, this explanation was superseded by an even more startling revelation. This newer version (in *Avengers* #185) suggested that Miss America's twins had died and that Wanda and Pietro were actually born to a gypsy named Magda, who had subsequently killed herself rather than reveal their whereabouts to their father Magnus, later known as ... Magneto. The cow-lady midwife later gave the children to a gypsy family, the Maximoffs, who brought Wanda and Pietro up until they were killed by a mob, whereupon the twins were rescued by Magneto—which is where readers came into the storyline with *X-Men* #4.

The 1970s were a romantic decade for the twins, as the Scarlet Witch fell in love with her android teammate, the Vision, and Quicksilver fell for Crystal of the Inhumans. Both couples married, and Quicksilver went off to live in the Inhumans' Himalayan refuge (and later on the moon), while his sister settled down to cozy domesticity in Leonia, New Jersey. (The Vision and the Witch starred in a couple of mid-1980s miniseries, *Vision and Scarlet Witch*, by writer Steve Englehart and artist Richard Howell.) But whereas Quicksilver gained a child, Luna, and was largely written out of the Avengers, Marvel writers had a different fate in store for the Scarlet Witch. During the company's *Secret Wars* series, the Vision was controlled by aliens, and a while later the couple left the Avengers for their West Coast branch. There Wanda became pregnant and gave birth to twins, William and Thomas; it later transpired that these were demon offshoots of the evil Mephisto. Then an increasingly unbalanced Vision was dismantled before being reconstructed without any emotion, and the couple tragically divorced, although the Vision's "half-brother" Wonder Man (on whose brain patterns the android's mind was based) unhelpfully declared his undying love for Wanda.

Things got even worse for Wanda in the 1980s, as she was reclaimed by Magneto after becoming a bride of Set, and went over to the "dark side." Quicksilver returned to rescue her, but she was soon claimed by another Marvel baddie, Immortus, who had been influencing her actions for years. Confusingly, it seems that she was in fact not a garden-variety mutant but a nexus being—"someone who belongs to all realities." In later issues of *West Coast Avengers* she became the group's leader, a position she continued to hold in Force Works, a team of former West Coast Avengers (1994), but there was more upheaval to come. In the "Onslaught" storyline, she died along with the other Avengers but was resurrected soon after. Wonder Man died, came back, died, came back as an energy being and died again, still proffering his undying love, even though it was his robotic half-brother who was Wanda's most enduring paramour.

Perhaps feeling that they have wrung every last plot twist from the unfortunate girl, Marvel's writers have been somewhat kinder to the Scarlet Witch in the new millennium. Back in the Avengers after a decade away, with the Vision restored to his full range of emotions, and with romance possibly back in the air, the future looks promising. Although she has made only one solo outing (in a four-issue 1994 miniseries), as one of the Avengers' longest-serving members, the Scarlet Witch will almost certainly feature in Marvel's plans for years to come. —*DAR*

Ultraman

The late Eiji Tsuburaya—Japan's greatest special-effects master—was responsible for the visual effects for the early Godzilla films, beginning in 1954 with *Gojira* (*Godzilla, King of the Monsters*). These films, referred to by the Japanese term *kaiju eiga* (literally, "giant monster film"), have grown in popularity and continue to be enjoyed in Japan and around the world, with new Godzilla films being produced. Yet Tsuburaya made his mark not just in the movies, but also on Japanese television, where his work on a unique live-action science fiction series led to the creation of Japan's most popular live-action superhero: Ultraman.

Ultraman's roots began with the television show *Ultra Q*. This twenty-eight-episode black and white science fiction series first aired on Japanese television on January 2, 1966. The premise dealt with three investigators—a pilot, his assistant, and a reporter—who explored strange phenomena that would lead to the revelation of a giant monster or an unknown creature. At the root of the appearances of such creatures would be an explanation grounded in science, such as environmental destruction or extra-terrestrial visitations. Many have referred to the show as a combination of *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits* (or one could call it a precursor to *The X-Files*). Not every episode of *Ultra Q* featured a giant monster, but the series scored high ratings, and its popularity would have a strong influence on *Ultraman*.

Tsuburaya's desire was to create a show that had giant monsters and a force powerful enough to defeat them. At the same time, the show had to fit within a thirty-minute time frame. The result of this work, a series titled *Ultraman*, premiered on July 17, 1966, on Japanese television, and was an immediate success. The original *Ultraman* series only ran for thirty-nine episodes, but in the nearly forty years since the character first appeared, the many television shows, movies, comics, and additional merchandise have gained Ultraman a worldwide recognition on par with Mickey Mouse and Charlie Brown.

At first glance, Ultraman appears to be a robot, with his red and silver body, bullet-shaped helmet (and its fin), yellow eyes, and giant stature—he stands forty meters tall and weighs 35,000 tons. However, he is actually a living being, an interstellar law enforcement officer from a planet located in Nebula M-78. He is part of a galactic law enforcement team consisting of many beings similar to him—all are called "Ultras." Each episode is set in

the present day or the near future. The first *Ultraman* series began with the title character pursuing the criminal Bemlar to Earth. Ultraman accidentally collides with a craft piloted by Hayata of the Science Patrol, killing him. In response (and as a way to make amends), Ultraman revives Hayata and gives him the "Beta Capsule"; by raising the device and pressing the button, Hayata transforms into Ultraman to battle giant beasts. The hero's main weapon is the "specium ray," an energy beam fired when Ultraman crosses his arms in a "plus sign" manner. There is a catch—Ultraman can only remain in his giant form for three minutes while on Earth. This time limit would become the standard for future shows. The battles between Ultraman and the various enemy creatures were performed by actors in costumes filmed on sets with detailed miniature buildings, hills, and mountains. Prominent villains of the original *Ultraman* series include Baltan-seijin (an insectiod alien monster), Red King, and Zetton, an alien dinosaur.

Ultraman became a major success, scoring high ratings and interest. Children were the show's largest fan group, although older viewers enjoyed the show too; it was also the first color television show in Japan made for children. With his immense size and strength, Ultraman is truly a larger-than-life superhero, a defender of Earth (even if the majority of the action took place in Japan). There are some similarities to American superheroes: Ultraman is a powerful alien who uses a human "disguise" to hide his identity (like Superman), and changes size to battle monsters (like Giant Man of the Avengers).

In 1967, Tsuburaya Productions decided to develop a new series called *Ultraseven*. This series introduced a new agent from M-78 who takes on the human identity of Dan Moroboshi while on Earth. The TDF (Terrestrial Defense Forces) represent humankind's line of defense against alien invaders or monsters. The new series, at forty-nine episodes, was darker in tone and dealt with more serious issues than the original series. (In fact, the twelfth episode caused a major controversy in Japan and was banned from television due to its portrayal of aliens whose appearance recalled radiation poisoning as in Hiroshima.) Over the next thirty-five years, *Ultraman* would continue through nineteen television shows in Japan as well as more than a dozen live-action theatrical films. Each new series featured a new Ultra, and in *Ultraman Ace*, two people—Seiji Hobuto and Yuko Minami—become Ultraman Ace by touching their "Ultra rings" together.

In 1996, the fifty-two-episode *Ultraman Tiga* introduced an Ultra who uses different "modes" to utilize in combat: a default "Multi type," a more powerful "Power type," and a "Sky type" that is faster, but not as powerful as the previous two modes. Tiga was also the first Ultraman to have colors other than red and silver—his "Sky type" mode is blue in color with silver trim. The series itself is set in the year 2007, but in a different universe than the previous shows in the franchise. *Tiga* was followed by its lighthearted sequel *Ultraman Dyna*, but the next series *Ultraman Gaia* was set in yet another universe different from *Tiga* or *Dyna*. *Ultraman Gaia* focused primarily on the conflicting beliefs of the two Ultras who were the main characters: Gaia wants to save the earth and humanity, but Agul (who is blue in color) wants to save only the planet—he is not particularly concerned if humanity is wiped out in the process. Another change that was apparent in the Ultraman series of the mid- to late 1990s was that the Ultras are not from Nebula M-78, but are instead guardians of Earth.

The most recent series, *Ultraman Cosmos*, ran on Japanese television from 2001 to 2002. With sixty-five episodes—and two movies—it is the longest-running series in the Ultraman franchise (despite a brief interruption in broadcasting). *Cosmos* also represents a shift in attitude toward violence in the media in Japan; as an Ultra, Cosmos has "gentle" and "strong" modes that are used to defeat the enemy, but gone are the bloody fights with enemies being hacked apart that were so popular on the earlier shows.

Despite being a unique Japanese hero, Ultraman is well known in America. The original series was dubbed into English and syndicated on American television in the late 1960s. *Ultraseven* was dubbed into English by Ted Turner's TNT cable channel in 1985, but the bad dubbing and writing was also combined with major edits. While the dubbed version of *Ultraseven* was shown during the early morning hours on TNT, it was not the entire run of the original forty-nine episodes. However, in 1987, a unique project was created by Tsuburaya Productions and Hanna-Barbera Productions. Called *Ultraman: The Adventure Begins* (or *Ultraman USA*), the animated pilot dealt with three U.S. Air Force pilots—Chuck Gavin, Beth O'Brian, and Scott Masterson—who join forces with three Ultras from M-78. Now known as Ultra Force, the three heroes battle alien monsters from the destroyed planet Sorkin. The pilot episode was the first *Ultraman* show to have a female Ultra as a prominent main character.

The joint Tsuburaya/Hanna Barbera pilot episode never made it to a full-fledged television series. However, there were other efforts to create Ultraman shows outside Japan (but with the full cooperation of Tsuburaya Productions). In 1991, *Ultraman: Towards the Future* (the title was changed to *Ultraman Great* when it was shown on Japanese television) ran for thirteen episodes on American syndicated television. This was the first Ultraman series to be made in English, and was filmed in Australia. The live-action series followed the adventures of former astronaut Jack Shindo, now a member of the UMA (Universal Multipurpose Agency) who became Ultraman to battle monsters created by the alien Gudis virus. The series boasted improved visual effects and miniatures, and was backed up by a merchandising campaign that included action figures and a sequel comics series produced by Harvey Comics in 1993, the same year the series was released on home video. Dwayne McDuffie wrote the limited series, with art by Ernie Colón and Alfredo Alcala. Bandai produced a videogame that was released in the United States for the Super Nintendo game console; called *Ultraman*, it featured the main hero and the villains from *Ultraman: Towards the Future*.

Ultraman #1 ™ and © 1993 Tsuburaya Productions Co. Inc. COVER ART BY KEN STEACY.

A second attempt at an English-language live-action Ultraman series was 1994's *Ultraman: The Ultimate Hero.* While the series' main character, Ken-ichi Kai, is Japanese (making *U: TUH* one of the few American shows to have an Asian American as the main character), the production was primarily done in the United States, under the supervision of Tsuburaya Productions. In this series, Kai is a member of the W.I.N.R. (Worldwide Investigation Network Response) team that defends Earth from malevolent aliens called Baltans. Major Havoc Entertain-

ment in California filmed the principal photography and the creature effects, as well as many of the visual effects. The design for Ultraman was modernized and redefined; his "eyes," while blue (instead of yellow), turn red during periods of intense combat. The series was shot on 35mm film (which is standard for motion pictures, not television). Unfortunately, the thirteen-episode series was never released officially in the United States; it was released in Japan under the title *Ultraman Powered.* Reaction to the series was mixed; while viewers lauded the creature designs and visual effects, many felt that this Ultraman series was a pale remake of the original 1966 series.

There would be no further attempts to make an English-language Ultraman series after *U: TUH,* but *Ultraman Tiga* was dubbed into English by 4Kids Entertainment, and was first broadcast on American television in 2002. Dark Horse Comics adapted the Hong Kong comic book for *Tiga* beginning in August 2003; popular artists Tony Wong and Khoo Fuk Lung created the ten-issue series. Nearly ten years earlier, Dark Horse, as part of its "Comics' Greatest World" line of comics, created the character Hero Zero, an obvious homage to Ultraman. Zero is the alter ego of teenager David MacRae, who becomes the size-changing hero. He can also communicate with a voice that only he can hear. Writers never revealed how David becomes Hero Zero. In the 1990s, Viz Comics released an English-language adaptation of the manga *Battle of the Ultra Brothers,* featuring Ultraman and his comrades against their standard array of villains. *—MM*

Ultraverse Heroes

New superhero universes come and go, but few have had the flash-bulb success of the Ultraverse, a line of titles from Malibu Comics. Its diverse pantheon of heroes, including Prime, Mantra, the Strangers, the Night Man, and UltraForce, would not only garner press attention, but also spawn a line of toys, a cartoon, and a live-action television series, and set up a buy-out from one of the world's most successful comic-book publishers.

Malibu Comics was founded by Scott Rosenberg in 1986, but the company didn't hit it big until 1992. That's when a distribution deal with the just-beginning Image Comics brought Malibu a huge financial windfall, enabling it to start work on a shared superhero universe to be called the Ultraverse. Unlike Image's art-based comics that sometimes lacked strong storylines, the Ultraverse was built by a group of writers—Mike W. Barr, Steve Englehart, Steve Gerber, James D. Hudnall, Gerard Jones, James Robinson, Len Strazewski, and famed science fiction writer Larry Niven—who worked out how all their concepts and "Ultra" characters would fit together as a seamless whole. The line debuted in June 1993 with *Prime, Hardcase,* and *The Strangers.* Malibu put posters in city bus stops, and advertised on television, both marketing elements which had never been done in the comics world.

Biggest amongst the Ultraverse heroes (in terms of both size and sales) is Prime. Costumed in red and gold, and with hugely muscled arms, Prime is reminiscent of Captain Marvel. The superstrong adult hero is really teenager Kevin Green, whose Ultra-body often becomes unstable and melts into protoplasmic glop. Prime eventually gains a sidekick known as Turbo Charge, an African-American gay teen, and battles villains such as Primevil, Doctor Vincent Gross, Maxi-Man, and the Aladdin organization. *Prime* was translated for video games, and optioned as a feature film by Universal, with scripts having been written by Doug Chamberlin, Chris Webb, Don Calame, and Chris Conroy.

Hardcase is an actor who gained Ultra-powers. Fighting crime for a while with three other Ultras in a group known as the Squad, Hardcase decides to retire when the other Squad members are killed or made comatose by the robotic NM-E. He plays a hero in the movies, but eventually Hardcase decides to become a hero again in real life.

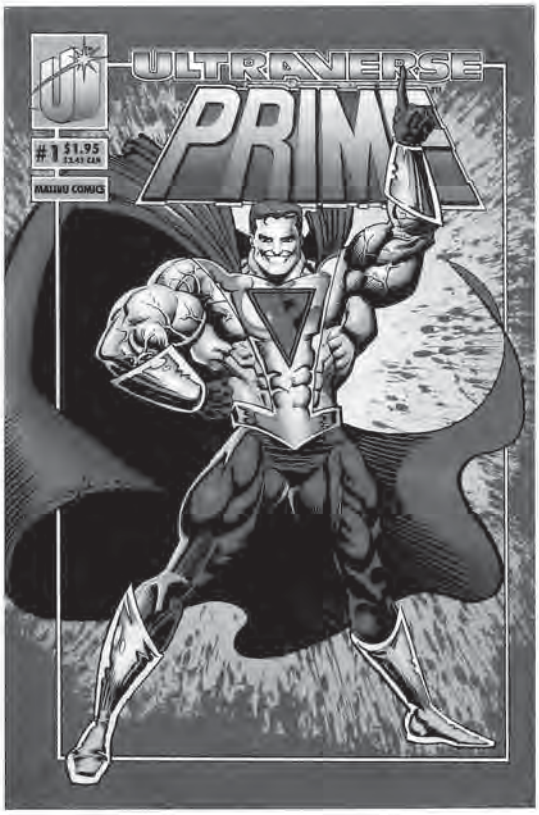
Villains he faces include Rex Mundi, Dirt Devil, and Hardwire.

The Strangers are a group of heroes whose origin is an accident that affects each of them. When a San Francisco cable car is struck by a blast from outer space (known as "the Jumpstart effect"), the people on it gain Ultra-powers. Seven of them join together as the Strangers, including target-hitting heroine Lady Killer, African-American teen speedster Zip-Zap, transforming hero Atom Bomb, shrapnel-shooting hero Grenade, alien woman Yrial, electrical-powered heroine Electrocute, and light-powered gay hero Spectral. One of the others affected by the cable car accident is Johnny Domino, who would develop the ability to "hear" evil thoughts from others, and soon gained his own series, *The Night Man*.

Other heroes soon followed with their own books. *Mantra* featured the adventures of a male sorcerer reincarnated into the body of a modern single mother. *Freex* followed the adventures of a group of underground teenage Ultras who felt disenfranchised from humanity. *Prototype* saw a young video game player taking over the super-armor of a corporate Ultra hero. *Firearm* showcased a tough guy with an uncanny shooting ability; in addition to his own comic, he was featured in a Malibu-produced thirty-minute live-action video adventure.

At its height, the Ultraverse published fifteen monthly titles, including *Exiles, Firearm, Sludge, Solitaire, The Solution, Warstrike,* and *Wrath*. An ageless evil vampire named Rune was also given his own series, written and drawn by comics legend Barry Windsor-Smith.

In November 1994, Marvel Comics purchased Malibu and all of its assets, including characters from the Ultraverse as well as other properties such as *Men in Black,* and a top-level computer-coloring department. For a brief period, it seemed as if Marvel would keep the Ultraverse a popular property, but the company quickly stumbled. Prices rose dramatically higher, and the comics were taken away from newsstand distribution and placed solely in the direct market of comics specialty shops. Editorial interference with the writers and art teams also led to wavering quality. Although Marvel crossed its own characters over into the Ultraverse—titles included *Rune/Silver Surfer* (April 1995), *Night Man vs. Wolverine* (August 1995), and *Avengers/UltraForce* (October 1995)—the line began to hemorrhage both sales and fans.



Prime #1 © 1993 Malibu Comics.

One of Malibu/Marvel's most popular titles was *UltraForce*, a series drawn by fan favorite George Pérez. *UltraForce* teamed up many popular Ultras, including Prime, Hardcase, and Prototype, with newer heroes Topaz, Ghoul, and Contrary. In October 1995, DIC produced thirteen episodes of a syndicated *UltraForce* animated series, with strong

ratings. A Galoob *UltraForce* toy line also premiered. Once the Malibu/Marvel merger was complete, however, even deals that were in place prior to it were in danger. Both the series and toys were killed due to internal politics.

As the Marvel Ultraverse titles continued, the quality slipped further. The creators and original writers were replaced. Characters were also replaced—Mantra changed from a mother to a valley girl—and fans rebelled. In 1996, Marvel made a number of drastic cuts, including canceling a number of books. *Prime, Rune,* and *UltraForce* were among the final hold-outs in publication, but each of them died by December 1996. The final Ultraverse publication was *Ultraverse: Future Shock* (February 1997), a one-shot that attempted to wrap the universe up.

As of early 2004, the last appearance of any Ultraverse hero was *NightMan,* a live-action syndicated television series from Tribune, that aired forty-four episodes from fall 1997 through 1999 (in 2004, it is in syndication in some markets). The Ultraverse is remembered by fans today as an entertaining experiment that could have been big … and almost was. —*AM*

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Index

A

A Carnival of Comics, 229
"A Day in the Life," 530
A Distant Soil, 21
A Touch of Silver (1997), 275
AAA Pop Comics, 323
Aardvark-Vanaheim, 105
Abba and Dabba, 385
Abbey, Lynn, 526
Abbott, Bruce, 147
ABC See America's Best Comics (ABC)
ABC News, 565
ABC Warriors, 441
Abhay (Indian superhero), 283
Abin Sur, 240, 582
Abner Cadaver, 416
Abomination, 259–260, 266, 577
Aboriginie Stevie, 583
About Comics, 194
Abra Kadabra, 220, 575
Abrams, J. J., 549
Abrams, Jeffrey, 542
Absorbing Man, 267, 577
AC Comics, 1, 140, 160, 210, 212, 234, 514, 532, 560
AC Comics Heroes, **1–2**
See also Astra, Astron, Black Cobra, Black Terror, Black Venus, Blue Bulleteer, Bolt, Captain Flash, Captain Freedom, Captain Paragon, Captain Wings, Cat-Man, Commando Yank, Dynamicman, Eagle, Femforce, Fighting Yank, The Flame, Golden Lad, Green Lama, Grim Reaper, Miss Masque, Miss Victory, Nightveil, Owl, Pyroman, Rio Rita, Rocketman, Scarlet Scorpion, Shade, She-Cat, Yankee Girl
Academy X, 650
Acclaim Entertainment, 563, 613
Ace, 42
Ace Comics, 160, 378
Ace Magazines, 427
Ace of Space, 440
Ace Periodicals, 77
Ace the Bat-Hound, 59, 72, 402, 562
"Aces," 527
ACG, 42
Achille le Heel, 342
Acolytes, 658
Acrata (Planet DC), 282
Acrobat, 578
Action #23, 550
Action Ace, 551
Action Boy, 110, 111
Action Comics, 41, 80, 90, 171, 342, 440, 479, 481, 486, 489, 495, 498, 500, 501, 502, 509, 510, 522, 534, 539, 550, 552, 562, 615
Action Comics #1 (Superman's debut, 1938), 172, 229, 305, 313, 427, 515, 522, 525, 538, 539, 554, 556
Action Comics #252 (Supergirl's debut), 432, 489, 534
Action Girl, **2–3,** 3 (ill.), 184
"Action Heroes" Series, 434
Action League Now!!!, 493
Acts of Vengeance, 390
Acy Duecey, 4478
AD Vision, 21, 135, 156
Adam, 97
Adam, Allen, 117
Adam Strange, **3–4,** 317, 441, 500, 573, 587
Justice League of America, member of, 294
Adamantium, 643
Adams, Art, 16, 44–45, 107, 254, 503
Adams, Arthur *See* Adams, Art
Adams, Jane, 62, 509
Adams, Lee, 545
Adams, Neal, 22, 25, 26, 32, 47, 59, 60, 94, 104, 174, 177, 237, 240, 241, 334, 325, 353, 366, 374, 435, 445, 485, 502, 503, 519, 542, 582, 635, 642
Adapt (Australian superhero), 283
Adolph (1983), 36
Adonis, 598
Adrienne, 649
Adult Swim (Cartoon Network), 246
ADV Films, 413
Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, 514
Adventure, 171
Adventure Comics, 31, 80, 103, 177, 236–237, 300, 349, 372, 373, 385, 413, 414, 431, 469, 470, 482, 483, 489, 500, 501, 536, 553, 557, 561, 614
Adventure Comics #58 (1941), 327
Adventure Comics #247 (1958), 308, 568
Adventure Comics #253, 586
Adventure Comics #432, 446 (ill.)
Adventure Comics #482, 180 (ill.)
Adventurers' Club, 181
Adventures in Babysitting, 525
Adventures into the Unknown, 434
The Adventures of Aquaman (1968–1969), 296
Adventures of Batman (TV series), 491
The Adventures of Batman and Robin (1969–1970), 56, 64
The Adventures of Batman and Robin (1994–1997), 56, 67, 493
The Adventures of Bob Hope, 103, 502
Adventures of Captain Africa, 378
The Adventures of Captain America (movie serial, 1943), 112
The Adventures of Captain Marvel (movie serial, 1941), 127, 128–129, 379, 509, 575
The Adventures of Jerry Lewis, 502
Adventures of Robin Hood, 479
The Adventures of Sock Monkey, 106
The Adventures of Superboy (TV pilot), 545
The Adventures of Superboy (TV series), 482, 484, 495, 548
See also Superboy

The Adventures of Superman (comic book), 472, 482, 504, 512, 515, 522, 525, 540, 548
The Adventures of Superman #441, 551 (ill.)
The Adventures of Superman (radio program), 58, 356, 586
The Adventures of Superman (TV series, 1953–1957), 173, 363, 371, 372, 430, 540, 544, 550, 575
The Adventures of the Jaguar (1961–1963), 138
Adventures of the Mask (1995–1996), 338
Aegena, 624
Aegis Entertainment, Inc., 623
Aeon Flux, 494
Aerosmith, 405
Affleck, Ben, 164, 166 (ill.), 197
African-American Heroes, **4–9**, 77, 154, 202, 206, 241, 300, 309, 344–346, 471, 472, 473, 494
first African-American comic-book superhero, 5–6
first African-American superhero series (comic book), 7–8
in Marvel Comics, 6
origins of, 4–7
as sidekicks, 4–5
stereotypes of, 4–5
Aga, Hidetomo, 322
Agent America, 216
Agent Liberty, 561
Agents of Law, 169
Agniputra (Indian superhero), 283
Agul, 606
Ahab, 646
AIDS in comics, 423
Aikawa, Noboru, 135
A.I.M., 114, 364
Aino, Minako, 412
Air Corps, 511
Air Man, 76
Airboy, 194, 574
Airplane! (movie), 392
AIUEO Boy, 325
Ajax Atomic Labs, 161
Ajax Comics, 382
Ajys (The Freedom Collective), 284
Aki, 597
Akira (comic book), 20
Akira (superhero), 22
Aladdin, 608
Alakazam the Great, 18
Alan Class Company, 602
Alanna, 4, 317
Albert, Edward, 165
Albert, Richard L., 324
Alberta, Canada, 626
Albino Joe, 349
Albright, Red, 131, 511
Alcala, Alfredo, 607
Alcala, Felix Enriquez, 297
Alcott, Todd, 635
Aleta (Guardians of the Galaxy), 242
Alexander, Joan, 545
Alexander, Scott, 266
Alfred Harvey Publications, 247
Alfred Harvey's Black Cat (1995), 81 (ill.)
Alfred the Butler, 56, 58, 59, 60, 496, 518
Ali, 519
Alias (comic book), 201, 215
Alias (Marvel MAX), 388, 465, 466
Alias (TV series, 2001–present), 147, 537
Alias the Spider, 480
Alice in Wonderland, 646
Alien, 51
Alien Brat, 441
Aliens (comic book), 167, 168
Aliens (villains), 589
Alizarin Crimson, 211
All-American Comics, 101, 219, 298, 532
All-American Comics #16 (Green Lantern's debut), 172, 239
All-American Comics #19, 40
All-American Comics #25, 529
All-American Publications, 172
merges with DC Comics, 298
All-Czarnia 9-Octave Chime-Haiku Festival, 312
All-Flash Comics, 219
All Hero, 126
All in the Family, 536
All-Negro Comics, 5
All-New Comics, 81
All New Super Friends Hour (animated series), 9, 65, 471, 477, 492, 545
All-Purpose Cultural Catgirl Nuku-nuku, 393
All Select Comics, 475
All Select Comics #2, 585
Blonde Phantom's debut, 91
All Star Comics, 40, 142, 189, 239, 252, 298–299, 414, 470, 499, 567, 628, 629
All Star Comics #3, 566, 585
All Star Comics #7, 585
All Star Comics #8 (Wonder Woman's debut), 142, 213, 298
All Star Comics #37, 299 (ill.)
All Star Comics #57 (end of the original Justice Society of America), 299
All Star Comics #69 (Huntress's debut, 1977), 270
All Star Comics (Winter 1940, Justice Society of America's debut), 298
return of (1976), 300
All-Star Squadron (comic book), 300, 359, 404, 470, 501, 567, 639
All-Star Squadron (superheroes), 177, 300
All-Star Western, 299
All Top Comics (November 1947), 234
All True Crime, 333
All-Winners Comics, 356, 475
All-Winners Squad (superheroes), 284, 285, 533, 566, 585
See also The Invaders
Allan, Liz, 317
Allard, Kent *See* The Shadow
Allen, Barry, 219–220, 317, 564, 565
death of, 220
See also The Flash (Silver Age)
Allen, Gale, 440
Allen, Irwin, 209
Allen, Matt, 180
Allen, Peggy, 532
Allen, Steve, 522
Allied propaganda (World War II), 172
"Allied Earth Calendar," 596
Allies, 514
Allred, Laura, 322
Allred, Michael, 107, 168, 322, 324, 405, 505, 520, 653
Alpha Centauri, 241, 242
Alpha Flight (comic book), 282, 368, 622, 623
Alpha Flight (superteam), **9–11**, 34, 77, 359, 367, 529, 567, 625
Altar Boy, 39
Alter Ego (fanzine), 300, 501
Alternate realities, 208, 251, 262, 270, 290, 294, 299, 300, 314, 315, 568
Alternative Futures, **11–15**
Altieri, Kevin, 227, 474
Altman, Jeff, 296
Alyn, Kirk, 90, 509, 540, 543, 544, 546
Amalgam, 590
Amano, Yoshitaka, 22, 134, 271, 596
Amara Aquilla, 651
Amazing Adventures, 86, 442, 536
Amazing Adventures (TV series), 278, 365
The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay (2000), 280, 418, 525, 528
Amazing Amazon, 32, 510
Amazing Fantasy, 372, 455
Amazing Fantasy #15 (Spider-Man's debut), 429, 449, 451, 516, 525
Amazing Man (superhero), 27, 230, 300, 359
Amazing Man Comics, 574
Amazing Mystery Funnies, 348
Amazing Spider-Man (comic book), 206, 318, 395, 396, 433, 451, 454, 455, 462, 463, 456, 460, 461, 496, 500, 501, 588, 599
Amazing Spider-Man #2, 450 (ill.)
Amazing Spider-Man #68, 431 (ill.)
Amazing Spider-Man #129 (Punisher's debut), 334
The Amazing Spider-Man (TV series), 96, 579
Amazing Spider-Man and the Incredible Hulk, 457, 492
Amazing Spider-Man: City in Darkness, 526
Amazing Spider-Man: Crime Campaign, 526
Amazing Spider-Man: Mayhem in Manhattan, 526
Amazing Stories, 440
Amazing World of Superman, 486
Amazo, 576