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Column -- "My Back Pages"

By: **Craig Fischer**

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COLUMNS



Monsters Eat Critics

My Back Pages

BY CRAIG FISCHER FEB 4, 2013

Don Draper: "In Greek, 'nostalgia' literally means 'the pain from an old wound.' It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone."

1.

In 1992, I was dawdling my way through a Ph.D. program in English at the University of Illinois. I had trouble focusing on my work that year, because back in my hometown of Buffalo, New York, my mother was dying of cancer. She was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1985, while I was still living at home but poised to start graduate school at Illinois in the fall. When my parents told me about the cancer, I said that I wouldn't go to graduate school, that I would stay and care for my mom, but they said "No." They were insistent that I begin my adult life and career, and they also realized that my offer to remain in Buffalo was based as much on my fear of an unknown direction for my life as it was in some sort of noble self-sacrifice. In retrospect, I'm incredibly grateful that they exiled me from home.

While I studied (and partied) in Illinois, my mom underwent several bouts of radiation and chemotherapy. One breast was removed, then another. I went home when I could, which wasn't often, because I didn't own a car and couldn't afford the time and money that the one-way 16-hour bus ride from Champaign, Illinois to Buffalo required. (The half-hour stopovers at the Cleveland bus terminal at 3am were sad and grimy.) By 1990, though, I'd started dating Kathy, the woman I'd eventually marry, and she'd graciously loan me her car (a hand-me-down from her own parents), and I'd speed down I-90 and visit mom and dad more frequently. Every time I went home, mom looked frailer, more diminished, and more folded-in on herself.

In December 1992, I charged an airplane ticket, flew from Chicago to Buffalo, and stayed with my parents for the Christmas holidays. A few weeks earlier, my mom had lost the use of her left arm. The nerves in the arm had been decimated by repeated radiation treatments, and, according to her doctors, were beyond repair. My mom cried every time she couldn't do a task with her single functioning arm. She wept when she couldn't make a cup of coffee or fish keys out of her purse.

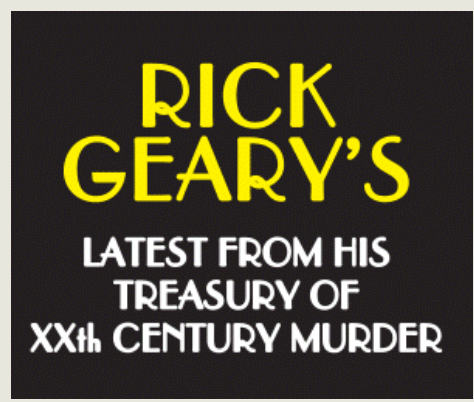
On Christmas Eve, we exchanged presents. I bought my parents a microwave, thinking that it would make it easier for my mom to cook one-armed, and she was ecstatic. Then mom and dad handed me my gift: the deluxe, polybagged version, complete with black armband, of *Superman* #75 (January 1993), the infamous "Death of Superman" issue. Of course, my parents knew that I read comics—though they didn't realize that by 1992 my tastes had migrated to *Eightball*, *Hate*, and other black-and-white alternatives—and they saw and heard the publicity barrage surrounding Superman's death. On the day the comic came out, my dad drove my sick, frail mom (who never had a driver's license) to a local shop, where she stood in line for two hours (mostly with investors, I think) to get a copy.

After the holidays, I flew back to Illinois, and returned to Buffalo one more time before my mom's death in April 1993. I still have that copy of *Superman* #75, worthless because I ripped open the polybag and read the comic inside. Occasionally, I'll remember the image at the finale of that comic, of Lois Lane holding the dying Superman in her arms, and I'll smile. In the last two years, both of Kathy's parents have died, and I told her the cliché "You're never too old to be an orphan," and that's absolutely true.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Zap: An Unpublished Spain Rodriguez Interview

In celebration of the release of the Comics Journal Library book of Zap interviews, we present this unpublished interview with the late Spain Rodriguez. It does not appear in the Zap Interviews book. [Continue reading →](#)



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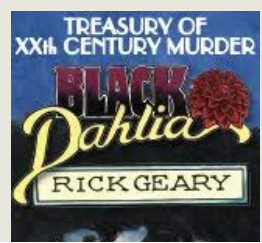
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2.

In 2001, my four-year-old son Nate accompanied me on my weekly trips to the comics shop. I felt guilty picking up a stack of comics for myself (and nothing for him), so I got into the habit of buying him a comic that he'd choose from the all-ages rack. During one of our visits, Nate picked out DC's *Looney Tunes* #75 (April 2001), and I read this comic out loud to him when we got home.

The story in *Looney Tunes* #75, "A Hare Gone Conclusion," written by Dan Slott, penciled by Dave Alvarez, and inked by Mike DeCarlo, is a film noir parody, where Daffy Duck plays a detective investigating the disappearance (and presumed death) of Bugs Bunny. (Slott is clearly riffing off the animated cartoons where Daffy tries and fails to fill a heroic adventurer's role, such as *Deduce, You Say!* [1956]—where Daffy plays famed sleuth Dorlock Homes—and *Robin Hood Daffy* [1958].) In Slott's story, detective Daffy begins by interrogating the suspect most likely to have killed Bugs, Elmer Fudd, and Daffy's interrogation segues into Slott's spin on the "rabbit season/duck season" cartoon routines:

This is an interesting gag to explain to a four year old. As I recall, I told Nate that Elmer "kissed" Daffy (obvious from all the lipstick marks), and vowed that I'd show *Looney Tunes* #75 to Nate again when he's a teenager (which I have). Clearly, though, more than smooching went on: Daffy is roughed up in that last panel on page two, and it's impossible to miss Elmer's fey facial expression and effeminate gestures.

Slott's joke seems wildly transgressive, but it's actually a logical extension of the fluid sexuality in the original Bugs Bunny cartoons. In his article "Bugs Bunny: Queer as a Three Dollar Bill" (1993), film critic Hark Sartin argues that Bugs' proclivity for drag (as in his show-stopping performance as Brunhilde in *What's Opera Doc* [1957]) is only one symptom of the general queer aesthetic of the Warner cartoons, present even in the earliest Bugs shorts. Sartin describes *A Wild Hare* (1940), the first battle between Bugs and Elmer, like this:

Bugs quickly established a playful sexual innuendo in his dealings with Elmer. When Elmer points his gun at Bugs' rabbit hole, Bugs' gloved hand reaches out and strokes the gun. And strokes it. And strokes it. It's just a little too much. This leads to an extended tug of war, with that big gun of Elmer's going in and out of Bugs' hole, in and out, in and out. Later, when Bugs comes up from behind and covers Elmer's eyes to play "Guess Who?" Elmer comes back with "Heddy Wemarr? Owivia de Haviwin?" Bugs responds to these charming misapprehensions by planting a big kiss on Elmer's lips.

Slott's script for *Looney Tunes* #75 also plays off other elements of the Warner Bros. universe besides its polymorphic sexuality. There's a pointed joke about mounting Buster Bunny's severed head, and cameos by obscure characters from the cartoons, including Hassan ("Chop!"), Gossamer and even the unshaven caricature of Humphrey Bogart. This comic was fun to read out loud; I loved reading to my son.

Twelve years later, Dan Slott still tinkers with corporate-owned characters (still to controversial effect), while Nate and I (and Kathy and my daughter Mercer) went to our first gay wedding last September. Life and love's pulse: in and out, in and out.

3.

Last semester, I taught a class on comics and graphic novels to college sophomores. I'd taught this class before, but I always change the syllabus around from semester to semester—I don't want to get into a boring routine. In revising my syllabus for fall 2012, I decided to foreground serialization as one of the major topics of the course. I added new assignments and readings that addressed the history of the comic book as periodical, and replicated (as well as I could) the experience of reading stories in spaced-out, floppy-sized chunks.

There were several comics I assigned to teach serialization, but central was all thirty issues of Grant Morrison's *Seven Soldiers* project (2005-06). *Seven Soldiers* consists of three parts: (1) a single comic (*Seven Soldiers* #0) that established the series' premise, an invasion of Earth by fairy folk called the Sheeda; (2) seven 4-issue miniseries featuring DC Comics B-listers (including Kirby characters like Mister Miracle and Klarion the Witchboy) moving through individual plotlines and overlapping with the events of the Sheeda invasion; and (3) a final issue (*Seven Soldiers* #1) chronicling the roles each of the seven characters play in defeating the Sheeda (although the seven heroes never coalesce into a super-team like the Avengers). *Seven Soldiers* is both a challenging modular puzzle and an exhilarating experience: the more issues you read, the more connections you can trace among the seven series ("Hey, isn't that Shining Knight in the foreground of this panel from *Frankenstein* #4?" "Hey, aren't all these characters dealing with absent fathers and authority figures?") and the more complete your understanding of the Sheeda storyline. Given the complexity of *Soldiers*, it was helpful that there were at least two superb exegeses of the series, Douglas Wolk's chapter on Morrison in *Reading Comics* (2007) and Marc Singer's chapter on *Soldiers* in *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary*



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Comics (2011). I shamelessly borrowed from the insights of Wolk and Singer in putting together *Soldiers* lesson plans.

To make my students read *Soldiers* serially, I put multiple copies of all thirty individual issues on reserve in our university library, with instructions to circulate only three issues per week, in the order that the comics were originally for sale in comic shops. The first week, my students read *Seven Soldiers* #0, *Shining Knight* #1 and *The Manhattan Guardian* #1, and then paused until the next week, when *Zatanna* #1, *Klarion* #1 and *Shining Knight* #2 would be available at the library, and so on. Students could cheat—they could've bought or downloaded trade paperback collections of the entire series and read ahead—but judging by our class discussions, most stuck to the “to be continued” plan.

Other parts of the serialization focus: near the end of class, my students read *Fantastic Four* #44-67, the best Lee-Kirby-Sinnott issues and a key example of comic-book soap-opera serialization. *The Fantastic Four* was followed by examples of Jack Kirby's Fourth World comics, which allowed me to talk about creators' rights, and about Kirby's influence—appropriate, since Kirby's technique of splitting the Fourth World mega-story across four separate titles was clearly the inspiration for Morrison's *Soldiers* design.

How did my unit on serialization go? Terribly. Choosing *Soldiers* as a semester-long text was a lousy idea. It's too stuffed with superhero arcana, too dependent on prior knowledge of DC continuity history. (One of the climatic beats of *Seven Soldiers* #1 involves a villain named Zor being “sewn,” i.e. changed, into Cyrus Gold, a child murderer killed by an angry mob and then reanimated as the zombie Solomon Grundy. None of my students understood this, and I barely remembered Gold myself.) I also assumed that the students would be interested in superheroes, which was untrue: they like superhero *movies*, possibly because the property destruction inherent in the genre makes for dynamic summer spectacles, but they found the comics much less of an immersive experience. Their most common complaint was that the ads in the individual comics kept breaking up the flow of their reading.

I also think serialization is increasingly irrelevant in 21st century media culture. In comics, floppies sell less as more readers “wait for the trade” and a coherent narrative arc. Television viewers ignore a program when it airs, opting instead for downloads and DVD collections that allow them to control when and how often they watch their favorite shows. (Some students will binge on a whole season of *Lost* or *Justified* over the space of a weekend.) Even though some movie franchises follow an episodic release model—“We've got to wait a *year* for the next *Hobbit*?”—many foreign and independent films open in theaters and on video-on-demand on the same day. One of the credos of the digital revolution is *I want what I want when I want it*, and my stories about waiting for my favorite serialized comic books to appear on drugstore spinner racks must sound to my students like a message in Morse code.

There's a moment in *Seven Soldiers* #1 where many of Morrison's narrative threads converge: while releasing a powerful mystic being out of a mason jar, the magician Zatanna screams “Ekirts sreidlos neves!” (“Seven Soldiers strike!”), as she activates the hidden machineries of Morrison's world to defeat the Sheeda:

Tellingly, Zatanna stares directly at the reader as she casts her spell. In issue #4 of her miniseries, Zatanna breaks the “fourth wall” of the comics panel with a direct appeal for help from readers, and she does so again here, asking us to mobilize the connections we've built up while reading the comics to interpret *Soldiers*' esoteric finale. Morrison invites us to figure out how and why the “Seven Soldiers strike,” but by the end of the semester, my students' turned down his invitation—they were tired of superheroes, tired of Morrison's narratives of transformation, tired of the class, and probably tired of me.

My ostensible reason for teaching serialization in the first place was that I felt an obligation to discuss the history of the floppy, but my students don't care at all about that history—they read comics in the book-length graphic novel format, they never buy comics from a Direct Market shop, and they laugh at the knotted continuities of the DC and Marvel “universes.” Maybe my real reason for teaching serialization is that I still give a shit, even though I've supposedly preferred alt-comix over mainstream comics for a long time. Maybe like too many fans of my generation, I've given in to nostalgia—and I wouldn't be the first on *TCJ* to do so, given how often the Lee v. Kirby debate rages in comments forty-plus years after the damn comics were published. And is it nostalgia when I connect specific comics (like *Superman* and *Looney Tunes*) to the memories of events from my personal life? Is it healthy?

4.

On Halloween, my kids and I went to our local comic shop, and picked up several of the free comics distributed as part of “Halloween ComicFest 2012.” Some of these giveaways were fun, and others less so, but one particular single-pager might've disabused me of my nostalgia permanently. Marvel offered a combination *Ultimate Spider-Man*/*Avengers* comic book, and although I'm currently not buying Marvel products (I'm participating in the Kirby boycott), my kids picked up the Marvel freebie, and I read it. It was fine, in a generic stripped-down, *Batman Adventures* way.

At the back of the comic was a single-page example of a “Marvel Mash-Up,” where a page from a previously published comic is rewritten with new dialogue that is allegedly funny. Here’s the page I saw:

I’m not offended by the incontinence gags, but they’re nowhere as amusing as Dan Slott’s “Mating Season.” I am surprised, though, that the art is identified as by Steve Ditko instead of Gil Kane. In his Morrison book, Marc Singer argues that the Sheeda—revealed as evolved humans from millions of years in the future, who travel back in time to pillage resources from earlier generations—represent Morrison’s critique of contemporary superhero comics. Like the Sheeda, contemporary comics creators repeatedly strip-mine the rich heritage of ideas inherited from Kirby, Ditko, and other creators, and this “Marvel Mash-Up” shits on the old work too. All I have left are untrustworthy memories and weird associations.

19 Responses to *My Back Pages*

Francis Dawson says:

[Feb 4, 2013 at 11:07 AM](#)

Really enjoyed reading that, thanks a lot.

“Their most common complaint was that the ads in the individual comics kept breaking up the flow of their reading.”

For sure. It seems that Marvel and DC go out of their way to make reading serialised comics on paper as unappealing as possible. I’m participating in the Marvel Kirby boycott too but I snuck a look at the Mike Allred drawn ‘FF’ in the comic shop. Facing a ginchy Allred page was a hideously designed advertisement of a guy stuffing pizza into his face. Why would Marvel do that to their own comic? How do guys like Allred feel when the whole design balance of their page is knocked for a loop by terrible production decisions? It just seems like needless self sabotage. The Roger Langridge written, Craig Yoe edited ‘Popeye’ comic from IDW shows that it’s possible to produce a nicely designed DM serial comic.

patrick ford says:

[Feb 4, 2013 at 12:37 PM](#)

Robert Crumb: When I – what was it – about five or six? – I was sexually attracted to Bugs Bunny. And I – I cut out this Bugs Bunny off the cover of a comic book and carried it around with me. Carried it around in my pocket and took it out and looked at it periodically, and – and it got all wrinkled up from handling it so much that I asked my mother to iron it on the ironing board to flatten it out, and – and she did, and I was deeply disappointed ‘cause it got all brown when she ironed it, and brittle, and crumbled apart.

Note the “five or six” part. As opposed to fifty or sixty and having the same fixation on super heroes, to the extent fans become furious and hurl insults at the thought litigation might deprive them of more whatever.

Mike Rhode says:

[Feb 4, 2013 at 7:03 PM](#)

50 years, Craig! Fifty years ago.

Nice article.

Craig Fischer says:

[Feb 4, 2013 at 8:57 PM](#)

@ Francis: The only mainstream artist who's able to use the design of the floppy—and in particular its double-page spreads—to optimal effect is J.H. Williams III. I wonder...are the ads in BATWOMAN placed on the same pages as in the other New 52 books?

@Pat: It can be a slow process of weaning. As my essay points out, I'm still uncomfortably interested in the heroes myself.

@Mike: I was judging the time based on the last wave of Lee-Kirby comics (FF #102 is cover-dated September 1970), but yeah...50+ years since the start of the collaboration. Whew.

Jones, one of the Jones boys says:

Feb 4, 2013 at 9:40 PM

Good piece, Craig. Three things:

1. Even with all the (100% justified) ill will in the world towards Marvel, that credit looks to me like some kind of mistake. Probably somebody got their wires crossed about giving credit for "spider-man created by" as opposed to "original page by". Of course, the exercise still sucks.
2. There are some important counter-examples to the trend against serialization, aren't there? Think of manga, or various popular kids' and YA books. Seems like serialization isn't dead, or even necessarily dying; it's just mutated.
3. "Students could cheat—they could've bought or downloaded trade paperback collections of the entire series and read ahead—but judging by our class discussions, most stuck to the "to be continued" plan"

Finally, this made me chuckle. Since when did any students ever read ahead, or any more than they absolutely had to? Lol, as the kids would say, or whatever the hell they would say now...holo-!o! The kids love holograms, right?

Bad Breath Comics says:

Feb 4, 2013 at 10:36 PM

Too bad about those kids not getting into the current comic books. Maybe if the comics had more charming ads (buy a little monkey that fits in the palm of your hand!) we wouldn't have this divide between the books being released and the latest generation of potential readers.

Boy, I remember all that "Death of Superman" hoopla like it happened yesterday. My pal Greg had a copy and I was quite envious. He said he'd be on the look out to try to help me get a copy, but I was pretty jaded about my chances. But sure enough, my friend found a copy of it wedged in the middle of some Ninja Turtles back issues! He said the store owner's jaw almost dropped to the floor when he brought up the comic to the register and only paid cover price for it. (It was already selling for over 50 bucks at that point!)

Charles Hatfield says:

Feb 5, 2013 at 3:07 AM

Something about being able to date a periodical comic book rather precisely seems to encourage nostalgia—that, and the pleasures of remembering how you got it, of the comic shop/fanclub environment, and of seeing a narrative bound up inextricably with the shape of a material object. All that seems conducive to remembering how your own personal story relates to a larger narrative or progression. Of course, in the case of *Superman* #75, there's also the memories of the hypefest that surrounded the book and got so many inexperienced shoppers into the shops—comic shops only rarely experience that kind of mania, so that's memorable in itself.

Craig, I'm sorry to hear that your serialization experiment didn't go over well. I thought it sounded awesome.

This time around, my comics class is doing an odd floppy of sorts (Nakazawa's *I Saw It*, translated and published by Leonard Rifas back in 1982), a new floppy of sorts (L. Nichols' *Flocks*, Chapter One, published by Retrofit), and a big emphasis on minis and zine culture, including a trip to the L.A. Zine Fest on Feb. 17th. More an alternative/small press approach to the pamphlet, less about serialization than about the pleasures of the small printed object. I haven't been able to work a lot of history into the syllabus this time around, though in other semesters I've pushed the history more.

patrick ford says:

Feb 5, 2013 at 10:06 AM

It must have been five or seven years ago. I was in a comic book shop which is no more. It was a comic book shop which had been for decades a used book store selling mostly paperbacks. I had been going in the store since it was run by it's original owner, and before comic books were sold there. It was a good place to find the very occasional choice item (say a first edition of WILD PALMS) because neither the original owner, or the comic book guy who took over, had any interest in the rare items which would very rarely end up on their shelves. Since I had frequented the place for many years it was convenient for me when it became a place where I could order comics.

Because it was my habit, and because "things" would turn up there, it was not only new-comic book-day when I would visit the store. The store was heart of downtown, and I was in there four or five times a week, if only for a moment. When you scout a place often, strangers on the shelves are easy to spot.

So one day I'm poking around and a woman about fifty comes in. She has a bagged copy of the death of Superman for sale. She begins kind of boldly offering it for sale and mentioning it's supposed value. The shop owner tells her it's a "good book" worth a good deal of money, but he is not interested because he already has copies in stock, and has not sold one, or even had anyone show an interest in a copy for a long time. The woman looked a little shaken and said something like, "Well, what could you pay for it?" The shop owner again told her it was a valuable item that he just didn't need.

They went around in tightening circles until the woman finally said (I swear), "I took the bus here to sell the comic book, and don't have the money to buy a fare home (that would have been one dollar). Can't you give me anything for it?" The shop owner just told her it was a good book, she ought to hold onto it, but he couldn't buy it because he had copies he could not sell.

Craig Fischer says:

Feb 5, 2013 at 9:09 PM

Aren't they installing holo-ports in spinal columns now?

Jones, about point #3: Believe it or not, I HAVE had students "skipping ahead" in other classes where I've taught material incrementally. Two years ago, in a TV history class, I assigned students to watch the first two seasons of MAD MEN at the rate of two episodes per week—only to discover that at least a third of the class blasted through the 24 episodes in the first seven days. Of course, that's TV, and the students were reading SEVEN SOLDIERS...is the binge effect stronger with TV and movies than with text? (What about the HARRY POTTER books?)

Stephen hirsch says:

Feb 6, 2013 at 1:40 AM

Regarding Batwoman, I remember noticing the ads were all crammed in the back, all in a row. A nice way to do it, though I'm sure it has an effect on how much DC can charge for the space.

Although the ads are pretty much all for other DC books anyways.

patrick ford says:

Feb 12, 2013 at 2:38 PM

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sj3NH4zeQDA>

patrick ford says:

Feb 13, 2013 at 1:49 AM

"Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats

Too noble to neglect

Deceived me into thinking

I had something to protect

Good and bad, I define these terms

Quite clear, no doubt somehow

Ahh, but I was so much older then

I'm younger than that now"

Allen Smith says:

Feb 13, 2013 at 7:14 PM

Marvel did what they did because it's the ads that are important, not the stories. The stories are included so that people would read their ads.

Stuart says:

Dec 23, 2013 at 9:00 PM

The story about your mother is heart-rending and incredibly sad but I wanted to thank you for sharing. Slightly surprised no one else mentioned it.

Warner Brothers cartoons, just hilarious!

Craig Fischer says:

Dec 25, 2013 at 9:48 PM

Thanks for the kind words, Stuart.

Oliver says:

Dec 26, 2013 at 10:02 AM

I remember whiting-out word balloons and writing bad language in my comics... only I was 10 years old and didn't get paid for it.

Dorian G. says:

Dec 27, 2013 at 6:04 AM

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money."

Dorian G. says:

[Dec 27, 2013 at 6:06 AM](#)

"Since when did any students ever read ahead, or any more than they absolutely had to?"

Wow, guess this is how I became successful and well-paid. I guess you should've done the same!

Oliver says:

[Dec 27, 2013 at 3:07 PM](#)

"Hi, I'm a narcissistic jackass!" — David 'Insane Kangaroo' Ross

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