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Column -- "The Ballad Of Axe-Faced Anne: Comics, Criticism, Contexts" (Part 2)

By: **Craig Fischer**

Abstract

Reading a comic book once made me sick. Like other Baby Boomer kids, I fell in love with Silver Age Marvel Comics, especially the Kirby/Lee/Sinnott Fantastic Four. I was imprinted by Lee's narrative voice (simultaneously melodramatic and folksy) and Kirby's visual imagination: the Marvel aesthetic became my be-all-and-end-all, my standard for quality comics. One day, though, a friend left some comics at my house, and the next morning I casually picked a non-Marvel from his stack to read at breakfast. I started eating and reading: the comic was a weird pre-Code horror anthology, and the first story featured inky, crosshatched illustrations (a lesser artist channeling Creepy-era Reed Crandall, maybe) for a disturbing story about a woman who turns herself into a leopard. I hated it because it wasn't a Marvel comic. I glanced at panels where the woman, with a human head and leopard's body, prowled over her unconscious lover. I felt nauseous. I threw the comic and my cereal away. Why did I get sick? Why was I so invested in Marvel, and why and how did this leopard-woman horror comic upset my tastes so traumatically? What does it mean to read a new comic?

Fischer, C. (2012). "The Ballad Of Axe-Faced Anne: Comics, Criticism, Contexts" *The Comics Journal (TCJ)*, February 6, 2012. Version of record available at: <http://www.tcj.com/the-ballad-of-axe-faced-anne-comics-criticism-contexts/>

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COLUMNS



Monsters Eat Critics

The Ballad of Axe-Faced Anne: Comics, Criticism, Contexts

BY CRAIG FISCHER FEB 6, 2012

11.

As should be clear by now, I wasn't impressed by *Scream* #5, and maybe for good reason. In *Ghastly Terror*, Sennitt argues that 1973 was Skywald's creative apex, but that by the end of that year "the rot had already begun to get in" (164), fueled by the company's increased reliance on cheap foreign artists and increased competition from Marvel's line of black-and-white monster magazines. Maybe I should give Skywald another chance. Maybe I should spring for the comic at the very top of Sennitt's "Ten Best Horror-Mood Magazines," *Psycho* #8, and review Skywald at its best. And I should definitely note that one story—"The Black Orchids and the Tale of Anne," written by Hewetson under the pseudonym of "Stuart Williams" and drawn by José Cardona—is better and more complex than the other contents of *Scream* #5. Thanks to the miracle of poor copyright filing, "Black Orchids" is presented in its entirety below.

12.

When I first read "Black Orchids," I was again unimpressed, since Hewetson's writing stuck to the same "tell, don't show" aesthetic I disliked in other *Scream* #5 stories. The doctor's exposition-heavy captions on pages four and five are too wordy for my tastes (which bend more towards Kurtzman than Feldstein), and Hewetson's dialogue is stuttering, weird, non-idiomatic. Visually, I like how Cardona draws the woods as a swirl of wash, silhouette and negative space, and I also like the last panel of the story, as Anne's psychosis rubs out the panel grid even while Cardona presents Anne's suicide in a sequence of four images. It initially seems, though, that Cardona missed the point of the story, which hinges on the fact that sister Mary is homely but has a pure and noble soul: as John says to Mary (and, unwittingly, to Anne) at the top of page six, "Anne is beautiful only on the **OUTSIDE**—a surface beauty...but **you** I love because of your **inner** beauty..." But throughout the story, Cardona persists in drawing Mary equally as attractive as Anne. On page three, Mary looks out at us with a glamorous, symmetrical face, in a pose that Cardona might've cribbed from fashion photography:

In a close-up on page five, Anne claims to be ugly, and Cardona again draws her as gorgeous:

It's tempting to read this confusion between word and image in "Black Orchids" as another example of Skywald hamfistedness, but wait. The story of Anne's psychosis is transmitted to us through at least two filters: Anne herself—who must've told the police and her doctors at the sanatorium some version of the events—and through Anne's doctor, the narrator of much of "Black Orchids." So why do we trust the version of the story related to us by the doctor, who's only learned about the crime second hand, and

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possibly only from a madwoman? Does Hewetson take inspiration for “Black Orchids” from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), with its tales-within-tales and unreliable narrator? Perhaps Hewetson’s words present a distorted, incomplete version of the events, even while Cardona’s art reveals that Mary was not the ugly homunculus Anne claims she was? Does “Black Orchids” itself twin into opposites? Are we reading a pulpy, low-down, unintentionally provocative American spin on Moto Hagio’s “Hanshin”?

13.

In a landfill in Western New York are decomposed scraps of paper that used to be a comic book, and before its pictures were mildewed out of legibility, that comic told a story about a leopard-woman in love with a normal man. I’d like to read that comic again today. I might like it better, and I also could learn from it—about a comics company I’ve never heard of, about the broader history of horror comics, about the wonky gender dynamics inherent in the figure of a leopard woman. When I think of that rotting comic, I remind myself that as a critic I’d like to make fewer snap judgments, and strive for more understanding, more contextualizing, more Jauss and axe-faced Anne.

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