

Comic-book hero alien, but he's surely no wimp

AUBURN, Maine (AP) — As the creator of the comic book "Zen, Intergalactic Ninja" sees it, most of today's space aliens are either bad guys or wimps.

Enter Zen, a short, muscular, blue-skinned space warrior; a no-nonsense sort of extraterrestrial.

"Sort of the Dirty Harry of aliens," said his creator, Steve Stern.

Rather than spattering small-time villains with a big revolver like the Clint Eastwood film character, however, Zen addresses the big questions.

His latest mission is to save Earth from ecological destruction at the hands of a planet-devouring madman named Notan the Magnificent. Zen works through his mental link with Jeremy, the offspring of an alien queen and a mortal human.

Stern and airbrush artist Dan Cote publish the bimonthly comic as a sideline from their jobs. Stern heads a small advertising business; Cote is a commercial artist in Lewiston.

Until now, writers and film producers have treated most space aliens as evil, said Stern, citing a tradition that extends from the H.G. Wells novel "War of the Worlds" to the hit movie "Alien."

The exceptions, he said, are creatures like E.T., whom he characterized as wimpy and ineffectual, and Alf, the fuzzy but obnoxious star of a children's TV show.

"The comic book-buying public responded to Zen because he represents a true alien hero," Stern said. In recent years, "there have been very

few, if any, alien heroes who come to mind."

THE EARLIER GENERATION of otherworldly superheros, such as Superman, don't count, because they looked like earthlings rather than aliens, Stern said.

To underscore his scorn for nerds from outer space, Stern has printed hundreds of stickers that show an E.T.-like character in a red circle with a slash through it, with the phrase, "No Wimpy Aliens."

Stern said he used Zen because he believes the branch of Buddhism offers a valuable guide to day-to-day living. Zen imparts that philosophy to Jeremy, who develops confidence and assurance as the story unfolds.

Cote draws the comic book with a painstakingly slow airbrush technique that gives it a realistic, three-dimensional look. It is produced in black and white with a multi-color cover.

From an initial printing of 4,000 copies for the first issue in November 1987, circulation has climbed to 20,000, Stern said. He hopes soon to get a break that would turn Zen into a national phenomenon.

"The explosion of comic books into the mass media is at a fever pitch right now," he said, citing box office records set by the movie "Batman."

STERN ALSO SEES as a promising sign a heightened awareness of environmental problems.

Organizers of Earth Day 1990 have

contacted Stern about a possible role for Zen in that observance. Stern and Cote also have established the Zen Save the Earth Foundation, which will divert a portion of the profits from licensing agreements to organizations dedicated to environmental protection.

Zen's creator hopes to follow in the path of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," an independently produced comic that became a major success, spawning a popular animated television series and sets of toy action figures.

A line of Zen pencils and notebooks is already on the market; Stern hopes a latex mask of Zen can be in stores by Halloween 1990.

As a boy growing up on New York's Long Island, Stern eagerly awaited each new issue of "Batman," "Superman" and the "The Fantastic Four."

Following graduation from the University of Miami as an English major, he returned to New York to write horror and science fiction comics. The pay was low, and he drifted into advertising to make ends meet.

Stern thought up Zen in 1970, but stashed a one-page synopsis in a suitcase. Four years ago, after moving to Auburn, 30 miles north of Portland, with his wife, he met Cote.

A couple of days earlier, Stern had opened his old suitcase and the sheet of paper with the idea for Zen flew out. He felt it was an omen and moved ahead with the project.

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"**POETRY IS THE** most subjective and personal of the arts," he explains. "Poetry to me is the one that sings to society."

McCusker doesn't restrict the promulgation of his point of view to the printed page. On any given

evening he might be found looking for an argument while imbibing with others so inclined.

"He shows a great pretense towards literacy," quipped Astoria businessman and Republican Dave Heck, who finds himself at odds with McCusker on most issues.

"He doesn't have an imagination, he has a memory," Heck continued. "Sometimes he feels the school of

hard knocks has graduated him cum laude."

"We keep each other sharp," McCusker says of Heck and his other verbal challengers.

McCusker has his own advice for Heck and others of his ilk adrift in the materialistic 1980s.

"Don't buy a Porsche," he says. "Don't be beguiled by the trinkets and the baubles."

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