



Comic book memories: parents, codes, 'Spidey'

Superman, Batman, Archie, Richie Rich... it's a rare university student who hasn't come into contact with comic books and their heroes at one time or another.

Since the early part of this century comic books have helped shape the lives of millions of Americans. Most people consider themselves too old for such things by the time they hit their late teens, though there are those who will go to their graves believing that the "funnies" are the most important section of the daily newspaper.

Occasionally, someone will re-use to give up his interest in comic books as he gets older. Darrell Grimes is such a person. Grimes, a 26-year-old comic book collector who owns the Fantasy Shop Comic Book store at 770 East 13th, recently bought an original copy of Action Comics no. 1. Published in 1938 by National Periodical Publications (also known as D.C. Comics), Action Comics no. 1 contains the first appearance of a Jerry Siegel/Joe Shuster character called Superman. There are only twelve original copies still in existence. Grimes paid \$6,000 for his.

Obviously, comic book collecting has become big business, big enough to command thousands of dollars for a single copy, and big enough for a man to make a living running a store which caters to comic book collectors.

Grimes began collecting comic books in 1967. Within two years his collection numbered over 12,000. In 1974 Grimes opened the Fantasy Shop in the back of the Koobdooga Book Store, buying out the previous owner and using his own collection to get started. Today, the Fantasy Shop has an inventory of approximately 100,000 comic books.

A bit of history: comic books, originally known as "funny books," began as nothing more than reprints of newspaper strips in book form. According to *A Chronology of the Development of the American Comic Book* by M. Thomas Inge, the first such collection was of Richard Outcault's *Yellow Kid* from the *Hearst New York American* in 1897.

The first monthly comic magazine *Famous Funnies*, was published by Dell Publishing Company in 1934. The following year saw the premiere of D.C.'s *More Fun*, the first comic book to use original material as opposed to newspaper reprints. Superman, who had been appearing in *Action Comics*, was given his own magazine in the summer of 1939. *Batman* followed suit a year later.

The appearance of Fawcett Publications' *Captain Marvel Adventures* in 1941 prompted D.C., publishers of *Superman*, to file suit, claiming that *Captain Marvel*, because he possessed many of Superman's powers, was infringing on their copyright. After years of litigation, Fawcett had to cease publication of *Captain Marvel*.

That wasn't all on the legal front. Prompted by parents and educators concerned about the effect of comic books on the nation's youth, the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency launched an investigation in 1954. The major publishers responded by forming the Comics Code Authority, which had the responsibility of examining all comic books to make sure they contained nothing which might corrupt the little ones' minds. A vast majority of comic books on sale today have stamps on their covers assuring parents that they have been "Approved by the Comics Code Authority."

According to Darrell Grimes, the hysteria surrounding comic books in the fifties caused parents to forbid their children to read them. Faced with declining sales, comic publishers printed fewer copies. Comic books printed between 1954 and 1964, because of their scarcity, are frequently more valuable than comics from other periods.

Comic book heroes are constantly changing. The original Superman was a somewhat less impressive figure than he is today, says Grimes: "He could only leap tall buildings in a single bound and move faster than a locomotive. And bullets kinda hurt."

Today the trend is for superheroes to have more complicated personalities, perhaps best exemplified by *Spiderman*. When Peter Parker, Spiderman's alter ego, was in high school, "he had acne problems, he had girl problems, he was bullied around by his classmates, he was called a bookworm, he had every problem you

could imagine. He grew out of some of them," Grimes says, "but not all."

Serious comic collecting began to spread about 1964. By 1968, the hobby had the potential to involve large sums of money. Today a comic book collection is much more than a hobby — it's an invention.

Grimes' Action Comics no. 1 has been increasing in value by a thousand dollars a year since 1974; its list price is now over \$7,000. Grimes keeps his copy in a safe deposit box.

Grimes had trouble gaining his parents' acceptance when he opened the Fantasy Shop. After all, his occupation wasn't exactly traditional. "They try to support what their sons are doing," he says. "But it took a long time before I got them to feel that my place in life is running a comic book store."

Asked if he could imagine doing that for the rest of his life, Grimes says yes without hesitation.

Customers at the Fantasy Shop range in age from 10 to 30. Some come in merely to find something to read, but most are collectors. Besides their investment potential, comic books offer "an escape into a fantasy world," Grimes says.

"Students come in here to get their minds off their studies, to find some relaxation away from Sociology or whatever."

Grimes advises the novice collector to talk to a reputable dealer before buying: "I don't know anything about coins, so I wouldn't dare buy a 1909 Lincoln Head penny, even though they're supposed to be valuable — I might buy the wrong one. Ask a dealer — he'll be able to tell you which comic books are the best ones to buy."

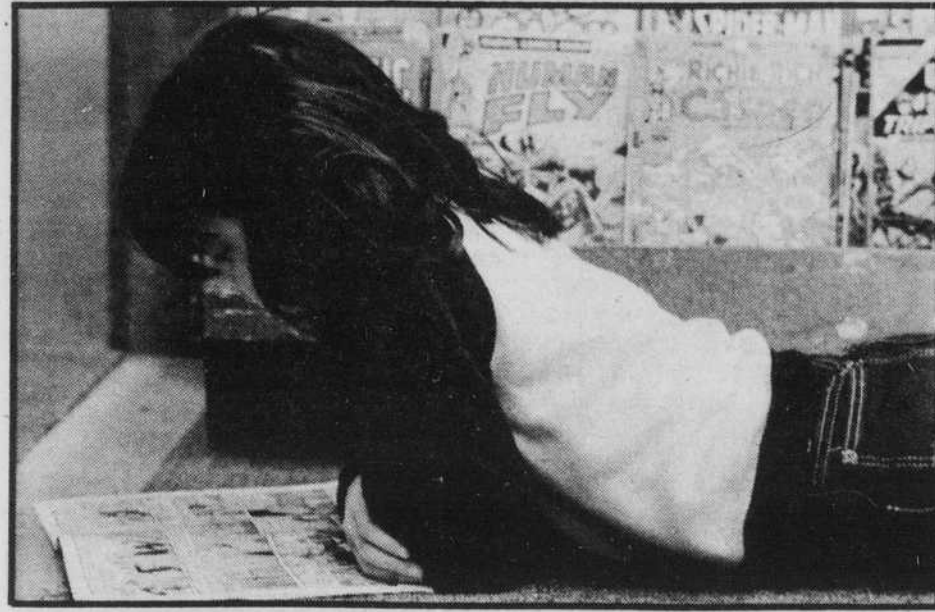
A rare comic book with good art, a strong plot and believable characters is fun to read, and may fetch quite a bit of money on the collection market.

That box of comics in your closet may turn out to be worth more than scattered memories.

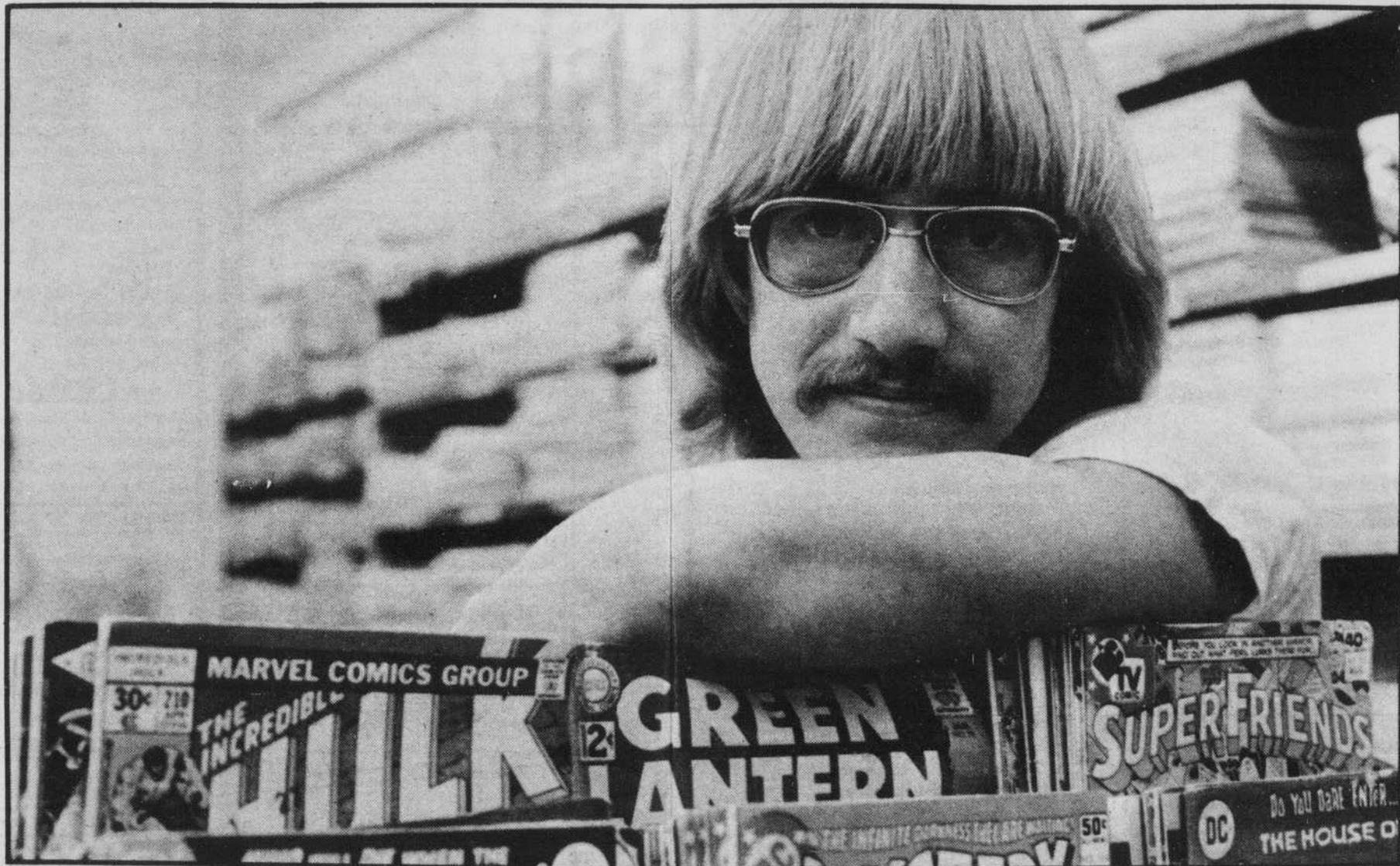


A \$6,000 find . . .

Story by Phil Bernstein
Photos by Doug Fick



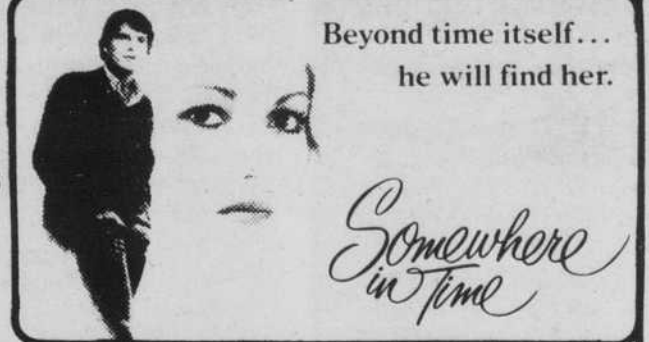
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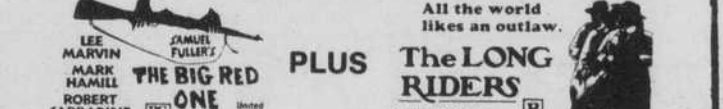
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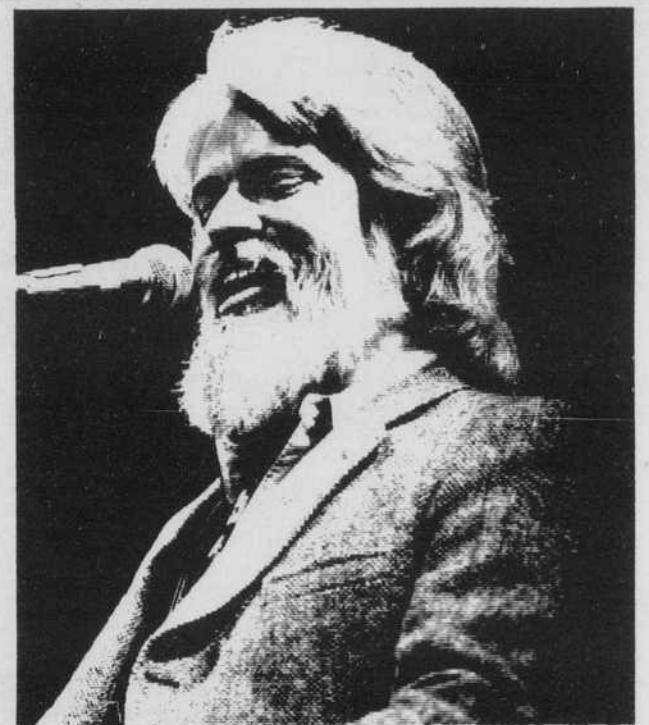
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