

Queer comic books

Gay, lesbian and bisexual cartoonists come to Portland

by Irene K. Hislop

Rocky Road Comics was host to one of the largest book signings by gay, lesbian and bisexual comic-book creators in the United States on Oct. 25. Andy Mangels, editor of *Gay Comics*, Vaughn Frick, creator of an anti-OCA comic, Donna Barr, author of the Desert Peach comics and play, Roberta Gregory, creator of the first lesbian comic book, Dave Young, creator of the local *Bernie* strip, and Michael Goldberg, longtime contributor to *Gay Comics*, turned out to give autographs and chat with fans.

COMICS

While gay and lesbian theme comics are a small portion of the industry, mainstream comics are starting to depict a few characters who "come out." Alpha Flight's character Northstar is one of three or four comic heroes to reveal that he or she is gay. "[Gay comics] don't sell as well," said Jeff Morehead, manager of Excalibur Books and Comics, "but those who try it usually like it. It's a fresh, different voice."

Rocky Road, the only gay-owned comic-book store in Portland, has a hard time keeping the various gay comics, which make up about ten percent of the inventory, in stock, according to owner Nik Baldwin. He noted that mainstream characters who come out generate debate in the letters section of comic books, with more people writing in support of having gay comic-book heroes.

Creating gay comics doesn't create a big paycheck. According to Andy Mangels, many stores are afraid to carry the comics, especially in light of the current economic situation. But *Gay Comics* is available in Australia, Canada, Great Britain and parts of South America. That doesn't make it any easier for gay-comic creators to cross over into the more profitable world of mainstream comic books. Mangels came out at the beginning of his comics career.

"It's only been a lot of perseverance on my part to keep it from being the end," he said. Mangels recently did an episode of *Quantum Leap* dealing with the Stonewall riots. His story will be in the *Quantum Leap* comic book, not the television show. He's also working on issues of the *Star Trek* and *Batman Adventure* comic books, as well as on more issues of *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Mangels says that he always puts gay characters in his stories, even if they just appear in the background. He's also working on putting more ethnic diversity into his comics.

Vaughn Frick, whose work has appeared in *Gay Comics*, *Meatmen*, *PDXS*, *Strip AIDS USA* and *Annie Sprinkle Is Miss Timed*, is the creative force behind *Righteous X Goes to Hell*, a comic book produced by the Special Righteousness Committee. Over 16,000 copies of the book have been sold. Frick said he's enjoyed doing the book because so many people are depressed about the OCA, but he added that it wasn't all fun.

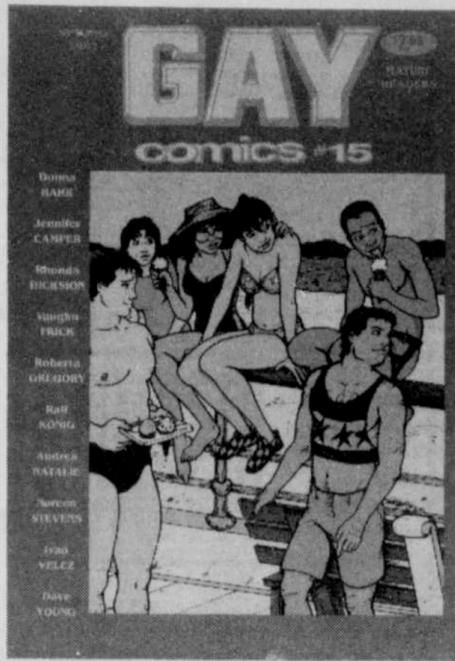
"In drawing Lon Mabon," he said, "you feel more like a coroner than a cartoonist."

Frick also has out a collection of his work, *Watch Out Comics*, and does fliers for several local progressive groups. Being political, he says, has made it harder to get his work published.

Roberta Gregory created the first lesbian comic book, *Dynamite Damsels*, in the early 1970s. Although some of her books are turning a profit, she says it's still hard for a lesbian comic creator to be taken seriously in the industry.

"I wish," she said, "I would find more respect than I do."

Women comic artists, she explained, are caught in a double bind because few comic publishers are interested in women's work, and few women's



bookstores are interested in comics. But slowly, more women are becoming interested in comics. Although the market tends to be dominated by adolescent boys, Gregory says comics offer women "a powerful means of expression" to discuss the issues affecting their lives. Gregory's work examines sexism, lesbian issues, body image, abortion and more.

"A lot of women's comics," she said, "are political because women lives are, by necessity, political."

Dave Young is planning to bring back his *Bernie* comic strip, which ran from 1980 to 1987 in the *Cascade Voice*, as well as being syndicated nationally to several other gay papers. *Community News*, a gay paper in Salem, has been running the old strips. Young describes the strip as a celebration of gay domestic life, with plenty of "homespun humor."

Donna Barr feels the Oregon Citizens Alliance has made her work more timely than ever. She is the creator of the controversial Desert Peach comic books, which tell the story of a gay officer in the Nazi forces in Africa during World War II. Barr describes the comic as "pro-human, anti-war and guaranteed to offend everybody." One point she tries to make with the books is that everyone has the potential to be a Nazi, and that we should all be vigilant about bigotry.

Barr does a great deal of research for her work, and readers familiar with World War II often write to tell her how realistic the comic is. She also received a letter from a former gay-basher who told her how the strip helped him overcome the homophobia from which he suffered ever since an older boy raped him when he was a child.

The Desert Peach is also a musical to be performed Nov. 6-29 in Seattle. The book and lyrics are by Barr and T. Brian Wagner; the music is by Portlander Michael Seyfrit. Barr says she started the comic book and play at the same time, but the two projects have gone in different directions.

Michael Goldberg is a longtime contributor to *Gay Comics*; his work has also appeared in *Meatmen* and *Strip AIDS USA*. Goldberg worked on *Choices*, a comic book about the abortion debate.

Fans of *Gay Comics* can look forward to work by Clive Barker within the next two years and strips from Alison Bechdel, without the *Dykes to Watch Out For* characters, in issue 18, due out this spring.

Baldwin described the turnout for the signing as "pleasant." A steady stream of customers arrived at his store to visit the cartoonists, and Baldwin is pleased with sales.



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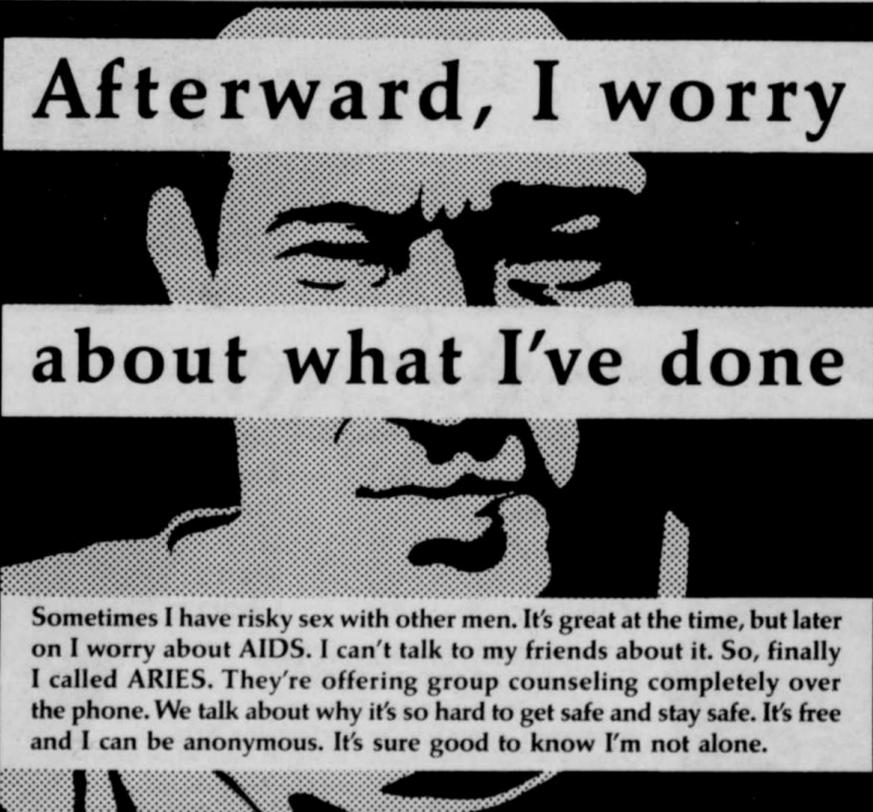
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