



# ZOMBIE ZONE

FREE COMIC BOOK DAY SAMPLER



ONLY MZS Presents... **THE ZINE THAT TIME FORGOT**

APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY

MAY NO. 508

★ STAR SPANGLED ★ 12¢

# ZOMBIE STORIES

CHEW ON THIS YOU MANGY LIZARD!

YOU'LL GASP AT THE ZOMBIGOSAURUS WHO ATE EAST TAWAS

BRAMA  
BRAMA  
BRAMA

FIGHTIN MARINES PIT RAW NERVE AGAINST FEROCIOUS EATING MACHINES IN THE MOST GOD FORSAKEN PLACE ON EARTH!

JOE BROWN



Central Mailer

James Little  
e-mail: cm@mzsapa.com

MZS Web Page - www.mzsapa.com

MZS MySpace Page - www.myspace.com/mzsapa

Emergency Central Mailer

Shane Hutchison  
e-mail: ecm@mzsapa.com

Marvel Zombie Society Amateur Press Association

presents

## **Zombie Zone**

Free Comic Book Day Sampler

2008 edition

### Table of Contents

Title	Contributor	Page
Cover	Laurie Brown	1
Table of Contents		2
Big City Capes and Small Town Legends	Ivan Martin	3
Round Table	various	4
Kids  corner	Shane Hutchison	8
New Horizons	Jennifer Bratcher	9
The Reading Report	Laurie Brown	10
On The Shelf	Kenneth Rasmussen	11
"If I Didn't Know Better, I'd Swear We Just Had A Lover's Quarrel"	Tilman Stieve	12
Manga Minute	Jennifer Bratcher	16
Mythic Manhwa	Shane Hutchison	17
About the Marvel Zombie Society Amateur Press Association		19
We Want Your Brains	Laurie Brown	20

---

The MZS APA mailing is published monthly by the members of the Marvel Zombie Society Amateur Press Association. The contents of this Free Comic Book Day sampler are © 2008 by each individual contributor, except where otherwise noted or other copyrights apply. Applications and other inquiries should be directed to the Central Mailer (e-mail: cm@mzsapa.com • regular mail: James Little, 8659 Potrero St., San Diego, CA 92114).

The MZS-APA was founded in July 1990 as an extension of the Marvel Zombie Monthly fanzine, which began publication in July 1988 by Robert Hough. The Marvel Zombie Society Amateur Press Association is in no way associated with or sponsored by Marvel Entertainment, Inc.

## Big City Capes and Small Town Legends

### Astro City (DC-Wildstorm)

*Written by Kurt Busiek and illustrated by Brent Anderson*

From its beginning as a 6-issue mini-series from Image Comics in 1995, *Astro City* has redefined the type of story that can be told in a superhero comic. Kurt Busiek is one of the most consistently excellent writers working in comics, and on this series he has been blessed with the fantastic artwork of Brent Anderson on the interiors, and covers by Alex Ross.

In recent years the title has been troubled by deadlines, but rather than let the book fade away, Busiek has responded by changing the structure of the title. He is currently telling a series of stories under the title “The Dark Age”. The story is being broken into chapters, with each chapter being a 4-issue mini-series. Between each mini-series is a one-shot issue focusing on a specific character. The main characters in the arc are two brothers who have very different approaches – one is a small-time hood who has occasionally worked for some of the super-crooks who operate in Astro City, and the other is a police officer. Each mini-series within the series moves a little bit further ahead in time, with the current sequence set in the early 1980s.

One of the best things about *Astro City* is that Busiek has made the city itself a character, with each new story revealing just a bit more about the history of the city and its residents. This is a series worth checking out. And if you can find a copy of *Astro City* #1/2, it’s worth reading as possibly the best story in the series, and one that Busiek has said is one of his favorite stories. There’s a Wizard mail-in version of the issue, but there’s also a regular Image Comics version of the #1/2 issue, featuring a rare cover by Brent Anderson.

### Fables (DC-Vertigo)

*Written by Bill Willingham and illustrated by Mark Buckingham and Steve Leialoha*

Following the conclusion of *Sandman*, DC’s Vertigo imprint seemed to be fading somewhat. But the imprint continued to be a home for unique titles, and this book, along with *Y: The Last Man*, essentially ended any question about the future of the imprint. In late 2006 the title had enough of a track record that it generated a spin-off ongoing title, *Jack of Fables*.

The premise of this title is similar in some ways to that of Neil Gaiman’s novel “*American Gods*”. It supposes that the characters from the fairy tales and children’s stories of childhood are actually very real, and that each inhabit their own realms, similar to alternate Earths. These realms are accessible to each other, and characters from them often interact with each other. Many years ago a being known as The Adversary began to conquer the weaker of the fable realms, driving their inhabitants into exile. Quite a sizeable number of the fable characters have fled to Earth, the mundane world, and set up a neighborhood known as Fabletown, which is magically hidden from the Mundy’s (that’s you and me – the non-fable inhabitants of Earth). There is also a secluded outpost in upstate New York known as The Farm, where non-human fables (like the three little piggies, for example) reside.

The fable characters have very complex connections with each other, and there are some fables who have been killed, and others who have worked for or spied for The Adversary. One example of how things have changed is that Snow White is divorced from Prince Charming, who turned out to be quite a womanizer.

The *Jack of Fables* spin-off isn’t quite as strong as the main *Fables* title, mainly because it has a slightly smaller cast of characters, but it is still quite entertaining. *Fables* has enjoyed a steady run of great artwork by Mark Buckingham and Steve Leialoha, with a smattering of issues drawn by other artists, with intricately-woven main plots and subplots by series creator Bill Willingham.

## Round Table

We polled a few of our members on some of the relevant topics affecting comics today.

**1) Do you think movies based on comic properties are helping to grow the audience for comics in any notable manner? Is the influx of movie and television producers and writers (individuals such as Allan Heinberg, Damon Lindelof, Guy Ritchie, Jon Favreau, Joss Whedon, etc.) who are writing or developing comic projects helping to grow the audience for comics in any substantial manner?**

[Anita] I think that movies may encourage someone to pick up a TPB if they happen to run across one, but as far as sending them to the comic book store, I doubt it. Movie and TV people (and novelists for that matter) who have a loyal following may help bring people over to reading those specific comics, but without good cross-promotion with other titles and writers, I don't know if it will make a significant impact.

I think of how I got into comics.... I was a G.I. Joe fan, discovered there were comics -- cool. Then I discovered -- through the letter columns, which don't exist much anymore -- that the writer of the *G.I. Joe* comics, Larry Hama, was writing something called *Wolverine*, so I started reading that. Then I found out that *Wolverine* was in *X-Men*, and then it was all over and I was spending an obscene amount of money on comics every month, considering I was a 16-year-old girl. But is that kind of cross-promotion in place anymore? There aren't many letter columns left, no ads that say, "This writer is also writing such-and-such, check it out!" No easy access for the new or casual reader.

[Kenneth] Comic related movies started out as a good thing. The new "boom" in this genre started with the success of the *X-Men* and the *Spider-Man* movies. Even the not so successful *Fantastic Four* movie helped promote the comic industry. But that was it. Even Hollywood has its limits when it comes to the number of quality scripts, producers and actors it can produce in a limited space of time. Movies like the *Hulk*, *Ghost Rider* and *Punisher* were so poor that they might actually have turned potential readers away from the comics books.

Comic books are still, by most, considered to be for kids only. *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* showed that comics contain quality stories and characters. Liking *Wolverine* was suddenly also accepted for us over the age of 15. Unfortunately, the comic industry's (Marvel's in particular) continued flirtation with Hollywood has now made potential readers believe that *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* is all there is to comics, in terms of quality.

I don't think that movie/television producers working on comics will have much impact on the audience, especially in the short run. But it will, hopefully, have a positive impact on recruitment for future writers and artists. The knowledge that comic books can be a stepping-stone to movies/television production, and that successful producers/writers choose to work on comics as well, should be a great motivator for the next generation of comic book creators.

[Mark] Of course the adaptation of comics into other media expand the comics audience and awareness. Superman, Batman et al. survived and thrived because of their expansion into radio, film, and TV. The general populace would have no idea who *Wolverine* was if not for the *X-Men* films. Ditto for obscure characters like *Hellboy*, *Ghost Rider*, or *Tank Girl* (ah, never mind on that last one). Still, any adaptation is a good one, in my mind, as it demonstrates that comics are a thriving medium with a variety of content.

However, I'm not so positive about film or TV writers/producers moving into comics. While it's the "hip" thing for them to do, and it does raise a brief curiosity, I can't see a non-comics reader jumping into comics because Jon Favreau is writing an *Iron Man* comic. In fact, most of these have been co-written by a comics writer. I think it does bring new ideas into the medium, but with a few exceptions (JMS, Whedon), most are not comics writers and are doing this as a lark more than anything else.

[Tilman] Well, they increase comics recognition, but whether they actually help the audience grow I'm not so sure, even though I had high hopes. "Blade", "Men in Black" and their sequels certainly did not seem to help the comic properties on which they were based that much. Even for high-profile stuff like *Spider-Man* and the *X-Men*, sales still seem to be a lot lower than they were in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

I am sceptical. Straczynski, for all his missteps, showed himself a great writer on *Amazing Spider-Man* (he made me accept some concepts I did not like at all, such as the *Spider-Totem* thing and Peter's new

job as a teacher), while Joss Whedon's writing on *Astonishing X-Men* and *Runaways* ultimately failed to convince me. Unfortunately I haven't kept track of what kind of impact they actually had on sales in general.

[Shane] I don't think movies are really helping to bring in a noticeable number of new readers. In particular, I don't think movies like *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, *Batman Begins* or *Superman Returns* affect sales in any significant manner --- I don't believe that anyone who isn't currently a comic reader sees those movies and thinks 'I need to go buy a *Spider-Man* comic'. It might open the eyes of a few youngsters and lead to their finding their way to a comic or two ... but I don't see the parents bringing them back into a shop on anything resembling a regular basis (and even if they are purchasing the comics in trade form at a mega-bookseller, it probably isn't going to be something the parent will repeat more than once or twice). That said, I do think that movies like *Sin City*, *Road to Perdition*, *A History of Violence*, *300*, or anything that isn't immediately recognized as what the common man (or woman) on the street envisions when they think of comic books, has the potential for broader-based audience growth. The problem is making those people aware of the material the movie originated from. If they walk out of a theatre having enjoyed a movie like *A History of Violence* and are blissfully unaware that it is based on an original graphic novel, then the industry has missed a great opportunity to reach out and let people know there is A LOT more to comics than what they think they are. If they had a better understanding of the depth of material that is actually available (the fact that it isn't all flying people who wear spandex and shoot laser beams out of their eyes), they would be much more likely to want to have a look.

I think there is some potential for movie and/or television people to provide some additional exposure. Individuals who have a very strong following can bring in new readers depending on the material. If there is already a built-in audience for a project, then you can expect there might be some influx of new reader. Joss Whedon is the obvious example. He has brought two television properties to comics -- *Buffy* and *Firefly* (*Serenity*). Both projects already had a very strong following, so of course there have been new readers that have come out of that group. The real question is, were Joss to create a brand new comic based off a completely new concept (no *Buffy* or *Firefly* ties), would those new readers be willing to read that as well? I'm not sure what the answer is to that. As far as other creators, I don't think there is really any bump in sales brought on by their name. Do a majority of the fans of a television show like *Lost* really know who Damon Lindelof is? Do they care? Are they going to flock to a comic because he is writing it? I honestly don't believe so. There have been some *My Chemical Romance* fans who picked up Gerard Way's *Dark Horse* mini-series *The Umbrella Academy*. Is Gerard Way going to be successful in bringing those same fans back for his next project? If they enjoyed *The Umbrella Academy*, then I say chances are good they do. So the next question becomes -- is there really any benefit to bringing over movie and television people for quick projects (you can essentially consider it moonlighting because they are not leaving their Hollywood career behind and certainly are not going to be one-hundred-percent focused on their comics work)? My personal opinion is no. If they're really not committed to the project (in the manner someone like Joss Whedon and Gerard Way have demonstrated), then they are more often than not doing a disservice to fans (especially if they are working on established characters in a work-for-hire type of situation --- they want to leave their mark but won't have to deal with the consequences of whatever it is they decide to kick around --- they're here today and gone tomorrow and the character is probably not the better for it).

**2) Are event comics taking the industry back down a bad road? Are there too many of them? What makes a good comic event?**

[Anita] Yes, event comics are not good at this point. There are too many, so we're desensitized; they're not really events if they're happening every month! A good event should explore the characters and their reactions to said event. It should start and end with a plot point, but the in-between should be character driven.

[Kenneth] Comic events can be fun and exciting, or they can be the spawn of Satan. The big difference is very often how many different comic book titles the event crosses over into. Publishers use comic events (crossovers) to 'motivate' readers to pick up new titles. The result can very easily be the opposite. A comic event fails when a reader of a certain title has to buy 4-5 other titles simply to figure out what is going on the one title he/she wants to follow. Success depends on publishers being able to limit themselves: Limited number of comic events, limited number of titles involved in each event, and limited time span for each event.

[Mark] Yes and no. You have to take this from a historical perspective. In the past, annual crossovers were done simply for the sake of needing an annual event. The current batch of event comics are more significant and seem to have a story-based purpose. Who can recall “Atlantis Attacks” or “Armageddon 2000”? But, one can recall *Civil War* or the latest Crisis. And, I believe Dan Dido or Joe Quesada when they say that the purpose is a jumping point for interesting stories. We would never have seen such an intriguing view of Tony Stark or seen him as a major character again if not for *Civil War*. Additionally, the quality of these event comics has improved. Where I think the problem lies nowadays is the non-event comics. Take *World War III* or “The Great Disaster.” These SHOULD have been event comics. Instead, these were compressed into a regular title. I would have loved to see a 4-part Kirbyesque return to the world of Omac, Kamandi, etc. Instead, we get a one issue watered down version.

However, the problem with event comics is and has always been that they disrupt a regular title’s continuity. That needs to be limited, else the event runs the line, not the other way around. That DC is not going to push *Final Crisis* into the monthly titles is a good choice. That I don’t need to know about the Monitors to enjoy an issue of *Action Comics* is a good thing. I think the bigger problem is that editors want an event to have earth-shaking, line-changing consequences and change them for change’s sake. Then, a few years later, all is reversed. This dampens any enthusiasm or intrigue of changes. Recall when Paul Levitz wrote “LSH” and we saw characters die. That was something new and shocking. Today, any major Legion saga has to have a character die. Any event comic has to have multiple deaths. That is a larger issue.

[Tilman] I am definitely suffering from event overload, so I’d say there are too many. The surfeit of events certainly brought me to a point where I am now buying practically no DC titles at all and where I give most Marvel events wide berth, sticking mostly to titles I buy anyway, with just one exception, *Annihilation Conquest*.

[Shane] An ‘event’, in and of itself, isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It depends on how it is executed. When it involves a bazillion crossovers, then it is definitely a bad bad thing. Even a well-coordinated event that steps into several titles has negative effects (and I’m not talking about the impact of the particular story on the characters involved). First, regardless of how much planning goes into place, when it is decided an event is going to take place, someone’s toes are getting stepped on. A storyline someone was in the middle of or working toward is suddenly derailed or delayed. That isn’t good for that comic. Take the recent Messiah Complex event that ran in Marvel’s X-titles. I don’t know how much of what Mike Carey and Ed Brubaker were doing over the preceding twelve months was specifically building up to that, but it certainly wasn’t a core part of what Peter David was doing in *X-Factor*. So when Messiah Complex hit, he had to work in story elements of that event while trying to keep the ball rolling with everything else he has been building toward with the title’s characters over the past couple of years. It was an unnecessary and most definitely unwelcome disruption for me as a reader. Any event that requires a reader to have to sift through numerous titles outside of the core book (if said event is an actual mini-series of its own) in order to really get a feel for what is happening is a disaster. *The OMAC Project* is a perfect example. Leading up to *Infinite Crisis*, DC produced several mini-series that fed into the event, and *The OMAC Project* was one of them. It was a six issue mini-series detailing the progression of Brother Eye into the worldwide threat it would become by the beginning of *Infinite Crisis*. The pivotal moment in the series is when Wonder Woman kills Maxwell Lord. The problem is, that particular action occurred in an issue of *Wonder Woman* and not *The OMAC Project*. When readers finished the third issue of the mini-series, Lord was alive. When they came back for the fourth issue, Wonder Woman was holding Lord’s deceased form. The story of how that situation played out happened in *Wonder Woman no. 219*, so if a reader wasn’t reading that title at the time, they missed it. THAT is ridiculous. THAT should never happen. Someone picking up a min-series should be able to get all of the core elements of that series without having to go anywhere else. A pivotal moment, or the events leading up to said moment, should never be outside the originating series. A hero unmasking and revealing his identity to the entire world shouldn’t just come mostly out of the blue – the reader should be able to see the difficulty, the how, and the why of such a decision, without needing to pick up copies of *Amazing Unmasking Man* and *Spectacularly Sensational Unmasking Man*.

You want a good event? We’ve got to go back a ways. *Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars*. The first one. That was a good event. EVERYTHING happened in the pages of that mini-series. There were no crossovers. Some characters came out of it changed and that played out in their individual titles. If a reader wanted to see the after-effects, they could follow the characters in their series. But they didn’t have to go anywhere outside of the actual mini-series to see how the characters had been changed. The

story was right there, every single bit of it. Unfortunately, it spawned a sequel that was a crossover fest. And it was the worst kind too. Titles were labeled as tie-in issues when nothing of any consequence actually happened. And it has been off to the races ever since. Now events are giant crossover machines. They're as much about selling as many extra copies of titles X, Y, and Z as they are about the actual event occurring in the mini-series itself. So I would say events are not killing comics so much as the crossover (which is being directly fed by the event) is doing it. If publishers were doing events similar in nature to *Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars*, it wouldn't be a bad thing at all. Unfortunately, I think those days are long gone.

### 3) Why do superhero comics dominate sales?

[Anita] Because they've been around most consistently. Because men have more disposable income and superhero comics are testosterone-driven soap operas, so you have to keep reading if you want to know what's going on, yet there's action to keep the male interest, cheesecake to keep the female interest, and, if the writer is blessed, there are some good stories to be told there. They're modern mythology, tales of beings with powers and abilities we don't have but wish we did. If I were Batman, I'd have this country fixed already.

People who don't read comics don't know that there's more out there than superheroes. Until they've handed *Sandman*, or *Blankets*, or *From Hell*, or *Courtney Crumrin and the Night Things*, they have no clue. Superhero comics almost have to be the "gateway drug" for most people who become fans of the medium, because until you've read those, you don't know what else there is, unless you've got someone who's already been there saying, "No, really, read this. It's not for kids. It's right up your alley."

[Kenneth] Two simple reasons (which are probably not so simple after all):

Comic books are for kids! We know it's not true, but that's what most people think. If I ask someone to pick me up something to read, they buy me a magazine about cars. If my four year old nephew asks the same question, he gets a comic book. He probably likes cars more than I do, and I know that I like comics more than he does. And since the general public (i.e. parents with the money) think comics are only for kids, the industry has to abide. Comics about war, crime, sex, vampires, the occult, etc., are not for kids. Superheroes with hearts of gold are.

As a result of the above mentioned reason: Superhero comics are promoted for all they are worth!

[Mark] This goes back to question #1. Because of multi-media cross-pollination, people are familiar with superheroes. If a crime or western or action story featured a non-spandex clad hero and was adapted into multiple media, the character could be massively popular as well. But, this will take marketing and money. Look at *Sandman*. That was a fantasy title but went through the roof in terms of popularity. If marketed appropriately, *Sin City* could have a larger audience. There's no reason why a crime/horror book couldn't sell well and then be adapted into film/TV/books. It's just easier to produce more of what works and sells. I'd think that once the current super-hero film cycle plays out (likely will die once JLA hits the screen), something else will capture the public's attention.

[Tilman] In a nutshell I'd say inertia and the aging fandom. The majority of North American fans consists of old superhero fans.

[Shane] Superhero comics dominate the market because those are the books that get ordered by comic retailers for the most part. Certainly there are shops that have a very diverse offering of comics, but there are a lot of them who never get past Marvel in the Previews catalog. They order most, if not all, of Marvel's titles, DC's core imprint titles, and possibly some Dark Horse and Image titles, and then they are done (though they might be bothered to at least turn to Devil's Due for *G.I. Joe* and IDW for *Transformers*). I expect those shops probably don't even carry many Vertigo titles. So there are many places where comic fans don't know about many of the great non-superhero comics because they've never seen them on the stands. They've never had the opportunity to pick up one of those titles and thumb through to see if there is actually something there to appeal to them.

**Amulet – Book One The Stonekeeper (Scholastic)**

*Written and illustrated by Kazu Kibuishi*

Synopsis: After a family tragedy, Emily, Navin, and their mother move to an ancestral home to start a new life. On the family's very first night in the mysterious new house, Emily and Navin's mother is kidnapped by a tentacled creature. Now it's up to Emily and Navin to figure out how to set things right and save their mother's life.

The book opens with an eleven page prologue covering the tragic event that forever changes the lives of Emily, Navin, and their mother Karen. This nicely sets the stage for the rest of the book as it transitions from tragedy to the family beginning a new life. Emily isn't happy about the move. She doesn't like the fact they are moving to a small town in the middle of nowhere. Financial difficulties have forced Karen's hand unfortunately. The house is in need of a lot of work as it hasn't been lived in for a while. It previously belonged to Karen's grandfather, Silas Charnon, but he disappeared after the death of his wife. He was a puzzle maker, though as Karen comments, his puzzles looked more like toys or machines. While cleaning upstairs, Emily stumbles across Silas' library and uncovers a hidden amulet. That evening Emily is awakened by a voice speaking to her from the amulet. She and her mother notice strange noises coming from somewhere in the house. They look for the source and determine it is coming from the basement. Karen descends into the basement and is attacked by a strange creature. Emily and Navin rush down the stairs when they hear her scream, but she is nowhere to be found. Emily notices a door however and they find a huge subterranean cavern on the other side. They eventually catch up to the creature that swallowed their mother, but then end up having to flee from it. The amulet again speaks to Emily and tells her where she needs to go to find help. They manage to escape the creature but are unaware someone is stalking them. They reach the destination given by the amulet and find a huge house sitting on a island of rock in the middle of a small lake. Before they can determine how they want to cross, someone approaches in a boat. When the individual notices them, they decide to run away, but find their path blocked by the dark character that has been stalking them. They are saved by the boatman, Miskit, who turns out to be not a man at all. Miskit takes them to the house where they find their great-grandfather Silas. He reveals some of the secrets of the amulet to Emily and places it in her final charge. Emily has the choice to accept the power of the amulet and Silas' legacy or to turn away. With time running short to rescue her mother, Emily has to decide on a course of action. Accept the power and responsibility or find another way to save her mother.

This is an outstanding book that is perfectly suited for both children and adults. The art is quite excellent and is in full color. The story is engaging and highly entertaining. There are many great touches along the way. I particular enjoyed when they arrive at the house and Karen determines they can't sleep in the house given its current condition so they have to attack it. Brandishing brooms as though they are weapons of war, the three line up in the entryway and then charge forth in unison. Then there is the scene where they are camped out with sleeping bags in one of the rooms upstairs. Emily starts to complain about the move again and when she comments about how her father would have approached things, Karen starts to break down. Emily realizes the mistake she has made and quickly apologizes. It turns into a nice family moment and also demonstrates some small amount of growth on Emily's part. I really like Kazu's character designs, as well as the overall look of this project. The characters have a very simple animated feel similar to a Hayao Miyazaki project, although there is a sort of a Don Bluth vibe to the book that I really can't explain. Miskit and the other denizens of Silas' hidden home are the charming sort of characters one would expect from a book aimed at a younger reading audience. The character stalking the children is particularly menacing in appearance. One thing that really impressed me with Kazu's storytelling throughout the book is his use of the characters' eyes as the primary communicator of what is actually happening to them. In fact, it might be possible to read the story without actually seeing all of the specifics of the surrounding action and still have a reasonably fair idea of what is going on just based on the strength of the characters' expressions. I'm not certain how many books this series is supposed to run but I am definitely looking forward to the remainder of the story.

4 ½ zombies (out of 5)

### Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter – The First Death (Marvel)

*Written by Laurell K. Hamilton and Jonathon Green and illustrated by Welling Alves*

In the 'Anita Blake' book series, in the first novel, "*Guilty Pleasures*", readers are introduced to the vampire executioner Anita Blake and Master Vampire-cum-sexual fantasy made flesh Jean-Claude right off the bat. Readers first encounter them when they already know each other. It is briefly touched upon that Jean-Claude finds Anita fascinating because, as an Animator of the dead, she is partially immune to vampire hypnotism, and she is a licensed vampire hunter so fierce that the other vampires call her the Executioner in hushed tones.

We are also introduced to Edward, an assassin so bad-ass that he switched to targeting supernatural beings because humans became boring to him. Edward is calm, cool, and collected, and he enjoys killing things. Yet he and straight-laced Anita are comrades and sometimes work together. Even though Anita fears Edward, Edward gives his assistance time and time again. However, readers never knew how Anita met these two men.

Until now.

*The First Death* is a prequel to *Guilty Pleasures* and the rest of the Anita Blake series. And Laurell K. Hamilton and her husband are writing the comic.

The story begins with a younger, less experienced Anita working her first case for RPIT (The Regional Preternatural Investigation Team), giving her 'expert' opinion on a case of child murders committed by vampires. Through a series of events, Anita and RPIT officers Dolph and the comical Zerbrowski head to *Guilty Pleasures*, a 'freak' strip club where shapeshifters and vampires dance for normal humans. It is there Anita meets Master Vampire Jean-Claude, who's charming, deductive and more than just a bit sinful. They end up taking one of the vampire strippers to the station to be questioned, only to find out that he is responsible for other murders. However, when he gives the location of the bodies, Anita and company find out that he's not responsible for the child murders they are investigating.

So far, the Anita Blake comics have been rather excellent in terms of translation from book to comic page and *The First Death* is not an exception. Even more so than the *AB-VH: Guilty Pleasures* comic, *The First Death* nails Anita and her world from the first page. This is probably due to it being Laurell K. Hamilton writing her signature character and not someone else's adaption.

It's also interesting to see a newer, greener Anita on her first true case. She doesn't have a feel for her abilities and she's definitely not as powerful as she is in later books. It's a refreshing change to actually see Anita getting farther and farther in over her head without realizing how deep and how fast she's sinking.

Even more fun is her early relationships with Dolph and Zerbrowski. This was set in a time when Dolph respected Anita greatly and Zerbrowski was a bit shinny and new to paranormal events to himself. It was also nice to see Zerbrowski in comic book form finally.

Wellington Alves is more than able to stand in for Brett Booth on the art chores, even more so in some aspects, especially his rendition of Anita. Here Anita looks more like a pretty young woman than a comic book babe and more in keeping with the theme of the book. However, Alves' illustration of Jean-Claude is almost line for line a clone of Brett Booth's, and while aesthetically pleasing, I'd rather see what Alves' own version looks like.

All in all, it's an excellent addition to the Anita Blake universe and I highly recommend it.

4 out of 4

## The Reading Report

While I enjoy the Bat books and *The Spirit*, what I most look forward to are the genre books, specifically the war and western titles. In that regard, one of the best things I read this past year was a five part mini-series from Vertigo called *The Other Side*, by Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart. It's a creepy look at the Viet Nam war from the perspective of one Viet Cong soldier and one American marine. Both are haunted by various demons as the war draws them closer and closer together for one final cataclysmic battle. Cultural ghosts visit the Vietnamese soldier as he sees his country ravaged by foreign invaders while the marine is tormented by his talking rifle and hallucinations of living corpses as he descends into madness. Now more than a quarter century after the actual war, the series is an astute observation of a conflict that solved nothing and shattered countless lives. I've never heard of Cameron Stewart but he does a terrific job of illustrating the saga with a strange blend of realism and cartooniness. Also notable are the colours by Dave McCaig which are also a strange blend, ranging from somber military tones to bright screaming, inky hues. I suspect it will be collected in a trade book at some point and if you are at all inclined towards war and horror themes, then I would definitely recommend having a peek at it and decide for yourself if it's worth investing in.

The only other war book I've been reading is the excellent satire *Army @ Love* recently released by Vertigo. It's a thinly disguised comment on the current mess in the Mid-East with sexually charged thrill junkies at war in the mythical land of Afbaghistan. In this imaginary battleground the American government finds it increasingly difficult to find recruits to fight for questionable causes when there appears to be no threat to their way of life Stateside. So they strike upon the idea of selling their war as an adrenalin and sexually charged adventure camp with a gender mixed army getting all the sex and excitement they can stand. Rick Veitch both writes and draws the book, doing a great job on both counts, and while it seems like a far fetched idea at first glance, it takes on an eerie resemblance to reality given some of the perverse nightmares that have come out of Iraq.

Another current favourite is *The Death Dealer*, which is apparently Image's biggest selling title. That doesn't surprise me as it's very well done and is a return to the sword and sorcery comics of the 1970s which seem to be making a resurgence these days with both *Conan* and *Red Sonja* also doing well. Writer Joshua Ortega and artist Nat Jones have revived the character from the famous Frank Frazetta paintings of the 1980s, with Frazetta's full blessing. Apparently Frank wasn't too happy with the Simon Bisley version from about ten years ago, which I thought was a bit light on plot but splendid to look at. This time around we get a six issue mini-series telling the origin of the soulless warrior which is also splendid to look at, but also nice to read. This is my first encounter with Nat Jones but his work is very labour intensive without looking overworked and is nicely coloured in a pale pallet of mostly greens, blues and grays. The total package is quite entertaining, also featuring the classic Frazetta paintings on the cover, an editorial/letters page and pin-up drawings from various artists, both professional and amateur. I met Ortega at the recent Calgary Comic Expo and he really sold me on this one with his enthusiasm for the project and his reverence for Frazetta. In the first issue there was a bio on Frazetta telling how he has a habit of leaving his work until the last minute and then banging out a painting the night before the deadline, and then having to dry the oil paints in the oven. Anyway, it's these extra touches, sadly lacking in most books these days, that makes this such an enjoyable read.

The final books on the list are all westerns, which are much loved by this reader. The genre seems to be enjoying a resurgence in the comic medium and I'm reading titles from Vertigo, Dynamite (*The Lone Ranger*), and even Marvel (*Classics Illustrated*). One of my favourite reads each month continues to be *Loveless*, the twisted post civil war drama from Vertigo. Written by Brian Azzarello, it roughly follows a rotating cast of characters in the town of Blackwater which is much of the appeal for me. There's no main character or presiding storyline, just loosely connected players whose adventures revolve around a related theme. As the title suggests, it's a remarkably hateful book with tales of rape, murder, and brutality between north and south, blacks and whites, and men and women as hostilities from the war spill over into peacetime. Azzarello has penned all the stories with the early issues featuring art by Marcel Frusin, who I quite liked. Unfortunately, Frusin has stepped down from the art chores although he continues as cover artist. Werner Dell'Edera has since settled in as the regular artist and while I don't like him as much as Frusin, his simple line work and heavy shadow shapes has begun to grow on me. This is not a book for the faint of heart, but if you have a taste for the dark side, this is great entertainment in the Vertigo style.

The book I look forward to most each month is still *Jonah Hex*, although in recent months my enthusiasm has waned somewhat. The merciless bounty hunter with the horribly scarred face has been a favourite character of mine since he debuted in *All Star Western* back in the early seventies and this current incarnation is the best since that original John Albano/Tony DeZuniga version. The stories by Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti are gritty, well imagined, and have a freshness for a character that has such a long history. My current misgivings have to do with the artwork – Phil Noto and Jordi Bernet have been trading the drawing chores and I'm not really crazy about either of them. It's a downgrade from the rotating cast of artists that was featured over the first year and a half of the series. I was also a bit perturbed when they ran a three part origin of Hex a while back, much of the mystique of Hex was the mystery of how his face was scarred, a mystery they were able to maintain for thirty five years. Nothing they could come up with could match the mystique and it turned out to be a fairly mundane explanation.

*Laurie Brown*

---

## On The Shelf

### **Nocturnals Volume One – Black Planet and other stories** (Olympian Publishing)

*Written and illustrated by Dan Brereton*

This volume contains the Black Planet mini-series, the 32-page The Witching Hour story, a new original story entitled Clean Hands, an afterword regarding the origins of the Nocturnals, a cover gallery, and several pin-ups. Black Planet is a six-issue mini-series originally published by Malibu Comics back in 1994 and later collected in trade form by Oni Press. The Witching Hour was published by Dark Horse in 1998 in their anthology series *Dark Horse Presents*. Clean Hands is a formerly unpublished script with spot illustrations.

These stories, along with Brereton's other Nocturnals work, are being repackaged in new hardcover editions from Olympian Publishing in advance of a new Nocturnals series. This is the first of three volumes.

Black Planet is a good old classic I originally read in the Oni Press collected edition. Dan Brereton is the master behind both the story and the art. The story of the Nocturnals takes place in a strange world with monsters, spirits and plenty other creatures of the night. Most of the creatures are created by a corporation called Narn K aka Monster Shop. For reasons unknown, the Narn K is after Doc Horror, who is the lead character in the book and leader of the Nocturnals. The Narn K cooperates with the local mafia, supplying them with monsters in exchange for help catching Doc Horror. But there is more to Horror than meets the eye and he is not an easy man to defeat. Not to mention that his team consisting of Gunwitch, Firelion, Polychrome, Starfish and his daughter Halloween Girl will stop at nothing to help Horror.

The story and dialog is great. Like Komodo's first thoughts when he meets Gunwitch: "He's dead. I can smell that. Dead a long time. Somebody should tell him". And it just keeps getting better. The story has plenty of surprises as it moves along.

And the art ... well... it is just spectacular. Every single part of it is painted. Not drawn, but painted. Beautiful!

Even so, there are those of you who might not like this book. If your love for comics is focused solely on superheroes in tights, and you need your art to be crisp, clean and colored in Photoshop, then you might find this book a little odd. That is too bad for you.

I strongly recommend this book. Even if you already own the original issues or the Oni Press trade, you're really going to appreciate the hardcover edition. It is an outstanding package and definitely the preferred way to collect these stories. If nothing else, it makes for an amazing coffee table book. No one will be able to resist checking it out.

4 ½ out of 5 stars, points, oranges, or whatever you measure your comics in.

*Kenneth Rasmussen*

**“If I Didn’t Know Better, I’d Swear We Just Had A Lover’s Quarrel”  
The Nature of Peter and Mary Jane’s Relationship on the Eve of their Wedding**

*Back Issue #23* had a very good creators’ round table about the Spider-Wedding on the occasion of its 20th anniversary which I heartily recommend you to read. Writers, artists and editors from the 1960s (Stan Lee and John Romita, Sr.) to the early 1990s (Danny Fingeroth, Erik Larsen and David Michelinie) at times hotly debated the behind-the-scenes story of the wedding, Spider-Man’s relationships, Mary Jane Watson’s character and related questions. At two points, the discussion took on a surreal quality. One was when Gerry Conway said: “[The marriage] weakened him and limited him. Instead of having one Aunt May to worry about, now he had two – Aunt May and Mary Jane”. Sure, because before they married, Peter never had to worry about MJ’s safety, just as he never had to worry about Gwen Stacy’s. Gerry Conway of all people should know! The other was provided in Marv Wolfman’s assessment of Mary Jane’s made-over character: “I’m old enough to have read the originals when they came out so I have a different view on her than someone who came after her makeover”. Such a ‘bow before my gray hair, for I am wiser than the young whippersnappers these days’ gambit comes off a bit hard at the best of times, but uttered in the context of a panel where (to the best of my knowledge) there wasn’t a single person on the panel who did not “remember the originals” and where it becomes self-evident that you don’t have to be young and/or ignorant to like the post-*Amazing Spider-Man* #122 MJ it is even more absurd. But it assumes a surreal pinnacle of irony when you realize that Marv Wolfman here is using the mere fact that he read the old appearances of MJ to bolster his opinion over, among others, those who wrote nearly all of those stories and the artist who drew most of them ...

Like others before him, Erik Larsen claims that the marriage in 1987 happened abruptly: “In the span of four issues they went from not even dating to being married”. Clearly the urban legend – so popular among detractors of the Spider-Marriage – continues to be spread. And I thought to myself: Is my memory playing tricks on me? I thought that even though the way to tying the knot was somewhat accelerated in order to ensure that and although there were production-side problems in the run up to the wedding, it did flow quite naturally from the way Peter and Mary Jane’s relationship had developed over the preceding years. So to make sure, I dug up the issues covering the two years before the wedding and analyzed the way their relationship was portrayed at the time.

**-Context-**

Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson’s relationship to a great extent was preconditioned by their previous history: The two had known each other for ages; their first meeting had been arranged by their aunts, May Parker and Anna Watson, and took place in Peter’s college freshman year (*ASM* #42). Starting out as friends, they had gradually become lovers in the aftermath of Gwen Stacy’s death. At the time it had been hinted heavily (for the time) that beginning with *ASM* #149 their relationship had also been sexual, and in *ASM* #182 Peter proposed marriage to her, but she declined. Nevertheless they had continued to meet for a time until Mary Jane finally left for Florida (*ASM* #193). This history was on the minds not only of Peter and Mary Jane, but also their friends and relations and was thus referenced a lot in stories after Mary Jane’s return in *ASM* #242 (200 issues after their first meeting). How serious Peter saw his former relationship became clear the following issue when Peter told the flighty Amy Powell: “... this is Mary Jane Watson ... we were engaged once ... sorta”. Their nearest and dearest, those who knew them best also clearly valued the old relationship; seeing them both apparently unattached (at the time Peter was starting to become serious with the Black Cat, but only as Spider-Man), their aunts as well as the Leedses and the Osborns set up a series of dates to bring them together again, even though they protested that they wanted to be just friends. These attempts at matchmaking as well as being close to Mary Jane did at times cause Peter to wander off into confusion, especially if one of MJ’s remarks caused him to wonder if she might still love him (vide the revealing exchange in *PPSSM* #85) or if Aunt May told him that she thought that he and Mary Jane would make a good couple because they had more in common than he thought and both had lost so much (*ASM* #246). But although the mystery of Mary Jane intrigued him, her fear of commitment was a big stumbling block, and anyway he was busy with his romance of the Black Cat.

But the whole nature of the relationship was changed when after a fight against the Puma in his apartment, Mary Jane told Peter that she had known for years that he was Spider-Man and that this had been the reason why she left him before. She also revealed a great deal of her past, which let readers understand better both the causes of her fear of committing and the at times strange behavior of the ‘party girl’ MJ in the past. Although this put their relationship on a more honest and trusting footing, they affirmed by their agreement that they would be friends and not more. However, their relationship could not help being affected by Peter breaking up with the Black Cat not long after, since that left Mary Jane as Peter’s primary confidante, the only person with whom he could discuss his problems both in his civilian and in his costumed identity.

Another part of the context is the economical. Around the time of MJ’s return, Peter had decided to give up

his post-graduate studies as well as his job as a teaching assistant at ESU to concentrate entirely on his job as a freelance photographer for the Daily Bugle. This move did not fulfill his hopes, and in the period we are looking at, Peter was in pretty bad shape financially, barely scraping by and repeatedly falling in arrears on the rent on his apartment. In contrast, Mary Jane was on the verge of becoming a success as a model.

#### -Sample-

What I took a look at is the comic stories in which Mary Jane made an appearance between the publication of *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #19 (cover-dated November 1985, shipped July 1985), a story I chose somewhat arbitrarily (not least because of its great cover, showing MJ in a Spider-Man costume), and *Amazing Spider-Man* #292 (covered-dated September 1987, shipped May 1987), in which MJ finally accepts Peter's proposal of marriage. Mary Jane was quite an important character of the feature, appearing in roughly every other Spider-issue. There were a total of 36 appearances, although it was actually just 35 because the brief appearance in *PPSSM* #111 is actually a reprise of a scene in *ASM* #273. As you can see, a full half of these appearances happened in the flagship title, *Amazing Spider-Man*.

*Amazing Spider-Man*: Annual #19, #271, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 279, 280, 282, Annual #20, #283, 286, 287, 288, 290, 291, 292 = 18 appearances.

*Peter Parker the Spectacular Spider-Man*: [#111], #112, 113, 116, 119, 121, 123, 129 = 7 [8] appearances.

*Web of Spider-Man*: #11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, Annual #2, #21, 28 = 9 appearances.

*Spider-Man versus Wolverine* #1 = 1 appearance.

In order to recreate the likely effect on a contemporary reader, I looked at the issues in the order they were published, not in the (significantly different) one in which they were arranged in continuity<sup>1</sup>.

#### -Dates and Date-Related Activities-

Since Erik Larsen claimed that Peter and Mary Jane had not been dating until four months before, let's start by listing events that may be considered a form of date or an attempt to have a date, although of course different readers would have different definitions of what constitutes a 'date' and what purpose it serves in the relationship. Here it has to be said that getting to know each other to find out if they were compatible with each other no longer was an issue, that had been done in the past, most of their secrets were out, so in the following list there was just one occasion (6) where a past event came up that they had up until that point avoided. By most people's definition, a date would probably entail going out together with each other but without other persons (unless it's a double date), but should one also count occasions where this meeting does not entail an expensive meal or cultural event (5, 6, 10, possibly 4 and 7)? On the other hand, by tradition it is men who are expected to pay, and as Mary Jane well knew, Peter could ill afford spending much when spending time with her; but having to foot the bill all the time would have made him feel uncomfortable (as can be seen by his reaction to her spending what must have been hundreds, if not thousands of dollars on refurbishing his apartment, even though MJ probably rationalized all these expenses as 'loans'). So it is perhaps not surprising that Mary Jane on some occasions took the course of preparing a meal herself rather than going out with Peter (1, 11, 13, possibly 9) or that the two meet at economy establishments (4, 10, probably 7). Peter's activities as Spider-Man and as a photographer reporting on Spider-Man caused him to break or cancel a number of dates (1, 8, 11, 12), so it is perhaps not surprising that ensuring he doesn't run out on her again is the reason MJ gives for throwing a party at his apartment (9).

1. (Nov. 1985): MJ has invited Peter to her apartment and prepared dinner for two as a surprise, but he arrives late and the meal is spoiled, so she angrily sends him away (*ASM Annual* #19).
2. (Nov. 1985): MJ and Peter have dinner at a swanky restaurant with their aunts, afterwards Peter and MJ go out for a movie (and possibly more?) by themselves. MJ pays for all this from the money she was paid by the Bugle for the photographs she took while being kidnapped by Alistair Smyth's Spider-Slayer (*ASM Annual* #19).
3. (Dec. 1985): MJ takes Peter out to dinner to celebrate her raise at work (*ASM* #271).
4. (Feb. 1986): On Peter's invitation, the two meet at a gallery to look at a photo exhibition and discuss his latest problems. Afterwards they go out to 'grab a burger' (*WoSM* #11).
5. (Feb. 1986): MJ, waiting for Peter on the stoop of his building, upbraids Peter: "Don't tell me you've forgotten about our date!" The 'date' actually entails the two repainting Peter's apartment, but it is probably safe to assume that they would have gone out for a meal and/or movie after finishing (given the stench of fresh paint, one would also expect Peter to spend at least that night elsewhere, presumably either at his aunt's home or in MJ's apartment). However, this is not to be because the Puma is waiting inside the apartment. A week later the two get around to painting, but just as they finish the Puma arrives and MJ once again has to leave (*ASM* #273, the 2nd event reprised in *PPSSM* #111).
6. (April 1986): After a party for Nathan Lubensky in Aunt May's house, Peter and MJ ride the subway home to Manhattan together and take a walk in Central Park while he tells her his origin and they discuss his plans

for the future (*ASM #275*).

7. (June 1986): MJ takes Peter out to breakfast before going to work (*W6SM #15*).

8. (Sept. 1986): MJ rings Peter up and takes him to task for missing their date and even more for his lame excuse (*W6SM Annual #2*).

9. (Oct. 1986): In order to ensure that Peter does not run out on her again, MJ sets up a big party at his apartment which is co-hosted by the two (*PPSSM #119*).

10. (Dec. 1986): Peter goes to Kingsley Ltd. to meet MJ for a quick meal in a diner or deli during her work break. While it may not seem like much, Peter does have to travel out of his way and has to spend some time waiting (*ASM #283*).

11. (Jan. 1987): MJ is waiting at Peter's apartment, as the captions says: "She has a date with Peter Parker tonight! Guess who's late?" When he finally arrives she decides to prepare a meal in his kitchen instead so they can stay in. However, an emergency calls him away (*ASM #284*).

12. (Feb. 1987): MJ and Peter have dinner at Aunt May's house with the people living there, then the two go to Manhattan for a movie. Afterwards MJ wants to go to the Palladium so they can dance Peter's frown away, but an emergency intervenes (*SMvsW #1*).

13. (May 1987): MJ enters Peter's apartment intending to prepare breakfast in bed for him, but the Black Cat is already in the kitchen (*ASM #288*).

14. (July 1987): MJ and Peter go on an outing to Liberty Island (*W6SM #28*, inventory story).

#### **-Moments of Intimacy and Displays of Affection-**

Before the wedding, Peter and Mary Jane said they were just friends and most of the time that was what they liked or wanted to believe. But not everything is said in words. Of course, a kiss is just a kiss and should not be overstressed, especially if it is not placed on the mouth. It can be a fairly common form of greeting. That said, (1) and (4) seem a bit more 'important' as they do not occur at a meeting or parting, and one might consider (4) especially revealing as Peter is asleep and thus unaware of Mary Jane kissing him. And the passionate kiss in MJ's apartment in *Spider-Man vs. Wolverine #1* ruined the lie that Peter and Mary Jane were not boyfriend and girlfriend, and even the fact that at the end of that story MJ was prepared to continue keeping up the pretense.

1. (Nov. 1985): MJ kisses Peter on the cheek as they walk off to go to the movies (*ASM Annual #19*).

2. (Feb. 1986): Peter kisses MJ on the cheek when they meet at the gallery. Presumably from old habit, she once addresses him as 'lover' (*W6SM #11*).

3. (April 1986): Peter and MJ hold hands when she asks how he became Spider-Man (*ASM #275*).

4. (Sept. 1986): Seeing he has fallen asleep, MJ is moved to kiss Peter on his forehead (*W6SM #18*).

5. (Dec. 1986): Peter has a cold and MJ hand-feeds him chicken soup (*W6SM #21*).

6. (Dec. 1986): At their meal, Peter and MJ sit holding hands, silently gazing into each other's eyes (*ASM #283*).

7. (Feb. 1987): An intense kiss puts Peter's and MJ's feelings into turmoil (*SMvsW #1*).

8. (Feb. 1987): After Peter's harrowing experiences, he is glad MJ is there for him. They stand in a long silent hug, making the pain go away (*SMvsW #1*).

9. (Mar. 1987): MJ peeks in on Peter as he is taking a shower: "Cute buns, Tiger!" Later on we see Peter asleep, his head resting against MJ's breast as she sits on the sofa (*ASM #286*).

10. (July 1987): Peter and MJ hug (*ASM #290*).

#### **-Other Clues-**

Peter and MJ are obviously on each other's mind, so it is not surprising that in those 35 issues we see a framed picture of Mary Jane next to the telephone in Peter's apartment (*ASM #279*), while in MJ's place there is a picture of Peter and Mary Jane (apparently about to kiss him) next to the answering machine (*PPSSM #112*) and one of Peter near the front door (*PPSSM #116*). One obvious reason why they had to keep thinking of the state of their relationship was of course that certain people would not stop thinking of them as potential lovers. In *ASM Annual #19* May Parker and Anna Watson interpret Peter and MJ's personal problems as a lovers' quarrel, maybe even as a sign that they will finally come together just as May and Ben, who tied the knot not long after a quarrel of theirs – and they will not be dissuaded by MJ's protestations that they are just friends. And not long after (*PPSSM #113*, April 1986), Aunt Anna again grilled Mary Jane about her relationship with Peter, which made her niece distinctly uncomfortable, as it forced her to think of her anxieties about her and Peter. How important Mary Jane is to Peter is also revealed when he comes close to being killed in *Spider-Man vs. Wolverine #1* (Feb. 1987) and involuntarily half-murmurs, half-stutters her name.

And there was of course another factor which did not always make being just friends all that easy – the possibility that the other might become romantically involved with someone else. Now considering the kind

of reputation 'party girl' MJ has with some people and the fact that she was supposed to be romantically unattached, she actually had surprisingly few contacts with other men. In the 35 appearances analyzed here, she only had one date with another man – a rich, but hardly fleshed-out young man called Alfredo – and she left him almost as soon as they arrived at his home in order to go to Peter and talk about what was happening to Flash Thompson (*ASM* #282, Nov. 1986). Her hordes of male admirers strangely enough did not come out of the woodwork until *ASM* Annual #21, the wedding issue. Peter did not know of Alfredo, but he was quite agitated when he saw Roderick Kingsley, MJ's then-employer and a man he knew to be involved in shady dealings (the people who then wrote the Spider-books did not know that Roger Stern had also pegged him to be the Hobgoblin), emerge from her apartment. He threw a major tantrum, slamming the door and causing MJ to muse: "If I didn't know better ... I'd swear we just had a lover's [sic!] quarrel" (*PPSSM* #116, July 1986). While the possibility of a love life for Peter with someone else did bother Mary Jane more than she thought, as she realized on one occasion when she could not reach Peter on the phone (*ASM* #280, Sept. 1986), on the other hand she was aware that should she want to be Peter's lover again she had a potentially serious rival in the Black Cat. So it is not surprising that Mary Jane makes some rather catty remarks about Felicia in *PPSSM* #119 (Oct. 1986), although later in that issue she feels shame about the strength of her negative feelings towards her when she sees the Black Cat fighting Sabertooth and finally winds up with very mixed feelings of antipathy and admiration.

With neither of the two willing to admit openly that their feelings amounted to more than friendship, the relationship kept hanging in the air. Then, in a story that appeared in *PPSSM* #123 (Feb. 1987), the same month as the catalytic kiss in *Spider-Man vs. Wolverine* #1 (but which through the vagaries of weird continuity was actually set quite some time before it), MJ is about to confront Peter about her anxiety about the way their relationship had changed after she told him she knew he is Spider-Man: "Except I haven't been sure whether it's for the better or the worse. 'For better or worse.' Now that's an interesting choice of words. Well, I may not be the genius-type Peter is, but it's time to resolve things between us, one way or the other. And frankly I know which way I'd like to resolve them. Finally." At the time I thought she was about to propose to him, but nothing happened because just then the Black Cat invited herself to Peter's apartment,<sup>33</sup> having faked a bomb attack on her own. Peter, presumably in a panic about the state of his relationship, apparently was not unresponsive to Felicia's advances. Disappointed, Mary Jane called Alfredo's answering service about a date that evening. Even if that date did happen, it can't have impressed Mary Jane overmuch, because soon after she is once again seen spending most of her time in Peter's apartment. In *ASM* #288 (May 1987) she goes there early to prepare breakfast in bed for Peter, but discovering the Black Cat in the kitchen already doing that, she naturally flies into a jealous rage. (Peter Parker's and Ned Leeds' trip to Berlin places *Spider-Man vs. Wolverine* #1 between *ASM* #288 and 289, no matter how much it strains belief that Peter and MJ would date as Peter was in the process of becoming seduced by the Black Cat between those two issues.) However, when Felicia's deception was revealed and Peter realized how stupid he had been to risk his relationship with Mary Jane, MJ apparently remembered that if there is one thing worse than a bad loser it is a bad winner, and she didn't give him too hard a time (*PPSSM* #129, Aug. 1987), but then she could afford to be gracious as the issue in which he proposed marriage to her had shipped over a month earlier ...

As I have been wont to say before, the change wrought by the wedding was less than you would expect because Peter and Mary Jane's relationship displayed many of the characteristics of married life for quite a time before Peter proposed again. For starters, the two spent a huge amount of their disposable time with each other or at each other's homes. Mary Jane especially was either in Peter's Chelsea apartment or in its close vicinity (e.g. standing before the door, on the sidewalk of the street leading up to it) in 18 of the 35 (36) stories I looked at in which she appeared. And it is not just that she looked in at his place every other appearance, she could spend quite a long time there. When Spider-Man went missing in West Virginia for several issues, *WoSM* #18 (Sept. 1986) relates that she spent every free moment at Peter's place, apparently passing the time with cleaning it, and thus was there to open the door (he had lost his key) and care for him when he returned. In *ASM* #284 (Jan. 1987), Peter is shown sneaking out from his apartment to go into action and then in #286 he is shocked to discover that MJ is still there (we must assume that she spent the entirety of #285 waiting for him off-panel). Since she was practically living there, it is not so surprising that she took an interest in the upkeep of Peter's apartment. With her go-getter attitude and her apparent organizational skills, she did not wait for Peter to do something about it after his apartment was damaged by fire, but set the worm in motion herself, by dragging him with her to buy paint and other supplies (advancing the necessary money) in *ASM* #271 (Dec. 1985) and later repainting the place together with him in #273. Later, after Mrs. Muggins threatened Peter with eviction if he did not completely refurbish his dwelling (which had been damaged by an arson attack, after which MJ had also offered to let him stay at her place for a time), MJ had the job done in the space of a day and behind his back (*WoSM* #15, June 1986). Peter was not too happy about this and once gave her a hard time about it, saying this wasn't what a friend did. Maybe not, perhaps it is more what a

lover would do... And in *PPSSM* #129 (Aug. 1987) she saw to it that the lock to his apartment door (broken during a fight with the Black Cat) was repaired in time for his return.

Mary Jane not only took charge of Peter's home, but also got involved in his costumed life (e.g. in *ASM* #276, May 1986, where she brought him clothes to an alley when he could not get into his apartment through the usual bathroom skylight because his three neighbors were busy on the roof), his career (attempting to get into JJJ's good graces by the way she told the story of the bank robbery in *PPSSM* #121, Dec. 1986), and his social life. In *ASM Annual* #20 (Nov. 1986) she reminded him of Aunt May's impending birthday. The party she had him throw together with her in *PPSSM* #119 also served to help Peter to better maintain his links of friendship with the Robertsons, the Osborns, and others.

<sup>1</sup> Sequence by shipping order: *ASM Annual* #19, *ASM* #271, *WoSM* #11, *ASM* #273, *WoSM* #12, *ASM* #274, *PPSSM* #112, *WoSM* #13, *ASM* #275, *PPSSM* #113, *WoSM* #14, *ASM* #276, *WoSM* #15, *ASM* #277, *PPSSM* #116, *ASM* #279, *WoSM* #18, *WoSM Annual* #2, *ASM* #280, *PPSSM* #119, *ASM* #282, *ASM Annual* #20, *WoSM* #21, *ASM* #283, *PPSSM* #121, *ASM* #284, *SMvsW* #1, *PPSSM* #13, *ASM* #286-288, #290-291, *PPSSM* #129, *ASM* #292.

Sequence in continuity as far as I could determine: *ASM* #271, *ASM Annual* #19, *WoSM* #11-12, *ASM* #273, *PPSSM* #111, *WoSM* #13, *ASM* #274, *PPSSM* #112, *WoSM* #14-15, *ASM* #275-276, *PPSSM* #113, *ASM* #277, *PPSSM* #116-117, *WoSM* #18, *PPSSM* #118, *ASM* #279-280, #282, *PPSSM* #119, *ASM* #283, #286-287, *PPSSM* #123, *ASM* #288, *SMvsW* #1, *ASM* #289, *PPSSM* #121, *ASM* #290-292. (*ASM Annual* #20, *WoSM Annual* #2, *WoSM* #21 & #28 cannot be exactly placed)

Tilman Stieve

---

## Manga Minute

### Wild Adapter (TokyoPop)

Written and illustrated by Kazuya Minekura

Makoto Kubota is a unique individual, always bored yet always curious, not caring about anything, but somehow clinging to everything. Seemingly lazy on the outside, but there is something about him that makes people fear and back down from him. This trait makes him a perfect lead for the Izumo Group's young gang of yakuza. Things are going well until he runs into a drug called W.A., has to contend with its dangerous side effects, and ends up bringing a stray 'cat' home with him as he sinks deeper and deeper into the mystery of the drug.

In *Saiyuki*, Minekura flirts with the Dark Side, but in *Wild Adapter* she joins the Emperor and kills a bunch of toddlers. The story starts off simply enough with Makoto being recruited by the Izumo Group for his skills and luck at the mahjong tables. However, when Makoto has to pass a test to either join the group or ruin his hand, we are presented with a very different canvas. Makoto kills in cold blood and feels nothing of it and the story progresses into drug rings, gang wars, and prostitution.

The first volume is more of a prologue to a big story than anything else as we are introduced to Makoto and his world. Makoto himself is a fascinating character and a bit of psychopath as well. He kills easily but he's rather childlike and curious. He kills humans with ease, but when he finds a dead kitten in the park he has his gangster underling help bury it in the ground. His curious nature makes him a very different lead than the clinical Priest Sanzo from *Saiyuki* and Toki Mishiba from *Bus Gamer*.

Also missing for the most part is Minekura's bits of humor ranging from sarcasm to sheer slapstick found in her other two (U.S. published) works. There are a few humorous lines here and there, but not enough to truly lessen the gravity of the book. Not to mention the character that seems an obvious choice for the role of humorous sidekick in the book dies rather soon, providing yet another shock to this series.

Much like with *Saiyuki* and *Bus Gamer*, the artwork is gorgeous and displays Minekura's curiously attractive men who aren't like the typical pretty boys of manga and anime. The unevenness of their features and expressions add a bit more realistic sexiness to the characters within, especially with Makoto's odd beauty that draws others around him and causes others to be curious and even want him.

I wouldn't suggest *Wild Adapter* to everyone. It is a very dark story, especially involving the side effects of the drug W.A. that will lead to interesting developments in future chapters. However, if you want something a little different from the traditional beaten manga path, I highly recommend it. Especially if you are like me, and a fan of the darkness hinted in Minekura's other works and enjoy the sultriness of her men.

3 out of 4

Jennifer Bratcher

## Mythic Manwha

### **Bride of the Water God (Dark Horse)**

*Written and illustrated by Mi-Kyung Yun*

Synopsis: When Soah's impoverished, desperate village decides to sacrifice her to the Water God Habaek to end a long drought, they believe that drowning one beautiful girl will save their entire community and bring much-needed rain. Not only is Soah surprised to be rescued by the Water God – instead of killed – she never imagined she'd be a welcomed guest in Habaek's magical kingdom, where an exciting new life awaits her. Habaek, the mysterious Water God, is cursed to live in the form of a little boy during the day – while he turns back to his true adult self at night. His new human bride, Soah, thinks that she's been married to a child and has no idea that the attractive 'Mui' is actually the indecisive adult Habaek. Surrounded by a cast of colorful elemental gods and their servants, Soah is tempted by flirtations from both 'Mui' and the rascal Huye. Things get even more complicated after Tae-eul-jin-in spills a surprising secret, and Soah audaciously plots to uncover the truth for herself.

Two volumes in, I can say without reservation this is an absolutely outstanding series thus far. Korean creator Mi-Kyung Yun is spinning a really engrossing tale and her art is remarkably beautiful. The first couple of pages of each volume have been in color with the remainder of the pages in black and white. The opening page (in color) of the second volume is nothing short of stunning.

*Bride of the Water God* features a very interesting mix of characters. Soah is the protagonist, a human who finds herself in the land of the gods, and the Water God Habaek is the one to whom she is sacrificed. The other principles are Murah – the Goddess of Cheongyo Mountain, Mu-san-shin-yeo (she goes by Yohee), the Fire God Judong, Huye, Tae-eul-jin-in, and Seowangmo, Habaek's mother.

Soah is chosen by her village to be the sacrifice to the Water God Habaek in order to bring rain and end a great drought. In some respects this might seem a great honor as one would expect the villagers to seek to offer their most beautiful maiden. Sacrificing anything less than the most beautiful of the eligible candidates would certainly seem like an insult to the Water God, and it wouldn't make sense for the villagers to risk his wrath when they so desperately need his favor. Soah does not see things from this particular view. She clearly feels betrayed and the value of her life unappreciated, but to her credit she does not try to escape the duty. Yet her thoughts indicate she doesn't care what happens to the village once she has been set afloat the ocean to wait for the Water God to claim her.

When Soah meets the gods, she initially mistakes Huye for the Water God. Her thoughts upon glimpsing him filter back to whispers she heard from some of the villagers – “They say once you see him, you never forget him.” “I heard he's a terrifying monster.” “Yes, I also heard he eats people.” Yet when he turns and shows his face, her thoughts quickly change – “The god, this being, is beautiful ...“ She is introduced to Huye (and is disappointed he isn't the Water God) and then to Habaek, who turns out to be a young boy. Habaek is rather rude to her initially (he even insults her beauty in later conversation, saying he “told the humans to offer the most beautiful woman”, and that he “won't let it rain for five hundred years”).

Soah encounters Tae-eul-jin-in when she becomes lost while wandering around the palace. He introduces himself as a doctor and inventor. Soah learns from him that it has not yet rained. She rushes back to Habaek and admonishes him for not fulfilling his end of the bargain. Habaek belittles humans for being selfish and thinking they can so easily sacrifice just one and they themselves can then be safe and live. Soah withdraws, upset that she allowed herself to be tricked by his childish looks and forgot he was an ill-tempered god.

Soah learns much later in conversation with Murah that Habaek has given the village rain. She also discovers Habaek had previous brides. In another encounter with Tae-eul-hin-in, Soah learns that Nakbin was Habaek's first bride and he loved her very much, but she died.

While enjoying a walk in the forest along with Habaek and the other gods, Soah is attacked by a deadly creature. Huye takes the bite intended for Soah then slays the creature. Soah twists her ankle during the encounter so Huye decides to carry her. Habaek is clearly irritated that he was powerless to help Soah.

The Water God Habaek is an interesting case. While Habaek may seem to be hard and insensitive, he is something of a tortured soul. He is stuck in child's form during the day (where he has no powers) and is free to regain his adult form (and powers) during the hours of the night (it hasn't been revealed as yet how and why this came to be). When in his natural adult form, Habaek is known as Mui. Habaek doesn't initially reveal his situation to Soah, and when he later meets her as Mui, he leads her to believe that he (Mui) is Habaek's cousin.

When it is revealed Habaek's mother, Seowangmo, is coming for a visit, Judong tells Soah that Seowangmo is the Goddess of Punishment and Torture (but he tells her she shouldn't worry because Seowangmo is

also the Goddess of Love and Beauty – then again, she is also the Goddess of Disease so ...). Soah is very frightened when she is brought for an official audience with her. Habaek is not pleased with her interest in his bride and angrily orders Soah to go off with Yohee while he remains to speak with his mother.

Following her second meeting with Mui, Tae-eul-jin-in reveals to Soah that Habaek and Mui are one and the same. He tells her she can ask the others if she doesn't believe him. When she does make such an inquiry, Murah tells Soah not to believe Tae-eul-jin-in.

Seowangmo wants Habaek to send Soah back, but decides it is her responsibility as a mother to help the couple when Habaek tells her that he is deeply in love with Soah. She gives her servant two potions, one for Habaek and one for Soah. Unfortunately, her servant mixes them up and Habaek receives the wrong one. Soah decides to ask Mui if he and Habaek are actually the same person, but she discovers him half-conscious on the floor. She kneels to help him and Mui, in a disoriented state, embraces her and calls her Nakbin. Soah is confused regarding his behavior since she knows Nakbin was Habaek's bride.

Soah later asks Tae-eul-jin-in if he was being truthful about Mui. He guesses Murah told her not to believe him and tells her that Murah has feelings for Habaek and therefore has no reason to like or help Soah. When Soah relates the events of the prior evening to Judong and Murah, Judong accuses her of liking Mui. Murah says Judong is being ridiculous because if Soah really does like him, it would be a true betrayal of Habaek. Some time later, Soah has the realization that not only was she shocked to hear Mui calling out Nakbin's name when he embraced her, but that she is also jealous of her.

While most of the other gods appear to each have their own hidden agenda (Murah, for instance, is in love with Habaek and sees Soah as an obstacle, just as she did Nakbin), Huye is the biggest mystery. He is very kind to Soah and expresses to her that if she has a problem, she can tell him and he will help anytime. He appears to have an interest in Soah which may or may not be altogether honorable. It is alluded to in a brief flashback that he and Nakbin may have been more than just friends. Habaek is trusting of Huye and yet seems to have some apprehension in regards to Huye's intentions with Soah. Huye presents Soah with a comb during a visit to the night market as a belated welcoming gift. Mui remarks to Soah that a man giving a lady a comb as a gift means he's proposing for marriage. It isn't clear if Mui is being truthful in this instance or simply measuring her reaction.

Soah is a very conflicted character. She is both strong and weak. She considers herself to be a phony bride (this harkens back in part to her not caring what happens to the village). When Mui tells her to go back, that he will help her to return home, Soah tells him that she is never going back because Habaek loves her deeply (this occurs the evening following her meeting Seowangmo – prior to Tae-eul-jin-in telling her that Mui and Habaek are one and the same). She twists a few of the comments Habaek made to her upon their initial meeting and tells Mui that Habaek said she "looked very nice", implied that he called her "the most beautiful woman" and that he told her he would protect her for the rest of her life (it is after this meeting that Habaek tells his mother, in his second audience with her, that he deeply loves Soah). Soah wonders that had Huye been Habaek when she first encountered him whether she would have fallen in love with him. She finds herself attracted to Mui (even though she is uncertain about his being Habaek – and she is unsure whether she wants that to be the truth or not). When Mui asks on the night of their first meeting if she is afraid of Habaek and why she didn't run away, Soah relates a tale told by her grandmother where Habaek grieved over a person who drowned and turned them into a water lily so such a thing wouldn't happen again. She concludes by saying she wasn't scared because she believes anyone who would grieve so much for a person's death can't be such a bad person. She is very frightened when she meets Habaek's mother, but after seeing how coldly Habaek greets her, she realizes that Seowangmo perhaps seemed very lonely. When Soah finds Mui collapsed on the floor (and after he embraces her and calls her Nakbin), she rushes to Tae-eul-jin-in's room and locates medication he administered days before to Habaek. She can't get Mui to swallow it from the bottle in his now unconscious state so she puts it in her own mouth and administers it to him in that manner. It is moments such as these that help define her as a highly intriguing and empathetic character.

Overall, this is a very complex tale with two primary characters that seem reluctant to trust not only in themselves, but the other as well -- two characters who are searching for the sanctuary and contentment they may only find with each other. There are clearly many challenges that remain ahead, certainly in the form of the goddess Murah and likely from Huye as well when his intentions become known. I'm most definitely looking forward to future volumes to see how the story continues to play out. In conclusion, I have to say this is really an exceptional and entertaining manhwa series. Honestly, I can't recommend it strongly enough.

5 zombies (out of 5)

## About the Marvel Zombie Society Amateur Press Association

### What Is An APA?

An APA (amateur press association) is a collection of individual fanzines collected and circulated to contributors in a single bound volume. Members create and photocopy their “zines” for the entire membership and send them to a Central Mailer, who then collates and sends out copies to members. A roster of set membership provides contributors a friendly forum to exchange thoughts, creations, and ideas. Assessments are based on mailing costs only.

### What Is The MZS APA?

The MZS APA was founded in 1988. It initially began as an individual fanzine under the guise of the Marvel Zombie Magazine before later transforming into a full fledged APA. But don't let the name and origins fool you; it is not in any way a “Marvel-only” APA. It may have started that way in 1988, but that was almost two full decades ago. The MZS APA is a creative community for fans of ALL comic books, fantasy, popular entertainment, media, science fiction and related fields. The diversity of the members provides spirited discussion on a wide variety of topics.

Artists and writers are given creative freedom to practice their crafts within the pages of MZS. However, you don't have to be a trained artist or writer to be a member; a desire to be involved in a unique level of fandom is all you need to produce your zines.

Monthly mailings can range anywhere from 80 to 200 pages or more, with a large percentage of the membership participating each month.

### How Does The MZS APA Work?

The MZS APA is a monthly publication. Members must submit a minimum of 2 pages every 2 months. 25 copies of your contribution are mailed to the Central Mailer (CM) by the beginning of each month. The CM then collates all of the fanzines, binds them together, and sends a copy out to each member. Each member is required to maintain funds in an account to pay for mailing costs. Assessments are based on mailing costs and generally range from \$3.75 to \$5.50 depending on the size of the mailing and delivery method (1st class or bound printed matter rate).

### What Can Be Done In The MZS APA?

You are the creator and editor of your own fanzine publication; you can do whatever you want. This may include artwork, reviews, stories, articles, interviews, humor, comics work, or mailing comments (MCs) to fellow members. MCs are one of the most popular features of every mailing because they provide you with active discussion and debate with other members over countless topics. Discussion on all comics, current films, current events, books and such have all been topics of interest.

### Why The MZS APA?

There is a unique spirit among this community of contributors. The MZS APA is a group of like-minded individuals who share common interests. Semi-annual joint publications (mini-comics, theme issues) are done collectively. Contests are frequently held. Members assist other members with projects and form friendships with each other outside the APA.

In addition, each issue contains numerous contributions full of interesting material covering a wide range of comics and other related entertainment.

There are lots of message boards and other forums where comics fans can engage in discourse about their favorite titles and even some places where various works by writers/artists can be posted. But there is just something about the printed page that you can't get from those places.

More importantly, you're dealing with a closer circle of fans who share the same level of passion for comics and a lot of other related interests (anime, sci-fi, and all sorts of similar stuff). And lets face it, we've all encountered the immature jokers on open forums who make the experience a lot less pleasant than it should be.

### How Can I Join?

You can obtain a sample copy of our monthly publication for \$2.50. If you are interested in joining the MZS APA, it takes only \$5.00 to open your account. If you would like more information about the MZS APA, visit our web-site ([www.mzsapa.com](http://www.mzsapa.com)) or send an e-mail request to [cm@mzsapa.com](mailto:cm@mzsapa.com)



WE WANT  
YOUR BRAINS

Join the MZS