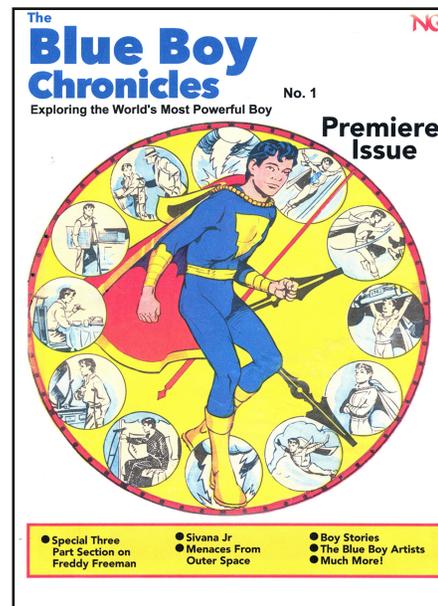


# The Ensign Report #8 (May 2013) UFO edition

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**5th Page:** Occasionally I'll add a fifth page to my normal four page columns. On this page I'll discuss issues that were raised in previous issues outside the context of normal reviews.



**The Blue Boy Chronicles:** One project I've been working on over the past several years is a publication devoted to the Golden Age Captain Marvel, Jr. The first issue is almost ready to head to the printers. If you are interested in getting a copy let me know.

**Ditkomania** #90 (Rob Imes, March 2013). This issue is almost exclusively dedicated to a long reminiscence of Ron Frantz. Frantz is probably best remembered as being the publisher of the short-lived Ace Comics in the late 1980s (not to be confused with the Ace Comics of the 1940s and 1950s). The primary strength of "Walking in the

Footsteps of Giants" is Frantz's engaging, folksy, somewhat crusty style of writing. He calls them as he sees them. He is strongest when he is telling about his personal contact, relationships and business dealings with comics makers like Steve Ditko, Vince Sullivan and Jerry Siegel. This lengthy piece has historical value as it sheds light on the later careers of these noteworthy comic book personalities. The other strength is the thinking ("what happened?") behind Frantz's publishing venture of Ace Comics. I remember when this line came out in the 1980s and thought it was a fine idea but only garnered enough reader support to last a short time in the marketplace. I appreciate finding out why the company failed. Thanks Rob for publishing this piece of comics history.

**Strawman** #10 (David Branstetter, 2012). As others have mentioned this is a very nice package with many small press contributors. When I think of "strawman" I think of a "strawman argument" in logic where someone misrepresents or trivializes an opponent's argument making it say something that it isn't. Without seeing any previous Strawman tales I can't say whether this logical fallacy is indicative of David's character. The main three-part mis-adventure of Strawman is a downer with our protagonist revisiting past failures. David has done a good job in portraying the anxiety, aimlessness, failure and blandness of Strawman's existence. He covets a coat, he can't remember a wife or girl friend who claims she spent five years with him and apparently his former girl friend (someone he does remember) is marrying his best friend. Interspersed amongst this depressive story are some

real gems. Strawman's far too short two page jaunt with Possum certainly provides a few chuckles. Blair Kitchen is a terrific big foot cartoonist. I enjoyed Max Ink's Blink. Hank starts out by doing an ecologically correct good work. But Sam, the Jewish girl, will have none of it. She, as a pessimistic realist, launches into lengthy harangue on the utter failure of human nature to change but is cleverly and mercifully offset by Blink's (the airhead Blonde) innocent desire to just go swimming. A wonderful and gentle counterpoint which deflated a tedious and self-important lecture. Undoubtedly the best story in the book was the Sin Hombres story where the character is in a hotel room reading probably a Gideon's Bible about the story of Christ's Resurrection from the gospel of John. A real pearl of direction and hope amongst the relative aimlessness and hopelessness of the rest of the issue. David welcome to UFO and I'll look forward to more of your work in the future.

**HeroCentral Universe** 8-9 (Jason Bullock, 2013?). As I read more of Jason's work on HeroCentral things are starting to become more clear. Fifty years ago in 1963 the X-Men first appeared. This super hero group was different from the rest in that they weren't just teenage mutants but they were a closed club or society. They were an exclusive club/family and actually didn't have much contact with normal people outside Professor X's school (later on several had normal girl friends). This group and the somewhat earlier Legion of Super Heroes contained large groups of super powered peers in which each character could relate to similarly powered super people. This was different than say the Avengers or the JLA where the heroes in each group had separate adventures and lives where

they related to a cast of normal people. The X-Men prototype (super hero group being a full time job and surrogate family- not just an infrequently attended exclusive club as with the Avengers or the JLA) has proven very popular since at least the 1970s. In some ways it mirrors the peer group of many of the readers. About the same time Marvel tapped into mythology with Thor presenting Norse legends and sometime later added in Heracles (and other Olympian gods) representing the Greeks myths. Of course, Wonder Woman (and Captain Marvel) had earlier used mythology as a basis for their origins and story material. However Thor was just much "cooler" than the rather juvenile Wonder Woman stories of the time. HeroUniverse is similar to the X-Men in that the characters seem to be super heroes almost all the time. They don't seem to have much down civilian time. We don't see a whole lot of interaction with normal humans--they spend most of their time fighting the bad guys. They also seem similar to the Thor comics (and the early Dr. Strange) in that they pulled characters from various mythological pantheons. HeroCentral is even more complex absorbing entities from Norse, Egyptian, Greek, Japanese, Arab, British myths and legends (as well as one from Biblical history). Probably the main job for Jason is to develop a coherent, understandable and relatable storyline out of these many disparate strands. The main problem is that I'm not always sure who the good guys are. Obviously Aesys, the puppy killer, is not one of the good guys. Hopefully as time goes on I can become sure who I should be rooting for. Once again nice layouts and breakdowns of the story. The extra pages helps advance the narrative very well. *The HCU: Confidential #3* has been helpful in getting a handle on so many characters that are popping up in the series.

**Self Publisher Magazine #60** (December 2012) This issue of *Self Publisher* has two different qualities from the previous issue. The first is the overall design has changed as graphic designer Jay Savage has taken over as Creative Director. Savage incorporates white space, more leading, a new sans serif typeface and large gutter spanning photos (and illos) to give the layouts a much more polished look from the previous issue. While there are still some design wrinkles to iron out Savage's design gives the magazine an elegance and visual sophistication that it previously lacked.

The second new emphasis is the spotlight on the British self publishing comics scene. There are three major interviews with British cartoonists Jim Stuart (creator of *Ganjaman*, a superhero made from a cannabis leaf), Mychailo Kazybrid (*Aardman Comics*), and Russ Walton (a former wrestler and publisher of Home-Made heroes). Two of these interviews were conducted by Brit Darren Worrow (interviewed in SP #59s see *T-Frags #227*).

This issue is also filled with articles on preparing your taxes, POD Printing, Picture Smash/Smashwords ebooks. Shire's article on POD is perhaps the most informative and is a followup on last issue's piece on distribution. These sorts of articles are important as they get into the nuts and bolts of self publishing. There is another review section with brief analysis of several small press comics. There are several comic strip samples such as Landlark by M. Neno is a very good imitation of Jack Kirby's work post 1972. To be fair with Neno he does add some rather non-Kirby pages (like p. 17 which shows multiple face shots and closeup of a record turntable). There is also "Stone" by Rick Silva and Alice Veidt). The art has a CC Beck feel to it showing a woman engaging another woman in a bar brawl. Also is a

sampling of various offerings from the 86'd horror anthology by Bill Hook and Nick Perry of 86'd Studios. Some of this is somewhat incoherent and offensive. Perhaps the best overall feature is the lead interview with Clayton Murwin of Heroes Fallen Studio publishes "stories from veterans and those currently serving in the armed forces about present and past conflicts" in graphic novel form. This is a noble effort well deserving of a lot of support. Criticism: New design: There is a problem with running images behind the type making the copy hard to read (pp. 18, 6, 5, 33). Second there is a review of *Assailant Comics Binary Gray #1* (p. 28), and part of the same review is repeated on p. 30. Third, there is confusing switching from three column format to two column and back to three columns (pp 41-43). There are not cover shots or art samples from the various comics reviewed (pp. 28-31). There are editorial issues that need to be addressed. There needs to be some introductory material presented to get the



British fan Frank Humphris made this fine illo. I'm very honored.

reader up to speed about why one should spend time reading a specific article or interview. For example the Jim Stuart interview starts off with a quote from Jim Stuart rambling on about how he first begin his *Ganjaman* comics. That is all well and good but Darren Worrow should have given some context (dates, places, the importance of Stuart, etc). Again why should I spend time reading about this gentleman? The same with the Smashwords article. What is Smashwords and why should it be important to my small press publishing efforts? Don't assume your readers are automatically up to speed on this stuff. There have been several issues published since this issue and these design and editorial bugs seem to be working themselves out. Perhaps the major question here is the one which looms heavily over all small/independent/self publishing. Is there an audience out there for the work that is produced by such a multitude of creators? It seems that it ultimately gets down to self expression--the desire to place your work in the public forum for anyone who might be interested in reading it. The problem here is that it seems as if the readership of magazines like *SPM* is made up mostly of creators. While that's fine it would become a lot more important if it had a board base of readers (not exclusively creators) who are looking for alternative content providers with material unlike that already produced by mainstream comic companies. While I am not exclusively a creator--so much of the work presented in *Self Publisher Magazine* is so far from what I'm interested in--it seems as if it was produced on a different planet. Of course this cultural balkanization is not an exclusive problem with comic book entertainment.

## Bio-Speak 8

Sometimes comics sneak in the backdoor through more respectable media. During the late 1950s there seemed to be a slight disreputable aspect to comics. Even though I lived through the crime and horror phase of the early 1950s comics era being a toddler and very young child I was oblivious to what was happening in the greater world of comic book publishing. Sometime between 1955 and 1960 my parents who wanted to cultivate my skills in reading got me a subscription to *Children's Digest* (probably through school discount plan). I remember that it was fun getting a real magazine in the mail once a month. I always thought of *Children's Digest* as a kid's version of the adult *Reader's Digests*. However it was published by *Parent's Magazine* and contained along with the short stories, puzzles, games were "good comics". These comics were reprinted from previously published comic books and were often educational or humor/funny animal type stories. Years later I came across an annual series of comic book evaluation or ratings listings/guides printed in *Parents Magazine* from 1950-1956. The comic books were evaluated along the lines of No objection (A), some objection (B), objectionable (C) and very objectionable (D). For example there were 555 comic books rated in February 1950 with 165 (No objection), 154 (some objection), 167 (objectionable) and 69 (very objectionable). *Superman* and *Captain Marvel Adventures* got As while *Batman* and *All-Star Comics* pulled Ds! The publishers of *Parents Magazine* apparently thought with the Comics Code Authority then in effect (post-1956) that further annual ratings were unnecessary.

## The Fifth Page

A Supplement to the Ensign Report #8 (*T-Frags* #228)

Since I started contributing a column to *T-Frags* it has been four pages in length. Occasional I will include a "Fifth Page" where I'll address issues of importance that have discussed in previous issues. These comments are not intended to be the "last word" on any topic but it will at least advance the conversation. Sam Gafford bought forward several issues concerning small press publishing and printing I'd like to comment on.

- 1. Printing:** I've been using an online printer for *Valiant Efforts* (for all four issues) named Comix Wellsping. I have been overall satisfied with their performance. The printing prices are on their website. Sam mentions that he had a 56 page digest-size pub (50 copies) that his local printer for for a print estimate of \$180. Let's say Sam resized his pub into a larger sized 52 page 8 1/2" x 11" format which would be \$2.17 a copy not the almost \$4 from the local printer. This is B & W interior with color covers which includes the Comix Wellspring house ad. Yes, there is a shipping charge, but still you'd get more for your money. If you wanted to get, say, 30 copies that would be around \$60-70.
- 2. Format:** I find it interesting that so many of you use the digest-sized format. (Disclaimer: I have published several digest-sized small press pubs over the years). With printing costs like those described in item 1 above—does doing digest-sized comics make sense anymore? I assume that it was a matter of economics say 20-30 years ago to do the comics or fanzines that size. Perhaps there needs to be some rethinking in the regard to size.
- 3. Sales:** One persistence complaint I've heard is that small press pubs don't sell like they used to. Larry Johnson has voiced this on some of Dan Burke's podcasts (with Dan agreeing he has the same problem with his Amazon/CreateSpace pubs-- an exception being his Matt Baker books). Johnson mentioned he used to place ads in small press trade pubs and get 10-20 orders or more which is not the case now. I can certainly agree with that--I have very few orders for *Valiant Efforts*.
- 4. Multi-Format:** It seems as if a multi-format approach is the future of small press. Yes for people who like paper pubs (I've ran into same

20s something comic shop denizens who prefer paper) continue doing them. They work at conventions. However doing digital formats seem here to stay with pdfs (or other file formats) from Create Space or similar publishing sites can only grow in the future. By the time you read this I will have just turned 65 and I recently purchased an I-Pad. One of the reasons is, as I realize my mortality, I'm becoming more carefully about stockpiling more paper. Having digital copies takes up a whole lot less room (and easier to organize) than paper pubs. I have a hard time tossing out magazines and books (goodness, I might need it sometime in the future!) Yes I still love paper comics, books and magazines but I'm running out of bookshelf and closet space.

**5. Mortality:** I believe, mortality kicks in at this point (as mentioned above). I've spoken on the phone to that small press comix cyclone, Larry Blake and both he and I agree that we want to produce as much as we can while we are still able (Dan Burke has echoed this on his podcast). Life being short it seems to be more about legacy no matter how many copies of a pub we sell --what we do now will influence the future--hopefully for the good and the better. While I'd not heard of William Hope Hodgson before Sam's website. Hodgson's work is worth remembering and Sam's efforts in that regard are noble and may find support with future generations. All of us seem to be facing the same problem--a creative compulsion to produce comics or publications that contain our unique voice and finding an appreciative and receptive audience. Also it seems as if the audience for small press may have diminished--people just don't buy them as they used to (which was never in great numbers). This perhaps is a sign of the times--a generational issue.

**6. New Generation comics:** I try to stay somewhat up to date with current comics (there are some new excellent comics). If I want to read them I borrow them through the local public library--its amazing the variety they have so I don't have to buy them. Its not that I'm being cheap its just that I'm not sure if I'd want to spend money on it--very likely not. If I do like the comic I can purchase it later for my collection.