

HEROES OF THE COMICS

Fantagraphics

Maxwell Gaines



THE HEROES of the COMICS

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Ten-year-old Drew Friedman with his comic book collection, 1969

INTRODUCTION

 **by Drew Friedman**

From as early as I can remember, I've been drawn to comic books. The plots, the panels, the word balloons. The characters, the colors, the sound effects. The look of them, the feel of them, even the smell of them. Especially old comic books, worn, yellowed, crackling with age from multiple readings. I even loved that they were called "comic books," a perfect name for the cheaply produced, dispensable children's ephemera they were meant to be—*All in Color for a Dime!* I've also always been interested in learning as much as possible about the (mostly) unsung creators behind the comics.

I couldn't really avoid the inevitable onslaught of comic books in my life; it was my destiny. In 1954, my dad, fresh out of the air force and newly married, was hired to edit several men's adventure magazines (among them *Man's World* and *True Action*) for a company called Magazine Management (MM), run by a prematurely white-haired man named Martin Goodman (my dad, always referring to him as "Mr. Goodman," once told me that Martin Goodman's own brothers who worked for his company also called him "Mr. Goodman"). MM published a wide range of magazines and comic books, which were originally pub-

lished under the banner of Timely, then Atlas, and finally Marvel. In the late 1930s, Mr. Goodman's company helped usher in the first Golden Age of comic books, publishing the early adventures of Captain America, the Sub-Mariner, and the Human Torch. Martin Goodman's wife's young cousin, Stanley Lieber, a.k.a. Stan Lee, was hired by Timely in 1939, and when my dad joined MM, Stan was already a fifteen-year veteran of the company. My dad's desk was side by side with Stan's, separated by a thin partition, and they got along well. But soon my father began feeling sorry for Stan, as the once vast comics empire he controlled had been slowly downsized to one desk and one secretary, ravaged by the comic book witch hunts of the midfifties, which put an end to horror and crime comics and resulted in the enactment of the strict Comics Code. Mr. Goodman was seemingly attempting to phase out the comics division altogether. That all changed in the early sixties, when the miraculous rebirth of Marvel took hold and the Silver Age arrived.

I was born in 1958, and as early as I can remember, my dad would deposit a pile of Marvel comic books in my bedroom every Friday evening after returning from the city via the Long Island



William M. Gaines, early fifties

Rail Road. Before I was five, my brothers and I had already amassed a large collection of Marvels, among them early issues of *The Fantastic Four*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Millie the Model*. I loved the bright, vivid artwork, especially the covers, and took special notice of the artists' names, mainly the amazing Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby. I prided myself on figuring out who drew what, even if the particular artist wasn't credited, a practice prevalent in early comics.

Aside from art class, I never had much use for school. I received a far more enriching education from watching TV (*The Three Stooges*, *Adventures of Superman*, *Popeye*, *Soupy Sales*, etc.) and reading *Mad*, monster magazines, and comic books. When we got a little older, my brothers and I would sometimes pay visits to our dad up at his MM office on Madison Ave, and I inevitably made a beeline toward the comics department, which by the early sixties had returned to its former glory. I rarely caught a glimpse of the elusive Mr. Goodman, but Stan Lee was omnipresent and holding court, a tall, pudgy, balding man, as charming as could be, like a favorite smiling uncle who instead of dispensing candy dispensed brand-new comic books. When my dad mentioned to Stan that I liked to

draw, Stan proclaimed: "Someday, Drew is going to draw for MARVEL!"

In truth, I was already more focused on drawing funny stuff and dreamed of working for *Mad* magazine, joining the ranks of "the usual gang of idiots," which included my cartooning idols Mort Drucker, Don Martin, Al Jaffee, and Dave Berg. I was already aware that *Mad's* publisher was one William M. Gaines, and thanks to my recent purchases of several Bantam horror and science fiction comics paperbacks, I connected the dots and realized Gaines had once also published a line of comic books under the banner of EC, which had originally published *Mad* as a comic book. I was instantly taken with the quality of the EC art drawn by comics greats like Johnny Craig, Jack Davis, George Evans, Wally Wood, and particularly "Ghastly" Graham Ingels. I was also trying to learn as much as I could about the early creators and the origins of comic books, especially after absorbing Jules Feiffer's essential book *The Great Comic Book Heroes*. Soon, like so many others, I would be startled, my mind blown, by *Zap* and early underground comics, mainly by the art of Robert Crumb, who forever changed my perception and outlook about comics, art, and life.



Martin Goodman, midfifties

M.C. GAINES

1894–1947

plate
I

Maxwell Charles “M. C.” Gaines (born Maxwell Ginsburg) was a pioneer of the early comic book industry. In 1933 he hatched the first four-color saddle-stitched newsprint pamphlets of comic strip reprints, known as “premiums” or “give-aways,” first published as *Funnies on Parade*. Gaines (a Bert Lahr look-alike) was responsible for maneuvering two teenagers from Cleveland, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, to newly installed publisher Harry Donenfeld at National Comics (DC) in 1938, urging Donenfeld to publish their character and playing a central role in the onset of Superman. He then formed a partnership with Donenfeld and his accountant Jack Liebowitz, creating a sister company to DC called All-American Comics and introducing Wonder Woman, the Green Lantern, and Hawkman. Relations between the partners eventually soured, and Gaines was bought out for half a million dollars and left to start his own company, Educational Comics (EC), at 225 Lafayette Street. At first he published reprints of Bible stories in comic book form, then expanded to a hodgepodge of undistinguished titles, some aimed at young children under the “Entertaining Comics” logo, among them *Tiny Tot*, *Dandy*, and *Animal Fables*. The bland company was limping along when, in 1947, Max Gaines was drowned in a freak boating accident in front of his home on Lake Placid, and the company fell into the hands of his reluctant twenty-five-year-old son Bill.



MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

1890–1965

plate
2

Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson joined the US Cavalry in 1917 and rose to become one of the youngest majors in the army. Subsequently he was forever addressed as “The Major.” An entrepreneur, he is also credited with being the creator of the modern comic book. The Major returned from the war and became a vocal, outspoken critic of war. He was a vocal, outspoken critic of some of the practices of the US military. He also penned adventure and western short stories for pulp magazines. In 1935 he formed National Allied Publications, releasing a tabloid-sized comics publication called *New Fun*, which was soon converted to *More Fun* and printed in the standard comic book size. *More Fun* was a humor and adventure comic and the first comic book to publish original material, much of it written by The Major himself.

The Major was credited with discovering Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the young and eager writer/artist partners from Cleveland. He ran their early comics adventures of Slam Bradley and others in his various National titles, including the first issues of *Detective Comics*. He also saw the potential in their newly created character Superman, but before he could act on it, he experienced cash-flow problems and was compelled to sell his publishing business to his partner at National, Harry Donenfeld, and Donenfeld’s accountant, Jack Liebowitz, in 1937. National’s new publishers soon introduced the characters Superman (quickly securing full ownership) and Batman. National became DC Comics, whose comics caused an instant sensation, launching the Golden Age. The Major retired from publishing and returned to writing his war stories and continuing his critiques of the American military.



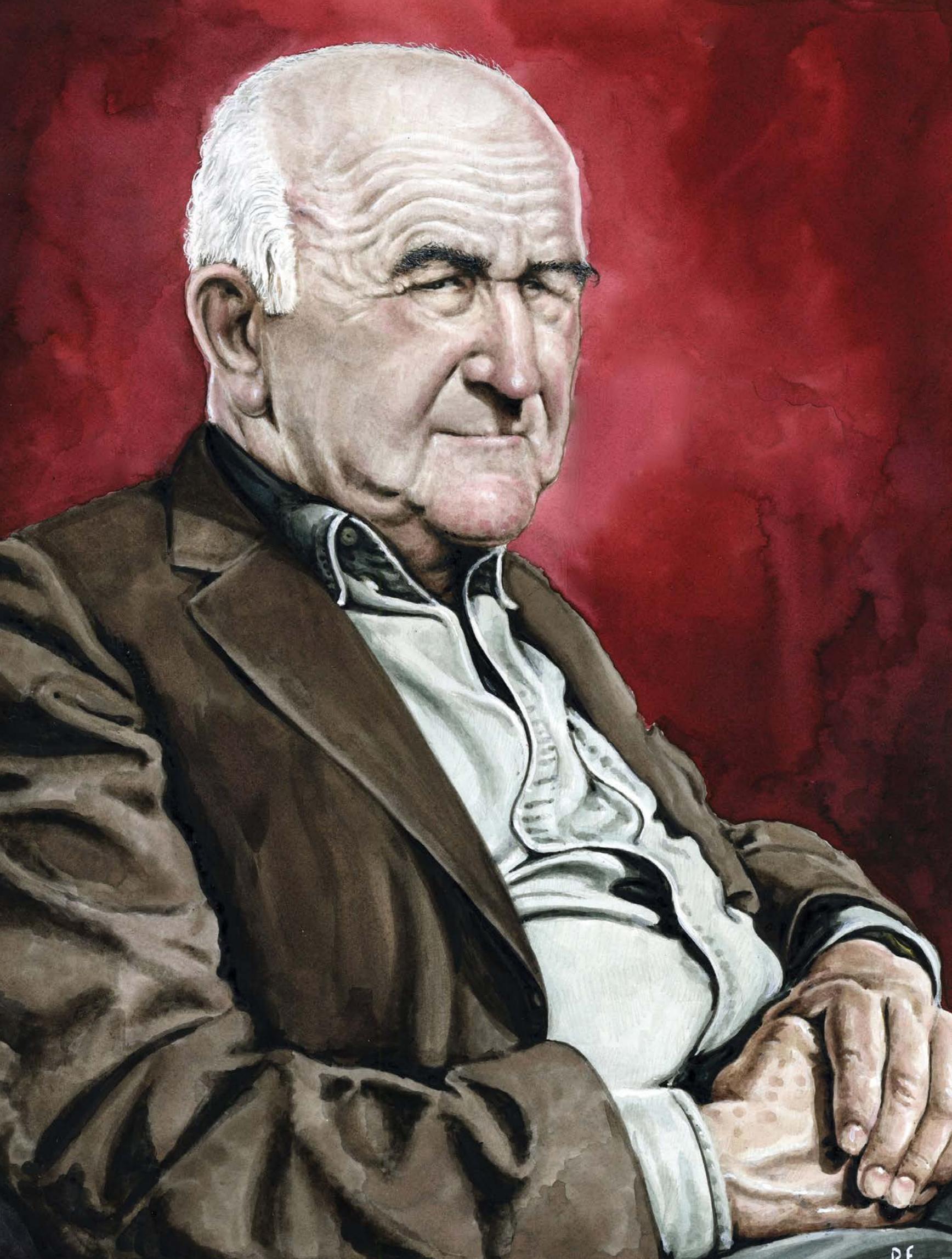
HARRY “A” CHESLER

1898–1981

plate
3

Harry “A” Chesler was a cigar-chomping, fedora-wearing entrepreneur and a pioneer of packaging and outsourcing comic book material for new publishers in the emerging medium of comics. In the midthirties he opened the first of what would be referred to as comic book “shops,” supplying completed comic book pages to the growing market of new comic book publishers by employing an assembly line of young comics artists to churn out hundreds of pages for little money but great experience. A strict taskmaster, Harry “A” Chesler, the “A” standing for “anything,” opened his Dickensian New York “sweat” shop in 1936 and soon gobbled up dozens of young and eager artists looking to jump-start their careers and develop their craft in the new field of “funny books.” Among them were Creig Flessel, Jack Cole, Carmine Infantino, Charles Biro, Mort Meskin, Mac Raboy, and even a twelve-year-old Joe Kubert. At one point Chesler had forty artists working in his crammed studio on West Twenty-third Street.

The Chesler shop (some referred to him as “Chizzler”) always followed the current comics trends: first, funny books featuring humor, adventure, and western stories; then, following in the success of Superman and Batman, superheroes; and finally horror. Chesler also published comics under his own imprint beginning in 1941, following the booming superhero market, and labeled each cover “Harry ‘A’ Chesler, World’s Greatest Comics.” Chesler was less successful as a publisher though, and his comics—basically a hodgepodge of unmemorable titles and characters—were sadly not the “World’s Greatest” and didn’t meet with much success. He would later rehash many of his comic titles, such as *Dynamic*, using newly created macabre covers in an attempt to cash in on the emerging horror trend. His comics shop remained active on and off until 1953. He would eventually donate over four thousand pages of original art, much of it created in his studio, to Fairleigh Dickinson University’s library.



SHELDON MAYER

1917–1991

plate
4

Sheldon Mayer was one of the earliest artist/writers to work in comic books, doing odd jobs in 1934 at age twelve at National Allied Publications (later DC) under Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson. While working at the McClure Newspaper Syndicate in the late thirties, he came across an unsold comic strip proposal by two Cleveland teenagers named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in the rejection pile. Mayer fell in love with their character Superman and saw its potential for becoming something special. He instantly showed it to his boss, M. C. Gaines, who also worked at McClure at the time. Gaines agreed with Mayer and contacted Harry Donenfeld at National (who had taken over the company from the Major), urging him to publish it, which led to Superman's debut in the safely titled *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. The next year Gaines cofounded a sister company (but separate entity) to National/DC, All American Publications, and hired Mayer to join him as the company's first editor. Mayer edited and helped create *The Flash*, *Green Lantern*, *Wonder Woman*, and *All-Star Comics*. He also kept busy with his own quirky, appealing cartoon work, creating covers for comic book reprints of *Mutt and Jeff* and working on his semiautobiographical comic *Squiggly*, which chronicled the haphazard daily existence of a novice cartoonist. In the late forties Mayer would dedicate himself to cartooning full-time for DC, writing and drawing *Leave It to Binky* and his most endearing creation, *Sugar and Spike*—featuring two adorable toddlers who communicated with each other in baby talk but weren't understood by adults—which he'd continue for decades.



CREIG FLESSEL

1912–2008

plate
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Creig Valentine Flessel was an early comic book artist who enjoyed a long and prolific career as an illustrator and/cartoonist, although much of his work went uncredited. In 1935 Flessel was drawing for pulp magazines when he saw an ad placed in the *New York Times* by publisher Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson seeking artists to work for his new company, National Allied Publications. Flessel answered the ad, and his first published comics work appeared in 1936's *More Fun Comics*. The next year the Major's *Detective Comics* made its debut, with the first cover depicting a menacing Asian villain drawn by the comic's editor, Vin Sullivan. Flessel took over the cover duties starting with issue #2, and today he is probably best remembered for his bold, pulp-like presuperhero covers created for the pre-Batman *Detective Comics* #2–19, which depicted stark murder scenes, evil villains, and earnest, square-jawed detectives. Flessel wrote and drew many features for the Golden Age of comics, including the early adventures of the Shining Knight and the Sandman. The versatile journeyman artist continued drawing comics throughout the fifties, including *Superboy*, and also worked on the “hip” title *Prez* for DC in the seventies. He also ghosted for several syndicated comic strips, including Al Capp's *Li'l Abner*, created advertising work, and drew illustrations and cartoons for *Boy's Life* and *Playboy*.



JERRY IGER

1903–1990

plate
6

Samuel Maxwell “Jerry” Iger began his career as a newspaper cartoonist. In 1935 he contributed several humor strips to what is now regarded as the first comic book, *Famous Funnies*, which was composed mostly of reprinted newspaper comic strips in the new comic book format. Iger became the editor of the comic *Wow*, *What a Magazine!* the following year, and although it would only last four issues, it included early work by Bob Kane as well as Iger’s future partner, nineteen-year-old Will Eisner, who drew the strip *Scott Dalton*. After *Wow* folded, Iger and Eisner anticipated the demand created by the newly flourishing comics publishers entering the new medium, who were seeking newly created material to fill their comic books. Following the lead of the Harry “A” Chesler comics packaging assembly-line shop, they opened their own shop, Syndicated Features Corporation, commonly referred to as the Eisner and Iger Studio. Their comics factory was an instant success, and they soon employed an assembly line of young, eager artists, writers, and letterers, including future comics legends Jack Kirby, Bob Kane, Lou Fine, and Wally Wood. The studio supplied completed comic books to publishers Fox, Fiction House, and Quality Comics, among others. Working under various pseudonyms, Iger also wrote many comics scripts. By 1939 the studio had fifteen employees on staff. Eisner later boasted that he was rich before he turned twenty-two. He split off from Iger in 1940 to concentrate on his character the Spirit, and Iger continued to package comics under the name S. M. Iger Studio until 1955.



WILL EISNER

1917–2005

plate



William Erwin “Will” Eisner grew up in the Bronx dreaming of someday becoming a successful cartoonist. In 1936 Eisner’s friend from Dewitt Clinton High School Bob Kane suggested he sell some of his cartoons to a new tabloid-sized magazine that was running comics called *Wow, What a Magazine!*, edited by cartoonist and letterer Jerry Iger. Eisner created the adventure strip *Captain Scott Dalton* as well as several covers for *Wow*. Although Iger was twelve years older than the nineteen-year-old Eisner, they clicked, and each anticipated the call for publishers looking for brand-new material for the infant comics industry. Together they opened the Eisner and Iger studio, a mass production comic book factory, in New York in 1937. Eisner roughed out layouts for young comics artists to finish, among them Lou Fine, Bob Kane, Bob Powell, and Reed Crandall. The studio produced finished comics primarily for Quality, Fiction House, and Fox, including the titles *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle* (created by Eisner), *Jumbo*, *Planet*, and *Wonderworld*. Eisner also created the characters Dollman and Blackhawk while working at the shop.

The “sweatshop” proved to be a huge financial success for the two partners, but Eisner, finally more interested in concentrating on his own writing and drawing, sold his interest in the shop in 1939 to pursue an offer to create a syndicated newspaper comics section of his own, aimed at a more adult audience. His first sixteen-page *The Spirit* episode ran in 1940. The urban, crime-fighting nonsuperhero the Spirit caught on big, and Eisner’s stories stood out in part to his innovative, almost cinematic artwork, writing, and panel composition, which combined dynamic action, tongue-in-cheek humor, and glamour (an Eisner specialty was drawing sexy women with features based on Carole Lombard). Some of Eisner’s assistants on *The Spirit* were Lou Fine, Bob Powell, and Jules Feiffer (who strongly objected to Eisner’s stereotypical black character, Ebony).

At its height, *The Spirit* insert appeared in twenty major market newspapers with a combined circulation of five million readers on Sundays. Eisner was called into service in 1942 and was given the job of editing *Fire Power*, the official army magazine. After his discharge in 1945, he returned to drawing *The Spirit* for another six years. In 1951 he hired artist Wally Wood to draw *The Outer Space Spirit*, an attempt to relaunch the floundering series, but Wood finally couldn’t meet the deadlines, and *The Spirit* was canceled in 1952. Eisner spent most of the next twenty-five years with his American Visuals Corporation, which created educational comic books for the government and military. He later enjoyed a resurgence of *The Spirit* via reprints by Harvey Comics, Warren Publications, and Kitchen Sink Press. Eisner became a comics instructor at New York’s School of Visual Arts in the early seventies (as did Harvey Kurtzman) and was a frequent and popular guest at comic book conventions. In 1978 he created the first of his many graphic novels, *A Contract with God*.



Will Eisner

JERRY SIEGEL

1914–1996

JOE SHUSTER

1914–1992

plate



Jerome “Jerry” Siegel and Joseph “Joe” Shuster met each other at Glendale High School in Cleveland, Ohio. The two shy Jewish teenagers discovered they shared much in common. The writer/artist team broke into comics by creating work for National Allied Publications’ early comic book *New Fun*. Among their earliest characters were the musketeer swashbuckler Henry Duval and the supernatural crime fighter Doctor Occult. Their character Slam Bradley debuted in National’s *Detective Comics* #1 in 1937, edited by Vin Sullivan.

In 1938 Max Gaines implored National’s new publishers, Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz, to publish Siegel and Shuster’s character Superman. The character finally debuted as the cover feature for National’s *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938). Superman was an instant sensation, heralding the beginning of the superhero craze and the Golden Age of comics. By accepting a payment of \$130 along with the assurance that they would be the primary artist and writer for *Superman* and the upcoming syndicated *Superman* newspaper comic, Siegel and Shuster, without any legal advice, forever signed away all their rights to the character.

The pair continued to oversee the *Superman* comic books and newspaper strip for close to a decade, collecting a decent salary, while Donenfeld and Liebowitz grew rich. In 1946, when the company refused to compensate them to the degree they felt was fair, Siegel and Shuster sued National over rights to the characters. They accepted a \$94,000 settlement, although the courts agreed that National had validly purchased the rights to Superman when they bought that first story. After all the legal wrangling, Siegel and Shuster were basically severed from the company, and their byline was removed from all comic books and newspaper strips.

In 1947 the team was hired by Superman’s original editor, Vin Sullivan, to create the short-lived character Funnyman for his company, Magazine Enterprises. In the early fifties, Siegel became the editor at Ziff-Davis. He returned to DC to write (uncredited) Superman stories until the midsixties, when he once again unsuccessfully sued DC over the Superman rights.

In 1975, after the announcement that DC’s parent company Warner Communications was producing a multi-million-dollar *Superman* film, Jerry Siegel, who had been working as a file clerk, and the near-blind Joe Shuster, along with artists Neal Adams, Jerry Robinson, and others, helped launch a public-relations campaign to protest DC’s treatment of them. After mounting public pressure, a shamed Warner Communications awarded the duo \$20,000 a year for the rest of their lives as well as a guarantee that the credit “created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster” would be added to all future Superman comics, TV shows, and films.

