

LOCAL SCENE

Comic book enterprises take off

By THOMAS J. McLEAN

Sun Special Sections Editor

The unassuming store on South San Francisco Street hardly looks like the sort of place you'd expect to find the amazing adventures of larger-than-life heroes, but that's exactly what you'll find at Beyond Comics.

"I've always wanted to do it (open a store)," said owner John Helmer, a 25-year-old archaeology graduate student at Northern Arizona University and a life-long comics fan.

Helmer said he is surprised to find that business has been pretty good since the store opened about two weeks ago.

"I've gotten a lot of people," he said. "Mostly college students and parents with kids." Much of his business comes from walk-ins, one of the reasons he choose a downtown location.

Those whose only memories of comics are of a George Reeves-style Superman facing off against small-time hoods like Bullets Barton and Mr. Wheels, may hardly recognize the comics of today.

Today, comics publishing is a huge business. The number of titles seems to grow monthly, as publishers continue to add new titles and small publishers enter the business.

Marvel is the dominant publisher, offering nearly 80 titles a month, most of them superheroes. Their most popular series is *X-Men*, a series about a group of persecuted heroes who battle for acceptance in a world that often hates and fears them and their strange powers. The first issue of the new *X-Men* series recently sold 8 million copies, Helmer said.



Guy Jacobs/Arizona Daily Sun

John Helmer poses with some of his merchandise at Beyond Comics, 10 S. San Francisco St. Helmer said he will carry a

full line of Marvel and DC Comics as well as a good selection of back issues.

Other popular series include *The New Warriors*, *X-Force* and *Ghost Rider*, he said.

DC also offers plenty of superheroes, ranging from the humorous self-parody of *Justice League America* to old favorites like *Aquaman*, *Superman* and *Batman*.

While superheroes are the dominating genre, there have emerged a number of others. DC

has found success with its line of "Mature Readers Only" books that tell adult horror and fantasy stories. Supreme among these is *Sandman*, a compelling mythological series whose stories range from surreal dreamscapes to the violent reality of serial killers. Marvel has its own mature line, called Epic Comics, which publishes material such as the Japanese classic *Akira*.

Helmer said he carries all Marvel and DC titles and some of the more popular smaller publishers such as Valiant and Dark Horse Comics. A subscription service is available that offers discounts of 25 percent to 30 percent on new comics.

"The new trend in comics is gimmicks," Helmer said. Past successes such as the first issues of

X-Men, *Spider-Man* and *X-Force* have had multiple editions with different covers, forcing collectors to buy multiple copies to keep their collection complete.

A recent DC miniseries, *Robin II*, featured holograms and multiple edition covers. However, some fans are upset with this practice

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and are backing off the multiple editions.

"I think the trend now is away from multiple covers," Helmer said. New gimmicks include die-cut covers, where part of the cover is cut out, showing part of an interior cover. A similar process is used on some paperback novel.

Back issues are also big business, and Helmer carries more than 1,000 older comics from the 1960s to the present.

"Comics are an investment, like coins and stamps," Helmer said. Comics have always gone up in value, but have shown more increases lately because of the bigger

audience of comic readers.

Demand is greatly affected by the artist who draws a comic. There are currently three big artists whose work is in great demand: Rob Liefeld, famous for *X-Force* and his Levi's commercial; Todd McFarlane, formerly of *Spider-Man*; and *X-Men*'s Jim Lee. Other factors affecting a book's value include first appearance of a popular character or a major event in the lives of a character such as a death.

The increasing cost of comics — prices for new issues begin at \$1.25 and go up from there — has made it a bit more difficult for younger kids to collect, he said.

Another trend to look for is the move to smaller companies, as big name writers and artists seek more creative control over their work.