

COVER STORY

Death of Superman ends era

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Entertainment Editor

An era will end next week with the sound of thunder ringing out over the great city of Metropolis, and the world will mourn the passing of Earth's Greatest Hero, Superman.

Superman, dead? It must be a trick. Who has the power to defeat the near-infinite might of Superman, let alone kill him?

The answer, as found in current issues of the four Superman titles published by DC Comics, is a new, single-mindedly destructive villain called Doomsday.

But what makes Superman's battle with Doomsday different from any story DC has done before is the fact that he will die at the story's end. No hoax. No trick. The Man of Steel will die in *Superman #75*, which goes on sale Nov. 20 with a newsstand edition and a polybagged collectors' edition that includes special items such as a copy of Superman's obituary from *The Daily Planet*.

Storywise, there is little reason given for Doomsday's rampage. Escaping from a mysterious complex hidden deep underground in Ohio, he begins to destroy everything in his path, drawing in and nearly killing Superman's colleagues in the Justice League America. Joining the battle, Superman finds his foe stronger than any he has met before with a single-minded, brainless determination to destroy anything in his path.

More like a force of nature than an individual, Doomsday heads toward Metropolis where his battle with the Man of Steel causes mass destruction as it wages through that proud city. Superman's last battle has been joined, and to win it he makes the ultimate sacrifice.

Saleswise, however, the death of Superman makes a lot of sense. The intense attention from the mainstream media has made the project a huge success for DC, with orders for *Superman #75* reaching well past 1 million copies, said Martha Thomases, publicity manager for DC. Those sales make the issue the best-selling comic of all time, she said.

John Helmer, owner of Beyond Comic Books, a Flagstaff store specializing in comics, said expectations are high and he has ordered between 300 and 400 copies to supply his stores here and in Prescott.

"We're excited because it brings in everybody, not just the comic collectors," Helmer said. Requests and inquiries about *Superman #75* have been coming in from all over northern Arizona, he said.

If you want to read the entire story, good luck. The issues featuring the "Doomsday" story are already difficult to find.

Helmer said he hopes to have enough copies to meet the high demand when the book goes on sale Nov. 20.

"I just hope he stays dead," said Helmer, adding he hopes DC



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Superman's battle with Doomsday, above, does a bit more than just disturb the peace in a scene from *Adventures of Superman #497*, part four of the storyline that culminates in Superman's death. Superman has come a long way from the days when creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster chronicled his adventures as in this 1940 story from *Superman #13*, below.

doesn't try to bring him to bring him back too quickly.

While death is rarely permanent in the world of comic books, Thomases said fans shouldn't expect the return of Superman anytime soon.

After the culmination of the seven-part "Doomsday" story, there will be an eight-part follow-up called "Funeral for a Friend," which explores the aftermath of the fatal battle, Supergirl's attempt to fill in for her cousin and the disappearance of Clark Kent, Thomases said.

That story will conclude in *Superman #77*, on sale in mid-January, to be followed by an uncertain future for DC's four Superman titles.

"I know that Superman is not going to be revived then. There are some special memorial issues (planned) for a while," Thomases said.

The Superman writing staff, led by editor Mike Carlin, spent much of late October at a story summit trying to figure out what to do with the four series they publish. Rumors in the comic fan press have mentioned the possibility that the Superman books may temporarily suspend publication. The idea that he may return in a few years as a more violent character to better appeal to today's comic fans has also been bandied about.

But DC isn't talking.



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"Everything you've heard (from) people saying they know what's going to happen is wrong," Thomases said.

BIRTH OF A LEGEND

The death of Superman will end a crimefighting career that has withstood the silly and the profound, the real and the imaginary ever since the character's introduction in 1938.

Created in the days of the Great Depression by two Ohio teen-agers named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, he was a hard concept to sell.

First conceived as a newspaper strip, writer Siegel and artist Shuster were turned down by nearly every American and Canadian newspaper syndicate. Fortunately, their work eventually came to the

attention of Sheldon Meyer, an editor at All-American Comics who got DC to look at the project.

After re-tooling the concept for comic books, DC bought both the strip and the rights to the character, who premiered to the public in the first issue of *Action Comics*, cover date of June 1938.

It is almost impossible for today's comic readers to imagine just how startling and amazing Superman was when he first appeared. The first and most influential superhero of all time, he broke ground for all who followed. It is arguable that no superheroes would have existed without him.

The character's impact on the comics industry was immediate. Soon after Superman appeared,



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Supergirl picks up where her cousin left off in the conclusion to the 1961 imaginary story, "The Death of Superman," from *Superman #149*.

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other superheroes began popping up at every comic company. Among the notable inspirations of the early years were Batman, the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, the Flash, Green Lantern, Captain America and the Spectre. The comics industry had found its niche in the only genre it could truly call its own.

The devices created for Superman in many ways continue to help define the parameters of the superhero genre, which would be almost unrecognizable without secret identities, mad scientists and outlandish origins.

Many supporting characters have become almost as well-known as Superman himself. Without friends like Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, Perry White and Lana Lang and enemies like Lex Luthor, Brainiac, Mr. Mxyzptlk and Bizarro, Superman stories would be almost unrecognizable.

Siegel and Shuster's early stories were simple and mostly plot-driven, focusing on Superman's aura of mystery and bizarre powers. Characterization and a private life for Superman were almost non-existent.

As the popularity of Superman began to grow, the merchandising frenzy started, and soon Superman appeared in a movie serial, newspaper strips and a radio series that actually invented several major additions to Superman lore. Jimmy Olsen, Perry White and even kryptonite were early developments.

A series began that detailed the adventures of Superman growing

up in Smallville, offering the hero's young fans avenues to even more adventures of the last son of Krypton.

DIVERSE HANDS

With the departure of Shuster and Siegel in 1947, Superman was left mostly in the hands of editor Mort Weisinger. Some of Superman's adventures began to lose their hard edge and took on a more fun and harmless tone than had been seen before.

Siegel and Shuster didn't fare nearly as well as their creation. Having sold the rights for the character to DC for a few thousand dollars, the pair's only source of income was comic show appearances until the late 1970s, when publicity inspired by the first Superman movie prompted DC to settle its longstanding debt.

While Superman was able to survive the collapse of the superhero genre in the late 1940s and the inquisitions of the early 1950s, a more dangerous foe for the comic book character awaited in the form of "The Adventures of Superman" television show that started George Reeves and began in 1952.

As with the Batman series of the 1960s, the comic character was limited to what could be shown on television so as not to confuse young readers.

Finally, the late '50s saw not only the end of the show, but the beginning of comics' Silver Age as DC revived and revamped the superheroes beginning with the Flash. Editors Weisinger and Julius Schwartz brought superheroes back to dominance in the industry.

A strong emphasis on science



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The newly-revamped Superman confronts businessman Lex Luthor courtesy of John Byrne from *Superman* #2, 1986. Byrne was the writer and artist responsible for revitalizing the character in the mid-1980s, laying the groundwork for the tightly interwoven Superman stories of recent years.

fiction in the Sputnik era helped the new writers, among them former Captain Marvel writer Otto Binder, revitalize the Man of Steel with a focus on simple soap opera stories, science fiction and the tragic fate of Superman's home planet Krypton.

EXPANDING LORE

In Superman's golden period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the stories were populated with bizarre characters, imaginary stories, mysteries and devices and people from the planet Krypton.

Prime among these was the bottle city of Kandor, the former capital of Krypton that was stolen and shrunk by the villain Brainiac before the planet's demise. After taking the bottle, Superman dedicated himself to restoring his countrymen and often shrunk himself down to enter the city for adventures with Jimmy Olsen.

The supporting characters also became more important, as Jimmy Olsen, Lois Lane, Lana Lang and Lex Luthor became characters in their own right, bringing their own problems into Superman's life. The result was like a soap opera, and the Superman family grew to include Supergirl, Krypto the super dog, even Super-Horse and the heroes of the 30th century, The Legion of Super-Heroes.

Many of the most interesting stories were the imaginary ones, which posed a question like what

if Superman married Lois Lane, and explored startling ramifications without making permanent changes in the series.

One of the most interesting is the 1961 story that has now become reality — "The Death of Superman." In this story, Lex Luthor pretends to give up evil and becomes a hero. However, he tricks Superman into taking part in an experiment where Luthor uses Kryptonite to kill his opponent. Supergirl takes his place and Luthor is tried and convicted of murder by the Kandorians who send him to the mysterious Phantom Zone forever.

These fanciful and light-hearted stories continued through the end of comics' Silver Age around 1968. The early 1970s brought the age of relevance as characters began to deal with real life problems of the day, such as poverty, racism and corruption in government.

Even characters like Superman were forced to question how much they should help people and whether or not it was good for people to depend on superheroes to solve their problems for them. The relevance ideas, spearheaded by writer Dennis O'Neil, were often clumsy, preachy and eventually short-lived.

THE '70s STRUGGLE

Among the many changes comics struggled to survive in the

1970s were some major, but superficial, changes in the Superman series. *The Daily Planet* was bought out by a large communications conglomerate and Clark Kent found himself as a TV reporter and anchorman. He began to wear suits of colors other than blue and even grew sideburns.

Superman was also deemed to have become so powerful it was difficult for any opponent to believably challenge him, so his power was cut by a third and most of the kryptonite on Earth was rendered harmless through a chain reaction.

Still, success eluded most comics in the 1970s as the industry struggled to find quality, commercial product. Superman reached new heights of popularity in 1978 with the release of "Superman: The Movie." Starring Christopher Reeve in the dual role of Clark Kent/Superman and Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor, the movie was a critical and popular success, spawning three sequels over the following nine years.

However, the movie didn't help the comic book much. With few outlets for people to buy comics and become familiar with the character, there was almost no way for DC to translate the movie's success into comic book success.



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Clark Kent misses out on a raise in this 1963 story from *Superman* #162. Many of the stories in this era focused on the personal problems of Superman and his large supporting cast.

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REVAMPING

As DC approached its 50th anniversary in 1985, it found itself with many of the most recognizable characters, but poor sales and story quality hindered by its long, convoluted continuity. A housecleaning effort called *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was launched to simplify the DC Universe for modern readers and make many of their classic characters, like Superman, more interesting to the new wave of modern comic collectors.

Enter writer-artist John Byrne. Instrumental in comics' creative revival of the late 1970s, early '80s at Marvel Comics, Byrne jumped at the chance to do Superman and introduced the current version of the character in 1986 in a six-issue series called *The Man of Steel*.

In the revised origin, the look of his Kryptonian parents were changed, the Kents now were younger when they found their foster son, the adventures of Superboy were eliminated entirely and a young Clark didn't hide his abilities as he had in the past.

Perhaps the biggest change was in the Clark/Superman relationship, as Clark became the real character instead of just a coy disguise and Superman became the alternate life.

Other Byrne changes included Clark's return to *The Daily Planet* and the transformation of Lex Luthor from mad scientist to well-respected, but still power-hungry, business magnate.

Despite these seemingly drastic changes, many of which drew fire from mainstream fans who hadn't read comics in years, the key to Byrne's revitalization was a return to the original spirit and verve of Siegel and Shuster.

Since the Byrne revamping, the character debuted in a new *Su-*

perman #1 and his adventures were chronicled in three monthly titles, each maintaining a tight continuity with the others.

The Superman books have managed to find a steady but unspectacular following among comic readers. A fourth book was introduced in 1991.

As always, soap opera and change play a strong part in the Superman mythos. Clark and Lois became engaged in 1990; Lex Luthor died and was succeeded by his more benevolent son, Supergirl is back, and Jimmy Olsen was laid off from *The Daily Planet*.

The changes didn't stop there, as the comic world was saddened a few months ago by the death of Joe Shuster, whose passing almost foreshadows the fate that is now waiting to befall the Man of Steel himself.

THE FUTURE

So what does the future hold for DC and Superman?

There are few hard facts, but fans love to speculate. One of the more unusual ideas bandied around is that Superman will return sometime within three to five years as a meaner, more violent character.

"I think they've got major plans to change the character," Beyond Comics' Helmer said. Many of today's popular characters, such as Marvel's Punisher and Wolverine and Valiant Comics' forthcoming Bloodshot, are violent with plenty of blood and guns, he said.

Regardless of whether Superman returns, his place in comic history and popular culture has been forever secured. He will continue to live on in the minds and hearts of fans everywhere who have looked up to his unwavering commitment to truth and justice and the American way.