



Oh Superman!

Something strange is happening to comics. You remember those ones you used to buy when you were a kid, where *Superman* or *Spiderman* or whoever would biff! bang! and pow! their way through the criminal world in a heartening display of heroism? Now that is all changing: today's supermen are just as likely to be pathetic as heroic, social misfits who have to wear costumes to make up for grave psychological inadequacies. If this sounds a bit much for a child to take on board, that is because children are no longer the market for one branch of the comic industry. Instead, 'adult-oriented' comics are beginning to be produced with what is termed the 'new realism', a controversial new direction but already a very successful one. In 1987, adult comics are where the action is.

In Britain the idea of a comic for grown-ups (in whatever form) has in the past had a very cool reception: one simply did not buy them after the age of 15. In any case, for the home-grown item low production values and low-rent story lines have inevitably confined the market to the young. Unlike the rest of the world, here there is no tradition of 'the comic' either as a respectable art form or as a (potentially) sophisticated product.

But on the continent, for instance, it has always been a

tiered commodity: there are comics for children, for teenagers and for adults (as with other media, such as novels and movies). In France, for example, even the minister of culture has been known to attend comics' conventions. Britain's backwardness is perhaps all the more surprising since the Japanese experience demonstrates that the market can be huge - one adult title alone sells 2m copies a week and is just as popular as the financial papers on the early morning bullet trains.

But now the freeze is over. A clutch of writers and artists has emerged who are capable of producing exciting, multi-faceted material in English for the adult reader. By imposing a new set of criteria on 'the comic' they are able to show for the first time its true range of possibilities. From America come the Hernandez brothers' Mr X and Frank Miller's inventive Batman rewrite *The Dark Knight*. But most remarkable of all is the massive 12-part *Watchmen* series which currently resides at the top of the comics chart. It is quite unlike anything that has been seen before, and by a strange irony is the creation not of an American, but an Englishman - Alan Moore.

Moore has been dubbed the comic-world's first megastar. His early work on the kids' comic *2000AD* saw him

begin to experiment with giving his characters depth, and develop his distinctive obsession with psychology. Some years later this style won him the opportunity to write his very own comics for the American DC company, resulting first in *Swamp Thing* (1984) and then, in September 1986, the epic *Watchmen*. The latter is his first title to be targeted specifically at the older age range, and shows just how far he has come: the starring superheroes are three-dimensional as never before, and riddled with psychoses. There is 'The Comedian' who finds every horror inherently amusing, 'The Night Owl' who is sexually impotent without his owl costume, and 'Dr Manhattan' who originally acquired his supernatural powers through a nuclear test accident (in traditional sci-fi fashion) but now finds the radioactivity he emits is giving his friends cancer. Along with Frank Miller, who ploughs similar ground, Moore has succeeded in turning the superhero genre on its head within the space of a year.

But there are other elements to his scripts - most noticeably the politics - that are ground-breaking too. *Watchmen*, for example, is particularly concerned with the fear of nuclear war and the stress this can cause people in their everyday lives, and comes complete with 'real' warnings from Albert Einstein and others. The social desirability of vigilantes - albeit superhero vigilantes - is also explored: 'Protection? Who are we protecting them from?' exclaims one hero to another after an especially destructive night's work.

In Moore's latest publication, *The Ballad of Halo Jones* trilogy, he tackles sexual stereotyping. The Halo Jones of the title is a woman caught up in a future war in which the troops are also female. She is not a heroine in the same mould as *Watchmen*, however, and Moore has taken pains to keep her as 'ordinary' as possible. Some proof of his success is the praise that Lisa Tuttle, editor

of *The Encyclopaedia of Feminism* has since accorded him for his ability to formulate independent female figures: not many comic writers can claim that distinction.

But talent like Moore's, on its own, is not all that matters. The marketers of the new wave in this country are wise to the fact that sophisticated material has to be sold in a different fashion. Titan Books Ltd, a British company, are now producing large format compilation 'albums' (comprising four or five issues) that would not look out of place on the most sober of bookshelves. Their strategy is based on the conviction that the British adult would not feel comfortable buying comics from among kid's titles in a newsagents, but would do if they retailed in this form from a bookshop. Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* has already appeared as such and sales are now pushing the Im mark. Later this year Titan hope to secure distribution rights to the big chains in time for the release of the albums of Moore's *Swamp Thing* and possibly *Watchmen* too.

The avenues these changes have opened up seem endless. The film rights to *Watchmen*, barely into its seventh episode, have already been snapped up and Moore is currently working on a movie with Malcolm McLaren. But comic fans need fear not: he is simultaneously completing another large-scale project, *A Killing Joke*, which should be out in the next couple of months. So the future looks bright for an industry which by taking itself seriously appears to have created a sustainable adult market seemingly out of thin air. Adapting to the success of titles like *Watchmen* has meant a move up-market in every sense of the word. The new look adult comic has grabbed for itself both commercial and artistic credibility and, for a commodity which has long been seen as throwaway, it looks like respectability is here at last. • *Roger Sabin*