# How to Cope with Crisis: Examining the Regressive State of Comics through DC Comics' *Crisis on Infinite Earths*

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(ABSTRACT)

The sudden and popular rise of comic book during the last decade has seen many new readers, filmgoers, and television watchers attempt to navigate the world of comics amid a staggering influx of content produced by both Marvel and DC Comics. This process of navigation is, of course, not without precedence: a similar phenomenon occurred during the 1980s in which new readers turned to the genre as superhero comics began to saturate the cultural consciousness after a long period of absence. And, just as was the case during that time, such a navigation can prove difficult as a veritable network of information—much of which is contradictory—vies for attention.

How does one navigate a medium to which comic books, graphic novels, movies, television shows, and other supplementary forms all contribute? Such a task has, in the past, proven to be near insurmountable. DC Comics is no stranger to this predicament: during the second boom of superhero comics, it sought to untangle the canonical mess made by decades of overlapping history to the groundbreaking limited series *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, released to streamline its then collection of stories by essentially nullifying its previous canon and starting from scratch. But in its attempt to further impose order on their sprawling body of work, the monolithic comic books company also further solidified a perception of comics as a conservative and retrogressive medium.

This thesis will explore *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as a means of revealing its status as a lens through which the traditionalist nature of comics can be understood. By examining *Crisis* through three crucial lenses—narrative, historical, and economic—I will argue that the text ostensibly designed to push past the canonical maze erected by its predecessors had the unintended consequence of actually rooting it further in its own history.

# How to Cope with Crisis: Examining the Regressive state of Comics through DC Comics' *Crisis on Infinite Earths*

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(GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT)

This thesis examines DC Comics' landmark *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series to better understand the comics as a both a discrete text and a piece of a larger narrative, historical, and bureaucratic canon. By examining *Crisis* as a narrative, historical, and economic product, I hope to shed light on how the text, while progressive in its desire to reshape DC's canon, ultimately proved to be counterproductive.

# Dedication

To the many earths lost in the destruction of the Multiverse, and the many lives which perished in turn.

# Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my committee members, whose invaluable feedback aided in crafting a text of which I am not only proud, but has further helped me refine my own interests. I am also thankful for Shaun Baker, whose unbridled enthusiasm for comics has had a tremendous impact on my own, and without whom I most likely would not be studying what I am today. I am also thankful for the incalculable amount of help and support I received from Dr. Reed during my tenure at Virginia Tech. Finally, I would like to briefly thank my two cats, Magenta and Blue, whose loud meowing consistently kept me awake in case I ever decided to sleep instead of doing work.

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# Introduction

> "There is no longer such a thing as strategy; there is only crisis management."
>
> *Robert McNamara*

To many lovers of comics and their study, it seems appropriate for a thesis such as this to open waxing poetic about my long-standing relationship with comic books. If I am to model myself after my predecessors—whose research has been invaluable to the construction of this thesis—I should begin with a story of how I took refuge among the many illustrated pages of my favorite childhood superheroes, awestruck by their triumphs, dumbfounded by their defeats, eagerly waiting for the next issue to arrive on my doorstep. Sadly, such a story would be more fiction than non-fiction—my earliest encounter with comics dates back to my first showing of *Iron Man* (has it really been ten years?); I didn't even begin to read comic books until after watching Scott Derrickson's *Doctor Strange*. Indeed, my history with comics is eclipsed by that of my history with Facebook, with the iPhone, with the internet itself.

But ten years, over thirty films, and countless number of comic books later, I've become smitten with a genre I barely gave attention to growing up. Despite their juvenile exterior, comics have routinely engaged me in creative and unfamiliar ways and have pushed the boundaries of what I should expect from a text, in terms of both production and consumption.

This does not mean, however, that comics are a genre which can be read with ease. Comics are work—hard work. And it is my unexpected encounter with that very difficulty that led to this thesis.

Among the sprawling continuities, interconnecting stories, and various character iterations, it is easy to be quickly entangled not just by the stories *within* comic books but by the meta-narrative surrounding and contextualizing the individual issues themselves. How far back should one begin reading about their favorite character? What should one read to properly understand Marvel Comics' *Civil War* event? And why the hell are there so many Spider-Men? These were questions I anticipated when entering into the genre, but nothing could have truly prepared me for finding ways to navigate that particular mine field when figuring out where to start. And even with my nascent knowledge of the genre, complications like this still arise.

Over at DC Comics a particular word is routinely used to describe such a phenomenon: crisis. The language here is telling: comics have appropriated clinical terms to describe a situation in which readers often find themselves when attempting to navigate a world of contradictions, paradoxes, reboots, and retcons. Indeed, to read comics is to, in effect,

navigate through crisis and find ways to cope with such an event, both for reader and writer. And while I cannot say for certain that approaching the genre with the mindset of a therapist may aid in navigating its many forking paths, I am prepared to suggest that a better understanding of what fragments comics, of what makes them so prone to an *nth* Superman or an *nth* alternate reality, may lead to a better understanding, perhaps even an appreciation, of the genre.

But such a resolution first requires a recognition of the problem. That problem is two-fold: first, how does a reader, whether novice or expert, come to navigate the overarching structure of comics on an individual level? Second, how can that knowledge be applied at the meta-textual level? Thankfully, an examination of a very famous comic book—one which serendipitously adopts the *crisis* motif—can provide the basis by which readers may learn to address this problem: Marv Wolfman and George Pérez's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, a landmark limited series which not only reshaped DC's own body of literature, but has had lasting effects on the world of comics at large. *Crisis* not only established the annual large-scale crossover event as annual tradition, it also progressed the entire genre in terms of how comics are published and read. With a such a reputation, it is hard to understate the impact *Crisis* had on the industry, especially its answer to how writers and readers treat the problem of large-scale narrative networks such as DC's own.

This thesis will not be so much an informed reading of *Crisis* as it will be an informed examination of the state of crisis which the text was written to resolve. In the case of this seminal work, what was present before and after serve as equally important texts to observe

and critically analyze, if only to understand just what events led to its creation and what exactly *Crisis* left in its wake.

To better examine these two questions (how can readers and writers navigate DC's sprawling continuity, both individually and collectively?), I will first look into the biographical events which lead to the need for an event such as *Crisis*. I will then approach *Crisis* through three distinct lenses—the narrative, the historical, and the economic—to address the many anachronisms which suggest that a text designed to push DC's history forward too often rests on the laurels of tradition and history that may ultimately undermine its very purpose. Finally, piggybacking on another important question—was *Crisis on Infinite Earths* successful?—I will explore the overall state of the comics industry with regard to a perceived conservatism underpinning its foundation, and discuss at length whether or not such a foundation is perhaps a bad thing.

To understand *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, I would argue, is to understand the very state of the superhero comic book itself. Not only is the text a keystone to DC's narrative strategy, its influence on the ways in which comics and large-scale narrative events occur in the medium cannot be overstated.

## 0.1 Literature Review: Why Study Comics?

Though comic books were relatively quick to boom in popularity since their reinvention in the 1930s, the same cannot be said for the field of research which surrounds them. This is,

of course, due in part to the popular opinion which seems to define any comic book before it hits a magazine shelf—that comic books are children's literature, juvenile works of unrealistic fortunes and failures with no broader message to convey. To some, comic books are of no more value than the pulp from which they are made and the genre (of the same name) from which they are derived. Indeed, in the struggle which was endured by many academics to prove comic books are worthy of academic study, it can be difficult to convincingly argue that a reading of *Batman: The Killing Joke* is of equal value to a reading of *Moby Dick*.

Such a cultural milieu makes it easy to understand why many have difficulty treating comic books as literature at all. Juliane Blank's work on the subject reminds readers that the genre has, until recently, been treated as low-brow literature, even well into the advent of the texts that would later challenge such assumptions (Blank 74–75). Though her work focused primarily on the effects of comic books in Germany, many factors which influenced such public opinions were themselves adapted from American social politics of the time, since America established comic books (and their criticism) as a dominant cultural product. Ultimately, the wildly successful effect of detractors such as American psychologist Fredric Wertham and his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) had a hand in shaping opinions on comic books' representation not only in the United States, but globally.

Another roadblock impeding the viewing of comic books as literature is the aesthetic distance (in the most literal sense) between reading comic books and reading other forms of literature. Though they share many structural and functional elements, to read comic books is no more identical to reading prose than prose is to poetry, or poetry is to drama. Just as

in those other instances, comic books are beholden to their own sets of rules in how they can be read and, more specifically, how their text—both words and images—convey meaning; Hannah Miodrag articulates the difference succinctly:

> Comics are not, of course, reducible to literature. They are a visual-verbal form, and layouts, pictures, other visual devices, and plotting might justifiably take precedence over a well-crafted sentence. Language is just one of the form's elements, and may not be at the core of a particular text's aesthetic. (Miodrag 64–65)

As Miodrag notes, critical analysis of comic books for its text alone (perhaps guided by a notion that their images are incidental) leaves readers, ironically, with only half the picture. Comic books must be read within the language in which they operate, "according to the specifics of the form," which can prove difficult for readers looking outside inwards. The distinction Miodrag makes between the language of comics and "language-in-comics" becomes pertinent to a reading and understanding of comic books, as attempting to read and evaluate the writing of comic books outside of its own semantic system is only cause for misinterpretation (Miodrag 61, 66). Similarly, Kai Mikkonen's work on reading comic books corroborates Miodrag's claims regarding the importance of reading them by their own in-text standards. (It is but mere coincidence that both authors researched German comics.) Whereas approached reading comics more abstractly, Mikkonen's work offers a practical investigation on the subject: central to his work is the relationship of meaning

created between a comic book's visual and verbal components, especially it relation to the function of time. As he notes in his examination of *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*, readers must use both the text *and* images in a comic book to understand how time is presented; this information cannot be discerned from one portion of a comic alone. And just like the passage of time in comics, Mikkonen reminds the reader that all other navigation towards meaning—whether it be characterization, or plot sequence, or conflict—must also be derived from every source of information in a comic book, whether it be written, visual, verbal, or otherwise (Mikkonen 79). In short, both Miodrag and Mikkonen make clear that one particular drawback in the viewing of comic books as worthy of academic exploration is the difficulty of treating their language by its own rules, with many instead excising its discrete components—words, images, themes, what have you—to apply them to the familiar standards of prose.

This is not to say that comic books have remained entirely unassociated with critical praise. Indeed, the term which Blank, Miodrag, and Mikkonen use to refer to the texts with which they work is a telling indication of just what kind of comic book has garnered the acclaim and legitimacy that many others often lack: whereas I refer to them by the term *comic book*, they employ the more grandiose term *graphic novel*. In her work on the subject, Mikkonen posits two fairly important questions regarding the form: "What is it that makes a collection of panel pictures a narrative text, and how is a series of images processed [as] a story?" (74). In looking into the avenues available for comic books to become worthy of critical study, I would like to forward another important question: exactly what is it that

turns a comic book into a graphic novel?

It would be remiss to say that the rise of Comics studies and the rise of the graphic novel (or the rise of its use in popular parlance) are, in fact, related. Achim Hescher notes that the term only emerged relatively recently, as a means of distinguishing the format from traditional comic books thanks to a perceived distance from popular comic pulp. Not only are graphic novels often not serialized, they are also often of a perceived greater quality and complexity relative to their mainstream counterparts (Hescher 3). Unsurprisingly, such a distinction allows graphic novels to more easily breach into areas suitable for academic study at the expense of an often distasteful reputation within the broader comics community. Yet whether dealing with graphic novels or comic books, both nevertheless remain a tool used to *introduce* readers to the world of literature rather than themselves being a *part* of it. In Eileen Richardson's examination of the ways graphic novels can be useful tools by which young readers may learn the fundamentals of literary fiction suggests, offhandedly, that such texts are merely designed to be a stop gap between what is not literature (comic books) and what is (traditional texts) (Richardson 4).

I find it necessary to ground this literature review in the comics-as-literature debate not only to demonstrate how Comics studies has learned to operate within this context, but also to highlight how public opinion of superhero comic books continue to shape perceptions of the entire genre. Superhero comic books, after all, were responsible for introducing the American public to the medium to a far greater degree than its predecessors; it seems only natural, then, for that particular genre to shape the reception of comic books at large. Consequently,

discussions of whether or not comic books are a valid area of study often curtails an equally-important conversation of whether or not *superhero* comic books are worthy of study, with many arguing against that case. What can characters like Superman and Batman offer the public beyond mere entertaining spectacle? What value is there in a medium aimed at children, sold for pennies on the dollar, and printed by the same companies responsible for pulp magazines? Needless to say, conversations like these remain abundant, and ultimately aid in establishing a distance between the appreciation of comic books as entertainment and as a genre worthy of study.

While I value the notion that Comics studies can engage in this debate and find compelling ways to argue in favor of its own merit, I also think that repeatedly returning to this debate may undermine the work that many writers, artists, and scholars set out to make. All too often it is not enough that an article posit "what am I trying to do with this comic?"; it must first field the question of "why are comic books worth studying in the first place?" to an audience who may be unwilling to afford the genre the courtesy it deserves. Thankfully, this landscape has begun to change: the rise of comics-focused scholarly journals such as *ImageTexT*, *The Comics Grid*, *Studies in Comics*, and many others which have appeared over the last two decades reflect an academic climate growing more accepting of comic books as a legitimate area of study. And the popularity of works such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and Umberto Eco's *The Myth of Superman* reflect the viability for scholars both in and out of the field to engage with this genre as they would any other. Simply put, the question of whether or not comic books are worth the time of those who question

their legitimacy is slowly being answered through an expanding research field elevating comic books beyond their status as newspaper fodder and occasional Christmas gifts.

## 0.2 Approaching Crisis

Whether or not one defines *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as comic book or graphic novel, one description which has often been a steadfast term attributed to the genre as a whole is *conservative*. Since this term is broad, and since I will be referring to the conservative nature of comics repeatedly throughout this thesis, I would like to offer a working definition of conservatism at it relates to comics, adopted from Adam Murdough's discussion of the subject: comics is a conservative medium insofar as it upholds even its most problematic elements for the sake of tradition or historical accuracy, prioritizing the demands of its historically dominant white male audience at the expense of minority voices (Murdough 54). One need only look at the hypersexualized state of female superheroes, even as the industry has begun to readdress the role of women in comics, to see this conservative system in action. Thus when it comes to determining whether or not a comic is canonical, the proverbial game is rigged in favor of the (predominantly white male) house. Canonicity favors those comic books which more closely adhere to precedence established in prior ones. With such a bureaucratic system of canon formation, it is no wonder that Benjamin Authers drew a connection between the making of comics canon and that of common law, as both involve composite bodies of self-regulating, self-examining archives of texts (Authers 67).

So *why* are comics conservative, then? For one thing, comic books are first and foremost a product designed with revenue in mind. Such revenue practices are tied to a product which has historically been consistent in making money through a fixed series of characters, histories, and stories; therefore, there is clear incentive to maintain what has already been established (and what, therefore, is easiest to profit off of) over what changes may take comics in innovative directions. This isn't to say, of course, that comic books are an inherently stagnant medium; the shift from comic strips to comic books during the 1930s prove otherwise. Rather, comic books are a medium in which prior content, commercially stable for decades, is an easier return on investment than the many innovative ideas which came about during the Silver and Bronze Ages of Comics.

Thus one may be puzzled by the very existence of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, a text seemingly designed to forgo any sense of traditionalism in favor of a progress so radical it seeks to change the very foundation of DC Comics as a storyteller, a historian, and a business. And while, on its surface, the text seems to do away with past precedent—which has rendered it impossible for many new readers to enter into comics without years of prior knowledge, research, and investment—it is clear that such grand ambitions are nevertheless tethered to the realization that *Crisis* remains a product commissioned by a company. As I argue in the economic section of this thesis, the struggle between *Crisis* as an intergalactic comic books tale and as a licensed property ultimately make it difficult for the series to impart permanent, lasting change on the DC Universe, since too much change (like the deaths of The Flash, Wonder Woman, and Supergirl) prevent those characters from fulfilling

their role as intellectual property—after all, killed heroes can't sell stories.

But *Crisis* is not affected by the conservative nature of comics based on economics alone. Two other major areas reflect the ways in which the comic book shows its traditionalist roots: first, in its narrative, and second, in its history/historicity. As a text designed to upend the entirety of the DC Multiverse and put a singular, streamlined universe in its place, both story and historical setting are inextricably linked to the events of *Crisis*. Consequently, it is crucial to examine *Crisis* not just as a narrative (and meta-narrative), but also as a product of DC Comics' own hiostoriography.

My examination of *Crisis* through a narrative lens will focus on how the text addresses both its story as an isolated unit and as component to DC Comics' continuity at large. It will highlight the incongruities of a text that simultaneously upholds its strategy to destroy and replace the Multiverse while maintaining many of the narrative elements which complicated the narrative surrounding the Multiverse itself. Finally, it will focus on the ways in which *Crisis* was employed to address DCs narrative concerns both within and without the text, to better provide readers with a sense of closure as many of their favorite characters struggle to survive the cataclysmic events therein.

My examination of *Crisis* through a historical lens will focus on how the text must deal with two different forms of history: first, the in-universe history which its many characters have accumulated over decades of publications; second, the out-of-universe history of DC Comics itself, which became a complex and unregulated field through which readers of DC navigated with frustration. I argue that the demand for DC to ultimately fix its own body of

history was one requested by both writers *and* readers, who too struggled under the weight of DCs prior canon.

To better place *Crisis on Infinite Earths* into context, I will also provide ample background for relating to the history of DC Comics which ultimately lead to *Crisis*' creation. Finally, I will use the knowledge gleaned from my study of the field in this thesis to answer one pertinent question: "Was *Crisis on Infinite Earths* successful in its mission to fully reset the DC Universe?" Indeed, this question has drastic implications regarding the comics genre as a whole. Most notably, as evident by *Crisis*, can comics overcome their seemingly inherent retrogressive state and push for a more progressive, innovative future, or is the genre doomed, as the saying goes, to repeat itself from one cycle of creation and destruction to the next?

# Chapter 1

# Prelude to a Crisis

## 1.1 Introduction

To fully understand the exigence for and impact of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, I believe it pertinent to first trace the history of comic books from their outset all the way up to *Crisis*' first published issue. As such, this opening chapter will attempt to situate *Crisis* in its historical moment to better understand its effect on not only DC Comics' publication strategy, but its effect in reshaping the overall comics industry as a whole.

## 1.2 1920s-1940s: The Golden Age of Comic Books

### 1.2.1 Prior to the Comic Book

The 1920s and 30s marked a transformative period for American comics. During this period, comics took on many forms, the earliest of which was the comic strip: a sequence of drawings which told a short narrative no longer than a page. These strips were often published in newspapers and had been entertaining readers since the late 19th century (Lopes 4). Due to popular success of the humor genre in these early strips, they were often referred to as "funnies" or "comics"—from which the whole genre would later take its name (4). Newspaper publishers, eager to capitalize on the success of their popular comic strips, began working with independent publishers to anthologize and reprint their most successful strips in book form, marking the transition away from the traditional comic strip and towards the earliest form of the American comic book (3).

### 1.2.2 The First Wave of Comic Books

The mid 1930s saw these new comic books flourish in both abundance and popularity. These early comic books were heavily influenced by three major factors: the first major influence was the collective body of comic strips popularized by newspapers and magazines in the decades prior (2). The second was the animation industry, whose success grew parallel to that of the comics industry itself: during this time, emerging studios such as Disney and

Warner Brothers began to shape not only the landscape of children's animation but also brought about new genres which comic books would later adopt—in fact, *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* became one of the most popular comic books of its time thanks to its focus on the antics of Disney's many anthropomorphic animals (3).

But early comic books' most influential predecessor was, unquestionably, the pulp magazines popular to the early 20th century (3). Most major comic book publishers emerging at the time made their early success as magazine publishers: Dell Publishing, which was the first company to publish comic books independent of magazines and newspapers, migrated to comics from early pulp fame; by the time the company embraced the highly successful comic book boom of the 1930s, it would bring with it a slew of artistic, narrative, and structural background from pulp magazines (3). The pulp industry not only provided comic books with its easily-consumable, mass-producible production strategy, but also provided comics with some of its earliest and most successful genres, entertaining readers with books on romance, science fiction, and adventure the funny and animal ones it had already adopted (4).

It comes as no surprise, then, that the first wave of comic books were dominated by publishers who had prior experience and talent in the pulp industry. Alongside Dell Publishing grew three other major publishers who would remain mainstays of the industry for decades to come (figure 1.1): National Periodical Publications (hereafter National)[1], created by pulp publisher Harry Donenfield in 1938; Timely Comics in 1939, supervised by pub-

[1]National Periodical Publications was originally founded as two companies: National Allied Publications, which published *New Fun*, and Detective Comics, which published *Detective Comics*. In 1946, they merged to form National Comics Publications, which was renamed National Periodical Publications in 1961.

lisher Martin Goodman; and MLJ Magazines in the same year, founded by Morris Coyne, Louis Silberkleit, and John Goldwater (4). Through their knowledge and practice in the pulp industry, these early publishers began to lay the groundwork for comic books' form and content, successfully transitioning comic from mere newspaper filler and sellable reprint to an original, independent medium. And while this era marked a successful entry into a new and innovative mode of storytelling, the true upswell of popularity for comic books in the 20th century came in May of 1938, when National debuted *Action Comics* #1, introducing the American public to its first ever major superhero: Superman (19).

### 1.2.3 The Second Wave of Comic Books

*Action Comics*' unprecedented success is largely seen to have ushered in the second wave of comic books—characterized by all-original publications no longer tied to reprinted comic strips—in what is now called the Golden Age of Comics (Petty et al. 3). This period, taking place from the mid 1930s up until the first major decline in comic books sales during the early 1950s, is most known for introducing the superhero comic book as well as establishing some of its most notable characters into the collective social consciousness. National quickly followed the success of *Action Comics* by retooling its already present line-up of comics for the superhero genre, ultimately shifting other titles away from serving short vignettes of multiple genres to producing titles with a singular generic focus. At National, this "single-genre strategy" provided a means for repurposing its most popular products to better incorporate the many superheroes whose rise in public interest did not go unnoticed by Donenfield (Lopes


Figure 1.1: Cover for *The Funnies* #1 (1936). The original *Funnies* was published in 1929 in comic strip form; it was later revived in the 30s as a bonafide comic book.

19). The "Bat-Man" was introduced on the pages of *Detective Comics* #27 (1939), aiding in a homicide case (20). The success of the character led to his receiving his own title a year later alongside his long-standing partner, Robin (20). In 1942, *Sensation Comics* #1 introduced Wonder Woman, who received her own title that same year (20). By the end of

1942, all but one of National's comic books had been indoctrinated into the superhero genre to unprecedented financial success (21).

Though the beginning of the 1930s was marked by a wide array of genres saturating the comic book market—including adventure, detective, and western stories—the decade ended with a clear trend towards superhero comics, with National leading the way in terms of sales and public reach. Ultimately, National's successful launch of the superhero comic book would come to define the genre as a whole. Before long, other companies began to adopt National's "superhero strategy" and the first wave of superheroes began to flourish across the entire comics industry (20). Timely published *Marvel Comics* #1 in October of 1939, and introduced readers to the Human Torch and The Sub-Mariner (20). Newcomer Fawcett Comics introduced the decade's most popular superhero, Captain Marvel, in February of 1940 in *Whiz Comics* #2 (20). Captain Marvel quickly became a cultural icon, so much so that he began to outsell even Superman and take the title of the country's most popular superhero (21). His massive success, ultimately garnered an entire line of Marvels, before Fawcett Comics was forced to cease printing *Whiz Comics* in the early 1950s. Timely would themselves introduce another captain to the social consciousness, Captain America, to readers during this time as a means of redoubling on the war effort and bolstering American patriotism through a series of stories which pit Captain America against the Nazis (Petty et al. 3). So successful were these latest additions to the field that by the end of World War II, despite broadly declining comic books sales, the superhero genre continued to flourish.

## 1.3 1950s–1970s: The Silver Age of Comic Books

### 1.3.1 Decline of the Superhero Comic

Comic books faced an uphill battle during the postwar period as the superhero boom began to wane. By 1949, dozens of popular superheroes in the 30s and 40s ultimately had their titles cancelled, including those such as the Human Torch and Green Lantern (Lopes 23). (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman remained popular exceptions). Though comic books still remained a lucrative product, routinely outselling other print publications during the early 1950s, publishers' decision to bank all of their success on only one genre ultimately led to sharp sales declines when superheroes faded in popularity after their early boom (23). Superheroes simply weren't selling.

Two strategies came about to combat this unexpected decline: first, publishers began to revive other comic books genres as well as establish new ones to recapture their declining audience. This period marked the reintroduction of two highly successful titles geared toward male readers, both pulled from the pages of pulp magazines: the first were crime comic books, which enticed readers for its visceral illustrations of gore and violent themes. As Lopes notes, crime comics quickly flooded the market, going from only three titles in 1947 to a staggering thirty-eight just a single year later (24). Second to the crime genre came the introduction of another highly popular genre: horror. With the popular success of Entertaining Comics' *Crypt of Terror*, *Haunt of Fear*, and *Vault of Horror* titles, published in 1950, the market also made room for a sharp increase in horror comics to accompany that of the crime genre

(25).

The second strategy publishers used is closely tied to the third genre popular at the time. Publishing companies, while attempting to retain their current readers, also sought to entice *new* readers to pick up comic books from the shelves. This strategy was largely geared towards bringing female readers, who had made up a large portion of readership in earlier years. And with the introduction of the romance genre during the 1950s, female readership increased dramatically (23). While National became the dominating force of the superhero comics boom of the 30s and 40s, it would be Timely who bore the crown during the 40s and 50s thanks to their aggressive push into the romance market with comic books such as *Tessie the Typist* (1944) and *Millie the Model* (1955) (23). Its most popular romance title, *Young Romance* (1947), ultimately paved the way for the many others in the genre which would saturate the market shortly after. One notable example includes the romance spin-off *Archie's Girls, Betty and Veronica* in the 1950s, created to capitalize off of the massive success of MLJ's Archie line of comic books (23). (Thanks in part to both of these successful titles, MLJ would later rebrand as Archie Comics). The sustained success of these titles in the marketplace came in part due to Timely's ability to blend the romance with other genres, producing comic books in categories such as romance-drama, romance-western, and romance-comedy (24). The development of this "mixed-genre" comic book strategy during this period would later prove profoundly influential on the superhero genre which would later adopt the strategy in the genre's revival (25).

### 1.3.2 The Comics Code Authority

The introduction of crime, horror, and romance brought with it a surge of both readerships and profits for National, Timely, MLJ, and the many other publishers in the field who began to adjust to the waning superhero craze of the 1950s. Unfortunately, the rapid success of genres such as horror and crime ultimately coincided with rising public concern about waning values among American youth. This fervor, exacerbated by Cold War panic of anti-Americanism, sought to identify texts that were deemed particularly damaging to children (29). And, as the growing association of comics as children's literature began to surface, comic books unfortunately found itself at the center of investigations of anti-Americanism from teachers, parents, and other officials who found the violence, gore, sex, and death on their pages damaging to American youth (29).

The public outrage against comic books resulted from an unfortunate string of coincidences and bad timing which the medium comic book around concerns of "juvenile delinquency" among children (30). Such talks were largely stoked by psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, whose book *Seduction of the Innocent* continued to frame comics as a powerful influence on children and capable of persuading, perhaps even encouraging, violent, criminal, or otherwise dangerous behavior (42). Wertham's book describes his deep-seeded concerns with comics in exhaustive detail, leading to conclusions about how crime comic books in particular were capable of enticing readers into drug use among other such depravities:

> When one knows the social milieu of some of these children one realizes that the

> spirit that permits crime comic books to exist and flourish is what permits the possibility of childhood drug addiction. And whatever factors come into play in the cases that we have studied, the conclusion is inescapable that comics do their part in the education of these children, in softening them up for the temptation of taking drugs and letting themselves be drawn into participation in the illegal drug traffic. (Wertham 26)

So successful were Wertham's claims in *Seduction of the Innocent* that his book became a bestseller. And while it should be noted that Wertham's study, poorly conducted and now thoroughly shown to be more anecdotal and speculative than scientifically-based, his book struck a nerve with the American public and led to a series of congressional hearings at which Wertham himself testified (Lopes 27). In a matter of years, thanks to a slew of unforeseen and ill-timed advances in the field, as well as social panic surrounding American culture during the postwar period, comic books became the centerpiece for public moral outrage. Further, the shaky link between comics and delinquency, the congressional hearings, and the dubious claims made by Wertham ultimately created an audience which demanded regulation in the comics industry. The Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) was founded in 1947 to attempt to alleviate some of these fears by regulating the comic books industry via a Publishers Code which banned many lewd things from appearing in comic books; very few publishers showed their support and the organization dissolved shortly after its creation (46). But amid growing pressure thanks to congressional hearings, comic book burnings occurring around the country, and even greater social unrest, the ACMP's successor was

created in 1955, called the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) (54). Using the Publishers Code as a foundation, the CMAA created the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a more detailed version of the Publishers Code, to which many of the publishers who failed to self-regulate under the ACMP, ultimately yielded. Comic books approved by the CCA were given a seal of approval, indicating that they adhered to the rules set forth by the Comics Code, including many guidelines aimed specifically at the horror and crime genres:

> [from *Code for Editorial Matter: General Standards - Part A*] 2. No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime, with the exception of those crimes that are so far-fetched or pseudo-scientific that no would-be lawbreaker could reasonably duplicate.
>
> [from *Code for Editorial Matter: General Standards - Part B*] 1. No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title. These words may be used judiciously in the body of the magazine.
>
> [from *Code for Editorial Matter: Marriage and Sex*] 2. Illicit sex relations are not to be portrayed and sexual abnormalities are unacceptable. (Comics Magazine Association of America)

The introduction of the CCA brought with it an almost immediate decline in comics sales of the industry's most successful titles (Lopes 56). Entertaining Comics, pioneers of the horror genre, were struck so severely by the Code that it ceased production on all but

one of its titles, *Mad*, which only survived after being retooled as a humor title (ironically leading to one of the most successful comics in history). Other publishing companies were not as lucky. The number of comic books approved by the Code was so limited and sales decline was so rapid that by 1958, of the twenty-nine publishers overseen by the CMAA since its inception, only five remained in business (57). And while other factors led to the decline in comic book readership—particularly the mass market attraction of television in the mid 1950s—it would be the Comics Code Authority that served to nearly eradicate the comics industry as a whole.

### 1.3.3 Rebirth of the Superhero Genre

Only a handful of publishing companies survived the CCA era. Amid intense financial pressure to galvanize sales for comic books once more, the early 60s saw many companies return to the superhero genre after its hiatus during the two decades prior (63). Further, the 60s marked a large-scale industry transition, in which the older generations that steered comics through its Golden Age made way for the younger generation that would begin to take over and subsequently revitalize the industry. Prior to this historical moment, comic books were seen as mass-market products and its publishers were more focused on quantity over quality, often quickly cycling through issues to maintain a high production volume. This changed with the newer generation of comic book writers and artists, who grew up reading comics and appreciated the genre's aesthetic and narrative choices being done in the genre. Whereas the old guard, largely made up of non-educated individuals who viewed comic

book production as nothing more than a means to an end, the younger, college-educated generation began to view comic books as an artistic craft in and of itself (62). This change in thinking about comic books was partly fueled by the rise of another subculture in comics of the 1960s: the underground "comix" movement (62). This movement is marked by a drastic change in landscape with regard to how comic books were perceived as a cultural product:

> Underground comix artists were the first comic book artists to claim principles of autonomy from dominant commercial forces. They were the first comic book artists also to approach this art form as a medium of authentic self-expression. (62)

It became clear that everything about comic books—from their aesthetic quality to their production to their perception—began to change in the 1960s thanks to advancements heralded by this newer generations of writers, artists, and publishers. Even the target audience for comics began to change: as growing emphasis on comic books' maturity arose, many popular publishers began to cater less to children and adolescents and more to teenagers and college-aged readers, many of whom themselves matured alongside the very comic books they read. With Dell Publishing ultimately shifting away from its failing comic books business and towards television (abandoning comics altogether in 1973), the two major publishers of superhero comics—National Comics and Timely Comics (rebranded as Atlas Comics)—consolidated control over the genre under their new leadership (61). National survived the

Comics Code Authority era with most of its popular titles unscathed, (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman), and remained the industry frontrunner during the 1960s through those alone (63). But the successful reintroduction of its other titles ultimately led to even greater success and ushered in the new Silver Age of Comics.

Many scholars credit the revitalization of the superhero genre to the work being done by then National editor, Julius Schwartz. Prior to being hired by National, Schwartz was employed as an agent for such prominent science fiction authors as Ray Bradbury, Stanley G. Weinbaum, and H.P. Lovecraft (Petty et al. 6). When National sought to reintroduce the superhero comic book to the public, Schwartz did so by adopting the mixed-genre strategy popularized by Atlas in the romance genre. It was Schwartz who began to fold elements of science fiction into the superhero genre (6). Doing so allowed for an increased maturation of the titles published under Schwartz's watch, as many writers used the tools of science fiction to better explore the origin stories of their characters, base their superpowers in the language of science and technology, and make National's superheroes more relatable for their growing audience (Lopes 63).

This revitalization of superheroes—indeed, the entire Silver Age—began in 1958, when Schwartz debuted an all-new Flash, Barry Allen, in *Showcase* #4 (Petty et al. 6). The new Flash became an instant financial success and greenlit the reintroduction of many of National's other comic book heroes in subsequent years. 1959 saw the introduction of the "Silver Age" Green Lantern, followed by popular mainstays Aquaman, The Atom, and Hawkman a year later (Lopes 63). Schwartz took similar measures to reboot National's superhero

ensemble with *The Brave and the Bold* #28, in which the Justice Society of America returned as the Justice League of America, an hero ensemble of many veteran figures alongside the newly created Martian Manhunter (63). Such aggressive franchising saw National revive dozens of its heroes for the Silver Age, and showed no signs of slowing as it further and further encapsulated the market.

Not soon after National's superhero renaissance took hold, Atlas Comics began to rethink its own strategy. Prior to the 1960s, Atlas' superhero comic books played second fiddle to its romance comics, which drew in considerably more money and readership. But the 1960s saw Atlas embrace the "superhero strategy" so aggressively that it became known primarily as a superhero comic book publisher by the end of the decade (64). Where National Comics has Julius Schwartz to thank for revitalizing its Silver Age heroes for a growing audience, Atlas's creative pivot into the superhero genre is attributed to legendary writer Stan Lee, who with artist Jack Kirby created dozens of comic book characters to compete with National (64). Seeing the success of the Justice League of America, Lee and Kirby created Atlas's own team of superheroes, the Fantastic Four, who debuted in November of 1961 (Petty et al. 7). 1962 saw the introduction of The Incredible Hulk, Ant-Man, Thor, and Spider-Man, all of whom quickly received their own titles (Lopes 64). The Justice League of America's most direct parallel, the Avengers, were introduced a year later, along with popular hero Iron Man (64). More than merely establishing superheroes, however, Lee greatly impacted the ways in which publishers approached superheroes by making them, in a sense, more human:

> Marvel introduced imperfect characters who were vain, malcontent, misunder-

> stood, or confused. Stan Lee told The New York Times in 1971 that in those early years he wanted to do something different with the superhero genre. "I said, 'Let's let them not always get along well; let's let them have arguments. Let's make them talk like real people and react like real people.'" (64)

In creating characters that were flawed, relatable, and less idyllic than their predecessor, Lee would lay the foundation for a new kind of hero mythology that would later reshape the foundation of the industry as a whole.

### 1.3.4 Alternate Realities and Parallel Earths

The superhero renaissance of the Silver Age brought with it a renewed social, commercial, and financial interest in the heroes of old. Following the success of Schwartz' revitalized Flash in *Showcase* #4, many more of National's older characters were given new life; further, the Silver Age saw the creation of completely original characters, many of whom (like Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) still headline titles to this day. Such a sustained rise in superhero comic books in America during this period, despite their decline during the 1950s, further solidified American comic books' reputation as an incubator for the superhero mythos that would come to dominate the field in terms of recognition and scope. Needless to say, the creative output spearheaded by both National and Atlas Comics came to permanently redefine the genre. Yet such innovative advancements were not the only thing new to the industry—complications began to arise as well.

While the success of Schwartz's superhero revival brought with it updated versions of its most iconic characters for a younger audience, longstanding readers remained curious about the old Golden Age heroes which were effectively deemed non-canonical with the introduction of their newer counterparts. How did their veteran heroes function within the world of their successors? How did their stories function with respect to what was currently being printed? Questions such as these began to arise, ultimately leading to system in which National's early material began to slowly come into contact—and conflict—with its current publishing line. It quickly became clear that fans needed a way to begin to organize the doubling universe of characters and their stories within the universe itself; further, writers and authors needed a way to address contradictions and narrative inconsistencies which inevitably arose as many Silver Age characters began to stand in contrast with their Golden Age counterparts.

In what would begin to fundamentally change the structure of comic book narratology at National and in the wider comics industry, fan concerns regarding the incongruities between the Golden and Silver Age heroes were addressed with the publication of the landmark issue *The Flash* #123 (Craft 111). Its story, "Flash of Two Worlds!," involved the newly-rebooted Silver Age Flash (Barry Allen) accidentally visiting Keystone City, home to the older Golden Age Flash (Jay Garrick). Through its plot, the story retroactively established that Jay Garrick, along with all of his Golden Age compatriots, were actually living on a separate, parallel Earth, dubbed Earth-Two; The Earth on which the heroes and stories of the Silver Age existed was later given the title Earth-One (116). "Flash of Two Worlds!" saw National employ a new narrative strategy which laid the groundwork for what we now define

as a Multiverse: a series of interconnected, parallel realities on which multiple characters, stories, and history can operate concurrently. This Multiverse also gave National a way of reviving its popular Golden Age heroes without further infringing on the exploits of their contemporary counterparts.

The critical and financial success of *The Flash* #123 drove National to quickly take similar measures for the rest of its collective canon. Throughout the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, National began to compete with its primary rival, Atlas Comics, not simply by creating its own superheroes but also through strategic acquisitions of intellectual property owned by other comic books publishers who did not survive the comic books bust following the creation of the Comics Code. Such purchases included notable characters such as Captain Marvel (previously owned by Fawcett Comics), Blue Beetle (Charlton Comics), and Plastic Man (Quality Comics), along with creative control over the many stories in which they appeared (Murdough 69). Though such acquisitions meant that National had a larger roster of characters to work with, it also meant that they became the proprietor for a handful of narrative universes of which they had no part in writing. Thus National approached these new universes the same way it had once approached its own: Fawcett Comics publications were said to have taken place on Earth-S; Charlton Comics on Earth-Four; and Quality Comics on Earth-Quality (69). National would even establish an Earth-Prime, upon which National was a publishing company and superheroes only appear in fiction (79).

### 1.3.5 Crisis for a Crisis

National's strategy to curtail its expanding Multiverse provided temporary relief to its readers, but struggles to keep its stories in check became apparent. As the company entered into its 43rd year, rebranding itself as DC Comics in 1977, a dizzying 90 earths existed in the collective DC Multiverse, home to its many acquisitions, alternate realities, "what-if" scenarios, and other such ventures that stood separate from its main continuity on Earth-One. The 1970s saw the DC's barrier of entry rise extraordinary for even the most diligent readers; newer readers had little to no hope of finding a point of entry into the many stories overseen by DC. Its convoluted structure, alongside growing competition from Atlas Comics (who rebranded as Marvel Comics in 1961 amid the success of their growing superhero roster) saw readership decline in favor of another universe equally saturated with superheroes, but better tailored for entry by new readers. It quickly became clear that its universe no longer needed to be organized—it needed to be fixed. Thus, in 1984, DC hired writer Marv Wolfman and artist George Pérez (popular in the DC universe for their work on The New Teen Titans) to construct a story which would effectively reboot the DC Multiverse with a tabula rasa that would allow the company to simplify its line-up, its history, and its narrative strategy. The story, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, began its publication that same year; its first issue released in April of 1985 and its galactic battle between good and evil (and catastrophic results) have remained influential to comic book storytelling and has shaped how comics are written, published, and canonized to this day.

# Chapter 2

# The Rhetoric of Reclamation

## 2.1 Introduction

Two parallel scenes bookend the bulk of *Crisis on Infinite Earth*'s ambitious crossover event. The first is its opening scene, a brief three-panel section meant to provide an in-text basis for the creation of the Multiverse in which DC's comic books operate. With each successive panel, the physical space of DC's Multiverse literally expands on the page as a single, dense origin point bursts in a chaos of gases and particles that condense into the many earths present in the text. The weight of this creation myth is further heightened through the use of striking biblical parlance (figure 2.1). The second scene, involving the birth of DC's new universe, is illustrated to similar effect (figure 2.2).

These two moments, held at the birth of two very different realities, highlight the sheer


Figure 2.1: Creation of the pre-*Crisis* Multiverse. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 11.

grandiose nature of the realities in which *Crisis on Infinite Earths* operates. By including the near mythic beginnings for each of DC's universes—providing readers their origin stories—author Marv Wolfman begins to introduce the scope of events which *Crisis on Infinite Earths* will address.

The panel that follows figure 2.1 concludes with a caption of particular interest: "a Multiverse that should have been one, became many," Wolfman writes, backdropped by an overlapping set of Earths stretching infinitely across the page (Wolfman and Pérez 11). As previously mentioned, this is the state of the Multiverse which *Crisis* was written to address and in which which readers, for decades, operated in: a tapestry of parallel Earths, created with the intent to bring order to DC's narratological strategy, which ultimately resulted in an unwieldy creation of contradictory characters, stories, and events. Yet through this


Figure 2.2: Creation of the post-*Crisis* universe. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 298.

very caption, Wolfman hints at a solution to address DC's issue of its own messy narrative strategy: using the in-text narrative tools as a means of addressing the out-of-text issue of DC's complicated publishing strategy. The careful use of his auxiliary verb choice—a Multiverse that *should have been* one—hints at a larger problem concerning not only DCs narrative structure, but its method of establishing canon in its entirety. Consequently, Wolfman's *Crisis* presents readers with not one villain, but two: the first is the deadly Anti-Monitor, bent on reshaping the universe is his image; the second, curiously, is the meta-narrative governing the text itself.

Wolfman's method of translating the corporate exigencies of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* into narrative ones is a strategy that will be central to this chapter of my thesis. DC by no means needed to commission, market, and produce an in-universe explanation for the radical

change in narratological strategy that would follow *Crisis*, as Adam Murdough succinctly notes:

> If the company had wanted to blithely, summarily abandon the past as if it had never been—to terminal the old DC Universe continuity, wrapping up old storylines and starting from scratch, without the textual mediation of a "gimmick" like *Crisis on Infinite Earths* to mark the transition from old fictional reality to new—the option was open to them. (Murdough 9)

So what motivated DC to address its Multiverse problem through stories which comprise the Multiverse itself? For one thing, such a strategy is an effective way to represent the sheer scale of the problem—one which involves both the narrative within the universe and the meta-narrative surrounding it. Further, as Murdough notes, confronting the issues via a superhero story itself eases readers' transition from one narrative era to the next, especially for those readers whose favorite characters perished during the struggle (44). Thus DC's strategy to simplify not only its continuity but also its publishing strategy through the same text became an effective means of demonstrating the urgency of the task, both as a corporate business and a storyteller, while also providing readers a space in which they could process and grieve the many hardships that await their favorite superheroes among *Crisis on Infinite Earth*'s 300-plus pages.

Unsurprisingly, the story of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* concerns the events which lead DC Comics from its pre-*Crisis* state to its post-*Crisis* state. After a wave of antimatter begins

to consume the many earths of the Multiverse, the hero known as the Monitor, overseer of the Multiverse itself, recruits the Multiverse's greatest heroes (including Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, and many others) to prevent the destruction of the remaining earths and thwart the Monitor's evil counterpart, the Anti-Monitor, from taking control of the universe. The heroes ultimately emerge victorious, but at a steep cost: dozens of earths and countless inhabitants are killed by the Anti-Monitor, including many notable heroes, and the Multiverse which all of the survivors once called home is destroyed and rebooted into a new universe in which they must start new lives. Readers are resigned to a similar fate, as they, like their beloved characters, must navigate the new post-*Crisis* universe.

It is this applied mythos—this conversion of DC's publication concerns into narrative ones—that the bulk of this chapter will address. Though *Crisis* made sweeping changes to its continuity to better streamline for a younger generation of readers, its resulting singular, cohesive, easy-to-navigate universe is ultimately created not by moving the narrative forward but by returning it to its past. The countless earths and its denizens destroyed by the Anti-Monitor reflect, in part, DC's decision to better uphold their most popular, most noteworthy (and most profitable) heroes at the expense of those fringe characters and character iterations which I argue push the genre into new (if contradictory) directions. By portraying the Multiverse as a disease needing to be cured, Wolfman successfully pits readers not only against the villainous Anti-Monitor, but against the concept of a Multiverse itself. Unfortunately, in Wolfman's desire to create a more progressive foundation for DC's continuity came a narrative misstep which ultimately resulted in the contrary.

## 2.2 The Malignant Multiverse

In her research on the mental models employed by readers to visualize and organize fictional worlds, Karin Kukkonen sheds light into how such processes tend to work only in limited capacity:

> Cognitive-psychological research on counterfactual thinking and mental models shows that in general only a very limited set of counterfactual options is kept in mind. (Kukkonen 42)

Though she goes on to argue that superhero comic books' "endless continuity" tend to preclude such limited mental model ranges, the meta-narrative "crisis" underpinning *Crisis on Infinite Earths* suggests that comic book readers, even those deeply invested within the worlds to which they frequently return, have their limits (Wolfman and Pérez 6). Prior to the events in Crisis, DC operated under the assumption that such mental-work being conducted by their consumers was one easy to navigate, selectively pursue, or altogether ignore. Further, such a work was encouraged by the company, who further sought to garner longtime reader interest through such tightly-woven interconnectivity. However, DC's desire to consolidate its own narrative canon resulted in the unintended consequence of a ballooning fictional universe which required greater amounts of maintenance as more heroes filled in its empty spaces.

Thus the villain to which the oft-quoted catchphrase of the text often assigns—"worlds will live. . . worlds will die. . . the DC universe will never be the same!"—was not so much the

monstrous Anti-Monitor and his planet-eating antimatter wave as it was the "crisis" of an ever-complicating Multiverse (*DC Sampler* #3). Wolfman capitalizes on this early in the text by rhetorically situating the ontological space of the DC Multiverse itself as a malignant cosmic force, whose unintended existence incites the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* itself. Returning to the creation myth that opens the text, a key phrase encapsulates the strategy Wolfman uses to this rhetorical effect: the pre-*Crisis* timeline is "a Multiverse that *should have been* one," [my emphasis] a phrase that incites readers to view the Multiverse as an aberration from its outset (11).

Such a rhetorical move is in part a recognition on behalf of DC Comics that its gordian knot of a narrative universe needed fixing; it is also in part an admission that such complications have led to confusion both within the boundaries of the DC universe as well as in the network of product distribution, licensing deals, in-print publications, and copyright struggles that surround it. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* mythologizes[1] many of those ailments and translates them into graphical cues within the text itself, addressing the very corporate problem of the Multiverse in the language of comics. The story opens with hooded figure Pariah witnessing the destruction of two separate Earths. Such cosmic chaos prompts the Monitor, overseer of the Multiverse, to recruit a team of the Multiverse's most notable superheroes (primarily those from Earth-One and Earth-Two) to save what remaining Earths there are before a wave of antimatter sweeps across the cosmos consuming all in sight. As

[1]Here I use "myth" less in its classical sense and more along similar lines to Murdough: that is, a mediating area in which stories and characters can interact with their own established contexts. Thus *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, instead of merely documenting the events of the universe from the outside in becomes a part of the universe, a part of the myth, in and of itself.

he explains the state of the Multiverse to his comrades, the Monitor informs the heroes that the central cause of the universe's instability is its own existence; since "each world [of the Multiverse is] weaker than the whole it was meant to be," the many Earths central to the Multiverse are in greater threat of the Anti-Monitor's antimatter wave and its ability to destroy entire universes (114). Such details reverberate throughout the heart of the Multiverse, whose many cataclysmic reactions to the antimatter wave—environmental disasters, temporal ruptures, and a history in flux, later discussed—are a direct result of a Multiverse never meant to be.

Of interest in reading the Multiverse as malignant is its universality. For all intents and purposes, the few decades prior to the writing of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* were focused centrally on Earth-1, home to the many Silver Age heroes published at the time. So why was Earth-1, DC's primary world, subject to the same rhetoric of ailment as all of its counterfactuals? Why couldn't Crisis merely destroy all of the other earths, leaving Earth-1 intact? One possible answer might be in Kukkonen's take on the ways in which DC previously opted to process its many counterfactual realities:

> ...superhero comics...generally do not posit any single storyworld as the baseline reality or textual actual world. Rather, these comics develop mutually incompatible counterfactual versions of their storyworld. (Kukkonen 48)

Should this be the case, the process of simply pruning away its most fringe world was not possible in a system in which all possibilities are held as equals and no one world is

prioritized (at least narratively) over any other. Treated as equal, no one part of the original universe could be maintained as it was all part of a compromise system which inevitably led to its own downfall. This sentiment is clearly expressed as the events of Crisis continue to unfold: as more earths are consumed by the antimatter wave, the vibrational barriers between the remaining few earths begin to weaken, and time folds in on itself. What results is an overlaid set of harrowing scenes in which the remaining heroes and villains watch in awe as separate moments in history slowly begin to meet in chaotic fusion (figure 2.3).

This panel serves as a microcosm of the effects of the Anti-Monitor's plan to control the universe: dinosaurs roam the streets of New York, submarines patrol near sailing ships, and biplanes share the same air space as space crafts. Five decades of DC's own continuity begin to share the same narrative space, both raising the urgency of the situation and visually manifesting the sheer scope of events with which readers are presented in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and which *Crisis* itself must navigate to its ultimate end (Authers 74). As the Anti-Monitor grows in strength, and the positive matter in the Multiverse is swept away, the text makes clear that the solution is to merge what remaining earths there are, thus resetting the universe into a single timeline. Again the text seems to corroborate the idea that the Anti-Monitor serves as metaphor for the Multiverse itself, and his defeat ultimately means a defeat of the entirety of the Multiverse.

During the battle, Harbinger notes that the accidental creation of the Multiverse was a direct result of a science experiment gone horribly awry. At the dawn of time, a scientist eager to witness the origins of the universe unwittingly fractured the universe infinitely,


Figure 2.3: Time collapses in on itself. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 127.

resulting in the creation of both the Multiverse and the antimatter universe that now seeks to consume them (figure 2.4):

Again and again *Crisis on Infinite Earths* makes an antagonist out of its own narrative precedence to better argue its case for a complete and total revamping of its universe which

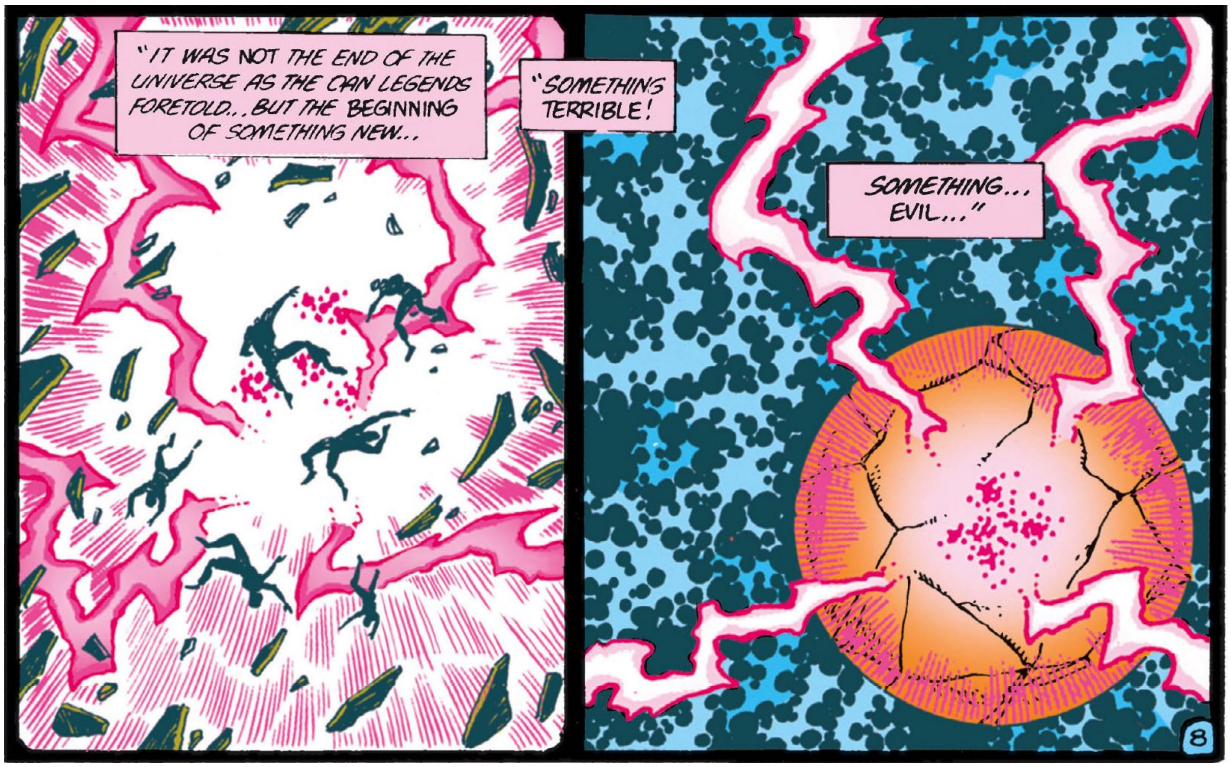



Figure 2.4: The Birth of something evil. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 182.

is fashioned at the end of the text. In so many words, Wolfman argues that through the text the narrative Multiverse is an inherently unstable (albeit inevitable) structure, ill-equipped to support the weight of a patchwork of overlapping, interconnected stories without buckling. By positioning the Multiverse itself as just as much of an antagonist as the one illustrated in the text, Wolfman seems to reposition the total destruction of the Multiverse as a *positive* outcome in the heroes' battle against the Anti-Monitor. Thus, Wolfman's solution—a battle at the dawn of the time which destroys the Anti-Monitor and the Multiverse—reads more like a means of *imposing* order than it does further dismantling it. However, in doing so, Wolfman's ambition, similar to those of the scientists responsible for the Multiverse itself, yields an unintended consequence in the form of a rigid status quo which doesn't so much

simplify the universe as it does sanitize it of its innovative ideas.

## 2.3 A Distaste for Possibilities

As previously stated, the solution with which Wolfman concludes *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is one with unforeseen consequences akin to those that inaugurate the text itself. In repeatedly fixating on the problems of the Multiverse's many excesses, *Crisis* treats its own sprawling history as disease needing to be cured, drawing a rigid boundary between its canonical and non-canonical features. To little surprise, DC's canonical continuity—the events which follow *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in the post-*Crisis* timeline—are composed primarily of the popular Silver Age characters that are the essential lifeblood of DC Comics: Superman, Batman, Green Lantern among many others make up the surviving members of the cataclysmic reshaping of the DC universe. Some favorable iterations of DC's Golden Age too remain, including Superman of Earth-Two, Wonder Woman of Earth-Two, and Superboy of Earth Prime (though Superman and Superboy are later retconned out of existence).

But the number of survivors following *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is severely overshadowed by those that were not so lucky. Countless characters and worlds were wiped from existence by the antimatter wave—thus wiped from the narrative canon—including many characters that were themselves iterations of DC's most popular cast. While a good deal of non-iterative characters too are affected by the events of *Crisis*, those which remain following its events—its many mainstream Silver and Golden Age heroes—reflect the very return to

status quo which Wolfman reaffirms. Gone are characters like Ultraman of Earth-Three, the supervillain counterpart to Superman. Gone are many of the sidekick characters, like Aquagirl, who further fleshed out DC's many franchises. And even more severely, gone are many popular Silver Age characters like Flash and Wonder Woman (whose questionable deaths will be further discussed in a later chapter). By establishing a more "conservative reading strategy" through which DC can now focus on its most successful characters, the post-*Crisis* timeline upholds a more traditional mindset towards narrative continuity, barring entry to counterfactuals that, while pushing characters into new creative directions, may lead to another unchecked Multiverse (and in turn another crisis) (Murdough 54). DC's decision to simplify its continuity strategy through *Crisis on Infinite Earths* inadvertently rids the canon of many of the stories which pushed its boundaries, thanks to the many teams of creatives reimagining original characters in innovative ways—even if those ways were contrary to pre-established canon. But with *Crisis* came a more aggressively-mandated, more conservative standpoint for how the canon should operate, what was permitted within its borders, and what the genre positioned as canon relative to the many stories that were published from the 1980s onward.

# Chapter 3

# An Intersecting Past and Present

## 3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I engaged with the narratological strategies of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* to investigate how it appeals to the conservative milieu enveloping the superhero genre at the story level. However, the concerns about comics' conservatism are not shouldered by narrative alone. This chapter will sidestep narrative issues to better investigate how such appeals can also be examined through an examination of history. History plays a crucial role in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*—in fact, *Crisis*'s relationship with its own history, both within and without the text, remains central to its apocalyptic events and provides the basis for the text's very production.

On its surface, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is a text not so much seeking to acknowledge

and reform its history as it is attempting to substantially alter it. As previously noted, such sweeping alteration directly resulted from the unsustainable canon of the DC Multiverse, beginning with its first fracture in "Flash of Two Worlds!" and concluding with a narrative superstructure consisting of over ninety Earths, countless heroes, and many alternate universes which, left unchecked, would have certainly continued to splinter. It comes as no surprise, then, to hear Andrew Friedenthal refer to Crisis as "in many ways the ultimate retcon"—a text which null–and–voided not just an entire canon, but entire histories, story arcs, and in some cases, entire characters (Friedenthal 9). As such, a thorough analysis of the underlying conservatism in this text must bear witness to, perhaps unavoidably, the history which led to its creation and the history it seeks to revise. This chapter will focus on the latter.

*Crisis* provides a strong example of comics' fluctuating relationship with its own history. On one hand, *Crisis* is seemingly designed to push past its history by abandoning precedence established in the Golden and Silver Ages to create an entry point for readers of the Bronze Age who had neither the experience nor the time to sift through DC's decades of publications. On the other, in its attempt to circumvent its history—largely by giving in-universe permission to ignore it entirely—the "history" which arises after the events of *Crisis* remains largely influenced by the heroes and stories that came prior to it. Thus its history was not so much abandoned, or reinvented, as it was simply reset. This chapter will examine the relationship between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and its history. Of particular interest will be how nostalgia plays a role in how history is revised and the limitations of

such history. Further, I will argue that despite the radical changes to the form happening during the Silver Age, the history which results after the events of Crisis is still beholden to historic precedence while not necessarily beholder to narrative precedence. Finally, I will discuss how the characters themselves learn to cope with their new history, and how such rhetorical strategies again index a traditional history favorable to those uniquely established in the prior Multiverse.

## 3.2 Historicity in the post-*Crisis* Era

By design, my chapter discussing the narrative strategies in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* largely focused on the pre-*Crisis* universe—the state of affairs which Crisis itself was designed to confront. Similarly, this chapter will mostly be restricted to the DC canon after its rebirth into a single, shared universe. What this results in, however, is a history permanently divided in two, separating the events of the prior Multiverse from those of the then current universe. Where does the historical canon begin? Where does it end? What is the historical moment separating the two? And how must readers now reconcile two very different histories? Indeed, for all its narrative resolutions, *Crisis* raises more questions than it answers when it comes to its history.

And as the text makes evident, such investigations into the historicity of the DC universe were not conducted by readers alone. *Crisis* concludes with two separate moments: the creation of DC's new universe, and the defeat of the Anti-Monitor and his reign of terror on

the cosmos. In fittingly spectacular fashion, both of these events occur at the proverbial dawn of time, where the Anti-Monitor has fled to change the course of all of history. To better pose a threat against the Anti-Monitor, the remaining heroes and villains of what few Earths still exist band together and themselves travel to the very beginning of the Multiverse to save the universe, using two strategies: the heroes will confront the Anti-Monitor himself; the villains will return to the Multiverse's first planet, Oa, to stop the scientist Krona from conducting the experiment that shattered the would-be universe and birthed the Anti-Monitor in the first place. Needless to say, the stakes of such a venture are incalculable, further heightened by the scale of the threat which Pérez details in cosmic proportions (figure 3.1).

Despite the threat, however, the Anti-Monitor is defeated by Superman of Earth-Two (for who but the father of the Golden Age could handle such a mythic task?) while the heroes succeed in dismantling the Multiverse by destroying it at the dawn of creation and inevitably replacing it with a new, singular universe that rises phoenix-like from its ashes.

It is here I argue that the "Crisis" of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* effectively ends, not to mention the "infinite Earths" on which the story is founded. Also a new crisis is born: one in which two seemingly incompatible histories must be reconciled. And, much like what follows any period of crisis or trauma, it is in the final issue of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, titled "Aftershock," where both our heroes begin the process of reconciliation, textualized through the rhetoric of historicity.

## 3.3 "Aftershock" and Reconciliation

As Friedenthal notes, the ultimate goal of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was not simply to streamline the DC Multiverse but to establish a shared universe (a strategy borrowed from Atlas Comics) in which its titles existed on the same narrative plane and could be better regulated

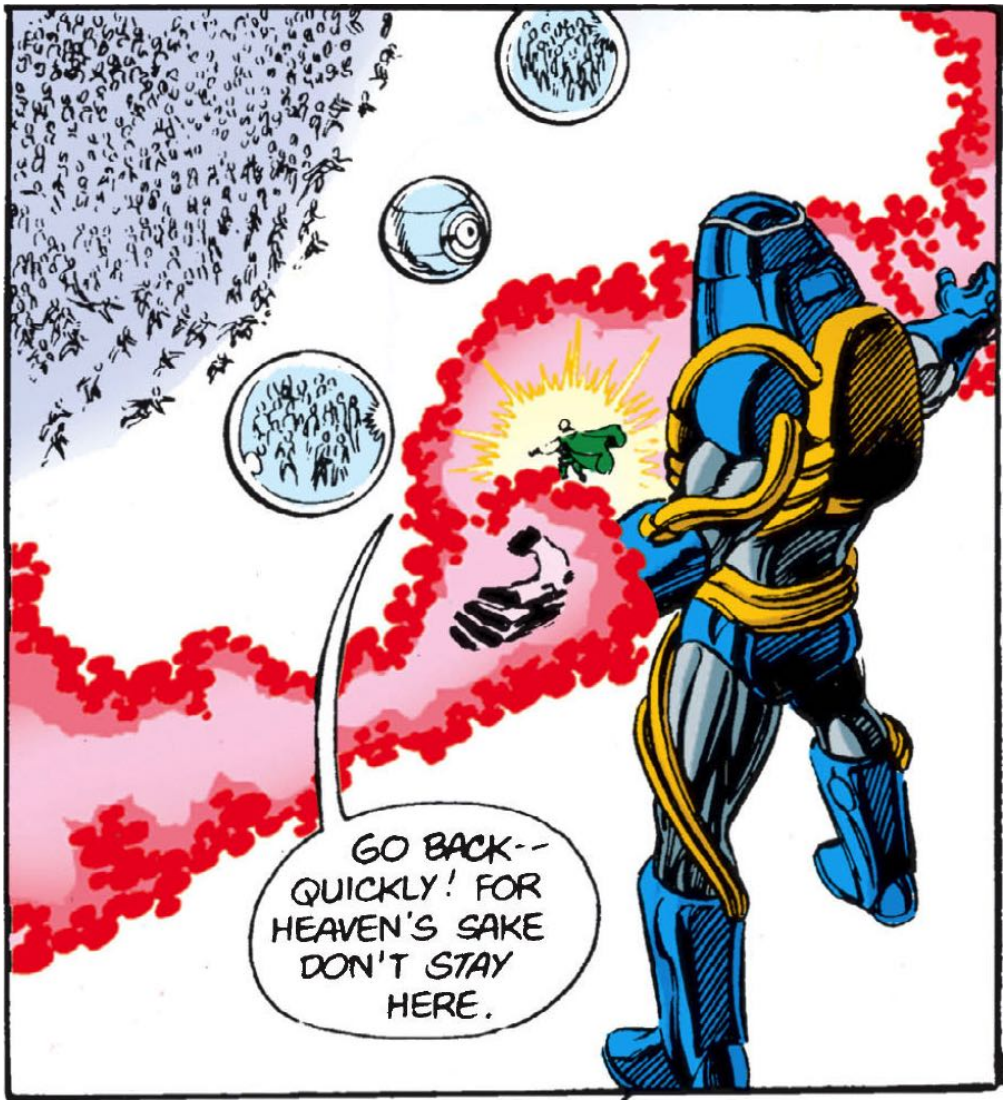



Figure 3.1: The characters enter the endgame. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 279.

than they had been in years prior (9). As a result, DC assumed the role of the fictitious Monitor on its growing franchise, establishing hard limits as to what existed within its borders (its canonical texts) from what lies without (its non-canonical texts). The revised history which lies in "Aftershock" showcases those results, as the superheroes (alongside the readers) must come to terms with the new history in which they now operate. For the many heroes, this canon is made manifest by what is remembered in the new shared Earth and what, narratively, is omitted. (readers, unfortunately, did not get the same luxury of merely "forgetting" what canon existed prior to Crisis).

"Aftershock" begins with Earth-Two Superman awaking on what he believes to be his home planet from a troubling dream (figure 3.2). But a series of disorienting scenes hint that all is not what it seems: The room in which he awakes has undergone a radical redecoration; on the street, the golden Daily Planet sign looms overhead (though on Earth-Two, the newspaper company is called the Daily Star); Central City (home of Earth-One Flash) and Keystone City (home of Earth-Two flash) have been merged; and most disorienting of all, the citizens with whom they come to interact in the successive pages seem to have forgotten heroes from Earth-Two, as well as some from Earth-One. Through a quick succession of details lasting no longer than three pages, Wolfman weans readers into the startling realization that this is neither Earth-One nor Earth-Two, nor any other Earth previously known; this is a new Earth entirely. These details all come to a head when the the two Superman and the two Flash make a startling revelation as they attempt to escort Superman back to Earth-Two (figure 3.3).

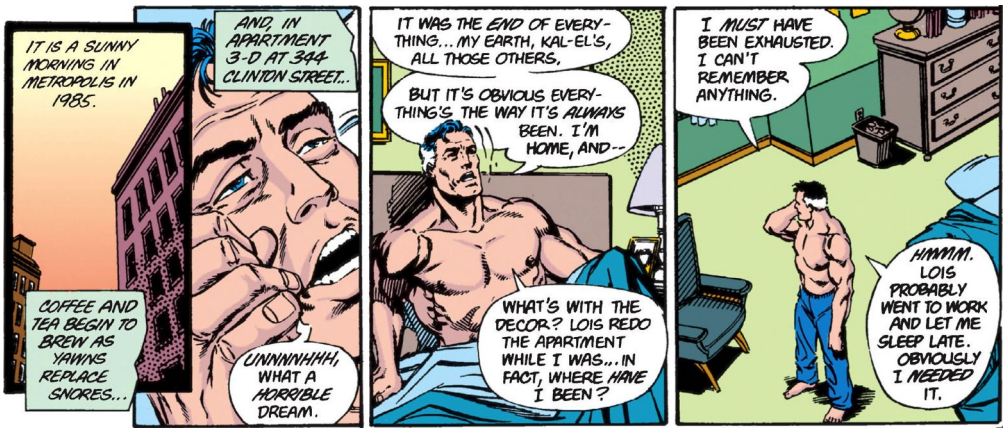



Figure 3.2: A strange new world. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 299.

The panel's art style pays homage to vibrant purples, yellows, and blacks used in Pérez's depiction of the two universes being born, but with a chilling deviation. Where once stood an infinitude bursting with possibility now stands empty, starless, planet-less space surrounding the cosmic treadmill used to travel between dimensions. The Multiverse is no more. And, as a fitting coda to the now grand movement that was the central crisis to the piece, their return to the "one Earth...one universe!" that remains breaks the treadmill beyond repair (a clever narrative move; in breaking the treadmill, Wolfman assures us that the point of no return has been reached) (Wolfman and Pérez 305).

The remainder of the epilogue serves to indoctrinate the surviving heroes into the brave new world in which they now live. Bringing the remaining heroes together, Harbinger—powers conveniently restored at the dawn of time—begins to explain that this new Earth, this new universe, is one in which "the Multiverse never existed" and the Earth that persists is one in which history was not altered, as is the case with many of its previous parallels (311). The Earth that now exists is one in which America won the Revolutionary War


Figure 3.3: Discovery of an empty universe. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 304.

(unlike Earth-Six), Germany lost World War II (Earth-X), and all other major points in history were conveniently aligned to the history of DC's readership, even with superhero interference. This new history also extends to the parahistorical level as well, detailed in two striking examples provided by Harbinger:

> A single planet Krypton exploded and sent forth a single rocket. Inside was young Kal-El. His world was the sole Krypton to survive the rebirth. On Earth,

> a prominent doctor in Gotham City was walking with his family...when out of the dark shadows...came death. On that night Batman was born. One Batman...only one. (312)

Harbinger's constant use of the word "only" begins to reflect in the DC canon something essential to the characters it established. There is only one Batman, one Superman, one Wonder Woman, and one Flash, Harbinger notes—so what does that say about that "one" version? Certainly there were confused looks as multiple versions of characters listened to Harbinger's tale. But what that language ultimately specifies is what these characters *aren't* more than what they are. And what they *aren't* are largely many of the creative changes of the late Silver Age which radically reshaped their abilities, backstories, and histories. Such a practice reflects the genre's conservatism by essentially retconning many of the changes made to these characters during the Silver Age to more closely align them to their Golden Age counterparts. A striking example of this retconing process presents itself via Supergirl, created during the Silver Age of Comics, whose death rewrites Superman as the sole survivor of Krypton—a piece of canon established during the Golden Age. Other such character deaths, including that of the Silver Age Wonder Woman, effectively acknowledge that many of the revisions which Wolfman employs are underpinned by a nostalgic retreat into characterizations from Golden Age. Perhaps this was merely an inevitable return to form often rooted in a nostalgia for an idealized post-War America, which seems more or less simpler than contemporary times. Perhaps Wolfman's decision to further retreat into Golden Age mandates was a way of distancing DC's canon from the moral ambiguity, violence, gore,

and other such changes which drew ire from concerned parents and led to the creation of the Comics Code and near extinction of the genre. Regardless of its exigence, such a move reflects the eagerness of *Crisis* to return to a prior historical state. Whether it be through the re-establishing of characters, or the resetting of stories, such a return is near inevitable in a genre fixated on a nostalgic view of its characters and their histories.

## 3.4 Forgetting the Past

This new history in which the heroes now find themselves begins to resemble, at least in part, the one that preceded it. Suffice to say that the heroes begin to act out the growing desires of the audience as they navigate this new history, one which delegitimized all that came before it and essentially established a conceptual barrier between the pre- and post-*Crisis* universes (Murdough 113). This barrier is complicated, however, by those heroes who, thanks to being quite literally outside of time during its rebirth, still recall their old homes, memories, and stories. Stricken at the grief of their countless losses, along with the realization that their worlds have radically changed and, to many, they don't even exist, many heroes struggle to move on in this world. In one startling moment, Earth-One Superman offers advice to Earth-Two Superman about how to handle such a daring predicament: as Earth-Two Superman mourns the loss of his reality, his counterpart assures him that "it will take time to forget" (Wolfman and Pérez 318). Through Superman, Wolfman's answer to the question hanging over the post-*Crisis* universe (how do we, as readers, move on?) emerges: one must let go

of the past, forget it, and move forward. Certainly such a task would prove challenging for even a superhero, as is the case with the Huntress, who has no home, no family, and who never existed in the first place. For readers fully entrenched in DC's history, however, this may prove impossible. Wolfman attempts to mitigate this stress on three fronts: first, as stated previously, much of the new post-*Crisis* history Wolfman establishes is not entirely new—rather, it is cherry-picked from what has come prior (thus maintaining the nostalgic, traditionalist milieu); second, instead of having readers come to terms with this new history on their own, Wolfman allows readers of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* to cope with his new history alongside their beloved characters, effectively providing readers space in the text to cope rather than merely ejecting them to the new post-*Crisis* titles which would later follow this monumental event.

However, it is Wolfman's third front that I argue makes the greatest impact on his readers, crucially employed just as the *Crisis* concludes. The final page of *Crisis* consists of a one-shot epilogue, focusing on the villain Psycho Pirate who has been admitted to Arkham Asylum. As a doctor exits his room, he converses with a colleague about Psycho Pirate's wild fantasies of multiple worlds, millions of lives, of a battle at the beginning of time and of a villain who nearly destroyed all life (366). The text then cuts to the inside of Psycho Pirate's room, in which he is speaking to himself. In a series of narrow panels, the view from Psycho Pirate's narrow, padded domain gradually recedes to one which encapsulates Earth itself. Two parallel panels, one of Psycho Pirate's eye, the other of the Earth, suggest that despite being such an insignificant figure, his knowledge of what happened to the previous

universe is one of cosmic proportions. Yet such knowledge remains in the hands of a figure deemed criminally insane, confined to a padded cell, with no one but himself who remembers the truth of what happened (figure 3.4).

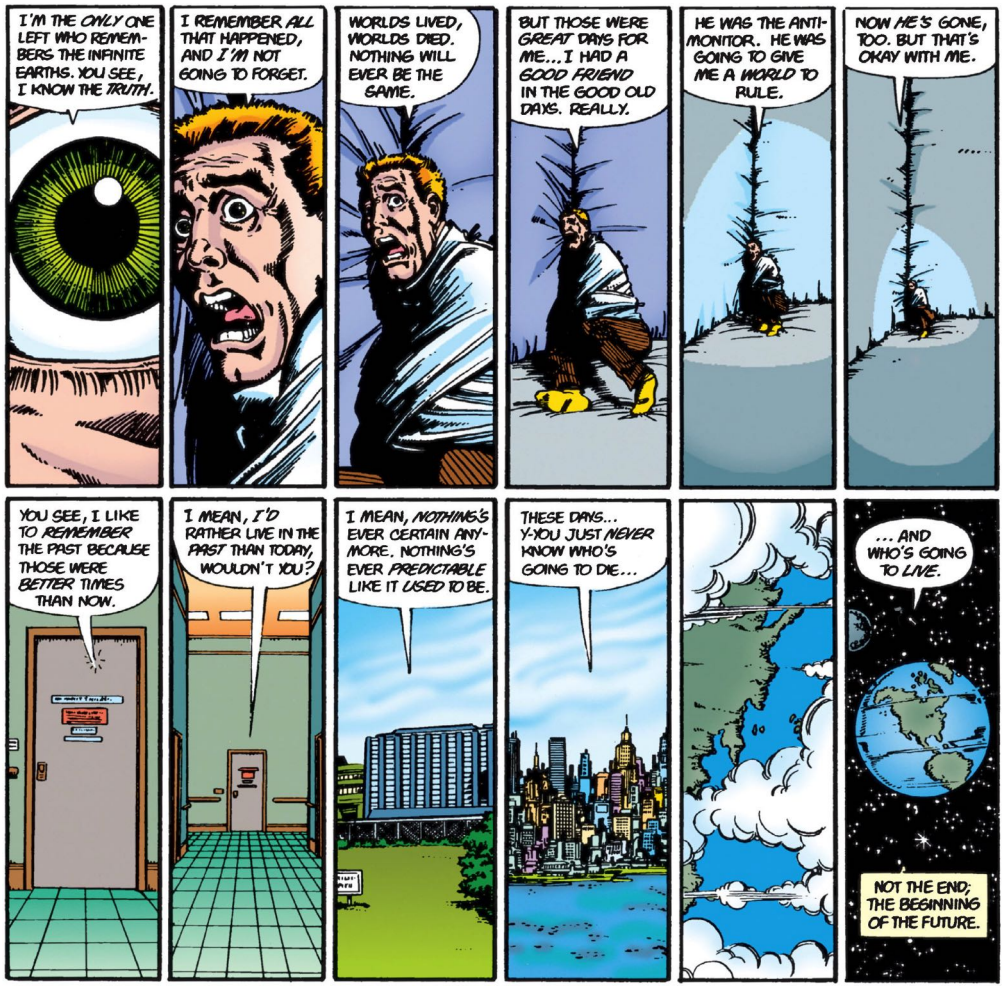



Figure 3.4: Psycho Pirate knows the truth. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 366.

The state of Psycho Pirate in the epilogue effectively begins to highlight Wolfman's strategy about those characters—and, by extension, those readers—who chose to stubbornly remember and legitimize the pre-*Crisis* history. Thus, readers are given a firm choice regarding how to proceed when it comes to history: either choose to move forward, no matter

how difficult, like the many heroes must now do, or refuse to let go, and be nothing more than a paranoid villain whose truth about the universe falls entirely on deaf ears. It is, quite frankly, a brilliant textual move; not only does Wolfman make an antagonist of the meta-narrative governing *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, he also makes an antagonist out of the history responsible for it as well. Thus Psycho Pirate represents all that is wrong with the Multiverse—including its many historical complexities—and as such readers are nearly coerced into a new history, one in which values from the Golden Age reign supreme.

## 3.5 Conclusion

As clearly explored, an examination of the history within *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is as involved as examining the text itself. As the text concludes, readers are left with the work of managing their knowledge of what comes before *Crisis* alongside what comes after, choosing what they wish to remember and forget of their own volition. But *Crisis*' open-ended conclusion does not mean Wolfman takes an impartial stance on how readers should proceed, however—through this examination it becomes clear that *Crisis* urges its readers to abandon the complex nature of historicity brought about by decades of complex worlds, stories, and characters, and instead focus on the new history written in its wake—one which seems on its surface a push into a more progressive future but nevertheless suffers from many of the same creative pangs as its predecessors as it reinforces many Golden Age constructs. This is not to say, of course, that the post-*Crisis* history was merely a retreat into the past; there

are clear signs during this time of a genre which has attempted to push past the tropes, themes, and conventions found in its forebears. However, I argue that one should not treat *all* of *Crisis* as progressive in its new take on its own history, as even in its attempt to kill the weeds in its historical garden to make way for new plants do some traditional roots still stand firmly planted.

# Chapter 4

# Life, Death, and Franchising

## 4.1 Introduction and Thesis

Tempting as it may be to fixate on comic books as narrative or historical artifacts, it would be remiss to ignore *Crisis on Infinite Earth*'s status as commercial product. As such, an investigation into the text requires the critic to don the role of economist as he has previously the roles of narrativist and historian. Indeed, to some extent, *Crisis* is nothing more than intellectual property, commissioned by corporate forces to persuade a frustrated reader base to further affect its bottom line. Thus it becomes pertinent to strip the mythos away from Crisis, as well as the narrative grandeur, and treat it as what it is truly designed to be: a product commissioned to recoup declining sales in an industry filled with publishers frequently on the verge of financial ruin. This means, of course, that there is much to learn

about *Crisis on Infinite Earths* when treated as a product of corporate strategy. By analyzing *Crisis* as a corporate product, I will further explore the ways in which DC Comics' then narrative-changing event was perhaps thwarted from executing true change not by narrative or historic means but by economic ones.

Whereas chapter 2 dealt with the events leading to the intergalactic battle in *Crisis*, and chapter 3 dealt with the state of the DC Universe after *Crisis*' conclusion, this chapter will primarily focus on those events in between. Specifically, I'd like to focus on Wolfman's decision to kill many of DC's iconic characters, since such a decision draws two things to light: first, characters, no matter how beloved, are nothing more than intellectual property to be exploited; and second, superhero deaths are rarely permanent, since a dead character means a dead revenue stream. Through a close examination of three key deaths which occur in *Crisis*—that of Flash, Wonder Woman, and Supergirl—I will further argue for a conservative reading of the text as the characters struggle to balance their role as mythic heroes amid their well-established status as intellectual properties.

## 4.2 Comics as Labor

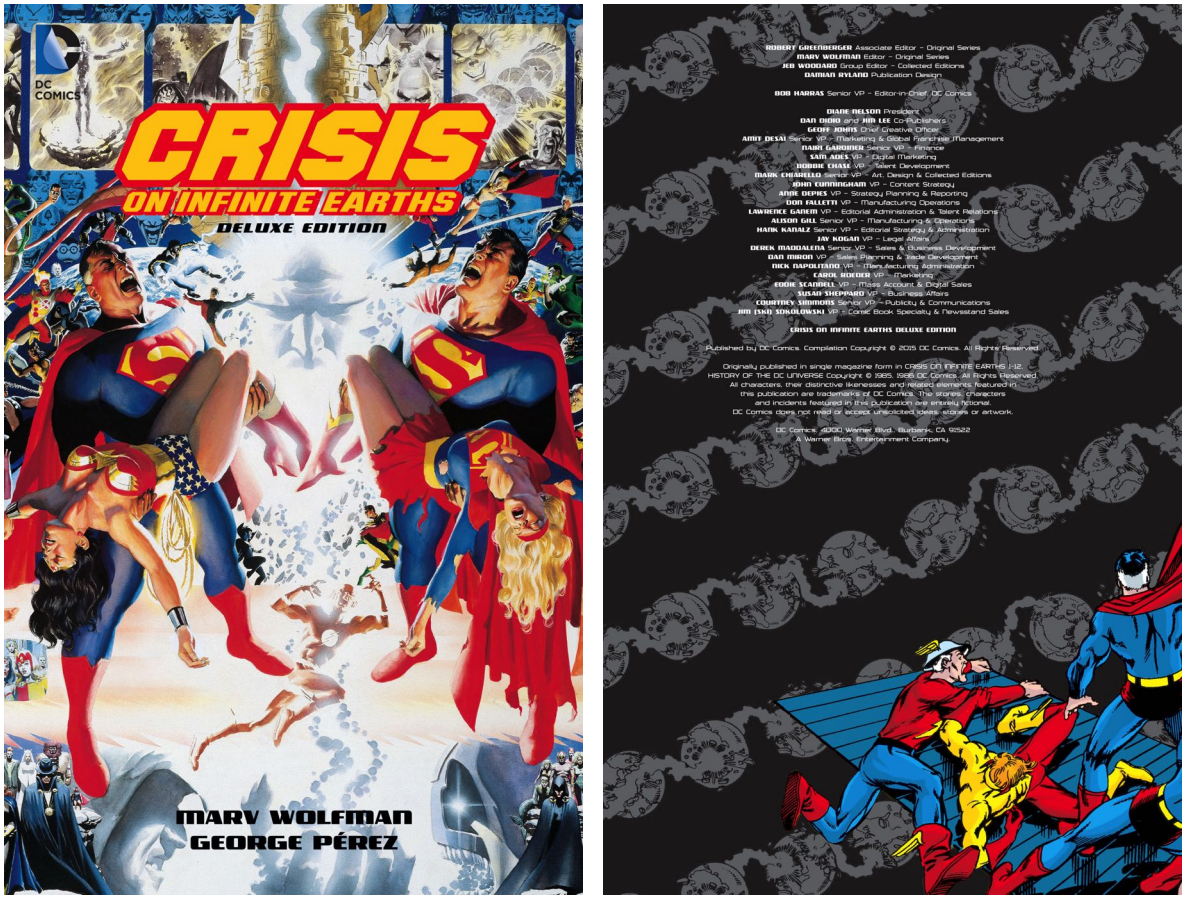
To better approach *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as economist rather than historian or narratologist, It is first important to temporarily shift the underlying metaphorical framework of *comics as continuous story* or *comics as cumulative history* to *comics as labor*. However, such a shift in metaphor is not one into which readers often easily transition. Benjamin

Woo's work on the subject consistently identifies three primary causes for the difficulty in interpretation of this metaphor: the establishment of comics as cultural work, the selective omission of lower-level labor, and the concept of commodity fetishism to which many texts ultimately prescribe.

First, the production of comic books is what he terms "cultural work," whose process of creation marks a strong exception to the creation of other mass-produced goods (Woo 1). Woo puts forth that the distinguishing features of forms of cultural work, like the production of comic books, are so radically different than other forms of work that the legitimization of such work may prove difficult for audiences unfamiliar with its specific means of production.

Secondly, the rigorous structure of creative acclaim often prioritizes and upholds certain figures in the field at the expense of others. This is, of course, a phenomenon neither new to the comic books genre nor particularly unique to it. For all the acclaim which Stan Lee and Steve Ditko receive for their work in establishing Marvel as a true competitor of DC during the Silver Age of Comics, it took the creative talents of dozens of writers, colorists, letterers, and inkers to bring to life the X-Men, the Fantastic Four. Nevertheless, Lee and Ditko are remembered as their sole creators. And National is by no means an exception to this rule. Indeed, the opening pages of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* prioritize its lead writer with multiple creator credits, placement on the front page, and a personal introduction, while the many others who worked on the text are reduced to mere boilerplate (figure 4.1).

Casey Brienza corroborates this claim through her research analyzing manga (comics created in Japan or by Japanese artists) from a sociological perspective. She argues, similar




(a) a (b) b

Figure 4.1: A clear difference in creative recognition.

to Woo, that those writers and artists popular enough to be on the title page almost always stand on the shoulders of dozens of assistants whose countless hours of work go into the creation of comic books and who truly encapsulate the labor being omitted. Her work is quick to remind readers of such labor and how easy it can be to ignore:

> Forget the romantic ideal of the heroic artist sitting alone in a studio and bringing works of the imagination to life; even when ostensibly attributed to a single creator, works of art are in reality the products of a complex, and often formally

> organized, network of social interactions. Furthermore, these interactions may be structured by relations of power and domination interpenetrating all levels of society. (Brienza 109)

Like Woo, Brienza recognizes that a cultural product, particularly a cultural literary product, may be attributed to its lead creator (borrowing Foucault's author-function terminology to underscore this phenomenon), but is a result of a network of creatives working in tandem to produce a printed medium of which only a few will grace the cover (110–111).

We can witness this phenomenon by taking a diachronic approach to *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as it has been printed and reprinted over time, with each successive printing providing legitimacy to its lead writer and artist, culminating in the Absolute Edition which omits even Wolfman and Pérez from the cover.

Certainly, there is only so much space on a cover, in a title, or in a citation, to attribute a creative work. But such a practice, as Woo and Brienza suggest, is not one entirely based on available space (or available merit, for that matter). This process instead highlights the ways in which every stage of labor in the creative process often succumbs to elision as only a select few are recognized for the work of many. At its most extreme, this process ultimately ends in omitting *all* labor contribution; such cases are frequent in comics, whose characters become divorced from their creators as heroes effectively outlive, and in some cases, surpass, their creators in terms of recognition. Many readers can tell you exactly who Superman is; only a dedicated few can tell you who created him.

The Superman example above conveniently indexes Woo's final concern involving the comics-as-labor metaphor: that the field becomes prone to the phenomenon of commodity fetishism, in which the product of labor itself obscures the laborers who produce it:

> Marxists have long argued that the productive labour that makes goods is obscured by the capitalist system...paradoxically, however, efforts to remind us of the people and the labour that make our things—especially when these efforts are compose its of marketing campaigns—often simply displace that fetishism, intensified, onto another object. (Woo 3)

While I recognize Woo's need to approach the valuation of comics labor from Marxist terms, I would like to forward that such a reading also exemplifies Barthes' death of the author, particularly prevalent in a field in which creative ownership is at best murky when characters are shaped by multiple hands (who gets credit for Flash, the writers who conceived him or the editor who popularized him?). (Again I turn to the Captain Marvel/Shazam fiasco to emphasize this point). As a product of continuous output, overseen by a rotating team of writers and artists who briefly entertain the characters and stories, it grows difficult to prioritize the laborer of a comic book when that labor is not a static operation. Indeed, despite the sole acclaim Wolfman and Pérez received for *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, they are but one of many laborers who produce content for these characters in a field in which significant ties between artist and medium are extremely rare. There are cases, of course, in which this happens—Alan Moore will always be inextricably tied to *Watchmen*—and I

would argue that Wolfman and Pérez could be candidates for such creative ensnarement with *Crisis*, but this is belied by the realization that despite the acclaim the text received in its time, its propensity for franchising—producing two direct sequels, 2005's *Infinite Crisis* and 2008's *Final Crisis*—hint at a textual strategy which has surpassed the author from whom it was conceived.

I would like to posit a fourth reason why the comics-as-labor metaphor proves difficult to prioritize: the relationship between creative and corporate concerns. Again, it is of equal importance to demythologize the superhero as it is to mythologize them; Superman plays as much of an important role as a popular icon as he does a massively successful point of intellectual property, capable of bearing the weight of an entire franchise. As previously argued, a character like Superman resists change partly due to an essentialist quality which demands a certain fixed characterization; such a quality, however, comes not from creative need but from corporate regulation of a figure intended to make money. When characters do change, then, they must do so with limited reach and with approval by those who own their copyright. As a result, it can be said that shareholders and CFOs have as much to say about what these characters are and aren't allowed to do as the writers and artists themselves. And in the case of the many, many deaths within *Crisis*, such changes are faced under even greater scrutiny, and an examination of how conflicting external forces shed light on how much death can play a role in the DC universe.

## 4.3 The Death of the Flash

Thus central to an economic reading of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* lies the faithful battle between character as myth and as market force. How do you enact cataclysmic change on a set of characters who are made immortal by their ability to meet earnings projections? The answer in which *Crisis* elects to operate is by making perhaps *Crisis*' most extreme changes to characters—their very deaths—temporary. Of these many temporary deaths, three stand out not only for their shocking execution but for the ways in which those characters and their deaths function within the myth-market force dichotomy: Flash, Wonder Woman, and Supergirl.

Arguably the most notable of these three deaths—and perhaps the most shocking in *Crisis* at large—was that of the hero who ushered in the Silver Age himself, Flash. At the height of the Anti-Monitor's conquest, he kidnaps Flash in the hopes to use his supersonic speed to power a device capable of weaponizing antimatter. In fitting heroic fashion, Flash frees himself from captivity and disables the device; however, the speed at which he runs to counteract the force of the antimatter is so great that it ruptures the already unstable space between realities, pulling in Barry Allen to a dimension outside of time and space. Ultimately, after ushering in his final words, he rapidly begins to age until nothing of the hero remains but his superhero suit. In a series of successive panels, Wolfman and Pérez elevate this scene to a near elegy as Flash utters his final thoughts as his body, for the final time, betrays him (figure 4.2). Thus marks the particularly gruesome end of the Scarlet

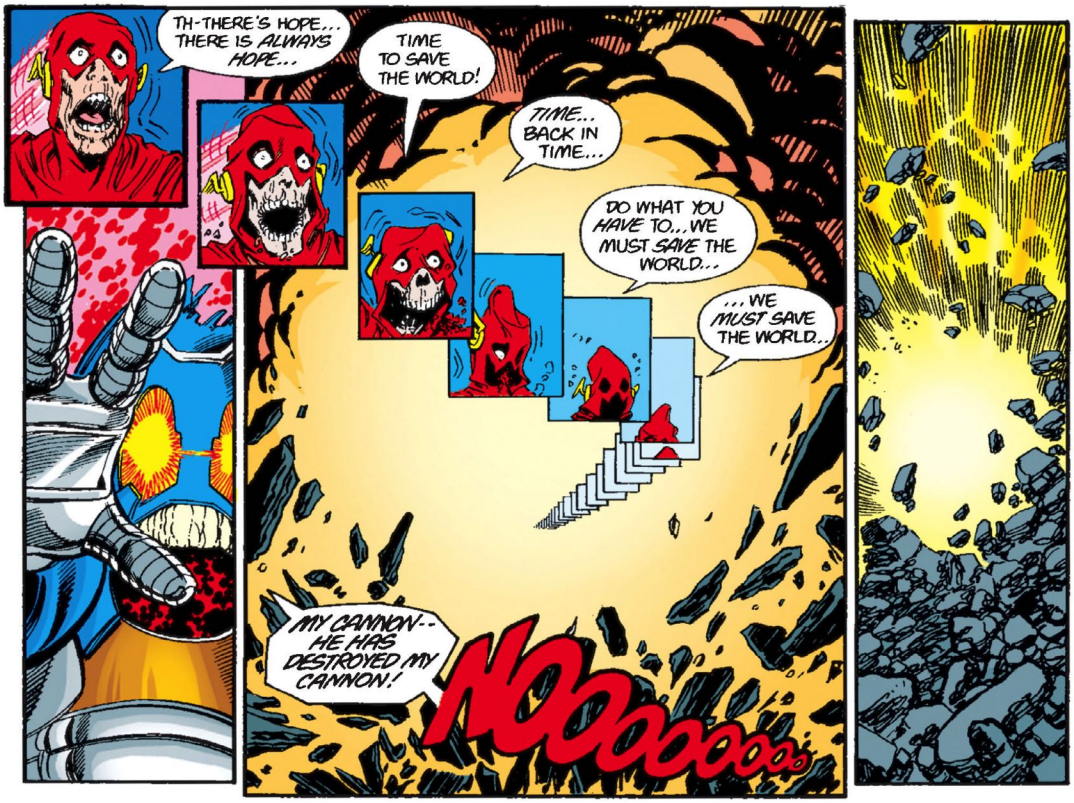



Figure 4.2: The death of the Flash. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 240.

Speedster who single-handedly ushered in the Silver Age. He is preceded in death by the Golden Age Flash, and his sidekick Wally West, who assumes Flash name to commemorate his fallen comrade.

Certainly this would be the sequence of events in any other genre, in which death is an inevitable and permanent end to a character's life. However, as comics repeatedly make clear, not even death can stop a superhero. In his work on the subject of intellectual copyright, Michael Deamer argues for a viewing of superhero characters in particular as assets of "high economic and cultural worth" (Deamer 468). Though his argument centers on the copyrightability of the Batmobile (the fictional car driven by Batman), much of the

legal precedence stems from cases such as *Warner Bros. v. CBS*, which dealt with the characters themselves. The death of Flash, then, also meant the death of an invaluably lucrative figure to DC Comics, one who successfully jump-started the Silver Age to records sales in 1956. Further, Flash's updated mythology signaled the beginning of a significant paradigm shift in the production of superhero comic books that would fundamentally change all those heroes who were refreshed following Flash's successful reintroduction in the public eye. Thus Flash himself began to represent the fundamental dichotomy which exists in superheroes, who operate as figures both mythic and marketable; as a result, his death would deal a blow not only to the shared mythology in which he operates but also to DC's bottom line. Consequently, the most practical move for DC Comics was to further lean into its conservative nature by making the death of its fastest hero one from which he would quickly recover. Indeed, sheer popularity seems to have breathed new life into Barry Allen, who would returned to print in the post-*Crisis* universe during the 2005 crossover event *Infinite Crisis*, in which he plays a major role.

What's interesting to note about the death (and eventual resurrection) of Flash was that it was not one merely which troubled the executives at DC alone. Wolfman himself admits that within the pages of the text lie plot devices capable of resurrecting Flash, should a later team of writers wish to bring him back from death (Wolfman and Pérez 6). By his own admission, Wolfman intentionally deflates any sense of narrative stakes by all but confirming death not as some fixed point from which no hero can return, but as nothing more than a narrative road block meant to be circumvented, even by absurd means. What reason

would there be for planting such a loophole? What value is there to gain in essentially removing such a powerful historical character moment? I argue that such an action merely enforces a traditionalist air to comics in which character change must be mitigated at any cost, even when that change is at its most extreme. As such, there seems to be no difference between returning Superman as the sole survivor of Krypton and un-killing Barry Allen—both represent a return to form which stifles progress by preventing characters and their stories to grow organically, and more importantly, to end organically, thus reducing the risk of readers not purchasing products due to changing (or dead) characters.

Apart from the cultural monolith Superman, *Crisis* reflects Flash's status as a striking example of a character who functions in the space where mythology and economics intersect. His death and resurrection, then, represent the outcome of that interaction, and suggest of comics a system which would stymie a character's natural evolution from birth to death if it affects sales. The interaction between these two forces is common to superhero figures, who are often immortalized by their ability to turn a profit. Yet despite this common area in which many heroes operate, the death of Wonder Woman in *Crisis* further troubles the divide between myth and market force by complicating its boundaries.

## 4.4 The Death of Wonder Woman

As previously mentioned, the death of popular superheroes in the genre is reflective of the struggle between two very different character functions. The death of DC Comics' first major

female superhero, Wonder Woman, proves to be no exception to this rule. However, Wonder Woman's untimely end does not entirely align to that of Flash; instead, her death and rebirth signal a complication of the myth-market dichotomy, as Wonder Woman is engaged with not only her role as mythic figure, nor as mere intellectual property, but also her role as a woman.

During the final battle against the Anti-Monitor, tensions begin to boil over as the many remaining superheroes succeed in foiling his plans to control the universe. Brutally enraged, the Anti-Monitor retaliates by mercilessly killing Wonder Woman while the heroes deliberate over whether to retreat or try and slay the Anti-Monitor once and for all. Unlike Flash, whose death was painted as a final heroic gesture for securing a victory over the Anti-Monitor and his destructive reign on the Multiverse, Wonder Woman's demise did not occur with similar grand intentions; rather, it merely served to further represent the unfortunate but inevitable collateral damage of cosmic warfare. Wonder Woman's death also differs from Flash in its literal illustration: at the end of *Crisis*, Harbinger shepherds the audience through the post-*Crisis* Earth through a series of pages which illustrate its unique history. During an ending monologue, a series of captions discuss Wonder Woman's death, explaining that she was not so much killed as she was merely returned to her "original state of creation" (363) (figure 4.3).

These differences begin to distance Wonder Woman's death from that of Flash's in how it functions both within and without the text. Interestingly, the distance is widened by the fact that the two superheroes seem to die in opposite directions: Flash is aged rapidly forward, while the four consecutive panels centered on Diana's face show her "dying" in reverse, going

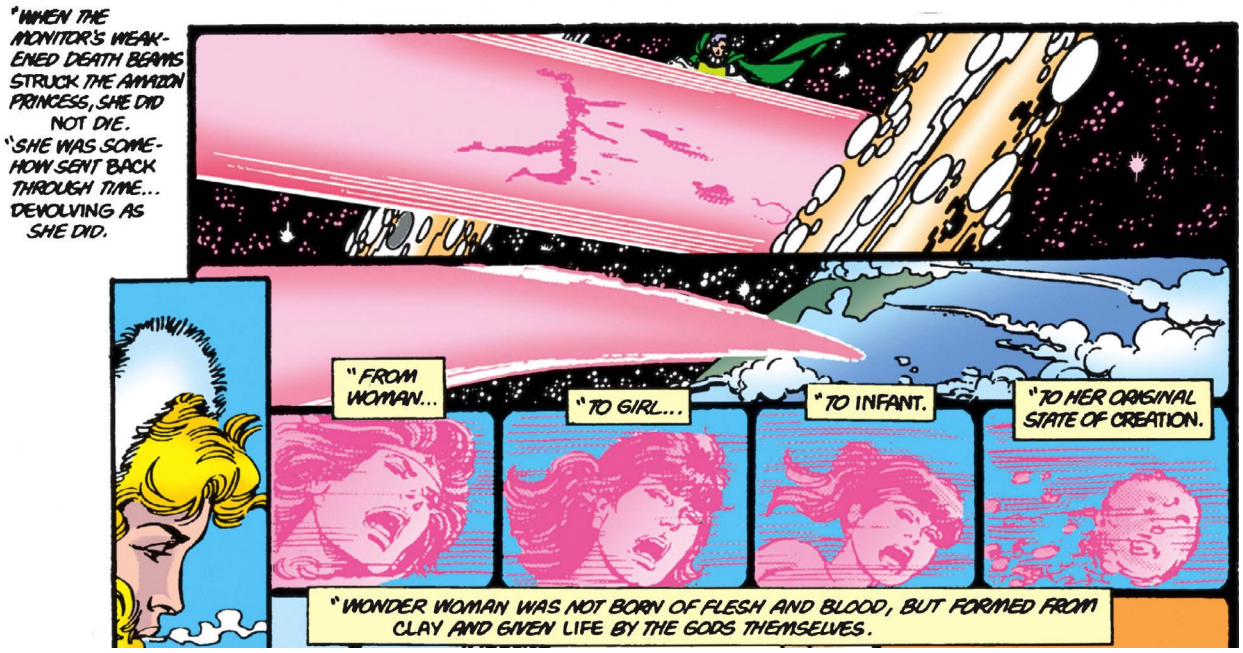



Figure 4.3: The death of Wonder Woman. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 363.

from woman, to young adult, to girl, to nothing but a ball of clay. Though this may seem like nothing more than Pérez taking artistic license to illustrate a death uniquely, its specificity further indexes a new *gendered* angle by which the myth-market dichotomy is represented in the text.

Like many of *Crisis*' other heroes, illustrator George Pérez used *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as a narrative tabula rasa to revamp the Amazonian princess for the newly created post-*Crisis* universe. Pérez took on the role of writer for the post-*Crisis Wonder Woman* title and used her return to clay as a way of streamlining her character, updating her origin story, and further rooting her powers and skills in Hellenistic mythology. Needless to say, such an approach to the character quite literally further mythologizes the figure of Wonder Woman for the 1987 title. However, in Pérez's choice to literally rebuild Wonder Woman from the ground

up lies a cultural conversation about the role of femininity in superhero comic books not present for their similarly rebootsed male counterparts. As Jaclyn Marcus notes, there are strong implications behind the many changes to Wonder Woman's costumes over the years, which often incite cultural conversations that are not present when Batman, Superman, or Flash undergoes similar revisions. Central to Marcus's argument is the historical importance of Wonder Woman's costume and its link to her role as a hero:

> Though clothing has long been understood as a key influencer of social identity (see Barry; Entwistle; and Wilson), for women fashion takes on even greater importance...In the case of Wonder Woman and her inventors, her costume was one of the first aspects of her character to be developed; nuances of her personality and superpowers were defined through her clothing. (Marcus 57)

Suffice it to say that for the female superhero, the revisiting of something as simple as a costume carries drastic implications for the character herself. And Pérez's reintroduction not only of Wonder Woman's costume, but essentially of every detail of her being not only reflects agency over the portrayal of superheroes in comics, and the portrayal of female superheroes in comics, but also the portrayal of *women* in comics at large. Certainly, this is not the case with the rebirth of Flash, whose return, I would argue, does not also signal a conversation about masculinity. Ultimately, this third factor working in conjunction with Wonder Woman's role as myth and market force further reinforce the status quo of the comics genre by perpetuating an essentialist link between a character's more superficial

qualities (like their costume) to their status as hero. And the very act of this death being used to literally reshape Wonder Woman in Pérez's image suggests a traditionalist milieu in which iconic female figures' identities are shaped, molded, and redefined not merely as superheroes, but as women.

The death of Flash illustrated the way superheroes must balance their status as both mythic and market force, and demonstrates how that balance affects the superhero's relationship with death. The death of Wonder Woman further complicates this relationship by incorporating a decidedly gendered angle into that conversation. Interestingly, the third and final death I will be discussing in this chapter, that of Supergirl's, will further expand on this myth-market dichotomy through a figure whose post-*Crisis* legacy further reveals the conservative nature of the superhero genre.

## 4.5 The Death of Supergirl

Perhaps the most interesting of the three deaths discussed in this chapter and what it signals about the function of death in the DC Universe, is the death of Superman's cousin, Supergirl. Before the final battle in *Crisis*, all but five universes remain safe from the Anti-Monitor's gruesome onslaught. However, the damage already done to the Multiverse has weakened the barriers separating these universes; should these barriers fall, and the five Earths merge in the same space, they would all be destroyed on impact. Thus the heroes must fight two enemies: first, of course, the Anti-Monitor; second are the collapsing dimensional barriers,

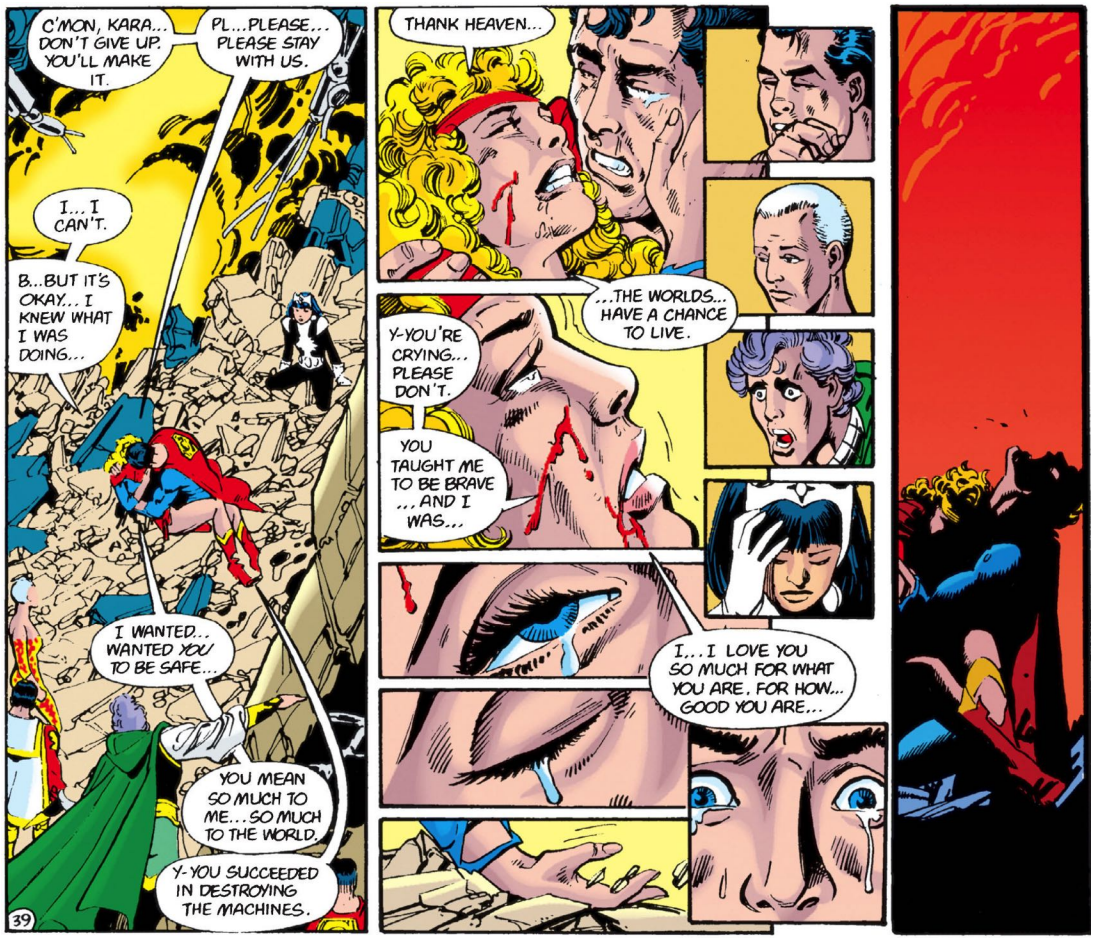



Figure 4.4: The death of Supergirl. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: Deluxe Edition*, 212.

which threaten to destroy the Multiverse just as quickly. Fearing the complete collapse of the Multiverse, the Monitor sacrifices his life to temporarily stabilize the barriers and prevent the Earths from merging. Meanwhile, the heroes find a way into the Anti-Monitor's lair and discover that he has a "solar collector" which uses massive amounts of power to hasten the barrier breakdown. In the ensuing battle over the machine, Supergirl is blindsided and ultimately killed by the Anti-Monitor, the only casualty of a pyrrhic victory (figure 4.4).

Though the character was established to capitalize off the success of Superman, the

sweeping editorial changes which happened under Schwarz's watch ultimately drove the character to be killed not out of heroic sacrifice, or future repurposing, but out of creative redundancy. Supergirl and her death clearly exemplify the function of superhero as market force at its most extreme, whose value diminished the moment her character was deemed inconsequential in the wake of Wolfman deciding to streamline Superman's origin. Unsurprisingly, Wolfman's motive for killing Supergirl remains in the realm of narrative:

> Before *Crisis*, it seemed that half of Krypton survived its explosion. We had Superman, Supergirl, Krypto, the Phantom Zone criminals, the bottle city of Kandor and many others. Our goal was to make Superman unique. We went back to his origin and made Kal-El the only survivor of Krypton. That, sadly, was why Supergirl had to die. (Wolfman and Pérez 6)

Implicit in the desire to make Superman unique lies the central truth that Super*girl* was not. With many heroes bearing similar power sets to the character, and a decline in sales, the character seemed unnecessary, and *Crisis* was used as a way of trimming away narrative superfluity. However, as repeatedly expressed, characters often find ways of returning to the page. And in the case of Supergirl, her death and "rebirth" would begin to look strangely familiar to post-*Crisis* readers.

Following her death in *Crisis*, many post-*Crisis* superheroes assumed the title of Supergirl. Curiously, an interesting parallel between the Supergirl mythos and the narrative strategy of the pre-*Crisis* universe began to develop: what began as a means of recapturing

the Supergirl brand resulted in multiple versions of multiple Supergirls simultaneously operating within the canon. And similar to the situation in which DC found itself prior to the 1980s, these Supergirls' titles created multiple inconsistent, but entirely canonical, parallel storylines. Ironically, Supergirl's death in *Crisis* spawned a network of characters which resembled the very narrative strategy *Crisis* was created to eradicate. Thus her death, and its after effects, signal the status quo inherent to the genre in its reflection of the very state in which DC's canon existed before *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was published. And with similar motivations in mind, the original Supergirl was resurrected/rebooted in 2005 to simplify the Supergirl branding and make her collective body of texts more accessible.

Supergirl's complex publication strategy, and its parallel to that of DC's pre-*Crisis* continuity, represents the conservative nature of comics at its most extreme. Though other instances of this conservatism often come from writers or illustrators actively taking influence from a prior era of comics history in their handling of characters, the nebulous state of the Supergirl titles published after *Crisis* suggest an almost cyclical nature to the genre, as DC returns to its original, complex state, evident through a character both killed *and* revived to simplify a line of titles.

## 4.6 Conclusion

By examining the deaths of the Flash, Wonder Woman, and Supergirl in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, it becomes clear that both the text and the characters are constantly straddling the

line between cultural myth and commercial product. And when those two forces inevitably come into conflict, as is always the case in comics where death is concerned, writers tend to alleviate such concerns through the very same retrogression which envelops their strategies towards narrative and historical concerns. Does this mean that death holds no power over characters in a comic universe? Certainly not; plenty have died, and stayed dead, in comics history. But major players remain constantly exempt from such a powerful foe, protected by powers bestowed upon them by corporate interests.

# Conclusion

In my introduction I offered an important question to consider when contemplating *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, one which up until now I have decided not to address: was *Crisis* successful in its attempt to impart lasting order to DC's continuity? Did the proverbial hero save the day? This is a question I believe pertinent for its ability to show how *Crisis* functions as a sort of microcosm for the state of the comics industry at large, and one that can only really be answered with some knowledge about field, about the event, and about the texts itself. It seems fitting, then, for me to engage with this final question in the conclusion of this thesis, now that three decades have passed since *Crisis*'s conception and its effect prominently known.

I would like to begin by saying that this question is not a new one—Wolfman himself chimes in on the subject in the forward to the 30th anniversary hardcover of *Crisis*, answering the question with a resounding, and accurate, "partially" (6). *Crisis* did temporarily reset the cosmic balance of the DC Universe and successfully refreshed many of their heroes for the Modern Age (just as Schwartz once had for the Silver Age in years prior). And the effects of

the so-called post-*Crisis* timeline were practically immediate: the newly rebooted Superman appeared in *The Man of Steel* a mere four months after *Crisis* concluded. But numerous publications following the epic crossover event have made clear that, despite DC's urge to sustain a streamlined pastiche of titles, the genre seems more inclined towards complexity than simplicity.

Primary inker Dick Giordano heralds *Crisis* for its status not merely as commercial product but also as "a story that needed telling—a story that made permanent, irreversible changes in a superhero universe!" (357). To their credit, the team overseeing this massive project did re-establish characters for a modern audience and, as Giordano goes on to note, set the benchmark for the large-scale superhero crossover event that is a staple of the genre today. But while *Crisis* was meant to be a stand-out feature of the genre, its effects on the genre have established an altogether different legacy.Perhaps inevitably, the "permanent, irreversible" change which *Crisis* attempts to erect would itself prove only temporary. 2005 saw the resurrection of the Multiverse in DC's continuity along with the revival of many dead Golden Age heroes with Geoff Johns and Phil Jimenez's *Infinite Crisis*; more recently, 2008's *Final Crisis* all but ratified the annual, apocalyptic "Crisis" event, moving it away from "a story needing telling" to one more situated in spectacle and fan service. Is this, then, the *true* crisis in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*? Is the superhero genre's oldest, unyielding enemy the very cyclical canon in which its heroes are merely recycled, and from which they may never escape?

I can recognize the emotional urgency to this argument. Perhaps by breaking free from

this cycle—of deaths and rebirths, of a constantly morphing universe, of superheroes which fluctuate faster than they can fly—can these superheroes grow old, die, remain dead, and pass the torch to those inspired to follow in their footsteps. But, in thinking of the ways *Crisis* itself struggles to manage these lofty ideals, I remain unconvinced that such a system is necessary. Certainly, the superhero genre's inability to budge unless forced to cannot be overstated; the Comics Code Authority stands as a striking testament to that. And certainly, there are genuine concerns about a genre which seems to cater to its vocal (white male) audience's wishes at the expense of its minorities, women, queer, and other readers. But I would argue that there is a sense of pride to be had about superheroes who have stood resolute in their characterization, who have taken on a mythic quality which has lasted decades of history, no matter how much *their* history has changed.

What's more, it is from the genre's resistance to change that come the very conversations *about* that change which the industry seems to ignore. From the often sacrificial role of female characters in comic books came *Women in Refrigerators*, an online movement which seeks to address how "fridging" affects not only characters in comic books, but in popular culture at large. And in response to the slow (and often combative) pace of appropriate female costumes came *The Hawkeye Initiative*, a forum which investigates the dynamics of sex and power in comic books through the lens of costume design. And both of these cultural conversations have been extrapolated to address similar concerns in video games, film, television, and many other sources of popular media which bear a similar quality of hesitance to that of superhero comic books. And on the heels of the many feminist voices which arose in the field thanks

to these movements came minority voices, queer voices, disabled voices, all of whom now take an active role in not only identifying and addressing these seemingly inherent faults, but also aiding in proper representation in the field at large. Does this mean, then, that the genre should remain essentially un-policed in the name of the many voices that may arise as a result of its hesitance to move forward? Certainly not. But it is important to note that from that hesitance came the very conversations that may, one day, move the genre to a more progressive (and inclusive) state.

With thirty years of history now behind *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, I admit that I cannot say that the text was entirely successful in meeting its ambitions. As my thesis repeatedly notes, many of the proactive changes in *Crisis* are enacted not with the future in mind, but with the past, and do more to return the DC universe to where it was than it did to move it forward. Yet it is not where *Crisis* failed, I argue, that is of importance, but rather where it succeeded. And *Crisis* succeeded not only in its establishing of the large-scale crossover event into mainstream canon, not only in its ability to show how these companies are engaged in an active conversation with their readers and can change alongside the demand of those readers, not only in its ability to continuously raise the bar when it comes to superhero spectacle, but also in its ability to use the tale of spandex-wearing superheroes as a means of addressing concerns in the genre at large, whether it be through an online article, a website, or even a thesis.

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# Glossary

**Anti-Monitor** A cosmic entity connected to the negative matter of the Multiverse, and the central villain of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. 35, 37, 39–41, 43, 49, 67, 71, 74, 75, 85

**Aquaman** A half-human, half-Atlantean hybrid with an aquatic physiology, providing abilities such as rapid swimming, breathing underwater, and control of aquatic life. 27, 85

**Batman** An billionaire orphan with a genius-level intellect skilled in martial arts. His wealth allows him access to high-tech equipment and a combat suit he uses to fight crime. 9, 20, 27, 29, 37, 44, 54, 68, 73, 85

**Blue Beetle** A superhero with an alien beetle-like creature bonded to his spine which grants him a suit of powered armor that can reconfigure into a wide array of weapons and gadgets. 31, 85

**Bronze Age** See Bronze Age of Comics. 11, 47, 85

**Bronze Age of Comics** The third wave of comics published between the mid-1970s and 1980s. Bronze Age comics are known for their topical storylines tackling drug abuse, racism, pollution, and poverty. The Bronze Age is generally said to have started with the release of *Conan the Barbarian* #1 (1970). 85, 86

**Captain Marvel** An adolescent orphan who transforms into a superhero with immense strength, speed, flight, and other powers after shouting a magic word (Shazam!). 19, 31, 65, 85

**Caption** A text box positioned above or between panels containing supplementary plot information. Captions are often used to provide clarifying information or as a transitioning element. 34, 35, 71, 85

**CCA** See *Comics Code Authority*. 24, 25, 85, 87

**Colorist** The person responsible for supplying color to the inked pages of a comic book. 62, 85

**Comic** See *comic book*. ii, iii, 1–4, 6–17, 19–26, 28, 30, 32, 39, 40, 46, 47, 61, 62, 64–66, 68, 70, 73, 77–79, 85

**Comic Book** The published magazine containing comic art. American comic books are usually 22 to 24 pages in length, and tend to contain a single story. ii, viii, 1–12, 14–33, 38, 60, 62, 63, 65, 69, 73, 81, 85, 87

**Comic Strip** A precursor to the comic book, comic strips are often found in newspapers as a short comic of three or four panels. viii, 15, 17, 18, 85

**Comics Code** The published guidelines created by the Comics Code Authority to prohibit certain obscenities in comic books to make them safe for children to read. 24, 31, 55, 85

**Comics Code Authority** An agency created in 1954 established to better regulate the content of comics and prohibit certain explicit themes. Comics approved by the CCA were deemed safe for children, and did not use offensive language, sexuality, and violence. 24, 25, 27, 81, 85–87

**Continuity** The collection of consistent characters, stories, and narrative elements established through a publishing company's cumulative body of literature. A text that is "canonical" adheres to precedence established by continuity; a text that is "non-canonical" deviates from it. 12, 32, 36, 37, 41, 44, 45, 77, 79, 80, 85

**Crossover** A event in which a character or characters appear in a title separate from their own. Superman's frequent appearances in *Detective Comics* (spearheaded by Batman) is an example of a crossover event. 3, 33, 69, 80, 82, 85

**Earth-Four** A parallel Earth home to the heroes of Charlton Comics, most notably Blue Beetle, Captain Atom, and Thunderbolt. 31, 85

**Earth-One** The central earth in the pre-*Crisis* Multiverse, home to all the Silver Age characters of the 60s and 70s. 30, 32, 39, 51, 55, 85

**Earth-Prime** A parallel Earth on which comics readers live, superheroes are fiction, and DC Comics is a publishing company. Earth-Prime would later serve as the home to Superboy. 31, 85

**Earth-S** A parallel Earth home to the heroes of Fawcett Comics, most notably Captain Marvel and the Marvel family. 31, 85

**Earth-Six** A parallel Earth on which the United States lost the Revolutionary War and America becomes a monarchy. Its notable characters include Lady Quark and Lord Volt, introduced in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. 53, 85

**Earth-Three** A parallel Earth and "mirror" to Earth-One, on which the American Christopher Columbus discovered and colonized Europe; and the Crime Syndicate of America (a mirror of the Justice League) are antagonist to the hero, Alexander Luthor. 45, 85

**Earth-Two** An parallel Earth home to the superheroes of the Golden Age. 30, 39, 44, 49, 51, 55, 85

**Earth-X** A parallel Earth in which the Germany won World War II, home to the Freedom Fighters, expatriates of Earth-Two. 53, 85

**Editor** The person responsible for managing various staff members during the creation process, and making sure issues are published in a timely manner. 27, 65, 85

**Flash** A superhero who can run at supersonic speeds. Though many heroes have used the name, Barry Allen is the most widely recognized iteration. viii, 11, 37, 45, 61, 65, 67–71, 73, 74, 77, 85

**Fridging** The act of killing, raping, or otherwise disempowering a woman as a narrative device, especially when used as a means to motivate a male character. Coined by legendary writer Gail Simone, the term originates from *Green Lantern* #54 (1994), in which the titular hero returns home to find his girlfriend dismembered and stuffed in his fridge. 81, 85

**Golden Age** see Golden Age of Comics. 25, 30, 31, 44, 49, 54, 58, 68, 80, 85, 88

**Golden Age of Comics** The first wave of comics published between the late 1920s and 1950s. Golden Age comics are known for the establishment of many major comic publishers, characters, and formal trends of the genre. The Golden Age is generally said to have started with the release of *Action Comics* #1 (1938). 17, 85, 88

**Graphic Novel** A comic book of greater length than the standard publication, usually with a self-contained story which often concludes after a limited number of issues. ii, 7, 8, 10, 85

**Harbinger** A superhero who can create doppelgangers which can exist simultaneously throughout the Multiverse. 41, 52–54, 71, 85

**Hardcover** The hardcover format of a trade paperback. Hardcovers often contain supplementary material beyond the titles themselves, including commentary, concept art, and alternate covers. Like trade paperbacks, they contain only a handful of issues. Special hardcovers containing ten or more issues are often called "oversized" or "deluxe"; a hardcover collecting an entire title is an "omnibus"[1]. 79, 85

[1]The title *Doctor Strange* (2015) consists of 20 issues, published from 2015 to 2017. In 2016, Marvel released the first volume, *Doctor Strange Vol. 1: The Way of the Weird*, collecting issues 1–5 in both paperback and hardcover formats. Three more volumes were released thereafter, collecting its fifteen remaining issues. Recently, the title has been again collected into two oversized hardcovers, each containing ten issues.

**Inker** The person responsible for supplying ink outlines to the pencilled pages of a comic book. 62, 80, 85

**Issue** A single, published magazine of a comic book title. 1, 2, 14, 25, 30, 32, 49, 85

**Letterer** The person responsible for supplying typography and font to the pages of a comic book. 62, 85

**Limited Series** A comic title with a predetermined set of issues, contrary to an ongoing series. The limited series format is often used for special events within a universe, including large-scale crossovers. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is a limited series, consisting of twelve issues. ii, 3, 85

**Manga** A style of comics created in Japan with highly stylistic art and often sexually suggestive themes. 62, 85

**Modern Age** see *Modern Age of Comics*. 79, 85

**Modern Age of Comics** The current wave of comics published during the mid 1980s. Modern Age comcis are known for their darker, "grittier", adult-oriented nature. The Modern Age is generally said to have started with the release of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986). 85, 89

**Monitor** a cosmic connected to the positive matter of the Multiverse, and a central figure of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. 37, 39, 40, 51, 75, 85

**One-shot** A specific type of limited series restricted to a single comic book issue. 56, 85

**Panel** A single image in a comic book, often contained by a black border. Comic books often use six to eight panels per page. 7, 33, 34, 41, 52, 56, 67, 71, 85

**Pariah** An immortal and invulnerable superhero cursed to bear witness to any major catastrophic event in the Multiverse. 39, 85

**Post-*Crisis*** The historical period which exists after the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. The post-Crisis timeline consists of the newly rebooted universe and its single Earth. viii, 35–37, 44, 45, 55, 56, 58, 69, 71, 72, 74, 76, 80, 85

**Pre-*Crisis*** The historical period which exists before the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. The pre-Crisis timeline consists of the original Multiverse and its many divergent Earths. viii, 34, 36, 39, 48, 57, 76, 77, 85, 87

**Reboot** The act of revising the established canon of a character or group of characters. A reboot may be used to resolve contradictory history. 2, 27, 30, 32, 37, 73, 77, 80, 85, 90

**Reprint** The re-publishing of a previously-published issue or title. Classic comics are often reprinted for easier mass consumption, since original printings can be incredibly expensive to obtain. 15, 17, 64, 85

**Retcon** Short for retroactive continuity, retcons involve editing pieces of previously-established continuity elements at a later date. Retcons are usually to a smaller degree than full-scale reboots. 2, 44, 54, 85

**Run** The informal term referring to a comic book series written by a specific author. Though run can be used interchangeably with title, some titles may be written by multiple authors if one leaves[2]. 85, 90

**Silver Age** See *Silver Age of Comics*. 27–30, 40, 44, 45, 47, 48, 54, 67–69, 79, 85, 87

**Silver Age of Comics** The second wave of comics published between the mid-1960s and 1970s. Silver Age comics are known for the successful revitalization of many major superheroes following their decline during the 1950s. The Silver Age is generally said to have started with the release of *Showcase* #4 (1956). 27, 54, 62, 85, 90

**Story Arc** A subset of a comic book title concerning a specific narrative event[3]. 47, 85

**Supergirl** The cousin of Superman with a suite of powers similar to his own. viii, 11, 54, 61, 67, 74–77, 85

**Superman** An alien superhero from the planet Krypton with superhuman strength, speed, vision, and flight. 3, 9, 17, 19, 20, 27, 29, 37, 44, 45, 49, 51, 54, 55, 64–66, 70, 73–76, 80, 85

**Title** The formal term referring to an author's take on a character in an ongoing series. Synonymous with the informal run. The superhero Spider-Man has had many titles, overseen by many creative teams, including *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Ultimate Spider-Man*, *The Spectacular Spider-Man*, *Astonishing Spider-Man*, etc.. 17, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25, 27–29, 50, 56, 72, 77, 80, 85, 87, 88, 90

**Wonder Woman** An Amazonian with superhuman strength and reflexes, flight, and immortality. Often uses her Lasso of Truth in battle to bind enemies and compel them to confess information. viii, 11, 18, 20, 27, 29, 37, 44, 45, 54, 61, 67, 70–74, 77, 85

[2]The X-Men achieved wide recognition thanks to Chris Claremont's run of the mutant team

[3]Issues 6–10 of *Doctor Strange* (2015) concerns the story arc "The Last Days of Magic"