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These eight "mystery men" ("super hero" as a term had yet to emerge) had formed a team so as to better battle the forces of evil, though their first meeting in *All-Star #3* consisted only of the JSA swapping stories of their exploits (maybe they should have been called the Mutual Admiration Society). Superman and Batman were mentioned as honorary members "too busy to attend", and comic relief was provided by two would-be crimebusters who crashed the meeting: the Red Tornado (a burly housewife who, unrecognizably female in her baggy disguise of cape, long underwear, and pot with eyeholes for a helmet, cleaned up neighborhood crime) and Johnny Thunder (a good-natured nitwit who commanded a genie-like, animated pink thunderbolt). The whole business seemed pretty laid-back, but in subsequent issues of *All-Star Comics* the JSA went into action against such criminal masterminds as Per Degaton, the Wizard, Brainwave, the Psycho Pirate, and the Injustice Society of the World. There was no shortage of good guys either, and later JSA members included Starman (playboy-astronomer Ted Knight, whose "gravity rod" enabled him to harness the forces of heat, light and gravity), Doctor Mid-Nite (a sightless surgeon who could see in the dark and who, with the aid of goggles that allowed him to see in the light, battled criminals with his blinding "blackout bombs"), Wonder Woman (the amazon adventurer in the star-spangled foundation garment), Mister Terrific, (Terry Sloan, a superb athlete and wealthy genius who turned to crimefighting because he'd run out of challenges in life), Wildcat (a catskin-clad prizefighter turned crimefighter), and Black Canary (florist Dinah Lance, who put her martial arts and moxy to use as a blonde-wigged crimebuster). The JSA were a popular group throughout the forties, and while the members' individual careers varied the team itself lasted until *All-Star #57* as the decade drew to a close and super heroes largely disappeared in the declining comics market of the late forties and early fifties.

As comics fans know, super heroes came back into fashion for keeps in the late fifties and early sixties, and among the first success stories were new characters who were based on the names and concepts of various forties characters (i.e. the Flash, Green Lantern, and Hawkman). Fans hadn't forgotten the originals, though, and the JSA returned. Inspired by the new generation of super heroes, the graying but vital JSAers moved out of retirement into semi-active status, frequently teaming with the modern Justice League of America and making appearances in such books as *Adventure Comics* and a brief revival of *All-Star Comics* in the seventies. As the decades passed the JSA got older (since they had been tied to a specific time period, the forties) but continued to appear on occasion, even spawning *Infinity Inc.*, a group made up of the children and proteges of the JSAers. Still, as the JSA aged, their continued

activity seemed increasingly implausible even for comic books. Rather than see them reduced to codger crusaders, DC gracefully retired the JSA in the eighties by having most of the surviving members zapped into an Asgardian limbo where they were locked in an eternal battle to prevent a Hitler-induced Ragnarok from devouring all existence. Don't you hate it when that happens?

Fans hated it when that happened, and interest in the JSA was sufficient for DC to try and revive the team. So it was that, in a guest star-cluttered *deux ex machina* of a mini-series called *Armageddon: Inferno*, the JSA was rescued from limbo in a series of events too complex to go into here. As a side effect of their time in limbo, the JSAers were physically rejuvenated to some extent, trimming off a few decades so that the seventy-something JSAers



now have the appearance of, say, fifty-something folks with the vitality of people even younger than that. The result: the JSA decide to return to action as semi-retired superheroes advising the next generation of crimefighters while remaining energetic enough to go into action themselves whenever the need arises. Therein lies the premise of the new ongoing *Justice Society of America* series that debuted last summer.

Writer Len Strazewski has carefully balanced his presentation of the JSA as elder heroes, portraying them as a force to be reckoned with while not making them too hard to swallow; for-instance, the Atom gets winded after unleashing his "atomic punch" and Wildcat's legs cramp up every now and again. Artist Mike Parobeck portrays the characters as genuinely older people with various receding hairlines, wrinkles, and excess poundage all around, but it's subtle, and the characters in general have

a distinguished but vital presence, similar to aging moviestars like Sean Connery. In terms of character, Strazewski makes the JSAers credibly impressive, conveying an easygoing wisdom and practical ease in action that comes from decades of experience. From the cool and detached Doctor Mid-Nite to the amusingly crotchety Atom the characters are portrayed consistently and with a surprising degree of humanity. The JSA talk and act more like real people than most current comic characters, perhaps because the writer doesn't have to try to pass off the elder heroes as the kind of flawlessly larger-than-life archetypes who dominate most comic book casts. Strazewski also blends quite a bit of subtle humour into the scripts, and even hints of self-aware satire aimed at such golden-oldie comic book conventions as giant monsters, silly costumes, and melodramatic villains. All in all, the book has often been very enjoyable to read.

Unfortunately, there are problems. One glitch is pacing. While the first and second issues of the series were tightly plotted, subsequent issues have seemed to wander amidst plots and subplots with very little development emerging from a given storyline. In short, not a lot happens, and the conspicuously slow pacing is a fatal blow in a medium that caters to rather action-oriented stories designed to quickly attract and sustain the attention of readers. The series is almost eight issues old and only six of the JSAers have emerged as ongoing cast members, while the rest of the JSA are scattered here and there in various unresolved or wholly unexplored subplots. Most annoying is the raw deal handed the Sandman, the token casualty of the otherwise well-preserved JSA: he suffered a stroke in the first issue of the new series and has been largely forgotten since then. Granted, his condition is an element of realism, but its a frustrating waste given the character's originality and stylishly spooky appeal, and Sandman has long been one of the overlooked gems of the JSA's cast (something DC has apparently recognized with the announcement of the forthcoming *Sandman Mystery Theatre* ongoing series set in the 1930's). While the featured characters have been well-handled, others have been under-utilized. The few new characters Strazewski has added have thus far proven to be no more than annoying distractions: Jesse Chambers (daughter of JSA peers Johnny Quick and Liberty Belle) is a likeable enough character but her unoriginal super-speed powers make her nothing more than yet another Flash clone, particularly glaring since she's hanging around a group whose members include the Flash; even more bothersome is Kiku, a Bahdnesian orphan teen adopted by Johnny Thunder...she basically has "feisty young thing" written all over her, and is becoming very tiresome very quickly. Strazewski would be wiser to concentrate on developing all the various JSA characters themselves, and while the book has in general been entertaining reading it does suffer from slow

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