

COMING OUT OF THE PHONEBOOTH

Comic books are an entertainment medium largely regarded as kid's stuff because of the larger-than-life super heroes who are the most popular stars of comics. In recent years, though, as writers and artists have worked to produce more sophisticated stories, comics have earned the readership of many adults as well. Consequently, comics have more and more often dealt with adult issues. While comics remain a literary genre devoted principally to fantasy adventure, they have also begun to address topics such as sex, drugs, unwanted pregnancies, alcoholism, divorce, and death. With Alpha Flight #106, though, comics take a look at a subject that, until now, they have almost never addressed: homosexuality.

Alpha Flight is a very unusual book to begin with. It made headlines when it debuted some years ago because it was the first comic book to feature a team of Canadian superheroes, created by Canadian writer-artist John Byrne. The team's adventures have been handled by other writers since Byrne left for other projects, but the book, while somewhat diminished in popularity, has continued to feature unique stories with its often bizarre cast of characters. One team member, Sasquatch, has been through a lot of weird doings. At one point he'd been killed, and his spirit came back in the body of a woman, his deceased Alpha Flight teammate, Snowbird (no relation to Anne Murray). Since then he's regained his original body, but now another Alpha Flight member, Northstar, is causing controversy without a gender switch. In the latest issue of Alpha Flight, Northstar confesses to the Canadian public that he is a homosexual, something that's been hinted at about the character for some time in the series. This revelation even made the TV news in a few places, the first time that's happened since Superman and Lois Lane announced their engagement last year (bizarro comparison, huh?). Northstar's revelation has gotten a lot of publicity for Alpha Flight, both positive and negative, and the effects it will have on the book's sales and its upcoming storylines remains to be seen.

Another question is what effect this will have on the character of Northstar himself. In a way, this revelation makes sense for the character. Northstar has always been something of a cynical, aloof character with a quick temper, rather withdrawn and bitter. The revelation of Northstar's sexual orientation provides

further motivation for the character's rather outcast nature. As a mutant (an individual born with super-human powers), Northstar has found himself as something of a societal outsider. Intensifying that feeling of isolation is that fact that he is a French Canadian, an avowed separatist, who even has some past links to terrorism in Quebec. As a mutant and a Quebec sovereignty advocate Northstar is doubly isolated in society, and his homosexual nature makes his insular, bitter personality still more understandable. Strictly from the standpoint of writing it's a logical extension of the character, so long as the book's writer is careful not to let this one trait define the character, making him a stereotype. A comparison could be made to the popular character Iron Man, who is a recovering alcoholic. Iron Man's stories do not deal exclusively with his alcoholism nor should Northstar's stories deal exclusively with his personal life.

Alpha Flight and Northstar aside, the new development in Northstar is a significant development in comics. It's the biggest "coming out" of its kind in mainstream comics, an earlier and lesser example being the Pied Piper in the pages of Flash. It's clear, though that this sort of thing is still pretty taboo. Marvel comics, the company that publishes Alpha Flight, is the biggest comics publisher around, and it usually heralds any new comic event with gratuitously hyperbolic advertising. In the case of Northstar's announcement, though, there was more or less no publicity preceding the story; no wonder, since it's an issue that may be offensive or disturbing to some, and Marvel isn't known for risky innovations these days. As the top comic company Marvel puts out some great stories, but they often avoid dealing with controversial characters and themes (they can't even seem to bring themselves to kill off a character these days, as witnessed by the rivals of Jean Grey, Iron Fist, Adam Warlock, Thanos, The Swordsman, Drax, The Red Skull, Dracula... the list goes on and on). That said, it's rather surprising that Marvel put out a story like this in the first place, though comics on the whole are becoming less and less wholesome, what with maniacal mass murderers like Lobo and Wolverine dominating much of the industry's sales.

Northstar is simply the latest aberration to creep into a medium that is becoming more and more permissive. What's next? It's hard to say, and one wonders if censorship may be looming on the horizon for comics again. That could get very ugly if one considers the altercations comics have had with censors in the past. In the nineteen-forties comics were at the height of their popularity, and guys like Superman and Batman