

by SEAN McQUAID

It's hard to believe, but the Legion of Super-Heroes have been around since the fifties. For those unfamiliar with the team, they were a group of super-powered teenage do-gooders in the thirtieth century, kind of an unholy cross breeding of the boy scouts, the Justice League, and the Jetsons. They were undoubtedly the most squeaky-clean, picture-perfect set of good guys on the comic racks: young, clean-cut, well-mannered, and possessed of nifty super powers ranging from electrical projection (Lightning Lad) to the ability to ingest any substance (Matter-Eater Lad). They were an almost nauseatingly idealistic and garishly clad group of wholesome kiddies who fought for justice in a universe that seemed just about as perfect as they were, Earth being the centre of a technologically advanced and prosperous alliance called the United Planets. The Legion were the perfect heroes for a perfect future, sometimes campy but with an enduring, almost cult-like readership that has sustained the many books spawned by the concept. Still, many readers find it hard to relate with or believe in such a fantastic future. That's why many fans like the new *Legion of Super Heroes* series, since that cozy future has been smashed to smithereens therein.

Now thirty-eight issues old, the current Legion series opens five years after the previous *Legion* title was cancelled, and the future is no longer a nice place to be. The United Planets' economy has crashed, logically enough, from the inevitable draining of its financial and environmental resources with its rampant technological advances. Earth, in the resultant political and economic chaos, fell victim to a secret takeover of its government by the manipulative alien race known as the Dominators, who covet Earth as a breeding ground for genetic irregularities that can be used in their experiments. As a side effect, the now tyrannical earth gov saw the Legion as a threat to its power and initiated a campaign of harassment that led to the group's disbanding and its members drifting apart. By the time the new series opens, the Legion is only a memory, and the focus in early issues was the efforts by some past members to revive the team at a time when the galaxy needs it more than ever. Since then, the series has been concerned largely with the war to free Earth, successful though Earth itself is blown to bits in the end (no, really!), in the latest issue to be precise. The current *Legion* series pulls no punches.

With the grim realities of the new 30th century, *Legion* has developed a stronger following among adult readers and has also cultivated its audience on another level in terms of characterization, with the now-adult Legionnaires in roles ranging from housewives to baseball coaches. It's like watching some

bizarre high school reunion of thirtysomething super heroes, and the writers, Keith Giffen and Tom and Mary Bierbaum, have taken great pains to produce characters with whom readers can sympathize. It's not always pretty, with some Legionnaires developing into casualties, crooks, or turncoats, but the group of adult Legionnaires that eventually develops is a more mature, believable and practical organization in the face of their new challenges, and what keeps a sort of magic in the stories

for old and new fans is that, at the heart of it all, the Legion is still driven by idealism. It's just an older, wiser, and more conservatively dressed Le-

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gion.

All this having been said, the series is not a depressingly serious affair all the time, and can in fact be one of the most delightfully silly series on the market, due largely to the fact that the Legion's huge cast includes more than a few oddballs, such as Matter-Eater Lad, Bouncing Boy, Porcupine Pete, Chlorophyll Kid, Infectious Lass ... the names speak for themselves, and the series often puts a light touch on the proceedings with efforts ranging from humorous interludes to such all-out farces as Matter-Eater Lad and Polar Boy's captivity at the hands of Prince Evillo and M.E. Lad's subsequent stint as a bagpipe player in Hell (don't ask).

As long as you can adjust to the really huge cast, extensive background, and ongoing plot lines, *Legion* is a book that has something for just about everyone (it's currently a good time to jump into the series since they've finally, after thirty-eight issues, resolved the long-running Earthwar storyline). The book's a bit of an acquired taste, but well worth the reading effort if you begin to appreciate the complexity of the stories and the development of the characters. The book's one really weak point is the art; the heavy writing emphasis often leads to dialogue crowding out the artwork and the artwork is usually very compartmentalized and stiffly arranged into solid nine-panel grid; worse yet, the series pencillers have turned in some unattractive, often sloppy drawing, from the perpetually declining Keith Giffen (the man as a penciller often seems to be making no effort, particularly frustrating given his solid work in the past) to the often sloppy Jason Pearson-Karl Story art team (c'mon, guys, do you really need to leave brushstrokes all over your faces and figures at random?). The art is compensated for by the solid writing, though, and with any luck there may be some improvement in the art with the announcement that newcomer Stuart Immonen will be taking over the art chores soon; regardless, *Legion* is a good read, and usually worth the price of admission (for more info on the characters, one good source is DC's first looseleaf *Who's Who* info series from a while back; check with retailers for availability). ■