

By Trent Drake

This Week Featuring The Mighty Marvel-esque Musing Of The Hyperbolic Homage Studios!!! I realize this space has been a little preoccupied with Image Comics over the last few weeks, so I thought it was time to take a Ginsu to the whole Gordian knot of material they send us and review a bunch of the good stuff en masse.

Homage Studios is one of the myriad Image imprints... and if you don't know what Image Comics are by now, CATCH UP!!! This particular group of books is created and owned by Jim Lee (popular fan-fave artist from years on the influential *X-Men*), Whilce Portacio (fan-fave from *X-Factor*...do you sense a pattern here?) and Brandon Choi (not a fan fave, but an ex-lawyer and childhood friend of Lee).

First up is Homage's flagship title, *WildC.A.T.s*.. When this series began a few years back, I read the first issue and thought it an incomprehensible mess. It's gotten much better. Part of this is because Chris Claremont (*X-Men* scribe extraordinaire) has come aboard to write four issues (10-13) worth of solid story, thus recreating one of the most potent creative teams in recent comics history. Another improvement is that Jim Lee has abandoned the "Liefeld's Little Lines" method of illustration and created a style halfway between it and his old Marvel stuff. The result is a much tighter storyline with eye-pleasing artwork and one of Claremont's trademark 'body-possession and history rewriting' storylines, sure to please any *X-Fan*.

On the down side, Claremont's storylines are way too complex to detail here. Subplots are grim and plentiful, but confusing if you miss an issue. The other bummer is the computer coloring, particularly on issue 11. You just don't know where to look.

Otherwise, this is an okay book for curious readers, and a must-have for fans of Claremont. I wonder what will happen when he leaves...

On the other hand, *Gen 13* is less complex and a bit more fun. It's kind of like *New Mutants* meets *Teen Titans* meets Stephen King's *Firestarter*. A bunch of young people are tricked into a government internship program that turns out to be a cover-up for a plan to create a team of super-powered beings. The characters find out they have powers and escape. They also make jokes.

I shouldn't like it. The T-and-A scenes are all-too-frequent (Fairchild bursts out of a negligee... literally!), the story's thin, J. Scott Campbell's females look like Barbie dolls (long legs, inhumanly large mammaries, nice hair), and the 'teen-age' dialogue sounds too forced...but in spite of all that, I like this book!! It's kind of refreshing, actually. The characters are likable, which is a switch

from *Youngblood*. I particularly enjoy the team prankster, Grunge.

One small fear I have is that the book will completely lose its direction when the five-issue mini-series is over, which would leave the characters wandering around like so many *ex-Avengers*. Otherwise, try *Gen 13* if you can find it. It already has a fan following.

To survive the mental and physical attacks, Cray takes up a quest for the Holy Grail, which is in the possession of the Order. At the same time, he becomes unofficial guardian to an honest-to-goodness Miracle Child, who seems to be a second coming in the making.

It's weird, but I found this book to be almost profound despite some pretty hokey religious ties.

torted poses covered in extraneous lines; however, his art is readable and doesn't induce headaches and constipation like Platt's does.

The story is on display here. While there are loads of cliches in terms of action and character development, there are a few high points and at least one major low. The low is all of issue 10, a whiny issue wherein Battalion muses about the future he's seen and how awful, unchangeable and downright depressing it is. You see, Battalion got to see a copy of issue 25 of *StormWatch* during the *Images of Tomorrow* promotion and now he knows that almost everyone on the team is doomed to die. Don't get attached to most of the characters, 'cause they're toast come issue 25. Also, Dwayne Turner's art was unremarkable except for the cop-outs in the action scenes. Meaningless splash panels leave no room for storytelling, which gets relegated to tiny panels and indistinct masses of black. It's frustrating when the best action is depicted in tiny silhouette shots.

The high points? Well, the current plot twists don't mean much if you're not a long-time fan; however, I did develop a certain reserved liking for Fuji, the team brick, who is trapped in a containment suit lest his radiation kill all near him. And issue 12 was a very enjoyable experience in near-death.

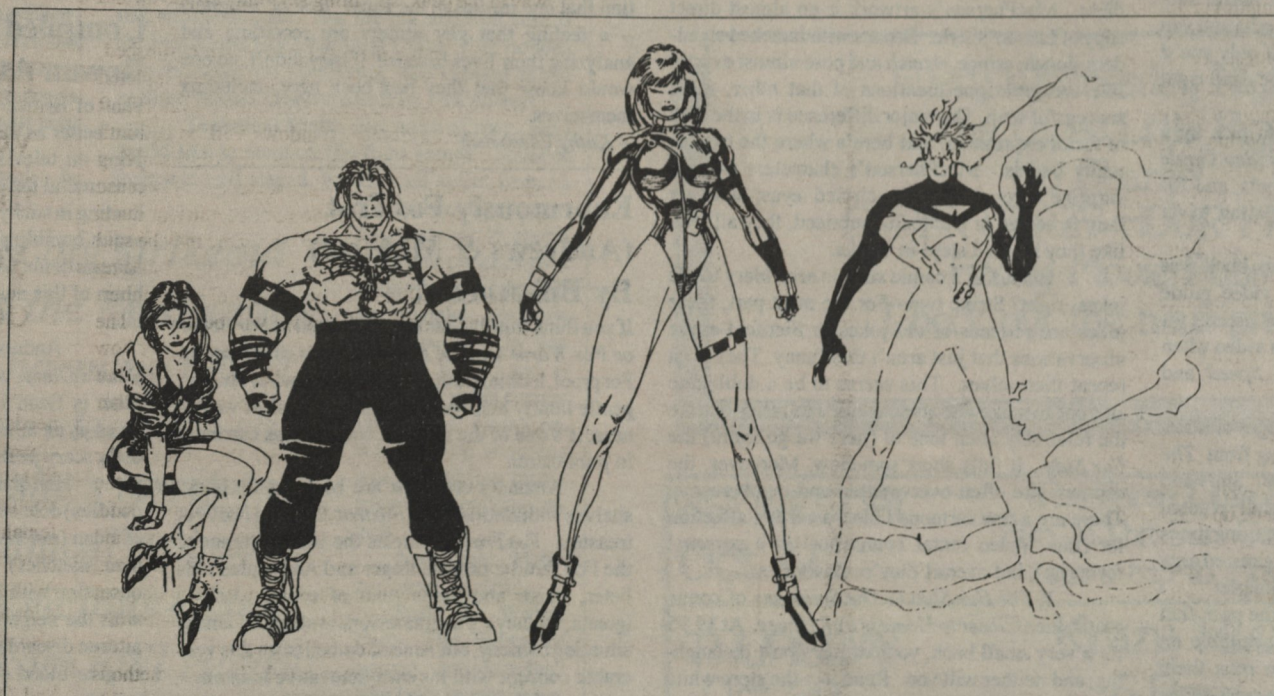
The whole issue recaps the turbulent life of the comatose Hellstrike, and how Fuji manages to bring him back from the threshold of death (which is, incidentally, a park bench in the middle of Nowhere) by giving him a heart-to-heart talk and feeding a few ethereal pigeons. It's really kind of touching.

Unfortunately, I have the same problem with this book that I have with most Image stuff. Namely, where the Hell are they going with this? Many of the stories seem perfectly good as finite series, but could become pointless and contrived after a certain amount of time. *Gen 13* and *Deathblow* will both become interminable if dragged out for too long. Sooner or later, Cray either dies or lives, and then the character loses his uniqueness. And what about the kids of *Gen 13*? After a while, even the *Teen Titans* had to be decently put out of their misery. And the *New Mutants* had to mature (?) into *X-Force*.

Perhaps I should just have faith that these books won't end up like that. But I have to wonder. It's my job.

In summation: the work of Homage studios is agreeable, likable fare, and the Jim Lee art style is much more palatable than most Image books. If you can find the back issues, I recommend *Gen 13*, *Deathblow*, and *WildC.A.T.s*. as the picks of the litter in terms of story...judging the art is up to you.

Next week we'll cover the much-delayed Whilce Portacio title, *Networks*. See ya!



*Union 0*—Just another zero issue on stands crowded with them. While it does shed light on an interesting civil war on Union's home planet, it doesn't seem very meaningful if you haven't read the ongoing series that precedes it. For fans only.

*The Kindred*: Why? Why come up with a mini-series based on characters you kill off in the last issue? The heroes are Grifter, John Lynch, and Backlash—all former or current government stooges who get captured by a group of half-animal men named the Kindred. They have a big, pointless fight scene and the Kindred get turned into pate by a particle beam satellite as our friends escape. Not worth reading unless you're a fan of Grifter...although you do get to see Grifter's costume regenerate between panels. Perhaps that's his oft-mentioned but never used power?

Moving right along, we come to perhaps the strangest of Jim Lee's creations. *Deathblow* is the endlessly twisty tale of one Michael Cray. A former member of Team 7, Cray has received the unsettling news that he's dying of inoperable cancer. Compounding this crippling blow are his angst over his murderous and deceitful life, and the fact that the priests of the Order of the Cross are trying to kill him. And to top it all off, the Black Angel (read: Anti-Christ) is trying to recruit Cray as one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse (which could happen as soon as next issue).

The story is potentially powerful stuff, marred only by being more of a gunfight than a spiritual quest. Cray seems to fall into the role of hero by accident rather than by choice. Still, it seems to work, as Cray becomes a memorable, Clint Eastwood-like, reluctantly heroic curmudgeon.

The artwork's reach also exceeds its grasp. Tim Sale tries desperately to draw in the minimal but powerful Frank Miller style, and doesn't quite make it. Neither his composition nor his drawing skills equal Miller's. The attempt is buoyed somewhat by a deft touch in the coloring: muted browns and sepia tones dominate the production, creating atmospheric eeriness essential to this book. But the big attraction here is story, not art.

Try it. It's much better than it sounds.

Finally, we come to *Storm Watch*. Here we have your average super-team in a strange position: U.N. peacekeepers. That's right. These intrepid, international heroes are stationed on an orbiting watchdog platform called Skywatch. They get dropped into trouble spots to mop up terrorist scum. And despite this gung-ho set-up, it's actually less action-oriented than most of the books reviewed here.

The artwork is typical Image stuff, as rendered by Mat Broome (issues 11 & 12). He comes dangerously close to being a Steve Platt clone by drawing unbelievably muscle-bound figures in con-