

PANELOLOGY



BY SEAN MCQUAID

1993 WAS THE THIRTIETH anniversary of Marvel Comics' Avengers Series, spawning a host of spin-offs and celebratory promotions- so it seemed that an apt way to start the new year would be to review the Avengers family of titles- the core book, and some of the related titles and spin-offs. One could devote an entire magazine to reviewing all the titles featuring past and present members of the Avengers, but for the purposes of this column we'll touch on some of the recent highlights.

Thunderstrike

(New ongoing series)

Creative team: Writer- Tom Defalco; Penciller- Ron Frenz; Inker- Al Milgrom

PREMISE: THOR, GOD OF THUNDER and all around swell guy, decides to leave Earth and his fellow Avengers behind so that he can devote more time to his role as prince of Asgard and kick some cosmic butt. Before leaving, though, Thor passes on a facsimile of his hammer (and along with it, a facsimile of his powers) to his mortal friend and ally Kevin Masterson, whom Thor charges with protecting Earth in his stead. Masterson, obligingly, sets out to do just that, using the costumed alias of Thunderstrike (actually his hammer's name).

Appraisal: It's better than you might expect it to be, though there are obvious flaws. Tom Defalco sustains his love affair with corn by continuing to emulate the worst writing flaws of Marvel founder Stan Lee- overdone thought balloon soliloquies, abominably melodramatic narrative captions, more cliches than you can shake a hammer at, and dialogue that too often sounds contrived (especially long-winded speeches or witty repartee in the midst of heated fight scenes). Still, Defalco has written far, FAR worse things than this, and the endearing Kevin Masterson character seems to bring out the best in him. As was the case in *Thor* and *Avengers*, Masterson retains a refreshingly unique man-on-the-street view of the bizarre and sometimes ridiculous world of super heroes and villains, emerging as an ordinary and gosh-darn-it likeable guy, with an appeal that not even Defalco (Masterson's creator, surprisingly) can wholly stifle. Visually, the series is more or less passable. Penciller Ron Frenz comes across as a competent Jack Kirby derivative with a sense of action if nothing else, while inker Al Milgrom's blunt, scratchy finishes are unattractive but do help solidify Frenz's work and prevent it from becoming too

slickly Kirbyesque. On a final visual note, it's hard to look at Thunderstrike's costume without snickering, especially if you're familiar with Thor. The pseudo-spandex Asgardian garb just doesn't mix all that well with the leather jacket, ponytail, and earring (!).

Spider-Woman

(4 issue limited series)

Creative team: Writer- Roy Thomas; Penciller- John Czap; Inker- Fred Fredericks

PREMISE: DIVORCED mother Julia Carpenter gains Spider-like abilities (enhanced strength/speed/agility, the ability to cling to any surface, and the ability to weave "psychic webs" of tangible mental force) in a secret government experiment, and after a brief career as a government operative, she goes rogue after disobeying orders as a matter of conscience, becoming an independent adventurer and eventually joining the Avengers (West Coast division). As Spider-Woman, Julia tries to juggle the contradictory obligations of superheroics and single parenthood.

Appraisal: It's okay, but that's due as much to the character's appeal as anything else. Veteran writer Thomas (an old favourite) turns in a competent and artful story, but as is his wont it's also a bit turgid in the scripting department. Plot-wise, points of interest include Julia's aforementioned parental dilemma (complicated by the return of her own parents) and the menace of the scary spider-styled trio of villains known as Death Web. Czap's artwork is moody but often sloppy and sparse on detail, a situation exacerbated by the inadequate inking by Fred Fredericks. The two do manage to provide some nice atmospheric action, though, as in the first skirmish between Julia and the grotesque man-spider, Therak (not for the arachnophobic). Good characterization combines with an interesting protagonist and some compelling plot threads to save this poorly illustrated, lacklustre script from being a waste of time and money.

Scarlet Witch

(4 issue limited series)

Creative team: Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning- Writers; John Higgins- Penciller; Mark McKenna- Inker

Cover to *Scarlet Witch* #3



PREMISE: WANDA MAXIMOFF, longtime Avengers member and mutant sorceress whose probability-altering "hexes" cause unlikely and bizarre things to happen at her command, emerges from a long period of traumatic ordeals and a mental breakdown to become the leader of the Avengers' West Coast division (long story). Struggling to find herself and restore her shattered self-confidence, she is now plagued by strange dreams that warn of evil mystical powers stalking her for as-yet-unknown purposes.

Appraisal: This is unquestionably the WORST of the Avengers spin-offs, and one of the worst comics to come down the pike in a while. In fairness to the writers, they

didn't have all that much to work with. Like *X-Factor*'s Havok and Polaris, the Scarlet Witch is one of those characters who has been so thoroughly and so frequently transformed by a succession of writers that whatever's left bears no discernible identity.

After stints as a reluctant terrorist, a veteran super heroine, a housewife, a deranged villainess, a comatose pawn, a powerless shrinking violet and a super heroine again, the Scarlet Witch emerges from her convoluted and sometimes contradictory past as a character in search of a personality- in the eyes of both herself and the reader. Her emerging personality is one of strength and determination undermined by understandable self-doubt, but it's not enough to engage the reader, and Wanda often comes across as a rather whiny and pathetic protagonist (i.e. screaming like some horror movie bimbo when confronted by the spooky Master Pandemonium). The scripting is poor, the plotting unremarkable, and the average reader may have trouble getting the full impression and/or significance of Wanda's checkered past. For that matter, don't even attempt to figure out where this story fits into the continuity of the Scarlet Witch and the now-disbanded Avengers West- the errors

in portraying the West Coast team are legion, and besides, the Avengers clutter up the story and distract from the already weak main character, anyway. For that matter, the portrayal of Wanda herself seems inconsistent sometimes, depicting her hex power as a sort of all-purpose mystical zap, for instance. To top it all off, Higgins and McKenna's art is barely a rung or two above *Archie* comics on the evolutionary ladder- sparse, slick, poorly laid out stuff that makes the story look even more insubstantial. *Scarlet Witch* attempts to mix elements of superheroics, sorcery, and science fiction, but succeeds on none of these levels--a fluffy fiasco.