

ComiColumn

by SEAN MCQUAID

Welcome to ComiColumn, the newest and perhaps strangest branch of the X-PRESS's Arts & Entertainment department. Many students (and many non-students) read comic books and this column is designed to showcase new and existing publications for readers, dealing out criticism and praise where each is deserved, as in the case with our first subject, Marvel's new *Spider-Man 2099*, which deserves a bit of both. *Spider-Man 2099* is a new ongoing, monthly series from the ubiquitous Marvel Comics group. While the book's name is familiar, it's not referring to the same web-spinning wonder who seems to appear in about half of Marvel's books every month. The Spider-Man in question here is an altogether different hero who makes his home in the late twenty-first century, the year 2099 as the book's title indicates. This comic is actually the first in a small series of titles set in the 2099 era of the "Marvel Universe" continuity and is receiving a lot of attention as the flagship title of this "Next Generation" line-up. Does it deserve the hype? Not necessarily, but the book on its own merits is a lot better than you might expect.

One of the things that turns some readers off from the start is the very concept of a 2099 Spider-Man. Marvel has shown (especially in recent years) a nasty tendency to take their popular characters and concepts and milk them for all they're worth, cheapening the original creation with overexposure and meaningless spinoffs (the megapopular *X-Men* spawning such things as Rob Liefeld's abominable *X-Force*, for example). The natural assumption in this case was that Marvel would create a cheap, future-era clone of ol' Spidey, but they've been considerably more original than that. The new Spider-Man, a brilliant young geneticist and wisecracking upstart named Miguel O'Hara, has no relation to our present-day Spidey, Peter Parker; however, he's inspired by the legend of the original Spider-Man in his research on ways to give humans superhuman powers by imprinting the genetic code of another creature on their cellular structure. In the story, O'Hara (and the writer Peter David through O'Hara) admits that this research is inspired partly by the sci-fi/horror classic *The Fly*, and partly by the original Spider-Man, who took on superhuman abilities based on those of a spider after being bitten by a radioactive spider in a freak lab accident. (okay, so it's not *Masterpiece Theatre*.) When Miguel tries to use his own genetic manipulator to nullify the effects of an addictive drug that his shady corporate employer had slipped him in an effort to ensure his loyalty, things go grotesquely awry due to the sabotage of the machinery by a jealous rival researcher, resulting in Miguel's being imprinted with the genetic code of a spider and mutating accordingly (don't you hate when that happens?). He does get augmented strength, agility, and the ability to cling to walls like Peter Parker, but he also develops fangs and hooked fingers. Miguel then faces not only drug addiction and coping with his new mutation and



powers, but he's also pursued by the law on behalf of his employers, Alchemax, who want him back at all costs after he pulls a vanishing act. Miguel becomes a fugitive and takes on the identity of Spider-Man, clad in a unique black-and-red costume equipped not with web-line shooters but with webbed "airfoils" that allow him to glide between the towering buildings of the future metropolis he prowls. The result here is a character who is visually, mentally and physically distinct from the original Spider-Man, battling an evil corporate empire of the future instead of the common criminals of the present. It's the same Spider-Man concept of an urban crusader who contends with both the law and the lawless in his city, but it's a different crusader and a different city.

A lot of this is probably due to Peter David, the series writer, who has made the bestseller lists with his futuristic, sci-fi novels, including various popular "Star Trek" novels such as *Vendetta* and *Q-in-Law*. David's experience in science fiction is put to good use here as he and artist Rick Leonardi craft a future society that is fantastic but seldom implausible, a metropolis where the buildings have been expanded further upward into the sky where people travel among the buildings in small hovercrafts, such as those driven by "The Public Eye," the future city's Big Brother-style police force. There are subtle touches of future technology, too, such as the sometimes amusing holographic "girl Friday" who acts as Miguel's secretary, day planner and confidant. Beyond the science fiction elements, David provides a solid story, providing action and suspense and developing well-rounded, believable characters, from the brash but inwardly compassionate Miguel to his vulnerable,