

ComiColumn

By SEAN McQUAID

He doesn't just fight crime ... he plays cruel tricks on it. That's the unique motto of *Slapstick*, a brand new character from Marvel Comics who is currently starring in his own four-issue limited series. From a company that's fond of endlessly regurgitating the same old batch of mutants, skull-shirted vigilantes, and spirits of vengeance, *Slapstick* is a surprisingly original and entertaining new concept. The story concerns class clown Steve Harmon, who stumbles onto an invasion of evil clowns from Dimension X (where else?). Tagging along to rescue his captured friends, Steve is physically warped while crossing the dimensional barrier in an attempt to pursue the clowns into their own dimension. The resulting molecular destabilization leaves Steve's body in a state resembling silly putty, but he's rescued by a wacky scientist who, with his goofy assistants, bears a disquieting resemblance to the Marx brothers. They provide Steve with gloves that stabilize his molecular structure so that he becomes solid, albeit in a form resembling a cartoon character. The gloves allow him to return his human form at will, and while in cartoon form his molecularly unstable body can be spindled, folded, and mutilated without harm, rendering him virtually indestructible, and the gloves are linked to a "spatial pocket" where small items such as clothing and weapons can be stored and made to appear seemingly from nowhere. The long and short of it is that Steve becomes a living cartoon character of sorts, and his first mission using his new found abilities is to thwart the evil clowns and their master, a sort of sinister little jack-in-the-box with delusions of conquest.

It's a very innovative and refreshingly off-the-wall book, and writer Len Daminski is very aware of it, occasionally making fun of his subjects and frequently taking pokes at a lot of the comic industry's sacred cows. The story opens with a depiction of the doomed planet Krypton exploding, and with a cavalier "so much for them" caption the writer launches into the story at hand. All readers should be able to grasp a lot of the book's absurdist humour, but there's more than a few in-jokes like the Krypton intro aimed specifically at comic fans, including a welcome *Punisher* satire and an absolutely hilarious reference to the origin of DC Comics' original Robin character (without giving it away, sharp-eyed readers should keep an eye out for a certain circus poster). Kaminski manages to capably introduce the character, concept, and supporting cast in the first issue, and the pacing is capable though the action beyond the origin elements is pretty standard stuff, the inevitable Marvel fight scene, though it's done in a cartoon style that may elicit more than a few chuckles.

James Fry, soon to become the regular artist of *Moon Knight*, gets a chance to show off his unique talents as the penciller of the series. He's excellent at maintaining variety in the depiction of the characters rather than drawing from types, and his work can be very expressive, allowing him to shift with relative ease from the cartoony to concrete realism and vice versa, something that a similar project, DC's recent *Plastic Man* revival, failed to do successfully. It's a visually eclectic book, but consistent thanks to Fry and inker Terry Austin.

A striking thing about the series is that, no matter how original it is, it draws on a wide variety of influences like most character concepts before it. Most obvious is the influence of Steve Ditko, to whom the story is dedicated. The story's youthful, lighthearted tone is reminiscent of Lee and Ditko's early *Spider-Man* stories, and the visuals exhibit a strong Ditko influence; in fact, both story and art bear strong resemblances to Ditko's original version of the Creeper in DC's *Showcase* series: both *Slapstick* and Creeper are clownish, maniacally laughing characters who are rescued by scientists to fight an oppressor and are given enhanced durability and the ability to take on a bizarre form instantaneously. The concepts are different enough to avoid duplication, but like many similar comic characters they draw on identical basic inspirations. The manic, cartoony *Slapstick* is still an original in his own right, though, and with any luck he may become Marvel's next sleeper hit.

