

SEAN MCQUAID

DILIGENT PANELOLOGIST THAT I AM, I feel odd admitting that my familiarity with the upstart company Image Comics was, until recently, minimal at best. I ignored their debut release, *Youngblood*, on the grounds of my familiarity with Youngblood creator Rob Liefeld (whose much-hyped *X-Force* was inexcusably pathetic). I did, however, browse a few other Image offerings: Jim Lee's *WildC.A.T.S.*, and Todd McFarlane's *Spawn*, for instance. Since then, I've sampled tons of their books and gotten an inkling of the bigger picture.

For the uninitiated, Image Comics is a relatively new company that has become an industry giant virtually overnight, proving that the field had room for not only isolated independent success stories like *Elfquest* and *Cerebus*, but also for whole entire companies capable of competing with the big two (the eternally dominant Marvel and DC Comics).

Image is most famous for its creators: its writers and artists retain ownership of the characters and concepts they create for Image books, whereas other companies usually claim ownership of all the characters they publish as a matter of course. The Image artists (Rob Liefeld, Jim Valentino, Todd McFarlane, Whilce Portacio, Jim Lee, Sam Kieth, Erik Larsen, Marc Silvestri, et. al.) were popular comics creators (most of them defectors from

Marvel) who banded together to create their own company.

Since the above gentlemen are all visual artists, Image's initial offerings were understandably (and in some cases deservedly) pegged as being all flash and no substance--after all, Liefeld and McFarlane had failed miserably in their initial writing attempts at Marvel (*X-Force* and *Spider-Man*, respectively). Most Image titles have a tendency for sound and fury signifying nothing.

One disappointment is how the Image books often seem to out-Marvel Marvel, incorporating the worst elements of the company they escaped: i.e. sex (cheesecake art galore), and the mighty Marvel penchant for all-out action (taken to new extremes of senseless violence and carnage). Big panels and splash pages abound, with a heavy reliance on spectacle, and many Image Comics are one big fight scene (*Brigade*, *Prophet*, *Cyberforce* and numerous other titles spring to mind).

What's most disturbing is Image's seemingly cavalier attitude towards violence. Comic books are traditionally a violent medium, but many Image books go to the extreme in that even their "heroes" seem to think excessive violence and even murder are not only acceptable ways of resolving disputes, but routine. McFarlane's *Spawn* thinks nothing of pulping two gangsters in a recent issue, and

Liefeld's *Youngblood* seem a strangely ruthless bunch-- Shaft (an archer whose arsenal includes a variety of non-lethal "trick" arrows), thinks nothing of perforating an opponent on occasion, and in *Brigade* # 25 the Youngblood team ruthlessly stalks and slaughters most of the title characters.

This is worrisome on two levels-- as unimaginative storytelling, and as potentially disturbing content: most Image readers are kids, and even if that doesn't worry you, the last thing we need is anyone provoking another censorship-fest in the comics biz. More than a few "general" readership books (like Marvel's *Hellstorm* and Image's *Violator*) should really carry a mature readers label to deprive impressionable kiddies and lurking censors of their respective unsavoury kicks.

Paradoxically, these books are often over-written in terms of scripting-- tons of unnecessary dialogue and captions combine with incredibly busy, over-detailed artwork to induce something not unlike a cerebral haemorrhage if read in one sitting (i.e. the *Kindred*, which like many Image books comes with a byzantine backstory astonishing for such a young company). Image's chief problem, basically, is excess. Big biceps, big breasts, and big guns are the order of the day.

Okay, before you expect me to lead you all in a chant of "crucify them," I should add

that Image most certainly has its good points (and hey, gang, this is all meant as constructive criticism of a company that has great potential). The concept of creator-owned comics makes both artistic and ethical sense no matter how you slice it, and the medium's recognition of creators' rights (a process accelerated by Image) is long overdue. Moreover, Image has very good production values: their comics are all printed on high quality glossy paper stock (at reasonable prices), which helps showcase another of their greatest strengths: colouring. Image's lavish, complex, computerized colouring is among the most sophisticated in the medium.

A few Image titles deserve a positive nod before I sign off: Erik Larsen's *Savage Dragon* has a great sense of fun sadly lacking in most comic books (and it takes more than a few nifty satiric pokes at said comics), Sam Kieth's *The Maxx* is one of the most mind-bendingly imaginative comics fantasies since *Little Nemo*, and McFarlane's *Spawn* is slowly but surely developing into a minor masterpiece light-years ahead of his *Spider-Man*. Heck, even Rob Liefeld's *Youngblood* is considerably more palatable than his (pause to suppress a shudder) *X-Force*. Expect to see more of the good, the bad and the ugly of Image in our reviews in the months to come as we explore their titles (and everyone else's) in more depth

PANELOLOGY



COMIC REVIEW

By Trent Drake

Title: *Violator*

Writer: Alan Moore

Artist: Bart Sears (1-2), Greg Capullo

Company: Image

Issues: 1,2,3

Cover Price: \$2.65- \$2.75 Canadian

EVERHAVE ONE OF THOSE DAYS WHEN absolutely nothing goes right? You wake up, your cereal's full of moths, the milk's gone bad, the dog ate your car and you're late for class because the bus driver doesn't stop on the right street? Sure you have.

And in case you thought that sort of thing doesn't happen to comic book characters, you should take a look at the *Violator*. A short background note: The *Violator* is a popular villain from the pages of Todd McFarlane's *Spawn*. In the early issues of that series, the title character went to hell (literally!) and accidentally brought this fun-loving gothound back to earth with him. The *Violator*'s habit of dismembering innocent passers-by with a good-natured wisecrack or two quickly made him

almost as popular as the hero of the book, *Spawn*. Now this freakish little demon (whose human form bears a disturbing resemblance to Danny DeVito) has got his own solo book.

This three issue limited series follows the misadventures of our exiled demon pal on the worst day of his unlife. He's lost his demonic powers, the mob is trying to kill him, there's a gun-loving psycho hitman on his tail, he can't get his last victim's head off his hand, and to top it all off, his four full-powered demon brothers are out to make him pay for the inequities of their childhood. And you thought you had it bad. Actually a pretty simple story, the mood of the comic (bloody death and scads of over-the-top-violence with black humor as an added attraction) is helped immensely by the presence of Alan Moore as writer. Well known and well respected in the industry, Alan made a name for himself on such books as *V For Vendetta* and the British comic *2000 A.D.*, where he worked on features like *D.R. and Quinch*. In all honesty, he was much better in those books than he is here.

Still, his trademark sick humor shines through in spots. The Admonisher (the aforementioned assassin) is basically a Punisher rip-off but gives his victims a stern talking-to as he

blows their brains out. Then there's the *Violator*'s four brothers: Vaporizer, Vindicator, Vandalizer, and the ever-indecisive Vaccillator. Clearly, they're mad at *Violator* because he got the coolest, most demonic name. They show up to kill their bro, but they run into the Admonisher and, for all their demonic rantings, they just can't seem to get past him. The super-violent, ultra-gory fight that ensues is the funniest thing in the whole book. And of course, the main character gets to do a few fun things too, like playing Ventriloquist with a dead mobster's head (and then getting it stuck on his arm), tricking *Spawn* into restoring his demonic powers and thrashing Vandalizer into little bitty pieces.

The dialogue is also good for a few chuckles. "Real men don't wear flesh!" "You despicable, loathsome, slobbering pieces of Helltrash! Now you're really going to get told off!" "Why doesn't one of you just jump on him until he's dead??" And my fave: "Hey, maybe I can do that thing, y'know, with the spine, where the arms and legs twitch and we all sing 'Saturday Night Fever'?" Heh, heh, heh.

The artists on the series are another story. Bart Sears is a good artist, yes. His stuff

here looks good, yes. But it's so gory and cluttered that it's hard to make out what's going on sometimes. Mix in those four demons and it gets even harder to make out. And the blood and gore is so gut-wrenchingly accurate that the humor of the scene is lost as you run for the bathroom. But at least the art is well-rounded. The characters are three-dimensional and consistent from all angles, and Sears uses some interesting points of view. Capullo, who takes over in issue three, isn't as good as Sears. His lines are more random and haphazard, and his grasp on anatomy seems a bit shaky in the scenes with *Spawn* (way too many abdominals, man!). Other than that, it's okay. Still, it really pisses me off when artists skip out in the middle of a limited series for no apparent reason. It destroys the whole story flow when you have to adjust to a new art style in the middle of a story arc. Overall, *Violator* is a pretty good read, with lots of blackly humorous overtones. It can be hard to read though, because all the gruesomeness gets in the way of the story and makes you want to throw up. Definitely for mature readers, not for kids, sensitive types, the old or infirm, or those people who make the "Violence Makes Victims Of Us All" commercials.