

# Science Fiction and Fantasy: New Works of the Imagination<sup>1</sup>

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Science fiction and fantasy are complex genres, incorporating a wide array of ideas and concepts within their boundaries. Science fiction ‘is so diversified a mode,’ wrote J. A. Cuddon, it ‘has such a range of form and content, that, ultimately, it eludes definition’ (1999: 791). Its ‘sister genre,’ fantasy, is a similarly ‘vast and varied field’ (Attebery 2018: 333). Nevertheless there are common tropes in both genres that are immediately recognisable, for instance spaceships and robots for science fiction, or swords and magic for fantasy. Science fiction *has* been defined, for example by Christopher Rowe as:

[. . .] encompassing adventure stories featuring futuristic and/or extraterrestrial elements and settings (“soft” SF), as well as idea-driven narratives exploring the consequences of scientific discoveries or other paradigm-shifting events (“hard” SF or speculative fiction).  
(2022: 281)

While Essi Varis draws on Hume to define fantasy as:

[. . .] both a sub-genre of speculative fiction and a strategy of narration or world building that presents obvious, often magical or supernatural divergences from common knowledge concerning the real world [. . .]  
(2022: 107).

Yet as these outlines make clear, the complexity and scope of each genre means that no single image or text is adequate to summarise them in their entirety. This chapter is no exception. Each of these fields is substantial on its own terms, and it would certainly not be possible to cover the whole of either of them in a comprehensive way even in an essay several times the length of this one. I therefore make no claims to completeness here (for more on genre in comics, see Labarre 2020). Instead, this chapter offers a survey of some of the ways in which these genres have manifested in the American graphic novel, and considers how they have influenced or been influenced by related genres. My intention here is to pick out several interesting currents and points of connection or development within the genres, but not to lay claim to a “complete” understanding of either field.

## Foundations

Just as modern science fiction and fantasy novels have roots in shorter forms such as the short story and the novella, particularly those found in the pulp magazines and journals of the 1920s and 30s, the genres’ presence in the *graphic* novel is presaged by shorter formats. Newspaper comic strips were particularly important in the early years of comics. Among the most iconic of the early strips was Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905-1911) and *Little Nemo in the Land of Wonderful Dreams* (1911-1914), whose protagonist, the titular Nemo, traversed a bizarre and fantastical dreamscape in every weekly episode, with large-format colour pages providing a sense of scale and impact few strips could match. McCay’s detailed style was similarly effective in evoking a sense of the fantastical as something that could sit within an ostensibly realistic

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Ian Horton and Roger Sabin for their suggestions and feedback on this chapter.

context: buildings looked like real places someone could live, for example, at least until they grew legs and started walking about the city. Although the oddities encountered by Nemo ultimately have a mundane explanation (they are simply dreams), the strips often express a notion of fantasy along similar lines to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with the characters' physiologies proving endlessly malleable and a huge range of talking animals, outlandish scenarios, and odd technologies on display. As Kerry Roeder has observed, '[r]eferences to circus posters and Coney Island thrill rides,' similarly 'abound in [McCay's] designs' (2022: web) and further diversify the strips' fantastical elements.

Later newspaper comic strip *Buck Rogers*, which launched in 1929, initially as an adaptation of Phil Nowlan's novel *Armageddon 2149 A.D.*, popularised many of the now common elements of science fiction in the daily newspaper comic strip format, including: 'rocket-powered space ships, antigravity belts, alien inhabitants of other worlds, space pirates, bubble-domed undersea cities, scientifically extended life spans, and much more' (Horn 1996: 70). As Maurice Horn has observed, the influence of the strip was immense and it 'came to typify interplanetary "space opera" so thoroughly that for the next five decades, science fiction of any sort was popularly known as "that crazy Buck Rogers stuff"' (1996: 70). Similar themes proliferated in later newspaper strips, perhaps most notably *Flash Gordon*, first published in 1934. *Flash Gordon* pitted its titular protagonist against crude Asian stereotype Ming the Merciless from the planet Mongo, with artwork by noted artist Alex Raymond.

Fantasy also featured in comics around this time, with Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant* launching in 1937 and ushering in an era of ostensibly realistic historical adventure set during the time of King Arthur and the court of Camelot. As Horn notes, Foster 'knew he was playing fast and loose with several centuries in presenting King Arthur's fifth-century world with mostly Norman castles and eleventh-century armor' but nevertheless 'created the right medieval mood for the strip' (1996: 249). Despite Foster's 'own preference [for] heroic realism', which is reflected in the drawing style he used for the strip, '[t]he saga began with a swirl of fantasy that befits the legend of King Arthur' (Horn 1996: 248). Of note was the origin of Valiant's weapon the Singing Sword, created by the same sorcerer as King Arthur's blade, Excalibur. Alongside comic strips, comic books were also engaging with classic science fiction and fantasy works: 1941 saw the launch of *Classic Comics*, later retitled *Classics Illustrated*, which featured adaptations of major works including Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*, and H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, among others. The series has been in and out of print for decades, and genre fiction remains a popular choice for adaptations both in *Classics Illustrated* itself, and more generally.

### **(Re)Formation**

A little over a year after *Prince Valiant's* debut in the newspaper comic strips, June 1938 saw another important development with the publication of *Action Comics* #1, a comic book that heralded what many have described as the start of a new genre: the superhero. Superman, making his debut in this issue, was partly inspired by religious and mythological characters; co-creator Jerry Siegel recounted coming up with: "'a character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one. Only more so.'" (quoted in Goulart 1986: 84). As "'tremendous science fiction fans,'" Siegel and collaborator Joe Shuster were also aware of the work published in science fiction magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales*, as well as

“‘interested in the comics field [. . .] [where] the two outstanding adventure strips were *Buck Rogers* and [Hal Foster’s] *Tarzan*” (quoted in Daniels 2004: 11).

Both fantasy and science fiction are evident in the origins of Superman: ‘As a distant planet was destroyed by old age, a scientist placed his infant son within a hastily devised space-ship, launching it toward Earth!’ (Siegel & Shuster 2006: 4). Subsequently we learn that ‘When the vehicle landed on Earth, a passing motorist, discovering the sleeping babe within, turned the child over to an orphanage’ (Siegel & Shuster 2006: 4). Here we find the clear outlines of a science fiction hero in the (at this point unnamed) alien species, a spaceship and a desperate scientist launching his son into the stars to save him. Aspects of science fiction thrived in the Superman comics over the years, with the character facing mad scientists, robots, atomic superweapons and ‘glass sheathed’ volcano cities within the first two years of his existence (Siegel & Shuster 2007: 9).

Yet there are also hints of a more mythological or religious conceptualisation: Kent’s ‘hastily devised space-ship [launched] toward Earth’ for example, has frequently been connected to Moses’ ‘ark of bulrushes [. . .] daubed with slime and with pitch [. . .] laid [. . .] in the flags by the river’s brink’ (Exod. 2.3). Although recent scholarship has challenged a simplistic reading of early Superman as a representation of Jewish identity, it is not difficult to see in this initial outing at least slight hints of general religious story structures, even if references to Moses or other religious figures such as Christ are ultimately inadequate since the character ‘has been something akin to all of these things, and much more, at one point or another in his long life’ (Lund 2016: 4; on reading Superman’s origin story specifically as Jewish, see also 74-78). Gestures towards religious and mythological figures can also be found in images like the cover of 1940’s *Superman* #4 (Siegel & Shuster 2007: 45), which depicts Superman heaving broken columns above his head in a manner reminiscent of Gustave Doré’s 1866 engraving ‘Death of Samson’, or the cover of *Action Comics* #27 later that year, which showed Superman effortlessly lifting a lion, recalling numerous images of Hercules’ battle with the Nemean Lion (Siegel & Shuster 2008: 18).

Both the scientific and mythological strands were developed in other characters in the nascent superhero genre as well. By the time of his third appearance in 1939’s *Detective Comics* #29, Batman was equipped with high-tech crime fighting gadgets including a utility belt and deadly gas pellets (Kane et al 1990: 29), supplemented two issues later by a ‘batgyro’ and a ‘baterang [sic.]’ (Kane et al 1990: 48); an arsenal that set the stage for a bevy of technological solutions to the age-old problem of crime. His foes too, while generally drawing upon classic criminal archetypes in this early period, did demonstrate some technically minded approaches to criminality, ranging from poison gases to a ‘Dirigible of Doom’ (Kane et al 1990: 13, 68), as well as some inclination towards the supernatural, with *Detective Comics* #38 showing Batman killing two vampires to end their two-issue reign of terror (Kane et al 1990: 66). 1942’s *Sensation Comics* #1 similarly leaned into both mythological and technological forms of fantasy and science fiction in introducing Wonder Woman as possessing ‘the eternal beauty of Aphrodite and the wisdom of Athena – yet whose lovely form hides the agility of Mercury and the steel sinews of a Hercules!’ while also depicting her at the controls of her own ‘silent transparent plane’ (Moulton [1942]: 1).

All three of these superheroes, and the many others that followed in Superman’s footsteps, combined ideas from science fiction and fantasy with other genres such as crime and war, into a form that drew upon existing notions but in that combination came to present something new.

The definition of the superhero genre is at least as elusive as those of science fiction and fantasy, but it is worth drawing attention to two aspects of the genre that clearly contribute both to how it was formed by science fiction and fantasy, and to how it subsequently had an impact on those genres. The first is looseness of inspiration. The superhero genre makes no claims to being a purist representation of the works it draws upon: it loosely connects big ideas in flexible ways. Thus Siegel can describe his inspiration for Superman as a combination of Samson and Hercules, figures drawn from two different narrative traditions, connected by the ‘strong man’ ideal. Similarly, Marston freely mixes Greek characters Aphrodite and Athena with Mercury, from the Roman pantheon. This flexibility remains a recurrent feature of today’s superhero comics, and, if anything, it has multiplied, as enormous numbers of ideas have been combined. The second characteristic to mention here is excess, concisely articulated in Siegel’s description of Superman as “all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one. *Only more so*” (my emphasis). The superhero genre is driven to exceed the bounds of existing genres: going beyond the typical *hero* narrative to become a *superhero* story. In these two characteristics, we see how the superhero genre rearticulates and reforms science fiction and fantasy. While Superman is an example of both, the character and his origin present those genres in a new mode: this is not just science fiction and fantasy, this is *superhero* science fiction and fantasy, in which ideas meet and mingle seemingly arbitrarily, and are magnified to the point of excess.

From their inception, superheroes were a popular and influential genre, but as WWII drew to a close, the public had tired of the genre and dozens of titles were cancelled, falling from a peak of forty titles in 1944 to just three by 1952 (Gabilliet 2010: 34). Into this gap stepped a range of other genres, most notoriously crime (Gabilliet 2010: 36), but also science fiction, perhaps most famously under EC Comics’ *New Trend* line, which included three science fiction and fantasy themed titles: *Weird Fantasy* (1950-53), *Weird Science* (also 1950-53) and later *Weird Science-Fantasy* (1954-55), which was created by a merger of the other two titles. These comics were more straightforwardly science fiction and fantasy, generally without the trappings of superheroes. As might be expected around this time, given the use of atomic weapons in 1945 and the beginning of the Cold War, these comics engaged with post-war anxieties around the destructive potential of science and technology. To give one pointed example, the cover of *Weird Science* #14 (1950) shows a group of robots wandering the devastated landscape of a (presumably) American city. In the foreground, a New York newspaper dated 1952 (that has somehow escaped the destruction) bears the headline ‘U.S. Threatens to Use Hydrogen Bomb to End Atomic War’, while one of the robots asserts to his companions: ‘Our observations were correct! There is no longer any life on this planet!’ (Cochran 2006: 77).

Similar themes appear in 1951’s *Weird Science* #5 (by this point the series had been renumbered, hence the later issue having a lower number). Here, the Atomic War destroys all life on Earth, but before it does a group of scientists build a generational spaceship to carry them and their progeny to a new life on the planet Exodo, nine light-years away. Five hundred thousand years later, Exodon science has developed light-speed travel, and the planet dispatches an expedition to take the now nine-year trip back to see what became of Earth. There they discover a new civilisation of giants (apparently humans, which are much larger than the Exodons who are otherwise human in appearance) and meet a scientist that looks very much like Albert Einstein. He tells them that ‘we here in 1950! We, *too*, face an *Atomic War*!’. Concluding that the population of Earth has ‘not progressed much,’ the Exodons make their escape, while the scientist begins

making plans for an escape of his own alongside the ‘all the great scientists of the world’ (Cochran 2006: 161). Despite its apparent similarity to Superman’s origin story in its depiction of a dying world and an escape to the stars, this narrative remains rooted in human reality; the Exodons are not superpowered saviours, at least not in the way that Superman was a physically mighty individual; they are only people with more knowledge than that of the average human, nudging humanity through the conveyance of that knowledge.

Ultimately the *New Trend* line fell prey, along with many other comics, to censorship following campaigns and actions against the violence, gore and criminality seen in many of them; these new publishing restrictions had a major impact and brought about a resurgence of superhero comics that were perceived as less explicitly violent. Among the titles appearing in the 1960s were *The Fantastic Four* and *The Incredible Hulk*, both of which spoke to similar anxieties to those found in *Weird Science*. In *The Fantastic Four* #1 (1961) a family of explorers undertake an experimental rocket flight to get into space before the Russians: ‘[. . .] we’ve got to take [the] chance. . . unless we want the Commies to beat us to it!’ (Lee & Kirby et al 2005: 9). Once there, the crew are exposed to cosmic rays that bestow upon them a range of superpowers, which they subsequently use to fight criminals, monsters, and madmen, including their arch-nemesis Doctor Doom. In *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (1962), meanwhile, the fear of atomic weaponry was clear as scientist Bruce Banner tests ‘the most awesome weapon ever created by man - - The Incredible G-Bomb!’ (Lee & Kirby 2007: 2). An accident leads Banner to be caught in the bomb’s blast and he finds himself transforming into the powerful and violent Hulk. As well as atomic age anxieties, *The Incredible Hulk* harks back to earlier science fiction, including Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which *Hulk* co-creator Stan Lee cited as an inspiration for the character, in the transmutability of Banner into the Hulk (Lee & Mair 2002: 121). The Hulk’s appearance, initially grey, later green, in both cases tall and muscular, hints at another of Lee’s inspirations: Boris Karloff’s depiction of the creature in *Frankenstein* (Lee & Mair 2002: 120), itself an adaptation of a seminal work of early science fiction: Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel of the same name. More than just a visual connection, *The Incredible Hulk* shares the novel’s preoccupation with the impact and dangers of scientific developments and ambitions (Shelley 2003: xxvii-xxx). Around the same time, Japanese animation was beginning to appear internationally with *Astro Boy*, ‘the first anime to be broadcast abroad’ (Clements & McCarthy 2006: 37) televised in the U.S. from 1963 and (very) briefly adapted as a comic by Gold Key in 1965; the character was later presented in another short-running series from 1987-1989, and a translation of Osamu Tezuka’s original manga, first published in 1951, later followed (Plowright 2003: 40).

Alongside science fiction, fantasy also gained a foothold in these more modern superhero narratives, and, as in the earlier stories, mythologies and religions were key points of inspiration. Of note here is the reinterpretation of Norse mythologies in the character of Thor. Thor’s origin depicts Dr. Don Blake stumbling upon an alien invasion of Earth by ‘The Stone Men from Saturn’ (Lee et al 2020: 2). While fleeing, Blake finds himself in a cave where he discovers a gnarled wooden stick, which, when struck on the ground, transforms him into the Norse god Thor and gives him immense powers (the cane itself becoming Thor’s hammer), which he uses to repel the invasion, before transforming back to Blake to avoid the suspicion of the authorities. Here again we see a combination of science fiction ideas with those of a more mythological nature, bringing together the classic alien invasion plot that populated science fiction films,

comics, and books of the time with nods to broader polytheistic ideas. However, the dual nature of Blake/Thor also allows the story to mould these ideas together in a way that clearly draws upon the superhero tradition as well: Thor is an alter ego for Don Blake just as Superman is for Clark Kent. Furthermore, this relationship enables allusions to Arthurian myth cycles. In the words on the side of Thor's hammer — 'Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of...Thor' (Lee et al 2020: 5) — it is not difficult to see allusions to those adorning the stone and anvil from which the young King Arthur drew his sword: 'Whoso pulleth oute this swerd of this stone and anyvld is rightwys Kyng borne of all Englonde' (Malory 2004: 8). Here we might likewise recall Prince Valiant's Singing Sword, with its relationship to Excalibur and the Arthurian myth cycles.

These texts and others laid the groundwork for Marvel Comics' ascendance as a major publisher of superhero comics. DC Comics likewise found itself revived with successful relaunches of characters like The Flash, Superman, and Batman. As Gabilliet notes, over time these developments narrowed the scope for titles outside the genre and its related fields:

By the late 1960s publishers had become aware that the leading genres of the 1940s and 1950s – western, romance, and war – no longer appealed to their constantly shrinking readership. The revival of superheroes that had boosted the industry in the previous years had shown that the readers of comic books were primarily seeking out content combining science fiction and fantasy. (Gabilliet 2010: 72)

As sales fell, he goes on, '[t]he most sensible solution to remedy the consistent lack of readers was to innovate as much as possible within the limiting framework of the superheroes-fantasy-science fiction generic trio' (2010: 73). The superhero was the lens through which many comics creators focused their narrative concepts, thereby becoming both enabler and constraint. On one hand, superheroes provided a platform for innovation in science fiction and fantasy, both in their narratives, for example in the development of long-running serialised fictions that exceeded the bounds of earlier "one and done" stories and thereby prefigured the graphic novel proper, and in their visuals, for example in what Hatfield has called the "Technological Sublime" in the work of Jack Kirby, artist on *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Journey Into Mystery*: 'the use of high-tech motifs to represent vast forces that are not only ineffable and awful (in the original sense of the word) but also may result in shock, estrangement, or madness' (2012: 146). On the other hand, the popularity of superheroes meant that they constrained possibilities: the combination of superhero science fiction and fantasy was viable, yet straightforward science fiction and fantasy were less so. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, conditions had changed sufficiently that new opportunities were starting to arise, and it is here that the science fiction and fantasy graphic novel began to develop in its own right.

### **Formalisation**

Although fantasy had featured in comics before the 1970s, prior to this point it had only a 'minimal presence' (Williams 2020: 67). Over the course of the decade, however, a general '[explosion] in popularity' for fantasy (Williams 2020: 67) thanks to the release of the game *Dungeons and Dragons*, among other things, made the landscape more hospitable. In 1970, Marvel launched *Conan the Barbarian*, adapting Robert E. Howard's pulp character and '[establishing] a blueprint regularly imitated in the following decade: sword-and-sorcery fantasy with an emphasis on raw-mannered, peripatetic blade-swingers' (Williams 2020: 68). *Conan* was a success and a

second, more adult, title launched in 1974: *Savage Sword of Conan*, featuring evocative colour covers and black and white interiors. That said, Gabilliet has described Conan as a ‘[variation] around the superhero’ (2010: 76-7), reminding us that even when the superheroes were not the obvious offer, they nevertheless exerted a cultural gravity, even on those works that appeared to break from them. One could *produce* superhero comics or pseudo-superhero comics, or *resist* superhero comics via the underground or alternative scenes, but by this point superheroes had become the de facto “mainstream” in terms of cultural consciousness.

If *Conan* was an attempt on Marvel’s part to have its cake and eat it by presenting an “alternative” to superheroes that was also a sort of superhero, alternative forums for science fiction and fantasy were starting to appear as well. The French science fiction anthology comic *Métal Hurlant* launched in 1975, having been ‘partly inspired by the liberating ideals of the American underground [comix]’ (Sabin 1993: 71), followed in 1977 by an English-language version called *Heavy Metal*. Both titles proved highly influential and were a means by which European works by creators including Moebius, Philippe Druillet, Jacques Tardi and Enki Bilal, among many others, were imported into the US and translated into English.

By the late 1970s, the arrival of the ‘Direct Market’ (a development I do not have space to discuss here but which is well covered in Gabilliet’s *Of Comics and Men* (2010: 143-6)) had enabled the establishment of alternative publishers that *were* financially viable (at least temporarily), even in the face of Marvel and DC’s substantial market presence and a comics marketplace that was in a general decline from the heights of millions of sales in the 1940s (Hajdu 2008: 87). Among these alternatives was Canada’s Aardvark-Vanaheim, which published Conan parody *Cerebus*, starring the titular barbarian aardvark starting in 1977; the series concluded with issue #300 in 2004. In North America, meanwhile, WaRP Graphics was responsible for the publication of Wendy and Richard Pini’s *Elfquest* from issue #2 onwards. The title launched in 1978 and concluded its first volume in 1984. What made *Cerebus* and *ElfQuest* notable, beyond their being substantial fantasy-genre comics that managed to sustain a presence well beyond their initial few issues, argues Paul Williams, is that ‘they were published continuously, and finished approximately when they were scheduled to end’ (2020: 67). Here then, we see the beginnings of the fantasy graphic novel as a discrete object, rather than purely in terms of segments of an ongoing narrative of the sort seen in superhero comics.

### Franchises

In the 1980s, ‘the term “graphic novel” entered common parlance’ (Sabin 1993: 235) with the publication of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Maus* and *Watchmen*. Among the key publishers to emerge during the 1980s was Marvel’s imprint Epic Comics, spun-off from anthology magazine *Epic Illustrated* in 1982. In addition to original works, Epic translated some important titles into English for the first time, including Alejandro Jodorowsky and Moebius’ *The Incal* (translated from French) and Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira* (from Japanese). 1986 saw the launch of Dark Horse, a publisher that is perhaps now most famous for Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* comics, but with a storied history outside these as well.

Dark Horse is a good example of a publisher that extensively published licensed works, using the existing popularity of those licenses to build a business strategy in which original titles were presented, but the risk of launching those new lines was offset by the relatively safe works with a pre-established audience. Dark Horse was not the first publisher to do this, but it was particularly

active in cultivating and developing licenses like *Alien*, *Conan*, *Predator* and *Star Wars*. As the publisher's own website puts it:

While licensed projects had been around for decades, most publishers devoted few resources to titles they did not own. Dark Horse took a different tack by plotting stories and using top talent to create comics series that were essentially sequels to popular films. (Dark Horse 2019: web)

As the mention of 'comics series that were essentially sequels to popular films' here implies, comics and graphic novels had long provided opportunities to science fiction and fantasy properties for expansion. The "unlimited" budget and consistency of imagery possible in a drawn image enabled a more diverse and convincing set of "special effects" than might be achievable within the constraints of a production budget. Moreover, the thematic overlap between these properties and the 'superheroes-fantasy-science fiction generic trio' made the genres obvious fits for licensing. Nor was the direction of travel one-way: adaptations of comics have long been popular and remain so today. These influences continually impact and reform both sides of the relationship: science fiction and fantasy in other media feed into comics, and comics influence the genres in other media. As *Star Wars* creator George Lucas has written, to give just one example: 'EC Comics had it all: rocket ships, robots, monsters, time travel and laser beams. [. . .] It's no coincidence that all of those are also in the *Star Wars* movies, because EC Comics had an indelible impact on me' (Cochran 2006: 7).

More recently established publishers such as IDW (launched in 1999) have also managed to make this approach work. That said, there is risk inherent in a license-focused approach: if the licence holder refuses to renew the licence, it puts an end to the line at the publisher. Again, Dark Horse is an instructive example: in 2009, Disney bought Marvel Entertainment (including Marvel Comics); in 2012, Disney also bought *Star Wars*. In 2014, Dark Horse lost the *Star Wars* licence to Marvel, with its last *Star Wars* comics being published in 2015. In 2019, Disney bought 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox, and the following year Dark Horse also lost the licences for the Fox-owned *Alien* and *Predator* franchises to Marvel. Separately, the publisher had also lost the *Conan* licence to Marvel in 2019, having held it since 2003. These developments have also impacted narratively on these properties: following Disney's acquisition of *Star Wars*, the company decreed that the "Expanded Universe", i.e. all *Star Wars* novels, comics and video games etc., would now be described as Star Wars Legends, and identified as narratively non-canonical. Newer works, such as Marvel's *Star Wars* comics, *would* count as canonical alongside releases such as the Disney produced film trilogy (Episodes VII-IX). While this is a minor reframing of fictional "histories," it points to a shift in science fiction and fantasy in the American graphic novel. As it becomes increasingly difficult to produce high-profile genre works without the backing of a corporation that can finance large special effects and marketing budgets, and as those corporations become increasingly homogenised, the possibilities for diverse representations are arguably in decline because works within the franchise model are required to toe the company line, aesthetically, narratively and commercially. This means adhering to tightly controlled metanarratives – stories must "fit" pre-determined timelines rather than having room to experiment and develop new ideas in parallel to, but without impact upon, "official" texts (for more on the effects of media consolidation see Labarre 2020: 23-4).

## Flourishing

Although the homogenisation of culture behind large corporate brands can be understood as problematic, big companies can also provide the resources and support necessary to nurture more diverse concepts and creators if those companies have the will. We have already touched on this briefly in mentioning Marvel's Epic Comics imprint, but in 1993 it was DC that launched perhaps the most significant publishing initiative in comics science fiction and fantasy since the launch of *Heavy Metal* in the 1970s: the Vertigo publishing imprint. Under the aegis of Karen Berger, Vertigo launched or maintained several significant science fiction and fantasy series. Some of these series, such as *Swamp Thing* and *The Sandman*, had previously been published by DC Comics, but were transferred to Vertigo and have since come to be associated heavily with the imprint: *The Sandman* is arguably Vertigo's flagship title. Written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by various artists, a creative process that gives it a strange and fluid visual aesthetic crossing a wide range of styles, *The Sandman* tells the story of Morpheus, also known as Dream of the Endless, as he interacts with various conceptual entities, including his siblings: Death, Desire, Destiny, Destruction, Despair and Delirium. The title integrates many genres in a comic that defies easy classification, incorporating superheroes, religious imagery and Shakespearean players among many other themes and ideas. In its range of bizarre characters, strange locations and a sense of long-running decline, particularly in that of the lead character whose own demise represents a key theme of the series, *The Sandman* evokes a blend of fantasy texts ranging from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* through to Mervin Peake's *Gormenghast* and many more. This melding of influences is concisely illustrated in the contents of Morpheus' library, which is stocked with books completed by their authors in their dreams. Among the luminaries on its shelves are J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis Carroll, and Lord Dunsany (Gaiman et al 2007: 37). Through its concerted engagement with dreams, the series also connects (sometimes through direct visual references) with similar ideas to those explored by Winsor McCay's in his *Little Nemo* newspaper comics from the early 1900s (Gaiman et al 2006: 284-5), and thereby to the more whimsical forms of fantasy explored through those strips. In 1991, the series won the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story, 'the only monthly comic in history to win a literary award' (Bender 2000: 74).

### **Freedoms**

Although the Vertigo imprint was ultimately retired and its titles moved to the publisher's DC Black Label imprint in 2020, the 1990s also gave rise to another important publishing initiative that remains vital at the time of this writing in 2021: Image Comics. Founded in 1992, Image was established when a group of disgruntled but popular artists took advantage of their superstar status to leave Marvel and DC and write, draw, and publish their own comics. Central to Image's founding concept was creator ownership: Image's creators retain the rights to their own works, a stark contrast to publishers like Marvel and DC, where the companies own all rights to creators' inventions.

Given the background of the publisher's founders, it is unsurprising that the initial titles to come from Image were superhero books. Today though, the publisher offers a diverse set of works. This is partly because creator-ownership has made Image attractive to a wide range of creators, and by the time of this writing in 2021 it has become home to a plethora of titles in the science fiction and fantasy genres. Straddling the two is Brian K. Vaughn and Fiona Staples' *Saga*, which the company describes as 'an epic space opera/fantasy' drawing from *Star Wars* for its inspiration

in telling a story about ‘two lovers from long-warring extra-terrestrial races, Alana and Marko, fleeing authorities from both sides of a galactic war as they struggle to care for their newborn daughter’ (Image Comics 2021: web). Alongside this high-profile space saga, the company publishes a range of other works in the genres, ranging from Jonathan Luna and Sarah Vaughn’s *Alex + Ada*, a story about artificial intelligence, Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro’s *Bitch Planet*, a science-fiction twist on 1970s exploitation films, and Jonathan Hickman and Nick Pittarra’s alternate history story *The Manhattan Projects* among many others.

## Futures

In considering what the future might hold for science fiction and fantasy in comics, it is unlikely that the genres themselves are at serious risk of disappearing in the same manner as western, romance, and war comics largely did after the 1950s. This is partly because these genres are highly adaptable and can generally fit themselves into the trends of any given period, and partly a result of the fact that the ‘superheroes–fantasy–science fiction generic trio’ has proven so foundational to modern comics and graphic novels. Nevertheless, we can see hints of at least two trends that are now developing and may well play out in the longer term in ways that define the field. First, Disney’s purchasing of various entertainment properties points towards large scale homogenisation and multimedia and transmedia exploitation. Narrative universes such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe are important examples of the ways in which comics might become parts of larger wholes: Marvel’s films are vastly more profitable than their comics and graphic novels, but those formats do offer alternative opportunities to their owners, as low-cost research and development platforms for new intellectual properties (IP) for example. This move may lead to a winnowing of opportunities, as we saw in the case of Dark Horse, although diversification could offer a bulwark against this: Karen Berger, the key figure in the development and success of Vertigo, now runs an imprint of non-licensed titles called Berger Books, published by Dark Horse.

A second trend can be seen in the continued development of new, diverse, independent platforms and approaches for telling stories. Image Comics represents one historically important example of this type of approach and is notable because its properties have started to appear in contexts like those in which larger media conglomerates are operating but without sacrificing creator rights – *The Walking Dead* is one of Image’s most successful comics series and has now spun out into a wide range of other media as well. Ultimately though, Image is now a relatively old hand in the field of publishing. Increasingly, comics are created and published via digital platforms that have made accessible many of the formatting and distribution technologies that were once limited to large publishers (although this does come with the question of discoverability). This has in turn provided spaces for more diverse and otherwise less visible creators to develop their practices and audiences. Moreover, these platforms can often connect directly to the places readers are positioned, such as social media, enabling new types of interaction and the development of new ideas and concepts. Digital platforms also enable different types of texts to be made accessible. Where Epic Comics was once pioneering in translating *Akira* into English, today massive amounts of manga are available in English through fan-produced scanlations (see Lee 2009; for more on manga’s influence in America, including discussion of scanlation, see Brienza 2016). Although these scanlations are often not strictly legal, they are popular and influential: manga and anime are transforming science fiction and

fantasy narratives in American graphic novels in terms of both their subject matter and the forms of their presentation. Lamentably, there was not space here to cover this subject in detail, but future histories of science fiction and fantasy will need to engage concertedly with manga if they are to give a comprehensive overview of the American context, particularly as it developed from the 1980s.

The future of science fiction and fantasy in the American graphic novel, then, is likely both less and more diverse than its past: spaces for big ideas are likely to be dominated by small numbers of high-profile players, but these spaces will also be subverted and challenged by innovative smaller groupings and creators. In this dichotomy, there is opportunity.

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