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## Jenette Kahn, Stan Lee and Harvey Kurtzman Discuss Comics

A discussion conducted by Mike Gold, head of public relations for DC Comics Inc., featuring Stan Lee, Publisher of Marvel Comics, Jenette Kahn, publisher of DC Comics, and Harvey Kurtzman, freelance humorist, co-creator of Little Annie Fanny, etc. This discussion took place at last year's Chicago Comicon.

Transcribed and edited by Lewis Shiner and first appeared in "Tales From Texas."

### Lee:

To me it seems that asking why we're still doing the same thing is like asking General Motors, "Say, how come you guys are still making cars? I mean, why don't you do something original?" We're in the business of doing comic books. What else are we going to do? I mean, Harvey, whom I lo—whom I li—whom I've known for a while (Laughter) is not in the comic book business, so why should he be doing comic books? He could be doing anything he wants to. So long as my job is Publisher of Marvel Comics, of course that's what I'll do, and the same with Jenette. As far as not doing new things, it seems to me we might come up with a couple of things we've done in the past few decades, but there's just so much you can do in the comic book business. You're doing comic strips in book form, and that's it. Saying why don't we get into undergrounds is like saying why don't we cut records, or why don't we do this or that—it's a totally different field. It's for different readers, and you can't really treat it that much as a business. The minute you become successful you can't be too radical—all you can do is the best you can within the confines of what your field is.

### Kurtzman:

To play devil's advocate for a minute, Stan, I'd like to ask a question. Why is it that comics have such a low grade of integrity? By contrast

with so-called slick magazines—the larger proportion of magazines that we'll all familiar with—and by contrast with the European comics, which we all know are drawn and printed beautifully?

**Lee:**

Boy, I don't know where to begin. That's like saying, "When did you stop beating your wife?" You're—

**Kurtzman:**

(Interrupting) I was going to ask that after you finished the first question.

**Lee:**

Yeah, I know—I haven't stopped! I—I don't know which point to take first..

**Kurtzman:**

(Interrupting) By low I mean if you could quantify on an abstract scale—low pay, low printing process—I'm not trying to say evil, or bad, just low grade.

**Lee:**

I'm afraid to try and answer—you'll interrupt me again. Can I talk?

**Kurtzman:**

Sure, go ahead.

**Lee:**

You're mad because you said I talked too much yesterday—

**Kurtzman:**

(Interrupting) What makes you think I'll interrupt?

**Lee:**

—that's what it is. (pause)

**Kurtzman:**

Go ahead, Stan.

**Lee:**

Thank you, Harvey. What you said is certainly true about the comics being printed on cheaper paper, and obviously that's so we can charge 30 cents for a copy. It would be the easiest thing in the world of us to have all the integrity of European publishers and people

would be paying \$2.98 or \$5.00 for every comic book you bought

**Kurtzman:**

I'll keep interrupting, Stan, because it's fun. Why doesn't Newsweek or Playboy or Time magazine use the same logic.

**Lee:**

Because they don't make money on the sales of their books. They make most of their money off advertising, just like a newspaper. In order to attract national advertising, they have to print on slick paper with color and so forth. Comic book companies like National and Marvel have been trying to change this image and to upgrade it for years, while you were out doing Annie Fannie and deserted us. And we—

**Kurtzman:**

(Interrupting) I was busy upgrading the image.

**Lee:**

We could never get General Motors, say, to advertise in the Hulk. We would love to. It is very unlikely that Xerox or IBM is gonna advertise—at least in the next few months—in *Howard the Duck*. So we have to live with 100 soldiers for a nickel, or whatever it is. Anyhow, I appreciate you wanting an argument. I love you too much to argue. However Jenette doesn't love you that much, so I'll stop hogging this.

**Kurtzman:**

I'd like to hear what Jenette has to say.

**Kahn:**

A lot of what Stan says is true—

**Lee:**

(Interrupting) A lot? What about all, like for example?

**Kahn:**

Not possible. But a lot. But comics are, here in America, a mass medium, and that means we have to sell as many comics to as many people as possible for as low a price as possible. Comics, when they began really were the equivalent of television to most people. They brought more than a movie because you could take it home with you. They were what you had in your home that was narrative, that was fantasy, and that was a visual realization of that fantasy. There was

a time when *Crime Does Not Pay*, I think, sold 1,300,000 copies of the comic every time it came out. Of course the numbers have been shrinking, but still comics are meant for as many people as possible, and in order to do that you have to have high press runs. To keep the price down, yes, we have printed on cheap paper. It's a whole different marketing approach to print the French comics. They're a different species, really.

In terms of Harvey's second point, about the artists and writers being underpaid, that's true. Why nothing has happened in thirty years to change that I don't know, but something is happening now at National. And things are changing in that direction because that has been the great inequity of the business.

**Lee:**

I am sure that artists and writers in the comic business, and editors, and most of all publishers, are underpaid. I don't think there is a business in the world where the people in it don't think they're underpaid. But there are very few—there are none—artists and writers in our business who are reasonably good, and are employed, who are on relief or walking the breadlines, or anything like that. I think the average salary, the average income of not the top guy, but a reasonably good artist or writer, certainly at Marvel, is about \$20,000 a year. All right, he's not going to be a millionaire, but I don't think this is the worst thing in the world. Usually any industry pays as much as it can. People feel comic books make millions and millions of dollars, but there are many years when the companies have literally lost money. Just think of all the comic book companies that have gone out of business. So it's not a case of everybody's pocketing millions and just trampling on the poor artists and writers.

**Kurtzman:**

I'm going to continue to try to play devil's advocate. Later on we'll kiss and make up, right? My impression of the comic book business, historically, is that comic book publishers have never been inspired. There has never been in the past inspiration on a publishing level. The kind of inspiration that created the Luce empire or the Playboy empire or—

**Lee:**

Or Howard the Duck.

**Kurtzman:**

Howard the Duck... There are exceptions in comics in 1976, and certainly there are exceptions in France, where—

**Lee:**

Harvey, how many copies of *Linus* do they sell, an issue?

**Kurtzman:**

That's not important...

**Lee:**

It's everything! Whaddaya mean it's not important?

**Kurtzman:**

What's important to me is the fact of the existence of good comic book publishing in certain portions of the globe. And these magazines are being put out by inspired publishers.

**Lee:**

Yes, I guess you're right, Harvey. It's only the people who are away from the norm, who are doing things on their own who are doing any good. *Annie Fanny* is no good because it's part of the Hefner empire and you've done nothing new for the last fifteen years and why the hell don't you go out and break the mold, and Hefner's just looking to make money, and Alfred Hitchcock when he does a movie is just looking to make money and Fellini, and their movies are no good, and when Kurt Vonnegut writes a book he's just out to make money and the publisher is doing it—

**Kurtzman:**

Stan—can you—

**Lee:**

Harvey, that's the biggest crock I've ever heard in my life! There are inspired comic books. Read some some times. If people didn't enjoy today's comic books, we wouldn't have these conventions. You're talking as though we're discussing a field that has nothing good in it and that nobody likes, and why don't we do something good. We'll admit the paper's no good! We wish it could be better. Find a way to give us better paper and charge 30 cents.

**Kurtzman:**

I will admit that on an artistic level comics have been very inspired over the years. There have always been artists willing to break their

heads for their art work. There have always been writers who have been inspired. Publishers, in my experience of comic books, were never inspired like the artists were, like the writers were, like sometimes the editors were.

Lee:

Harvey, you are belaboring the most ridiculous point in the world! A) You're making it sound as if you wish comics were printed on lovely paper with fantastic printing—

Kurtzman:

(Interrupting) Don't you?

Lee:

Of course we do! And I wish the books were a hundred and fifty pages each! And I wish we had Kurt Vonnegut writing for us, and I mean, My God! We can all say what we wish, but the thing is impossible at the moment.

Kahn:

In the beginning it was accountants and businessmen and people who ran the comic companies, and they did not care about what they produced and they didn't care about their writers or their writers or their material. Times have changed, and Stan, who began as a writer, is now a publisher. I, who began creating magazines on both the art side and on the writing side, am now a publisher, and both of us I think consider ourselves inspired people who care about the medium, who love comics. And I think you'll see the changes coming. It's not what happened before. That's history now. It's what's going to come in the future. I think that's represented by Stan and myself. (Applause)

Question:

(from audience) I think basically the comic book form is the way it is because people like it. I don't think there's a great desire on the part of most consumers to change the basic format of the comic.

Kurtzman:

There's never a great desire for anything that hasn't been invented yet. It's when it's invented that all of a sudden there's the desire. You never work on the premise that you never improve things because people are satisfied with the buggy whip. If you're creative and enjoy what a creative society does, which is ever changing. There's always the argument, "why change anything?" I'll go with that

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argument, if you just want to go on and on in the same way you've been going. There's virtue in that, too. When you seek to develop new forms, and on this globe I've seen exciting new cartoon forms. I know it's been done. It's been done in Europe. Why shouldn't we be developing those areas as well? Is it because we have a perfectly satisfactory form and we can rest on that? I don't think so.

Lee:

What makes you think we're not?

Kurtzman:

You can go into a Parisian book shop and find on the shelves four or five, six feet of hardcover on the shelves four or five, six feet or hardcover comic collections. Not the esoteric quasi-underground stuff that's coming from the rebels or the would-be French undergrounders, but collections of strips out of *Pilote* magazine, *Tintin*, and they're just done in a very respectable format. Somebody's buying all that stuff. Tons of it.

Lee:

Not really that many, Harvey, and—

Kurtzman:

And we have nothing! NOTHING!

Lee:

Let me give you an example. Have you seen the *Origins of Marvel Comics*? Now there's comics on slick paper. The damn book, we couldn't produce it for less than seven bucks. So we managed over a period of a year, we sold 125 or 30 or 35 thousand, which is damn good. But we sell that many—more than that—of *Spider Man*, month after month after month.

Question:

Don't you find that the lack of change in comics represents a certain stability?

Kurtzman:

Well, I find that I enjoy change, myself. It's a very personal thing. I find that there are people who are very comfortable with stability. Sameness. If you enjoy sameness, then by all means, nothing should change. If you enjoy change, then let's be creative.

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**Kahn:**

I think there's a lot in what you're saying. When I say that comics are a mass medium, that's true, and the more you move in the direction that Harvey's speaking of, the smaller you will shrink your audience. But Harvey did mention at one time there's no reason that both can't be done, and that's really the solution. There's no reason why we can't make ventures into the kind of printing that does go on in France. And find that market, which might be separate from the traditional comic reader. Somebody made the remark that it doesn't seem to matter to the comic reader about the quality of the paper—sure you feel bad about it, but it doesn't take away from the fact that the story is good and the artwork is good. That's really what you buy a comic for—the story, and how it looks. I think one of the ways to go is to give you more story and better artwork, and more creative stories.

The whole other question of quality publishing... I don't like to call it a low integrity business because integrity implies morals and ethics, but I'd call it low quality in terms of the—

**Lee:**

No! It's not low quality either. It's probably as high a quality business as you could find. I want to mention one thing that I really take exception to, Harvey, and that is when you talk about creativeness. For years people have considered people who labor for money in the art field as hacks, and the people who go out and just do their own thing in a garret somewhere you know, they're the fine artists and they're the creative ones. It's something I don't really agree with, and I'll tell you why. It seems to me that somebody who has to be creative within a structured framework is in a much more difficult position and has to be more creative. Now look at it this way. If we are not creative presently in the comic business, none of you are going to buy our books or be interested. The only way we hold your interest is to be creative, month after month after month so that you enjoy these stories. Despite what Harvey said, if these things don't keep changing you'll be bored sick!

**Question:**

Mr. Kurtzman, you said there weren't any inspired publishers in the past, and I assume you put Bill Gaines in that bag. Would you like to make any comments about that?

**Kurtzman:**

Well... Gaines was the beginning of inspiration for me. For my personal experience, and I was careful to say that my view of the

lack of inspiration was most intense between the middle forties and fifties. I came on to Bill Gaines in the middle fifties. There was a certain degree of inspiration involved in his line of comics, although it hardly scratched the surface for me. The intention seemed to be there. The comic book business certainly hasn't been a wasteland, there's been inspiration since the middle fifties. The business could use more. The format is still a low grade format. It's the lowest grade format in media. It's capable of being much, much better, and when it gets better it has to happen on a publishing level.

**Lee:**

Anybody can say, "Hey, listen, I got a great idea, we'll make the book bigger and we'll get more pages and we'll make it round!" We used to laugh in our office in our circulation company—one guy, who suddenly got a lot of money and wanted to be a publisher was going to revolutionize the business. He said, "I got an idea for a book that nobody ever thought of. I'm going to print it on round paper! It'll be a round book!" And he really wanted to sink hundred of thousands of dollars into this. Well, we showed him the error of his ways. One of the little problems would be it wouldn't stay on the newstand—it would roll off!

**Question:**

Do you think there's any area other than Howard the Duck where fantasy and superhero comics can cross over into the realm of humor?

**Lee:**

Sure, but these things are usually never planned. Nobody at Marvel, certainly not Steve Gerber, said "I'm going to take a superhero or a fantasy adventure story and I'm now going to inject humor and start a new thing. He was writing it and he thought of this great idea for a plot and put it in and it happened. And that's the way things are. It's very possible—maybe probable—that other things like this will be happening in the next few months. But Harvey was talking about inspiration—basically these things are inspiration. As you write a story, as you draw a story, you're never really sure what the end result is going to be. Sometimes you get a result you didn't even expect. A little incidental character that you just threw in for kicks takes off, sets a whole new trend. This is what happened with Howard, and it can always happen again.

**Kahn:**

Stan's right about the planning. For instance, I'm a great Howard

the Duck fan, and I sure wish that Howard the Duck was running rampant through the pages of National. But I would never ask a writer to come up with a Howard the Duck for National. You shouldn't look over your shoulder at what the other company is doing thinking, "Howard's hot, we really ought to have a Howard." You just do what comes really, basically from your heart, or from the inspiration you're talking about. What really feels best and right to you. And then you have the best comics.

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