

THE DESIGN PROCESS OF *THE LEGEND OF WILD MAN FISCHER*

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process involved in designing and publishing a graphic novel. It places this examination within the context of the history of comics publishing in North America and the background of a small-press, independent comics publisher. The report looks at the publication of Dennis Eichhorn and J.R. Williams' *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* by Top Shelf Productions in Fall 2004, and analyzes the design choices made by the designer, the publishers, and the authors, and what effect choices such as these may have on other aspects of the publishing process, such as marketing, distribution, and relations between the publisher and its authors. The report also discusses the monopoly on comics distribution by Diamond Comic Distributors, and the challenges this creates for publishers and retailers alike.

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Chapter 1: A Short History of Comics Publishing

Scott McCloud has provided an influential definition of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”¹ Using this definition as a guide, the origins of comics have been traced to Egyptian hieroglyphics, European stained glass windows, pre-Columbian Central American manuscripts, and the Bayeux Tapestry, but the modern comic book first appeared in the 1930s as collections of newspaper comic strips.² Soon, publishers were producing original stories, many of which were rooted in the traditions of the pulp novels that were comics’ main competition for the nickels and dimes of readers. However, June 1938 saw the publication of a comic book that would change the comics industry and would define the medium forever: *Action Comics #1*, the first appearance of Superman.

Superman’s debut ushered in what would later be termed the Golden Age of comics, lasting from 1938 until roughly 1949. At a price of ten cents for a 64-page magazine, comics were an affordable and widely accessible form of entertainment. During this period, super-heroes dominated comics — Superman was followed quickly by Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and a host of others — and comics sold in the millions, primarily to children. In addition, World War II provided both subject material and an audience for comics. Soldiers on the European and Pacific fronts could entertain or console themselves by reading stories of Superman or Captain America beating up on Nazis and helping the Allied war effort.

Soon after the war ended, though, comics suffered a series of setbacks that greatly

reduced their sales, and as a result their importance as a principal form of entertainment. Perhaps most importantly, Dr. Frederick Wertham in his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* claimed that comic books were responsible for turning children into delinquents, drug addicts and murderers. While Wertham's arguments were mostly spurious and without foundation, they were enough to attract unwanted attention from the government and form unwanted associations in the public's mind. Rather than face the possibility of government action, the industry voluntarily instituted the Comics Code, a set of prohibitions on "inappropriate content". One of the main results of the Comics Code was to effectively destroy Harvey Kurtzman's EC Comics, publisher of titles such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *Weird Fantasy* and one of Wertham's main targets. EC Comics' titles were successfully selling non-super-hero comics to a growing audience, and are today considered to have "just about defined the early possibilities of the medium through their intelligent and finely-crafted collection of anthology titles."³

During the immediate post-war era, while Kurtzman's horror and fantasy comics were rising to prominence only to be knocked down by the Comics Code, readers and publishers mostly abandoned the super-hero comics that had been the industry mainstays since the 1930s. However, the Comics Code — with its prohibition of profanity, gore, and vulgarity and a prescription that all crime must be punished and depicted as sordid and unpleasant — allowed the super-hero to return to glory. This return began in 1956, when DC Comics, the publisher of Superman, Batman, and many other Golden Age heroes, revamped its super-heroes for a new audience. Soon, Marvel Comics — which in the 1940s had published Captain America's adventures but had since been "cranking out

pale imitations of war books, romance titles, or whatever else was selling at the time”⁴ — was publishing the Fantastic Four, Spider-man, the X-men, and innumerable other super-hero books that are still popular today. This heroic renaissance has since been dubbed comics’ Silver Age, second only to the Golden Age in commercial and artistic importance.

In the 1970s, as traditional super-hero comics lost some of their audience, many publishers looked to other genres as a way to continue their success. Books such as *Tomb of Dracula*, *Conan the Barbarian*, and *Howard the Duck* became briefly successful, but were not able to maintain high sales figures; unlike in the 1940s and 1950s, super-hero books were able to withstand this slow-down and continue into the 1980s as the dominant form of comics publishing, albeit with lower sales than in their heyday.

At the same time that the major publishers were experimenting with non-super-hero books, a new kind of comic book began appearing. Underground and alternative comics “reflect[ed] the concerns of the 1960s counterculture: experimentation in all things, drug-altered states of mind, rejection of sexual taboos, ridicule of ‘the establishment’.”⁵ These books were definitely not aimed at children — as super-hero books still usually were, despite a growing college and adult readership throughout the 1960s — and were often sold in “head shops” which also sold underground newspapers, psychedelic posters, and drug paraphernalia. By the mid-1970s, this distribution network had dried up and most underground comics disappeared. To take their place, though, were independent comics publishers who did not comply with the Comics Code, and many of the underground cartoonists, such as Art Spiegelman, Robert Crumb, and Bill Griffith, found mainstream success.

At the same time that the underground and independent comics were establishing an adult audience for comics, some cartoonists were trying to break free of the traditional limits of serial comics production. One of these was Will Eisner, who had created one of the most innovative and influential comics of the Golden Age, *The Spirit*.⁶ In 1978 Eisner published *A Contract with God*, labeled on the cover as a “graphic novel”. This term was adopted by other writers who wanted to create works that went beyond the disposable and often formulaic stories published in the super-hero comics. Graphic novels would look like books, feel like books, and hopefully gain the mainstream acceptance of books. In the late 1980s graphic novels achieved a higher profile when Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, the story of Spiegelman’s father’s struggle to survive the Holocaust as a Polish Jew, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. Around the same time, Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, more mature takes on the super-hero comic, broke out of the “comics ghetto” and became mainstream successes.⁷

Today, the comics industry is in many ways split between the traditional serial model and publishing graphic novels. Where once super-hero comic books sold by the millions and were available on every newsstand and in every corner store, today they are available almost exclusively through specialty stores and even the most popular titles struggle to reach 100,000 sales. In contrast, bookstore sales of graphic novels are booming, and more and more publishers are forgoing serial comics altogether. The reasons for this shift are a matter for debate, but many believe that they stem from the industry’s shift to direct-market, non-returnable distribution — a shift that first started in the late 1970s and was supposed to save the comics industry.⁸

Chapter 2: Direct Market Distribution and the Diamond Monopoly

For the first 40 years of their existence, comic books were distributed the same way as magazines, and were seen the same way by the public. The same periodical distributors that supplied newsstands with *Time* magazine supplied them with *Superman* comics, and for the most part retailers sold whatever they were sent by their distributors rather than picking and choosing the bestsellers. Comics that remained unsold after three months would be stripped of their covers and destroyed, while the covers were returned to the distributor for credit. This system had worked capably in the 1930s when both *Superman* and *Time* sold for ten cents, but while magazines chose to combat inflation by raising their prices, comics publishers did not: “Because publishers wanted to keep comic books a cheap form of entertainment, they chose to cut pages instead of raising the cover price. Ten cents bought you (more often than not) 64 pages of entertainment in 1943; by 1961 that dime was only worth 20 to 24 pages of story.”⁹ Not until the 1960s did dime-priced comics start to disappear, and by then the thick magazines providing a day’s entertainment had dwindled to flimsy pamphlets. More importantly, since comics were cheaper than magazines but took up the same amount of space on the newsstand, retailers no longer wanted to carry them. Why carry a 25-cent comic book and give up space that could be used for a one-dollar magazine that would net you four times the profit? This was especially true during the days of returnable distribution, when sellers only received a small discount from distributors; selling a comic might net a store-owner only a few cents, yet required that unsold issues be kept track of and sent back to the warehouse every month.

It was clear that the traditional distribution model for comics was disappearing

and harming the industry, and that a new model would have to take its place. It was Phil Seuling, a writer and English teacher that ran a New York City comics convention in the 1970s, that made the necessary breakthrough. Through his contacts with Marvel and DC, the two dominant comics publishers, Seuling made a special arrangement: publishers would sell product direct to him on a non-returnable basis, and Seuling would sell direct to retailers at a higher discount than the periodical distributors offered.

This new distribution system was good for the publishers, who would now be able to sell 100 percent of what they printed, and for the comics specialty stores that had started appearing, that needed more control over their inventories than the periodical distributors afforded. But the arrangement was especially lucrative for Seuling who now had a monopoly on direct-market comics distribution, and who fought hard to maintain it. Chuck Rozanski, the owner of Mile High Comics, an important comics store in Denver, explains: "The only thing direct about his direct market was that Phil was selling the material directly to the stores. It was essentially a private fishing hole for Phil Seuling. He had his own best interest in mind. He fought tooth and nail to keep the system his."¹⁰ However lucrative the monopoly was for Seuling, it was equally harmful to retailers who had no other distributor to turn to. "The internal systems at Seuling's Company, Seagate, were catastrophically poor. He required advance payment with all orders. They had no computer system for tracking who had paid them for what. It was very seldom that you could get credit out of them," recalls Rozanski."

By 1978, Seuling's monopoly had been broken thanks to a lawsuit brought by New Media/Irjax, a paper distribution company, that alleged the comics publishers had

committed anti-trust violations by selling to Seuling under different terms than they gave their other distributors. The threat of the lawsuit spurred Marvel and DC to open up their distribution channels, while maintaining the basic Seuling model of deeper discounts on non-returnable product. When Irjax went bankrupt in 1981, their accounts were taken over by Steve Geppi's Diamond Comic Distributors. Throughout the next decade, Diamond and their main rival, Capital City Distribution, would control 70 percent of comic distribution. This consolidation only became more pronounced in the 1990s as Diamond began to acquire rival distributors: Bud Plant in 1988, Ernst Gerber Publishing in 1992; Russ Cochran Publishing in 1993; and Overstreet Publishing in 1994.

In 1995, a major change to the comics distribution marketplace occurred when Marvel Comics bought out Heroes World, a small regional distributor, and took its distribution in-house. Faced with the loss of their largest client, Diamond retaliated by signing exclusive deals with DC and a host of smaller publishers. These developments meant that retailers could no longer order all their comics from a single distributor, and also forced them to deal with Diamond and Heroes World regardless of the quality of the service they provided. With their takeover of Capital City in 1996 and Heroes World's collapse soon after, Diamond became in effect the sole distributor for direct-market stores. Today, only FM (a mid-western regional distributor), Cold Cut (limited product and reorders only), and Last Gasp (target market) also distribute comics, and Diamond is the sole agent for advance orders.

Chapter 3: The History of Top Shelf Productions

The origins of Top Shelf Productions go back nearly ten years, and trace back to two individuals, Chris Staros and Brett Warnock, whose dedication to the field of small press and independent comics helped build one of the preeminent small publishers in the field today. What these two comics fans, living at opposite ends of the continent and having met face to face only a few times, were able to achieve exemplifies many of the things that make comics publishing special and that draw people to it, both as fans and readers, creators and publishers.

Unlike most who are in comics publishing professionally, Chris Staros didn't read comics as a child. He only discovered comics in his late twenties, when he paged through a copy of Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* while waiting in a comic shop for his wife to get off work. *Vendetta* inspired him to seek out other intelligent comics, but he found it difficult not only to find the kind of books that interested him, but also to find information about books that might interest him. This stumbling block led him to consider publishing a guide of comics worth reading. As he explains it,

Most stores didn't carry alternative comics very deeply, and even when they did, it was difficult to get people in them to really point me in the right direction. As I began to voraciously read everything I could get my hands on, I started taking notes to keep everything straight in my head. After a year or two of reading, I started to realize that my notes might just be valuable in helping to answer the question: "What should I be reading next?" Thus, *The Staros Report* was born.¹²

Staros at first envisioned *The Staros Report* as a column or article he could write for a publication such as *The Comics Journal*, but soon decided that it would be more

successful as a self-contained, self-published venture. In 1994, for the first issue, he produced 300 copies on a photocopier, of which he was able to sell 40 and give the rest away. In 1995, he printed 2,000 copies and contemplated distribution through traditional channels, but found no interest. This only served to motivate him to raise the bar to ensure the 1996 *Staros Report* would find distribution, and to this end he went to great lengths to promote the publication. While he sold about a quarter of the 1995 copies, he used the rest of the print-run to raise awareness of the publication by sending copies to influential comics writers and publishers, giving away free copies at conventions and book signings, and letting retailers have free copies to sell in their stores.

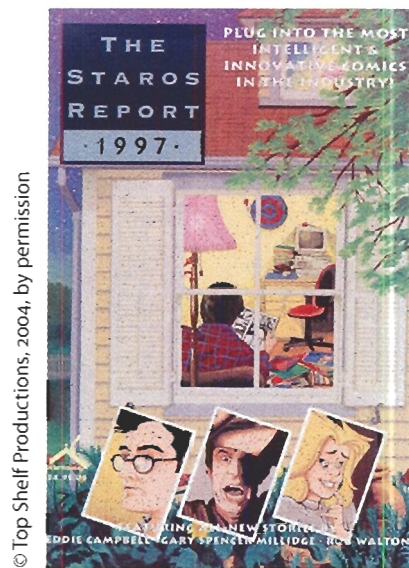


Figure 1: The 1997 *Staros Report*

The promotional efforts for the *Report* led Staros to develop relationships with several comics creators, and eventually led to him becoming the distributor for a number of foreign cartoonists. One such creator was Eddie Campbell, a prolific and well-respected Australian cartoonist who self-published his graphic novels. Campbell, working

from Australia, found it difficult to personally deal with the North American comic book market, and enlisted Staros to be his American distributor. Similar deals followed with creators such as Gary Spencer Millidge and Rob Walton.

At the same time that Staros was self-publishing *The Staros Report* and distributing the work of foreign cartoonists, Brett Warnock was entering the comics business by producing anthologies to promote the careers of up-and-coming cartoonists. His work, though produced on a small scale and very much independently, was impressive for its high quality and sharp production and design values, and was recognized with nominations for best anthology from several influential industry awards.

Staros and Warnock first made contact when the latter wrote a letter to *The Staros Report* and included copies of several of his anthologies. They later developed a friendship while meeting on the comics convention circuit, an important part of the business for any self-publisher. It was at one of these conventions, the 1997 Small Press Expo (SPX), that Staros proposed becoming publishing partners, Warnock agreed, and at that moment Top Shelf Productions was formed, taking the name from the anthologies Warnock had been publishing.

3.1 Top Shelf Today

In 2005, nearly eight years after its inception, Top Shelf is one of a handful of small press comics publishers that are rising to prominence by publishing intelligent, accessible comics and graphic novels that are being embraced outside the traditional comics market. As with companies like Fantagraphics and Drawn & Quarterly, Top Shelf has been able to attract mainstream attention for its titles, but has done so while remaining a small opera-

tion. Staros and Warnock still run the company on a day-to-day basis, and it was only in 2004 that the company's first full-time employee was hired.

While Staros and Warnock work together and split responsibilities, they do so from a distance, with Staros working from Marietta, Georgia and Warnock in Portland, Oregon. In addition, each focuses primarily on his own area of expertise: Warnock is in charge of artistic presentation and design, and Staros is involved more at an editorial and administration capacity. However, the two ensure that the company's "house style" will always reflect both of their sensibilities, as Staros explains:

To make sure that we were both were behind everything that we published, when we formed the company we gave each other what we call 'an inarguable veto' over the other. In other words, we wouldn't fight over projects. If one of us didn't want to do something, that was it, and we moved on. And that intersection of our tastes has helped guide us and define us over the last several years — without a single argument, I might add.¹³

The "Top Shelf style" that this approach has generated is eclectic and not easily defined, but has earned the publisher a devoted readership and widespread critical acclaim. "The graphic novels we like to publish are all crafted with an eye for character and storytelling, characterized by a unique, engaging art style, and complemented by a thought-provoking subtext full of social realism, humor, and heart," Staros explains.¹⁴ Some of the titles that have brought Top Shelf its greatest success are Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* and Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. (*From Hell* has sold about 150,000 copies worldwide (100,000 in the US), and *Blankets* about 80,000 worldwide (50,000 in the US).)

From Hell, a creative and intricate telling of the Jack the Ripper killings, is widely regarded as one of the great achievements in comics history and has found a large readership outside comics circles, in part because of a Hollywood adaptation (which, admittedly, diverges from Moore and Campbell's version in many respects). Originally self-published in serial form by Campbell and Moore, the collected edition of *From Hell* sprang from Staros' early distribution relationship with the Australian cartoonist and has proven to be one of Top Shelf's most successful titles, with a seventh printing coming in June 2005.



Figure 2: *Blankets* and *From Hell*

In contrast to the success of *From Hell*, which came from two industry veterans and had been successful in its pre-Top Shelf incarnation, Craig Thompson's *Blankets* was more of a "home-grown" enterprise. Top Shelf had previously published Thompson's debut graphic novel *Goodbye, Chunky Rice*, which had gotten the cartoonist noticed as a promising young talent, and Staros and Warnock were convinced that the autobiographical *Blankets* would further cement his reputation. The end result was a massive tome (at nearly 600 pages likely the largest graphic novel to be published without prior serializa-

tion) with gorgeous artwork and a challenging yet accessible story of first love that immediately won Thompson and Top Shelf nearly universal critical and popular acclaim.

Blankets' success was especially notable for the recognition it received both within the comics industry and by critics from outside the industry. Not only did *Blankets* become the first graphic novel to sweep the three major comics awards — the Ignatz (awarded by the SPX), the Eisner (awarded by the San Diego Comic Convention), and the Harvey (voted on by comics professionals and publishers) — in both the “Best Graphic Novel” and “Best Cartoonist/Outstanding Artist” categories, but it also made year-end “best of” lists from *Time* magazine, the American Library Association's *Booklist*, the *Library Journal*, and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA).

Apart from the content of their books, Top Shelf has forged a unique identity by publishing original graphic novels (OGN) almost exclusively. In an industry where the norm is still for a new title to come out serially as (usually) 32-page, stapled comic books that may then be collected into a trade paperback volume some time later, for a publisher to deal primarily in graphic novels is seen by some in the industry as a risky move.¹⁵ For one, eliminating the serial edition removes a critical revenue stream that can sustain a company and its creators month-to-month. However, Staros sees the move towards OGNs as the future of the comics industry, and a necessary evolution to break out of the specialty-market ghetto. He believes that “periodical comics are, for the most part, rotten fruit a week after they hit the stands. Graphic novels (complete stories) and Trade Paperbacks (collections) are perennial forms of entertainment, and they can be sold outside of the comic book marketplace as well as within.”¹⁶

Top Shelf's focus on OGNs has allowed the publisher to establish a large mainstream bookstore presence, a critical concern when taking into account the fact that a large percentage of dedicated comics shops rarely if ever order small-press, independent, or alternative comics. "It seems to me that the top 100 direct market retailers more closely resemble book stores than they do the classic back-issue-laden comic shops of the past few decades," explains Warnock. "As for the rest of the 3,400 stores, well, unfortunately they generally don't support our own books."¹⁷ This split is evident in Top Shelf's sales figures, as well. For example, in the case of *Blankets*, despite winning all the major comics industry awards, less than a quarter of the book's sales came from traditional comic book stores.

However, despite all of Top Shelf's successes, they are still vulnerable to the same threats faced by any small publisher, a situation brought into sharp relief in April 2002 with the bankruptcy of the LPC group, then the largest distributor of independent comics publishers into mainstream bookstores. At the time, Top Shelf was owed over \$80,000 by LPC and had a \$20,000 cheque from the distributor bounce. This, in turn, caused the publisher's cheques to printers, conventions, and cartoonists to bounce as well. Overnight, Warnock and Staros found themselves needing to raise \$20,000 in a month or face the possibility of having to suspend publishing operations indefinitely.

To stay afloat, Top Shelf reached out to the comics community and asked fans to buy direct from the company in order to maintain the necessary cash flow needed to run the business. In addition, many other high-profile voices in the comics industry spoke out and joined the effort to save Top Shelf. The response to these appeals was immediate and

resounding, and Top Shelf was able to continue its operations as before. However, Top Shelf's brush with insolvency is not an isolated case, and since 2002 publishers such as Fantagraphics and Alternative Comics — small companies but publishers of many high-profile and critically acclaimed comics — have had to appeal directly to consumers to avert disaster.

Chapter 4: The History of *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer*

The Legend of Wild Man Fischer is something of an anomaly in Top Shelf's catalogue, since it is not an original graphic novel. Instead, it reprints stories that were previously serialized in Dennis Eichhorn's *Real Stuff* anthology, a series that saw 20 issues published in the 1980s by Fantagraphics. *Real Stuff* told tales of Eichhorn's larger-than-life life, illustrated by many of the top alternative cartoonists of the day, including Peter Bagge, Jim Woodring, David Collier, and many more.

Among the many stories to appear in *Real Stuff* was "One Man – One Glove: The Legend of Wild Man Fischer," illustrated by J.R. Williams, about Eichhorn's experiences with the titular outsider musician. Fischer is a former street busker who was discovered by Frank Zappa and whose album *An Evening with Wild Man Fischer* has reached near-mythical status within certain musical circles. Throughout his life, Fischer has struggled with mental illness and life around him was always unpredictable, as Eichhorn's experiences as his promoter evidence. The Wild Man Fischer stories from *Real Stuff* follow Fischer as he gets thrown out of all-you-can-eat cafeterias, plays a not-well-received concert at a national guard armory, and becomes a minister of the Universal Life Church.

While some of the *Real Stuff* stories were collected in 2004 by Swifty Morales Press, Eichhorn and Williams felt that the Wild Man Fischer stories were substantial enough to form their own book, and they approached Top Shelf Comics about publishing the collection. Williams explains:

I hadn't worked with Top Shelf before, but I'd known Brett Warnock for a few years. We both live in Portland, and have a few mutual friends in the comics business. I felt that the company had a great track record for designing great

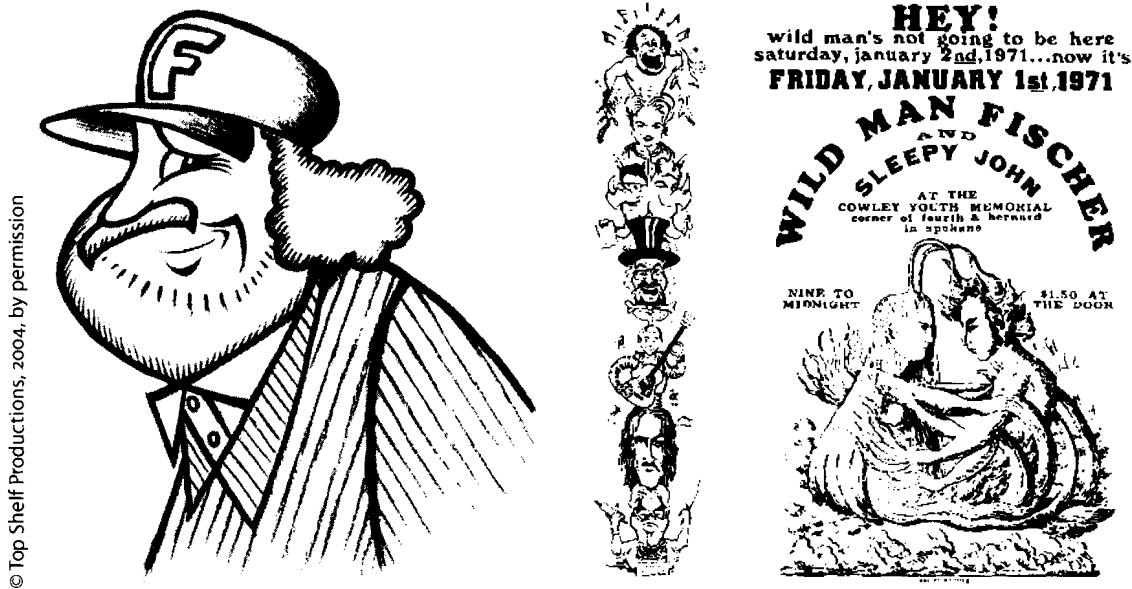
looking books, and Brett is a very positive, upbeat, enthusiastic kind of guy; he seemed genuinely interested in publishing and promoting the book.”¹⁸

Warnock and Staros were receptive to the idea and took on the project for publication in Fall 2004. While publishing such a collection of previously serialized comics is not the focus of Top Shelf’s publishing business, it is not unique among their titles. For example, the publisher has published *Shuck Unmasked*, a collection of Rick Smith’s self-published Shuck comics, and one of Top Shelf’s most popular titles is *Box Office Poison*, a massive collection of a 23-issue series originally serialized by Antarctic Press. Top Shelf has also sometimes published new editions of self-published graphic novels, as they did with Derek Kirk Kim’s *Same Difference and Other Stories* in 2004 after Kim’s self-published edition went out of print after it was named one of the best books of the year by *Publishers Weekly*.

Since the Wild Man Fischer stories from *Real Stuff* amounted to only 34 pages — too short for a proper graphic novel with a spine — additional material would be included in order to fill a 64-page volume. These materials included a four-page Wild Man story written by Eichhorn and illustrated by Holly K. Tuttle that had originally appeared in *Scram* magazine; an introduction and interview with Fischer by Williams; text pieces by James Pierron, a long-time confidant of Wild Man Fischer, and Josh Rubin, producer of a documentary about Fischer; an afterword by radio personality and author Irwin Chusid; and various photographs and miscellaneous artwork.

With so many disparate elements coming together to form one book, the main challenge as the designer would be to make the elements work well both individually and as parts of a greater whole. This involved not only creating page designs that worked well

together, but also editing the text pieces to maintain uniform styles and grammatical conventions. Furthermore, the design stage also involved scanning in the comics pages and using Photoshop to clean up both them and the photographs (many of which dated back to the 1970s) to create a print-ready document.



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Figure 3: Miscellaneous artwork used in *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer*

Chapter 5: On the Design of Comics

While the design and layout of comics and graphic novels serves the same purposes as for all books — that is, making the publication easier to read and more appealing to readers, while ideally creating a beautiful object in its own rights — the medium brings with it its own unique challenges and requirements. Most importantly, since the interior pages of most graphic novels are illustrated pages, there is no need for lengthy text passages to typeset, as you would find in a novel or non-fiction book. Usually, there will be at most a few pages of front and back matter (e.g., title pages, copyright notices, etc.) to be set separately and that do not form part of the comic itself as provided by the cartoonist. In addition, the covers, especially the back cover, must be designed as for any non-comics work.

Traditionally, comic-book covers were either an iconic image about the comic (e.g., Superman flying or Spider-man swinging on his webs) or an illustration of a key scene from the story within. Furthermore, since comics were traditionally a cheap, impulse purchase, usually aimed at children, the covers were a key sales tool and were designed to grab your attention and make you pick up the book. (This led to a spate of comic covers featuring apes and monkeys in the 1950s, as DC Comics found that any book with a gorilla on the cover would see a spike in sales. The belief that “gorillas = sales” was so prevalent that DC editorial had to set a limit on how many could appear in a month.¹⁹)

With the move towards an older, more mature audience for comics and graphic novels sold through mainstream and specialty stores, many publishers have begun developing house styles that are more refined and less garish. In the case of Top Shelf, Brett Warnock has shaped the company’s design esthetic by creating books that look at

home on any bookstore's contemporary fiction shelf. As he explains, "I try to make our publications look less like comics and more like books, always attentive to the themes and/or emotional resonance of the narrative itself."²⁰ Similarly, publishers like Drawn & Quarterly and Fantagraphics have embraced a more book-like design style and seen their mainstream bookstore presence escalate.

The task of actually designing and laying out graphic novels varies from publisher to publisher and from title to title. For the kind of serial comics that still form a major part of Marvel and DC's monthly output, there may be very little to do, design-wise, on each individual issue. The entirety of the interior story pages will be penciled, inked, and coloured by the book's creative team, and the cover will consist of a single image topped by the same title banner that is used every month. If the comic includes a letters' page, that may be the only page that requires much layout input from the publisher.

For other books, the design process will be more involved, and may be done by any of a number of people. In some cases, the cartoonist will do all the design himself, including covers and non-story pages, in which case the publisher need only assemble the parts into a whole that can be delivered to the printer. This was the case with the Top Shelf title *Carnet de Voyage*, Craig Thompson's follow-up to *Blankets*. Thompson delivered TIFF images for every page of the book (including covers and hand-lettered text pieces and copyright pages), leaving the publisher with only the task of placing the images in an InDesign document. In cases where the cartoonist does not do the design work himself, the publisher will take over that responsibility, either by doing the design in-house or contracting it out. For example, Dark Horse Comics recently hired award-

winning graphic designer Chip Kidd to design the new editions of Frank Miller's *Sin City* line of graphic novels.

At Top Shelf, while the driving force behind the company's publishing "look" comes from Warnock, he tries to involve the individual cartoonists as much as possible in the design of the books themselves. While some choose to take on the task of book design and layout themselves, others prefer to leave it more in the hands of the publisher. "My role is more of an art director than a designer, in that I encourage any of our cartoonists to do their own design, if I feel they are up to the challenge," explains Warnock. "In these cases, I just step back and let them do their thing. When a cartoonist doesn't maybe have the skills that I think make for a good cover design, I still encourage their input. Even a rough sketch can send me on the path to a finished design."²¹

Chapter 6: The Design Process for *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer*

In approaching the design and layout of the collected edition of *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer*, in addition to design factors that are common to all design projects, there were a set unique challenges posed both by the graphic novel format and the special characteristics of that project in particular. Among the unique challenges, from an artistic point of view, was the main goal of having the look of the publication reflect the tone of the subject matter. This meant trying to capture in some way the “wild” nature of Larry Fischer’s life story and of Eichhorn and Williams’ comics while maintaining an appeal to customers and retailers. In addition, since the book contained not only Eichhorn and Williams’ main story but also several text pieces, illustrations, and other comics, the design needed to successfully accommodate such disparate content.

Initial design discussions of *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* with Brett Warnock revealed Warnock’s preconceived notion of the book looking like something of the era during which the Wild Man Fischer strip takes place. To attain this look, in part, he was anticipating using typewriter fonts and a slightly grungy feel to the design to give the reader an impression that the book might have been produced by hand and mimeographed 30 years ago. At the same time, he wanted the design of the publication to reflect the story that was being told, and in particular to reflect the personality of Wild Man Fischer himself. To do this, it would by nature have to be somewhat disjointed and wild, much like Fischer himself. As Warnock explains, one of the principal difficulties with the project was “simply trying to capture the essence of the narrative itself, as well as the personality of a guy whose story goes back almost 25 years ago. It really is a ‘wild’ story, and

capturing that craziness was certainly a challenge.”²²

Of course, designing *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* to look old, weathered, and of a different era could have resulted in a book that would have been difficult to read and of limited appeal to consumers. So these design features had to be checked by a commitment to making the book easy and appealing to read. To this end, it was decided that the cover would need to be something that would inspire retailers to display the book prominently and inspire browsers to pick it up off the shelf. Furthermore, while the interior would contain elements that reflected the desire to echo Larry Fischer’s personality and era, these would by necessity take secondary importance to designing a book that was easy to read and enjoy.

Finally, great importance was placed on balancing the different elements of the book so that the text pieces, comics pages, illustrations, and other elements worked well in harmony and no one type of content overwhelmed the rest of the book. In designing most comic books or graphic novels, this is not a great concern since the most important element is clearly the comics themselves while any non-comics material (e.g., introductions or forewords) are secondary. However, the non-comics parts of *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* make up nearly half of the book’s pages, and they are likely to be of equal importance to potential readers. Thus, in developing the design of the book, it was important not to give any one element greater importance or reduce any section to an afterthought. As a result, this meant that most pages and spreads in the publication would require more attention than they would normally get through the application of a single template which was tweaked as necessary on a case-by-case basis.

The design of *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* was broken down into two main tasks: the cover of the book and the interior pages. While the interior was obviously the larger job in terms of the number of pages to be designed, both tasks were equally important to the success of the publication. Since the cover is an important marketing tool and must grab a reader's attention at the point of sale, its design was scrutinized much more rigorously. Ultimately more time was spent working on the cover of the book than on the interior pages, and the final delivery date to the printers hung on this portion of the task.

6.1 Designing and Laying Out the Interior

In designing the interior of the book, the chief goal was to evoke Wild Man Fischer's wild life while still resulting in a book that was not difficult to read. With so many different text and graphic elements competing for the readers' attention, *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* could easily become chaotic and unorganized, and potential consumers could possibly be put off and choose not to read the book. In order to avoid this, several key typographical and design principles were adhered to during the planning and design stages. Most importantly, it was decided to utilize the principle of unity when designing all the sections so that readers could easily jump around in the book without being thrown off by conflicting or contrasting designs. In addition, repetition of key design elements and motifs were used to link together the different parts of the book.

The first step towards assembling the book's interior was getting digital versions of all the interior elements that could be placed into InDesign. The photos and spot artwork was delivered to Top Shelf already digitized, as were the text pieces, but the comics pages that made up the bulk of the book were available only in hard copy, as the *Real Stuff*

comics were published before digital layout and production were common. To yield the needed digital files, these pages were scanned in and cleaned up in Photoshop. This process involved scanning copies of Williams' artwork and reviewing the resulting image files at high magnification to erase any smudges or stray pixels that might have developed during scanning. Furthermore, since the pages came from the *Real Stuff* "One Man – One Glove" stories, the original page numbers and writer and artist credits had to be removed at this stage as well. Once each page was scanned and cleaned up it was saved as a high-resolution TIFF file and named after its chapter and page number (e.g., 1-1.tif, 1-2.tif).

Apart from the comics pages themselves, most of the graphic elements of the interior were delivered already digitized, but often still required some degree of computer manipulation in order to be made print-ready. For example, nearly all of the photos were tweaked in Photoshop to improve their contrast and sharpness and in many cases resized to reduce their file size. Those photos that were sent as JPEGs were also converted to TIFF files to eliminate the loss of quality that could result from being saved and compressed many times over.

The book's text pieces also underwent several changes before they could be placed in the final publication. Firstly, they were edited thoroughly for content, style, and grammar, and in some cases anecdotes had to be cut because of redundancy. Then, each essay was edited from a typographical standpoint to ensure that conventions such as quotation marks, ellipses, and italics were being used consistently throughout the book.

Once the interior elements were assembled and digitized, it was necessary to plan out the break-of-the-book to map out how many pages each section would need and how

the different sections would relate to each other. This was a crucial step since, as noted earlier, the great variety of content could prove confusing for a reader if great care was not taken to make the book orderly and easy to navigate. This break-of-the-book planning was accomplished by sketching out a flat plan with thumbnails of all the book's 64 interior pages, making it easy to see at a glance the makeup of different sections and hopefully making obvious any potential pitfalls or trouble areas.

During this planning process, it was decided to have each text piece separated from the next by at least one page of non-text content; this would allow a reader to easily find the different sections by skimming the book's pages and would create a natural rhythm to the book when read straight through.

Furthermore, the book was planned out so every major section (i.e., the essays and the comics) began on a right-hand page, in keeping with typographic convention. The only exception to this rule was Holly K. Tuttle's four-page comic, which was assigned two double-page spreads; this was chosen because it seemed more natural and easier to read with the story on only two spreads rather than split up over three, and also because such a placement made the layout of other sections of the book less cumbersome and more harmonious.

Once the overall layout of the book was established, the task of actually designing and laying out the pages began in earnest. There were two major portions to this task, the text pieces and the comics, and each presented its own challenges. In addition, there were a number of secondary, yet still important, elements to be designed, such as the table of contents, the title page, the copyright page, and the various in-between pages featuring miscellaneous artwork.

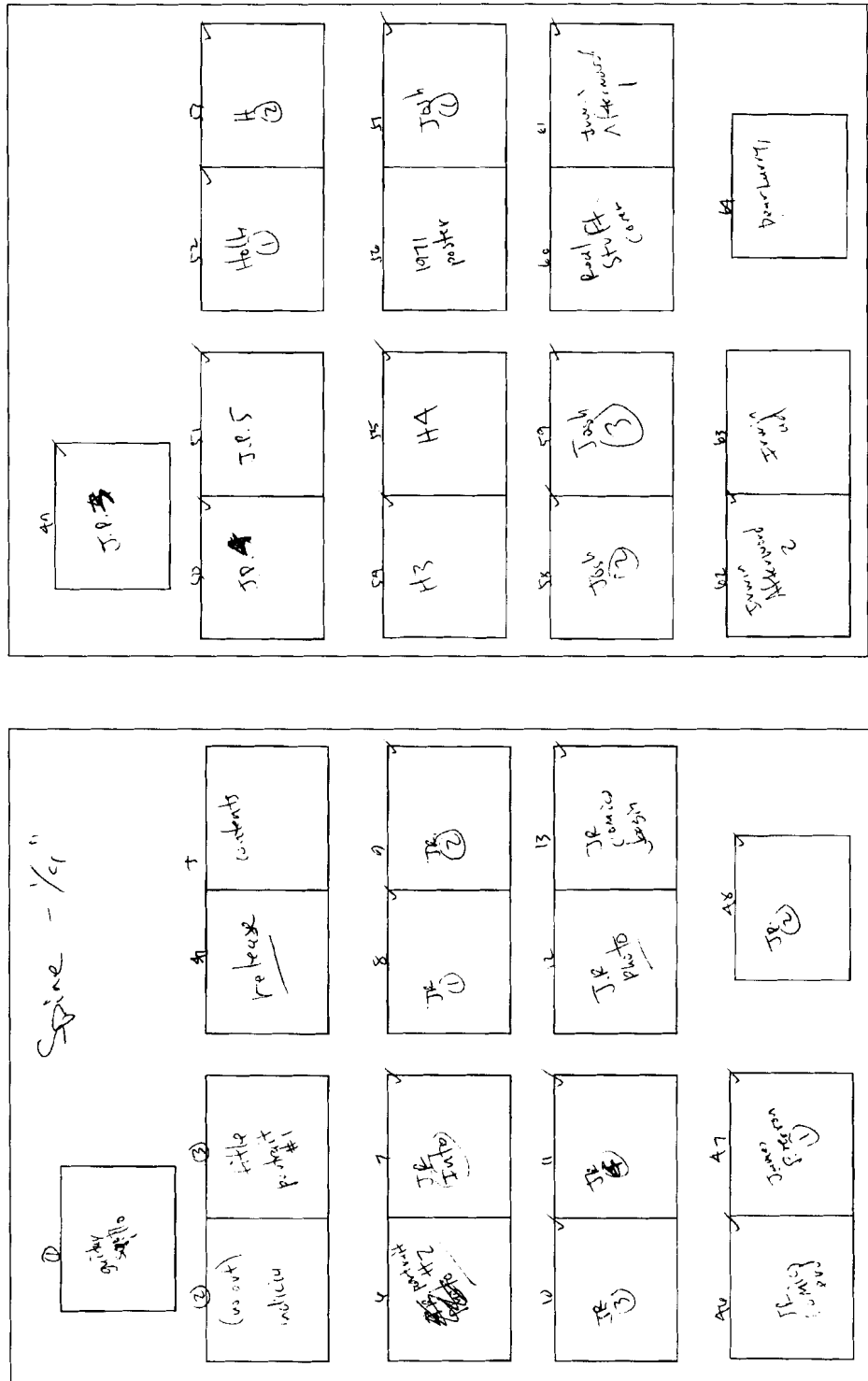


Figure 4: Samples of the flat plan used to plan the break-of-the-book

In designing the text pages, the most important task was balancing the need to make the pages easy to read with the need to make them visually stimulating and interesting. One of the first decisions made was to set the text pages in double-column spreads rather than single-column pages. Since the book would be published in an almost square format (6.75" × 8" — shorter and wider than most text-heavy books) with narrow margins (necessary to fit the essays into the limited number of pages available), a single column design would have resulted in an uncomfortably long line length that would have been difficult to read. The final design, with lines of roughly 45 characters, conforms closely to the guidelines laid out by Robert Bringhurst in his book *The Elements of Typographic Style*: "Anything from 45 to 75 characters is widely regarded as a satisfactory length of line. . . . For multiple column work, a better average is 40 to 50 characters."²³ Furthermore, the two-column grid allowed greater flexibility in flowing the text around photos and gave the text sections a look that was more "magazine" than "book", echoing the desire to create a design that looked like an old mimeographed brochure or pamphlet. Finally, the columns were set ragged-right rather than fully justified, since with short lines full justification would cause awkward word spacing and rivers of white that are not only esthetically unattractive but that can also decrease the legibility of the page.

The choice of typefaces and their use were also contributed to the feel of the book's text pages and were very important in developing the old and worn feel that was one of the goals of the design. As mentioned earlier an idea that was considered was to set the text pieces in American Typewriter or a similar face, to mimic the look of a publication produced on a typewriter and mimeograph 30 years ago. However, it was quickly

it could've been better if it was personally autographed!" — and was very surprised to receive a prompt response from "Mr. Hand" (David Baker, former Deputy Chief Architect of Rhino Handmade Records), thanking me for my short review and saying that since I was the first to reply with kind words, he would actually make an attempt to have Larry autograph a CD booklet for me.

I was impressed. Sure enough, within a week I had an autographed copy of *The Fischer King* CD booklet. This inspired me to start a project that had been in my head for quite some time: to record my own versions of some of Larry's songs and to try to send a copy to Larry to show my appreciation, both for the autograph and his music in general.

I've been playing music for around fifteen years now, having played in a few cover bands, and I currently play bass in an acoustic duo. I do a lot of songwriting and four-track and digital recording, and love to mess about with digital effects, mixing and basically screwing up other-wise maybe good-sounding songs. So with all that, I started the "Jim Sings Larry" project, and worked up a very basic version of "Don't Be A Single" that came out OK. I subsequently worked up versions of some of my favorite Fischer tunes (though admittedly a bit of an odd selection). Monkey's versus Donkeys' (in a country/bluegrass style), "Which Way Did The Freaks Go?" (punkish), "My Friend Robert" (blues, of course), "I Light the Pilot" (speed metal), "The Mogie" (ska), as well as a couple of different versions of a few songs that Larry recorded on his albums but did not write. "Gimme A Ride Down The Hill" and "The Rain Song."

I recorded all of the songs over the period of a few months, and sent a tape to Mr. Hand, who, at my request, passed it along to Larry. A few days later I received an e-mail from Mr. Hand, indicating that Larry had indeed enjoyed the songs, and would like to personally give me his thanks over the phone. I also received a careful warning from Mr. Hand about Larry, reminding me not to forget that Larry is indeed a paranoid

schizophrenic, and may want to talk more than a person would want to listen. And he reminded me of the fact that Rhino Handmade can't be held responsible for any 3:00 a.m. collect phone calls. The phone rang a few hours later.

Operator: "You have an A101 collect call from... Larry. 'LARRY: WILD MAN FISCHER!'"

For those who haven't personally spoken to Larry, it's difficult to represent with a large bold font the extreme volume of his voice. In my first conversation with him, I quickly realized that he was experiencing a state of being which some people around him refer to as the "triple pop." This is 10,000% Mega-Supercat-Larry, and all one can do is just hang on and listen to what the man has to say. I didn't get to contribute too much in that first conversation, for the first few, for that matter, but it was very interesting listening to him (yet a bit worrying, watching the clock and knowing that the collect call was getting expensive).

Larry told me about the music business sharks, running one story into the next. He seemed to assume that I knew all of his friends. He would speak to me as if I were him (such as "...so when you made the album, and Frank said to you..."), making it very, very difficult to piece all of his stories together. Larry told me that

"Jim Sings Larry" really pissed him off, and he thought, "Who in the hell is this Jim guy trying to rip off my songs? Another fucking freakin' Shazam! I explained to him many times my intent: that the recordings were not going to be sold and were only done for his (hopeful) enjoyment.

After a while, Larry calmed down quite a bit, and told me that he actually enjoyed some of the songs, and said I had a hot little band playing behind me (note: I played all instruments on the recordings, and pretty sloppily at that, but Larry still doesn't believe me!). I had a great laugh when he summed it up with:

"Your versions of my songs are OK, but they're not as good as mine.

Our friendship is unique. I'm somewhat of a 'normal' guy. I work in mechanical engineering and have a decent job that I enjoy, live in a nice

house and play video/record (and collect) music for fun. Larry's situation is so different: having such an unstructured life living in hotels, with no steady source of income, still relying on the music business somewhat, and dealing with people who are always looking to carry off a piece of him.

Larry's always asking me why I don't want to get into the music business, and offers to help "my career." At the same time, he tells me that I shouldn't be in the music business, and says I'm extremely lucky to have the things that I have.

I think he enjoys talking to me, because I'm so far removed from the glitter of Hollywood and couldn't give a shit about the music business. Then sometimes he asks if I could put in a good word for him to my boss — in case we need another engineer at work. Larry says he might give it a go.

Larry is a really funny guy... I was kind of surprised to find that even in this situation he's in he maintains a good sense of humor. He's very sensitive, so you need to be careful with subject matter. The combination of his brutal honesty and sense of humor can sometimes lead to some hilarious moments. I went to Disney World a few years ago with my wife Kristen (whom he still refers to as my girlfriend). So then he assumed that every time I was out of town, I must've been at Disney. Some examples of his phone messages are:

"JIM! JIM! ARE YOU THERE, JIM? THIS IS LARRY, JIM, LARRY FISCHER. REMEMBER ME, JIM? AGGH... YOU MUST BE AT DISNEY AGAIN, JIM. WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH MY LIFE, JIM?"

"HELLO, JIM! ARE YOU THERE? THIS IS LARRY, JIM, PRESIDENT OF LARRY RECORDS. I'M THINKING OF SIGNING YOU UP



ON LARRY RECORDS, JIM, JIM SINGS LARRY... YOU WANT THAT, JIM? YOU'D BE THE FIRST ARTIST ON LARRY RECORDS, JIM. JUST REMEMBER — IT'S NOT A RECORD UNLESS IT'S A LARRY, JIM SINGS LARRY... YOU LIKE THAT? ARE YOU THERE, JIM?

Even though we are close friends and Larry confides in me, I still have yet to actually meet him in person. We came close to meeting on a couple of occasions. When Larry

told me of his scheduled performance at the Key Club in Los Angeles on July 7, 2001, I was prepared to fly to Los Angeles to catch the show. I spoke to Larry one week before the show and told him of my intentions. To my surprise he advised me not to come out; he said that he probably wouldn't actually perform, because he changes his mind frequently when his paranoia gets the better of him. He was concerned that the journey just wouldn't be worth my effort and cost. In the end, he did perform, and I missed a good (albeit nervous) Larry performance, as I was able to hear from a copy of a fine audience recording that I acquired later.

I also invited Larry to visit me. He considered taking a bus to Wisconsin, but was unable to arrange for someone to watch his possessions while he was away.

Early last year I was in Ogden, Utah, when Larry was supposed to perform, but that one didn't happen due to some scheduling/venue problems. Then last summer, while traveling back home from Australia after visiting my friends Geoff and Jane, I was in Los Angeles for a night and hoped to track Larry down. But that didn't happen either. The problem this time was traffic jams: We'd get together someday... it will happen. Larry has gone through hell with his mental condition. My wife is a registered nurse, who has

Figure 5: Page spread, showing two-column layout and flexibility of Myriad Pro

apparent that such treatments were too overwhelming and difficult to read so the “typewriter” fonts were relegated to section headers, titles, and other incidental text. The essays themselves were set in Myriad Pro, a very legible and readable sans serif type family that Erik Spiekermann and E.M. Ginger describe as “neutral enough to stay in the background, but [with] that little extra personality to shine when necessary.”²⁴ Myriad Pro was also chosen because it is a versatile type family with many different weights and styles, allowing the text to be modulated for special effect when necessary.

When it came time to choose the “typewriter” font, American Typewriter was rejected for being too clean and sterile, a benefit when set as body copy but which meant the font lacked the personality necessary to be set in large sizes as titles and headers. Instead, several freeware and shareware fonts were considered. Some, like 1942 Report and Adler, were too “worn” to be set in the small sizes that would be used for captions and or copyright info. Others, like Splendid 66, were too similar to American Typewriter and thus too plain and boring. The final choice was Typical Writer, a freeware TrueType font by Carl Johanson that struck a comfortable balance between legibility and personality, making it attractive at both text and display sizes. Nonetheless, Typical Writer was not perfect. It did not feature an italic, so the text had to be skewed in InDesign instead, and it had a limited character selection, so Courier had to be substituted for characters such as the copyright symbol. Finally, as a TrueType font (rather than a Postscript font) there was a fear it might cause conflicts during the printing process.

Laying out the comics pages was simpler than the text pieces because every comics page was essentially identical and a single template could be used for the entire sec-

tion. The main challenge for these pages was accommodating artwork that had originally been published in a taller, narrower format in the pages of a book that was more square and squat. This was accomplished with some success by using wide outside margins and smaller margins along the gutter. This joined facing pages together into a single unit and helped the reader's eye cross the gutter without getting caught on a wide white space. Another final issue was that not all of the original pages used the same dimensions. To maintain a harmonious look, each page of original art was resized as it was placed in InDesign, maintaining consistent top and bottom margins. While this caused the outside margins to vary slightly, never an ideal situation, it was preferable to leaving the top or bottom margins uneven.

American Typewriter

1942 Report

Adler

Splendid 66

Typical Writer

Figure 6: Samples of typewriter fonts

Throughout the book, to create unity and tie the different sections together, small design elements were repeated in order to create visual reminders to the reader that the book they were holding was one organic whole. For example, as stated above, Typical Writer was used as the typeface not only for section titles, but also whenever there were small amounts of incidental type, as for the copyright page, photo captions, and page

numbers. Also, the layout of Williams' pages in an eight-panel, two-column grid allowed those pages to echo the two-column grid of the text pages, mostly by placing the centre of each grid along the same imaginary line on the page. In addition, a set of small illustrations reflecting various aspects of Wild Man Fischer's story were created by J.R. Williams for use on the inside covers of the book, and were then repeated inside the book at the front of every text piece. As well, when using these illustrations with the text pieces the images were faded to grey to lie behind the titles, a technique that was also used to put a "ghost" of the title page illustration behind the table of contents.

6.2 Designing and Laying Out the Cover

The design process for the cover to *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* began simply by placing all the elements to be used on a blank template to see how everything fit together and how different text and graphic elements worked in combination. The main elements to be used were a black and white illustration of Larry Fischer by J.R. Williams for the front cover; a smaller Fischer portrait, also by Williams, for the back cover; a cover blurb and quotes for the back; and the title and credits for the front. As well, the design would incorporate such standard elements as the Top Shelf logo, a UPC bar code, and the price and subject categorization of the book.

Bringing all the cover elements together, it became clear that the cover would need a hook to make the cover stand out on the shelf and tie everything together: simply arranging everything nicely would result in, at best, a serviceable but dull cover, and at worst one that would turn away potential readers and purchasers. After some experimentation and brainstorming, an idea took form to make the cover look like Wild Man was



My Friend Larry

By Jim Pierron

songs? They won't be played on the radio!

In my humble opinion, all of the songs on Side Two are Larry Classics, and I challenge anyone out there to find an equal. Here's a guy singing his songs without a backing band, no backing music, and performing them with such passion, feeling, and pep it seems at times that he's going to burst — and this is his debut album! Throughout that first listen, I could imagine musical arrangements to his *cappella* singing... I'll get back to this later on. Anyway, I thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the album ("The Taster," "The Rocket Rock," "The Wild Man Fischer Story," "Larry & His Guitar," etc.), and proceeded to wear out my tape copy and find out everything I could about him, which meant hunting down the rest of Larry's recorded output.

I found all of the Rhino albums to be very enjoyable, though quite different in style and in terms of Larry's voice) and not quite as focused as *An Evening With...* Larry's 1984 release *Nothing Scary* remains one of my personal favorites. The production by Barnes & Barnes provides a nice touch of popish, with great songs like "All I Think About is You" and "Outside The Hospital" being musically solid in early August 1999. Rhino's Handmade label released its debut release *The Fischer King* which consisted of most of Larry's post-*An Evening With...* recordings, and a lot of previously unreleased tracks.

Being an avid collector, I placed my order early that Monday morning. A few days later I had this great low-numbered set in my hands; I was very impressed with the remastered sound, the bonus tracks, the packaging, and the Mona Lisa poster and artwork, as well as with the nice liner notes and comments from Larry. I felt it absolutely necessary to thank the kind folks at Rhino. Handmade via e-mail for their commendable efforts — I believe that I used the words "... the only way

Figure 7: Sample spread, showing symmetry between comics and text pages

Contents

Introduction	7
Wild Man And Me by J.R. Williams.....	8
The Legend of Wild Man Fischer by Dennis P. Eichhorn & J.R. Williams	13
My Friend Larry by James Pierron	47
Wild Man Fischer Amongst The Shroom People by Dennis P. Eichhorn & Holly K. Tuttle	52
You Will Be Derailroaded by Josh Rubin	57
Afterword by Irwin Chusid.....	61

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Figure 8: Table of Contents, showing artwork “ghosting”

jumping off the black and white comics pages and into the vibrant colour of the real world. Williams' cover illustration would serve well for this purpose because it showed Fischer leaping in the air, but the black and white line art would need to be coloured to fit the cover concept and to better draw attention towards the book.

The first attempt at colouring the artwork reflected the abilities of somebody who had no prior experience in colouring: most of the colour was applied flatly, without shadows or tonal gradations, except for Wild Man's shirt, which used a simple Photoshop rainbow gradient to simulate tie-dye. In a way, this approach matched well with Williams' clean, cartoony style, but it was not especially interesting and eye-catching, and did not do a good job of portraying the cover concept of the character from the comics leaping off the page into the real world. To remedy this, the image was coloured again, this time using more subtle colours and more texture, but still not enough to stand out. Ultimately, a successful approach was found by scanning in swatches of actual fabric, which were then heavily manipulated in Photoshop to blend in seamlessly with Williams' line art. For example, for Wild Man Fischer's jeans, a denim swatch was scanned and recoloured using Photoshop's Hue and Saturation tools to better resemble jeans. Similarly, a swatch of intricately patterned fabric was scanned in to use for the shirt in the illustration, then distorted using the Twirl filter in Photoshop to simulate tie-dye. Sampling from real life materials effectively provided the cover illustration a measure of depth, while the subsequent manipulations ensured that the samples were not jarring when combined with the comics artwork.

To complete the illusion of the Wild Man from the comics jumping into the world outside the page, several pages of interior artwork were selected for the background

for the cover. These pages needed to represent the interior story, and feature Wild Man Fischer prominently, but the images should not be so overpowering that they would distract from the foreground illustration and text. Furthermore, they should not contain any nudity or offensive language, so that retailers would have no qualms about displaying it prominently. Finally, every page should feature the full 8-panel grid of Williams' pages, and none should feature a chapter title panel, so as to make the entire cover background a single, homogenous texture.



Figure 9: Two different approaches at colourizing Wild Man Fischer

As with the design of the book's interior, unity was important for the cover. For the cover, unity would be maintained both between the book's interior and the cover, and between the front and back covers. For the former, unity was achieved by using the same typefaces for the cover as for the interior: again using Typical Writer for the titles and incidental text and Myriad Pro for "body copy" (i.e., the back cover blurb and quotes). Also, by using interior artwork on the cover, readers seeing the book for the first time can know right away

what the contents are like. To tie the front and back covers together better, comics panels used as the front cover's background were extended across the spine and back cover, forming one continual image. In addition, the Top Shelf logo on the back cover was recoloured with colours sampled from the front cover illustration.

6.3 Revisions and Authors' Notes

When the interior and covers were both in a close-to-final state, galley proofs were sent to Chris Staros, Dennis Eichhorn, and J.R. Williams, for approval and to solicit changes. The interior pages were received enthusiastically across the board with only minor changes requested. Among these changes were the repositioning of certain photos, addition of photo credits, and minor typographical changes. Staros and Eichhorn both gave their approval to the general cover concept, but Williams was not happy with the design and suggested wholesale changes to yield something closer to his original vision. As he explains, “[the] first cover design was quite nice, actually . . . very sharp and crisp. I just wanted a cover that said something more about Wild Man's persona; the insane, imbalanced, spontaneous, unpredictable, paranoid-schizophrenic street singer.”²⁵

Williams' suggestions prompted a move towards a cover design concept that Warnock had proposed in the brainstorming stage but was not developed further. The new design would use the same illustration of Wild Man Fischer as the rejected cover, but in the context of a more colourful and psychedelic overall design. To help implement this design, Williams was asked to paint a suitable background texture for this new design. He obliged and quickly provided several vibrant circular designs full of bright greens, yellows, reds, and purples, strongly reminiscent of tie-dye designs from the 1960s. The cir-

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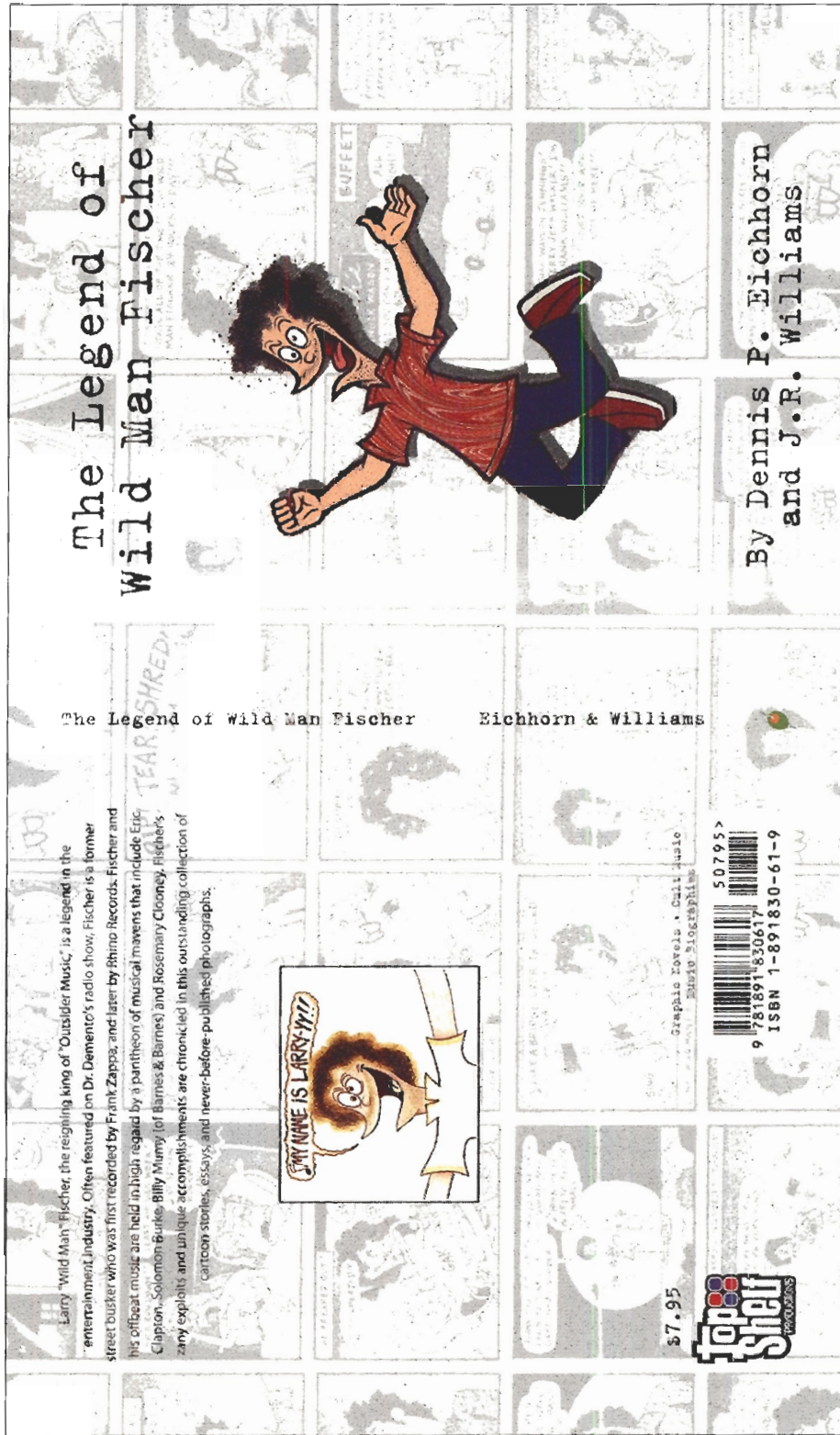


Figure 10: Complete version of first cover

cular motif worked well, allowing the Wild Man Fischer illustration to be placed on the cover as though he was leaping out of a swirling vortex of psychedelic colours. In fact, the colours in Williams' paintings were too vibrant and had to be faded slightly for the final design so that other elements on the cover such as the title, creator credits and illustration not be overwhelmed.



Figure 11: Coloured Wild Man Fischer from final cover

With this new concept for the cover, the earlier treatment for the colouring of the Wild Man Fischer illustration no longer worked, as the idea was no longer that the cartoon Wild Man was leaping into the real world. Rather, the very painterly background provided by Williams lent itself to an inversion of the original concept: the new cover would depict a more cartoony Wild Man Fischer jumping off the more “solid” background. The idea of sampling real world textures for the figure's clothes was put aside in favour of returning to a flat colour scheme with a minimum of shading and texture. The first attempt at this approach used very rich primary colours, with the cartoon Wild Man

sporting a bright red shirt and bright blue pants. This made the image too overpowering and was a poor match for the more subtle colour gradations of the background, so the colours were faded down to a paler, more washed out red and blue. Photoshop's burn tool was also used to lighten portions of Wild Man's pants, lending the appearance of faded jeans wearing thin on the knees and around the cuffs. As a final touch, the bands on the sleeves and collar of Wild Man's shirt were recoloured to make them stand out slightly more against the background and to avoid having them blend in with the rest of the shirt.

With the changes to the art for the cover, the type also needed to be reconsidered to work properly. Principally, Typical Writer no longer seemed appropriate for the major elements on the front cover, as it had been chosen originally when the concept was to mimic an old magazine or pamphlet. With the shift to a more psychedelic look, the design called for a "wilder" typeface that would not be overwhelmed by the other eye-catching elements around it. Among the first faces considered was Cooper Black, a venerable and very popular font that was widely used for posters and T-shirts in the 1970s (in fact, a poster for a Wild Man Fischer concert reproduced in *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* uses Cooper Black or something very similar). However, this ubiquity is also a disadvantage, as it means that Cooper Black verges on the cliché. Furthermore, it was felt that the type for the front cover, since it would be used at a fairly large point size and for only small blocks of text, could use an even more distorted and artistic font. To this end, a variety of decorative fonts from House Industries' Street Van and Tiki Type collections were considered. Among the typefaces to receive strong consideration were VantasyHouse, SlickHouse, MachoHouse, and Tiki Holiday, but the HaulnHouse face was the final

choice. This typeface is at once intricate and detailed enough to be interesting and visually arresting, while also heavy enough to command attention and be easily readable on an already busy cover.

Cooper Black

VANTASHOUSE

SLICKHOUSE

MACHHOUSE

TikiHoliday

HAULHOUSE

Figure 12: Samples of cover fonts

The move to a more psychedelic feel for the cover design also opened up the possibility of playing around more with the look of the front cover text. In the first redesign, the title and author credits were set in plain white, and while this was clean and readable, it did not mesh well with the rest of the cover elements. To improve this, a thin outline was applied to the letters in a shade of purple sampled from the background image and the white shade of the letters was made slightly transparent to let some of the background colour show through. These changes resulted in text that was still easy to read, but still provided a subtle tint that helped unify the cover as a whole. To further bring all the elements together into a cohesive design, the text was distorted in Illustrator to follow the curve of the background design and to frame the illustration of Wild Man Fischer.

Myriad Pro worked equally well in the new back cover design as in the old one, so there was no need to change the typeface of the main body text. However, the redesign did require several other changes to the back cover. Firstly, since Typical Writer was no longer used on the front cover, it no longer made sense to use it for the incidental text on the back cover. For this reason, elements such as the price and the subject classification were set in Myriad Pro as well. Furthermore, the cover blurb and quotes were set in an invisible round frame that roughly followed the shape of the background painting; as with the distortion of the front cover text, this helped integrate the foreground and background elements into a unified design. The “shaped” back cover copy also helped to create a more dynamic design that deviated from the traditional without becoming distracting. Finally, colours sampled from the background were applied to the main and incidental text, the Top Shelf logo, and the UPC code, transforming a nearly black and white design to one bursting with colour.

Once the new cover design was assembled, a copy was sent by email to Williams to get his opinion of the changes, and to hopefully get his approval for the revamp. Williams’ reaction to the new, psychedelic cover was mostly favourable, though he did have certain suggestions and concerns to be addressed. He felt that the new cover still didn’t highlight the musical aspects of the Wild Man story enough, so, at his suggestion, a number of musical notes from the comics story on the interior were copied and colourized, then placed around the Wild Man illustration on the front cover. These served not only their main purpose of illustrating the musical side of the story, but also balanced the overall design by adding to the empty areas at either side of the main illustration. Fur-

thermore, the same musical notes were added to the back cover, above the main copy, balancing out a design that had previously been very bottom-heavy. Williams also suggested changes to the Wild Man illustration from the front cover. He favoured a return to the more naturalistic version from the first rejected cover design and the addition of a drop shadow behind the figure. These changes were tried, but the sentiment at Top Shelf was that they were not effective and the flat colouring was retained.

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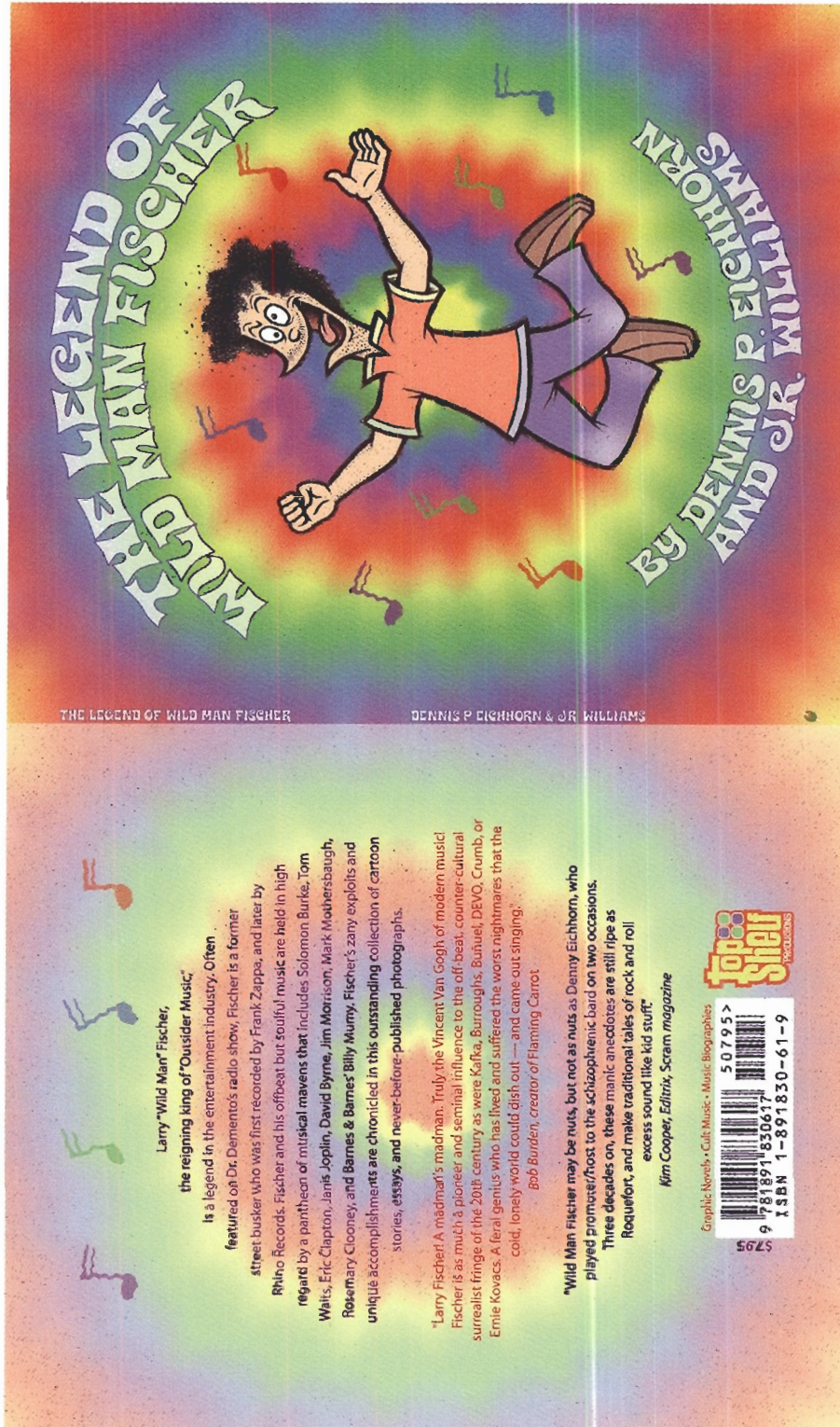


Figure 13: Final cover design

Chapter 7: Looking Back on the Design and Production Process

After a design process involving multiple levels of approvals and several rejected or revised designs for the cover, the question that naturally arises is whether it was worth the effort. Is the second, more colourful and more psychedelic design for *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer* more effective than the initial designs, or would the book have been better served by using a design with less colour and a more subtly coloured Wild Man Fischer illustration? To Brett Warnock, both designs have their merits: "I like them both. I loved the way the first design extrapolated strips from the interior, suggesting the life that Wild Man Fischer actually lived, but on the other hand, I do think the color of the new version may affect impulse purchases."²⁶ Meanwhile, J.R. Williams agrees that the flashier design may be more attention-grabbing: "I felt that the original cover design was a bit too sedate, balanced, 'solid'. I was more artistically than commercially motivated, though I guess I did consider that a more colorful, eye-catching cover might make the book more attractive to potential purchasers."²⁷

Overall, it seems that the second design is a more cohesive unit and that the various elements work together better than in the initial design, and that the added colour and bolder lettering make it stand out more when surrounded by competing designs. However, the redesign does sacrifice many elements that made the initial cover special, such as the sampling of real-world textures for the colouring, the use of interior illustrations as a background, and the use of Typical Writer, a typeface with a very strong personality.

Perhaps more importantly, the new design stands out when viewed on its own, but it no longer retains any strong ties to the material on the interior pages. There is no

longer any interior artwork on the cover, and the entire concept of making the book look like a relic of Wild Man Fischer's era has been abandoned (or, at the very least, modified to use a different kind of relic as the template). For example, the typewriter font that had been chosen with such care and used throughout the interior does not appear at all on the newly designed cover. Furthermore, the motif of line art faded to grey that is used in several instances on the interior, and which the initial cover design used to fade the comics panels into the background, is not used for the revised cover.

It is also important to consider exactly why the revised cover design is more effective: is it simply that it is inherently a stronger design than the original, or was it the longer revision process that allowed it to be more fully developed? The first cover design was submitted to the publishers and creators at an advanced stage of development, but that is not to say that it would not have needed further polishing and improvement before it was ready to go to the printers. By comparison, after the second design was submitted for approval and revision to J.R. Williams it still underwent a series of minor, but ultimately very important changes before reaching a state that was deemed ready to go to press. Had this back-and-forth process of revisions and changes taken place with the initial design, rather than having that design replaced outright, is it possible that it might have reached a point where it, too, was deemed satisfactory for all parties involved?

Chapter 8: Conclusions and Ramifications

These elements of the consultation and design process are important not only for the effect they have on the final outcome of the design, but also for the impact that they can have on the entire publication process and beyond the scope of any one project. The decisions made and processes followed at the design stage will affect such aspects of a publisher's operations as its marketing and promotional plans and its relations with creators, retailers, distributors.

Access to distribution is particularly important. Since Diamond Comic Distributors dominates comics distribution to the point that they have a near monopoly on all comics specialty retailers, it is imperative for comics publishers to not only be on good terms with Diamond, but also to make the most of their exposure in *Diamond Previews*. This is the monthly catalogue that comics stores use when making their monthly orders, and is often the only opportunity publishers have to promote their books to retailers. While publishers can purchase advertising in the catalogue, the standard *Previews* listing allows for only a short description (no more than a few hundred words) and a small illustration of the book's cover (approximately the size of a postage stamp). In the case of *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer*, though, there was no cover design ready when the catalogue went to press (generally three months before a book arrives in stores). Because of this, Top Shelf had to use a mock-up that in no way resembled the final product. As a result, one of the most important sales tools for both retailers and publishers was nullified, and the book's initial orders may have been negatively impacted. In addition, unlike non-comics publishing catalogues, *Previews* is also widely used by consumers to plan their

upcoming purchases and to order books from their retailers (as many stores can not or do not carry a wide selection, special orders are common), and the lack of a finished cover at this stage may have resulted in lost sales in this way as well.

Beyond not having the cover design in the *Diamond Previews* catalogue, a production and design schedule keyed to printing and on-sale dates can also impact a book's marketing and promotion. Since it is common for comics readers to order books in advance of publication, it is beneficial for a publisher to focus promotional efforts around the ordering period, which takes place about three months before a book hits stores. Beyond the actual catalogue listing and advertising in *Diamond Previews*, these efforts may include seeking coverage in comics publications, both in print and online, or sending advance review copies to prominent reviewers. These efforts will naturally be more successful if the book were in a near-complete state, but in the case of *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer*, at least, this did not occur. Instead, the bulk of the design work did not begin until after the Diamond solicitation had already appeared and after initial orders were in.

Finally, a production and design schedule that operates further in advance of printing and distribution deadlines can allow greater opportunities to involve the creative talent in the process, building better relations between authors and the publisher. While the Top Shelf publishers make great efforts to keep their creators involved, there is still the chance for miscommunication. Such may be the case for *The Legend of Wild Man Fischer*, as J.R. Williams feels some of his input was not listened to. He explains the design process from his side of the project:

Brett asked me to draw a black and white figure of Wild Man, which he said he would color & put into a cover design reminiscent of the “*Little Golden Books*” for children. Obviously, this didn’t exactly happen. Secondly, I clearly stated that I didn’t care to spend excessive personal time designing the cover of the book myself. I sent Brett written suggestions, which he apparently lost or simply disregarded; the first cover design looked nothing like my suggestions, or like the ideas discussed by Denny, Brett and myself. So, I found myself having to repeat my instructions, and eventually put in a good deal of extra time, something I’d hoped to avoid. The bottom line was, I preferred to do the work so that the finished product would turn out the way I’d envisioned it. I was certainly frustrated by the breakdown in communications more than once, but I feel very satisfied with the finished book.²⁸

Had Williams seen the work that was being done on the first design of the cover while it was in progress, rather than only been sent a copy for approval when it was almost finished, his concerns could have come to light earlier and a new design could have been created in consultation with him. As a result, he would have finished the project with a better impression of the process and the company, and much wasted time and effort could have been prevented.

Notes

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