

Small Press Digest

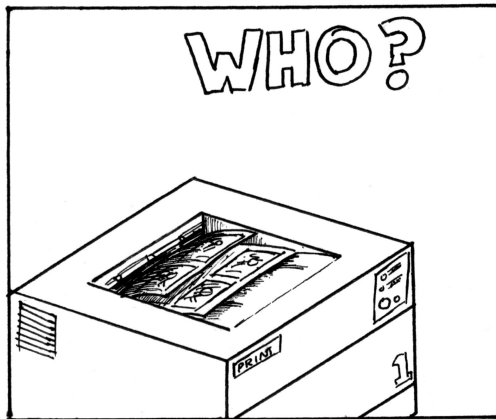
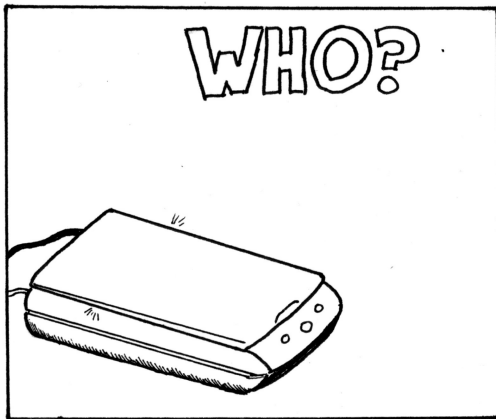
Issue 1

December 2011

£1



YOU!



It's never been easier to start your own comic
What are you waiting for?

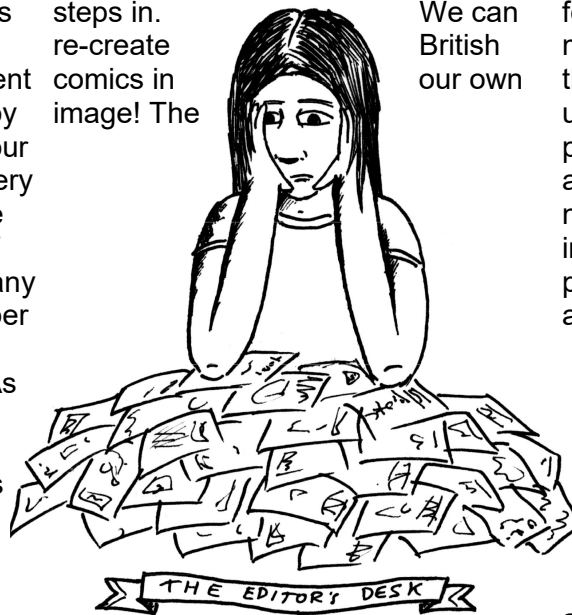
Editorial

Welcome to issue 1 of the Small Press Digest. This magazine aims to be a helpful guide to the wide and varied world of small press publishing in the UK today. Whilst Britain's "home grown" (Dandy, Beano, Commando etc) comic industry is on the rocks our small press scene has never been stronger! While the comics you can buy in the newsagent today are dumbed down monthly toy catalogues with perhaps a whole four pages of strip an issue, virtually every week finds laser printers across the land turning out page upon page of brand new comics. You won't find any of these in the shops, but the number of conventions that feature small press tables expands every year. As a case in point MCM, one of the newest and biggest conventions in the country, featured a "small press village" from the very beginning... And that village isn't getting any smaller!

The main advantage of small press comics is, of course, their freedom. Aside from illegal stuff (though depending on your print run and audience even that may prove no barrier!) you can write about virtually anything you want. At a small press convention by-the-numbers superhero and shonen battle stories rub shoulders with bizarre surrealist experiments and extreme political propaganda. There really is something for everyone... and for lovers of the comic medium there's almost too much!

"Lovers of the comic medium" brings me on to another point. Readers of our sister publication, The Sentinel, will no doubt have seen the shabby treatment that comics are given in Britain today. The mainstream media either ignores the existence of Britain's comics or only ever concentrates on their negatives. A change in the art style of Dennis The Menace or Desperate Dan is immediately condemned as "ruining"

the characters (in the latter case 4 years after the fact!). However when a brand-new and ambitious comic such as Strip Magazine gets launched the silence is deafening. At best it's laziness, at worst treason! However this is where the small press steps in. We can re-create British our own comics in image! The



conventions springing up around the country (not to mention a few 'invasions' of craft markets and other events) enable us to get home-grown British comics directly into the hands of readers. The art may be a bit rough around the edges, the paper not glossy and the writing lacking 70+ years of convoluted continuity behind it (hang on, that last one's a good thing!), but the passion and love of the format is there for all to see.

In fact the quality and professionalism of some comics, Spaceship Away, Sweatdrop Studios and Vworp Vworp to name but three, has spread their fame beyond the 'mere' small press and created what might be termed "medium press"! Are these names the vanguard of a movement to rebuild Britain's comics from the bottom up, led by the fans themselves and not pencil-pushers with heads full of figures? It's an idea that I feel has potential at any rate. You've all seen the shocking state of comic displays

in mainstream shops, the apathy if not outright hostility of the retailers beggars belief. Creating and distributing your own comics is, in the face of this, almost a revolutionary act. A boat somewhere certainly needs rocking, and if we can get the format of comics back into mainstream culture where it belongs these retailers will be forced to clean up their act too. In fact with the whole print industry in trouble you could argue they need us more than we need them! Somebody's got to introduce new readers to the joy of picture-stories on the printed page... and certain companies just aren't trying.

It's never been easier to create your own comics either. The cost of printers, computers, scanners and high-quality image editing software is coming down all the time. If you keep your eyes open and shop around you can even get a large amount of what you need for free! There's a full article on this later on. The internet, too, makes it easy to link up with artists or writers if you don't have the skill yourself. In addition the wealth of print-on-demand sites such as Lulu gives you an outlet for selling your material world-wide, often with print and binding quality indistinguishable from "the real thing". And of course if you want to keep all your printing "in house" sites such as Etsy and Ebay still allow your bedroom creations to reach readers across the globe.

With cheap printers, easy editing, a wealth of conventions and a huge scene full of "friends you haven't met yet" there really hasn't been a better time to get stuck in! And with the help, advice and assistance available on the internet it's also never been easier to develop your own skills or meet people who can create a comic with you. If you've got an idea for a story... you've got enough!

-The Editor

Reviews

The small press reviews in the Digest are not going to be “reviews” in the traditional sense, nor will they award ratings of any kind. The reason for this is that the small press is far too varied and different, without any “standards”. Also every small press writer and artist approaches their work with different intentions. In the world of ‘real’ comics, books, films and videogames the “intention” is to create a work that will sell the most copies. In the small press on the other hand, profit is often barely thought of. While some people do

make money out of small press publishing most people produce comics and magazines simply out of a love of the art form. For this reason it's no use writing off a work full of spelling mistakes as “badly written” or a tribute to golden-age superhero comics as “dated” if that was the whole point!

Instead, then, the reviews in the Digest are going to be simple descriptions. When you are running around at a convention, probably after having got up early or partied the night before, it's easy to take the

path of least resistance. You might only visit the tables of people you know, or of comics you have bought before. But to do this you might be walking right by your new favourite comic! Some of my favourite Small Press comics are titles I'd never heard of before I bought them. This is part of the reason why the Digest exists – let us do the hard work so you don't have to! Instead of telling you is a comic is good or bad we'll leave that up to you, our reviews are simply to point you in the direction of material you might like.

Free Z

Credits: Willie Hewes

Size: B5

Colour: Limited

Age Rating: Teen

Price: \$2

Further Information

<http://www.webcomicsnation.com/williehewes/freeze/>
(Now free online)

Though this comic is priced in dollars and is clearly aimed at an American audience (it deals with the “brat camps” that exist there. Though no doubt they, like the *diseases* of “hyphenation” and gunfights, will infect Britain in time) it is actually produced by Bristol-based Willie Hewes.

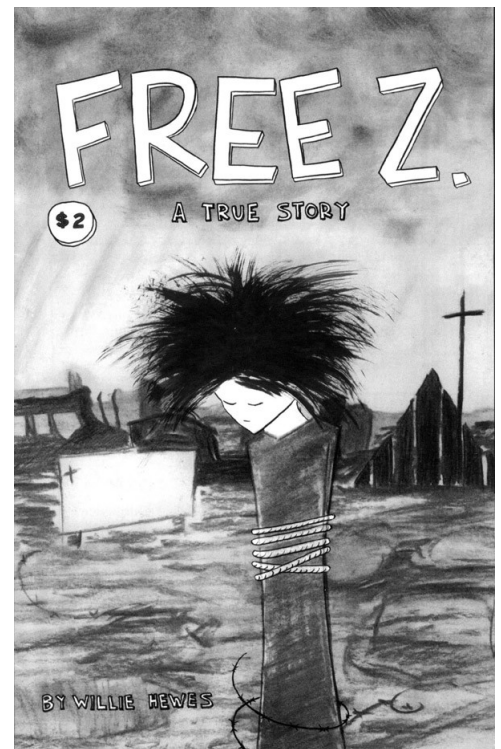
Willie usually draws in a manga-influenced style, but here has gone with a scratchy, “gloomy” look with lots of washed-out greyscale and heavy blacks. The art would suit a horror comic... which in a way, this is. The story is told in verse in small captions beneath the pictures. Unsettlingly like the very old British humour comics such as Film Fun. There's no slapstick antics with banana skins here though. It features

a young gay teen who comes out to his parents and is promptly packed off to a “brat camp” called “Love In Action”. Here the staff try to turn him straight through intimidation, isolation and a number of extremely petty rules (such as “No Calvin Klein”!). All this does is make the main character grow increasingly depressed. He is later released from the camp, having been “treated”, though he knows he is still gay inside.

The comic also contains some short articles about the cost and actual effects of Love In Action, which comes off as a scam at best. The first article contains a bizarre statement from one of the current directors of Love In Action saying that he can believe a yellow wall is blue with help from God. On the opposite page is a damning letter from one of the original founders of the same organisation who realised that he was deluding himself and other people. He also points out that the church once believed that slavery was acceptable by biblical standards, and mentions that there are more passages in the Bible condemning divorce than homosexuality. He says that while he has retained his religion he believes that Christians have interpreted the bible wrongly before and are likely to do it again before

judgement day arrives.

The closing article reminds readers that the ex-gay movement is effectively a swindle, taking thousands of dollars to “change” people in a way that does not really



“change” them at all. It also contains another cartoon with probably the funniest line in the book. “Yes officer, I saw a red light, but I wanted to believe it was green...”

Art School Scum

Credits:**Size:** A5**Colour:** B&W**Age Rating:** Teen**Price:** Unknown**Further Information:**

This originated as a series of satirical posters anonymously stuck up around the artist's school. They attack various stereotypes that populate the school such as metalheads, 80's nostalgia fans, embittered tutors... oh and different kinds of artists too! One particularly good one highlighting the conflict between Fine Artists and Graphic designers that ends with a university student muttering "Those damn art students don't even need to do any exams or learn anything!".

Bleep & Tweet

Credits: Alistair Maceachern**Size:** A6**Colour:** B&W**Age Rating:** Teen**Price:** £1**Further Information:**www.amdrawing.co.uk/

This is a small A6 sized comic putting a new spin on an age-old joke. A robot is given an instruction and follows that instruction literally, in this case being told to "pull a bird"! He tries buying her a pint and asking if

The Dexter Dimension

Credits: Eddie Bowley**Size:** A5**Colour:** B&W**Age Rating:** Universal**Price:** Unknown**Further Information:**www.eddegg.com/

This is just one of many comics from the freakishly productive Eddie Bowley, most famous (now) for the brilliant Edd Egg cartoons. The Dexter Dimension is a series of single-panel

The posters are all reproduced at A5 size, though were possibly originally bigger. They are primarily in the overly-dramatic style of classic American horror comics. Lots of FEAR! This and SEE! That. They're also completely hand-produced, no typed text! Oh and as a fan of cross-hatching the work on display here is sublime (I'll be sounding like an art student myself at this rate).

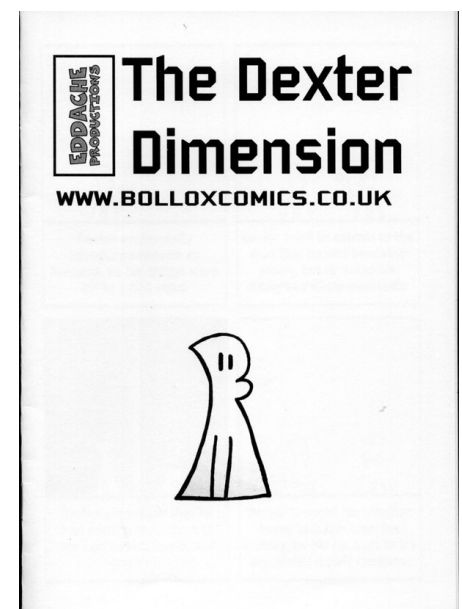
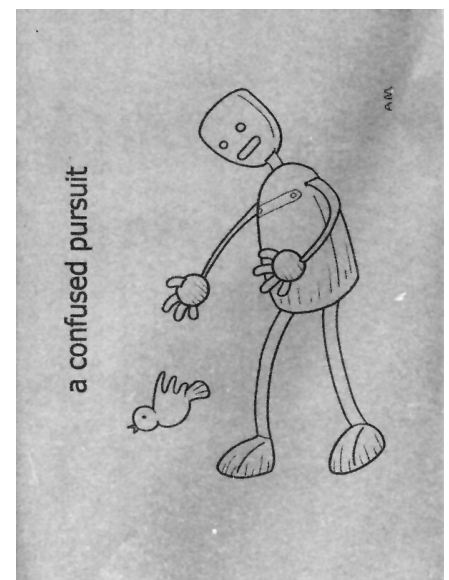
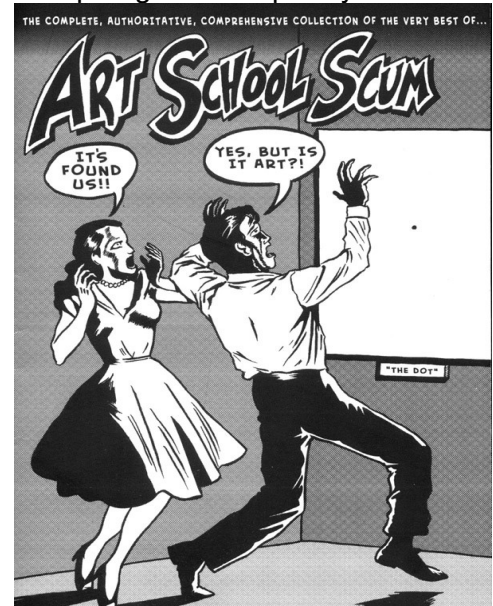
Also included are additional pages about the readers of Art School Scum who either thought it wasn't funny or didn't quite get the point (wanting to be 'featured' next!). Finally there is a brochure for a local exhibition which came about because the organisers wanted to appeal to "the yooof" so decided to go to "the comic book guy" that they'd heard was selling funny books in the SU bar. Because comics are something that the young working

she comes to the tree often, but doesn't seem to get much of a response. Only "tweet!". Still, though she is playing hard to get she does leave him two feathers, which gives him hope that she does like him after all.

The artwork is in a simple and clear style that suits the story perfectly. The story says it's to be continued and indeed part 2, "A Mistaken Date" is listed on the AM Drawing website. Unfortunately this first part isn't any longer. Perhaps it's sold out.

cartoons, often quite surreal but all funny. Examples include Dexter regretting choosing a mars bar over a shield when facing a dragon, and "getting lost" and ending up in the caption rather than the panel. The artwork would probably be written off as "mere" MS Paint by some people, and copy-and-paste is clearly evident. But the quality of this comic is all in it's writing! It's just a shame The Dexter Dimension doesn't even seem to be even mentioned on the Edd Egg website any more.

class demographic likes... or so we hear. This includes an amusing strip about the artist's internal conflict between "selling out" and "being paid to disparage contemporary art!".



The Girl Who Is Always Crying And The Penguin Who Dreams Of Africa

Credits: Yuri Kore
Size: A5
Colour: Full Colour
Age Rating: Children
Price: £5
Further Information:
www.yurikore.com

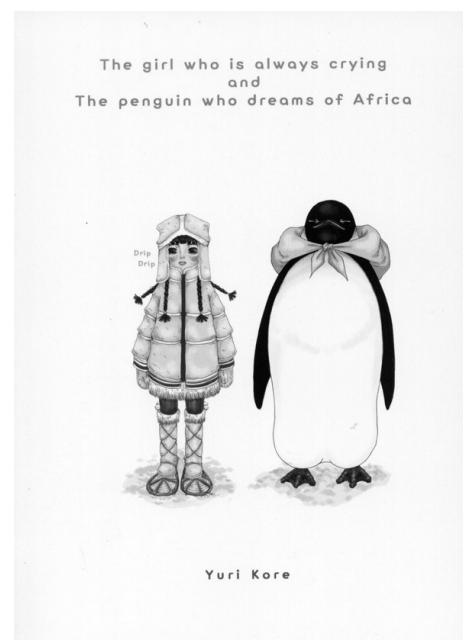
Phew. This is a full-colour comic with absolutely wonderful artwork, created by the absurdly talented Yuri Kore. She is originally from Korea and has worked for published comics there. However in this country there is a disgraceful lack of outlets for her art and so she is forced to self-publish her stories. This shortage of non-licensed, home-grown and high quality comics is a disgrace that

shames our nation. But I'll save that kind of thing for our sister publication The Sentinel.

The Girl who is always crying is an Eskimo, and she is not actually crying but simply has tears on her face all the time. According to the author this was inspired by a girl she saw at an airport in the decidedly non-arctic island of Bali. In this comic she befriends a penguin who stands alone on the "hill of contemplation" dreaming of going to Africa. She then tries to help him achieve this dream with the aid of characters such as "The Sarcastic Albatross Brothers".

It's a very amusing and cute story with a perhaps unexpected ending. Also included are "In front of a maze", a puzzle, and another story about The girl who is always crying trying not to laugh at penguins who walk funny. (With brilliant Wo. bble. 'sound effects'). While the art is brilliant some of the English writing has minor mistakes in it, as English is not the author's first language. However some of these mistakes make the

comic seem more 'cute'. Finally in a continuation of a great British tradition (that has now virtually ended) of free gifts with comics that are specially (and well!) made with new artwork this book comes with a Girl who is always crying sketch book... which is actually bigger than the comic!



Chemical Blue Volume 1

Credits: Irina Richards
Size: Paperback
Colour: Limited
Age Rating: Teen
Price: £6.50
Further Information:
www.sweatdrop.co.uk

This is a story in a genre I thought was long dead - the boarding school story! However the tale features a distinct lack of ragging, fagging, cricket and dorm feeds. Instead it is set in a boarding school that seems to be organised more along the lines of a modern university, and is mixed-sex too. I wondered if such places even really existed to begin with, thinking that the author, who grew up in Russia, had simply overdosed on Harry Potter and was trying to create something similar in the 'real' world. However my Brother then got a job at a school just like the one in this story! Anyway, enough of that. The story itself revolves around Amber Kayar, who we meet entering Emery College as a year 11 student. She imagines that her combination of beauty and brains will have all the girls wishing to be like her and all the boys falling at her feet. However instead she falls asleep in the car, makes loads of clumsy mistakes, is embarrassed by her parents and is put in with a bullying "mentor" girl who is just trying to look good. After this bad start she just wants to leave, but then meets a punk called Leanne and her best friend Shawn, who she quickly becomes friends with - especially as they all like the same band!

After some more Bullying Amber decides to run away, but instead is persuaded to stay by a sixth-former called Kelly, who has her own romantic and family problems in the background. Meanwhile Leanne and Shawn have a disastrous night out that adds to the complicated and intertwined plot. Oh and the headmaster is pretty good at Tetris too. There's plenty going on in the story and I don't want to give it all away, but I will say it's a great page-turner.

Also included are some short four-panel vertical gag strips (these no doubt have some fancy Japanese name), a short strip using the Chemical Blue characters to advertise Sweatdrop Studios (even if this does say that "Manga" is not "Comics" -_-) and a gallery of fan-art sent in by different people. In format, paper style, quality of writing, quality of art and use of screentone this book is virtually indistinguishable from the professionally-produced Shoujo titles you can find in ordinary shops. With the exception that it's written, drawn and printed right here in the UK! This is exactly the sort of thing that Britain's "real" comic publishers ought to be doing and is a real ambassador for our thriving small press scene.



Rant!

Credits: "Rant Comix"
Size: A5
Colour: Black and White
Age Rating: Teen
Price: £1.50
Further Information:
rantcomix@aol.com

I was given this comic at the first ever convention I exhibited at, the UK Webcomix Thing 2006. I've never seen it since! I owe somebody somewhere £1.50 or a copy of Scum Slaughter (current retail price 20p) anyway.

As it's name implies this comic is primarily an anger-venting tool against various "little injustices of life"

High Maintenance Book One

Credits: Mallory Smith
Size: A4
Colour: (very!) Limited
Age Rating: Adult
Price: £1.50
Further Information:
www.thefallenangel.co.uk/store.htm

This comic is a grim, bleak and sick piece of work full of unremitting violence, gore, criminal behaviour and sexual depravity... is no doubt how a right-wing tabloid would describe it. On the other hand I'm wrong in the head so I think it's brilliant!

The main character is Jess Mason, a highly-skilled night-crawling vigilante avenger in the mould of characters such as Batman, or perhaps Modesty Blaise. Oh and she's also been through a sex-change, among other 'interesting' things. She's remotely assisted by the much more careful (and sensible) Bobby, who is in the middle of transitioning in the other direction. Bobby sits at home monitoring CCTV cameras, police radio transmissions and so on to give Jess an extra edge. Together these two set out to protect freaks and misfits like themselves from the more undesirable elements of Bristol's

that the author experiences. Such as ties and neighbours playing music way too loud. The latter forms the plot of the first story, which is apparently also the first strip the author ever completed (I feel very jealous). It's crammed with plenty of gags, such as a granny in a jury wearing a badge saying "Dredd is soft"!

There's also a vaguely shonen battle-styled story about a serial killer prowling the city streets, with a nice twist at the end. The story of ties enslaving the human race is pretty amusing too. Then there's "The Diplomatic Affair" which was apparently "An excuse to draw babes".

The artwork is in a nice cartoonish style that's full of life, and there's even a little variation between the stories to keep them separate. It's a crammed

population. And if a few rapists lose a few body parts in the process who are they to shed a tear?

Virtually every other character in this comic is "weird" in some way too. And I don't mean a safe kind of science fiction "weird" like in X-men either! For instance the scene of Jess' latest rescue is the pavement outside a club owned by a local gangster, who employs a very nasty enforcer. In the meantime another woman is thinking about suicide, a little girl thinks her teddy is talking to her and even the cop trying to sort this mess out isn't having an easy time at home. We're also given a hint of some mysterious hacker that is aware of who Jess is and what she's up to.

The story rattles along at a fine pace and leaves you wanting more. It's just a shame that Mal Smith has now become the moving spirit behind the Bristol Comic Convention, one of Britain's oldest and largest. I don't think she has much time for drawing at the moment!

The artwork in this comic is as dark as the story. It's always a world of gloomy light and deep, black shadow. Everything seems to take place in dark rooms, dark alleys or dark rooftops, a lot of panels don't have any backgrounds, making the close-ups positively claustrophobic. When backgrounds do appear, though, they are fantastically drawn. A standout scene being one in an ornate, empty

20 pages 'o fun that's great value at the price... I need to look for more!



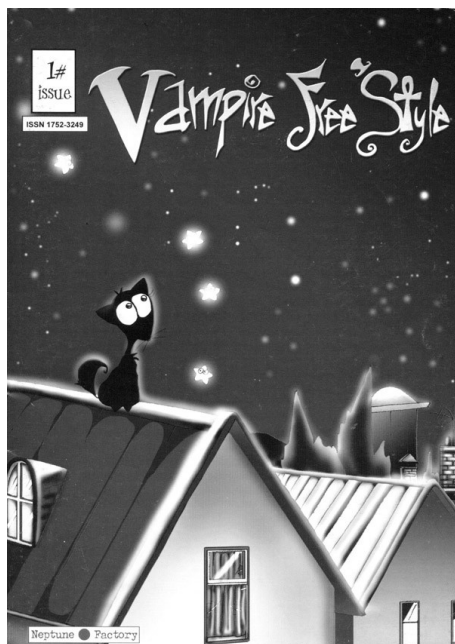
theatre. Far and away the best part of the artwork is the faces, though.

Creating distinctive, expressive faces in comics is a difficult skill, but here you can tell who everybody is at a glance, even without relying on hairstyles or clothes. There's more than a few properly-published comics where that isn't possible!

As you may have gathered this comic is something ordinary publishers wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole (even in light of a few recent controversies with comics that 'went too far'). But there's the beauty of the small press, you can buy as uncompromising as you like and it'll still find fans somewhere!



Vampire Free Style issue 1



Credits: Jenika Ioffreda
Size: A5
Colour: Limited
Age Rating: Universal
Price: £2.50
Further Information:
www.neptunefactory.com/

This is a very interesting story in the mould of a traditional fairy tale, only it's set in modern times. A prince, who is a boy learning witchcraft, has lost his princess. She appears to have been transformed into a black cat and partly lost her memory. However as a cat she again meets the witch... while he is learning to fly a broomstick without much success! We also meet another guy called Ed, who is able to see the mysterious cat in her true form, when he finally catches up with her. Then there's

Auntie Margherita, the comic relief character who dresses up the cat, Micia, in funny costumes all the time. This is a well-produced comic with great artwork that sits between "manga" and "western" styles. There's also plenty of little added jokes and cute sound effects revolving around Micia. The scene where she's reading in a library and suddenly reminded she is a cat is brilliant. One criticism of this first issue is that we don't seem to find out the names of the two main characters! (Well apart from Micia). But in later issues we learn that the boy is called Padroncino and the girl is Elea. There's going to be six parts to this story in all, and five are currently available. Next part reviewed in the next issue!

Petunia Rascal

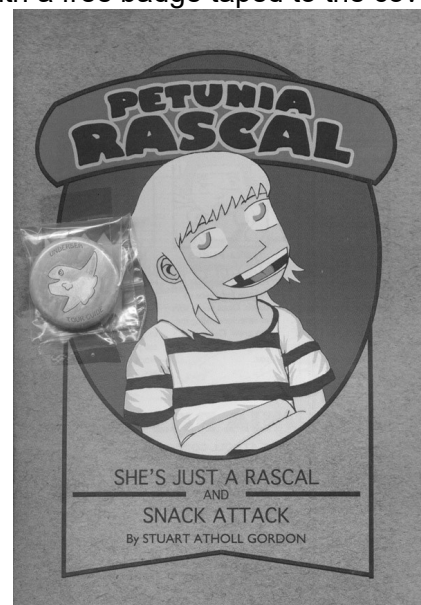
Credits: Stuart Atholl Gordon
Size: A5
Colour: Limited
Age Rating: Universal
Price: Unknown
Further Information:
<http://sathollgordon.blogspot.com/>

With the freedom of the small press it's easy to create a story that's full of the most gruesome depravity you can imagine. However it can be a lot more fun to create something that would sit comfortably in traditional kid's comics such as The Beano or The Dandy... this is it! In fact I'm surprised this isn't in the modern Dandy, I think it would fit perfectly. Petunia is the boss of her "crew", the

Skate Pirates which also includes Bill Pukes (the dumb one) and Jolly Rodney (the straight man). Other characters include a witch that lives under the sea and a bunch of sinister crisp magnates of dubious copyright status.

The book contains two stories, in the first Petunia runs afoul of the witch and takes refuge in the ocean. In the second she organises a raid on the 10p crisp factory in revenge for the price being increased to 45p! Sometimes the writing of the stories seems a little surreal, but they keep you laughing. The artwork is deceptively simple, but the characters are distinct and very expressive. Also when a scene calls for an intricate, detailed background (for instance at a market or in a shop) we aren't left wanting.

Finally each copy of this comic comes with a free badge taped to the cover...



that's how free gifts ought to be done! Specially-made artwork and not interfering with the comic itself.

The Darkest Path

Credits: Ben Palmer
Size: A5
Colour: Limited
Age Rating: Universal
Price: Free
Further Information:
<http://palmer-san.deviantart.com>

This is the first item from Sweatdrop

Studios I ever got, right back in 2005! It's a free sample comic of a longer story. It's set in a fantasy world containing three races, the Guardians, Elves and Humans. This is only a sample book so it's just a Guardian introducing the story, which seems to involve the world being invaded by some sort of fiery dark angels.

The book also features some short character introductions. But where it really must be praised is the artwork,

it's fantastic! Screentone is used to create shading, but it's used as lavishly and accurately as other artists would use charcoal or pencil shading. It will probably be very difficult to track this sample comic down today (in fact I haven't seen the full version around either). But if you can it will be an interesting look back into the genesis of one of the leaders of today's British small press movement.

Sorry, no cover scan for that last one. A scan ought to be able to fit perfectly with some rejigging of the text in the columns, but no word processing software on earth seems able to handle columns *and* images properly!

Red Planet Ride

Credits: Jim Round

Size: A5

Colour: Full Colour

Age Rating: Universal

Price: £2.80

Further Information:

<http://www.studiotaikofish.com/>

This is an interesting fantasy comic set on Mars in the ancient past, when that planet was inhabited by humans, ogre-like creatures and a big flying blue puffer fish! Oh also "Mars" looks a great deal like "Japan". Even including tiny turbo-powered cars with the letter R in their name. There's even Shinto-like shrines at which people make offerings (of pot noodles rather than coins) to the gods, who appear (like, er, the blue puffer fish)

to actually appear and help people with their problems.

The main character is a girl called Ken, who is living with a group called the Environment Squadron. She doesn't know who her parents are, but the leaders of this organisation know that her father is "The Second Sea Lord". I gather this has nothing to do with the navy of this world, though! Their mission is to protect creatures caled Sky Whales, who are overdue for their regular migration. The puffer fish god, Oboro, says that the whales have been attacked somehow. Ken and two other agents in the Environment Squadron are assigned to investigate this.

The artwork of this comic is full-colour and fantastic. The style is very distinctive, most of the characters have big pupils in their eyes. The fact it's full colour is fully exploited too, with colourful shops, houses, clothes

and scenery everywhere. The only real criticism is that the story is a bit slow paced, not a great deal happens in the two chapters in this book.

Perhaps it's intended to be collected into a larger book later?

