



THESE WERE THE TERRIFYING, SHOCKING,
SENSATIONAL, APPALLING, FORBIDDEN...
BUT SIMPLY WONDERFUL...



HORROR COMICS

by Joe Brancatelli

OF THE 1950'S

The late H.L. Mencken, known as the "Image Breaker" by his peers in the history business, would not have been welcome by the EC fan. Mencken was always known as the defiler of the pseudo-gods, attacker of the unattackable, and criticizer of the untouchables. E.C. Comics have become all of those to their fans—pseudo-gods, untouchable, unattackable—and any attacks Mencken might have mustered against the myth that has formed around the Entertaining Comics groups would not be readily appreciated.

Fans venerate anything concerning the EC comics group. Folk lore has perpetuated itself for years. All those fans (or as they like to be called, "fan-addicts") pictured the employees of the EC group as knights on white horses, rescuing the reader from the mediocrity of comic books in the 1950's. In fact, however, EC was

Recently, those EC fan-addicts, the very same who twenty years before fell for the EC gimmick, published an ever-lasting tribute to their knights in shining armor—a 208 page, full color book reprinting the best stories EC had done. They have not forgotten, and The Monster Times' very own Joe Brancatelli takes a look at the book, the outfit that inspired them, and the people behind the legend.

H.L. Mencken, where are you when we need you?

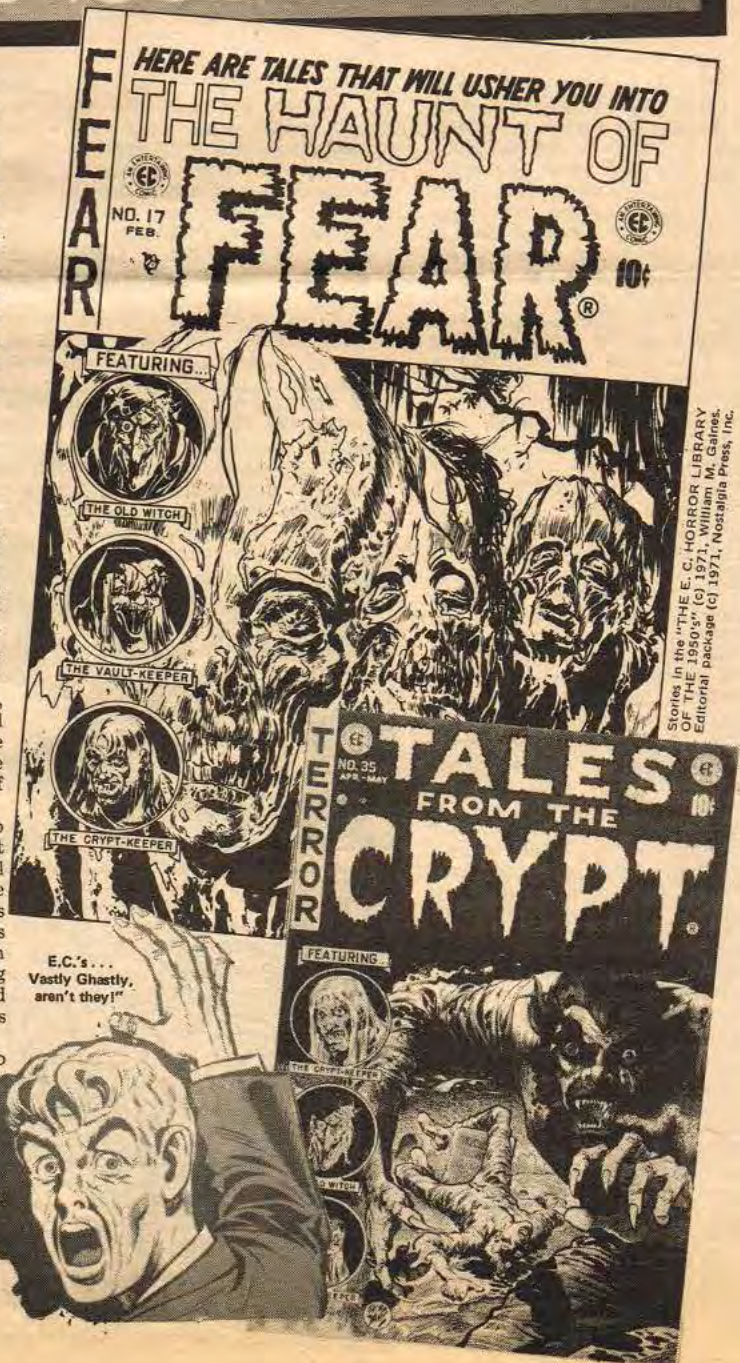
What prompts anyone to plunk down twenty hard earned dollars for a book. Especially a book of stories taken from those supposedly god-awful, offensive horror comics of the fifties. You might remember those horror stories, terrible, grisly tales of grue and gore. They were the stories that incited a nation. So controversial were these stories, they prompted a Congressional witch-hunt, led by the venerable old witch-hunter himself, the late Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee.

So what motivates a person to blow twenty clams on a book that all the established institutions tell us is bad. Discounting the rich, the people who buy anything that is anti-establishment and the mobsters who must hide their money from Uncle Sam, the overwhelming reason is that misty-eyed commodity known as NOSTALGIA.

For those of you too young to be struck by nostalgia, let us tell you a little about the peerless fifties. Or at least the state of comic books in the fifties (this isn't the AMERICAN HISTORY QUARTERLY, or hadn't you noticed).



like any comic outfit during the trying 50's. The 1950's were lean years for comics, and everyone, EC included, was looking for some gimmick to hypo sales. They would try anything to sell their books. E.C. was lucky—they found the gimmick. Any company might have, National, Atlas, Fiction House, Charlton, Dell, any publisher of the 50's. But EC found the gimmick first. Their gimmick was quality.



Stories in the "THE E. C. HORROR LIBRARY OF THE 1950's" (c) 1971, William M. Gaines. Editorial package (c) 1971, Nostalgia Press, Inc.

AND I WAIT. I WAIT AND LISTEN TO THE TEARING AND PULLING AND SCREECHING AND SOFT MUNCHING. AND THEN I LOOK...



AND I FEEL NO PAIN AS THE VICE-LIKE JAWS OF THE RAW-NECKED VULTURES CLOSE UPON MY FLESH AND PEEL IT FROM MY BONES. I CANNOT MOVE... I CANNOT STOP THEM.



THE CORPSE BESIDE ME IS PRACTICALLY STRIPPED CLEAN. BUT I FEEL NO NAUSEA. I FEEL NO REVULSION. NOT EVEN WHEN I SEE THE HULKING SHADOW ON MY OWN CHEST TEARING AND RIPPING AND SQUEALING...



I CAN ONLY WATCH IN SILENT HORROR AS THEY FEED UPON ME. I CAN WATCH ONLY UNTIL ONE OF THEM PLUCKS MY EYEBALLS FROM MY SKULL...



This picture of a quiet day in the desert, presented by the incredible Reed Crandall, is the ending of "Carriion Death." From SHOCK SUSPENSTORIES #9, 1953, we understand this tale was a favorite of vultures everywhere.

Comics were not in good health in the decade that also featured such luminaries as Joe McCarthy, Alger Hiss and some Californian with long jowls named Dick Nixon (you remember him). The comic book had just emerged from a period later to be known as the "Golden Age of Comics" from 1939 to about 1945. From then to about 1949, they marked time, feeling their way around, looking for a trend to replace the now tarnished image of the super-hero who had been the stalwart of the good times. In that Golden Age, such long-johned good guys as Captain Marvel were selling about two and a half million copies every ¹⁵⁰ weeks, with Superman close behind. But the end of World War II also ended the dominance of the super-hero (who had spent most of his time beating Krauts and Nips. Someone once calculated that American super-heroes had killed about nine billion of the enemy.) And the slump that started in the late forties developed into a serious depression in the early months of 1950. All the big companies were looking for a trend that would sell comics. The super hero was dead (indeed, the Big Red Cheese, as Captain Marvel was called, had dropped to about 300,000 copies a month and would not survive the fifties or a lawsuit with Superman), cowboys were not selling and romance wasn't exactly making readers storm the newsstands. Kids were giving up comic books in droves, spending most of the time they were supposed to spend doing homework watching that newfangled television set. Companies folded by the dozen, and it looked as if the comic book industry, conceived in the early 1930's by M.C. Gaines (remember that name), Irwin Donnenfeld and several others was about to die a quiet death. And then came E.C. comics.

Well, not really. E.C. (first standing for Educational Comics and then Entertaining Comics) had been around for a while, created by

M.C. Gaines (we told you to remember him) in the mid-forties. It too was looking for a trend. It had bet on cowboy comics, romance comics, sf comics, and all sorts of combinations of the aforementioned (for instance one title started as MOON GIRL, changed to A MOON ... A

GIRL...ROMANCE and then finally MOON GIRL FIGHTS CRIME). Their Managing Editor, Bill Gaines (yes, folks, poppa's son) and Editor Al Feldstein (he wasn't related, he just walked into the office one day) decided they might try horror. They created a few story tellers.

Feldstein and Gaines' creations, The Crypt-Keeper, The Old Witch and The Vault Keeper, were obnoxious if they were anything. Sarcastic, impudent and absolutely shiftless, they wove yarns of horror, twisting tales of gore and gruesome reality. The three witches dealt in perverted scenes of horror, scary gore and simply disgusting realism. No matter how horrible those tales of the witches were, the main characters were rotten people, and they all got theirs in the end, usually by some ironic twist of fate that sealed their doom.

And for about three years (from 1950 when Gaines and Feldstein introduced the pilot magazines, THE HAUNT OF FEAR and THE CRYPT OF TERROR), E.C. comics were the hottest sellers going. They introduced war books, crime books,

science fiction books, humor books, and they all were gobbled off the stands. And they were imitated.

And that was EC's downfall. Their imitators tried hard to match EC's class, but couldn't. Their tales almost always ended as senseless situation-violence. They were bad books, thrown together to capitalize on EC's popularity. Many of the younger kids couldn't tell the difference, and brought home the trashy imitations and their parents found them. Justifiably angered, the public raised an outcry. Men like Estes Kefauver seized upon the comic book horror, and called for their censorship. Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist who has been on a life long crusade against violence in the media, published a book entitled SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT, reprinting lots of EC art, but neglecting to mention the story line of EC comics, or to differentiate between them and their imitators. With the public aroused, the comic industry (or at least some of the industry) instituted a self-censoring body

The last four panels from "Midnight Mess," drawn by Joe Orlando. This bloody-but-beautiful tale gave E.C.'s version of what became of the old, honored professional vampire. From TALES FROM THE CRYPT #35, 1953.





A scoop, for all you sharp readers of TMT. Johnny Craig's cover for THE VAULT OF HORROR #32 was finally published without the axe, making it a much duller cover!



Horsemeat, anyone? The Old Crypt-Keeper beckons to all his frantic little fans at the start of the 1952 tale "Tain't The Meat . . . It's The Humanity!" Drawn by Jack Davis.

known to this day as the Comics Code Authority. The Code had its desired effect, placating an incensed public, who then went back to persecuting non-existent communists, but by then EC had been struck a mortal blow. Distributors refused to distribute them, vendors refused to sell them, and EC comics were dead. They threw in the towel in 1955, and after several brief attempts at revivals, EC faded into whatever old comic companies fade into.

Or so the editors thought. The fans of EC never relented. They went underground, publishing clandestine magazines, never forgetting EC. They reemerged briefly in 1964, when Ballantine Books published paperbacks that reprinted some EC stories. Later merging with the now growing general comic fandom, they educated a whole new audience to EC comics. Now there were two EC fandoms; the original group, that saved their lunch money to buy the EC's as they came off the presses, and, the new group, the fans of EC who were too young to have bought EC off the stands, but who were paying \$10 and \$15 at comic conventions for the honor of owning an EC comic book.

For the original EC fan,

HORROR LIBRARY OF THE 1950's is a memento, a reassurance that what was good for them, is good for the youth of today. For the new EC fan, it's a sort of legitimacy. A sort of reaffirmation of the validity of comic collecting. And that is why the EC book will become a classic, if not in terms of sales, definitely in terms of feeling. That feeling of nostalgia, if you will.

The book reprints twenty-three stories between its covers. They are all hallmarks of EC comics. Everyone of them a nugget of writing that you'd swear took days to even conceive, not to mention the actual plotting, dialoguing, panel breakdowns and everything else. And the art . . . heaven, pure and simple.

Some critics of EC comics (No doubt sons of the irrepressible H.L. Mencken) claim that E.C.'s comics fall into the trap of repetition. They claim that stories are basically similar. The villain, who might not look like the villain at first, is a supremely rotten guy, and in the end, through some irony gets justice dealt to him from the bottom of the deck. That, critics persist, is the basis for every one of E.C.'s horror tales. What they fail to realize is that all comic writing is formula writing, and that E.C. found a formula that provided consistently interesting tales is an achievement in itself.

But the amazing thing is that most all the tales in this book, indeed almost all E.C. stories, were written in one day by a combination of Gaines and Felstein. Comic publishing is a hectic business, and deadline pressures force a rapid pace, this making comic writing tantamount to hack jobs. But somehow, somehow, Felstein got the twist ending in everytime, and simultaneously developed a style. A comic style. Feldstein developed a fluid style that read like the great short story writers, especially Bradbury and De Maupassant. Later EC even began adapting some of the memorable Ray Bradbury stories into comic strips.

But enough of the abstracts. You want to know about the stories in the book. Well, since THE MONSTER TIMES is in the entertainment business, and since THE MONSTER TIMES is not above recognizing the achievements of others, let us tell you about some of those EC masterpieces.

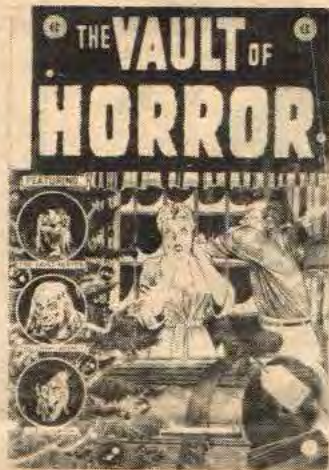
For our money, "TAIN'T THE MEAT . . . IT'S THE HUMANITY" is the best in the book. Set in the World War II era of food rationing, old Zach Gristle, small time butcher, decides to get into the black market. He sells his relatively small amount of choice meat to black market customers, while the regulars get horsemeat. When that runs out, the regulars get spoiled meat, then tainted meat, all



'TAINT THE MEAT... IT'S THE HUMANITY' is a quaint little yarn about a butcher... one that will surely tickle your spare-ribs! This meaty melodrama comes from TALES OF THE CRYPT #32 and was cleverly done by none other than Jack Davis.

unbeknownst to them. Old Zach's wife discovers this, but does nothing until her own son is killed by eating the tainted meat (seems he was a guest at one of his dad's customers). What does she do? Well, Mrs. Gristle cleaves old Zach to death and opens up her husband's store with... choke... her husband all carved up and on display in the store showcase. Meaty tale, wot?

Another, aptly titled FOUL PLAY, features super-nasty Herbie Satten. Herbie is a real mean guy. So intent was Herbie on winning a ball game for his team, that he put poison on his cleats, then spiked the opposing second baseman in what looked like a useless steal attempt. The poison was quick acting, and, as it would happen, the second baseman falls dead shortly after Satten strikes him out, ending a rally. The other team knows it's Satten's doing, and in a most grisly revenge, they dismember Satten, then play a game of ball, using Satten's bloody head as the ball, his leg as a bat, his heart as home plate and his intestines as the foul line. They sure threw him a curve, eh? And while we don't want to ruin your fun when you buy the book,



This woman is certainly NOT going to have a Merry Christmas, thanks to Johnny Craig and the staff of E.C., who arranged for her appearance in VAULT OF HORROR #33.

we want to mention one other tale that struck our fancy. It's called STROP! YOU'RE KILLING ME! It's a devilish tale of two firemen, who hate each other. One night, while one was on duty, a call comes to save the other's house. Naturally, the fireman on duty takes his time,

and eliminates his enemy, who died in the fire. The dead fire-fighter gets his revenge several months later, when the remaining fireman gets a call to put out a fire at his own house. But while going down the descent pole, he is slashed to death. Someone (and the story indicates that it is the dead fireman) has replaced the pole with a sharp blade. Cutting tale, yes?

If we had ten issues to discuss this book, I might talk at some length about the artistic content of this book. How can you discuss the legendary art of E.C. comics? (And any of you out there who said "quickly" deserve to be starred in a new EC story entitled HOT SEAT, the tale of Santa Claus coming down a lit fireplace.) They compiled in just five years the best collection of artists ever to grace the pages of comics.

There was Graham Ingels, the head of the staff. His art was so horribly unique he started signing his name GHASTLY. Ingels had a non-descript career before joining E.C., and declined after EC folded and later disappeared, but his work for E.C. was amazing. Never before in the history of the comic medium, perhaps illustrating itself,

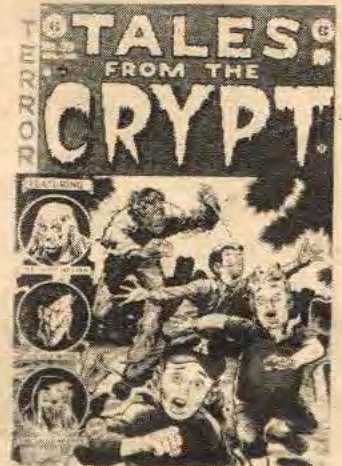
The Graham Ingels cover for "Horror We, How's Bayou?" Haunt of Fear #25 was never the same, as Ghastly struck again!



This poor devil is about to be "Swamped," in HAUNT OF FEAR #27. Reed Crandall created the story, with an unforgettable feeling of muddy death that haunted the newsstands in 1954.

had any artist so graphically portrayed and conveyed the sense of horror as Ingels had. His work was truly inspired.

Then there was Jack Davis. Davis is a genius, pure and simple. You've seen his work countless times, on



Tag... You're it, kids, if this Jack Davis ghoulie gets you!

TV GUIDE covers, television station commercials, MAD MAGAZINE and many others. It was Davis who portrayed the previously mentioned Zach Gristle who ended up in the meat showcase. It was also Davis whose grisly portrayal of Herbie Satten being dismembered in FOUL PLAY made the story famous. He's most recently drawn SESAME STREET's "Cookie Monster" so well that when TV GUIDE wanted the monster for one of its covers, they chose Davis.

Reed Crandall was another, as was George Evans. They may not be familiar names, but they are geniuses in their own right. And, of course, there was the young Al Williamson, present SECRET AGENT CORRIGAN artist, who drew for EC. He couldn't draw faces then, but could he draw everything else. The other names flow like water down a mountain: Frazetta, Orlando, Feldstein, Craig,

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