

THE THING ON TV

Marvel's The Thing has escaped — and who could stop him! — from The Fantastic Four tv animation series. He's vaulted into his own slot with thirteen half-hours . . . or a collection of 26 11-minute shows.

The Hanna-Barbera Thing is a long way from Stan Lee's, though. William Hanna and Joseph Barbera have pulled a fast one on the old rockman. They've turned him into a scrawny, little teenage kid. Oh, he's brainy, too, I'll grant you that. But "Benjy" Grimm . . . That's worse than turning The Incredible Hulk into pint-sized David Banner instead of the taller Bruce. It lacks the tradition and credibility of the official version.

For instance, didn't I hear somewhere Stan Lee himself confessing that one of his many pet peeves had always been the young teenage sidekicks of comic-strip superheroes. Yes, indeed I did. *Origins of Marvel Comics* 1974. And Stan the Man said some more on the same theme, to wit: "If yours truly were a superhero, there's no way I'd pal around with some freckle-faced teenager. At the very least, people would start to talk."

Well, in defence of the old firm of Hanna-Barbera, I suppose one should point out that Benjy is not quite The Thing's sidekick. He *is* The Thing. His alter-ego. His humanoid form. Even so, turning brash Ben Grimm into Benjy is a bit too close to that which Stan Lee cannot abide.

But money talks!

Besides, the tv series is aimed at the younger audience more than at Marvel fans. And if the kids around the globe turn on to the tv version, they'll start buying the comics as well, and get the real thing . . . once they grow up to a ripe enough age to really appreciate them!

Originally part of The Fantastic Four show from Taft — H-B International, run by London Weekend over here a couple of years ago, The Thing has our handsome test pilot Ben Grimm still being accidentally turned into a phenomenally strong, monstrous man of orange clay. The change is still caused by the same overdose of cosmic radiation in space that turned his fellow travellers Dr Reed Richards into Mister Fantastic, Susan Storm into The Invisible Girl, her brother Johnny into The Human Torch and the ever abrasive Ben into, well . . . "I ain't Ben anymore. I'm what Susan called me . . . The Thing!"

Unlike the ever-wandering David Banner, known in the US as The Green-Eyed Son of The Fugitive, Ben manages



to find a medical man who can assist him with his transference problem, and change the life he seems doomed to live out as this awesomely ugly of all uglies.

Dr Harkness (no relation to Agatha in the comic version) is a high-school teacher. Subject: science, of course. Meeting The Thing, he figures that a dose of negative radition, purely medicinal of course, can turn old stone chops back into a normal human being.

Old Thingie is only too willing to give it a go. Why, he'd even sacrifice his strength of ten men to look normal again. (Vain fellow!) Dr Harkness fixes up his bizarre device and hey presto . . . the experiment works. Kind of . . .

Instead of Ben, though, there stands thin, gangling Benjy Grimm. The radiation has regressed his human form to an earlier stage in life, back to his days as an insecure but bright schoolboy.

Good job Dr Harkness stopped the experiment when he did, otherwise we'd be into a Watch With Mother cartoon show here about some super-toddler. Although when you look at The Thing, his pants do rather resemble nappies . . .

Furthermore, the Harkness theory does not, however, stop The Thing re-emerging every now and then. Or when young Benjy utter his own with it version of the *Shazam!* cry of yore. "I'm doing my thing!" And bingo, he literally is . . .

"Once he takes on the form of the

mighty superhero," says producer Alex Lovy, "there is a time limit as to how long he will remain The Thing. He, therefore, must plan his change so that he can be The Thing and return to normal without being discovered." Ah!

Well, of course, he's not the first super-hero to face that little problem. Though it's perhaps less fun for our new form Thing than for most of his colleagues in superherodom. I mean, poor Ben-cum-Benjy has a tough time of it. How would you like to be a crack test pilot who now has trouble in learning to ride a bike all over again? Or be the mighty Thing and about to round up a gang of no-good crooks, when splat! — It's suddenly time to be weedy young Benjy again?

That's not all.

"Benjy faces double trouble as he struggles through his teenage years for the second time," points out Alex Lovy.

"He's grappling with bullies, suffering through crushes and struggles with his now limited powers as the awesome Thing," sympathises Lovy. "He still must also live the life of a superhero yet fit in with a bunch of crazy teenagers cutting up with their high school friends and teacher."

Benjy has some advantages with the new split in his personality. He's far less of an ogre in his street persona. For instance, Benjy is too sweet to be such a grouch like the Ben he is to grow to be.

He has girl problems, though. On both fronts. Dr Harkness has two daughters. Kelly, all of 14 going on 35, knows Benjy's secret and likes him — both of him — very much. Her sister Betty, 16



ONE OF MARVEL COMICS' BEST-SELLING TITLES, THE FANTASTIC FOUR DEBUTED IN 1961. SINCE THEN THEY HAVE STARRED IN TWO ANIMATED CARTOON SERIES. RECENTLY, A NEW CARTOON SERIES TO SOLO-STAR THEIR STRONGEST MEMBER, THE THING, WAS ANNOUNCED BY HANNA-BARBERA. WE PRESENT THE FULL STORY FROM TONY CRAWLEY.



On this page: A selection of scenes from the forthcoming Hanna-Barbera cartoon series, *The Thing*.



and going on 12, goes more for The Thing for the simple, groupie reason that he's famous. She loves to be seen around with him — and couldn't spare a second thought — or indeed a second — for Benjy, despite his terrible crush on her.

They all go to the same high-school as yet another youngster — Ronald Radford, rich and full in the mouth. He shares the same flashy interests as the mindless Betty, is mildly friendly with Benjy and prone to boasting that anything The Thing can do, he could do better. Once The Thing turns up beside him, however, Radford keeps his lip buttoned.

Radford puts Benjy on quite a bit; humorously, though. Not so Spike and the rest of The Yancy Street Gang. They love to torment the bookish kid. He manages to get his own back naturally. With a quick cry of "I'm doing my thing!" he becomes The Thing and deals

with the bullies.

Life may not be beautiful or easy, or even particularly Marvel-lous for Benjy and The Thing. But, you've guessed it, they manage to come out on top in every one of these thirteen half-hours.

Joe Baker supplies the voice of The Thing in the series, with Wayne Morton as Benjy. Noelle North is Kelly, John Erwin plays Ronald and Art Metrano supplies Spike's jibes. The rest of the regular cast, Betty, Dr Harkness, Miss Twilly and gang members Turkey and Stretch are voiced-over by Marilyn Schreffler, Michael and John Stephenson.

Personally, I'd prefer a live-action movie version, sending Benjy back to his acned oblivion and restoring Ben Grimm to us. Starring who? Well, there is only one actor for *The Thing*. Old Stoneface himself — Charles Bronson. Start dealing, Stan!