

ALSO BY GERARD JONES

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# MEN OF TOMORROW

Geeks, Gangsters, and the  
Birth of the Comic Book

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do what was right, the executives felt the pressure. Nor did the pressure come only from the outside: More and more editorial seats were filled by young men who'd come up through fandom. The most respected young editor at National was Adams's friend and frequent collaborator, Denny O'Neil.

The pressure worked. In early December Warner Communications announced it was ready to settle: It would pay Jerry and Joe each \$10,000 annually for life. Jerry Robinson told the two not to take it and made a counteroffer on their behalf. On Tuesday, December 9, Warner increased its offer to \$15,000 and gave Jerry and Joe two days to accept it. Robinson stalled with a provisional acceptance but demanded that Warner cover Siegel and Shuster's legal debts and pay for full medical insurance besides. By Friday the two sides were close to a monetary agreement. They planned for Jerry to fly in from LA, and on Monday, the 15th, all the parties would sit down in the Warner offices in Rockefeller Center for a final negotiation.

On Monday morning the *New York Times* reported that Siegel and Shuster were "expected to accept an offer of \$15,000 a year for life." Robinson thought the financial offer was far too low, but Jerry and Joe wanted to close the deal before it could fall apart. The end of their long battle was in sight—except for one issue on which neither side would budge. Every Superman product, Robinson insisted, must bear the words, "Superman created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster." Warner said no.

Robinson understood how much it meant to Jerry and Joe that the world knew who'd invented the Man of Steel. He also understood that he was fighting for principles much greater than Jerry and Joe's feelings. "In Europe," Robinson has said, "one of the fundamental rights in art and entertainment is the creator's right to be credited for his work. In some countries it's in the law. This was an area in which American law and business practice badly needed change." To Warner's attorneys, however, credit threatened to open the door to legal challenges. If someone other than the corporation could claim to have created an intellectual property, authorship and ownership could be called into

question. And if Siegel and Shuster were given credit as creators, who would be making the same demand next? What other properties would be disputed?

The negotiations went nowhere Monday and resumed Tuesday morning. Now Jay Emmett took personal command of Warner's forces. Emmett had become a major player in the conglomerate, one of the four men closest to Steve Ross in power. He was also Ross's best friend—some said "soul mate" or "consort"—and was once called "the glue that held everything together under Steve." Temperamentally, he was as different from his uncle Jack Liebowitz as he could be: ebullient, funny, immensely likable, and accustomed to winning most battles on charm alone. Robinson made a point of resisting his charm, but he did notice another Emmett trait: "He was the sanest businessman there."

By Wednesday the meetings were nearing the breaking point. Emmett had increased the offer to \$20,000 a year with built-in cost-of-living increases and provisions for Siegel and Shuster's heirs, but he couldn't give creators' credit. Robinson said credit was a deal breaker. On Thursday the Warner group hinted they might pull the offer off the table if an agreement couldn't be reached soon.

On the way out of the building that evening, Jerry Siegel told Robinson that he couldn't take it anymore. He was physically ill and worrying about his heart. He could live without the credit; he just needed it over with. Robinson said he believed they could win this. "I'll give it one more day," said Jerry. "Whatever their lawyers agree to by tomorrow is what I'll live with. I'm sorry."

Emmett had given Robinson his home number in the course of the negotiations. That night, Robinson called him. "Look, Jay," he said, "we've got to bring this to a close somehow. You want the bad publicity to stop. Give them 'created by' credit and Warner's looks like the good guy." Emmett said he'd call his lawyers and get back to him. About an hour later he called back to say they could put the credit in the comic books, but not on toys or in the movie—it was too hard to put text on plastic toys, and the movie credits were already designed. Robinson scoffed. "I'll grant you the toys," he said, "but I've been involved with

able but strangely inspired bits of popular culture: science fiction, Douglas Fairbanks, the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. They'd both wanted to forge their own version of that culture, to find a way to live in their dreamworlds, "to avoid," as Yeh put it, "looking for a job." They were both geeks.

With Joanne sitting beside him, voicing the anger that he held back, Jerry told his whole story, for the first time, to someone outside the circle of family and lawyers. Phil turned it into a passionate story for *Cobblestone*. Jerry discovered that for a new generation, he wasn't a loser but a hero.

At last, in late October, the break came. The press release Jerry had sent to the *Washington Star* had slowly found its way to a feature writer named John Sherwood. Sherwood called Jerry for the story, then called National Periodicals, where no one would comment. Los Angeles was too far for the *Star* to send him, but Sherwood took the train to New York, where Joe Shuster gave his first press interview since the days of Superman's early glory. The story appeared on the front page of the *Star*, and it touched a nerve in that moment of popular disgust with the American corporate system. It hit the wire services and other papers began to call.

Still no one at National Periodical or Warner Communications would comment. Apparently the company strategy was to wait out the flurry of news items until people forgot and business could go on as usual. It might have worked, too, had not the producers of a late-night talk show, *The Tomorrow Show* with Tom Snyder, thought the story would make an interesting short piece. Jerry was about to tell his tale on national TV.

JERRY ROBINSON ALWAYS worked with the TV on. The background noise made it easier to relax into the semiconscious flow of brush on paper, and sometimes he picked up a tidbit of news that sparked a political cartoon. He was working late that night in his apartment on Riverside Drive, past the evening news, past Johnny Carson, and into

the intimate, smoke-filled domain of Tom Snyder. He heard the name "Jerry Siegel" and put down his brush.

Robinson was shocked to hear Jerry's story. A few years before, he'd heard that Jerry was fighting National in court, and then Jerry and Joe had gone silent. "I was under the impression they'd reach some sort of settlement with the new owners," Robinson has said. "I had no idea they'd still been fighting and suffering all those years." He immediately tracked down Jerry's phone number and asked what he could do for him. Jerry didn't know what could be done, but he'd be grateful if Robinson could think of anything. He said he'd just heard from another New York cartoonist, too, named Neal Adams. Robinson knew Adams and called him the next day. They agreed to launch a campaign to pressure Warner Communications into doing its duty.

The National Cartoonists Society's annual board meeting happened to be convening the next week and Robinson took the cause to it. He came out with a unanimous statement of support for Siegel and Shuster. With that in hand he secured the support of the Screen Cartoonists Guild, then the Writers Guild of America. He knew that cartoonists didn't matter much to Warner Communications, but the TV and movie communities did. Robinson owned a weekend cottage on Cape Cod, and he called up two of his neighbors, Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut, to ask if he could add their names to the campaign. They not only let him use their names but also began lining up support from the literary and journalistic communities. The media took note. The *CBS Evening News* covered the dispute, and Jerry was flown to New York to appear with Joe on *The Today Show*.

Neal Adams, meanwhile, roused the comic book community. He packed significant clout at National Periodicals. He'd been the fans' favorite superhero artist since his expressive, naturalistic style had first burst into DC Comics in the late 1960s. National's publisher, Carmine Infantino, personally admired his work. In the past few years, Adams had been drawing fewer comics, finding advertising a far more lucrative field; but when he returned to draw the occasional *Batman* story, it was an event. When Adams called on his fans and peers to push National to

enough movies to know that the credits are the *last* thing you do.” Emmett laughed. “I’ll call you back,” he said. A little after midnight, Robinson’s phone rang again. “Okay,” said Emmett. “Credit on all printed matter, TV, and movies. But no toys.” It was done.

The next day, Friday, December 19, the parties shook hands. The signing of the contracts was scheduled for the following Wednesday. Robinson promised an exclusive on the story to CBS News. Joanne and Laura Siegel joined Jerry and Joe at 75 Rockefeller Center for the signing. Afterward, Robinson flagged a cab in the freezing wind and took Jerry and Joe to his apartment on the Upper West Side. He and his wife had arranged a party in their honor, starting early enough that everyone could see the signing announced on the evening news. The apartment was filled with people who’d helped with the campaign. Neal Adams was among them, and Jules Feiffer and Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut. Robinson’s neighbors, Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach, dropped in. Jerry and Joe were given seats of honor in front of the television set as the news came on. Segment after segment rolled by, and no mention was made of Jerry and Joe. Other news, it seemed, had pushed them aside.

And then, in the broadcast’s final moments, Walter Cronkite began to speak of the boys from Cleveland who had created a hero and then lost him. He told of their fall into poverty and their struggle to wring some recognition from their publisher. As he announced the signing of the settlement, an image of Superman in flight appeared on the screen. “Today, at least,” Cronkite said, “truth, justice, and the American way have triumphed.”

Jerry and Joe couldn’t hear anything above the cheers that filled the room, but for a few more seconds, they stared at the TV, as though they still had to make sure it was all true. They watched Walter Cronkite mouth his final words: “And that’s the way it is, December 24, 1975.”

THE SETTLEMENT WITH Siegel and Shuster was only part of a more sweeping change of image brought by Warner Communications to its

comic book subsidiary. Just weeks after the settlement, National Periodicals’ publisher—the gravel-voiced, cigar-chomping Carmine Infantino—was let go. His replacement was an executive unlike any ever seen in the industry: Jenette Kahn, a children’s magazine publisher in her early thirties, a Reform rabbi’s daughter from the Upper East Side, a complete outsider to the old-boy comics network. Under Kahn the company would even shed the name Jack Liebowitz had given it, becoming DC Comics, Incorporated. That same year a young editor, Paul Levitz, was promoted to editorial coordinator. Paul was a die-hard comics fan who’d taken a job at National when he was fourteen years old and never let go. His passion was the *Legion of Super Heroes*, a series first written by Jerry Siegel in the early 1960s, and even as he rose in the company, he seized every opportunity to write *Legion* stories himself. With Paul’s ascendancy, there could no longer be any doubt that the fans were taking over the industry.

In February 1976 DC presented its smiling new face to the world by sponsoring a comic book convention in New York. Paul Levitz, who handled the programming, brought in not only the fan favorites of the moment but some of the most important figures from DC’s past: Bob Kane, Sheldon Mayer, Jack Schiff, and the creators of Superman. Jerry and Joe met fans they’d never realized they had and reacquainted themselves with men they hadn’t spoken to for decades.

One old coworker chose not to appear at the convention because of his health but made a point of coming into the city to see Jerry. Mort Weisinger was still bilious and sour, more obese than ever and battling high blood pressure. When he saw Jerry, though, he acted as though they’d always been only the best of friends. He reminisced about the old days in science fiction fandom and the crazy things that had happened in the early comic book industry. He told Jerry he should pitch a story idea to their old pal Julie Schwartz, who was still editing *Superman*. Jerry couldn’t hold the past against him. As much resentment as Jerry could pack away, he never could sustain it in the face of friendliness; he wanted too badly to be liked. When Mort died two years later, Jerry was one of the few people in the comics industry who spoke kindly of him.