

## Funnyman: The Tragic Adventures of a Crime-Fighting Comedian

by Paul Hirsch

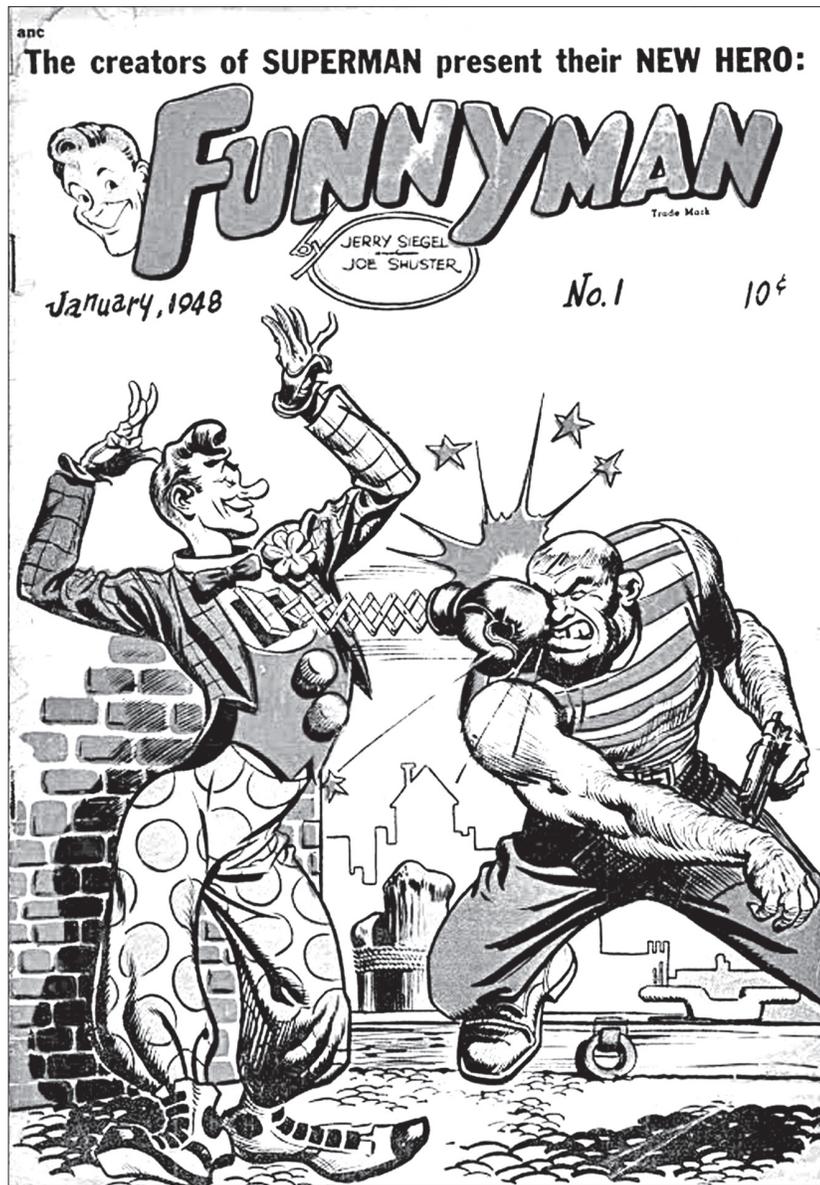
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Between the mid-1940s and the early 1950s, near the peak of what the joyless, vulturine, investor-collector caste has termed the “Golden Age” of comic books, American publishers churned out a staggering one billion comics each year. World War II had created an enormous adult audience for comic books, as the government shipped millions around the world to entertain and indoctrinate American servicemen. Coarsened by wartime experiences, these soldiers returned to civilian life with rather advanced tastes. Whatever one’s passion or perversion—from true crime to bondage—the uncensored comics industry made sure to provide a relevant publication. Subsequently, postwar sales of traditional superhero comics slumped, while gritty, hormonal titles such as *Crimes by Women* and *Phantom Lady* clawed their way—bloody and nearly naked—up the sales charts.

Regardless of their content, most “Golden Age” comic books were ground out in conditions familiar to the piece-work laborers trudging in and out of New York’s Garment District sweatshops. Not surprisingly, these comics reflected the haste, poor pay, and exploitation intrinsic to a cultural form produced by the millions every month and sold for a dime to a population not yet satiated by television. With few exceptions, publishers—not writers or artists—owned the rights to popular characters. The “creative types” were considered interchangeable, and were paid by the page. As a result, in the wake of World War II, comic book publishers worked themselves into an exploitative frenzy, paying minimal money to artists and writers tasked with chasing the latest, most sensational trends through a medium unique in its freedom from external oversight or supervision.

From out of this postwar swamp of ceaseless production, unfettered creativity, and creeping Cold War dread emerged a comic book called *Funnyman*. It lasted a mere six issues, from January through August, 1948. To the extent that *Funnyman* is remembered at all, it is because it was created by the writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster—the very men who had concocted Superman.

Siegel and Shuster coughed up *Funnyman* as an attempt to escape the confines of the comic book sweatshop. Although they had invented the world's first and most popular superhero back in 1938, the pair famously lacked the rights to the character. Rather, Superman was owned by the publisher, the company now known as DC Comics, which wasted no time



*Funnyman* #1, 1948

wheeling the public out of every cent it could through an endless array of comics, toys, clothing, and other tchotchkes featuring the square-jawed Man of Steel. Siegel and Shuster, in turn, received a salary from DC Comics that presumably reflected the profits from these licensed products, along with their work on various comic books and strips. Contrary to legend, the pair was hardly poor, and made vastly more money than a typical paid-by-the-page comic book artist or writer. But in the wake of World War II, the checks from DC Comics grew smaller and Siegel, in particular, grew angrier. Why, he wondered, should the creators of Superman enjoy anything less than total ownership of their character? Intellectually, perhaps it was a reasonable question—but the pair had signed ownership of Superman over to DC. Siegel seethed. Prodded on by a hoggish lawyer named Albert Zugsmith, they decided to sue DC Comics for the rights to Superman.

Needless to say, they lost. But the duo's legal failure was simply a preliminary knee to the groin in a year, 1948, which would provide multiple humiliations. While losing their lawsuit, Siegel divorced his wife and married a woman who previously worked as an art model for Shuster; poor Shuster nearly went blind. But a year earlier, when Zugsmith filed suit against DC on behalf of the pair, they were perfectly unaware of what awaited them. Now, the lawsuit had destroyed their ability to earn money from DC, and they were desperate for a new character that would captivate the world as Superman had a decade earlier. What they had to offer was a wisecracking comedian-cum-crime-fighter: Funnyman.

Funnyman was a popular stand-up comedian named Larry Davis—just one letter away from precognition—who took to fighting crime after his agent dreamed up a scheme in which Davis, in a bid for publicity, was to foil a fake robbery. Davis instead trips up a group of actual baddies and decides that he enjoys fighting crime even more than cracking wise. Not a moment is wasted explaining why a stand-up comedian might garner positive press from mixing it up with criminals. Hurling forward, the redheaded, freckled Davis dons a disguise consisting of a long, putty nose and a baffling combination of a clown outfit and a nightclub comedian's sport coat. The result looks unnervingly like a mix of Danny Kaye and John Wayne Gacy. (In their book *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero from the Creators of Superman*, Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon argue that the character also appeared unusually Judaic.) Once costumed, the non-super-powered Davis fashions a collection of pranks to assist him in fighting crime. These include the relatively traditional itching powder, squirting ink, and spring-loaded boxing glove, as well as a more hallucinatory flying jalopy that helps foil a group of crooks in issue number two.

Naming a comic book *Funnyman* is risky. Spend your dime on this comic, it promises, and you are guaranteed to read all about a guy who will goddamned well make you laugh. But Funnyman isn't funny—he isn't even sympathetic. In truth, he is a jerk: The grade school punk who tripped you up for no reason and then laughed as you lay on the sidewalk, stunned, as blood ran from your nose and knees; the high school smart-ass who mocked you, then whipped out a bat when you tried to fight him. By the second issue, I find myself sympathizing with the crooks trying to run him through with a gigantic drill.

Compounding the problem of Funnyman's personality is Siegel's creaky dialogue. When, in issue number two, Funnyman escapes being crushed beneath an armored "crime car," he exclaims, "Whew! One more second and I'd have been renamed 'Tragicman!'" Or consider Monsieur Cheval, the French baddie replete with waxed moustache, top hat, and an unhealthy interest in postwar American panties, whose assistants are named Levacuum and Lecleaner. No doubt, Siegel wanted his hero to boast a bright, breezy tone, perhaps resembling the physically similar Hollywood stars Kaye and Dick Powell, who relied upon wit to escape more muscular predators. But Larry Davis comes off as obnoxious, not witty. Although *Funnyman* incorporates several visual references to film noir and contemporary adult culture, it's genuinely tough to tell whether Siegel was writing for readers aged 10 or 20.

The artwork, regrettably, also fails to capture the joyous, anarchic potential of a character named Funnyman. Because the unfortunate Joe Shuster was losing his sight and capable only of mapping out the general outlines for each story, a procession of anonymous artists filled each issue with piece-work, just like garment workers assembling dresses in a factory. Their styles clashed, yet all lacked any of the simple, good-natured joy that the younger and healthier Shuster had brought to *Superman*. *Funnyman* deserved chaotic, rule-breaking artwork of the sort that Jack Cole applied to *Plastic Man*. But *Funnyman* received much less respectful treatment. It is almost heartbreaking that Siegel and Shuster believed the result could gain traction in a world immersed in sex and gore-drenched comics, Hollywood, and the budding threat of television—to say nothing of Superman. Putting aside the dismal quality of the artwork and writing, a freckled goof in spring-loaded clown pants who blew spitballs at his nemeses was not merely out of step in 1948. He clearly came from an earlier, pre-atomic age.

Saddled with inconsistent art and wheezy jokes, the *Funnyman* comic book vanished from newsstands after only six issues. Somehow, Siegel and Shuster then managed to sign a deal for a *Funnyman* syndicated comic strip

that launched in a variety of newspapers in October, 1948, just months after the demise of the comic book. The strip received crisper, less gag-driven dialogue that marked a distinct improvement over the comic book. And while I can't find any hint of Shuster's charming style in the strip's artwork, it was at least of a higher and more consistent quality than that of the doomed comic. Still, the strip failed to find an audience.

Bizarrely, Siegel and Shuster responded by phasing out the Funnyman character—while retaining his name for the strip's title—and replacing the comedian with a completely new protagonist, Reggie Van Twerp. If Funnyman seemed a bit behind the times, Van Twerp was an outright relic of the Roaring Twenties. Debuting in 1949, Reggie was wealthy, good-natured, and dim. Perpetually at risk of foundering into schemes hatched by his evil aunt or various hucksters, he was constantly saved by his butler, Higgins, thus freed to enjoy life as a carefree bachelor. Perhaps this sort of thing had some appeal before the horrific revelations of World War II, and before politicians accused the “striped-pants boys” at the State Department—boys much like Van Twerp—of selling out America's security to the Soviet Union. But in 1949, it simply disappeared against the landscape of more vital popular culture and a deepening Cold War. By decade's end, Reggie Van Twerp, Larry Davis, and *Funnyman* itself were kaput.

In a twist that would doubtless have left Larry Davis doubled over, there was but one participant of this mess who emerged both solvent and stable: Siegel and Shuster's lawyer, Zugsmith. After losing the DC suit, he went on to produce a string of exploitative films including *The Girl in the Kremlin* and *Sex Kittens Go to College* (along with, it must be admitted, *Touch of Evil*). But where had he found the money to head west and make movies? To the end, Siegel believed that the lawyer had stabbed him in the back. As Gerard Jones argues in *Men of Tomorrow*, his history of the early comic book industry, Siegel was convinced that Zugsmith had approached DC Comics and, in return for a payoff, intentionally fumbled the lawsuit. Stunned by the failure of *Funnyman* and banned from working at DC, the writer drifted from one comic book company to another, trading on his status as the co-creator of Superman and hoping for a similar success. It never came.

Shuster continued to face personal and professional challenges from his failing sight. In 1954, desperate for work, he provided the artwork for a series of underground comic books called *Nights of Horror*, which featured graphic (for the time) depictions of torture, bondage, and racism. He did not sign his work, but many of the male figures in *Nights of Horror* resemble Shuster's most famous creation. One page shows a nearly naked Superman lookalike lashed to a table, being whipped by a buxom dominatrix, while another depicts

the character on his knees, kissing a lingerie-clad woman's high-heeled shoe. Compounding this hallucinatory effect, many of the women in *Nights of Horror* bear eerie similarities to Lois Lane. The creepy artwork reads both as a frustrated middle finger aimed at Shuster's legendary creation and as a kind of twisted farewell to the character he could never again draw for DC.

Siegel and Shuster, from whose brains Superman took flight, would



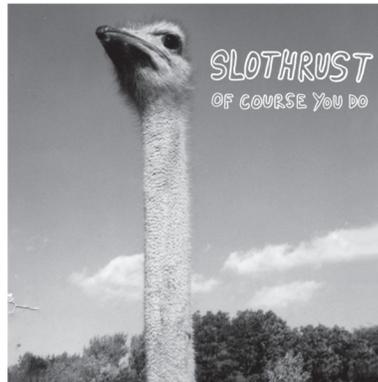
Funnyman #4, 1948

never work together after the Funnyman debacle. It was a sad note on which to end—imagine if Lennon and McCartney had reunited in the '70s to create a sitcom, which got canceled mid-season. And yet I can't help but savor the duo's final creation. There is an unbelievable earnestness to Funnyman. By every imaginable metric he's toxic, but the simple fact that Siegel and Shuster believed so deeply in this character carries through the bad writing, anonymous artwork, and miserable plots. One man was nearly blind, the other was fixated on his perceived mistreatment at the hands of savvier operators, and both were forced to watch as others grew wealthy from a character—an icon!—that they had created. Hungry for a hit, if not necessarily a second Superman, the two men hoped against all reason and evidence that their salvation lay in the form of this braying, prank-pulling ginger who teased and tricked his opponents into submission. Surely, they felt, Funnyman would sweep the nation, just as Superman had a decade prior—only this time they would own the character and nobody could exploit their accomplishments. No doubt, it all made sense to Siegel and Shuster: After all, they had no other options. Their desperation seethes from every panel of *Funnyman*; the duo's faith in their unlovable comedian-superhero renders this spectacular failure strangely endearing. ☒

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