

THE WEIRD WORLD OF EERIE PUBLICATIONS OPENS THE LATEST CHAPTER ON HORROR COMICS' GRISLY HISTORY.

AXES AND EYEBALLS

BY APRIL SNELLINGS

NOW THAT GUSSIED-UP EXPLOITATION FLICKS SUCH AS *PIRANHA 3D* AND *MACHETE* ARE POPPING UP IN MAINSTREAM MULTIPLEXES, IT'S A PERFECT TIME TO REDISCOVER EERIE PUBLICATIONS. AFTER ALL, THE LURID HORROR MAGAZINES, WITH TITLES SUCH AS *TALES FROM THE TOMB*, *WEIRD* AND *WITCHES' TALES*, WHICH HIT THEIR STRIDE IN THE 1960s AND '70s, ARE ESSENTIALLY GRANDHOUSES BUILT OF CHEAP PAPER AND BLACK INK OVERSHADOWED BY ADMITTEDLY CLASSIER ACTS SUCH AS *SKYWALD'S NIGHTMARE* AND JAMES WARREN'S *CREEPY* AND *EERIE MAGAZINES*. THE EERIE PUBLICATIONS LINE HAS BEEN ALL BUT FORGOTTEN.

Most of the stories in the Eerie Publications family of titles were simply redrawn versions of previously published horror comics, but with one important innovation: gore by the gallons. Horror comics before the establishment of the Comics Code Authority might have been grisly, but Eerie Pubs went over the top, with graphic depictions of violent death and dismemberment. Since Eerie's output technically fell into the magazine category, it skirted the restrictions of the Code altogether. *Vertebrae* could be seen tumbling from mangled neck stumps ("House of Monsters" from the January 1970 issue of *Horror Tales*) and bodies were torn apart until nothing was left but "an unrecognizable heap of mutilated flesh and crushed bones lying in a massive pool of blood" ("Voodoo Terror" from *Terror Tales*, July 1970).

"Violent horror was coming of age at the time and the Eerie Pubs magazines were among the trailblazers," says Mike Howlett, author of *The Weird World of Eerie Publications: Comic Gore that Warped Millions of Young Minds*, out this month from Feral House. "They were the bad boys of comics, much like H.G. Lewis and George Romero were the opposite of Hollywood at the time, breaking the gore taboo."

Eerie Publications developed a winning, if not exactly ethical, formula: pick a story from one of the hundreds of pre-Code horror comics (preferably not EC — too high-profile), photocopy it, and hand it off to an artist to produce a much gorier version. And not just any artist; Eerie hired top-notch talent such as Dick Ayers and Chic Stone to raise the gore quotient for its "remakes."

Many of these artists had lost a lot of income due to the devastating effects of the Comics Code of 1954, so they welcomed the work — even if they were initially uncomfortable with the material.

Ayers, for instance, rejected Eerie's offer at first. During a telephone interview from his White Plains, NY home, the artist, now 86, laughs when he recalls his first meeting with editor Carl Burgos, who worked





The Sum of Its Parts: Two interior pages from "Blood Bath," written and illustrated by Chic Stone, a variety of Eerie Pubs covers, and (opposite) one of Dick Ayers' stylized severed heads.



HE SPAN DIZZILY... FEELING PAINT HE FELL TO THE FLOOR WITH THE STING OF DEATH IN HIS NOSTRILS... BLOWY LIFE WAS FEELING FROM HIS SPINNAKOC, BRANNS' BODY...



under the auspices of an umbrella company known as Countrywide Publications. "When he showed me what he wanted me to do — to really make these stories horrible, with [body parts] flying through the air heter-skelter — I said, no, I wouldn't do that. ... Marvel had me doing horror stories, but [what Burgos wanted] was just too much. So he took me into the office of Myron Fass, who was the publisher. Myron sat back and he listened to me say, 'Oh, no, I won't do that; I don't want to go that far.' And he said, 'Look, before you make up your mind, go to the movies tonight and see the one called *The Wild Bunch*.' So I went to see it with my wife, and I came back and said, 'Hey, if they can do that in the movies, I can do it in a comic book.'"

It wasn't long before he was producing some of the most grisly comic art the world had ever seen. He even developed his own trademark Fulci-esque gag; whenever one of Ayers' characters was on the business end of an axe, you could bet that at least one eyeball would come popping out.

"It developed naturally," the legendary artist says. "It just seems like the logical thing to do, to have someone's eyes pop out when they're getting all cut up."

Besides their gored-up art, the stories also received lurid new titles. "I Killed Mary" from Gillmor's *Weird Mysteries* #8 (1954) was rechristened "I Chopped Her Head Off" when Ayers redrew it for a 1975 issue of *Weird*. Eerie did publish a few original stories, as well — most notably "Blood Bath," Chic Stone's gruesome cautionary tale about the dangers of LSD, which apparently causes one to nail severed body parts to the nearest wall. Ayers was happy to have the gig, and had no qualms about reworking the stories. "I never gave that a thought. That was Myron's problem, not mine. I liked them better with the titles that they picked anyway."

For Howlett, like most Eerie Pubs collectors, the gonzo art is what initially attracted him to the magazines. The full-color covers (interiors were always black and white) were eye-catching; notable images include a woman being

THE HORROR! THE HORROR!

COMIC BOOKS THE GOVERNMENT DIDN'T WANT YOU TO READ

Jim Trombetta
Abrams Comicarts

We're in the midst of a horror comics revival, as evidenced by the reissues and remakes of the likes of *Creeper* and *Eerie*, and various books about the lurid pre-Code titles (e.g. *Four Color Fear*; RM#104). The latest is Jim Trombetta's *The Horror! The Horror! Comic Books the Government Didn't Want You to Read*, an astounding journey into the incredibly prolific and shockingly graphic genre of ten-cent terrrors.

Trombetta structures the 300-page book around a series of essays covering various aspects of horror comics. While detailing the history, and celebrating certain triumphs (such as the psychedelic art of L.B. Cole), he also deciphers the meaning behind the depictions of race, war, women, skeletons, vampires, decapitated heads, even ocular trauma. Though he may be reaching in some places – is that soldier's holster on the cover of *Battle* really meant as a phallic symbol? Are skeletons "a parody of the bodily resurrection promised in the Christian Bible?" Really? – the essays are absolutely fascinating, revealing

much about the '50s-era repression these pulp publications dangerously unleashed. For example, he connects Cold War paranoia and the rise of psychiatry to brainwashing narratives in tales such as "The Brain-Bats of Venus."

The author's historical research and attention to detail are exceptional, but even if you don't read a word of Trombetta, *The Horror! The Horror!* contains scores of eye-popping (sometimes literally) covers and dozens of entire stories. Whether it's the graphically lobotomized monster on the cover of *Weird Mysteries* #5, or the original tale of a vampiric, milkman-like blood collector in "Nightmare Merchant," Trombetta's book delivers a wealth of ghoulish eye candy. If that wasn't enough, it's got an intro from R.L. Stine and a DVD of the 1955 TV documentary *Confidential File – a Reeler Madness-like* look into the evils of comic books that'll have you rolling on the floor.

Rate this one E, for "Essential."

DAVE ALEXANDER

THE BLOOD-DRIPPING HEAD



Minced Meat, Not Words: "The Blood-Dripping Head," which was redrawn by Oscar Fraag from original tale "River of Blood" (from *Harvey's Black Cat Mystery* #48, Feb. 1954), appeared five times in various *Eerie* publications.

fed alive into a sausage grinder; a giant monster gnawing a woman's flesh from her bones, corn-on-the-cob style; and Frankenstein's Monster giving his own severed arm to pound a stake into a vampire's chest (monster smackdowns were an *Eerie* cover favourite).

"When I saw Chic Stone's cover for the May 1969 issue of *Weird*, I was floored," Howlett says. "I had somehow missed this one until the mid-'80s. It blew my mind and started a multi-decade obsession. The fact that nothing was known about the people involved with *Eerie* was another thing that lit my fire. ... Who the hell would publish this audacious shit?"

The answer is the aforementioned Fass, Countrywide's prolific and controversial magazine publisher. Horror magazines such as *Tales of Voodoo* and *Terrors of Dracula* were only a fraction of Fass' pulp empire. His New York offices published a huge body of work that covered practically every pop culture touchstone of the era. Magazines such as *Jaws of Blood* and *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind* rode the coattails of blockbuster movies; rock music inspired craptastic music mags that included *Acid Rock* and *Paul McCartney Dead – The Great Hoax*; and a number of men's magazines with titles such as *Hush-Hush News* were also on the roster.

Remembered for his colourful personality as much as for his work, Fass often confronted editors with a loaded gun strapped to his side, and supposedly once dealt with a business disagreement by beating one of his associates in front of the rest of his employees. At one point, Fass even took on famed horror publisher James Warren in a high-stakes, if less than spectacular, duel.

Both men wanted to publish a magazine called *Eerie*, so it was decided that whoever delivered the mag first would get the title. Both publishers were forced into frantic, all-night production sessions with their respective teams. Warren won, so Fass had to rename his hastily produced magazine. In fact, you can still see unerased pencil marks on the cover of the January 1966 issue of *Weird* magazine – the first title published under the banner of *Eerie Publications* (the name clearly a stab at Warren).

"I admire Fass for what he accomplished, but not necessarily how he accomplished it," says Howlett. "Honestly, when I think of him, I think of a tyrannical, egotistical, boorish man whose quirks and intentions left a bit to be desired. But he taught so many young kids the ins and outs of the business and he gave many people in the publishing industry their start. His magazines influenced many artists, writers, actors and other creative people with tastes that run just a bit left of centre. Even we weirdos need an outlet!"

TERROR TALES

MEET ME IN THE TOMB
THE SHELVE OF SKULLS

DEATH CLAWS



TALES OF VODOO

CORPSES OF THE JURY
THE DEAD WENT MARCHING BY
MURDER ON THE WOOD

