

INTER- VIEW WITH DENNY O'NEIL

BY GUY H. LILLIAN III

Denny O'Neil was a newspaper reporter when he first became involved with comic books. "I did a series of articles around 1965 about the resurgence of the field," he recalls, "and they came, through Roy Thomas, to the attention of an editor who wanted a writer. They tried me out; I got the job.

"I was thinking, 'This is really neat. I'm a journalist **REALLY** but I'll do this comic bit for six months. It'll be a great story for my grandkids: Denny's six months in the funny book business.'"

That was almost ten years ago. Denny's now the most famous writer in the field, with the first SHAZAM award given for comics writing lost in the swales of paper—letters from readers, magazines, comics—that overflow his desk. Lest we give the impression of professional sloppiness, though, it should be pointed out that the material for four DC comics he edits — **SHADOW**, **KUNG FU**, **JUSTICE INC.**, and **BEOWULF** — is kept neatly arranged in his own locked cabinet or next door with his assist-

ant, Allan Asherman.

He hasn't written a newspaper article since that fatal assignment in the mid-sixties, but comics certainly don't take all of his time. He does 50 or 60 book reviews a year. He has written pieces for **THE HARPOON** and, when he gets the time, a science fiction story for magazines like **F&SF** or an original anthology. These works "are not primarily money-making projects," Denny says. "When I get a week out from doing comics I sit down and do a story for **myself**. Fortunately I've sold them all." He's also written a novel, co-authored another ("a martial arts book of which neither of us are proud"), and places an occasional article with a magazine, the most recent being a piece on "Doonesbury" creator Gary Trudeau for **VIVA**.

"I don't think a writer should limit himself to one thing," O'Neil explains. "Each of your projects **feeds** the others. So when I do a piece that requires a lot of research, I come back to comics with new ideas—and kind of refreshed; it's like a vacation.

"I don't consider myself a **comic book writer**. I consider myself a writer who does comics."

The comic work of Denny O'Neil is obviously the focus of **AMAZING WORLD's** interest in the writer/editor. We wanted to get his perspective on **THE BATMAN** (to fit in with the theme of this particular issue), sneak an inside story on his most famous and controversial work, **GREEN LANTERN/GREEN ARROW**, and look into his concepts of his books, both as editor and as writer. A heady assignment? Read on.

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SO HOW (said the interviewer) DID YOU COME TO DC?

It was part (said Denny) of a deal with Dick Giordano. I was working for Charlton and various other outfits under various names, and when National hired Dick, Steve Skeates, Pat Boyette, Jim Aparo and I came along with him.

THE THEME OF THIS ISSUE OF AMAZING WORLD IS BATMAN. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS CHARACTER—AS ONE WHO HAS

WRITTEN HIS ADVENTURES?

Next to Eisner's **SPRIT**, maybe, he is the most **flexible** character that comic books have produced. You can do virtually any kind of story you want with **BATMAN**, from straight off the wall science fiction to grim moody realism. I don't think science fiction works as well with the character as a realistic approach, but it can be done. Personally, I've done almost any kind of story I'd write for any medium using **BATMAN**. I really like working with the character a lot.

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING THINGS YOU'VE DONE WITH BATMAN IS REVIVE OLD VILLAINS.

That was Julie Schwartz's idea and I think it's a good one. For a while, **BATMAN** was fighting fairly colorless characters; in the stories that I've written over the past couple of years, before we started bringing back the old villains, only **RAS AL GHUL** was a heavyweight bad guy. That type of villain had worked in the past and they seemed to be part of the rather flamboyant appeal of the character. Julie suggested that we try a story with **TWO-FACE**, and that clicked. So we've been systematically working with the others with varying degrees of success.

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL?

I liked the **JOKER** stories a lot; I liked the **TWO-FACE** stories a lot. Some of the others I don't think are quite as successful.

HAVE YOU READ THE BATMAN #1 FAMOUS FIRST EDITION?

I thought it was interesting, historically. Frankly I'd have to say that we've come a distance since then, technically and in sophistication.

HOW WOULD YOU EVALUATE THE INFLUENCES ON YOUR WRITING?

I think everything I've ever done has influenced me. If you produce thirty or forty scripts a year, not counting stuff done outside of comics, you'll use everything you've got. Professionally, in terms of getting the work done, I think that the best thing that happened to me was my experience as a journalist. It taught me to write to deadline, and not to regard my every single syllable as a precious gem, to be cherished! I don't mind being edited, within reason. If it gets out of reason I make noise, but that seldom happens.

Influences: I've read science fiction and fantasy since I was eight, and I've written a certain amount of it, so obviously that was a major influence. In the last five years I've become involved with the detective/private eye mythos, both reading the fiction and reading critical studies.

That's an increasingly strong influence.

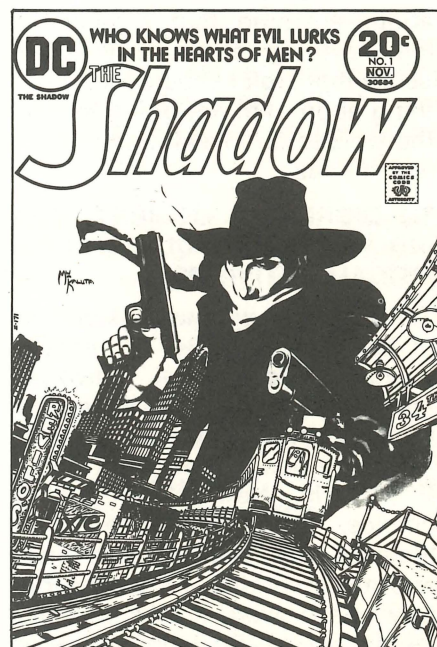
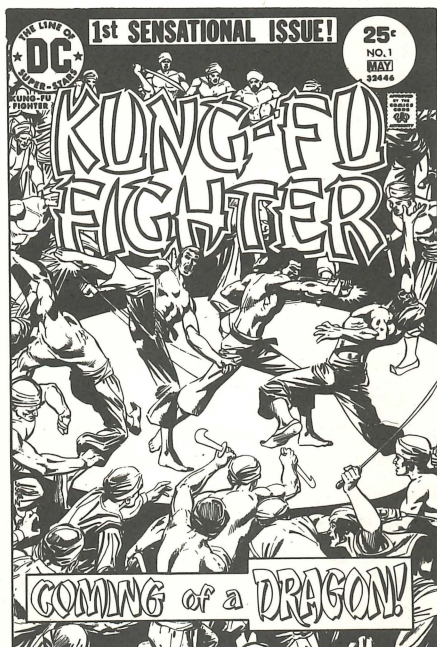
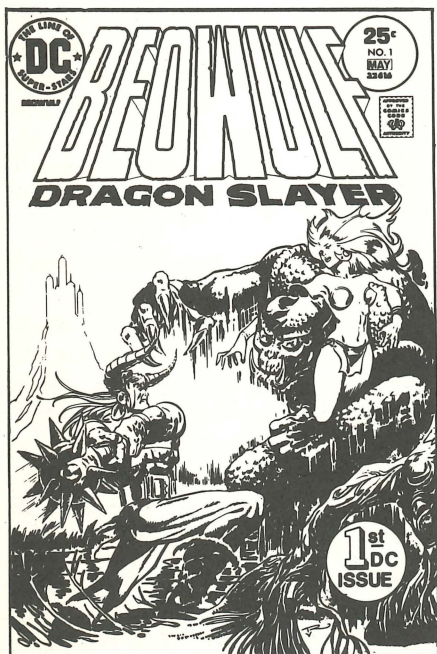
In a wider context, everything I feel about everything obviously influences what I do.

IT'S INEVITABLE THAT WE GET INTO THIS SO IT MIGHT AS WELL BE NOW. DO YOU RECALL THE GENESIS OF YOUR MOST IMPORTANT STRIP, GREEN LANTERN/GREEN ARROW?

I'd done **GREEN LANTERN** for years, on and off. In fact, he was one of the earliest characters I did for Julie. At the time, the book was faltering, and Carmine (Infantino, our boss) said, in effect, "If you have any ideas, go with them."

I had for a long time wanted to see if we could combine a journalistic concern with the flamboyance and fantasy that's part and parcel of superhero concepts. By happy coincidence, Julie — and Neal Adams — were thinking along approximately the same lines.

So I came up with "No Evil Shall Escape My Sight", the first issue (**GREEN LANTERN** #76, April '70). I didn't think Neal was going to draw it at the time; I thought it was going to be Gil Kane. For that story I wrote two pages of character and atmosphere notes, something very rare for me, since I generally leave that up to the artist. It so happened that Adams got the script, got — I assume from what



he said — turned on by it, and other people got excited about it too: Julie . . . Carmine . . .

So we went with it. We decided that for as long as it lasted we would plot stories from the headlines and from our personal concerns about what was happening in the United States and the world. It lasted 13 issues, and in that time I think I sounded off about everything that genuinely concerns me. In fact, there are one or two goofs, one or two stories in that run that I think are **bad**. But they are ones in which the issue we were dealing with did not **really** concern me.

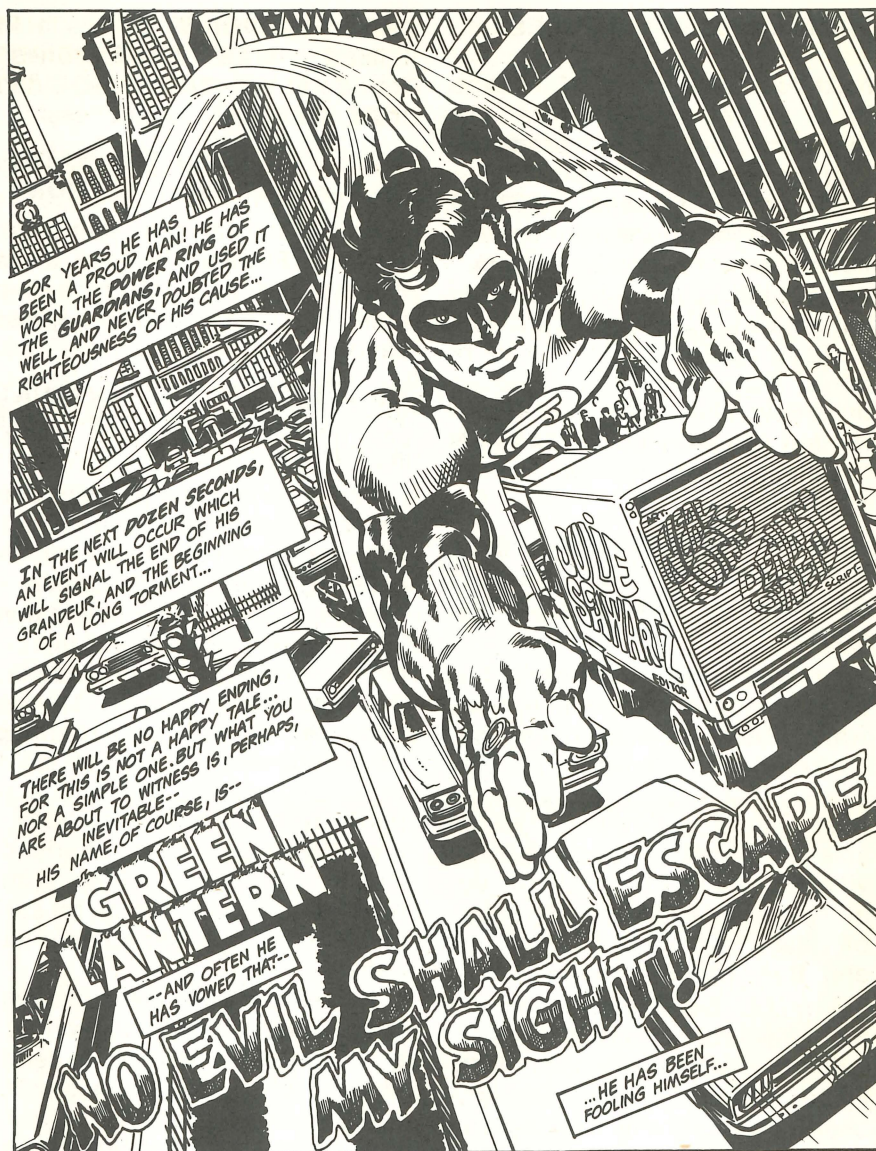
LET ME GUESS. "A KIND OF LOVING, A WAY OF DEATH"? THE "CHARLIE MANSON" ISSUE?

No, that wasn't it. I think that story (in **GL #78**) may have been in bad taste at the time, but the fascism of the left concerns me very much. I've seen friends in the peace movement become terribly authoritarian. We were dealing, in that story, not with **Manson qua Manson**, but with the phenomenon of the authoritarian left. There's a term in French: **circle de politique** — you come the full circle. That's what we were concerned with. It's unfortunate that that issue was almost unanimously interpreted as dealing with Manson. I can certainly, in retrospect, see why. But it was not specifically our intention.

Those times when I goofed were times when I was not writing about anything that I genuinely felt anything about, but rather, issues that I **felt** I should feel something about. I'm not going to blow the whistle on myself and tell you which ones.

TO DIGRESS A MOMENT, HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN POLITICAL ACTIVISM?

The first time was when I got out of the Navy in 1964, an election year, on a local level. I involved myself in the black movement, peripherally, through friends. When the peace movement began I was in New York, writing comics. I didn't approve of the Vietnam War, even though I was and am a veteran. As I think history has proven, it was a monumental waste. So I did the good



liberal stuff, marched on the Pentagon and so on. Never very heavy. Just a little social conscience there, folks.

A LOT OF SCIENCE FICTION INFLUENCE SURFACED IN THIS MOST "RELEVANT" OF COMICS.

Yeah, if we **fantasized** those political issues, made them **fantastic**, we could get away with doing them in a comic book. If we had dealt with them realistically, we would have been in, quote, bad taste, and would have put ourselves in the way of possible lawsuits.

I WAS THERE AND I REMEMBER, BUT JUST FROM YOUR POINT OF VIEW: WHAT WAS THE FAN RESPONSE TO GL/GA?

The mail was very seldom lukewarm. Most of it was very favorable. Boy, it was **fun** to open a mailsack in those days. We got,

of course, a certain percentage of hate mail. There were the people who just plain disagreed with what we were implying, people who **liked** what was going down in Chicago — and I ought to add parenthetically that I was not all that terribly sympathetic to all the defendants' standpoints in that case. **But** I didn't like the way the trial was being conducted.

(Interviewer's Note: Apparently Denny refers to issue #80 of **GREEN LANTERN**, "Even an Immortal Can Die", which many readers saw as a satiric comment on the celebrated trial of the Chicago 8.)

Anyway, there were people who really disagreed with our saying that there were some things wrong with this country. And there were those who had, I think, a stronger case. They said that that sort

of thing had no place in a fantasy medium. I disagree with that simply because I think that anything you **can** do, you **ought** to do, in **any** medium. But I understand their viewpoint: you pick up a comic book for escape, and get your headlines on the front page of the paper.

DID ANY FANS EVER ACCOST YOU AT CONS BECAUSE OF GL/GA?

Oh yeah, but that's the usual thing, if you put yourself in a convention situation. People will always come up to you and say "Goshamightfriday, you're such a genius I want to polish your shoes." Or: "You know, you're a creep, and your last story was **garbage!**"

You take both reactions lightly. You learn after a while that the praise means about as much as the hate.

THE HIGHPOINT OF THAT SERIES WAS "SNOWBIRDS DON'T FLY", THE TWO-PART DOPE STORY.

That was one we wrote out of genuine concern. I lived in a neighborhood heavily populated by drug addicts at the time. I saw people nodding out from heroin every day on the street. I had friends with drug problems, people coming over at 3 a.m. with the shakes. Neal was, at the time, involved in a drug rehabilitation program in his neighborhood. So it was a problem that genuinely concerned us.

We did some research, talked to people at Phoenix House, particularly young people in the process of kicking. We talked to doctors, reformed addicts, we did some reading. Then we went ahead and did the story, and got a heavier reaction from our audi-

ence than on anything else.

We got a lot of negative reaction because we made a long-standing superhero an addict: **Speedy**. Sorry about the name, but there it was, folks — I didn't make it up. People said that superheroes should be idealized — above such things as addiction. There was a reason for doing it like that, though. I wanted a sympathetic character to be an addict for purposes of drama, and also to demonstrate that it's a **disease** — and **anybody** can get sick. It's not scuzzy, pimplefaced punks in the gutter that become addicted to heroin, it's nice clean middle class kids, too.

We had a total of like 44 pages to work with and that was not really enough room to create a character from scratch, build sympathy for him, get him addicted, kick, and also add action and plot. The only way to go was with a character already established, and **Speedy** was the logical choice.

By the way, there was one point that we were trying to be subtle about and we were so subtle nobody saw it. In the cocktail party scene we implied a condemnation of **alcohol** addiction, too, but nobody, evidently, paid much attention to that.

WHAT ABOUT THE ENDING TO THE DOPE STORY?

Well . . . it's not exactly as I wrote it. Let it charitably go at that. And it was not changed by the editor, nor the publisher.

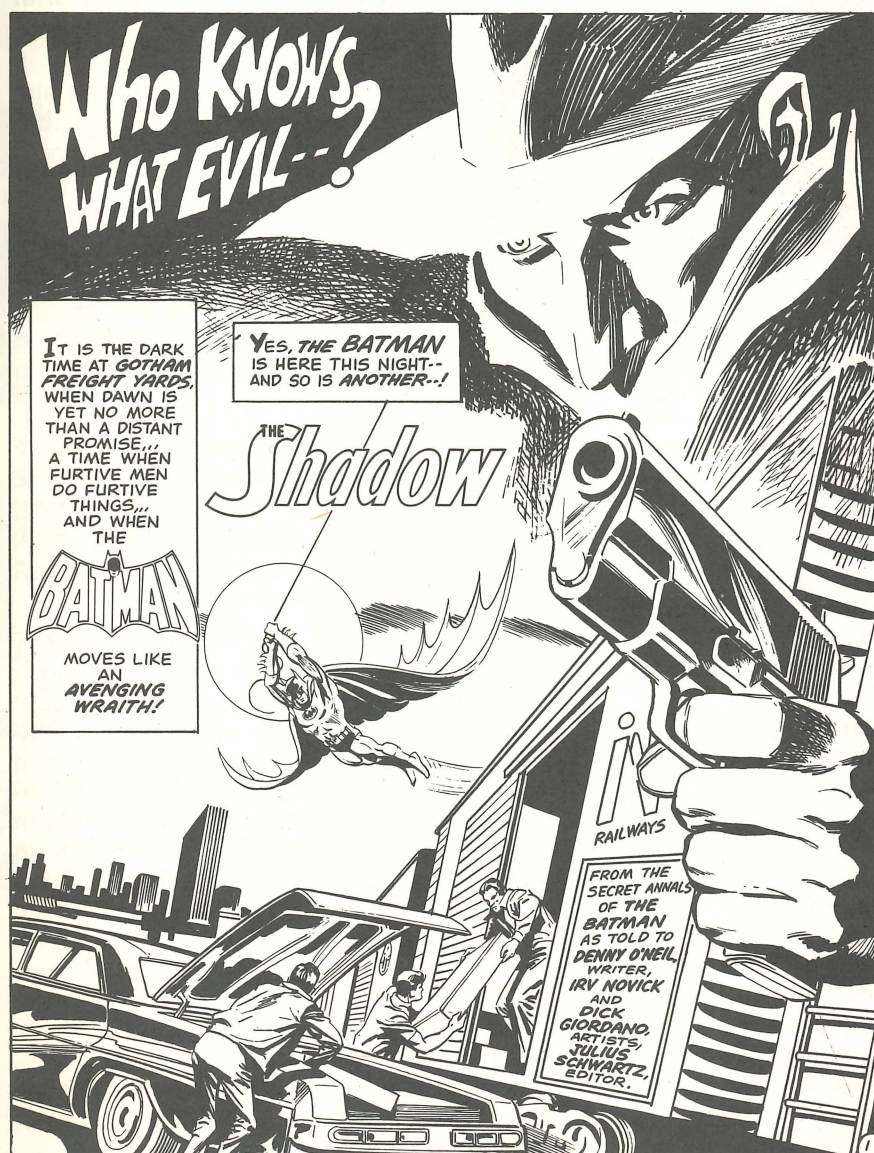
I disapprove of the implied conclusion of that story. What's implied is that a punch in the mouth solves everything.

THAT'S PLENTY ABOUT GL/GA. LET'S GET UP TO DATE. HOW DID YOU BECOME AN EDITOR?

"How" was a telephone call to my home one afternoon. Carmine said, "We need someone to edit **WONDER WOMAN** and we'd like you to do it." And I said sure.

WAS THE SHADOW YOUR OWN PARTICULAR PROJECT.

I think I mentioned it. It seemed to me that the thirties characters were going to enjoy a resurgence — and that seems to have hap-



pened, in paperback publishing, with movies like **CHINATOWN**, and so on. Pyramid is reprinting the **SHADOW** paperbacks and Warner Paperback Library has **THE AVENGER**, from which our comic **JUSTICE INC.** is being adapted.

WILL JUSTICE INC. FEATURE ADAPTATIONS FROM THE PULPS?

Yes, and I've done the first one, a very liberal adaptation of the first book in the series . . . which I think was published in 1939, the year I was born. Al McWilliams' art has a nice period flavor, which is important to a book like that.

But not more important than anything else. There are fundamentals to any comic book story: story-telling, good drawing, a sense of flow — those are always more important than anything else. Period flavor makes a nice decoration for **THE SHADOW**, say, a nice addition. But what I think endemic to the series is a sense of the mystery of the **Shadow**, his near omnipotence. He's not quite **Superman**, but he's more infallible. **Batman** is a much more human character than the **Shadow**. The **Shadow** doesn't make mistakes, his agents make them; crooks do clever things he can't anticipate, but if he knows something, by heaven, he **knows** it. **The Shadow Knows**. The artist has to capture **that** above all. Then, if they can get the "period flavor", that's nice.

HOW ABOUT THE SHADOW'S ORIGIN? WILL YOU PRINT THAT FROM THE PULPS?

I recently talked to Walter Gibson, the creator of the character. He told me that there **is** an origin: I know **who** the **Shadow** is, and I know how to find that story. But we're down to 18 pages every other month now, and I can't do a continued story very easily because people have to wait too long for the second half. Besides, I don't want to do just an origin; I'd like to tie it in with some rather more regular **SHADOW** adventure.

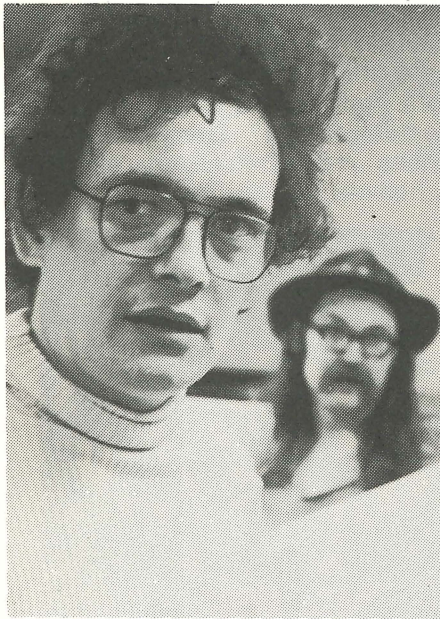
As of now, then, I have no plans to do it. But I don't want to rule it out. If I get some more pages to play with . . .

MOST OF THE SHADOWS HAVE BEEN ORIGINAL PLOTS, EXCEPT FOR . . .

#2, "The Freak Show Murders". And I thought it was the weakest one we've done, in terms of both scripting and art. But that's what makes horseracing.

YOU'RE EDITING DC'S KUNG FU BOOK, AND YOU REFERRED TO SUCH A NOVEL YOU CO-WROTE. WHEN DID YOU GET INTO THE MARTIAL ARTS?

The day after I got mugged, I suppose. I guess that was four or five years ago now. Doesn't seem that long . . .



I'm not "into" it — just a dilettante. I took 15 hours of karate, 15 hours of judo, twenty hours of aikido, but I never had any intentions of being a bad guy, a toughie. I wanted to familiarize myself with it so I wouldn't look like an ignoramus if and when the time came to write about those things. I've been using the martial arts in comics for a good three years; we did **WONDER WOMAN** as a straight martial arts character long time before it became fashionable. You'll notice that **BAMAN** gets in a martial art move or two per issue.

I have a shelf full of books at home for reference. Often, when I need a fight for a story, I take down the books and kind of **construct** it, choreograph it, almost like doing ballet.

And I have a wife who is in-

volved in karate, going at least three times a week to a studio which is — small world — run by Bill Gaines' cousin Laura. Plus, I have a friend who is very deeply into jiu-jitsu. Every time he comes over he about breaks my shoulder with a new move.

But personally — I'm not fanatic about it, not even currently involved enough to be taking any instruction. It's a useful thing to have working familiarity with in this world, though, exactly as it's useful to have a working familiarity with automobiles or the subway system. On that level.

WE'VE WANDERED FAR FROM THE BATMAN THEME. YOUR MOST RECENT WRITING PROJECT WAS ONE OF DC'S NEWEST BOOKS . . .

The **JOKER**. Doing this book is about the most difficult thing I've had to do. We are dealing with somebody who is a thorough and unregenerate villain and yet in order to build stories around him as opposed to his conflicts with a superhero, he has to have some sort of **nobility**; the reader has to admire him on some level, though God I hope not **like** him. So I'm finding that it's taking me about **double** the normal amount of time to do **JOKER** scripts. It's the most challenging thing I've had to do in comics for years.

WE'VE TALKED ABOUT MOST OF YOUR COMIC WORK OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS. DO YOU THINK A COMIC WRITER CAN HAVE THE INTEGRITY A WRITER HAS IN OTHER FIELDS?

Why not? You know, everybody draws their own lines; everybody makes their own decisions about what they will or will not do. Ultimately, you answer to your own conscience. Obviously I like popular culture, mass culture, and I'm delighted to be involved in it, both as critic and as participant. There are attitudes I won't take, kinds of stories I won't do. People around here know what they are. To their credit I have never been pressured. I've been asked, but allowed to politely refuse.

But sure, integrity isn't a matter of **where** you're working . . . but of what you're doing.