



POW!

CAPTURING
SUPERHEROES
& COMICS

MARCH 23 THRU SEPTEMBER 17, 2017

FROM THE CURATOR

The World Chess Hall of Fame is thrilled to present another family-friendly exhibition, *POW! Capturing Superheroes, Chess & Comics*. With over 200 comic books, 18 limited edition or rare chess sets, original drawings, posters, a photo booth, dress-up station, illustration room, and books and toys, this show will delight kids of all ages.

The ancient game of chess was created in the 6th century and immediately, the pieces became a way to tell stories, especially about the battle of good and evil. As the game moved through Asia and then to Europe, the pieces were transformed to reflect current political moods, historical heroes, as well as legendary figures. Similarly, the stories and characters in comics and then later comic books would do the same thing.

The Golden Age of Comics in America began in the 1930s—especially with the introduction of the first superhero, in *Action Comics* #1 on April 18, 1938. Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman would only have to wait less than a decade before becoming a chess piece on the cover of the *Action Comics* Vol. 1, No. 112 in September, 1947. The height of comic sales took place during World War II, with a surge of pro-American characters, before it began to see a decline. Coincidentally, the "Golden Age of Chess" in America also took place during the height of the Cold War as American Bobby Fischer sought to topple 29 years of Russian dominance of the World Chess Championship.

A game of war, battle, strategic thinking, and artistic moves lent itself well to the nature of comics and their characters. From 1940 to the present day, chess has graced the cover or pages of comics including the Superhero genres, as well as horror, crime, science fiction, teen, and even Walt Disney characters. With hundreds of chess-related comic book covers, stories, and original characters, *POW! Capturing Superheroes, Chess & Comics* celebrates another remarkable intersection of chess, art, and popular culture.

—Shannon Bailey, Chief Curator, World Chess Hall of Fame



Roy and Dann Thomas (writers)
E. R. Cruz (penciler, inker)
Mike Worley (colorist)
Jean Simek (letterer)
Captain Thunder and Blue Bolt, No. 9
July 1988

Hero Comics

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Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

COMICS & CHESS: WHERE GRANDMASTERS MEET SUPERHEROES

by Michael Tisserand

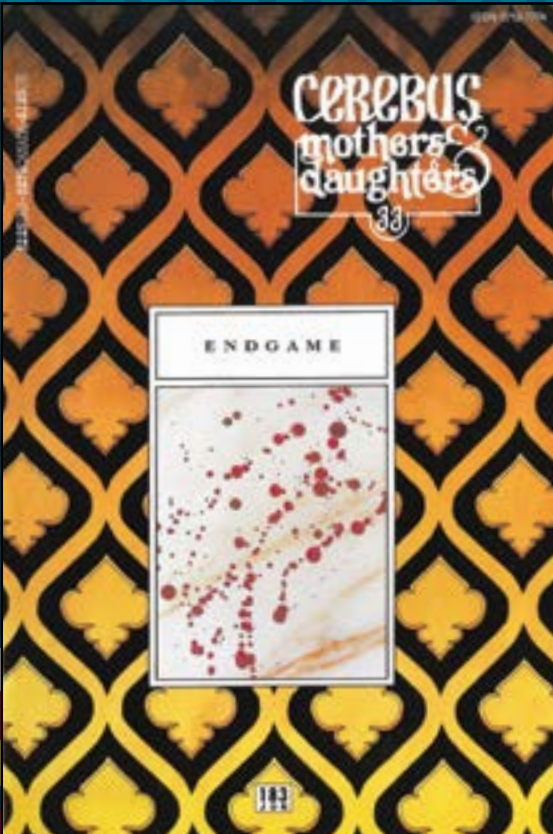
From Archie Andrews to the Avengers, from the Mighty Thor to Mickey Mouse, it seems that nearly every character in comics has taken a turn on the chessboard. It might be because chess provides a potent metaphor for the struggle of good and evil—or perhaps it is because 64-square grids and tiny sculpted pieces are so much fun to draw. Whatever their reasons, cartoonists have been offering their own twists on chess ever since the dawn of cartooning.

In fact, chess has been imagined and re-imagined in comics from the early newspaper comic strips and the Golden Age of comic books (late 1930s–mid 1950s), right up to the modern era of graphic novels and online comics. Now, with *POW! Capturing Superheroes, Chess & Comics*, the World Chess Hall of Fame (WCHOF) offers a unique chance to explore what comics can tell us about chess as well as what chess can tell us about comics.

The exhibit spans nearly every possible genre of comic books. Represented here are classic superhero comics including *The Invincible Iron Man* and *Wonder Woman*; teen tales such as *Archie*; children's classics such as *Richie Rich* and *Casper*; and movie and television spin-offs like *Aladdin*, *Simpsons Comics*, *Star Trek*, and *Dark Shadows*. There are titles featuring crime-fighting teams and heroes directly inspired by and named for chess, including DC's *Checkmate!* and Marvel's *Gambit*. Lurid horror tales from the legendary EC Comics line are on view, as is political satire from *Mad* magazine and even a starring role by Grandmaster Magnus Carlsen in a Norwegian Donald Duck comic (presaging Carlsen's cameo in a 2017 *The Simpsons* television cartoon). Major publishers are joined by independent titles such as Canadian cartoonist Dave Sim's innovative and controversial *Cerebus*. Also in the collection is the short-lived but delightful *The Incredible Adventures of Chessman*, written by International Master John L. Watson and emblazoned with a faux seal promising the contents are "Unapproved by the USCF," or the United States Chess Federation.

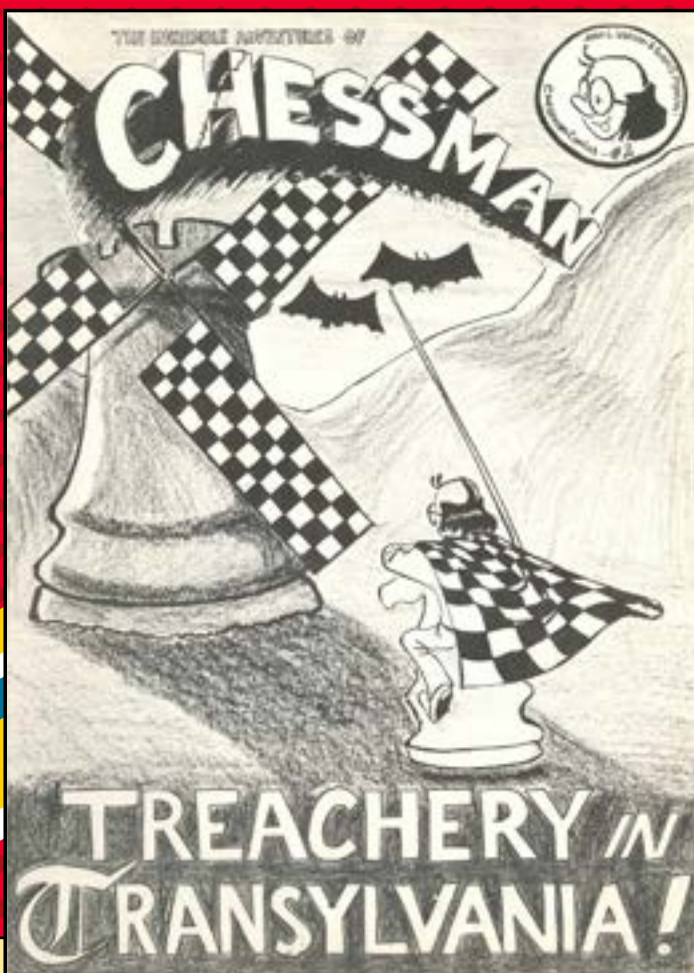


Chris Claremont (writer)
 Luke McDonnell, Al Milgrom,
 and Vince Colletta (pencilers)
 Al Milgrom, and Vince Colletta (inkers)
 Bonnie Milford (colorist)
The Mighty Thor Vol. 1, No. 9
 November 1981
 Marvel Comics Group
 © MARVEL
 Collection of Bernice and Floyd Sarisohn



Dave Sim (writer, penciler, inker)
 Gerhard (colorist)
 Linda Berzins (letterer)
Cerebus Mothers and Daughters 33
 June 1994
 Aardvark-Vanaheim Inc.
 Collection of Bernice and Floyd Sarisohn

Perhaps it should not be surprising that the history of chess and comics are so intertwined, especially in the United States, where one of the country's first editorial cartoons, a severed snake with the title *Join, Or Die* (published in 1754), was drawn by founding father and chess enthusiast Benjamin Franklin. Chess was even present at the dawn of the American comic strip. Launched in 1906, the early comic *Hairbreadth Harry*, a lampoon of melodramas, was a precursor to later adventure and superhero comics; its creator, Charles William "C.W." Kahles, also served as president of the Brooklyn Chess Club and decorated the walls of the club with his cartoons. "When at the board he, as a good player, took his chess seriously, but, naturally, he was only too well aware of its humorous side," reported the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* upon Kahles' death in 1931.



IM John Watson (writer)
Svein G. Myreng (penciler)
The Incredible Adventures of Chessman Vol. 1, No. 2
1982
Chess Enterprises
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame



Cover art created by Matt Groening; Bill Morrison (Pencils); Mike Rote (Inks); Nathan Kane (Colors). Reproduced with permission. © 2001 Bongo Entertainment, Inc. The Simpsons TM and © Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. All Rights reserved. *Simpsons Comics* No. 56 March 2001 Bongo Comics Group Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

By the 1930s, the modern comic book had started to emerge. Once reproducing newspaper strips, periodicals began to feature original stories and art. Their cultural influence and economic future were ensured with the advent of costumed superheroes such as Superman, debuted by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1938, and Batman, created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in 1939. During this early Golden Age of comic books, characters and ideas tumbled out with super-heroic speed, including the vivid use of chess to tell stories of struggles between good and evil, and even humanity and fate. Of early comic books to showcase chess at the center of a story, none is more wondrous than "The Cross-Country Chess Crimes" in *Action Comics* Vol. 1, No. 112 (September 1947). Here, Superman is plagued by Mr. Mxyztplk, a mischievous trickster from another dimension. Unlike villains bent on world domination, Mr. Mxyztplk just wants to have fun with Superman, who suggests to Mr. Mxyztplk that he try chess instead, thinking hopefully, "Chess is the world's most fascinating game. So it may keep the little imp out of mischief for awhile." Mr. Mxyztplk responds by kidnapping two contestants from a world chess tournament (a fictitious "Bugashlovsky" and "Smith") and using the whole world as his chessboard, with actual castles as rooks.

No work of literature has influenced chess comics more than Lewis Carroll's 1871 novel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865. Carroll's works featured fantastical size shifting, with Alice even making her way across a giant chessboard to be promoted to a queen. This idea of human chess, re-popularized by J.K. Rowling in her *Harry Potter* series, has inspired decades of comics of all varieties, including comic-book adaptations of Carroll's work. Among the more bizarre tales of human chess is "I Was Trapped on the Chessboard of Giants," the cover story of *House of Mystery* No. 77 (August 1958). Drawn by Ruben Moreira, the comic follows the husband-and-wife archeologist team Charles and Flora, who are storm-blown to an uncharted island, where they are enslaved as chess pieces by a race of giants. They eventually escape back to civilization, and Charles later muses that his mind still wanders back to his time with the giants whenever he sits down for a friendly game of chess.

Lewis Carroll (original),
Serge S. Sabarsky (adaptation) (writers)
George O. Muhlfield (cover artist,
penciler, inker)
The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland No. 1
January 1945
Civil Service Publications, Inc.
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame



Ken Rice (penciler)
 Rocco "Rocke" Mastroserio (inker)
 Leroy Lettering (letterer)
The Hand of Fate No. 9 (Interior)
 February 1952
 Ace Comics
 Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

The high-stakes chess game is another favorite storyline for comics, and nothing is more high stakes than life and death itself. Playing chess against death is nothing new; it is the subject of a famous 15th-century ceiling fresco by Albertus Pictor in the Täby Church in Stockholm, Sweden, which inspired filmmaker Ingmar Bergman's movie *The Seventh Seal* (1957). A terrifically lurid version of this epic struggle

is seen in "Strange Rendezvous at 17 Rue Noir," from *Hand of Fate* No. 9 (February 1952), published before the advent of the Comics Code Authority, a self-regulatory code adopted in 1954 by comics publishers in response to a national anti-comics hysteria stoked by Frederic Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). The elaborate and gruesome chess tale concerns a vain chess champion named Guido Nicola, who is challenged by the ghost of Jan Kovacs, a long-dead player gone "mad with agony and rage" over Nicola's undeserved fame. Their dialogue is recognizable to any player who has endured a painful chess loss to an ungracious victor:

Nicola: I—I can't understand it! T—this never happened before!
 Every move I make is the wrong one!

Kovacs: That's because every move I make is the right one!
 There goes your knight!

Most remarkable in this pre-Code tale are the piece captures—horrible deaths by living combatants, with swords cutting into throats before blood-stained walls.



A high-stakes game is also the subject of the historic *Justice League of America* No. 1 (November 1960). The cover of this inaugural issue shows the Flash playing a game of chess with the evil Despero, who admits, "I've got his game rigged so that every time Flash makes a move, a member of the Justice League disappears from the face of the Earth." Also historic is the brilliant Pop Art-derived series *Strange Tales: Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, legendary in comics for the graphic splendors provided by artist Jim Steranko. Running from December 1966 through October 1968, the series included the first appearance of Prime Mover, a chess-playing robot invented by the villainous Doctor Doom, who explains in *Strange Tales: Nick Fury Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. and Doctor Strange* Vol. 1, No. 167 (April 1968), "Even a monarch such as myself is deserving of occasional droll sport!"



Jim Steranko (writer, penciler)
Joe Sinnott (inker)
Sam Rosen (letterer)
Strange Tales: Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. Vol. 1, No. 167
1968
Marvel Comics Group
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Albert B. Feldstein (writer)
Graham Ingels, George Evans,
Jack Kamen, and Jack Davis
(pencilers, inkers)

Haunt of Fear Vol. 1, No. 22

November/December 1953

EC Comics

Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

Another favorite theme (or even a cliché) in comics is the supposed eccentricity of chess players. Future *Mad* magazine editor Al Feldstein takes this idea to the extreme in "The Chess-Mate," which appeared in the pre-Code *The Haunt of Fear* Vol. 1, No. 22 (November/December 1953). It tells the macabre story of a gifted chess player named Zeb Taylor, who sits on a park bench and plays for spare change with passersby. Expected to doff his large top hat for a passing flag, he instead shoots himself. His secret is then revealed: His great skill at chess comes from having two brains, the other one belonging to a conjoined twin attached to the top of his head. Drawn with extravagant detail by George Evans, "The Chess-Mate" is among the weirdest chess stories committed to print.

More often, eccentric chess players are presented for laughs, from elderly men falling asleep over a long game to high school players being celebrated by chess cheerleaders, a gag from *Archie* comics that would later be adopted by *Saturday Night Live's* Spartan cheerleaders Will Ferrell and Cheri Oteri. For younger children, this theme might be illustrated in the *Richie Rich* No. 5 (April 1973) comic book cover showing the "poor little rich kid" playing with bejeweled pieces, or the *Casper* Vol. 1, No. 117 (May 1968) cover picturing the pieces running away in fear of Casper. In fact, there is no serious chess theme in comics that is not also given a humorous spin—even the dreaded hand of fate serves as a gag for *Simpsons Comics* No. 56 (March 2001), in which Mr. Burns is playing on a board with Homer, Bart, and Lisa Simpson as chess pieces.

Another idea used by cartoonists for both thrills and laughs is the notion of chess as a metaphor for political struggle. This idea can be seen as early as 1875 in an unsigned political comic that showed Otto Von Bismarck and the Pope Pius IX playing chess, published in the German satirical magazine *Kladderadatsch*. Nearly a century later, in April 1963, political chess would be given a Cold War twist by Al Jaffee, a star player in *Mad* magazine's "Usual Gang of Idiots." In "Modern Chess" from *Mad* Vol. 1, No. 78 (April 1963), fallout shelters represent rooks, and hydrogen and atomic bombs are kings and queens.

No chess tale reflects its era more keenly than "Five Dooms to Save Tomorrow" in *The Avengers* Vol. 1, No. 101 (July 1972), which is based on a story by famed fantasy and science fiction writer Harlan Ellison and adapted by Roy Thomas. Published during the 1972 World Chess Championship between grandmasters Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky, the comic has all the Cold War tensions that infused both chess and society in the early 1970s: a Russian chess player, poison-covered chess pieces, a chess-playing computer, and the threat of nuclear holocaust. Thomas, an avid chess player himself, would later introduce even more detailed chess themes in later works. (See "Four Questions for Roy Thomas.")

Today, there seems to be no limit to the types of comics that can feature chess. While the elements of the game continue to inspire new superhero adventures, more intimate stories appear in newspaper comics—especially Bill Amend's amusing sagas of family chess in *FoxTrot*. Perhaps the most personal chess comic was drawn for the Web: Scott McCloud's confessional *My Obsession with Chess* (1998–99) covers his youthful passion for the game and his eventual decision to leave it all behind. Chess has even seen print in graphic novels. Jane Irwin's 2014 book-length comic *Clockwork Game: The Illustrious Career of a Chess-playing Automaton* is a remarkable work of art, history, and imagination about the world's greatest chess hoax.

It should come as no surprise that chess—a game of characters and conflict, deliberate plots and surprise twists, thought and emotion—proves to be such fertile ground for comic writers and artists. There is also one more important similarity: in both comics and chess, the next move is not always so easy to predict.



Jane Irwin (writer, penciler)
*Clockwork Game: The Illustrious Career of
a Chess-playing Automaton*
May 2014
Fiery Studios
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

FOUR QUESTIONS FOR ROY THOMAS

No comic book writer has brought more ideas from chess into superhero comics than Roy Thomas, the former editor-in-chief at Marvel Comics. For Thomas, it is not enough for a superhero to be playing chess—Thomas might turn characters into pieces in an endgame or even show a hero stumped by a position and reaching for a Wilhelm Steinitz (U.S. Chess Hall of Fame, 1987; World Chess Hall of Fame, 2001) book. Here, Thomas discusses how he turned a personal pastime into exciting stories for comic books.



Roy Thomas (writer), Sal Buscema (penciler)
George Roussos (inker), Sam Rosen (letterer)
The Avengers Vol. 1, No. 92
September 1971
Marvel Comics Group
© MARVEL
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

Q: Your comics seem to make it clear that you yourself play chess. Has this been a lifelong pursuit?

A: I taught myself to play around the eighth grade, from a *World Book Encyclopedia* "C" volume. I read one rule wrong, though, and it took a couple of years—when I read some actual chess books while in high school, checked out from the local library—before I got the *en passant* rule right.

Q: Why did you want to bring an actual chess game into *Arak, Son of Thunder*? Had you included chess in other stories?

A: Mainly, I remembered that chess was a game that came from the Middle East and/or India, so it seemed right in place. Besides, chess has been a part of many fine tales over the years. I was intrigued by Edgar Rice Burroughs' 1922 novel *Chessmen of Mars*, even though Martian chess was quite different from the Earth variety.

In *The Avengers* Vol. 1, No. 92 (September 1971), I have Vision and Quicksilver playing chess on the splash page, and I'd sent a photo of an actual position to artist Sal Buscema. He did well...except that he put a black square on the right instead of a white one, and by the time it was inked, it was just too difficult to change, so I had to let it pass. But I never look at that splash page without wincing.

Harlan Ellison used chess in the Hawkman story he had plotted in the early 60s and tried to sell to Julie Schwartz, and I certainly kept that aspect when I adapted it into *The Avengers* Vol. 1 No. 101 (July 1972), but that was his chess story more than mine, of course.

Q: Although the chess stories in those issues of *Arak* and *The Avengers* are uniquely complex in their depiction of the game, you do see images of chess showing up fairly often in comic books, especially in superhero stories. Do you think there is something about a chess match and its dynamics that adapts well to the struggle of good and evil that we see in superhero and other comics?

A: Yes, and I think a lot of comics writers and perhaps many artists as well have played chess at some time or other. A chess game makes a good image.

Q: When you see chess used in these comics, what does it seem to represent?

A: I don't have any profound thoughts on that besides that it represents a struggle between good and evil—except that, really, there is no "good and evil" in chess, just two sides battling.

—Michael Tisserand

Author Michael Tisserand's most recent book, *Krazy: George Herriman, A Life in Black and White* (HarperCollins, 2016), was a finalist for the PEN America and National Book Critics Circle awards for biography. His previous works include the Hurricane Katrina memoir *Sugarcane Academy* (Harvest/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007) and the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award-winning *The Kingdom of Zydeco* (Arcade, 1998). He lives in New Orleans, where he also volunteers as a chess coach and organizes the annual New Orleans Chess Fest. He can be contacted at michaeltisserandauthor.com.

A member of the Will Eisner Comic Book Hall of Fame, Roy Thomas is a legendary comic book writer and editor who served as editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics. His extensive work for Marvel, DC and independent publishers includes helping to create numerous characters, as well as popularize "sword and sorcery" stories in comics. Thomas is a native of Jackson, Missouri.



POW! CAPTURING SUPERHEROES, CHESS & COMICS

MARCH 23 - SEPTEMBER 17, 2017

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ABOVE • *Baffling Mysteries* No. 26, October 1955. Ace Magazines. Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame.

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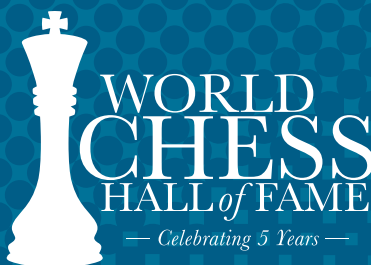
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