

# GOOD COMICS

## and why you should sell them

At the Diamond Comic Distributors 10th Annual Retailers Seminar, Neil Gaiman gave the following speech. The year was 1993 and the world of comics was at the height of an unprecedented boom, a year away from diving into a recession that it has yet to truly recover from. Gaiman's speech was a warning of the problems to come and a suggestion for a way out. He tells us that he did not come to "play Cassandra," but in some ways that is just what he did. Like Cassandra, his warnings were mostly ignored and his direst prediction came true. (Gaiman didn't quite have it as bad as Cassandra—he wasn't taken as war booty by a Greek king and subsequently murdered by the queen. At least, not yet.) His advice on weathering the storm is as true today as it was six years ago.



This is Rise and Shine with Neil Gaiman, which is something of a contradiction in terms. I am not a morning person. I am not a morning person the same way that Carl Barks is not unimportant to the history of comics.

So, pretty much for the first time ever, I wrote a speech, and I don't do that; I just get up and talk like this. But I figured no, I did that once at a breakfast event . . . and it was terrible. People still talk about it—this white thing that got up there, and said something and nobody knew what it was, and I got down again.

I want to talk about comics. I want to talk about good comics and why you should do what you can to sell more of them. But first I want to talk about tulips.

I am often asked via letters to the editor and at signings to suggest interesting books to the world or assemble a reading

list for the letters column, and I never seem to quite get around to it. Well, one of my favorite old books is the remarkable volume called *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, written almost 150 years ago by a gentleman named Charles McKay. In it, he details many of the pursuits, wise and otherwise, to which people have given their lives. He devotes chapters to such diverse subjects as, for example, alchemists, haunted houses, the slow poisoners, the great Louisiana land swindle, and the popular street cries of Victorian London—of which my favorite was "tuppence more and up goes the donkey." Nobody ever knew what it meant, but they used to shout it at each other.

It's a book with a huge cast of characters within its pages that includes such luminaries as Matthew Hopkins, the self-proclaimed Witch-Finder General, who wandered around England in the early 1640s finding witches. He charged each village 20 shillings for the privilege of

having him turn up and make them all feel really uncomfortable and another 20 shillings a head for each witch discovered and disposed of. He was turning a merry profit finding witches and sending them to meet their maker until one day he went to find witches in a little village in Suffolk, the elders of which were nobody's fools, pointed out to him that no man could find as many witches as he had unless he was getting his infernally accurate information from Beelzebub. Before Mr. Hopkins could come up with an adequate response to this, he was put to the test and was a former Witch-Finder General. The moral of which, I suppose, is that it can be unwise to start witch hunts. But I didn't come here to talk about witches, who after all have little enough to do with the vitally important business in front of us, which is that of comics and the retailing thereof.

Now, as I said, I want to talk to you about something far more germane to the world we all share of four-color funnies:

#### Tulips.

Picture the scene: 17th century Holland. Imagine the screen going all wavy at this point and a hasty montage of wooden clogs and windmills and dikes with fingers in them, and red-wax wrapped cheeses that taste more or less like yellow rubber. And one thing is missing. Tulips. Now the first

tulips—this is all true, terrifying, but true—arrived from the East in the late 16th century and became very popular in Holland. Very, very popular. As Mr. McKay tells us in his book:

*In 1634, the rage among the Dutch to possess them [tulips] was so great that the ordinary industry of the country was neglected, and the population, even to the lowest dregs, embarked on the tulip trade. As the mania increased, prices augmented until in the year 1635, it became necessary to sell tulips bulbs by their weight in perets, a small weight, less than a grain.*

This is true. The Dutch were very, very keen on tulip bulbs. One tulip bulb sold for 12 acres of prime building land in Holland, another sold for 4,600 florins, which is about \$100,000 in modern money, plus a new carriage, two gray horses, and a complete set of harnesses.

There's a strange story about a wealthy merchant who received a foreign sailor one morning who came with news and was given, for giving the news, a smoked herring for his breakfast. The sailor, who knew nothing of tulips, also took with him when he left something he thought was an onion. And when he returned to his ship, he sliced it and ate it with his herring. And

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he'd eaten a 3,000 florins tulip bulb and, following a hunt, was caught and sentenced to prison. By 1636, there were tulip exchanges in every major town in Holland. These functioned as stock exchanges. I'll quote from McKay's book again:

*The tulip jobbers speculated in the rise and fall of the tulip stock*

*and made large profits. Many individuals grew suddenly rich. Everyone imagined the passion for tulips would last forever and that the wealthy from every part of the world would send to Holland and pay whatever prices were asked for them. The riches of Europe would be concentrated on the banks of the Zuyder Zee River and poverty banished from the favorite clime of Holland. Noble citizens, farmers, mechanics, seamen, footmen, maid servants, even chimney sweeps and old clothes women dabbled in tulips. People of all grades converted their property into cash and invested it in flowers. Houses and land were offered for sale at ruinously low prices.*

You had an entire country obsessed with getting rich and convinced that it was impossible that tulips could ever be less than the ultimate, perfect investment object.

After all, when the rest of the world caught up with the Dutch, the Dutch would have all the tulips, and they'd be even richer than they were already. And instead, the rest of the world stared blankly at the Dutch for fussing foolishly after something that was, after all, only a tulip. The entire economy of Holland was destroyed. I wish I were exaggerating, but I'm not.

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There was a madness and a foolishness that seems pretty apparent to an outside observer. Now, not being Dutch, it's very easy for me to feel very smug about this. But something very similar happened 100 years later when the South Sea Company infected all of England with the joy of investing. At the height of the craze—the so-called “South Sea Bubble”—you got share certificates being traded. At one point, there was an alley-way they were being traded on and the same share certificate would go down the alley going up in price as people

bought it from each other. And eventually a lot of people were wiped out, fortunes were lost, and a lot of people were made very miserable—and at least the Dutch had been able to eat the unwanted tulips bulbs.

And if you think this has nothing to do with you, well, it does. Too many comic stores are trading in “bubbles” and tulips.

I'm not here to play Cassandra. I do not have the figure and I do not have the legs. I merely point this out.

Personally, I think any comic shop that sells multiple copies of the same comic to any child under, say, sixteen, because that child has somehow been given the impression that he or she has been handed a license to print money, should, if nothing else, get the child to read a form explaining that comic values can go down as well as up and require it to be signed by a parent or guardian.

I think any organization or store that pushes comics as investment items is at best short-sighted and foolish, and, at worst, immoral and dumb. You can sell lots of the same comic to the same person—especially if you tell them they're investing money for high guaranteed returns. But you're selling bubbles and tulips. One day the bubbles will burst and the tulips will rot in the warehouse.

Which is why I want to talk about good comics. Now I have a vested interest here. I write—or try to write—or when I'm doing well, I write good comics. I don't write collectibles nor do I write investment items. I write stories. I write the best I can. I write stories for people to read.

Now, a little digression here. Before I wrote comics, I was a journalist. Like writing comics, journalism is another

profession that usually doesn't involve getting up in the morning. And as a journalist I used to write—whenever people would let me—about comics. The high point of this—for me—was in 1986 when I was commissioned by the prestigious *Sunday Times Magazine* in England to do a feature article on comics. I interviewed a number of people for it, I interviewed Alan Moore, Frank Miller, Dave Sim, Brian Bolland, and many, many others. I worked really hard on it. This was going to be the first major national magazine article promoting comics as a medium in

England. I sent the article to the editorial gentleman who had commissioned it and heard. . . nothing. Not a sausage. So after a couple of weeks, I rang him up and he sounded very subdued.

"How's the article?" I asked. He said he had a problem or two with it. This is always what they say. They never say, "I don't like it." They say, "Well, I have a problem with it." And I suggested he tell me

what the problem was so I could rewrite it and get better.

"Well," he said, "it lacks balance."

"In what way?"

"These comics," he paused, and then he spat out, "You seem to think they're a *good* thing!"

Now he'd been hoping for something that Fredric Wertham would have been proud of, and that wasn't what he got. But we agreed I had no

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plans to rewrite it to give it the balance he felt it lacked, and he sent me a kill fee for that article which was twice what I got for getting articles printed anywhere else. This huge check for this thing that never got published. I would much rather have had the article printed than the money, because I *do* believe that comics are a good thing.

If I didn't, I'd still be a journalist, or I'd be writing unproduced screen plays for mind-boggling sums in Hollywood. Or I'd be growing tulips.

We're living in what the Chinese curse described as "interesting times." And I like that. The landscape is changing and erupting and exploding. New lines and publishers and titles and universes appear and vanish. Some comics are selling in numbers undreamed of in 1986. Stores spring up like mushrooms after a heavy rain. And it's hard to tell what things are going to be like in five years' time.

But I'll tell you this: stores that sell and push good comics will still be around because people who read will still be with us and they will want comics.

Another flashback. Philadelphia, 1990, and I'm attending a small

American convention which was followed by a meeting of the CBRI, and I was asked to stay on and attend a panel discussion. The panel consisted of marketing reps from all the major publishers at the time, someone from Diamond, and right down at the end more than a little bemused, and rather puzzled about what I was doing

there—me. Literally, actually. Everybody down the line, right at the end there's me, looking at everyone. First of all, everyone talked about bar codes and comics and I learned more than a human being would ever wish to know about putting bar codes on comics. And then they talked about racking, and then they talked about pricing and then they talked about bar codes again. I was starting to wonder really what am I doing here on a really existential level. And Steve Gursky, who was presiding over the whole shebang, might have thought the same thing. He stood and he said, "We have a creator here. Does anyone want to ask

the creator anything? Ask him a creator question."

There was no sea of hands, no forest of waving arms. There were some very puzzled looking faces, and eventually someone took pity on me and put up their hand and asked a question.

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