Suffering and Seriality:
Memory, Continuity and Trauma in Monthly Superhero Adventures

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A respectable bookshop stocking nicely-bound superhero stories on their shelves is a recent occurrence. Comic fandom used to be a very different beast: collections composed of individual issues, mostly 20 or so pages a piece, sometimes glossy, sometimes not, fastened with a pair of ordinary staples. It's hard to imagine any book held together so haphazardly. And this kind of collection is *heavy*. Do the math. A long-running daily soap opera might show the equivalent of around 1300 feature films in a ten year run (Allen 1992:108). For superheroes like Batman and Superman, who have been fighting crime monthly for over half a century each, the equations are more complicated. At times they had one monthly comic; at other times, over five monthly titles, a generous handful of miniseries, guest cameos in others' adventures, and ensemble roles in the Justice League of America, all at once. Thousands and thousands and thousands of pages. Imagine the weight of it. Imagine all the punches thrown, battles won, and worlds saved. Imagine all the lives lost along the way.[1]

"Stop… me… if you've heard this one before…"
The Joker, being beaten savagely by Batman. *Batman* #614.

Throughout superhero history, a comic was much more likely to end up yellowed, torn, and used as source material for Silly Putty imprints than kept mint of research purposes. Collections were never complete. Batman editor Denny O'Neill points out that irregular distribution meant the "audience could not be certain if they bought *Batman* #28 of being able to buy *Batman* #29" (Pearson & Uricchio 1991:28). It meant that stories lasting only a single issue were the norm, rather than ongoing stories that fans would be forced to read with gaps and fissures. Progress was ignored in favour of self-contained adventures, and any lingering events were kept to a minimum to avoid impacting the status quo for the next issue, the next writer, the next storyline. There was no rest for the heroes, who – barring cancellation – had to find new, exciting conflicts every month. The monthly timetable of serialised superhero comics forces writers not only to produce novelty, but to do so on a strict timetable (Lang &

Trimble 1988:167). Clark Kent would understand. As a newspaperman for The Daily Planet, he knows that pages regularly need to be filled.

The obvious question, then, is how many times can we read about Batman fighting crime? Issue after issue, fighting the same rogue's gallery, year after year – can *Batman* #28 really be all that different to *Batman* #29? In his analysis of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels, Umberto Eco wonders how any writer can possibly produce storylines that are "sensational and unforeseeable" when forced to write to such a specific, limiting pattern of events. The pleasures, he decides, are the slight variations introduced to each text: how the hero's victory is deferred, or the deviations that come before the inevitable ending (Eco 1983:113). The fantastic nature of superhero stories allows this quest for novelty to produce surreal results. Changes to the supporting cast, powers suddenly out-of-control, everyone transformed into primates… you name it, it will be introduced in an attempt to make the standard superhero plotline more complex and varied (Lang & Trimble 1988:167). It's how we ended up with Superman being bestowed odd powers like super-hypnotism, or transformed into electricity, or – at its most extreme – months during the *Reign of the Supermen* storyline where the original Superman had been replaced by new variations, each with an easy hook. A teenage Superman! A black Superman! A cyborg Superman!

Pushing variation to extremes isn't unusual in the strange world of superheroes. In fact, excess is one of the defining characteristics of the genre. They exist in a universe of pumped muscles, fluid bodies, manly tears, and shouted, expositional soap opera. Excess can be a dangerous point of difference for our heroes, too. What is one of the simplest ways to make *this* story different from *that* story? Greater threats, bigger risks, and more danger than ever before. This is Superman's greatest battle! Batman's greatest foe! The repetition of superhero stories, and the variation that repetition, in turn, demands, pushes every element to the limit in the quest for further novelty (Calabrese 1992:51). Comics are famous for editorial hyperbole – where else would a series be called something as straightfacedly grandiose as *Crisis on Infinite Earths*? – and if these heroes could read the blurbs adorning their covers, they'd rightly be nervous. Powers, spectacle, and soap opera are all subject to this excess; the danger for the heroes is that tragedy escalates in exactly the same way. Time-travelling sorcerer Arion pointed this out to the ever-optimistic Superman:

> Superman: "Wait. We just – we just stopped a crisis like this, turned back a tide of darkness and chaos…"
> Arion: "Yes. And yet you never notice, do you, that it always returns, always worse?"
> (*Superman* #657)

Variation isn't all zany time-travel and transforming apes; after all, no one needs rescuing in a perfect world. Frank Miller, tough-guy Batman writer, goes so far as to say that the character really only functions if "…the world is essentially a malevolent, frightening place." (Pearson & Uricchio 1991:206). A recent promotional issue of *Batman*, designed to hook new readers by harking back to the days when comics were just ten cents each, begins with the narration: "His life is a story of tragedies…"; it ends with the same line, repeated. He can never rid the city of crime or find peace. His mission is impossible, "…doomed to failure, again and again…" (*Batman: The 10 Cent Adventure*). When this monthly doom meets the blueprint of repetition and excess, however, it makes ongoing trauma into a structural necessity. It's been proven that major character damage is one of the only ways to make the mainstream media pay attention. Batman had his back broken in the epic *Knightfall* crossover that ran through innumerable Bat-books in the early 90s, not long after Superman has been killed in the imaginatively named *Death of Superman* story. Subsequently, his death made the front page of New York's *Newsday* and was mocked in a sketch on *Saturday Night Live* (Bailey 2002). Superman saving the world is nothing, but when he dies? Well, *that's* a story.

Invulnerability is one of the foremost power-fantasies of the superhero genre. In fact, superheroes and invulnerability are almost synonymous: they stand stock-still, smirking a little, while bullets bounce off their chests. Scott Bukatman's analysis of the superhero body has shown it to be a site of physical anxiety – adolescent, unstable, and "explicitly traumatic" (Bukatman 1994:96); but Bukatman also acknowledges that Superman's impermeable form is a body on which "history cannot be inscribed" (Bukatman 2003:197). Luckily, superheroes are used to dealing with the impossible, and can absorb this contradiction without breaking a sweat. One of the many impossibilities of the superhero form is that, for such an unstable site, it is undeniably consistent. No matter what it's put through – transformation, teleportation, dismemberment and death – the superbody survives. No one *really* believed that it would last when Batman was broken and Superman was deceased. It took some narrative hoop-jumping (a forgettable mutant doctor and unknown Kryptonian biology, respectively) but soon enough our heroes were back, triumphant, unchanged.

"And just like that… I'm eight years old again."
Bruce Wayne, seeing Alfred attacked. *Detective Comics* #815.

The status quo has powers that even comic book science can't explain. The invulnerability it provides isn't just a generic convention, like wearing capes or doomsday devices. It's another necessity for ongoing seriality. For example, there's always acknowledgement that the Justice League might be made up of Amazons, Martians, and Plastic Men, while Batman is merely human. For a mortal, however, he never seems to age a single day. Immortality is an unremarkable birthright enjoyed by all in comic books. Fans have expressed a desire – perhaps selfishly – that their heroes should grow old with their readership (Larsen 2005). After all, we invest our time in these heroes. Not only in the hours spent reading their stories, or the years spent collecting them, but also because comic books are animated by the reader, closing the 'gutters' between the still panels, giving the heroes movement and life (McCloud 1993:68). How can the heroes ignore it? Why don't they feel us giving them our time and animation? There's something terribly human in wishing our heroes to wrinkle and fade…

Time is necessarily complicated in comic books: sometimes by a good old-fashioned wormhole to the past, or a magic youth spell, or even a company-wide reboot. DC's *Crisis On Infinite Earths* (1986-87) remains the most famous example. The shared, fictional universe was reshaped, past continuity streamlined and shifted, and heroes' origins were retold with new, more modern details.[2] Sometimes, though, comics present a quieter resistance to the clock. Writing about Superman, Eco recognised that if new events were introduced into the ongoing continuity of a hero, it could compromise their episodic adventures and, therefore, their immortality. He explains that this is why Superman could never marry Lois: future stories couldn't ignore such a major shift in the status quo; there'd suddenly be pre-marriage and post-marriage Supermen; and this new before-and-after would mean foregoing his agelessness. Superman's clock would be ticking, and he'd be moving "…from life to death through time." (Eco 1979:114).

Immortality affects other narrative rules as well. Some of the most celebrated formulas of comic books have sprung from the convenience of writers: for instance, that many superheroes would be vulnerable to a single element that would remove their powers and leave them vulnerable. (The Martian Manhunter had fire, Green Lantern had the colour yellow, and Superman's Kryptonite remains a kind of pop-cultural shorthand for this kind of Achilles' heel.) This might have been introduced just for ease of creating quick, dramatic threats, but repetition has transformed the formula into pure superhero mythology (Bukatman 1994:100). Can comic book morality – heroes always fighting for good, for truth, for justice – also be understood through the demands of repetition and seriality? Exhibit A: Batman doesn't kill. "The trauma that made him Batman had to do with a wanton waste of life," says Denny O'Neill. "That same trauma that makes him go catch criminals will forbid him ever

taking a life." (Pearson & Uricchio 1991:19). After all the crimes, all the murders, and all the years… Batman still point-blank refuses to kill the Joker. In fact, he's actively saved the Joker's life on more than one occasion – even proving the Joker's innocence when falsely accused and waiting on Death Row (*Devil's Advocate*). Lamenting this puzzle, Batman once explained:

> [The Joker] does insane, horrible things. And then we fight. And then he escapes no matter how hard I try to stop him. That's the punchline – I never stop him. (*Gotham Knights* #44.)

And Batman never will. The most deadly – and popular – villains like the Joker are protected by the invisible, impenetrable aura of the status quo. Batman's stance against killing is a necessity of the marketplace that has been absorbed, transformed, into a defining characteristic of the hero; even though, at times, it feels like a cruel joke, rather than a moral choice. It must be worse for Superman. Every child has wondered why he doesn't just use his amazing powers to stop all crime, all evil, once and for all. The excuse of Kryptonite only goes so far. Superman's virtues and accomplishments must be dramatic, must be spectacular – but the status quo requires that they also must always be small enough to fail to change the world (Eco 1979:124). 1972's famous "Must There Be A Superman?" goes even further, as aliens accuse Superman of actively hindering humanity by enforcing the status quo. "Surely you realise," the aliens say, "that your presence on earth directly contributes to the Terrans' cultural lag?" (*Superman* #247).[3] Heroes, by definition, are required to believe they can make a difference. Superman saves lives, sure. But next issue? He's made no difference at all, and it all begins again in a brand new adventure. It's for the best that the requisite amount of slam-bam action each month doesn't give him much time to think about it.

When Batman wakes, do you think he still feels the twinges of his once-broken back? No; superhero flesh heals miraculously, often with no more treatment than simple exposure to the limbo between one issue and the next. When a Daily Planet reporter was forced by his editor to cover the anniversary of Superman's death, and Clark hears about it, he responds: "Why can't he ever leave that in the past?" (*Day Of Doom* #1). Their bodies are healed. The scars have disappeared. The status quo self-corrects itself, even without a *Crisis*, as unwanted stories are simply ignored to death. "Because it's not ever mentioned again, it slowly fades away," says DC editor Dan Didio (Newsarama 2006). Events are allowed to fade as their issue numbers count backwards, receding into garage sales and yellowing pages and Silly Putty impressions.

"Bullet-proof skin is useless against grief."
Green Arrow, *Identity Crisis* #4.

There must be good memories, too, captured and frozen between these comic pages. The occasional grateful bystander or key to the city. Scenes of the heroes' loved ones 'scrapbooking' their achievements are quite common in comics. Ma Kent proudly never misses an article of Superman's averted disasters (*Man Of Steel* #1); Commissioner Gordon cuts and pastes Batman's early appearances for posterity (*The Killing Joke*). As 'fans' of the superheroes, it's their role to remember these victories. And fans of these characters in our, outside world remember the events of each issue, too. When individual issues used to simply stand alone, beginning and ending at the same point, it was easier for events to be forgotten – but collecting comics has changed. "Comic books are not read on a hit or miss basis anymore," says editor O'Neill. "They are read by fewer people […] but the current fans read a great deal more intently. It is now possible to get every issue of everything." (Pearson & Uriccho 1991:23). As collections become complete runs instead of sporadic, stand-alone stories, and fans have easy access to every issue, this new form of mass-memory transforms the nature of the ongoing superhero narrative – just as cinema shifted to accommodate the new and immediate access to past visual texts, thanks to home video and constant reruns (Collins 1995:132). The new weight of collected memory makes it more and more difficult to simply ignore a ridiculous or inappropriate issue into oblivion.

In *The Killing Joke*, the scene of scrapbooking foreshadows tragedy. Gordon is interrupted as the Joker arrives and, in one of the most shocking moments of violence seen in a superhero comic at the time, shoots Barbara Gordon through the spine. (Gordon, in true comic book tradition, isn't aware that his adopted daughter is also Batgirl by night.) So why is Barbara still in her wheelchair, nearly twenty years later, where Bruce's once-broken back is barely even mentioned? Why do some events resist the aura of the status quo, and others do not? In fact, writing this kind of chapter requires flicking through back issues, and it can feel superficial – even disrespectful – to be reading in fast-forward. Comic books control time through the manipulation of space. Panel sizes are used to speed up and slow down the attention of the audience (McCloud 1993:101). For the climax of the *Death of Superman* (*Superman* #75), the final shot isn't just a double-page splash, but actually has one extra page that folds out of the issue. The regular dimensions couldn't contain the appropriate levels of spectacular grief: torn and bloodied costume, grief-struck loved ones. Jimmy Olsen, who photographed the moment, later said: "I don't know why I took that photo. It was sick."

(*Day of Doom* #2). How can you flip past it, unthinking, in the name of research? This history becomes a 'black scrapbook', collecting all the worst moments of melodramatic excess – those given the most space on the page, demanding to be remembered.

In *The Killing Joke*, the Joker speaks about exactly this – saying that it's always better (and less painful) to forget: "Remember? Oh, I wouldn't do that! Remembering's dangerous. I find the past such a worrying, anxious place. 'The past tense,' I suppose you'd call it. Ha ha ha!" Looking back again to James Bond's ongoing adventures, Eco suggests how the neurosis caused by Bond's first murderous act didn't carry through into his later stories. Fleming, instead, chose to move from a "psychological method to the formalistic one" and, in doing so, kept Bond free to keep on stylishly killing without any real accumulation of psychological angst (Eco 1983:96). A quick peek into the Batman's secret cave and Superman's Fortress of Solitude show that they're often depicted holding mementos from previous adventures. Events that resist being forgotten and become fixed in continuity are here given visual reminders (Uriccho & Pearson 1992:186). The tiny, tragic Kryptonian 'Bottle City' of Kandor sits under glass; a dead Robin's costume sits in a glass display case.[4] These are moments of recognition for long-term fans, visual memorials to painful events that cannot be forgotten, and are now locked in to current continuity, issue after issue.

And after the attack on Barbara Gordon, the Joker punningly uses the fact that she works as a librarian to compare her to a coffee-table book. "Mind you, I can't say much for the volume's condition. I mean, there's a hole in the jacket and the spine appears to be damaged." Foregrounding the physicality of reading is appropriate as *The Killing Joke* was DC Comics first attempt at a 'prestige format' book, including a thicker cover and glossier paper. It allowed for more 'mature' levels of violence to be displayed inside, but it was also less flimsy than a regular monthly comic. The Joker's twin points – the dangers of persistent memory in comics, and the physicality of the medium itself – are frighteningly sane. Not only has the more dependable distribution of comics led to stronger, ongoing continuity, but this kind of book is actively designed to be less disposable, and more memorable. Just like the mementos have in their cases in the heroes' headquarters, *The Killing Joke*'s contents are protected and preserved in their cardstock armour.

Of course, there's another reason why Bruce's injury healed, and Barbara's did not. After decades of putting heroes in danger, wounding them, and leaving them to fight another day, the *Knightfall* and *Death of Superman* storylines seemed to spell an end to traumatic hyperbole. What can you do to these characters after you've killed and crippled them? Pushing the search for painful novelty so far threatens the stability of the characters as the

level of excess forces them into strange new shapes (Calabrese 1992:58). Readers didn't want four, fragmented Supermen! They wanted Clark Kent! So the imaginative excesses of superhero trauma need to be relocated. Bullets might bounce of the heroes, but what about those supporting cast members who happen to be standing nearby? The series *Identity Crisis* recently made this logic overt from its very first pages. Ralph – stretchable detective known as the Elongated Man – narrates:

> In a novel, it's different. There, you start worrying about the main character's safety almost immediately. Of course it's a false worry. Nothing really bad ever happens to the main character in a novel. But if the story opens with a minor character or two – (*Identity Crisis* #1)

Well, then there's danger, because minor characters aren't as protected by the invulnerable aura of the status quo. In *Identity Crisis*, the loved ones of heroes are deliberately targeted: wives, fathers, girlfriends. After the murder of his wife begins the story, Ralph explains that "…anyone who puts on a costume paints a bull's-eye on his family's chests." Barbara's attack in *The Killing Joke* wasn't an attack on her, but on her father, Commissioner Gordon. (His second wife was also murdered by the Joker, by the way.) Batman has lost two Robins during his crusade. Oh, and a girlfriend or two, including one killed to frame Bruce Wayne for the crime. In an interview for DC Comics, *Identity Crisis* writer Brad Meltzer said that death isn't all that final in comic books. "…For me, that's not the ultimate harm you can do to somebody. There are far worse things that you can do to someone that involves leaving them alive." (Meltzer 2006). The status quo can use a character's tragedy to correct itself, too. For example, *Identity Crisis* has the current Robin finally losing his father – and thus he becomes an orphan, just like the Robins before him. The aversion to change in these universes mean that rigid formulas reassert themselves; it may take years to get there, but their status comes full circle (Calabrese 1992:41). Bruce Wayne will always be Batman. Gordon was shot and retired years ago… but now he's back as Police Commissioner like nothing has changed.

As for poor Vesper Fairchild – Bruce Wayne's romantic interest, killed in *The Ten Cent Adventure* to frame Batman? Well, she's been forgotten. Even the most dramatic – and traumatic – moments can slip from the sanctity of their double splash pages and, in time, be ignored away as more recent adventures overtake them. In fact, for the 'World's Greatest Detective', Batman's memory isn't what it should be, and neither is the Super-Memory of Superman. Just like the paradox of the superhuman body's perfect, immutable invulnerability and its unstoppable, unstable transformations, so too comic book continuity is a tug-of-war

between recall and forgetfulness; between scrapbooked moments fixed on the splash-pages of memory, and the necessary structural amnesia of serial storytelling.

"I hate coming here. But it was the first lesson Bruce taught me. Never forget."
Batman's ex-sidekick, Nightwing, standing at his parents' graves. *Identity Crisis* #1.

While continuity can forget almost anything, it can never forget a hero's origin. The origin story and the man, the hero, are always intertwined. Denny O'Neill: "It simply in one incident explains everything that anybody will ever need to know about the character. Why he does what he does and why he is who he is." (Pearson & Uricchio 1991:24). A full reboot of the comic book universe is the most dramatic way of returning to these moments, but there are more subtle ways too – and far more common. After it stated that Batman's life "…is a story of tragedies", the narration of Batman's *10 Cent Adventure* continued:

> It created him, and will assuredly end him as well. He cannot escape it. Starting in that moment when young Bruce Wayne saw his parents gunned down before his eyes… […] a moment he lives again every night.

An origin story is the single, fixed event of a hero's complicated continuity, informing and explaining everything that follows, no matter how excessive or outlandish (Uricchio & Pearson 1991:186). No hero is more than a single flashback, plot twist, or tick of the clock away from their beginning. Individual adventures are echoes of the origin moment. It is contained and refigured within recurring plot elements – every time Superman flies back to Smallville, he interacts with his origin story; besides, what's Kryptonite if not painful pieces of his birth still lying in wait? For Batman, an inkblot test will, inevitably, reveal a terrifying bat in *Arkham Asylum*; a full moon will transform in an instant to one of the pearls worn by his mother on her final night (*Death and the Maidens* #1). With all the variables introduced to keep the heroes interesting, month after month, the origin story is part of the 'core' of the character that helps keep them reasonably stable under the stresses of ongoing novelty (Brooker 2001:39).

New readers, perhaps unfamiliar with the characters, appreciate this constant retelling of the origin, and long-term readers understand the character-stability it provides. Putting ourselves in the invulnerable skin of the heroes begs another question: how can the trauma of their origin stories ever heal if the psychological wounds reopen with each new flashback? Does

Batman's pain return with each symbolic reference to his parents' obituaries? It's not only unintentional flashbacks, but also how heroes purposefully remind themselves of their past tragedies. The secret entrance to the Batcave is opened by moving the hands on a grandfather clock to show the minute of the Waynes' death. In fact, one issue pushed this to new frightening levels of bleakness, showing Bruce sitting under a portrait of his dead parents in a whole *room* full of stopped clocks (*Legends of the Dark Knight* #6). In his discussion of the 1989 blockbuster *Batman* movie, Jim Collins explains that while the Joker anarchically rearranges and refigures the complicated imagery that comprises the *Batman* text, Batman himself sits in the Batcave calling up the past, reliving personal history in an active process of retrieval (Collins 1991:168). The moment he's recalling? His parents' murder, of course.

Recalling the origin is part of a heroic, and symbolic, transformation. Often this flashback imagery will prefigure the shift from Bruce-to-Batman. Like the pictographic representation of a magic word – SHAZAM! – recalling his origin is what separates man from superman.[5] Month-by-month adventures can still recede, for the most part, into hazy memory, while the origin story cannot be forgotten – it is, for example, described as "the engine that drives Batman" (Pearson & Uricchio 1991:24). What happens without that engine? Batman's opening narration in the series *Death and the Maidens* highlights his concern about just that. Over nightmarish images of his parents' murder, he thinks: "I can't remember my mother." Despite living in their home, surrounded by symbolic stopped clocks, he worries that "…it is only intellect keeping them alive, now. I can't remember them anymore. […] And I am afraid… I don't feel it anymore…" (#1). He's right to be afraid. Without his origin-pain, Bruce Wayne is no longer Batman. He can't get better, get therapy, or let go – not without also renouncing his superheroic qualities.[6] This ensures the hero's origin story is never actually relegated to the past, but kept fresh in the present day. Rather than simply becoming Umberto Eco's retold "already said" it is "still-being-said", kept fresh in the now (Collins 1995:132).

Almost every major Batman story, for example, has retold the origin with some new twist or take (Brooker 2001:55). Gaps present in the original telling are used to generate new stories, such as Superman resisting the influence of a robot from his home planet, determined to turn him into a true son of Krypton (*Superman #41*); or further painful details are added as the origin is replayed – as, most recently, it was implied that young Bruce Wayne's final words to his parents were "I hate you." (*Batman* #625). Some of these variations become canon, and others disappear. The origin is the engine that drives the hero, but must also be an engine for future storylines, retold and reshaped for further novelty – and thanks to the demands of serial excess, that novelty is always skewed towards more pain, as though Superman's homeworld

having been destroyed or Batman's family being gunned down simply weren't enough to motivate them for all these issues over all these decades.

The occasional happy event is also allowed to accrue: after all, despite Umberto Eco's protestations, Clark and Lois were eventually allowed to marry. But the events most likely to be retained in continuity, however, are those that add tragic fuel to the already tragic origin-engine, embroidering them with further pain. While their bodies will never show it, heroes are allowed to remember their history if it will add to drama, action, or grim emotional spectacle. Batman often has a mid-combat flashback to Jason, his murdered sidekick, or to the crippling of Barbara, because it will add to his parents as motivation for vengeance. After all these decades, these rare, accruing events can build up to become too much for poor Bruce Wayne. The epic crossover and kind-of-sequel to *Crisis On Infinite Earths* – the slightly-less grandiosely named *Infinite Crisis* (2006) – portrays Batman collapsing under the weight of his own continuity. He falls to the floor of the Batcave, surrounded by panels of his parents' murder, their gravestones, and a bloody, dead Robin in his arms, crying out:

> This wasn't supposed to happen.
> …I can't breathe. Can't… do this anymore…
> God… I wish…
> I just wish I could start over. (*Infinite Crisis* #3)

Through some complicated meta-plot-mechanics, a Superman from a parallel universe, long written out of continuity, offers Batman precisely this chance – to start over. To reboot this terribly grim DC Universe, destroy all the back-issues, and start again. But Batman refuses, determined to move forward, dragging his more recent tragedies behind him.[7]

"It's what made us what we are. More than anyone else in the world, when you scratch everything else away from Batman, you're left with someone who doesn't want to see anybody die."
Superman to Batman, *Kingdom Come* #3.

This kind of technique – of retelling stories with the novelty of new trauma along the way – is not limited just to origin stories. The recent *Identity Crisis* begins with a murder-mystery as its opening hook, but it also uses the complicated backstory of a piece of throwaway continuity from 1979. Back in the Silver Age of comics, when superheroes regularly faced

even more ridiculous threats than they do today, the 'Secret Society of Supervillains' swapped their minds into the bodies of the Justice League. Good triumphed, obviously, and the whole thing was forgotten before the 1980s arrived. *Identity Crisis* writer Brad Meltzer, however, went back to this storyline, and suddenly explained exactly *why* the villains had never mentioned this story again, or made the most of the fact that they must've known all the Justice League's precious secret identities. (For the record: apparently, the villains' memories had been magically wiped by the heroes afterwards.) Instead of retelling a piece of superhero history, comics like *Identity Crisis* expand upon the past, suddenly providing the tragic answers to questions that never needed asking before the new, ongoing continuity of memory required it. Jim Collins defines this as 'hyperconsciousness': when not only the audience, but the also those involved in the production of the text are fully aware of the history of their particular sphere of popular culture (Collins 1991:171).

For the fans living outside the comic book universe, immersed in this hyperconsciousness, there's no magic spell of forgetfulness to help them ignore the storylines that are supposed to be ignored. Comic collections aren't disposable, like memories; the violence and drama of individual issues are pressed flat, archived in mylar polybags, just as they're symbolically found in the heroes' memorial cases or secret files. Fans are forced to accept both the usual amnesia required by the status quo, as well as new memories, retroactively inserted into old stories. As the continuous memory of fandom becomes standard, however, the medium itself adjusts to it. One example: DC Comics are now binding affordable, black-and-white, cheaply printed versions of their superhero archives into thick, phonebook 'Showcase Presents' editions. Years and years and years of stories – of victories, and defeats, and pain – in a single chunk! It makes the collections of fandom somewhat redundant. These volumes do the 'collecting' for us.[8] It may be reassuring for the audience, but spare a thought for what this means for the heroes. The option open to Eco's James Bond – to replace ongoing psychology with the clean-slate of structural variation – is slipping away from Superman and Batman. Their continuities are expected to remember more and more of their half-century histories at once. If hyperconsciousness forces the 'spell of amnesia' bestowed by seriality to wear off altogether… how much painful continuity can our heroes be expected to bear?

There's more to be remembered in every title, every month, with no end ever in sight. Just as with TV soaps, there's no final moment, no point to breathe, look back, and see the totality of the text (Allen 1992:109). Superman's adventures have always been a "never-ending battle"; before his back was broken, Batman described the possibility of his story finally ending with death as "…the blessed relief of ending it all." (*Batman* #497). Heroes like Superman and Batman have dedicated their lives to the simple wish of not wanting to witness any more

death, but no matter how accidents they prevent and lives they save, serial storytelling will demand more victims to fill monthly quotas of action and tragedy. Batman might have refused to have his story rebooted in *Infinite Crisis*, shrugging off the weight of all this collected continuity – but the alternative? Even if everything else is deleted from continuity, our heroes would only appear back at their beginnings, and therefore, back to the trauma necessarily contained in their origin moments. Buried deep under all those issues, the real punchline might be constant, inevitable return to their dead parents and dead worlds.

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[1] Let alone the Batman and Superman narratives that aren't contained in their ongoing comics: the blockbuster movies, old TV series, computer games, action figures, and more. The extra tonnage of these other texts is beyond the scope of this paper.

[2] For example, a direct result of crisis was the *Man Of Steel* (1986) miniseries, which modernized and retold Superman's earliest adventures in Smallville and his arrival in Metropolis.

[3] This suggests the terrible curse of the everyday inhabitants of superhero worlds. Citizens of Gotham and Metropolis get all of the limitations of being mired in the status quo, but with none of the benefits. The best they can hope for is to stumble into a cosmic accident or violent tragedy that might pass for an origin story.

[4] Tim Drake, the current Robin, has learnt from the master: he also has glass cases with the costumes of dead heroes, but – taking Bruce's 'stopped clocks' one tick further – actually has his dead parents' clothing stuffed and mounted for posterity. (*Teen Titans* #43)

[5] Both the opening issues of *Batman: Year One* (#404, 1987) and *The Dark Knight Returns* miniseries (1986) feature sequences where flashbacks to the Waynes' murders – imagery of his mother's broken pearl necklace, spent bullets, and so on – are used to 'activate' the transformation into Batman.

[6] This is more explicit when it comes to Batman, although Superman's origin-trauma frames his heroic acts in similar fashion. When he announces that he "…is the last son of a planet long dead – my entire existence has been dedicated to not losing my adopted home as well…" (*Superman / Batman Secret Files 2003*) he is making the most of his tragic beginnings.

[7] Recent additions to the DC Universe are the "All-Star" comics, wherein Batman and Superman are given new titles that exist outside of regular continuity. *All-Star Superman* #1 boils down his origin to four panels of shorthand on page one; whereas *All-Star Batman* seems vaguely annoyed to have to explain his origin and motivation one more time. When confronted in yet another retelling of his first meeting with the first Robin, Batman says: "What, are you dense? Are you retarded or something? Who the hell do you think I am? I'm the goddamn Batman." (*All-Star Batman* #2).

[8] Soon every these collected editions will seem old-fashioned. DC Comics' main rival, Marvel comics, have recently released DVD-ROMS of their most popular heroes, proudly advertising that 40 years of issues are contained within; let alone the bootleg scans of pirated issues, which can pack an entire run of a title, along with all its cross-overs and specials, onto a 'collectable' series of easy downloads.

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