Comic Book Collecting from Aquaman to Zatanna

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Introduction

It All Began With Superman

This is truly the very best time to be a comic book fan. The art has never been better. The writing is fresh and ground breaking. And most importantly there is a huge network of fellow fans, comic shops and conventions all of which has built an engaging and welcoming community.

Of course I came to the hobby a “few” years ago...46 to be exact! So journey back with me to those halcyon days when comics were four colors and cost a dime...or 12 cents...or maybe a quarter....

If you were a kid in the 1950’s or 1960’s your first exposure to a comic book character was almost certainly via TELEVISION. The Adventures Of Superman, starring George Reeves in the titular role, was a mainstay in households across the nation. Although first run episodes of the show ended in 1958, George was smashing through walls, saving Lois and winking at the audience every SINGLE day well into the late 1970’s. in fact you can STILL find it on Television from time to time, and the recent DVD collection won the coveted Saturn Award for best retro TV series. The Adventures of Superman influenced TWO generations of children and brought millions of us to it’s comic book antecedents.
I began collecting comics when I was only seven years of age. This was back in 1964 at the very height of what collectors call The Silver Age Of Comics. It was a great time for a young boy to discover the world of four color fiction and it was the beginning of what would be a lifetime love affair with comics for me.

Over at DC Julie Schwartz, Carmine Infantino, Gil Kane, Gardner Fox and Curt Swan were reviving their Golden Age heroes such as Atom, Hawkman, Green Lantern and The Flash with a modern Sci-fi patina, while streamlining their mainstays, Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman. The Justice League of America, a reimagining of the Golden Age Justice Society, brought the entire stable of DC heroes under one roof...for a DIME! The JLA would in fact inspire Smilin’ Stan Lee and crew to create their own super team, the dysfunctional Fantastic Four and ushering in the “Marvel Age Of Comics”.

These were the early days of Spider-Man, The Hulk, The Fantastic Four and the Merry Marching Marvel Society. In short...it was a great time to be a comic book fan! Back in those halcyon days there were no comic specialty shops, online auctions or even comic conventions. In the early sixties you got your comics at the neighborhood news stand or “candy store”.

I got MY first comics from a box at the local JUNK YARD for a penny a piece! And what comics they were! Spider-man #1, FF#1, Superman Annual #1 and so many more came to me from that old penny box at the junk yard. Of course condition was not something we even thought about. As long as you could read them, collect them and trade them ANY comic was gold! This was long before collectors would shell out hundreds or thousands of dollars for a single comic. Comics were not investments back then. They were entertainment.
I stayed an avid collector right through my high school and college years and was devastated by the death of Gwen Stacy, intrigued by the rise of horror Comics like Tomb Of Dracula, and amazed by Watchmen and Dark Knight Returns.

Then came the dark days in the 90’s. The age of the speculator when it seemed like every comic had to be an “event” and sport a holographic cover. In the process someone forgot to create good comics and the hobby nearly crashed. The nadir being the NON Death Of Superman. An event created solely for the purpose of selling multiple copies of over printed comics to speculators looking to turn a quick buck. And they used MY hero to run that particular scam. Disillusioned, I drifted away from my beloved hobby…

Until 2007 when I spotted a news article in the NY Post claiming that another beloved Icon, Captain America was going to be killed off. Well, along with Superman, Cap was always my favorite character, and Mid-Town Comics was right across from my office so I decided to read the ONE comic.

And I was immediately HOOKED! Who was this guy Brubaker? One hell of a writer. And that other guy Epping. Some kind of GREAT illustrator! This was NOT the Death Of Superman. It was in fact a big budget blockbuster movie between the covers of a comic book! Cap shot by a sniper on the steps of the courthouse where he had been arraigned for inciting to riot??!! This was big time stuff.

Well I was BACK and boy did I BINGE! Pretty soon I was back up to twenty titles a month, buying everything from Buffy to Wolverine…and enjoying myself immensely. I dug my old long boxes out of the attic and reacquainted myself with all of my old favorites, hunted down a local comic store for my weekly fix, and even started surfing this new fangled invention called the internet for more comic book goodness.

My return to comics eventually lead me to a wonderful comic Specialty Shop on Staten Island called Comic Book Jones. Not only did the store have the usual range of comics and comic related material, the proprietors (Socko and Tiger) fostered a community atmosphere where fellow hobbyists were encouraged to hang out and talk...well comics. In speaking with these great people over the past few years I became aware that there as many ways of collecting comics as there are comic collectors. They range from grizzled old veterans like me (and what exactly IS grizzled anyway), to brand new collectors who don’t know the Golden Age from The Ice Age or Superman from Wolverine. I met collectors who can list every single comic they own and have thousands of books preserved in Mylar, and collectors who never even considered bagging and boarding their books.

I decided to put down on (virtual) paper some of the tricks of the collecting trade that I have picked up over 45 years as a comic book collector...make that comic LOVER. I believe that the
newer collector will find a lot to use here...and there may be a tip or two for my fellow grizzled, and not so grizzled veterans.

That’s 30!

Mitch
A Brief History Of Comics

What’s a “Golden Age” Anyway?

Almost every serious comic book collector I have ever met has at one time or another become very interested, even obsessed, with learning about the history of comics. Knowing the history of comic books seems to be a rite of passage from casual to serious collector. There have been literally hundreds of books and articles written on the subject that have delved every aspect of the growth and development of comic books. Two books in particular, The Steranko History Of Comics and Men Of Tomorrow (Gerard Jones) are must reads for the collector wishing to know about the early days of Comic Book history. Another “must read” is the novel The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, by Michael Chabon. Although a work of fiction this Pulitzer winning novel provides a vivid account of the Golden Age of Comics. With that in mind consider this chapter a primer, a brief outline into the history of Comic Books.

Although it may be hard to believe, comic books are less than 100 years old! In fact the first true comic book did not appear until 1933. It was a 36 page compilation of comic strips that had previously appeared in national newspapers. It was called Famous Funnies A Carnival Of Comics. It was created by Dell and used in Woolworth Stores but it is unclear whether it was a give-away or if it was sold for a dime. Later that year Eastman began producing famous Funnies and by issue #12 it was turning a fat profit on print runs in excess of 200,000. A new medium was beginning to form. The earliest comic books were almost entirely reprints of newspaper comic strips but as they gained in popularity this material began to dry up and original material began to creep in. Publisher Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson founded National Allied Publications, which would later become DC Comics and released New Fun #1 (Feb. 1935). An anthology, it mixed humor drama and action features. In Issue #6 Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster who would go on to create Superman made their comic book debut with swashbuckler Henri Duval and the mystery crime fighter Dr. Occult. New Fun (later known as MORE Fun) would be a staple title for the fledgling company and run 127 issues. It would also be the comic title that featured the debut of Superboy in issue # 101. New Fun Comics was the first title to feature all original material.

This period prior to 1938 is known as The Platinum Age Of Comics.

By 1938 Nicholson had been pushed aside by his partner Harry Donnenfeld. Donnenfeld had been a publisher of Pulp Magazines, many of which featured the word “Spicy” as in Spicy Detective Stories. These pulps (named for the low grade paper they were printed on) featured scantily clad women on the covers who rarely had anything to do with the stories within. Harry had seen the growing popularity of the fledgling comic book industry and took over National Allied in short order. Looking for material for a new
comic to be called Action, Allied editor Vin Sullivan decided to take a chance on a character that had been rejected by...well everyone. The character was Superman. He made his debut as a secondary feature in Action #1, but was featured on the cover. And the rest is history.

The Golden Age Of Comics actually has a very specific date. It began in June 1938 with the release of Action #1, the first appearance of Superman, and the birth of the Superhero. Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman was influenced by science fiction and the Jewish legend of The Golem. The Man of Steel was certainly not the first super powered character. Hercules, Atlas, Paul Bunyon...the list goes on and on. But no one had ever created a character quite like Superman, with his circus costume and cape and Warner Brothers influenced stories. Superman was an immediate hit and every comic publisher scrambled to produce their own Superheroes. Overnight a new genre was born and comics would never be the same.
Almost immediately there was a flood of Superhero characters. DC produced batman in 1939. Timely followed with The Torch, Captain America and Sub Mariner, among others. Captain Marvel came forth from Fawcett and actually OUTSOLD Superman! And the first female superhero, Wonder Woman made her debut in All-Star Comics #8 in 1941.

While other genres like Humor and Funny Animals also enjoyed success, it was the costumed hero that drove comics through the Golden Age. The superhero found an audience with young kids and the GIS stationed around the world during WWII.

After WWII the popularity of Superheroes went into rapid decline. By 1952 virtually all superhero comics except for Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman were gone or marginalized. This period at the end of the Golden age saw the rise of teen Humor like Archie, Funny Animals (Disney), Horror, War, and Science Fiction (EC), Westerns and even Literary (Classics Comics). In fact anything OTHER than superheroes sold pretty well.
EC in particular, with its adult themes and superior art and writing was doing very well. EC, founded by William Gaines attracted an older more discriminating audience, as well as the man who would almost single handedly end The Golden Age Of Comics.

Frederick Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), took the position that comics were sadistic and encouraged homosexual behavior in horror and in superhero comics. Wertham’s thesis was that comic books were a key component in the rise of juvenile delinquency. In short order a grass roots movement grew across the country and some comics were even banned in some areas. In order to save the industry, the major comic publishers came up with a self censorship group known as the Comics Code Authority. The Comics Code was a stringent set of rules governing what could or could not appear in a comic book. Most news stands and stores would not carry a comic book unless it had the Comics Code Authority Seal on it’s cover. In short order all of the more adult comics, horror titles in particular disappeared.

Comics fell into a bland, lifeless coma. Every title resembled every other title and the stories were formulaic. Older readership disappeared and comics had finally become what detractors had always called them…”funny books”. Not much would change until 1956, when the dying industry would once again be saved by…a Superhero.

Like The Golden age, the start of The Silver Age of Comics can be traced to a single event. Showcase #4 (DC – 1956) written by Gardner Fox introduced a re-imagined version of The Flash, a popular 1940’s superhero. Encouraged by the popularity of TV’s Adventure’s Of Superman, DC decided to take a chance on the superhero genre again and it was The Flash they chose to give a face lift to. Instead of magic and fantasy elements, it was Science Fiction that
dominated the story line. Barry Allen, a Police Scientist is doused in chemicals that are struck by a freak lightening strike. The accident endows him with super speed. (Ok so it was not GREAT Sci-Fi but it worked). Brightly costumed and sleek, the modern day Flash was a huge success. In short order DC gave a similar make over to many of it’s Golden Age Superheroes. The Atom, Green Lantern and Hawkman all got a make over and eventually their own solo titles. But it was the birth of the Justice League Of America that gave the Silver Age of Comics it’s jump start.

Over at Atlas comics, formerly Timely and soon to be Marvel, Stan lee and Jack Kirby were redefining the Superhero genre by introducing heroes who were as likely to worry about the rent or school, or girls than the villains they fought. Oh and by the way, they were just as likely to fight EACH OTHER as the bad guys! It was Smilin’ Stan, Jolly Jack Kirby, Rascally Roy Thomas, Jazzy John Romita and the fantastical realm known as the “Bullpen”. Particularly astute readers could aspire to the greatest recognition that the Marvel crew could confer…the coveted No-Prize!

Comics were back and while they have never reached the unit sales of the 1940’s, the Silver Age Of Comics was a very healthy time in our hobby.

By the early-70’s Comic Code Censorship was starting to ease up. Horror titles like Tomb Of Dracula and Ghost Rider were beginning to hit the stands and draw a new and more adult audience back to comic books. While not as graphic as the 1950’s EC comics the 70’s Horror titles represented the beginning of a shift from the rigidly narrow standards of the 1960’s. By 1972 a QUANTUM shift was happening that would effectively bring both the comics Code and the Silver Age Of Comics to an end. Stan Lee took on the Comics Code with issues #96-98 of The Amazing Spider-Man. These books featured a story arc that was concerned with drug abuse by a major supporting character (Harry Osborne). The C.C. rejected the stories and Stan made
the decision to go to print without the Comics Code Seal on the cover. The books sold very well and the dominance of the C.C. was at an end, allowing writers and artists to start tackling more complex and adult story lines. Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams were tackling issues such as drug abuse, over population, government abuse and racism in the pages of Green Lantern/Green Arrow. Issues #85 and #86 showed a superhero, Green Arrow’s sidekick Speedy, to be a Heroin addict and scenes showing both a fatal overdose to one character and cold turkey withdrawal by Speedy were graphically depicted.

In 1973 Issue #121 of the Amazing Spider-Man the final blow was dealt to the Comic Codes Authority and the Silver Age came to an end. This issue featured the death of Gwen Stacy during a battle with Spidey’s arch nemesis, The green Goblin. It was not a hoax. It was not a dream. It was not an “Imaginary” story. Gwen, Peter Parker’s true love was dead, and she was not coming back. It was the end of innocence in comics and it was the end of the Silver Age.

The next decade known as The Bronze Age Of Comics would see the gradual but steady trend towards complex adult stories continue. The lines between hero and vigilante would be blurred by characters like Wolverine and The Punisher. The X-Men, a marginal Marvel title, would undergo a face lift and become the most popular title on the shelves once a young artist named John Byrne took over the penciling chores.

Also during this period the specialty comic shop began to pop up across the country. For most of their existence, comics were distributed through newspaper companies to candy stores and news stands. Unsold books were stripped across the top of the cover and returned to the distributor for credit. This is why you see older books on Ebay from time to time missing the top third of the cover. Then came direct distribution and the comic shop was born. For the first time there was a place where comic collectors came together on a very regular basis to buy, read and discuss comic books. The Comic Specialty Shop remains the primary venue for selling comics and related merchandise to this day.

In 1986 two events happened almost at the same time that catapulted us into the Modern Age Of Comics. During that year DC comics produced two mini-series that would completely change the way we look at comic books. They were Alan Moore’s Watchman and Frank Miller’s Batman The Dark Knight returns. It was these two titles along with the complete collection of MAUS (which had been a work in progress for several years) that elevated comic books to the status of literature. All three series take place in dystopian worlds with central figures who must survive a bleak existence. Watchmen and Dark Knight in particular examine how heroes more often than not have feet of clay. Death is very real and central to all three series. They were not written for children.

Which brings us to the present. The Modern Age Of Comics…or perhaps the Second Golden Age Of Comics. It is the age of the $2.99 comic printed on high gloss stock with literally millions of colors. Comics are making their way into digital form and blockbuster movies from Iron Man to Spider-Man are perhaps the most profitable genre in film. Welcome to the future of comics!

Excelsior!
Starting My Collection

**You Can’t Collect EVERYTHING (unless you’re VERY rich)**

Ok. Now that the background is out of the way let’s talk about starting YOUR collection.

Here is how you do it:

1) Go to a store
2) Buy some comics

You have now started your collection. Easy, huh? We can end this chapter and move on!

Not really.

While it IS very simple to start your collection there are some things you can do to help you choose the right books for you and avoid spending your hard earned cash on books you are less likely to enjoy.

Just like movies, TV, music and books, comics are broken up into many types (genres). To mention just a few, comics break out as follows:

- Superhero
- Television/Movie Adaptations
- Humor
- Horror
- Science Fiction
- Western
- Literature
- Children’s
There are more “sub-genres” but these will usually cover it. Some examples of titles you might find are:

- Superhero – Superman, Batman, fantastic Four, Iron Man, Justice League, Withcblade etc.
- Television/Movie Adaptations – Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Sherlock Holmes, Night Stalker etc.
- Humor – Archie, What The?, Peanuts etc.
- Horror – American Vampire, Tomb Of Dracula, Night Of the Living Dead etc.
- Science Fiction – Star Trek, Mass Effect, Battlestar Galactica etc.
- Western – Bat Lash, Jonah Hex. Lone ranger etc.
- Literature – Classics Comics, Maus, The Complete Dracula, Sherlock Holmes etc.
- Children’s – Kids versions of Superhero titles, Pokemon, Sponge Bob etc.

Most of us will find some of these genres to our liking and others leave us cold. Remember that’ some books actually cross genres. For instance Green Lantern comics are superhero books but VERY heavily oriented towards Sci-Fi. Daredevil is ALSO a superhero book but heavily oriented towards gritty urban action in a film noir style. Focus in on the types that you find appealing for your collection. (Of course it is always fun to try something new from time to time!).

If you are brand new to comic collecting or if you are coming back and don’t know what might be good to read, talk to the staff AND customers in your local comic shop. For the most part, hobbyists are friendly and LOVE giving their opinions on the latest and greatest. These people are your greatest resource.

Another resource you can use to help you make decisions on what to buy is the internet. Just do a search for comic book reviews and you will get thousands of hits! Many of these sites even put up sample pages. Go to the home sites for Marvel, DC, Image, IDW etc. All these sites have plenty of promotional material.

OK, so now you’ve decided what types of comic you might want to read. You are a Superhero nut! Great! Now you can get started.

WAIT!

On any given week over 100 Superhero comics hit the stands! Since you don’t want to spend $300 to $500 a week on new books you are going to want to whittle this down a bit. Here is where you need to decide how much of your hard earned bucks. Let’s say you are going to limit
yourself to 10 books a week or 40 a month. That will run you between $30 and $40 a week for new books. Sounds like a lot of money for comics but when you consider what you spend on DVDs, music downloads, movies, video games, fast food and the like, comics are a great bargain!

BUT that $30-$40 ONLY gets you ten books a week so you have to be careful with your picks. You will find that picking you titles can be even more challenging because many characters cross more than one title! There are a couple of approaches you can take:

- Focus on a particular character. Suppose you like Green Lantern. Well that means you want to pick up at least Green Lantern, Green Lantern Corps, and The Justice league Of America (when he is in that book). That’s three from your MONTHLY forty, leaving you thirty seven books. Easy right? Well try it with X-Men and you get About 10-12 titles a month in which members of the “X community” appear. So you have to pick carefully.
- Focus on TITLES. I recommend this for newer collectors. You have 40 books a month in your budget. Pick 40 different titles. That means you get to sample a lot of different characters, writers and artists. Ultimately this method will help you narrow down the field to those books you really want to read and collect. It will also expose you to things you never would have considered, some of which you are going to LOVE!

How can I stretch my comic buying dollar you ask? How can I make that 40 books a month into 50 ...or 60? Yes, young Jedi, there are ways!

- New comics are typically on the stands every Wednesday, though holidays can push this out to Thursdays on occasion. Look for shops that offer release day discounts! Many shops do this so why not shop in those stores as opposed to the shops that DON’T? After all you can turn your savings into MORE COMICS!
- Many comic shops offer incentives to regular customers. In other words if you spend past a certain dollar amount, the store issues you a credit or a gift certificate. This works out very well for both consumer and retailer as it builds customer loyalty!
- Hit the $1 bin! Most comic shops have large back issue bins and MANY of them are in the $1-$2 range. This can get you TONS of books and also help you catch up on stories you may have missed.
- Go to local garage sales. I have gotten hundreds of books for pennies on the dollar just by canvassing the neighborhood for garage sales. Many of them are all beat up but they are very cheap and still readable. LOTS of comic book goodness! And you never know when you will find a VALUABLE book at a garage sale, but more about that when we discuss investment collecting.
• Pick up trade paperbacks! These are most often reprints of an entire story arc that covers 6-12 issues. Trades typically cost less than you would spend on the individual books. This will help you with those nagging crossovers!

• Look into subscription sites on the internet. This is a good alternative for the collector who lives a long way from a comic specialty shop. You can get deep discounts from many dealers on line. Depending on how many books you buy on a monthly basis it can climb as high as a 35% savings. But there are drawbacks to this. First is that, in order to save on shipping you will have to take your books at most TWICE a month which means you get weeks with NO comics. (I can’t wait that long!!). Also, if you are not very careful, the shipping costs can exceed any savings you realize. AND you lose all that fun time schmoozing at the comic shop with your buddies!!.
Let’s do a little math. Suppose you purchase ten comics a week at an average price of slightly over $2.99 each. Add your local discount, allow for the occasional Trade Paperback or special Issue and you can easily invest over $200 per year on your comic fix. And THAT is if you only average TEN books a week. I average close to twenty and I know a lot of collectors who buy far more than that! Obviously we make a pretty hefty investment, on an annual basis, in our hobby! So why would ANYONE not want to take proper care of their collection when it costs you LESS than 10% more to properly care for your precious books???

Believe it or not, many if not MOST, collectors fail to do at least one of the big three.

The BIG THREE are:

1) Bag and Board
2) Box
3) Inventory
Bagging and boarding your books is the single most basic and important step in maintaining your collection in top condition. Over time even modern books on high grade paper will degrade for any number of reasons. They become creased, water damage, tears, color fade etc. By putting your books in bags with acid free backing boards you can protect your comics from most, though not all, forms of degradation. There are many options for bagging and boarding your comics that can run you between 10 and 25 cents a comic. LESS than 10%! I prefer to put all of my books from Silver Age through Modern Age into SILVER AGE re-sealable bags with Silver Age Acid Free boards.

Why use the larger Silver Age Bag for smaller modern comics? Well it is an individual choice but I find that Modern Age bags are a bit tight and with my fumble thumbs I am more likely to damage the book during the process of bagging and boarding. Using a Silver Age bag in conjunction with Silver Age boards gives me a nice tight fit BUT allows some wiggle room in bagging and then removing the comic for reading. I use re-sealable bags because I don’t like to fuss with the scotch tape but re-sealable are not better or worse than normal bags. I also tend to use the lighter gauge bags because I think the books LOOK better in them but again that is a personal choice and many collectors favor the heavier bag.

Of course I am describing bagging and boarding with standard bags and acid free boards. You can also opt to use Mylar or Mylite bags but they are more expensive and typically will push your cost to 25 cents a book, still a great deal. Mylar/Mylites have several advantages. Mylar is the heavier, less flexible of the two choices for archival storage.

Mylites2 are made from 2-mil thick Mylar® D. The 2 mil sleeves are twice the thickness and 4 times the protection of 1 mil thick bags, and offer hundreds of times the archival storage protection of non-archival polypropylene and polyethylene bags. This means that you won’t have to rebag your comics every five years or so. I use this option for my more valuable and older books. Both Mylite and Mylar make your books look fantastic!
BIG NOTE HERE ON MYLAR AND MYLITE! When you go to shows bear in mind that the books you are looking at up on the wall all benefit in appearance from Mylar storage. They tend to look HIGHER in grade than they really are. Any reputable dealer will let you see the book OUTSIDE the bag if you are considering a purchase. If the dealer refuses to do so I always wonder what he/she is hiding and move on to the next table. Of course the etiquette goes both ways, never ask a dealer to remove a boom from the Mylar unless you ARE seriously considering making a purchase.

The bottom line is that bagging and boarding your comics is a must for any serious collector. You never know, you MAY want to sell your books one day and they will always fetch a better price if they are in high grade.

Now let’s talk about boxes.

You COULD use any old box for your comics. Anything made of sturdy cardboard will do. However I use standard long and short comic boxes, specifically designed for my books.

The Comic Long Box is the highest quality, most competitively priced cardboard storage box on the market today. They are constructed of white corrugated paper and have a 200 lb. test strength. Use this box to store and protect all your valuable collectible comics.

The major advantage to using comic boxes designed to HOLD comics is that you can store your books standing up which makes them much easier to arrange and organize. In addition the heavy gauge boxes are somewhat stackable. I typically have no problem going three high myself. Another advantage is that you can get about 250 bagged and boarded comics into a single long box. As your collection grows storage DOES become a very real issue. I currently have over 30 long boxes filled with my “active” collection and at least that many more that I have archived away. If I tried to do that with non standard boxes, it would be a complete mess!

A note on boxing. If you box your comics UNBAGGED and UNBOARDED they tend to bend and suffer damage over time. Boxing your books in that state IS better than not boxing them at all but I highly recommend doing the two in conjunction.

ANOTHER NOTE ON BOXING. I keep different “flavors” of box.
1) First are my “Active boxes” these seven or eight boxes are for my current ongoing purchases of ongoing titles. (Superman, FF, Iron Man, current mini series etc)

2) Completed runs. In these boxes I store recent completed mini-series and cancelled books. I can get at them easily but it leaves my Active Boxes free for filing new books.

3) Archive boxes – These are boxes that I use for multiples, books I want to sell, older books I am not going to read any time soon etc.

4) Current “Read me” box. This is a short box that I keep for my brand new, unread books. When I fill it after reading them, those books move down to my Active Boxes for filing.

Now to, what I consider the most overlooked aspect of maintaining a comic collection. INVENTORY.

“Why should I inventory my comics? I know what I have.”

Tell me that when you own 1,000 comics, or 5,000 comics. They add up SO fast. Just go back to our original premise of 10 books a week and you add 520 comics to your collection EVERY year! There is no way anyone can know every single book they own unless they record them in an inventory. There are MANY advantages to maintaining an up to date and accurate inventory of your books.

1) On that day you consider selling your comics it will help to know what you own!

2) A good inventory also tells you what you NEED. Want to fill in that run of Amazing Spiderman? Keep an inventory and you can create a “want list” anytime.

3) I ALREADY buy doubles accidentally because I am chronically absent minded. If I did not keep an inventory I would probably buy two of everything!!

4) A good inventory allows you to properly organize your books so you can actually FIND a title when you want it. All you need to do is NUMBER your boxes and make a note of which box your inventoried book is in. You are not compelled to keep them in alphabetical order which is a pain to maintain.

5) A good inventory helps you in knowing when to archive a title or put it into a “non-active” box. For instance I have all of my Secret Invasion and Final Crisis runs in a single box. As they are completed runs I don’t need to keep them in my active boxes.

“OK, so HOW do I inventory my books?” you ask. Good question grasshopper! There are several ways depending on the size of your collection and how much detail you want to go in to. At one time or another I have used all of the following methods.

1) Writing the titles on the outside of the box. This is the MOST basic way to inventory your books. However the minute you consolidate your books the information is no longer correct. I gave this up almost as soon as I started the practice. NOT a good method at all.

2) The next method I used was to record my books into a notebook. I established 10-20 pages per title and entered the issue #, qty, condition, value and which box they were in. This IS a very
accurate way to keep an inventory but it also has some drawbacks. Not the least of which is that you have to WRITE an awful lot and that you have to RE-write when you change the storage box, or the value changes. It is a nice ANALOG method though if you are computerphobic!

3) Computer Spreadsheet – Excel, Lotus, it makes no difference. Any spreadsheet program will work. You can easily update and edit your inventory and create reports and charts. I used this method for several years until I migrated to an Access database.

4) If you are a computer geek like me and know how to use Access, you can build a custom inventory program. This has advantages over a spreadsheet because data entry is easier, you have many more reporting options and your data can be imported/exported to a number of different formats. The disadvantage to this method is that, like the other methods, updates happen manually across the board and you must create a new record for every entry. There are a lot of keystrokes involved!

5) Third Party database – This is the method I use today. There are many over the counter programs designed for maintaining your inventory. I currently use ComicBase. (www.comicbase.com) This program automatically updates current values, adds new issues through weekly updates, and gives me an option to post books for sale at NO COST. The program has a robust reporting function and entry only requires me to enter the quantity and location. I no longer have to waste time entering title or story line information. AND ComicBase actually supports bar code scanning so all I have to do is scan the barcode on the cover! There are several good programs out there and most of them have a stripped down FREE version for you to try out to see what works best for you.

A note on inventorying your books. While it is a ton of work at the beginning, once you have caught up with your back stock, keeping your inventory up to date is just a matter of entering your new purchases so don’t be discouraged by the size of the task facing you. It really does pay off in the end!
So there you have it. Using these three steps, I have been able to keep my books in good shape, organized and accessible. I know what I have, what condition it is in, the current value and where all of my books are.
There Is No Secret Formula!

Like coins, stamps, trading cards, or any collectible comic books have graded conditions from Poor to Mint. A comic book’s ‘condition’ is one of the key factors in determining it’s value. There are other factors such as scarcity, character popularity and demand that also play a part but those will be covered in the next section. For this chapter our focus is on the condition of a comic.

There are eight basic grades for comics:

- Mint- (M) (10.0)
- Near Mint – (NM) (9.0)
- Very Fine- (VF) (8.0)
- Fine – (F) (6.0)
- Very Good – (VG) (4.0)
- Good - (G) (2.0)
- Fair – (Fa) (1.0)
- Poor – (P) (<1.0)

These grades break out further with mid grades. For instance a book graded between Fine and Very Fine is designated a F/VF. I personally a numbering system a 0-10 scale. Thus a F/VF might be a 6.5, 7.0, or a 7.5, which allows me to be more specific than using the F/VF designation. This is a method that I have developed over the course of 40+ years of collecting and it is similar, though not exactly like the Overstreet or CGC grading methods. (Overstreet publishes an annual Comic Book Price guide and CGC is a professional grading and preservation service).
Ok, that’s as hard as this gets. The good news is that grading comics is not all that difficult. It IS given to a wide interpretation however. Everyone grades a bit differently, but for the most part it goes like this:

- **Mint** – Just what the term says. This is a PERFECT book. No defects of any kind. A truly MINT book is extremely rare. (I have never actually seen a flawless book though there are many sold as flawless). Think about it. The second someone touches a comic, puts it on a shelf or thumbs through it, that book is no longer perfect. In fact the printing process is not perfect. There are ALWAYS some minor defects with any comic. However, a book can get MIGHTY close. To the naked eye a 9.2 and a 9.8 don’t look different at all. It takes an extremely close inspection to see a difference. For a book to be considered mint, there can be no discernable defects.

- **NEAR Mint (9.0-9.9)** - Books in this range can have only the most minor defects. Corners are sharp. Small crimps at the binding or tiny creases that do not break the color can exist. In short this looks like a book fresh off the shelf that has been read once VERY carefully and then bagged and boarded. Be very careful when you see a Silver Age or older book advertised in this condition. Older books were printed on news print and naturally discolor with age and become brittle. Older books DO exist in Near Mint condition but they are exceedingly rare.

- **Very Fine (8.0-8.9)** – Books in this range are also largely free of defects. There can be minor corner blunting and very small cover creases that do not break the color. There should be no spine roll and the book should lay flat. Minor foxing is allowed in this grade. Date Stamps or minor date notations are allowed at the lower end of this scale. This is generally the high end range for Silver/Golden Age books. These are books that look as if they have been read a few times and then carefully stored.

- **Fine to F/VF – (6.0 – 7.9)** – Books in this range can have some minor spine roll, small to medium creasing, corner blunting and very small tears (1/4 inch). No pieces can be missing from the cover and staples must be tight at both the cover and centerfold. At the lower end of this grade the book may have a single splits of less than 1 inch. Books in this grade are still very nice looking, appearing as if they have been read many times but are well cared for and preserved.

- **Very Good to VG/F – (4.0-5.9)** – This is the most common grade for older collectible comics. A very good book can have significant spine roll, moderate to heavy creasing, spine splits both on the top and bottom of the spine, small parts missing from the cover
(1/2 inch). The cover and centerfold must be attached by at least one staple. Pages can be significantly discolored at the lower end of this grade. Only the most MINOR moisture damage may be present. Date stamps or writing may be present. Some minor tape repair can be present at the lower end of this grade. Cover colors may be faded. In short a VG book can have a lot of flaws, but must still be a solid, complete book that will not fall apart if you try to read it. This grade is VERY collectible for Silver and Golden Age books and can still increase in value.

- **Good – G (2.0-3.9)** – The short story is that comics in GOOD condition are not really IN good condition. A book in Good condition can have significant fading, moisture damage, spine role, rips, and missing cover pieces. The cover and centerfold can be detached and significant tape repair may be present. The comic should be complete but missing coupons are allowed as long as they do not interfere with a story. Comics in this condition are often referred to as READERS. For the collector of Golden or Silver Age comics, books in GOOD condition can be an affordable means of getting a rare or high priced issue to fill in a run.

- **Fair – FA – (1-1.8)** – Barely collectible. The cover may be missing. Water damage and severe ripping and creasing may be present. The book SHOULD be substantially complete but may be missing large chunks. Only the rarest of old books are even remotely collectible in this condition.

- **Poor – P (0.0-.9)** – Forget it unless it is a Superman #1 in Poor condition. A book in POOR condition is pretty much garbage. It may substantially Incomplete, ripped, brittle, water damaged. Name a flaw and a poor book has it.

There you have it. A quick, high level guide to grading. Just bear in mind that grading comics is highly subjective. Even collectors and dealers with years of experience may have different grades for the same book. However, once you have gotten the hang of grading your books, you will find that your grades are FAIRLY close to other collectors (within a half grade).

One last note on grading. There is a natural tendency to OVER grade what you are selling and to UNDER grade what you are buying. It takes time and effort to be completely unbiased in your grading. However it is very important that you ARE unbiased in your grading as you will find it much easier to buy and sell back issues if you have a reputation for being fair minded.
Let’s face it. At some point most collectors look around at their piles upon piles of comic books and think to themselves...

“I can make millions off this stuff!”

Not likely.

BUT you can have a lot of fun and possibly make a few bucks buy selling your comics when the value goes up. This is not something a collector has to do, and I suspect that MOST collectors don’t spend very much time investing and speculating on the back issue market. But for those of you who are interested in this aspect of the hobby, investing and to a much lesser extent speculating can enhance your hobby in several ways:

- You can make a few bucks!
- Researching, grading, buying and selling older comics is another level to the hobby. In short, you get to play with your comics even when you aren’t reading them!
- Any profits you make can be turned back to building your own back issue collection. While you may never want to spend $100 of your own money on a copy of Ultimate Spider-Man #1, if it is $100 you made selling comics you originally paid $10 for you just might do it! FOUND MONEY!
- It’s just plain FUN to buy, sell and trade with your fellow hobbyists!

If you are going to engage in the investment/speculating side of the hobby, OR if you just want to sell your collection off one day, there are several things you are going to need to know.

**What’s the difference between investing and speculating?** – Primarily it is a matter of age. You INVEST in a copy of Batman #1. You SPECULATE on a recent “hot” book like Blackest Night #1. With the Batman #1 you have a truly rare book that has shown a steady increase in value over a long period of time. The investment book has fewer copies in existence than people who want them. The supply is LOWER than the demand over a long period of time. When you speculate you are looking to turn a profit over a SHORT period. For instance, when Superman #75 was released, speculators bought up MILLIONS of copies, betting that they could sell them for a stiff profit while the book was “hot”. Those speculators who sold quickly made a LOT of money, however the value of those books dropped very quickly when everyone realized that there
were actually MORE copies in existence than there were people who wanted them. Supply was GREATER than demand. Speculate at your own risk.

**AS A RULE INVESTING IS SAFER THAN SPECULATING.**

Speculating, to make money usually needs a bigger investment on your part than investing. When you speculate on a hot book, you want to dump it as soon as it goes up a dollar or two. Consider Blackest Night #1. You want to speculate on it so you buy 10 copies at cost of 39.99. If you sell it when it goes up a buck you make about 25% on your investment which is a great mark up, but you have to buy a LOT of copies to make any serious money. When you invest in a more “proven” comic, you plan to sit on that book for as long as 10 years. Consider Superman #100. I purchased an investment copy in VG condition in 1998 for $100. By 2008 the book was worth roughly $500. Not only did I have a 400% mark up, I was able to sell it for $400 (giving a deal in doing so) AND turn that money into another low risk investment book. Investing takes a bit more patience but the potential rewards are greater. Just remember that ANY book you invest in OR speculate in COULD drop in value. So you are always taking a risk. Never spend more money on your comics for this purpose than you are willing to lose!

**How do I know what my comics are worth?** – There are several factors that determine the value of a comic book.

- **Condition** – Obviously the better condition the book is in, the more it is worth. That is particularly true of books produced in the last 20 years or so. Most books produced since 1990, NOT in VF or better condition are simply not going to rise in value to any great extent. For older books, lesser condition books can be VERY valuable. That Superman #1 I was telling you about earlier is now worth $300 or so in GOOD (2.0) condition according to the current Overstreet Price Guide. Currently Silver Age books between VG and F are doing very well as investment copies.

- **Availability** – As a rule of thumb, a scarce book is more likely to go up in value over an extended period of time than one that is plentiful. Remember that Superman #75? They sold SIX MILLION copies on a title that averaged a little over 100,000 copies a month. There are ALWAYS copies for anyone who happens to want one. Now just TRY to find a copy of Adventure #247 (1<sup>st</sup> appearance of The Legion Of Superheroes) in any grade over VG. If you do, expect to spend THOUSANDS of dollars on it. And there are ALWAYS more collectors looking for Adventure #247 than there are copies to satisfy the demand.

- **Popularity** – Obviously if no one wants an older book, the condition or scarcity means very little. A comic book called The Human Fly came out at roughly the same time as
Tomb Of Dracula. Tomb Of Dracula was popular and Human Fly is not. Tomb Of Dracula #1 (NM) is worth well over $100 while you can get a Human Fly #1 for about a buck.

- Key Issues – First Issues, Character deaths, First appearances, and major events. In short, anything outside the normal “day to day” life of a comic book series can add to it’s value. For instance Action #252 is worth many times either Action #251 or #253 because #252 was the first appearance of Supergirl. The Amazing Spider-Man #1 is worth many times #2 although they were released about a month apart, because #1 was ...well...#1! You get the idea.

- The CGC factor – In recent years a number of companies have come into existence that “professionally” grade and preserve comic books. The idea being that these companies have created a “standard” for the condition of a collectible comic book that is not subject to individual opinion. While this is highly debatable these books in higher grades were initially fetching prices far above “book” value. Recently this trend seems to be flattening but time will tell if the “CGC factor” has long term staying power in defining a book’s value.

Where can I go to find out the current value of “back issues”?

- There are several ways to get an idea of what people are paying for back issues. Remember, that these sources are only guides and merely suggest the “value” of a given book. Comic books are not gold. They have no intrinsic value. In other words a comic books is only worth what someone is willing to pay for it.

- The Overstreet Price Guide – This is the “bible” of Comic Book Price Guides. Overstreet is published on an annual basis, with a semi-annual update. The Guide covers hundreds of thousands of individual books from all eras of comic book collecting. This the book you will see the dealers using. It certainly has a place on my shelf. However in recent years, many Overstreet values have become highly debatable. The prices are arrived at by a panel of retailers selected by the publisher and are their opinion (based on a lot of experience) of the value of any given book. It is very analog and does not take into consideration the actual prices realized on sites like Ebay. Your book may be listed in Overstreet at $100 but in the real world you may only be able to get $50. That is why they call it a Guide.

- Comic Buyer’s Guide – Also known as CBG is a monthly magazine and website that deals more with trends in the market than a book by book value. There are always interesting articles and you can often gain insight as to how the overall market is trending.

- Ebay! – More back issues are sold on Ebay than any other single venue in the world. You can easily see what any comic you may want to buy or sell is going for just by browsing
the completed auctions. In my opinion this is the MOST ACCURATE indicator of comic book values you can use. It is real time. It is what actual people are paying for actual books. For instance, I recently wanted to add a copy of Amazing Adventures #18 to my collection. The guides I looked at all had the book at about $35 in Near Mint condition, and the auction ad also mentioned this value. I browsed the recently completed auctions on this book and got about 50 “hits”. The highest a NM copy of Amazing Adventures had sold for this year was $10.99, with many not selling at all. Based on that I put in a bid of $7.99 and won the book. Quite a difference from the $35 “book” value!

• Dealers and Retailers – Go to the shops and shows. Leaf through the back issue bins and see what dealers are selling their books for. They are certainly not going to price themselves out of a sale, so you can believe their prices are fairly accurate. But remember that, especially at comic conventions and shows, dealers expect you to try to bargain the price down so they tend to price at pretty close to the Overstreet Guide.

Keep the following things in mind when buying and selling back issues:

• If you want to make the most profit, you MUST sell on your own. If you sell to a dealer or retailer you will only get a fraction of the resale value of your books. Hey! Dealers and retailers have to make a living too! And unless you have a VERY valuable back issue, dealers are more likely to buy a collection than they are an individual book. You can almost NEVER unload recent books that you have speculated on to a dealer or retailer. They are the PROS in this business, so if YOU have keyed into a short term hot item, you can bet THEY have plenty to sell.

• It’s easy to be your own dealer these days! Just set up an Ebay account and you are in business. There are also many collectors sites that have market places. Try out www.atomicavenue.com and you will get the idea.

• When you are buying at a show, barter! As long as you make a fair offer to a dealer AND you are polite about it, you will, find that most sellers will work with you. After all they make no money as long as they have to schlep the books around. The best time to get the BEST prices is during the last hours of the last day at a show when dealers are looking to make those last sales that could make or break their weekend! Just don’t offer $10 for a $1000 book because that is just embarrassing!
• As a rule avoid dealers who don’t put prices on their books. What are they hiding? Also if a seller won’t let you look at a book, outside of the bag, run away fast! You have the right to inspect a book you are about to drop $100 on and any reasonable seller is fine with that. (CGC slabs can’t be opened so both buyer AND seller are making a leap of faith).

• Be honest. This may sound obvious or even trite but it is vital if you are going to be a buyer/seller. The comic hobby is very much a small community and bad reputations go around FAST. You may get away with cheating for a while but over the long haul no one of any stature will want to do business with you. If you are selling a book at a VG make sure you really believe it IS a VG and not a Good that you are passing off. As I mentioned in an earlier section, grading IS highly individual, but with experience, you should come in pretty close.

So there you have it. A brief guide for the new, and not so new, comic book collector. These are lessons that I have learned over a lifetime of collecting. BUT there are no hard rules to collecting. Follow everything in this, or any other guide to the letter, or do NOTHING that I suggest. It is entirely up to you. As long as you have fun and enjoyment from reading and collecting comics, you are a GREAT collector!

Hey it’s Wednesday! Time for me to go get my comics. Gotta run!

That’s 30!

Mitch