

# Great but Forgotten

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Sunday, May 6, 2007

## American Flagg! (Comic Book)



(1983-84)  
By Howard Chaykin

I read comics sporadically: I'll pick them up regularly for awhile, then go ten years or so without reading them at all. Around one of these times, I happened to attend a local comic book convention featuring Howard Chaykin.

I was impressed by his work on the graphic novel, Empire, written by one of my favorite SF writers, Samuel R. Delany. With Chaykin in town, I took the book to be autographed and told him I thought it was the best comic book ever (I wouldn't say that today, but it was certainly very sophisticated for its time). He thought I was referring to his

newest project: American Flagg!

It wasn't an unreasonable assumption.

American Flagg! was set in 2033. Reuben Flagg was a Plexus Ranger -- a cop -- sent to a wild and decadent Chicago (in a fragmented US) to keep order. Flagg had been the star of a popular TV show before being replaced by what would now be called CGI effects.

Chaykin populates Chicago with a wild cast of characters. There's corrupt mayor C. Keenan Blitz and his daughter Medea Blitz (Chaykin liked puns). There's Flagg's boss, Hammerhead Kreiger, and his daughter, Amanda. There's Gretchen Holdstrom, proprietor of the Love Canal brothel franchise ("Love Canal" was very much in the news at the time), William Windsor-Jones (the current Prince William in middle age), and the Russian pilot Crystal Gayle Marakova. And, of course, there was Raul, the talking cat, and Luther Ironheart, the robot with a holographic head.

But, no, the strip wasn't comedy. Reuben was trying to keep order in a chaotic and violent society and, while there were jokes, the entire strip was basically an antiestablishment view of society. It was early cyberpunk.

Chaykin structured the comic into three-issue stories, and the first year was part of one arc, centering on the mysterious Peggy Kreiger, the mother of Amanda and Medea (yes, she got around), who vanished long ago (or did she?). He sprinkled in a bit of social commentary whenever he could. For instance, in a visit to South America, one of the streets was labeled "United Fruit Boulevard." There were even some protests in the letter column that this was gay bashing until someone explained about the United Fruit Company and what they did in South America.

After completing the first year, Chaykin took a few issues off and when he came back, it was never the same. There were visits to other areas (like the People's Democratic Prairie, a communist state in western Canada), but once the essential mystery of the first year was solved, it just wasn't the same. Eventually, Chaykin left, and the book lost contact with the world he created. He came back to try to salvage it (retitling it Howard Chaykin's American Flagg! and renumbering it), but it had lost what had made it great.

The weakness of the later episodes cast a retrospective pall upon the original year. I think that at one point, the first dozen issues were collected into graphic novel form, but that's hard to find. It's a comic that's worth rediscovering.

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