

Friday, 9 September 2016

Howard Chaykin



American Flagg!
by Howard Chaykin
(First Comics, 1983-1988)

DAVE SIM:
(from the [Cerebus Yahoo Group Q&A](#), August 2004)
...Howard Chaykin I always admired a great deal. Very intimidating fellow, very sure of himself. I was terrifically impressed back in 1982 when Deni and I had dinner with him and his then-wife Leslie on the first US Tour that he was planning to do an on-going book called **American Flagg!** whose theme he neatly encapsulated as "the future is the same as the present, only later and more so." That's awfully good. That's very Howard. One good sentence can save you fifteen minutes of explanation, so come up with it, schmuck. It was particularly interesting for me because it was going to be a monthly book and I was already becoming conscious of the fact that there weren't a whole lot of those in the new direct market age. Of course, to Howard we weren't in the same league. I was still a strange kind of semi-pro

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A MOMENT OF CEREBUS: Howard Chaykin

fanzine publisher, which was the reaction to **Cerebus** and **Elfquest**. Being in the comic-book field meant living in New York and all that that entailed. Of course now it seems very natural to mention **Cerebus** and **American Flagg!** in the same sentence, but not back then.

I have several Howard Chaykin stories that have stayed with me over the years. I already told one in the Synchronicity Triptych essay. Back in 1974 when I first met him doing an interview with him for **Comic Art News & Reviews** he had long hair down to his shoulders and mutton-chop sideburns. Very Neil Young. Overnight, at some point, he realized that this was a mistake. He was living in New York, he was a grown-up who was interested in having a solid career in comic books AND in commercial illustration and he realized that, in the latter category, you weren't doing yourself any favours showing up for meetings with art directors looking like a Woodstock leftover. The sixties were ten years ago. Get over it. But that also put him in a "minority of one" situation. I can't think of any comic-book creator of his generation in the mid-70s who didn't look like a Woodstock leftover, and the community was (and, I assume, still is) particularly brutal with anyone who breaks ranks with the pack. But, I have to hand to him, he didn't go halfway and get a 1964 Beatle haircut and just shorten his sideburns and start wearing new jeans. He got his hair cut very short -- shaved on the sides -- bought fashionable dress clothes beautifully cut and tailored and suspenders (which were just then coming into fashion in chic New York circles). The whole nine yards. And, at some point he had to be, you know, seen like this in a comic-book environment. And, again, I have to hand it to him. He didn't try to put on some Woodstock disguise. This was the choice he had made, this was what he was going to look like. So, as the story goes, he walks into either Marvel or DC one day and sees (whoever it was -- the first comic book person who was going to be exposed to the New Howard Chaykin), walks right up to them with a big grin and an outstretched hand and says (by way of introduction): "Hi. Joe Nazi."

I also remember having dinner with Howard and an excruciatingly young Frank Miller right around the time the first few issues of Frank's **Daredevil** had come out. I'm pretty sure that this was pre-Upstarts, the studio that Howard and Frank later had with Walt Simonson. I was virtually non-existent at that dinner. As I say, I existed on Howard's radar screen but somewhere between fanzine and professional, a quirky kid. It was a very interesting dinner, though, because it was largely an uninterrupted monologue/interrogation of Frank by Howard. What did Frank want to accomplish, how were things going with his editor, when the editor said that did it have this sort of tone or that sort of tone, is Frank aware of the pitfalls in, etc. etc. I remember Frank being very quiet through most of the dinner, mostly nodding, a lot of shrugging, but a very intense look on his face because he realized what he was getting for free here -- a dense-packed education on the ins and outs and why's and wherefores of suddenly being a Big Name in the comic-book field. Because it had nothing to do with me -- as far as I could see I would never have to make my way through the labyrinthine maze/gauntlet that is a New York City comic-book career (otherwise I would've been making my own mental notes on every word out of Howard's mouth) -- I was able to observe the whole process from a greater remove and what struck me was Howard Chaykin's sheer open-hearted generosity in doing this. Howard was far enough along in his career at this point that it was obvious he was never going to be in the category he was educating Frank about. That category happens overnight, the fact that it happens overnight is a big part of it. If you've been working in comics for five years you can't suddenly make that leap. Neal Adams was in that category. Steranko was in that category. Wrightson was in that category. Howard was a very career-minded individual and ferociously competitive and, in context -- particularly in the brutal world of the New York City Funnybook Industry -- he could certainly be forgiven for taking a "sink or swim" approach to Frank Miller (there were always better-than-average odds that they might end up competing for a plum assignment somewhere up ahead). But, he didn't do that. He went out of his way to give Frank the advantage of every scrap of information he himself had gleaned -- since he had been Gil Kane's assistant -- about the situation in which Frank had suddenly found himself.

The only time I found myself in a comparable situation was in 1993 when Bonemania hit. As I told Jeff at the time, I was quite a ways away from ground zero when this happened to the Pinis and I was only marginally closer when it happened to Kevin and Peter (the only two comparable self-publishing success stories) but here is everything that I know about being an overnight skyrocket success in independent comics. Since there were a lot of self-publishers that I was helping at the time in various ways, there was always the temptation to give Jeff the same sort of limited access that I gave them (always having to bear in mind that I had my own monthly comic book to write and draw). If it hadn't been for Howard's example, I don't think I would've given Jeff as much time as I did, dense-packing as much as I knew about the ins and outs and whys and wherefores of being an overnight hit in independent comic books.

Oddly enough, one of the few moments when I did enter the conversation (mentally, anyway) at that long-ago dinner was when Howard offered the opinion that the comic-book collector's market was crazy because people were buying and selling the first issue of Marvel's **Star Wars** comic book for (I think, at the time, it was around \$20 -- it goes for around \$60 now, according to the latest **Overstreet Price Guide**) and it wasn't anywhere close to being Howard's best work. Howard drew the cover of the first issue and pencilled the first ten. That was the first time that I had known Howard Chaykin to perceive something inaccurately. Which was understandable in a way. George Lucas had made no secret of the fact that Han Solo had been based to a large degree on the prototypical Howard Chaykin space and/or pulp hero, as typified by Cody Starbuck, the Scorpion and Monarch Starstalker. Sort of Gil Kane's "laughing cavalier" with a lop-sided grin on his face. I'm pretty sure that this was the reason that Chaykin landed the assignment to do the comic-book adaptation (and the reason Al Williamson was tapped to do the newspaper strip. Whatever Lucas didn't get from Chaykin, he got from Williamson, thematically and visually). But, I thought at the time that Howard was overlooking the obvious--the book was commanding those prices because it was **Star Wars**, not because of whomever was writing and drawing it. At the same time his reaction was understandable, one of those molar-grinding incidents of being at a one-step remove from a worldwide mega-hit. How could you do your best work when you could see that Han Solo wasn't any sort of improvement on Cody Starbuck, but just a watered-down Hollywoodized version of same?

I have to admit at this point that I didn't -- and still haven't -- read **American Flagg!**. I read, I think, the first three issues and just found the ironic "adult" tone uninteresting. No, that's not fair. I did find it interesting, but, for me, it just suffered in comparison to **The Scorpion**: the previous example of Howard doing the whole package on his own for Atlas/Seaboard. From the splash page with its white handwritten captions and craft-tinted "photo album" panels, it

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seemed to me that *The Scorpion* was the book Howard had been born to draw. **American Flagg!** seemed to me like a parody of **The Scorpion** -- we're all adults here, we don't take this sort of material seriously. I really should read **Flagg** sometime. There's no question in my mind that it is a better piece of material than the vast majority of what I've retained over the years. I understand there's an anniversary edition of it coming out this year, so I'll keep my eye out.

At the 1986 San Diego Comicon, Gerhard's first experience with San Diego, I had told him about all the great parties that they had there and how you just went from one to the other all night. So, it was more than a little embarrassing when we checked into our suite and then went out to all of the primary convention hotels, literally going from floor-to-floor listening. You know, "Where de party at?" Finally we gave up and went back to our suite on the top floor of the Holiday Inn Embarcadero. "Well," I said. "I guess we'll have to have the party." So, I made up a quick invitation and got the hotel to photocopy thirty of them. Nice sized party, I figured. Eventually two hundred people showed up, but there were only thirty invitations and one of them I had definitely given to Howard Chaykin. I had also printed up proposals for a handful of artists if they were interested in doing a book through Aardvark One International. I think I had four or five packages made up for people I knew were going to be at the show. One was Howard. Jaime Hernandez was another. But, anyway, the party was going pretty good when Howard walked in. "Howard," I said. "Here. Just in case you're ever looking for a publisher for a project." He flipped through the proposal. "Dave," he said, in his matter-of-fact tone, "Are you hustling me?" A little taken aback by the verb, I stammered something about well, yeah, I guess you could call it that. He said, "You've said some negative things about me in print which I don't take very seriously because when I think of you I remember a pimply-faced teenager with stringy hair interviewing me for his fanzine. So, let's resolve never to work together on anything ever." He handed the proposal back and said, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go and enjoy myself." And he wandered off into the depths of the party.

What Howard was referring to was my "Declaration of Independence" in **The Comics Journal No.105** where I described the "inverted pyramid" of traditional comic-book publishing. I wrote:

"The inverted pyramid is difficult to disguise...but then, little effort is expended in doing so. 'First Comics! You can count on us.' (this was the motto of First Comics, publishers of American Flagg! among other titles) (This means you can count on Rick Obadiah, Rick Oliver, the production guys.) 'We publish one of your favourite characters -- American Flagg!' (As Mike Gold says, 'A great character is forever -- a fresh approach is what's needed, that's all.') 'created and written by Howard Chaykin, Joe Staton artist.' (Doesn't really matter who does it, right? A great character is forever.)

This approach is a betrayal of the fans, the readers, the shop owners, the distributors and everyone who had a stake in American Flagg!, emotional or financial. The back issues will decline in value, a slap in the face to those distributors and shop owners who now have boxes of dead or dying wood-pulp they will be forced to sell at cost or below. Chaykin's assurances all along that "he can't foresee leaving Flagg!" gave a false message to the marketplace in which economy functions (Flagg! Is, after all, a direct-sales-only comic). The fans feel betrayed because they had come to rely on Chaykin's Flagg! month-in and month-out; and, more importantly, had been given no indication that this situation could or would change.

If, as I have heard, Chaykin planned it this way all along, we can chalk up another victory for the inverted pyramid. Had this been the 'independent comic' it had been declared to be (and I'll get to my personal definition of that term in due course), it would have run its course over 20-some-odd issues and have left a legacy of a remarkable (I'm going to go out on a limb and add 'brilliant') and singular vision. With the replacement of Howard as artist on the series, First Comics and Howard declare themselves to be 'business as usual' and neither alternative nor independent."

Well, you know, I still think I was right about this. But I can certainly see how it would rub Howard the wrong way but -- as is usually the case with Dave Sim -- it's more important to me to discuss openly what we think is "good for comics" and what we think is "bad for comics" because the improvement of the medium and the business context within which it exists is more important than who has or hasn't got bruised feelings about what was or wasn't said.

I have no way of proving it, but I always suspected that the **Black Kiss** mini-series that Howard did for Vortex Publications in Toronto was directed at me, Howard at his most eloquent. "Is this what you meant, Dave? A small, prestigious project that will get talked about? Yes, this is the sort of thing I might've done through Aardvark One International if you hadn't lit into me in print. So, instead, I've given it to one of your competitors, the guy just down the highway from you." And then he called the collected version, **Big Black Kiss**. "And, see? You would've made money off of the collected version as well?" This was the reason that I called my 24-hour comic about a divorced wife (at this point Howard and I were both divorced from our wives) **Bigger, Blacker Kiss**. My reply to Howard being: there are larger issues at stake here which is why I wrote what I wrote about your choices on American Flagg! Larger issues that I think need to be discussed and need to have actual examples cited so that the next generation of cartoonists can make up their minds based on the two sides of the debate. The largest issue to me, now, would be, "How long has **American Flagg!** been out of print? How long has **Big, Black Kiss** been out of print?" Those questions are far larger than whether I did or didn't get to publish them myself.

THE CEREBUS OVERSIZE PROJECT



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AARDVARK COMMENT

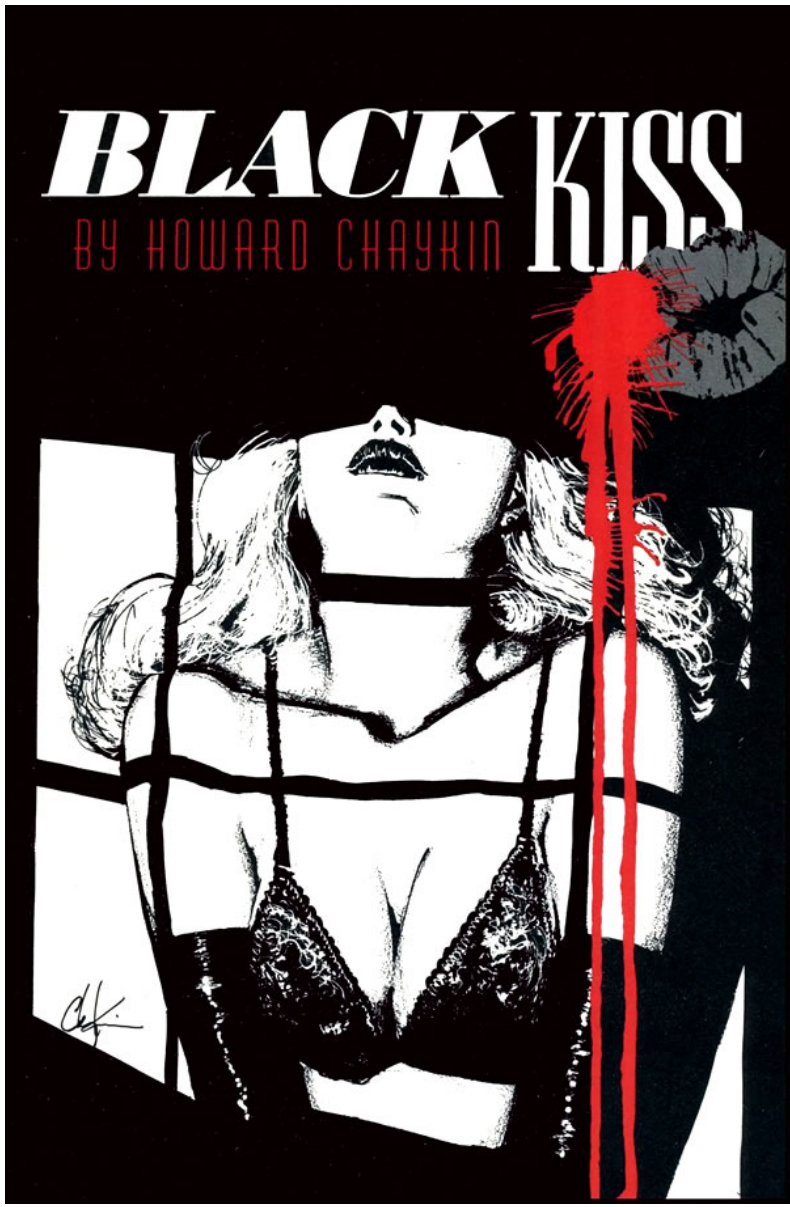
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Black Kiss
by Howard Chaykin
(Vortex Comics, 1988-1989)

Anyway, I saw Howard at another convention a few years after this and made a bee-line for him. He was glad to see me. I was glad to see him. He said something flattering about the fact that I had figured out very quickly a few things it had taken him years to figure out which, braced as I was for a body shot, left me stammering in the other direction this time. It's certainly something I would always say about Howard, too. Particularly Howard's ability to encapsulate a huge argument in one pithy sentence. As you can see here, I just don't have that aptitude. Howard not only had -- and has -- a very successful career in the ballbusting brutal confines of the New York City Funnybook Industry, he's also had major successes in Hollywood career -- and not just as a storyboard artist or as a scriptwriter -- he's actually risen to the executive level on the shows that he's worked on, something which doesn't happen unless you know your way around and have the ability to think fast and accurately on your feet in a pressure-cooker environment. Very, very rare qualities which Howard Chaykin has in spades. If Howard ever needed me for anything, he remains on a short list of people I would drop everything to help in any way that I could -- un-work related, I would assume. He'd be my first choice of someone to have dinner with in just about any comic-book context I could think of. And a big reason for that is that I would never have to wonder where I stood with Howard Chaykin. He would never say anything behind someone's back that he wouldn't say to that same person's face. As was the case at the Aardvarks Over San Diego party. He had something to say and he said it. It cleared the air so that I didn't hesitate for one second before approaching him the next time I saw him.

Those are the sort of people I have always admired and whose company I have most enjoyed.

[Comics Buyers Guide \(1998\)](#)
[Alan Moore: "From Hell" \(1997\)](#)
[Comic Book Rebels \(1993\)](#)
[Comic Collector \(1992\)](#)
[The Comics Journal #100 \(1985\)](#)
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- [Cerebus: An Untold Tale Of The Secret Sacred Wars \(1988\)](#)
- [Cerebus: Breaking Up... \(1986\)](#)
- [Cerebus: The Applicant \(1986\)](#)

I notice in the latest **Overstreet Price Guide** that all of the back issues of **American Flag!** are priced at between 3 and 4 dollars, even Alan Moore's run from 21 to 27.

MWAH, Howard.

Labels: [Frank Miller](#), [Howard Chaykin](#)

6 comments:

Tony Dunlop said...
I hope Dave has at least read the first ten or so issues of AF! by now. Not only is it visually stunning, it's one of the *funniest* comics I've ever read.

If Dave is right about why the back issues are so cheap, then I have to thank Mr. Chaykin; I once lost my first issue of AF! - how, I have no idea - and was able to replace it for just a couple of bucks.

10 September 2016 at 09:41

Jim Sheridan said...
Certainly one thing I'm sure Dave would appreciate about AF is how the lettering of the sound effects was part of the art. Dave is a master of that.

It's cool that Dave admires Chaykin's pithiness, but especially when it comes to thoughtful recounting of great anecdotes, I'm grateful for Dave's style. I appreciate the care he takes to fully paint the scene so that we can soak in it.

I get a real kick out of Chaykin also. He gives great interviews, and his art is so dynamic and full of character.

They say that when it comes to comics (and music), the stuff that grabs you early on is what stays with you. That's partially true. I really got into comics in the late 1970s / early 1980s, and many of the artists who knocked me out then do remain my favorites: Chaykin, Sim, Sienkewicz, Rude. I have very sentimental attachments to them and what they remind me of. I'll admit that some works I loved back then didn't age as well as I'd like, so I find myself pursuing Byrne, Starlin, and Perez and some others less than I would have guessed 30 years ago. I appreciate Kirby much more though!

10 September 2016 at 22:32


Dave Sim said...
Tony - No, I haven't. Not out of disinclination but more for lack of time. Robert Rowe used to send me beat-up used Marvel and DC comics he thought I'd like and I read a few AMERICAN FLAGGs in those bundles. Yes, the lettering was phenomenal and fully integrated into the book.

Had it not be for 9/11, I think the "future" would have looked a lot more as Howard pictured it.

I really hope that Howard does an exhaustive reconstruction of Gil Kane's "cruel but fair" assessments of his contemporaries that Howard remembers from his days as Kane's assistant. That would be a real loss if those weren't committed to paper by someone and preserved online.

It would be interesting to see who is remembered and who isn't WAY up ahead when we're dead but unfortunately we'll all be dead.

12 September 2016 at 12:09

 **Ray Cornwall said...**
I once bought two long boxes of every First back issue comic for \$10. This was about 15 years ago.

As I recall, AF was out of print for a long time because of significant restoration issues, If the amount of work to restore an issue of Cerebus is X, say, restoring an AF issue is 3X. Now, there's less of them, but there's a lot more work, and I don't know the level of commitment Howard has to restore anything outside the first twelve issues, which have been restored and brought back into print (as has the Black Kiss books- and there's even been recent sequels!).

12 September 2016 at 12:46

Jim Sheridan said...
Dave, your mention of Gil Kane's critical analysis of some other artists' work made me think of Alex Toth's thorough and exacting commentary on some pages that Steve Rude had sent him. Fascinating ideas about the language of comics.

[Cerebus: The Spirit \(1985\)](#)

[Cerebus: The Girl Next Door \(1985\)](#)

[Cerebus: Night On The Town \(1984\)](#)

[Cerebus: Dreams II \(1984\)](#)

[Elfguest \(1983\)](#)

[BWS's Cerebus Dreams \(1982\)](#)

[Cerebus: Arnold The Isshurian \(1982\)](#)

[Cerebus: What Happened Between Issues 20 & 21 \(1981\)](#)

[Hard Boiled Dick \(1981\)](#)

[Howard The Duck \(1980\)](#)

[Cerebus: Passage \(1978\)](#)

[Cosmix \(1978\)](#)

[The Beavers \(1976-78\)](#)

[Doorway To The Gods \(1976\)](#)

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[Life Suit \(1975\)](#)

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by Grant Morrison & Gerhard
(November 2017)

A MOMENT OF CEREBUS: Howard Chaykin

An artist I forgot to mention in my listing of guys from the 1970s that I never tire of is P. Craig Russell.

12 September 2016 at 21:44

Dave Sim said...

Ray Cornwall - Yes. I think it would be a matter of the expense as well and what the status of FLAGG as Howard's property is. I can afford to think long-term on restoring CEREBUS but if I was just going to sign a contract with a publisher to a) pay for the restoration and b) pay me as the creator, I suspect the amounts involved would make it a non-starter.

None of our business, but definitely a core element of the business.

Tough one.

14 September 2016 at 17:59

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A "Cerebus In Hell?" One-Shot
(August 2017)

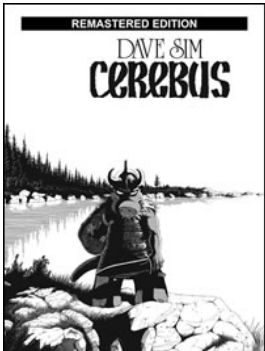


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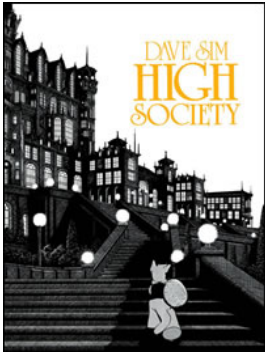


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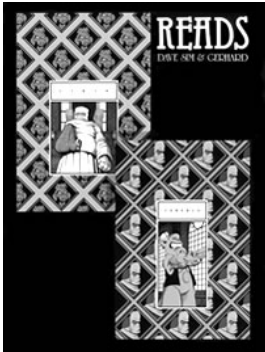
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The Judge Before He
Was The Judge

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The First Twenty-Five
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On Sale 35 Years Ago:
Cerebus #30

Carson Grubaugh's
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Scenes From
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GOING HOME on
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Kill Gene Day"

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Cerebus In Hell? -
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Going Home page 330

Catching Up... in Hell?

Carson Grubaugh's
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Flight

George & Dan's
Cerebus Statue

On Sale 15 Years Ago:
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Howard Chaykin

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Cerebus In Hell? -
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Details for Small
Publishing-- IS...

"Don't Do Comics.
Comics Will Break
Your Heart."

Ernest Hemingway in
Cerebus

Cerebus Archive
Number 5
Kickstarted!

"That's Comics For
You"

7:37 PM \$29,333
PLEDGED! MANY
THANKS!

7:22 PM \$29,178
PLEDGED!
THANKS,
EVERYONE!

7:14 PM \$29,158
PLEDGED! MANY
THANKS TO
EVERYONE

6:53 PM \$29,158
THANK THANK
THANK THANK
YOUSE!

6:24 PM \$29,138
PLEDGED! THANKS
THANKS THANKS
THAN...

6:00 PM \$29,013
PLEDGED! MERCI!
MERCI BEAUCOUP!

5:00 PM \$28,973
PLEDGED!
THANKS! THANKS!
THANKS! T...

4:30 PM \$28,953
PLEDGED! THANK
YOU, ALL!

4:00 PM \$28,798
PLEDGED! THANK
YOU ALL, AGAIN!

3:30 PM \$28,798
PLEDGED! THANK
YOU, THANK YOU!

2:10 PM \$27,607
PLEDGED! MANY
THANKS TO ALL!

1:20 PM \$27,607
PLEDGED! MANY
"LABOUR DAY
WEEKEND"...

12:40 PM \$27,547
PLEDGED! MANY,
MANY THANKS!

11:12 AM \$27,447
PLEDGED! MANY,
MANY THANKS

10:40 AM \$27,447
PLEDGED! MANY,
MANY THANKS!!

10 AM \$27,447
PLEDGED! MANY,
MANY THANKS!

Cerebus Archive
Number 5:
Kickstarter Ends
Today!

One Day To Go On
CAN5!!

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The Many Origins
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Cerebus Facebook Group
Cerebus Fan Girl
Cerebus TV
Cerebus The Aardvark
Cerebus The Tumblr
Cerebus Timeline
Cerebus Wiki
Cerebus Yahoo Group
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
Comic Shop Master List
Creators Bill of Rights
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Dave Sim: The Blog & Mail
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Kickstarter: High Society Digital
TCJ: The Fantagraphics Offer
World Without Cerebus

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Beavers & The Strange Death Of
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