

KAPOW!

I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. My father was a lawyer who, when I was a boy, sometimes took me with him on visits to clients. I rarely got further than their parlour or waiting room – which was far enough for me, thank you very much, when we visited the city prison – and was given a book to keep me quiet.

One exception was a barber who had a shop near my Grandmother's house. When my dad met with him, it was in the barbershop. Those visits were brilliant. While the barber sat in his chair and gave out about his soon-to-be ex-wife, I busied myself with the comics he kept stacked on short tables inside his shop. After one rather long sessions with my dad, the barber said, 'Hey, kid. You like comics? There's a box of them in the backroom I was going to throw out. You want them?'

I did.

He returned with the biggest stash of comics I had ever seen. All of them were worn, dog-eared and a few years out-of-date, but for a seven year-old boy, it was like I had hit the lottery. I couldn't wait to get them home.

Inside the crate he gave me were *Batman* and *Spiderman* comics I knew well, and many I didn't. There was high school Americana in *Archie* where children with names like Jughead and Betty drove around in jalopies and slurped ice cream sodas. There was Ben Grimm aka The Thing in *The Fantastic Four* shouting 'It's clobberin' time!' There was the ghoulish *Tales from the Crypt*, a comic which I only dared read during daylight hours and the bare-knuckled *True Crime* which frankly terrified me (aged 7) with its accounts of gangster killings and break-ins. I met old heroes like the Phantom and Sgt.Rock and new ones like Scarlet Witch and Wolverine.

I wore my hair short for the next few years – more haircuts meant more trips to our barber so I could badger him for the comics he wanted to get rid of. In time, two more bundles arrived, smelling of hair oil and Brylcreeme, which I immediately read and re-read. I searched their panels for hidden clues. I poured over their “Letters to the Editor” page to hear what other like-minded souls thought of past issues. I read plenty of other books too, but comic books I studied.

There were some drawbacks. Because our barber didn’t read comics himself (with the possible exception of *True Crime*, which reeked of cigarettes and arrived with pages dotted with coffee rings), he had no allegiances. He bought Captain America one month, the Hulk the next. Two *Justice Leagues of America* would be followed by a *Donald Duck*. It was almost as if our barber handed money to a newsagent and said, ‘Surprise me,’ when it came to buying comics. It did, I confess, drop him down a notch or two in my estimation. True comic lovers don’t sleep around. We find our superheroes and stick by them.

The other problem was continuity. In the very first stash of comics I received, there were three *Spidermans* (my favourite). None of the issues were in sequence which left me trying to figure out how Peter Parker who was living with Aunt May in the January issue, had a new roommate and flat by the July edition, who then turned out to be the son of the Green Goblin in September. This wasn’t easy. Restrict yourself to episodes 1, 4 and 7 in a season of *Breaking Bad* or *Succession* and you’ll see what I mean. There’s a lot happening, but you’re not terribly sure why. Still, I couldn’t complain. When a new stack of comics would come home, I would start by selecting my favourites (I grew up in the golden age of Marvel, so their comics always came first) and put them in order (if possible) before rifling through the others.

Years later when I came to write my first novel, *Fire Boy*, those comics were my inspiration. I wanted to re-create the fun I had reading them so I needed heroes who didn't take themselves seriously, a rattling adventure that zigged and zagged and memorable characters who each possessed a distinctive voice.

As for my barber, he skipped town on wintry day when I was ten. I found out later that he owed money to everyone (including my father) and was on the run. I was sorry to see him go, and not just because of the comics, though it did mean I could start wearing my hair longer. I often imagined him boarding a bus to Philadelphia whenever we passed the shuttered windows of his barbershop. His suitcase would be stuffed with aproned shirts, clippers, brushes, combs and a copy of *True Crime* magazine.