

Amoeba

ADVENTURES™

24
NOV



MAX
INK
96

THE DARK AGES • 5 OF 8

PROTOPLASM PRESS • \$2.00 U.S. \$2.50 CAN • NOVEMBER 1996

AMOEBA ADVENTURES #24

THE DARK AGES



PART FIVE: Death.

Written and created by Nik Dirga

Pencils, inks and letters by Max Ink

Art assistant: Benjamin Bayliss

Cacography Consultant: Ann Bostic

"You must risk something
that matters."

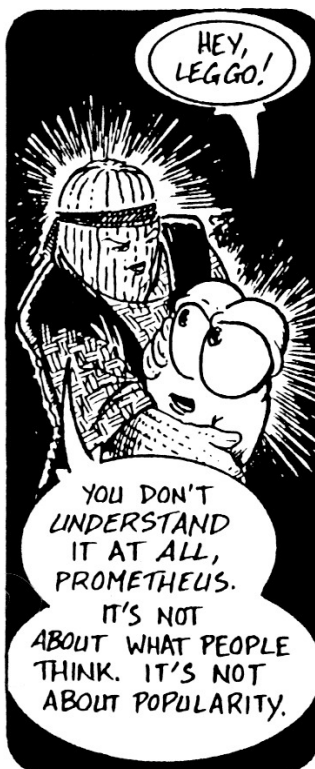
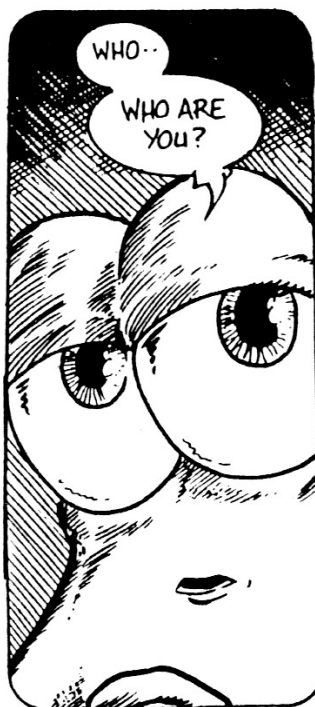
—Tom Waits, *Bone Machine*

Previously: Karate Kactus is dead, murdered by the Dark One, capping a series of assaults upon the All-Spongy Squadron by the mysterious masked villain. The entire team has now reunited and is dealing with this mammoth loss the best they can.

**Protoplasm Press
is a member of the**



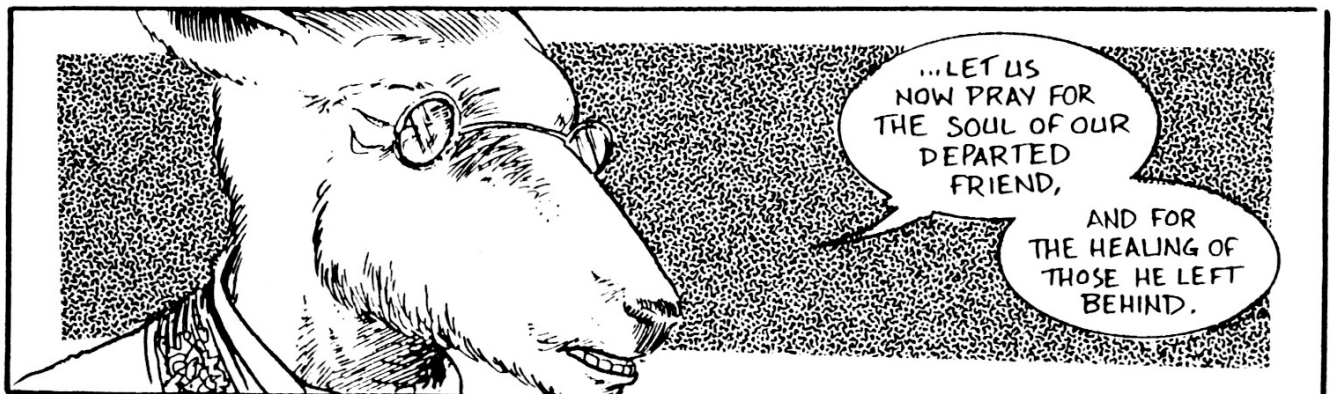
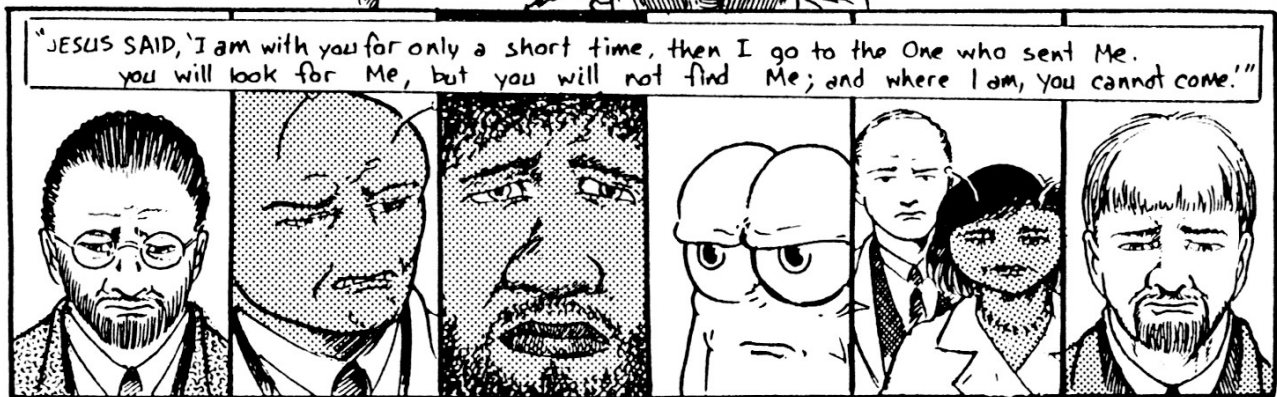
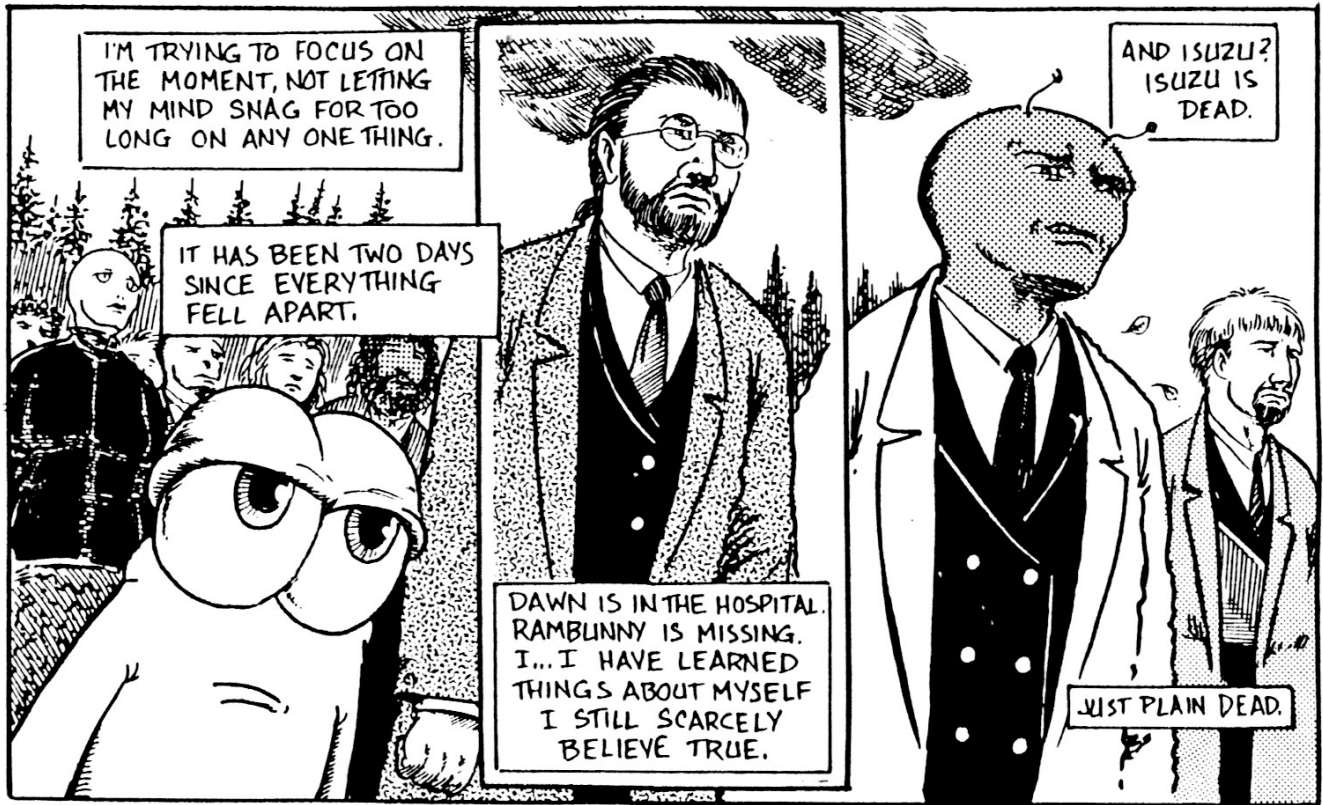
Amoeba Adventures #24, November 1996. Published every three months or so by Protoplasm Press, P.O. Box 2230, University MS 38677-2230. Amoeba Adventures and all characters herein are created by and ©1996 Nik Dirga; Artwork ©1996 Max Ink. All rights reserved; reproduction allowed for purposes of review only. Additional copies available for \$2.00 postpaid; \$2.50 for Canadian or foreign orders. Subscriptions to Amoeba Adventures are not currently available; see editorial for more. Please make *all* checks payable to Nik Dirga, not Protoplasm Press. Attention retailers: address all inquiries to Protoplasm Press c/o Max Ink, 276 Mainsail Drive, Westerville OH 43081-2741. Ohio address meant for retail and bulk orders only.



THAT WAS SIX
YEARS AGO.

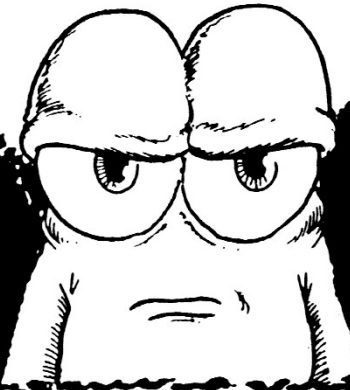
THIS IS NOW.







I THOUGHT THE WORST WAS OVER. I CAME BACK FROM THE 'ZONE,' INVIGORATED WITH THE TRUTH ABOUT MYSELF, THINKING THAT AT LONG LAST, EVERYTHING WAS GOING MY WAY...



--SO MUCH TO TELL YOU, IT'S AMAZING...

WHAT IS IT?



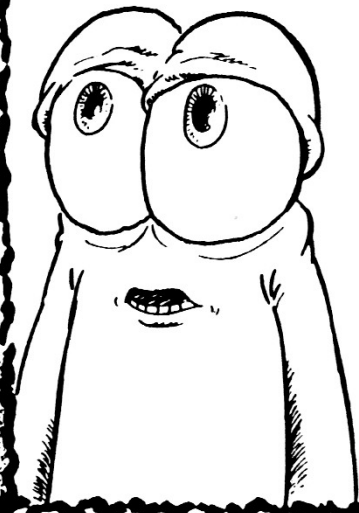
IT'S ALL OVER, PRO.

IT'S ALL OVER.



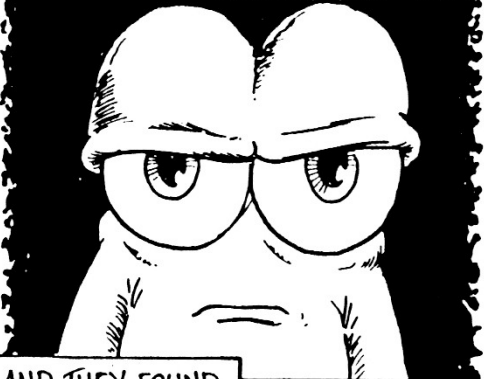
ISUZU IS DEAD, PRO.

MURDERED. BY THE DARK ONE.



AND HE WAS. AND HE IS.

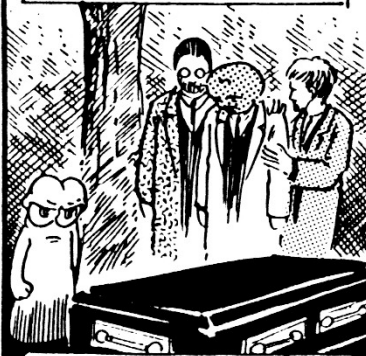
SPIF AND MITSU FOUND HIS BODY IN THE CAVE WHEN THEY RETURNED FROM A TRIP OUT WEST.



AND THEY FOUND ALEX, BADLY BEATEN.

AND SEVERAL OF OUR WORST FOES, UNCONSCIOUS. THEY PIECED IT ALL TOGETHER LATER, WITH ALEX'S HELP.

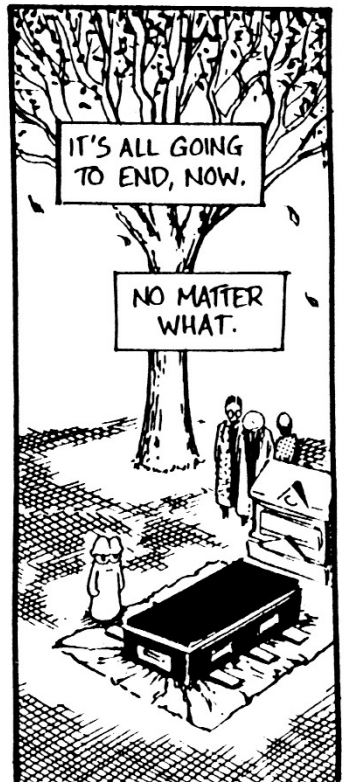
WHILE I WAS OFF GALLIVANTING AROUND THE UNIVERSE, THIS "DARK ONE" HAS BEEN HURTING ...KILLING... MY FRIENDS. TERRORIZING THEM.

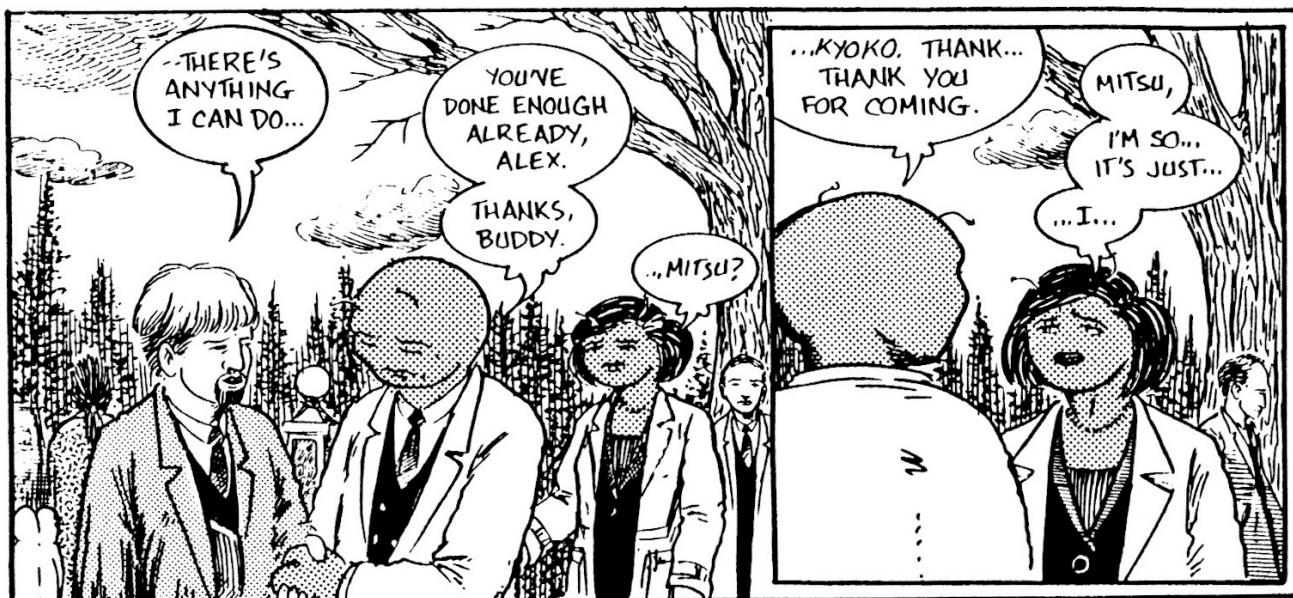


HE HURT DAWN. HE'S DONE SOMETHING TO HANK JENSEN'S MIND. ... HE KILLED ISUZU.

IT'S ALL GOING TO END, NOW.

NO MATTER WHAT.









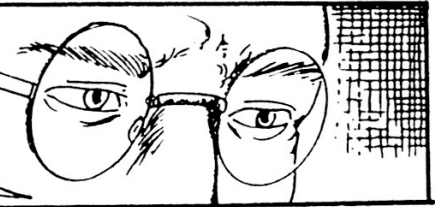
SO —
WHERE DO WE
GO FROM
HERE?

GO?

WE... WE FIND
OUT WHO'S DOING
THIS. WE FIND THIS
DARK ONE AND...
WE TAKE CARE
OF HIM

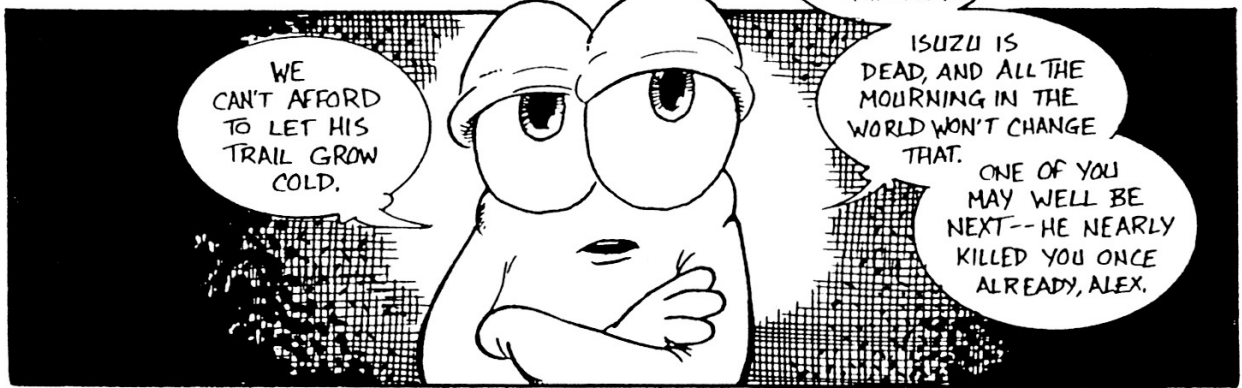
I AM TIRED
OF BEING THE
VICTIM.

I AM TIRED
OF REACTING. I
AM READY TO TAKE THE
FIGHT TO THIS DARK
ONE, NO MATTER HOW
STRONG HE IS.



ACTUALLY, I
WAS ASKING WHAT
OUR IMMEDIATE PLANS
WERE FOR THE
REST OF THE
DAY,

BUT I
ADMIRE YOUR
THINKING.



WE
CAN'T AFFORD
TO LET HIS
TRAIL GROW
COLD.

ISUZU IS
DEAD, AND ALL THE
MOURNING IN THE
WORLD WON'T CHANGE
THAT.

ONE OF YOU
MAY WELL BE
NEXT-- HE NEARLY
KILLED YOU ONCE
ALREADY, ALEX.



DON'T
YOU MEAN
"ONE OF US"?

WHAT?

YOU SAID "ONE
OF YOU MAY WELL
BE NEXT." WHAT
ABOUT YOURSELF,
PRO?



SLIP
OF THE
TONGUE.

SPIE, IF
YOU LIKE, WHY
DON'T WE WORK
TOGETHER THIS
AFTERNOON ON
CRACKING THIS
CASE.

WELL, I...
ALL RIGHT, THIS
AFTERNOON IS OKAY.
I'LL SEE YOU AT THE
CAVE, THEN.

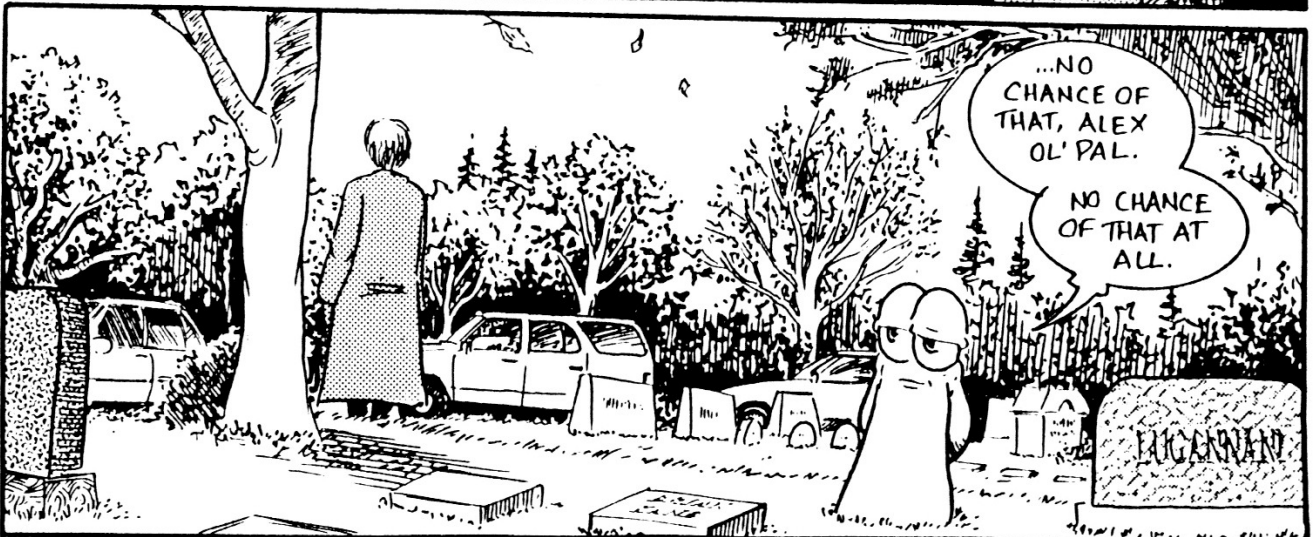
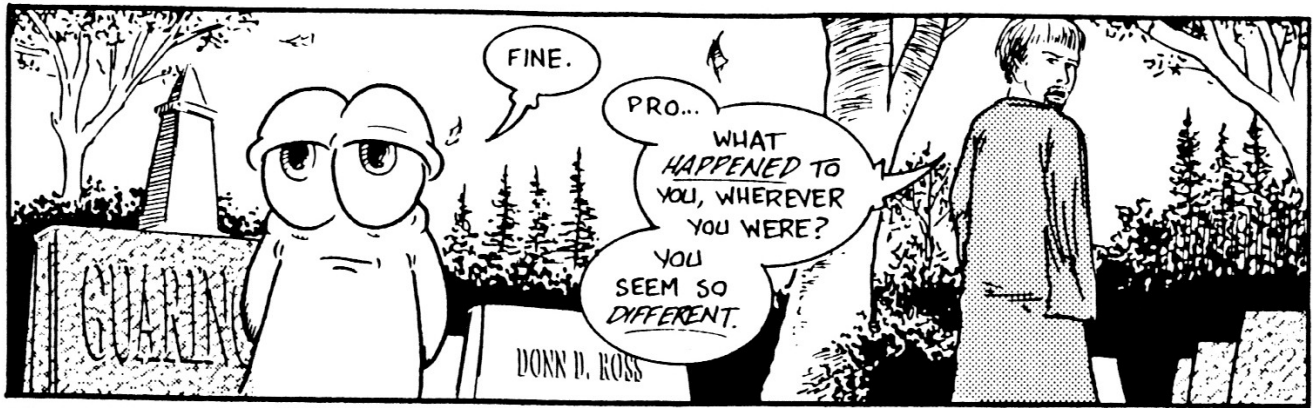


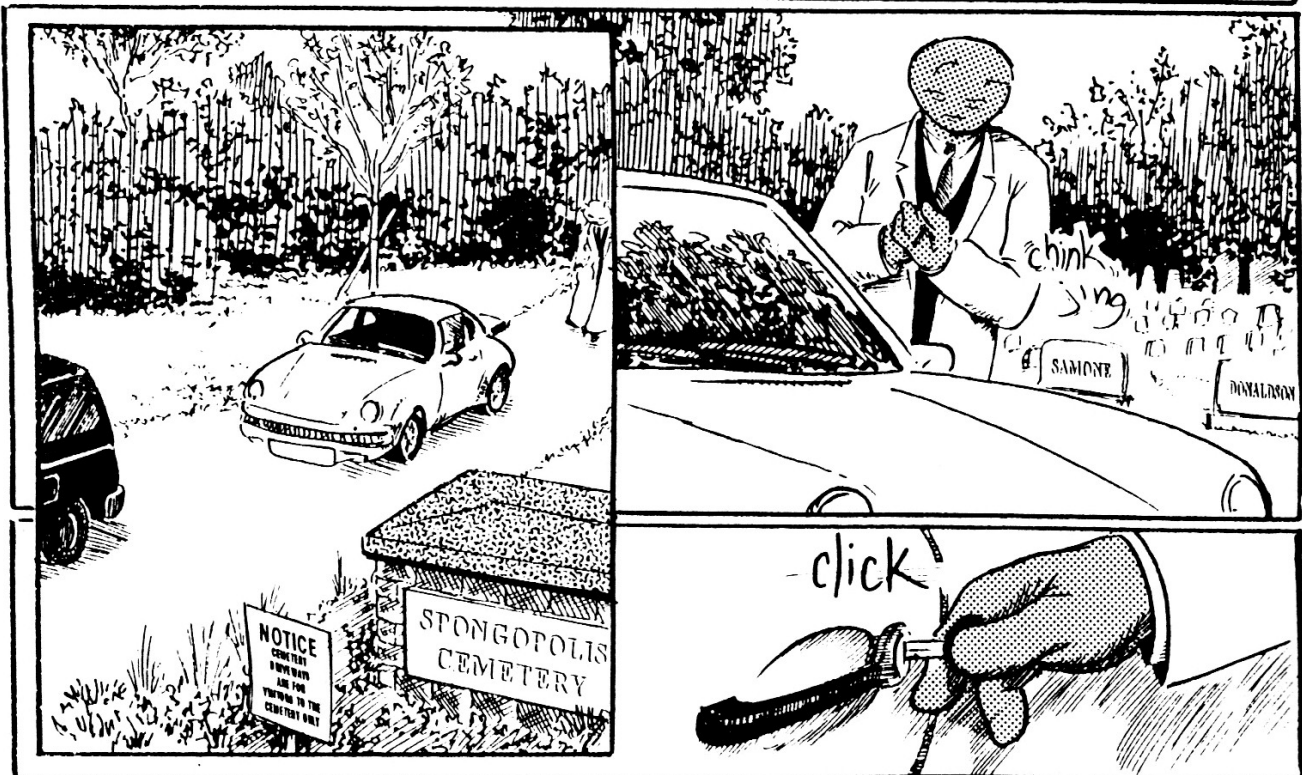
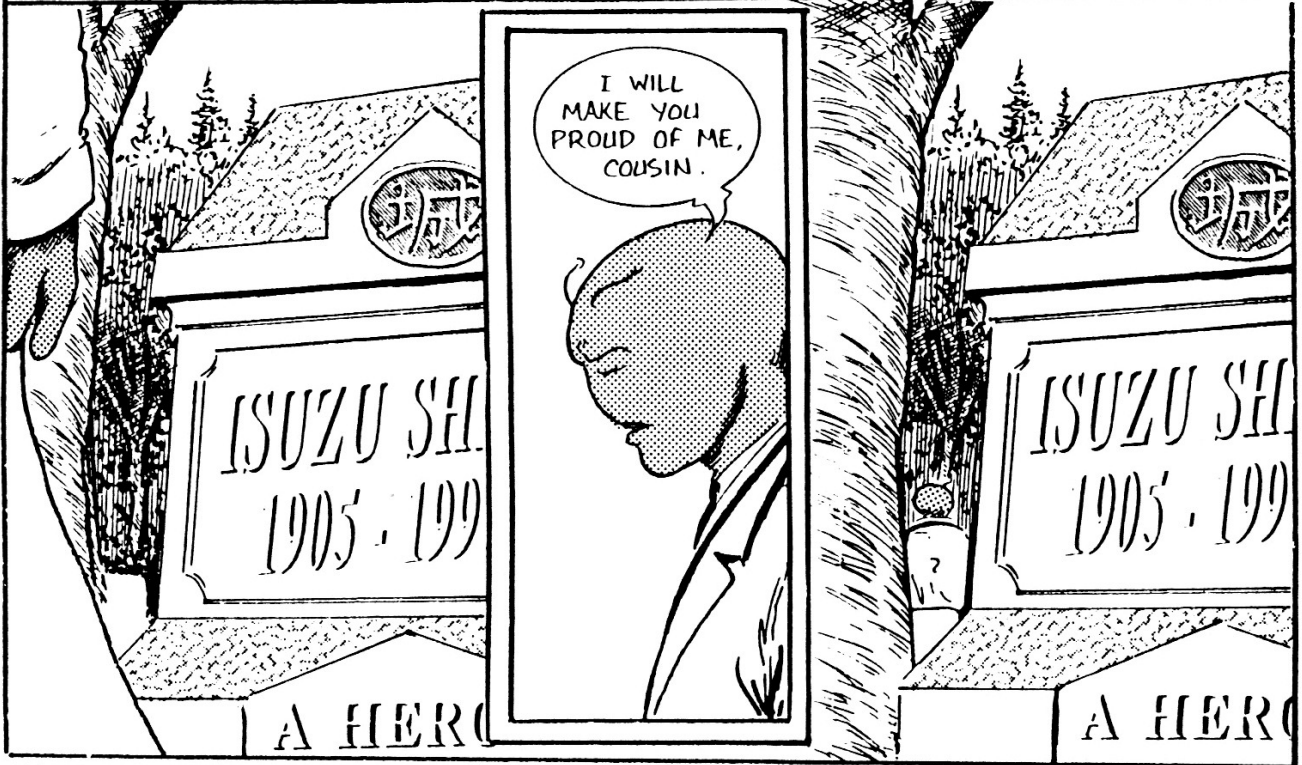
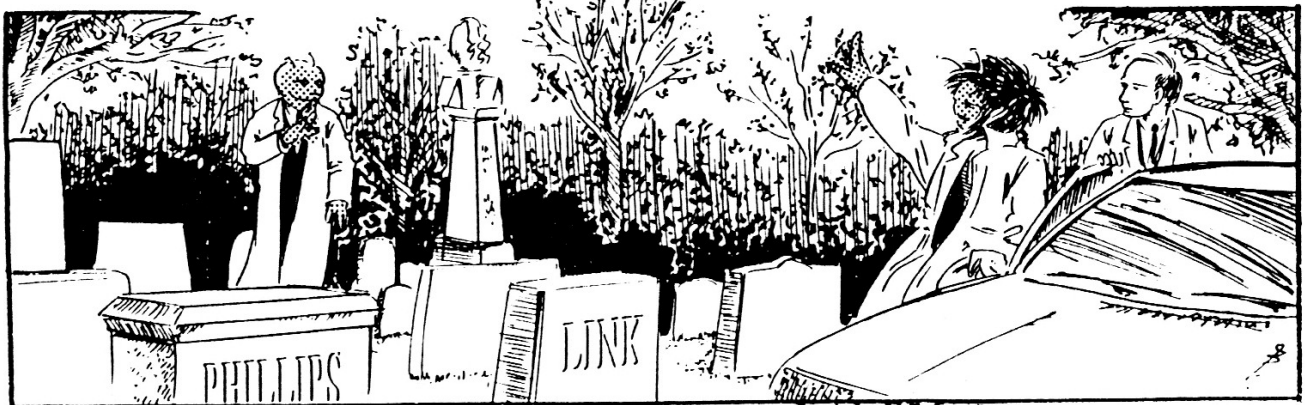
WILL YOU
BE JOINING
US, ALEX?

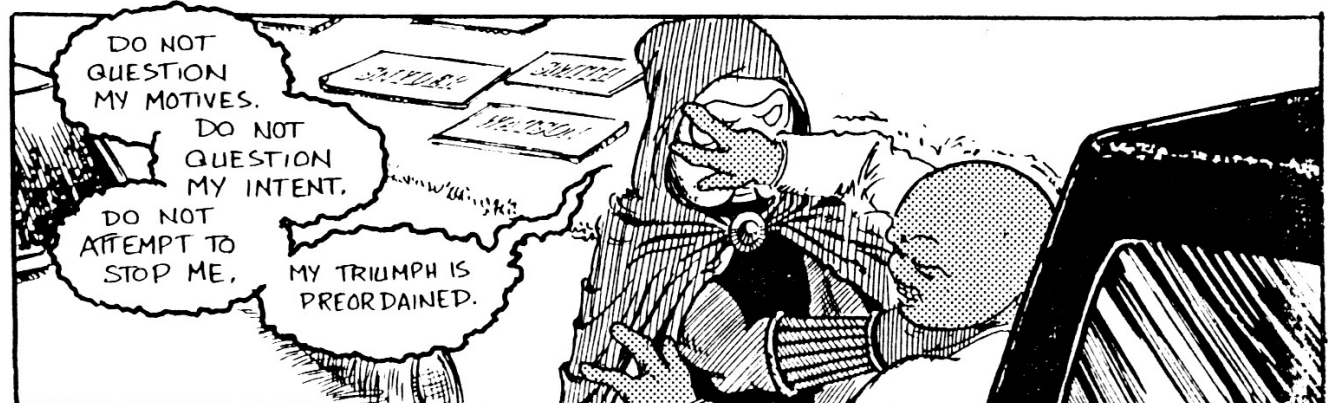
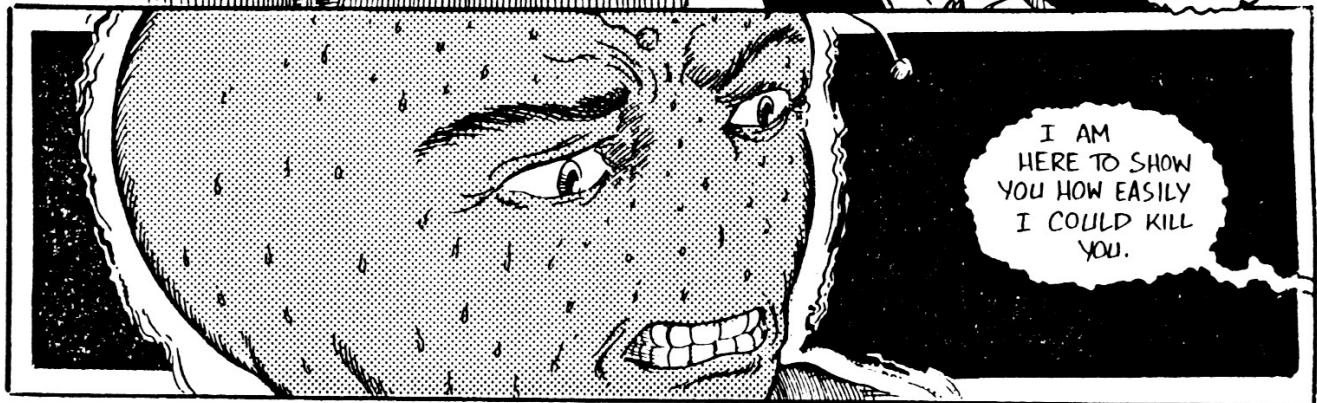
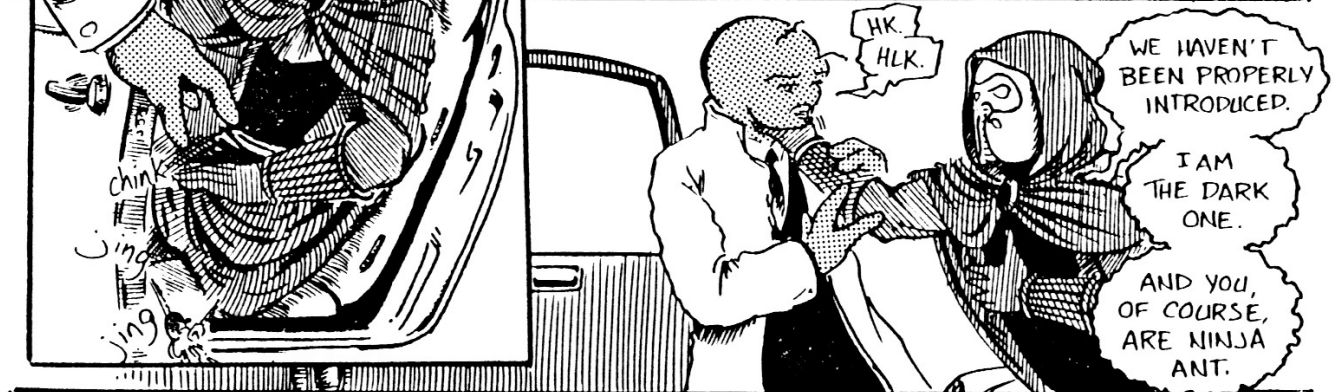
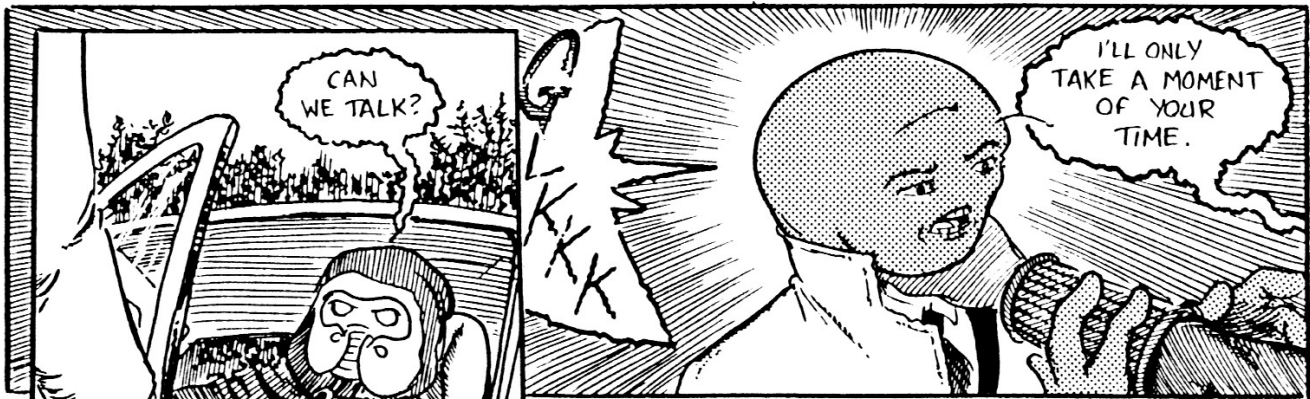
I'LL TRY
TO LATER.

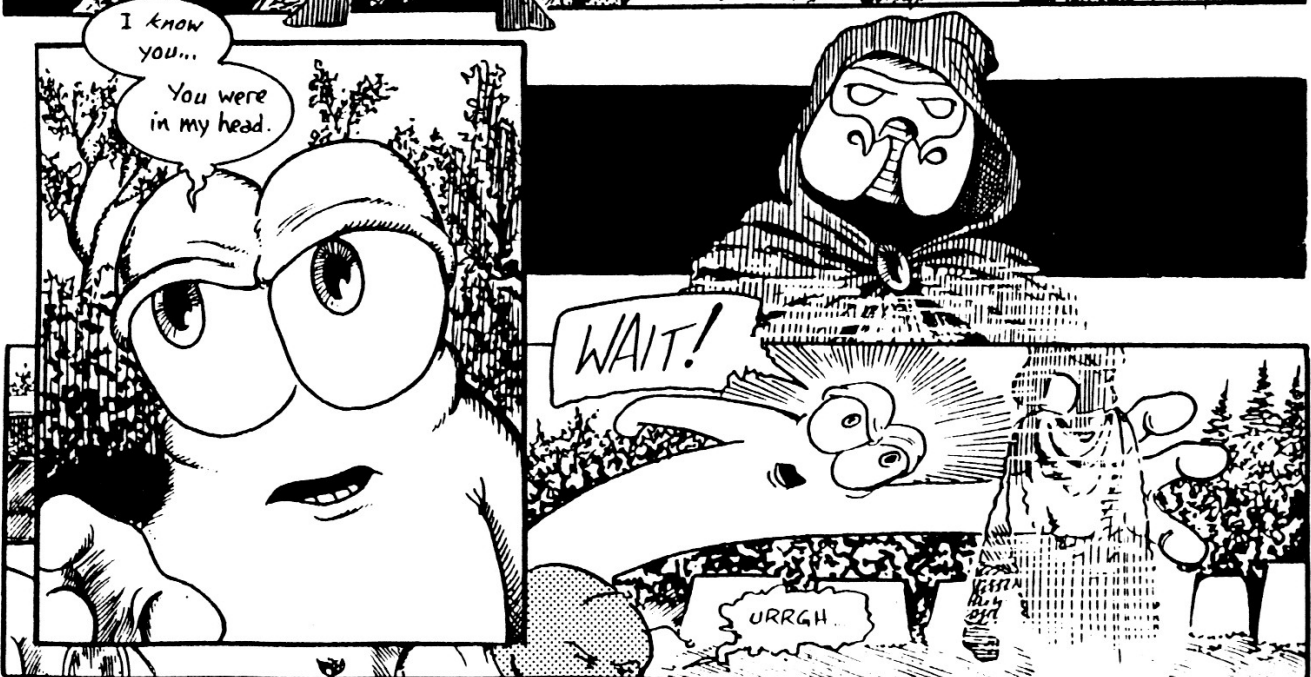
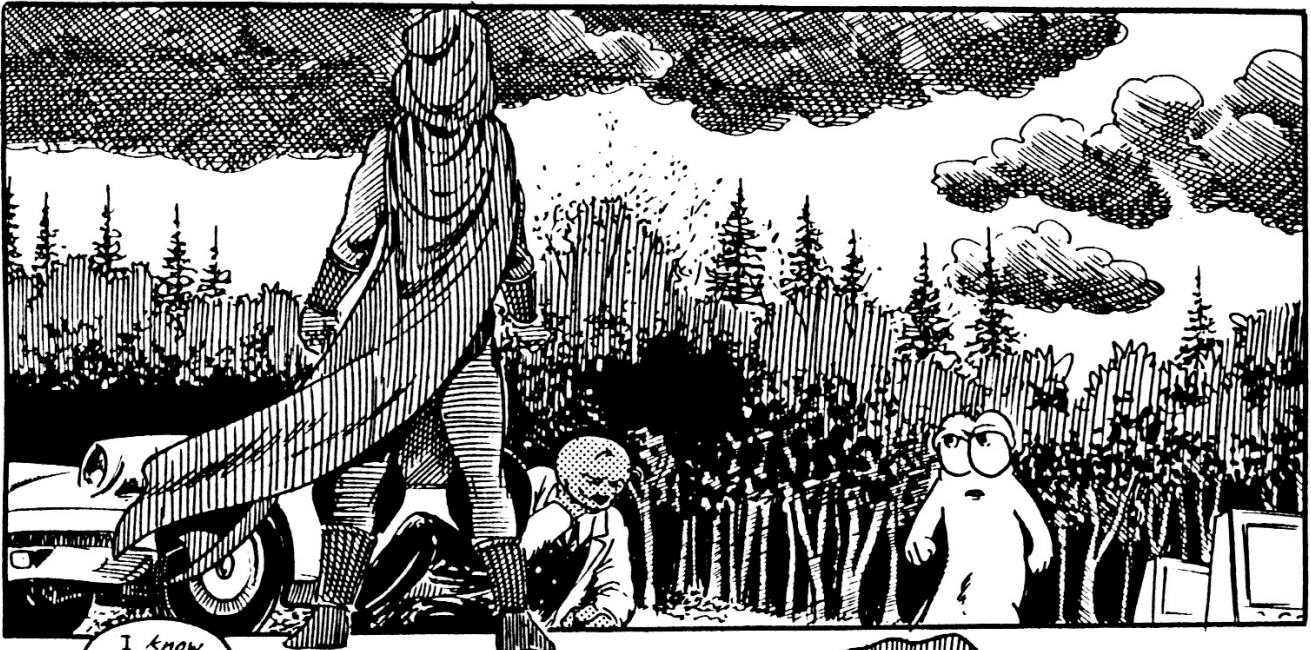
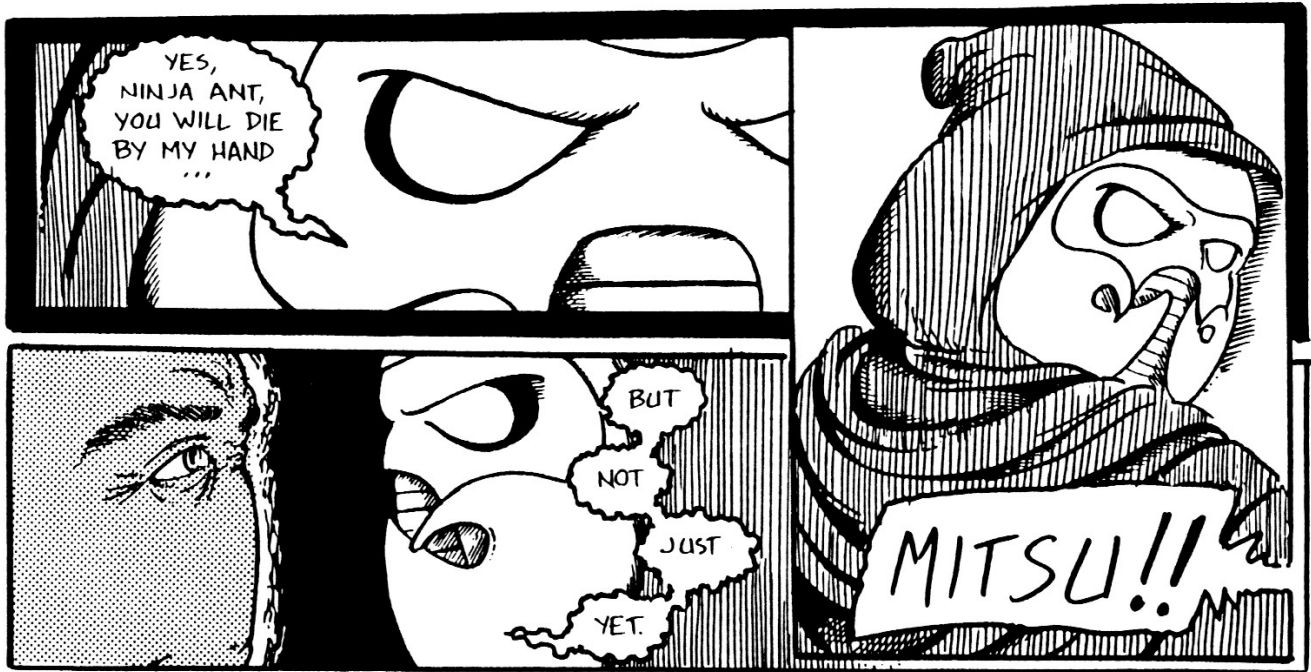
I HAVE
SOME BUSINESS
TO TAKE CARE
OF FIRST.

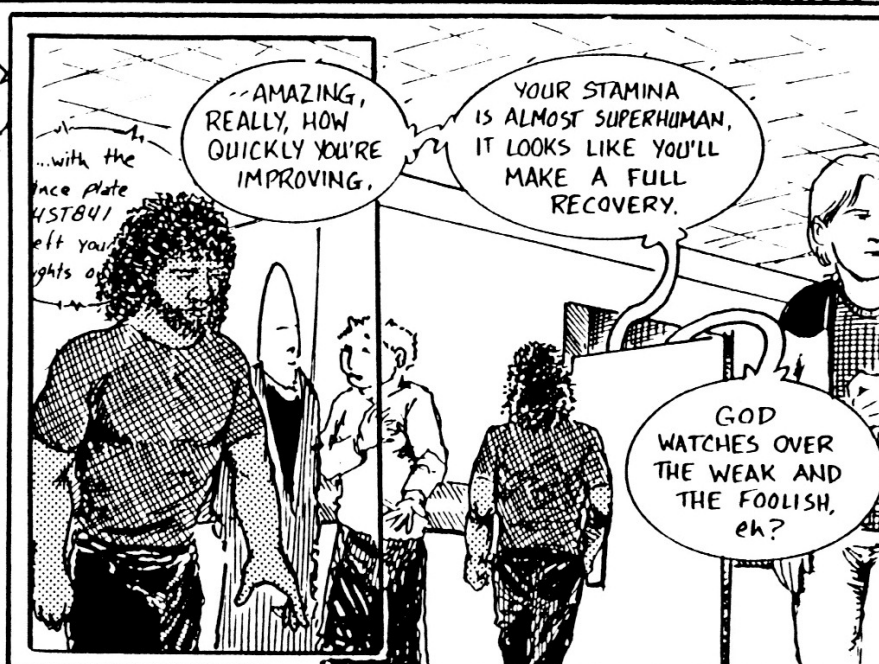
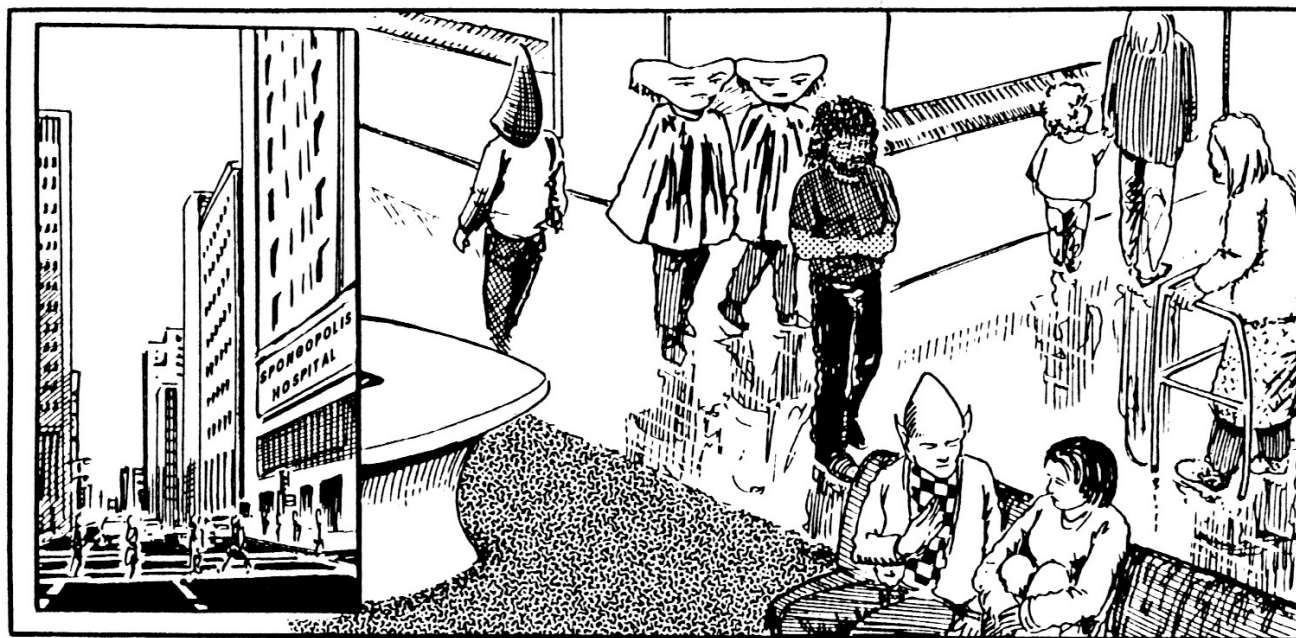
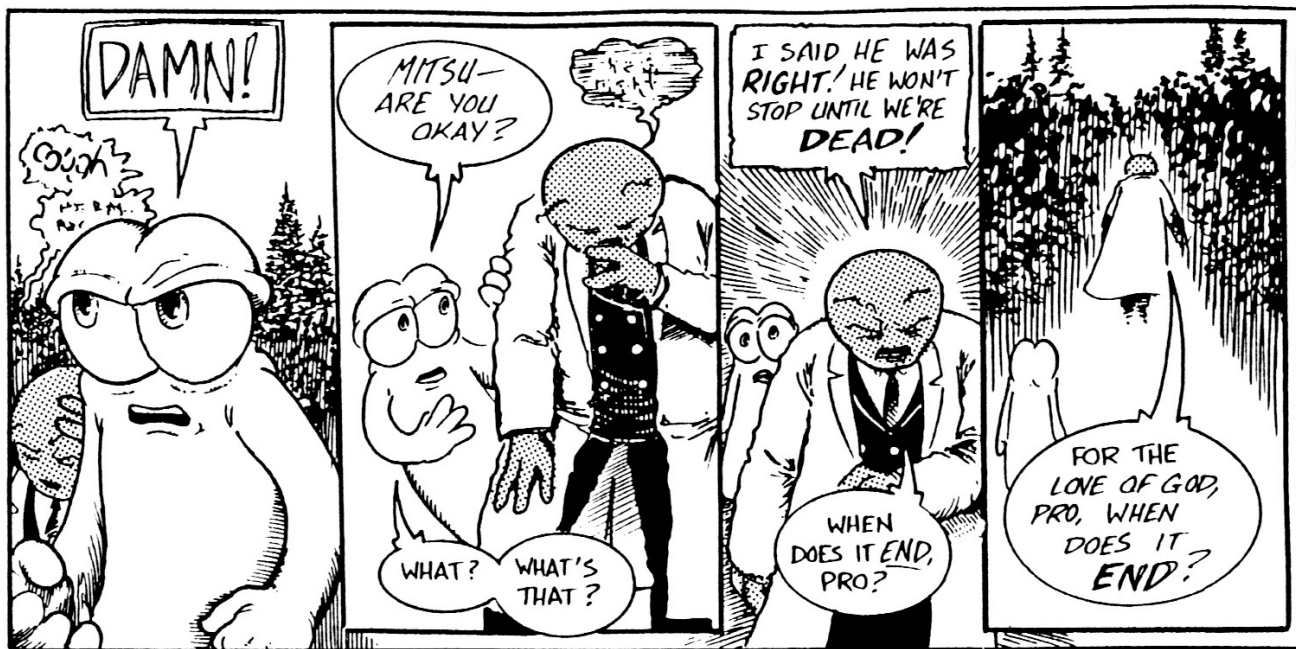
















THEY
SHOULDN'T
HAVE TO.



I HAD A
DREAM THAT I
COULD FLY ONCE,
DAWN.

HANK FLEW
TO THE STARS
AND EVERYTHING
WAS OKAY.

I SAW
THINGS NOBODY
EVER SAW.



I WAS
HAPPY
THERE

WHAT
HAPPENED,
DAWN?

HANK,
I'M SORRY.

...IT'S ALL
MY FAULT,
WHAT HAPPENED
TO YOU.



I NEVER
SHOULD HAVE
TALKED YOU INTO
HELPING ME FREE
PROMETHEUS FROM
DOCTOR CRANE--

IT WAS
ME THAT GOT
YOU INTO ALL OF
THIS MESS. I'VE
RUINED YOUR
LIFE!



...DON'T TALK
LIKE THAT, DAWN.
YOU— WE — JUST
DID THE RIGHT
THING.



...IT'D BE
NICE IF DOING
THE RIGHT THING
MEANT YOU WERE
REWARDED IN
THE END.

HERE,
WIPE YOUR
FACE.

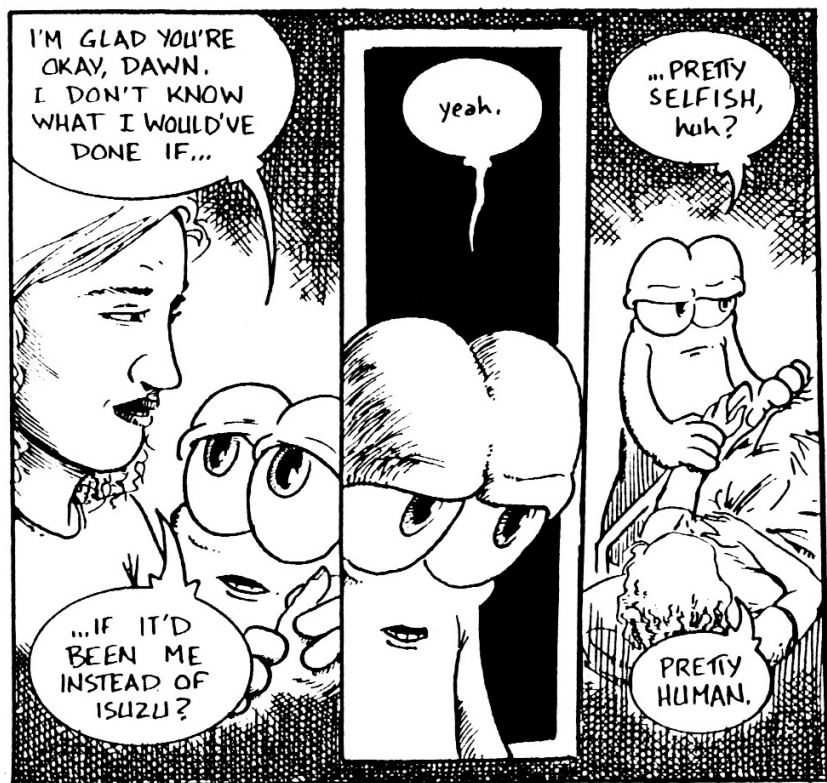
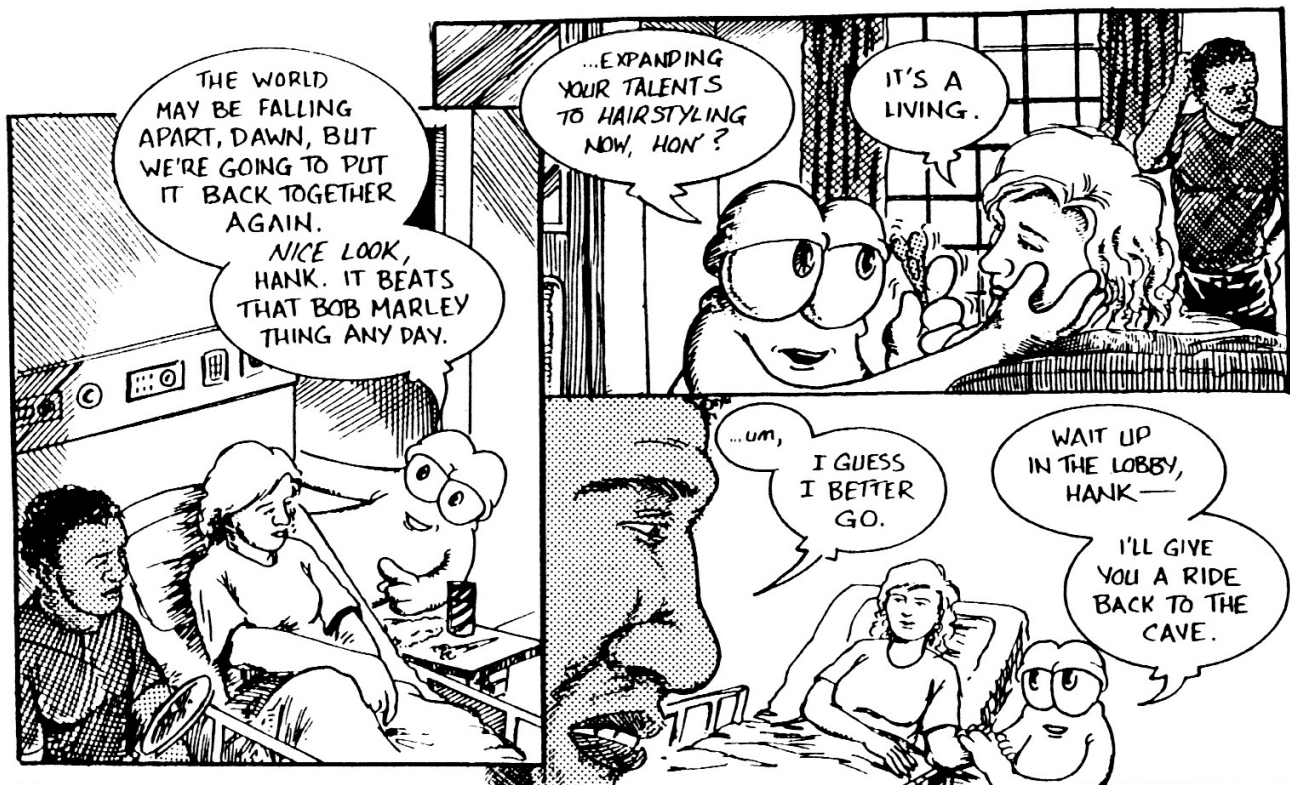


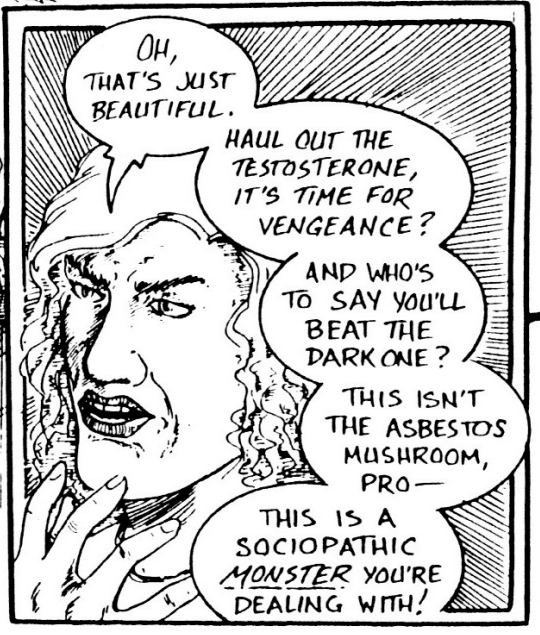
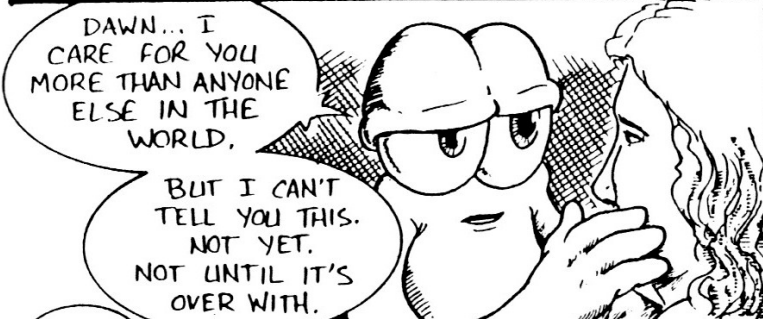
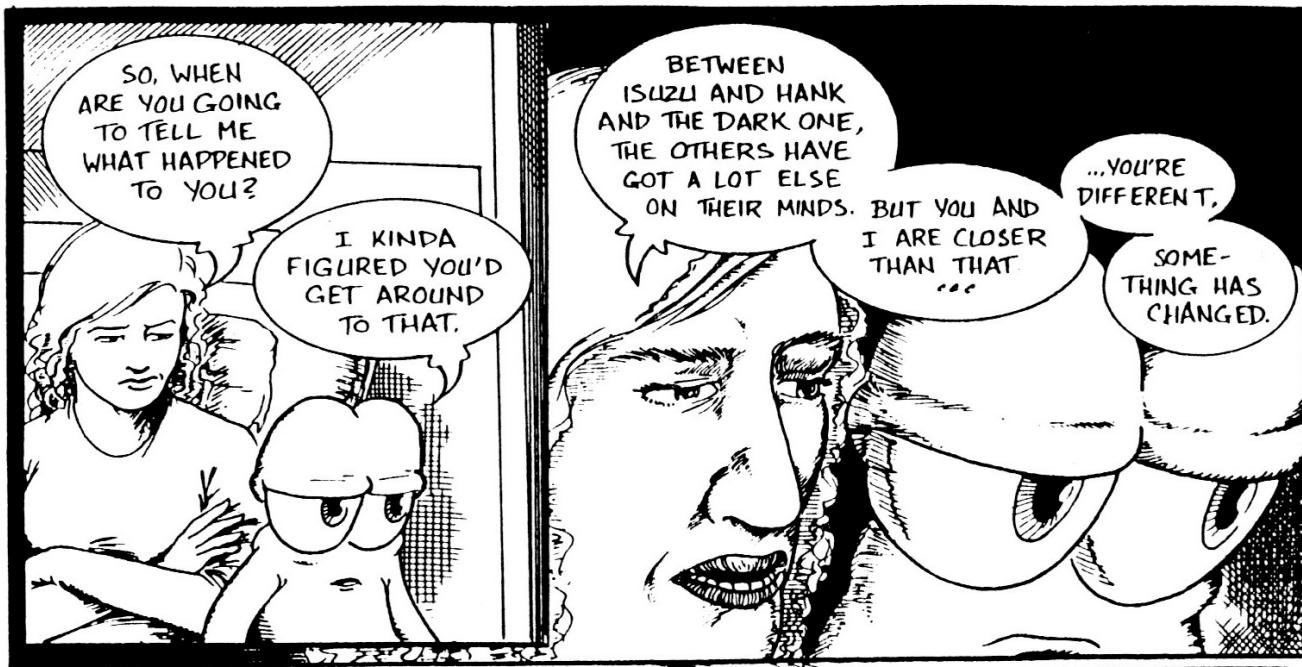
I LOOK
LIKE ME
AGAIN.

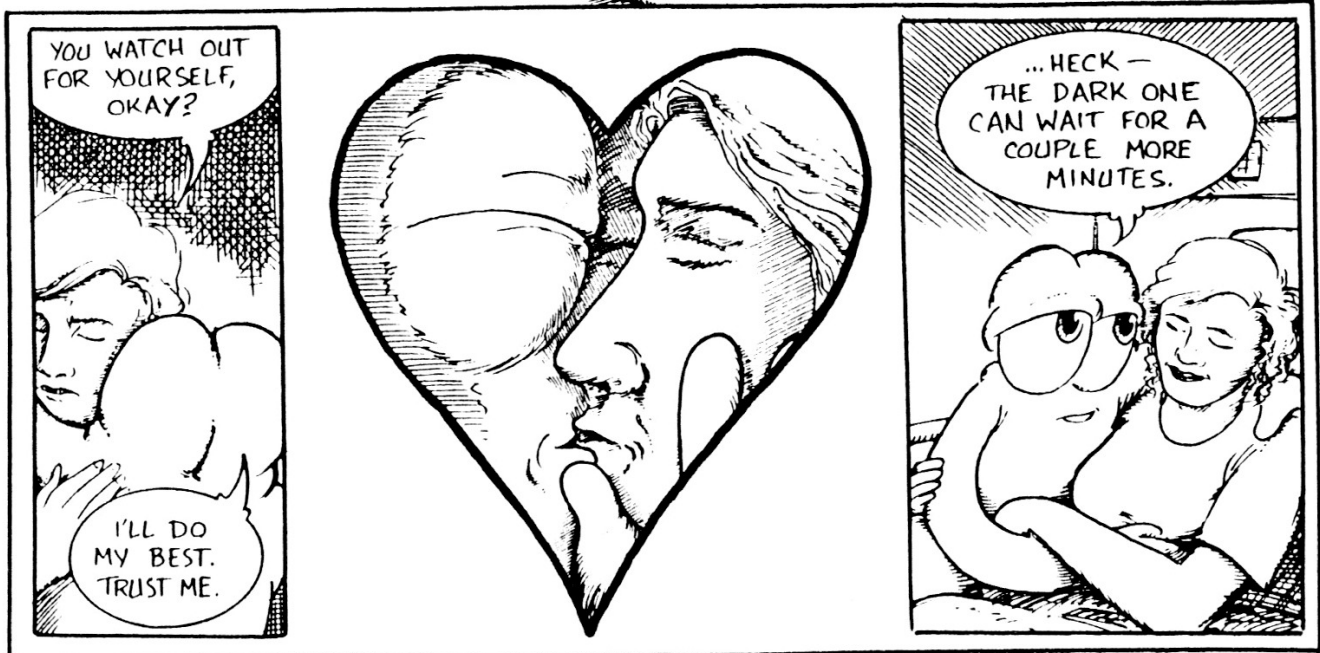
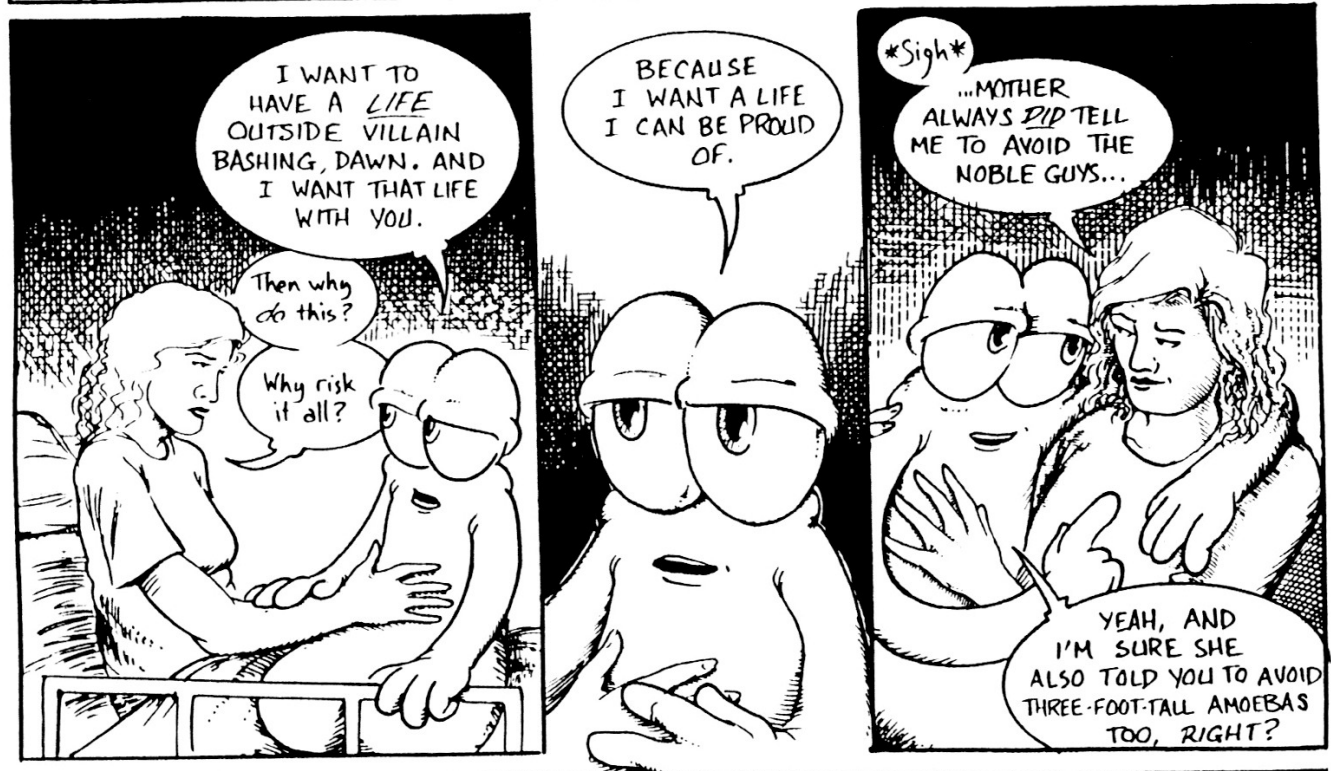
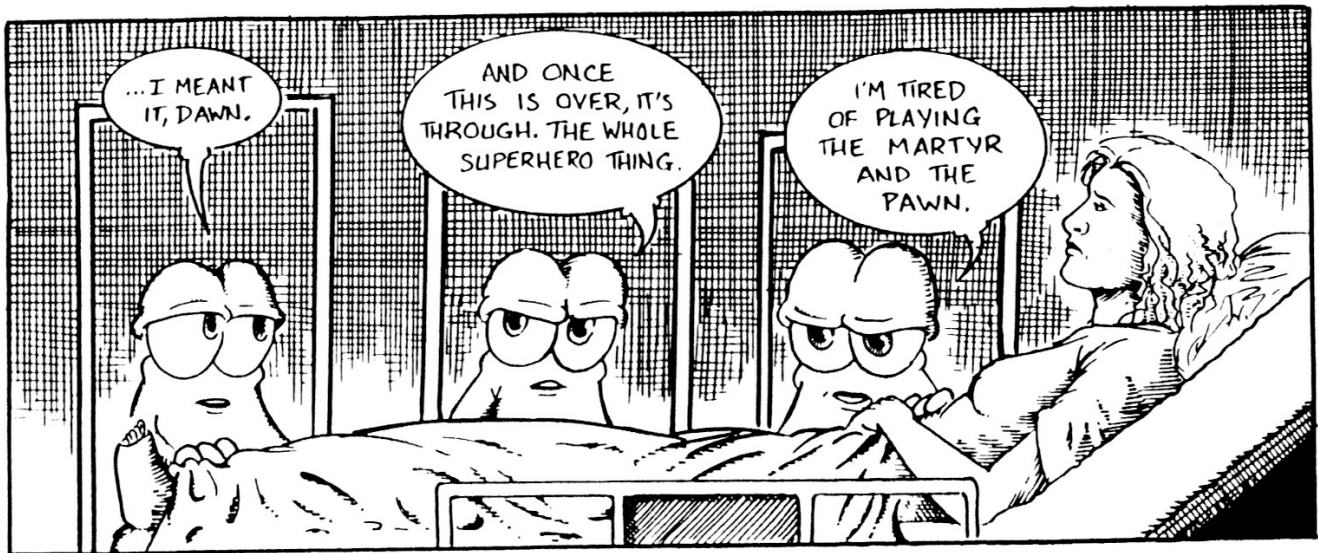
THANKS.

...I'M SORRY
I GOT ALL
WEEPY, HANK

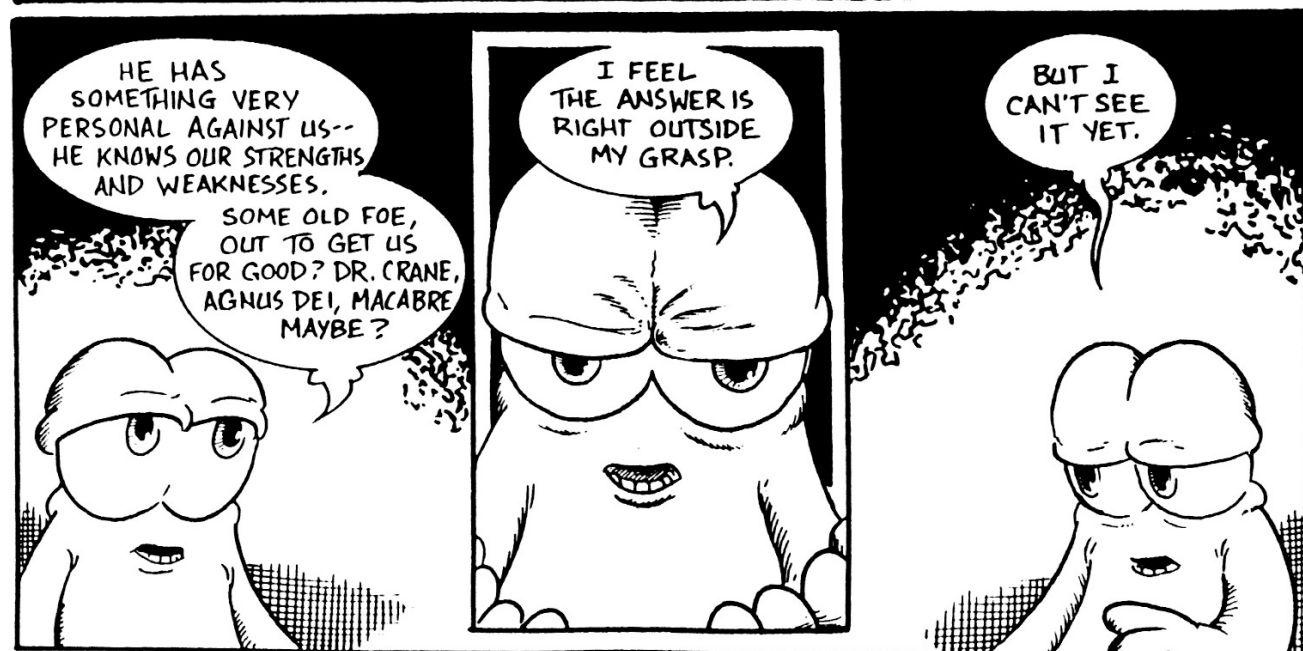
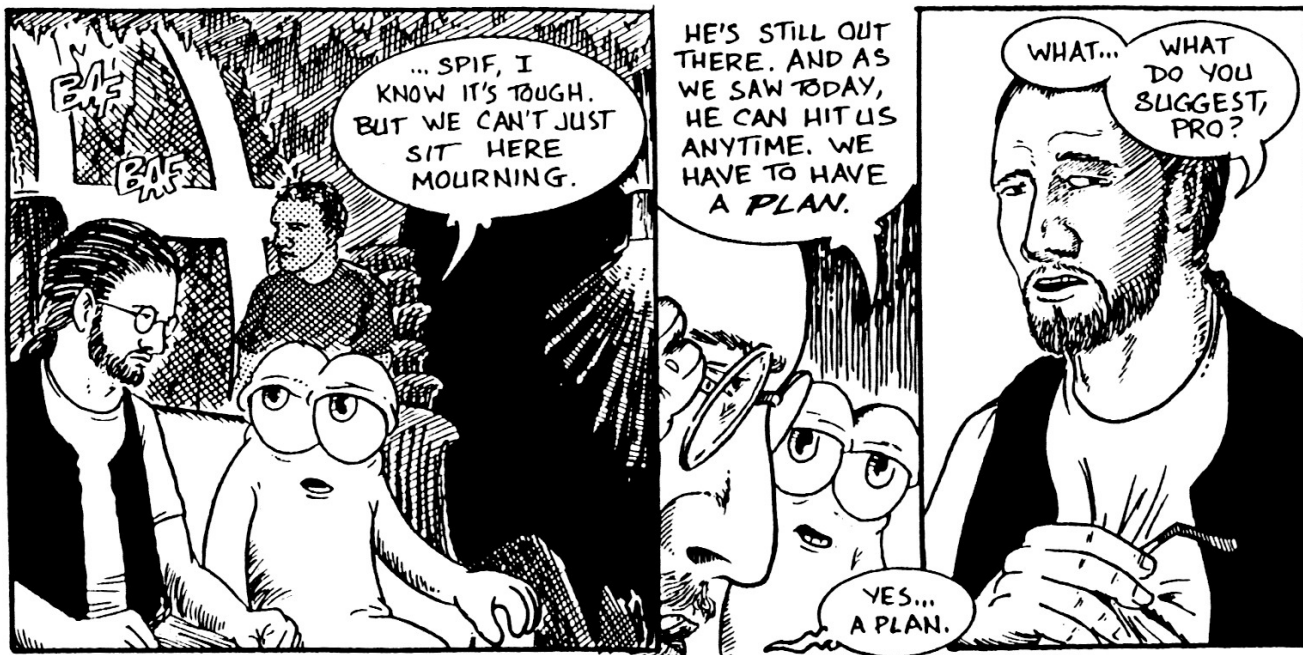
BUT JUST SITTING
HERE IN THIS STUPID HOS-
PITAL BED WHILE THE WORLD
SEEMS LIKE IT'S FALLING
APART IS GETTING TO ME.



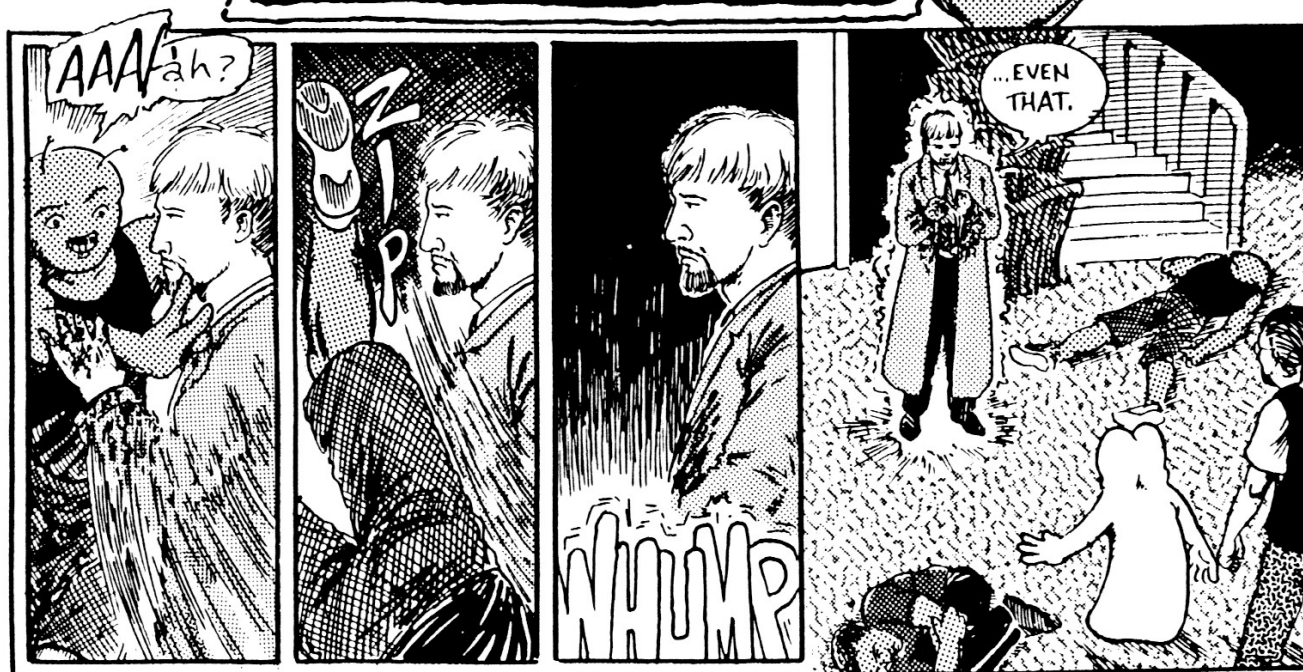


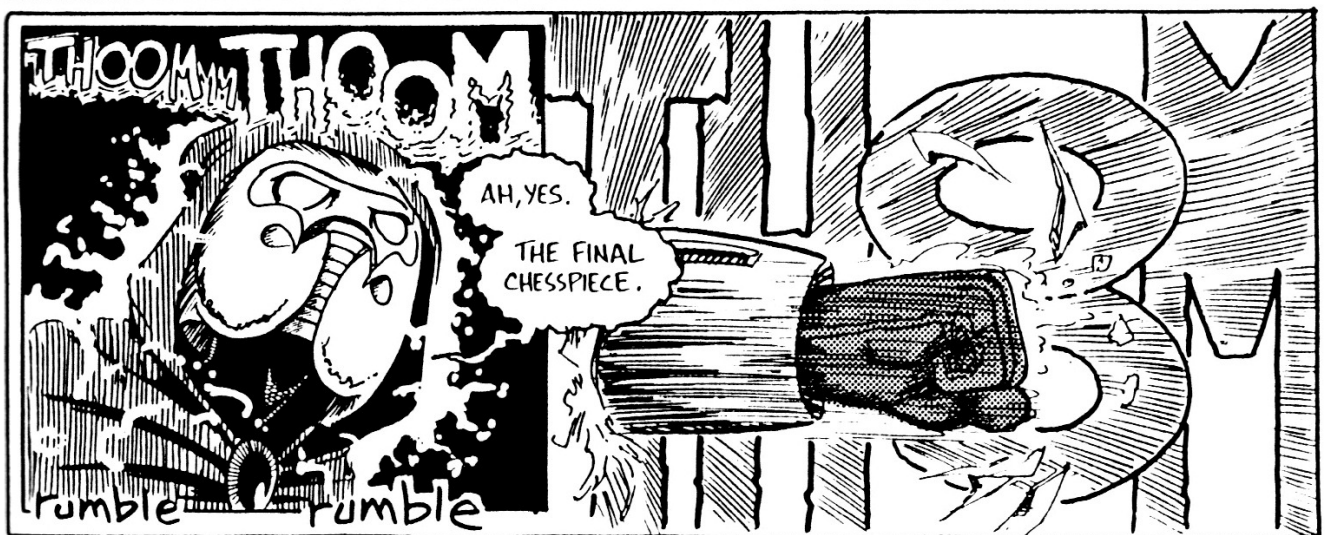














NEXT: WRATH

the slimeball speaks

I want to take a moment out to thank the fine retailers across the country who've been carrying *Amoeba Adventures*. As we're winding down our small press venture and getting ready to leap into the independent market sometime next year, these retailers have been invaluable in bringing *Amoeba Adventures* to new readers and promoting small press in general.

So thanks then to Amazing Comics of Columbus, Ohio; Comic Relief in Flint, Michigan; Comics & Comix in Berkeley and both stores in San Francisco, California; Dark Star Books and Comics in Yellow Springs, Ohio; Funny Books 'n' Stuff in Cincinnati; Comic Relief in Berkeley; Dungeon Comics in Las Vegas, Nevada; StoryTeller Comics in Goffstown, New Hampshire; Comix Experience in San Francisco, California; Einstein's Art & Entertainment in Irving, Texas; Windy City Comics in Chicago, Illinois; both Central City Comics in Columbus, Ohio; and especially big large thanks to the gang at the Laughing Ogre, also in Columbus. You folks have helped keep us going, and for that we surely thank you!

As we told you all last time, we're count-

ing down *Amoeba Adventures*, with only two issues left: the double-sized #25, coming in March, and *Amoeba Adventures* #26, due in May 1997. We're no longer taking subscriptions, so you need to pre-buy AA on an issue-by-issue basis if you wish to keep receiving it.

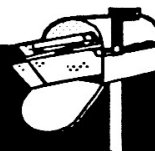
We feature two fine Canadian artists this month: Thanks to Mark Oakley of *Thieves & Kings*, our back cover artist this time out. *Thieves & Kings* is a fine indy series well worth checking out; a trade paperback collecting #1-6 is available for \$12 at your better comic shops or from I Box Publishing, P.O. Box 6671 Station 'A', Toronto Ontario M5W 1W5, Canada. Graciás, Mark! Also thanks to Scott Dutton, whose way-cool picture of the Promethean and Prometheus adorns our inside back cover this issue. Scott puts out *The Global Gazette*, a really intriguing new superhero comic — for info, write him at The Viceroy Suite #4, 739 15th Ave. SW, Calgary Alberta T2R 0R8, Canada.

See you in March for the double-sized climax to "The Dark Ages!"



Amoebamail!

PO Box 2230
University MS 38677



(We dive into the mail stack once again, with your comments on #22 and #23. Thanks again for taking the time to drop us a line, and don't forget we have e-mail access now at OXFORD_TOWN@mspress.tfnet.org- Nik)

Troy Hickman
Lafayette, Indiana

Hiya! Hey, thanks for AA #22. Hey, a superhero comic where two guys just stand around talking? What are you, nuts? Seriously, this was a very cool story, one which does what any issue of a continuing series should: it raises as many questions

as it answers. I like this new immortal character, this Rod Stewar— um, I mean Jacob Potter. Is he going to be sticking around for a while? I'm still not entirely sure I trust the guy, though; just a hunch. Hey, here's a question: given that Pro hangs out with superbeings and has had so many wild adventures, would he have any doubt in the existence of immortals? (Of course, given all the crap he's gone through over the years, I wouldn't be surprised if he doubted pretty much everything.) Really smooth dialogue throughout (and since I know first-hand how tough it is to carry a single scene conversation

over the length of a whole book, I have to say my hat is off to you). Max turned in one of his best art jobs, too; sometimes his stuff is a little cramped, but the openness of the backdrops here really worked to his advantage. A really nice job overall.

Scott Davis
Storyteller's Comics
Goffstown, New Hampshire

I finally got a chance to sit down and read *Amoeba Adventures* #23. Great story! I have no idea where you are going with this, but I'm sure enjoying the ride. I open each issue thinking "what's going to happen to the team in this issue?"

Max's artwork gets better with every issue too. Awesome news about your becoming a full-sized comic. I'm having a tough time to get anyone to try the small press stuff in my store. I have regular readers of both *Amoeba Adventures* and *Xeno's Arrow* at this point, but I've discovered that most comics readers don't want to even give a small press series a chance. I certainly haven't given up hope, though. These small press series have more heart in them than almost anything published by the mainstream companies at this point, and they're more fun to read.

(Now why can't all retailers be like this guy?)

Dave Van Domelen
Columbus, Ohio

Drat, and I was so sure Dr. Crane was the Dark One. Oh well.

With Alex in the bad guy seat, I think I can see why he'd consider the All-Spongy Squadron his enemies. After all, they *did* turn him into the Backwards Man. Sure, they *thought* they were curing him, but in his backwards memories they were the ones who afflicted him in the first place!

Teri S. Wood
Banning, California

Yahhhhh! What do you think yer doing? I *like* Karate Kactus! Bad comic creator! Bad! Bad! Razzerfrazzerrazzer-fraz!

Anyway, just wanted to get that off'a my chest and let ya know that *Amoeba*

Adventures is still one of the best little comics out there — small press *or* mainstream! Darn good stuff!

(The eminently gracious Ms. Wood is, of course, the force behind the acclaimed indy comic Wandering Star, available at finer comics shops everywhere.)

Michael Neno
Columbus, Ohio

I just read #22 and #23 of your fine series; very entertaining! You're definitely on a roll here, with your superior characterization and plot mechanics. And the suspense! Mr. Ink's fine portrayal of body language also stands out. I'm so glad this series is going full-size because it's just too good to not reach as large an audience as possible. The only superhero series I read on a regular basis are *The Spectre*, *Amoeba Adventures*, *Madman*, and *Nexus* (when drawn by Steve Rude); fine company indeed. Looking forward to more.

Matt Kelleigh
Seattle, Washington

Alex did it? What the &%#!? Damn, you better have a good explanation of this. By the way, what's Alex's origin? I mean, I'm familiar enough with him to realize that he's associated with the gang, but I can't remember where he came from. Was he one of Macabre's men? He was the one who was displaced in time,

NEXT ISSUE: This is the big one — the cataclysmic climax to the Dark Ages as the revealed Alex takes on the entire All-Spongy Squadron and we learn The Dark One's secrets once and for all. It's a special double-sized extravaganza that marks the finale of over three years' worth of storytelling by Nik 'n' Max. Look for *Amoeba Adventures* #25 coming your way in March. (OK, so it's a little later than normal — whadaya want, it's double-sized!)

right? Now he turns around and does this? What a complete dick! This doesn't sit right... nosiree... but hey, you sure got a way with twist endings! Yow! Two more months 'til the next issue? You can't do this to us!

Hey: I just read Eric Hess's letter in #23. He is just like, the most observant reader I've ever seen in small press.

(Alex first appeared in *Amoeba* #6, and his tale is told in the "Details of Design" storyline from #6-10, still available from me for a mere \$7.50 postpaid for the set. Or, you can just stay tuned for next issue as all the long-awaited revelations are made in our next-to-last issue! - Nik)

What *really* goes on behind the scenes of *Amoeba Adventures*?



Find out in the pages of ***Small Press Feedback* #24** as **Troy Hickman** goes one-on-one with **Nik Dirga**, creator and writer of ***Amoeba Adventures***, in an interview about making comics, going indy, and the future of ***Amoeba Adventures***.

SMALL PRESS FEEDBACK: The world's best source on small press comics since 1992. To order ***Small Press Feedback* #24**, send \$3 to Allied Comics c/o Bob Elinskas, 1805 Girard St., Utica NY 13501.



THE UFO CHECKLIST



Here's a list of the latest releases in Fall 1996 by the members of the United Fanzine Organization, a co-op of self-publishers interested in creating good comics. For information about joining the UFO, contact current Chairman John Yeo, Jr. at P.O. Box 2620, E. Peoria IL 61611.

LOOKING FOR MORE GREAT SMALL PRESS COMICS? CHECK OUT THE LATEST FROM THE UFO!

☒ **The Adventurers #7:** "Hell on Earth" continues as John Yeo's heroes face their greatest challenges yet, as a demon invasion overtakes New York and leaves The Adventurers helpless! Fine superhero action in the classic *Teen Titans* vein. 28 page digest, \$1.50 from John Yeo, Jr. at P.O. Box 2620, E. Peoria IL 61611.

☒ **The Global Gazette #3:** Is the world ready for the adventures of Atomic Fruit? Written by Scott Dutton and drawn by Derek Mah. All this lunacy in a 20 page digest, \$2.00 from Scott Dutton, 739 15th Avenue SW Apt. 4, Calgary, Alberta, T2R 0R8 Canada.

☒ **Holey Crullers #3:** Troy Hickman and Jerry Smith's groundbreaking small press superhero comic continues with two stories this issue. "Heir of Truth" introduces the heroes Charm and Strangeness and explores their mysterious past, while "Elsewhere" features the Analog Kid's search for his missing mentor. 28 page digest, \$1.50 from Troy Hickman, 3200 S. 9th St. Apt. A, Lafayette IN 47905.

☒ **Rhino Bytes #1:** Don't touch that dial! This is the old *F-Man* with a new title. Denny Stephens' hilarious ne'er do-well hero and his sidekick Rhino Boy fight evil and other bad stuff in this 24 page digest, \$1.50 from Denny Stephens, P.O. Box 716, Ortonville MI 48462.

☒ **The Professional Unofficial Chicago Comicon 1996 Whip Cream Jam Comic #1:** Don't try to take this comic seriously, because it could utterly damage your mental health! Scott McClung and an all-star cast of creators bring you a goofy, wacky tale of the Whip Cream Factory. With cameos by small pressers including Larry Blake, Pam Bliss, Greg Hyland and more. 12 page digest a steal for a mere dime from Scott McClung, 537 S. University #6, Norman OK 73069.

☒ **Tetragrammaton Fragments #152:** The official newsletter of small press's oldest and most distinguished co-op, now entering its 28th year! Full of news, comics and reviews - sample copy \$2 from Chairman John Yeo, address above.

...And still out there:

• **AG Graphix Presents #5:** 24 page digest, \$1.50 from Anthony Gray, 1103 West St., Utica NY 13501.

• **Amoeba Adventures #22:** 28 page digest, \$2.00 from Nik Dirga, P.O. Box 2230, University MS 38677-2230

• **Global Gazette Special #1:** 24 page digest, \$1 from Scott Dutton, 739 15th Avenue SW Apt. 4, Calgary, Alberta, T2R 0R8 Canada.

• **Mister Midnite Special #3:** 28 page digest,

\$1.50 from Bob Elinskas, 1805 Girard St., Utica NY 13501.

• **Project 72 #1:** 20 page digest, \$1 from Jason Wright, 1813 Girard St., Utica NY 13501.

• **Ronnie & David #14:** 8 page digest, 50¢ from Rich Watson, 172-32 133rd Ave. #11-A, Jamaica NY 11434.

• **Time's Up #5:** 28 page digest, \$1 from Patrick J. Lee, 10720 S. Lakewood Blvd #335, Downey CA 90241-3555.



SCOTT
DUTTON

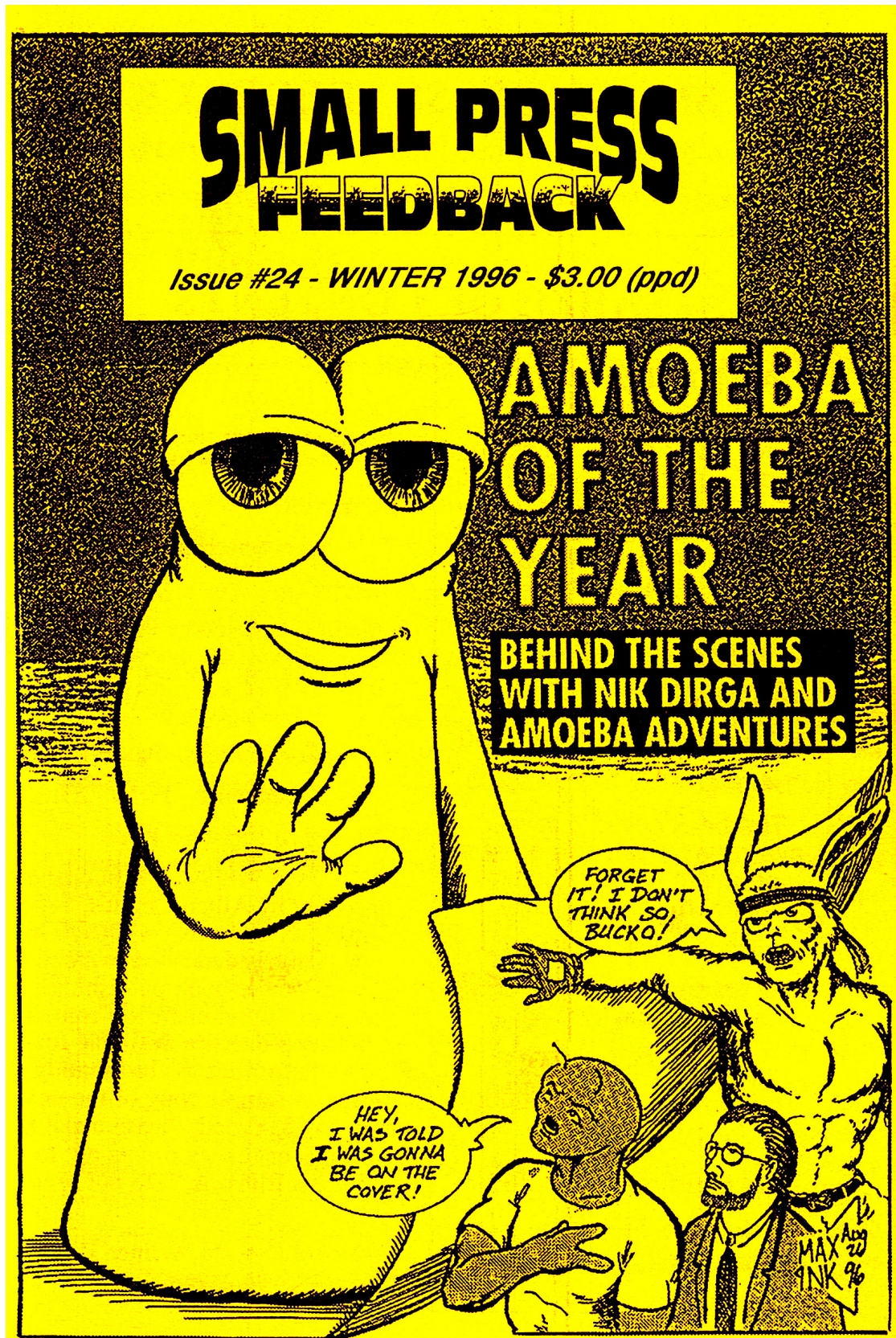
GEEZ!
THIS GUY NEEDS
SOME SHOULDERS!



Ph'awk

SPECIAL 2020 BONUS SECTION

Here's a lengthy interview with Troy Hickman published in Bob Elinskas' terrific long-running zine Small Press Feedback in late 1996. It's the longest interview I ever gave and while some of it definitely reeks of a rather pompous 25-year-old's opinions, it's an interesting look back as Amoeba Adventures came to an end. Life got in the way of the "big press" plans for the book unfortunately but I'd still never trade the eight years of publishing for anything. Thanks Bob and Troy for the interview back in the day!



A Modern Prometheus:

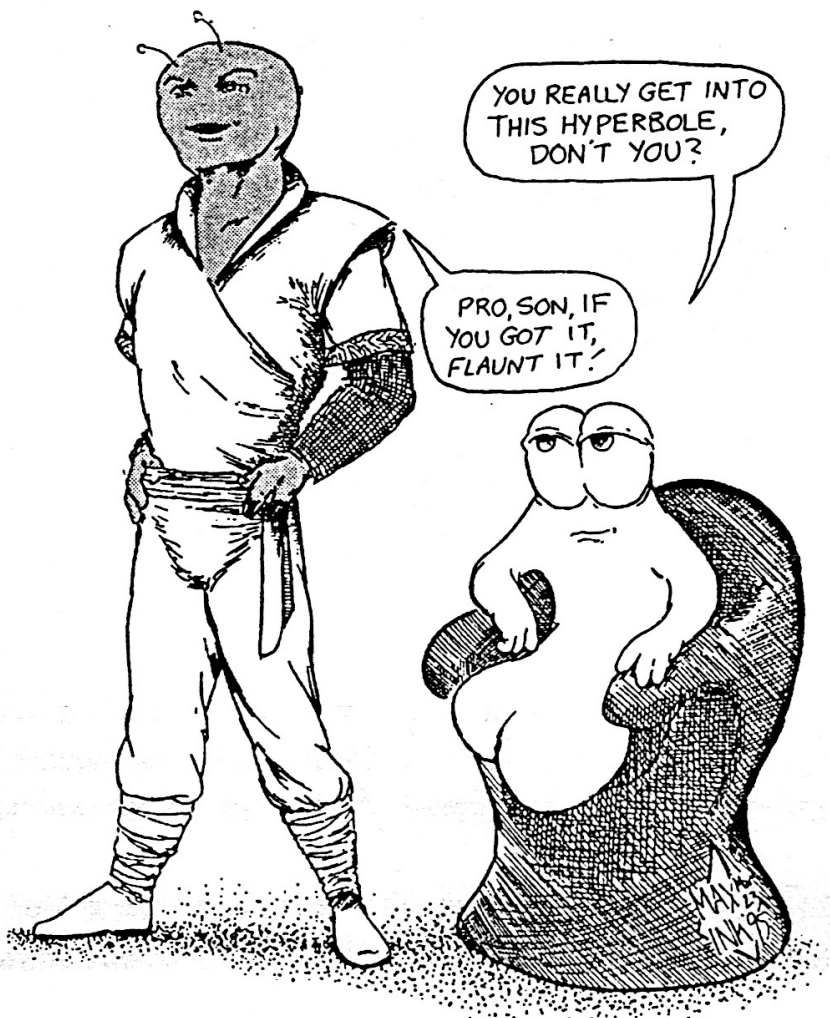
Nik Dirga Creates a Small Press Monster

An Interview by Troy Hickman

*I started reading **Amoeba Adventures** all the way back at #3, and even by that time, Nik Dirga was winning critical acclaim for the comic. He's become such a fixture of the small press community that it's easy to take for granted just how he got to this point: by creating some of the finest self-published comics any of us have ever read. Nik's work never fails to be poignant, funny, enlightening, and action-packed, usually all at the same time. A lot of people these days talk about the sorry state of comics, but Nik does something about it, by writing the kind of stories that devotees of the medium have always wanted to read, and by doing it consistently, issue after issue.*

I'm sure he gets asked quite often how he's able to create such a wonderful comic, and Nik probably answers with some explanation of the craft of writing. As his friend, though, as well as a fan, I can tell you how he really does it: by being himself. It's simply a matter of

Nik being a great guy, and letting that humanity come through in his work. So when we're amazed at the realism of Prometheus' naivete, or Ninja Ant's heartache, or Karate Cactus' wisdom, it's just Nik putting himself to paper. Now, for a change, let's cut out the fictional middlemen, and go directly to the source.



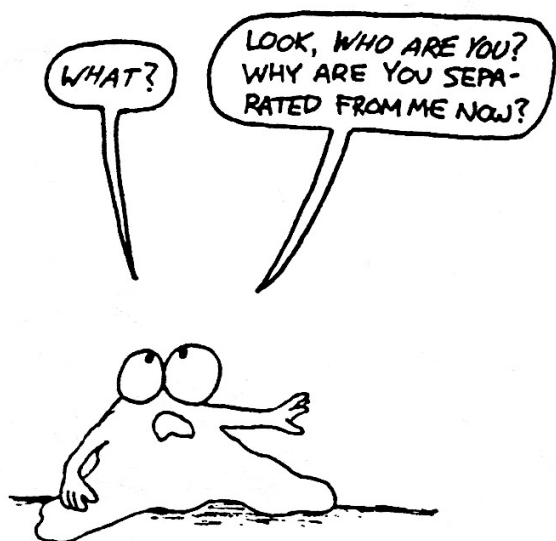
SPF: I've known you for years, and yet I know next to nothing about your life pre-small press. Were you created full-blown from the head of Matt Feazell, or what?

ND: Well, the short version of my biography as sanctioned by the Dirga Estate is that I was born in Fairbanks, Alaska in 1971, an Air Force brat. My parents moved to a little ex-mining town called Grass Valley in Northern California around 1975, and we stayed there until 1990, when I began college at the University of Mississippi. It was right around there my small press experiences began, too, although I'd been creating goofy comics and doodles for years. I graduated from Ole Miss in 1994 with a couple of degrees, and began working at a local alternative weekly newspaper. This past spring, through a series of maneuver-

ings and shocking turnabouts, I became the Editor of it, and now toil 40-50 hours a week as the head honcho of *Oxford Town*, north central Mississippi's largest weekly newspaper.

My first comic I can recall was the eminently forgettable *Super Ant versus Bugs Bunny*, which I scribbled on butcher paper in crayons when I was about seven. "Super Ant" was my first creation, a distant predecessor to the Ninja Ant who runs around in *Amoeba Adventures* to this day. Incidentally, "Bugs Bunny" was my creation, too, but those jerks at Warner still refuse to back me up on this.

Anyway, I created Prometheus sometime in '86 during a really boring junior high science class. For a good three or four years prior to that, a friend named Chris Matthews and I had been messing around with a bunch of Marvel rip-off characters we called the "Galaxy Comics Universe" -- thinly veiled bozos like Robotron, El Jaguar, Silver Sorceress and The Arachnoid. Chris and I always talked about taking over the world with these characters -- this was in sixth grade or so, mind you -- but we never did much more than talk about it and do really bad drawings of our heroes and villains, a good hundred or so of them. Prometheus was the first character I created that I felt was *my* creation, rather than just me imitating the comics



I liked. Plus, and this was an important factor to me at the time, he was *really* easy to draw. Two eyes and a blob, what could be easier than that?

SPF: The story of Prometheus started out as doodling in your notebook as a teenager. At the time you created the character, did you have even the slightest idea that he'd someday play such a major role in your life?

ND: I think I had a vague feeling at the time that Prometheus was going to be something that *lasted*, as opposed to The Archnoid or Robotron... There was a kind of universality in him that I feel persists to this day, the everyday Joe caught up in the events much larger than himself. I was really big on Woody Allen, had just seen *Annie Hall* and *Sleeper* for the first time, when I started fiddling around with Pro, and so there's a lot of that sort of whining-nebbish-with-a-heart quality to him. The other characters -- Rambunny, Ninja Ant, Spif -- were all just parody characters at first, so Prometheus was



the only one that really resonated to me. I knew somehow or another I'd be dealing with him for a good long time -- although I had no idea that ten years later, I'd have put out 30 or so comics with him in it! I thought he'd just be something I'd be doodling in the margins of my notebooks through college, nothing much bigger than that.

SPF: Let's talk about your characters. What purpose does each of the Squadron members serve, dramatically speaking?

ND: They're all facets of my somewhat-fractured personality, to an extent. Prometheus is more "me" than any of them, and his growth since 1986 reflects my own changes as I left tortured adolescence behind and entered tortured young adulthood. The others, as I said above, started out as little more than cutesy archetypes;



Rambunny "the tough guy," Spif the joker, etc. Since then they've all really grown into their own men, and women.

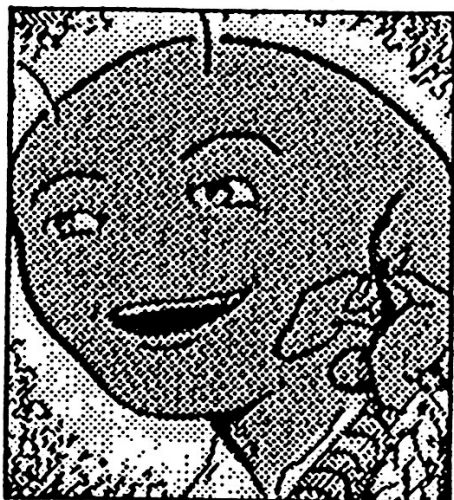
Rambunny and Spif were the first two characters I created after Prometheus. Rambunny hasn't really changed fundamentally since I first drew him barging on the scene with a machine gun in his hand - but he's gained a lot of layering in his character, more depth than the sort of Stallone or Wolverine figure he was modeled after. I have a lot of fun with Rambunny, and in some ways he's my favorite character to write, because his world view is so *basic*. He *acts*, plain and simple, and deals with the consequences later. Rambunny may not be able to talk with you about Kant or unified field theory, but he will in some ways show you far more resonant truths about life and humanity than any other character could. He's the "id" of the book,

stomping around raising hell.

Now Spif, to me, was a lot harder to get a handle on. His character has been mutating constantly for the past ten years, and is about to change a good deal more. He started out in the role Ninja Ant now has, as the carefree joker, but then went through a brief phase as the brooding loner before emerging as the brains of the gang. He provides a kind of moral conscience to the team, and gives it a little bit of a human face amongst the cacti and amoebae.

Ninja Ant serves as the set-up for most of the punchlines in *Amoeba Adventures*. It's terrific writing him, because he's never serious for more than a moment. The world is a big playground to him, and he can't help riffing and cracking jokes even in the





darkest moments. I have never considered *Amoeba Adventures* to be just a "comic" comic, but at the same time I don't think I'd like it half as much if the jokes were taken out. I agree with Ninja Ant on this: life *is* a funny thing, damned peculiar if you think about it long at all. Much as I love Flannery O'Connor, there's a classic line of hers at the very end of her story "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" that I just can't let myself agree with too much: "It's no



real pleasure in life." God knows it might be true, but I prefer to be Ninja Ant sometimes and laugh in the ashes, you know?

As for the other characters: Karate Kactus is a composite of the "mentor" figure and my vision of what a standard "Silver Age" comics hero like Green Lantern or The Flash would be like in today's world of gray areas. He wants very much to just fight the bad guys and save the day, but life's a little more complex than that. He is an iron will in a world of plastic and rubber.



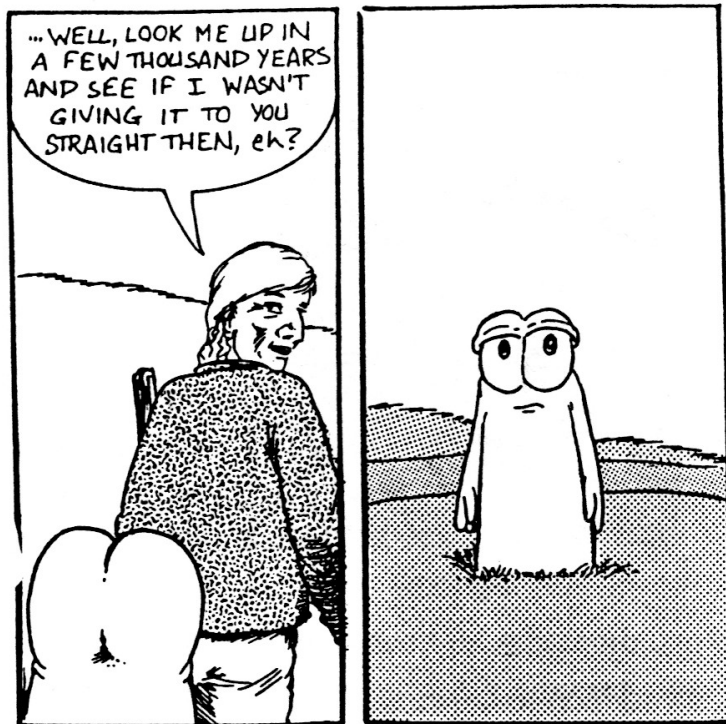
And Dawn, who came on the scene somewhat later than the others in *Amoeba #8* or so, was my attempt to write a believable, non-stereotyped woman superhero character. It's been rocky going -- I think the first issue I really got a firm handle on her was #16 or so -- but I'm proud with what I've accomplished with her. Many women friends of mine say she's realistic in a way that doesn't make it seem like I'm

trying overly to *make* her real. I like writing her because with her, I really have to work at becoming something else -- the other characters are similar enough to me I can fudge it some, but Dawn is a woman, about as different from me as you can get, and it's a real challenge making her work as a character.

SPF: Writers tend to keep coming back to the same underlying themes, sometimes without even realizing it. Would you say there are any recurring themes in *Amoeba Adventures*?

ND: It's funny, because when I did the first 11 or so issues, I was just trying to tell a fun story. I wasn't going for too deep a message. But after #11 -- which I felt was the real turning point issue between "old" and "new" *Amoeba* tales -- I reread a lot of the first 15 or so comics and found a real underlying thread, about Prometheus and his search for self.

This is the main theme that goes through *AA*, I think, to this day: it's about one guy trying to find his place in the universe, trying to be self-sufficient and independent while still being able to love and care about others. It



reflects my own life, because at 14 or so when I created Pro I was a bit of a loner, a fairly shy near-outcast kinda guy who'd spend more time doodling than playing football -- like a lot of comic creators, I'm sure -- and Pro's evolution mirrors mine. I never dreamed that at 25 I'd be Editor of my own weekly newspaper. I figured I'd never get much beyond my own little sphere of influence as a kid, and I spend a lot of time fixating on the imaginary world as a result.

Yet somewhere between 13 and 25 I discovered I didn't give a damn what other people thought about my sketching amoebas and reading comics, and I realized that just because I couldn't play football or date the Homecoming Queen didn't mean I didn't have strengths. I found my strengths and became a lot better person as a result

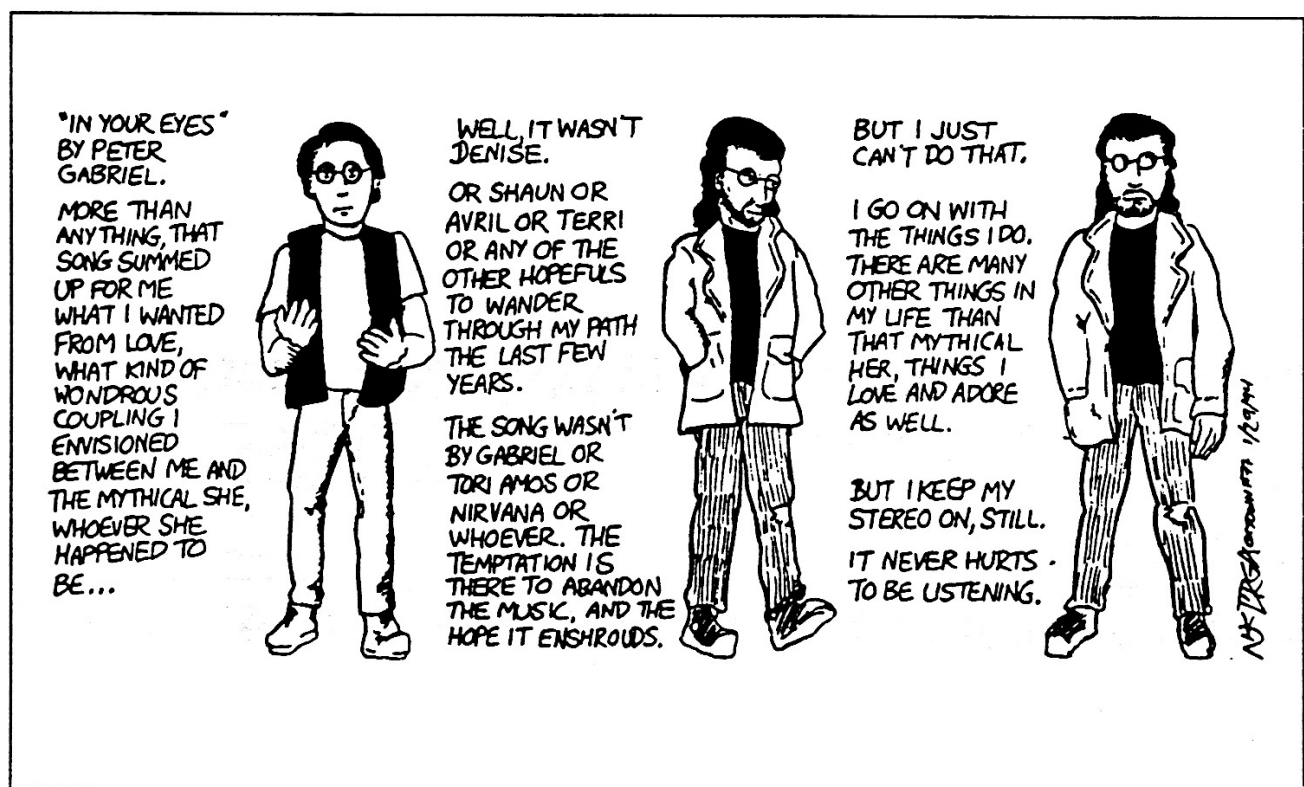
-- having this strong inner core of *self* that keeps me going when work, comics, whatever becomes tough. And this is what Prometheus has been doing for 24 or so issues of *Amoeba Adventures* since he first scrambled onto the page -- finding his *self* and being a lot better able to face the world armored with that. The other characters in *AA* are all important to me, of course, but in the end it is "Amoeba" adventures and Prometheus' story being told.

SPF: I know you've been influenced quite a lot by literature, but it seems that songs have also affected you, as far as lyrics turning up in *AA* and such. Would you say music has influenced your writing?

ND: "Those who can't do..." Yeah, I'm a big music freak. I'm not real ghettoized in my tastes, I love anything

intelligent from The Beatles to Replacements to Charlie Parker to James Brown. I worked as an intern for *Billboard* magazine in Manhattan a couple of summers ago, and thought about becoming a music journalist for about ten seconds there, but figured I wanted to broaden my horizons some more than that.

I don't have an iota of musical skill in my body, can't carry a tune with a wheelbarrow, but I really love music and the unique voice it has. I did go through this phase in the first ten or so issues of *Amoeba* where I was kinda "quote-happy" and kept dropping in lines from Lou Reed or T.S.Eliot or someone to augment the story a bit, but I realized later that comes off as a bit exclusive and name-dropping. "Look at me, I'm so much more 'hip'



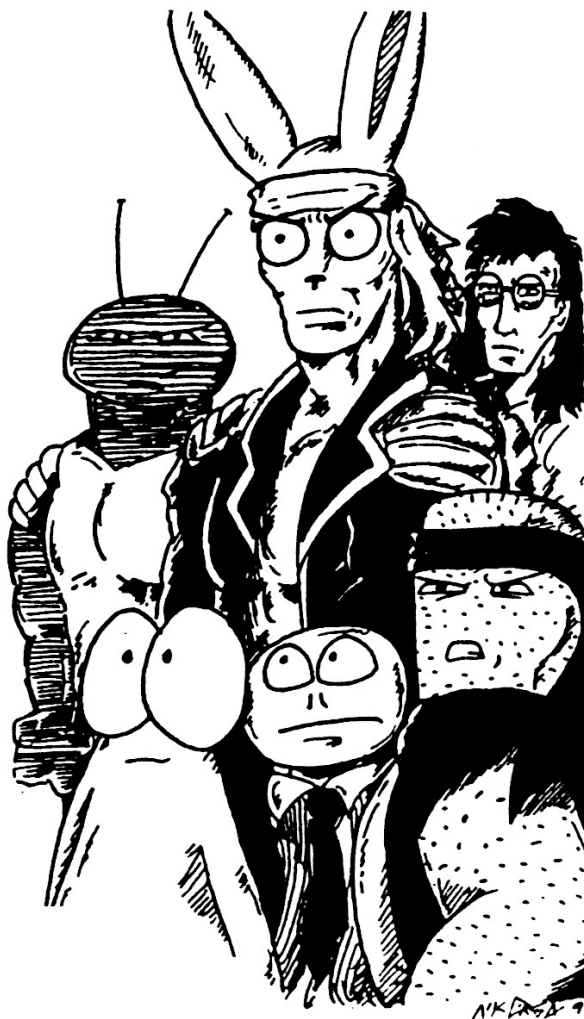
than thou..." So I've tried to back off on that some. Music now just is a background for me when I write my scripts, work on the paper, or whatever. I'm inspired by it about as much as I am by books, movies, comics, life in general.

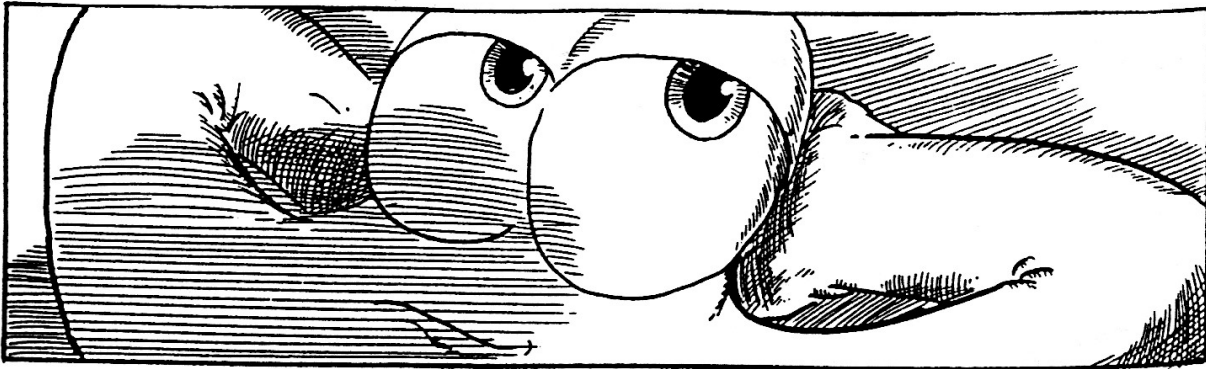
SPF: Prometheus and his friends live in a world of anthropomorphic animals and weird creatures; it's sort of like the cantina scene in *Star Wars* on a global scale. Do you use that basically as a backdrop, or have you actually developed theories on how such a place would work?

ND: Geez, do you think it could work? I think Earth-Spongy is pretty out there from modern science. I just started throwing all kinds of weirdies and beasties in the backgrounds of my comics to keep it interesting visually. Also, with Pro and the majority of the other main characters so strange-looking, it seemed fitting to immerse them in a world of similar creatures so their oddness wouldn't be constantly questioned. I love stuff like the *Myth Adventures* books and *Star Wars* where all manner of lunatic beings are tossed in the field; it really

makes it fun to look at.

I only attempted to address the social and political workings as Earth-Spongy in a few issues of *AA*, in the Dr. Crane story arc of "Details of Design" in #8 and 9. Basically, Crane's whole schtick was a kind of forced Darwinism -- he saw that in a world like Earth-Spongy, humanity was constantly subsumed and overshadowed by the other strange beings, and he felt humanity deserved to take back its dominion of the earth. The only way he





thought he could accomplish that was by scientifically jump-starting evolution, creating a mutated race of super-humans -- from where Hank Jensen and Dawn's characters came. It was an interesting idea, and Crane remained one of my favorite villains. He basically thought he had humanity's best interests at heart. There's probably a lot more to tell about the human/other tensions in Earth-Spongy, and that's something I have a notion of addressing down the line a ways.

SPF: Can you tell us what the addition of Max Ink as artist did for you and Amoeba Adventures?

ND: Sheesh, it made us look like a real comic! I drew the first 10 or 11 issues of *Amoeba* mainly because there was no one else to do so -- I consider myself an average artist at best. Max is a natural, and when he expressed interest in working with me, I jumped at the bait. It certainly sped up production of *Amoeba* a thousandfold -- by #10, when I was really burning out on the art end of things, I was down to about 2 issues a year, rather than the four or five we do now. I still love doing art on

the side, pinups and my own projects, but day-to-day production of something as artistically demanding as *AA* was becoming way too much for this cow-poke.

Max has made *Amoeba* into the comic I always visualized it as, and I'm amazed at the way we click together. Sure, there are a few rough spots, but by and large our partnership this past three years or so has been amazingly fruitful. We have the comic down to a kind of psychic shorthand, and next to myself, no one knows the *Amoeba* characters as well as Max.

I tended to be a more kinetic, Byrne-and-Adams-influenced artist, always going for the bombastic drama of the moment -- which might be fine elsewhere, but didn't quite suit a talky, thoughtful book like I was writing *Amoeba* to be. Max has such a naturalistic, smooth talent that really brings the characters to life. And watching his skills improve since #11 has been a real treat -- my words and his art really began to fuse together in the way I envisioned with the start of "The Dark Ages" arc.

SPF: You've been self-publishing for almost seven years now. What kind of changes have you seen in small press during that time?

ND: If anything, I've realized small press is cyclical. It goes up and down in phases. There are times when you'll see a book in your box every day, then dry spells where it seems like no one's ever gone near a Xerox machine. Yet, fundamentally, I don't think small press has changed too much in the past seven years. Technology, obviously, has started playing a big part in improving the general look of books -- desktop publishing does wonders for it all -- and you've started seeing a handful of online small press comics that really ought to be interesting to follow. Yet the general "network" is still the same in terms of its composition. There are the "lifers" who have been doing this for years, the "rookies" who're just getting all fired up about what small press is about, and, less positively, you'll always have the "shooting stars" -- people who come on like a blaze of glory, trying to revolu-

tionize the network and burn the Bastille, and who then fizzle out and leave in a huff when they realize they can't do these things. Small press is wonderful *because* there's no expectations of you. I do wish people would realize that when they come in trying to whip us all "into shape" that they're perverting the meaning of what small press is about.

If anything, though, I'm still hopeful about what small press is. I doubt it'll be much different in ten years, nor should it be. There will be ups and downs and feuds and the rare handful of folks who really change the way people think about small press, and make it better for all.

SPF: Hindsight is a marvelous thing. If you could do this all over again, is there anything you'd change?

ND: I'd probably have tried to look up Max Ink back in 1990 and begged him to start in with me from the ground level, but otherwise, very little. Sure, I've published stuff that makes me



cringe when I see it, but I wouldn't be putting out what I am today without that behind me.

SPF: What's the best thing you've ever written, in your opinion? What's your least favorite?

ND: I'm hoping "The Dark Ages," running in *Amoeba* #20-26, will all come together to form a coherent, powerful body of work. So far the first four issues have impressed me, to the point where I can actually sit down and read it through and not mentally lam-baste myself every two panels for not writing it differently. It's a demanding story arc, because really what I'm doing is taking every single little dangling plotline from over twenty issues of material and trying to tie them all together neatly, without making it so incoherent and cross-referential that it reads like an issue of *X-Men*.

I'm also quite fond of parts of my past stuff -- I simply love *Amoeba Adventures* #16, the time travel issue, and still think it's the best single issue I've done. I dig Dr. Crane's final soliloquy at the end of #9, I think that's pretty powerful stuff. I love the Ninja Ant short story in #12. I think *Prometheus: The Silent Storm*, the AIDS awareness jam I did in 1992, despite its preachy overtones, is still a pretty strong bit of storytelling. I was happy with *Jip*, a daily comic strip experiment that I did 150 of for my college newspaper my senior year -- that was



something different than a comic book for me to play around with. I also really like a little story I did for John Kline's *The Last Good Guy* #6, a totally un-*Amoeba* piece of work that John did a spectacular job on.

As for my least favorite, well, again, there are bits and pieces. I didn't like the Period/Asbestos Mushroom story in *Amoeba* #18-19 as much as I thought I would, it seemed too forced. The first big story arc I did, "Details of Design" in #6-10, was fine up until the end, but I felt like I dropped the ball in #10 and just made it a tangled mass of crud. There have been some characters I introduced into the *AA* mythos I thought would work better than they did; Kyoko, Ninja Ant's girlfriend, and Raoul the Boy Cockroach, neither of

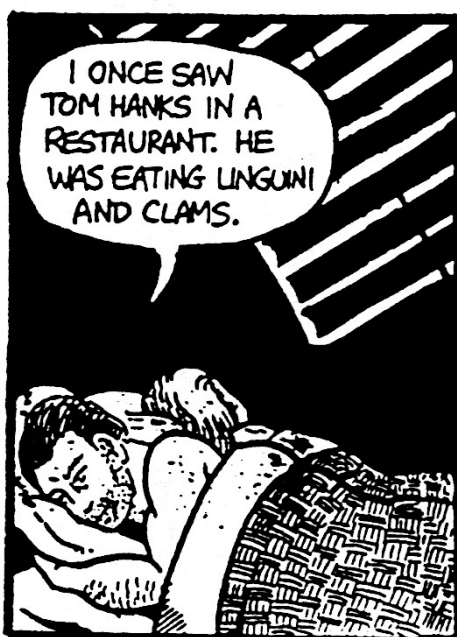


whom really became more than cardboard to me during their time in the book. Some, like Dawn Star, took a while to catch on, though, and I feel the rough patches I endured with her were worth it in the end.

SPF: There are many sources of wisdom out there for young writers: textbooks, writing classes, etc. so let me ask you this: is there any

advice you can give that they probably won't hear anywhere else? Something from your own experience?

ND: If you're serious at all about writing, you'll hear it all -- the problem is making sure you listen to it. Two things, I think, make a writer: reading and openness. The first, you have to read, read, read like there's no tomorrow to really know how to write any-



thing. And I ain't just talking comics, either. Read fiction, read non-fiction, read biographies and magazines. Read until you start to pick out the rhythms you want your own work to have and the paths you want to follow. Secondly, be open to all avenues. There's nothing worse than a close-minded writer. Don't say, "well, I don't like history, or I don't like Hemingway," without having read a drop of either. A true writer never reaches a day where

he stops reading and starting writing. You read *and* write your entire life, I think, if you have a prayer of ever being where you want to be.

SPF: Your book has been getting critical acclaim since the beginning of this decade. Why are you just now seriously thinking about making it a full-sized comic?

ND: Well, we weren't ready. We still aren't, entirely. People have been telling me since #5 that I should go independent and storm the market. Heck, we wouldn't have lasted two issues with the stuff I was doing at #5. There is way too much pressure out there for people to think of small press as some sort of vocational education program for comic artists, and too much emphasis on going beyond small press and "succeeding" in big press. This isn't a race. I will do my work at my own speed and, if and when I feel like I want to broaden my audience, I'll give it a shot. I can't count the number of small pressers I've seen with, and I say this without fizing on anyone in particular, less talent and experience than I feel we might have, leap into the indies way before they were ready and then they fall on their faces. And lose a bundle, I'm sure.

When we do *Amoeba Adventures* as an indy, I'm in it to *win*. I ain't doing this as a lark, I'm doing it because I want my book to kick some ass and become another *Bone* or *Cerebus*, a touchstone for the independent and comics industries. There's no point in doing otherwise if there's that much at stake. By mid-1997 or so, I think Max and I will have reached the point where there is nowhere else we can go in small press. We're close to it now, Bob Elinskas said in a recent issue of *Tetragrammaton Fragments* that *AA* is "almost past the point of needing a review." Small press has a finite ceiling, and we're brushing the edge of it, I think. I love small press and plan to keep doing my own side projects in it once *Amoeba* moves on, though, and I think that's the difference between me and those "shooting stars" I talked about earlier. I recognize small press for what it is, and don't want to change it to accommodate my own goals.





The readers, critics, everyone has been absolutely amazing to *Amoeba*. It still blows my mind that people would pay me to read something I wrote. It knocked me out of my socks when we got a subscriber from Japan last year. I guess #16 was the first issue we really "broke out," and started getting some notices outside the small press circle from folks like Tony Isabella and Will Eisner. It was about that time *Fact-sheet Five* and *CBG* started running reviews of us. But you can't let that kind of ephemeral material success persuade you you're ready when you're not.

SPF: Will you be changing anything about the book when you go full-size?

ND: Well, besides replacing Max with

Rob Liefeld, there will be a pretty substantial change in the direction of *Amoeba*. It's all a fallout of the climax of "The Dark Ages," which is my swan song to oversized superheroics in a lot of ways. Some longtime characters will be written out of the series by

#26, and some new ones will be coming on board. The focus will be a little more human, a little less cosmic in the new series. Prometheus and Dawn's relationship will reach a focal point; the All-Spongy Squadron as we know it no longer exists, so suddenly Dawn and Pro find themselves having to live like real people with real lives. There will still be "Adventures," of course, it's the last half of the title! By no means will we become a slice-of-life book. The stories will kind of be along the lines of *Tintin* meets *Concrete*, and there will be a lot of globetrotting. It's all a little nebulous to me right now, because I really want to concentrate on finishing off "The Dark Ages" and not losing the tone I've established there.

SPF: I hear folks debating all the time about whether the comics medium is better now than it has ever been, or whether it's in a downward spiral. What's your take on it?

ND: The old adage is "99% of everything is crud," and that surely applies to comics too, and always has. Some of the hallowed "golden age" material is pretty darned weak when you look back on it, others of it shines with a new light. There's always going to be a lot of spandex-clad junk aimed at the 12-year-old reader, and it serves its own purpose. The overarching superhero snobbery in small and indie press really annoys me; that kinda stuff, juvenile and unoriginal as a lot of it, serves a purpose as a kind of gateway for a lot of kids to the real cream of the crop, and besides, these "anti-superhero" people have the problem I talked about earlier with not being open. I've had a

handful of people tell me they would like *Amoeba*, but it's part of that "tired superhero" genre. I mean, I ain't Kirby by a long shot, but I would like these folks to give *Amoeba* a shot based on its merits rather than the genre they assign it -- doing otherwise is a sign of a very closed and stagnant mind, I think.

Yet I do feel right now is the best time ever for creator's rights, and freedom of expression in the comics field. There's books out there you wouldn't have dreamed of seeing 20, 30 years ago that really test people's conceptions of what comics today are.



Stuff like *Naughty Bits*, *Too Much Coffee Man*, *Optic Nerve*, *Stray Bullets*, *Eightball*, *Kingdom Come*, *Acme Novelty Library* is as fine to me as any John Updike novel might be.

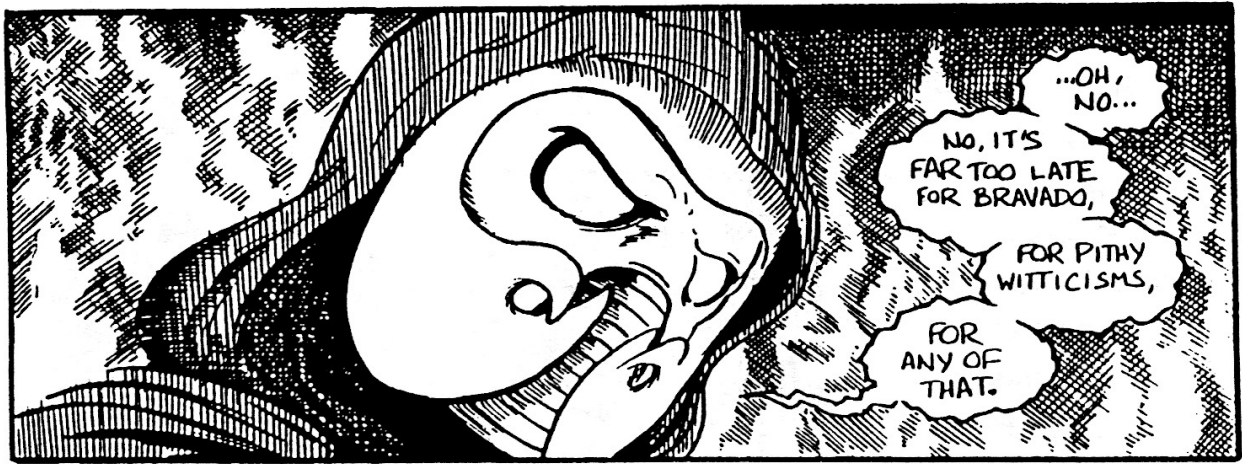
SPF: Here's a goofy question: if you could spend an hour with anyone who has ever lived, who would it be?

ND: Ouch, tough question. What is

myself I might glean from a conversation with dear ol' great-granddad and where it might take me.

SPF: Would you ever consider writing for the mainstream companies, and if so, which pre-existing characters might appeal to you?

ND: I might consider it, but I'm sure I'd be ripped to shreds by the corporate giants at the Big Two within days if I



this, Truth or Dare? My answer would likely change every five minutes given the mood I'm in, but right now I think it'd be my great-grandfather Nicholas Dirga, who emigrated here from Austria-Hungary in 1897 and died in 1918 of influenza -- my namesake, his story would really interest me because so much of it has been lost to time. Most American lives lack a real sense of history because we're all mutts in a way, with bits of everything mixed in. I'd like to see what kind of things about

attempted anything along the lines of original thought. Still and all, I'd love a crack at writing the pre-1984 or so Spider-Man, who was my first big comics obsession and whose spirit permeates *Amoeba Adventures* in a lot of ways. I might also dig a chance at The Batman, another childhood favorite, and for some reason I've always had this crazy idea that I would love writing DC's The Atom, one of the more obscure Silver Age heroes.

SPF: As we finish, tell our readers one thing that will make them run to their mailbox and order a copy of *Amoeba Adventures*.

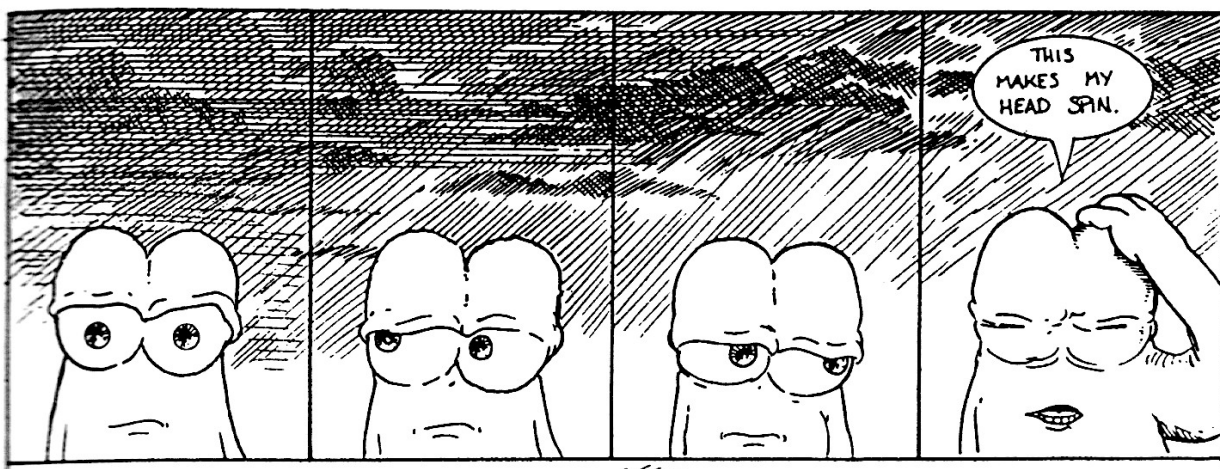
ND: Go for the joke or be serious? Ah, heck, I'll be serious. Besides the fact that one day we'll take over the world and it's best to like us now before we become popular and you have to sneer at us for selling out, I like to think *Amoeba Adventures* is the kind of comic that anyone, be they mainstream or independent comics fan, can enjoy. In fact, that's one of the things we'll be banking on as we leap boldly into the mainstream waters next year. I try to write the kind of comic I'd like to read: one with intelligence and humor, depth and characters that make you want to keep reading to see what happens to them next. Max is simply the finest artist the small press has to offer, and I predict that by the millennium he'll be dazzling millions every month while Jim Lee flips burgers in

Mendicino. Together Max and I have tried to craft something that we can both be proud of, and even if there's been a few pits and valleys along the way, I feel like we might just be getting there.

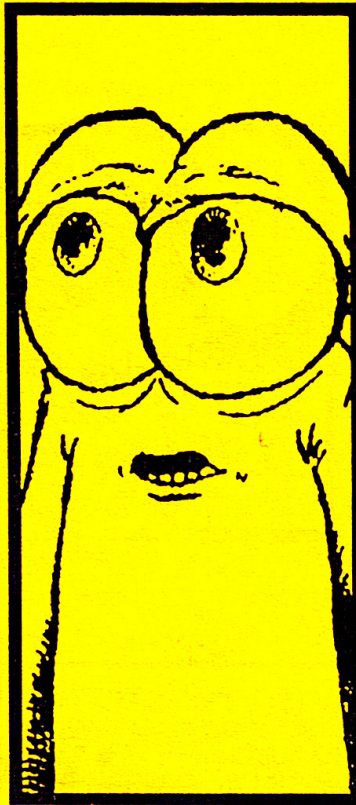
[Together, Nik & Max have produced numerous issues of "Amoeba Adventures" and several one-shots and specials. All of which are well-worth your time checking out. You can get a complete list from Nik by writing to him at : P.O. Box 2230, University, MS 38677-2230.]

I want to take this time to thank Nik for taking the time to sit down with Troy for this interview. It's greatly appreciated. We wish him and Max all the best as they pursue their full-size success.

This is one of the more lengthy interviews we've run in these pages, as well. Let us know what you think of the longer format.]



Everything ends.



The Dark Ages Concludes.

The "Dark Ages" saga comes to an explosive climax in the pages of *Amoeba Adventures* #25, debuting in March.

And two months after that: *Amoeba Adventures* #26, the final issue of one of the most acclaimed small press series ever.



Amoeba Adventures ©1996 Nik Dirga
Artwork ©1996 Max Ink

Written by Nik Dirga and drawn by Max Ink, *Amoeba Adventures* has been called "a small press landmark" by *Small Press Feedback* and praised by good folks like Will Eisner, Tony Isabella and Dave Sim. Get the latest issue for \$2 postpaid, or in this special offer only to *SPF* readers, you can get the *entire* run of *Amoeba Adventures* - all 26 issues, plus the specials *Silent Storm*, *Only A Man* and *Amoeba Archives*, for \$39.95 postpaid — a \$15 discount off the cover price! Just tell us you saw us in *SPF*. Send orders to Protoplasm Press c/o Nik Dirga, P.O. Box 2230 University MS 38677-2230. Make all checks payable to Nik Dirga, please.

The very first page of Amoeba Adventures #24 was a kind of reimagining of the very first time Prometheus met Karate Kactus, way back in my pre-small press comic Prometheus The Protoplasm #3, as seen below.

I have to admit that that first page of #24 chokes me up like few other scenes did. Killing Karate Kactus kind of made sense for the story, but it was a darned hard thing to do. He was a character who became the heart and soul of Amoeba Adventures in many ways.



A larger version of the great illo of Max Ink and I "hard at work" as the team micro-manages.

