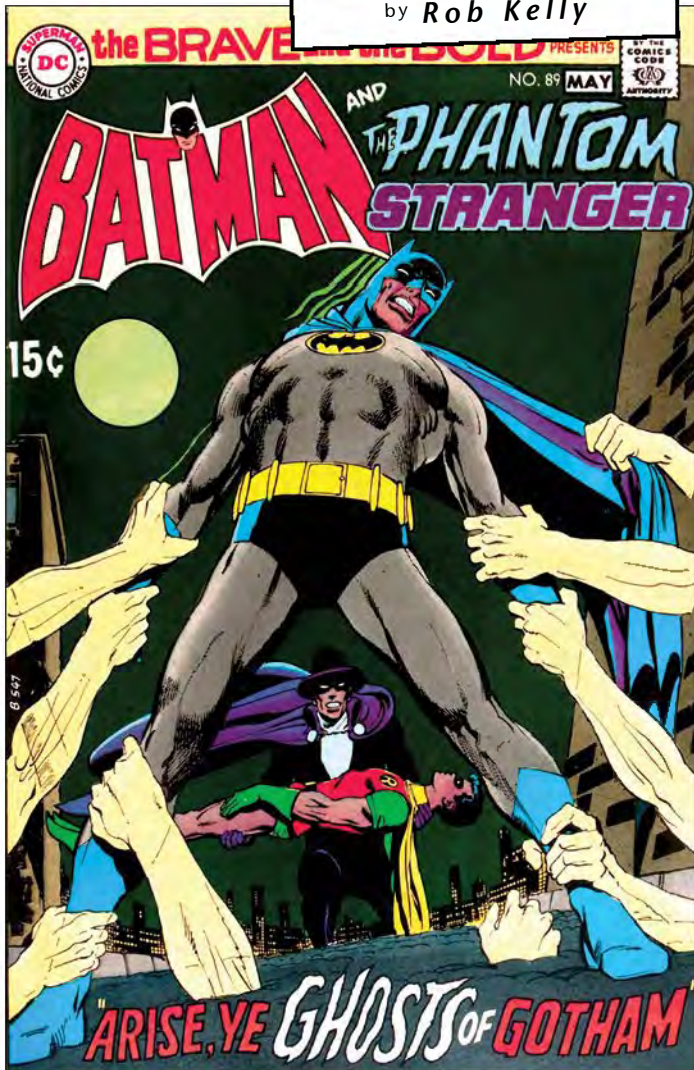


THANK YOU FOR BEING A STRANGER

BRONZE AGE PHANTOM STRANGER TEAM-UPS

by Rob Kelly



First Encounter

We're up in arms over this gripping Neal Adams cover for the first Batman/Phantom Stranger team-up, in *The Brave and the Bold* (B&B) #89 (Apr.–May 1970).

TM & © DC Comics.

As you might imagine, someone named the Phantom Stranger doesn't lend himself to being a team player. You can't look the guy in the eye. He rarely answers any question directly. He comes and goes at will. He *never* ponies up for gas. And yet, as we'll see, he's been a popular team-up star in the DC Comics Universe since his first (re)appearance almost 50 years ago.

DC clearly had high hopes for the character, when he was (re-)introduced in *Showcase* #80 (Feb. 1969). His first appearance was an odd hybrid of new material by Mike Freidrich, Jerry Grandinetti, and Bill Draut surrounding reprints from the 1950s *Phantom Stranger* series, but he quickly graduated into his own book a few months later. The new/old mix continued for a few issues, and then took off for a solid run of horror-tinged mystery stories that continued into the mid-1970s. But it didn't take long at all for DC to bring the Phantom Stranger into its burgeoning larger universe.

In *The Brave and the Bold* #89 (Apr.–May 1970, written by Bob Haney and drawn by Ross Andru and Mike Esposito), the descendants of a religious sect who settled Gotham City centuries ago show up to demand reparations, in the form of the land itself! As you might imagine, most of Gotham's citizenry and political class are against this—except for Councilman Bruce Wayne, who quickly agrees to turn over the Wayne Foundation building to the sect and its leader, Josiah Heller! As Heller watches from his newfound, lofty perch, the Phantom Stranger arrives, much to Heller's displeasure. He tries to attack the Stranger, who disappears before Heller can lay a hand on him. Naturally, Batman gets involved, who at one point tries to put this stranger under "Bat-Arrest" (really), wrongly assuming he is in league with Heller. Eventually, professional wet blanket Dr. Thirteen shows up, trying to convince anyone who will listen that the Stranger is a dangerous fraud. But all that is put aside when it's the Stranger who reveals that Heller is a criminal, and is instrumental in stopping his mad quest for power. The story ends with Batman realizing that this Phantom Stranger guy may be weird, but he's a force for good. And with that, the template for almost all of the Stranger's future guest appearances is set.

Sales must have been particularly good for that issue, because the Stranger returned to B&B just nine issues later, in #98 (Oct.–Nov. 1971), again written by Haney but this time drawn by *The Phantom Stranger's* artist, the legendary Jim Aparo, in the first time he rendered Batman (but certainly not the last). In "Mansion of the Misbegotten," Batman goes to visit his godson (uh, because he has one of those), a little tyke named Enoch (!), who lives in a big, creepy mansion with his mom. It seems like the misbegotten mansion in question is haunted by some sort of ghostly blob of light, and the Phantom Stranger shows up to tell Bats the bad news: the house is a cover for a coven of witches! As if that wasn't bad enough, little Enoch is the evil being they all worship! This being a Bob Haney story, there're more, much more, and it all ends with little Enoch alive, still Batman's godson and probably a sore spot for DC continuity cop E. Nelson Bridwell for decades to come. Having dealt with the Stranger earlier, this time Batman is much more willing to trust what the Stranger tells him, even the bad news about Enoch.

The Phantom Stranger then showed up in *Justice League of America* #103 (Dec. 1972), going so far as to calling the various team members together (including Batman, who vouches for him) to alert them to a mystical threat brewing in the small town of Rutland, Vermont. Writer Len Wein was writing the *Phantom Stranger* solo series and *JLA* at the time, so it was only natural for them to cross over. Wein had the Stranger pull the ultimate mike drop at the end of the story, when the JLAers offer him membership, only for the mysterious one to disappear before ever giving them an answer! Despite some later writers considering the Stranger a full-fledged JLAer, Wein never did, as he told me in a 2008 interview for my blog *JLASatellite.com*: "He was offered membership but vanished, as per usual, without actually accepting the offer. Over the years, other writers have assumed PS was a member, but in my world, he never really said yes."

Wein used the Stranger again in the classic "The Man Who Murdered Santa Claus!" (*Justice League of America* #110, Apr. 1974, drawn by Dick Dillin and Dick Giordano), with the mystery man showing up at the end

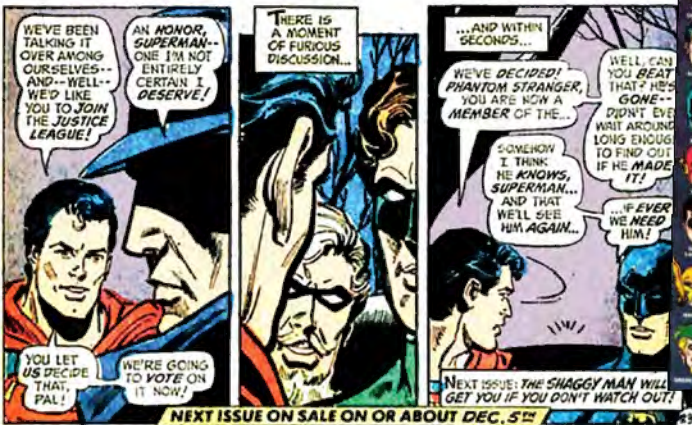
to help the team defeat the Key, who believed he managed to kill many of the JLAers once and for all (SPOILER ALERT: He didn't). Wein's assertion that despite all this team participation, the Stranger wasn't an actual League member was challenged just a few months later in *Wonder Woman* #218 (July 1975), written by Martin Pasko and drawn by Kurt Schaffenberger, when he is one of the JLAers who subject a newly repowered Wonder Woman to a series of trials to determine whether she's "fit" to rejoin the team. If he's not a member, why is he in on this? Maybe that's because in this issue, it's malevolent mage Felix Faust who is causing problems, a perfect villain for the Stranger. However, when it comes time to vote on Wonder Woman's membership, the Stranger once again disappears before officially casting a ballot.



A few months later, however, in *Wonder Woman* #222 (Mar. 1976), the Stranger shows up just to cast a vote, which he does—in Wonder Woman's favor. That makes it unanimous, and the Amazing Amazon is welcomed back into the Justice League. (To underline his pro-member status even further, the Stranger attends a JLA party, held at the satellite, seen as a poster in *Limited Collectors' Edition* #C-46, an all-reprint Justice League treasury.)

After the power of the Comics Code Authority diminished in the early 1970s, DC and Marvel had gone full blast on horror/supernatural characters and titles. When this wave crashed, it took many of those characters down with it, leading to the cancellation of the Phantom

Stranger's solo title, leaving him "homeless" for the first time in his rebooted career. After a few more appearances with the JLA (in issues #139, 145, and 146, all written by Steve Englehart), he



co-headlined *DC Super-Stars* #18 (Winter 1978) with Deadman, squaring off against longtime foe Tala, and also tangling with Dr. Thirteen, still doggedly on the Stranger's tail. The book is divided into two stories, with the first (Deadman) leading into the second (the Stranger), with both heroes meeting up for the third chapter. It reads like a "lost" issue of *The Phantom Stranger*, as it deals with some plot threads left over in the last issue of his series. Oddly, it references a story in *House of Secrets* #150, which had not yet been published. Also appearing in the story: Gerry Conway (who wrote the issue), Carla Conway, Martin Pasko, Paul Levitz, and Romeo Tanghal, meaning they are now all officially owned by DC Comics.

Despite not having a solo book, 1978 was a busy year for the Stranger: He reappeared in *Justice League of America* (#150, again fighting the Key), and then co-starred with Superman and Batman in *World's Finest Comics* (#249) to help out when the Man of Steel is turned into a vampire. After the Man of Steel is incapacitated by a mysterious force at the bottom of the sea, Batman goes to investigate, where the Phantom Stranger is there waiting for him... *underwater!* After it becomes clear that Superman has turned into a "Vampire of Steel," the Stranger gets really hands on, going so far as to track down a magic stake with which Batman has to use on his old pal. It's only at the last moment that the true nature of the evil is revealed, and Superman is saved. That same month, remembering his mystery roots, the Stranger popped up in *The House of Secrets* (#150, Mar. 1978) to tell a story about a man named Thomas Corbett, a warlock who once tried to kill a friend of the Stranger's.

In May, he participated in the book-length adventure "There Shall Come a Gathering" in *Showcase* #100, a story featuring every character to headline the title to date, rubbing shoulders with not just the Flash and Green Lantern, but also Sugar and Spike, Dolphin, Angel and the Ape, and dozens more. A disruption in the time stream starts pulling Earth from its orbit, so a large group of heroes meet on the JLA Satellite to address the problem. They break up into smaller groups to keep our big

blue marble spinning, as well as dealing with catastrophes on the planet itself. When Flash and some of the others fail in their outer space mission, they call in some "big guns," one of which is the Stranger. He, along with Flash, Green Lantern, the Atom, Adam Strange, and Space Ranger hold a séance, which conjures up the Spectre. The Spectre then tries to literally hold Earth in its place, while the cause of all this trouble (I'm not saying it was aliens—but it was aliens) is dealt with by some of the other heroes, including Lois Lane and the aforementioned Angel. Written by Pauls Kupperberg and Levitz and drawn by Joe Staton, "Gathering" remains a high-water mark for DC anniversary issues, managing to give each of the main heroes (including the Stranger) a moment to shine while also finding a way to work in dozens of disparate characters.

After some more appearances in *Justice League*, the Stranger re-teamed with Batman in *Brave and the Bold* #145, once again drawn by Jim Aparo and written by Bob Haney. In "A Choice of Dooms!" these two men of mystery join forces to stop a voodoo cult. At one point the



Just One of the Guys

(inset top) The Stranger played a role in Wonder Woman's "Twelve Trials." Cover to *WW* #218 (June–July 1975) by Bob Oksner. (inset middle) Nick Cardy's hair-raising cover to *Justice League of America* #103 (Dec. 1972). (middle) The Stranger fades out after being offered JLA membership. (bottom) Terry Austin and Dick Giordano's JLA Satellite pinup from *Limited Collectors' Edition* #C-46, showing PS with the JLA.

TM & © DC Comics.

Stranger changes a bad guy's gun into a snake mostly just to freak him out, which shows that, hey, even the Phantom Stranger can have a little fun sometimes! He then jumped over to *Superman*, helping the Man of Steel take on no less than Dracula and Frankenstein in issue #344 (Feb. 1980), in a story co-written by Paul Levitz and Len Wein and drawn by Curt Swan. The Stranger doesn't do a whole lot this time around, pretty much just appearing at the end of the story, but the issue is worth it just for José Luis García-López's brilliantly scary, moody cover.

After attending a Christmas party with Madame Xanadu being thrown at the House of Mystery (*DC Special Series* #21), and (thanks to an impish Terry Austin) making a gag cameo in *The Uncanny X-Men* #125 (told you he gets around!), the Stranger continued with the "equal time" bit by appearing in *DC Comics Presents* #25 (Sept. 1980), teaming with Superman to take on the Stranger's old nemesis Tala. After the Stranger appears unexpectedly in the Fortress of Solitude, the story changes the formula up a bit—the Stranger explains to Superman that there's trouble a-brewin', and disappears as usual. But the story (by Paul Levitz) then follows the Stranger, who finds himself face-to-face with his longtime foe. Tala's plot involves taking over Pete Ross (wow, that's a plan) and using him to take control of Superman. For most of the issue, Superman and the Stranger are not together, making this team-up an interesting change of pace.

He went back to Batman (c'mon Stranger, there are *other* heroes in the DCU other than the big two!) in *Detective Comics* #500, appearing in Alan Brennert and Dick Giordano's classic "To Kill a Legend," which led off the anniversary issue. In "Legend," the Stranger appears to offer Batman something truly special—the chance to right the wrong that set him on his path, namely the murder of his parents. Explaining that this horrible crime might be taking place on an alternate Earth, the Stranger tells Batman that, if he wants, he can be sent there to prevent it. Robin—meeting the Stranger for first time—is dubious in the extreme, but nevertheless Batman takes the trip. Aside from the gut-level appeal of the tale, writer Brennert throws in some great moments of characterization, like when the Stranger goes so far as to call Batman his "friend." An instant classic, "To Kill a Legend" has been reprinted many times (and discussed in depth in these very pages) and remains of the great Batman stories of all time. Brennert doesn't recall whose idea it was include the Stranger in the story

(perhaps the suggestion of editor Paul Levitz), but had this to say when I interviewed him in 2009 just about this story: "I did like using the Stranger. I liked the idea of him coming to Batman and offering him a chance to alleviate some of the guilt and grief he's carried over since his parents' death. It was a chance to show superheroes acting like real people, not just fighting crime but showing real kindness to one another (and I also had fun contrasting the Stranger's stentorian pronouncements with Robin's more casual attitude)."

The Stranger's very next appearance was yet another anniversary issue, *Justice League of America* #200, written by Gerry Conway and drawn by an all-star roster of artists such as George Pérez, Joe Kubert, Gil Kane, Dick Giordano, and more [*Editor's note*: We gave that landmark issue a close inspection recently in *BACK ISSUE* #87, in case you missed it]. The Stranger appears in Chapter 2 (drawn, again, by Aparo), there to ensure that Aquaman—under the spell of the Apellax aliens—defeats Red Tornado, which he does with a well-aimed lightning bolt, which puts the android out of commission long enough for the Sea King to escape. Like Kupperberg and Levitz did with *Showcase* #100, Conway manages to throw a wonderful party, giving each member of the JLA plus a gaggle of guest stars a moment in the sun while still telling a powerful, dynamic story of superheroic adventure.

For those of you watching closely, you can't help but notice that for a guy so concerned with being an outsider, a loner, a man of mystery, the Stranger sure does show up at a lot of parties—*House of Secrets* #150, *Showcase* #100, *Detective Comics* #500, and *Justice League of America* #200: Plan an anniversary issue, and the Stranger will be there!

After a few years of guest-starring gigs, the Stranger returned to lead-star status with a backup feature in the new *Saga of the Swamp Thing* series, written by Bruce Jones and Dan Spiggle. With the second issue, the feature was taken over by Mike W. Barr, who mostly eschewed an ongoing Stranger-centric storyline, instead featuring one-off horror or mystery-tinged morality tales in which the Stranger acted as narrator and occasional participant. Barr spoke to me in 2009 about his work on the strip: "The glory—and the curse—of Phantom Stranger is that he works on a number of levels. I wrote the first *Who's Who* entry for him, where I referred to his occupation as 'conscience, advocate.' The glory of the character is that he can be used equally well in the role of active hero or the role of narrator. The curse of the character is



A Pair o' Aparo Covers

(left) An extra-length team-up in *DC Super Stars* #18 (Winter 1978). (right) The spooksters first met when Deadman guest-starred in *The Phantom Stranger* #39 (Oct.–Nov. 1974). A year later, Deadman returned for the final three issues of the Stranger's book, #39–41.

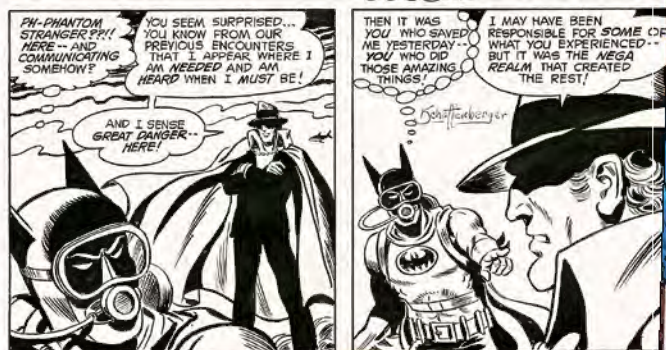
TM & © DC Comics.



Voodoo You Think You Are?

(top) Our mystery man can hold his breath and speak underwater, as seen on this original art page illustrated and autographed by Kurt Schaffenberger, from *World's Finest Comics* #249 (Feb.–Mar. 1978). Courtesy of Heritage (www.ha.com). (inset top) The Stranger's on pins and needles on this Aparo cover to *B&B* #145 (Dec. 1978). (bottom) Inker Terry Austin snuck the Phantom Stranger (and Popeye) into this John Byrne-penciled panel in Marvel's *X-Men* #125.

Batman and Phantom Stranger TM & © DC Comics. X-Men TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc.



leeway makes it very easy to handle the character inconsistently—he can end up being too conveniently powerful when you need him to be, but sometimes powerless before things readers would expect to be no problem for him based on earlier stories.”

The Stranger reappeared with the Justice League in issues #210–212 (Jan.–Mar. 1983) of their series, for a three-parter entitled “When a World Dies Screaming.” When Professor Ray Palmer learns that a mysterious “X-Element” has started disappearing from Earth, a series of disasters start occurring, and he calls in his JLA pals to help. This leads to a battle between two warring alien factions who also want the X-Element, and when Superman and some of the others find themselves needing some extra muscle, the Phantom Stranger appears! He even sticks around long enough to fight other battles alongside the JLA, but (of course) disappears without a word after the battle is over. Written once again by Gerry Conway and drawn by Rich Buckler, “Screaming” was originally produced for a JLA treasury comic. After DC grew cold on the idea of their tabloid comics featuring original content, the story was put on the shelf and then broken into three parts and published about half a decade later. (That sound you hear is this author sobbing at the idea of a Justice League treasury comic that could have been.)

Mike W. Barr grabbed the Stranger again for an appearance in the Christmas-themed “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle” (*Batman and the Outsiders* #8, Mar. 1984, drawn by Jim Aparo), picking up some story threads Barr left dangling in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #5. Another of the Stranger’s old foes, Tannarak, makes a return, using a newborn infant as his spirit’s host body. Barr has some fun putting Batman—always in charge—in the awkward and slightly humbling position of being around another hero who is not the least bit intimidated by the Darknight Detective.

Paul Kupperberg had the Stranger guest in *DC Comics Presents* #72 (“Madness in a Dark Dimension!,” Aug. 1984, drawn by Alex Saviuk), where he helps Superman and the Joker (!) defeat the otherworldly baddy Maaldor. Maaldor was defeated by Superman and Stranger’s on-and-off-again squeeze Madame Xanadu in a previous *DCCP*, but he is now poised to escape from the dimension he was trapped in. This dimension is so daunting to those of a “normal” mind, only someone as disturbed as the Joker can navigate it. This leads to a sequence where the Stranger takes control of the Joker’s mind, but doesn’t do the obvious when he had the chance. He could have spared Batman and the citizens of Gotham City a lot of grief had he just made some small adjustments... (Paul Kupperberg would end up being a major creative force in the history of the Phantom Stranger, as you’ll see explained in this very same *BACK ISSUE* you’re reading!)

After a walk-on in *Justice League of America* #231 (which would prove to be the character’s final appearance in the title), the Stranger



that he can be used equally well in the role of active hero or the role of narrator. It takes a firm understanding of the character to realize which role he’s playing, and I know of no way to obtain that understanding other than just to read lots of stories about him.”

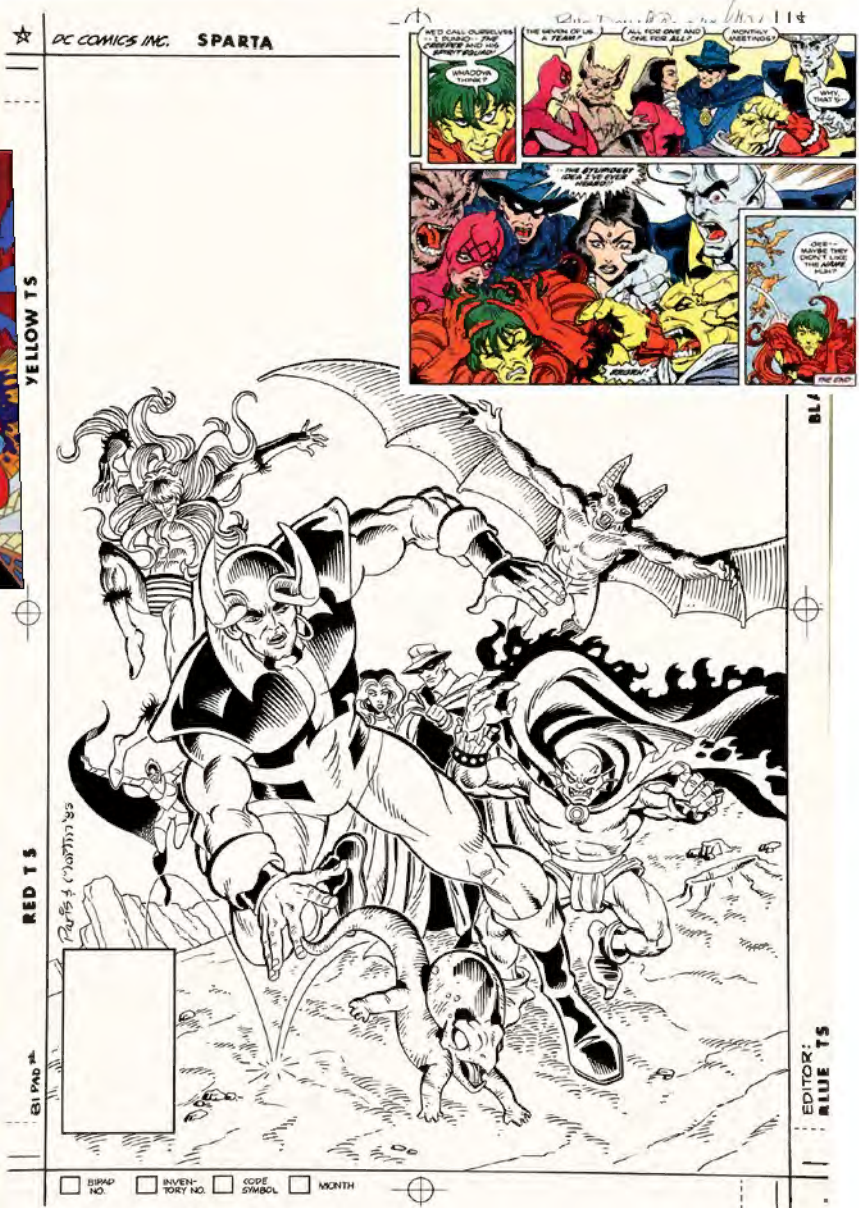
The Stranger eventually joined Swamp Thing in issues #14 and 15 (June and July 1983) for a book-length team-up, written by Dan Mishkin and drawn by Bo and Scott Hampton. Thanks to some toxic chemicals illegally dumped in the swamp, a scientist gets transformed into a crystalline creature and goes mad. Moody and somewhat poetic, this two-parter served as a fine swan song for the Stranger’s run in the book. Like Barr, Mishkin was aware that the character has to be handled with care, due to the vague nature of his abilities: “It’s something you have to be careful with. You keep things mysterious and that gives you some leeway in how you portray the character and his abilities, but that same

showed up (in all places) in *The Fury of Firestorm* #32 (Feb. 1985), written by R.J.M. Lofficier and drawn by Alan Kupperberg. Firestorm recognizes the Stranger from the JLA's computer files, but is still leery of the guy. Of course, the Stranger proves he's a good guy by helping the Nuclear Man defeat a ghostly crook who takes over the Martin Stein half of our titular hero. That same year, Dan Mishkin and writing partner Gary Cohn brought the Stranger into their new lighthearted superhero title, *Blue Devil*, for the *Blue Devil Summer Fun Annual*. Teaming up with the Demon, Man-Bat, the Creeper, Black Orchid, and old flame Madame Xanadu, the Stranger gets a number of wonderfully funny moments, including one where Xanadu mocks him for his "man of mystery" bit, something the Stranger doesn't take too kindly to! They help Blue Devil take on Felix Faust, and work so well together that the Creeper proposes they form a permanent team: the Creeper and the Spirit Squad! This is met with a less-than-enthusiastic response from the other heroes.



The Stranger's final pre-Crisis team-up took place in another Annual, this time *Swamp Thing Annual* #2, written by Alan Moore and drawn by Steven Bissette and John Totleben, right in the heart of that creative team's historic run on the book. You can't find a better set of examples of how malleable the Stranger is a character than these two consecutive appearances—in *Blue Devil*, the Stranger plays straight man (mostly) in a frothy, lighthearted adventure that pokes fun at DC's horror comics conventions. And then you have "Down Amongst the Dead Men," which features no less than the Swamp Thing traveling through Hell itself to rescue the soul of his beloved Abby Arcane. The Stranger accompanies Swamp Thing on his journey, leading him to an audience with the Spectre, who has begun to lose his connection to humanity ever since abandoning his identity as Jim Corrigan. When the Spectre initially refuses to help, the Stranger has the temerity to question him, which elicits a laugh from the Spectre and this comment: "Of all the presences, you were always my favorite." He then allows the two men (?) to continue on, which leads to a meeting with the Demon, who takes Swamp Thing the rest of the way. Alan Moore clearly had a fondness for the Stranger, and it shows in this appearance. Bissette and Totleben give us some bona-fide, thoroughly un-mysterious closeups of the Stranger, yet he still seems just as unknowable. He even gets to smile.

The Phantom Stranger would appear here and there in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, only taking part in the universe-spanning fight on a mystical level. He made several more guest turns in Alan Moore's run on *Swamp Thing*, got a *Who's Who* listing (appropriately drawn by Jim Aparo), showed up for the *DC Challenge*, participated in DC's *Crisis* follow-up "event," *Legends*, and had what might be his finest solo star moment in *Secret Origins* #10, which featured no less than four possible origins for the character. Featuring outstanding work by Jim Aparo, Mike W. Barr, Ernie Colón, José Luis García-López, Paul Levitz, Dan Mishkin, Alan Moore, and Joe Orlando, *Secret Origins* #10 is essential reading for anyone interested in the Phantom Stranger—which you must be, or why else are you reading *this*?



As the decades since his first modest appearances have shown, the Phantom Stranger is one of DC's most durable characters, someone any decent writer can find use for to add some magical mystery to whatever story they're crafting. Whether it be leading man, guest-star, or simply narrator, the Phantom Stranger might not at first seem like someone you'd want to spend a lot of time with, but eventually you'll get a glimpse of what's going on in the shadows. And as difficult as he can be sometimes, you know he's always fighting against the forces of evil, a fight that never ends...

ROB KELLY is a writer, illustrator, and comics historian. He is the co-host of The Fire And Water Podcast, the co-creator/writer of the award-winning webcomic Ace Kilroy, and the creator of the book *Hey Kids, Comics! True-Life Tales from the Spinner Rack*. He runs a blog devoted to the Phantom Stranger, IAmThePhantomStranger.blogspot.com.



Creepy Company

Phantom Stranger was among DC's spooksters congregating in 1985's *Blue Devil Annual* #1. Cover art by Paris Cullins and Gary Martin, courtesy of Heritage. (inset) The Creeper's rejected recommendation.

TM & © DC Comics.

end