

# INTRODUCTION

## BY ARLEN SCHUMER

After Thor's creation in 1962 as more or less Marvel's Superman—dressed as a Viking, yes, but with the same primary-colored costume, cape, and powers as DC's flagship super hero—artist and storyteller Jack Kirby and writer Stan Lee gradually transformed him, by the mid-1960s, into an iconic warrior-king with a stature that befitted his title of god. With their backup feature, "Tales of Asgard," providing the ample historical background and mythological gravitas to their lead characters—Thor's fellow warriors, cosmic beings, deities and demons—Kirby and Lee began to produce truly awe-inspiring adventures beyond Earth, into Asgard, and throughout the universe. They reached their apex, perhaps, in the artwork, stories and themes found in this volume.

"I began to realize what a wonderful and awesome place the universe is, and that helped me in comics because I was looking for the awesome," Kirby said in a 1993 interview. "I found it in Thor." Awesome indeed and terrible to behold was Mangog, the hellspawn behemoth Kirby unleashed in *Thor* #154, setting off a four-issue epic saga that is undeniably definitive in Kirby's oeuvre of epic sagas. An unholy amalgam of minotaur, devil and dinosaur, Mangog was, in Lee's best hyperbolic prose, "possessed of the strength of a billion billion beings" and on a single-minded mission of mayhem, vengeance, destruction and death—not only of Odin (whom Mangog blamed for the death of his entire race) and all of Asgard—but of all life everywhere, for Mangog wanted to bring on the dreaded "Ragnarok—the death of all thy universe!"

Ragnarok, the Asgardian Armageddon, was a concept Kirby and Lee had bandied about in *Thor* for years prior, most prominently in a "Tales of Asgard" installment (*Thor* # 128, May 1966, its splash page echoed in the background of the cover of #157, one of Kirby's greatest masterpieces, a perverse Pieta, with Mangog's humongous claw cradling a fallen Thor), but never had it come so close to actually happening until this Mangog multi-parter reached its climax: after laying waste to everything in his path, including Thor and all of Asgard's best and brightest, Mangog begins to unsheathe the sequoia-sized Odinsword, thus initiating Ragnarok.

But just then, in a bit of a *deus ex machina*, Odin awakens from his "life-giving Odinsleep" and stops Mangog dead in his tracks, literally, with a wave of his hand; for it turns out Mangog was in reality an illusion, part of a spell Odin cast on his entire race ages before, in penance (for crime or crimes never revealed, strangely)—"a living prison." Once Mangog fades away, Odin brings the "billion billion beings" to life again, "...to dwell in peace...fore'er!" Thor and company all hail Odin as the curtain falls, and Lee adds a final burst with the Latin "Dum spiro spero," which means, "While I breathe, I hope."

What was this Mangog epic about? Not in a literal, surface-reading sense, but rather, given everything we know about Kirby's background, his upbringing, his life experiences—especially his World War II duty—in a more between-the-lines, under-the-skin analysis; a deconstruction, as it were, of Mangog.

To begin with, the name Mangog was probably derived from the Biblical Magog, a grandson of Noah, but is more commonly associated with an apocryphal Biblical story of Gog and Magog, in which Gog, one of the fallen angels of a nation called Magog, represents an apocalyptic coalition of nations arrayed against Israel. In other biblical traditions, Gog and Magog are variously presented as supernatural beings like giants or demons, and even in the Qur'an they are described as "evil and destructive in nature" and causing "great corruption on earth." A Georgian tradition compares them to "wild men with hideous faces and the manner of wild beasts, eaters of blood."

With this portentous provenance of Mangog's appellation established, it would appear clear that such a monstrous being, swathing a path of total destruction across Asgard, could only represent, to a war veteran of the European theater like Kirby, the Blitzkreiging Nazi war machine as it stormed over Europe, annihilating all who stood in its terrible path. If so, then are the "billion billion" brethren of Mangog the German people that Kirby, through Odin, figuratively forgives for their collaboration with their Nazi countrymen? It seems unlikely that Kirby, a proud Jew born Yaakov Kurtzberg from European immigrant parents, would ever forgive the German people—indeed, issues of their passivity, responsibility, ignorance or awareness of the extent of Nazi evil are still being debated today—so perhaps Odin, in a more general way, stands for the victorious United States, "forgiving" the Germans (or, in this analogy, the Japanese) after a horrible war by rebuilding their country and turning them into an ally. Either way, the Mangog epic demonstrates that, like the greatest American genre storytellers in westerns (John Ford) and science fiction (Kubrick), Kirby's super-heroic sagas operated on two levels: the one you read, and the one you read into.

Like the *Thor* three-parter that ends this volume, the awesome showdown between two of Kirby's greatest cosmic creations: Ego, the Living Planet and Galactus, the planet devourer. Though Galactus had, up 'til then, only been seen in the pages of Kirby's *Fantastic Four* from whence he arose, it seemed a natural that he would have to eventually crossover to *Thor* and meet the ultimate planet on the menu in Ego. While

those two engage in a battle royale that lives up to any and all expectations of Kirby's pulse-pounding power on the page, he introduces a legion of alien nomads called the Wanderers, who were the first victims of Galactus ages before, and who have been wandering through space seeking revenge ever since. To see them as wandering Jews in a cosmic diaspora (minus the revenge), in light of the previous Mangog exegesis, is fairly overt.

Especially when, at the climax, the Wanderers are left stranded on a triumphant Ego, though the planet itself is barren and incapable of sustaining life—until Ego (God?) transforms the planet into an Edenic paradise. This parallels the situation of the wandering Jews of the post-Holocaust, who settled in a desert wasteland and transformed it, relatively overnight, into the desert oasis Israel is today. And to complete the Judeo-Christian symbolism, Ego/God takes human form and bequeaths his planet to the Wanderers, telling them "...make of me your home...forever! Until the end of time." Sound familiar?

Sandwiched between these two bombastic classics is a most interesting interlude, a retelling and revision of Thor's origin that forecasts the post-modern approach to super-hero origins, in which heretofore minor and simple plot points are retroactively illuminated and expanded upon, given backstory and exposition. In this case, Kirby and Lee not only explained how Dr. Donald Blake first came to find Thor's hammer years before, but more saliently, extrapolated the nature, duality and coexistence of Thor's and Blake's true identities.

Kirby always made time, in between Asgardian adventures and star-spanning sojourns, for Thor to gambol on earth and interact with its denizens, both human and superhuman. Often these mini-exploits were more lighthearted in tone, and the one in issue #154 is one of the best, both funny and profound. After dispatching a typical band of Kirby suit-and-hat bad guys called Muggers, Incorporated, Thor happens upon a trio of hippies, who Lee has speak in dialogue as pseudo-hip as his Thor dialogue was pseudo-Shakespearean:

Hippie: "I dig the hair and the guru getup—but that hammer's from nowhere, man!"

Thor: "Thou deign to scoff at enchanted Mjøltnir?"

Yet, just when you think their exchange will degenerate further into broad comedy, Lee issues, through Thor, a challenge to the hippies—and by extension, Marvel's sizeable 1968 college-age readership—to turn off, tune out, and drop back in to society: "'Tis not by dropping out—but by plunging in—into the maelstrom of life itself—that thou shalt find thy wisdom! Yea, thou mayest drop out fore'er—once Hela herself hath come for thee! But, so long as life endures—thou must live it to the full!" As subtle as Thor's hammer those words might seem—and as charmingly dated—they nevertheless reflect accurately Lee's overwhelmingly successful Marvel formula of the 1960s: dynamic super-hero action in the panels kids could revel in, sophisticated dialogue and witty repartee in the word balloons an older audience would gravitate to.

As for the dynamic super-hero action in this volume, it's on bountiful display throughout, with all manner of battle scenes, both on earth and in Asgard and beyond, interspersed with monumental full-pages (mostly of Odin's many regal headdresses) and even a handful of Kirby's patented photo-collages, usually seen in *Fantastic Four*. The art by Kirby and his longtime Thor inker, Vince Colletta, reaches multiple apogees herein, including perhaps the greatest single, iconic image of Thor ever illustrated: the statuesque full-page figure in issue #161. The scratchy, thatched, thin-line inking of Colletta, often maligned in a debate among Kirby aficionados that has never ended, still seems to suit the rough and tumble, rock and mountain mis-en-scene of Thor's world best; an ideal example would be his rendering of the Storm Giant on the cover of issue #159—you can't imagine any inker other than Colletta capturing the gargantuan's grizzled skin and organic textures so perfectly. Yet even the more high-tech and outer space scenes, like the full-pages of both Ego and the Wanderers' spaceship in issue #161, are delineated by Colletta with the same degree of detail and slickness as is often credited to Joe Sinnott, Colletta's counterpart on the more high-tech *Fantastic Four*, whom many of those same Kirby aficionados consider his greatest inker (this writer among them).

Great artwork, great stories = great comics. This collection contains nothing but, and therefore has to be judged as not just some of the best *Thor* comics Kirby and Lee produced during their eight-year run on the title, but as some of the greatest comics produced in the history of the medium itself.



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