

“Phans”, not Fans”: The Phantom and Australian comic-book fandom¹

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Abstract

The Phantom is an American comic-strip character who, at the time of his debut in 1936, became the forerunner of the costumed superhero, but whose popularity was eclipsed by the subsequent appearance of Superman in 1938. Although historically neglected in the United States, *The Phantom* comic strip enjoyed consistently greater popularity overseas – most notably in Australia, which today hosts the world’s oldest edition of *The Phantom* comic book. This paper will argue that the dissemination of *The Phantom* in Australia’s pre-war print media culture, particularly through women’s magazines, greatly influenced its public reception and cemented the character’s appeal amongst mainstream audiences. This paper further examines the role played by Australian fans of the Phantom – or “phans”, as they preferred to be called – in using print and online media to sustain public interest in the character, and thus entered into a symbiotic – and occasionally adversarial – relationship with *The Phantom*’s commercial gatekeepers.

Keywords: The Phantom; superhero; comics fandom; Australia; “phans”; fan clubs.

1. Introduction

The Phantom is an American comic-strip hero who, at the time of his debut in 1936, became the forerunner of the costumed superhero that today dominates America’s media-entertainment industries, from comic-books and licensed merchandise, to blockbuster movies and videogames. Yet even as the Phantom’s profile in the United States was eclipsed by the subsequent appearance of Superman in 1938, he soon found greater favour amongst international audiences – and nowhere has the Phantom enjoyed a more ardent following than in Australia.

It is undoubtedly tempting to regard the commercial success of *The Phantom* comic-strip in Australian newspapers and magazines as yet another instance of American media organisations utilising their vast economies of scale to cement their dominance in foreign markets, by syndicating cheap content to overseas media outlets, typically to the detriment

of domestic rivals within those markets. Yet such generalisations go only some way towards accounting for this remarkable publishing phenomenon. In order to understand why this American comic-strip character enjoys a unique, and sometimes baffling, status within contemporary Australian culture, this paper will argue that the dissemination of *The Phantom* comic-strip in pre-war Australian print media significantly influenced its public reception. The series' initial placement in a popular women's magazine allowed *The Phantom* to be framed as 'family entertainment', thereby cementing its longstanding appeal amongst mainstream Australian audiences.

This strategy proved crucial to the subsequent success of *The Phantom* comic-book, which has been published continuously in Australia since 1948, and today remains one of the world's longest-running comic magazines. The series' longevity is due partly to the activism of Australian readers who, since the early 1980s, established fan clubs to foster renewed public interest in *The Phantom*. However, their demographic diversity and single-minded devotion to *The Phantom* sets them apart from the rest of Australian comics fandom; in fact, many 'phans' (as they prefer to be known) would not regard themselves as comic-book 'fans' at all.

This paper examines a broad range of fan-generated texts, including fanzines, readers' letters and online fora, to understand how the Phantom has been appropriated as an Australian hero. Studying the popular adulation of the Phantom amongst Australian audiences also offers unique insights into a singular cultural iteration of comics fandom which has enjoyed a symbiotic, and sometimes adversarial, relationship with the Phantom's official gatekeepers.

2. The Phantom and the American Superhero Genre

The Phantom is the 21st descendant of an English nobleman who, in 1525, on the skull of his father's murderer, swore an oath 'against all piracy, greed and cruelty' and pledged that the eldest male of each succeeding generation would carry on his work (Falk & Moore, 2010, p.115). Thus began the unbroken dynasty of 'The Phantom', whom many believed to be the same man and was henceforth known as 'The Ghost Who Walks – Man Who Cannot Die'. The present-day Phantom's real name is Kit Walker – the family's ancestral name, coined in honour of the legend, 'The Ghost Who Walks'. The Phantom presides over a hidden stretch of jungle, known as the Deep Woods, located in the fictitious African nation of Bangalla, and home to the Bandar pygmy tribe, whose lethal poison arrows are feared by all. He resides in the Skull Cave, which houses the crypts of his ancestors, along with the 'Phantom Chronicles', a library containing the hand-written accounts of his forefathers' exploits. The Phantom's true identity – and the secret of his family dynasty – is known only to a trusted few, among them the Bandar tribe's medicine man, Guran; the Phantom's wife, Diana Palmer; and their twin children, Kit and Heloise.

Created by author Lee Falk and originally illustrated by Ray Moore, *The Phantom* comic-strip premiered in the *New York Journal-American* (owned by William Randolph Hearst) on 17 February 1936 (A separate Sunday newspaper colour version of *The Phantom*

debuted on 28 May 1939). *The Phantom*, unlike many American adventure-serial strips of the 1930s, outlived its creator, Lee Falk, who wrote the series until his death in March 1999. Today, *The Phantom* is written by Tony De Paul and jointly illustrated by Paul Ryan (weekday episodes) and Terry Beatty (Sunday episodes) and is distributed by King Features Syndicate (a subsidiary of the Hearst Corporation) to over 500 newspapers worldwide and published in 15 languages.

Clad in a skin-tight purple costume, his face concealed by a cowl and black eye-mask, the Phantom was the first costumed hero to appear in American newspaper comic-strips and became the visual template for the modern comic-book superhero. Yet even though the Phantom preceded the debut of Superman in *Action Comics* (1938), the character's contribution to the superhero genre has gone largely unrecognised, despite being hailed by comics historian Maurice Horn as the 'granddaddy of all costumed superheroes' (1996, p. 242). Peter Coogan has argued that the Phantom's greater historical significance resides in the character's pivotal status as a transitional figure between the pulp-magazine vigilante heroes of the early 1930s and the super-powered heroes that appeared in American comic-books prior to World War II. Despite his superhero-styled costume, the Phantom's reliance on his 'ordinary' physical strength and Colt .45 automatics, along with his distinctive 'skull ring' (which leaves an indelible 'death's head' mark on the jaws of his opponents), evoked similar dramatic motifs employed by the earlier generation of pulp-magazine heroes, such as *The Shadow* (1931) and *The Spider* (1933). While acknowledging that the Phantom 'laid important groundwork for the [comic book] superhero', Coogan emphasised that the Phantom did not inspire the 'popular culture principle of imitation and repetition' evidenced by the proliferation of costumed superheroes that followed Superman's debut in 1938 (2006, p.185). The Phantom's peripheral status as a costumed superhero is evident in the character's chequered career as an American comic-book fixture, which, according to Bill Black, has seen 'the licence ... passed from publisher to publisher for decades' (1999, p.13). While the Phantom's exclusion from the pantheon of American superheroes has proved detrimental to his success in the United States, it will be argued that his nominal 'super-status' has been a cornerstone of his appeal to Australian audiences.

3. The Phantom in Australia

The Phantom made its antipodean debut in *The Australian Woman's Mirror* on 1 September 1936, its front cover inviting readers to 'Meet The Phantom!' on page 49. The homely interior of a women's magazine seems an unlikely venue for a masked adventurer, but the inclusion of *The Phantom* in the *Woman's Mirror* was driven by commercial urgency. Within a year of its launch in 1924, the *Woman's Mirror* achieved the highest circulation of any weekly Australian periodical (Rolfe, 1979, p.290). But its comfortable dominance was challenged by a colourful new competitor, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, which began boosting its already impressive circulation figures with the inclusion of Lee Falk's first comic strip serial, *Mandrake the Magician*, commencing on 1 December 1934 (O'Brien, 1982,

p.55). *The Woman's Mirror* was therefore understandably keen to purchase the magazine serial rights to Falk's newest comic strip from its Australian licensor, Yaffa Syndicate.

The *Woman's Mirror* initially devoted a full-page to *The Phantom*, compiling five daily newspaper instalments into a single weekly 'episode'; subsequent weeks would feature a brief text synopsis of the unfolding storyline at the top of the page.³ From the outset, the *Woman's Mirror* marketed *The Phantom* as adult fare; the first instalment was promoted, not as a comic strip, but as an 'exciting picture serial' (AWM, 1936, p.49), which was deliberately placed outside the magazine's children's supplement, the 'Piccaninnies Pages'. Early episodes of *The Phantom* emphasised the torrid cliff-hanger courtship between the masked hero and the headstrong New York socialite, Diana Palmer. The series' romantic melodrama was amplified by the Phantom's ongoing rivalry with the dashing army officer, Captain Melville Horton, for Diana's affections – a love triangle which made *The Phantom* the perfect complement to the magazine's romantic fiction serials. **(Figure 1)**

The Phantom's longstanding tenure in the *Woman's Mirror* – where it remained until the magazine's closure in 1961 – cemented the character's status as a widely recognised fixture in Australian popular culture for years to come. The character's exposure to a large female audience may also go some way towards explaining why the present-day edition of *The Phantom* comic-book retains a strong following amongst Australian women. Eileen Gomm's recollections are perhaps shared by many of her contemporaries:

I have been a fan of *The Phantom* from my early childhood ... [when] I used to read my mother's copy of the *Woman's Mirror* and anxiously check-up on the Phantom's adventures (Gomm, 1997, p.97).

Yet it took the initiative of a rival publisher to demonstrate how the *Woman's Mirror* could further exploit *The Phantom* to its commercial advantage. *The New Idea*, a popular women's magazine published by Fitchett Brothers (Melbourne) since 1902, began serialising the American science-fiction comic-strip, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century A.D.*, in April 1936. Sensing its potential appeal amongst younger readers, Fitchett Brothers released *The Adventures of Buck Rogers* comic-book in November 1936, which became a monthly publication in April 1938 and remained in print until 1953 (Ryan, 1979, p.150). Keen to exploit this emerging ancillary market, the *Woman's Mirror* released the first issue of *The Phantom* comic-book in March 1938, a 100-page edition that reprinted abridged versions of the series' first two storylines, 'The Singh Brotherhood' and 'The Sky Band', along with an excerpt from the third *Phantom* adventure, 'The Diamond Hunters', which would be continued in the following issue. The first edition was sufficiently popular to warrant two printings (Johnson, 2006, p.10) and a further four issues were released at irregular intervals throughout 1938-1940, before the series was curtailed, in part, by the imposition of wartime newsprint rationing. The *Woman's Mirror* dutifully promoted each new edition of *The Phantom* comic-book and even made a modest foray into comic-strip merchandising, running a brief advertisement on 29 August 1939, exhorting boys to 'Send for the Phantom

Gun and Holster. 3/-, Post Free'. Thus, Australia became the second country in the world – after Italy, in 1937 – to issue *The Phantom* in a comic-magazine format. Tellingly, *The Phantom* had to wait until 1962 before it received its own, self-titled comic magazine in its American homeland.⁴



Figure 1: 'The Phantom', *The Australian Woman's Mirror*, 13 April 1937. (Rare Book Collection, Monash University Library)

More significant, however, were the magazine's deliberate attempts to portray *The Phantom* as an Australian, rather than American, comic strip. References to American dollars were changed to sterling currency, while American spelling and slang was replaced with their 'correct' Australian equivalents. Diana Palmer was referred to as a 'young Sydney girl', whilst the opening setting was changed from New York Harbour to somewhere 'off Sydney Heads' (Falk & Moore, 1938, pp.5 & 9). Although such devices were later abandoned, they helped foster the widespread belief amongst Australian readers that *The Phantom* was a home-grown comic strip.

There were additional dramatic elements within *The Phantom* that further obscured its American provenance. Lee Falk based many of the Phantom's early adventures in the geopolitical milieu of pre-war Southeast Asia, which was then still firmly under the yoke of British and European colonial rule. For example, in 'The Prisoner of the Himalayas', the Phantom is beseeched by British intelligence officers to intervene on their behalf in Barogar, 'the most dangerous spot in India', as an urgent 'matter of empire' (Falk & Moore, 2000, p.56). The Phantom's secluded jungle home was originally given as Luntok, 'a British protectorate off the coast of Sumatra', in the Dutch East Indies (Falk & Moore, 2010, p.65). The Phantom's geographic proximity to Australia, and his occasional entanglement with Britain's imperial affairs, may have reinforced the popular perception amongst Australian readers of the 1930s that he was, in some way, more 'Australian' (or, at the very least, 'British') than American.

4. The Phantom & Australian Comic-Book Culture

Despite the cancellation of *The Phantom* comic-book in late 1940, *The Phantom* comic-strip continued to appear in the *Woman's Mirror* throughout World War II, and remained a constant selling-point in external press advertisements for the magazine well into the early 1950s (*Courier-Mail*, 1951, p.6). The strip's ongoing presence in the *Woman's Mirror* proved beneficial for Frew Publications, a Sydney firm that acquired the rights to launch a brand-new Australian edition of *The Phantom* comic-book in September 1948.⁵ Frew entered the market amidst the explosive post-war expansion of Australia's comic-book industry, which saw the number of publications almost double from 90 titles in 1949 to nearly 180 titles by 1954, the majority of which – like *The Phantom* – consisted of reprints from syndicated American comic-strips and comic-book features. By the mid-1950s, annual sales of comic books within Australia were peaking at 60 million copies – truly astonishing figures for a country whose population had not yet reached 9 million people (Patrick, 2012, p.164). The character's weekly appearance in the *Woman's Mirror* became a form of free advertising for Frew's edition of *The Phantom*, which achieved a monthly circulation of 90,000 copies by 1950 (Snowden, 1973, p.6).⁶ Featuring a hero associated with a wholesome family magazine helped shield *The Phantom* from the public outcry against comics that grew ever louder throughout Australia during the 1950s (Finnane, 1989, pp.220-240; Osborne, 1999, pp.155-

178; Patrick, 2011, pp.133-156). Such a fate not shared by Frew's other comic magazines, including their cowboy hero, *The Phantom Ranger*, which was condemned for '[polluting] children's minds' (*Argus*, 1950, p.7).

However, by the late 1950s, Australia's comic-book industry was dealt a succession of devastating blows, commencing with the introduction of local television broadcasting in 1956 and culminating with the readmission of imported, full-colour American comic books (originally banned from Australia as a wartime austerity measure) in 1960 (Patrick, 2012, pp. 166, 170-171). Frew Publications was not immune from these seismic disruptions and made drastic cuts to its range of comics, magazines and paperback novels, leaving it with just a handful of comic-book titles by the early 1960s. Yet contemporary press reports noted that *The Phantom* continued to exert a 'phenomenal grip on the juvenile market' (*Observer*, 1960, p.6), as it shifted from a monthly to a fortnightly publishing schedule (Ryan, 1979, p.196). Despite the closure of the *Woman's Mirror* in 1961, *The Phantom* continued to circulate widely through Australian print media outlets. The series was swiftly reinstated in the *Mirror's* youth-oriented replacement, *Everybody's*, where it remained just prior to the latter's demise in 1968. By this time, Yaffa Syndicate was selling *The Phantom* comic-strip to growing numbers of regional and metropolitan newspapers throughout the country, thus further extending the character's public profile (Shedden, ca.2006). **(Figure 2)**

The sheer ubiquity of *The Phantom* comic-book has arguably contributed to its longevity. Whereas imported American comics suffered from erratic distribution, *The Phantom* was a dependable product, available in newsagencies and milk bars (convenience stores), while back-issues could be cheaply and readily obtained through book exchanges. Copies of *The Phantom* were included in 'show bags' sold at agricultural fairs across the country. Graham Golding's first encounter with *The Phantom* in the early 1970s was a typical experience for many Australian children:

Two days after [visiting] the Easter show, the chips and lollies were long gone, the amazing flying disc over the fence, the only thing remaining was *The Phantom* comic. I've been hooked ever since (1992, p.97).

The Phantom's availability in the farthest corners of Australia may also partly account for its enduring popularity amongst remote aboriginal communities. As the aboriginal lawyer and land rights advocate, Noel Pearson, pointed out:

When I was a kid, the old and ... young read comic books, cowboy stories and magazines ... [which] would make their way around the village ... *The Phantom* was, of course, premium (2009, pp.37-38).



Figure 2: *The Phantom* No.439, Frew Publications, 1971.
(Rare Book Collection, Monash University Library)

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that Australian government agencies have recruited *The Phantom* for use in educational comic-books distributed to aboriginal communities, which addressed such topics as enrolling to vote (Garage Graphix, 1988) and how the Family Court could help resolve marital disputes (Legge & Lemos, 1997). An aboriginal language centre in Western Australia translated *The Phantom* into the Manyjilyjarra language for young

readers, as part of its indigenous language preservation scheme (Wangka Maya PALC, 2007, p.14).

Renewed public interest in *The Phantom* resulted from Lee Falk's decision to finally bring the Phantom and Diana Palmer to the altar in 'The Wedding of The Phantom', which was syndicated to American newspapers with considerable fanfare throughout 1977-1978, and subsequently commemorated by Frew Publications in a special edition of *The Phantom* comic-book (No.634 – 'Married at Last'). The couple's comic-strip nuptials sparked ongoing media interest in *The Phantom* (Cook, 1978, p.12; Gardiner, 1982; and Kennedy, 1980, p.35), including a satirical sketch performed by comedian Paul Hogan on his top-rating television show, wherein he played a henpecked and clueless 'Ghost Who Walks' – years before he became the world-famous star of *Crocodile Dundee*.

Just as the Phantom's domestic circumstances were changing, so too were the commercial fortunes of Australia's comic-book industry. Since the early 1960s, Australian readers could still choose from a variety of imported British and American comics, as well as from an even larger range of licensed Australian reprints of overseas comics. However, by the early 1980s, Australia's remaining comic-book publishers, such as Gredown, Yaffa Publications and Federal Comics, were gradually exiting the field, unable to compete with colour television, videocassette films and computer games (Porter, 1981, p.30; Patrick, 2012, pp.166-167, 170-171). That *The Phantom* survived this drastic industry downturn is further testimony to the character's enduring appeal amongst Australian audiences.

5. The Intrinsic Appeal of The Phantom

While *The Phantom* undeniably benefited from its continual exposure in a variety of print media outlets, its high profile does not automatically explain why it has remained so popular in Australia for over 75 years. Given the series' longevity, it is necessary to draw a distinction between particular instances when *The Phantom* comic-strip may have appealed to specific audiences at different times in Australian history, and the Phantom's unique embodiment of a particular kind of heroism, which continues to resonate with Australian readers, regardless of their age.

Swedish comics historian Fredrik Strömberg has argued that *The Phantom's* basic premise, wherein 'a white man in the jungle protects simple savages by spreading law and order', was an 'acceptable concept in 1930s America' (2003, p.81). It may have also seemed equally acceptable to 1930s-era Australian audiences, who perhaps saw parallels between the Phantom's quasi-imperialist mission and the efforts of Australian patrol officers in bringing 'law and order' to the highlands of New Guinea (Mair, 1948, pp.19-24). Australia's mandate to control this former German protectorate (recognised by the League of Nations after World War I) gave it a true external frontier, romanticised in the Australian imagination as a dangerous land wherein white settlers were continually under siege from a hostile 'aboriginal population' – a popular image of New Guinea which, according to Robin Winks, was entirely 'out of keeping with reality' (1971, p.33).

Issues of race and colonial rule came to the fore during Lee Falk's 1942-43 storyline, 'The Inexorables', which saw the Phantom defend his jungle domain (then known as 'Bengali') against an invading Japanese army. Appearing in US newspapers within months of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, 'The Inexorables' remains an undeniably visceral example of American wartime propaganda, which saw the Phantom and his coalition of tribal warriors inflict appalling casualties on the Japanese soldiers, who were portrayed as sadistic, sub-human monsters. The story was serialised in *The Australian Woman's Mirror* from April 1943-May 1944 (retitled 'The Phantom Goes to War'), at a time when Australian troops – aided greatly by Papuan scouts, guides and stretcher-bearers – were gradually repelling the Japanese advance through Papua New Guinea.⁷ In this instance, the Phantom's martial exploits could be easily appropriated for Australia's own wartime propaganda needs.

When Frew Publications subsequently acquired the rights to 'The Inexorables' in 1950, the story's Asiatic war setting was modified to reflect the political realities of the Cold War, which saw Australian combat forces serving as part of the United Nations' coalition during the Korean War (1950-1953). Frew retained the *Woman's Mirror* title ('The Phantom Goes to War') for their comic-book serialisation of the story (published in 1950-51), but with one crucial difference – all references to the 'Japanese' or the 'Nips' were replaced by 'Chinese Communists' and 'Reds'. While some of the more violent sequences were censored by Frew Publications, the derogatory racial depictions of the Japanese (now 'Chinese') soldiers were left unchanged, a symbolic reflection of Australia's historic antipathy towards both China and Japan, which remained a virulent feature of Australian political life (McQueen, 2004, pp.30-44, 57-71) and a recurring theme in Australian newspaper cartoons and comic-books, for much of the 20th-century (Broinowski, 1996, pp.83-85; Hornadge, 1976, pp.98-107).

Yet the Phantom's popularity amongst Australians cannot simply be attributed to the infrequent topicality of his adventures. A more intriguing explanation may be found when we consider the Phantom himself as a heroic archetype. Chief amongst the reasons given by Australians for enjoying the Phantom is that he is the antithesis of the American superhero. As one reader put it:

I enjoy *The Phantom* stories, because he is not a superhero, just a law-enforcer. He does not fly, he is not allergic to ... kryptonite and he does not have x-ray vision (Skender, 1996, p.34).

But if the Phantom isn't a superhero, then what kind of hero is he? Lee Falk always maintained that he drew on his childhood interest in Greek mythology and Arthurian legend as the chief inspiration for *The Phantom* (Hurd, 1996, p.21). The French essayist Francis Lacassin concurred, claiming that Falk's stories adapted 'epic poetry for the ... needs of ... industrial civilisation' (1975, viii). The idea of the Phantom as a latter-day knight-errant, bound by a chivalrous code, is by no means a fanciful one to Australian readers. As one devotee argued, the Phantom is 'constrained to act within the confines of his mandate ...

[which] came from antiquity', thus setting him apart from 'all other so-called [comic-book] heroes, [who] are free to act from their own conscience' (Rose, 1996, p.48).

The Phantom's embodiment of 'old-fashioned' heroism is, perhaps, key to understanding his appeal to Australian audiences. On a superficial level, the Phantom certainly resembles a storybook knight, charging into battle astride his mighty stallion, Hero. But on an emotional level, the Phantom's moral code clearly resonates with Australian audiences. Parents frequently wrote letters praising the Phantom for being 'strong, virtuous and a true hero' (Davis, 1996, p.33), whose actions '[make] him a role model ... that I can hold up to my boys with confidence' (Furlong, 1996, p.34). Such comments echoed the often conservative rhetoric that underscored the formation of *Phantom* fan organisations during the 1980s.

6. The Formation of Phantom 'Phan' Clubs

For much of their publishing history in Australia, comic books remained an essentially one-way medium, which rarely encouraged direct communication with their readers. This was in marked contrast with the pre-war generation of Australian 'children's papers', such as *Pals* (1920) and *Comet* (1936), which, like the British publications upon which they were modelled, printed readers' letters, offered editorial advice columns and facilitated exchanges between pen pals. Such devices, according to Vane Lindesay, 'involved the reader, stimulated young imaginations' and gave Australian children 'a sense of cultural identity' (Lindesay, 1983, p.129). Some comic-book publishers sought to recreate this 'clubby' atmosphere amongst their readers, but usually did so for less altruistic purposes. Atlas Publications (Melbourne), publishers of *Captain Atom*, Australia's most successful locally-drawn superhero comic, launched the Captain Atom Fan Club which, at its peak of popularity in the early 1950s, boasted 75,000 members. While members were exhorted to be 'truthful and honest' and 'helpful always to other people' (Atlas Publications, ca.1953, p.12), the club was also designed to sell character-based merchandise, such as the Captain Atom 'power ring' and Film Projector Gun.

Frew Publications adopted a similarly indifferent stance towards its audience for nearly 40 years, to whom they would occasionally market a range of *Phantom* products, such as skull-rings (Frew Publications, 1965, p.31) or 'autographed' *Phantom* posters (Frew Publications, 1970, p.32). By the early 1980s, *The Phantom* was being published on a largely successful 'print-and-forget' basis, reportedly selling a still-healthy 50,000 copies per issue (Henderson, 1986c, p.14). As Frew Publications could anticipate receiving only 4-5 new Lee Falk-penned *Phantom* stories from King Features Syndicate each year, the company had little choice but to continually recycle previously-published episodes, which were reprinted approximately every 5-7 years. The magazine's casual readership reportedly turned over with sufficient regularity within this timeframe, thus ensuring that this strategy did not adversely affect sales. Yet even if long-term readers objected to this policy – and there is

anecdotal evidence to suggest that that some of them did object (Benjamin, ca.1985, p.73) – Frew Publications, like its competitors, remained publicly unresponsive to their opinions.⁸

The Phantom Club, launched in 1981, sought to redress this situation by giving *Phantom* ‘phans’ (as they came to be known) a forum in which their voices could be heard. Principally formed to ‘meet the needs of keen Phollowers of The Phantom’ and give them ‘the opportunity to express their admiration for The Phantom’, the club was unusual insofar that it was a business venture, created and driven by fans. King Features licensed Hendo Industries Pty. Ltd. (formed by club president, John Henderson) to reproduce *The Phantom* on merchandise for use in conjunction with the official Phantom Club throughout Australasia and the South Pacific region (*Intellectual Property Reports*, 1991, p.590). The Club, in turn, would pay King Features either AUD\$1000 per year, or seven per cent of sales, whichever figure was higher (Robson, 1985, p.83).

Yet from the outset, the Phantom Club was imbued with a distinct moral purpose. Prospective members were asked to sign the Phantom’s ‘Sacred Oath’ on their application form, in order to make ‘phollowers’ aware of ‘the motivation behind every Phantom adventure’ and to remind them ‘they also have a responsibility to society’. John Henderson declared that ‘there are many disturbing features of our society that demand attention, and like the Phantom, the club believes it has a duty to help in whatever way it can’ (Henderson, ca.1981, p.2). Club membership was organised along the lines of the Jungle Patrol, a paramilitary police force featured in *The Phantom* comic-strip, whereby members could rise in rank from ‘Patrolman’ to ‘General’, and greeted each other publicly using the club salute and password (Henderson [attrib.], n.d., pp.1-4); the Club’s military overtones might account for the seemingly high number of Australian defence force personnel amongst its ranks (*Jungle Beat*, 1986, p.12; 1987a, p.7). Local club chapters organised sports and recreational events for members and their families, while Club Headquarters briefly offered a job-finding service for unemployed members (Henderson [attrib.], 1985a, p.15).⁹

The *Jungle Beat* club newsletter became a new site for ‘fan-scholar’ inquiry, with members exchanging knowledge about different aspects of *Phantom* lore and legend. Brisbane resident Barry Stubbersfield became a notable contributor by documenting the complex – and hitherto unknown – publishing history of *The Phantom* in Australia (1986, pp.14-15; 1987, 5-7) and uncovering the censorship of *Phantom* stories published by Frew throughout the 1950s (n.d., pp.4-7; n.d., pp.4-6; n.d., pp.4-6). **(Figure 3)**

The Phantom Club found itself in a symbiotic, and occasionally adversarial, relationship with *The Phantom*’s official gatekeepers. The club initially relied on placing paid advertisements in Frew’s *Phantom* comic-book to promote its mail-order merchandise and recruit new members, but John Henderson frequently used the club’s *Jungle Beat* newsletter to criticise Frew’s growing reliance on using *Phantom* stories produced under license by the Swedish publisher, Semic Press, for the Scandinavian market.¹⁰ Dismissing the Swedish stories as ‘substandard and an insult to both us and The Ghost Who Walks’ (1985b, p.23), Henderson declared that ‘the Swedes do pose a serious threat to the real Phantom that generations [of Australians] have come to know and love over many years’ and urged

‘fair-dinkum Phantom people’ to act as a ‘united force’ capable of reversing Frew’s editorial policy ‘before it’s too late’ (Henderson, 1986b, p.12).

Despite these objections, the club remained indefatigable in its promotion of *The Phantom* to the wider community, with John Henderson (dressed in his tailor-made *Phantom* costume) doing press interviews and television appearances across the country (*Jungle Beat*, 1987b, p.8). However, the resultant media coverage was not always favourable, with Henderson initially portrayed as the president of a ‘bizarre’ organisation catering to ‘phantom phreaks’ (Robson, 1982, n.p.), who were deemed to be otherwise ‘sane human beings’ who had not yet outgrown reading comic-books (Kershler, 1987, p.3). Nonetheless, the club attracted high-profile members, including Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke (Brown, 1988, pp.25-26),¹¹ as well as prominent sportsmen like cricketer Max Walker (Walker, 1986, p.20) and rugby player Wally Lewis (Jones, 1986, p.131). Bryan Shedden, creator of *The Deep Woods* (a *Phantom* fan website) has argued that ‘much of the public awareness of *The Phantom* that currently exists in Australia probably owes to the activities of The Phantom Club during those years’ (Shedden, ca.2007). If that was the case, then the club’s influence clearly exceeded its modest size; by 1986, the club boasted 3291 members worldwide, which was a fraction of the estimated 50,000 Australian readers then purchasing *The Phantom* comic-book every fortnight (Henderson [attrib.], 1986c, p.14). The Club’s licence, however, was withdrawn by King Features Syndicate in 1988, due to alleged copyright infringements (Shedden, ca.2007). Henderson maintained that the decision, made by ‘the businessmen in the Phantom head office in New York’, boiled down to a ‘philosophical difference’. As Henderson saw it, ‘they were more concerned with the profitability of the character, and we are more concerned with the spirit’ (Henderson [attrib.], ca.1989, p.2). Undeterred, Henderson continued to operate the organisation as The Independent Phantom Fan Club of Australia (ca.1989-1995), but all subsequent club literature clearly emphasised that it was ‘an unofficial organisation and is no way associated with the owners of “The Phantom” character’ (Henderson [attrib.], ca.1989, p.3). Despite these straitened circumstances, the club had grown to 4788 members worldwide by 1990 (*Jungle Beat*, ca.1990, p.3) and would, according to Henderson, exist as a ‘secret society’ (Kiefer, 1989, n.p.), which continued to operate in the shadow of its authorised and licensed successor (The Phantom Official Fan Club of Australia) until 1995.¹²

7. The Phantom and Australian Comics Fandom

The formation of The Phantom Club coincided with the latter phase of Australian comic fandom’s expansion throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. John Ryan’s fanzine, *Down Under* (1964) is widely credited as being the first Australian fanzine dedicated solely to comics, which became an early foundation for his pioneering history of Australian comics, *Panel by Panel* (1979) (Stone, 1983, pp.39-43). However, the debut of *The Australian Comic Collector* fanzine (1975-1983) signalled the emergence of a loosely-organised comics fan culture, facilitated by the proliferation of specialty comic shops, and culminating with the

opening of Comicon (Melbourne), Australia's first comic-book convention, in 1979 (Bentley, 2007, pp.15-19).

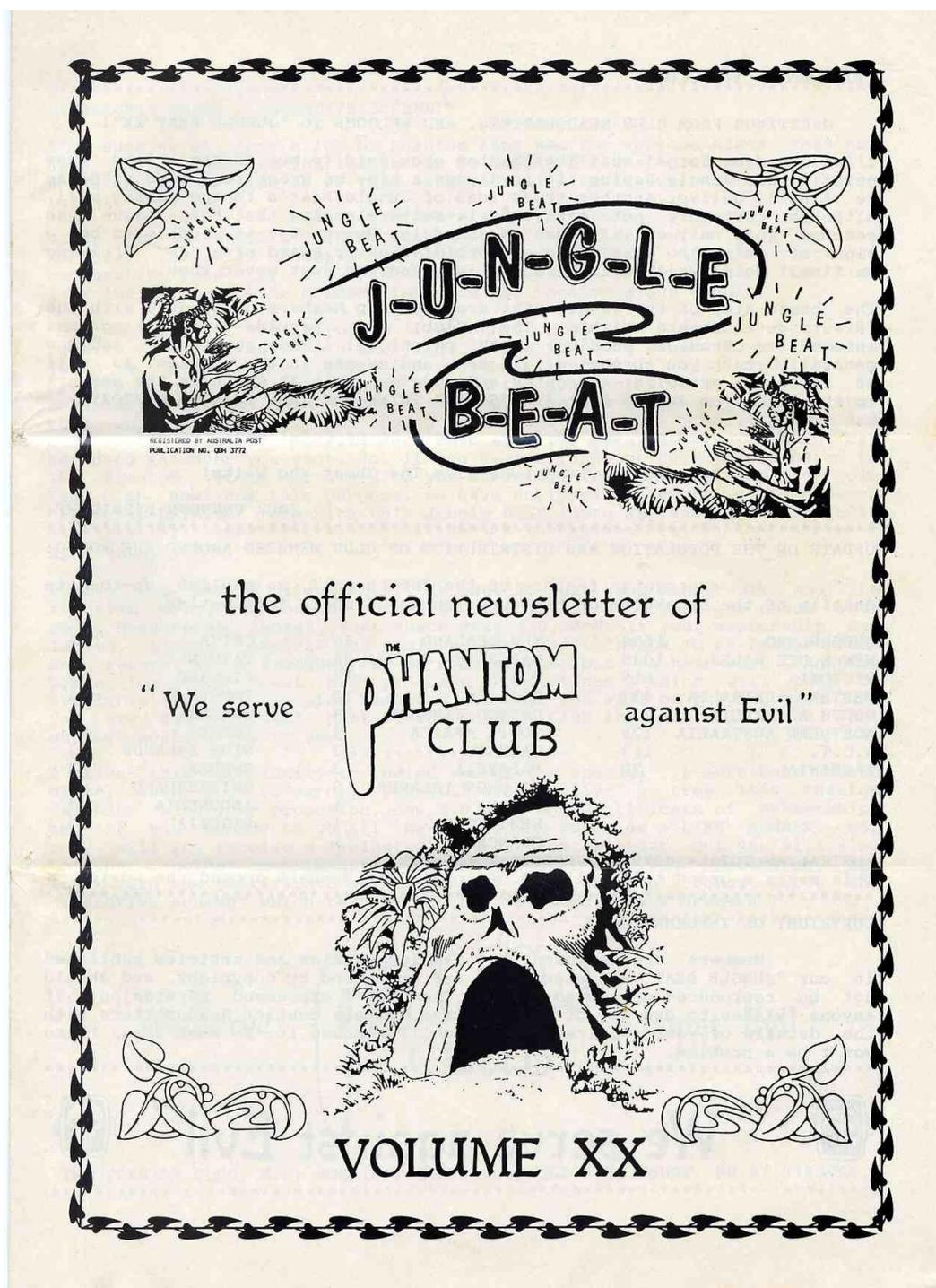


Figure 3. *Jungle Beat - Phantom Club Newsletter*, Vol.20 (n.d.)
(Author's Collection)

Australian comics fandom, however, remained collectively preoccupied with American superheroes to the virtual exclusion of all other forms of comic-book culture. This genre focus did not extend to the activities of Australian publishers producing licensed reprints of

American superhero comics, which were looked down upon by fans and collectors as ersatz imitations of 'genuine' American comics. Judging by its near-total absence from contemporary fan literature during this period (cf. Snowden, 1973), *The Phantom* clearly fell into this disfavoured category. Printed in black & white on cheap paper and sporting crudely coloured covers, *The Phantom* comic-book was the very antithesis of glossy, full-colour American superhero comics. Nonetheless, the magazine's threadbare presentation made it more affordable than imported American comics, thus ensuring that *The Phantom* appealed to 'ordinary people' who, as *Phantom* 'phan' Chris Lassig pointed out, 'would never step inside a comic shop' (1997, p.7).

Australian comic-book fandom was, and largely remains, geared towards the interests of male collectors. Jonathan David Tankel and Keith Murphy's case-study of American fans' comic-book collecting practices suggests that 'the lack of female interest [in comics] has been due to the dominance of male heroes and action-oriented themes' (Tankel & Murphy, 1998, p.61). Yet in the Australian context, this observation does not appear to hold true for *The Phantom*, which enjoys a comparatively loyal following amongst Australian women – many of whom, like Victoria Davis, began reading *The Phantom* as a child, and was now encouraging her ten-year-old daughter 'to read and enjoy' it as well (Davis, 1996, p.33). The availability of *The Phantom* comic in female-friendly retail outlets, such as newsagencies (which also sold newspapers and general-interest magazines), may help explain its comparatively high take-up amongst Australian women; however, one 70-year-old female 'phan' did remark that her local newsagency proprietor thought it odd that 'an old biddy like me read comics' (Skinner, 1990, p.61). By contrast, the distribution of imported American comics in Australia is largely confined to specialty comic shops, which, like their US counterparts, typically foster a 'male club-like attitude' which made women feel uncomfortable (Nyberg, 1995, p.211).

The schism between mainstream comics fandom and 'phans' of *The Phantom* became evident to John Henderson, Phantom Club President, when he made a guest appearance at the Australian Comic Convention held at the Sydney Opera House in January 1986, dressed in his Phantom costume. 'The convention itself wasn't really our scene,' he recalled. 'As I've said before, we aren't really "comic collectors", but rather just hard-core Phantom fans, and there's quite a difference' (1986a, p.4). The convention's organiser, Richard Rae, later acknowledged that the 'Aussie-produced *Phantom* comic still outsells most imported US comics' (1994, p.23).

Jim Shepherd, a former Sydney sports journalist and broadcaster, was able to capitalise on the Phantom Club's legacy when he was invited by Frew Publications' remaining founders, Ron Forsyth and Lawford 'Jim' Richardson, to join the company in 1987. Acknowledging that *The Phantom* magazine 'was getting a bit tired' (Patrick, 2007), Shepherd commissioned market research in order to tap readers' collective memory of their favourite scenes from 'classic' *Phantom* adventures (Shepherd, 1998, p.11) and enlisted prominent Australian 'phan' researcher Barry Stubbersfield (amongst others) to help restore previously edited and/or censored versions of these stories for publication (Shepherd,

1988a, p.9). Shepherd introduced a letters page ('Phantom Forum') in 1988 to foster a sense of community amongst 'phans' and to foreshadow new developments planned for the comic (Shepherd, 1988b, p.2).

Shepherd used the 'Phantom Forum' to manage readers' competing expectations of the magazine. Frew's growing reliance on Swedish/Scandinavian stories continued to generate heated debate. Some 'phans' complained they were 'unnecessarily complicated' (Denton, 2007, p.113) and that the historical stories set in Europe (featuring the Phantom's ancestors) came across like 'a history lesson' (Small, 2010, p.48), while others lauded their sometimes outlandish concepts and fantastic storylines (Wilkie, 1994, p.32) and regarded the 1990s as a 'golden era for [Phantom] stories from Scandinavia' (Martin, 2010, p.33). While keen to give equal space to both camps, Shepherd nonetheless stressed that only Lee Falk stories were 'accepted as being official *Phantom* history', while acknowledging that the Swedish-produced stories 'varied the official [Falk] history, or ... have been based on the calculated assumption of many modern *Phantom* writers' (Shepherd, 2006, p.93). Shepherd also used the 'Phantom Forum' to justify the company's occasionally contradictory editorial policies. One reader challenged Frew's decision to censor scenes from a Swedish story depicting naked women, suggesting that such a move signalled a return 'to the bad old days of censorship'. Shepherd, however, argued that some of the Scandinavian stories indulged in 'unnecessary titillation' and that Frew Publications would continue to 'tidy up any [Swedish] artwork considered [to be] over the top' (1996, p.96).¹³ Shepherd further justified this stance by printing letters from readers who endorsed his 'selective censorship', on the grounds that such scenes were demeaning to women (Furlong, 1996, p.34) and that Frew's policy was entirely in keeping with the Phantom's 'high moral character' (Davis, 1996, p.33).

Engaging with readers in this manner was a matter of economic necessity for Frew Publications, as Shepherd later admitted that 'the reason for introducing the [letters page was] to find out who the buyers were' (Power & Pietrzykowski, 1995, pg.29). Whereas Frew's owners previously thought that 15-year-olds comprised the bulk of their audience, Shepherd discovered that most *Phantom* readers were aged '20-years and over', and that 'phans' aged 40-years and above represented a real 'growth area' for the magazine (Power & Pietrzykowski, 1995, pg.19). Catering to this broad demographic meant Frew Publications had to resort to publishing an eclectic, but undeniably successful, mixture of both 'classic' and modern-day *Phantom* stories from America, combined with new Swedish/Scandinavian stories and, occasionally, Australian-drawn *Phantom* adventures.¹⁴ As Shepherd explained:

That's why we have what appear at first glance to be a bit of a strange mix of stories ... but it works, [because our readers are] never quite sure what's coming next (Power & Pietrzykowski, 1995, pg.33).

As Frew's publishing renaissance was getting underway, the Phantom Official Fan Club of Australia (POFCA) was launched in May 1991 by the gift retailer, Famous Faces (Melbourne), which also operated licensed Australian fan clubs dedicated to Marilyn Monroe and Elvis

Presley. This new organisation emulated many features of the former Phantom Club, including the 'Phantom Army' which, like Henderson's 'Jungle Patrol' scheme, awarded merit points and promotions to industrious club members (POFCA, 1992, p.2). Despite promising members abundant 'historical information' about *The Phantom*, as well as 'behind the scenes' profiles on the comic-strip's American creators (Shedden, ca.2007), POFCA rarely made such content available, relying instead on its subscribers to become 'Phantom correspondents' and contribute letters, news stories and artwork to their quarterly *Member Newsletter* (POFCA, 1991, p.4), which also doubled as a sales catalogue for *Phantom* merchandise available via mail-order purchase from Famous Faces. Frew Publications also used the Club's *Member Newsletter* as an additional publicity channel to promote forthcoming *Phantom* comics to the club's estimated 3,500 members (POFCA, 1995, p.1).

Despite emulating many of the practices associated with comic-book collectors, 'phans' might arguably object to any suggestion that they belong to the broader comic-book fan community. For some of the magazine's readers, *The Phantom* remains their first, and often only, engagement with the comic-book medium. It may be more accurate to regard *Phantom* 'phans' as a parallel fan community that only selectively engages with broader comics fandom. This is evident in the proliferation of both licensed and 'unofficial' products catering specifically for *Phantom* collectors, such as specially-designed archive boxes for storing *Phantom* comics (Phantom's Vault, 1998, p.211), and fan-authored publications, such as *The Phantom Reference Lists*, promoted as a 'comprehensive review of *Phantom* comics in Australia' (Lewis, ca.1990). Just as Australian comics fandom gradually migrated online throughout the 1990s, so too did Australian 'phans' create their own *Phantom*-centric websites and message boards, such as Bryan Shedden's encyclopaedic online reference, *The Deep Woods* (<http://www.deepwoods.org>) and *Phantom Phorum* (<http://phantomforum.com>). Whereas most Australian comic-book collectors favoured the American *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, 'phans' preferred to consult *Johnson's Official Phantom Price Guide*, an Australian publication designed to help them build and value their collections of *Phantom* comics and merchandise (Johnson, 2006). The convenor of *The Phantom* fan-site, *ChronicleChamber.com* (<http://www.chroniclechamber.com>), began using the Sydney-based Supanova Pop Culture Expo as an unofficial forum to stage a separate *Phantom* 'Phan Gathering' in 2009 (Douglas, 2009). These segregated 'phan' activities and practices, together with the demographic differences evident between devotees of *The Phantom* and 'mainstream' comic fans further accentuates the ambiguous status of both *The Phantom* and its readers within Australian comics' fandom.

8. The Phantom as an 'Australian' Superhero

The Phantom may wear the colourful garb traditionally favoured by costumed superheroes, but in the eyes of his Australian readership, that's where the similarity ends. 'Phans' appear to accept the Phantom precisely because he embodies a tacit rejection of outlandish

American superheroes. Nor are such views confined to conservative, older readers; David Pappas, aged 13, enjoyed *The Phantom* as ‘a classic and intelligent alternative to the mindless “beat ‘em up” garbage currently dominating [newsagents’] shelves’ (Pappas, 1995, p.112). That he has no super powers, and can be injured, even killed, makes the Phantom all the more believable to readers.

Given Australians’ apparent devotion to their hero, radical changes to the Phantom’s persona are usually met with fierce opposition. News that Marvel Comics (US) had commissioned two Australian artists – David De Vries and Glenn Lumsden - to revamp *The Phantom* as a hi-tech, *Robocop*-styled character for the American market made headlines in Australia (Abbott, 1993, pp.45-47), but also provoked a fiery response from local ‘phans’, such as this reaction from one Phantom Club Member:

They [De Vries and Lumsden] claim that our Phantom lacked punch! How dare they! ... The Phantom not violent enough? How idiotic to change a role model who uses violence only as the last resort ... American attitudes, language and fashion are making greater inroads into our Australian culture ... Don’t let the Americans dominate our society’s tastes any further by letting our hero be forever changed (Zilm, n.d., pp.7-8).

When the Marvel Comics mini-series of *The Phantom* was eventually published in late 1994, King Features Syndicate stipulated that its Australian release would be restricted to local comic-book stores, so that it would not compete with the Frew Publications’ newsstand edition of *The Phantom* comic-book. Jim Shepherd was understandably ‘delighted’ with the decision, arguing that the American mini-series depicted the Phantom ‘as a real tough guy ... carrying all these weapons, which has nothing to do with the Phantom tradition’ (Harvey, 1995, p.7). Nonetheless, Zilm’s comments demonstrate how the Phantom has been thoroughly domesticated in Australian print culture, to the point where many ‘phans’ regard him as an indigenous hero.

The outcry against the perceived ‘Americanisation’ of the Phantom suggests a more intriguing debate at work about competing definitions of the superhero genre. As Joe Douglas, convenor of the *ChronicleCamber.com* website observes, ‘while comics ... have really changed their tone over the years ... reading *The Phantom* still feels like an “innocent” comic’ that belongs to a ‘bygone era, when ... [comics] were in their infancy’ (Douglas, 2010). Readers’ objections to seeing their hero being remodelled along more contemporary lines are grounded in the belief that this ‘classic’ superhero archetype is inherently superior to the newer, grittier American interpretation of the superhero genre. Without recourse to a home-grown alternative, Australian ‘phans’ have made the Phantom a de facto Australian superhero; that he is an American creation is virtually irrelevant. Paradoxically, Australians have endorsed the Phantom as an indigenous response to the dominant American comics culture, symbolised by the omnipotent superhero. This contradiction is thrown into sharp relief when the US licence-holders seek to inject changes into their property, thereby

upsetting whatever tenuous nationalistic claims that Australians have made on the Phantom.

9. Conclusion

As Lee Falk originally told the story, it was an English nobleman, Sir Christopher Standish, who, centuries ago, was washed up on a remote jungle shore, the sole survivor of an attack upon his father's merchant ship by the dreaded Singh Pirates. And so it was that his father's death at the hands of pirates led Sir Christopher to first utter the 'skull oath' and dedicate his life – and that of his male descendants – to the destruction of all evil as the Phantom (Falk & Moore, 2010, pp.112-115).

David Dale has suggested that Australians recognise in the saga of the Phantom an idealised version of Australia's own 'founding myth' as a place of exile for Britain's convicts in the 18th-century:

[The first Phantom] was an innocent, cast away on a fatal shore, far from his home and loved ones, and forced to carve out a new life. He made friends with the local wildlife, adapted to the ecology and earned the respect of the natives. Then he proceeded to fight for the underdog, wherever he saw injustice. Isn't that exactly the story of Australia? (Dale, 2006, p.74)

In a similar fashion, the Phantom has become an orphaned superhero, ignored and forgotten in his American homeland, only to be cast upon Australian shores over 75 years ago, where he was swiftly adopted as an ersatz 'local hero'. This transformation was made possible by a succession of Australian magazines and newspapers, whose inclusion of *The Phantom* comic-strip endorsed and legitimised the Phantom as a classic adventure hero in a manner that was never extended to the American superheroes that followed in his wake and were confined to the cultural ghetto of the comic book. The Phantom's ongoing popularity also owes a great deal to the single-minded efforts of 'phans' in rejuvenating and sustaining the public recognition of the Phantom, sometimes in the face of implacable legal and commercial obstacles. Therefore, the story of the Phantom's Australian journey is more than just another instance of American cultural imperialism, flowing unimpeded from centre to periphery. Instead, it demonstrates the process whereby one culture can take a product of another and refashion it in often surprising and contradictory ways, to fulfil an unspoken need for a national hero that it cannot express – for whatever reason – in its own vernacular.

Biographical Note

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Endnotes

¹ This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the Joint International Conference on Graphic Novels and Comics/International Bande Dessinée Society, held at Manchester Metropolitan University, 5-8 July, 2011

² The author would like to thank Australian comics historians John Clements and Graeme Cliffe, along with Bryan Shedden (creator of *The Deep Woods* website), for their invaluable research

assistance in the preparation of this paper. Any errors and omissions, however, are the author's own.

³ The *Woman's Mirror* would adhere to this format until 1946, when it commenced using the Sunday newspaper version of *The Phantom* comic-strip, which was originally designed for the larger (US) tabloid newspaper format.

⁴ *The Phantom's* first appearance in American comic-books – culled from reprints of the daily newspaper strip – was in *Ace Comics* No.11 (February 1938), followed by a self-titled, one-off volume in *Feature Book* No.20 (December 1938), a series of comic-strip reprint magazines published by David McKay Publications. The first regular, ongoing American series of *The Phantom* comic-book was published by Gold Key (November 1962).

⁵ Frew Publications was established by four investors – Ron Forsyth, Lawford 'Jim' Richardson, Jack Eisen and Peter Watson – who each contributed £500 towards the company's formation. 'Frew' was an acronym using the first letters of each investor's surname.

⁶ Frew sought to capitalise on the appearance of Lee Falk's *Mandrake the Magician* in *The Australian Women's Weekly*, by promoting *The Phantom* comic-book with the blurb, 'By Lee Falk, Author of "Mandrake"', which appeared on the magazine's front-cover for many years.

⁷ The Phantom has become a folk hero in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, where he is apparently revered as a magical warrior, embodying the spirit of returned ancestors. The US Sunday newspaper edition of *The Phantom* comic-strip was translated into Pidgin and began appearing in a Catholic newspaper, *Wantok*, in 1972, while the daily episodes were published in the *Post-Courier*, an English-language newspaper (Gill, 1977, p.14).

⁸ This is not to say that Frew Publications entirely refused to engage with their readers. The author has seen copies of private correspondence between Frew employees and individual readers dating from the 1970s, which demonstrate the company's willingness to answer readers' questions about *The Phantom*, as well as occasionally referring collectors to fellow 'phans' with whom they might wish to correspond, or to sell and trade back-issue *Phantom* comics.

⁹ Not all Phantom fans shared such altruistic goals; in 1984, Melbourne real estate agent John Northwood formed a 'rebel' Phantom Club, simply as a pretext for staging regular school reunion parties with his friends. 'People admire the Phantom because he's good and wholesome, no alcohol, a fitness freak ... [but] we're just the opposite', he explained (Freeman and Halfpenny, 1986, p.5).

¹⁰ Frew Publications, in its efforts to overcome the infrequent availability of new Lee Falk-scripted *Phantom* stories from the United States, began publishing translated versions of *Phantom* comic-book stories produced under licence by Semic Press (a division of the Bonnier Group) for the Scandinavian market. The first translated Swedish *Phantom* story to be published by Frew was 'The Ghost' (*The Phantom* No.730, 1981)

¹¹ The Australian Prime Minister, Robert ('Bob') Hawke, was depicted meeting the Phantom (dressed in his civilian guise of 'Mr. Walker') in an Australian-drawn Phantom adventure, 'The King's Cross Connection' (Shepherd & Chatto, 1992, pp.275-302). Hawke's cameo in *The Phantom*, released in January 1992, received considerable press coverage, chiefly because the story was published just weeks after Hawke had been deposed by the former Federal Treasurer, Paul Keating, for the leadership of the Australian Labour Party. As one journalist remarked, 'if only Bob had asked The Phantom to deal with Paul' (Lewis, 1992, p.23).

¹² Legally prevented from advertising the Independent Phantom Club of Australia's existence, Henderson adopted unorthodox tactics to promote the Phantom, such as standing as an

independent candidate in the 1993 Australian federal election, citing the Phantom's creed as the basis for his political platform (Hart, 1993: 6; *The Truth*, 1993: 7)

¹³ Shepherd occasionally used the topic of censoring 'racy' Swedish *Phantom* stories to generate media coverage for the comic; in one instance, he explained how a Swedish story depicting the Phantom's wife, Diana Palmer, in a topless bathing scene, had to be altered. 'Swedes being Swedes,' he explained, 'do these sorts of things [and] we have to touch [up the artwork]'. (Quoted in Walsh, 1988, p.4)

¹⁴ The first Australian-drawn *Phantom* adventure, 'Rumble in the Jungle' (written by Jim Shepherd and illustrated by Keith Chatto), appeared in *The Phantom*, No.951A, 1990.