



If the patient is terminally ill,
is not death with dignity better than this?

The Surfer Scripts

BY WILL JACOBS AND GERARD JONES

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1970, AFTER A RUN OF only eighteen issues, the comics magazine *Silver Surfer* ceased publication. It had been the most thoughtful, challenging, creative, significant, complex, and avant-garde of the very successful Marvel Comics line. But the Surfer didn't sell, and as publisher Stan Lee likes to say, "'Nuff said!"

It wasn't just pimply, crypto-fascist, goggle-eyed adolescent boys who were dismayed by the passing of the Surfer. The highbrows of America were likewise distressed. But where the sci-fi dorks could only stutter and drool at comic-book conventions in inchoate rage, the intellectuals determined to rally to the Surfer's support. Maybe, reasoned these acclaimed writers, artists, directors, and composers, if they submitted new script ideas, publisher Lee might be persuaded to revive the series!

For months, comic fandom was abuzz with gossip, rumors, anticipation. But, mysteriously, the longed-for reincarnation of the Silver Surfer never came to pass, and for thirteen years the many treatments, drafts, and scenarios of the super-hero's new adventures proposed by the best minds of our generation languished in the Marvel Comics dead file, under a heap of righteous Barry Smith resignation letters.

Inspired, however, by the vision of Richard Gere's devotion to the Surfer (in the recent, stupid movie *Breathless*), the team that unearthed the notorious

Beaver Papers set out to uncover the legendary Surfer Scripts. Applying the tried-and-true combination of “checkbook” journalism, blackmail, legwork, breaking and entering, and blind luck, Jacobs and Jones somehow obtained the file. Generally speaking, it wasn’t worth the trouble.

REPRESENTATIVE OF THE LOW QUALITY OF most of the material is James Michener’s forty-two-issues-long story entitled *Zenn-La*, an all-too-comprehensive study of the Silver Surfer’s native planet. Sample “caption copy” from the the third issue:

For millennia the very strata of the planet heaved convulsively. Torrential rains pounded the lifeless rocks where not a shoot of vegetation would grow. The fierce sun turned the rain to steam, and later the steam fell as yet more rain upon the lifeless rocks.

In an attached letter, Marvel artist John Buscema was asked by Michener himself to illustrate his version of the saga. Buscema’s answering note reads: “What are you, crazy? You think I’m gonna draw twenty pages of rocks?”

Not all the scripts are boring, however; some could be described as downright dumb. A few examples: John Irving wanted to take away the hero’s surfboard and give him a unicycle; Erica Jong wanted to make him female; Tom Robbins wanted the Surfer to dis-

cover Jesus’ body floating in space, except it really wouldn’t be space, it would be the inside of a box of Camels; Margaret Atwood wanted to make him female; Sylvester Stallone proposed an endless series of movies in which the Surfer fights the Hulk; Ralph Ellison wanted to make the Surfer invisible; and Gore Vidal wanted to make him female.

“Sex might have spiced the stories up a little,” admits the recently interviewed Roy Thomas, Marvel’s number-two writer, “but the only author who really titillated us was Charles Bukowski.” In *Notes of a Dirty Old Surfer* the inebriated L.A. novelist, poet, and pornographer tells how the Surfer and his cosmic buddy, the Watcher, rent an apartment in one of the seedier parts of Los Angeles and take up poetry and drink. An excerpt from the script, as written by Bukowski:

Cindy said, “I never made it with a silver dude before while a bald-headed giant watched.”

She found out that silver dudes weren’t any different from white, black, or yellow dudes as my seven and three-quarter inches of throbbing silver soared in and out of her space lane. Afterward she took a swallow of Thunderbird and said, “Maybe it’d be more fun if he didn’t just watch.”

The Watcher said, “The oath of my race forbids my participating in the ways of other beings.”

Cindy said, “Can’t I even suck your dick?”

The Watcher said, "Well, fuck, I guess one blowjob won't hurt. As long as I just watch."

I left them in the room and went to the kitchen, where I sat down at the typewriter. I tried to type a poem but I kept barfing on the platen and the keys stuck. So I shit, showered, and shaved and went out to find a job. But that was a drag, so I just soared around for a while. A kid saw me and said, "Hey look. There goes the Silver Chinaski!" I said, "Fuck you." Then I soared some more and pondered how fear and hostility had filled the hearts of mankind and brooded at length on my alienation. But that got boring, so I bought a bottle of port and went to the horse races.

The Watcher was there. I asked him how it was and he said, "I've seen the birth and death of worlds, but I think blowjobs are more fun."

NEXT ISSUE: "Erections, Exhibitions, Ejaculations, and General Tales of Ordinary Space-Heralds."

According to Thomas, everyone at Marvel loved the script, agreeing that it presented an unexpected new side to the Surfer's character, until boss Lee pointed out that it couldn't possibly pass the Comics Code Authority. Evidently no one had told Bukowski about the Code's injunction against heroes gambling.

Thomas continued, "There was another risqué entry that I thought was pretty titillating, but Stan never could understand what was happening in it."

Typically, Jerzy Kosinski's *Surfing There* was a collection of terse, ghoulish episodes that formed a collage of oblique horror, told in the first person by the Surfer himself. One example:

I was soaring further south. When I saw the Invisible Girl again she was lying open-legged in the snow, using her invisible force field as a peasant girl might use a large animal. Upon seeing me she turned invisible once again, but this did not diminish the urgency of my intention. Tracing her by the virtue of my power cosmic I drew her violently to me. Mistakenly believing that she was capable of using only one super-power at a time, I was surprised to find myself struck savagely by an invisible force sphere. I realized then that I had somehow confused her with Ultra-Boy, which was inexplicable to me, as he was not a Marvel character, was in fact a *Brand Ecch* character, but even this did not diminish the urgency of my intention.

In my arms she was an object, an extension of myself to be manipulated, if not seen. Without a pause I set in motion the design which I had conceived upon first seeing her among the corpses of the polo ponies. She reacted with surprising violence. The nature of her reaction was such that I was forced to perform an action that I found to be quite other than what I had intended. The shock of it forced her to turn visible. In the rolling planes of her body I

imagined I could see the death agonies of the Fantastic Four, their bodies spindled by the wreckage of the Pogo Plane in the shadows of the sanatorium.

Despite Lee's confusion the *Surfing There* script was readied for publication, but a last-minute scandal killed the project; Marvel production chief Sol Brodsky confessed to the *Village Voice* that the Polish genius had really paid him to write *Surfing There* and send it in under Kosinski's name.

Some efforts to save the *Silver Surfer* from cancellation were inspired by a belief that the series suffered not from a lack of intellectuality but rather from a surfeit of it. Many purveyors of children's entertainment sought to broaden the Surfer's audience by making him more meaningful to the young comic-book audience. Charles M. Schulz proposed changing the title of the series to *Surfnuts*; the alien hero's head would be enlarged and his mouth drawn simply as a wavy line whenever he meditated on the hatred that turns man against man. The idea also called for Mr. Fantastic to carry a stretchable security blanket, the Thing to attract flies, and the music-loving Human Torch to become infatuated with Aaron Copland. Belgian cartoonist Peyo, then first attempting to sell his cute creations to America, suggested *Silver Smurfers*, a whole horde of little blue cosmic heralds, indistinguishable from one another

except that each succeeds in being more obnoxious than the last.

But it was William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, tireless savants of low-budget animation, who presented the most commercially promising scenario: in *Surfy-Doo*, the spanner of the spaceways would share his board with a pair of cute teenage space twins and be followed by a little canine sidekick who would giggle incessantly and be neverendingly hungry for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. This idea died, however, when Marvel's durable staff letterer Artie Simek couldn't think of a way to letter a laugh-track onto a comic-book page.

Another school of contributors consisted of America's crime writers. Notable contributions were: George V. Higgins's *The Friends of the Silver Surfer*, in which Galactus, rather than punishing the Surfer by confining him to Earth, breaks his fingers by slamming them in a drawer; Robert B. Parker's *Looking for Shalla-Bal*, in which the hard-boiled Surfer learns to cook gourmet food; John D. MacDonald's *A Deadly Shade of Silver* in which the Surfer talks pop economics after trading in his surfboard for a flying boat; and Donald Westlake's *Cops and Aliens*, in which the Surfer and his buddies — Galactus, the Watcher, and the Super-Skrull — pull off an incomprehensible but allegedly hilarious caper.

Of all the “mean streets”-type submissions, the most noteworthy was *Galaxy Primeval*. *High Noon in Space*, penned by then-obscure Elmore Leonard (who is now America’s fastest-rising chronicler of the demimonde). A passage:

Poke, in tan slacks and powder-blue shirt, sipping the Salty Dog, saying, “The fuck? Bastard owes us ten grand. I earned that ten grand, man.” Thinking, “This motherfucker, shit, silver goddamn skin riding a silver goddamn surfboard, shit, pick us out of a lineup in a minute.”

The Surfer, pushing off the little crossbolt safety above the trigger, sliding it back and forward again, the Beretta nine-millimeter Parabellum dark against his silver skin, saying, “But why have fear and hostility so possessed the hearts of men?”

Poke thinking, “This dude, fuck, man, dude’s a fucking square. Dude’s ready for the psycho ward. The fuck I’m thinking, man, walk with this dude out on the streets? Freakiest fucking dude in Detroit. Shit, man, freakier than DeLeon Johnson and his .38 with the rubber goddamn bands wrapped around the handle.” Poke, earing back the hammer of his Walther P-38, saying, “The fuck, ain’t got no hostility, man. Cocksucker owe me ten grand, I’m gonna get it. Don’t care if the fucker eats planets, man.”

The Surfer, hands outstretched, fingers spread out beseechingly, saying, “But you canst not understand.

Human, how can one such as you comprehend the limitless power of him whom men call Galactus?”

“The fuck,” Poke saying. “Don’t give a shit what people call him. Just stick this here gun in his fucking mouth, man, and ear back the hammer. Fuckin’ blow his brains all over outer space, man. Like, no one will hear him stream.”

The Surfer, glancing into the mirror behind Poke, cocking his head like Gary Cooper in that movie, *High Noon*, liking the way he looked in the original Crested Beaut American cowboy hat with the funneled brim, the way it curved down over his eyes, saying, “Perhaps, then, human, it is desolation you seek, and perhaps, in that desolation, you will find the peace your heart desires. But as for where the Silver Surfer soars ... know you that he soars alone.”

Poke saying, “Then fuck off, chickenfat.”

Lee liked the script, but cautioned that if the Surfer appeared wearing a Crested Beaut American cowboy hat he might be confused with a Marvel reprint standby, the Rawhide Kid. Buscema argued, “Yeah, but this hat has a funneled brim. The Rawhide Kid’s doesn’t have a funneled brim.” Arguments raged on for weeks, during which time another script was rejected, despite its obvious merits. This was *Horseman, Surf By* (subtitle: *Sud*) by Larry McMurtry.

I went down to the Board Rodeo to watch the good old boys trying to bust the flying boards. I was looking at the boys with their big boots and their tight jeans and their shiny bald heads and their eyes without pupils and I was wishing I had some of that power cosmic myself. I was thinking maybe then I could get Shalla-Bal to come across, when just then Galactus glided up in his big yellow convertible starship with the blonde next to him. Everybody knew she was really an ugly green Skrull-woman, but she'd transformed herself to look like a blonde with a pair of big ones, and that was all the good old boys gave a damn about.

Galactus hollered at me, "Hey, sonny, you going to ride a board?"

"Heck no, Gal:" I said. "Grandpa Watcher says it ain't fittin.'"

Galactus sneered and spat and said, "You got any dreams of being the soarer of the spaceways, you don't listen to that passive old fool."

So I said," But Grandpa Watcher's seen the birth and death of worlds, the climb of uncounted races from infancy to decrepitude, ain't he?"

"You forget about that ol' cosmic fart, boy," Galactus said. "Just keep your eye on me. The day's gonna come when I eat this town, and then I'm gonna eat this whole goddamn planet. Hell, I'm even gonna eat Dallas. And one of these days I might need me a herald, sonny. You just stick by me and you'll see."

McMurtry, in a cover letter, claimed that Paul Newman had been approached to do a movie version of this script and was agreeable, provided the hero's name was changed to the Hilver Hurfer.

Among the Surfer Scripts is a lone, dissenting note from black activist Eldridge Cleaver: "Hey, you call this for the honky alien gestapo he is. Maybe he save Earth, okay, but he serve up the Black Man like so much barbecued ribs."

Cleaver apparently stood alone in his dislike of the Silver Surfer, and that is completely understandable in light of his total antipathy to popular culture; as political historians have pointed out, this deep-seated hatred no doubt derives from Eldridge's having been so coldly spurned by his half brothers, Wally and the Beaver.

One contributor who was able to better appreciate the significance of popular culture was dandified hanger-on Tom Wolfe, who submitted *Alien Chic, or Super-Skrulling the Space-Spanners*:

In Big Daddy Galactus's magenta-headed bourgeois torpor (after all, now, let's be frank, what could possibly be more bourgeois than devouring planets?) all the wool-dyed, flag-flying, raise-the-eyes-and-hand-on-the-he art, blood-of-Nathan-Hale ideals of Earth could all be rung up on the big-time Cosmic Balance Sheet as just so many kilocalories for the next big evening stroll around the galactic park. But little

buddy Norrin-Radd now, he was one of the *people*, he was *cool* now — hell, he was *radical*! — and he hung it out over the edge of that neat trick of a board and he saw the Thing doing his orange-collar sweat-it-up-for-the-little-man number and saw Mr. Fantastic never missing a beat as Mr. Rubber-Bodied Scientist of 1965 and saw the Black Panther doing his Mau Mau dance in the white man's jungle, and, well now, friends and neighbors, we could be polite and say that he was majestically irritated ... but can we get down to the four-dozen-for-a-dollar-a-little-green-under-the-head American vernacular brass tacks to say that that silver-plated cat was decidedly *pissed off*?

Stan Lee was ecstatic about this submission, immediately drafting the following note of acceptance to Wolfe: "Hang loose, Tommy-boy, 'cause if that isn't the grooviest passel of cornball brilliance this side of the ol' Marvel bullpen itself, I'll give a No-Prize to Irving Forbush! You sure have jazzed up that crazy writing style of yours since that sorry mess of dullsville I had to read in school, *Look Homeward, Angel*! Excelsior!"

The note of acceptance was never sent, however, due to the objections of letterer Artie Simek. Said he in a memo to Stan: "What is this, some kind of cruel joke to play on a man with weak eyes? Look at my glasses, like a finger they're so thick. I should hand-write all these words and go blind? He wants all

these words, you let this Wolfe letter the comic himself! I should care if he wrote *To the Lighthouse*?"

Even though Marvel was not looking for submissions from science fiction authors (since they felt that with Lee and Roy Thomas they already had the best writers in the field), they welcomed one submission from J.G. Ballard, the avant-gardist who had made inner, rather than outer, space his special province. In *Why I Want to Fuck Galactus*, Ballard truly went inward all the way, to where the sun itself dares not shine.

Perpetually, it seems, I imagine Galactus in a conceptual auto disaster, fixating, primarily, on his massive head crashing through a windshield. In my mind, I superimpose Galactus's face on unretouched photos of accident victims, especially those which exhibit rectal hemorrhages, as if their assholes had been bludgeoned by the Hulk. My most powerful fantasies are those displaying an anal-sadistic character, as when I imagine the rectum of Galactus impaled by an exhaust pipe, or my surfboard.

These scenarios often result in sexual fantasies. I envision imaginary genitalia, such as the exhaust pipe of the Pogo Plane, the mouths of Elizabeth Taylor and Marvel Girl, and the Thing's tightly constricted, orange sphincter, only to see them pierced by the bloody phallus of Galactus. In the cases of the Pogo Plane, Marvel Girl's mouth, and the Thing's

asshole, the images result invariably in self-induced orgasm, whereas in the case of Elizabeth Taylor, I am only reminded of deprived children in the throes of rectal stimulation.

The pronounced anality of the Planet Eater's personality must be expected to dominate the fate of the galaxy in coming years. His face, as well as the faces of most males in the Marvel universe, must be perceived in genital terms. The Human Torch is a scrotal sac, the Watcher a testicle, Spider-Man a pubic hair, and Thor a phallic shaft. The faces of Cyclops, the Hulk, and the Beast can be best perceived as uncircumcised, while those of Charles Xavier, the Red Skull, and myself are clearly the opposite. Comic fans are invited to devise the optimum sex-annihilation for Galactus.

Buscema flatly refused to draw the script, and the task fell to Marvel veteran Jack Kirby. After many failures to draw his beloved old characters as scrotal sacs, Kirby despaired and left to work for DC Comics.

Other scripts discovered but unread by researchers Jacobs and Jones include: *Semi-Cosmic* by Dan Jenkins, about what wacky funkiness really goes on behind the scenes among space-heralds; *The Silver Hotel* by D.M. Thomas, in which the Surfer gets psychoanalyzed and exterminated; *God Bless You, Mr. Galactus* by Kurt Vonnegut, in which our hero says "So it goes" a lot (this was rejected outright because

Stan Lee insisted he only say "So be it!"); *Slouching Toward Zenn-La* by Joan Didion (still in its unopened envelope); and *The Planet-Baggers* by Harold Robbins, a lusty, brawling saga which ripped the lid off the planet-eating business.

For a few months the movement to save the *Silver Surfer* from discontinuation had, in Roy Thomas's words, "lit up the global literary firmament like a bolt of the power cosmic." But in November 1970, Lee announced that all the submissions had been in vain: never again would the Surfer soar in a comic book under his own title.

The last, bittersweet note of the campaign came two months later, when one belated script summed up all the poignancy of Norrin-Radd's passing. This was *A Confederate General from Zenn-La* by Richard Brautigan. Although far too desultory for the Marvel Comics style, this lyrical, unassuming script featured what was, without doubt, the most delightful scene ever written for the Soarer of the Spaceways. As the Surfer and his friend the Watcher are cruising high above the California coast on the way to Big Sur, they happen to glance over and spot Galactus, sitting in a big convertible, waiting for the mail.

Beautiful. ■

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