The Shadow Knows

Image Comics gives the world its first HIV positive superhero

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For those of you who have never attended a comic book convention, it is a scene that is described with great difficulty.

Imagine, if you will, thousands and thousands of young, ostensibly heterosexual males with impossibly limited sophistication and sex appeal crammed into an indoor convention hall screaming at the top of their lungs for a buyer of the original *Fantastic Four* limited edition in mint condition. It is not a scene I, personally, would like to revisit in the near future but I am not, rest assured, a comic book executive's intended or desired demographic.

My brother, on the other hand, when he was much younger, coerced me into accompanying him to a combo *Star Trek*/comic book expo, where Trekkies and comic book aficionados (two groups with a very significant overlap) can find great deals on comics, sell their own paraphernalia or even meet Lieutenant Uhura in person. I will admit, the uncomplicated devotion so evident on the convention floor was sweet on some level; but to many of them, it is so much more than a hobby -- it is a calling, a sacred devotion.

Enter *ShadowHawk*.

I was convinced that the last -- and I mean the very last -- audience that would ever be receptive to AIDS information would be this adolescent motley crew I remembered. But that is precisely what they are getting with Image Comics' superhero, *ShadowHawk*.

The plot for *ShadowHawk* is pretty straight forward: Apparently, African-American former district attorney Paul Johnstone was exposed to the AIDS virus when evil drug dealers injected him with HIV positive blood. And *ShadowHawk* was born. This genuinely revolutionary story line was dreamt up by *ShadowHawk*'s creator and illustrator, Jim Valentino, formerly of Marvel Comics.

"I included AIDS in the *ShadowHawk* storyline for a couple of reasons," says Valentino from his office in Dana Point, California. "I was trying to come up with a good reason to motivate someone into becoming a superhero. None of the other reasons superheroes had given in the past (fighting crime, revenge) rang true. I also wanted to say something to the comic book audience, which is primarily adolescent males, about AIDS. And that is that AIDS is a reality; everyone, including

superheroes, can get it. Everyone can get it. They can get it."

But is it working? Is this audience genuinely understanding what ShadowHawk is going through or are they just buying the comic book for the first-rate dark, mysterious drawings of the superhero? After all, Superman doeasn't complain about the taste of AZT as ShadowHawk did in a recent issue. Nor does any other comic devote a full page to AIDS information.

"The response has been mostly very positive," says the New York City born Valentino. "Yet, some people think I'm on a politically correct soabox or that this is an improper medium. But AIDS is real. It's certainly more real than guys taking nose dives off of buildings. My viewpoint is one of a father who is very frightened by AIDS and how little people understand or realize about this disease and how it can strike them. Heterosexuals -- especially adolescent males -- are in complete denial about this disease."

All I keep thinking about are those acne-riddled faces screaming in adolescent splendor about Spider Man and Captain America. Are they really going to follow ShadowHawk into the next story arc which calls for the superhero to fight "the monster within" by searching for a cure?

Jim Valentino really hopes so. "*ShadowHawk*, after all, is fantasy. AIDS is not."

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