

## **COMIC LEGEND WILL EISNER AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL**

By G. W. Brown

<http://www.ajlambert.com>

Will Eisner was a legend in the comics spanned from the '30s through the '40s with the creation of "The Spirit," on into the '70s, when his more mature, complex work led to the creation of the graphic novel. Eisner coined the phrase "graphic novel" with his book of short stories, "A Contract with God," Eisner is celebrated as one of the comic's most influential creators. The Eisner Award is given to the best who follow him in perpetuating the comic art form.

"To the Heart of the Storm" is an autobiographical graphic novel of Eisner's life. It shows racial bigotry that young Jews experienced on the home front in America's communities prior to the second World War. It shows how if America had leadership similar to Germany, the Jewish community could have been made a scapegoat and the outcome of the war could have gone a different direction.

The most unique aspect of the tale is following an intelligent, active young man of great potential who lives through a great period of discrimination against his kind. He experiences discrimination against the Jewish people by Germans and Americans alike. He also learns that there is resentment amongst the Jews against each other. German Jews believed Polish and Russian Jews were peasants. The later referred to German Jews as educated snobs. The two didn't mix well. For a true insight into how it was to be a young American Jew in pre-war times, "To the Heart of the Storm" is a must-read. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Eisner was one of the first to establish a studio for the commercial publication of comic books. Eisner's greatest creation was "The Spirit." Like the Lone Ranger, the Spirit was a former lawman believed to be dead. He fought criminals from behind a mask. In 1939, the Register & Tribune Syndicate Sales manager contacted Eisner.

Newspaper sales were down due to comic book competition. "The Spirit" was created to appear in a 16-page comic book insert for the Sunday newspaper. Eisner saved the newspaper industry with creation of "The Spirit." He created the graphic novel. His mother thought he should give up art for a real job like welding.

In 1938, Superman and Batman launched the world of costumed superheroes. In April 1940, Batman added a junior sidekick, Robin the Boy Wonder. The second junior sidekick of note to appear was Spirit's own assistant, Elboy White in the newspaper strips. He was an African – American street kid who was highly intelligent and creative, though he spoke in "Negro slang." It was he that was the creative genius behind many of the Spirit's crime fighting arsenal of weapons and devices.

Ironically, there was a big screen movie production of "The Spirit" in 2008, staring Gabriel Macht, which failed to include the character Ebony White. He was a regular in

the strip during the 12-year run. The Spirit's arch-enemy, the Octopus, became African-American and was portrayed by Samuel Jackson.

Ebony White did pave the way for ethnic sidekicks. Captain America and the Human Torch followed with Bucky and Toro. A long line of others followed down through history with names such as Aqualad, Kid Flash, Speed Arrow, Wonder Girl and many others. The young hero groups like X-Men and Teen Titans followed.

In 1941, when Bucky and Toro formed the Young Allies, they were joined by White Wash Jones in their battle against Nazi terror. February 1946, Ebony was sent to school for a formal education, or in his words, "Go to school t'git ejakated so's ah c'n speak wif a no'thern drawl!" He was replaced as the Spirit's sidekick by a young Eskimo, Blubber, until May 1946. In 1959, Green Lantern had an Eskimo sidekick, Thomas Kalmaku.

Today, heroes of ethnic descent are no longer reserved to the sidekick role. Black Panther, Blade, Cyborg, Spawn, Steel and all the others owe their rise in statues to little old Ebony White.

\*Read more writer's corner at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>