

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S HAUNT OF HORROR

DRAWN IN BLOOD BY
RICH CORBEN



FROM THE TOMB 21

Looking back at the summer of 2006, it could hardly be described as an earth shattering season for the comic book industry, although Eric Powell learned that rattling the cage of certain right wing religious groups, particularly in Alabama wasn't the done thing. Elsewhere things appeared noticeably calm. Something did happen though, something that escaped the notice of a few too many comic book fans. Richard Corben had returned, and this time he had brought his own unique take on horror to that bastion of the costumed hero, Marvel Comics. Yet for some inexplicable reason this moment wasn't championed by the company in a way that would have done it the justice it so truly deserved.

A Luminary from the Underground

If this had happened just over thirty years ago when horror peaked for a second time in the industry's brief history it would have caused quite a stir. Just imagine Richard Corben one of the creative luminaries of the underground coming to work for one of, if not the finest comic book publisher of the period. That however was a long, long time ago. While Marvel published a memorable range of horror titles back then, they are no longer a company readily associated with the dark and twisted. It's no great secret but the last twenty years haven't been overly kind, so understandably they have stuck to what they know best. Business at the end of the day is business, even at the one time House of Ideas. What they have tried to pass off as horror has been at best feeble. Did anyone pick up the last outing for *Tomb of Dracula*? What a sorry state of affairs that turned out to be; a bunch of kung fu action heroes going out fighting vampires! It's been done before and no doubt it will be done again, but next time, please try not to call it horror.

As the temperatures soared during the summer months Richard finally began to inject some heat into the near defunct Marvel based horror comics, in a three issue series entitled *Edgar Allan Poe's Haunt of Horror*. Marvel allowed him to go the whole hog, although it has to be said he has toned it down since those self-publishing days of three decades past, which is probably why he was granted so much freedom. You'd have to scrutinise the statement of ownership box at the bottom of page two of each issue before you'd ever realise it was a Marvel Comic. This isn't a Marvel Comic as such, it's a Max Comic. The cover to this imprint states quite clearly "*explicit content*", so you know almost immediately you are going to get something a little more extreme than anything found in the run of the mill superhero titles. Okay there is a bit of naughtiness in there, but it hardly compares to the days of Richard's legendary excesses on the underground, although even he was tame when compared to some of those guys. Let's not be too harsh on poor old Marvel, *Daredevil* has pushed back the boundaries in comic book story telling and we are talking about a mainstream company, one with a reputation spanning almost seventy years. However I cannot shake the feeling the company are detaching themselves from the potential in what could be a line

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of very daring horror comics. They could also be trying to reel in a new readership, one who may have shunned them in the past primarily because of their lacklustre approach to the genre? I suppose it's a similar idea to DC's line of Vertigo titles, although such comparisons might be offensive to both companies.

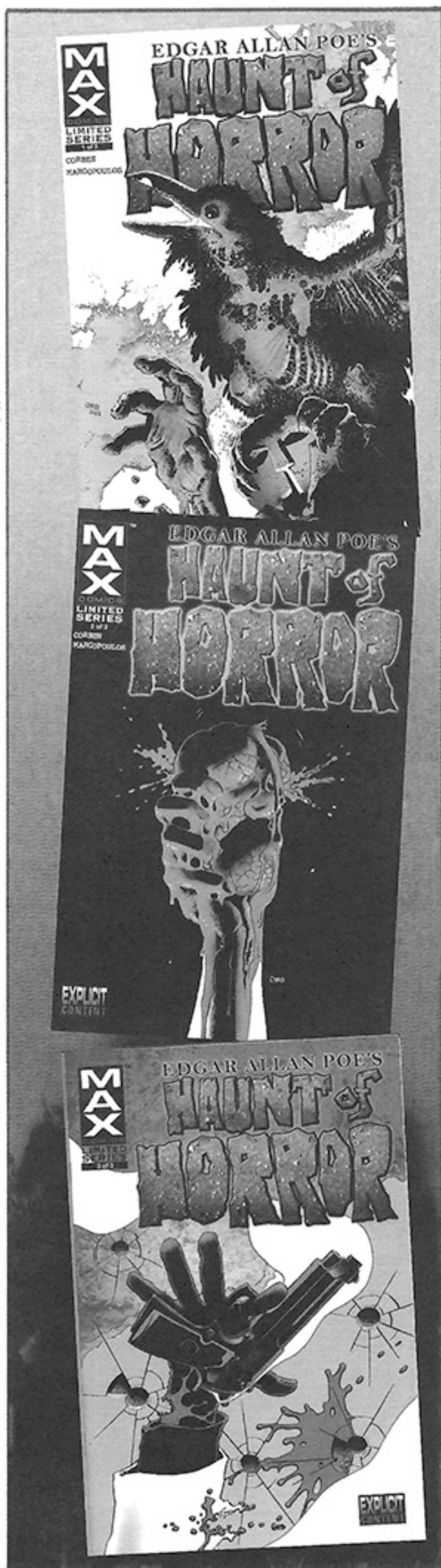
Out on a Limb

The editorial team of Cory Sedlmeier, Alex Alonso and Joe Quesada, went out on a limb with this one. It bears precious little resemblance to any Marvel Comic I have seen since the cancellation of their tales of terror at the introduction of the Comics Code. The team's audacious spirit may have been vindicated if Marvel's publicity machine had been oiled and set to work on their behalf. Then they could have so easily put these three issues into the hands of a good few more people and secured a future for more offbeat Marvel, or should I say Max horror. The reports I have seen aren't so good, alluding to just over sixteen thousand of the first issue finding its way into the direct sales market. By the standards set by a publishing house of this repute it is hardly a big seller raising concerns about other prospective endeavours of this kind. Mind you I have been brainwashed by the sales figures of yesteryear when such titles sold by the tens of thousands and in the modern world the comic isn't the big seller it once was; so maybe there is hope. The sad thing is this was an excellent series one, which deserved to be seen by a considerably larger audience.

While the modern horror comic has become obsessed with the zombie phenomenon, and before you say anything there's nothing wrong with that, Richard went back to discover one of his greatest sources of inspiration, Edgar Allan Poe. Rather than resorting to the easy option of using his more renowned works, he has interwoven them with a selection of relatively obscure verses, which in time will make the series as a whole of greater interest to both the Poe and horror connoisseur. The art throughout is polished, at times reminiscent of those days of glory spent infusing *Skull*, *Slow Death* and his own *Fantagor* with a lust for creation. There was never enough of this incredible material and there never could be; they were very special comics published at a time so different to our own. Back then he had the chance to experiment, he was young and doing more than simply learn his craft, he was on a voyage of discovery striving to take comic books beyond the repression of the last fifteen years. His use of the airbrush and exaggeration of the nubile human form provided the instruments with which to do this, but he also had a penchant for story telling, particularly that of the more macabre kind. These qualities would soon endear him to many teenage fans of this generation, with his admirers growing in number when he began accepting work from Jim Warren's magazines as early as 1970 with *Creepy 36's* self scripted "*Frozen Beauty*". By 1973 he had eluded obscurity, now revered as an institution in this thriving line of monochrome terror.

The Visual Spectacle

It will be no surprise then to hear *Haunt of Horror* is a black and white collection. The covers are showcased in these ominous tones, whilst also being liberally daubed in shades of grey with a sanguinary saturation of red to unsettle anyone scouring the racks of the local comic book store. The design works to draw your attention and has a lure unlike anything else seen on the shelves, and that's no mean feat because there is an abundance of brooding horror material out there at the moment. The interiors are, as you would expect typically macabre, but they also bequeath a visual spectacle, making them a pure joy to behold. His fans from the halcyon days on the underground and Warren will savour a collection of exquisitely airbrushed pages in the premiere's "*The Raven*" and the second issue's "*The Lake*". They are each





gifted with that distinguished sense of three-dimension Richard has come to embellish his tales with. With the aid of his airbrush the characters within assume a life of their own, albeit a hideous one. Uncannily solid blacks and whites with clever use of equally substantial grey tones are then used to intensify the unease in the remaining chapters of these veritable tomes of terror. There is an incredible confidence to his work, borne out of years of experience and genuine ability.

The Accomplice

His long time accomplice from those years dutifully employed by Warren, Rich Margopoulos laid his hands to the script writing and plotting. What a combination! Rich had previously adapted a selection of Poe's tales in *Creepy* #69 and #70; two issues dedicated entirely to the memory of the great man's works. Mr Corben also illustrated a contribution to each of these issues, "The Oval Portrait" in #69 and "Shadow" in #70. Thirty years later they once again found themselves in collaboration, deeply immersed in these morbid portrayals. The world had gone through so much change in a very short space of time. With this in mind they have applied a range of diverse elements from this new frontier in crafting this collection of often unusual interpretations, the most surprising of which has to be "Izrafel" more commonly remembered as "Israfel". The twenty-first century rendition dares to affiliate the poem penned so many years ago with the unseemly world of gangster rap. As odd as it may sound Poe's narrative flows through these sequences of escalating violence with remarkable ease, although I can't wonder if the faces of these latter day creators weren't etched with a mocking sneer as they saw this take shape. Similarly a girl with a little rubber head enters the proceedings in "Eulalie", to my recollection blow up dolls hadn't come into being during the nineteenth century, I could be wrong though, contrary to popular opinion it's not really my area of expertise. Their unruly approach echoes a time from shortly before they were in the employ of Jim Warren, that experimental episode of anarchy on the underground.

Flesh Eating Denizens

The purists amongst you have precious need to fear; there are sufficient

more conventional translations to satisfy. *"The Tell Heart"* immediately springs to mind. Each page is played out as a single panel with the drama acted out within as a cleverly interposed collage. It is an extraordinarily magnificent piece of work, which insists you return time and time again to satiate yourself in its startling craft. I have previously made mention of *"The Raven"* again adheres very closely to the original verse. The airbrush rendering to this curtain raiser is unduly reminiscent of his early creations for both *Creepy* and *Eerie*; long time fans are assured they won't be disappointed. The flesh eating denizens of *"The Sleeper"* probably stirred a little more than Edgar Allan Poe ever intended, but once again it is a stunningly realised piece, with page upon page of exquisitely detailed panel design, occasionally suggestive of the photography seen in German silent and later Expressionist cinema. Rich and Richard have used the archetypal text to great effect; although they now tread that one step further to entice a more ghoulish readership. Our tastes have indeed become a tad more bloodthirsty! The finale to this short-lived series *"Berenice"* will leave countless horror fans inevitably craving more. While it is again a very modern take, the pervading milieu of psychedelic noire ensures it beguiles as a tale to haunt. If you've not already come upon this piece you're going to have to place your trust in me on that one. Newcomers to these writings shouldn't despair, you will be pleased to learn Poe's own narrative follows each adaptation, allowing you a closer appreciation of just how far at times they have deviated from this once nascent elucidation.

There is so much to celebrate in these three issues; it's such a shame they couldn't have continued to expand their run to a few more. Richard Corben however is always moving on, with new tales to tell and challenges at each turn. For those of you who missed these three issues they are to be released as a collected volume, it will probably be available as you read these words. Projects of this calibre need your support if Marvel through its Max Comics is to become the esteemed publisher of horror comics it once was. To everyone involved with *Edgar Allan Poe's Haunt of Horror* a very big thank you.

Peter Normanton

September 2006

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*The illustrations included in this article are as follows:-*

*Page 10: The dead awaken in "The Lake" HOH #2*

*Page 11: The covers to HOH #1-3*

*Page 12: Sequences of panels from "The Sleeper" HOH #1 "Berenice" HOH #3 and "Spirits of the Dead" HOH #2*

*Page 13: A warning from the "The Happiest Day" HOH #3, the image of Lenore from HOH #1's "The Raven" and the immortal "Tell Tale Heart" from #2.*

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