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Biography recalls 'second-best' comic book artist

By:Christine McCluskey , Journal Inquirer

MANCHESTER - Stephen Starger loved reading comic books when he was a boy in the 1950s. One of his favorite artists was Wallace "Wally" Wood, who drew for EC Comics.

"Only the kind of weird and in-the-know kids would buy EC's," Starger says.

The EC Comics books were different from everyone else's because of the themes they tackled. Instead of telling stories of superheroes, more often they told science-fiction and horror tales and stories with political subtexts.

Some of the EC Comics artists produced "war books that were really anti-war books," while others tackled subjects like racism and drug abuse, Starger says. One of Wood's books from 1952 was called "Atom Bomb"; it told the story of the Nagasaki bombing from the point of view of a Japanese family.

Wood was a great cartoonist, but it was generally acknowledged that he wasn't the best - most gave that honor to Jack Kirby, who drew characters such as Captain America and the X-Men.

Starger's new biography of Wood, "Wally's World: The Brilliant Life and Tragic Death of Wally Wood, the World's Second Best Comic Book Artist," explores the question of "what it must have been like to be Wally Wood in that environment," Starger says.

Wood, who killed himself in 1981, was "a very complicated man," Starger says.

He had wild mood swings, was a binge drinker, and couldn't take criticism. Yet with all his problems, he could still turn out great work, Starger says.

Despite his boyhood appreciation for Wood, it took a chance meeting to set Starger on the path to writing his biography.

When Starger, a Portland resident and freelance writer who works in the continuing education program at Manchester Community College and sometimes teaches there, was getting ready to get married in 1995, he and his wife found Eleanor Wood, a retired judge of probate, to perform the ceremony.

Eleanor Wood invited Starger and his wife to her home in East Hampton, where she introduced them to her husband, Glenn Wood, a retired engineer and photographer.

Later, when Starger was back at the house to pick up the wedding photos Glenn Wood had taken, Glenn Wood mentioned that his brother was Wally Wood.

"I'm like falling out of my chair at this point," Starger recalls.

Starger later brought Glenn Wood to the now-defunct Words and Pictures Museum in Northampton, Mass., a museum that featured comic-book art. He introduced Wood to the curator.

On the way back from the museum, Wood agreed to help Starger with the biography project, and Starger started interviewing him, Wally Wood's former wife, Pat Jana, and many others.

One interview would lead to five others, Starger says. He eventually met J. David Spurlock, an artist who had started on his own biography of Wood.

Spurlock proposed combining the two projects, which they did, coming up with a book that tells three interwoven stories, Starger says - Wally Wood's story, the rise of the comic book, and a quick cultural history of Wood's times, from the 1930s until his death.

The book was published late last year, and features over 200 illustrations and rare family photos. The text is as important as the art, though, Starger says.

He says he went to a Wood family reunion a few years ago and no one really knew what their relative had accomplished. He sees the book he and Spurlock wrote as "a way of restoring his reputation."

Wood will read from and sign copies of "Wally's World" from 6:30 to 7:30 tonight in the Library Fireside Commons at Manchester Community College. The event will also feature a presentation of Wood's art.

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