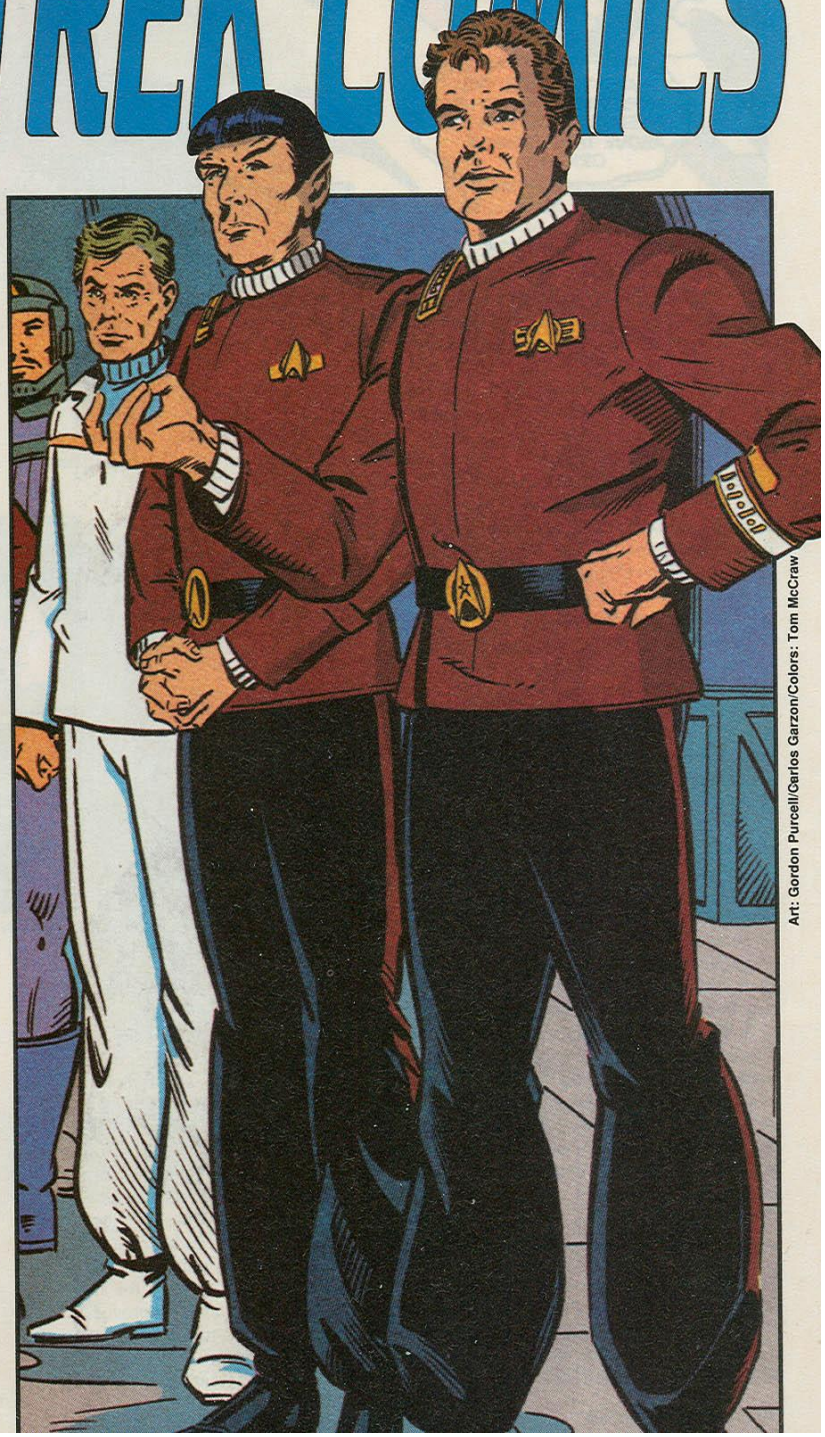
By HOWARD WEINSTEIN

HOW TO WRITE STAR TREK COMICS

When you're scripting for Starfleet, all you need are a few good ideas.



Art: Gordon Purcell/Carlos Garzon/Colors: Tom McCraw

People who work in the comic book business actually *talk* in word balloons. *Really*.

Oh, they don't do it in *public—only* in their offices, when they think no outsider can see. I discovered this secret the first time I visited *Star Trek* editor Bob Greenberger at DC Comics' New York City headquarters. I didn't know it then, but several years later I too would be speaking in word balloons, when I took over for comics writer/*Trek* novelist Peter David as monthly writer of DC's continuing *Star Trek* series.

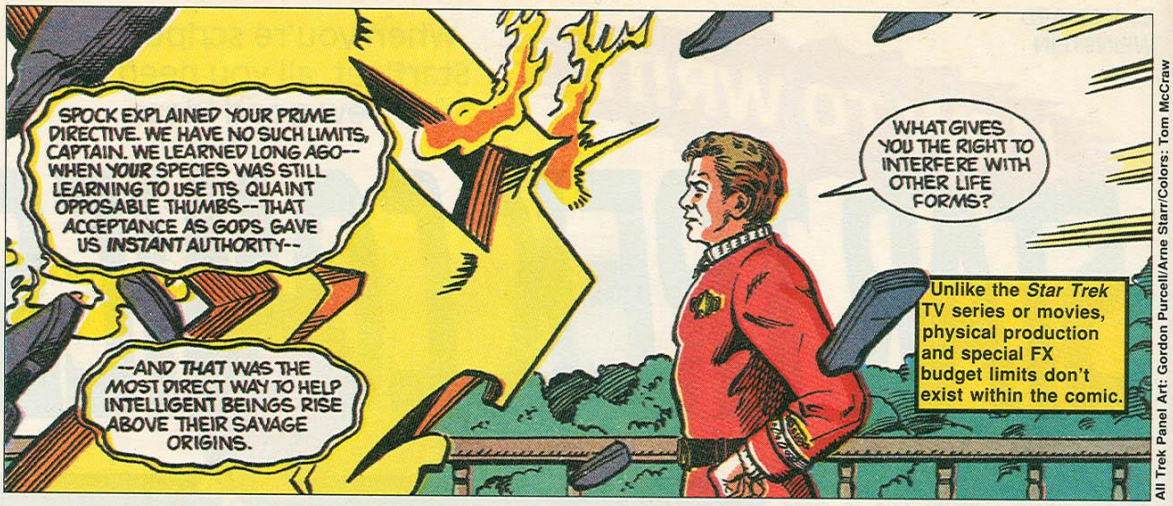
Some fans may know that I've been writing *Star Trek* stories professionally since 1974, when I was a college kid and sold "The Pirates of Orion" script to NBC's two-season, Emmy-winning animated revival of the original show. I've also written five novels in Pocket Books' best-selling *Star Trek* series (two "classic" and three *Next Generation*). And I received a teeny-tiny "producers' thanks" screen credit for story-development tidbits contributed to *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*.

Despite all that boldly going, I hadn't really given any thought to writing *Star Trek* comic book adventures until a couple of years ago, when Bob Greenberger (a former STARLOG staffer, still a correspondent for the magazine) asked me if I would like to guest-write a fill-in issue. My reaction? "But I don't know *how* to write a comic book!"

Persistent fellow that he is, Bob renewed his invitation over the next couple of years. He gave me some sample scripts to analyze, and patiently answered my naive questions. Eventually, during summer 1990, I wrote a two-part story called "Partners?"

And that, I thought, was that...until a few months later when Bob called to tell me he needed an instant replacement for Peter. Would I take the job?

I would, and I did. It's hard to believe a year has already flown by, with a dozen or so scripts done. And it has actually been *fun*. With a year's perspective, I'll try to give you a taste of what it's like to write these monthly adventures of the original *Enterprise* crew.



All Trek Panel Art: Gordon Purcell/Arne Starr/Colors: Tom McCraw

World of Ideas

At the start, I had a very basic worry: *Where the devil was I gonna come up with that many stories?!* Let's face it—after all the episodes of both original and new series, the movies, the books and the comics, it's not that easy to think of *Trek* ideas that are truly fresh. It's tough just coming up with a new twist here and there.

Of course, a single comic issue is not necessarily a complete story. Doing multi-part tales provides the room for more complex plots and more character development, not unlike the freedom offered by a novel-length story, and an advantage over the time restrictions of the one-hour TV format.

However, even if my stories averaged out at three parts each, as seemed likely, that *still* meant at least four distinct and complete stories a year. Did I have that many *Star Trek* stories to tell? Once I signed the one-year DC contract, the answer was clear: "I had *better* have that many stories to tell!"

So far, I've been saved by the pile—the *story* pile. Like many writers, I'm an incorrigible note-jotter, scribbling plot ideas, character sketches, even whole scenes. Why? Because you never know which of those seeds might prove fertile enough to sprout and yield a full-grown story. So you save *everything*. Even the bad ideas. They may be worth a laugh or two on a slow day.

I also happen to be one of those writers whose fiction is often inspired by real life. Sometimes I borrow from the world stage, as with that first DC two-parter, "Partners?" Although the outline was written long before Saddam Hussein decided to open a Kuwait City branch office, the initial story had certain elements in common with the then-developing Persian Gulf crisis, and I had the time to enhance those parallels before we finalized the scripts.

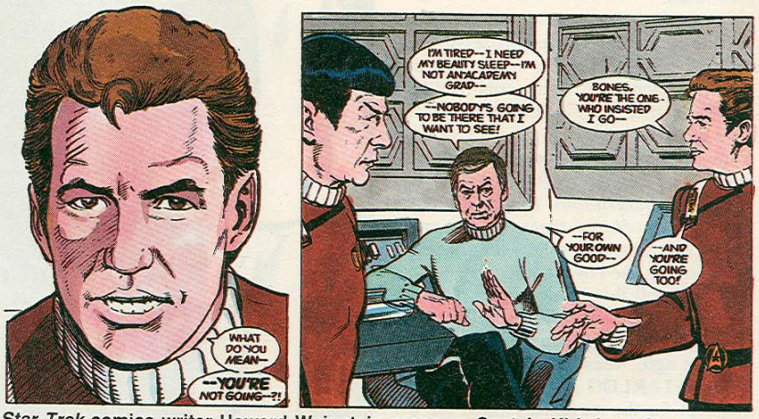
But inspiration needn't spring only from world-shaking wars. With my 20th high school reunion coming up in August '91, I decided to have James T. Kirk facing a Starfleet Academy reunion with less than unbridled enthusiasm (see upcoming issues #25-28). Of course, what happens to Kirk after running into an old female friend at *his* reunion bears little resemblance to what happened to me at *mine*. But it did provide a good launch point for the story, as well as giving me a chance to place Kirk in a human and humorous situation with which many of us can identify.

Most writers try not to ever waste a story idea. If it doesn't fly in one incarnation, put it away—a later reworking may make it blossom. That's what happened with an idea I tried almost 10 years ago—the return of Harry Mudd. First attempted as a novel, it didn't quite make the grade. But it did provide the basis for a substantially revised and vastly improved version in a just-completed trilogy presented in issues #22-24.

Harry Mudd's reappearance brings to mind one of the peculiar aspects of doing a comic based on a property like *Star Trek*, which is owned by Paramount Pictures and Gene Roddenberry. DC Comics pays a licensing fee for the rights to publish the comic, including the rights to reproduce the likenesses of the actors who have appeared on-screen.

But not *all* the actors, apparently. It seems we didn't have the rights to use an exact likeness of the late Roger C. Carmel, who portrayed Harry Mudd so memorably. So, I did my best to capture Harry's speech patterns in those word balloons, and the artists came up with a character who looked *something* like Harry without looking *too* much like Harry. A fine line indeed. But we think the results were worth the effort—which concluded with a special bonus-size issue #24, coinciding with *Star Trek*'s 25th anniversary this month.

Longtime fans remember that the original TV series focused mostly on Kirk, Spock and McCoy, with only an occasional spotlight shining all too briefly on the supporting characters and cast. *The Next Generation*, on the other hand, has successfully mined the wealth of story po-



***Star Trek* comics writer Howard Weinstein prepares Captain Kirk for a Starfleet Academy "Class Reunion."**

HOWARD WEINSTEIN is the author of the Star Trek *novels* Deep Domain, Covenant of the Crown, Exiles, Power Hungry *and* Perchance to Dream *(due out in December) as well as "V" original novels. He profiled Walter Koenig in STARLOG #128.*

tential present in *all* its regular characters. And one of the great joys of writing the comic has been the chance to redress some of that original-series imbalance by featuring characters *other* than the Big Three in both main and subplots.

One such plotline I've enjoyed developing is Sulu's romantic involvement with Chekov's younger cousin, first introduced in our current issue #25, "Class Reunion," then cropping up here and there all the way through #31.

As a TV viewer, as well as a writer, I've admired the way the staff writers on the best TV shows flesh out the personalities of their regular characters over the course of the series, thereby adding resonance to the stories they tell. Regular writers of a monthly comic book have much the same opportunity to weave through the fabric of a series the details that spell character growth. There's even a chance to start a thread and continue it for a few issues, then let it drop for an issue or two before bringing it to a conclusion. Done properly, it can add a satisfying variety and richness to any series, for both reader and writer.

Artists Gordon Purcell and Arne Starr can't use the late Roger C. Carmel's likeness, so Harry Mudd must be identified through Weinstein's dialogue.

A Breed Apart

How does writing a *Star Trek* comic book script compare to telling a *Trek* story in a novel or a teleplay? In terms of scope, I think a television episode is the most restrictive. For one thing, even an expensive series like *Star Trek: The Next Generation* doesn't have an infinite budget. That fact, in turn, places limits on the magical-accomplishment potential of even the most talented special FX, makeup and design people. And only so much plot can be squeezed into the 43 minutes left over after credits and commercials.

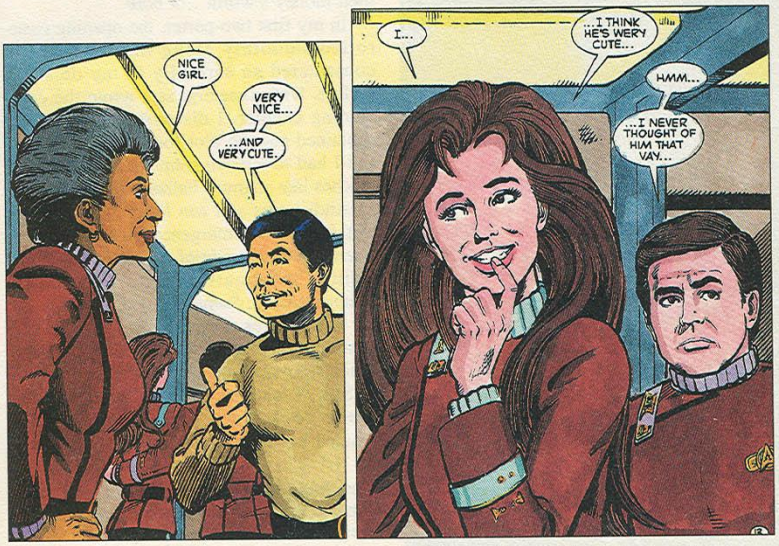
Accepting the reality that weekly TV couldn't provide an epic showcase, the producers and writers of *Star Trek*'s original and next generations have wisely concentrated on smaller, more personal stories focused on the characters and their interactions as they wrestle with internal and external conflicts.

In both novels and comics, of course, those physical production limits don't exist. The novelist's words can transport a reader to worlds and wonders that would break a TV episode budget before the first commercial. Likewise, in comics, the creative team of writer and artists can bring to the reader any visual experience in the universe, limited only by imagination.

There is, however, a danger to all that freedom. I've never forgotten how the original *Star Trek* guide for prospective script-writers cautioned them to avoid getting lost in "the wonder of it all." That warning still applies today. When we write *Trek* comic books and novels, liberated from the small screen's budgetary confines, the heart of our stories must *still* be *Star Trek*'s family of regular characters. But that doesn't mean we can't send those characters to some mighty exotic locales.

Comics do, however, have their own quirky boundaries. Take the 24-page limit (not to be confused with the *24-second clock*, or the *12-mile-limit*). That's how long our typical issue is. Not a page longer, or shorter. Even a multi-part story must divide into *exact* 24-page chunks.

That's a requirement even more stringent than a TV writer faces. The current *Star Trek* writers' guidelines prescribe a teaser and five acts, with a total length of between 53 and 58 pages. And each act need not be the exact same page length. So, the television writer has at least *some* flexibility.



Love is in the *Enterprise*'s life support system for Sulu and Chekov's cousin.

Trek comics and novels such as Weinstein's *Perchance to Dream* have more storytelling latitude, but must also follow Paramount's specific guidelines.

Art: Keith Birdsong/Courtesy Pocket Books

Art: J.K. Moore

It takes a bit of practice to judge just how much action fits into the 24-page monthly comic. Too much, and you wind up either tossing things out, or compressing like a trash compactor...or *both*. Too little, and your readers may yawn with boredom, or conclude angrily that they're not getting their money's worth...or *both*.

In my first two-parter, the opening issue rolled smoothly along the track I had constructed so carefully in my detailed outline. Unfortunately, as I wrote the concluding chapter, I discovered the outline contained enough plot for *two* more issues, and I had to jettison subplots and character touches like so much ballast. *Ouch.*

And it was *still too long*! As a last resort, I had to do emergency surgery, making essential scenes as brief as possible without losing information vital to story comprehension. Somehow, I did manage to get that sucker down to 24 pages. But I wasn't all that happy with the final product, which seemed choppy to me.

Still, I learned valuable lessons about comic book story structure—and I've avoided having that problem again. Now I

More imaginative adventures can take place in the *Trek* comic, as long as it doesn't take Weinstein more than 24 pages per issue to write them.

know that a narrow-scope story, similar in plot density to a TV episode, translates to two or three comic issues; while a novel-sized story can easily fill from three to five issues.

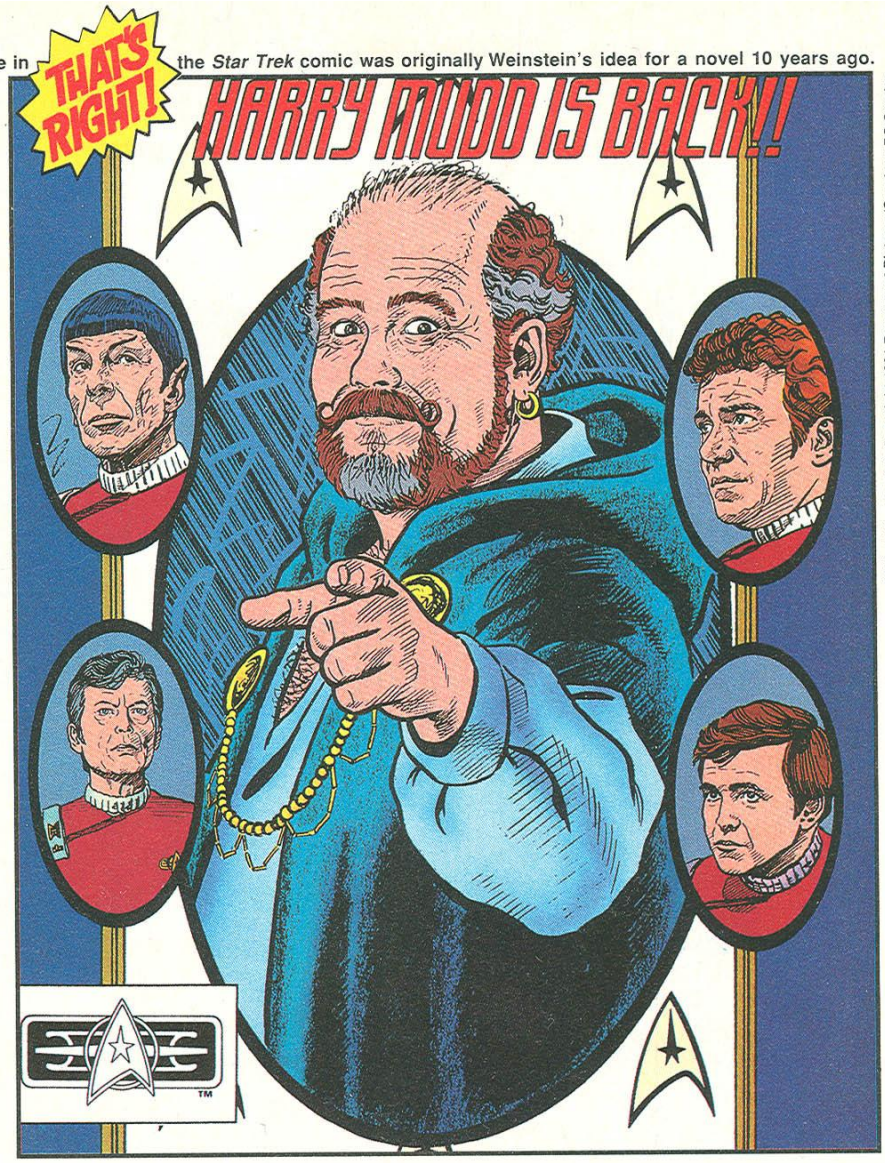
Outer Limits

Earlier, I referred to our "creative team." Publishing a comic book is truly a cooperative venture, quite a change from the mostly-solitary work of writing novels. Generally, except for editorial dabbling (how much depends on the editor), novelists are very much the masters of their own universes. With *Star Trek*, that's not *quite* the case. We do have to answer to Paramount.

All *Star Trek* fiction projects must be reviewed and approved by Gene Roddenberry's office and Paramount's licensing department. They may reject a proposal as not being a *Trek*-type story; they may ask for changes small and large; or they may accept it pretty much as is.

Those of us who write *Star Trek* novels and comics are required to work within some fairly rigorous parameters, and some writers find such restrictions too confining. To some extent, though, that's simply the nature of writing for *any* pre-existing series. Still, within those established borders, we do have a fair amount of storytelling latitude. If we want to write *Star Trek*, that's the balance we have to find and maintain.

Harry Mudd's recent appearance in the *Star Trek* comic was originally Weinstein's idea for a novel 10 years ago.



All Trek Comics Art: Copyright 1991 Paramount Pictures/Courtesy DC Comics

Art: J.K. Moore

Compared to novels, writing comics is much less a one-man show, requiring a level of collaboration similar in some ways to television production. As the writer, I not only write the story and dialogue—I also describe what I think should be seen in each "shot," giving the artists a panel-by-panel blueprint to follow. If the panel is a simple conversation between two characters, I'll probably write nothing more than MEDIUM TWO-SHOT - KIRK AND SPOCK, AT SPOCK'S CONSOLE. Are they standing or sitting? Is Kirk drinking coffee? Those details of composition are left to the artists' discretion.

For some panels, though, I may have a very particular image in mind. If I think that image is crucial to the story I'm trying to tell, my descriptions will be quite specific. For instance, in the Harry Mudd story, Harry has been captured by one of the villains and he's hanging by his feet prior to being tortured for information. But I didn't want the first panel of the page to be a standard long shot, establishing that Harry is hanging upside-down. I felt the scene called for a more unique visual opening, so my script suggested a BIG CLOSE SHOT of Harry's mouth, obviously upside-down, wide open and screaming. In the *next* panel, we get the whole picture. The artists are always free to follow my suggestions, or improve upon them.

As I've become more adept at pacing my stories, I've also learned the value of varying the number of panels per page. Most pages will have five or six. But lots of smaller panels, without much dialogue, can give readers a sense of accelerating action or danger, the way fast cuts do in a movie. And every so often, I purposely write a three- or four-panel page, literally giving the artists more space (the final frontier) to exercise their creativity. They also have the choice of combining or splitting panels if they think it makes the page look better.

Obviously, there's no comic book without a script. But I genuinely think *my* job is the easy part of producing a comic. Almost without exception, I'm both pleased and amazed when one of our issues is completed and I see how the art and graphics craftsmen have translated my words into pictures. They decide what the "guest stars" and aliens will look like, what they'll be wearing, and how otherworldly landscapes will appear. They design the page layouts that guide the reader's eye from one panel and word balloon to the next. And I can't imagine a more talented regular group than penciller Gordon Purcell, inker Arne Starr, colorist Tom McCraw and letterer Bob Pinaha.

As I start my second year scripting DC's *Star Trek* comic, I'm looking forward to the continuing challenge of coming up with fresh adventures for the crew of the NCC-1701-A. I'll be counting on my faithful and ever-growing story pile, and it hasn't failed me yet.