



THE BROWSER: CEREBUS THE AARDVARK

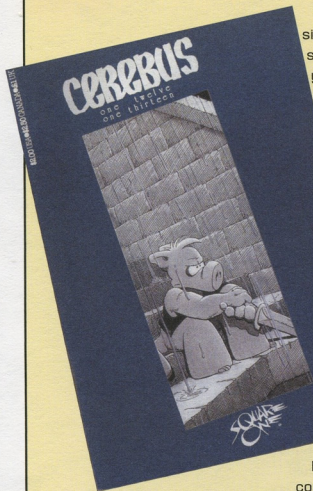
Paul Slade relates the turbulent tale of Dave Sim's independent comic project

In December 1977, a young Canadian cartoonist called Dave Sim wrote, drew and published the first bi-monthly issue of his comic book, *Cerebus the Aardvark*. Two years later, he upped the frequency to monthly publication and announced that he planned to single-handedly produce 300 issues of the title. All those issues would make sense as a single 6,000-page story, he promised, and that story would follow *Cerebus* all the way from early adulthood through to death in old age.

Everyone thought Sim was mad to commit himself to such a ridiculously ambitious project, and assumed the book would collapse ignominiously long before its planned completion date. Slowly, though, as Sim racked up issue after issue on a reliable monthly schedule, it dawned on people that he was serious. He recruited a background artist named Gerhard to help with the book in August 1984, but has otherwise stuck doggedly to the original plan. He remains unique in making self-publishing work so well for him, and as uncompromising as ever about the virtues of this approach. "I might be going down in flames," he said in 1996. "Maybe this plane won't fly. But by God, this is the plane I want to go down in."

There's been a fair bit of turbulence along the way, but *Cerebus* touched down safely on the runway in March this year when issue 300 arrived in specialist comics shops all over the world. The finished series is not only the first comics project of this scope to be so firmly controlled by a





single individual, but also the first to offer such sustained intelligence and substance over a 26-year run. In its two-and-a-half decades of life, Sim has developed the book from an amusing (if unremarkable) sword and sorcery parody through political satire and a meditation on the death of Oscar Wilde to a complex epic of warring religions and an unflinching look at the slow decay of old age.

Sim's natural cussedness has also led him to use the book as a personal soapbox to deliver his own highly-provocative views. This process reached its peak in 1994, when Sim used Cerebus 186 to print his 15-page essay blaming women for most of the world's woes. Among the outraged responses to this essay was one reader's letter calling it "the Mein Kampf of comics" and a Comics Journal cartoon picturing Sim in full Nazi uniform.

No-one who read the first issue of Cerebus could have predicted such a controversial future for the series. The book started life parodying the Conan comics which were popular at the time. Cerebus, a three-foot-tall talking aardvark, is introduced as a nomadic soldier of fortune, always looking for a quick buck and none too scrupulous about how he gets it. At this point, most of the book's humour sprang from Cerebus's cartoony appearance and his determination to undermine any notions of nobility which the original Conan stories may have carried. Each story ran for just one issue.

Cerebus spends most of his first appearance trying to steal an ageing wizard's "flame jewel". That set the pattern for the next 18 months, as Sim set about working his way through every sword-&-sorcery cliché he could think of. Along the way, he introduced several enduring comic characters including Elrod the Albino (a cross between Michael Moorcock's Elric and Foghorn Leghorn) and the Pigtish leader Bran Mak Mufin.

It was in May 1979 that things began to change.

Then, as now, Superman was one of the industry's best-known and longest-running books. As with all mainstream comics, however, Superman's adventures had been chronicled by dozens of different writers and artists over the years. Each contributor had his own ideas on how the character should be handled, piling up far too many contradictions and illogicalities for Superman's life story to make any sense as a coherent whole.

"I started thinking what a horribly futile thing it was that Superman was up around issue 250 or whatever it was at that time, and it wasn't 250 issues of one story," Sim said in 1983. "It occurred to me, since I'm only at number 11, and it's reasonably consistent so far, why not have a consistent viewpoint, a consistent story? And be the first one to do it? Why not be the first one to do 300 issues of a comic book that all makes sense in one large context?"

All Sim needed then was a Cerebus story big enough to fill 300 issues, and one with enough surprises along the way to hold his readers' interest

for the next 25 years. This problem was solved in June 1979 when, fuelled by "about a week and a half of doing acid", he had what seems to have been a fully-fledged vision revealing Cerebus's destiny. Some parts were sketchier than others, but the broad sweep of the story was all there.

The tale which came to Sim that day envisaged Cerebus's universe as a hierarchy of stacked chessboards, where the same game was being simultaneously played out at successively more godlike levels. Throughout his life, Cerebus would make repeated attempts to ascend through this hierarchy to achieve the divinity which he believed was his due. Sometimes he would come very close, but invariably find his own selfishness, small-mindedness and greed brought him crashing back down to Earth. When he finally abandoned these attempts, all that was left to him would be a few years of tying up loose ends and coming to terms with his failure.

The 300-issue structure he had chosen gave Sim the luxury to tell this story as slowly as he pleased, and he was approaching

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November 1995's *Cerebus* 200 by the time he revealed many aspects of his 1979 vision to *Cerebus* readers. It was not until issue 179, for example, that we learnt a surprising fact about *Cerebus*'s sexuality. We had to wait until issue 190 for Sim to tell us about the “kitchen knife incident” and until 196 to discover that he had reinterpreted *Cerebus*'s early life to place one of the little fella's key decisions in the off-stage moments between issues 3 and 4.

This glacial pace has led many *Cerebus* readers to abandon the book in frustration, but Sim insists the boring bits are there for a reason. “To me, it's a matter of contrast,” he said in 1985. “If nothing happens for three issues, then you know that, in the fourth issue, there will be a major revelation. There's no question that reading a single issue of *Cerebus* is not likely to convince someone to buy the book regularly. But let someone read ten issues in a row, and I might as well be pushing heroin.”

Sim continued with short humour stories until May 1981's *Cerebus* 26, which began his High Society saga. This 25-issue arc, which saw *Cerebus* running for (and winning) high political office, gave Sim the chance to write the political satire which now took his interest. In 1986, he reprinted the 25 issues of *High Society* as a single 512-page volume, launching the string of “phone book” collections which he maintains permanently in print. There have been 16 other collections since, most notably the four volumes of *Mothers & Daughters* (*Flight*, *Women*, *Reads and Minds*), which collect the heart of the *Cerebus* storyline into a manageable 1,000 pages.

Like all the *Cerebus* novels, *Mothers & Daughters* contains a great deal of humour to sugar the pill of an essentially serious storyline. Often, this humour is supplied by the gallery of real-life characters which Sim uses in his supporting cast. Groucho Marx, Mick

Jagger, Margaret Thatcher, Marty Feldman and



Oscar Wilde have all found themselves drafted into Sim's world at one point or another, and all have benefited from his skills as a deft caricaturist and his ear for reproducing accents.

Sim printed just 2,000 copies of *Cerebus's* first issue, thinking that would be all he could sell. By 1982, these were fetching up to \$150 each on the fan market, and this led some fraudsters to produce a batch of fake *Cerebus* number 1s. These were quickly detected by the comics shop owners who were offered them, but they very fact that they had been produced in the first place was a testament to the book's growing reputation.

Circulation of the monthly book grew steadily over the first ten years, settling at between 30,000 and 37,000, and remaining in that range for most of 1986 and 1987. Black & white comics went through a major recession in the years that followed, and *Cerebus* sales suffered as a result. By July 1989's *Cerebus* 124 - the last issue in which Sim carried a circulation figure - sales were down to 24,500. Some of the lost readers would have simply started buying the phone book collections instead, but others must have abandoned the title completely.

There have been times when Sim seems to have gone out of his way to alienate readers - most memorably with the notorious issue 186. Sim summed up his argument in that issue's essay with an image of "the female void and the male light". Men, he said, represented reason and women represented emotion. Reason was a far more reliable tool, and yet had been comprehensively defeated by emotion to form a world where what one thought was accorded far less importance than what one felt. Men remained the main source of "light" in the world - that is, of creativity, discipline and rationality - but many had cravenly abandoned these virtues in return for the promise of sex.

No good could come of this. Any man who succumbed to "merged permanence" - Sim's term for marriage or long-term cohabitation - would



find his spirit drained away by his leech-like female partner. "If you merge with that sensibility, you will share in its sickness," Sim wrote. "No matter what you pour into it, it remains empty; no matter how you reassure it, it remains afraid; no matter how much of yourself you permit it to devour, it remains hungry. If you look at her and see anything besides emptiness, fear and emotional hunger, you are looking at the parts of yourself that have been consumed to that point."

Sim knew full well that *Cerebus* was one of the very few comics to attract female fans, so he must have realised also that the essay would cost him readers. His decision to plough ahead regardless reveals

a heroic degree of bloody-mindedness. It's impossible to say how many Cerebus readers quit the book as a direct reaction to 186 and the furore that followed. What we do know, however, is that, by the time, Sim wrapped up issue 300, he had a total of only 7,000 Cerebus readers left to thank.

When all the dust has settled, Sim's greatest achievement may be seen as his success in maintaining complete independence for so long. By ensuring that the lion's share of the book's income comes directly to the people who create it, he has managed to parlay a small but loyal readership into absolute artistic freedom and a higher standard of living than most conventional comics artists could hope for. Cerebus has never been a top-selling book, but that has clearly never been Sim's measure of success.

He addressed this point in the farewell letter to Cerebus readers which appeared earlier this year. "I find it difficult to view the twenty-six-year-and-three-month Cerebus project as a failure," he wrote. "The fact that Ger and I enter our respective retirements unencumbered by any debt, the fact that we have never been forced by financial necessity to relinquish any part of our absolute control over Cerebus as a creative work and the fact that I am typing these words in a 100-year old Victorian house fully paid for by our joint creativity is a source of no small gratification."

All the Dave Sim interviews quoted here appeared in The Comics Journal. The Cerebus phone books are available at a comics shop near you. Many larger bookshops also carry them in their Graphic Novels section.

