

## Next Men Takes Me Back & Savage Dragon Still Surprises

By FuMaku!

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I hadn't been to the comic shop in more than a month but it was time. The latest issue of *Savage Dragon* should've been out around a month ago and I wanted to know how Emperor Kerr was fairing in his conquest of Earth. Believe me, there's a lot of back story to this but don't worry, I will spare you the details. There simply isn't enough time or space to get you up to speed. Suffice it to say, *Savage Dragon* is written and drawn by Erik Larsen, who has been publishing *Savage Dragon* for 19 years. Certainly one of the longest runs in creator driven titles, *Savage Dragon* features something fairly unique in the comic world. That is, that the comic takes place in real time: Meaning all the characters, those still alive, have aged 19 years. I followed Erik Larson when he left Marvel Comics to help form Image Comics, where *Savage Dragon* is published. I would describe Larsen's style as a mixture of Marvel's groundbreaking Silver Age comics with John Byrne 80's Marvel: Byrne, himself, a Marvel Silver Age aficionado. The stories treaded new ground in the early days of the 60's but after a point, the characters had been around a long time yet had not aged. Comic book publishers would not allow characters to age because eventually they'd have to retire profitable titles. Or course their thinking was limited but there was wisdom in their stance. Otherwise, Batman and Superman, unless otherwise disposed of by their various colorful enemies, would be dead of old age and Spiderman would be retiring right about now. John Byrne took the *Fantastic Four* back to their roots by considering only seven years had passed since the first issue, though 20 years and well over 200 issues had passed. It was like Byrne picked up where Stan Lee and Jack Kirby had left off. *Savage Dragon* incorporated these great qualities in *Savage Dragon* along with real time, which is just not done in comic books. Erik Larsen has never shied away from introducing dramatic change to the *Savage Dragon* story and he has always made it work. Lately, much dramatic change has been taking place and I am eager to see what happens next.

Driving to Bookery Fantasy, I realize that enough time has passed that two issues of *Savage Dragon* may be available. At the store and scanning the racks something unbelievable catches my eye. It is an issue of John Byrne's *Next Men*! *Next Men* ceased publication back in 1995 or so, what the fuck? A reprinting seemed likely but who knew? It is not a reprint. It is the second issue of a new *Next Men* series that picks up where the old series left off. Awesome! But did they have the first issue? None were readily apparent. Still loyal to the lone comic book I still pick up; I searched for the latest *Dragon* tale. I found the *Savage Dragon* and, much to my delight, found it to be the issue after the one I was looking for. I was right, two issues were out. Or course, now I worried I wouldn't be able to find the issue I missed. Usually, Bookery had a couple back issues available, but you never know. I missed out on a couple of issues in the past and it took me years to find copies for myself. That was not the case and I found what I was looking for. That done, I marched to the counter to inquire of *Next Men* #1. I had no idea where to look so, why not let the good people of Bookery Fantasy do what they do best? They found the issue in question and I felt excited.

Paying for my prizes, I comment on my surprise at seeing the new *Next Men* comics to the clerk. I have been buying comics from him for years but I do not know his name. He might know my name because I have paid with my credit card over the years. Who knows? He is knowledgeable and to my statement he says that he has had many surprised comments on the *Next Men*. There was a thrill: Other people were buying *Next Men*, too. It has been far too long since I have enjoyed a good John Byrne yarn and it was a revelation that others may feel same way.

Getting into my car, I realized I felt excited about comic books in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. I had four issues of what I knew to be exciting comics in my possession and I looked forward to kicking back and checking them out. After getting home, my woman would be going to work and I would be watching our young child. It would be a while before I could kick back and using this: I would savor the moment.

After performing various Dad duties and knowing my daughter was preoccupied, I retired to my command center. Sitting down in the sunlight that beamed brightly through the window I would begin with the Savage Dragon and then it would be on to the Next Men. Savage Dragon #167 and #168 packs a blood soaked punch with the wanton death, and wholly unexpected twists and turns. I am amazed at Erik Larson's consistent ability to just go all out, throwing the pieces in the air and seeing where they all fall. After all this time the Savage Dragon still offers surprises supreme. Bravo, Erik Larson! And a Stan Lee "Excelsior" to thee!

John Byrne's Next Men are next. I thought about digging the old issues out and reading them again, so as to be up to speed. I decided not, figuring all would come back as I read. I shouldn't have worried as Byrne does an excellent job of recapping what had gone on before while simultaneously jumping into the new storyline. It is good. I'm happy to be picking up on an old story that was never finished after so many years. I can only compare the feeling to when I saw the DIO era Sabbath in 1993 and the OZZY era Sabbath in 1998 or the all original members of KISS in 1996. These bands had reunited against all possible odds and expectations after many years of estrangement. Growing up, it was a foregone conclusion that I would never see these bands live in these particular incarnations. But then it happens and it's like, WOW! Byrne has a story to tell and, as such, a definite conclusion to the Next Men story, which will culminate with issue #50 (or is that 80?). This is great. Now, after probably over a decade, I will be collecting two comics a month. Well, at least for the next four years.