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By Juli Cragg Hilliard

GRAPHIC NOVEL PUBLISHING

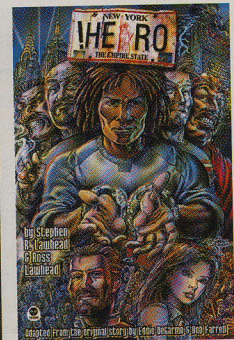
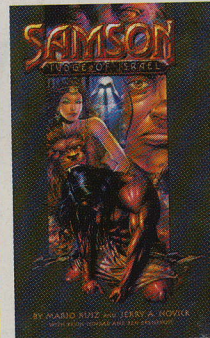
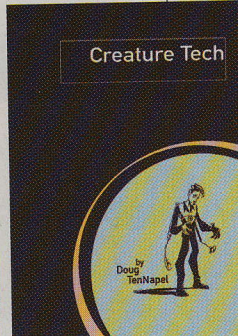
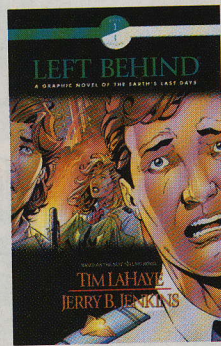
Religious Comics In the Book Trade

Despite sales, talent and teen readers, Christian stores ignore graphic novels

TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS SOLD JUST over half a million copies of five graphic novels based on the Left Behind series' first two books—spectacular sales numbers by mainstream comics industry standards. But the Christian publisher, which has sold 40 million copies of the print books, still decided to discontinue the graphic line for now.

The biggest problem, apart from the expense of writers and artists, was that Christian bookstores and many other retailers don't know how to merchandise book format comics, says Dan Balow, Tyndale's director of business develop-

ment, for example, Doug TenNapel's *Creature Tech* (2002) and Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (July 2003). Both come from alternative press Top Shelf Productions and have spiritual themes—*Creature Tech* is about finding faith and *Blankets* is about losing it. Twentieth Century Fox has picked up film rights to *Creature Tech*, cited by comics critics and industry insiders as a creative model for graphic novels. "The book has just garnered so much praise for being a fun adventure story with a positive message about faith," says publisher Chris Staros, a self-described nonreligious person. He reported sales of 10,000 for *Creature Tech* and 20,000 in the first three months for *Blankets*. Top Shelf has pushed the two



Titles (l. to r.) from Top Shelf, Tyndale, Top Shelf, Metron and NavPress.

ment for the Left Behind series. The stores tend to reflexively shelve graphic books in the children's section, he says. "The graphic novel has an age demographic that's 15 to 34 and male." In a religious store, "you should put it in the music section or something," Balow says.

Tyndale may revive the line, and Balow is convinced the format has great potential. "But I think it has a future only if retail can figure out how to sell them."

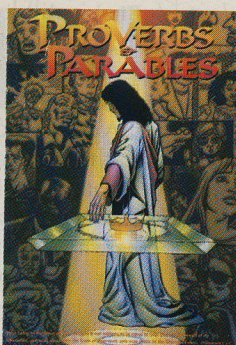
Welcome to the seedling category of spiritually themed graphic books. It is so new and small that nobody really knows how to market or merchandise it quite yet, as its offerings are scattered among mostly religious houses and comics publishers. But it is teeming with talent, ideas and possibilities, and a few high-profile projects may propel it into mass consciousness.

books in comic book specialty shops, trade retailers and the press, scoring writeups in *Spin*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *Time* magazines.

Christian publishing house NavPress released on October 3 a !Hero graphic novel by author Stephen R. Lawhead and author-penciler Ross Lawhead, his son, as part of a project surrounding the new touring !Hero: *The Rock Opera* ("Jesus Christ Superstar for the MTV generation") starring contemporary Christian music artists Michael Tait, Mark Stuart of Audio Adrenaline and Rebecca St. James. "Graphic novels really seem to be on the rise, especially in the general market, and there isn't a lot available in the Christian line," says Amy Slivka, NavPress's marketing director. "It was intriguing to us to try to break into a new market." The book compiles five comic books that NavPress started releas-



Vertical's new Buddha bio ; biblical proverbs from New Creation.



GRAPHIC NOVEL PUBLISHING

books do feature other faiths. After all, Art Spiegelman's *Maus, A Survivor's Tale, My Father Bleeds History* (Pantheon), based on his parents' Holocaust experience, remains the only graphic project to win a Pulitzer Prize, in 1992.

The Jewish Publishing Society anticipates reprinting this spring *Jews in America* (2002), a history in comic format by syndicated comic strip artist David Gantz. Helene Bludman, marketing manager, says that before the book's release, *Alter Ego* comic magazine gave it an 18-page spread. Then JPS promoted it to Jewish bookstores, libraries, gift shops and book fairs. More specifically for children, the publisher in 2002 released *The Kids' Cartoon Bible* by Chaya Burstein, who is working on a graphic book about religion and ecology for JPS. And don't forget Stan Mack's acclaimed *The Story of the Jews*, originally published in hardcover by Villard in 1998 and now published in paperback by Jewish Lights.

Given Japan's historic strength in comics

of all kinds, it's only natural to find several graphic books with Buddhist themes. Wisdom Publications, a nonprofit publisher of Buddhist titles, in September released a revised edition of the decade-old graphic book *Prince Siddhartha* by author Jonathan Landaw and illustrator Janet Brooke, which spokesman Rod Meade-Sperry says straddles the line between children's and adult's books.

Vertical Inc., which translates Japanese fiction for the U.S. market, released its first manga title on October 1—the first of eight volumes of *Buddha* by the late Osamu Tezuka. "We think the main market for it is people who read a lot of manga," says Ioannis Mentzas, editorial director. "Secondary audiences would be, basically, people who aren't necessarily Buddhist, not Asian-American even, but who are interested in world culture. Then come the Buddhists." Vertical plans most marketing in manga circles, but Buddhist organizations will get discounts for direct orders.

Viz, which publishes English versions of Japanese animation and comics in the U.S., lists several religiously oriented titles, including Tezuka's masterwork, *Phoenix*:

ing September 2; NavPress also has a three-novel trilogy by the Lawheads of the Hero story.

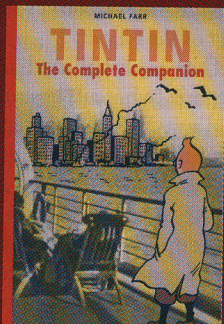
Slivka expects the tour, which starts in November, to fan interest in the graphic novels, being marketed to ages 10 to 25. But she echoes Tyndale's frustration over booksellers' placement. NavPress launched with a large in-store display with the CBA stores. "But once that kind of goes away, stores don't really know where to put this stuff," Slivka says. "They end up putting the books in children's products."

While the most action may be happening with Christian publishing, some graphic

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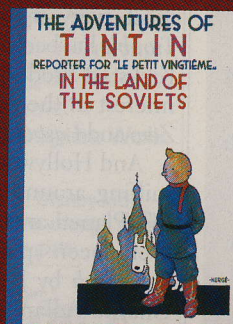
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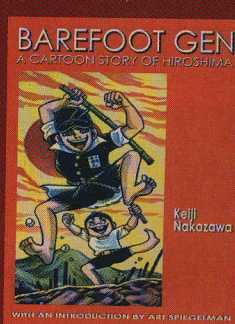
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A Tale of the Future (2002), which also touches on Buddhist philosophy.

Christian comics producers are just discovering that graphic books have a longer shelf life and better pricing, says Buzz Dixon, an editor with a background in mainstream comics and Hollywood animation who is trying to launch a Christian graphic magazine, *Serenity*, for girls ages 12 to 18.

"I think we're going through birth pains and a growth spurt right now," says Mario Ruiz, a graphic artist who is creative director and managing editor at Metron Press, a graphic book imprint of the American Bible Society that has been assembling established and promising writers and comics artists. Metron published *Testament* (Sept. 2003), which tells Old Testament stories in a bar setting and was written by Jim Krueger and illustrated by a team including Ruiz, Jason Alexander and the highly acclaimed Sergio Aragones. The house has also issued *Samson: Judge of Israel* (Feb. 2003), written by Jerry A. Novick and illustrated by Ruiz, Kevin Conrad, Rich Bonk and Ben Penvost.

Metron plans six more books within the

GRAPHIC NOVEL PUBLISHING

next two years, including *Mary Magdalene* (May 2004), *The Son of Man* (June 2004), the Krueger-written and Scott Hampton-illustrated *Til Death* (Sept. 2004) and *Revelation* (fall 2004). Ruiz says sales are "steadily growing" as Metron tries to generate a reputation for quality, especially in the local New York press, and service both mainstream and Christian audiences.

Even as creative energy churns in this hatchling category, stores and distributors say the genre is too new to register much with them. Kuo-Yu Liang (vice-president of sales and marketing for Diamond Book Distributors, the trade book distribution unit of Diamond Comic Distributors, which specializes in comics specialty shops) said the market is small but has potential for Christian publishing: "It's a matter of finding the right materials to sell in these bookstores." Barnes & Noble buyers say the

format is still looking to attract a readership, according to spokeswoman Christine Tzen.

At LifeWay Christian Stores chain, kids/youth product buyer Becky Wilson is enthusiastic about the format, but says religious graphic novels have yet to perform. "Our challenge as a retailer is to create a space that's attractive to the customer where we can house all these products in one spot. But we're just not there yet."

In the meantime, Top Shelf's Chris Staros advises noncomics religion houses experimenting with the graphic format to pay their dues. "Distribution is one of the toughest games out there, and it takes years and years," Staros says, adding, "Most of the direct market—the comic book specialty stores—weren't really founded to sell Christian books, if you know what I mean." ■

Comics Electricity at AiT/PlanetLar

LARRY YOUNG ORIGINALLY NAMED his small-press graphic novel company PlanetLar, after a nickname he'd had in college; then he prefaced it with the initials of his first major book, *Astronauts in Trouble*, so it would be listed under A instead of P in distribution catalogues. Four and a half years later, AiT/PlanetLar has 42 titles in print, with another one coming almost every month. Now *Astronauts in Trouble* has been optioned as a TV show by Kickstart Productions, and there's media interest in the company's titles *Channel Zero* and *Last of the Independents*.

And Hollywood is already sniffing around at least one AiT/PlanetLar title that hasn't even been published yet: *Codeflesh* by Joe Casey and Charlie Adlard, due in November, about a bail bondsman and skip tracer for supervillains. That will be followed in December by Stuart Moore and *Lucifer* artist Ryan Kelly's *Giant Robot Warriors*, which Young describes as "a sociopolitical satire about the Middle East peace process." The company plans for the

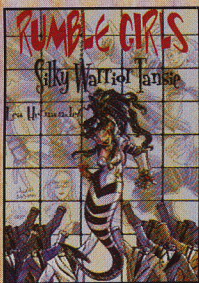
long term, giving its star creators the same month each year for their titles: every January is Brian Wood month, and next July, Matt Fraction and Kieron Dwyer are following up 2003's successful *Last of the Independents* with the twisted Western *Big Hat*. Other upcoming titles include a second collection of Tom Beland's *True Story*, *Swear to God* comic strips, and Young and Brandon McKinney's comics-business allegory *Planet of the Capes*.

AiT/PlanetLar is distributed by Diamond to bookstores, where its bestselling titles are "far and away" Mike Brennan's two-volume kids' graphic novel *Electric Girl*, Young says. "I have to work very hard to sell 30 copies a month of *Electric Girl* in the comics trade, and we sell about 500 a week in the book trade. It's the librarians—YA librarians love it, and they all talk to each other." The title is up to about 10,000 copies on each volume and, says Young, "Mike just had a little baby girl, so he's committed to doing more *Electric Girls* for her."

—Douglas Wolk

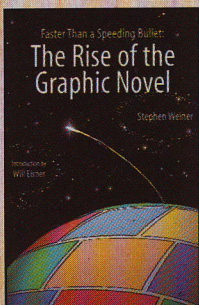
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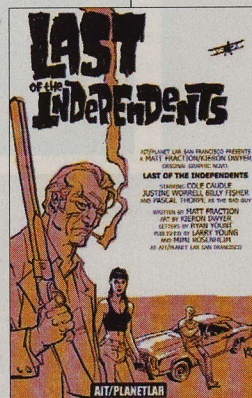
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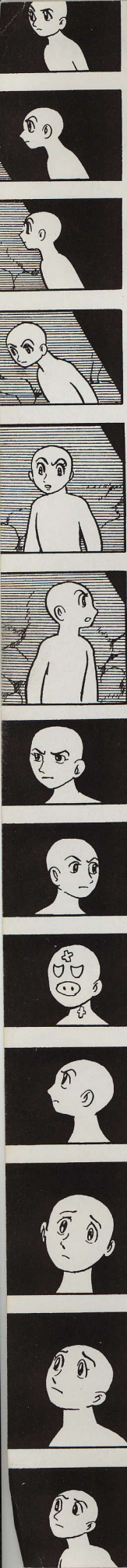
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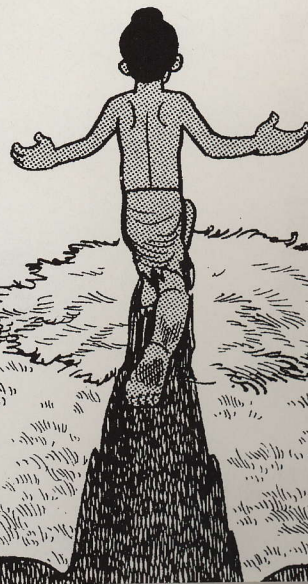
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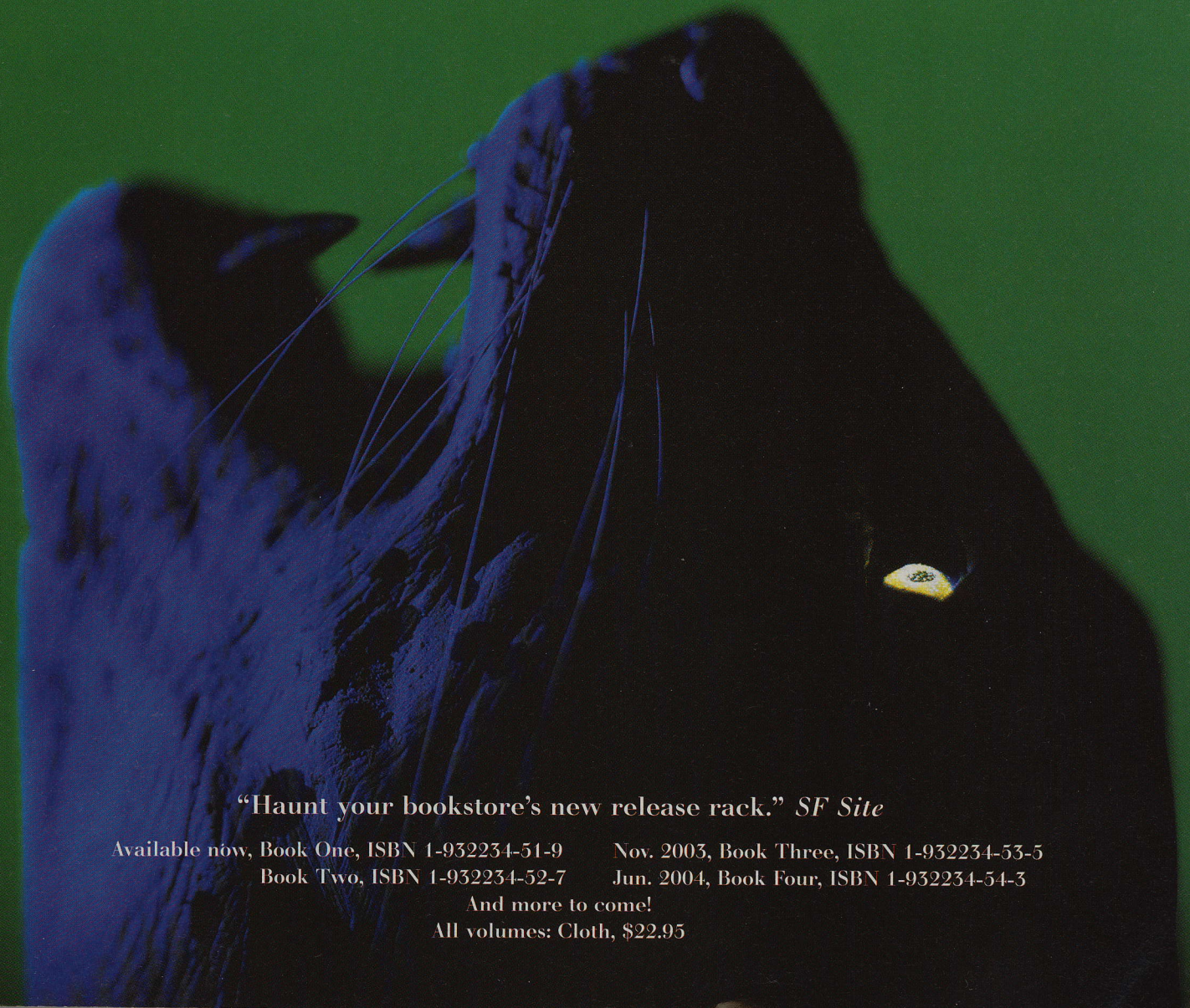
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