Plastic Man And Jack Cole Are Worth Reading!

When gangster Eel OBrien was double-crossed by his partners during a heist, he fell into a vat of chemicals that would forever change his body and life. These are the original stories of a common thief who turned into the world's wackiest super-hero. With the ability to stretch his body into any shape and length, Plastic Man has become one of the most colorful and comical icons of all time. This book collects some of his zaniest earliest adventures as they were first published in the 1940s.

My Personal Review:
Jack Cooper's reputation stands primarily on the reputation of his most famous character, Plastic Man, and rightly so. These stories are terrific treats from the Golden Age of comics, and demonstrate why so many people rate Cole as one of the great comic book creators, often naming him in the same sentence with Will Eisner.

Plastic Man first appeared in the anthology series Police Comics 1, published in 1941 by Quality Comics (DC obtained Quality's stable after Quality went out of business). In his foreword, Will Eisner recalls that Cole had been hired by Quality to more or less produce a clone to Eisner's own The Spirit. Instead, Cole took a different route, creating his own distinct Plastic Man.

For those not familiar with the character, criminal Eel OBrien leads a gang of crooks on a robbery in a chemical plant. When the police arrive, Eel is shot. Acid seeps into his wound. Left behind by his men, Eel escapes the police, and is rescued by a kindly monk. The next morning, Eel discovers that the acid has given his body elastic abilities, allowing him to take any shapes. Touched by the monks kindness, Eel resolves to use his powers for good, and takes on the identity of Plastic Man. Working as Eel, he is able to get inside info on criminal gangs. As Plastic Man, he works in the employ of the police (and later the FBI) to take down criminals.
Plastic Man faces a variety of criminals, some fairly conventional (a dope ring, a group of Axis spies) to the bizarre (a brain that won't die, a thug whose lower body has been replaced by a peg, and man-eating trees). He also gets a sidekick, another former criminal, Woozy Winks. After saving a mystic's life, Woozy lives under a spell which protects him from all harm. As the series progresses, his power is a little less constant. Largely, Winks is a terrific running joke.

The Plastic Man Archives Vol. 1 collects the Plastic Man stories from Police Comics s 1-20, which covers a great deal of material. We get to see a variety of changes in Plastic Man's commercial career. In the first issue, Plastic Man was the fourth or fifth story, and the cover belonged to a character called Firebrand. Subsequently, Plastic Man became the star of the covers, sharing only with Eisner's Spirit, whose adventures were being reprinted in Police. The page count of the stories went up, and Cole began using the Eisnerian technique of a splash page to introduce the story.

But Cole never simply aped Eisner, or anyone else. Plastic Man stayed distinct, maintaining a precarious balance between laugh out loud funny, and out-and-out creepy. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that since Coles death, Plastic Man has been played mostly for laughs (see, e.g., Kyle Bakers current series published by DC). Cole had no problem with depicting acts of violence juxtaposed with comedy. People unfamiliar with the original work will find this a bit jarring. Nonetheless, Cole could and did make the balance work.

DC seems to have fast tracked this particular Archive series. This a good thing. I look forward to picking up the rest of the series.

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