In The Fantastic, witness the beginnings of the Four - Reed Richards, Johnny Storm, Susan Storm, and Ben Grimm - super-hero icons for the new century! When high-school genius Reed enrolls at a secret government-sponsored school for the most gifted minds in the world, he unwittingly embarks on the journey of a lifetime! In Doom, Reed and his friends must learn to adapt to their amazing new situation. But before they can even begin to get accustomed, former classmate Victor Van Damme - who was transformed by the same experiment as the Fantastic Four - returns to exact his revenge!

My Personal Review:
Stan Lee and Jack Kirby struck magic when they created the Fantastic Four. Not only did they reinvigorate the superhero comic for Marvel, but they moved the bar for the rest of the comics industry as well. One of the greatest things Lee and Kirby did was make the Fantastic Four a family in the truest sense. Still today, they love each other and strive to get along, but they fight and argue over personal issues as well as political ones that took place in the outside world.

There's no discounting the familial ties of Batman and Robin, Superman and his cousin, Supergirl, and even the Captain Marvel family. The Legion of Super Heroes was even a family. But the Fantastic four was just unique at the time.

Over the years, fans have wondered what the Four were like as kids. Except for Johnny Story, because he was presented as a teen from the beginning and only starting aging the last couple of decades. There were limited mini-series that kind of touched on these missing years, but it wasn't until Marvel became successful with its Ultimate Spider-Man relaunch that the Fantastic Four was given a relaunch as an Ultimate title.
The Ultimate line is really reader-friendly. Basically each of the characters in the Ultimate universe gets a reboot while still staying, more or less, true to the roots of the originals.

Mark Millar (writer of the ULTIMATE AVENGERS) and Brian Michael Bendis (writer of ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN and ULTIMATE X-MEN) teamed up to write the first six-issue arc. Millar provided the plot and Bendis turned in the finished scripts.

The beautiful thing is that they started out with Reed Richards as a newborn and quickly followed him throughout his life. I loved the fact that he didn't fit in as a kid, which was what I'd always imagined for him instead of the pipe-smoking college graduate we were treated to. When he was getting a swirl in the bathroom, I was dying of laughter. Reed Richards suddenly became more human and more sympathetic than I'd ever before known. Then when Ben Grimm, football jock extraordinaire, strides through the door and puts an end to all the torture, my heart swelled with pride. THIS was how the two of them knew each other, and how they built this lifelong relationship that has gotten them through everything they've dealt with.

One of the best things about this new series is the science that's built into it. In the regular Fantastic Four series, Reed is an acknowledged master of nearly everything. Peter Parker was bright enough to concoct his webbing and web-shooters. And don't get me started on Bruce Banner.

The fact that Reed was exploring the nature of the universe was totally awesome. The writers worked in a new explanation of the Baxter Building as a think tank, and Willie Lumpkin (the postman) even became a recruiter and special ops soldier in his reboot.

Susan Storm, Reed's love and guiding light, is depicted as a scientific whiz-bang as well, specializing in biology. Johnny is regulated to the role of tag-along troublemaker, which fits the character perfectly and makes him a great foil for when times get way too serious. Her father is the director of the Baxter Building think tank and provides parental authority/resistance as well as the adult voice to balance the young people about to embark on fantastic adventures.

The first arc is somewhat slow in development of plot, but it is rich in the development of character and exploring this new world where everything long-time fans know is taken and twisted, shaken and stirred. Yet it remains remarkably true to the spirit of Lee and Kirby's initial vision of the team. They have to deal with the Mole Man and a rampaging monster that breaks up from the underground into the city street. And they have to learn how to accept their changes and reinforce their relationships with each other.
I love these books for their sheer sense of adventure. But its also the feeling of nostalgia and familiarity, of being in a safe place, that I relish as well. While I was reading this book, I was eight years old again, discovering the Fantastic Four for the first time. Only this time so much of the characters was more accessible and understandable.

Warren Ellis wrote the second six-issue arc included in this book, and it centers on Victor Von Damme, who soon becomes Dr. Doom. As it turns out, Van Damme was also transformed during the N-Zone experiment that changed the Fantastic Four, and his changes are even creepier than the original.

Ellis drives home the science edge to the series as well as plays with some of the political maneuvering that Dr. Doom eventually went to in the original Fantastic Four series. I enjoyed the fact that Doom was not an infallible villain, but that he was a very good one and highly motivated. And there's no question about him being the victim in this series. Even though he was affected by the same radiation that changed the others, he was evil before his changes.

The artwork this time is by Stuart Immonen and there is a drastic difference between his and Kuberts pencils. You can't help but notice it if you read the two arcs fairly closely together. However, Ellis spins his story out in different ways and Immonen gets to flex his muscles in different parts of the world, providing for a very different look.

The Mole Man gets beaten back in the first arc, but his menace isn't ended. And Dr. Doom is definitely going to get even deadlier.

Long-time fans may have trouble transitioning to this new Fantastic Four, but it won't be because of the storytelling and the art. They're decidedly different, but I'm really enjoying that. The older issues can now be picked up in trade editions as well, so fans can dig into either era.

But its the young fans that are going to find the most to love about this series. Its so much more of a Spielberg world and something they've grown up with. I tried reading these comics initially on the month-to-month basis, but I finally gave up. As graphic novels with whole stories in them, though, they're gems.

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