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# SHATTERING CONVENTIONS

COMMERCE, COSPLAY, AND CONFLICT ON THE EXPO FLOOR

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**TO ROSIE  
FOR SPENDING HER BIRTHDAY AT A  
SASQUATCH HUNTERS' CONVENTION**

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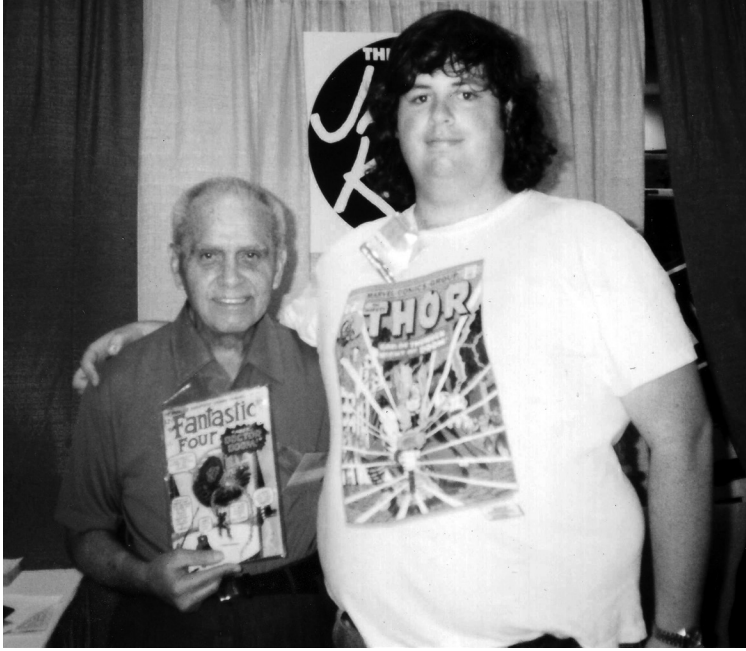
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# SHATTERING CONVENTIONS



The author with Jack Kirby at Comic-Con, 1992.

## COMIC-CON HOLY WAR

I WAS HURRYING, but there was no hurrying at Comic-Con.

I had less than 30 minutes until my scheduled interview with a spiky-haired pro wrestling champ called The Miz, but I wasn't even inside the San Diego Convention Center yet. A half-hour would've been more than enough time to make the interview if this were any other event held there, like the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Metabolic Bariatric Surgery, the Rock and Roll Marathon and Health and Fitness Expo, or even the goddamned '96 Republican Convention. But this was Comic-Con, a spiritual rite for the nerdy and obsessed, a hajj of mass fantasy co-mingled with consumerism. The con drew an estimated 140,000 fanboys and geek girls that year, and at that moment it seemed like all of them were swarming the streets surrounding the convention center. I was only a few blocks away, but they were going to be very long blocks.

A full-sized military chopper carted in on trucks to promote an upcoming alien invasion blockbuster stood partially constructed in front of the Hilton, making San Diego's bayside real estate resemble a Middle Eastern warzone. The priests and priestesses of different sects moved past the simulated wreckage with indifference.

The order of the enslaved Princess Leias, garbed in their bronzed bikinis and bearing choker chains around their necks (a vestige of their former bondage to the vile Jabba the Hutt), moved in the greatest numbers. They were often flanked by the worshippers of Boba Fett who, in contrast to the barely dressed Leias, were covered from head-to-toe, making their vestments of intergalactic body armor a kind of male equivalent of the burka.

There were also more than a few Heath Ledger Jokers and Johnny Depp Pirates, although they didn't seem to travel in flocks like the Leias and Fetts. Then there were those that clung to chosen deities who had failed at the box office, like the guy who insisted on dressing like the Frank Miller version of The Spirit.

I turned onto Third Avenue towards the crosswalk that served as the sole access point between the convention center and the rest of downtown San Diego. The walkway ahead of me was jammed with a full squad of *Return of the Jedi* scout troopers, all pushing imperial baby strollers. Some dark part of me wanted to tackle those imperial surrender monkeys—I mean they lost to Ewoks—but think of the children. Crushing toddlers was never good.

I played a human game of Tetris instead, hopping into what small, open spaces there were to gain some yardage.

But I weighed over 300 pounds, so this still wasn't a good idea. I'd slipped past the imperial strollers, but one of my hops left me teetering like a felled buffalo. I was about to fall on the most adorable Batman and Batgirl you've ever seen. They must've been about three and four years old. Both of them looked up at me through their cowls with pleading eyes. I waved my arms and regained my balance, and kept moving. No toddlers were crushed.

I made it to K Street, but I was caught in a maelstrom of swag. At its center, a team of zombies more convincing than anything out of a George Romero movie shambled around in circles to promote AMC's *The Walking Dead*, while hula girls in grass skirts handed out cards hyping the new reboot of *Hawaii Five-O* and some Showtime interns begged passersby to apply temporary tattoos of a gaping razor slash to drum up interest in the latest season of *Dexter*. It was getting hard to tell who was dressed up because of an inner calling, and who was on some network's payroll.

Pressing forward, I crossed the lightrail tracks. This was progress, but the closer I got to the crosswalk, the more the masses of nerds seemed to congeal into one slow-moving, multi-legged organism.

In a patch of dirt just after the tracks, an Asian man stood with an oversized sign that read "Justice? CIA is EVIL" in big, handwritten letters across the top with the six reasons that the sign-holder was the "#1 specimen of the CIA's human brain control study" listed below. Reason number four read, "Used to teach intermediate calculus." Reason six: "Nonsmoker, nondrinker I'm homeless." At

first I thought he might have been another corporate shill working some clever gimmick to promote an upcoming TV show on the SyFy Network, but then I figured that he was just your garden variety, mildly schizophrenic urban crazy drawn by Comic-Con's strange energy. There were a lot of them around.

The light at the crosswalk turned green. The horde in front of me trudged across East Harbor Drive. I took my place in front of the line just as the "Don't Walk" sign started to flash and the traffic cop doing crossing guard duty motioned for everyone to hold up. While waiting for the light to turn green again, I nervously looked to my right and spotted more crazy signs. A regular looking guy in a checkered shirt held a piece of Day-Glo cardboard with "GOD HATES KITTENS" scrawled across it. Next to him, somebody dressed like Bender, the cigar-chomping robot from *Futurama*, held up a placard that read "KILL ALL HUMANS." This whole thing was obviously a goof on something, but what? The mentally ill guy on the other side of the tracks? That didn't make sense.

I gazed a few yards down the road and I found my answer. She was a hard-bitten middle-aged woman with an American flag wrapped around her lower half. In her hands she held four signs that made her resemble a multi-armed pagan goddess of intolerance. One sign read, "FAGS DOOM NATIONS," in bold, blue letters. Another screamed, "AMERICA IS DOOMED" in patriotic red, white and blue. Beyond her were more members of her clan with equally apocalyptic signage. They were the "God Hates Fags" people, the disciples of Pastor Fred Phelps

and members of the Westboro Baptist Church. They could usually be found harassing the families of dead soldiers at military funerals, but now the Westboro Baptists were waving their screen-printed hate at Comic-Con.

Across the five-lane boulevard, nerds massed on the ramp leading from the convention center, their crudely fashioned cardboard signs held aloft like the banners of a medieval army. A man in a Starfleet uniform bore a piece of brown cardboard with the words "God Hates Jedi" hand-drawn in block lettering, each character filled in with a Sharpie. Further up the ramp, a woman in a Robin the Boy Wonder suit waved an oversized sheet of butcher paper that read, "The Dark Knight is by my side," while Edward Scissorhands photographed her with his point-and-shoot camera. Another sign-holder offered "Free Hugs if U Don't Like Phelps," and a more succinct message just read, "Fuck God."

This was shaping up to be a crusade, a clash of civilizations, with Bender the Robot and his cat-hating pal forming a beachhead for secular humanism. The nerdy triumphalists fighting for the love of Steve Jobs, George Lucas, Marvel Comics and skimpy anime costumes were on one side. The Westboro Baptists were on the other, doing their damndest to summon the fire and brimstone of their Lord's wrath. All of a sudden, the six million or so cable viewers that watched the Miz wrestle every Monday night and all of the clicks that he could bring to my blog didn't seem to matter so much. Something was going on—something that couldn't be arranged by sweet talking a publicist—and I was in the middle of it.



I sprang into action like a combination of Peter Parker and Clark Kent, only without the super-powers. If I was going to do this thing, I had to do it right. I couldn't just call it a day after interviewing the sci-fi nerds. As revolting as it was probably going to be, I also had to talk to the Phelps people too. While the mob of nerdy counter-protesters were still crossing the street, I moved past Bender the Robot towards the Westboro Baptists, but my drive came to a stop almost as soon as I'd started.

Getting to the zealots wasn't going to be easy. Standing between them and me was a row of San Diego cops in pressed blue uniforms with the authority to tase me, cuff me and throw my fat ass in jail. I had to get through the police line somehow, but I didn't even have a press pass.