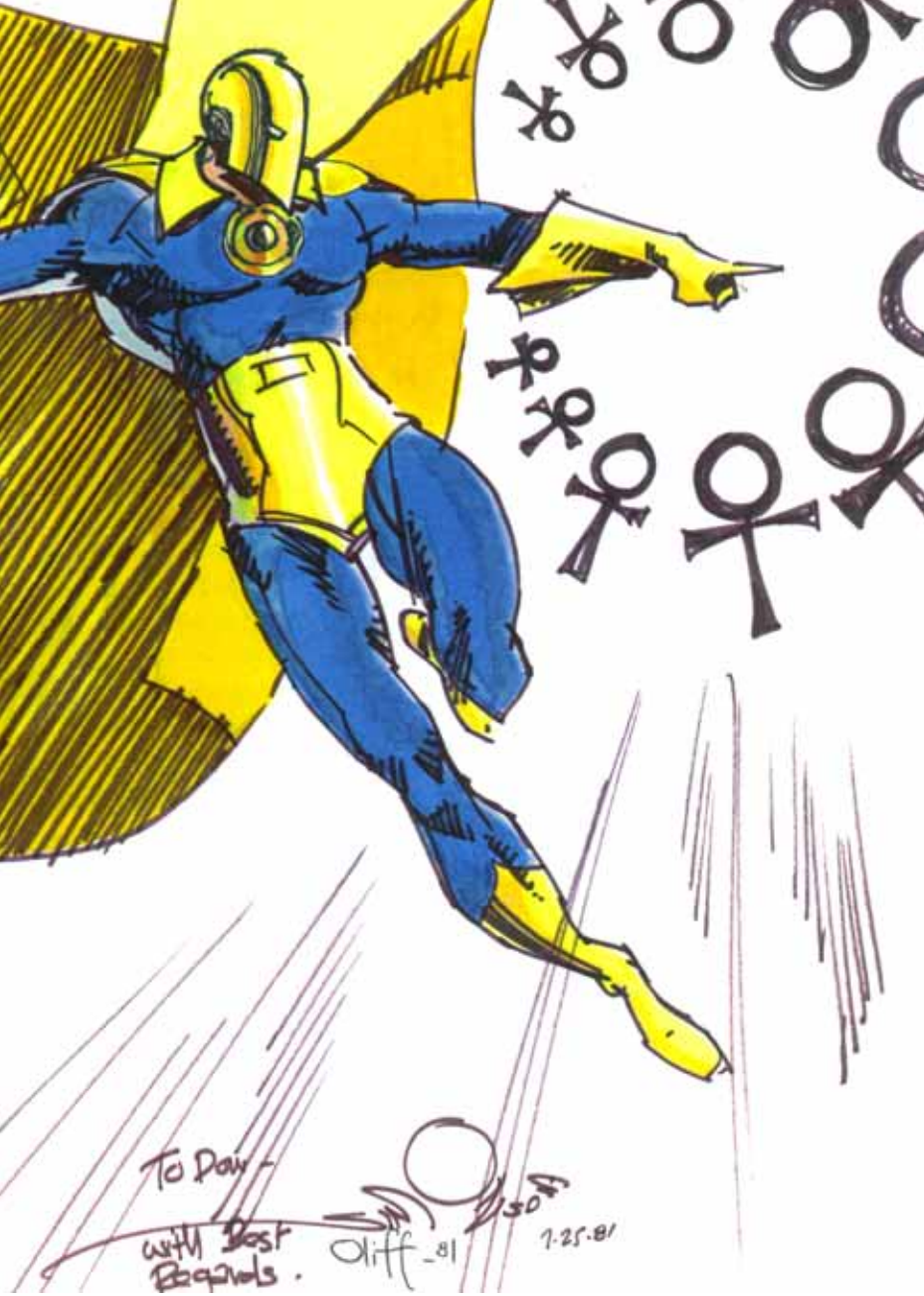


Orb of Nabu: The 1970s Revival of



by Allan Harvey

DR. FATE™



It's the helmet.

That golden, face-obscuring headgear distinguishes Doctor Fate from the competition. It's what people remember most about him.

"I've always been a fan of Dr. Fate," says Gerry Conway, "probably because I think his mask is cool."

Keith Giffen agrees: "That helmet's one of my all-time favorite hero headpieces."

Created in 1940 by Gardner Fox and Hal Sherman, Dr. Fate was a founding member of the Justice Society of America and starred in his own series for a time, in *More Fun Comics* #55-98 [reprinted in 2007 in *The Golden Age Dr. Fate Archives* vol. 1]. However, by 1944 he was gone; the gleam of his golden helmet a dim, yet fond memory.

While the Silver Age had seen revivals of the Flash, Green Lantern, Hawkman, and the others, poor, old Dr. Fate was left on the shelf. While most of the JSA membership was *reimagined* as the Justice League of America, there was no Dr. Fate analogue. Editor Julie Schwartz was a fan of *science* fiction, and magic got short shrift in his comics.

Eventually, of course, the original JSA was revived for annual team-ups with the JLA, and Fate was always along for the ride, but he was never given a solo outing. His appearances outside the group dynamic consisted of team-ups with Hourman in 1965 [in *Showcase* #55 and 56] and Superman in 1971 [in *World's Finest Comics* #208]. Indeed, so ill defined was the good Doctor, that in the *WFC* story DC couldn't seem to decide whether his alter ego, Kent Nelson, was an archaeologist or "one of the nation's top surgeons."

FROM CONWAY'S CORNER

In 1975, Gerry Conway, newly installed as an editor at DC, decided to change this state of affairs by putting together a proposal for a revival of Dr. Fate. But where to put the story?

"*First Issue Special* was a brainstorm of [DC publisher] Carmine Infantino," explains Conway. "Because the first issue of any given comic always seemed to sell better than the subsequent issues, Carmine thought that a comic made up solely of first issues would be a

The Fickle Finger of Fate

From the collection of Aaron Bushey comes this 1981 Dr. Fate commission by Walter Simonson. Those of you reading this issue in the downloadable PDF format can enjoy this amazing piece with Steve Oliff's colors.

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The Pasko-written/
Simonson-drawn
splash to *First Issue
Special #9* (Dec. 1975).

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hit best-seller. It was a tryout magazine, though not as substantial as the original *Showcase*. If an editor had an idea for a tryout, he would pitch it to Carmine, who would either approve it, or not, for a *First Issue*."

Having successfully pitched his Dr. Fate story, Conway's next task was to choose a creative team to do the actual work. "I tried to get the best team I could, and as a fan of Walter Simonson, I was eager to see what he'd do with a magical setting. And I've always enjoyed Marty Pasko's writing."

Martin Pasko was then a relatively new writer making waves at DC, and keen to work on Conway's brainchild. "I jumped at the assignment," he recalls, "less for the character than for the chance to work with Walt Simonson, whom I had known for a couple of years. I would've said yes to Gerry's offer no matter what the property was."

Walter Simonson had been a professional artist for just a few years, and the Fate story would provide him with one of his first full-length art jobs. Prior to this he had mainly produced short backup tales for anthology comics. The exuberance of an artist finally being allowed to cut loose is visible on the completed pages.

"I think it was probably my second full-length story after the final *Manhunter* tale," says Simonson.

"It felt great. Marty and I thought we had a story that deserved some length and we got it. The whole experience was a lot of fun.

"There was probably some additional cachet about doing a full-length story back then as well. At the time—at least at DC, where I had been doing most of my work—the company brought you along slowly. You started out doing short stories, say, in the horror/mystery comics or war books or whatever. And, as you paid your dues, you sort of moved up into longer material. Doing a full-length story was a little like gaining a certain level of professional acceptance or acknowledgment for your work. You had kind of made the grade."

Pasko: "I would never want to seem so grandiose or arrogant as to take any credit for Walt's later success as a writer-artist, and I don't, but I do hope my enthusiasm for Walt's storytelling skills helped give him the impetus to stretch later on. I actually said to him, 'What do you need me for? You should be doing this yourself.'

"I remember that after I finished my second job with him (on *Metal Men*), I told him I'd learned more about scene structure and pacing in our brief collaboration than from any of my editors or colleagues, or from my own trial-and-error."

Having chosen his team, Conway sat down with Pasko and Simonson for a story conference to discuss ideas and decide upon a direction for the revived hero. They didn't feel the need to be too reverent to what had gone before.

"We could have done a lot of research," says Pasko, "and, yes, the bound volumes in the library had all the old stories which we could have read—but there wasn't much point. I think the consensus among Gerry, Walt, and me was that if Fate were anything we needed to be *strictly* faithful to, DC would've been exploiting it more by then, the way they had gotten so much mileage out of other JSA properties like the Flash or Green Lantern. I guess you could say we approached it as a 'demi-retconning.'"

"We had a fine time working together," says Simonson. "I'm guessing that we worked plot-first style. I know that I very rarely worked from full scripts back in the day. And I know that Marty and I did some collaborating on the plot, which probably means I kibitzed here and there."

Pasko concurs. "I work full-script exclusively today, but that Fate story was done plot/pencils/dialogue, probably the only one of the very few jobs I've done that way that I'm still happy with. The retconning wasn't done in a separate, formal document, but if you were to edit together my story conference notes, my typewritten page breakdowns, and a transcription of Walt's marginal notes, you'd get the equivalent of a series bible that any other writer could have made an ongoing series out of, with the *First Issue Special* as the pilot."

THE CURSE OF ANUBIS

The resulting comic was finally published as *First Issue Special #9*, cover-dated Dec. 1975. The tale opens with the escape of a murderous Egyptian mummy from a sarcophagus held within the Boston Museum of Egyptology. Called Khalis, it soon attacks Dr. Fate, who finds himself helpless before a powerful foe. Overwhelmed, Fate collapses, and Khalis tears the Amulet of Nabu from his chest. Alarming, it seems that Fate's Amulet is the source of Khalis' power.



On waking, Fate manages to fly back home to his stone tower in Salem, where he leaves Kent Nelson's body. Nelson's wife, Inza, helps the archaeologist recover. She loves Nelson, but is resentful of the Fate entity that inhabits his body from time to time. In fact, so resentful is she that this time she's had enough, and storms out of the tower, leaving Kent Nelson to brood.

Alone in his study, Nelson discovers the true nature of Khalis. Khalis was a priest in ancient Egypt who seized control by worshiping the god Anubis. Impressed, Anubis gave him an Amulet to maintain control, until one day a stranger arrived who defeated Khalis. That stranger was Nabu, and he took the Amulet for his own. As punishment for his evil, Khalis was mummified—alive!

Jump cut: Four thousand years later, archaeologist Sven Nelson and his 12-year-old son, Kent, discovered Nabu's tomb buried in the Valley of Ur. Upon opening the tomb, Sven was overcome by gas and died. Kent discovered that Nabu was still alive after millennia of suspended animation. Nabu took the boy under his wing and remade him as Dr. Fate.

Now realizing that the Amulets of Anubis and Nabu are one and the same, Fate flies to engage Khalis in battle.

Meanwhile, Inza Nelson has realized that walking out on Kent was a mistake: She still loves him and must learn to cope with his Fate aspect. She decides to try and help in any way she can and heads for Boston Museum.

Fate blasts Khalis with the light of the entire city of Boston, which, as a result, is plunged into darkness. Khalis staggers but does not fall. He uses the power of the Amulet to materialize a sphinx and a pyramid in the heart of Boston, and summons the god Anubis. Anubis appears, but is disdainful of Khalis' efforts. He says, however, that he may reconsider—if Khalis can destroy Dr. Fate!

Inza arrives and hands Fate a shard of Khalis' sarcophagus that she has found. The hieroglyphics carved on the shard reveal Khalis' magical name. When spoken aloud by Fate, these destroy the mummy, and Khalis crumbles to dust. Having finally been allowed a glimpse of Fate's world, Inza realizes that she might be able to learn to live with him after all.

It's a remarkable issue, full of great action sequences and rich characterization. Inza Nelson especially comes off as a fully rounded person, a woman who loves her husband deeply, but finds it difficult to accept his double life. Pasko and Simonson pulled off something very special, and the result was extremely influential. It informed every subsequent appearance of Dr. Fate and so is as important to that character as, say, *Showcase #4* was to the Flash.

"We did run into a glitch about the story length," confesses Simonson. "DC dropped two pages of story from their comics when I was right in the middle of drawing the issue. Books were being shortened in general in a series of cost-cutting measures [the story length dropped from 20 to 18 pages at that point]. We had a plot that was suddenly two pages too long. As a result, Marty and I had to do some finagling with the plot right in the middle of working on the comic. I don't remember what we trimmed from the original plot, but I do remember the scene where Inza Nelson finds the Mummy's true name was part of our revision to shorten the plot. That bit always seemed a little too coincidental to me, but it was necessary to bring the story length into line with DC's new editorial directives."



WALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN

One innovation, while perhaps not pioneered by Simonson, was certainly brought to the fore by him: the use of Egyptian iconography to represent Dr. Fate's magical powers. They were to be a part of Fate's appearances ever after. "I think there may have been some Egyptian flavor to the character already, but Marty and I really pushed that pretty hard for our story, harder than it had been pushed before," Simonson says. "I'm guessing that the association of the Ankh design with Fate was my idea rather than Marty's, but it's possible Marty thought of it. Again, Marty might remember more about this. However, I know that I liked the Ankh because of its symbolic association with 'life.' [It] seemed an appropriate symbol for a magician fighting on the side of the good guys. And I had a typographical reason for wanting to use a letter glyph like the Ankh as part of Fate's magic.

"At the time, I was really interested in creating a graphic system of magic that would rival the visual creations of Steve Ditko on [Marvel's] Dr. Strange. What can I say—I was young and full of hubris,"

Simonson's proposed revision of Dr. Fate's helmet in what the artist had intended to be the cover to *First Issue Special #9*.

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Keith Giffen's pencil art to what we're told is an unpublished Dr. Fate ad or cover, courtesy of Russ Garwood. (If any reader knows more about this art, please contact the editor euryman@msn.com.)

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Simonson laughs. "I loved what Ditko did with magic in Dr. Strange. It was graphic and strange and weird, but when Dr. Strange used magic it was always extremely clear what was happening. His magic was great storytelling. While I was in art school, I developed a real love of typography and creating interesting designs using individual bits of type as pattern. The Ankh symbol gave me a glyph I could fiddle with typographically to try to create a visually coherent system of magic in the comic. I used it in a series of repetitions and in various arrangements to try to give Dr. Fate's magic a unique graphic flavor."

While happy with his graphic invention, there was one aspect of the *FIS* experience that disappointed Simonson. The finished book had a cover by Joe Kubert (who was returning to the character after drawing him in the 1940s), but Simonson had originally submitted his own.

"I drew a Dr. Fate cover but it was rejected. Getting to do your own covers was also part of a process of

gradually becoming accepted at DC. You can find a version of my cover in the back of the *Art of Walter Simonson* book published by DC about 18 years ago. [Editor's note: It also appears on the preceding page.] The version in the book has an altered Fate helmet as we were thinking about redesigning it. I did a little preliminary design work on a new helmet using Egyptian motifs. We didn't change the helmet in the end but when the unused cover was printed in that book, I thought it would be cool to include the alternate version. The original version of my cover had Fate wearing the standard Fate helmet."

Martin Pasko was himself in an innovatory mood, and explains his thought processes in updating Fate for a mid-1970s audience: "The suggestion of borrowing the Lords of Order and Chaos concept from the ideas of the late Roger Zelazny, like the idea of creating a villain whose backstory allowed us to tweak the origin, came from Walt. I provided the other two innovations: the way in which the Nelsons' relationship was strained by the husband's super-heroics, and the re-conception of Dr. Fate as a separate entity, with a consciousness separate from Nelson's, with the helmet being an 'urn' for this entity that would 'possess' the archaeologist. Both of these conceits were inspired by the need to address deficiencies or overcome stumbling blocks [creator] Gardner Fox and company had built into the source material. Which I don't want to make sound like an onerous chore, by the way; it was fun.

"The main reason I don't consider myself a fanboy is that I don't seem to think in the same terms, or have the same interests, as any of the self-described fanboy writers I've known over the years. I've never wanted to recreate the comics I enjoyed as a kid, for example. Why would anyone want their older brothers' or their fathers' comics?"

WHAT TO DO ABOUT INZA?

"Gerry wanted to include the Inza character (I seem to recall someone, maybe Walt, wondering aloud if she should be cut altogether), and that meant—especially with most comics readers in the mid-'70s embracing feminism and gender equality—figuring out how to do more with her than playing the same old damsel-in-distress card," Pasko says.

"So I said to myself, let's make her more independent-minded, a woman who pushes back against the oppressiveness of her life. But what, exactly, was that oppression? Well, she was married to a super-hero but wasn't allowed to share in his experience unless she was somehow victimized by it. And she was forced to live, we were told by the source material, in this 'tower without windows or doors' that looked more like a medieval prison than a magic castle. So she was, in essence, held hostage by her husband's circumstance. But [at the same time] I wanted Inza's rage and frustration to be tempered by love for Kent and by sympathy for his oppression.

"I thought, *Let's make Inza a super-hero 'widow,'* likewise cut off from her husband during crisis situations and unable to help him. And, since the tower design already gives us the visual metaphor for the caged animal quality of the emotion, her desperation will be easy to dramatize quickly and forcefully. But what about that sympathy for her husband that tempers her resentment? What was *his* burden? That question led to my second pitch, which was that Kent Nelson was not the super-hero; something that *inhabited* him was.



"What the abstraction called 'Dr. Fate' really came from Walt's pitch about Lords of Order, which was in response to my idea that Nelson should be just the guy whose body was used by an incorporeal entity that lived inside the helmet (thus providing a rationale for why a helmet at all). Nelson would be presumably only one of many people in history to serve as the 'host vessel,' though we never explicitly stated so. This meant that Kent wasn't being insensitive to his wife's plight; he was simply powerless to ignore the call to service from the thing in the helmet.

"Once I realized that, I saw a way in which the dramatic tension between Inza and Kent could be heightened, making the relationship more interesting (as well as giving us much more story territory to explore in a later series): by establishing that Kent didn't remember much of anything that had happened to him while he was Fate.

"Merely asking him what had happened to him wasn't going to bring her closer to him even vicariously; he wouldn't be able to tell her. The Fate-Nelson-Inza triangle was not about jealousy so much as a couple controlled by a father figure, with the husband submitting and the wife rebelling.

"So Walt and I were delightfully free to invent and, as it turned out, I think we enhanced our reputations by giving DC a new, more-readily exploitable character. I think that's a fair assessment because Dr. Fate has been a more continuous and highly visible presence in the DCU ever since, even if subsequent hands took it in directions that, however interesting, chose not to exploit the original setup to its full potential."

Paul Levitz is now DC's president and publisher, but in 1975 he was an assistant editor (and was about to start writing for *All-Star Comics*, a JSA series that heavily featured Fate). Levitz remembers the Fate revival well: "I was a big fan of that project. I think the success of the issue was its freshness—Marty and Walt were both coming into the first flowering of their talent, and put themselves totally into it. At the time I started on *All-Star* I was sharing an apartment with Marty, so I'm sure we talked occasionally about the character."

DR. FATE RETURNS ... AGAIN

As good as it was, though, that *First Issue Special* was destined to be Dr. Fate's last—at least for the time being. "I would have loved to see a *Dr. Fate* series," admits Conway, "but I'm not sure *FIS* was set up to actually launch new titles, or even to gauge reader interest. I'm pretty sure Carmine never thought past that initial idea [of a title made up of first issues]."

And so Dr. Fate went back to his role as a guest star, appearing in team-ups with Batman in 1979 (in *The Brave and the Bold* #156) and Superman in 1980 (in *DC Comics Presents* #23). But his single solo outing didn't go unremembered. In *The Flash* #305

(Jan. 1982), Fate made a guest appearance in a story that teamed up the original Flash with his Silver Age counterpart, and that led into a regular backup slot for the Doctor starting in the very next issue.

Also returning was Martin Pasko—this time working alongside artist Keith Giffen. For eight glorious issues they weaved intricately constructed stories that made full use of newly available printing technology to produce pages that are beautiful to behold. This achievement is all the more remarkable considering that they had a mere eight pages to play with each month.

"Marty's scripts were spot-on," says Giffen. "He really kept it interesting—especially the whole Aztec/Mayan god thing. I'm a huge Simonson fan, so intimidation was definitely a factor [in my approach]. I plundered his ankh magic graphics pretty freely.



An offbeat Dr. Fate outing (with cover co-star Batman) in the round-robin maxiseries *DC Challenge*. Original cover art to issue #11 (Sept. 1986) illustrated by Keith Giffen and contributed by Cesar Alvarez.

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"Mike Barr, who was editing the *Flash* at the time, offered [the job] to me as an assignment. I was kinda on 'former asshole freelancer' probation, and this was a chance to start showing I could function as a pro."

What made this series so eye-popping was the use of color-holds. This is a process where color is applied to a panel without a black outline to contain it. Giffen went on to use the technique extensively in his fondly remembered run on the *Legion of Super-Heroes*. "I was trying to make full use of whatever tools were available. All I had to do was indicate a color-hold by drawing in non-reproducing blue pencil. The inker [Larry Mahlstedt] would then ink on a vellum overlay. It was a much bigger pain for him than for me."

Though initially not keen to revisit old ground, Pasko had agreed to come on board thanks to welcome financial changes at DC. "By the time they offered me the backup, a royalty program had been introduced and I said to myself, 'What the hell,' because [writing] eight-pagers was not tough to do on a moonlighting

basis after I got home from the animation studio. And, unlike a full book at that point, I could afford not having to worry about how it would sell."

And working with Keith Giffen? "In terms of the comfort level, very much like working with Walt," Pasko says, "because I had already known Keith for about six or seven years. It was similar also in that Keith was already taking more control over story (though not with me), and it would be only a matter of time before he'd be off and running on a writing career of his own. Again, my intuition about the artist's trajectory was correct and, though I'd kill to work with Keith today—just as I would with Walt, and Howard Chaykin—by now all those guys know from vast experience that the easier, faster paycheck for them is to write it and let someone else slave over the drawing board.

"The art was gorgeous, of course, even if it didn't print as well as we might've wanted. Our reach exceeded our grasp. Keith was very good at using the new tool of color-holds to visualize the magic effects more imaginatively, and he rose to the occasion of delivering the set pieces with maximum impact. But Larry Mahlstedt's exquisite inking was undone by the crude plastic plates [then used in the printing process]. The color-holds were not helped by Sparta's separations, which tended to go badly off-register. But this stuff comes off as crude only when you view it in hindsight. It's impossible to imagine today, but the reader accepted this kind of thing as state-of-the-art back in those pre-Ronald's, pre-digital direct-to-press days.

"The only frustration in those Fate backups in *Flash* was that the limited page count left us only enough room for the Menace from Antiquity part of the format I'd developed. The stuff that was much more interesting to me—the Kent-Inza relationship and the "triangle"—kept having to be cut."

A change in editors put an end to the backup series, and Fate sank once more into relative obscurity.

Post-Crisis, Fate was reborn as a major player in the DC Universe, starting with a four-issue limited series by Keith Giffen and J. M. DeMatteis, which led into a regular series for the master mage, written by DeMatteis. Though it didn't sell hugely, it was popular enough to spawn several follow-up series throughout the '90s and beyond.

So, in summation, while that initial solitary appearance in a lowly title like *First Issue Special* may have seemed like a shaky start, we can see in hindsight that it actually provided a rock-solid foundation for the rebirth of a character that still has much potential.

Let's leave the last words to Martin Pasko:

"I'll remain forever grateful to Walt for that sweet collaboration; I learned much from him, and his beautiful art allowed people to read writing that I was very proud of, who probably would not have bothered had the book been drawn by a lesser artist. I owe Walt and Gerry all of whatever credibility I earned as a comics writer at that point in my career."

ALLAN HARVEY is a London-based writer and artist. He maintains *Gorilla Daze*, a blog that appreciates wacky comics. It can be found at: www.thefifthbranch.com/gorilladaze.



Giffen penciled and inked this spooky 1987 Dr. Fate pinup.

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