

# FIVE YEARS LATER: THE ORAL HISTORY OF COUNTDOWN TO FINAL CRISIS

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# COUNTDOWN

*Yesterday was the fifth anniversary of Countdown #51.*

*Hopefully everyone honored the anniversary in the same way as its creators: by trying to forget that Countdown ever existed.*

Indeed, what can be said about Countdown that has not already been said about the Vietnam War? It was a quagmire, an unwinnable war of attrition that even the planners could not find a graceful way to end. It left a psychic scar on the nation, and destroyed the best years of countless young men's lives.

Okay, maybe it wasn't quite as bad as Vietnam. If nothing else, Countdown provided the spark that led to me blogging about comics. And if you don't think that's a good thing, fine: it also provided us a near-perfect lab specimen of what an Editorially Driven Comic Book looks like. To a certain extent, everything you can say about Countdown is true of nearly every Big Two superhero comic:

It was published to fill a hole in the schedule.

Non-Executive-Staff creative members were treated like interchangeable cogs, comic-producing machines.

Plot Events (and importance to the companywide Überplot) were privileged over what would be traditionally called "story" and "character".

It received constant "comics" "media" attention on the big blogs despite no one, not even the interviewers and DC employees extruding the book weekly, seemed to care in the least.

## COUNTDOWN



Countdown may have been a lightning-in-a-bottle, textbook demonstration of what you get when the entire publishing line of a company is hashed out by people who have never been hired to be creators on a dry erase board, then handed down piecemeal to people actually hired to be creators. But it isn't the last. From countless Blackest Night tie-ins (now with free prize inside!) to Marvel's endless series of Avengers Presents: We Need Some Movie Tie-Ins, from Avengers vs. X-Men to Before Watchmen, we are seeing a shift towards ever more editorially driven comics from "The Big Two". All of the gradual, glacial movement towards treating superhero comics as something that might exist because a creator had a compelling story seems to be eroding. Of course, this exists in all media: just as there Has to Be an issue of Batman every month, there also has to be a

few dozen episodes of CSI shows every year, an appropriate number of Star Wars Extended Universe novels, a Battleship motion picture, whether anyone has the perfect idea for it or not. But the ratio of "someone has a good idea they have pitched" to "someone in marketing decided this needs to exist" is growing more and more lopsided.

I've already written a lot about Countdown. In the weeks to come, I will probably write more. But in honor of its fifth anniversary, I thought I would let the people responsible for Countdown tell their own story. Thanks to nearly every major Comic News site purging their archives since 2007, this was no small task. Most of these interviews had to be scraped out of message boards and caches.

It's as if the Internet itself does not wish to dwell on the recent history of the comics industry. Regardless, I have exhumed **COUNTDOWN TO FINAL CRISIS: AN ORAL HISTORY.**



## Dan Didio

Executive Editor, DC Comics

“I was involved heavily in the early stages of [Countdown], establishing who the main characters are and what the primary goals of the series would be. That’s pretty much what I’ve done.

I’d say about 75% of the concepts that are being created [at DC Comics] are editorially driven. And realistically, at that point, we are trying to figure out bringing in the best people for the job. One of the tougher aspects of the job is waiting for people to pitch you ideas, you know?”



## Grant Morrison

Writer of Final Crisis

“Well, the way it worked out was that I started writing Final Crisis #1 in early 2006, around the same time as the 52 series was starting to come out, so Final Crisis was more a continuation of plot threads from Seven Soldiers and 52 than anything else.

Final Crisis was partly-written and broken down into rough issue-by-issue plots before Countdown was even conceived, let alone written.”



“When Countdown was originally being discussed, it was just a case of me saying ‘Here’s issue 1 of Final Crisis and a rough breakdown of the following six issues. As long as you guys leave things off where Final Crisis begins, we’ll be fine.’”

—Grant Morrison.

## COUNTDOWN



“I think the initial ideas for Countdown were born sometime last summer [2006] in the diabolical mind of Dan Didio...but our first actual story conference with head writer Paul Dini and layout artist Keith Giffen happened in early November.”

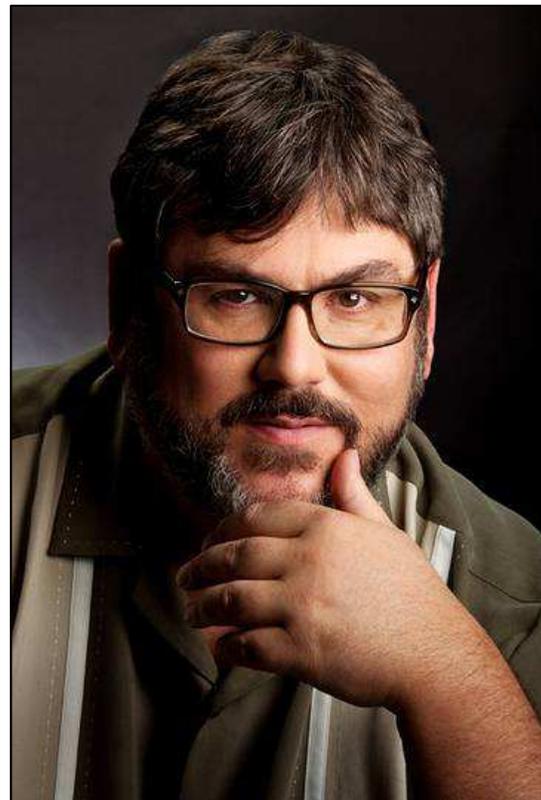
### **Mike Marts**

Initial Countdown editor

“Dan Didio was the ultimate web-weaver, I guess you would say, in that he cast us all in various roles in Countdown. He had ideas in mind for writers or writer teams he’d like to bring into the mix the same way he had ideas for artists. He came to me with the intent of taking what was, at that time, the skeleton ideas for Countdown and giving them to me and getting us all into a discussion of where we could go with these storylines.”

### **Paul Dini**

Countdown head writer



## COUNTDOWN



DIDIO: [Countdown is] a weekly comic, and that's probably where most of the similarities begin and end between Countdown and 52. The way Countdown is constructed is different from how 52 was done. With 52, we had a team of four incredibly talented writers working in unison to produce each issue. As we called it, it was the first comic book rock band, or super group, I guess, working together on the story.

What's being done with Countdown is different in the sense that the sensibilities and the way we assembled the art on the 52 side is now being done on the writing side. We've got one head writer in Paul Dini, who's working in conjunction with the editor on the book, Mike Marts, and together, they're breaking out the story on a week by week basis. Paul has written the overall outline for the entire year, and together with Mike, they get on the phone with the individual writers of the issues, and together, they break the book out page by page.

## COUNTDOWN

MARTS: Dini was great in that he had an extremely detailed weekly outline of Countdown in before the end of '06.

A lot of the story pieces were in place prior to me coming over to DC [in September 2006], but as soon as I came in, I was approached. What Dan had said to me was that **he wanted someone who was unencumbered by** everything else that had taken place over the last few years to be connected to it.

DIDIO: the best part about Mike, and I use this as a real plus now, is that he was unfamiliar with so much of the DC Universe. Being a Marvel guy for so long, which I've forgiven him for [laughs], he wasn't as familiar with our characters and our stories. The best aspect of that is that in creating a weekly book, we're hoping to attract new readers – so **here's the guy who's running the project that actually has a fresh set of eyes**, and is unfamiliar with some of the characters and the stories that took place prior to this.



## COUNTDOWN



DIDIO: **The reason why we changed from Mike Marts to Mike Carlin** had nothing to do with anything Countdown-related. It was simply due to the fact that the Editor's seat on the Batman books came open and Mike Marts really wanted to work on those titles. Because of that, I had to hand a series that was up and running at full steam – and encompassing the entire DC Universe – and at that particular moment, it made sense to hand it over to Mike Carlin, because he was so intimately involved with everything that was going on. It just made for an easier transition.



## COUNTDOWN



### **Mike Carlin** Second Countdown editor

“I had a **big target on my head** since I was the only other person who’d done anything weekly before... the process is only different for me because we would all get together to plot Superman... Writers, pencilers, inkers even colorists... On Countdown, Paul Dini and Marts and Dan Didio worked out the story long before I was even on the book!”

MARTS: For the first four books, we’ve brought in Jimmy Palmiotti and Justin Gray, Adam Beechem, Sean McKeever, and Tony Bedard. These are our key writers who will be working with Paul in the beginning, but also that doesn’t stop us from bringing other writers in to work on the project... If we choose to crossover with another storyline or a book which is being driven by another writer, we can allow that writer to come onboard and tell their portion of the story inside Countdown and working with Paul. That way, there will be **a real feeling of cohesiveness** between the series and Countdown, but it also allows the writer to **maintain some level of input and control** over the character they’re writing on a monthly basis.

ECKERT: *In case anyone is curious, this never happened.*



## COUNTDOWN



MARTS: [The artistic lineup is] pretty much set...the artists that readers will see over the first ten or so issues are for the most part our “core” group: [Jim] Calafiore, [David] Lopez, [Jesús] Saiz and [Carlos] Magno.



*ECKERT: Calafiore drew four issues (50, 45, 39, 36), Lopez drew parts of three issues (48, 43, 37), Saiz drew six and part of a seventh (51, 46, 38, 34, 30, 19, 12) and Magno drew eight (49, 44, 42, 33, 27, 25, 22, 8). In all, the “core” group had art appear in only 21 out of 51 issues, with the bulk of the series drawn by eleven other pencillers and a total of sixteen inkers.*

DIDIO: [The writers are] involved **much more than readers may think**. We created the story bible which charts out what’s going to happen with each one of the major characters month by month, and in some cases, week by week. From that, Paul has an idea of how he’d like to break down the story on a page-by-page basis, and he works that out with the writers and the editors. So there’s an open discussion going on between the writers on the book, as well as the editors involved on how the book breaks down.



## COUNTDOWN



### Tony Bedard

Writer of eleven issues of Countdown

“Keith [Giffen] would lay out the issues before they were scripted. We would all get together and discuss it on the phone, then Dini would do his plot breakdowns. I mean, it’s all there more or less. [Giffen] would also add little bits of business and storytelling and stuff, and then I would script from there. **I’d say there’s a little less choreography going on from [the individual writers’] standpoint.** It’s funny, because in some ways that’s a little less creative perhaps, but in other ways you have to step it up with dialogue and funny lines and stuff like that. Being on the inside of Countdown, I don’t know what it’s like for [writers on other DC books] trying to pick up on what’s going on in there. My guess is that folks who aren’t working on the team don’t see every piece of the puzzle. We’re trying to play our cards close to the vest a little bit.”



### Sean McKeever

Credited writer of twelve issues of Countdown

“**I’ve never actually seen Dini’s massive, big outline.** [The characters introduced by McKeever in Countdown #34] may have been something that Dan DiDio brought in, it may have been something that one of the other editors said this would be a cool character to bring in, or it may have been something that Paul wanted. I couldn’t tell you for sure.

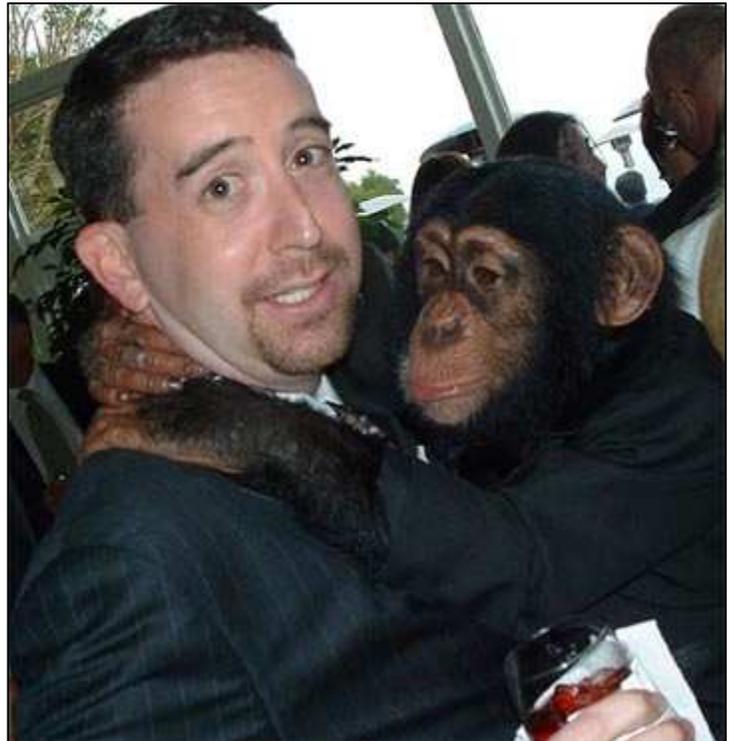
I did have an outline for the whole thing to start, but never the detailed bible. I think part of that is because it’s always been very fluid, and it was more of a need to know thing.”



## Adam Beechen

Credited writer of ten issues of Countdown

“There have been a few occasions where DC has said, **you know what, plans have changed** – we’ve got this coming up that we want to do and we need to tie it in somehow to Countdown, and we need to alter the storyline of Countdown somewhat to accommodate this or that.”



DIDIO: I don’t want to diminish the level of involvement the other writers have, because they’re all adding to the story, and making key contributions, and they’ve all been incredibly professional in regards to how it works, but it’s all structured a little differently than it was with “52”, because so much of what was done in the beginning was done with Paul, Mike and myself.

BEDARD: I’m not setting the overall direction of the book, so in one sense I’m trying to make sense of the particular chapters that I get and make them sing, **but on the other hand I’m also waiting to find out the ultimate pay off on a lot of these things.** I don’t know if that sounds clueless, but I don’t want to know all the stuff. I like being a reader as well.





"With Countdown, Paul is the head writer, and broke down the overall story, and is in communication with all of the other writers, so it runs a lot smoother. Realistically speaking, we have a weekly conference call between Paul and the writer who's working on that week's issue and that writer can change, based upon availability, so that way, it doesn't slow down the process as you're waiting for other people to turn in work.

The writers actually do the execution of the book, and then Paul does the finished polish on the dialogue." — Dan Didio.

"In Countdown, each week I go over the beats of the upcoming issue with the editor and the writers. If new ideas arise, [I] amend the series's outline before writing the script. I then review the final script before it is sent to the artist. Once drawn and given dialogue, it is reviewed again. We have to make sure the tone is right and that we're keeping the ultimate vision of the story line." — Paul Dini.

## COUNTDOWN



### **Jimmy Palmiotti**

Co-writer of fifteen issues of Countdown

“We discuss and go by a general outline where we should be going and all the points that have to be hit. When it goes to specific details and dialogue, that’s where we go in and add our ‘flavor’. The best part of the whole project is being able to see the work make such an impact on the whole DC line and be involved with that.”



### **Scott Kolins**

Artist on four issues of Countdown

“I looked at the Countdown job as more “fitting in” and not as a “Scott Kolins” book. I didn’t want readers to stop reading the story and look at the Scott Kolins art.”

## COUNTDOWN



BEDARD: It's all there to build from, and if he has specific ideas for jokes or cool visuals or whatever, he'll specify those. I think Paul's background in the collaborative process of TV writing gives him a good feel for leaving each of us room to bring our own inspiration to each issue. **Countdown is going to be huge:** it deals with the whole DC Universe and it's a game-changing story. The repercussions of the story will echo through the DCU for a long time to come.



BEECHEN: Everybody is bringing something very different to the table and it's going to be very exciting. Another thing that has worked out really well is that **the voices have been unified.** You can't look at an issue and say that it is clearly an Adam Beechen issue because it is so much different than the other guys. That is not the case. To me it feels like we are writing with a unified voice. That is a testament to Paul and Mike [...] these stories are going to shake DC up. These stories are important stories.



BEDARD: Because of the way the book was set up, **it was not as collaborative as I would have liked.** I got to collaborate with [head writer Paul] Dini a lot one-on-one. It was mostly each of us hashing out our particular part with him, rather than everyone in the same room figuring out the whole tale.



MCKEEVER: We all went into it with the best of intentions and we were all very excited. It started out fun, and a neat challenge, but **it became more and more trying as the series went on.** As with Bedard, Palmiotti, Gray and Beechen, I had very little say. As time passed, we were promised a more prominent role, but the reality was we wound up having less and less to do with it.



BEECHEN: The way I understand it, and even I'm not privy to all the details of Final Crisis, is that some of the storylines that are happening in our book are going to wrap up and some of them will carry over into Final Crisis.

## COUNTDOWN

DIDIO: I'm also suspecting that **we'll pick up more readers** as we get closer to Final Crisis because people are going to want to see what the line is between Countdown and Final Crisis itself. The introduction of the Pied Piper and Trickster, and that particular beat might just seem like two Flash villains showing up for no particular reason, but quite honestly, it's something that's so very important to everything that's going to be going on in the DCU.



MORRISON: The Countdown writers were later asked to 'seed' material from Final Crisis and in some cases, probably due to the pressure of filling the pages of a weekly book, that seeding amounted to **entire plotlines veering off in directions I had never envisaged, anticipated or planned for in Final Crisis.**



## Frank Tieri

Writer of Countdown Presents: Lord Havok & the Extremists

“It was something I saw in [a] Dan DiDio interview [he] did a little while ago— this question of whether or not a series like Lord Havok and the Extremists is “necessary” or “important”. I’ve seen this way of thinking before—people so

worried whether a tie-in is necessary/ not necessary to the event in question—and honestly, **I really think those people get too caught up in that nonsense.”**

## Justin Gray

Credited co-writer of fifteen issues of Countdown

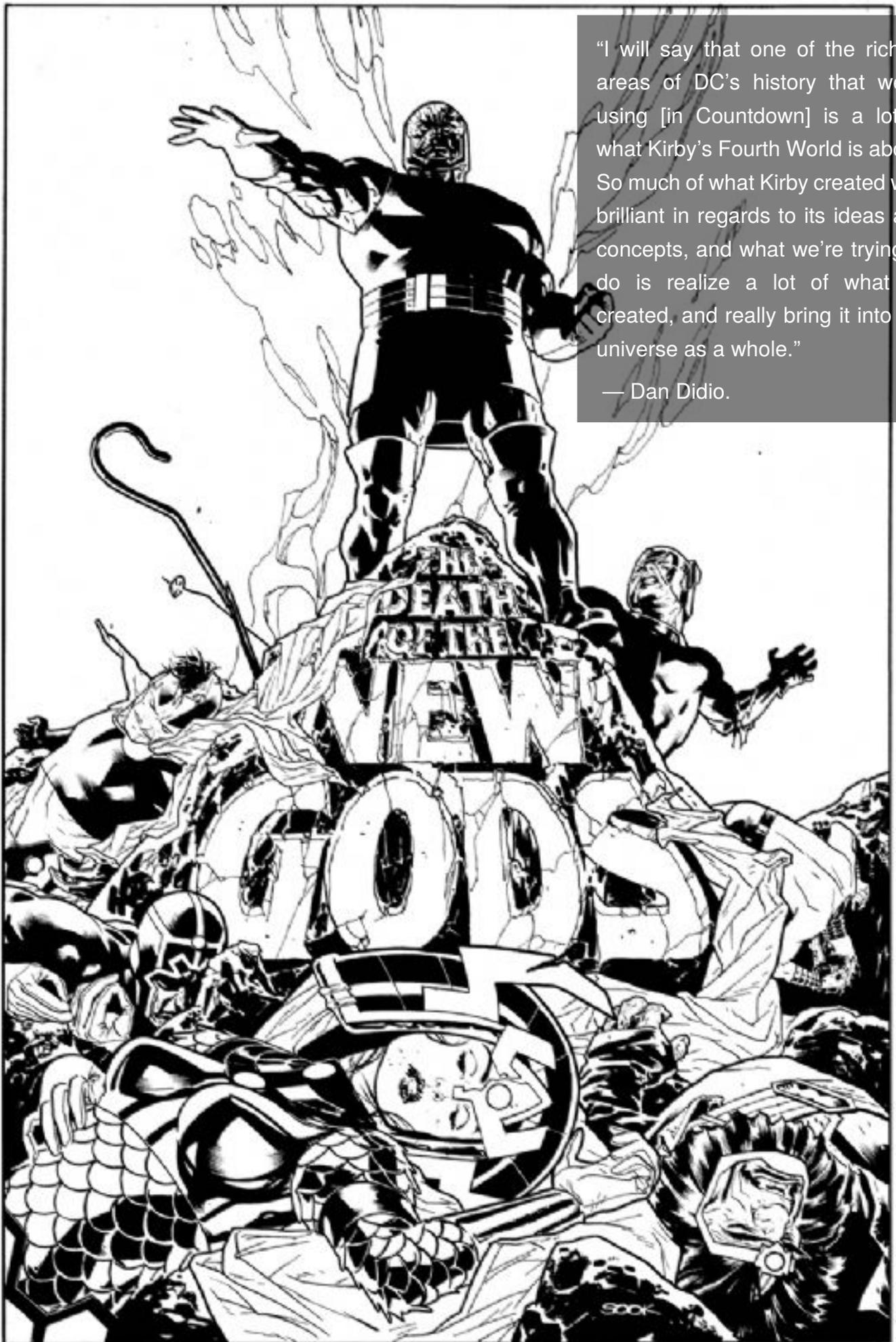
“As an overview of the series I can understand a certain amount of impatience and frustration with the ebb and flow of the story.

However **the importance of the story to the DCU and impact it has on Final Crisis** dictated how certain issues would unfold.”



“I will say that one of the richest areas of DC’s history that we’re using [in Countdown] is a lot of what Kirby’s Fourth World is about. So much of what Kirby created was brilliant in regards to its ideas and concepts, and what we’re trying to do is realize a lot of what he created, and really bring it into the universe as a whole.”

— Dan Didio.



## COUNTDOWN



MORRISON: Dan DiDio knew I wanted to delve deeper into the mythology of Jack Kirby's New Gods as I'd adapted it for my Seven Soldiers series, so we talked about doing a big project that would put the New Gods back on the map.

DINI: Basically we're going in a different direction with the New Gods. You will see Scott Free and you will see some of the other characters showing up in Countdown, but the interpretation of some of those characters in Seven Soldiers is pretty much the Seven Soldiers version or "universe".

DIDIO: What we're doing right now is reestablishing Darkseid as the premiere villain or one of the premiere forces in the DCU.

## COUNTDOWN



“But one of the things that I liked about Countdown and wanted to see reflected more out there was this whole drumbeat of the New Gods getting killed and how it kind of increases in tempo and you get a sense of something big going on. Because that is a huge storyline that’s going to really pay off big.”

— Tony Bedard.

## COUNTDOWN

DIDIO: The New Gods are appearing everywhere lately, and that's not by accident. It's not a coincidence that we're starting to see them in the various series.



MORRISON: Back in 2006, **I requested a moratorium on the New Gods** so that I could build up some foreboding and create anticipation for their return in a new form... instead, the characters were passed around like hepatitis B to practically every writer at DC to toy with as they pleased, which, to be honest, makes it very difficult for me to reintroduce them with any sense of novelty, mystery or grandeur.

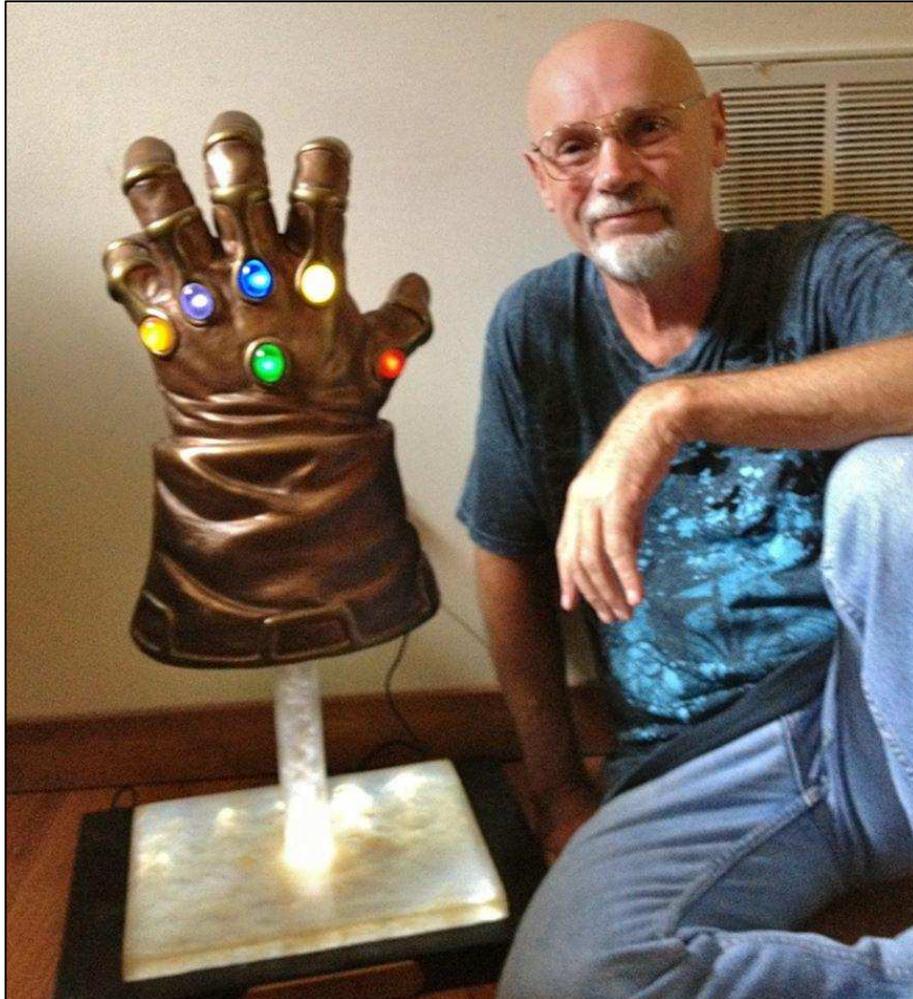
## COUNTDOWN

“Like I said, I was not familiar with them at all and realized that I had to look [New Gods supporting cast members Deep Six] up on the Internet and **figure who the hell they were and why would a reader care.**”

— Jimmy Palmiotti.



## COUNTDOWN



### Jim Starlin

Writer of the Countdown tie-in *Death of the New Gods*

“Since Kirby’s initial run on the characters others have presented them with mixed results. Looking back I’d say at least half of the past New Gods series have done more harm than good. So for me, *Death of the New Gods* is half honoring Jack Kirby, half mercy killing.”



## COUNTDOWN

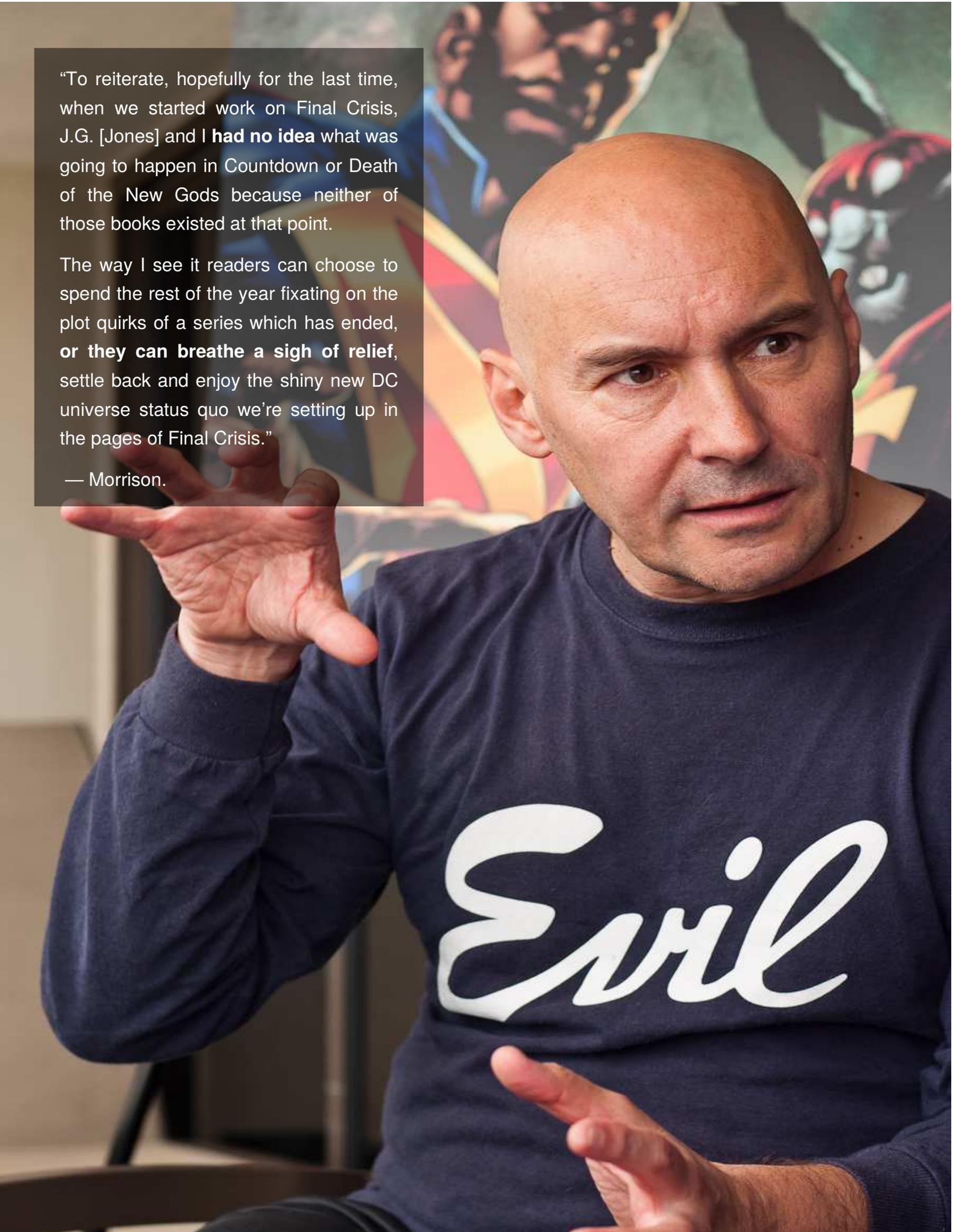


“Obviously, I would have preferred it if the New Gods hadn’t been spotlighted at all, let alone quite so intensively before I got a chance to bring them back but I don’t run DC and don’t make the decisions as to how and where the characters are deployed.”

— Morrison. 🙄

“Originally, we were going to do Countdown to Final Crisis #0 – that’s what Countdown has been counting down to: 51 to 0 – 52 issues in total, a year’s worth of work. Ultimately though, what happened was that when we were looking at how #0 was being created, we realized that in collecting Countdown to Final Crisis, it would be hard to collect the #0 issue, because it would leave us on a cliffhanger at the end of the book. We felt that probably wasn’t the best way to end a book, so we decided to end all the Countdown stories with #1, and therefore make the #0 issue separate.” — Dan Didio.





“To reiterate, hopefully for the last time, when we started work on Final Crisis, J.G. [Jones] and I **had no idea** what was going to happen in Countdown or Death of the New Gods because neither of those books existed at that point.

The way I see it readers can choose to spend the rest of the year fixating on the plot quirks of a series which has ended, **or they can breathe a sigh of relief**, settle back and enjoy the shiny new DC universe status quo we’re setting up in the pages of Final Crisis.”

— Morrison.

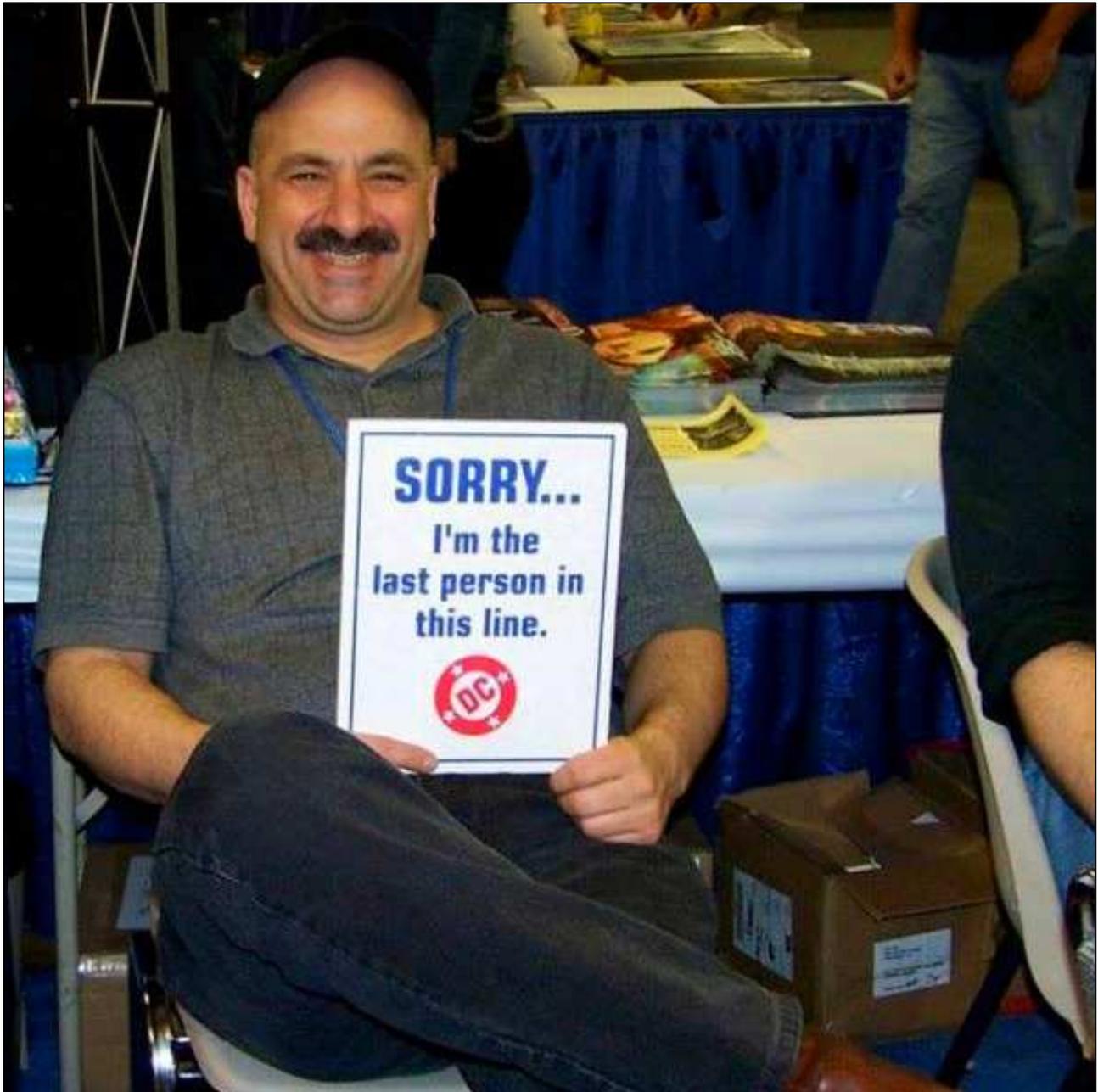
## COUNTDOWN



DINI: After sixteen months of Countdown, my writer's office resembles a nineteenth century bear pit. **It's time to clean up.**

On the floor next to the shark head are twelve unopened boxes of Countdown comps that Rashy has stacked into a fort.

## COUNTDOWN



DIDIO: If you're creating stories **just for the sake of having events** to tie things together with no real meat on the bones, then you're going to have **event fatigue** because you have all this promotion and drive and anticipation, but you've under-delivered on what the expectations are. That's what some people felt about what Countdown to Final Crisis was. They felt it didn't build properly off the event or for the amount of anticipation they had for the series itself.

## DON'T WORRY ABOUT COUNTDOWN -- FOCUS ELSEWHERE

A COMICS BLOG THAT USED TO BE ABOUT COUNTDOWN AND IS NOW ABOUT STUFF.

### Andrew Hickey

Founder of the DC Countdown Blog

[4/15/2007]

I'm going to review Countdown in a different manner to the way in which 52 has been looked at. I'm going to look at the comic every week and review it, make predictions, say what's interesting about it, but I'm also going to post brief reviews of the other DCU titles I'm reading, and look at how they tie in.

[7/14/2007]

**I have now dropped Countdown.** The extent to which there will not even be a pretense of a story in this comic has become painfully clear. Everyone involved in the production of this series should be ashamed of themselves for producing such meretricious drivel. But not as ashamed as I am for supporting them.



## COUNTDOWN

*ECKERT: Matt Brady, from Newsarama.com, asked why they liked Countdown, and another fan said, "I was expecting a train wreck and didn't get it." To which DiDio said should be used as a back cover quote on the trade.*

*Neither this, nor any other quotation from a review of the series appeared on any Countdown to Final Crisis trade.*



DIDIO: One expression that I find humorous is "editorial mandate." I feel that expression gets thrown around a great deal. The role of the editor is to assemble and be responsible for whatever project they are in charge of. Whatever talent they hire, that is an editorial mandate. They choose to hire that talent. [...] So when you say "editorial mandate," please understand that whatever book you hold in your hand, at the end of the day, is there because of an editorial mandate to create that book. End of story.



# COUNTDOWN



CARLIN: If you think about it too much you will die!