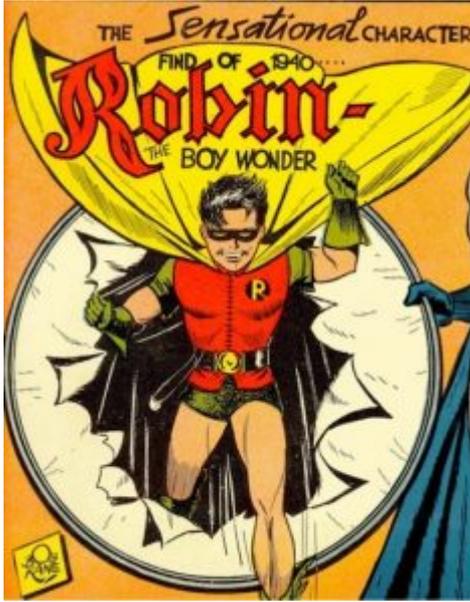


Teen wonder



Or, I wonder how many post titles he can come up with using the word "wonder".

Moving on from my youth, my teen years were marked by a life-changing event: I was now old enough to become gainfully employed.

Of course, teen years also brought graduation from high school and then college, living away from home for the first time.

And, along the way, some interesting things occurred.

Working for a living

My first job was for a grocery chain called Publix. It was still reasonably small in 1975 when I got my bag boy apron. There were fierce competitors like A&P, Winn Dixie, Albertson's, Pantry Pride, Food Fair and Grand Union.

Lucky me, I got there just a month or so before they stopped customer tipping of the bag boys. They actually stationed the assistant manager on the roof to make sure. His name was Jerkson. No comment.

During my time there, there was an incident in the back room. Some jokers had taken meat markdown stickers and pasted them all on the meat locker in the shape of a swastika and below

spelled out "Jews Suck".

Understand, this store was in the center of North Miami Beach, which, in the 70's, was a heavily Jewish area. Considering I was just two years removed from my bar mitzvah, I had an understandably negative reaction.

It was shortly afterwards that I got a job manning the register of a small used bookstore. This was a peculiar arrangement. The owner, Harry, was absent most of the time. He only showed up to sell from his stock of men's pornography in the back of the store.

I took it upon myself to group and alphabetize all of the books in the store, including the coverless copies he (illegally) obtained through an arrangement with the new bookstore on the other end of the strip mall.

In short order, he made me the "manager" of the store. I wasn't paid any more than before, but I could make all the buying and selling decisions – as long as I left the porn alone.

As unfortunate as that might seem for a 16-year old male, I turned my attention to all the books open to me. Expanding from my Sci-Fi and Fantasy roots, my reading took a turn for the diverse as I began reading all different authors. Michener, Ludlum, Wouk, McDonald. All the Agatha Christie's. All the Erle Stanley Gardner's. No romances (like Cartland or Rogers) and no westerns (sorry, L'Amour).

At one point, in a bizarre occurrence, my Grandma was visiting me in the store and Henny Youngman popped in. I didn't know who Mr. Youngman was, but my Grandma sure did. They actually chatted about New York (where my Grandparents moved down from). I guess he was in town for a show (perhaps with Jackie Gleason).

I ran that bookstore all the way up until I left for college.

It's a diamond!

Comics still played a major role in my life. During the time I was working at the bookstore, Harry had let me move boxes of my own comics in the store to sell, without any cut to him. I also added new comics and books to the store and gave him a share of those. It was during this time that my comic collection grew from manageable (a few boxes) to unimaginable (30-plus boxes holding 300 comics each). This process also enabled me to pay for my first year of college.

Also at that time, my best friend was working in a comic store several miles away. The owner there was the anti-Harry. He went after every penny there was and if there were half cents, he would have gone for those too. His name was Arnold, which my friend and I always pronounced "Ahnold" (yes, long before Mr. Schwarzenegger). His catchphrase, when anyone tried to get him to go down a little on his prices, was, "It's a diamond!"

But, there was that one time, when he took me and my friend with him up to a big comic convention in Atlanta at a hotel that looked like a castle (it was a Dunfey's Royal Coach, called, appropriately, "Castlegate"). This was the first time I had ever been out of the state and it was both scary and fun. Especially with "Ahnold"

College daze

The big day arrived. I was going to live away from home for the first time. Cheap college tuition only existed through state schools and, back in the 70's, the closest school with the highest rated accounting program was in Gainesville, some 5-6 hours north.

My first quarter (yes, we did quarters back then) at the University of Florida was a disaster. About the only thing that went right was I somehow got into the "graduate level" campus dorm, Beatty Towers, which featured two-bedroom apartments with their own kitchens and bathrooms. Amazing.

Not so amazing was my Cro-magnon roommate (seriously, you had to see this guy, he actually *looked* like a caveman), whose bong made the room unlivable, let alone to study. Add to that my feeling of intense isolation only accentuated by all these strange people around me and I flopped big time in my classes.

I was on academic probation three months into my higher education life. I didn't even know what that meant. I never got less than a B my entire life. I was scared to stay and scared to quit. I never told my parents what was happening.

In the meantime, I also decided accounting was not for me. What convinced me was calculus. I couldn't understand it and I couldn't understand why I needed to understand it. Supposedly it was required and, despite grudging admission from the professor that I would never use it in accounting, it was still required.

So I switched majors to advertising, having a ball with that and easily zipping through while producing some cool ad ideas (a cheese radio campaign where each cheese was represented by a different orchestral instrument, an egg TV spot with the egg coming from behind the earth like in 2001: A Space Odyssey and other stuff), One or two of them got picked up.

During this time, I somehow got talked into becoming Vice President of the dorm area government. I still don't know how that happened, especially given my social ineptitude. But, the president was a persuasive and creative guy and we started producing a monthly newsletter for the dorm. Of course, I created a super hero, Captain Towers and we serialized it for the length of the newsletter.

Fascinating tidbit: Years later, I was up with some (younger) friends of mine who had also graduated from UF. We went tubing and went to a Gator game and I stopped by the old Beatty Towers office and found out they were still producing a Towerscope (the name of our newsletter). The kids there

actually thought I was “cool” for being one of the original creators. Huh. Who’d a thunk?

Odd tidbit: When I would return to South Florida each summer break, I would try to find work. Usually, my Mom would just “employ” me at her flower shop, but one year I got a job filing owls.

These were pewter owls, molds removed from a vat and still piping hot which needed to be snapped off their branches and filed down to be shipped. Think, “Nobody’s perfect”, three owls on a branch with one upside down.

We worked in a sweltering warehouse with just a box fan and a cheap AM radio. It got ridiculously hot and we either burned or filed off our fingers all summer. Memorable. An actual sweatshop.

Eventually I graduated and went looking for real work. Then things got more interesting.