

UNDER PRESSURE

Erik Larsen returns to DC Comics with a mission: Present Aquaman with villains worthy of the lord of Atlantis

BY ANTHONY PEARCE

We know what you're thinking. If Aquaman's thing is to talk to fish while wearing orange and green tights, it can only mean one thing: this guy's a wussy.

But we dare you to say that to his face. Not interested? That's good, because whatever you call him—Monarch of Atlantis, King of Poseidonis, Your Majesty, Orin, Arthur—you'd better say it with respect. After all, he's Aquaman, King of the Seven Seas. And if you think he's still the clean-cut, water-breathing former fifth wheel of the Justice League, boy, are you behind the times.

Aquaman's no longer the pushover many once perceived him to be, thanks to outgoing writer Peter David's revitalization of the character, first in the *Time and Tide* mini-series and then in his current ongoing series. The underwater hero's now got a tougher, more gritty attitude, which is a perfect match for *Savage Dragon* creator Erik Larsen, who began

his stint as the new regular *Aquaman* writer with October's issue #50.

Not that Aquaman's rise to respectability's been easy. He's had his share of problems, not the least of which is dealing with an estranged wife, a rebellious son and the loss of his hand to piranha. But don't expect him to go running to the JLA for

help every issue. Larsen plans to keep the series focused on the aquatic hero and his life beneath the waves.

"It's Aquaman's book—he's got to be the focus," asserts Larsen. "When he's out of the water, he's in the JLA. He feels they need him. He doesn't feel he needs them. If the world's destroyed, that affects Atlantis, so he wants to be part of saving it. If there's any problem in Atlantis, he's the last guy who's gonna have the JLA come out. It's not his way."

CHANGING TIDES

Aquaman's not the only one who's had to re-define himself lately. Larsen's stint as the sea king's new regular scribe returns him to DC after a 10-year hiatus to re-establish himself with readers.

"I've been doing *Savage Dragon* for six years now," says Larsen, who penciled DC's *Doom Patrol* in 1988. "If you haven't been reading that, you probably don't remember I exist."

The oceans have always been a metaphor for change, so it's only natural that as Larsen took over the series with October's issue #50, along with penciler Eric Battle, he was faced with a number of key plot developments. In issues #47-#49, Aquaman learned that his son Arthur Jr. is now the Aquaman of the other-dimensional water world of Oceanid, while at home he was forced to banish his rebellious son, Koryak, from Poseidonis because of repeated plots to capture the throne.

Perhaps the biggest change that Larsen will be faced with, however, is Aquaman's reunion with his estranged wife, Mera. When she was captured by Nemo and his Maritorn army on Oceanid, he teamed with Artie Jr. to rescue her, and she subsequently returned to Poseidonis with him. But starting over again won't be easy for the couple, or Poseidonis' populace.

"By Atlantean law they're no longer married," says Larsen. "The kingdom would like them to be back together. Aquaman's not really sure."

THE NEXT WAVE

While Aquaman's busy trying to re-establish his relationship with Mera, other troubles still lie ahead for him as well, including a number of new villains. "Aquaman's had some lame villains," admits editor Kevin Dooley. "The Fisherman? He's a guy with a fishing pole. Ooooh, I'm scared. The only



IT'S MARI-TIME: New scribe Erik Larsen wants to keep the focus on Aquaman and his undersea friends and kingdom.

KINGDOM COME: In addition to being a full-time JLAer, Aquaman also rules the undersea kingdom of Poseidonis.



MONARCH OF THE MOON

GRANT MORRISON TELLS US WHAT THE WORLD THINKS OF AQUAMAN

While the rest of the JLA are superheroes with day jobs, Aquaman is in the unique position of ruling 75 percent of the globe. So, how do most land-dwelling citizens view this aquatic defender?

"As some combination of Ghandi and Colonel Quaddafi," jokes Morrison. "He's the king of the seas. I'm sure Aquaman appears on television a lot because he's monarch of three-quarters of the world. I expect he's at least as well-known as Princess Diana. He wouldn't have *that* kind of position as a world leader, but nevertheless he's a world leader who's also *in* the Justice League—kind of like seeing Bill Clinton in the JLA with Black Canary under the desk. [Laughs] It would be like seeing the leader of your country sitting on the Moon fighting aliens. He's almost a King Arthur figure, a fighting monarch." ■ SB

AQUAMAN

**REAL NAME:**

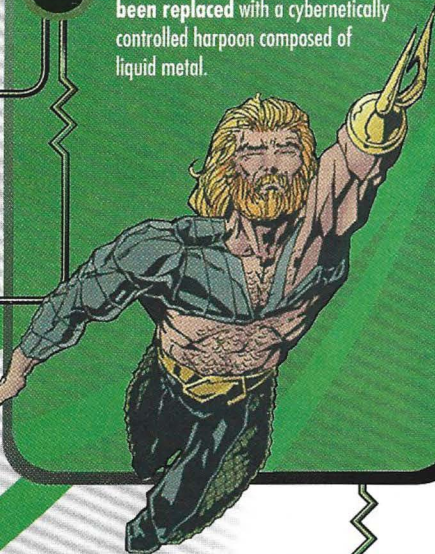
King Orin of Poseidonis

STATUS:

Active (Core Member)

POWERS:

Aquaman's body, adapted to the stresses of life in the oceans' depths, allows for **incredible strength** on land or in the sea. As a result of his Atlantean genetic heritage, he can **communicate with all forms of sea life**. In addition, Aquaman's **left hand has been replaced** with a cybernetically controlled harpoon composed of liquid metal.

**SPECIAL NOTES:**

- Despite his duties as sovereign of the domed undersea city Poseidonis and its sister Atlantean cities, as well as governing the oceans of the world, Aquaman has nevertheless remained a full-time member of the JLA.
- Because of his role as oceanic monarch, Aquaman takes offenses to the sea and marine life **VERY** seriously, often meting out a very harsh justice of his own, regardless of international law. Occasionally, he requires some gentle reminders of League policy.
- Aquaman's marine tanks in the Watchtower link directly to the League Olympic swimming pool in the gymnasium. Members are asked to show "restraint" while swimming... after all, Aquaman doesn't "swim in your toilets," does he?



BAD FISH: King Noble was the first of a new pantheon of villains Erik Larsen plans to introduce in *Aquaman*.

two who have some punch to them are Black Manta and Ocean Master."

To address Aquaman's seeming lack of respectable foes, Larsen plans to create new villains, as well as revamp a few oldies. "I'm trying to build a rogues gallery of all new underwater guys," says Larsen. "I don't think we've seen his Green Goblin or Joker yet."

First up is King Noble, monarch of an undersea kingdom located further beneath the ocean's surface than Poseidonis, who debuted in Larsen's inaugural issue. Described as "handsome, vibrant, heroic and kingly" by Dooley, Noble not only disputes Aquaman's right to rule the seas, but has also become a rival for Mera's affections.

The romantic entanglement leads into December's issue #52, a split issue that finds Noble showing Mera his kingdom in the first half, until they're attacked by Fire Trolls, with art by Battle. The second half offers a flashback to Mera's first tour of Aquaman's kingdom, when she was kidnapped by those very same Trolls, with art by guest artists Bill Sienkiewicz and classic Aquaman penciler Jim Aparo.

In issues #53-#54, Larsen turns to his old *Doom Patrol* days for inspiration, drawing on the villain Shrapnel he created to wreak havoc during a sea disaster, which

also draws the attention of a more global-conscious Superman [see "King of the World," page 36, for details] in issue #54.

Issue #55 takes a break from villains and explores the developing relationship between Aquaman's former sidekick, Tempest, and his ex-girlfriend, Dolphin. After that, however, Larsen promises the return of a pivotal Aquaman villain, albeit in a much-altered form.

"Charybdis, who tried to absorb Aquaman's powers and had his hand chewed off [by piranha], will be back," confirms Larsen, who says the villain didn't bite it when the piranha turned on him. "I had him absorb the piranha, so he becomes Piranha-Man. Now he's like the Creature from the Black Lagoon meets the Joker. In #56 he's kidnapping people close to Aquaman, and actually [steals] Aquaman's powers in issue #57."

Aquaman's not left helpless, though. Far from it. He has a new liquid metal hook that can morph into a number of offensive and defensive weapons, as well as a prosthetic hand. "He can make it into any damn thing he wants," says Larsen, who had Aquaman trade up in issue #51 after Noble broke the original in #50.

SURFACE TENSION

Introducing new villains and weapons isn't the only agenda on Larsen's plate as he dives into his new Aqua-duties. He and Dooley also want to explore Aquaman's underwater kingdom further.

"[I'd like] to do more with Poseidonis," says Larsen, "to know the people better, the city more. Are there criminals in Poseidonis? Is there the equivalent of a [crime boss, like Marvel's] Kingpin? Are there gangsters?"

Adds Dooley, "Is there entertainment? How do they trade? Are there clothing stores? Are there restaurants? Do they just serve fish? Aquaman's in a world that's totally fantastic. I think people read *Aquaman* to see just how things are different underneath the water."

Along the way, Larsen hopes readers will also come to appreciate the depth of Aquaman's responsibilities and why the King of the Seven Seas, although a hero, can be a bit cranky sometimes.

"He has the biggest job on the planet," says Larsen. "Three quarters of the world's surface is covered with water and that's his domain. That makes the guy irritable because his responsibilities are, well...huge."



Washington-based freelancer Anthony Pearce hates the water, ever since he found that "candy bar" floating in the local pool.