MY LIFE IN ORBIT



Also by Richard Blandford

Novels
Flying Saucer Rock & Roll
Hound Dog
Whatever You Are Is Beautiful

Short Stories
The Shuffle
Erotic Nightmares

Non-Fiction
London in the Company of Painters

MY LIFE IN ORBIT



RICHARD BLANDFORD

EVERYTHING WITH WORDS

Published in the UK in 2024 by Everything with Words Limited,
Fifth Floor, 30–31 Furnival Street, London EC4A 1JQ

www.everythingwithwords.com

Text copyright © Richard Blandford 2024
Cover © Holly Ovenden 2024

Richard has asserted his right under the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-911427-37-7

Song of Myself, 51

The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them,
emptied them.
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to
me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay
only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait
on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work? who will soonest
be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove
already too late?

Walt Whitman

Atom Comics. I can tell you a thing or two about them.

Since 1959, there have been 31,284 Atom Comics published. Some of these sparkle with imagination, wit and a surprising level of philosophical insight. Many of them do not, and are derivative, repetitive and uninspired. The art has been, at various points, visionary and boundary-breaking, but is often simply hackwork. Nevertheless, I have read every single one.

I could tell you their history, how they began in New York in 1940 under their original name of Quality Tales Comics, a subdivision of a larger magazine publishing house, and soon flourished under the editorship of Joe David (born Joseph Davidov). That they initially specialised in war comics but diversified into romance, horror, sci-fi, crime and mystery titles as tastes changed in the post-war years. How an upsurge in interest in the superhero genre in the late 1950s led David to rename the company Atom Comics (a reference to the atomic tests happening at the time) and, working primarily with the artists Ben Hammer (whose name perfectly encapsulates his dynamic and action-packed drawing style) and Mo Lightman (who drew in a more sinuous, lyrical manner), launched a new

set of titles – *Ghost Frog, Radio Girl, The Silent Scissor, The Super-Absorber* and *The Trout*. About the ingenious way the stories interwove, with the heroes occupying a shared world, characters drifting from one title and into another with a freedom never before attempted in the medium.

I could go on to explain how the company survived the resignations of Hammer and Lightman, and the eventual retirement of David, and continued throughout the ensuing decades, introducing more characters and titles to greater or lesser success, before developments in computerised special effects led to the unexpected arrival of Atom Comics movies in the last few years, achieving a commercial dominance that the comic books (always a cult concern) never managed.

But none of this really matters. What does matter is what happens on the letters page of *The Super-Absorber* #7, published in 1960. A reader complains that on the second panel of p. 16 of the previous month's issue, the titular hero's costume features white zigzags across the shoulders, rather than the customary yellow. This is surely a mistake, the reader says, expecting an apology, if not a refund of the 10 cents he spent on the comic book. It actually is not a mistake, replies writer/editor Joe David, and that in fact, that particular panel occurs in 'a differing reality' in which the Super-Absorber has white zigzags across his shoulders, and not yellow.

The 'differing reality' (DR in fan terminology) rationale was, from that point on, used to explain any momentary deviation from the norm readers found in Atom Comics. Even an audience of mainly prepubescent boys could see this as an obvious ploy on the part of David to cover up the inevitable mistakes that would occur in a medium relying on fast turnaround of production. But this is not the end of it.

Some older Atom Comics fans, unable to leave behind childish things, became aware from conversations with Mo Lightman at early fan conventions that he was a follower of the nineteenth century mystic, medium and probable con-artist Micajah Culp.

Culp's esoteric ideas are seen by some as a precursor to the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, perhaps coincidentally proposed just two years before the launch of Atom Comics. In any case, throughout the sixties, there was a growing tendency among fans to take the 'differing reality' statements seriously, with a consensus emerging that any Atom Comics story may be jumping back and forth between them, the break from one to another not always even noticeable. Reading Atom Comics while 'high' and looking out for the invisible leaps between realities became a countercultural pursuit. When a few of these stoned fans eventually emerged as the next generation of Atom Comics artists and writers in the early seventies, it was obvious they were deliberately inserting discrepancies in the text and pictures in order to suggest shifts from one reality to another (David, nearing retirement at this time, remained tight-lipped about the seriousness of his 'differing reality' declarations. Goodman, whose sinuous art style had become increasingly eccentric under the influence of Culp, had already quit Atom Comics some years before and was now avoiding all public statements, while Hammer, at the time of his own resignation, said only of the issue that he wanted to work for a publisher where 'no one writes you a thirteen-page letter when you make a mistake'). By the mid-eighties, the idea of 'differing realities' was explicit in the stories themselves, starting with the multi-part 'Infinite Atom' crossover event and carrying on to the present day, the intricacy now their main selling point.

And so, 31,284 comic books. Nearly all of them containing discrepancies that suggest to the eagle-eyed reader that the story has shifted from one reality to another, slightly different one. Atom Comics readers of the world have come to rely on me to identify all these shifts, logging in my online database exactly when they occur while employing a numbering system to denote each reality, a system that requires constant revision with each new publication or revelatory rereading of a back issue.

But not for much longer. For contained in the letters pages of the most recent batch of Atom Comics was an announcement. While the Atom Comics films would continue, the comics company itself was shutting down, the whole enterprise ending in just one month. There was no explanation given. Fans across the world were stunned, the centre of their lives ripped out from them.

I knew why they were stopping (although I would never tell).

Inadvertently, I had helped kill them off.

I remember when I first called it Daddy. I was very young (any older and I would have been too self-conscious to adopt such an affectation), and it had told me the rule was to run around the outside of an emptied-out paddling pool. Sitting on the side, bathing their feet in the absent water were two women in sandals and sundresses. Friends, I should imagine, having a lazy day out. They were older than Lori, which to me then meant they were very old, but were probably younger than I am now as I tip into middle-age. I was running as close to the edge of the pool as possible, without actually being in it.

To get past these two, sitting serenely and enjoying the day, I would have to run around them. But going around them was not the rule. The task that had been set was to run along the edge. If they were on the edge, the only acceptable compromise would be to run over them. And while I knew it was not acceptable to run over people, I also knew that the commands that came from the voice that was not a voice (more an urge) had ultimate authority.

And so, that is what I did, or attempted to. When I came to the first of these women to block my path, I did not slow

down. I did not deviate. I carried on running, or attempted to, over her lap.

Immediately, my foot caught in her sundress and I tripped, my head landing fortuitously in the bosom of her companion. Both women shrieked, but due to my then-pocket size and my characteristic lack of momentum, the impact was not that severe, and both swiftly recovered from the interruption.

'I'm sure Mummy and Daddy don't think you should be doing that!' said one of them as I carried on running.

My mother, Lori (a name she chose for herself and by which I always knew her) was on a bench with a book some way away and had not seen. I had not consulted her about the plan. Even then, I knew such things were private.

But the woman had mentioned my daddy. As far as I was aware, I had no daddy. One had not been mentioned by Lori up until that point. So was that voice (that was not a voice) then my daddy? In which case not only did he approve, but it was his idea. From that point on, I have always half-thought of that voice as Daddy. An annoying mental tic that has never gone away, even though the original conceit faded almost as soon as it appeared (as did any childish pleasure I might gain from running. Perhaps not coincidentally I became a stationary creature soon after).

Although I have never been a daddy, I am, it improbably turns out, a father, at least in the tiniest sense of the word. I will meet her for the first time today, at two o'clock, in my least favourite coffee shop on the high street. This is not the sort of thing that is meant to happen to someone such as myself. I come from little and lead to nothing. And yet, here I am, putting on the special clothes I bought for the special meeting with this young woman (whose hobbies include horse riding,

exercise classes and something called street dance), and who is, it is very strongly argued, my daughter.

It has gone nine. I am running late. After breakfast, I got stuck in the shower for nearly an hour. This was a long one, even for me. It's not that I believe a shower should last for that amount of time, although I have them religiously (I must not contaminate). It's just that once I have persuaded myself to enter and adjust to the watery world, it can take me that long to face the challenge of transitioning to dryness. And so I exist in a state of limbo, not really wanting to stay, but unable to leave. It is only when I catch a glimpse behind the shower curtain and find the bathroom white with steam that I can bring myself to turn the dial down to nothing and get out (it's the transition from one state to another that is the problem. Where, exactly, is the border? When does one thing definitively stop being itself and become something else? The edge of the paddling pool before the pool itself. Or, how far, for instance, must lips stretch before they change from impassivity and make a smile? These are more things that bother me. And I have trouble smiling).

The showers have gotten longer since the library burned down. But then, without a schedule to stick to, everything has expanded. I have been trying to get dressed now for more than fifteen minutes. So far I have managed to put on my pants and one sock, achieved several minutes ago after a slow start. I have been standing in front of the chest of drawers since then, going over a list in my head. Not a list of useful information that might help me during the course of what will inevitably become one of the most important days of my life. It's a list of comic books, precisely those published by the Atom Comics company in March 1976.