



Alpha Flight: Members include (from left) Shaman, from Calgary, Guardian of London, Ont., Vindicator, from Calgary, Snowbird, from N.W.T.

SUPERHEROES VS. RIGHT- WING CANADA

*A new comic book
is 'definitely an art-
imitating-life moment'*

WHEN NEWS OF Canada's federal election hit Marvel comics headquarters in New York, a group of employees interrupted work on an important deadline to do a happy dance. "We jumped for joy, literally!" laughs graphic novelist Fred Van Lente via phone from Manhattan. "It was as if we'd won the lottery." As luck would have it, Van Lente, his co-writer Greg Pak and illustrator Dale Eaglesham were just putting the finishing touches on the relaunch of their latest comic book, *Alpha Flight*, due out in June. The Flight, as it's called on many fan sites, is a team of Canuck superheroes defending truth, justice and the Canadian way. Created in 1983 by John Byrne, *Alpha Flight* ceased publication in 2005. Van Lente and Pak's prequel to the first issue—which landed on comic book stands this week—focuses on Byrne's original nine-member team of caped and bodysuited crusaders. What's different is who they're up against: namely an enemy Van Lente calls "their most horrific villain of all time—the Canadian government."

In fact, the plot Van Lente and his crew boiled up—months before Stephen Harper, Jack Layton and Michael Ignatieff were waging their own epic battles—includes our nation

going through some serious political unrest post-election. The prequel begins weeks after an extreme right-wing majority takes over the country and Vancouver is completely destroyed. After a series of events unfolds, Alpha Flight, a government-hired group of freedom fighters, are suddenly deemed enemies of the state for not toeing the line.

"It's so perfect," explains Van Lente. "Our actual tag line is: 'Do you fear your country turning on you?' It is definitely an art-imitating-life moment if you look at what is going on today. As American writers, we do take liberties, of course," Van Lente says, jokingly. "Despite Alpha Flight's best efforts, the Canadian government goes fascist and chaos ensues." One of the historical liberties they've taken is using parts of Pierre Trudeau's October Crisis speech to frame the catastrophe.

"Alpha Flight has always been one of the most progressive comic books out there," says Eaglesham, the sole Canadian of the trio. "This superhero team has been able to take on clichés, social issues and cultural differences and blend them up in a way that is not only unique to comics but to popular culture in general. In that sense, this isn't just a team of Captain Americas."

One of the main characters in Alpha Flight—a Québécois mutant named Northstar (civilian name: Jean-Paul Beaubier) who has powers of flight and superhuman speed—is a case in point. Beaubier is an atypical hero. Aside from being obsessed with his long-lost twin sister, another mutant named Aurora from whom he was separated shortly after birth, Beaubier is a fiercely proud gay Quebec nationalist who is a former member of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ). He is also a former Olympic skier who cheated his way into winning gold medals by secretly using his powers.

"Northstar is one of the most amazing main

characters to write for," says Van Lente of Alpha Flight's star. "He has a lot of leftist guilt. Add in the fact that Alpha Flight are seen as branded traitors and that he is at odds with everything the team stands for, and you have a gold mine of trials and tribulations to work with." Then there's his personal life. "Let's just say no one will be hiding Northstar's sexuality," says Eaglesham. "He has a partner in the book and they will be sexy together."

Beyond the intriguing Beaubier twins, Alpha Flight boasts a list of dysfunctional members who have opposing political beliefs. Led by a bickering husband and wife, the crime-fighting roster includes a sasquatch from Vancouver, a green-skinned alien from Newfoundland, a demi-goddess from the Northwest Territories, a First Nations shaman from Calgary and a 97-year-old, three-foot-six acrobat named Puck.

The title is signed on for eight issues, and Van Lente promises an epic finale that will be the talk of comic book conventions for years to come. "We really appreciated you having your election on May 2 to promote our comic, but I just hope you Canadians do not spoil our ending with any of your real-life politics." **ELIO IANNACCI**



The old guard

Long before the Alpha Flight gang came along, the Great White North had a sole protector: Captain Canuck. Various incarnations of the captain have been defending the nation since 1975.