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Freelance writer

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Books: Prince Valiant's Glorious Return

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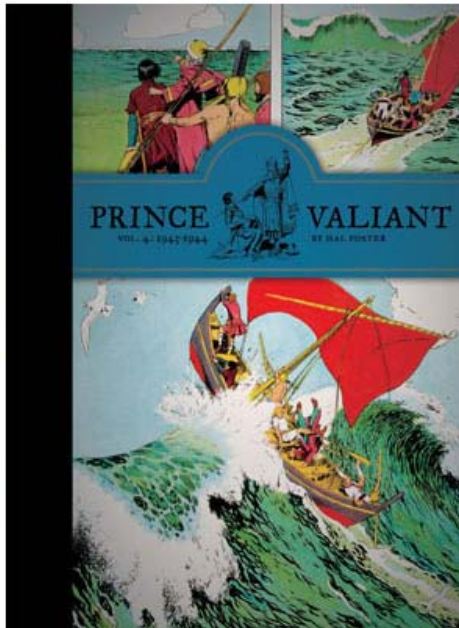
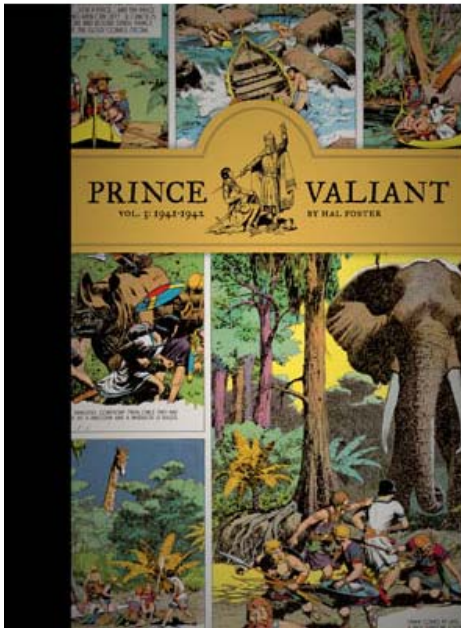
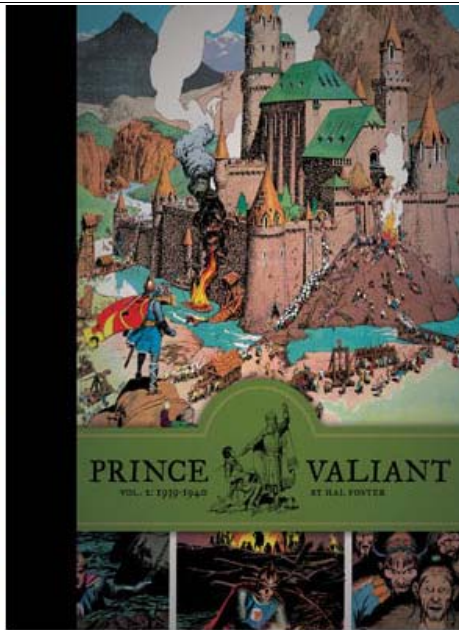
PRINCE VALIANT VOLUME 1 1937-1938

PRINCE VALIANT VOLUME 2 1939-1940

PRINCE VALIANT VOLUME 3 1941-1942

PRINCE VALIANT VOLUME 4 1943-1944

[PHOTO GALLERIES](#)



One of the greatest comic strips of all time and a peak in visual splendor and breath-taking adventure, the story of Prince Valiant's 30+ year odyssey is getting a marvelous presentation in Fantagraphics' series of books, which just reached Volume 4 (\$29.95 each; [Fantagraphics](#)).

You can dive in anywhere, but if you're like me -- someone entirely new to this tale -- it makes sense to begin at the beginning. In Hal Foster's masterpiece, you'll discover the handsome and willful young prince in the days of King Arthur, a winning lad who is brave, strong, clever, conceited, a little brash and boastful but just as quick to apologize for his follies. Valiant will laugh at himself just as often as he laughs at anyone else. What might surprise modern readers is the relative complexity of Valiant, who grows and matures subtly over the years. The strip is violent, sexy, serious, droll and above all eye-catching.

Foster made his bones with a comic strip about Tarzan and clearly learned a thing or two about storytelling from Edgar Rice Burroughs and other antecedents like *Ivanhoe*. But the great power of a comic strip is the combination of character and story and visual flair. No one before or since has had a more exacting and lively eye for detail and historical accuracy than Foster.

Prince Valiant appeared only on Sundays in full color and Foster's sweeping ambition explodes off the page. The real estate he was given to play with on Sundays contained 12 square panels, but Foster juggled them with aplomb. Each panel is filled with subtle color, sweeping vistas and characters with movement and individuality (no one creates more vivid crowd and battle scenes than Foster). And at dramatically important moments, Foster will expand his vision and have an image take over the space of two or four



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panels or enlarge one square to center the action marvelously. If Valiant reaches the top of a hill and spots a castle in the distance, that castle will appear with the majesty of a cinematic shot straight from David Lean. If Valiant jumps off a cliff to avoid danger, you catch your breath as he tumbles down, down, down the entire side of the page towards the bottom.

Prince Valiant is great fun from the start, but it really comes into its own in Volume 3. Now in Volume 4, Valiant is determined to seek out Queen Aleta of the Misty Isles, the one woman who has bewitched this red-blooded lad. The series is filled with quests but this is the granddaddy of them all -- it stretches over an 18 month period in all.

Each volume is bookended with some fascinating detail about Foster and the series, whether it's a biographical sketch of the creator, reprints of how some panels deemed too violent or sexy were actually shown to readers at the time (needless to say, the originals are in the volume) and so on. Volume 4 is intriguing because it appeared during WW II when a paper shortage struck the country. Foster knew space was at a premium so he only used two thirds of the page for his strip and imagined editors might want to use the bottom third for some other property. He filled the space with another tale called The Medieval Castle which depicted life in a castle through the eyes of two young princes. It's illuminating to see how deftly Foster fills the strip with details about said life and how a siege actually worked. But Foster needn't have bothered: his tales were so popular almost every newspaper included Foster's entire offering, including The Medieval Castle, which appears here along the bottom of the last 1/4 of the book just as it did in newspapers.

It's intriguing to imagine what Foster might have done with a digital strip, one that could present a battlefield scene on a tablet where the reader could scroll from side to side to capture an entire panorama or maybe scroll down and down even more dramatically than in a newspaper. But these oversized volumes which are 14 inches tall and 10.4 inches wide are far bigger and more dramatic than any tablet. The pleasure of how solidly and carefully they're made is part of the pleasure of reading them. You feel like a little kid as you prop the giant volume up and literally dive into the tale that fills your vision, much as kids and adults did more than 70 years ago. It's a worthy presentation for one of the most important and entertaining works in comic strip history.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the co-host of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of books to consider for review, including digital and physical galley as well as final review copies. He typically does not guarantee coverage and invariably receives far more books than he can cover.

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