**Cerebus**

Author: Sim, Dave  
Artist: Dave Sim (illustrator); Gerhard (backgrounds)  
Publisher: Aardvark-Vanaheim  
First serial publication: 1977-2004  
First book publication: 1986-2004  

**Publication History**  
Originally self-published as a black-and-white comic book by Dave Sim and his wife, Deni Loubert, *Cerebus* was later published by Aardvark-Vanaheim. Because *Cerebus* tells a single story in three hundred chapters, Sim realized relatively early that it would become increasingly difficult for new readers to begin reading the title after having missed the earliest issues. To redress this problem, he published short collections of four issues under the title *Swords of Cerebus* in 1981. Recognizing that this would not provide a long-term solution, in 1986, he began publishing collections of older material in thick books, nicknamed “phone books” because of their bulk and low-quality paper. The sixteen volumes collecting the series have remained in print. The success of the “phone books” in the late 1980’s helped lead American comic book publishers to consider the graphic novel a serious publishing genre. Sim himself was a strong proponent of the graphic novel and, particularly, of long-form comics. He was also the leading proponent of comic book self-publishing, which he championed in numerous editorials and interviews, with *Cerebus* serving as the prime example of a successful self-published product.

**Plot**  
Created by Sim in 1977 as a parody of the then-popular sword and sorcery genre, *Cerebus* eventually grew into one of the most significant graphic novel experiments in the history of the field. Published as a series of twenty-page monthly comics over the course of twenty-eight years, *Cerebus* tells the life story of an anthropomorphic aardvark in a society populated by ordinary people. Over the course of six thousand pages, Cerebus takes on many roles, from mercenary to politician, pope, bartender, traveler, and holy figure.

Cerebus’ fictional world is immense and incredibly detailed.

In the earliest of Cerebus’s adventures he is portrayed as an amoral barbarian and a mercenary. These fantasy stories parodied the popular *Conan the Barbarian* comics by crossing them with the absurdist humor of Steve Gerber’s *Howard the Duck* (which started in the 1970’s). The tone of Cerebus changed dramatically with Sim’s first extended story, *High Society*. In this volume, Cerebus travels to the city-state of Iest, where he is drawn into the world of high finance. Caught in a tug-of-war between Lord Julius and Astoria, Cerebus is elected prime minister of Iest but is unable to keep Iest financially solvent. A series of military miscalculations lead to his downfall, and Cerebus returns briefly to life as an adventurer.

In the two volumes of *Church and State*, Cerebus returns to Iest after a brief period in exile. Weisshaupt, the president of a newly created federation of states...
opposing the matriarchal Cirinists, schemes to have the popular former politician named as pope of the Eastern Church of Tarim. Unlimited religious power goes immediately to Cerebus’s head, and he becomes despotic. He threatens his followers with the end of the world unless they deliver to him all of their gold. After battling with a giant stone monster named Thrunk, Cerebus learns that his former political adviser, Astoria, has assassinated the Western pope. Confronting her in a dungeon, Cerebus marries, then rapes, her, and then dissolves the marriage. Following this, Cerebus ascends to the moon, where he meets a character named The Judge, who recounts the creation myth to Cerebus and warns him that he will shortly die “alone, unmourned and unloved.” When Cerebus returns to Earth, he discovers that the Cirinists have invaded Iest and destroyed his empire in his absence.

Now living under a Cirinist dictatorship, Cerebus is wanted by the authorities. He lives with Jaka, a dancer with whom he had fallen in love during his days as a mercenary, and her husband, Rick. The story of Jaka’s childhood is recounted by a character named Oscar and is written in a style approximating that of Irish writer Oscar Wilde. With Cerebus away, Jaka, Rick, and Oscar are arrested by the Cirinists. Rick leaves Jaka when he is told the truth about her past, including her decision to have an abortion. When Cerebus returns to their home, he assumes Jaka to be dead and enters a state of near-catatonic mourning, and the death of Oscar is recounted.

The four-part “Mothers and Daughters” story line focuses on Cerebus’s battle with Cirin and her forces. After learning that Jaka is alive, Cerebus returns to Iest and slaughters a number of Cirinist soldiers, leading briefly to a failed revolution. Cerebus ascends into darkness for a second time and meets the philosopher Suenteus Po. When Cerebus returns to Earth, he is assisted by a woman who is under the surveillance of the Cirinists (later revealed to be the real Cirin, with an impostor having deposed her). Cerebus, Cirin, Astoria, and Suenteus Po are brought together and engage in a philosophical discussion about the nature of power. Ultimately, Cerebus and Cirin engage in a drawn-out sword fight, but the fight ends when both begin a new ascension. Now separated from Cirin, Cerebus is given a tour of the solar system, where he is shown images from his past. Dave, identified as Cerebus’s creator, lectures Cerebus on the origins of Cirinism and of Cerebus’s personal failings. After realizing that Jaka can never truly love him, Cerebus asks to be returned to a bar that he remembers from his mercenary past.

Cerebus tends bar in a pub for degenerate men beside the Wall of T’si. During this portion of the story, a series of characters are introduced, each of whom is parodic of a figure in the comic book industry. Cerebus begins a relationship with a woman named Joanne, who eventually leaves him for Rick. When Jaka’s former husband arrives at Cerebus’s bar, he is heavily scarred from the events at the end of Jaka’s Story and mentally unbalanced because of alcoholism. Rick begins writing a book about Cerebus as a holy figure. When the romantic triangle involving Cerebus, Joanne, and Rick reaches a critical phase, Rick departs. Jaka arrives at the bar, and she and Cerebus decide to travel to his childhood home in Sand Hills Creek.

Cerebus and Jaka travel by riverboat, under the constant watch of the Cirinists. While on the journey, they are accompanied by F. Stop Kennedy, a fictional version of F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer who, though married, flirts with Jaka. Later, Cerebus and Jaka continue their journey in the company of Ham and Mary Ernestway, fictional versions of Ernest and Mary Hemingway. When Ham kills himself, Cerebus believes him to have been murdered by Mary, and he flees. When he and Jaka arrive at his childhood home, they find that his parents are dead and that his community has shunned him. Cerebus blames Jaka and drives her away.

Years later, Cerebus is abducted by three men modeled on the Three Stooges. In his absence, a religious movement based on the teachings of Rick has been born. When Cerebus provides a revelation, an anti-Cirinist rebellion takes place. Nearing the end of his life, Cerebus falls in love with a woman who looks exactly like Jaka, and he marries her. The two have a son, Sheshep Ankh, nicknamed Shep-Shep.

Cerebus concludes with the depiction of the final day in the life of its protagonist. Now enfeebled and senile, Cerebus has a theological dream that he endeavors to transcribe. He meets with Shep-Shep, who
Cerebus has sided against Cerebus and with his mother in establishing a “feminist-homosexualist” world promoting pedophilia, zoophilia, and lesbian motherhood. When Cerebus tries to kill his son, he falls out of bed and breaks his neck, dying alone, unloved, and unmourned. As Cerebus enters “the light” he worries that he may not be going to Heaven but to Hell.

**Volumes**
- *Church and State I* (1987). Collects issues 52-80, in which Cerebus becomes pope of the Eastern Church and is corrupted by power.
- *Church and State II* (1988). Collects issues 81-111. The two volumes of *Church and State* recount Cerebus’s life as pope and ascension to the moon.
- *Jaka’s Story* (1990). Collects issues 114-138. This volume introduces long text pieces into the story for the first time. This prose, written in the style of Oscar Wilde, recounts the story of Jaka’s youth.
- *Reads* (1995). Collects issues 175-186. Includes a series of controversial essays by Viktor Davis outlining Sim’s theory on the nature of gender relationships, the “Male Light” and the “Female Void.”

**Characters**
- *Cerebus*, the protagonist, is a three-foot-tall anthropomorphic aardvark with gray fur and a long nose. He is one of only three aardvarks in the fictional world of the story. He is nearly sociopathically self-interested and pursues his own goals to the exclusion of any sustaining interest in the lives of other people. He is deeply in love with Jaka but is unable to sustain that relationship because of his selfishness. Late in the series, it is revealed that Cerebus is a hermaphrodite.
- *Jaka Tavers* is Cerebus’s primary love interest. Tall, thin, and blond, she was raised in a family of great wealth and privilege but met Cerebus when she was dancing in a tavern. She loves Cerebus but, after being spurned by him, marries Rick. The story of her youth is recounted in the text sections of *Jaka’s Story.*
- *Astoria* is Cerebus’s political adviser and the chief philosophical opponent of Cirin. She is the founder of the Kevillist movement. She is the former wife of Lord Julius and the Duchess of Parmoc. When she assassinates the Western pope, Cerebus marries and rapes her, then divorces her. She is a tall, thin brunette drawn to resemble the actress Mary Astor.
- *Cirin* is another of the three aardvarks in Estarcion, although she is much taller than Cerebus.
She is the leader of the Cirinists, a group of soldiers who impose matriarchal martial law across the lands depicted in the series. She is the author of numerous philosophically feminist works and is an opponent of Astoria. She was originally known as Serna, but she adopted the persona of Cirin in order to seize power.

- **Lord Julius** is Grandlord of Palnu. His character is based on Groucho Marx, whom he resembles exactly. He rose to a position of power by using double-talk to confuse his enemies and a system of open bribery. He is the former husband of Astoria and the uncle of Jaka. He is a major rival of Cerebus during *High Society*. There are many other characters who look exactly like Lord Julius, and these are termed Like-a-looks.

- **Rick Nash** is Jaka’s husband during *Jaka’s Story* but later divorces her. He is a tall, thin man with blond hair and a goatee, affable but not really very bright. When he reencounters Cerebus late in the narrative, he begins to write a book, the Book of Rick, in which he posits Cerebus as a prophet. This book later becomes the basis of a religious movement.

- **Oscar** is a fictionalized version of Oscar Wilde and is drawn to resemble a cartoonish version of the Irish author. In Cerebus’s world, Oscar is the author of *Daughter of Palnu*, a biography of the young Jaka Tavers that is popular with the upper class. He is imprisoned by the Cirinists at the end of *Jaka’s Story*. Melmoth tells the story of his death.

- **The Judge** is an overweight, balding man with a mustache who wears black robes and lives on the moon. When Cerebus ascends to the moon, The Judge recounts the origin myth to him and reveals to Cerebus the circumstances of his own death. Cirin states that The Judge is actually the god Tarim, a philosopher-king as hermit.

- **The Roach** is a character who takes on numerous personae over the course of the book, many of which are parodies of popular superhero characters. The Roach is a mentally unbalanced character who is manipulated by various other characters in the books. Among the personas adopted by The Roach are Captain Cockroach, Moon Roach, Wolveroach, Punisheroach, Loboroach, Swoon, and Fanroach.

- **Viktor Davis** is a pseudonym for Sim, whose first and middle names are David Victor, within the fictional world of Cerebus. The character is depicted only in silhouette, and during the course of the story he speaks to Cerebus, and directly to the reader, in text pieces. The character gives voice to much of the misogynistic philosophy about the opposition between the “male light” and the “female void” outlined by Sim in the *Cerebus* series and elsewhere.

**Artistic Style**

The earliest issues of *Cerebus* were entirely written and drawn by Sim and are visually unsophisticated. Sim’s artwork changed dramatically over the course of the three hundred issues, and the way that he draws Cerebus changed accordingly. Sim’s art mixes an extremely cartoony depiction of Cerebus akin to the anthropomorphic characters found in Disney and Warner Bros. animations, with increasingly realistic human supporting figures. Beginning with issue 65 (August, 1984), Sim collaborated with an assistant named Gerhard who was responsible for the elaborately detailed background illustrations in the comic; Sim continued to draw the characters. Gerhard’s contribution freed Sim to become more expressive with his figure drawing and added a high level of pictorial realism to the design of places and sets in the fictional world of the comic. Sim frequently experimented with unusual page designs, including the addition of extremely ornate panel borders to many of his pages. His work shows a greater attention to the presence of negative space than does the work of most of his contemporaries, and the overall feel of *Cerebus* is of a series with a keen sense of visual design.

More than almost any other cartoonist, Sim incorporated lengthy text pieces into his work. Beginning with *Jaka’s Story*, Sim told a significant part of the story through illustrated prose intended to recall the writing style of Wilde. In later volumes, Sim would incorporate travel diaries, letters, philosophical statements, religious exegeses, and essays written in his
own voice as elements of the *Cerebus* narrative. To this end, *Cerebus* is one of the most text-intensive graphic novels ever published.

**Themes**
The major theme of *Cerebus* is power. In the first half of the epic narrative *Cerebus* is constantly seeking power. Initially, in his adventures as a barbarian, this is physical power, as he seeks riches and glory through physical exploits. In *High Society* he seeks political power, realizing that this is superior to sheer brutish strength. In *Church and State* he seeks religious/spiritual power and is ultimately corrupted by it, becoming despotic. In the second half of the narrative, *Cerebus* spends much of his time combating the tyrannical power of the Cirinists and learning to live a simpler life devoid of power.

*Cerebus*’s opponents through most of the story are matriarchal feminists known as Cirinists, modeled on real female figures as diverse as Margaret Thatcher and Oprah Winfrey. Gender relations are introduced as an important theme in *Cerebus* with the appearance of Astoria in *High Society*, but they come to dominate the second half of the book from *Flight* onward. Issue 186 (collected in *Reads*) contains a long prose essay describing Sim’s “antifeminism” that has been widely decried for its deep-rooted misogyny. One important theme of *Cerebus* is the destructive power of women in contemporary society.

Much of *Cerebus*, and particularly the final third, is concerned with spiritual themes. The two volumes of *Church and State* can be read as a satire of the power and excesses of the Catholic Church. The final two volumes of *Cerebus*, in which *Cerebus* himself becomes a holy figure to the cult that has sprung up around the teachings of Rick, offer lengthily detailed analyses of scripture. These have been read as an elaboration of Sim’s personal theology, which draws equally on Jewish, Christian, and Islamic beliefs.

**Impact**
In its earliest years, represented by the first collection, *Cerebus* was primarily a vehicle for parodies of other comic books and fantasy novels. While the targets changed over time, *Cerebus* remained an important and widely celebrated source of comic book parody, particularly through the character of Artemis, who adopted numerous personas related to comic book superheroes, including send-ups of Marvel’s Moon Knight and Wolverine, the Frank Miller version of DC’s Batman, Neil Gaiman’s Sandman, and Todd McFarlane’s Spawn.

More than many graphic novels, *Cerebus* is read by its adherents and detractors as the reflection of the personal psychology of its creator. Over the course of more than a quarter century, the work shifted tone dramatically from a lighthearted parody to a highly idiomsyncretic reflection on the act of creation. Once widely regarded as among the most important of graphic novels, the work and its reputation faded considerably in the light of the political statements made by its author.

*Bart Beaty*

**Further Reading**

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Dave Sim

One of the most outspoken and controversial figures in comics, Dave Sim rose to fame by producing the six-thousand-page *Cerebus* epic at a pace of twenty pages per month for almost a quarter-century. Sim became the spokesman for a generation of self-publishing cartoonists through the editorials and essays that he published in his comic book, and the long-term success of the title became his calling card. Moreover, over the course of his endeavor he became one of the most distinctive stylists in the comics form. His blend of cartoony anthropomorphism and carefully composed pages, buttressed by superbly detailed background work by Gerhard, made him one of the liveliest of cartoonists and the producer of comics in which every detail counted, even down to the lettering. Sim alienated many readers with his pronouncements on gender and religion late in the series, but is widely regarded as a superlative comics stylist.

**Bibliography**


**See also:** Bone; Conan; Wolverine; Spawn