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Marvel Comics to unveil gay gunslinger

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NEW YORK (CNN) -- Marvel Comics plans to break new ground in the comic book industry by introducing the first openly gay title character in a comic book.

The character will appear in a revival of the 1950s title, "The Rawhide Kid." Marvel expects a February debut.

The new series pairs the original artist, John Severin, now 86, with Ron Zimmerman, a writer for the "Howard Stern Show."

The Rawhide Kid has been a Marvel character since the 1950s both as a main and a secondary character. However, it was not until Zimmerman approached Marvel with his idea of a homosexual Rawhide Kid that sexuality was mentioned in the discussion of the character.

Although shy with girls, the original Rawhide Kid was not intended to be gay. The new version uses double entendres and euphemisms to reveal his homosexuality without saying anything explicitly. Based on a blurb on Marvel's Web site, the tone may be campy.

In a bubble in the first edition of the series, Rawhide Kid comments about the Lone Ranger: "I think that mask and the powder blue outfit are fantastic. I can certainly see why the Indian follows him around."

Brian Reinert, Marvel's public relations officer, said that Marvel has always been "interested in tapping into stories that are relevant today." He expects the reactions to this comic to vary.

Although many readers will accept the new sexuality of the Marvel hero, Reinert expects possible negative responses from people who don't accept homosexuality and readers who do not want to see a change in their beloved character.

"When you tackle these issues it will always push buttons," he said.

Marvel is planning six stories over the next six months. After looking at the response to those issues they will decide whether to continue production and whether they would be interested in more series with gay title characters.



Although Rawhide Kid is the first gay title character, Marvel does have several existing gay characters, such as North Star of the "X-Men" comic book series.



The new Rawhide Kid

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The Rawhide Kid series, beginning with the first edition "Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather," will run about 22 pages and have a suggested retail price of \$2.95.

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