

My thesis is a 32 page comic about one young man's particularly grotesque end and the aftermath his friends must deal with. As the old adage goes, it seemed like a good idea at the time. I wanted to push myself as an author and explore horror – I also wanted an excuse to draw gross things and play around with ink splatter. The result is definitely not the most thought-provoking piece I've created but is still a success as an experiment and as a launch pad to the beginning of my comics career. Currently, I am in the process of storyboarding the next issue, and already I have arrangements with local comic book stores to sell my work.

On the story itself: I wanted to work with the idea of surviving decapitation as way to talk about our relationship with the body – specifically, about losing control over the body. Simon, our hero, began his life as the protagonist of a sprawling story about disembodiment, genetic mutation, puberty, madness, small-town society and a sort of 'brother's keeper' theme – and at some point Simon was even meant to be the beast of the apocalypse. As I added more whistles and bangs to the story to make it bigger, crazier, etc. I found that any kind of message or underlying concept I intended for the story was being buried under over-the-top, superfluous crap. Reluctantly, I drastically downsized my story and tried to focus on a smaller 'cast' of four (eventually five) characters, fleshing them out and setting the story within the context of one day.

I wanted to create a creepy theme of retribution underlying my story, but I am not sure it exists. Honestly, I don't think there's any real moral or purpose left in the story now. Simon, my protagonist, has undergone so many changes as a character, from simpering genius to average high school stoner, that by page twelve it was a relief to slice his head off. To even call him a protagonist is a stretch – he's more of a vehicle for the story now than an active character. What real story exists is the dynamic between the characters (before and after Simon's accident). Because of a convenient back-story illustrating Simon's medical history, I used that as the motivation for Mark (Simon's best friend) to try to push the other teens to recover Simon's AWOL body so he could be saved. Now, Mark's gusto seems completely unbelievable to me, and if I could do it over again I would make him just as horrified as the other teens over Simon's demise. They would not pursue Simon's body but instead destroy his slightly alive head and tell no one about the accident – perhaps then Simon's body could come hunting for them or manifest punishment in some other way.

To use another old adage – hindsight is always 20/20. I could not conceive of what the whole story would look like and focused on chunks in creation. Slowly, I lost much of my original intention (the idea of surviving decapitation and losing control of the body) as I reworked the story over and over again. It was an unfortunate result but still a necessary one. I now have a much better understanding of how to see the gestalt of my story, and I know how to give myself limits in creating comics.

I wish I could elaborate on my reasoning and provide a highbrow explanation for my purposes, but I can't. I'm an exhibitionist and I enjoy shocking people, and that's part of it. The rest lies in my inclination to bite off more than I can chew. My initial idea was a 200 – page coming-of-age horror opus that, in my fantasies, would immediately draw critical acclaim and herald the comic world of my obvious genius. This was before I had any comprehension of how much work went into one comic page – let alone 200.

After hundreds of pages of storyboarding (much of which was actually helpful, though masturbatory and useless at a certain point), I forced myself to minimize the story to a do-able 32 pages so I could finish it on time.

I am extremely glad I shortened the story – it really wasn't worth the 200 pages of work. I realize now that shorter stories give me space to learn how to be a better author. Part of my interest in comics comes from a private 'identity crisis' I wrestle with everyday. I would like to be perceived as something closer to an author than an artist. At heart I am a storyteller. When I get an idea, it is almost always a narrative, or a visual concept or problem that could be used as a basis for a narrative. Some examples - What does an imaginary friend look like? What about a new species of alien made entirely of light? Where did Eden go? What if sex was always deadly? What if China defeats and seizes control of the US? And so on.

As a child I intended to be an author and wrote obsessively, producing over 500 pages of material by the time I was ten. I was drawing at this time too, but this became secondary pastime until, in the contest of my brain, I found I could not grasp the words to describe the worlds I produced in my head. I was drawn to the immediate gratification and forcefulness of drawing. I could not force someone to read my 200-page opus, but a picture can be consumed visually in five seconds or less. I fret over what skill I should ultimately choose over the other, and it wasn't until I stumbled across my father's secret stash of *Heavy Metal* magazine circa 1980 – 1993 that I realized I had another option.

I did not know comics for adults existed prior to this moment. Gratuitous violence and sex aside, I did not know comics could be so complex or beautiful. To explain, *Heavy Metal* is originally a French publication (called *Métal Hurlant*, roughly translated as 'screaming metal') that was translated and released in the States after its considerable success in France. Within the comics community, the American *Heavy Metal* issues that ran during the 1980's is regarded as adult fantasy comics at its finest, featuring mostly work by European artists like Moebius (a.k.a. Jean Giraud), Milo Manara, Phillippe Druillet, and even H.R. Giger. These artists were worlds beyond the dribble I'd read in *Archie* or even *DC/Marvel* comics as a child. Through them, I realized I could use comics as a way to tell my stories like paper movies, and I did not have to sacrifice one of my beloved skills for the other.

I didn't start producing comics until my early twenties, however, and devoted most of my teen hood learning how to draw and developing my style. Meanwhile, my abilities as a writer/storyteller stagnated because I wasn't actively exercising them beyond thinking about them, and I am in the process now of re-learning how to construct a story. It's an awkward, humbling but exciting journey, and in a way it's nice to be a novice all over again.

Reflecting on the body of this thesis, it must read like I am bashing myself over and over again. I do not intend to come off this way – I am merely being objective. When I create something, I see it as a part of the huge web of work that I will create over the span of my lifetime. With each piece I make a few mistakes, with each mistake I learn a little more, and with what I learn I improve a little more. The incredible thing about art and storytelling, and many other skills too numerous to name here, is that there is no ceiling – you can keep going, learning and improving, pushing and surprising yourself, and there will never be a cap, a stopping point where you can learn no more. I believe people do not master skills, but rather succumb to them – and what a sweet

submission it is. For me, this project is part of that submission, and skill-wise I am still crawling towards my ultimate goal of being a great storyteller. In time, I will learn to walk, after that, I will run. After that – who knows?

Perhaps I will fly.