On the art of conversation

Comic book historian Christopher Irving discusses why it's essential to talk with creative people about what they do and how they do it.

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As told to Sam Kusek, 3118 words.

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Graphic NYC: The Essay Collection **is mostly based on interviews you've done for Graphic NYC. I'd love to hear more about your preparation. How do you go about writing your essays?**

Graphic NYC was a web project I did with a photographer named Seth Kushner. I did these interview-based critical essays with creators. They usually ran about an hour.

It was a weekly website, a new profile every week… It took me about, on average, eight to nine hours a profile, the subway, transcribing, writing the darn thing. I had to stack my prep quite a lot, so I had to just go back and forth between reading the work of different creators.

To prepare for them, I read as much of their work as I could. I never got Dan Clowes, but had I gotten Dan Clowes—and, at one point, I will get an excuse to interview Dan Clowes—I will read all of *Eightball*, and I will make notes as I read it. I will look at themes. I will look at stylistic development. I will look at the context in which it was created. I really wanted to get under the hood for why these creators made these decisions where they were with their work.

It depended on the creator. That differed between an author like Mike Allred with *Madman*, or Jim Shooter, who was editor in chief at Marvel, and a comic book writer in his own respect. It depended on who the subject was, but I would then basically come down with bullet points that I would have handy during an interview. I rarely write really straight questions because I like for it to be an organic conversation. It will be, of course, chopped up, and dispersed, and reorganized within the essay itself.

I was sick of Q&As at that point in my career. I felt like general Q&As for books were kind of lazy. When you look at magazine spotlights and feature articles, there are these fantastic essays. That's how I started thinking about my work.

Graphic NYC really started as a book on creators. [*hold ups notebook*] I did these from 2008 to 2013… Peter Bagge was the first one which got printed, and Dean Haspiel was my second. These are actually notes from that. I had a flip phone, but I have all of these notes that I would go through and make as I talked with them, but I would also have these really wonderful bullet points.

It was an amazing experience, and I insisted that when possible, which turned out to be 95% of the time, these were in-person interviews, so I got to really capture the personality. I got some really cool people, like Raina Telgemeier. We had lunch, and I interviewed her. This is right before *SMILE* came out.

The preparation was to be prepared enough so that I knew what I was talking about, or at least sounded like it, and to know what the high points I wanted to address were. There were some instances, like Jules Feiffer, I found

out the night before that we're going to talk to him the next day. The legendary Jules Feiffer! The reason I'm here today is because the great comic book heroes were given to me by my father. That was the thing where I just had to brainstorm the best I knew, do some last minute Wikipedia-ing. I had a flip phone, so I had to use my ex-girlfriend's laptop and hope for the best. Those things happen, too.

Would you, for somebody, like a Mike Allred, would you isolate their best known work or particular work? You obviously can't read *everything* in preparation.

When I moderate for GalaxyCon, have to still do the same thing. You have to hit the big work, the high notes, but at the same time, try to dig deep enough and find the work where it feels like that artist was starting to develop.

For instance, I can't remember if I got to talk with Frank Miller about *Ronin*, but *Ronin*, that's where you can see him develop into being the Frank Miller we all start to know in love.

I've found that creators want to talk about their early work, and if you ask them about the more esoteric work, it's good to create a connection between their earliest work with their big signature pieces of work.

Art Spiegelman did not want to talk about *Maus*. You can't fault the man, but you can still find sneaky ways to get Art to talk about *Maus* by asking him about the graphic novel form and what qualifies as a graphic novel.

A lot of that comes from having a conversation with people, breaking the ice. You know these things, but you also have to think on your feet and figure out ways to respond and work with your interview subject as a human being.

There's a few tricks I've found that have worked real well. Basically, when the interview's done, that's when I get the most responses. I'm like, "Well, I think this about wraps it up." People kind of feel naturally like, "Oh, okay. I don't have to be guarded," and that's when you start to get the good stuff. You keep the recorder going, you're there with them. They know you're still recording, and that's when the conversation starts.

With Frank, he had the *Adventures of Superman* show from the 1950s. He had a box set, and I started talking about that with him. It's just icebreakers, typical things. It's why I look at Graphic NYC as me starting to appreciate the art of the conversation. A good interview is a conversation. Even though it wasn't presented in a Q&A form like a conversation, I try and convey that through the prose, where I describe the creator and maybe even how they respond.

One of my favorite stories is from Joe Kubert. He started in the 40s. Had the School of Comic Art. Joe was in his eighties when I interviewed him. Bear of a guy. He was a big tough dude, and a very, very nice man. He did a graphic novel called *Jew Gangster*. It was about a kid who turns to a life of crime during the Great Depression, because the gangsters, the mob, they were kind of like the heroes.

We were just talking, and Joe was like, "Yeah, many of my friends were really kind of lured by the mob." I was like, "Were you ever?" Joe just sat there for a second. His mouth was kind of open. For a millisecond, I was like, "Oh, my god, he's going to punch me and I'm going to hit the floor." I don't care if he's 80. He's…"

You're about to find out the hard way that he does have some pretty tough mob skills.

He just kind of laughed. He was like, "That's a very provocative question." It's like, "Well…" He still never answered it. That made for a really great moment, because I was able to convey his character as this guy who, I don't know… I just couldn't believe I asked him that. It just kind of came out just in conversation. He thought it was funny, but he would not have hit me. He was a sweet, lovely man. For this millisecond, I panicked and I'm like, "Oh, you stepped across the line, Irving."

You've mentioned a number of great creators. Looking through the list of people featured in this book, it's obviously a very heavy emphasis on creators. I'm curious, are there other aspects of the comics industry that

this book touches on, or that you feel like you would want to explore in further interviews? I often think about how these kinds of interviews can capture a real moment in time.

It's been 15 years since the last one in this book, I think. Looking through it again, I realized what an interesting moment in time was captured in regards to comics and technology—we were on the precipice of digital. The iPad was just out [in 2010]. There's a sense that the tablet was going to happen, but how would that affect comics? I was kind of like, "Well, do you think print issues are going to go away and it's just going to be trade?"

I'm honestly still surprised by print, like floppies, I hate to use that term, but single issues exist. It's a really interesting moment in how people address it. Scott McCloud, we had a really great time with him. I've known Scott since I was a student, so like 1997, and I've come to consider him a friend. Hearing him talk about that, and the missteps we make in trying to predict the flow of technology, and how it's going to change things a little too soon as he talked about reinventing comics…

Also web comics, there's quite a lot, because Dean Haspiel was basically the person who made this happen. Dean and a bunch of friends were doing a thing called ACT-I-VATE, which were web comics. They had some really incredible people there and we were really having discussions about, "What is the point? Where is it going? Do we offer things free on the web? How do we pay for this, or how do we sell this?"

There are 85 creators in this book, and I would say at least half of them were active young creators who were really thinking about these things. No one foresaw the subscription model.

That's what I would say would be the real moment in time we captured.

What I think is also really fascinating, looking back at this, this collection is dedicated to the friends and storytellers we've lost. Seth is of course top on the list. He died from cancer about a decade ago. I miss him. I miss him still.

We've got Neil Adams, Gene Colan, Jules Feiffer, Irwin Hasen, Hernan Infantino, Al Jaffee, Joe Kubert, Stan Lee, Dwayne McDuffie, Denny O'Neill, Harvey Picard, like this list of creators, at least a dozen creators, maybe a little bit more, all kind of in the same space. It makes it a much more generational work from the literal beginnings of the industry. Joe Simon was 98 when I talked to him for this. Sharp as a tack, 98.

We go back to, as far as people I spoke with, Simon and Jules Feiffer, Al Jaffee… Al was there early on. I think you're not only going to see a generational collection, a multi-generational collection, that you're just not going to be able to make anymore, as far as in-person interviews go. I think that's part of what makes this a distinctive collection.

Was that always part of the inspiration for wanting to do this is capturing the moment and giving historical perspective to then color where we are now? You mentioned Scott McCloud. He gave this fantastic Ted Talk about comics, and in it, uses an example of a comic that is an infinite scroll.

The way he sets it up, he talks about the influence of his father who's blind, but he worked in Massachusetts for a missile provider, and then all of his siblings have more typical careers. He ended up being a comic artist, and even though his dad was blind, he had blind faith in him, and does a nice job illustrating, I think, some of that belief even from older generations feeding into it.

I'm curious what inspired you to write this collection of essays? What continues to inspire you to engage in the scene, and is it primarily about capturing the history in the moment of this space?

Well, I had the benefit of Seth's photography, which is not reproduced here because this is an essay collection, and honestly, the photos were reproduced in *Leaping Tall Buildings*, and I could not do them justice through what I'm doing for this campaign. I really wanted to complement the work he was doing as a photographer, and he was

amazing. That was a high bar for me to meet.

I couldn't half-ass my work as a writer, because I didn't want to feel like I want people to only go to the site to look for the pictures. Some people did, let's be honest. I think a lot of capturing a moment in time is creating the context around it. You're establishing where this person is through where they are now physically. Denny O'Neill met up with us in a Starbucks, and I put that in there. I don't really wanted to show, "Hey, guess what? Denny O'Neill, legendary comics writer, editor, hangs out and gets a cup of coffee too, like anyone else."

Peter Bagge, and I've done an entire book on Pete, who I love very much, and he's one of my favorite creators and human beings. We went to this Belgian, it was like a waffle place or something, or crepes, or I can't remember, but they had an accordion player. I'm like, "Of course, Pete Bagge is going to have an accordion player." Pete's funny as hell. He's a really good guy. I really wanted to place that.

I think the one in this piece that really hit me was Dwayne McDuffie, a legendary writer. I really wanted Dwayne for this project. We were limited by geography and budget. We could only photograph people in New York. We traveled with advance money to Chicago where we got Alex Ross, Jill Thompson, Brian Azzarello, Jeffrey Brown, and Chris Ware. We got Chris Ware in his house. We got to see his really cool house, but most of it was in New York, and Dwayne lived in LA. He came through to promote the *All-Star Superman* animated movie.

He wrote a script, adapted it for it, whatever. I was on cloud nine, because I've always loved Dwayne's work. He had always been nice to me when I'd met him through conventions and his wife, Charlotte. I had a great talk with him. Seth took a great photo of Dwayne in Central Park. It was winter, and Dwayne passed away a week after, on my birthday.

I had a hard time writing that essay because I was pretty upset, and I barely knew this man. I imagine with people who really knew him and loved him and worked alongside him, but it was very important that I capture what had to be part of the narrative, the story I was trying to tell around him is, yes, this is a vibrant, brilliant creator. Like Scott McCloud, Dwayne was an actual literal genius, and he decided to do anything, and he decided to write comics, and some of the best comics.

One of the things for *Comic Book Artist Magazine* is for a couple of years I did straight tribute pieces. It was tough after a while, but it was capturing that moment in time. Part of the reason I stopped doing it and took the site down was again, Seth had already started to move towards some other projects he wanted to do, and once he passed away, I couldn't do it without him. It didn't feel right. Also, it was exhausting.

If I do go back into this and bring Graphic NYC back, which I'm debating, I think I have to see how well this campaign goes. I would probably focus on more than just people who were graphic novelists as we had for our original, because we had to narrow it down. We had so many people who wanted to be in this, and we could only do so much. I would go and include folks who are artists for the big two writers, there's a whole new generation of creators who came up since these were originally done, folks like Scott Snyder comes to mind.

He was one we wanted, but we weren't able to get. Jason Aaron has really blown up since then. There's a creator, Tana Ford, who I've met through the cons, who I would love to [interview]. Tana's like the greatest person to have on a panel, because they're just so quirky, and funny, and interesting, and brilliant, and I would love to do a profile on Tana. There's also a lot more, just in that short amount of time, I think we have an even more diverse range of creators.

It's nice to get it out on paper, but yeah, who knows? I hope that this interview and this campaign inspires people to see the real power of interviews and conversation. There's an element of comics that I always tell people with Kickstarter, letting the work speak for itself, but then there is letting the creators speak for themselves.

That's a large part of what The Creative Independent interviews are about, is the person behind the work, and not necessarily always just about the work—the intention is capturing the moment and their experiences. I think it's a really vital piece of the industry.

Larry Hama's one of my favorite people. I did a conversations book on him for University of Mississippi, and what I love about Larry is it's all craft. If you ask him, "Well, hey, why did you have snake eyes?," blah, blah, blah, he might give you one or two answers, but he really likes talking about the craft of storytelling, and I love that about him. I also love, conversely, Chris Claremont will go in, and he'll dig into the weeds, and tell you why he had Jean Grey wear a green dress instead of a blue one.

He's still present in those books he wrote years ago. It's like there's so many different approaches to the work, and then you have an up-and-coming creator who's doing their comic, they're so invested in it, and it's such a personal piece of work for them.

I wanted an *Inside the Actor Studio*-approach to creators, and that's still my dream, to do *Inside the Actor Studio* for comics creators, because no one's doing it.

I think that they deserve that level of respect.

Christopher Irving Recommends:

Superman! (2025 film)

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds, Season 3

Reading the entirety of the 1980s post-Crisis *Superman* run of comics

Excavating more '80s goth music I missed the first time around

Summer-time with my kid

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