

On sustaining a life-long project



Comic artists advocate and indie comics publisher Zach Clemente discusses the past, current day-to-day, and hoped-for future of Bulgilhan Press.

July 10, 2025 -

As told to Sam Kusek, 3282 words.

Tags: [Comics](#), [Publishing](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Money](#), [Production](#), [Day jobs](#).

Where did the name Bulgilhan come from?

It's a Korean word, so it's typically challenging for most people I interact with to pronounce. By my understanding, in Korean, the B is pronounced with a B and a P sound, so it can have a stronger plosive. As far as speaking in Korean, this is the most I speak, it's just this one word. It's funny how random it seems, but it does come from my own roots. Even though the Press kind of obfuscates who I am; I tend to speak about it in the third person, for example. I say "we" a lot in posts and online. I try to keep it professional. The entirety of the Press, the business and its whole mission, it built around me. I can't deny that.

Essentially, I'm left handed and I was thinking like, "Okay, let's dive into that a little bit." I was looking into the typical associated terms. I love Left-Hand Press, Southpaw Press, but these all exist. There are dozens of them across the world, so I'm like, "Okay, let me try something more specific." I'm thinking, I'm thinking, I'm like, "Wait a minute." I remember growing up, my dad would tell me that if I was born in Italy or I was born in a more traditional Italian family, I probably would've been forced to be right-handed, because for a long time left-handed people were considered to possess the hand of the devil, so you didn't want to be left-handed. So in Italy you would be called sinistra or "sinister." I'm like, "Oh, shit. That's cool. 'Sinister,' that's a really awesome name, but I don't want to call it 'Sinister Press.'" It promises something that I won't be delivering, frankly.

It's ratcheting up the gore and zaniness to 11 and that's not quite my bag.

And I was like, "Okay, what's 'sinister' in Korean?" I was checking on different words. I was asking friends and "Bulgilhan" was the one to stick. Once I picked the name, I remember I told my mom and she was kind of mad at me. She's like, "Why'd you pick a word you can't pronounce?" and I said "Why didn't you teach me Korean?" It was not a very fair dig at her, there were a lot of reasons why she wasn't really able to teach me Korean growing up, but during the first Kickstarter I ran in 2021, I wanted to do an intro video. Then I realized that I would finally need to pronounce "Bulgilhan" live on camera and started to panic. So I would text my mom voice memos of me pronouncing it, and based on her emojis, I would learn if I was getting hotter or colder, and by the end I got a bunch of gymnastics emojis, which told me I was doing great. She loves the gymnastics emoji.

Has this sparked an interest in you learning more of the language?

A little bit, but it hasn't happened yet. What really sparked it is, I think I told you this, but at the end of the year, my partner and I are going to Korea and are going to Asia for three weeks. So I'll be in Korea for two weeks. I am learning a little bit of Korean to get by while I'm there. I think it's "yes" and "no." Ultimately, in

my mind, picking this name is a way to represent my uniqueness instead of my Korean heritage. I consider those as two different things.

I wouldn't actually consider myself Korean the same way a person from Korea would and I'm very at peace with that difference. It's not like I've not met another Korean-Italian person. I've met other Asian-Italian people. I've met other European-Korean people, but I've never met another Korean-Italian person. So I feel it's a very unique aspect about me worth celebrating. I'm sure there's just only a handful of us in the US, so it's exciting to just have this name that represents so specifically to me.

As you noted, you're the sole person working at the Press. Every book you produce is really colorful and lush—it's really beautiful work. How did you go about defining your taste? Your taste drives so much of what you publish, right?

I've received pitches by artists whose comic became famous on Instagram, providing this whole pitch around here's how many followers they have, here's what the "reader-to-buyer" conversion rate should be, etc. It's all very professional and it's like, I have zero interest in this.

But really, there's a couple of different things here, and one is when it comes to the physical book itself. I really want to make beautiful books or interesting books or tactile books or books that people want to pick up and want to read.

I read digital comics at the time. It's just that's not what I wanted to make. I knew that in a decade's time I wouldn't feel satisfied looking at a collection of PDFs that I've helped create. I need to see them on a shelf. I need to see it in person around other books. I've long had this vision of having my books alongside publications by small press publishers who I really admired and who greatly inspired me. So I thought, "I want to make something that stands up to that sort of aesthetic. It stands up to that crowd." So that was part of it. I'm a very tactile person. I love textures, I love weights, I love physicality, so I wanted to also make books that I would be excited by finding in a shop.

One of my favorite things is when someone picks up a copy of [Stray by Molly Mendoza](#), for instance, which is printed with a textured felt-weave cover. People often go, "Oh, I love it." I get an, "Oooh," out of somebody when they pick it up, and then I get to show them that the little smoke trail on the cover is embossed so they can just feel it when they run their finger over it. I just love showing readers that. I am that person as well!

What especially helped me when I launched Bulgilhan, was that I working at a design studio at the time. It gave me a lot of insight to the way in which designers approach creating physical items: products, paper, goods, what-have-you. It really opened the door for me and gave me a bit of confidence to learn and explore what got me excited about book design and printing. So I was already thinking about that process when I launched the Press.

As far as my taste goes though, man, that's the hardest thing. I get the question a lot at shows and festivals, especially in the form of people asking, "Oh, what are you looking for?" Typically my response has been, "It's more like what I'm not looking for," but I also think there's a critical difference in what my personal tastes as a reader are and what they are as a publisher. I would say it's like a square, rectangle situation. Everything I publish is within my tastes but I don't publish everything within my tastes. For instance, I'm probably not going to license a manga anytime soon or perhaps ever.

That's not really something I'm equipped to do. Or if I was, it'd have to be a really special project that I really think wouldn't fit anywhere else. It would have to be a project that for some reason wouldn't fit at publishers that specialize in indie manga like Denpa, Glacier Bay Books, or Starfruit. It would have to be something really unique, and I actually don't know what that would be! I'm not actually that plugged into the indie manga world. While I would love it, I think that it would come about by such a bizarre scenario, I just can't envision it.

But as far as the kinds of comics I'm going to leap for as a publisher, I think, this is why I ended up with

"self-indulgent" as the Press's primary motivator to bind the books together; it's purposely vague and is very much up for interpretation. Ideally the mysterious pit of vaguery is meant to encourage the cartoonist to fill it with something I can connect my artistic desires to. It all sounds fairly metaphysical I suppose, but something I've learned about me reading comics is that I have a great desire to be moved by individual stories, so that desire expresses itself with what I'd like to publish.

So I don't usually go for books that are going to be a series, although we're gonna bend that rule for *Die Horny*, but that wasn't by design. I also tend not to publish overly long books, because I think that a very successful version of a story can be and sometimes should be accomplished in a hundred pages or less. I ultimately find that size really appealing. It's just enough for you to sink your teeth in and start feeling the emotions radiating from the comic, and then you have to let go and ideally get a very ethereal emotional moment. I resonate with books, with stories and comics that, even if the artist isn't intending for it, have a very strong motivation and drive to instill a feeling within the reader.

One of my favorite feelings is when I finish reading a short comic and I put it down—I sit there and I breathe out and that exhalation is a reminder to my body that I'm alive. I'm in the world. This may be just a piece of fiction, yet it is a piece of fiction that affects me greatly and deeply, and both things are true. I get to live in that cognitive dissonance, and this is such a ridiculous answer to the question "what defines my tastes?". It's tough to answer! It's stuff that makes me feel things in a way that's hard for me to describe, and I don't always know what that is until I read through it.

I have a similar sort of feeling of exhalation that you've talked about where if I have a moment with a book where I'll see something and go, "Oh, fuck."

That's the best description of it. It's an "oh, fuck" moment, and there's so many different versions of, "oh, fuck," and that's one of them. That's one of the best ones.

You talked a lot about what you look for in terms of what you want to publish. There's also a working relationship that comes along with your artists based on what you and I have talked about and what you're very public about: You offer a very good deal for your artists. It's a collaborative working arrangement, as I understand it, but correct me if I'm wrong there...

I would disagree with the term "collaborative." I would say that "collaborative" would require a higher level of creative function from me. I would say a very supportive relationship is the goal. I'm ultimately here to help the artist make the best version of the comic they're trying to make. Really help them fine tune it.

That's what I was thinking as well. You're lending your expertise as a publisher to collaborate and take something that maybe had a nebulous shape and help form it into a more beautiful state. What do you look for in collaborators? What makes you want to publish somebody outside of what you've already said?

It's really just like I don't necessarily think of my artists as collaborators. I think of them as my artists. I think of them as people I'm supporting and helping hone their craft as they need it and stuff like that. When I was writing comics and self-publishing them with artists like Ricardo López Ortiz, K.L Ricks, and Grim Wilkins. I was a collaborator for sure. In this situation I would think maybe the closest I've gotten to being a "collaborator" is maybe on *Stray* with Molly because we were talking about what ended up becoming that book for maybe four years and really that's just because we were friends.

We were chatting about it for a long time, well before it became the version of *Stray* you can read now a much more personal book about their own struggles with vices or their own journey with regard to looking at the ways those vices and how they view them has colored their life, both negatively and positively. It was very interesting but it sort of turned into a more fictionalized story, navigating these themes and whatnot. That might've been the closest I got, but honestly it was still kind of just editorial. What I look for in my artists, that's a good question. I can't say it's strictly the working relationship because obviously, I get excited about certain artists before I work with them.

The times I've reached out to artists directly asking if they want it to be published by me, I've been very grateful when they say, yes, like with Huahua who made *The King's Warrior*, which we Kickstarted last year. She's an artist I've been following for a very long time and have been in huge admiration of. On a whim, I just cold emailed her to tell her how much I liked her work and if she ever wanted to send a pitch my way, the door was open and I think she got back to me the same day!

Sometimes I'm just excited about the artists, I need to find their storytelling really compelling. A big consideration is that I, like anyone, can be hooked into someone's art through one illustration, but what I really, really need to see is storytelling chops, the ability to convey a story through their illustration and make it meld really beautifully. That's one of the reasons why I pretty much exclusively want to work with solo cartoonists; in my mind illustration is a form of communication. Another aspect of this is that I want to give cartoonists a real shot at being their own writer. Perhaps not every comic artist is suited to write a script but I trust my intuition to figure out which artists to trust. So much of comics publishing is built around pairing writers with artists - why not be different?

I know they have a story in them and I know they want to tell it, and that's sort of where Bulgilhan becomes a desirable and exciting publisher to work with; I'm there for their ideas. I really want to help them shine not only as artists but as storytellers.

I also think it's about curiosity because exploration is such a key part of art making and mark making and the craft of making comics. I don't need someone to level up their cartooning when they're working with me, but I love the idea that my artists get time and room to explore. The way the publishing agreement is built, it's sort of designed for that. I don't really give deadlines and I try to be really flexible with them, stuff like that, but ultimately I seek out artistic motivation.

I want my artists to have, even if just a gut feeling, a vision. I need that to exist. My understanding of their vision purely comes through conversation. Sure, I can get a little bit of that from the pitch and by emailing with them, but I really like to speak with my artists, at least once. I gotta have that human-to-human connection so I know who I'm publishing.

Looking ahead, what are your hopes for Bulgilhan and for indie comics in general?

I'll start with the hope that is impossible, or nearly impossible, which is I hope to win the lottery. That'd be great, and then I could just take Bulgilhan to wherever I wanted, without any concerns about being "profitable." It's extraordinarily unlikely, but it'd be cool as hell.

That said, my hope as a publisher, is to be doing this until I die. I've been joking about this lately, but the more I say it, the more true it becomes. I don't know if it means I'm going to be editing when I'm 88 or something. It could be a thing where I sort of pass it on to somebody else if they're interested in it. I have no idea what this looks like. I don't think it's going to "scale" very much, at least not its current form. Bulgilhan was not designed to be a business that takes up my entire time.

If I was independently wealthy and didn't have to worry about anything else, I would absolutely publish full-time. I would 100% let it eat up a lot more of my time and be very happy for it, but that's not the reality right now. So the Press is sort of like a consistent crank I turn, ideally at a normal rate. Put out a few comics each year and just keep doing that until the wheels fall off. That's what sustainability looks like for me and the Press.

It's meant to essentially break even financially, reinvesting whatever extra funds we have into keeping books in print. That and also being able to pay our artists a little bit more each time are the closest Bulgilhan has to "growth" as a business. I have hopes for something to change in creative industries or something to make people suddenly go "wait, this could be more viable for X, Y, Z reasons" and invest out of interest and excitement, not out of short-term IP extraction.

I don't know what that answer is. I feel like there needs to be a colossal cultural shift that moves comics

readership, and appreciation in western audiences to something more akin to the kind of appreciation you get in France and Belgium. That said, they have their own problems no matter how much people look up to them. Same with Japan. I don't know if I'd feel okay publishing in their model. But I do love the fact that comics is such a foundational medium for people to access stories, and that's something I would love for the US and Western countries to adopt and see flourish within our communities.

As for being a publisher, I just wish for it to keep going. I want to be able to keep this a thing that I retain near-absolute control over. I'm grateful for the high level of trust I have with my artists and the business partners that I work with. I just want to keep that going. I love it. It's sort of funny, I currently have no plans for kids. I often half-joke that all my artists, all the books I've published, those are my children. That's where I'm putting my energy. That's the legacy I want to leave to the world. This is a life-long project in my mind.

Zach Clemente Recommends:

Tokyo These Days by Taiyō Matsumoto (magnificent 3 volume manga series)

Friends at the Table podcast (specifically their current "Realis" & "Perpetua" arcs)

Balatro (on mobile, I've invested too much time to play on another platform)

Beta-testing my friend's incredible *Gentleman Magician* TTRPG based on *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* by Susanna Clarke

Re-reading the Sam Vimes-centric books from the *Discworld* series by Terry Pratchett

Name

Zach Clemente

Vocation

comic arts advocate and indie comics publisher

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