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As told to J. Bennett, 2989 words.

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# On being willing to do the work

Comics artist Brian Pulido discusses telling your own stories, securing your creative property, and following your own path.

**Storytelling is the backbone of what you do. What was your process for discovering how to tell a good story?**

I became interested in telling stories as early as I can remember. And for some reason I really connected with comic book storytelling, the interplay between words and pictures. The neat thing about it is as people read it, they get to really paint the picture of what it looks like. Although in this day and age, we're seeing these wonderful Marvel movies with these amazing special effects, I'm here to let you know that I've seen that by reading comics since the mid-70s. And I've always found that to be very exciting and unique to the form. The other thing I like about comics as a storytelling vehicle is that it actually asks something of the reader. It doesn't do it to you. You have to do it to it—meaning it's active. You've got to get in there, you've got to read, and you start putting the things together.

From a young age, I had this natural inclination to tell stories. It was primitive, but there was a lot of energy to it. And I was wearing my influences on my sleeve. I was reading the mid-'70s comics of Jim Starlin and Jack Kirby. They're the main creators that really come to my mind. What emerged over time was telling a comic book-related story as a means to have something to say about life. Now, my stuff is not necessarily deep and profound, but it's ultimately a story about persistence. Our stories really echo these really simple principles of life, where if you want to go after something, you got to go after it. If you have to defend yourself, you go do that. Persistence really wins the day.

**Was there a specific moment or project that you were working on when you realized that you had a knack for storytelling?**

I remember I graduated college, and I was working in the film business in New York City as a production assistant. I was the person who was getting coffee and all this kind of stuff. That's really what my college degree back then in 1985 qualified me for. I said to myself, "I've got to get the show on the road and start telling a story." And ultimately that story became my first published comic book called *Evil Ernie*. I worked on it literally for years before it came out, and through that I learned some measure of a craft. And when that book came out in December 1991, it connected. It didn't have the sales of a *Batman* or *Superman*, but from a cult perspective, it was a slam dunk.

For me, that's the ultimate because personally I like very cultish things. So, to make a cult classic, I'm all about it. Right around there, I realized *Evil Ernie* and the books that I was writing filled a need that really wasn't being filled in the comic book marketplace because the comics marketplace at that time—and maybe to this day—is still dominated by superheroes. There was nothing representing that cool, blue collar, high amplitude, heavy metal, rock and roll, horror-inspired type comic. That's when I noticed that there was a connection, and I really haven't looked back since.

**You originally wrote *Evil Ernie* as a screenplay. Why did you decide to turn it into a comic instead?**

What happened was, as soon as we finished the screenplay, we very luckily got it to the producers of the motion picture *Hellraiser*. This was very exciting. An offer came back, and they said, "You can write this movie. You could direct this movie. We'll pay you \$40,000 of a two-million-dollar budget to do it, but we own all the underlying rights." In my real primitive way of thinking, I said, "Yeah, no." I declined that offer. And please keep in mind, I'm a penniless post-college student at this point. That kind of money would've been life changing. I'd probably live on that money for six years back then, which was about

1988-89—the height of thrash metal. I’m filled with piss and vinegar and taking on the world. But I didn’t think it was fair.

I decided to take it in another direction because a screenplay unto itself is just this document that, if not used, is only good for propping up a table. But if the story is given life in something like a comic, it then is viewed differently. It’s viewed as a “property.” It has its own life. And, being attached to it as a creator, you have a little bit more say probably, and you actually have rights. At the heart of it, that’s what moved me in that direction. But I know it served a whole other purpose because I just have a blast writing comics. It’s fun. I don’t really have a boss other than our readers. There’s no one standing over me saying, “You can’t do this. You can’t do that. You can’t do this.” It’s a great form for endless freedom.

**Not only did you make a savvy business decision by maintaining the rights to your character and your story, but it’s really admirable that you turned down the opportunity that you were being offered. A lot of young artists—then and now—might’ve jumped at the chance to direct their own film and get a payday in exchange for their creative rights. What do you think it was in you that allowed you to make that decision?**

It’s interesting. I’ve actually reviewed this recently in my mind. What gave me the spark to say that? I guess at the heart of it, I’m human like everybody else. I’ll have a rollercoaster ride of confidence in my own work and my own ability. But I thought that the character could stand the test of time. I thought it would resonate, so that was my gut reaction. And then also let me just admit to you in this conversation that, at that time, I’d probably say anything to anybody. I was very assured, and that really might come from my love of heavy metal and hard rock music, where there’s a lot of bravado. There’s a lot of epic take-on-the-world quality. I might even just have had this wonderfully, luckily misplaced confidence.

**Speaking of heavy metal, I understand that *Evil Ernie* was born at a Megadeth concert in 1988. Is that right?**

Absolutely true. I was at this show—it was probably Meadowlands Arena—and I was like, “What would really freak people out? I looked around and said, “Us,” and that was the germ of the idea.

**Was that the first time that music infiltrated your creative process?**

I think perhaps consciously, but I will tell you then and now I will go to a concert and depending on the artist, completely involuntarily, I just get a flood of input. As a small example: In 2004, my friend and I were traveling the Midwest and following Ozzfest. We’re seeing a bunch of shows strung together, and I literally never even heard of the band Lamb of God. And I’m sitting there watching Lamb of God and this outrageous cascade and flood of imagery just started entering my mind. And it ultimately led to a giant 12-issue miniseries of *Lady Death*.

I don’t know if I’m directly answering your question, but I will also go to a show if I’m workshoping a story in my mind. There’s something about the concert experience, the live music experience, where it jogs my mind. And suddenly my subconscious is just workshoping that story. It’s coming out to the conscious level, and it would not be unusual for me to end a show and say, “Damn it. I solved the story problem.”

**You seem to create and publish an incredible number of books. How do you maintain such a strenuous pace?**

I admit to you that it really did get to be a strenuous pace recently. I got a little bit of burnout about this time last year and said, “Okay, dude, slow your roll just a little.” I think for us to be a company that independently produces comic books, that it was incumbent upon us to learn everything that we needed to run a business. We could have abdicated all the business acumen and all that stuff and looked to someone else for it, but it didn’t seem to make sense. I also had a background in motion picture production, so I really applied that to our business.

I think what helps us with our output is this constant and incessant drive to improve our business practices in every department. And it’s funny because I’m not really big on meetings. We probably, as a company, do two hours of meetings a week and one monthly meeting, but our departments do have sub-meetings. The meetings are intentional. People in every department in our company are constantly getting training and we’re always refining our system. The reason we have to do that is what I always tell people: “I don’t have a daddy. There’s no one writing that blank check. There’s no one taking us under their wing. We do it. To do it, it’s incumbent upon us to just be really good at it or else there isn’t a company.” So, I’m writer-creator, but also publisher. I would say 15% of my time is creative and 85% is the business execution. That’s just, I think, “the cost.” That’s just what it takes.

**You’ve been your own independent publisher for a long time now. This question might have an obvious answer for you, but how important is independence to you in the comics world?**

Well, I guess it’s not even a giant stance of mine. I love and adore Marvel and DC comics and comics from all over the place, all different types of comics. I can read a wide swath of comics and I’m a fan of them, but I never grew up wanting to make comics for other people. I would look at authors like Stephen King and think, “Oh wow, isn’t that great. He gets to make up his own stuff and put it out there and people like it.” So, that’s where I’m coming from. I just like to make my own stuff. I like to tell stories about characters.

I like to world build and have fun with that. I never quite had an aspiration to say, "I want to work on *Batman* and *Superman*." I am completely void of that interest. And keep in mind, I'm a huge *Captain America* fan. I have a complete *Captain America* collection from his reappearance in Marvel in the early '60s to the present. But I never aspired particularly to write him. I'm very happy to be a fan, but my drive and my inclination and my interest is to just tell my own stories.

**But you have created comics for pre-existing entities and franchises, like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween* and bands like Megadeth. When you're working on a project like that, how do you find the balance between staying true to the existing entity and infusing it with your own creative touch?**

Oh yeah, I've loved doing all that stuff. Particularly when I wrote horror like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Chucky*. For me, my first obligation is to honor the earliest work because I think, in most cases, the first of the thing is the best. That even sometimes applies to metal. The first Metallica, the first Mötley Crüe—they're just insanely excellent records. Before I would take on a gig, I have to seek and find my way through the story because I feel a deep obligation to honor it and not necessarily to flip the switch on it. But by the same token, I ask myself, "Can I contribute something fresh that builds on that original idea?" So, that's exactly what I attempted to do. And I must admit, while I never aspire to write superhero stories, I do love writing the horror stories.

**When you're creating your characters, do you map out all of their personality traits and emotional tendencies alongside their physical traits, or do you leave anything to develop with the story as you might need it?**

Well, I do both. I think the first thing I do is I have—either in writing or in my brain and ultimately in writing—a cluster of ideas and attractions that could form a character. And then I might take a very dominant trait and say that this character provides this contrast. Let me give you an example. The character Lady Death is fairly cold, almost like a death metal goddess from Iceland. When I was thinking about things like her arch villain, I wanted to provide contrast. Hence a very hot, passionate character, like the character Hell Witch. They represent fire and ice. And that begins to inform everything about the characters—their behavior, their traits, their Achilles' heels, their strengths, and sometimes their weaknesses.

Additionally, I do develop the looks. The game for me is to get to a place of simplicity. That might take a ton of drafting because—let's be honest—the bare bones of Lady Death's costume is a black bikini. And yet, it has stood the test of time. Speaking for myself, I'll sometimes start with a complicated idea, but my goal is always to try to get it to something simpler because I believe simple is impactful. But I do like the idea that the character can constantly surprise me and present new things. I think that's one of the joys of writing.

**You're working on the next chapter of *Lady Death* right now, which kind of ties into the idea that your characters can surprise you.**

Yes. I'm writing *Lady Death* chapter 18, which would be for August of 2023. And even this many years into the character's history—30 years—there's little things that are surprising me. The journey that she's on is something that people wouldn't necessarily equate with the character. She's in an alternative-future history story. The character is cast into another universe where she meets herself—but it's herself if she stayed evil for 13 years. There are only 999 people left on earth, and it's actually a story where she discovers the value of heroism. That's the exploration. She finally gets it after all these years and admires it. It's what I'd call a golden fleece story or a *Wizard of Oz* story, where you meet a bunch of people on the way, you learn a bunch of lessons, and you apply those lessons to go back home. I love it that there are these little gaps where the characters can surprise.

**You and your wife started Coffin Comics in 2015, and you decided to generate the funding through Kickstarter. What led you to that decision?**

This is definitely the journey that brings this all together. Around 2014, I settled a lawsuit with a former publisher and retained full ownership of Lady Death. So, I took a look at the landscape in terms of how I could get my comics out to people. I looked at the traditional comics market, and I interviewed literally all the captains of that industry—I know them. In the end, I concluded that wasn't my path. One thing that I did realize is that I was no longer going to chase down making monthly comics. In the generally agreed-upon comics market, monthly comic books are the bread and butter—but no matter what, the sales decrease. It doesn't matter if it's *Spawn* or anything else. Issue number one sells the most, then number two, and they just keep going down. Even publishers like Marvel and DC, they constantly restart.

I looked at that and I said, "Okay, I don't think that's workable." I didn't see the amount of enthusiasm we would need in that traditional market for the work. I looked around and I saw crowdfunding. And even from the outside looking in, Kickstarter seemed tailor-made for a creator like me because I was totally willing to put in the work and the effort. And I just loved the idea of directly connecting with our reader, our customer. So, we launched our first Kickstarter on February 5th, 2015. We put our soul into it. And we realized on our first Kickstarter, \$76,000 and over 1,000 backers. We were off to the races.

That particular year we did four Kickstarters. And the thing is, they had to work, man. The first one had to work to provide us the capital to make the next one work, to make the next one work, to make the next one work. I kid you not that it was a roll of the dice every time, but thankfully it all worked. And Kickstarter has been tremendous for us to roll out newer characters like *La Muerta*, *Zack the Zombie Exterminator*, *Hell Witch*, and others. It's been life changing. We've launched 28 campaigns—this next one

will be 29—and we’ve realized \$6.7 million, which has allowed us to make the highest possible quality books at 48 pages, sometimes 64. We’ve made statues, sculptures, all kinds of stuff. For me, all that is an expression. It’s this component that was always missing in the past—the idea of connecting directly to your reader. If you’re willing to do the work, you can reap the reward of having a career where you get to express yourself ongoingly.

Brian Pulido Recommends:

Reservation Dogs (Hulu)

The Angry Red Planet (1959 film)

Devolution by Max Brooks (book)

Black Summer (Netflix)

To The Lake (Netflix)

Name

Brian Pulido

Vocation

comics artist

Fact

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