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WE KILL
MONSTERS

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by Frederik Hautain

Remember when I mentioned Diamond's Top 300 sales chart in last week's Editorial? It's interesting that the distributor uses *Batman* as the barometer when calculating actual monthly sales. *Batman* hence is considered the benchmark, the steady hand of all comic books.

Leaving aside the discussion why - as leading publisher - none of Marvel's premier ongoings is used as the anchor title, the choice for *Batman* is a clear sign that the Dark Knight is the absolute #1 of DC's holy Trinity. It's not Superman, and it's definitely not Wonder Woman.

Sales of *Wonder Woman* and (*Adventures of Superman*) and have been in constant flux for a long time now. The same goes for *Action Comics*, historically the first mainstream superhero book and as such perhaps the logical index point for the rest of the market.

Looking to veer Supes and Diana into calmer waters and sunny skies, DC has appointed one and the same captain for both ships: Joseph Michael Straczynski. While the baby isn't thrown out with the bathwater, both Superman and Wonder Woman are in for a radical change in direction - and in WW's case, appearance. In fact, it was the lack of spandex in Wonder Woman's costume that made me think JMS may very well have a similar affect on these top dogs as Grant Morrison had a decade ago when he put the X-Men in leather pants. If Straczynski can sway enough readers to pick up a copy of *Superman* or *Wonder Woman* (again), DC may be in for a true brightest day.



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FRAZER IRVING'S BOHEMIAN DEN OF SIN & EXCESS

by Nathan Wilson

Nestled in Castle Irving on the outskirts of London, artist Frazer Irving has been extremely busy of late with his recent work on the phenomenal *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne #2*. Beginning with issue #13, Irving will also rejoin with his now three-time collaborator Grant Morrison on the seminal *Batman & Robin* series.

Taking time to escape the brutality of London heat, the lure of digital comics via the iPad, and the frustrations associated with numerous Photoshop crashes, Irving sat down with Broken Frontier to discuss his art and his life with comics.

As the youngest of three children, Frazer Irving was raised on comic books from an early age, joking that “I reckon my mum just needed an easy way to keep me quiet.” Growing up in 1970s England, Irving recognized how comics were largely available everywhere he turned because they were still targeted and sold to kids. “I think this sowed the seed that ultimately led



2000 AD's Judge Dredd versus Aliens by Frazer Irving

to me being here and doing this stuff, because as far as I can remember I have been obsessed with comics in one way or another, and that sort of drive towards one particular art form can only be generated at an early age.”

Choosing either black and white reprints of American books or the latest color new releases by American publishers, Irving had access to a wide variety of comics from the 1960s through the early 1980s and found himself mostly drawn to the superhero team books of the period, especially “the younger characters and the more oddball the better. I think subconsciously the art and craft of comics was also speaking to me, but back then all I could do was relate to the comic in terms of story.”

Focusing on Marvel’s X-Men, Irving found an affinity for the Byrne-era book (1977-1981) that also corresponded with DC’s *The New Teen Titans* and a mid-1980s Marvel series known as *Strikeforce: Morituri*. Irving revealed, “I was mesmerized by the art of Dick Dillin on the *Justice League of America* back in the late 70s, which is odd because I never thought that that style of art was really my thing (it was Perez or Byrne for me) but something in the way he drew the stories had deep and compelling vibes which I couldn’t turn away from. It’s possible his use of lighting had a profound effect on why I draw the

way I do, but then I guess lots of other artists share that glory.”

Yet, reading comics and wanting to produce them are two completely different things. For Irving, the seminal moment of inspiration came with Barry Windsor-Smith’s work on *Conan* in the early 1970s. Although he admits that many of his school friends were probably better drawers than he was, his strong fascination with comics lasted longer than theirs and taught him “the importance of persistence.”

While Irving had doodled a lot mainly in school, Windsor-Smith’s images were the most pivotal comics that forced him off his “butt to make comics for real beyond doing character doodles or cover mockups.” Digesting Zukala’s *Daughter*, Irving found himself drawn repeatedly to that single story. “I don’t know what it was about it, but I read that story dozens of times and each time I just wanted to get creating... It was almost like I was empathizing with the way Barry had made the pages and I knew instinctively how they were constructed with the ink and white out. The Barry Smith influence lasted a good while, and I think this also contributed to me burning out so early on because he wasn’t an easy choice to emulate. My constant failure to reproduce his style of art pushed me into the murky pit of self doubt very early on, and I’m kinda thankful for that because it

I wanted to draw and tell stories in comics, it was a sort of innocence that set me on my path and as the harsh realities of life became apparent, this remained the one core feature that kept me sane.



Detail from the cover of the first issue of *Klarion, the Witch Boy*.

got me used to that feeling early on.” Looking back at those *Conan* stories, Irving recognized “the black and white *Conan Saga* reprints were not only amazing for the work inside, but also for his painted covers which mixed line art and color in ways I think I’m still trying to work through.”

By the age of fourteen, Irving decided to try his hand at professional art after sending Marvel some samples he had created from *Excalibur*. “I don’t know if I was particularly realistic about it,” Irving mused, “but back then I doubt I had any real idea how the world actually worked so all I knew was that I wanted to draw and tell stories in comics, and that was good enough for me. It was a sort of innocence that set me on my path and as the harsh realities of life became apparent, this remained the one core feature that kept me sane and focused.”

Giving himself only a four-year time frame for artistic success that was often complicated by his other interests in music, or as Irving called it, “an identity crisis for the next seven years as I flipped between art and tunes,” he received his first professional assignment when he was sixteen with an advertising company. Although the work did not pay very well, the experience was, for Irving, “a bit of a wakeup call in terms of deadlines and working to other people’s requirements, but it also taught me that I could do it for real.” After pursuing an art degree that did little more than provide an excuse to be a student and get high for three years, Irving relied more on what he learned during high school and what he had taught himself over the years to hone and perfect his style.

That approach eventually landed him work with *2000 AD* in August 2000.

For American audiences, however, Irving’s move to *Dark Horse Comics* in the 2002 four-issue *Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained* and similar work for Wildstorm’s *The Authority: Scorched Earth #1* in 2003 provided a broader and much wider readership. Even though he continued his work with *2000 AD* during these projects, it was the release of Grant Morrison’s *Seven Soldiers: Klarion* mini-series in 2005 that established Irving with American fans.

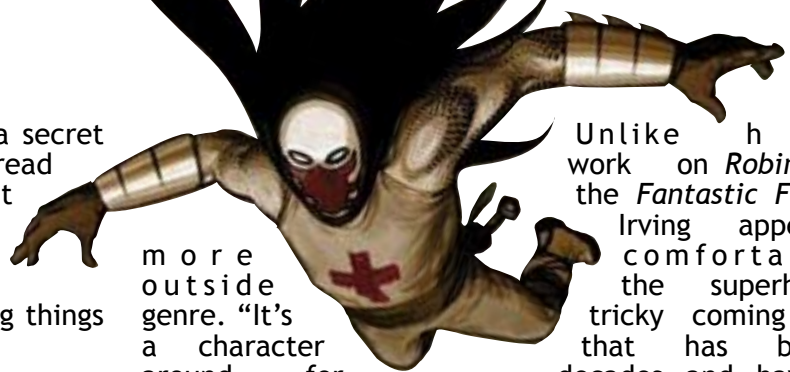
From sketches and notes by Morrison and fellow artist J.H. Williams regarding the character of Klarion the Witch Boy, Irving created “an audition piece which gave the little elfin dude blue skin (I reasoned that it was the reflected color from the dank underworld he lived in) which is what stuck. As I was drawing that first issue, it became apparent to me that this was heading more towards the Dark Disney feel than the standard Goth comic *Sandman* artwork, and that was almost entirely due to the way Klarion behaved himself—a perfect example of the writing transforming the artwork.”

His designs of Klarion and the other inhabitants of Limbo Town established Irving as ‘the Puritan Dude,’ a theme that he has revisited several times in subsequent series. Irving said that the inspiration for Klarion and for the Puritan iconography was all down to Morrison. “I’ve never had any interest in drawing this stuff, but after Klarion came out it seems that the world latched onto me being the Puritan dude.

I don't mind it, but it's not like it's been a secret passion of mine that I finally get to explore. I read once that John Buscema felt the same about superheroes, which shocked me as I always held his superhero work to be among the very best out there, from any time period. I guess a lot of artists get known for drawing things they're not naturally drawn to."

Even in his creator-owned series *Gutsville*, Irving noted that the Puritan look and theme all originated with writer Simon Spurrier. "It was sort of a coincidence when he pitched it to me, but I figured I'd done Puritans in the dark cartoony way, so it would be interesting to try it from another perspective." Yet, Irving has also worked on nearly every major superhero for both DC and Marvel either in one-shot explorations or mini-series, tasks that required a different set of artistic guidelines and approaches for the artist.

Like many of his contemporaries such as Frank Quitely, Doug Mahnke, or Francis Manapul to name but a few, Frazer Irving has a very definitive and distinctive style that is immediately recognizable as his own. This can be both a curse and blessing in the comic world with fan reaction to change, innovation, or difference usually being quite hostile (outcries over costume differences or insignia alterations spring to mind). For Irving, he finds himself more connected with the non-superhero assignments he has been given because the stories are often self-contained which means he gets to control all visual aspects of it.



more outside the superhero genre. "It's a character around for decades and having to sort of squeeze myself into their skin, though I try to see this challenge from a more positive angle these days. As a kid I'd make up my own superheroes, but as a pro I have to draw established icons and I keep thinking to myself 'Man, this belt buckle is too awkward to draw each time. I would have used a sash because I know how I could make it work with my style.' This isn't a concrete rule though. Judge Dredd isn't a superhero, but he is one of the most difficult strips to draw due to the costume and demands of the world he inhabits. Also, when I worked on *Azrael* it was surprisingly liberating because I got to revise the costume for the new character and that freed me up to use those sashes I've been aching to draw all these years.

"What it really boils down to though, in terms of comfort, is that the story has to be good. It doesn't matter if it's a story about Charles Fort or Superman—if the story isn't engaging, then it's hard to get into and do my best. All the other details like costumes and technology and cosmic explosions, it's all surface. You give me a good, left field, cosmic Superman story and I can make it as unique as any dark Cthuluesque Puritan adventure or magical underworld crime thriller. It's all about the story."

Yet, most of his mainstream work with both Marvel and DC has been within the superhero genre. Asked about what research goes into a new superhero-themed assignment, Irving indicates that it varies for each project and that all that really matters is that he knows what the characters look like—the interpretation arises solely from the script itself. "I know the *Fantastic Four* have blue costumes with a 4 on it, but after that it's all down to what the writer tells me they're feeling."

At times, however, the final project Irving produces can differ dramatically from his first interpretation. "I am often surprised to see these characters turn out differently to how I imagined them, either weaker looking, or taller, or more serious etc.," Irving stated. "It changes so much from initial impression to the actual acting on the page. If I come to the story abruptly, then it usually takes me a good chunk of

Top: Irving's *Azrael*
Bottom: *Batman and Robin*



Cover details to Marvel Comic's Iron Man: The Inevitable miniseries

pages before I fully find my take on the character, though I personally find that to be one of the more interesting aspects when looking back at a story, seeing how it developed. That has its downside though as many of these gigs are so short. I found my *Azrael* was starting to really cook by issue #3, and then no more. It was sad, but I take from that and put it into the next gig, to learn from his time in Gotham.”

While *Azrael* allowed him such freedoms, Irving usually researches the most recent interpretations of characters. “That’s mainly because they change so often I don’t want continuity gaffes. Once I have references on what they look like on a quite basic level I aim to flesh them out independently, to avoid being too seduced by another creator’s vision. The same applies to the settings. If it’s something new, then I enjoy it because I can build a whole reality that serves that particular story instead of trying to twist a current world to reflect these new themes and ideas.”

Even prior to DC’s *Azrael* mini-series in 2009, Irving had spent a short time in Gotham City during his two-issue stint on *Robin* in 2007. Asked to design the two-part appearance of Klarion based upon his earlier work on the character, Irving attempted to improve upon his previous work, but found some difficulty when it came to inking the issues himself. One of the characteristics of Irving’s art that most people may or may not be familiar with is his transition from traditional ink work into a completely digital artist. For *Robin*, Irving admitted, “The inking skills I was using were inhibiting me somewhat, so I suppose any difference between this story and the *Klarion* miniseries is all just a reflection of me trying find a way to bridge the gap between the ink ethos and the pure digital way of doing things. In the end, I think I had to make a drastic leap, as the slow blending idea wasn’t doing it for me.”

My output is usually too strange for mainstream but also too mainstream to be really unusual.

This process of going digital, however, did have its drawbacks at first as Irving discovered. While traditional methods of art allowed him the opportunity to explore a wider range of marks such as depths of expression with a brush that computers cannot simply replicate, the connection between an artist and the tactile page has its pros and cons, he says. “The fear and tension when drawing tricky parts, happy accidents... drawing with the brush and ink is an experience very far removed from the safety of the digital realm, which is both the reason I miss it and why I left it.”

The tradeoff though in employing a Cintiq interface and utilizing Photoshop for Irving “is that it offers so many more artistic options in terms of color, etc., and that the safety of the undo command and layers means that one can be bolder in experiments. “I personally found I had inked myself into a rut back after the *Robin* issues. The gear changes from pencils to inks to colors were slowing me down and there were so many ideas I had that I wanted to explore.” Irving admits that while he will at times desire a return to traditional ink work, finishing a complete comic with brushes is no longer justifiable for him: “I always told myself I’d do it one day when it can be a project of joy, on the side where I play to all the strengths of the brush, taking as long as I want.”

Just because Irving has embraced a digital art environment, doesn’t mean he no longer recognizes its limitations and need for improvement. For Irving, it is a conflict between an efficient output and the necessity of greater details within the story: “I keep trying to add more to the pages yet to keep them clear, but this causes issues with how I actually make that happen in the software, which means that sometimes the restrictions in my method dictate the content on the page, and in reverse the desire to make certain



images happen force me to modify my method.

"I settled on a specific method back in 2008 which uses grays mainly, then adding color on top. This has done me well until now where I find myself tweaking it yet again to allow me to bring the *Batman* pages to life a little more." In turn, this technique has allowed him to challenge himself and improve as an artist because his work demands tighter and more detailed drawings to accommodate the digital platform. Irving revealed that "it's good to see that development. It's best seen in *Gutsville*, which will be an excellent chart of my development from the first pieces I drew on the Cintiq all the way through to whatever I will be drawing next month, and I'm pleased to see the art evolve in this way."

Self-admittedly though, Irving has also indicated that most of his output is usually too strange for mainstream but also too mainstream to be really unusual, which might seem counterproductive to working within the superhero genre. Instead of a hindrance, however, Irving saw it as another avenue for self-improvement: "I just draw how I draw these days. I know that there is enough people out there who respond to my stuff to make it worthwhile continuing, and I always feel that the best thing any artist can do is to draw from the heart. That way the reader gets the most unique vision that artist can offer, as opposed to a

carbon copy of someone else.

"*Silent War* was excellent for allowing me to explore all these new methods, as it gave me 6 issues which had to be consistent, which is an excellent training ground for someone like me. I learned a lot in that series, made a lot of mistakes which led to discoveries and ultimately verified my notion that digital was the way forward. I know that my work elicits strong opinions from both sides, and I see this as a good thing. I'd like to please everyone all the time, but given a choice I'd rather have it the way it is now than to be overlooked and unmemorable to all."

Of course, finding the good stories that allow for such expression and original interpretations can be difficult, but Irving has been quite fortunate to work with a wide-variety of solid, top-talent writers. Despite the different approaches of many of his collaborators (Joe Casey, Adam Beechen, David Hine, Fabian Nicieza, Spurrier, Morrison) towards scripts and writing styles, Irving prefers a more open script because it allows him to tell his own stories. "I like to get a bit of freedom to interpret the action in my own way, to play to my strengths," Irving related, and he is attracted to projects that allow for flexibility and openness.

Although he recognizes that dealing with some writers or editors who often try to direct his designs by referencing other artists and instructing him to mimic their styles is always part of the gamble, he's discovered a greater freedom since moving to American comics and working with more avant-garde writers such as Spurrier and Morrison. Irving admits, however, that while he's drawn to the non-traditional approaches as a "welcome break from the norm," he knows that having a preference "is a bit like asking me what my favorite food is. I like a lot of food." Of course, Irving also hinted that readers may see a completely Irving-driven project in the near future with him handling both art and writing duties. Until then, however, this approach to comic art has earned him the respect of the industry and the opportunity to reunite with Grant Morrison on two *Batman*-themed projects this year alone.

Working again with Morrison after five years was a learning experience all over again for Irving. The artist joked that "it seems all new and fresh again, which may be due to it being a different beast for him this time, or maybe he has in fact altered his method for this book. Regardless of how he may have changed, the changes at Castle Irving are the ones I am more concerned with." When Irving received the script from Morrison for *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne #2*, he revealed that in the sequence between the Architect and Superman, Green Lantern, and their associates in the Vanishing Point, the scene

Cover detail from *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne*

was all described verbally by Morrison as opposed to thumbnail sketches Morrison has utilized in the past with different artists, but the Architect himself was designed by Grant.

“I tend to avoid jobs where the writer tells me how to do my job. I’ve been making comics for over 20 years in some form or another, I know my craft, and so if I get thumbnails from the writer I’m half inclined to mail back a pencil. Grant is good in that his working method (with me at any rate) seems to be more organic...the art informs the story and then that feeds back into the art and so on. I like this, as it means the work is more collaborative rather than the product of an illustrator rendering precise descriptions written by a writer who may well be obsessed with a completely different artist altogether.” Although only a single issue, *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne #2* has become a pinnacle for Irving of where he currently stands as an artist in terms of style and technique, a work that he is truly proud of in addition to the collaborative efforts on *Gutsville*.

With this Wednesday’s release of *Batman & Robin #13*, Irving begins his next phase not only as a digital artist, but also in his return once again to the streets of Gotham City alongside Morrison. In having such a history with Tim Drake, having worked with Dick Grayson (as Nightwing), and now, with *Batman & Robin*, working with Damian Wayne as Robin, and Dick as Batman, Irving has come full circle in his exposure to the various recent incarnations of Robin. Irving’s work on Drake and Grayson was very distinctively true to both of those characters.

When asked how his approach to Grayson’s new role as Batman and Damian stepping into the red, yellow, and orange sidekick role differs from his previous explorations in Gotham City, he revealed “I haven’t quite got a grip on who Grayson is yet, inside the costume anyway. The story gave me far more on Damien and I am totally taken by his way... he acts on the page already whereas I’m having to coax Grayson out a little bit. Because the visual archetypes are so strong, the difficulty lies in making this guy in the bat costume different to the other guy in the costume: Grayson has to be different to Wayne, and that’s the challenge I face right now. I feel when drawing Grayson that he still has issues as if he’s pretending to be Batman... I feel as uncomfortable drawing him in that suit as he feels wearing it, but I think that’s the point of all this. Batman is more than just the outfit. That contrasts with the other stories I did in Gotham. There, the characters were very well established and comfortable playing their roles. There was no sense of ambiguity about who they were, yet this current story is taking me to more morally interesting places.”

Although Irving is inheriting a series illustrated by

some of the industry’s top talent, it’s an honor that he equally shares alongside his predecessors on *Batman & Robin*. While providing only hints of what’s to come in subsequent issues, Irving has proven that his innovative and original approach to the comic medium consistently delivers a vivid, visual portrait that seamlessly blends with the narrative no matter who is penning it.

With his short tenure on one-shot stories and his mini-series with both Marvel and DC, to his creator-owned work with *Gutsville*, Irving has achieved the goals he established as a young artist. He jested though, “When I was younger I heard that if your hobby becomes your job, get another hobby. Reading comics is hard these days because all I do is analyze them. If I do read them I go for the weirder stuff, like Shaun Tan’s work etc. I also find a lot of the subject matter to be of a nature that is unappealing to me... after so many years of consuming fiction I’m left with a rather demanding palette and limited options to fill my plate.

“In recent years TV shows like *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost* have been major inspirations, more in terms of narrative structures than anything, though currently I have a hankering for some good solid comics which I can use to spark new ideas in my head.”

Cover detail *Gutsville*

