

Crimespree Interview

Crimespree: How did the Beast of Burden first come about and what brought the two of you together on it?

Evan Dorkin: Scott Allie had asked me to contribute an 8-page short story to a horror anthology he was putting together called the Dark Horse Book of Hauntings. I wanted to do a haunted house bit, I'm a sucker for stories like The Haunting of Hill House, Hell House, The Uninvited, and the like. After a few ideas that went nowhere I came up with the idea of a haunted doghouse, and the plot fell into place fairly quickly, and Scott gave me the go ahead. I wrote *Stray* with Jill in mind as the artist, which is one reason it has a storybook feel to it. Scott initially wanted me to draw it, but I begged off, this wasn't something I felt I could do a decent job on. Anyway, I can't remember if I contacted Jill or Scott did, but she agreed to do it, and it worked out even better than I could have hoped for.

JILL THOMPSON: I was really pleased to have been asked to illustrate this story. One because I loved the idea of a haunted doghouse and two, because I've been a huge fan of Evan's work for years and years. And was really excited to collaborate with him.

CS: Were you surprised with how well the series was received?

ED: That's hard to say, because on the one hand, folks at Dark Horse were very supportive and enthusiastic, and we won some awards, so, someone out there must have liked what we did. But I received very little feedback on the stories from actual readers, there seemed to be almost no chatter about the material online, there were very few reviews. The folks who did mention the stories were mostly enthusiastic about them, which was gratifying. And I was told a few professionals enjoyed them. But I felt like we were very much under the radar, most folks have never heard of the stories or the books they appeared in. I guess what surprised me the most was the fact that we ended up doing four stories, not to mention a series. *Stray*, the first story, wasn't designed to kick off a series. So, I can't complain.

JT: I'm assuming that there was lots of positive feedback to dark horse directly because they asked for more stories. I agree with even that I did not hear much buzz about them originally, but we won an Eisner award for our work in the anthologies, so that's a very positive review. And all the fans that have seen the work I'm doing on it seem really enthusiastic. I suppose I'll have to open my mouth about it more.

CS: When putting this crew together how did you decide what personalities they would have?

ED: It wasn't something I gave a ton of thought to, as I said, *Stray* was supposed to be a one-off story, I never planned to revisit the characters. When I started working on it, I wrote down a list of personality types I wanted in the group to fill certain roles and to play off one another; the "innocent dog", the "tough dog", the "stalwart dog", the "obnoxious dog", etc. I only had eight pages to work with, I wasn't going to be delving too deeply into their personalities beyond basic types. I cast the characters by going on the internet and looking up some dog breeds, the obnoxious dog was cast as a Pug, the stalwart dog a Husky, the haunted dog a Beagle, the nervous dog a Jack Russell, and so on. And I threw in a cat, for contrast and to have an outsider who could comment and question the proceedings. It was a fairly quick and mechanical operation, fleshed out, hopefully, through the dialogue and plot, and certainly through Jill's expressive art.

CS: I really enjoy the blend of mystery and suspense with the supernatural, I think the balance works well. Are you careful about the balance?

I don't really differentiate those elements, at least not in this series. It's all connected. What I'm trying to do is balance the genre elements with humor, and characterization, and emotion. I think if those things all work together, we have something that resonates, if people care about the characters, what happens to them will have more impact. I try to change tempo and mix things up if I can, if terrible things are happening I'll try to find a place to inject some humor, and if something ridiculous is happening sometimes I'll have something gruesome creep up. We're dealing with dogs and cats fighting the supernatural, which is a ridiculous concept. I work with that in mind, and I play off that, each story has the horror and monster stuff, but there's always glimpses into the lives and beliefs and culture of the animals. I'd like to think that if we did an issue without any supernatural elements we could still pull off an interesting story. Maybe. I don't know. I just don't want the book to be boring. That's the main thing.

CS: Jill, you manage to paint these animals so realistically and yet they each have such expressive faces and postures. How do you manage to blend the human characteristics and yet keep them animals?

JT: Well, dogs have those little eyebrow, so it's easier to inject a bit more expression onto their faces than it is with the orphan...ha! But, really, that's not too far off. I suppose I've had a bit of practice with Harry the werewolf from Scary Godmother. He's a good mix of canine and human and he's very over the top expressive. So I'm actually toning it down. It's not hard to tweak the animals features slightly to give the impression of human facial features. It's cartooning. I just keep the structure of an animal's head and manipulate it until I get the acting I need to tell the story.

CS: Is it a safe bet to assume you both have pets?

ED: I have two cats. We had four, but the oldest two died. I'm a cat person, but I'd love to have a dog, I've never had one as an adult, and my daughter, Emily, would certainly love to have a dog in the house. Maybe someday. Wish I had a monkey, but that's a whole different thing. I know Jill's always had pets. When I first met her, back in the 90's, she had something like 9 cats. Maybe more.

JT: I had nine cats, it's true. But that's when I lived in Ohio. I ended up with four and now, I've only got one of those fellas left. It's my little Archie. He's my last man standing. Evan met him once. In fact, I believe Archie even slept on Evan's feet one night when he stayed at our house. I love all the animals. Never had a dog, but I like them very much. And now I refer to all the neighborhood dogs by our character's names. "look, there's Pugsley! Oh, it's a Rex! "and so on. And, I use the cat, Sammy, that lives across the street as my model for the orphan.

CS: So far all the characters have managed to stay, if not safe, relatively unharmed. While the animals are really adorable this is by no means a kids book. With the horror elements is it a fine line you're walking as far as how gory to go with this?

ED: Jill's not crazy about painting anything too gory, or too nasty. We've had several discussions about blood and gore in the series, there's two sequences in the second issue in particular that we discussed at length, as Jill prefers to not work too explicitly, she likes subtle horror and shadows and inferring the horror. I'm fine with that, I like Val Lewton films and implied horror, but there are times where I think the blood is necessary. I'm not going for a splatter effect here, but we're dealing with animals with claws and fangs, and monsters, and some horrible things happen in these stories. Jack London with monsters, or whatever. The creatures fight, they don't use weapons, save for a few who use magic, so, it's tooth and nail. Not everything needs to be shown, but there are places where I think you need the impact of blood. And sometimes more. We don't revel in it, it's not exploitative, it's not the Bloody Best of Fangoria or anything like that. But it appears from time to time. For me, the

worst thing Jill's had to paint in the series doesn't have a drop of blood in it. Sometimes you try for an emotional punch in the stomach, and it doesn't have to be gory for it to work. Especially if you give people a reason to care about what happens to your characters.

The funny thing is, while Jill doesn't go in for the gore, she does a great job of it when she does slap the red paint around. There's a pack of zombie dogs in the third short story, and she did an amazing job with them, these creepy dead dogs with their skulls and innards and blood on display. She's great at painting cute animals, at landscapes and forests and graveyards, anyone who's followed her work on Scary Godmother or Magic Trixie knows that. I think folks will be surprised that she can pull off the gross stuff when she wants to. She just doesn't want to draw snakes. I keep threatening her with an all-snake menace issue. Snakes eating kittens.

JT: Oh jeez now i have that horrid image in my head, thanks Evan! I agree with everything that Evan said, i do prefer to let the reader's brain fill in most of the horror, so when i really decide to show it the blood or violence has much more impact. And, I'm not the greatest 'gore renderer". I find the emotional horror to be the most jarring. That's why I try so hard to make sure the characters are beings the reader identifies with and invests in. I want the raise of an eyebrow or the silent beat before an especially important statement to punch the reader in the gut as opposed to just try and shock them with any gory scenes. I think I've done a decent job of giving Evan the truly bloody where it's most important. As he mentioned in the zombie story. I wanted to keep all the yuck off panel until our heroes opened the gate, so the reader would be as shocked as the cast was at seeing the living roadkill at their door.

CS: Evan, I have to admit that the stories I've read so far are quite emotional, I really got caught up in the welfare of these dogs (and cat). Was it difficult to put that much punch into a short story? You really manage to get it all on the page, humor, suspense, mystery, drama, and plenty of scares.

ED: I tend to put a lot of stuff into my scripts, whether they're intended to have any emotional impact or just be stupid piss-takes or a batch of dumb gags. I just like to have a lot going on in a comic, I like background information, multiple characters, back and forth dialogue, bits of business and additional detail that help sell a character or a mood or an idea. It's been somewhat difficult for me to work everything in because I have to cut down the amount of panels per page to give Jill room to paint everything. She needs more space than she would if she was doing this in pen and ink. And I'm someone who uses a lot of panels most of the time, and I normally write a lot of dialogue, I tend to write like I talk, which is too much. So, that's been tough. I always wish I had an extra page or two, though. I'm sure most writers do when they're working on a script. It's been a learning experience.

JT: Evan and i , as creators, pace our storytelling completely differently. But that's okay. What I'm trying to do when i get his scripts is read through and find the main emotional impact of each page and build up to that point. There have been times where i've asked to be able to add more pages to a certain sequence because i wanted to make something Evan wrote last longer and hit the reader harder, but he had been constrained by our allotted page count. Luckily the editor was able to sacrifice something somewhere to make room for it. And, I've actually cried while drawing and painting these stories, some of them touched me so deeply. The story affected me deep in my heart. So if i can translate that feeling to the page, then the readers should be tearing up when appropriate.

CS: What can you tell us about this new story coming out?

ED: Demons, spirits, frogs, possession, resurrection, monsters, graveyards, voices from beyond, fights, raccoons, black metal song lyric quotes, rat mystics, cat gangs, magic, fire, sarcasm, mystery, death, and some other comic book-type stuff.

CS: What can we as readers do to help make sure the two of you spend the rest of your lives with this great group of pets?

ED: Buy a few thousand copies of the comic. Send us gold. Put us in your wills and commit suicide. Or just tell folks about the book if you like it.

JT: Please order multiple copies! One for your reading pleasure and several others to leave out amongst the general public. In coffee shops and airports and cafe's. Anywhere people might need to read to pass the time. Put a sticker inside the back cover that says "if u liked this comic, go to (name of comics shop or online store) to read the next exciting episode! Grass roots viral marketing. Give them a taste and they might seek out their next hit. And of course, spread the word around.

CS: It has to be satisfying to see how much advance buzz this is getting, even publisher's weekly mentioned it on their blog. Did you foresee this level of popularity when you first wrote the shorts?

ED: I don't know how much of a buzz we're actually generating, especially in comparison to the really popular stuff, but I'm certainly doing more interviews than I have in ages. So, that's something. But it's not something you can call popular, most folks have never heard of it. We'll see what happens after the actual series comes out, hopefully folks will like it and spread the word around and we'll get some decent interest. I have no idea how the comic will do, the market is so different from when I was putting comics out regularly in the 90's. The numbers are so relatively low on even the top selling series, it's crazy. I'm trying not to think about it because I'm paranoid and already bracing for bad news. Still, like I said, I never expected to be working on anything beyond the first 8-pg story. Everything else has been gravy.

JT: I think if you like these books- spread the word. Post online about it. Ask you library to carry them, tweet and such if you are a social networker. I think our book will stand out as there is nothing on the stands like it. I've never had a book on the cover of previews before and it's been quite a while since I've been asked to do so many store signings. I'm really proud of the work we're doing and I'm glad to be part of this team.

Side Bar

CS: You just won an Eisner for Magic Trixie, is the series continuing?

JT: I won an Eisner for best painter 2009 for my work on magic Trixie and magic Trixie sleeps over. There are three books out from Harper Collins and it seems that three will be all for now.

How do you go about writing Magic Trixie, are you channeling an inner 8 year old?

JT: Kinda. I remember how it feels to want to do things and having someone keep you from doing them actively or passively. And I wanted to focus on a magical character who needed to learn all of the tricks as opposed to being perfect at them, say like scary godmother. I wanted magic Trixie to have the same frustrations as the kids her age that might be reading the books. And all the fun facial expressions and kid perfect dialogue comes from studying my 8 nieces and my friend's children. I have a notebook that i keep with me to jot things down and make notations when i see a kid react to something in a way an adult never would. Kid logic is pretty spectacular.

And even though both series are painted with watercolor, they are completely different techniques used for Trixie than for beasts of burden. I tend to rely on a limited palette for beasts of burden to create an ominous mood whereas magic Trixie is kind of skittles colored.