

FRANK MILLER

AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR OF BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS



PUSH THE WALL

MY LIFE, WRITING, DRAWING, AND THE ART OF STORYTELLING

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*To my father, Robert Whitley Miller, who showed me what work
is.*

*And to my mother, Marjorie Brighman Miller, who told me I
could.*



Prologue:

A Letter to My Younger Self

It started in a cold part of a cold city, and I was a cold-bellied youngster from cold Vermont, a lot bigger in ambition than prospects. It was nasty in Manhattan that winter of 1976. The city was in passionate disrepair. The sidewalks were broken dishware. The pavement, third-world rubble. “New York is over,” said my West Coast friends. But there I was sharing a SoHo tenement flat with my high school friend Josie, learning from her so many of the city’s secrets.

It wouldn’t have looked like it to anybody, but this was chapter one of what was, for me, a grand adventure.

Those long winter walks you’re taking? The ones on which you stubbornly embark, despite Manhattan’s frigid winds and lurking dangers and the unending, smudgy gray skies above? Those daily journeys are your way of welcoming life and experience, and doing some soul-forging of your own.

I’ll place a big, fat bet that, right now, you’re saying to yourself, “What the hell is he talking about? I just love the city streets. And it’s the best way to pass the time when you have very little money.” And you have a point. To walk and wonder is free of charge, even now in 2025, when the fat cats and power brokers would charge for the air if they could. But, more than that, for you, New York is a Romantic place, in the poetic and artistic sense, romance with a capital *R*. There’s romance of the heart, too, of course, and even objectively beautiful spots—Central Park in the snow comes to mind, as does the New York Public Library’s Rose Reading Room on a rainy, fall afternoon. And most romantic of all is the city’s soaring sense of *ambition*, exemplified by its glorious bridges and sky-piercing office towers. Romance is synonymous with love, ambition—and adventure. Life *must* be an adventure. That, or it is only dreary torment. But Romance isn’t really what you’re after at the moment. All that can wait.

What you’re seeking is the city itself—the steam vapors and the flickering neon; the barflies, the hustlers, and the predawn hours when deals are done and banks are robbed; the sooty water tanks atop shabby buildings and empty diners on lonely, midnight-cloaked avenues; the slick, rainy streets after dark and the way they reflect the city back to itself. And you want to discover your place in this strange metropolis—writing and drawing day and night, letting it hum and filter through your pencil and into your creations. All those old movies you’re watching on *Million Dollar Movie* are flooding you with the visual and verbal

dialectic of classic American Film Noir. You want to live in that world; create wisecracking heroes and villains in black hats. You want to somehow get all that cigarette smoke and gunpowder burn into your drawings and dialogue. For you, despite its darkness, the rotting Big Apple is nothing short of a jeweled city, a circuit board of emotion and fascination, the dingy New York grid holding your imagination like the Lake District did for Wordsworth. Keats had his nightingale and that famous Grecian urn; you've got Hell's Kitchen, South Street, and the Lower East Side.

You want to be inspired and to make it happen—taste the fruit of your ambition. But you're now realizing it's tougher in reality than it was when you were dreaming it up back home in Vermont. Crime-ridden, drug-rattled, and disenfranchised, the city has certainly seen brighter days. It's worth remembering that in 1975, just a year before you moved to the Village, New York was considered so bleak and neglected that President Gerald Ford reportedly told the entire city to "Drop Dead" while playing hardball with federal loans for cleaning up the place. This later proved apocryphal, but it doesn't matter—the damage was done, America turned its back on Gotham. You didn't care, though, you moved there anyway, you were answering a call. You saw right past all that, focusing instead on the city's unceasing pulse, great buildings, and mythological power. So what if it had more than its fair share of thieves and druggies and lost souls? You take the good with the bad. And the good? The place was a hub of free thought, creative drive, and, of course, comic book legends, the ones you've looked up to since you were a kid. Hooked after your first few visits when you were seventeen, a drawing table in New York was your destiny.

So, on this February day in 1976, as you brace for the cold to go out once more to walk and experience, you're still feeling it—that buzz from the city and your bubbling aspirations. By the time you're reading this, you know what happened next, but allow me to recount it here so I can relive it.

This is how I remember it.

As you step out into the street, you realize the city buzz is wearing off. You're hungry. (As you well know, I had an adolescent's view on things, so I didn't do much of a job of feeding myself. I'd gorge on peanut butter sandwiches to save up for a bacon cheeseburger dinner.) But now it dawns on you that the gnawing pit in your stomach is more than hunger pain. Worry is seeping in, stirring up trouble. There's more lint in your pocket than change. You also realize that the soles of your shoes are so thin that one could consider them nonexistent. You start asking the big questions: Why am I here? What am I going to do? Is this really what life does to a person? And you're asking the small, more expedient ones, too: Where's my next meal going to come from? How am I going to pay the rent? Poverty isn't simple; it's endlessly complicated.

And it's then that you start conjuring home. But it's not Vermont in the snow, it is Vermont in the spring and summer, when it's warm. You picture the family

house and the town of Berlin, and you see the rivers and streams and undulating Vermont-green hills—your American Eden. You hear the waters of the creek where you hunted for tadpoles and crawfish and built dams from mud and rock. Dinner's served picnic-style at a long table overlooking the family home, dear old "Ledgewood," a big old house full of handmade quilts and fresh-cut flowers and wall-to-wall books and noisy kids. All six of your brothers and sisters are there and your father looks out the window, enjoying a very rare day off. As she spreads out the food, your mother, while not in her nurse's scrubs, remains every bit the nurturer, the person you most want to see when you're not feeling yourself. You start to realize just how beautiful it all was, just how lucky you had it. Let me tell you, though, even now as you're reading this, you're only a quarter of the way to an understanding. You won't fully grasp it till you're much older. You'll go back home to visit, and you'll realize Thomas Wolfe was right—you truly can't go home again. The place will look smaller, the water will have lost a bit of its glisten. Some of the wonder will have left the woods. The picnic table by the pond will be gone and your parents, too. That old tire you swung on, giving yourself a view of the whole valley? It's gone. So is the ancient maple on which it hung. And then "home" will become a part of the castle of memory to which you retreat when the world becomes too much.

But I digress. It's just then, when you're pining for home and starting to panic, that you look around and realize you're standing on a sidewalk in far west Greenwich Village with no direction home, but not in a good way, like in Dylan's song. You're hungry and you're broke. You look down, and under your left foot, poking out from your near-soleless shoe, you see a twenty-dollar bill. You pick it up and you are in awe. Sometimes you've just got to believe in angels. There's instant relief, of course—there's at least *some* money for food. You can build on that. The panic subsides and you're starting to feel restored, even a little warmth returns. It's a golden moment and you definitely feel it—your luck changing, a small shift in the world. It all seems possible again, your reason to be comes back. You feel the need to draw and write—to think and create. You want to get back to the apartment, back to your drawing table. But first you need food.

You march off to the old Sheridan Square coffee shop you frequent. The woman behind the counter couldn't be nicer. She winks at you as if she knows what happened. You stop shivering and you order a coffee. You pull the twenty out to admire it. You don't ponder the why or how of it, you just think, "So this is how it goes." You return it to your pocket, but quickly check to make sure it's really there. You order a bacon double cheeseburger and fries. You swear it's the best meal of your life. You will never forget it.

And I don't have to tell you, because you're now living it, but this was a hinge moment, it was a genuine turning point from that lucky twenty. Neal Adams, the comic book master who you pestered and who agreed to look at your stuff, finally said that your drawings were "no longer horrible." You, and the hundreds of

others he would help in his lifetime. He was the stern sensei, determined to move comic books forward into an era even *he* could not have imagined. Adams was rough on you, yes, but you were lucky that he took you on. Always blunt and demanding, he was also endlessly generous with his time. His presence was electric. Give yourself a pat on the back because it was your persistence and sense of purpose that landed you by his side. The man taught you some valuable lessons. Principal among these: Despite what so many people tell you, go ahead and take criticism personally. Take it damn seriously. Let it hurt. That will make you remember it. That will make you learn from it. Humiliation can make you crumple, yes, but it can also make you tough.

For what's it worth, I still think this way and use it to propel my work. So that's a lesson for life right there. And I'm here to tell you that it was Neal who introduced you to the notion that an artist has a particular role in the world: he or she is a problem solver. Artists know how things work. They figure it all out on the page, on the canvas, on the whatever. I bet you spout off about the importance of failure and craft to anyone within earshot now. Well, it was Neal who beat that into you. That's because, either by words or example, Stan Drake and other mentors Neal may have had drilled that into him. A dedication to craft and process and an undying commitment to hard work is the only true path to artistic achievement.

Thanks to Neal you're now at Western Publishing's Gold Key Comics. I know Gold Key is struggling, but the whole industry took a hit when television and animated cartoons changed the game. Those holdouts from the McCarthy era over at the Comics Code Authority aren't helping matters either. Hard to believe that with all that's out there in film and television—particularly in the mid- to late seventies, a time known for dark and challenging art, Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* being an obvious example—those stuffed shirts down in that tiny office can still wield power and censor anything, much less comic books. It's a difficult time for your chosen medium, but it won't last. So hang tight.

Gold Key's not exactly where you want to be for the rest of your life, but don't let ambition cloud your judgment. It's work and you're damned grateful for it. Those three-page *Twilight Zone* comics have taught and will continue to teach you more than you realize. (They'd better! Your per-page rate for finished black and white artwork is a whopping *twenty-five bucks*, putting you way below the poverty line.) Rest easy, you're exactly where you need to be—toiling in relative obscurity. "Paying your dues," as they call it, and learning your craft, line by line, inch by inch: the anatomy, the perspective, the expressions, the buildings, the cars, the million drawing problems, the million drawing decisions, and the million *cartooning* decisions, all in your hands and nobody else's. All of it is up to you and only you. Besides, you learn how to draw a decent enough Rod Serling.

Grappling with all that now, you're trying to harness the power that's flowing from the act of figuring it all out, and from your influences, too—Kirby, Eisner, and Adams; Film Noir; crime novels; and those Westerns you still love as much as you did when you were a boy. You want to puzzle out how to blend them into your own style, to create something new while not forgetting those who came before you. It's a tall order, remember that. I know patience isn't easy for you, but you've got to embrace it, even cherish it. You're going to need it.

Some of the old-timers you encounter there are industry legends, like *Flash* artist Carmine Infantino, and old Joe Orlando, veteran of the 1950s EC Comics line and longtime assistant to the legendary Wallace Wood. All this will benefit you in so many ways, particularly after your next professional move to Marvel Comics and all *those* adventures to come, where a who's who of comic book giants await. You'll settle into your next job and find your voice, get into a groove. You'll find that thing that's been eluding you. But I don't want to ruin any future surprises. Suffice it to say, there is so much more in store for you. New York will provide, and your hard work and dedication to the process, not the outcome, will pay off in huge dividends. The chapters of your life are full of revelations, twists, and turns, and more of those hinge moments that alter your course.

Like I said, I don't want to go into specifics of what's coming down the pike—I want you to experience them as you are meant to: at full velocity and in intense and vivid colors. But I can't resist giving you a quick sketch. Believe it or not, you are going to reimagine one of the world's most treasured superheroes. More than that, you're going to do it in your own way and in your own style. The world will embrace your vision. This will bring you success, some fortune, and a lot of madness—more than you're prepared for. There will be ego trips, excess, the trapdoors and funhouse mirrors of fame, fiery fallout, and a rock bottom, but from the ashes Opportunity and Freedom will rise. You'll leave the throb and gloom of New York for sunny Los Angeles and the bizarro world of Hollywood. In Los Angeles, you will embrace collaboration, witness astounding levels of expertise in every area imaginable, and learn from others, even those you'd never dream you'd work with. And you'll discover they value work and creativity just as much as you do. You'll take on new titles and you'll see through a new lens, both literally and figuratively.

I'm not one to pull punches, so I'll be straight with you: the obstacles will stack up along the way. Your hero's journey is riddled with them. There are villains out there in the world and also more than a few skulking around in your inner life, too. You don't know it yet, but artists have to contend with the world, sometimes over and over again. On the horizon is rejection, and I hate to break it to you, but it pretty much stays there. On the flip side, failure becomes just another word for

opportunity. Thick skin is required. Hard work is as vital as inspiration and humility turns out to be an orchard.

So the sooner you develop a sense of humor, the better. Never ever forget that a setback is a lesson, and an outright failure is nothing less than a master class.

I don't like to lean on advice platitudes, so I'll give it my own spin.

To contend with all this, you do have a handful of superpowers. Simple ones, really.

You are persevering and devoted to your art—you don't give up easily and learned early on to take one on the chin or in the stomach. This will allow you to get back in the ring time after time. You're here to tell stories with pictures and words. Anything or anybody who gets in the way of that is an obstacle, or worse.

You are receptive and infinitely curious. Use that. Don't get bored. If you're bored, those who look at your art and read your writing will be bored, too. If you do get bored, burn it all down and start over.

Torch the institutionalized laziness dressed up as "tradition" that strangles fresh ideas. Be unafraid to radically challenge the status quo. A sense of artistic freedom and a horizon of possibility will be your reward.

Always remember: A good story starts with a problem. Your hero or heroine must solve this problem. He or she will face obstacles and encounter rivals, allies, friends, and enemies in seeking to solve that problem. It's that simple—and that difficult.

This is as good a place as any to bring this to a close. I know you're itching to get back to it. I don't want to be the one to stand in your way. Work is never done, which is a good thing, since it will be the one thing that lifts you when you need it most. And our kind of work takes everything you've got. So be diligent and bold, two essentials for living an examined, creative life. But before you go back to the drawing table, take another long walk. The metropolis awaits. There's a villain and hero just a couple of blocks from where you sit, and a storyline prowling in the alleyway. And always keep a twenty in your pocket as a reminder and a talisman. I wish I would have. But, if I'm going to practice what I preach, I suppose it's never too late to start.

Do or Die,



LESSON 1

PUSH THE WALL, DEFY THE CODE

Find Out What You're Made Of and See
Where You Can Go



How to start a story?

At the ending.

Know your ending.

I repeat: *Know your ending.*

Before you launch your ships, you've got to know where they're going. Once you've locked in the conclusion, your every scene will be somehow aimed like a spearpoint at that ending. There. Now you can start. Tell whoever's watching who the hero is, and then get that hero into trouble *right quick*. By getting your hero into trouble, he'll show you who he is. And the odds have got to be against our heroes—that's what made the story of the three hundred Spartans a source of lasting inspiration.

You'll need your backstories, too, for all your characters and for your world. Some of it you can make up as you go along, sure, but the more preparation, the better. Retrofitting can be a clumsy trap.

So prepare carefully. Know where you're going. Then start the action *as late as possible*—throw the poor reader into it at the *last possible second*. Embroider as you go—details will provide themselves.

But let's not forget, your characters need an environment—a setting replete with atmosphere and obstacles to overcome and villains to defeat. A world that shapes them and hurls them into light and shadows. Take *Sin City*: Who is Marv without the grime and grift of Basin City? And the New York City underworld is the perfect incubator for Elektra's transformation into Kingpin's chief assassin. A place is often defined by those that inhabit it, the restless souls who wreak havoc on it, redeem it, or seek solace from it. Batman's relentless pursuit of justice casts a light on Gotham's darkest corners.

My comics often start as unformed masses of character, place, and language that form in my brain and make their way onto my drawing board. There's nothing mystical about it. More than anything, it all begins with a hunger for a type of story (Crime? Horror? Romance?), then to character (Hero? Victim? Villain?)—then to world. And this world and this character must both reflect and define each other.

But for our purposes here, let's start with a world. Vermont of my childhood. To quote the Bard, I came mewling and puking into life in Olney, MD, which, in 1957, was a community in transition, a small town in the sprawling Maryland farmland mutating into a DC suburban satellite in the post-World War II boom. After leaving Maryland, we spent a short time in the Berkshire mountain town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, but it was Berlin, Vermont, where the world came into focus for me. I took shape on the drawing board of central Vermont, in its idyllic countryside where rivers and forests ramble and gather in the foothills of the Green Mountains. Mother Nature was kind to Vermont, that's for sure. And Vermont was kind to me—I came into my own in the cupped hands of a natural wonderland.

Berlin is a half-hour walk over a mountain and a granite quarry from the spires and domes of Montpelier, Vermont's capital, twenty minutes by bike. But most of my exploring was on the railroad tracks near my home, the cranky old "Dog River," and the low mountain behind my parents' house; all this I took to be my private fantasy land. In one of our lengthy conversations, Will Eisner told me that "Memory is impressionistic." And he was certainly right about that. Will also said that to understand what drives your art and fuels your creative life, you've got to go back as far as you can. At the time, I took that to mean to journey back through human history to look at cave paintings and hieroglyphs, which I did, and it proved essential. But now I know that he also meant to investigate the primitive paintings of your own personal history, too: remember the people, the images, the colors, the moods, all those things that made their mark early on.

Autumn jumps to mind—just the mention of "fall" triggers remembering. A season of shortening days and colder nights, the first iron bite of winter in the air and raked leaves in crumply heaps. And one of Vermont's calling cards is her fall leaves. But, seeing them for the first few times as a kid, those reds and golds seemed otherworldly. Some of the leaves laden with color, painted by a heavy hand. While others were brushed with a flick of the wrist. Bursts of colors, brighter because of their contrast with the long shadows that also come in that season. The forest floor of the woods near our house: the final resting place for moldy leaves and spider-legged, fallen limbs spotted with lichen and crawling with beetles and maggots. But mostly, those woods were as full of strangeness and miracles to me as an alien planet. Only a city kid would think that staring down a bullfrog is boring, or that crickets are quiet. Spend a night in the forest—there be monsters. These are the same woods where I would later crouch, dressed in my Superman pajamas, and spring out with arms stretched forward in imaginary flight to surprise my big brother, Steve.

Winter in Vermont arrives fast and harsh, and it stays forever. Blankets of white for months. Heavy slow-falling flakes quietly amassing by red barns and along narrow roads. And ice. Tons and tons of ice. The smudged mirror of a frozen pond. The red ball atop my oldest sister Anne's stocking cap and the

silver-buckled black snow boots of my sister Magaret as they set off into the white veil of a snowy morning after learning school was out for the day. And those icy trees. It was as if some great hand had gently pulled them from the ground, turned them upside down, dipped them into a glistening gel, and then lovingly returned them to the snowy fields and creek banks. Doing all this without making a sound or letting us see even a second of the work. It was the land of Robert Frost and Norman Rockwell, a land rich in arts and crafts and storytelling.

And then there's Summer. A season that passes in a heavenly blur of cheery picnics and breathtaking exploration. It is here where the "city" of Montpelier takes form: stacked red brick buildings on wide streets—grand boulevards to me—and, along the curbs, hulking Ford Fairlanes and Pontiacs parked one in front of the other, clunky but big-engine-charged metal beasts at rest. I'm downtown with my parents and Steve, standing outside the Capitol Theater on State Street. We're waiting in line for tickets to the Saturday matinee movie and the Capitol's jutting, V-shaped awning is throwing a cape-like shadow on the sunbaked concrete.

The movie theater: that was another wonderland. The stories on the screen captivated me as much or more than the children's books back at home on the shelf. How I loved exploring the other worlds captured in those vintage children's books, which were passed down to us through the generations in my mother's family. The stories cast a spell over me and I pored over the images, particularly the ones that featured Arthur Rackham's watercolors and pen-and-ink drawings. They drew me in, took me on a journey, and lit up my imagination. So I started drawing as a very young child and immediately knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. One summer afternoon, I took a pile of typewriter paper that I had folded over, stapled, and drawn on to create a rudimentary comic and dropped it on the kitchen table in front of my mother. I then announced to her, "This is what I'm doing for the rest of my life." I was five years old. Utterly in character, my mother, not missing a beat, said simply, "You can do anything you want to if you set your mind to it."

Summer was also a time to roam free outside, from dawn to dusk, if I wanted. But I wasn't a Boy Scout, I was too young to be one. I was just a tagalong kid. I loved being out by the water and in the woods, but in my own way—I didn't like being told what to do or how to do it. The Boy Scout thing was a big deal back in the 1960s, but it just wasn't for me. Camping was fun, but I made a lousy soldier-in-training. My father, Robert, was a carpenter and electrician by trade and the Army posted him in Greenland during World War II. He was good with his hands, and his training served us well when it came to camping in the woods, especially in the middle of a Vermont winter. He could start a fire in a blizzard. Dad was an Irishman's Irishman. Raised in New York's Hell's Kitchen, he was a strong, squarish fellow with a lantern jaw and craggy, Bifrost eyebrows that perched over piercing, icy sky-blue Viking eyes. Hell's Kitchen and I seem to be destined for each other. My dad was a child there, and my career kickoff was Marvel's

Daredevil, featuring a hero from Hell's Kitchen. And after manufacturing jobs fled Manhattan and freed up big, rough-hewn spaces perfect for artists, Hell's Kitchen became my workplace and home.

When my dad wasn't on a job, he volunteered as a "scouter," a troop leader responsible for training the boys and guiding their camping trips and work projects. My oldest brother, also named Robert, was an Eagle Scout and born explorer. Though it was in the realm of the mind that he did most of his exploring: in music, opera, astronomy, physics, philosophy, history, and science fiction. But it was my brother Steve who was the truest scout of all, and the son who most carried on our father's legacy as a carpenter—in fact, an architect—as well as an all-around handyman, able to repair or jury-rig any mechanical problem that comes along. Steve was and still is a gifted cartoonist and artist. When we were kids, I drew superhero adventures and Steve spun out World War I adventures with his *Stevie Spad*™. Also, like Dad, Steve was and remains a man of good will and hard work. By the time I was ten, I was tagging along with my dad and my brothers on their scouting adventures, and I even helped with some of their community projects. Looking back now, it seems like I spent entire summers in their company.

We cleared paths in the woods, built foot bridges across creeks, pulled weeds in church parking lots, and built quirky bird houses for some of Berlin's elderly crowd. I really enjoyed the latter, because I liked working with my hands—just like my father and brothers—and the old folks fascinated me. They so resembled some of the people and personalities that Norman Rockwell captured in his cartoons and illustrations. I did some of my first sketches after hanging out with these real-life American characters.

We hiked, pitched tents, and huddled around flint-and-steel-lit campfires. It was at Boy Scout camp when the world turned over for me. Someone handed me a well-worn copy of the paperback book *Tales of the Incredible*, and the hook was set for life. Not since I was a toddler watching Max and Dave Fleischer's *Superman* cartoons had I been so *transported*.

A collection of eight magnificently illustrated sci-fi stories pulled from the pages of the legendary EC Comics, it worked a strange magic over me. Under a dome of stars and by the dancing fire light, the tiny mass-market book grew in my hands—I was mesmerized, every page was a revelation. The artwork was so involving—dragon-like aliens, astronauts, and their rocket ships on moonlike planets—and the stories were absorbing. At first it seemed like a long way from the world of Arthur Rackham, but as I looked deeper, I saw the similarities. Rackham's images and the ones in *Tales* were just so *alive*. They seemed ready to jump off the page. I rose early from my tent the next morning so I could read more, and, when it was time to break camp, I rolled it up in my sleeping bag for the hike home. In a way, it's been with me ever since. For the next few years, I read it over and over again, poring over the illustrations until the pages fell out.



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frank MILLER

HELL and BACK

A **SIN CITY** love story



I later figured out that the source of that strange magic was EC Comics' dedication to making evocative but outrageous art. The illustrations were (and still are) some of the best you'll find anywhere, not just in comics, and the subject matter was meant to push some buttons. Rebelling against McCarthyism and the staid and repressed 1950s, EC published words and images that pushed the boundaries—they traded in both high art and shock value. They delved into genres that comics hadn't dared to touch yet, like horror and fantasy. And the writers explored mature, even forbidden themes, such as environmentalism, nuclear disarmament, and the miseries of war. Comics weren't just for kids; they could also challenge the status quo through high quality art and unblinkered storytelling. Comics entered blood-pumped, hormone-drenched, drooling, bloodthirsty *adolescence* with abandon. Along the way they showed just how good comics could get, showcasing maestros like Wallace Wood, Johnny Craig, Harvey Kurtzman, and many others. Comics became more popular—with readers of every age—than seemed possible. So of course the censors came running like a pack of bug-eyed monsters.

Enter the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a crusty remnant of "Red Scare" censorship and the prim morality of postwar America. They sold themselves as a regulatory body to save American children from harm and cultural decadence. But the truth was nothing short of sinister: the "Code" surely pandered to war-weary parents now afraid of their own rebellious children. Likewise, it was drafted with the obvious intent to shut down the most high-quality, successful comics publisher of the time. Comics magazine titles using the words "horror" or "terror" were expressly forbidden. The same for stories featuring ghouls, vampires, etc. I first came across these crown jewels of fifties comics in paperback reprints with titles like *Tales from the Crypt*, *Tales of the Incredible*, and *The Autumn People*—remnants of a lost golden age of horror, science fiction, and crime comics. Great comics, all censored before I was born, during the disgraceful siege on comics' best publisher, EC Comics. Back in the 1950s, a pop psychiatrist led the attack, and the battle cries fed into parents' fear of their own children. Blame the comic books, wailed the shrink, and the pile-on began. Most disgracefully, the other publishers joined in, forming a conspiratorial "Comics Code" that named EC Comics by title names, thereby strangling a young story form just as it entered adolescence. But the legend of EC survived, kept alive and beloved by the comics tribe. They do more than stand the test of time; they still inspire.

It was from EC Comics that I learned to always push the walls that others constructed, to challenge the strictures others put in place to stifle and smother. Later on in the 1970s, when I moved to New York and settled into my first jobs at DC and Marvel Comics, I had to grapple with the CCA, which was still around, proof positive that any base of power will stay in place until it is forcibly extinguished. In my opinion, a cabal of sanctimonious bores created the CCA for one purpose—to stop my beloved EC Comics in their tracks. But, of course, once

they got a little taste of power, they found their footing, and then tried to lord over the comic book trade. Even in seventies New York, a place wholly consumed by that decade's experimentation and nihilistic excess, the CCA maintained their position as a regulating body from their ratty little office north of the Flatiron, sticking their nose in and sharpening their red pencils for a dying cause.

Case in point, here are two of the more ludicrous principles of their Code: "All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated" and "Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly, nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader." If you stick by these rules, then it follows that you'd have to censor John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, too. His Satan, the ultimate supervillain, is the most interesting and alluring character in the whole epic poem. Likewise, say goodbye to *Dracula*, or, say, the Bible.

This "Code" was not in any way legitimate. It had zero legal power, and it was just a mush-up of parental fear; opportunistic, posturing politicians; and cynical publishers, who saw it all as a win-win proposition. They could wipe out the highest quality line of comics, cheating EC out of its success, all the while portraying themselves as saviors. Recounting all this sickens me to this day.

Up to this point in my career, my mantra was simple: "Keep pushing the wall." It surfaced from my deep appreciation for EC's dogged pursuit of good, scary, sexy, and exciting comics. But when the CCA and those who blindly followed their rules stepped on my work, I added the clause "Defy the Code" to it. This last, of course, eventually took on a more appropriate tone: first, *challenge* the Code; then, finally, *kill the damn thing*.

When the CCA bounced one of my *Daredevil* stories that was based on the angel dust scare in New York City at the time, I thundered down to their office to make my case. The folks who worked there were buttoned-up types, throwbacks to the straitlaced Archie Comics days. I shared my reasons and said my piece, and the morality police cleared the story. I think they were surprised that anybody even knew they were still there.

Push the Wall and Defy the Code. To this day, I still live and make art by following these simple dictums. Now the meaning of them and what I use them for has changed over my career. For one, there is no actual Code to rebel against anymore. It's hard to defy something that's dead. But I've found other things, of course, because I like to push the envelope and make a stand. It propels the comic art forward, which is how all art forms survive. But I also like the energy that comes from it—there is immense creative freedom that follows the simple acts of thinking for yourself and following your instincts, especially if it challenges the norms. I'm a little like Johnny Strabler, Marlon Brando's character in the 1953 outlaw biker film, *The Wild One*: when asked what he's rebelling against, Strabler answers, "Whaddaya got?"

I maintain that the comic medium was, still is, and will forever remain an outlaw art form, and that's the way it should be. I've also learned over time—and with age—that while it's important to keep a rebellious spirit and blow through the false strictures, you've still got to recognize artistic limitations and frameworks. You should always value the craftsmanship, even when you're in defiance mode and kicking down doors. Remember, what you're doing is taking down other people's walls, kicking other people's doors in, but you've got to have a methodology, logic, and structure. Take chances and go wild, but always return to the craft, those essentials that keep your story moving. If you're going to drive your car off a cliff, you had better have another car waiting at the bottom, and make sure it's one that runs. And always watch out for anybody that claims they are “protecting the children” from *fiction*. I'll shout it out till the cows come home: censorship is *always* stupid.

When you're in the full rush of artistic freedom and rebellion, take a breath and ask yourself, “Does this feel right? Is this working?” Jerry Seinfeld's question when he's writing his jokes applies here: “Is this anything?” I can feel it down in my gut. I know when something isn't really working in the drawing or the writing, and I remind myself that you can't use everything that vomits out of your skull. That's why I do so much preliminary work and lean on the craft. And that's what the trash can is for. And that's what your editor is for. Creative work takes *passion*. It takes *intelligence*. It takes *craft*. Caution is not your friend. Neither is fear, especially if that fear is somebody else's.

I use tracing paper to rough out the images. With pencils and markers, I draw, redraw, draw over, erase, draw again; I wrestle with it until I find it: the lasting image that emerges from this search. Then I lay out the story on matte paper and, as I go, I cut and slash as if I were in a film editing room. A lot gets thrown away, like film on an editor's floor. I can't afford to be precious with the words *or* the pictures—if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. I've got a nice big trash can next to my drawing board just for this purpose. I'm not one to have quotes hanging around for inspiration, but, if I did, the first to make the cut would certainly be the one from the British writer Arthur Quiller-Couch: “Murder your darlings.”

Pushing the wall in bold provocation and quietly honing your craft are not mutually exclusive impulses. The opposite is true, they often work hand in hand, and, in most cases, if you have one without the other, you really won't *have anything*. More than that, one can save you from indulging too much in the other. But an overfixation on craft will zap the emotion from your work and slow you down, and the work will drift into a study of anatomy or architecture. When one leads you astray or starts to bore you, lean on the other. Never forget: if you bore yourself, you're almost certainly boring everybody else.

Sin City was me at my freest. I remember there were times when I said to myself, let's see just how much of “the Code” I can violate on one page. I wasn't breaking the rules; I was making new ones. But it was also me finding my deepest

commitment to my craft. While the devil on my shoulder was ripping up the rule book, the angel on the other reminded me that “Hey, there’s only so much you can do here.” As a result, the writing and subject matter take it right to the edge, and, in some cases, right over it, but the starkness of the art—the lines and the black and white—while inventive in its own way, was also the outcome of my steady adherence to the limitations of comic art. I pushed, but did my pushing within a framework.

So join the two when you can. Tune into the joy of craft and revisit your original inspirations, those elements from art and life that propelled you to Push the Wall and Defy the Code in the first place. I often revisit those early but vivid impressionistic memories of Vermont, experience their colors again, and feel their emotional impact. My life as an artist was born there. And I take a turn through my current copy of *Tales of the Incredible*. Last time I took it off the shelf, though, I noticed the pages were starting to fall out.



BUT I'VE GOT NO RIGHT TO
BELLYACHE. THIS LITTLE
MISSION I'M ON IS THE
LEAST I COULD DO.

THERE'S A KIND OF
DEBT YOU CAN'T *EVER*
PAY OFF, NOT ENTIRELY.
AND THAT'S THE KIND
OF DEBT I OWE GAIL.

BESIDES, I'VE GOT
REASONS OF MY *OWN*
FOR TAKING ON
THIS SIG. HELL, I'D
HAVE *VOLUNTEERED*
FOR IT, IF THEY
HADN'T ASKED ME
FIRST.

I JUST WISH THIS
DEAR OLD *BEETLE*
COULD MAKE IT
ALL THE WAY TO
THIRD GEAR
WITHOUT SHAKING
MY *TEETH* HALF-
WAY OUT OF MY
GUMS--



--AND THAT IT
COULD CARRY ME
TWENTY YARDS
WITHOUT THE
CARBURETOR
KICKING OUT A
FAT ONE.

LESSON 2

WELCOME CHAOS

Embrace Spontaneity and Creative Explosions



I love drawing nasty shards of shattering glass and ragged bursts of gunfire. I adore swirling hair and rumpling trench coat cloth and frothing spittle. The explosiveness punctuates the story's melodrama and brings energy and apprehension to the page. And I like emphasizing the visceral—the sweat and blood of life. This pulls the reader in and drags them through the narrative. If the character is in trouble or really upset, I'll show sweat streaming down their face or flying right off them. Teeth clenched like psychotic Chiclets. This is comics qua comics, with no apologies, as pure and powerful in Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* as it is in Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*. Robert Crumb was the master of this, and his big-foot comic style, with all those distorted caricatures and exaggerated body parts—including big feet, bulging eyes, and raging hard-ons—lent itself to huge drops of sweat and splashes of slobber, not to mention other bodily fluids. Crumb secured his throne in the cartoon pantheon by reviving—and releasing—the wild, wondrous, savage, reckless id of the comic-book cartoonist. It doesn't hurt that he can draw like a maestro, either. And it's no secret that I don't shy away from blood. In *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye*, gobs of it hang from a dismembered limb and wild spatters fly around Batman's fist in *The Dark Knight Returns*, along with a molar or three.

The spatter is particularly important because it gives your picture a reckless, unpredictable element. It can be justified as blood, snow, sweat, rain, mist, or just plain atmosphere. *Sin City: Family Values* is, graphically, a joyous romp of spattered white paint and liquid frisket.

Over the years, I've fine-tuned my spattering technique, but it's still a hell of a lot of fun to do. I dip a toothbrush into ink and thumb back the bristles to send droplets flying across the drawing. For a more threatening, piercing effect, snapping a loaded brush across the wrist will cut a *wound* across your drawing. Controlled chaos. I know where it's going and have a general idea of how it will look, but not the exact pattern it will create nor the size of the drops. Because of that, it feels out of control and alive. The French call this a *frisson*. These frissons and moments of excitement often come from the tumult of sudden occurrences and eruptive moments when everything goes haywire. Just a simple flick of the

wrist. And then, BAM: a spark and a thrilling flash of impulse. I'm not drifting in thought, I'm in the middle of an act—I'm putting something in motion, giving it life. I'm down there in the craziness of process. For a glorious few seconds, it's chaos, and chaos can be a beautiful thing. Just as it can horrify. The (more or less) task is to let Loki dance his wild dance, all the while keeping him in your command.

New York City in the 1970s was a shabby, crime-infested metropolis, full of junkies and grifters and rotten cops. Violence reigned and Fear was second in command. Most of the Bronx looked like a war zone and uncollected trash left a heinous stench in much of Manhattan. Dealers and pimps controlled the corners. Barflies and broken dreamers held court under the neon in bars across the city. The Lower East Side, still hanging on to its early-twentieth-century identity, was a wasteland of vacant tenements and street gangs. Alphabet City was practically a no-go zone for both citizens and police, and in the far West Village's Meat Packing District, ex-cons turned butchers and meat haulers sprayed blood off the cobblestones in the wee hours of the morning after their saws finally went silent. It was a chaotic place, and it was not for the faint of heart.

But my unbound heart was set on New York City ever since my early-life discovery of the joys of drawing, which only intensified as comics became my sole driving passion. My ambition hadn't changed since those first drawings on typing paper that I presented to my mother: I was going to New York City to make comic books. Sure the city was violent, but it was also the hub of comic books and had been since the beginning. Marvel and DC were there, and all my real-life heroes were either still there bent over their drawing boards or they had spent formative time in the city, honing their skills and learning the lessons that only New York can teach you. Captain America himself, Jack Kirby, was a product of a Jewish tenement on Suffolk Street on the Lower East Side. The Master, Will Eisner, was a Brooklyn Depression-era boy whose whole world was New York, until he decamped to Florida late in his life. The unstoppable superhero creator, dazzling writer-showman, and star of the Silver Age of comics, Stan Lee, hailed from the Upper West Side and the Bronx, and he was still kicking around the Marvel offices in the 1970s. Neal Adams, the comic craftsman extraordinaire with the twin soul of an artist and teacher who gave us the more realistic style that we still see today, was fittingly born at the confluence of the Hudson and East Rivers on Governors Island, and he spent most of his life in New York, penciling and inking the city and the characters that he loved.

So New York was it for me, and I was more than ready. I was a classic rebellious teenager—lots of piss and vinegar and firing hormones. And my impatience with school only amplified all this. For the most part, the teachers at Union 32 High School were well-meaning, and I enjoyed some of my classes, particularly my English class. The teacher, Jeff Danziger, was a plainspoken, no-nonsense man of letters, and he gave it to us straight. But I just didn't think the

school system at the time offered me that much. I already knew that, if I was going to get any education, it was going to have to come from someone who was willing to drop the hard and fast rules on me and quickly give me all the information I needed to get my diploma and move on. And that just wasn't the way in 1960s Vermont. A lot of refugee hippies from New York who had embraced the countryside's earthier ways were teachers in Vermont and they brought their softer approach to life and learning to their posts in the schools. More than that, I grew frustrated that I didn't get a more nuts and bolts education about the things I wanted to learn. Nobody there was teaching me anything to do with the kind of stories I wanted to write or the kinds of drawings I wanted to do. Even way back then I'd been inspired to write and draw what would later become *300* and *Sin City* after oh-so-much evolution and development, but I was still finding my way, still making stories that were exploratory and reactive. I was still wandering in the wilderness. There was yet to be a Joe Kubert school of comic art. Heck, comics were still considered kid stuff at best, cultural poison at worst.

Remember, this was a time when people talked about art, they mostly focused on self-expression and feelings. So I didn't learn much about creative discipline or get a chance to study anatomy or perspective, and that's what I really wanted to learn. That kind of education would come later and mostly at the feet of Neal Adams.

I got more out of the odd jobs I did during those years. I liked daydreaming and coming up with story ideas while delivering newspapers and mowing yards, and I got an introduction to the art world while working as a greeter at the T. W. Wood Art Gallery in Montpelier. The gallery was named after Thomas Waterman Wood, the capital's native son who earned his American Artist wings by painting portraits and scenes from New England life in the mid- to late 1800s. And I got my own introduction to New England life helping my father deliver food to those in need as part of the Meals on Wheels program. Like I did after meeting some old folks while tagging along with the Boy Scouts, I snagged this opportunity to try my hand at some more character sketches, which I enjoyed. Not just meeting and drawing some of these people, but being out on the winding country roads with my father. But this didn't fulfill me either. Make no mistake: I grew up in a child's paradise. Though my boomer family was seven offspring deep, I could easily spend entire off-school days swimming and climbing trees and exploring the wonders of Vermont's unspoiled woodland. Yet I was restless, always restless. I wanted—I *needed*—to get to New York City and make comic books.

The motto I chose for my senior year high school photo read: "Get the hell out of my way." I now look back on Vermont and my childhood with fondness, but, back then, in the summer of 1975, I wanted to get the hell out and make a name for myself. I wanted to live and work in New York's kinetic insanity and lock in on a new life in comic books, and nothing was going to stop me from doing so. Not even my mother, who tried to conspire with my father to come up with ways

to keep me from making the move. My dear mother, how she despised New York City. Raised Quaker, I imagine she saw New York as a sister city to Gomorrah. She told me, bitterly, years after the fact, that she'd told my dad of their boy's ambitions. "I told him I knew just how to keep you here," she said, "and he got his back up, and he said, 'My boy's moving to New York City, and I'm driving him there.' " This from a man I'd never seen disagree with my mom. What a dad.

In the winter of 1976, he did as promised—he helped me pack up and move to "The City." My first act in New York is Horatio Alger stuff—I barely got by. My friend Josie put me up in her tiny apartment on Thompson Street in SoHo and we split the rent. I was always short on money, so I set up my room the best I could, often with found objects from the streets. My first light table for drawing consisted of a car window that I found by a trash can out on the street and a bare bulb in an old lamp placed underneath it. SoHo at the time was gritty and blown-out, like the rest of Manhattan, but it was a haven for artists, some of whom were converting vacant warehouse spaces into lofts for living, painting, making music, or sometimes all three. It was in one of these warehouse buildings down on Mercer Street where I worked my first job, one that almost put me in the line of fire. Being the son and brother of carpenters and handymen, I picked up enough of the trade to swing a hammer and measure and cut wood, and I could certainly speak the language, well enough to talk my way into working with a moneyed guy who was converting an empty space into a sizable loft apartment. It turns out that this guy made his money dealing cocaine and owed some of the proceeds to the Mafia. Or so I gathered when I showed up to work one day and found myself staring at a whole lot of guns. I ran like hell and never went back.

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What I really wanted to do was draw and write. The city's chaotic thrum worked its strange magic on me and stories burbled in my head. I took my sketchbook everywhere and embraced spontaneity—I drew what I saw, and my mission was to see everything. Every damn square foot of the place. There were long walks up and down Manhattan at night and hours spent meandering around Greenwich Village by day, following in the footsteps of my wandering troubadour-hero, Bob Dylan.

When I wasn't exploring, I was making comics, but they weren't any good. That's when I spontaneously decided to cold call Neal Adams. And so I looked him up. In the phone book. And there he was, right there in the white pages. So I dialed up the number (yeah, an old rotary phone). A young woman answered. I introduced myself and asked for an appointment. "Dad," called the woman, "we've got another one." So with that, Kris Adams ushered me into her father's world.

Neal's work meant a lot to me because there was so much craft to it—the dramatic storytelling and the draftsmanship working hand in hand. At that time, Neal was freelancing for Marvel and DC, and running the legendary Continuity Associates art studio with his artistic and business partner, Dick Giordano. The studio was on the ninth floor of a nondescript building on 39th Street, but Continuity Associates was both a hotbed for innovation and a shop class in the art of comics. Neal agreed to see me, which kind of blew my mind, and on my first visit he dished out some tough love. He told me just how awful my stuff was and didn't bother with any sugar coating either. "Where'd you say you were from? Vermont? Get back to Vermont. Pump gas. Get married. You're no good and you never will be." I gulped, and then asked, "Can I fix it and show you again?" "Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow," he growled.

I kept going back for more and more critical punishment and more and more generous instruction. I'm astonished now that Neal gave me so much of his time without ever asking for a nickel, and I'll be forever grateful, because this was the education I needed, the instruction that the hippies up in Vermont could never give me. Neal was a hard task master, utterly ruthless in his criticism. He was a godsend.

One afternoon, months later, he sat me down to what I thought was going to be another brutal hour of instruction. Neal said, "Okay, yeah, Frank. You're getting there. This isn't total crap." And with that, he picked up the phone and called Gold Key Comics and gave me my first foot in the door. At Gold Key, I penciled and inked some pages for the *Twilight Zone* comic, which didn't blow anyone's hair back, but I got paid and it saw print. And, best of all, I got more work. I was in the game.

My rocket was aimed at Marvel Comics, because that was *the* place to work at the time. It was the cool house. Primarily because Chris Claremont and John Byrne had just started their game-changing long run of *Uncanny X-Men*. I met

with the boss over there, Jim Shooter, and he agreed to give me a chance. I drew two issues of *Spider-Man*; both of them included Daredevil, Stan Lee's blind superhero, who I had a good time with. It turns out that right about then, longtime *Daredevil* artist Gene Colan up and quit the gig, so I jockeyed for a job on the series. A year later, in 1979, I got complete control of the writing and drawing for *Daredevil* and I was off and running.

After I started, I realized that what I was creating couldn't rightfully be called an epic, but it was going to be long—an ongoing yarn that I would make up as I went along. I was in the middle of what I now refer to as controlled chaos: I had a structure and prescribed format to work in, but everything else was pure freedom and impulse.

Shooter set Marvel's course at the time and he could be a stern captain. He laid down some draconian laws for those of us under his direction. One of his missions as editor in chief was to restore some order and structure to the company because he felt that the stories had become flabby and reckless, making them almost impenetrable to new readers. He wanted to trim the fat, tighten things up, and get back to telling more compact and controlled stories. The problem was, I didn't want to let go of my love of the Stan Lee/Jack Kirby/Steve Ditko "ongoing epic" tradition of Marvel Comics. Once I was in charge of the title, I saw *Daredevil* as a single, sprawling epic. A big story told in many episodes.

I said to Shooter, "Well, Jim, how about we do this? I'll agree to give you a complete dramatic unit in each monthly comic, so long as you let me make it all part of one big, rangy yarn." He looked at me and said, "If you think you can pull that off, then, okay, great. Let's try it." And that's when I let controlled chaos reign: *Daredevil* became an expansive story that was romance in the old sense of the word, as it was used in reference to *The Three Musketeers* or *The Count of Monte Cristo* or *Robin Hood*, uniting romantic love with high adventure. All of this was made up as I went along—or, more accurately, as the characters dragged me along. It was all the things that were running riot in my brain. And riot they did.

I went full bore again later in my career, when I created *Sin City*. It is obviously a violent series, but it's not just the subject matter. You can feel the turbulence in the illustrations, down at the micro-level—in the lines, angles, and perspectives. It's not just Marv with a gun in his hand, walking in the pouring rain; it's Marv as primal energy going to battle against the slashing forces of life. He's Conan the Barbarian in a trench coat, and you feel this by way of the composition. It's like a J. M. W. Turner painting that way. Stand back from a Turner and you see a beautiful, if sometimes frightening, scene of motion—a ship at the center of a storm. Get close and you see frenzied brush strokes and you feel the glory of nature in all its fury. There are no mistakes down at that level, just instances and uninhibited process. You see and feel the artistic fearlessness and spontaneity. You gotta aim high, folks!

After working in the Hollywood system as a screenwriter for *RoboCop 2* and 3—valuable work, for sure, but often slow and with lots of bosses and people staring over your shoulder—I wanted to create something spontaneous and full of energy, something that answered to nobody, something that followed its own rules. I wanted to reflect the craziness of the modern world in *Sin City*, capture the relentless motion. The whole series is hard and fast, but especially *Family Values*. I wanted to satirize the term “family values” because to me it was hollow and meaningless, a piece of jargon tossed around by a negligible vice president and cultural nag named Dan Quayle. A family emerges from this story, but it is comprised of two lesbians, a bruiser from the wrong side of the tracks, and the feisty hookers that orbit his life. But primarily, the “family” in my *Family Values* is the goddamn Mafia.

I’ve always believed there is a fine line between melodrama and satire, and I wanted to crisscross that line in this story. To do this, I knew it needed to speed along and throw some punches. So I decided to create it that way. *Family Values* was my first nonstop single volume, which later became my signature process and style.

What a whirlwind of a project *Family Values* was! What a joy! First, I laid it out as a script, mapping out how the pages would flow. Then I sketched and penciled 126 pages all in one go, and then lettered the whole thing. The next step was adding flat black areas to all the pages, which provided lots of freedom for me in the next step: inking all the pages in one go. Then, finally, the “white out” phase, for lighting effects and for snow—falling, splashing, splattering snow. That’s what I mean by “nonstop.” Instead of completing this multistep process page by page, which is what most comics were doing at the time, I did each step for the entire comic before going to the next. It was a frenzy, but I was down in it, down in the creative furnace. But because I knew where the story was going and how it was going to end, I could let in a little madness. The story called for frenzied motion, so I created some of my own.

Don’t fear the simmering dynamism, welcome it. Allow entropy to run its course, like unpredictable spatter or nonstop action, and then step in to guide this natural force through the creative process. This is the quintessential task of the artist. It’s what painters and potters do, it’s what a bricklayer does, it’s what we all do as we make our way through life. When I’m getting too precious with anything—writing, thinking, drawing—and trying to protect it from error and change, I’m sheltering it from life. And this tells me I’m afraid, and if I’m afraid, my art will suffer, my drive will weaken—and the work itself will become fearful and tentative. Any time that happens, just crumple it up and toss it out like the garbage it is. You’re lucky that you’re not standing in front of an open mic, drowning in flop sweat like a live comedian on a bad night. You can just trash the damn thing and start over.

So do just that: start over. Loosen up and *play*. Go back to using your whole arm when you draw. Mistakes aren't your enemy; *fear* is.

Chaos is always out there, and brewing inside us. It's part of our story. So, open the door to it. Let it motivate you and keep the fear at bay. Find meaning in the random spatter. Or not. But put yourself into the process, the volatile middle of it all, where order and chaos duke it out. Heroes are born here.

LESSON 3

GET MUGGED AND FALL IN LOVE

Life Experiences and Making Art



The glint of a knife blade inches from your face is something you never forget. On a poorly lit street, just off New York City's Washington Square Park, I heard a slurry voice call out from some place low on the street. The thing with the voice got to its feet, a dullish wedge in hand—a swing blade, best I could tell. There was nowhere to run. So I acted crazy. I kicked at trash cans and told my would-be mugger I was going to kill him. There was no fight or flight moment, I just reflexively made a racket and waved my arms around like I was scaring a bear away in the woods of Vermont. My manic dancing and squawking took him by surprise, and, eventually, scared him off. But still, it scared the hell out of me. And it stuck with me.

I knew New York City was dangerous when I moved there. Who *didn't* know that? It was New York in the seventies, a time notorious for race tensions and dirty police, for crack cocaine and the men who would kill for it and the sad, young women who'd sell their bodies for it. But I was young and immortal, so I just leapt into my grand adventure. There was no other route for me. New York City was where you had to go if you wanted to make comic books. And the idea of "The City" was already imprinted on my mind: it functioned as a character in Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's *Spider-Man*, and it was implicit in Batman's Gotham City and Superman's Metropolis. And, most unforgettably of all, in Will Eisner's *The Spirit*. Mickey Spillane immortalized 1940s and '50s New York City in *I, the Jury*, and his dozens of other hard-boiled classics. Many of the crime novels I loved featured the city's smoky rooms, shadowy streets, and small dives. Charles Bronson as the architect-cum-vigilante Paul Kersey in *Death Wish* also smashed into my consciousness, as did *Dirty Harry*. The seasoned homicide detective Harry Callahan hunts a savage psycho killer in the streets of San Francisco in that one, but it could have just as easily been New York. For me, any city was just a stand-in for New York City.

Another influence that forged my impression of the Big Apple was the old cop show *Kojak*. It was revolutionary for its time and launched a thousand other shows like it, so much so that *Kojak* became the gold standard for the now ubiquitous police procedural. They filmed it all over the five boroughs, using the city's shoddy glory to maximum effect. They even adopted one of the city's run-

down precincts as their own police headquarters. Some of the grittier, uglier scenes shocked audiences, which made me appreciate it all the more. From 1973 until 1978, Telly Savalas played Theo Kojak, an urbane and tough NYPD lieutenant who wasn't afraid to bend the rules. All the way if he had to. Like so many of my favorite Noir protagonists, Kojak had a dark side—he was often cynical, single-minded, and dedicated to a fault. He wore a fedora, smoked and chewed on a cigarillo (before they replaced it with a silly lollipop), and used street slang. But he was also witty and smart and tenacious. He was tough, he was ugly, and he was a relentless moral force.

I arrived wide open to the strange gifts of the city's seedy decline—the Sodom and Gomorrah of Times Square, the hard-up characters hanging around fleabag hotels by Port Authority, the graffiti and urban dross in the subway, the misfits skulking in the East Village parks after dark, the crumbling, uneasy feeling of it all.

Manhattan at night was a fantasy land for me—the charged atmosphere held the keys to my imagination. Gotham's wailing sirens, blustery drunks, and street-corner lurkers: the city's midnight cast of characters in an edgy melodrama I was finally getting to watch in person. It was all a source of romance for me, not terror.

The nightlife spilled out onto some blocks, while others were ghostly, lit only by the pale puddles of light under streetlamps and the flashing blue from TV screens in lonely, shabby apartments. Every so often an undraped window revealed the warm lamp glow of a book-lined study or a brightly painted room where a mother was tucking in a child, providing the perfect contrast: quiet retreats, ports in the storm. All those stories in all those windows, millions of them. All happening at once.

Any city, but particularly New York City, is a living organism. It reacts and adapts to the hopes and dreams and follies of those who call it home. Late-seventies, early-eighties Manhattan was my Emerald City. It gave me everything. It truly was both Gotham and Metropolis, both dark and light.

For all the talk I'd heard about how rude New Yorkers were, I discovered the opposite. My frenzied, knife-wielding mugger notwithstanding, the people I encountered were the friendliest in the world. At every turn, people were generous and would do what they could to help you out. Maybe because of the city's dire conditions, there was a sense that we were all shipwreck survivors or foxhole friends, a fellow feeling that briefly returned post-9/11. Near my apartment in SoHo there was a bakery that, at closing time, handed out hot loaves of fresh bread to the hopeless and the hungry.

There wasn't much open after hours in SoHo back then. Most of the businesses were clothing wholesalers and textile shops, and the majority of the neighborhood's restaurants and diners were only open from nine to nine. But Dave's Corner Luncheonette on Canal and Broadway was open twenty-four hours

and they brewed up good, strong coffee. The grilled cheese was just right—butter-soaked bread and lots of bright yellow cheese. And so was the chocolate egg cream, a treat I only allowed myself every now and then, when there was a little more change in my pocket. The crowd in Dave's ran the gamut, from the loft artists who sipped their coffee and pushed their scrambled eggs around all hours to the bleary-eyed cab drivers who stood by the counter waiting to eat standing up. Early-morning risers with their papers sat next to half-drunk, late-night revelers who were in for some sustenance before finally calling it a night. If you wanted to see a microcosm of New York City, Dave's was the place.

For me, Manhattan at that time was an embarrassment of riches, too many to count, too many to name. But here are a few of my favorite things.

The old yellow taxis, the checkered cabs, those big-as-a-house monsters that you could fit five or more people in. They roared across town, barreling in and out of traffic like angry bison. They owned the streets and wove a heavy stitch in the fabric of the city. So much so that Scorsese and Paul Schrader explored late-seventies alienation and despair through the eyes of a New York cab driver in their neo-Noir masterpiece, *Taxi Driver*. De Niro as Travis Bickle was the perfect antihero of urban ruin and Scorsese's strung out, down-at-the-heels Manhattan profoundly captured what we were all living through.

They are long gone now, but I frequented those big, shabby movie theaters, the ones that rolled up the curtains before the movie started. They weren't exactly the cleanest places, often the floors were sticky from spilled soda and stepped-on candy, but they had lots of character and exhaled history. I saw a lot of first run movies that are now considered classics in those sloppy, ramshackle theaters—*Annie Hall*, *Star Wars*, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, to name just a few. And I loved the small repertory houses, too. Places like Film Forum and Quad Cinema were more intimate, but still threadbare, perfect spots to take in an old movie, like Orson Welles's *The Third Man*, Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, or Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*. Now a multiscreen operation and a bona fide New York treasure on West Houston Street, Film Forum opened in 1970 with just one projector and a few rows of fold-up chairs. It wasn't much more than that when I stood in line to see Max Fleischer's *Superman* cartoons for the first time on a big screen. In the late seventies, Film Forum only showed movies on weekends out of the old Vandam Theater, a small playhouse on a leafy street in SoHo.

With my sketchbook under my arm, I made my way down to the South Street Seaport in every kind of weather. It was the real deal then. One of Manhattan's oldest neighborhoods, it still felt like a dirty port from another era. The Fulton Fish Market was in full swing, and if you went early in the morning you could see and hear (and smell) the most astonishing things: the fish gleaming on ice, bloody aprons hanging on hooks, and fishmongers working their knives with lightning speed. The mongers and restaurant buyers had their own lingo, and their

interactions were loud and gruff, but honest. Respect going both ways. When I walked on the docks, the wood gave under my feet, soggy from decades of East River slosh. Across the street from a tall, collapsing parking garage, some of the old eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Georgian-style buildings maintained their charm and teased old stories, and I liked to draw them with the tall ships squatting all stoic in the background. The whole place felt like it was made for creepy deals in side-water saloons. It inspired many of the settings in my comics.

This may sound strange, but I loved the trees in Manhattan, any time of year. I still do. But back then they were like manna from Gaia herself. Hailing from Vermont, I was used to trees, of course. I climbed them, walked and sat under them, admired them as they changed through the seasons and transformed as they grew. The red maple in our front yard shape-shifted from season to season, from year to year, eternal, ever vigorous. The trees were everywhere, and I got to the point where I stopped noticing them and started taking them for granted. But in Manhattan, where I spent most of my time among the rising concrete and glass and down in the rattling and screeching tunnels, the site of a tree, or better yet a cluster of them, lifted and calmed me. I felt like the air was more breathable around them. Luckily, they were plentiful in the Village and in many parts of SoHo, so I sought them out. I didn't climb trees anymore, but I got back to appreciating them.

There were also a few comic book stores close to my apartment. Before Forbidden Planet opened their doors on lower Broadway in 1981 and forever altered the comic landscape, the comic book stores around town were generally small operations, and this was certainly the case with the ones I frequented in the Village, on 4th and 8th Streets, (yes, 4th and 8th cross each other—that's city planning in old New York) if memory serves. Most of these were run by collectors who rented a storefront, hauled in their boxes, stuck some price tags on the plastic sleeves, and flipped a sign in the door to "open." But I loved them, of course. Like a record store, part of the charm of these places is hanging out with people who like the same things you do. You can flip through the bins and gush over comics and comic book creators without fear of clearing the room. I didn't have a lot of money to spend in those little shops, but I certainly shared a bank's worth of my opinions.

There was a universe just outside of Manhattan, the other four boroughs holding worlds of their own. Because I liked riding the subway—the grime, the train sounds, the stories in the eyes of those sitting across from me—I explored the outer realms when I could. A trip to Coney Island was a favorite because the orange line trains knock and rumble under the East River and through the sprawl of Brooklyn to reach their seaside terminus, the elevated station at the Coney Island–Stillwell stop. From the train platform, you could see the Wonder Wheel, the turns and drops of that old rattling, roaring roller coaster, the Cyclone, and, beyond that, the crashing Atlantic Ocean.

Like the rest of the city, Coney Island was run-down. The stores along the main drag of Surf Avenue kept up appearances, but trash stacked up and blew around just outside their doors. The storied Kister's Hotel was shuttered and the Parachute Jump tower sat derelict and rusting in the salt air. The Cyclone was a source of endless fascination for me, particularly in the winter when the ride was closed and no one was around. The tracks and crossties whistled and groaned in the cold sea wind.

But in the warmer months there was lots of life on Riegelmann Boardwalk and in and around the amusement park, what was then called Astroland. People flocked to the park and the beach; the place came alive in the spring and stayed that way until late fall. Even in the summer of 1977, the searing Summer of Sam, when David Berkowitz's killing spree terrorized the entire city and crime and fear and heat lorded over, New Yorkers still made their way to the escape of Coney Island and the ocean's rolling waves. Whether it was Son of Sam or urban decay, nothing stopped New Yorkers from getting on with their lives.

Persistence: that was (and is) another one of my favorite things about New York City.

The summer of '76, my first summer living in Manhattan, was also sweltering. Heat coiled above the pavement, and afternoon downpours—over as quickly as they started—left only steam behind. The smeared summer skies baked white by the polluted air hovering over the island hurt the eyes and made the borough feel like an alien planet, one way too close to the sun. Manhattan had returned to its primordial state: a swampland. People shed what clothes they could and negotiated the heat on stoops and sidewalks where traffic and occasional breezes stirred the air. The action in the jumbled streets of southern Manhattan slowed in the humidity and the lively sounds of Greenwich Village and SoHo quieted some as many of us sought relief in coffee houses and dark bars.

"Hello, Frank, you wanna burger and a cold beer?" The barkeep's greeting at Bob and Kenn's Broome Street Bar, a neighborhood SoHo saloon, and a refuge from the summer sweat. "The coldest one you got, please." And with that I would while away a couple of hours, nursing the beer (and maybe another), savoring some real food, doodling cartoons of locals, and jotting down scraps of local jargon that would make for lowlife dialogue to come.

I often made my way from the cool, dark wood of the bar to find some place where somebody was hiding a tree. I spent many afternoons and evenings under the elms in Washington Square Park—breathing, thinking, drawing. You could always count on a breeze there. And an abundance of colorful New York types. I enjoyed watching the old men play chess, smacking the timers and leaning back on the benches to study the board, their focus absolute. They played the game silently and grimly, exuding that joy that comes from total concentration of mind and will.

I sketched and worked on my drawing skills in the park. I did that everywhere, really, but Washington Square had it all: the fountain, the arch, the view up Fifth Avenue to the Empire State Building, and the people, all the varied and wonderful people. One blazing day, when it would have been easy to sink into misery, I looked around and the kids were having a great time, splashing in the fountain and running circles around their mothers, and I saw the most beautiful women I'd ever seen in my life sitting on benches or reclining on blankets on the park's grassy patches. I didn't care about the heat. I was far from miserable; I was right where I wanted to be. When I recall this now, I hear Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely." It was a monster hit in the mid- to late seventies, so you heard it everywhere, and I never got tired of it.

It was a glorious time.

But it wasn't just the city itself that enchanted and captivated me. Around this time, I went head over heels for an alluring young woman who had brown eyes and black hair. Her name was Marie-Josée Lacasse, but she was just Josie to me, a roommate and friend that I grew increasingly fond of. Her family was French Canadian and before spending some of her high school years in Vermont, she was raised in Queens. She was pure New York—self-possessed, direct, and never suffered fools. Perhaps her job as a waitress reinforced this latter trait. But mostly, Josie was who she was because that was who she was—a sweet city kid in a town full of predators. She was generous; twice she saw me dizzy from hunger and served me relentless gourmet dinners at the high-end restaurant where she worked.

I haven't seen or heard about Josie for many years. Wherever she is, I wish her well. She's one of two angels who have graced my life.

Around this time, my professional career began. What a *world* I had entered! Comic books were, I quickly learned, not just a profession but a tribe. From publishing house to publishing house, there they all were, heads down on the boards and scrambling to meet tough deadlines—getting the job done. The comic book industry was in the financial and cultural toilet then, disdained by society and the greater culture alike, but you wouldn't have known it hanging out with those who worked in it! It had a salon-like quality—we shared our work, traded ideas, tried to best one another, and went out for cheap lunches together. There was a lot of shoptalk. Denis Kitchen's Kitchen Sink Press had just reprinted Will Eisner's *The Spirit*, so Will's work was always a topic for reverence and discussion. We drank gallons of coffee and smoked stacks of cigarettes, and decided comics, despite poor sales and a receding audience, were far from over.

Working for hire and by the page, we got paid like dogs, but we had a good time. We were all in it together, all learning from one another. So it was the foot in the door and the training ground that I needed. Remember, the comic book medium is most often a collaborative art form that incorporates layers of craft. The comic book creator is usually not one person, but a team: the writer, the

penciller, the inker, the colorist, and the letterer. And craft and hard work go into all of these stages. This was especially true in those days. We were hired guns working on strict timelines and at the behest of the publisher who owned the work; we were each responsible for his or her own part of the process. For my first shot at *Spectacular Spider-Man* #26 at Marvel, Bill Mantlo wrote it, I penciled it, Frank Springer inked it, Bob Sharen was the colorist, and Denise Wohl lettered it. And my first *Daredevil* #158—Roger McKenzie wrote it, I drew it and created the cover, Klaus Janson inked it, George Roussos colored it, and Joe Rosen provided the lettering.

There were a lot of personalities that worked in these roles, too. Stan Lee was more than a writer, he was an impresario, a conductor, and a sometimes ringmaster. John Buscema, the legendary penciller and inker, talked like a truck driver, but drew like Michelangelo. He was all about gettin' the job done and not jabbering about it. In fact, if you paid him any high praise using any flowery art talk, he gruffly reminded you that he was just a comic book grunt like the rest of us. He was just fine with the grind. On the other hand, Neal Adams was a comic book Renaissance man: he wrote, penciled, and inked, but also worked as an editor and publisher. No one worked any harder than Neal, but, during those years, many considered him a bit of a troublemaker. (Of course, at that time, anyone who suggested that the talent were anything more than lowly wage slaves was branded a troublemaker, or crazy, or worse.)

At his Continuity Associates studio, Neal fostered a stable of artists to support our poorly paying comics work with TV advertising storyboard artwork. I did my share of the stuff myself, and was grateful for the chance. Along with Will Eisner, who was a supreme comic creator *and* a legitimate businessman with a vision for the future of what he called “sequential art,” Neal was never satisfied with the status quo. With a healthy respect for the past, these guys always looked forward. I learned to do the same. There was a new world just beyond the bend. And I was itching to help bring it into being.

I used my own life experiences as fodder to get there. Manhattan informed the rhythm of my life and so it became the rhythm of my work. I poured everything from it into my work: the sneaky shadows and slant light, overheard phrases from the diners and bars, the shapes and perspectives from narrow streets, the wrought-iron art deco, the elevated highways, the urban heat and rot, the river of battered taxis draining down the avenues, the *takka, takka* of the trains, the city itself—breathing like mucus-clogged lungs, terrifying, embracing.

As soon as I experienced or witnessed something, it went directly to the page. I didn't—and still don't—go up to Mount Olympus and ponder it for years and then come down to create boons for my fellow humans. I quickly draw and write what I see or experience, I keep the energy. Work is an active part of life.

For one of my early issues of *Daredevil*, I said to the writer, Roger McKenzie, “I think we oughta set a big climax on Coney Island.” Roger said, “Yeah, okay,

let's try it." And asked, "Do you have what you need to draw it?" With eyebrows raised, I told Roger, "No, not yet, but I'll get it." I had some sketches from previous expeditions, but I wanted more. Soon I was down on a D train, rattling my way out to Coney Island. I walked around the place for a few hours, drawing whatever piqued my interest, including the Cyclone. Roger and I then built the entire issue around the climactic scene on the roller coaster, Daredevil and the assassin Bullseye duking it out on the tumbledown, wooden ride. And in a later issue I used the grit and sludge and waterlogged life of the South Street Seaport as inspiration for a big battle scene on a dock.

New York City is a city of extreme experiences, and extreme experiences are key components of drama. And drama is my business—as it is for any storyteller.

Getting mugged and falling in love. They stand out now, because, as I look back on these twin experiences, I see them as defining markers from my passage into manhood, high water marks from the rush of youth. They're evidence that life is full of tension and contrast, two essential elements in art. These experiences and many others from my early years in New York City are foundational events that continue to feed my art. Among other things, they were the driving inspirations for *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Set in a dystopian Gotham, my reimagined Batman—beset by his own demons, hardened by life, and scarred by adversity—comes out of retirement to fight crime and seek justice, to restore balance. And to make sense of it all, even knowing there is a slashing blade out there in the night waiting for him and that a broken heart is inevitably in the making. It's a darker story, yes, but a truer one.

LESSON 4

KILL OFF ELEKTRA

Embrace the Story



We breathe. We hunt. We kill. We cook. We eat. We argue. We mate. We tell stories. We've done all of those things (*all* of them) since first we crawled up out of the muck. "Let me tell you a story" is a *promise*. One of the sweetest we can make. It's a promise of adventure and romance, of fantasy and alien worlds, of crime and passion, of sex and violence, of tragedy and redemption, of wisdom and truth, of legacy and heroism. We need our stories. We'd be lost without them. There's not much better than a long, well-told yarn that sweeps us up into a drama that reflects our human concerns: the yearnings, desires, hopes, and lunacy that animate and ensnare us. We love a riveting tale of love and sorrow that dares to untie the human heart's weathered knot of failure and triumph.

Stories remind us of who we are. Stories show us who we want to be, and they show us what scares us. And stories show us where *courage* waits.

And telling stories to one another is just what we do. Margaret Atwood said that storytelling is "built into the human plan. We come with it." That nails it. It's in our DNA—story strands twist and turn like the double helix. So it's only natural that art often aspires to storytelling and that artists often work in service of a story. The earliest ancestor of the comic strip is cave paintings and their tales of hunts, of conquest over nature.

Novels are a more obvious example of how this works. Stephen King certainly gives us a lot more than a plotline in his novels, but, at their most basic, they are page-turning, ripping good stories. King knows that the best way to burrow into human nature is via a powerful narrative, one that a reader can't put down, one that keeps his audience in his corner, even as he terrifies them. Visual art is no different. To illustrate the black holes of fear and pain and violence, Goya leans on an old myth about a wrathful God eating one of his own children in his horrifying painting *Saturn Devouring His Son*. The stark, expressionistic drawings of Käthe Kollwitz dared to tell the story of working-class women when no one else was. Later in her career, she was forever changed after her son was killed in World War I. And as she changed, so did her art. Her drawings and sculptures evolved to tell us another tale: the journey of a mother whose grief reminds her that even a righteous cause is no match for loss. Cézanne's remarkable still life *The Basket of Apples* is so much more than that. It tells a

story of a time and place and does so through perspectives and color and the sensual folds of a tablecloth. Although painters and sculptors also lean on abstraction, they rarely take it to the point where they lose their audience. Picasso's *Guernica* is fragmented, but it still grabs you by the shirt to recount its parable about the miseries of war.

The same can be said of comics. Down at the elemental level, comics are drawings and words intelligently sequenced to tell a story. Eisner's stake in the ground on this was that the art of comics is another way of writing, a language all its own. That's right on the button, insofar as it serves as a reminder that people *read* comics, they don't just look at them. While the combination of words and pictures is what makes comics unique—in fact, the arrangement of the visual elements often does the lion's share of the storytelling, when the job's done right—those who buy and enjoy comics still experience them like a book: they pick them up and move through them from left to right, turning the pages, as they would a novel. The narrative is the thing, more than any other virtue. A Brian Bolland panel will likely cause your eye to linger for the sheer joy of seeing it, but that is a secondary virtue. Mostly, it's there to convey content, action, and drama. (Bolland's work, of course, succeeds at every value.) So if you abandon the story and get too precious or spend too much time gazing at your own navel, the energy will flow out of it. No matter the visual pyrotechnics and format innovations, a comic book is still a reading experience, and if you want to keep your readers, you had better tell them a story, and it better be a good one. Comic book creators (and artists in general) who forget this do so at their peril. Take it from me, I learned this the hard way. That's how I've learned from just about every mistake there is, though I'm sure there's still more out there.

Everything starts with, and proceeds from, the *story*. Some simple story rules: (1) Start your story as *late into the action* as possible; end it as *early into the action* as possible. (2) Get your hero into trouble *fast*. That, or give the hero a *pressing* problem to solve. I work on the spine of the story and figure out how it starts and ends, and then roughly plot the in-between. To do this, I make notes and create scenes that will advance the storyline, but allow room for digressions and narrative side streets. Along the way, I'll make some preliminary sketches to illustrate some of my ideas so I don't lose them in the burst and whirl of the initial creative process. But I don't normally draw much of anything narrative until I'm comfortable with the outline and confident with the storyline. I want to be sure my story's spine is strong enough to take a beating from the starts and stops, mistakes, and happy accidents that happen when I'm battling it out on the boards. Through it all the mission never changes: tell a good story. And tell it as concisely and dramatically as I possibly can.

So let me tell you the story of Elektra. Or rather, the story behind her story.

The blind superhero Daredevil hunts an underground informer. But a vicious new enemy attacks Daredevil. When he hears her voice, he realizes this new enemy is his first love, long lost to him.

She demanded a dramatic debut. Though I had penciled several issues before this one, *Daredevil* #168 in January 1981 marked my first official writing gig in comics. Elektra's grand entrance was also my inaugural big splash.

While grappling to reach that place where I could launch her into the story, two thoughts occurred. First, I realized the story needed the dramatic component of a sustained conflict. Luckily, in the mythology of Marvel Comics, you can add new stories to the past, not just the present. So I introduced Matt Murdock's college sweetheart, the exotic, deadly Elektra. BAM! Instant romance. And instant torment. Stories to tell and live through and love telling for years to come. And here it begins: *What will become of our law-abiding hero after he falls hard for an assassin, one who just happens to be a flickering flame from his past?*

And the other thought, an impulse just as strong, was that I wanted to draw the kinds of pictures that I most liked to draw and see in comics: *Daredevil* needed a great-looking lady. I wanted to reshape the *Daredevil* story into a crime comic and a good crime story requires a beautiful woman. In the novels of Spillane, Hammett, and Chandler and the classic Noir films of Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, and Billy Wilder, the strong, alluring female characters provide much of the drama and often steal the show. Bacall! Dietrich! Monroe! Turner! Gardner! All of them played shrewd and beautiful characters, perfect foils and antiheroines. But I didn't just want a one-dimensional femme fatale; I wanted to create a fully realized woman that had as much substance as she did sex appeal. I wanted an assassin who broke Matt's heart—and yours.

So at this point, I did what all great writers do. I shamelessly stole from someone else. Will Eisner's Sand Saref was a perfect model for my Elektra. In *The Spirit*, Eisner casts her as a childhood friend of his masked crime fighter, Denny Colt. She is his first true love and reenters his life after committing armed robbery and spending some time staring at the four walls of a jail cell. She might have become a thief, but deep down, she is so much more than that. The tough circumstances of her life sent her down the wrong path, and Colt knows this. Her father was a cop killed in the line of duty and Denny's uncle was somewhat responsible. Despite their feelings for one another, as rivals from opposite sides of the law, Denny and Sand can't make it work. She vanishes as quickly as she appeared. Just like Sand, Elektra resurfaces in Murdock's world only to stir up old feelings and send him into an eddy of doomed love and inner turmoil. I changed the circumstances and the staging, of course, but the storyline was undeniably similar to Eisner's. Still teething in my role as a writer, I thought it best to lean on some broad shoulders.

Now that I had lifted and adapted her storyline, my sexy assassin needed a name. For that, I went back to the ancient Greeks. In Greek mythology, Electra is

the daughter of King Agamemnon and Queen Clytemnestra. The queen and her man on the side, Aegisthus, collude and murder her husband. Years later, Electra and her brother, Orestes, who is back from a long exile, scheme to take their revenge and then kill their mother and her lover. But the hatred and fury that fuel her vengeance are too much for Electra, and she keels over while dancing to celebrate her so-called victory over her mother. It's dark and powerful stuff, high drama that illuminates the destructive forces of betrayal, anger, and revenge—the dangers of untampered human emotions. The Greek tragedian Aeschylus used the myth for his masterful *Oresteia* trilogy and the great Sophocles later adapted it for his play *Elektra*.

The emotional violence of that story was exactly what I was after—that's what *Daredevil* needed. And I loved the old spelling of Elektra, with a *k* instead of *c*. *Elektra*. It just *looked* and *felt* more charged, like a bolt of lightning. And while I was putting her character together, I dressed her in clothes reminiscent of the ancient Greek islands—sandal-like shoes, straps wrapped around her arms and legs, a scarf around her head, and a loincloth attached to her bodysuit. I used the Greek angle for her background, too. Elektra became an expatriated Greek citizen, the daughter of Greek ambassador Natchios, whose tragic death derails Elektra into a life lived on the edge as a trained killer. A dead father, a lost and angry daughter, and the consequences of undiluted revenge—it proved a pliable character and plotline, from the Greek myth to Eisner's *The Spirit* to my own version of the story, and so Matt Murdock began his long, torturous dance with death.

As for Elektra's skills and weaponry, well, it was here where the character became all my own. I loved the kung fu movies from the seventies and early eighties, so I quickly decided she would be an expert martial artist. And while watching one of these movies, I noticed a weapon I hadn't seen before. It turned out to be the sai, a three-pronged sword that I later learned was essentially a farm tool that Japanese peasants used as a weapon against the marauding samurai. So this became her trademark weapon, the one she hurled at Daredevil in her debut.

Elektra was born—a combination of myth, appropriation, and my own imagination. At first, my attitude about her storyline was “Let's see where this takes me,” but I wasn't convinced she'd hang around for long. I soon discovered, however, that I just couldn't wait to get back to her, I couldn't wait to get back to the page and see where *I* could take *her*. She was in charge, and she demanded a continuing, important role. Her presence (and her voice) quickly became critical to the feel and tone of the comic. *Daredevil* came into focus like it really never had before. Her storyline brought Murdock's narrative shape into high relief.

With the benefit of hindsight and some hard-won wisdom, I now see how multipurpose my beautiful assassin was. Sure, she was a lot of fun to write and draw and her complicated relationship with Murdock gave the comic the theatricality and the long, unfurling narrative it needed, but she was also critical to

Daredevil's heroic quest. At some point, the hero must stop *reacting* to what's going on and become the story's *engine* himself. After Elektra reemerges in his life, bringing back the past and the complex emotions that go with it, Murdock as Daredevil must not only react to the injustice in the world around him, but also start taking action to resolve the conflicts in his inner life, too. The hero must surmount the obstacles that he encounters, but also the ones that he creates, and sometimes, worst of all, the demons that wait inside him.

All this brought a new energy and sense of opera. I embraced this. The operatic elements were all there: star-crossed love, passionate violence, impending tragedy, and loss. If I put my ear down close enough to the page, I could almost hear the singing, maybe even some of Richard Wagner's pounding "thunder machines."

The readers fell in love with it. Letters full of high praise for Elektra flooded into the Marvel offices. The audience enjoyed reading the issues as much as my collaborators and I enjoyed creating them. I wrote and penciled them and Klaus Janson inked them, and we ripped through pages as rapidly as we could without losing our minds. We were up to our ears in work, but damn! It was joyous, having a ball playing off one another, learning from each other, challenging each other like two kids with penknives playing mumblety-peg. Colorist Glynis Oliver called me up once just to tell me how much fun she was having. It was a great time.

As an artist, it doesn't get any better than this. In just those few words, not only did Glynis express how much she liked the comic itself, but also how much she liked *working* on the damn thing! After Elektra came on the scene, the making of *Daredevil* was a real joy ride, and, even then, I could tell Elektra was going to mean much more to me and my work than it did at that moment. The birth of her character was the true genesis of my career in comic books. No longer was I merely a hired hand, dusting off old trophies and polishing them up. I had *created* a new *character* for the pantheon.

But the story doesn't end there. All this riding high on Elektra and my reanimated *Daredevil* was intoxicating and the reader demand for more, more, more was certainly an ego stroke, but it was time for a daring new chapter. A part of me wanted to keep it going as it was—just invent new twists and turns for Elektra and Daredevil and maintain their tug of war between the affairs of the heart and their respective responsibilities—but the bigger part of me, the part that was mindful of serving the story, knew that what the narrative needed, what was crucial for my big, unspooling yarn, was a climax, a resolution, an *ending*. The *only* ending this story could ever have. The ending foreshadowed in nearly every scene that showcased my dark angel. Elektra had to die.

I went to my editor at the time, Denny O'Neil, and told him, "Elektra's going to die." O'Neil leaned back in his chair and said, "She's more popular than the lead character! Shooter will never go for it." But this didn't deter me, so I told

him, “Well, the boss is right down the hall, so let me go talk to him.” As I entered Shooter’s office, I got right to the point. “Jim, I gotta kill Elektra.” He looked down for a few seconds and then back up at me. “Tell me a story, Frank.” And so I did, and did so in vivid detail. Jim glared at me. “That’s great,” I recall him saying. “Do it.” Thinking fast, he added, “We’ll give it a double-length issue.”

Daredevil’s archnemesis, Bullseye, decides enough is enough. Both he and Elektra are hired killers for the supervillain Kingpin, but Elektra has emerged as the crime lord’s favorite. Envious of her role as the top assassin and hungry for recognition and power, Bullseye hatches a treacherous plan: he will take out Elektra and reclaim the elevated position in Kingpin’s crime organization. A fierce battle between the two ensues, and Bullseye stabs Elektra in the stomach and up into her chest with one of her own sais, leaving her to bleed out. As her last act, the bloodied Elektra stumbles to Matt Murdock’s apartment. She dies in his arms. And Matt Murdock’s mind begins to crumble...

Exit Elektra. When it came to my decision to end her life, I have to say, it just felt like the right thing to do. Bringing this storyline to a conclusion was the most dramatic thing I could do for the story: the narrative demanded an exclamation point, so I gave it one, in the most lapel-grabbing way possible. A less grandiose reason, but equally as important, was that it was the only logical way to disentangle the tangled web. And far, far more important than any other reason—it was the only ending the story could have. The lawful Murdock can’t sustain his heroism as Daredevil as long as the love of his life is out there committing cold-blooded murder right, left, and center. The hero at some point has to slay all the dragons he comes up against, including those he doesn’t want to. In this case, I just put the sword in the hands of Bullseye, to release Daredevil from the act itself, but not the pain that follows.

Her death scene appeared in March 1982, issue #181, so readers had been following Elektra’s journey for over a year. Like me, they loved her. Unlike me, they weren’t ready for her to die. The criticism was fast and furious—readers were pissed off. Just as letters were delivered on winds of praise when she first appeared, letters of vitriol stamped in fury arrived at the Marvel offices. Bags of them. Some of those contained death threats aimed squarely at me. I turned these over to the FBI. One of their agents told me that they couldn’t do anything, not without proof that the threat was actually *mailed*. There was no such proof because Marvel threw out the envelopes when they sorted the mail. “But don’t worry,” reassured the agent, “the ones who plan to kill you don’t usually write first.” Hah! One positive outcome of this ordeal: Marvel promised to stop trashing the envelopes these letters came in.

The level of reader anger and disappointment at Elektra’s death was startling. Although I knew that readers are bound to get mad at something somewhere along the line, and that a part of them even expects to get pissed off by something they read or see—just another function of the relationship between reader and

author and viewer and artist—this experience was a first for me. Here was a beloved character and popular storyline that I put into the world, and it was my sole creative decision to abruptly end it. As a result, the applause meant more, but so did the criticism. It was a revelation as I realized just how wrapped up in a story and how enchanted by a character readers can get. And how these attachments fix on the creator, too.

Getting back to my present tale, though, Elektra's death wasn't exactly the end of her story. If I only wanted pathos as a culminating emotion, her death would have proven the perfect end to the narrative. But I was in search of something more. The hero must contend with the aftershocks of Elektra's death: he is not set free; loss and grief bring their own drama. And with that, I set a whole new storyline in motion.

Matt does the manly thing—he goes nuts. He starts a fight in a saloon. He beats the crap out of a whole bunch of three-time losers. He finds whole new ways to make a fool of himself. He's broken and bereft. But he must find the strength to wear the Daredevil mask again. For this is his true calling, his true nature. Memories of Elektra stalk and destabilize him. And, in his crazed state, he starts to believe she's still alive.

Setting my hero back on his path, with Elektra's death haunting the story, allowed me to foreshadow the dead assassin's return. Later on, Elektra appears again, this time as a lifeless body after Murdock, in a delirious state, digs her up to see if she's really dead. And then Elektra returns a third time many years later, in 1990, in my graphic novel *Elektra Lives Again*. As it turns out, Elektra was a greater presence dead than alive. She hangs over the story like a sword of Damocles, until her own resurrection sends Murdock on yet another odyssey of the mind.

Truth be told, I seesawed over whether to bring back Elektra from the grave. Part of me wanted her to stay dead—embrace it as an end point and move on. But I found myself pulled back into her story. Because I went so deep into her storyline and character, I was absorbed by the mythos, too. And, in my view, this is when the magic happens. I set out to tell an involved story and then dared to let it tell me where it wanted to go next. And when this one came to me I told it in as lavish a format as possible. My partner and colorist, Lynn Varley, and I slaved over the pages, redoing many. We scoured the color separations, Lynn bringing her uncanny eye to every last panel. And we spent sleepless nights at Montreal's Quebecor Printing watching roaring presses spit out pages while we shouted, "Rouge!"

I'm no different than those primitive cave painters. I just followed my instincts to tell a tale. In doing so, I felt the unfettered joy of creating. And it gave me a reason to be. The eureka moments in the story doubling as moments of self-discovery, too—this is how it works (a little "message in a bottle" I subconsciously sent myself), this is how the pieces fit together, here's how I get

around the problem: I aim myself right at that problem, make it bigger than ever, and stare it square in the eye. *Elektra Lives Again* was a fever dream about grief, jerking from shock to anger to negotiation to obsession to madness to acceptance. It was Elektra's story that took me to that magical place where I said to myself, "No one's done this before! I'm going to do it." We all strive to arrive at that extraordinary place where possibilities come into view, whether in life or art. Storytelling shows us where we can go.

Like it is with Elektra, life is full of resurrections, and for artists it has to be. If we are not re-creating ourselves, then we are dying. Bob Dylan said it best: "That he not busy being born is busy dying."

LESSON 5

MASTERLESS

Ronin: Taking the Plunge



“There is no greater solitude than that of the samurai, unless it is that of the tiger in the jungle...”

—*BUSHIDO (WAY OF THE WARRIOR)*

“Do not act following customary beliefs.”

—MIYAMOTO MUSASHI

I jokingly call my Hell’s Kitchen studio my “Beachhead.” It’s in a tallish, older building with a big, clanking freight elevator that directly opens to my studio, which is a long, rectangular space divided up into several rooms by heavy steel doors. For years, a garment wholesaler operated a business here, no doubt employing many of the working-class Irish folks who lived in the neighborhood at the time. The Beachhead is light and airy with large windows and hardwood floors. And it’s spacious. This is important, because I like to pace around a lot when I’m working. It helps me think.

In the room where I do most of my work, my sturdy oak drawing table, a relic I acquired in the 1980s, sits in the middle by a window, the floor underneath it stained black from decades of splattered ink. This is the command center. Right by the table are several containers that hold the tools of my trade: Blackwing graphite pencils, white paint, black India ink, liquid frisket, erasers, and sable brushes. Winsor & Newton series 7, mostly, sizes 3–12. Other brands include Raphaël and, harder to come by but my favorite, da Vinci. And we can’t forget the toothbrush, my trusty spatter-maker.

There are flat files close by full of tracing and matte paper and, on either side of the room, shelves full of reference books and comics, and cabinets full of toys and tchotchkes. At heart, I’m still a kid who likes his toys. That will never change. There is an army of figurines and action figures, including a Japanese take on Marv from *Sin City*, which is a personal favorite. The cabinets also hold a fleet of toy cars and an armory of fake guns, many of which I acquired to use as props for drawing. Geof Darrow once said to me, “Frank, if you want to draw a gun, go out and buy one.” (He meant a replica! Honest.) Down at the far end of the room, by the front windows, is a *Sin City*-themed slot machine, and hanging above that is a spot-on replica of a Spartan helmet.

The Beachhead is for working. And I consider the entire studio a workspace, even the couch in the front room. Because right in front of it is a large screen for watching movies, most of which are old classics and forgotten Film Noirs. I watch these for inspiration and pleasure, and most of the time in that order. And there is a wall of wooden bookshelves, mostly comics, old crime novels, reference and anatomy books, and lots of art books. I love books simply for being what they are, but I also have a utilitarian outlook on them: they inevitably contain images and phrases that I can borrow from and be inspired by. They are never-ending source waters.

My graphic novels came from all around the world, and I bought most of them at Forbidden Planet. The place is a mecca for international comics. When they hung out their shingle on East 12th and Broadway in Greenwich Village in 1981, the New York comics world turned over. It was a colossal moment. Comics from all around the world were suddenly right there staring me and my buddies in the face. My world of comics became gigantic, a gleaming cornucopia of what our globe had to offer, and Forbidden Planet's vast and varied selection never failed to turn me into a wide-eyed kid. As a young creator ever-busy corralling my influences, this was a mammoth leap for me. The line of greats so far were all North American: from Hal Foster and his Arthurian *Prince Valiant* and Will Eisner, to Jack Kirby, Neal Adams, Gil Kane, and Alex Toth. But the shelves at Forbidden Planet introduced me to the great big world.

I got deep into works from France and Japan in particular. The surreal abstraction and futurism of Jean Giraud, aka Moebius, knocked me over. Moebius turned out to be the European Jack Kirby, in terms of how much he changed pop culture, visualizing a future that utterly transformed our view of the future. His work in film (and influence on it) shaped the worlds of *Star Wars*, *Alien*, and much more. Moebius was to our era what Jack Kirby had been to his: after him, there was no looking back. And the cinematic realism of the manga master, Katsuhiro Otomo, was also a complete eye-opener. His *Akira* is a fast-paced, postapocalyptic magnum opus that road tested the cyberpunk genre for the rest of us. Moebius and Otomo, and so many others I discovered around this time, woke me up to how expansive, innovative, and rebellious the comic art form could be.

Not long after Forbidden Planet blew fresh winds into my sails, another elemental force changed my direction—a sea change that opened new passages that I'm still exploring. My girlfriend at the time, Laurie Sutton, introduced me to a comic that would turn out to be one of the biggest inspirations of my career. She brought home a weird little black and white comic with Japanese writing and I went completely nuts for it. Created by the "Golden Duo" Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima, *Lone Wolf and Cub* is a masterpiece of comic art, and it worked a magic over me just like those EC comics did when I was a boy. Koike's epic story of a shogun-era samurai turned freelance assassin forced to wander a dangerous country with his young son is breathtaking in scope. Kojima's exquisite drawing

is precise and emotional all at once. It was all done with a brush, but because the brushwork is so fine, I first thought he created it with a pen. He used a multiplicity of lines to express motion, blending a rendering of form into motion-evoking “speed lines,” a distinctly non-Western approach that exploded with vigor. The lines suggest so much motion that the sword fights in *Lone Wolf* appear blurred. Take a look at some of my conceptual drawings for *Ronin* and you’ll see that I spent a fair amount of time imitating it.



Some of my colleagues and friends thought I was crazy for admiring the artwork as much as I did. To their eye, it was scratchy and ugly, but I loved it. To me, it cut to the heart of what comics are. It was *living drawing*, rough, a little reckless, literally alive. And when it comes to words, *Lone Wolf* is sparse. But that’s only because it is meant to be read at a *different speed*. Japanese comics, or manga, run for many pages, each to be read very quickly. This suits *Lone Wolf*’s story because it’s loaded with sex, violence, and adventure. But it’s never overcooked or overstuffed. There is no fat on the bone. It is epic, evocative, but streamlined storytelling at its best.

There was a lot going on in comics in the early to mid-eighties. There was a feeling that the art form was waking up from a long slumber. I was still riding high from my run on *Daredevil* and looking to spread my wings wide with *Ronin* when comic artists–writers Howard Chaykin and Walter Simonson invited me to join Upstart Associates, a studio on 29th Street in Chelsea. Chaykin and Simonson created Upstart with fellow comic artists Jim Starlin and Val Mayerik,

and when Mayerik moved out, I moved in. The studio space was a big old Midtown Manhattan loft just busting with creative energy. Everyone was into new stuff that they discovered at Forbidden Planet and elsewhere, and was juiced to find ways to inject these influences into their work. But there was also extensive historical and institutional knowledge working its way through the studio. Simonson knew all of the European artists and loved to talk about them, while Chaykin was a go-to source for anything to do with illustration history. These guys exposed me to all kinds of artists, including two Italian comics who greatly influenced me over the years: Hugo Pratt, a master storyteller known for his historical accuracy, and the virtuoso draftsman Sergio Toppi. Upstart was a repository of new energies and tested skill, exactly what I needed at the time.

Meanwhile, back in the stables at Marvel, the barn was beginning to feel a little stifling. I felt hemmed in. I was pleased with my work and learned a great deal from everyone I collaborated with, but the Marvel system had slotted me in as another work for hire, another pencil pusher trained to polish up their comic crown jewels and keep them relevant enough to keep selling in big numbers. And the publisher retained ownership of these franchises, so, at the end of the day, despite all my imaginative rethinking and original stories, I didn't own anything that I worked on. That's how it worked in those days. After all, Marvel and DC Comics had done a fair job of chasing competition to the shadows, holding a duopoly that wasn't really shaken for some years.

Like a jazz musician, I was improvising on old standards, giving the tunes my own touches wherever I could. But there's only so much you can do within that framework. It was rewarding work, don't get me wrong, but I was simply getting to the point where I wanted more. That said, I had fun riffing on *Spider-Man*, *Daredevil*, and *Wolverine* and reimagining and modernizing them was good training. But—and this is an *emphatic* but—I wasn't creating anything brand new, and that's what was stirring in me at the time. I wanted to create a whole series from scratch, and (with Neal Adams's words echoing in my mind) *own* it!

It cooks down to this: I was reinterpreting someone else's creation when what I really wanted to focus on was the creating part. John Coltrane's version of "In a Sentimental Mood" may be a jazz classic in its own right, but it's still a Duke Ellington tune, a monument in the American songbook. Shortly after Coltrane cut his version, he recorded his own original and unique masterpiece, "After the Rain." It's an atmospheric composition that sounds like Coltrane and no one else. Johnny Cash's version of Kris Kristofferson's "Sunday Morning Coming Down" is a beauty, but the one he penned himself, "I Walk the Line," remains his signature song. That's what I was after: my signature work. You might say I'd been wearing hand-me-downs long enough. I wanted to walk around in some pants of my own.

The beginnings of what would later become *Ronin* started to surface during this dynamizing time of freedom-seeking and far-flung influences. Japan was a

deep well for me, and the country's warrior traditions and folklore had been a creative stream in my work for some time. I created The Hand ninja clan as mercenary foes for Daredevil and, while on a long bus ride to Ohio for a comics convention, Chris Claremont and I decided to bring ninjas into *Wolverine*. We had both just watched the *Shōgun* television show, so we talked all things ninja for most of the trip. And because of my interest in manga comics and my obsession with *Lone Wolf and Cub* in particular, I was steeped in samurai culture and the ethos behind it. The samurai valued bravery, discipline, honor, duty, and living in service. Skilled in weaponry, partial to flashy armor, and committed to serving their masters, the samurai were highly trained killers who were selfless and unafraid to die. All heroic qualities ripe for conflict and drama—the perfect fodder for comic storytelling.

And then there were the ronin. By definition, a ronin is a wandering, masterless samurai, a fallen warrior out on his own after a master's death or one forced to roam in exile after committing a disgraceful act. A fighter with no lord or master, an outlaw samurai. This naturally appealed to my rebellious nature, which was running in overdrive at the time. And because of my own desires to leave the fold at Marvel and venture out on my own, I began to see myself as a bit of a ronin: a masterless artist, casting aside the advantages of a company man to journey a demon-filled world of my own creation.

Lest we forget, in 1978, Will Eisner released *A Contract with God*, which basically announced itself as a comic that dared to go where others had not. Using an intriguing mix of melodrama and social realism, Eisner unapologetically created a comic for grown-ups, one that grappled with serious issues that transcended any place or time. Its destiny: a place on the shelves for generations. It put a stake in the ground and said, "This is where a comic can go." I wanted to put a stake in the ground like that, but give it my own spin while doing so. What exactly it was going to be, I didn't quite know yet. I had France and Italy and Japan all buzzing around in my head, as was my ambition. "Who needs a boss?" I asked myself. Cocky as hell, I announced that I was doing a book called *Ronin* and was open to offers.

The young and extremely enterprising new publisher at DC Comics, Jenette Kahn, called me up and invited me to lunch. The menus were still on the table when Jenette asked, "Frank, if you had the freedom to do whatever you wanted in comics, what would you do?" Before I could finish telling her about my idea for the adventures of a ronin, she jumped in and told me that she, too, was enamored by samurai culture and that she had just watched a trilogy of samurai films. She said with a confident smile, "So, I know what a ronin is, Frank, there's no need for you to explain it." At this point, we were off to the races. An educated but lively conversation about samurai movies and Japanese culture ensued, each of us trading names and references like a couple of giddy biologists who just learned

they are enamored by the same living thing. By the time we actually got around to talking about my ronin story, Jenette was all ears.

She then asked me, “What would it take for you to bring this story over to DC?” I felt it already, the restraints coming off, and recognized the moment for what it was: a fateful chance to pitch my first creator-owned work. And to an enthusiastic audience no less. So I went for it, swung for the fences. I said, “It’s one long story, a ‘graphic novel’ that aims for the full scope and scale of a prose novel, telling the story of a fallen samurai warrior of the late shogun era who is transported to New York City’s dystopian future, a three-hundred-page tome serialized in six chapters.” As for how I wanted it to look, I told Jenette, “I envision it painted full-color and on high-quality paper—I’m tired of that cheap toilet paper everyone uses. Absolutely no ads anywhere. I want each volume to have a spine, like a book. But most of all—I need you to take a chance on me. I need *total* freedom to tell *exactly* the story I want to tell, *exactly* the way I want to tell it. I want us to compete directly with the high-production *bandes dessinées* of France and the high-energy manga and gekiga of Japan.” What I was asking for was transformative. I told her I wanted this to be *Frank Miller’s Ronin* and that I wanted creator involvement every step of the way.

She didn’t answer then and there, but several days later she called and said, “It’s a go, Frank. We can turn your vision into a reality. DC is prepared to publish *Frank Miller’s Ronin*.” With that, it was enough said. A fallen samurai came to life.

I flew into the making of *Ronin* with reckless abandon. Zero constraints and no guardrails in sight. My eyes were wide open and everything was flooding in. I felt free enough to harness and wildly mix all my influences, the grab bag of characters and themes and styles that I snatched from the zeitgeist. And then filter the bag’s contents through the sieve of comic book history and the artistry of new influences that had inspired me, principally Kojima, Moebius, Pratt, Hirata, and Bilal. Like a mad poet, I wanted to synthesize it all within the comic book framework, twist and bend it to its breaking point, and then make it new.

So in early 1983, I started what I already knew was going to represent my wildly ambitious attempt to put everything I loved into one book. Early on, while I was still sketching my first ideas, I noticed that two of my favorite comics at the time were lying next to one another on my coffee table at home: *The Incal* by Moebius and, of course, the ever-present *Lone Wolf and Cub*. I said to myself, “I’m going to mash these two together and see what happens.” And so my ronin became a fallen samurai from feudal Japan who was killed by the shape-shifting demon Agat, only to come back to life via a limbless telekinetic who works in a twenty-first-century, sci-fi dystopian New York City, an urban hellscape where the artificial intelligence is steadily, ominously turning from servant into a malignant goddess.

It was a furious artistic odyssey across styles and cultures, reckless and explosive. There are Nazi gangs, sewer-dwelling cannibals covered in boils, giant multiarmed sword-wielding rats, and the dead-eyed drones who serve at the behest of the head honchos at the Aquarius Complex, a sprawling bio-circuitry corporation that is literally engulfing the city. Functioning as Aquarius's nerve center, Virgo is a sentient AI, a pansophical system that grows more powerful by the day. An homage to the omniscient HAL 9000 supercomputer in Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, mixed with a gallon-sized smattering of Ridley Scott's *Alien*.

The characters come from all corners, too. Before Ronin's initial death in Japan, readers meet his wisecracking samurai master, whose sense of humor comes directly from the action-packed Toshiro Mifune movies I was devouring at the time. As for the demon, Agat, while on a study tour of feudal Japan in the early 1980s, I saw a picture of an old ukiyo-e print—one done in the style of the legendary Hokusai, a favorite of mine—that featured a magnificently strange demon with horns all over its head. I was so entranced by its weirdness that I took a snapshot of it in my mind and memorized it. Agat was born.

I wanted a fearless female character, a warrior who operated on her own terms, despite the overbearing men in her life. She had to be more than just a love interest or foil for the hero. For Casey McKenna, there is a bit of Elektra in there, but I must admit that Sigourney Weaver's portrait of Warrant Officer Ripley in *Alien* was the initial inspiration for Casey. She was tough, a survivor. But with Casey I wanted something else—a romantic lead. As head of security at Aquarius, Casey McKenna is certainly no shrinking violet, and, while she may work for a corporation, she doesn't blindly follow rules and regulations, especially when they run counter to her sense of justice. Her strong moral center gets her into trouble, but it also leads her into Ronin's arms and drives her to slay the hero's demon for him. It is the ronin himself who identifies here as a "samurai"; by story's end, she has joined him, defying Virgo and becoming a ronin herself.

This newfound freedom, and the wild influence of Goseki Kojima, suffused my drawings with supercharged energy. As I conceived Ronin on the page, I went through dozens of permutations of him. At first, he looked like a Marvel character who was trapped in a science fiction nightmare. I filled sketchbooks full of different versions, drawing over, scrapping page after page, until I found his true form: a warrior carrying the weight of his humanity. In the last volume, you can even see the weariness in his eyes. He is a battered, beaten man and a fallen samurai all the way up to the story's denouement and the moment of his spectacular rebirth.

When I finished my drawings, I turned them over to Lynn to color. Her coloring brought an entirely new dimension to it. We had a shared vision for how it needed to look. Both of us sought to make an American comic book that would go at *bande dessinée* in a jaw-to-jaw competition. Together, Lynn and I worked

ourselves to exhaustion, seeking excellence. Lynn always poured her soul even into the smallest problem, utterly dedicated to finding the best possible solution.

While writing and drawing *Ronin*, I felt a little like I was being reborn myself. I was jumping from one style and influence to the next, in pursuit of my vision with scant attention to what was established practice. For the story's underground scenes, where showing darkness was essential, I created lots of panels that were mostly black, and, in some cases, I went with nothing but black. The wretched cannibals appear out of solid black and then disappear back into it, just as they would do in a nightmare. Up to this point in *Ronin*, I hadn't been using heavy blacks, but this sequence brought them thundering back in. It was like this throughout the process. I wasted no sweat over slavish consistency of style—this book was out to accomplish *everything*. And creating like this made for an awful lot of fun. Most days working on *Ronin* were like those rare but life-changing school days from childhood, the ones when you're locked into learning, seeing the world anew, and discovering what you love. I was no longer pushing against walls or defying any code, I was adventuring.

I left it all on the field. After I completed the whole series, I felt exhausted and depleted, but exhilarated. I came out of it a changed man—freed from convention and timidity. It was a complete transition for me: I went from being one kind of comic book creator to another, from a rebel to my own man, my own artist, one who set his *own* rules.

It was a huge effort. I'd totally misjudged just how *consuming* *Ronin* would be, how *long* it would take to research what I needed to research, to learn what I needed to learn, to execute at twice my past page count. It was the most creatively challenging piece of work I'd ever embraced. And so I was late. Damn late. *Ronin* was one of the books that taught us all that a promise to your retailers must be a promise kept. All this left Jenette and others at DC, well, let's just say a little less than pleased. But they loved the finished product and aggressively supported it all the way to market. It was boom times in the marketplace and I was the hot kid in town, so DC put it all out there, prospecting for a runaway bestseller. Things did not go as planned. *Ronin* sold well, but not as well as expected by the end of the run. It was declared to be too experimental for its time.

I felt lost at sea. I completely emptied myself into *Ronin* and got so emotionally invested that when the public didn't throw me a parade for it, I just crashed and burned. I was shipwrecked for a few months, just plain disheartened, but after a while I gathered the pieces and put myself back together. The drawing board didn't stay quiet for long. The editor in chief at DC, Dick Giordano, called me into his office and said, "Frank, we need to get *Batman* moving again. Let's talk."

Making *Ronin* was a magical, liberating experience—I derived so much joy from it. But I lost sight of this when it didn't become the sales juggernaut everyone

wanted it to be. Eventually I learned that to get over any perceived failure, you just have to get back into the ring. You have to stay with it and keep at it, long enough for time to help you transmute the experience and derive some meaning from it. So you can't put yourself on trial every time you don't get that parade. There are going to be the ones where you're not declared the messiah. And if you *are* declared the messiah, go hide somewhere—that is more dangerous than anything.

I knew I was taking big chances. But taking chances is what it's all about. If you're not taking chances, if you're not challenging yourself, you are not leading a creative life. So climb out on that limb! Caution and timidity be damned. You'll learn, and you'll startle yourself and everybody else with what's coming out of you. Be your own Daredevil. Anything that doesn't work—that's a clue to new, untried solutions. Your best work can be inspired by an error or a blunder. You must celebrate your errors for what they are: informative missteps on the way to creating what you intended to make all along. Mistakes are gifts from the gods, and if you aren't making any, you aren't taking enough chances.

The ups and downs of *Ronin* taught me that, ultimately, it's about the process, not the outcome. If you bravely put your whole self into the making of something, you'll enjoy it, no matter how it shakes out. And that tells me that if you aren't enjoying your work, then you are probably not being brave enough. Get out there, go beyond your comfort zone. If it all works out, so be it. If it doesn't, so what?—there's still the next thing, the next crazy idea, the next mistake. In the endeavor to make, that's where the meaning lies. That's what those Winsor & Newton brushes are really for. As T. S. Eliot affirmed in *Four Quartets*, "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

Ronin changed my life and it changed my career. My first out-and-out original, it paved the way for *Martha Washington*, *Hard Boiled*, *Sin City*, and everything to come. I smile every time I think of it.

LESSON 6

THE DARK KNIGHT COMETH

Smash Expectations



“If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster And treat those two impostors just the same...”

—RUDYARD KIPLING, “IF”

There’s nothing like a broken nose to clarify the mind. As a creative experience, *Ronin* was a fascinating, exhilarating exploration, but didn’t meet (admittedly wild) sales expectations. Some branded it “a flop” and dismissed it as my “swan song.” Discouragement got the better of me for several rounds. I was assailed by self-doubt, which is a whale of an opponent, a serious heavyweight in the realm of personal demons. You never truly defeat it; you just learn to embrace it, as strange as that may sound. Bob Dylan was booed when he “went electric” at the Newport Folk Festival. Did he retreat, cower, apologize? Hell no! A bad reaction can be your best education.

So what was I going to make next? While I never lost my will to stay with it, there was a real crisis of purpose. And, truth be told, I only knew one way out of it: just go create something. Get back to *it*.

I intended *Ronin* to be ambitious; its many critics found it reckless. Whatever. Let history decide. In the meantime, it seemed like a good time to change course.

Jenette and the old wizard Dick Giordano, longtime artist, inker, and teacher, had now stepped in as vice president and executive editor at DC, respectively, and called me to talk about *Batman*. At the time, the Caped Crusader was a second-class citizen in comics. That awful Adam West TV show had eviscerated the character. Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams had brought him back to vivid life—but all that had faded into memory just as the readership had grown older, eager for rougher fare. Stan Lee had unleashed Ditko’s gritty streets and Kirby’s galaxy-spanning wonders. It was the Marvel Age. And when the writer Chris Claremont took up the *X-Men* mantle in the early eighties, he ushered in a new era of creative experimentation and a more “adult” approach to this flagship series. With artists John Byrne and Dave Cockrum, Claremont and writers like Len Wein introduced a new stable of international and colorful superheroes. There was Colossus from the Siberian waste of the Soviet Union, Nightcrawler from a small village in the hills of West Germany, and Thunderbird, an Apache Native American born on a

reservation in Arizona. While Wolverine, the breakout star of the bunch, hailed from an arctic lakeshore town in Alberta, Canada.

Marvel had all but eclipsed DC at this point, and the top brass at DC wanted to reclaim some of the light. Jenette's mission was to bring DC charging back into the game, and she did so with exuberance. It's safe to say I was on her and editorial boss Dick Giordano's hit list. Jenette asked me straight-up what I most wanted. I told her "freedom." She smiled, and said, "Spoken like a true artist." I got that freedom with *Ronin* and, to an amazing extent, with *The Dark Knight Returns*.

That's one of the reasons why they brought me over—to inject some vitality into the place. They were after some of that twentysomething piss and vinegar that I was so full of at the time. I was raring to go and itching for a daring adventure. DC embraced that wild purpose and proved they could walk the walk with *Ronin*. Around the same time, they also cleared the runways for a new British Invasion. DC welcomed a slew of fresh talent from across the pond, including Brian Bolland, Dave Gibbons, and Alan Moore—a crew of visionary and skilled creators who gave us *Camelot 3000* and *Watchmen*, among others.

In comparison, Batman the character looked and felt too familiar, a little dusty, and downright staid and conventional. Neal Adams and Denny O'Neil had revived old Bats like gangbusters a few years back, but Jim Shooter engineered an overwhelming response, making Marvel more powerful than ever. And sales-wise, *Batman* was in the toilet. The good-natured and mustachioed Giordano was a legendary artist and inker with a stellar reputation, and a primary mission in his new head honcho editorial position orbited around one thing: get *Batman* selling again. Despite the sales slump, Batman was still a popular character at all the conventions, so Dick and Jenette were sold on the idea of reviving DC's trademark character. And they enlisted me to breathe new life into him.

The problem was that everybody was so reverent about Batman. They'd preserved every detail of him so carefully that he'd become as exciting as Norman Bates's mom.

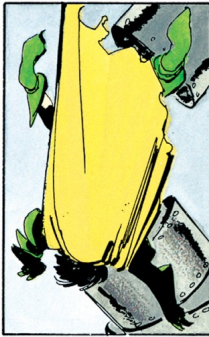
Batman had been a childhood favorite of mine. I read and admired all the different iterations of the comic, from the Golden Age original—the brainchild of Bill Finger and Bob Kane that debuted in 1939—and the Dick Sprang and Jerry Robinson interpretations in the 1940s to the Silver Age reinventions by Julius Schwartz and the more serious take on the hero by the writer and artist combo Frank Robbins and Irv Novick in the late 1960s. And let's not forget the entertaining buffoonery and pop art candy of the 1960s TV series with West as the "Bright Knight" Batman (his words, not mine) and Burt Ward as Robin, Batman's trusty but goofy teenage sidekick. The show was amusing at times and always over-the-top, and I watched it with one eye closed in a cringe as the Dynamic Duo capered around and dropped waggish one-liners. To use 1960s slang, the show was a real gas!

But, from Kane and Finger to Sprang and Robinson to Infantino and Aparo to Adams and O’Neil, there’d been some damn good *Batman* comics across the years. So, at first, Batman seemed too big for me to reinvent, too impenetrable—an icon with too much reverence, a symbol with too much meaning, a superstar with way too much baggage. But I was getting ever closer to turning thirty, and there was the solution! I’d turn him back into the father figure he was when I first met him. I’d make him staggeringly old, as old as his legend. I’d make him fifty. And cranky as hell and ready for war.

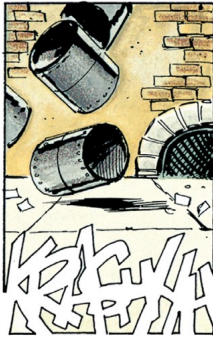
You’ve got to catch your audience off guard. It’s part of your job. You’ve got to keep yourself charged-up and challenged. *Daredevil* had given me a chance to bring back the long-forbidden crime comic. I swiped the kingpin of crime from the Spider-Man folks and introduced the hero’s first love turned ninja assassin, Elektra, and scrambled the bunch to turn my crime comic into a Greek tragedy. What a wild ride! And I had a ball.

It was late 1985, and I was twenty-eight going pell-mell into twenty-nine. Seems ridiculous now, but, at the time, I was really dreading my thirtieth birthday. It loomed out there on the horizon. Not because things weren’t going well for me personally either. Life was pretty good. I was an emerging writer-artist getting recognition. Neal Adams had led the charge, and enough of us had joined him, so that now at least *some* of us could negotiate real-life contracts.

Lynn and I were storming the barricades, attempting to compete with Europe’s high production standards and go toe-to-toe with them in terms of content and craft. Keep in mind here that when it comes to content and craft, comics had diverged from the Marvel/DC “mainstream” since the “head comics” of the 1960s, and out of this came Kitchen Sink, Fantagraphics, and other champions of creative ambition.



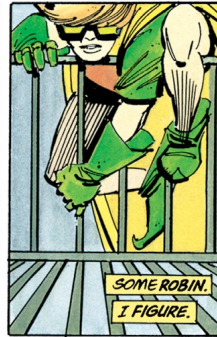
COMMISSIONER--
YOU JUST SHOT A
BOY. HOW DOES
THAT FEEL?
COMMISSIONER?...



THANK YOU, HERNANDO.
THIS IS THE THIRD
ATTEMPT ON GORDON'S LIFE
IN THE THREE WEEKS SINCE
THE LEADER OF THE
MUTANT ORGANIZATION
MADE HIS VIDEOTAPE
DEATH TREAT...



WE WILL KILL THE OLD
MAN GORDON. HIS WOMEN
WILL WEEP FOR HIM. WE
WILL CHOP HIM. WE WILL
GRIND HIM. WE WILL
BATHE IN HIS BLOOD.



SOME ROBIN.
I FIGURE.

I MYSELF WILL KILL THE
FOOL BATMAN. I WILL
RIP THE MEAT FROM HIS
BONES AND SUCK THEM
DRY. I WILL EAT HIS
HEART AND DRAG HIS
BODY THROUGH THE
STREET.



DON'T CALL US A GANG.
DON'T CALL US CRIMINALS.
WE ARE THE LAW. WE ARE
THE FUTURE. GOTHAM CITY
BELONGS TO THE MUTANTS.
SOON THE WORLD WILL
BE OURS.



GORDON, FACING MANDATORY
RETIREMENT LATER THIS
WEEK, HAS OFFERED TO
STAY AT THE JOB UNTIL THE
MUTANT CRISIS HAS BEEN
RESOLVED. POLICE MEDIA
RELATIONS DIRECTOR LOUIS
GALLAGHER HAD THIS TO SAY...



NICE OF JIM TO OFFER, BUT
I THINK WE ALL KNOW
THINGS'LL COOL OUT ONCE
HE STEPS DOWN. THE
MUTANTS HAVE A THING
ABOUT HIM...NO, I THINK
IT'S TIME FOR NEW BLOOD...



STRANGELY, THAT "NEW BLOOD"
HAS YET TO BE OFFICIALLY
ANNOUNCED. WHILE
INSPECTOR JOHN DALE
SEEMS TO BE THE OBVIOUS
CHOICE, THE MAYOR HAS
YET TO COMMIT HIMSELF...



I'M STILL POOLING
OPINIONS.
I'M STILL POOLING
OPINIONS.



WITH A SCANT SIX HOURS
REMAINING, THE QUESTIONS
HANG IN THE AIR--WHO
WILL REPLACE JIM GORDON?
AND WHAT WILL BECOME
THE OFFICIAL POSITION ON
THE BATMAN? TOM?



GOOD QUESTION, LOLA.
MRS. JOYCE RIDLEY WAS
ADMITTED TO A PRIVATE
HOSPITAL UPSTATE FOR
PSYCHIATRIC OBSERVATION
FOLLOWING HER COLLAPSE
THIS MORNING.



HER TEN-MONTH BABY,
KEVIN, HEIR TO THE
RIDLEY CHEWING GUM
FORTUNE, IS STILL
MISSING. ANYONE WITH
INFORMATION IS URGED
TO CALL THE CRISIS
HOTLINE...



Working in tandem with my hard-nosed ambition was my impatience with the comic book business at large. I believed that both bygone era guidelines for what constitutes a comic book and entrenched, status quo business practices that stifled individual talent were twin malignancies making the whole industry pretty damn sick. Comics were being held back by adherence to bad habits. Neal Adams, far and away the most “swiped” comics artist in a generation, remarked that “imitators only seem to pick up an artist’s *mistakes*.”

It’s worth recalling that up until Jack Kirby changed the game in the 1960s, comics mostly stayed within the traditional six-panel grid: three tiers with two panels each. When I first started work at Gold Key, the paper actually came to us with those panels scored on the page. But Kirby started tweaking this format, and eventually banished the panels altogether and used the entire page for a single image. Then he really broke through by creating double-page spreads. He smashed the mold, and comic art hasn’t looked back since. Gil Kane took this further, playing with *diagonals* to liven up the action.

Taking our cues from Kirby and Will Eisner, there were a few of us pushing walls, kicking down doors, and rewriting the script, but, in my view at the time, many of those that controlled the levers were content just staying the course—happy with the way things were, the way things had always been. Sure *X-Men* at its outset and some outlier comics like *Ronin* had moved the needle, but, to me, comics were simply treading water, trying not to drown in Hollywood’s wake. While other forms of pop culture pushed the limits, the comic book business remained risk-averse and slow to change. We were still in the playground when I thought it was high time to jump the fence.

As for the world beyond comics, the Cold War was still active and the threat of nuclear war with the Soviets still loomed. We were in the middle of the Reagan era and the paint job was fading on his folksy idealism. The B-movie cowboy president had promised a new shining city on a hill, but what America got was no such thing. As for life in the Big Apple, New York City in the 1980s experienced two seismic upheavals, and both of them were epidemics. Crack cocaine addiction rampaged through the boroughs, creating a crime wave that built on top of the one left behind by the 1970s fiscal meltdown. And HIV/AIDS ravaged its victims and virtually decimated an entire New York City community, while the establishment downplayed the killer virus as a “gay disease.” Because of crime, drug use, and gang violence, certain neighborhoods were still no-go zones and economic disparity still fell along racial lines, creating palpable tension and visible strife in the city as a whole. You wouldn’t know this if you spent most of your time down on Wall Street, however. It was boom time in the canyons of lower Manhattan and investors and brokers were making money hand over fist.

Life was out of balance.

When I was working up new ideas for Batman and thinking of ways to give Bats his edge back, all of this trickled into my notes and sketches. Reagan's America and TV culture were ripe for parody, and I liked the idea of doing this within the framework of a comic book. Why not some political parody? This is comics, for goodness' sake! Aren't we known for this sort of thing? Ever hear of the *political cartoon*? As for the setting, Gotham had to be on the brink of frenzied disintegration. The real world was in dire straits. Add to that, comic book readership, while perceived by many in the public as children, had expanded, despite the insipid structures of the Comics Code. Comics were already growing up, and so were comic book readers. So why not the heroes themselves? Batman was, at the time, turning fifty, so why not make him look and feel like a man who'd been dishing out, *and taking*, jawbreaking violence for *decades*.

Bruce Wayne, aka Batman, had always been a young man in his twenties, but I decided to turn that on its head. As you now know, I was a young man anxious about turning thirty, so there was no way Batman was going to be younger than me! Instead, my Bruce Wayne would be coming out of retirement to reanimate the Batman persona at age fifty, complete with creaky knees, a bad back, and an older man's hardened sense of what is right and wrong. Gone is the slender fop who swoops in with a wink and a smile. My reconfigured Batman is big, bulky, and battle-worn, but he's not cynical or corrupted by time. His moral code is intact. He has to don the cape again; he has no other choice: the corrupt and twisted state of things forces the hero back into the fray. To do this, he would need an updated set of wheels. His mode of transport would no longer be a flashy sports car, but a military-grade, tank-like vehicle armored for war. And, last but not least, it was time to get rid of that silly yellow bat emblem on his costume!

As for Robin, the introduction of a brave, young female to the story was long overdue. My colleague John Byrne suggested that Robin should be a girl—he even doodled one to show me the idea. I ran with it, and introduced Carrie Kelley: a bright, thirteen-year-old prodigy whose own fearless idealism motivates her to make a Robin costume of her own and join Batman in combat without his permission. Carrie is a young woman of action, an enterprising and committed fighter for what is good and right. She serves as a counterposing force to the Mutants, a nihilistic gang of young people who terrorize Gotham and leave frightened souls and scores of dead bodies in their wake. And this gang is led by a psychopathic leader who is more monster than human. They congregate at the city dump on the edge of Gotham with only one mission: to feed their appetite for chaos and violence.

Functioning like a bizarro Greek chorus and a burlesque version of television talking heads, newscasters, politicians, and dime-store psychiatrists bloviate throughout the story. Even a Reagan-like president makes an appearance, looking haggard and disoriented, much like the Gipper did at the time. The late show host

who brings on the Joker as a guest looks all the world like David Letterman, right down to his warm Midwestern smile and the gap between his two front teeth.

Comic books are part of pop culture, and *The Dark Knight Returns* celebrates this. And pop culture interacts with its own time and place, sometimes reflecting the current culture back to the audience and other times offering its own brand of criticism—the entertaining kind. It amplifies elements in the world to make sense of it, and sometimes the only way to make sense of it is to laugh at it. And, to make a point that ought to be obvious—cartoonists *cartoon*, folks! There’s a direct link between comic books, newspaper cartoons, and political cartoons. Take a look at the work by Jeff Smith, Bill Watterson, and Herblock, respectively. It’s all right there.

I was armed and ready when Giordano called me back into his office to talk more about getting Batman moving again. He reiterated that they were in a pinch with Batman, and then asked me about my thoughts on revamping the winged avenger. Now, it’s heaven when a publisher effectively says, “We’re at a loss here, we need your help,” because this means the handcuffs are off—you genuinely have creative freedom and some wide-open avenues for your ideas. And, of course, I had plenty of ideas, most of them running counter to what was expected.

I told Dick that I wanted Batman to be older and meaner than ever, and he replied, “Great!” He responded the exact same way after I told him that I wanted the Batmobile to look more like an urban assault vehicle, a futuristic machine capable of taking out an entire city block. I told him this new Batman meant business, and that the panels would be littered with bodies and destruction. Again, he said, “Great, yeah, that sounds good, Frank.” I told him my new Robin was going to be a teenage girl who earns Batman’s trust by fighting the good fight on her own, and Dick said, “Oh, that’s a great idea! Yes, it’s about time.” And that a new anarchic gang called the Mutants were out to destroy Gotham and used an unknown street lingo to hatch their dirty deeds, and he said, “Wow, okay, yeah, go with it.” Then I told him I wanted to get rid of that silly yellow circle around the bat emblem on Batman’s chest.

To this, Giordano said, “No, Frank. No way!”

The yellow oval emblem with a smaller bat debuted in the early 1960s and then the TV series virtually trademarked it. I was convinced that the curlicue bat in the pool of yellow didn’t work for my reconceptualized, edgier Batman.

Of all the goddamn, silly-ass, inconsequential things to be arguing about...

First of all, why would Batman, a crime-fighting superhero, take to the mean streets and hidden corners of Gotham with a bright target on his chest? It might have jibed with the cornball atmosphere of Adam West’s Batman, but that dainty little decoration would not work on my darker, heftier Batman. I was convinced that the old Dick Sprang emblem from the 1940s was more fitting. It was tougher and scarier. The simple but imposing black bat—a striking square block—with no

other adornments was more in tune with my big-chested, squared-off, Sprang-inspired Batman.

But Giordano wasn't having any of it. DC resisted. The yellow circle was now the tradition, and, even more important, the *trademark*. The almighty trademark. I wouldn't win the argument butting heads with him on this point, I knew it was a nonstarter.

So I found another way to push against it, or rather *sneak around* it. On the cover of the second book, *The Dark Knight Triumphant*, our caped hero appears all beat up, looking like a cross between Batman and the Hulk—a gnarled, wounded gladiator. In the story, after he gets torn to pieces in a brawl with the Mutant leader, he limps back to the Batcave, his costume in tatters. Alfred patches him up and gives him an old suit, the one with the Sprang emblem. Just like that, the yellow emblem was gone! He roars out of the Batcave on a motorcycle with the new black emblem. And Carrie, who is now wearing the official Robin costume, occupies his sidecar with steely conviction, ready to do her part. Transformations complete.

Don't let the shadows of statues blot out your individual light. To admire something doesn't mean you have to enshrine it. And remember that statues can't *move*. Nor can they breathe. Besides, we're not in the statue-polishing business, are we? Our heroes are alive.

When confronted with something that feels too big or inviolable, give it a good, hard look-over. Play with it. See what works, and *do* what works *best*. That's not rebellion for its own sake. It's not rebellion at all. It's doing your job. You're not just there to carry out everything like it has been done; you're there to build upon what's there, not slavishly imitate it. Rebel, sure, but a splash of wit doesn't hurt. I learned this early on during my work on *Daredevil*. I admired how Eisner created a sense of motion by drawing scraps of paper and trash that floated in the panels. You felt it right away—there's wind! So I aped this quite a lot in my *Daredevil* creations. That is until Jim Shooter said, "Enough with all the bits of paper, Frank! It's too much." My response to this: the next *Daredevil* episode took place during a *ticker tape* parade. There was paper flying all over the place. When Shooter laid eyes on it, he just laughed, nodded his head from side to side, and said, "Okay, Frank, you got me!"

And so I've been just going with it ever since, when I'm playing with somebody else's toys. I've simply learned how to tamp it down a bit more over the years, starting with *The Dark Knight Returns*. In many ways, *The Dark Knight Returns* marked the end of my adolescence as an artist.

As serious-minded as I can be about the creative process and the craft necessary for a fully realized piece of art, I always avoid the quicksand of reverence. Strangely enough, pop culture has taken my interpretation of Batman as the Dark Knight, the very character I created to radicalize a venerated icon, and they've turned *him* into a statue. This drives me crazy. I don't want him to be

preserved in amber. I want others to poke and prod and reinvent and rewrite and knock him over. Smash all the expectations. Throw some floating bits of paper in there. Go ahead, give the old hero a broken nose. It might just clarify a few things.

LESSON 7

THE SWORD IN THE STONE

The Power of Myth



“Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them.”

—ALBERT CAMUS, *THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS*

“Mythology gives you a sense of what a people believes, what they fear.”

—GEORGE LUCAS

“Oh, the places you’ll go!”

—DR. SEUSS

Gotham goes dark. An aging but undaunted crime fighter lumbers toward the Man of Steel like a battered warrior, a forgotten heavyweight champ in for one last fight. Not for the glory, but to right an ancient wrong. Haunted by his parents’ murder in this very place, Batman seethes. The street remains a dark and twisted place, menacing and infested, evidence that the old tyrannical order that Superman upholds is still failing the citizens of Gotham, still failing the whole damn world. Criminals run rampant and sirens follow the screams.

Batman lands the first blow, a walloping right to Superman’s jaw that sends him reeling to the pavement. He rises and slams a Kryptonian fist into Batman’s midsection. All-too-human ribs pop. Now with Batman firmly in his grasp, Superman hurls the Caped Crusader down the alley, farther into the darkness.

But Batman doesn’t stay down long, a referee’s count of three. And just like that, he’s clambering back into battle. The two colossal heroes, the biggest on earth, thunder toward each other. The whole city seems to shake with each thunderous footstep.

The gods go to war.

My heroes belong in the streets. Down in it, where the action is. I like to play the devil with old mythologies and classical archetypes, including the hero. Not because I don’t respect them, but because I know they can take it. Myths and heroes have been around the block a time or two. Cultures adopt and adapt them, artists co-opt and refashion them, and storytellers borrow and build on them. There’s an entire field of study dedicated to comparative mythology and Joseph Campbell distilled and popularized these ideas, so I won’t belabor them. But here’s one relevant example to drive the point home: it’s no coincidence that Jack Kirby’s primal, empowering energy is called “the Source” in his *Fourth World*

comic series and, years later, George Lucas deemed his mysterious power “the Force” in *Star Wars*. Both represent the elemental energy source in the eternal struggle between good and evil. A concept as old as the human imagination. Also, just as Kirby’s evil father, Darkseid, is transmogrified not only into the “Dark Side” of “the Force,” but also as Darth Vader, the “dark father” of hero Luke Skywalker, who is a lot like the dark father of Kirby’s hero Orion. In this light, Kirby’s *Fourth World* series must be regarded as a primary source inspiration for Lucas’s creation. Nothing is created in a vacuum.

There’s a long line of mythological superheroes, many of whom contain elements from their predecessors. They’ve always been with us, fighting our battles and doing the unthinkable. From time immemorial these larger-than-life characters have set out for unknown lands, squared off against evil, and fulfilled our wishes.

The old poet Homer gave us two of our best. Wandering Odysseus is a model superhero. “Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of man skilled in all the ways of contending.” This is how the ancient poet begins *The Odyssey*, his winding tale of confrontation and heroism. His “wily Odysseus” sails the “wine dark sea,” slaying monsters, cheating death, and tricking his way out of thorny situations just like our most cherished comic book heroes. Batman uses every last trick during his epic brawl with Superman in *The Dark Knight Falls*. He takes a huge risk by faking his own death to keep his fight for justice alive. While justice-seeking motivates Batman, a deep need to reclaim what is his and see his wife and country again are the twin forces that push the “great-hearted” Odysseus onward. He is driven by *nostos*, a yearning for home. By making it back to Ithaca after the gods put him through his paces, Odysseus fulfills one of our greatest wishes: to reclaim what has been stolen from him, to cleanse proud Ithaca of thieves and pretenders.

In *The Iliad*, Homer’s Achilles proves beyond a doubt that he is the ultimate warrior, a god among men. Literally, in his case. Like Superman, who will theoretically live as long as the sun, Achilles has more than a touch of the immortal. Half of his DNA comes from Mount Olympus. Born of a union between an immortal sea nymph and a Greek king, Achilles is essentially indestructible. Mere mortals don’t stand much of a chance. He is invulnerable, with the exception of his famous heel. That’s his Kryptonite. When he was young, his sea goddess mother dipped him into the River Styx to give him special powers. She held him by his heels, leaving that part of his foot as his only weak spot.

Harnessing his godlike status, Achilles is merciless on the battlefields. After he kills another heroic fighter, Hector, to revenge his comrade Patroclus’s death, Achilles drags Hector’s body behind his chariot and around the city walls of Troy to demonstrate his power and wrath.

Consider, also, the Hebraic origins of the superhero. Not only was the genre itself begun by Jewish teenagers Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, it reached what was arguably its apex in the hands of Jacob Kurtzberg (Jack Kirby) and Stanley Lieber (Stan Lee). Here, in the Hebrew Bible, we have the Goliath-slaying David, the sea-parting Moses, and the almighty Samson, who could break stone with his bare hands.

Myth comes from everywhere. When I was seven, my mom and dad took me to a theater in Montpelier to see Walt Disney's musical fantasy *The Sword in the Stone*. An animated adaptation of the medieval Arthurian legend, the movie had it all: a long-bearded wizard named Merlin, and his talking pet owl; a mysterious forest and a castle with a moat; knights, lances, and a shape-shifting dragon; and, of course, the young hero, whom everyone called Wart until he was the only one to pull the sword Excalibur from the stone and became King Arthur.

Around the same time, my eldest brother, Robert, who was then in his mid-teens, introduced me to Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*, a complex, melodramatic cycle of operas. He was a Wagner devotee. His enthusiasm was infectious. Being nine years my senior, Robert was more than an older brother; he was a teacher, guide, and role model for me during my early years. He couldn't get enough of Wagner's epic stories in song, particularly the *Ring*.

I learned that Siegfried's sword, Nothung, was based on a mystical blade from an old Norse myth. In the older story, the hero, Sigurd, inherits a magical sword called Gram. Sigurd's father gave him the sword after he—yep, you guessed it—pulled it out of an ancient log when no one else could. After recasting the sword and demonstrating its power by splitting a metal anvil in two, he sets out on a journey to slay a dragon and locate a hidden treasure. (Why Disney substituted the anvil for the original, exquisite device of the enchanted Lady of the Lake is beyond me! But such is mythmaking.) Wagner told the tale differently: the sword was introduced as a lump of magic gold, the *Rheingold*. Young Siegfried stole the gold from the miserly gnome Alberich, who vowed revenge on Valhalla itself. Siegfried hammered the Rheingold lump into a sword powerful beyond belief.

When these mythologies merged and cascaded into my consciousness, I realized that it was all about the sword. Whether it was named Gram, Nothung, or Excalibur—or even Luke Skywalker's lightsaber!—wasn't important; what was important was that the sword made its way into the hands of the right hero—the one who would make things right. Once he has possession of Excalibur, King Arthur goes on a number of heroic quests, and his castle, Camelot, stands as a symbol of chivalry and hope and law and justice.

From then on, the *Tales of King Arthur*—and swords in particular—exerted their mythological pull on me. In the early versions of the myth, Arthur doesn't pull the sword from a stone, but instead it arises from water. The Lady of the Lake's arm emerges from a lake that surrounds the mythical island of Avalon and offers the sword to Arthur. A sorceress who lives in an enchanted castle under a

lapping lake rises to meet the occasion and bequeath a magical sword to a chosen one: it's an evocative, powerful image that's never left me. An echo of the Achilles myth, Arthur's super-heroic power comes from a water spirit.

I read as much as I could about Arthur and his knights. I'll never forget the first time I saw Arthur Rackham's illustration of Arthur pulling Excalibur from the stone, and it remains a favorite to this day. And then two very different films solidified it as a lifelong interest. In 1967, my brother and I were first in line to see the film adaptation of the musical *Camelot*, starring Richard Harris and the unforgettable Vanessa Redgrave, and then in 1975 *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* left me sore in the gut from laughing. As an eighteen-year-old budding artist, Monty Python's satirical take on the ancient myth was completely eye-opening. Their contrasting of myth with sickening dark ages grit makes *Holy Grail*, to my mind, the finest translation of Arthurian myth to date.

Myths are wide open to interpretation. If a myth can withstand the Walt Disney treatment, Broadway song and dance, and a hammering from the Python guys, then it can withstand anything.

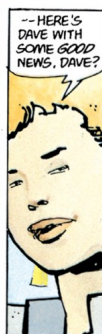
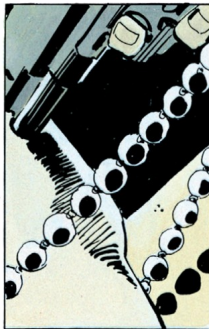
And then came *Star Wars*. On a warm spring night in 1977, a group of friends dragged me to see *Star Wars*, probably on its opening weekend. I was less than excited about it, because this same crew had talked me into seeing *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. But the opening scroll hooked me, slammed by that John Williams score. The crawl of words moving up the screen into deep space signaled that I was about to see an epic story unfold. Then, in a matter of minutes, Darth Vader emerges from a hallway of smoke in a really cool spacecraft—an archetypal villain's entrance if there ever was one.

I instantly got so many of the references in it, from King Arthur to Jack Kirby. In addition to being one of the coolest things I'd seen on film, I knew right away that the lightsabers were an obvious nod to both samurai culture and Arthurian legends. Kirby's evil supervillain, Darkseid, morphed into Darth Vader, a terrifying antagonist who uses the Dark Side of the Force to crush his enemies. Luke Skywalker, the orphan who becomes a hero, is clearly the one who will pull the sword from the stone. He will make things right.

It really is true that everything comes from something. Comic book creators, like other artists in other media, have always used—and continue to use—mythical tales as foundations for their work. Myths echo in our culture, and in our souls. When I first started working in the comic book field, those of us who toiled “on the boards” were considered “commercial artists,” writers and drawers and inkers commissioned to create a *product* to sell. Early on, Neal Adams told me that the label “commercial artist” was a complete misnomer and shortchanged us by devaluing our work. He knew of what he spoke. Neal did a lot of commercial artwork over the course of his career, so if anyone could delineate the difference, it was Neal. He told me that it was a misleading title because commercial artwork

sells *something*, but a comic book sells only *itself*. With a gleam in his eye, Neal said, “Comic books don’t sell cars or candy bars. Comic books sell *themselves*. They sell *stories*.” This is an important distinction to make because it gets to the heart of the intent we bring to comics. And the respect we give them and therefore to ourselves as artists.

Myths and archetypes are mighty turbines, current-generating *dynamos*. Artists and storytellers rely on both their power and their timelessness. And I’m no exception. Look no further than Excalibur, Nothung, and, obviously, the Japanese katana for the inspirations for Ronin’s sword, and, while there isn’t a magical blade in the pages of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman does wield a sword in one hand (with that military-grade rifle in the other) on the cover of book four, *The Dark Knight Falls*. He also mounts a mighty steed, looking every bit the traditional hero off to slay a monster. (Although I was thinking more of Zorro than Siegfried.) And Bruce Wayne as the Dark Knight certainly embarks on an odyssey toward justice, one that is full of near-death experiences and confrontations with the criminally insane, creatures from the underworld, the quasi-immortal, and outright monsters. From the beginning, I thought of *The Dark Knight Returns* as an epic novel. This allowed me to freely follow Batman as he changed throughout the story—his heroic journey surprised me as much as it later did the readers. At first, I envisioned him as a much darker character: a wrathful hero out of retirement and on a warpath, driven by single-minded rage and a death wish. But he became much more than that, particularly after Carrie Kelley donned the Robin costume. Batman brings dark revenge, bloody justice. He smashes into us like shards of broken glass. Carrie Kelley is a beacon of hope and joy. With Carrie around, he now has a reason to live—protecting her gives him purpose beyond vengeance. Like an Arthurian knight, loyalty and chivalry propel him forward. Her presence bestows on him the courage required, much like a sword rising from a lake. Carrie Kelley is the key to *The Dark Knight Returns*. The first time she wears the Robin costume, Batman saves her life. In the last panel of *The Dark Knight Returns*, she has saved his soul.



At the time, Batman suited my creative vision for a superhero much more than Superman. I grew up reading and idolizing Superman. He was my first favorite superhero. But, truth be told, I had gotten pretty sick of the guy. He was just so ridiculously powerful, and his invulnerability reached the point of limiting him as a character for me. I couldn't see a way to de-power him enough to make him interesting. He had always been perfectly epitomized in the old WWII-era Fleischer brothers' cartoons, landing a stolen super bomber in *Japoteurs* or, in their most unforgettable episode, using his might to stop a runaway train. After that, in all the decades of getting built up as more and more powerful, he became ridiculous. In the face of the Hulk and Thor and other Kirby gods and demigods, old Superman seemed to amp up his power level beyond comprehension.

As for Batman, he is more vulnerable and human. He is more like us, just amplified for drama. Batman is more complex because he's an entangled mess of human feelings. For me at the time, this made him a more suitable cipher for myths and creative storytelling. I could breathe my imagination into him.

Let's briefly consider his origin story and progression as a character. After he sees his parents shot to death, he is presented with a choice: take the money he inherited and slink off to an easier life, but one that will surely be riddled with pain, or channel his rage and horror into a fight against the forces that killed his mom and dad. His hero's journey starts right then and there. He becomes the world's greatest crime fighter, but he is not without his foibles and compulsions. Because, at heart, he's still a little kid with wide-open eyes staring into the existential horror of life. But he keeps doing what he deems is the right and true thing, even if he could take his money and run. That's as heroic as it gets.

All of us carry wounds. All of us are forced to make hard choices. In many ways, Batman is us. He's just bigger and better, and his circumstances allow him to do what many of us can't. He does what we wish we could. That's what a *hero* is: someone or something we *aspire* to.

Adopting and adapting myths gives me stories to tell. Mythologies trade in human emotion, and human values. Heroes, as they struggle to overcome the stacked odds, reflect back our innermost feelings—self-doubt, confusion, desire, loneliness, love, and hate. There is a commonality to these emotions: we all share them. So by tapping into a myth, you tap into the human experience writ large. And as Jack Kirby and George Lucas and so many, many others show, wonders give way to wonders.

When I was working on *The Dark Knight Returns*, there were so many predecessors and antecedents jumping around in my mind. There were the more distant mythical heroes of course, but also newer ones like The Shadow, Dirty Harry (Batman is fond of the word “punk”), and Zorro, who I even name-checked in the series. Batman as the Dark Knight is an assemblage of heroes and I wouldn't have it any other way. Because of this, there is something universal

about his dogged individualism. We all recognize something in him. He is the part of us that stares the devil in the eye—and *smiles*.

Myths are universal because the tales, characters, and imaginative creatures are folkloric. They spark our imaginations and engage our sense of magic and wonder. There aren't dragons swooping in on us out there in real life, but dragons represent something in our minds—they symbolize the supernatural and the unknown forces prowling on the edge of reason or the monsters in our psyche.



FM/LV

One sunny, midsummer day in Vermont, as a little boy, I stretched out flat on my back in the front yard of our house. It was a bright, hot afternoon. I fell into one of those deep and tranquil naps you're only lucky enough to snag as a kid. The singing insects and the wind in the trees just lulled me to sleep. When I woke and opened my eyes, there was a dragonfly hovering right over my eyes. But, in that moment, it wasn't a dragonfly, it was a dragon. For what seemed like minutes, the dragon just stayed there, suspended above me and close enough for me to see up close, up *way* close, how intricate, ugly, and menacing it was. Its buzzing was horrifying, painfully loud. It was just me and the dragon, deciphering one another, taking each other's measure. It soon shook its (seemingly) massive wings and flew off. When I rejoined the real world, all I could hear for a few seconds was the buzzing of the dragonfly ringing in my ears.

The terror and wonder of life. Its dual nature is sometimes difficult to comprehend, but it's out there, and sometimes it zips right in and stares you square in the eye.

Myths are essential to our collective memory and imagination and our shared human story. The sky is the limit when it comes to adapting and reshaping them. You don't need to know your Carl Jung or Joseph Campbell or all the nuances of the collective unconscious to recognize that mythological heroes will forever transcend cultures and time. Superheroes will not disappear. The basic myth of the hero is open to infinite expansion because it's irresistible to us. As storytellers, we can embellish the narrative, but the nuts and bolts are already there and have been for as long as we've been telling stories by firelight or by the taps in the bar.

Heroes right wrongs. They stop bad people from doing bad things. They offer hope. And these heroes and superheroes, they do things no ordinary mortal would attempt. They do things we can't do. That's why Superman is the quintessential superhero—he promises a return to order, and he does it by doing what all the rest of us land-bound humans can't do: he takes to the skies. He fulfills that universal wish. The tagline to the first Superman movie says it all: "You'll believe a man can fly."

Always keep in mind that heroes go *way* back—to Beowulf and Siegfried and Robin Hood and Moses and Samson. They're as old as gods. Maybe older.

Our heroes do the unimaginable. Will Eisner's Spirit wears blue gloves and a domino mask, travels the globe, and even goes to the moon, in his quest to rid earth of its villains. Daredevil enacts vigilante payback on New York City's underworld criminals and gangsters—the supervillains who appear untouchable to cops and courts. Heroes answer the call, and do what needs to be done. Batman isn't iconic because he drives a cool car or a futuristic tank, although that certainly helps. He's an archetype because he restores a sense of continuity and fair play. "The world only makes sense," he growls, "when you force it to."

Batman's energy is waning fast. He's on one knee as he peels himself off the pavement. He's at the far end of Crime Alley and the darkness is enveloping. The glow from a lone streetlamp is the only light.

He is broken and bleeding. Superman has worked him over, but he's not belly-up yet. His primal drive and strategic cunning have distracted Superman just enough. The Man of Steel's been too busy spinning from one setback to the next and extricating himself from the ingenious traps Batman set in advance.

But now Batman is all out of tricks. And he's feeling his age.

As Superman shakes his head and wipes his eyes, still disoriented from Batman's gas attack, he tells Batman, "This was never going to end well, Bruce. Relent. Before it's too late. We can still fix this. If you promise to stop your crusade, I'll help you disappear. If not, you know what's next. You still have a choice." Batman is flat on the ground, regathering his strength, starting to make his way back to his feet.

Batman is not resigned, but doesn't see a way out. And then he notices a gleaming object in a puddle of water under the streetlamp. After he makes his way to it, he sees that it's a glistening sword. It reflects the light and almost hovers above the water. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees what looks like a female figure dash between two bombed-out buildings. There's a gust of wind. He feels a sudden rush. He picks up the sword, feels its weight, and slashes the air with it. Energy flows back into his body. He feels young again. Clarity is restored.

Just as he turns back into the alley, Superman is coming full tilt, shrugging off the full weight of a crumbling tenement. Batman's finally got the big blue Boy Scout angry.

And he's ready.

And he's eager.

"This is going to HURT," he hisses.

LESSON 8

UP, DOWN, AND SIDEWAYS

The Page as a Tennis Court



Contrast is everything. Enormous power radiates from the push and pull of opposites, and this power generates creative opportunities. As Dr. Jung put it, “The greater the contrast, the greater the potential.” When you type that first word on a page—just a few black letters on a white expanse—possibilities are born. A rough pencil drawing in an empty sketchbook augurs a character whose story will later fill that book’s remaining pages. A simple guitar chord, a sound rippling through the silence: the first stroke of a song. All of this—all of it is disposable, all of it full of possibilities.

So you scribble down your first, blunt intention (“Conan in a trench coat” was mine for *Sin City*). Then you figure out who your hero or heroine is and what he or she has to do and what is standing in the way. That’s usually the first chapter of a prose novel. Or the first ten pages of a screenplay. Or the opening scene of a comic book.

Comics is a story form, and its nearest sibling is cinema. (That’s the rich and famous member of the family.) Both use words and pictures to tell stories. And both exist *in time*. In comics, each panel leaps to the next, like words in a sentence. Further, if you follow Eisner’s bold claim that the first comic book was painted by prehumans on cave walls, our lineage is ancient indeed! I agree, and comics needs to be understood as a storytelling form *all its own*. Not as some amalgam, a mash-up of the children’s picture book and the Saturday morning cartoon, or an illustrated offshoot of the epic novel. Or, more accurately, as the bastard child of all of the above.

A contrast we use in comics is the juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal panels. Independently, both verticals and horizontals evince more than you realize, just by virtue of their respective shapes. Consider a portrait painting: the verticality of it commands attention—there is nothing else at which to gaze. It says, “See me now. Focus on this image alone. This is something to remember.” The horizontal landscape painting, on the other hand, invites the eye to travel across it and take it in. The subject matter dictates some of this, of course, but the shape alone and how we take it in does much of the work. Shapes indicate what the eye is supposed to do for the image to register with the mind. The artist’s

touch then connects it to the heart when skill and inspiration are involved and the viewer's mind is receptive.

In comics, each panel shape generates a different kind of emotion and reaction from a reader and brings its own unique twist to storytelling. Because we read horizontally, a vertical image is like an exclamation, and readers take it in quickly. It is a jolt to the heart and mind. The reverse is true of the horizontal panel. Since we generally view things horizontally, a horizontal image calms the eye down. It provides a sense of greater space, signaling that the reader can slow down to comprehend it all. It's more natural to us, because wide-screen is how we normally take in the world around us. If you're walking the streets of a city with tall buildings, you can spot the people who are visiting or new in town because they are the ones cranking their heads up to look at all those rising buildings around them. Those who live there, on the other hand, tend to keep their eyes level. For one thing, they don't want to get their pockets picked, and for another, they are used to this sky-reaching architecture. Eye level is just how we move and experience life. So, in simple terms, the horizontal image slows the story down, the vertical speeds the pace. Artist Gil Kane used these dynamics to startling effect, especially in his bold sci-fi epic, *Blackmark*.

When you combine the two shapes, whether by mashing them together or alternating them, the possibilities multiply. As do the emotions they create. A larger, powerful horizontal image is made all the more so if it's balanced by smaller staccato images placed near it or, better yet, a strong vertical after the reader turns the page. Blending these shapes is a technique that helps the comic propel the story and, hopefully, adds drama to the piece as a whole. It takes readers on a journey, one that is immersive and elicits feelings and connections. It's like a film that way, but uniquely so. *Comics can change the actual shape of the image*—alter the shape of the “screen,” as it were. Mixing verticals and horizontals is when comics can enjoy the sport of competing with cinema. Take that, Hollywood! You can't change the shape of your screen! But in comics we can choose and combine shapes and tell the story however we want. None of this is meant to put the two story forms in competition, but to point out that the differences are so profound that to call comics “movies on paper” insults both. The two forms are hardly in competition. Think of us as friendly cousins.

Ever since I sent Daredevil careening around the Manhattan skyline, vertical images have played heavily in my work. For two reasons, the first of which is because of the titans that came before me. It's fair to say that we all took our cues from Will Eisner, who mastered the use of verticals to speed the story along, particularly in *The Spirit*. And then in 1955 the illustrator Bernard Krigstein ripped up the playbook with *Master Race*. An eight-page avant-garde triumph published by EC Comics, it tells the story of a Holocaust survivor encountering his concentration camp tormentor on a New York City subway. Back then, EC sent illustrators their art boards with the finished lettering and the panel borders

already drawn in—all the illustrator had to do was fill in the visual elements. As the story goes, after Krigstein received his art boards, he cut them all up and rearranged them, even the lettering. He took one box and turned it into four. For example, toward the end of the story, the survivor, Reissman, falls onto the subway tracks. Instead of depicting this in one horizontal box, Krigstein chopped it up into four vertical panels so that his fall takes on a filmic quality: frame by frame Reissman falls to his death. *Master Race* is an amazing piece of graphic storytelling that accomplishes more in eight pages than most people could do in a hundred, or on two hours of film.

In his Marvel Comics work (and more so in his *Fourth World* tetralogy at DC Comics), Jack Kirby blasted the panel grid to bits, going “wide-screen” with double-page tableaus, one after the other. Later on, Gil Kane and Neal Adams both used extreme verticals—even diagonals!—in their panel shapes. But the way in which Kane and Adams employed verticals was revolutionary—it opened up the comic book page, gave it space to breathe, freeing it completely. So much so that the actual arrangement of images was part of the excitement. This was during the Marvel Age of comics, when excitement and energy lit up the art form. It was this opening, this new feeling of breaking out, of a fist coming unclenched, that thrilled and motivated me.

The second reason for so many verticals is simpler: New York City. Particularly Manhattan’s towering fortresses. Growing up a country boy meant the wide-screen world was my first home. Even the mountains settled down into the spacious sweep of Vermont’s green world. But even as a child, Manhattan was my true inspiration—I drew it from imagination and from, well, other comics, like Ditko’s *Spider-Man* and Eisner’s *The Spirit*. New York energies soared upward. And Manhattan was never far from my mind, even while I was skipping rocks in a Berlin pond or scrambling around the foothills of the shouldered mountain by our home. So when I moved there, my worldview changed, metaphorically and otherwise.

KAPOW! All of sudden I was living in a vertical realm, and I couldn’t wait to experience it. I was the new kid in town, so like one of those tourists I mentioned, I walked around with my head tilted up for a while. I still do that when the mood strikes or my art demands it. But it’s an older man’s neck now. It stiffens a bit.

Back then a ticket to visit the top of the Empire State Building was dirt cheap (pennies!), so I made my way up there a lot. Because the authorities hadn’t put up that horrible protective railing yet, I leaned on the wall’s edge and stared out at the city with nothing to obstruct my view. And I took out my sketchbook and drew everything I could—the glinting Chrysler Building, the stolid but towering Rockefeller Center, the cloud-piercing Twin Towers (I got to watch them go up), and Lady Liberty hoisting her torch way out there in the churning waters of Upper New York Bay. It was a magical cityscape with everything rising up like stalagmites made of steel and concrete and shimmering glass.

Manhattan's upward energy is everywhere, from the tall apartment buildings where people live on top of each other in womb-like environments to the soaring commercial totems that dominate the skyline.

I harness this ascending power in my work, and you can see and feel it in my comics that are set in a metropolis — *Daredevil*, *Ronin*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Sin City* — where multiple vertical panels on a page mirror the brimming, strident rataplan rhythm of a city. I was a young artist at play. It was like that old line “I can't believe I'm actually getting paid to do this.” I was practically jumping out of my skin to write and draw and ink. That thrill has never left me. It only grows.

Because you take in these vertical shapes quickly, I use them that way—to hurry the story along and keep the action or to convey something with no fuss. A vertical panel often adds a burst of energy, like a short sentence after a series of longer ones. Like a quick jab before an arcing uppercut or a punctuating point after a ponderous, run-on thought. You can reveal the gravity of a simple gesture this way, or the immensity of a moment. A vertical panel reads like a Hemingway sentence or a hard-boiled crime story—no frills, just information and feeling.

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In *Daredevil* and *Ronin*, I incorporated a lot of tall panels that dwarfed the poor characters' heads at the bottom so readers would feel as overwhelmed by looming buildings or scary blackness as those characters. In some cases, I added some word balloons above their heads to let readers in on their inner fears and excitement. But, in many ways, my motivation was a bit more selfish. I was just following Eisner's work, his sense of fun playing with all these different shapes and perspectives, his desire to use every tool in the bag to tell his tale. For the fun of it and for the story. It doesn't get any purer than that. The large number of vertical panels in both *Daredevil* and *Ronin* led one critic to complain that they were sick of looking at my drawings as if forced to look through a picket fence. I thought that was great, and it gave me yet another reason to keep doing it!

Aaaiii!! With this samurai call arching across two pages and vertical images below it doing the same, *Ronin* makes his dramatic entrance into a pivotal scene in book four. Holding his sword high, *Ronin* jumps in to save Casey from the sewer dwellers who are holding her hostage. His leap into the fray takes up a page and a quarter of the two-page spread, and the action actually starts on the previous page, in a small horizontal panel with *Ronin*'s hand appearing in a black space with the first few A's of the "*Aaaiiiiii*" trailing off the page. The jump itself is depicted across five vertical panels that go shot by shot, from *Ronin* with one foot still on the floor to reaching midair to landing ready to fight. And right in the middle he is so large that it seems he will jump right off the page. He's coming at you, feet first.

This is a big scene, a critical one to the story, so I wanted to punctuate it with dramatic *design* to match its dramatic *action* and its dramatic *importance*. I thought it should look and feel "big-screen," almost 3D. I wanted to floor readers without confusing them. A mission like this called for vertical panels. I coupled the larger vertical images with four smaller panels to be read rat-a-tat-tat, keeping the accelerator on the story, even after *Ronin* appears. *Ronin* dispatches Casey's prisoners with power and ruthless efficiency, so my goal was for readers to experience that on the page. Over and done with, fast—with Casey looking up and over her shoulder in muted astonishment and gratitude as the last image in the scene. Mission accomplished.

But just a few pages after, I slow it down, using a combination of smaller vertical and horizontal panels to depict their first embrace. And their kiss is shown as a stand-alone portrait, complete with a black border around it to frame it as its own thing—a profound moment captured. A punctuation mark on this part of their story. Like a railroad sign: *Stop. Look. Listen.*

I used this same style of storytelling in *The Dark Knight Returns*, now emphasizing hold-your-breath *tableau* over rapid-fire *motion*. The more you play with storytelling, the bigger your toolbox—and the deeper your arsenal. An artist must keep digging deeper, while searching wider for new solutions, new

techniques, new tools, new tricks, new pain-in-the-ass problems to solve. In this respect, the storyteller has to be a kind of superhero himself.

But back to Batman. In book four, *The Dark Knight Falls*, Batman, saddled on a horse, rides in on the Sons of Batman to stop them from enacting any more violence and death on his behalf. Similar to Ronin's entrance to free Casey, this is a critical moment: Batman convinces the Sons of Batman to stop their rampage, he turns the tide on the flood of killing. It's a full-page vertical portrait, with the horse rising on two legs providing most of the action. And this action starts in a small vertical panel on the previous page, showing the Sons of Batman looking over their shoulders at something coming toward them. Like the *Ronin* spread, this is also a two-pager, sort of. The sky from the page on the left carries over to the page on the right, but the first image on the second page is a bigger horizontal revealing a cityscape with a raging fire. Underneath is a mix of smaller horizontals and verticals, which allowed me to keep the story moving forward in a hurry.

I used the same style of graphic storytelling as I did in the *Ronin* spread, but changed it up to fit the story, and the comic's style. Like Ronin, Batman appears in a powerful vertical—one full page instead of a row of panels—that demands attention as he leaps in on horseback to confront the torch-wielding Sons. I contained the image to one page, however, and then immediately transported the reader back to another part of Gotham via the horizontal at the top of the next page. The small horizontals and choppy verticals below send readers back into the story's rapid-fire pace and film-like flair. With *Ronin*, the long vertical panels gave it space and air to breathe, but in *The Dark Knight Returns* I was after density and cracking speed. Gotham was on the verge of mayhem, and I wanted readers to feel that. That meant no letting up, just keep it coming. So the hero's grand entrance only needed one side of the spread this time. I built on the technique I had employed before, but reworked it and distilled it. I had learned some lessons from *Ronin*. More importantly, this new twist is what the story itself demanded.



THE
DUMP.

IT'S A BREEDING
GROUND FOR
INSECTS AND
RODENTS.

SOME
RODENTS
FLY.

The Dark Knight Returns is the densest comic I've ever done. Manically dense. From *Daredevil* through *The Dark Knight Returns*, I was pursuing comics as cinema. This meant doing lots and lots of panels. With *The Dark Knight Returns*, I wanted it to be as choppy as possible so that the reader hurtled through the story, much like someone sitting through an action-packed movie. Another factor that gave *The Dark Knight Returns* its pacing were some radical changes I made in the process. I had so much story and so little room that, when I was partway through the first book, I realized that there was no way I was going to fit it all in the panel grids that I had initially laid out. Like Krigstein, I took a pair of scissors and cut them all up to make smaller panels—to squeeze the story in as best I could. I did the dead opposite of what Krigstein did in *Master Race*: I took scissors to fully penciled pages, cutting out panels to compress the action, leaving Klaus Janson with an awkward heap of floppy, taped-together boards to finish. Klaus, the gentleman, did not *loudly* curse me for this.

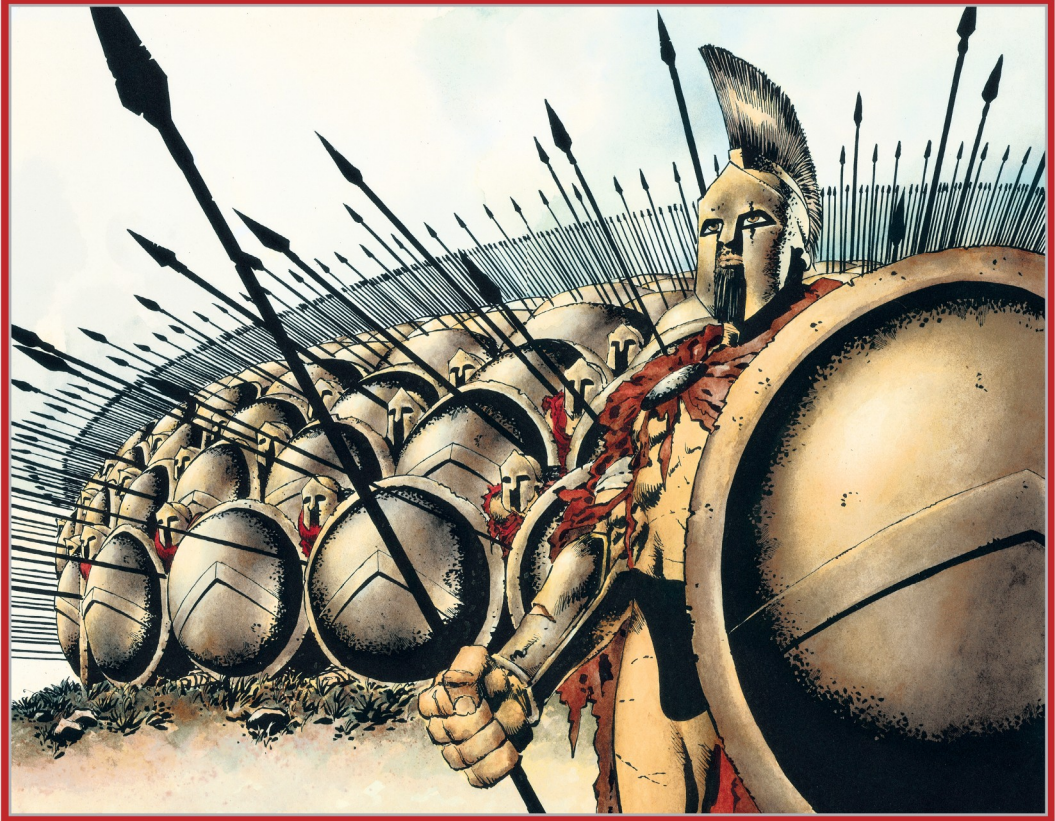
This was how I edited the behemoth down, but the scores of new panels also made it denser and denser and denser. I soon recognized this density mirrored the story in a creative way, and gave the comic an entirely new dimension. And the storytelling technique of combining and contrasting verticals and horizontals helped me get there. So through both creative vision and good fortune, I had established a rhythm that I then had to keep up for the rest of the series.

Later in my career, when I was conceptualizing *300*, I went in the opposite direction. I decided to use only one shape: the horizontal. The flip side of the vertical rush is the horizontal scope. It's the wide-angle world, the one you absorb more slowly. A larger-than-life retelling of a resistance battle from ancient Greece, *300* called for a wide lens and buckets of atmosphere. It needed space and lots of it. Yet, the past always seems to inform the future—the staccato rhythm of little panels last seen in *The Dark Knight Returns* served to play off all those tapestries. And to get in close and personal.

I based *300* on the historic Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, a monumental fight that saw just three hundred Spartan soldiers stand strong against an invading Persian army comprised of hundreds of thousands of men. I didn't want *300* to feel like a comic; I wanted it to feel more like a storybook—an engrossing, epic graphic novel. So I used the horizontal format in *300* to capture the sweeping expanse of a mythical land. The Spartans' spears stretch from the forefront to the back of the horizontal panel, too numerous to count and blurring into a black smear before your eye leaves the page. This is the magnitude of war: it extends to the edge of comprehension.

After I made the decision to go horizontal, I worked up some vertical images to see if they would work just to test myself. They didn't. The images felt trapped, and the pages took on a claustrophobic feel that was antithetical to the wide world I was creating. The helmets and spears alone required a lot of space. It was also essential to show the contrast of the small Spartan army and the vast Persian one,

and this called for more room, more flat earth and sky. Also, the story was about land-bound people, so I thought the images should be tethered to terra firma to the fullest extent. There was no air-war story to tell.



Deciding to use all horizontal images was a breakthrough. Format followed function, rather than the other way around. This way I could portray this very horizontal battle *horizontally*, across two-page spreads in the serial, and then, at last, as a “wide-screen” graphic novel.

Next, the choice for a narrative voice. This I gave lengthy consideration. *300* is, after all, not the story of one hero. While the Spartan king, Leonidas, does take center stage, *300* is about a *group* of men. With this in mind, I chose to use a communal voice, one that echoes the collective heroic drive of an ancient military hive.

I was after an authentic, but very different point of view, the perspective of the bicameral mind—an ancient way of thinking and seeing the world. It is believed that our human ancestors all the way up to the twilight of the ancient Greeks had a two-chambered mind: one that speaks and provides information to the individual and another that blindly follows the whims of the gods. Their emotions and motivations were not their own; the gods were responsible for these things. I wanted it to sound and feel like the pre-Christian, pagan world, one that we can only slightly comprehend from our position here in the third millennium. This

communal, first person voice gave it that distance, and the horizontal images amplified it. I like to call my *300* narrative voice “first person plural.”

Lynn’s coloring also augmented the storybook quality and turned the dial up on the atmosphere. By this time in our collaborative partnership, I had learned through working with her just what she was capable of. Since my land-bound people only occupied the lower half of the page in many cases, I was confident that she could work her magic in the expansive skies and backgrounds. I didn’t need any proof of this. All I had to do was set her up and step aside. For the cover of *The Dark Knight Returns*, I drew a small silhouette of Batman and she dropped in a striking, unforgettable lightning bolt.

Striking and unforgettable. Two words that summarize the ideal goal of many an image, one you drop in anytime you want to stop the reader in their tracks: to startle, to shock, to inspire, with iconography or panorama. Of course, not every image in a comic is going to be highly memorable, especially when you remember that the images themselves—if they are doing their job and not showing off—are in service of the story. There is a higher calling when you are making something with pictures and words. I really like a good picture, and that’s what I try to deliver, but what’s on my mind while I’m making it is mostly “What’s this getting across? What’s this *feel* like?” And this brings even more joy to the process. Because they’re part of a narrative, comic images are also an assemblage of evidence. Readers must make conclusions as they take in a picture—figure out what’s going on, who’s doing what. The comic book image has to be something the reader understands almost immediately. Or else, as they say in the movies, you’ll lose them. And confusing the reader isn’t an option. Confusion is the enemy. Always. That sound in your head is your audience storming the exits.

Images in comics, beyond whatever pleasure they bring or emotions they evoke, have a narrative, *literary* function: they move the plot forward and set the pace, sometimes dragging you by the collar and sometimes charming the eye, giving you pause to linger and savor, as in Bill Watterson’s treasure of treasures, *Calvin and Hobbes*. But the primary function of comic art is narrative. Every panel, observed Will Eisner, must tell you something. It can’t just be there because it’s fun to look at. *It must move the story forward*. Further, each image must set the pace—now fast, now slow—and every aspect of the panel must likewise guide the reader in this respect. Sometimes a simple contrast of a vertical and a horizontal will do just that. And if it doesn’t, the simple act of trying them together may just spark an idea or create a new set of creative problems you have to sort out. It may just give you some profound choices, and hard work and experience will help you make the right choice, in both your pictures and words. The old adage from Mark Twain applies here: “The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter. ’Tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” One feeds you information; the other is an epiphany.

But every image does have to have a little *something* in it, just a touch of magic. Something that acts like a musical note that increases the sense of environment and emotion. In many instances, the shape of the image brings its own sound, even before you start filling it in. The vertical is like a ringing bell and the landscape is symphonic. One strikes and echoes, the other swoops in and out. Contrasting and combining the two produces the music in this soundless medium.

Existence is a beautiful and terrifying spectacle. Every moment is alive, both rising up toward us and expanding out beyond us. Capture it however you can. Squeeze it for every ounce it's got.

LESSON 9

MIX IT UP

High, Low, and In Between



Writers face fierce competition in every field I know of. The term “flop sweat” was doubtless coined by some writer facing a tough deadline or stymied by some damn neurotic block. But storytelling is as natural a human function as hunting or sex. We each of us start telling stories as soon as we start talking. We start out, of course, with lies. And we brag and exaggerate. We say whatever is needed to get our butts out of trouble. We’ve been doing this since there were packs of Neanderthals squatting around the fire swapping tales about the latest hunt. We talk of Thor, Pele, and the creatures who looked like men but split the seas and walked on water. Fiction preceded science because all we had to explain a deadly thunderstorm was that it was angry gods and cackling demons.

And the ones who leaned closest to the fire, the ones with flashing eyes and raspy voices, were given an honored place in savage society.

So think of yourself as that shaman, that witch doctor. Study all around you carefully, and dig deep inside yourself, then weave the web of lies that tells the truth.

Your influences and the things that inspire you, these are foundational and reliable: you can lean on them, count on them to motivate you, even when the chips are down. You can go back to them to remind yourself what a long, open road feels like; to cast your eye on a cool green valley or, lost at sea, to finally spot land again; to survive a lightning strike.

These thunderbolts can come from all over, so don’t be tricked into only waiting for the skies of “high art” to open up and inspire you. They come from whatever you *really* like to read or watch or gaze at, not what the culture dictates is worthy of your time. If it’s seventeenth-century baroque still-life paintings, great. If it’s comic strips, that’s wonderful, too. If it’s both, even better! This business of categorizing art as high or low is a worthless endeavor. Who’s to say and why does it matter? It’s worth remembering that publishers first issued Dickens’s celebrated, literary tomes as monthly serials, just like comic books. Before Jean-Michel Basquiat became an art legend, he was SAMO, a street artist who painted and drew on any surface he could find. I just don’t see any distinction between high and low art, never really have—only between *good* and *bad*. And art, like story, like the scent of a flower or a hornet’s sting, exists

primarily *in the mind*. If it hurts you, it hurts you. If it moves you, it moves you. Celebrate that, then ask yourself why. And use the answers to that question to fuel your own creativity.

An influential spark that I often return to is the one that came from the children's books of my childhood. Storybooks accumulated in our house over the years. My mother's Quaker family passed a parcel of them down to her when she started having kids; many of these were ones she loved as a child. She was born in 1928, so by the early 1960s they were falling apart, the pages ripping from the spine. But I loved them, especially when someone read them to me. And more kept coming. This was, after all, the era of Dr. Seuss! My grandmother, a quiet and strong woman, very much in the Quaker mold, lived in my uncle Dave and aunt Gladys's home, not too far away from my first childhood home in Maryland. Memories of the place are that of a child's: sensory, evergreen smells and musty old books, and a constant, gentle, below-the-Mason-Dixon-Line breeze. Creaking floors and stillness, old wavy glass in the windows, cabinets full of china, and the smell of baking bread. "Ganny," as my grandmother was called, was as blind as Homer, and, like him, loved to tell a story. She told stories of every kind, those passed down to her, those from her own life, and those remembered from the storybooks that she loved, as I'm sure she shared them with my mother before me. And I'll never forget reading the epic poem "Horatius at the Bridge" by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859) to Ganny as an inspiring moment in my young life.

Along with these family treasures, my parents went on to fill our Vermont home with books, especially illustrated children's books—vintage stuff, beautifully illustrated, many passed down the generations, all weathered and worn. The home library burst with wonders. Beatrix Potter, E. H. Shepard, Arthur Rackham, George Cruikshank, Sir John Tenniel, and Edward Gorey, among so many others, created such fascinating, beautiful, and terrifying animals, people, and places—whole new worlds that enlarged my own.

I fell in love with the absolute beauty of the drawings and color work in these books. As for the words, well, they were the first books I actually *read*, and those tend to stick with you, even if it's just the feelings that surfaced while reading them. As time went by, I moved on to the playful, odd world of Dr. Seuss and the stoic heroism of the 1940s *Superman* cartoons and then on to the wider, wilder world of comic books. All of these containing the magical combination of images and words. So the two have always been married in mind, functioning as one thing—a story. These early books gave me the gifts of wonder and storytelling. Words and pictures have been my whole life.

I create from the point of view of a cartoonist and a cartoonist doesn't just exaggerate, the cartoonist juxtaposes. A cartoon has to hit fast and make its point very clear. If you want to satirize income inequality in a cartoon, start by placing a crooked, scrawny, homeless person dressed in rags on a street. Draw him

looking up at a plump and prim woman walking by with a fur around her neck and a tiny, dutiful, decked-out poodle by her side. Readers will instantly get the point. Cartooning is a fast medium; it's not an anatomical study. Even the word "study" sounds slow to me when you make a noun out of it.

Using the cartoonist's perspective is liberating, because everything is fair game in cartoons, it's all on the block for a send-up or some cutting, laser-fast insight. Politics, sex, sacred cows, violence, buffoons in the corridors of power, existential quandaries, bare-ass-naked hypocrisy, heartbreak—the whole human predicament. Nothing escapes the cartoonist's eye. He's part hard-nosed prosecutor, part court jester—the one person who can speak bald truth to the king.

That eye is wide open in most of my work, particularly *The Dark Knight Returns*. When I was putting together the story, I knew that I had to show how Batman's troubling, heroic return impacted those in Gotham and beyond. That's when I got the idea to use the talking TV heads as a cartoon Greek chorus. This achieved two things: first, their reactions helped me tell the story, but through a prism of viewpoints; and, second, it added some levity to what was up to that point a pretty dark tale. It also set me up to do some straight-up political cartooning. Parody all sides and, by way of their reaction to Batman's crusade, show how small and superficial we humans can be when we encounter something we don't fully understand, when we try to explain the unexplainable, how it sounds when an antiheroic society is confronted by the presence of a hero. I made all the TV screens really small to reinforce how inconsequential their droning noise was compared to the mythic forces at work in the world outside their bubble. The cartooning spirit allowed me to throw everything in there—complicated heroism *and* full-blast parody, the full range.

It's all fodder for the comic art, whether in a single panel newspaper cartoon or a graphic novel. *Everything* is fodder! Again, the jester can say *anything* to the king. Historically, as soon as comics entered adolescence in the 1950s with EC Comics, the censors went to war. We were getting too good at our job. It was only censorship and the persistent but misguided idea that comics are for kids that limited the art form to the juvenile section for so long. The impulses to depict and mirror back, to lampoon and upend: these are human instincts, artistic ones. They are creative responses to an often confusing and unjust world. The voice of the artist rising above the choir's censorious chatter. All this, plus the agonizingly obvious truth that kids' imaginations feast on the outrageous and the macabre. These were central to the appeal of EC Comics, and to their survival in endless reprints, imitations, and movie adaptations. EC Comics was the boldest and the best, and so it was murdered, but its legacy lives on as the gold standard of its time, and the fierce adolescence of American comics.

Cartoons and the comic strip. Think about it: for centuries, this is how most people first experienced the comic art form. Cartoons and strips have been with us for a long time; they are elemental in pop culture. Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* is an

American treasure. His understated genius is remarkable for both its simplicity and universality. Gary Larson's single panel masterpiece, *The Far Side*, popularized his particular strain of surreal and wonky, science-savvy humor that is now prevalent in all kinds of different media. There's *Mad* magazine, of course, and all those wonderful cartoonists affiliated with the *New Yorker*, like James Thurber, Jules Feiffer, and Roz Chast.

But perhaps the greatest cartoon-strip influence on my work is *Calvin and Hobbes*; and Bill Watterson is in my personal pantheon of heroes. Watterson draws like a master illustrator, but *Calvin and Hobbes* never appears labored over, studied, or tormented. It dances. There's joyous movement and expression, but it's balanced by a sense of craftsmanship and attention to detail. It's an explosion of joy: joy of childhood, of imagination, and, most of all, of *drawing*. An unequaled body of work, it stands as the comic strip *epiphany*. And, as in any good cartoon, the feeling and information come across immediately. In *Calvin and Hobbes*, a daily strip about a friendship between a six-year-old boy and a wise but sarcastic stuffed tiger, Watterson touches on some heavy, philosophical perplexities, but always shows them to us readers from the perspective of a precocious brat. *Calvin and Hobbes* never misses a beat. It squeezes every bit of joy out of any subject it touches. There's plenty of joy in going dark, too. My *Sin City* is loaded with laughs, and it's meant to be.

This joy serves as a constant reminder for me: going too dark will suffocate what I'm making. And it reminds me that if I'm not having fun, neither is the reader. I had so much fun while working on *Sin City*, and, even as dark as it gets, I believe that sense of fun and adventure that flowed into the work flows out to the reader. Like a good Noir movie, the subject matter may be dark, but it's a pleasure to watch.

Watterson is a singular talent, a characteristic of artists across art forms that I admire, whether it's musicians like Dylan and Cash or some of the old fine art masters who worked wonders with their brushes and paints and chisels. El Greco, the sixteenth-century painter and sculptor, was a complete original. Scholars have a hard time sticking a label on him or categorizing him in any school of art, which is always a good sign. And he was way ahead of his time, a visionary precursor to expressionism and cubism—a great-grandfather to abstract art in general.

He didn't give a damn about how the public perceived him or his art. Motivated by imagination but grounded in craft, his vision and style challenged the status quo. His paintings were full of high drama and expression, and his relentless, unique interpretation of the human figure was his way of staging and exaggerating the heroic. He didn't adhere to the rules of classical proportion, but sought to express the human body as it related to the painting's emotional heartbeat, often as elongated and spectral beings for dramatic effect. In *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, a painting that depicts the moment two saints descend from the heavens to help bury a venerated man, the colors are bold and the composition

challenging, but it is the human gestures (a delicate, lengthened hand extended in praise) and expressions (the solemn eyes looking skyward) that provide the painting's poignancy and grace. And El Greco's skies. Those amazing skies. Swirling and crumpled and draped with clouds, they always pull you into his vision of life here on earth: tempestuous, out of proportion, full of striving. El Greco was a cartoonist, first and foremost. So was Michelangelo. Just look at those figures. Look at those proportions! Those hands! Those feet! Impossible—yet *perfect*.

Another old maestro whose work I revisit for inspiration is someone I've already touched on, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painter Francisco Goya. His work is beautiful and exquisite, but there's pain running through every inch of it. I'm particularly fond of his "Black Paintings," fourteen paintings from the latter part of his career that offer his rather grim and tormented view of humanity. I previously mentioned *Saturn Devouring His Son*, but there's also *A Pilgrimage to San Isidro* and *Fight with Cudgels*, two dark works that depict humans struggling in a hostile world. Both are murals that Goya painted on the walls of his house in Bordeaux, which others later transferred to canvas after the artist's death. The first depicts a gaggle of harrowed souls led by a singing lunatic guitarist as they trudge across a desolate landscape. And the second shows two men, one bloodied and the other ghostly, battling it out with cudgels in what looks to be a mythical and undisturbed, indifferent landscape. And then there's the haunting *Two Old Ones Eating Soup*, depicting two time-ravaged figures, one already mostly skull and bones, hovering over a bowl of soup and looking off to one side at what one guesses is Death approaching. All of these take you to dark places, but if you seek out art just for reassurance, you're missing out on wonders.

As for those who've influenced me from my own chosen art form, well, the list is long and that's part of the reason for this book, to honor those comic book artists who've inspired me over the years. But for the context of this chapter, I'll let Friedrich Nietzsche be my guide. Nietzsche favored the contrast of Apollo and Dionysus to explain the dual nature of the human mind and spirit. Apollo was the ancient Greek god of reason, balance, and beauty and Dionysus was the god of primal surging, ecstasy, and insanity. It's no secret that my tastes have always run more on the Dionysian side, and I have Jack Kirby to thank for that. I immediately leap to Kirby because he's been such a pervasive influence on me through my entire life and career. His work erupts and explodes, but it isn't what you might call "pretty." Beautiful, yes, but never *pretty*. That wasn't the point. Kirby was after energy, vitality, passion, and power. So much so that my good buddy and honored colleague Walter Simonson refers to Kirby's way of drawing cosmic energy as "Kirby Crackle." In his more raucous work, like *Mister Miracle* and the *New Gods* series, it's evident that Kirby took in what was going on in the world around him and said, "Okay, this is all fine madness. I'll work with this." And then he just let it romp across the page, bigger than ever.

But I also have a deep appreciation for the Apollonian. And the Apollo to Kirby's Dionysus is Wallace Wood. Everything Wood did looked beautiful. The guy just *loved* to draw and it shows. From his early sci-fi work for the EC Comics series *Weird Science* to the *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* superheroes to the super-sexy glamor of his creator-owned comic strip *Sally Forth* from his later years, Wood's craftsmanship shines. But it never leaves you cold. His work is beautifully crafted, but also beautifully human. The artistry and skill invites you in and the sheer, sensual beauty makes you stay. As with Hal Foster's work, Wood favors beauty over dynamism: a leaping figure of the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. agent Dynamo, his perfect cast shadow stretched beneath him, looks like he might stay floating right where he is for a month.

And then there's Will Eisner. He was the full range—the Apollonian who danced with Dionysus. He produced work that was exquisite and also stuff that was really grisly. I regard him as one of the uber-masters. I would hasten to say we'll never see his like again but for the wistful way Eisner spoke about the grandeur of Milton Caniff's work.

These influences represent just a small handful out of a treasure chest. Honestly, my pantheon of heroes is ever growing in number. I'm wide open to art and artists of all kinds. I'm told that Wallace Wood once said, "I don't worry about words, like whether I'm an illustrator or cartoonist or whatever. I'm an artist. I do it for a living. I don't make any great distinctions between fine art and commercial art either. After all, they sell those fine art paintings." This notion of not making distinctions is terribly important when you're considering what interests, inspires, or influences you. If it stirs the blood, that's what matters. The rest of it is irrelevant. Whether it's fine art or underground work or mega-popular commercial entertainment is not important. You are after inspiration—sources to pull from, to drink from. Elements to work with. A collision of these elements may just bring something new into the world.

When I'm putting together a comic, the drawing stage is fairly planned out. I'm like an architect working out the problems, finding the blueprint. But when I'm working on the story, I'm like a mad scientist: mixing it up, drawing on my influences, imitating and weaving, looking for chemical reactions, taking risks. I like to explore, to pursue an idea up an avenue, down an alley, around a corner, into a sewer—go where it takes me, even if it fails to take me anywhere. If it doesn't work, that's okay. I'll go somewhere else. If I write myself into trouble, I'll write myself out of it. That's *my* job.

I. It must be noted that *Mad* began as an EC comic. When the treachery of the comics code shut down EC, publisher William Gaines converted *Mad* to magazine format and created an American institution.

LESSON 10

SWIMMING POOLS, MOVIE STARS

Process Not Outcome. Forward Ho!



“When I got home I mixed a stiff one and stood by the open window in the living room and sipped it and listened to the ground swell of traffic on Laurel Canyon Blvd., and looked at the glare of the big angry city hanging over the shoulder of the hills through which the boulevard had been cut... A city no worse than others, a city rich and vigorous and full of pride, a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness.”

—RAYMOND CHANDLER, *THE LONG GOODBYE*

“The process is everything, the outcome is nothing.”

—BRUCE LEE

LA greets you with a heavenly breeze and feast after feast for the eyes—endless rows of palm trees, exotic flora and fauna in abundance (for goodness’ sake, *live pelicans*?!). The glimmering, unfenced Pacific always just *right over there*, vaguely confirming that you’ve made it. You have arrived. A sunny port of call. Disembark for reinvention. Destination: Dreams Come True.

And everything’s pretty much as promised. It’s sunny and bright, and there’s plenty of palm trees and exotic cacti and vintage cars kept pristine by perfect weather. In LA, there’s a lot more people who care what they look like than you’ll find on the streets of New York City.

Those legendary Santa Ana winds that both Raymond Chandler and Joan Didion wrote so beautifully about blow from fall to spring. Hot desert gusts from the Great Basin speed through mountain passes and then bluster and moan through the city sprawl. They’re dry, troublemaking blasts—fire starters. Ill winds. Ominous in the mornings, treacherous at night.

A restless city in search of itself, wary of the fame and fortune that Burbank and Beverly Hills stickered over the place, Los Angeles is always in the making, in a state of becoming. And it invites those who live there to do the same. A hive of creativity and opportunity, it’s a place to start your story or rewrite your script. Yet there it is. Improbable. An impossible city built on water rerouted from mountains a thousand miles away. A tropical paradise made from desert wasteland.

All a city can give you is opportunity. Everything else is what you bring to it: your ideas, your skills, your eagerness to learn, your love of working and working

hard. Make no mistake, for all its beauty and its aura of relaxation, LA is one huge, hardworking factory town. And what that factory produces is magic. Movie magic.

LA gives as much as it takes, and even when it doesn't, you don't really mind. It's hard to get all worked up when it's sunny and seventy-five degrees. Then there's the beautiful people—the city is a magnet for them. Walking embodiments of wish fulfillment. While just beyond the concrete borderlands, natural beauty awaits: the Angeles mountains, the rugged coastline, the fierce, unforgiving majesty of the deserts where dinosaurs walked.

It's beautiful, and it's just so damn comfortable. Maybe too comfortable. Peter Bogdanovich, friend and biographer of Orson Welles, said that the legendary filmmaker once told him, "The terrible thing about L.A. is that you sit down, you're twenty-five, and when you get up you're sixty-two." Therein lies the city's magic, therein lies its heartbreak.

When I touched down in Los Angeles for my first screenwriting job in 1989, I felt like I was in a dreamland. The vintage cars, the gorgeous women, the palm trees in the sun, the terra-cotta romance of the place mesmerized me. I wandered around goggle eyed like a hayseed visiting the big city for the first time. There was just so much sky and it was often blue. I was thirty-two and LA made me feel like a kid again.

Understand, LA's had its own share of problems. A scary earthquake makes the great weather seem fragile, even illusory—until you find yourself breezing down the West Coast Highway, the sea breeze strangely warm on your face, watching perfect marbled waves crash across a rocky shoreline, sending the gulls scattering and screeching and complaining like they always do.

After leaving my first LA home in Hollywood Hills, I moved into a drafty space on the edge of downtown. My neighborhood—next door to Little Tokyo, playing footsie with Skid Row—was home to abandoned factory properties, and a Depression-era desk manufacturing operation on Traction Avenue became my first artist loft. My best buddy and devout Angelino, Flint Dille, said that I had managed to drag New York grit and gloom all the way to the City of Angels. But me, I loved that place. So much room! And in a building filled with other artists! It was there, in Los Angeles, that *Sin City* found its voice, its look, its dark yet beautiful heart. Downtown was, at the time, ideal—it was *scary*.

The city's seedier side was what intrigued me in the first place. My attachment to LA came from the hard-boiled novels of Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. Those dark romantics rolled the city over to expose its underbelly—the sunken souls in barrooms, the scoundrels in boardrooms, the grift in the streets, and the corruption in the precincts, the dark menace piercing the heart of the City of Angels. And introduced us to some unforgettable, hard-bitten antiheroes, like Chandler's Philip Marlowe, a wisecracking detective whose world-weariness is no match for his relentless pursuit of the truth.

So it didn't matter to me that I arrived to a Janus-faced Los Angeles; both sides enamored me. I was also chomping at the bit to do some screenwriting. After the wild success of *The Dark Knight Returns*, opportunities far and wide came knocking. I was still in New York when the producer Jon Davison called and offered me my first Hollywood gig. He was the executive producer of *RoboCop*, a blockbuster sci-fi movie set in a crime-infested, dystopian Detroit, featuring a cyborg police officer on a mission to clean up the Motor City. Davison said he needed a writer to come up with a sequel. I hadn't the seen the first *RoboCop* yet, so Jon sent me a VHS videocassette tape by mail. (For the youngsters out there, a VHS tape was an earlier, bigger, inferior version of the DVD. They were a breakthrough: you could finally purchase a movie and play it at home! Golly! What a concept!)

So I loaded *RoboCop* into the VCR and enjoyed the hell out of it. It was plain as day that they were damn familiar with my *The Dark Knight Returns*. The subject matter was a natural fit for me, and surely why they reached out to me in the first place.

Davison and I got along great, and I agreed to write the script for the sequel. I was on a plane to LA before I could give it another thought. When I started working on it, I was all systems go and gassed up on wild ambition and astronomical hopes. They asked me to come up with a good, solid story and I threw the kitchen sink at them, starting with a lengthy treatment. A treatment is supposed to be ten pages or so, but I sent seventy pages over the transom! This behemoth didn't land well with Davison. He graduated from the Roger Corman school of moviemaking, and Corman, a legendary B-movie pulp master, made movies fast, and with keeping costs down front and center. The scripts were full of gags, one-liners, and lots of action sequences. My treatment was definitely not that. It contained multiple backstories, and all kinds of characters, many of them nonessential.

At this point, Davison said to me, "Um, Frank, I think we have to boil this down. I don't often say this, but you've got too many good ideas in this thing! Start trimming. Streamline it!" So I did. Sort of. The first draft of the actual screenplay was also wildly too long, so the multiple rewrites started right then and there. But I held on to some parts of it like a pit bull. I was tenacious. I was still seeking my first Oscar, while everyone else simply wanted a script that was compelling and solid—strong enough to handle multiple rewrites and actor suggestions. They wanted a blueprint so they could start building. Because Davison and crew had the experience that I didn't, they knew that a script gets hashed over and morphs throughout the process, including all the way up to and during the actual movie shoot.

I worked on rewrites with the veteran screenwriter Walon Green. Even back then, Green was considered an old hand. He had proven his worth as a screenwriter many times over, most notably for his work on the script for *The*

Wild Bunch, a legendary, star-studded Western by Sam Peckinpah. Green certainly knew his way around a screenplay, and could navigate all the ins and outs of moviemaking. He had a real gift for knowing what would work and what wouldn't. We really went to town on the screenplay, lots of passes over it. We went through so many drafts that I can't tell you which one they went to film with. Each time a draft came back to us with notes and requests and changes, Green would say, "Don't sweat this, Frank." It was good to have him around, considering how high-strung I was in all of it.

This madness didn't stop when shooting started either. It had only begun. I held on, writing and rewriting as the production passed from director to director, while ad-libbing caught on like a prairie fire, and everybody who gave a damn was driven to utter exhaustion. I learned that multiple drafts isn't the end of the world for your vision; something's bound to remain. But most important, I learned that *tenacity* is essential. Listen, yes, especially to the needs of others, but maintain your stewardship. *Understand* that many actors feel quite alone staring into those blinding lights, and *welcome* being given context and guidance. Be ready to rewrite, but only to improve drama or clarity—never to fit anybody's whim. I discovered that rewriting can be your friend or reveal itself as a self-inflicted wound. And that you can rewrite all the way to the end, until the director yells "Cut" for the last time, which I did, all the way through postproduction and into the final edit. Learn, most importantly, that as the writer, you must be the steward of the story, as well as its fierce guardian. There will be powerful forces pulling the story this way and that. You must keep track. You must hold the whole mess together—but, once the cameras start rolling, the writer's voice can be a tiny one indeed.

Paul Chadwick named one volume of his graphic novel series *Fragile Creature* to describe his own moviemaking experience. He could not have coined a better title. A movie is a vast, complicated creation, requiring layer upon layer of expertise. A lot can go wrong.

As for the movie itself, well, it's not considered the next *The Wrath of Khan*. The nicest word applied to it was "disappointment." The worst was... Look up the reviews yourself. Bad stuff.

The flip side of this is how much I learned in the process. The whole experience was both wonderful and utterly energizing, and it was an indispensable education in moviemaking. I learned about as much as anyone could learn. Old Hollywood-style, too. This was pre-digital, the twilight of the stop-motion animation that the visual effects guru Phil Tippett specialized in. I had a front row seat to this type of old-fashioned moviemaking where animators maneuver objects step-by-step between single frame photographs so that when pieced together and played continuously they look like they are moving in one fluid motion. As a comic book creator who often works frame by frame to create motion, this was

endlessly fascinating to me. And as a guy raised on stop-motion behemoths like *King Kong* and *Godzilla*, I was bedazzled.

This was also my first experience working with actors and the beginning of a lasting appreciation for their craft. Peter Weller, the actor who played RoboCop, was terrific. He was very serious about his role every step of the way. On set, he worked with the talented mime Moni Yakim, and they were almost inseparable. With Yakim's help, Weller worked out RoboCop's every movement. Yakim moved and Peter mirrored it. It went on like this for hours. I admired the commitment and work ethic Peter put into his character; it took a dedicated and intelligent actor to create the illusion of a human mind trapped inside cold machinery.

So while the movie's "success" failed to meet my expectations, the experience of writing and rewriting and the intense on-set work and collaboration far exceeded them. Because of this, I never lost that feeling of how lucky I was to be working as a screenwriter in Los Angeles. My inner hayseed would chime in: "Golly, I get to do a movie!" Looking back now, even though there were some hard lessons learned, I realize that the process, not the outcome, is often what matters most. Bruises to the ego heal and go away. But the lessons learned in the doing, the making, the falling short, these leave enduring marks. They teach lessons. And bear fruit.

RoboCop 2 was my first brush with the magic of making movies, working with the most powerful storytelling form there is. So far, anyway. And the biggest lesson I got out of it was a deeper appreciation of comics and that art form's particular virtues. Comics combine the virtues of cartooning, illustration, and prose. And comics celebrate drawing *done by hand*, enticing the reader to look at a jumble of scribbled lines and "see" anything from a werewolf to a flower grove to an advancing phalanx. In Marshall McLuhanesque terms, the reader's brain *creates* the subject. Also, the white "gutters" between individual "panels" on a comic page *imply* a multiplicity of images between the panels, involving the reader in a creative capacity. Again citing McLuhan, comics is a "low information, high participation" medium.

A comic book cartoonist is inhibited only by his or her abilities, not by any budget—and they sure as hell don't have as many bosses. In some ways, comics can't compete with movies, but that's precisely why it's foolish to pit one form against the other, or to overstate their similarities. They are cousins, not siblings. Better the comic book cartoonist play to the medium's own strengths, not compete with cinema. There's no point in that, nothing to gain. Of course, we can learn from each other, but to turn one into a pale imitation of the other serves only to denigrate both.

If you can imagine it, you can write it. If you have the skills, you can draw it. This notion propelled my work from then on. Before, I was trying to mimic film, particularly in *Daredevil* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, but now I focused on

making sure comics do their own thing, just better and with more creative energy. In a way, *Sin City* was born at this moment, but we'll get to that.

This doesn't mean what I dream up is always hatched in joy, fully conceived, and/or well-received. Later in my career, I created something that sparked a fire of criticism, some of it warranted. My graphic novel, *Holy Terror*, was created in a bloodthirsty rage. Sure it was—I had just moved back to Manhattan, my one true home, when nineteen terrorists hijacked four fully fueled commercial jets full of passengers, crashing one into the Pentagon, one into a field in Pennsylvania, and two into the Twin Towers in lower Manhattan. 2,977 people died on September 11, 2001, and 2,753 of those perished in Manhattan. Like so many other New Yorkers, I wasn't far from the scene of this horrendous atrocity. The stench of it—the burning metal and plastic, the burning human meat—these are things that I will never forget. It lingered for weeks, a sickening, sensory stew, a daily reminder of mass murder, of lives lost, of the open wound to my city, to my country.

The comic features The Fixer, a vigilante who takes on Islamic terrorists after an attack on New York, thinly disguised as Empire City. It was my ferocious gut-level reaction to 9/11 and the ongoing jihad activity that followed. *Holy Terror* was done in a state of unbroken trauma. I was processing some serious anger and letting myself run with it, aiming my skills and my energies *right at* an existential enemy. It was a fever. But it was not a political tract.

I wasn't trying to convince anybody of anything. I remember thinking, "I've always regarded propaganda as the enemy of art, and now I'm going to set out to do a piece of naked propaganda." I learned the full value of the axiom: *propaganda is an enemy to art—and to truth itself*. After it hit the shelves, I came under heavy fire. People labeled me all sorts of things and accused me of this and that. I have no hatred in my heart for Muslims; what I was reacting to was religious fascism and terrorists, regardless of their race or religion. What matters is that *Holy Terror* failed. It didn't persuade or seduce; it ranted. It railed and snarled and bellowed. And the audience charged the exits.

The idea at the center of *Holy Terror* was originally for a Batman story, and I decided to return to that. I wasn't done addressing the horrors of *invasion*. By the time I symbolically tackled this same issue in *Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again*—an alien monster lands in Metropolis and sets out to destroy it—I gave it a much more distant, sadder feel. I had gone from rage to sorrow, two steps in the five stages of grief. This distance made for a story the wider audience found more relatable. This doesn't mean my attitude toward religious fundamentalism and terrorism had or has changed a lick. It hasn't. But would I make another *Holy Terror*-style comic? The answer is that I did in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, and I hope I'm never inspired to do so again. Those were dark times. But I refuse to rule out any subject because of an angry reception. A cartoonist, like any

practitioner of arts or sciences, should never be scared off so easily. A rough reaction should inform the cartoonist, not castrate him. So, lessons learned.

You can't please everybody. Nor should you want to, especially if you're an artist. It's your damn duty to speak up. An unpopular opinion is not treason. Quite the opposite. You have to develop the attitude of "Sorry you didn't like it" instead of "Oh no! *Why* don't you like *me*?" There is no pleasing everyone, and even if you could, do you really want to? Eventually, you have to be the captain of your own ship and realize that every individual piece of your work cannot serve as a source of validation. This wisdom and acceptance comes with experience and maturity. In my case, it came a little sooner in my creative life because of the stern words and caring advice from two of my friends and mentors, Will Eisner and Neal Adams.

Will Eisner was the grand old man, the *éminence grise*. Eisner left the world of comics in the middle of his career to pursue other ventures, only to return with a crystal clear vision for where comics must go to survive the first age of "new media." And he loved a good debate, and I liked to give him one! We talked and argued all the time. Will wanted comics to achieve the literary heights of Saul Bellow, while, at the time, I was pushing for comics to mimic the films of directors like Alfred Hitchcock and Sergio Leone. This was a point of heated contention; we argued like crazy about that. But these were loving arguments—both of us advocating a way forward for an art form we felt passionate about. We debated over long dinners, with voices raised and then diffusing laughter. Friends later asked me, "Why do you guys have dinner together? You don't even like each other." My response: "Are you kidding? He's my second dad."

Neal and I rarely argued, but he always gave it to me straight and unvarnished. He was unsparing in his criticism. Drawing was a religious act to Neal. It was his purpose on the planet. He drew so naturally and beautifully, and his mastery of the craft was such that anything that wasn't up to that level wasn't just less fortunate, it was criminal! Anything less than excellence bored him, displeased him, left him cold. I dearly loved the guy, so this isn't a critique, just a fact: the craft came so easily to him that he couldn't understand why everybody couldn't draw like him. There was a purity about him and I really admired it then and still do today. Neal simply wanted to bring the quality up in everyone's work. He was a voice in the darkness that way. And he was the best in the field during his heyday, and the rest of us all knew it.

At one point, looking over one of my drawings, Neal pointed out an object in a panel and told me that the object—some office tool, if I recall—was drawn in such a way that it would not perform its function in reality. "*Artists*," he intoned, "don't just know what things look like. *Artists* know how things work."

Neal was a gatekeeper for me at different times in my life. And he was a crusty sensei. Early on, when I brought some drawings to show him, he asked, "You own any mirrors, Frank? Use them!" And on another occasion later in my career,

he said, “How ’bout next time you draw someone who is walking by, you take your damn shoes off, take a look at them, so you can see what shoes look like.” He was right, because if you really look at something, it’s more intricate and a lot stranger than the image of it you have in your mind. Geof Darrow, the master of surrealistic detail, once said to me, “Things look much weirder than you expect them to.” Some invaluable words of wisdom to be sure. In the 1957 film *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, the protagonist, Scott Carey, starts shrinking after exposure to insecticide and radiation. As he shrinks, the mundane all of a sudden becomes incredibly strange. Just as it is in old Steve Ditko horror comics: *nothing is ordinary in the right hands*.

I am very grateful to Will and Neal for the wonderful times *and* for the stern words. This is the kind of teaching a young artist *needs*. These guys never minced their words, and their tough criticism was a rite of passage for me. You’re never going to get any better as an artist or grow as a person unless someone tells you when you’re wrong or tells you that your work needs to be better. Or when it flat-out stinks. You have to listen. You have to learn. And you have to *internalize* each lesson.

At one point I specifically asked Neal, “What can I ever do in return for what you’ve done for me?” He said, “Nothing, Frank.” There was a thoughtful pause, and he continued, “Except the one thing that it’s your duty to do. Do the same thing for the next guy.”

Criticism is a consequence of living a creative life. But there’s no use whining about it—that’s a waste of energy and time, two essentials of which we do not have an infinite supply. You can choose to be a meek little mouse and not take a chance, but, at the end of the day, your work will suffer and any praise you do receive may feel unearned. And there’s no way around it; someone somewhere is going to shoot their mouth off and brand you as one thing or another. You can’t dwell on it because it will just eat your guts out and start making you timid. Timidity is yet another enemy, another monster you have to slay. Or better yet—a clown to laugh at. Never forget: *failure is your friend*. It makes you reevaluate and reanalyze. Just as success can be a treacherous lover, failure can be a harsh sensei. Suffer it. Survive it. Be grateful for it. Nothing will teach you more.

Ego is more complicated. It is an ineluctable factor in the creative act, and it can be your friend or your enemy. A fearful ego, the one that is content in the corner licking its wounds, this version of the ego is not a good companion. If you tread with fear and abundant caution, you’ll always be in the back with the crowd, doing exactly what everybody else is doing. Another side of ego is the confident one. As long as this version doesn’t swell to hideous proportions, the bold ego will drive you forward. But when you are charging forward, inevitably you will fall and fail and get scraped up. But you will learn. Much more than you expect. And you’ll be out there in front of the pack, making mistakes and solving them, which will *keep* you out there in front, charging ahead.

Then there's the third side of ego, your archenemy. That monster tells you to believe any praise, mistake silence for awe, and savor applause like it's sweet maple syrup. It will make your mind as dull and puffed up as it will make your work. It will make you no damn use to anybody.

Steel yourself. Never let your purpose become muddled, nor your process become precious. Open your mind wide. Out-of-the-blue inspiration is rare. Look for journeys to take, for problems to solve—every solution is a creation and a story being born.

Be *fearless*. Make those damn mistakes! That's what delete buttons and trash cans are for! Forge ahead. Look it over again tomorrow.

Be *ruthless*. Take no prisoners. There's a world of people out there who do the worrying for you. You've done your research; you've outlined and sketched and rendered and planned. Now *fly*.

Inspiration is important, but don't worship it. If it's not working, start over. If you make a mistake, redo it. One of my first editors once told me that "everything is malleable." You just have to relax and remember you can always revise, correct, adjust. Your best friend might be that little bottle of Wite-Out at your side. Or it might just be your trash can.

All the while—hey, nobody said this is a simple job! Charge ahead! Keeping moving the ball down the court. Keep your blood pumping. That'll do the same for the reader. And when your blood's pumping, well—that's when you just *know* that you're *alive*.

LESSON 11

HEADLONG INTO *SIN CITY*

Back to the Drawing Board



“Look at that mountain, look at those trees.
Look at that bum over there, man, he’s down on his knees.

Look at these women,
Ain’t nothin’ like ’em nowhere.”

—RANDY NEWMAN, “I LOVE L.A.”

“Just as every cop is a criminal
And all the sinners saints
As heads is tails...”

—ROLLING STONES, “SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL”

I always get into trouble when I’m not writing and drawing. Life’s vagaries vex me more than usual and my sense of purpose gets entangled in the vines of overthinking. I spin my wheels. An unmoored feeling sets in and, along with it, a weird and precarious comfort. In the movie *The Graduate*, the father admonishes his son, Ben, for dithering during his first summer after college. To his dismay, he finds Ben floating on a raft in the backyard pool and asks him, “What are you doing?” Looking up at his father with sunglasses on and his arms folded on the raft, Ben says with no emotion, “Well, I would say that I was just drifting. Here in the pool.” After his father asks him why, clearly irritated, Ben, again unbothered, says, “Well, it’s very comfortable just to drift here.”

That’s me when I’m not drawing: just drifting. Comfortable, but squirrely. It was worse when I was younger, especially in LA. I learned the hard way that idle hands are indeed the devil’s playthings. Let’s just say I got really comfortable by the pools and on the barstools of Los Angeles.

One devil I brought with me from New York was drinking. The simplest of messages about alcohol, and it’s a message to myself and a simple truth: alcohol is, by definition, a poison. If you got the wrong genes like I do, it will kill you. For the alcoholic there is absolutely no middle ground of controlled drinking. At first I thought I needed to drink to lower my inhibitions to be an artist because I had always felt like I was missing a layer of skin. Later, it was shame—one of the many excuses people use to drink, but shame is emotional poison.

Aristotle says that happiness is the ultimate human purpose that is achieved through a life of excellence, and that we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence,

then, is not an act, but a habit. The striving for excellence is your function as an artist and writer. But my habit was tied into a disease I needed to conquer because my artistic expression had become a function of alcoholism, or rather, a malfunction.

I wouldn't stop drinking until I came back to New York, and while the physical effects of getting off it, the cravings, go away pretty quickly, getting your life together... takes longer. My success was not a suit of armor against the consequences.

My LA life in the early to mid-nineties was sunny, but complicated. The disease was setting its own pace. I was under its sway. Despite LA's grimier side, it still felt like the most glamorous place on earth, and I loved it. Part of me did, anyway. As an artist who had toiled in the sandbox of comic books, a field that, after the horrors of 1950s censorship and the madness of the old, now-defunct Comics Code, had a major inferiority complex when it came to holding itself up to the movies, I was told that I had really made it to the big time when I got settled in LA. Here I was in Hollywood playing with the big boys and girls—the producers and the stars. Enjoying the Big Screen life—wine, women, and song, the City of Angels version. It was a new adventure, and it instantly affected my work: *Sin City* sprouted palm trees, iguanas, and cliffside drives.

So much of it was just so new that it was disorienting. Following the success of *The Dark Knight Returns* and my arrival to LA as a screenwriter, I stepped directly from the insular world of comic books into a place of total exposure, one where I didn't know the rules, but excitement levels were through the roof.

I decided to set aside the old toys and start creating comics of my own. My buddy Geof Darrow and I were putting together our *Hard Boiled* when Geof suggested Dark Horse Comics, an indie comics outfit looking to poke its nose into the mainstream. Geof and I met with Dark Horse publisher Mike Richardson and a long partnership began. We were off and running. Geof and I got rolling on *Hard Boiled*, while Dave Gibbons and I began our future history epic, *Give Me Liberty*, the four-chapter first book of the multivolume Martha Washington saga. I wrote, they drew. We had a blast. And I fell back in love with the *doing*, the daily grind of it. Finally, I asked myself what I *wanted* to spend my days and nights doing, and the market be damned—and *Sin City* was born.

After *RoboCop 2* came and went and the excitement from the experience waned, I came to a hard-earned realization. Writing a screenplay can be a lot like carefully casting and assembling what you're certain is a beautiful fire hydrant, only to watch a long line of dogs come piss on it. This is just the nature of the beast, an LA trademark, part of the total experience in many a movie. But thrills there were. The lights, cameras, actors, and the Big Production of it all was a wild ride. The whole deal—the screenplay process, dealing with directors, and interacting with cast and crew—taught me how to be tough and persuasive.

Hollywood turns everyone into salespeople. To make it there, you have to get to know your inner marketer and give voice to the charming huckster that's lurking around in all of us. Make it compelling and always be selling—your ideas, vision, point of view. Often the central mission of the moviemaker is to keep the whole thing from pulling itself to pieces.

But, golly, is it *fun*.

And then there's the money.

There's a lot of it in Hollywood, of course, and it's changing hands everywhere. Big movies cost a lot to make, and huge sums of money raise the stakes. When stakes are high, so is the number of bosses and opinions weighing in on your work. I value feedback, process, and the collaborative spirit as much as the next guy, but to experience so much of it all at once was jarring and dispiriting at times, especially since the one thing everybody has an opinion on is the script. It's the easiest part of the works to change, and the least expensive. The sheer number of reactions and insights, valid or not, was overwhelming, particularly because I was used to writing alone, with only a quiet cat asleep by my drawing board.

And after the thrill ride, it was back to the drawing board where I wanted to go, where I needed to go. I decided to finally bring *Sin City* to life. *Sin City* was my long-time ambition, my modern day revival of the pre-superhero, pre-code crime comic. It had been cooking for a very long time. I drew something that was very much like that way back when I was in the seventh grade. Since then I'd grown up, moved to New York City, and discovered classic Film Noir on late night television. So I defiantly set out to do a comic just for me, one I didn't expect to succeed, and one that would never be made into a movie. I called it *Sin City*.

Now that I was back to drawing, I was done ignoring it. It got my life as a storyteller back on track. I was determined to do something whereby I just followed my own course, no deviations, no unplanned stops. Until this point, I had always been told that comics were movies on paper, meaning that comics were an imitation of movies. But this just wasn't holding true for me anymore. In *Sin City*, I wanted to celebrate what comics accomplish on their own: sequential storytelling, panel by panel, with just words and pictures. The two working together and inviting readers to let their minds achieve the rest, using the "gutters" to fill in the blanks.

With *Sin City*, I decided to let the comic art form speak for itself. I was not interested in seeking the approbation of Hollywood. In fact, I set out to create a comic that *couldn't* be adapted into a movie. Later, of course, a tall Texan by the name of Robert Rodriguez proved me wrong. Through my experience working with him on the *Sin City* movies, I learned that movies and comics can work in harmony, as long as you respect them both while continually pushing the storytelling and visual envelope.

I knew the time was right. Back at comic book headquarters in New York, all bets were off. The inmates had taken over the asylum. There was a new sense of freedom because many of those now at the top had grown up loving comics—the art form, not the business—and they were the ones running the show. If you were a comic artist who had experienced some success already, all the better—they gave you an even wider avenue to do what you wanted to do. They had done this for me with *Ronin*, and now the whole gang was charging the gates.

As I was gearing up for *Sin City*, I remember telling myself exactly this: “I’m going to sit down and do a comic that is going to please *me*. I don’t care about anyone else.” So I called up Mike Richardson at Dark Horse and said, “I’m going to write and draw and letter a black and white comic, and I don’t know how long it is going to run, and I don’t think the market even wants it, but I’m going to do it anyway and I’m going to do it exactly the way I want to do it.” Mike’s clear-minded, heartfelt response: “Yes, Frank! Yes. I want it.”

It was all systems go after that. I was free as a bird. No bosses, no collaborators. The phrase “focus group” becoming a distant memory. The market be damned. There was no preordained page count, no army of revisionists and opinionators waiting in the wings, no producers or actors to mollify. I was back in charge, just me at the potter’s wheel, centering and shaping and trimming, splattering myself with mud and having a ball. I was grappling and creating with pencils and ink again. And I was the only voice in the room. That’s a beautiful thing about cartooning. You don’t need a lot of tools to do it, and it can be done by one person.

I was back at the drawing board—my creative home. And *Sin City* was born. After all that time spent in the weeds revising and reworking, I wanted to produce something that could cut stone and howl along like a Santa Ana wind. No more flab, blow through the fluff, just precision and sharpness—black and white would dominate and splashes of color would punctuate and reinforce.

For inspiration, I had decades of Film Noir, from the classy to the trashy. I had Johnny Craig’s EC run and Will Eisner’s *The Spirit*. I had Mickey Spillane and Dashiell Hammett and Jim Thompson. You get the drift. Then there were the underground comics. Newer, more experimental works by artists and writers like Chester Brown, Daniel Clowes, Dave Sim, and Jeff Smith. The cut back to the bone (sorry, Jeff!), celebrating comics as comics, not as anybody’s poor substitute for anything else. There was a purity about their work that I admired. Being this was more than enough; it didn’t need to aspire to anything else. You could feel it in the artwork: the playful freedom with, and mastery of, the craft. At the same time, it challenged readers by way of themes and subject matter. They celebrated the comic art form as a worthwhile medium unto itself, but also made sure no one could banish it to the children’s section.

Around this time, I bumped into Dick Giordano at a comic book convention. We talked shop like we always did and I told him what I was up to with *Sin City*. I

passed him some early, rough pages of it and said, “Look over it and tell me what you think. Honestly.” Being the serious accomplished artist that he was, he did just that. When we met up again, Dick said, “I gave these a look, Frank. Back in the fifties, Noel Sickles taught me to lay in the solid blacks before adding any linework. That’s the way you’re thinking here. Go ahead and see how many lines you *really* need—if any.” After this conversation, I started whiting out some of my lines, and the real look of *Sin City* emerged. That was Dick Giordano for you, a born teacher. In just a few words he’d shown me the path.

There are even echoes of the 1930s comic masterpiece *Dick Tracy* in *Sin City*, remembered from a reprint collection I’d received as a Christmas present while I was a little boy. Echoes like deformed villains, saucy vixens, and a lead character with a profile that could cut glass.

I worked in defiance of the color-drenched, superhero-universe-choked market, so I hit hard and cut deep. The current trends and conventions of the craft did not concern me. In a time of saturated, computer color, I was entranced by the Russ Cochran reprints of old EC *Shock SuspenStories*, which featured stunning crime comics by Johnny Craig in ruthless black and white, and, of course, by Film Noir itself. So I went black and white and punched the “starkness” pedal to the floor. The marketeers wanted more superheroes, more from the Marvel Universe, and the comic du jour was Marvel’s *Secret Wars*, which pitted these superheroes against each other. But I was after something totally different: the sinners and saints from the American fringe. The dispossessed, the despairing, the forgotten, the lonely, and the violent, those who never had a shot at the Dream, or those that did but got lost along the way. A place where those in power are crooked and corrupt and the criminals are out for vengeance, or maybe just a taste of the good life or a drop or two of redemption.

I wanted drama. Violence. Passion. Madness. Something that body-slammed Film Noir fever dreams into Forbidden Fifties comics. I wanted a feral atmosphere. I wanted to take something very old and transform it into something very new—something scary and primal. Enter Marv. An imposing brute with an axe to grind and revenge on his mind, a man born out of his time, unafraid to kill, Marv was the antihero I needed—an alienated tough guy from the margins who had to sort it out for himself.

Now that I had Marv primed for trouble and a dark universe of characters for him to encounter, it was time to fine-tune the setting. Marv’s town, the center of his struggles, became Basin City, a gritty metropolis in the American West run by the Roark crime family. A desert oasis for lowlifes, villains, and rotten cops. Like Los Angeles, Basin City is hot and dry, full of palm trees and sunbaked streets; and surrounded by mountains, desert plains, farmlands, and citrus groves.

Beyond the environment itself, I decided that three traits would define the characters of Basin City: their jobs, their guilty secrets, and their cars. It’s just a fact that you can’t draw a place like Los Angeles without drawing beautiful

women and cars. This presented drawing challenges I was eager to tackle. I'd been drawing women in every comic I'd made, most notably the femme fatale Elektra. Now I'd be drawing plenty more femme fatales, sure. They'd be prostitutes, sure. Haute couture prostitutes who were armed to the teeth and in total command of their territory. Nothing sad or sleazy, the ladies of Old Town would be haughty angels. They'd be Valkyries.

But the *cars*—now *those* looked tough. Along came friend and soon-to-be collaborator Geof Darrow to the rescue. He told me that he had seen the future—and that it was made of die-cast metal. As in the Franklin Mint, Danbury Mint, and, what the heck, a Matchbox car. Geof also encouraged me to think more and more like an animator. Since I fell in love with Max and Dave Fleischer's *Superman* cartoons long before I even saw a comic book, I took to it immediately. As for showing the cars in swift motion, Geof taught me to think animation—never let them touch the ground! And show some bits of earth or trash blowing around beneath them. The bits of paper and whatnot flying around suggest wind and motion, a trick you'll remember I learned from Will Eisner. An airborne hunk of metal with wind beneath it got my cars moving, hurtling down the roads *fast*. Hey, it works in the cartoons!

When it came to the women, again, the same principle holds (as it does everywhere): *cartoon*! Yes, of course, study as much as possible from real life models or photography, but learn to construct—or build—a figure. Then learn what to emphasize or exaggerate. Hint: it's often not the breasts.

The feeling of working alone and creating something out of whole cloth coupled with the pure rewards of getting back to basics to solve drawing problems left me feeling born again as a cartoonist. I was rolling in clover. I was exploring again, storytelling again—it was a purifying experience. My hero, Marv, only enhanced the purification. When I started *Sin City*, Marv, in terms of character traits, was a lot like Mickey Spillane's rogue detective, Mike Hammer, an unharnessed, two-fisted tough guy full of rage who doesn't blink when it comes to acts of brutal violence. But underneath it all, Hammer remains human—he's a crime fighter with an agenda.

At first Marv was on a human scale like Hammer, but it wasn't working the way I wanted it. He needed to be more than that—Marv must be like an almost indestructible force. So I turned Marv into what I call a "punching bag character," a character you can put in the absolute worst situations and they'll find a way out. Marv takes a licking and keeps on ticking. In *The Spirit*, Will Eisner showed us a hero who'd face down a jackhammer. Marv had to do this, too. Underground comics visionary Richard Corben explored such rampant masculinity. Jack Kirby transformed the common man into a bloody-but-unbroken totem in the *Fourth World* classic "The Death Wish of Terrible Turpin."

In the first volume of *Sin City*, *The Hard Goodbye*, Marv gets locked in a basement with Lucille, his tough-as-nails parole officer who lost her hand to a

killer, who chopped it off and ate it. They're stuck in a small room behind a steel door that is bolted shut from the outside and reinforced with a long security bar. There is no way out, no exit from their nightmare. This is the end. Marv throws himself against the door to no avail. He gathers his strength and goes at it until it crashes down. This is a pivotal scene because Marv does what no one else can do—he frees them from what, just moments ago, seemed like an impossible situation. And he does this with a complete lack of wit, cleverness, or acrobatics. Just good old brute force and persistence.

It goes back to the very first note I made to myself about Marv: “He’s Conan in a trench coat, a one-man wrecking ball.” And if you’ll remember, Conan was a Herculean barbarian, godlike in strength, and he knocked down everything and anything that stood in his way. This scene shows Marv as the absolute primal character that I always wanted him to be. He fulfills a fundamental human wish: He always finds a way out. Until he doesn’t.

Marv was an original: a complicated protagonist swollen to superhuman proportions, a new type of antihero who I wanted to put through his paces as long as possible. I grew fond of his voice, even though I’m not sure where the hell it came from. It’s distinct, and anytime I want to, I can write in that voice. As for the rest of the denizens of Basin City, they were essential to the world I was building. World building doesn’t just apply to creations with elves and dragons in them. Every time you tell a story, you’re world building. Emily Brontë built a world in *Wuthering Heights* and J. D. Salinger certainly built an ecosystem around his troubled Glass family. He arguably drove himself mad doing it. *Charlotte’s Web* is likewise a masterpiece in world building.

After seven volumes, I think I’ve proven that I’m always ready to return to the world of *Sin City*. The story sprawled and I let it take me where it wanted to go. Structure isn’t the be-all and end-all, and sometimes you have to let it go, be without it or, more accurately, let yourself be *unaware* of structure as your subconscious builds it for a while. If your story is bogging down, it may be time to break out your diagrams and plotlines and figure out how to fix it. But if the story is pulling you along and you’re in the flow, stay there and let it ride. It will take you places. It will surprise you at times and reassure or pop out that crown jewel of fictioneering: the *epiphany*. That discovery that makes you slap your forehead and cry out, “Of course!” As I like to call it, the *inevitable surprise*.

It’s been energizing for me to return to *Sin City* because, in many ways, it’s become my home. Going back to the drawing board gave me that. When I first set down to create *Sin City*, I just went with it, and sometimes just going with it is the only way to go. It may lead to a new world, may give you something unique, like a new voice to grow fond of. Oddly enough, this raw tale of vengeance full of blood and guts cleansed my creative palate. It was a turning point, and the alternate universes of Hollywood’s crowded read-through tables and buzzing sets and the silo of my studio showed me that I could thrive in both places, and that, in

fact, knowledge of this new one might reveal much to me about my old sweet home.

LESSON 12

WORK WITH P. T. BARNUM

Collaborate to Grow



Spooky action at a distance. This is how Einstein described the concept of quantum entanglement, which is a highfalutin physics term to describe the phenomenon where two separated particles stay connected without being in direct contact. The particles become linked to such a degree that they do not act independently, even when separated—there’s a persisting connection between the two, no matter how far apart they are. Einstein’s “spooky action” was his phrase for describing the weird behavior of subatomic particles, but it’s also a good way to describe a high-spirited artistic collaboration. When a creative collaboration *really* works, it does get a little spooky: the incredible flow and rate of productivity is difficult to describe. You enter a zone of interconnection and then move at the speed of light, together as one.

When Klaus Janson and I worked together on *Daredevil* for Marvel, we developed a type of shorthand. We got into a flow state where each of us knew what the other was thinking. What we created as a team was totally different from what both of us might have cooked up as individuals. When Jim Shooter gave me the nod to draw Marvel’s *Daredevil*, I knew I had to convince Klaus to stay on board. The book *needed* his look, and so did I.

But before I go too far down this road, let’s uncloak this process. While it’s true that certain elements of the collaborative spirit remain enigmatic, I don’t want to underestimate the hard work involved. Klaus and I worked hard to get to the point where we could finish each other’s sentences and anticipate what the other might do. Also, we both underwent boot camp–style training in the work-for-hire, collaborative world of the 1970s comic book trade. But the simple, plain truth of it is that Klaus and I simply brought out the best in each other, and this also kept the collaboration energized and moving forward. We helped each other, we were each other’s critics, and we kept each other sharp. We just went to work, day in and day out. There’s nothing mystical about the labor impulse—it’s simple and healthy. Klaus and I just happen to be really good at responding to that impulse as a team. So whether it is like quantum entanglement or not, we got the job done, and we had a blast doing it.

Also, I learned a hell of a lot from Klaus—his way of thinking and inking, the kinds of pens he used, his inspirations and methods. Klaus taught me how to piece

together my own approach to the craft. Mostly, he did this by example: his bold and slashing pen lines, flying in the face of the dominant decorative style of the time, encouraged me to cut loose and go for mood and drama. Most fascinating to me is how unlike so many collaborations, and despite us living and working not far from each other, Klaus and I didn't socialize much. Nor did we discuss the work with each other that much. We simply collaborated. And elevated each other, challenged each other, and taught each other. We were quite a team.

As we've already established, the comic book art form is most often a collaborative one, and I've worked with a legion of talented artists, writers, and editors during my time on the boards and in the trenches. I look back in amazement at all that I've learned from my fellow trench mates. The best collaborations are the ones where two people come to the table with open minds; work hard, but have a great time; and then walk away enriched, having learned heaps from one another. My work with Lynn and Klaus are standouts, but there are others that rise like cream to the top. On *Elektra: Assassin*, I had a hard time keeping up with Bill Sienkiewicz. I wrote, he illustrated, and we threw stuff back and forth so fast that it felt like we had entered a state of controlled madness. Bill can do wonders with paints, and his color originals for the series were so explosive and clever and alive that I had to recalibrate how I wrote the story—it had to be faster, looser, more fragmented—as vital as Bill's art. His virtuoso multimedia technique encouraged my own experiments with points of view and my zealous embrace of the unreliable—or just plain crazy—narrator. Bill taught me to lose some fears that I didn't even know I had at the time. David Mazzucchelli was just a young buck when we worked on *Daredevil: Born Again*, but his prodigious talents were already up and running. We explored together, and figured it out together, both the pictures and words. I was the writer and David was the artist, but each affects the other, at every stage. (Will Eisner liked to say that a writer and artist should work together very closely. In fact, he said, it is best when they share the same body.) David's astonishing progress from *Daredevil: Born Again* to *Batman: Year One* also instructed, as he dragged us back to cartooning qua cartooning. Going as harsh as Chester Gould on Loeb, the utterly vile police commissioner with a horrible facial complexion, and then giving us a Bruce Wayne who looked like a cameo of Gregory Peck in the old strip *Dondi*.

What I love the most about Dave Gibbons is his relentless intelligence and creativity, and the way this combination pushes him to deliver the craziest ideas with a straight face. He was George Burns to my Gracie Allen. While collaborating with me on the miniseries *Give Me Liberty*, he taught me to let go of the reins a little and create some insane situations for our heroine, Martha Washington. He did this by taking every last concept I threw at him and tossing it back at me with a straight face. Letting the *content* deliver the parody, never the presentation. I took the storyline to some wild places, and I did so with confidence, knowing Dave could pull it off on the page in a wry and masterful

style. Then came Geof Darrow, as extraordinary a talent as I've ever encountered. Working with him on the dystopian LA bloodbath that is *Hard Boiled* was mind-boggling. The complexity of his art is astonishing, but even though it is detailed, it's never flat or schematic—it breathes, moves, and shouts. Geof's eyes are always open. He makes the preposterous convincing by nailing down with utter precision *every last detail*. I recall him once summing up his surrealist point of view very succinctly: when you actually *look* at something you realize how *weird* it really looks.

Then I met a tall Texan by the name of Robert Rodriguez. But our collaboration didn't come easy, at first, anyway. Sometime in the late nineties, my editor Bob Schreck called me up and said, "Listen, Frank, this is exciting: Robert Rodriguez wants to talk to you about making a *Sin City* movie." And when I asked, "Who's that?" Bob sputtered, said something snarky, then said, "Frank, you've got to talk to this guy!" I asked Bob if this was about movies and he said, "Yes, Frank, this about making a movie." My response: "Well, I'm not interested." End of conversation.

I created *Sin City* with the intention of never seeing it made into a movie—I wanted it to stand on its own two legs as a comic book, and stand proud. The idea that *Sin City* could become just another Hollywood crime movie rubbed me the wrong way and I wanted no part of it.

But one thing I came to learn about Rodriguez: the guy is a force of nature, he puts things in motion, creates "a trajectory," as he puts it. He was persistent: Bob called me again and said, "Frank, Robert Rodriguez will be in LA next week. You have to meet him. I think you'll come around to the idea, honestly. He means business. But if you don't, then you can tell him no in person—that might be the only way this thing goes away."

When I met Robert, I immediately liked him, and he had a wonderful grasp of what *Sin City* was. He also had so many filmic and technological ideas about how to make the film so that it would be new and different—not just another Hollywood redo. His vision: a visually stunning combination of live action and animation. He wanted to make it look like a comic more than a movie, to create a glamorous Film Noir, but with modern technology. (This seemed pie in the sky to me at the time, but boy did he prove me wrong.) Even after this impassioned spiel, I reminded Robert that I had worked in movies already and saw up close and personal how many hands go into the pie, and I told him that I didn't want to see that happen to *Sin City*. "*Sin City* is my *baby*. I'm just really protective."

I was a man of my word and I thought it over, but I called Robert a few days later and said, "Listen, man, I really like you, I really like where this conversation went. But I gotta turn you down because I just don't want *Sin City* to be remembered as a movie, even though it was a comic book first. That happens too much already." There was a long, pregnant pause, and just so he knew that I

meant it, I added, “I can’t really live with that when it comes to my baby. I’m too close to it. I love it too much. So thanks, but no thanks.”

He was a gentleman about it, but he called back just two days later and said, “Frank, I just can’t get this out of my head. It’s bugging me too much—you not wanting to do this! Tell you what, I’ll fly you down to Austin and we’ll do a little test. A couple of my friends will act in it and we’ll shoot a little test of one of those short stories you did for *Sin City*, and we’ll see if we want to do this.” Next thing I know I’m on a plane to Austin. There, he proved his point.

Robert chose my story “The Customer Is Always Right” and enlisted the actors Josh Hartnett and Marley Shelton to play the parts. He set up a green-screen operation so there were no sets and no locations, just the actors in a studio. At one point, Marley approached me and asked, “So, I just want to know, why does my character hire someone to kill her?” And I found myself explaining it in detail to her, telling *my character* about her *backstory*. All the while staring into the most beautiful blue eyes I’d ever seen. She nodded, absorbed it, and her performance suddenly took on an intensity that energized the whole scene. She took this tiny little story and elevated it to new dramatic heights. It sealed the deal. I got a taste of the process, the craft, and the type of environment Robert creates. The hook was in my mouth.

After we finished shooting, I walked over to Robert, shook his hand, and said, “I’m in.” Robert gave me a knowing grin.

Robert ushered me in as codirector and the show was on. We worked, it seemed, almost nonstop. All of us—me, the cast, and his hyper-dedicated crew—set out to match Robert’s Promethean energy. It was joyous to direct actors and provide input whenever and wherever I wanted. This approach kicked the door open to a new kind of film collaboration and it established trust and transparency from the get-go. The first thing I noticed about Robert on the job was just how *fast* he works. He is a juggernaut, and as someone who also likes to work fast, this fused an immediate connection and set the stage for an intense collaboration. We quickly got to the point where we finished each other’s sentences.

Because it was so involved, I relocated to Austin so Robert and I could work around the clock, if need be. We proved a versatile team; we constantly played ideas off one another. Since we were basically on top of each other on set, we saw each other twelve hours a day and sometimes into the evening hours, preparing the next day’s work. Robert’s energy and film knowledge knows no bounds. If he isn’t doing it, he is talking about it. He breathes the art of movies. He *lives* creatively. One evening after a long day on set, Robert said to me, “Come on over for dinner tonight!” When I arrived, completely exhausted, there was Robert banging around in the kitchen, fixing a gigantic steak meal and ready to talk shop. After all the dishes were done and put away, the guy was still full of beans, still going and going.

And going, especially on set, where he is a source of both endless vitality and intelligent direction. His sense of theatrics and his camaraderie with the actors was a real lesson for me. I've said it before and I'll say it again, Robert is like P. T. Barnum—he's a sophisticated showman who can marshal the circus and somehow fuse all the moving parts into a coherent narrative and wildly entertaining production. But as the ringleader, he also gets the people around him to *deliver*, to produce as promised and as envisioned. There's no sitting around on the set, no losing focus. He likes to walk onto a set and ask everyone with a smile, "Why are we not *shooting*?"

He looks for the most efficient and effective way to get the right result, from lighting and visual effects to writing and blocking out the scenes. For the uninitiated, "scene blocking" is simply showing actors how to move around the space in a scene. He often engaged me in this process and the two of us worked quickly together, but the mission was always to get it just right. At one point, while on set blocking a scene, he walked over to me and pointed at the notepad in my hand and said, "Okay, Frank, we need something, we need it now. It's got to be fast, it's got to be cheap, and it's got to be brilliant." A tall order, but this is the kind of challenge you want. It requires everything of you. This is how you *grow*.

Robert's much more than a director, and his films are testaments to his boundless enthusiasm and creativity, from the *Sin City* adaptations to the neo-Western violence of *El Mariachi* to the kid-friendly adventures of the *Spy Kids* franchise. He can work with every tool in the toolbox. He's a first-rate photographer and he loves the technical side of things, particularly editing. When it comes to editing, he acts as he does in every other aspect of filmmaking: he makes quick decisions and doesn't look back. And he's a wizard at editing. He'll take a bunch of film and then quickly slice off pieces here and there, intuiting that making these cuts is *exactly* what is required to make a scene more intense or artful or both. I've always been a dedicated practitioner of self-editing, counting it as top priority when writing and drawing, but from Robert I learned to do this almost as a matter of reflex—trust your initial reaction and don't get all tangled up asking why. Make your mark and move on.

Neither of us spent much time in the directors' chairs. And watching Robert's committed involvement with every aspect—sometimes learning the ropes as he went along and always showing those around him how something works—reinforced something I already knew. Educating yourself on how it all works gives you a superpower: when someone says, "Sorry, that can't be done," then you can say, "Yeah, it can, and I'll show you how." I had already put this to use while working on *Ronin*. Because DC gave me complete creative control over the comic, including how it was printed, I made damn sure to go learn as much about the printing process as I could. I knew that I wanted *Ronin* to look and feel like a substantial piece of art, so I didn't want anyone coming in at the last minute to tell me that I couldn't do this or that with the printing or that a particular kind of

paper wouldn't work. Don't get me wrong, I learned it for the sake of learning something new, but I also wanted to make sure no one stepped on my creation or thwarted my intent. And finding out how things actually work can open up a world of possibilities. Hence the climatic triple gatefold in *Ronin*, the curvaceous spot varnish on some of *Sin City*'s sexier covers. Learning about production and printing has served me well, and I've discovered new ways to think about my craft. When it comes to the creative life, knowledge truly is power.

Learning new skills, the importance of craft—on these two points Robert and I certainly connected. We rolled up our sleeves and dug into the processes involved; we talked shop and gushed over the nuances and minutiae of what we were making; and we watched with joy as the comic book became a film. Robert showed me the craft behind the magic, he demystified filmmaking by teaching me. Some directors keep others at arm's length, shrouding the actual work and know-how in mystery so that, at the end of the day, everyone will hoist them up as the witch doctor who made it all happen. With *Sin City*, Robert did the opposite: he delighted in showing me how it all worked. As I took my first baby steps as codirector, learning the basic opportunities that the set and the actors provide and the capabilities of the equipment, Robert guided me through it all, saying things like "You're already thinking the right way. You've just got to add some steps." It was a reminder: There are simple steps to take to make this happen; one thought, one act follows the next. No magic is required.

That's why demystification is so important when it comes to making art. It breaks one huge problem into a thousand little easy-to-manage ones. Then you can see all the opportunities, the open doors, the possibilities. It's like any other kind of work that way. There are components and tools, systems and processes: things to *use*. Art is part of the real world, not a mystical one in which only a chosen few are capable of traveling. The field of creative arts tends to hobble itself by pretending artists are from a different dimension. Perhaps because many legendary practitioners who came before us sometimes acted as if they were liaisons to faraway realms, visionaries and favored ones with gifts too precious for this world. Or maybe we need our mystique. Without it we might all drown in unintelligible AI dreck. We wouldn't, but that's an understandable fear, now that we're being trained to refer to ourselves as "creatives." Far better that we reject that odious term and lay claim to our millennia-old role in society: pulling on our headdresses and building our fires so that all the other natives will gather round to hear about the angry thunder god and the mighty bear who was felled in the great hunt.

Storytelling. When you know it works, the opportunities multiply. You can make more creative decisions with confidence. When actress Devon Aoki came on set to play Miho, a ninja assassin and master swordsman in *Sin City*, she didn't have any training in martial arts or any real knowledge about them. She held up a wobbly, plastic prop sword and politely asked, "What do I do with this?" I said to

Robert, “Miho doesn’t speak at all, she’s completely defined by violent action, but Devon isn’t trained. It’s not going to work. We have to get someone to train her!” And Robert said, “Yeah, but look at her, Frank. That face, look at what it’s telling you. The rest will fall into place.” I later realized that this was a directing lesson dressed up as a casual conversation. He taught me that when it comes to directing, a good director, like a good cartoonist, relies on what the audience brings to the work. Sometimes it’s better just to give hints and let the readers or viewers do the rest. (We got Devon a sword master anyway. He taught her, shot by shot, what moves to make. She rose to the challenge beautifully.)

His lesson in directing reminded me of something essential in comic books or any other medium for that matter: you have to trust that the audience will bring their own intelligence and imagination to the work. They’ll work with you. You don’t have to hold their hand or dictate everything to them. That’s one of the things that makes Charles Schulz one of the greatest cartoonists who ever lived. *Peanuts* is not full of finely detailed draftsmanship, but it pulls you in nonetheless. Schulz uses simple balloon shapes for heads; squiggly, wavy lines for most everything else; and an economy of words in his bubbles. That’s it! But all this together invites readers into Charlie Brown’s world, prompting them to use their own creative power to manufacture the colorful world around his simple characters. There is something about his construction of lines combined with his use of language that makes Charlie Brown and the *Peanuts* gang completely real people, characters as real in people’s minds as the human children around them. As simple as he appears in drawing, look at Charlie Brown’s shape and face, it tells you what you need to know—just enough to kick-start your mind’s eye. And to remind you that you’re a lot like Charlie Brown, too.

I used the same principles in *Sin City*—I gave hints. I constructed the framing, just enough to encourage the audience to build the rest. What I didn’t realize until I worked with Robert was that so many of these concepts apply to film as well. It’s the limitations of an art form that often make the illusion complete. For the length of a movie, the screen becomes the audience’s entire world, and, when the lights go down, they bring their own context and experiences, their own dreams and wishes. When a reader is engaged with a comic book, the panels, gutters, words, and images all working together create the comic’s proscenium arch, just as Will Eisner said. Once the audience accepts the artifices and suspends their disbelief, they’re in for the whole ride.

Collaborating with Robert on the *Sin City* movie was a shock to my system, the right kind. It was astonishing to watch and participate in the processes whereby Robert’s vision joined with mine—the comic panels metamorphosing into a film via a thrilling merger of live action and animation. Hollywood had already introduced me to the notion of a revolving door of expertise and teamwork back when I worked on *RoboCop 2*, but this was on another level. If Klaus and I created a third person for our joint vision, then it’s fair to say that Rodriguez, the

actors, crew, and I created some kind of multiheaded, mythic spider that spun a web of creativity that ensnared anyone who came close to it.

Our temperaments are very different, but it worked. Robert would never be accused of being a grump and a sourpuss, but I get labeled that all the time. After it was all said and done, I told him that if we were rock stars, he was Elvis Presley and I was Bob Dylan. From this experience, I added the title director to my resume. Robert bravely fought to officially raise my level of participation on the film to codirector, even going as far as quitting the Directors Guild to ensure that I was properly credited as such. I've been a director ever since, taking my first solo stab at it on the film version of *The Spirit*. For this and so many things, I'll forever be grateful to Robert, the visionary ringmaster who opened the doors to the whole fantastic show.

Sometimes you have to work with others to grow. You have to put yourself back into learning, back into wonder, back into some spooky action. You have to say yes to that offer you told yourself you'd never say yes to.

Working on *Sin City* with Robert and the rest of the crew were some of the best days of my life. To this day, whenever I see clips of it during interviews or at conventions, it takes me right back there: I can actually smell the set and see the actors at work. While at work on that film, I was down deep in the concentrated act of creation. It reminded me why I was on the planet. The grand old philosopher Aristotle said that true happiness is a state where all your energies are channeled along the lines of excellence. Happiness isn't something someone gives you or something that arrives, it's something you achieve by way of work and fulfilling purpose. You know this feeling already. Whenever you sit back and say to yourself, "I had a good day today." That's it. You're there. If you're not there, you don't need a magic wand, just take a few simple steps in the right direction. And then a few more steps. Make these ones quicker.

Then strike out for somewhere you've never been.

LESSON 13

DON'T FEAR THE LOCOMOTIVE

Welcome Surprises



There was a moment on the set of *Sin City* when the story jumped from genre to opera. The tiger force that is Mickey Rourke brought Marv frighteningly alive, and he did so at full blast. In one scene, Marv grabs the parole officer, Lucille—played by Carla Gugino—by the shoulders and screams at her. Mickey brought such ferocity to the moment that spit flew wildly from his mouth, with some striking Carla in the face. But she held her own. Her eyes locked on Mickey's. Her face transformed into a beautiful study in courage. I told her later that her performance in that scene was absolutely wonderful, and Carla said to me, “Oh, I don't know how much *acting* I was actually doing. I was just hoping he wouldn't hit me!” Carla's modesty aside (the lady is the *soul* of grace), her performance in that scene was expert. She stayed in character—she didn't even flinch. She didn't even blink.

Mickey brought this full-steam-ahead energy to every scene. If he wasn't boiling over he was simmering. You could feel it stewing and surging—a barely contained violence. He became my Conan in a trench coat. Mickey is the most visceral actor I've worked with; he flooded the set with passion. I wasn't quite prepared for it, but, after the initial shock and surprise of seeing and feeling it firsthand, I eagerly embraced it.

Mickey and Carla were two of several elements from the *Sin City* film experience that led me to the conclusion that the essence of cinema is not intellectual; it's emotional. Like in a comic book or any other form of storytelling, you need logic to hold it together: words and literary content are necessary for it to make sense and have purpose. But the audience experiences it viscerally—in the gut and the heart first and foremost.

At the beginning of *Sin City*, Marv wakes up to discover that his one-night-stand lover, Goldie, is dead. Before the scene, Mickey disappeared for a while to be alone. It was best to leave him to it, to give him the space he needed. When he came back to the set, he delivered a startling, unexpected interpretation of the scene. Jaime King played Goldie, and when Mickey touched her lifeless body, he did so with such a gentle sadness that it took on a childlike quality. It was almost unearthly. I later asked Mickey, “So, where did you get that? That emotion and

feeling?” He looked me straight in the eye and said, “I just thought about how I felt when my dog died.”

It was a revelation for me about how deep actors will dig for the right emotion. And Mickey is of the Method school: he delivers the lines you give him and grinds until he connects himself *viscerally* to the moment. He was born to play larger-than-life characters, so Marv was a perfect fit. The emotional content he brought to the role was always right on target. In the scenes with Carla and Jaime, Marv became the existential figure I’d dreamed up for the comic. It was almost cyclical. I’d dug into myself to create Marv, finding often unpleasant, often pathetic, sometimes scary chunks of my id to put this beast together, then sculpted him 2D on bristol board. Now Mickey Rourke had dug deep into *himself* to bring that fever-dream alter ego of mine to life. Spooky isn’t the word for it. It was haunting.

From my personal perspective as a comic book artist, part of what actors bring to the art of film is that they are living drawings. They are walking, breathing characters that jump off the page. This was especially true of the cast for *Sin City* because of the way it was filmed and the overall tone of the movie. Robert and I wanted it to look and feel like a cartoon, in the best sense of the word. Remember, cartoons and comic books deal in melodrama and extreme emotions. And Mickey’s acting was extreme, but it worked on every level, so Robert and I encouraged the other actors to do the same. We welcomed bravado and emotional overdrive, and the surprises they might bring.

Rosario Dawson brought an electrifying swagger to Gail, a leading member of the Girls of Old Town, and a dominatrix all decked out in whips and chains and brandishing an Uzi submachine gun. Running the neighborhood that put the “sin” in *Sin City*, the Girls of Old Town function like Valkyries: they lead Marv into an underworld where he becomes an einherjar warrior, an army of one. When Gail and the other girls mistakenly blame Marv for Goldie’s death, Gail encourages her fellow enforcer and Goldie’s twin sister, Wendy, to torture Marv for information. She’s a tough woman. And Rosario took it to the next level, introducing a feline menace to Gail that was palpable—her hard stare and her cheetah-like aura plunge you into a world of dangerous secrets. She’s Catwoman in fishnet and leather. At the same time, with just a simple raise of the eyebrow, Rosario reminds the audience that, while she may be tough, she is still a woman in a violent male-dominated world. She hints at the vulnerability hiding under Gail’s leather mask and dominating sex appeal, connecting with the audience on an emotional level. She’s tough like us, but just as wounded.

Behind all the emotion on display, actors make intelligent, considered decisions about their characters, much like writers do once they’ve gotten into the minds of their heroes and heroines and dropped them into a world of trouble. A big part of acting is intelligence—knowing how to find the energy for that integral connection between audience and actor. And the Englishman Clive Owen has this

in spades. In the first movie, Clive plays Dwight McCarthy, a tough guy with the soul of a do-gooder. It was amazing to watch Clive work—his process is cerebral, but the result is high drama. He puts a lot of thought into what comes across as raw emotion.

While working with Clive, Rosario, Mickey, and the rest of the cast, I discovered that just about everything I'd been told about actors is wrong. The line on actors is that they are temperamental, lazy, and self-involved, worried only about their appearance and their awards. And elements of that might be true for some, but, generally, I've found actors—the good ones, that is—to be dedicated, hardworking artists and craftspeople who will go to all lengths to deliver a good performance. They put their reputation and often their well-being in the hands of producers, writers, and directors. Actors take a leap of faith to produce good work. Anyone interested in creating art should follow their lead on this. Sometimes you have to invest everything and trust you'll come out all right on the other side.

I absolutely love working with actors: the intense creative collaboration involved, from line readings and working in their ad-libs (and then talking them out of using them!) to selecting clothes and costumes and everything in between. We gave Rosario and the rest of the Old Town Girls some ridiculous earrings to wear, modeled after the ones I drew, on a whim, in the comic book, and they used these crazy things to take their characters to new places. All the magical, creative decisions the cast and crew made together to steer this huge production in the right direction and make it sing surprised and energized me on a daily basis. We were immersed in the fantasy, swept up in this world that I had created in my studio. Going from comparative isolation to a huge, teeming movie set, a place dedicated to making movie magic happen, is a rewarding adventure. Watching all that technology and talent dedicated to making an idea that crawled around in my head until it bugged me enough to draw it on paper come to life was thrilling. The fantasy came to vivid life, right before my eyes.

The set was alive with possibilities, because each actor brings a different set of both problems *and* opportunities. Some actors require nurturing and teaching, while others prefer directness and a more hands-off approach. And, if you're open to it, every situation and dilemma will teach you something about the craft and a few things about yourself, too. Just as it does when I'm drawing, solving problems and discovering new opportunities really revs my creative engine. It's the spark of a challenge. When you're staring at a blank page or screen, the challenge may seem overwhelming, but just keep at it. Make your changes *in flux*, even when doing so goes against your original vision. Anything that helps you get it done as well as you possibly can under pressing circumstances is worth trying. In the process, you realize that it's not one colossal, almost paralyzing impediment ("How will I *ever* do this?"), but a series of reasonable hurdles to leap over and factors to consider ("How do I solve *just this piece* so I can keep

moving?”). So being on a set with a constellation of personalities to acknowledge and cases to crack taught me that the faster I dive in, the better. The sooner you start swimming, the sooner you’ll get to shore, with your blood up and your mind clear.

None of which is to say you shouldn’t plan. Plan the hell out of your story. But be prepared for surprises along the way—surprises and opportunities. A movie set is a living thing. Let it breathe. Let it flex its muscles.

Mickey’s locomotive energy got us rolling, but then we all jumped on board. And we rode it at high speed and as far as it would go. There was a lot of play on the set, an immense amount of positive energy. Robert encouraged it and taught me to do the same. Because a joyful set is one that generates faster results, and one that produces better work. At one point, I spun around and said to Robert, “This is the best time I’ve ever had in my whole life!”

The experience filled me with a sense that anything is possible. Welcoming this new energy and working with the surprises that came with it reinforced something essential: If you’re creative, you have to always be learning. Always out to find new ways of looking—at your craft, yourself, the world around you.

My time in Los Angeles, *RoboCop 2*, the *Sin City* films, and my later collaboration on the film version of *300* and my debut as a solo director on *The Spirit*—all of this took me on quite a journey, but it also reminded me that there is still plenty to explore in comic books. Sometimes the best thing about trying something new is a reminder that what you started with still has a lot to give—and can still surprise you. I arrived back at a familiar place: throw out any notion of comics and movies as being too closely related to one another. Sure, there is a relationship between the two—they both tell stories—but they are profoundly *different media*. So Vive la Différence!

As it turns out, I realized the same thing I did after my first screenplay experience: working in the most powerful medium in history puts the unique gifts of comic books in high relief. Sure, comics are capable of being loud and splashy for a *silent* medium small enough to hold in your hands, but the cinema is the undisputed powerhouse of modern media. So let’s not compete with that big bruiser. Let’s go *quiet*. And this enticed me to play with the more internal side of storytelling—the interiors of characters, the emotions kept locked away. I finally came around to Will Eisner’s view of comics: they are at their best when they’re not trying to be a poor man’s anything. So it was time to let the big guys do what the big guys do and get back to exploring the world of comic books, to find new ways of looking *there*, to keep pushing the wall on the drawing board.

The superhero universe has subsumed comics for a long time. This makes sense, considering superheroes were created for comics! But when they became so wildly popular, they wiped out the other types, like the old horror comics, the EC masterpieces of the 1950s, war comics, and Westerns. *Sin City* was part of my new direction, to break things open again: political parody and sci-fi in *Martha*

Washington, crazed cyberpunk in *Hard Boiled* and *Bad Boy*. On it goes, to this day. The COVID pandemic and its attendant paranoia inspired me to merge this menace with Cold War sci-fi and develop invasive species. It's our job to push things outward, into new directions, not just to keep spinning our wheels. The later works of Eisner and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* need not be isolated incidents. Comics have already grown up.

Striking out in new directions remains my call to action. I believe comic books can go anywhere they want. Given the existential crises during and after the COVID pandemic, I'm interested in working on comics that venture into paranoia, sickness, and horror.

I've gone in the other direction, too, because, while I want to make sure comics aren't always stuck in the juvenile section, there's absolutely nothing wrong with making things for kids. When I launched the publishing venture Frank Miller Presents in 2022, one of our flagship projects was *Pandora*, a children's fantasy collaboration with Emma Kubert and my cowriters Chris Silvestri and Anthony Maranville. We created *Pandora* with a children's audience in mind, which came naturally to both Emma and me, considering Emma is a third generation Kubert—granddaughter of the legendary Joe Kubert, and daughter to Joe's brilliant and talented son Andy—and my own long-standing love of children's books. Like the rest of the Kuberts, Emma is full of enthusiasm, generous with talent, and, like me, always eager to work—ready to meet it head-on.

In addition to having a lot of fun, *Pandora* led me back to my childhood. It resurfaced my love for L. Frank Baum's Wizard of Oz books. As a child, W. W. Denslow's and John Rea Neill's illustrations for these books really got me going. So while working on *Pandora* I often found myself transported back to the Miller family home in Vermont: leaves blowing outside the window and afternoon sunlight ratcheting across the wooden floor while I journeyed out into Baum's fantasy world.

There are so many places for comics to go, and every direction I've taken so far has brought its fair share of joy. Now that I'm older I've learned it's best to seek joy wherever you can and ensure you stimulate it in others. Interestingly enough for someone whose art contended with life's darker and seamier sides for so many years, I now find that, when I'm writing and drawing stories, a lot of my characters are smiling, even when the subtext is spooky or sinister. After working in the comic field for so long, I've grown bored with much of what passes for "grim" these days. Now, that's not to say that I won't get dark, but if I do go dark, I go *really* dark. And chances are my heroes and heroines won't be wearing tights.

Explore. Be surprised and surprise yourself. And don't overanalyze. Remember, making art should be fun. As my friend Walter Simonson once said, "The best answer to give a critic when they ask you why you did something, just say, 'Because it seemed like a good idea at the time.' " Without the joy, what's the point? As you work in service of art, the art will serve your life—enrich it,

bring light to it. Take it from me, life has its own constellation of problems and circumstances to navigate and reckon with. It's not an easy thing. Reality does intercede. So do whatever you can to keep joy in your corner. Before I started *Sin City* I made a list of the fun things to draw: cars, sexy women, guns, and trench coats. Then I thought to myself, "This is gonna be fun."

Robert Crumb said it best: "It's only lines on paper, folks."

LESSON 14

ASPIRE TO *HIGH NOON*

Keep It Simple



“The noonday train will bring Frank Miller,
If I’m a man I must be brave,
and I must face that deadly killer,
or lie a coward,
a craven coward,
or lie a coward in my grave.”

—TEX RITTER, “HIGH NOON”

The 1952 classic American Western movie *High Noon* opens with three outlaws arriving one by one at their meeting spot near a big rock and some forsaken trees out in the dusty plains of the New Mexico territory. Shot in stark black and white, the scene instantly feels mythological—evil is gathering out in the wild, and it’s all dressed in black and ready to saddle up. As they gallop into the Wild West outpost of Hadleyville, the reaction from the town’s citizens confirms that these guys are up to no good. Fear ripples across the faces of those who see them, with the exception of a few wayward men who have congregated outside the saloon, waiting for it to open. Seeing these three marauders is all the reason they need to start drinking: “Come on, Joe, open her up. We’re going to have a big day today.”

As the three men ride by the Justice of the Peace office, the camera takes us inside to where a wedding is taking place. The town marshal, Will Kane, after deciding to hang up his pistol and lay down his tin star, is marrying the lovely Amy Fowler Kane, a strong, determined woman of the Quaker faith, and, as such, a dedicated pacifist. As a dutiful marshal, Will brought peace and stability to Hadleyville, but it’s his time now: he’s leaving town to start a new life with his bride. But he will leave Hadleyville better than he found it and his Quaker bride has pledged him to lay down his guns for good.

Just as Will and Amy are stepping into their wagon and out into their future together, Will learns that the newly arrived outlaws are connected to Frank Miller, the loathsome, murderous bastard who Kane sent away to prison five years before. (Frank Miller is a terrific name for a villain, I must admit.) Miller was supposed to hang, but the judges “up north” commuted his sentence to life and then set him free for unknown reasons. Now Miller is coming back to take back

his town. The three hired guns are now at the train depot on the outskirts of town to meet Miller, who is due in on the noon train.

By virtue of how Miller's imminent return unsettles the townspeople—Kane included—the audience quickly gathers that Miller is no ordinary bad guy; he's a symbol of the violent chaos that Kane banished from the town as marshal. As Kane says when learning of Miller's return, "He was always wild and kind of crazy. He will probably make trouble." We later learn that Kane tamed the town and instilled a sense of civic duty. Frank Miller's return threatens to upend Hadleyville's stability—Miller is the darkness at the edge of town.

The screenwriter, Carl Foreman, and the director, Fred Zinnemann, got their hero into trouble, and did so fast. Kane is immediately conflicted. You can see it on his face. Played by an older Gary Cooper, Kane rubs his chin and looks distracted, worried, and confused. He's weathering the storm of a moral dilemma, asking himself, with increasing urgency, the age-old question "Should I stay or should I go?"

He doesn't stay undecided for long. Even though the town leaders convinced him to leave, he turns the wagon around just a little ways outside of town. He stops the horses and tells Amy, who is played by a young Grace Kelly, that he has to go back: "They're making me run. I've never run from anybody before." Amy tells him she doesn't understand any of it, and pleads, "Don't go back, Will." But he's already decided that it's his duty to do so, this is just what he has to do, this is who he is: "I've got to. That's the whole thing."

When Kane and Amy get back to the marshal's office, he explains it all to Amy, but she remains against staying in Hadleyville and claims she'll leave on that same noon train. As Kane puts on the tin star again, he says, "I'm the same man with or without this thing." And with that the hero answers the call.

But he hasn't much time. It's ten minutes to eleven. He has just over an hour to prepare for his showdown with Frank Miller. The movie now plays out in real time with multiple shots of the clock ticking away, creating more and more tension as it gets closer to noon. This opening sequence of events is storytelling at its best. Straightforward, but effective and compelling. The pieces are in place, time is running out, and you're on the edge of your seat.

I saw *High Noon* for the first time at a repertory movie house in Manhattan, sometime in the early 1980s. The film's simplicity gripped me, and the narrative set the hook in a hurry. The movie's raw honesty spoke to me as an artist, but also as a young man living in a city and a country that also felt on the edge of doom—we were in need of some heroes of our own. Up to that point, it was one of two movies that profoundly affected me this way—both as a writer and also as a human being. The other was an old clunker from the early 1960s called *The 300 Spartans*, which is, of course, an ancient story I would take up myself much later in comic book form. I was seven years old by the time the movie made its way to the Capitol Theater in Montpelier. Movies had exceedingly long runs at the

Capitol in those days. *Camelot* screened for months on end and it seemed like *The Sound of Music* would never leave. Toward the tail end of the *300 Spartans* run, we went as a family to see it, and I remember that day like it was yesterday. My older brother, Steve, and I sat behind my parents, because even back in the olden times, it still wasn't cool to sit with Mom and Dad. Toward the end of the movie when the arrows rained down and killed all those heroic Spartans, Steve and I conferred for a minute before he leaned forward and asked my dad in a hushed, movie-theater tone, "Frank wants to know, did the good guys all die?" My dad just said, "I'm afraid so, son."

My whole idea of what makes a hero changed forever. This was one of those before-and-after moments: before, I thought a hero was like Superman, someone who swooped in and saved the day and everything was fine; after, I was aware that heroes sometimes fail to save the day, that good guys sometimes die trying. And, much more deeply, that the heroic death can in itself be a triumph.

It was heavy stuff for a kid to absorb: the concepts of fallen heroes, triumphant sacrifices, and moral victory. That moment and those concepts have informed everything I've done since.

High Noon stuck with me in the same way years later, but it was the storytelling style that spoke to me first. From the first moment out there on the plains, when Lee Van Cleef, starring as one of Miller's three henchmen, looks up from his cigarette and points his carved, merciless face toward the camera to see who's coming his way, I was completely enthralled. It was unaffected, unadorned, and authentic from the jump—here is a story, plain and simple. Inviting us in like a good host. No irony to parse, no trickery to strip away, just POW, you're in it. There's a hero and a heroine. We climb the horse and ride. Nothing cloying, nothing pandering, nothing cynical about it. And the villain is on his way. Irresistible.

It's a strong, stripped-to-the-bone tale, and it's obvious that Foreman, Zinnemann, and the actors trusted the audience in return. It expects a lot from viewers, in terms of what they bring to the dusty streets of Hadleyville. Like a good comic story, the film only hints at backstories and the history of the town, allowing the audience to fill in the blanks with their imagination. We know that Frank Miller is a bad dude and a heinous killer, but we don't know exactly what he did. We know Hadleyville was once a lawless frontier town, but no specifics are mentioned and it's up to us to conjure up just how bad it got. The moviemakers let us in on the fact that Kane used to be involved with Helen Ramirez, a Mexican woman who owns the local saloon, but we don't know to what extent. The Hays Code was in full censorious force back then, after all. Still, it's obvious enough that their relationship was not platonic—and that liquor wasn't always the only sin sold there.

High Noon looks as if it were done for a nickel—shot on back lots in and around Hollywood. As for locations, there's the outlaw rendezvous spot, one

street in the town, the train station, and a barn—that's it. But done at a cut rate or not, it remains a visually compelling movie. Similar to Film Noir, the movie's austerity harmonizes with the sharply contrasting characters. The classic American Westerns and Film Noir flourished at the same time, and most of them were made fast and on the cheap. And both are variations on the same theme: strong protagonists—usually heroes and heroines—contend with unforeseen dark forces, make tough choices, and dig deep to see if they're made of the right stuff. Samurai films move in these same waters and explore this same territory. All these genres, which originated in America, France, and Japan, respectively, are intimately related. Sergio Leone, the great spaghetti Western director, used samurai movies as a basis for his Westerns. And then Clint Eastwood used Leone's interpretations of samurai movies to remake the Western. The ouroboros of cinema at work.

In this light, *High Noon* emerges as an American Western Film Noir—the lawman meets the villain, sure, but there's a lot of psychological turmoil present, too. Kane answers the heroic call, but he's not one bit happy about it. Amy pleads with him to stand down and leave with her before Miller darkens the town, and she says to him, "Don't try to be a hero. You don't have to be a hero, not for me." Kane's response: "I'm not trying to be a hero. If you think I like this, you're crazy."

Kane just wants to do what is right and fulfill his purpose, but he is human, so he has his moments of weakness and irresolution. At one point, he walks to a stable, where he contemplates saddling up a horse and riding away from all of it—Frank Miller, the town, his new wife, his own sense of duty. But he doesn't, not even after he fails to round up a posse to help him confront Miller. The men in Hadleyville are either too wimpy, drunk, or jaded to join him. When Kane goes to see Martin Howe, the former marshal and his mentor (played by the inimitable Lon Chaney), Howe refuses to help Kane. With a heavy heart, he says, "[You] risk your skin catching killers and the juries turn them loose so they can come back and shoot at you again. If you're honest you're poor your whole life and in the end you wind up dying all alone on some dirty street. For what? For nothing. For a tin star." Everyone in Hadleyville fails him, even the town's institutions. The law is useless. The church is a shill. But as we know, it's not the tin star or the pews of a church that define Kane or stoke his heroic fires. The badge does not make the man; the church cannot cure society's ills. Kane knows this, so he doesn't shrink from his duty. He prepares to meet Miller and his goons alone.

This speaks to my other lasting takeaway from *High Noon*: Kane is a different kind of hero. Much like those Spartans, Kane is not heroic because he can fly and repels bullets, but because he takes on difficult or impossible odds. He doesn't have any attributes and advantages built in—he's a self-made hero. His individualism, pride, and sense of obligation push him forward. You can almost

hear Kane saying to himself, “Well, someone has to stand up to Miller. And it looks like nobody else is gonna. So I guess that leaves me to do it.”

This goes against the modern concept of heroism, in the sense that there’s no Joseph Campbell–like character arc. Kane is not a hero who changes. He is tested repeatedly and is defined by those tests, but he’s not a Luke Skywalker who grows into the role. Kane already is who he is, and he stays that way. The rest of the world reacts to him. He is a rocky shore that the ocean smashes against and tries to break.

It’s a short walk from Will Kane to Batman as the Dark Knight. Bruce Wayne channels his vengeful rage into purpose, and his Batman crusades go for broke against a sea of troubles. If he changes at all, it is only as a result of his initial choice: he chose the path to fight crime over the easier road to dissolution or villainy. The latter is the route some would take after witnessing their parents’ murder. But, after he makes his choice, he sticks with it. And, like Kane, the odds are never in his favor.

In the end, however, Will Kane is not alone. Helen Ramirez confronts Amy about abandoning Kane in his hour of need, and Amy finds herself in a moral dilemma of her own. As a Quaker, she adheres to pacifism and is against violence of any kind. At one point, she says to Helen, “I don’t care who’s right or who’s wrong. There’s got to be some better way for people to live.” Disgusted, Helen comes back with, “If Kane was my man, I’d never leave him like this. I’d get a gun. I’d fight.” And reminds Amy, “[He] is not my man. He’s yours.” After Amy sees Frank Miller’s ugly mug at the train station and hears gunfire, she too makes a choice. She gets off the train and goes running to help Kane. By this point, Kane has killed two of Miller’s men, but the two remaining villains are closing in. Amy runs to the marshal’s office for cover, where a holster and pistol hang by the door. The “craven coward” deputy hung these up when he quit and left Kane high and dry. Recognizing Kane is in deep trouble, Amy takes the pistol and shoots Miller’s goon. Her heroism doesn’t end there. Soon Miller makes his way into the marshal’s office and takes Amy as a hostage. Amy fights against Miller, distracting him long enough for Kane to fire the one shot that kills Frank Miller. Will Kane shoots Frank Miller dead all right, but it is his wife who helps him do it.

On a storytelling level, this is a hell of a surprise, and, thematically, it countered some tired old Western clichés. Considering how most Westerns at the time portrayed women—relegated to the kitchen, the church, or as “painted ladies” waiting in velvet-laden rooms above the saloon—this turn of events really went against the grain. Here was not one but two women helping save the day. Without Helen’s pushing, Amy might have stayed on that train out of Hadleyville. Also, what a twist! Just an hour or so before, Kane was going to give up his gun and, in the end, Amy, his Quaker wife, takes one up. She defends her man and

does what the moment demands of her. She, too, answers the call. Amy and Kane together fulfill the wish.

The conceit that men take all the risks and do all the work was, is, and always will be total nonsense. All you have to be is an observant person to realize that a masculine-dominated world has only created nightmares. But back then, many hadn't opened their eyes yet, including those in Hollywood. Yet here was a movie from 1952, in a male-dominated genre no less, that dared to go against that empty mythology. This stuck with me. On a personal level, I recognized my grandmother's Quaker ways in Amy, and some of my mother's, too. They were both disciplined, passionate women who shaped my life and steered my values, particularly when navigating through the storms of life. In fact, much of my life has been modeled by strong, determined women, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Case in point. I was born and raised in Olney, Maryland. I learned to shoot on an old, WWII-era .22 caliber bolt action rifle. Wild pigs occasionally raided the family yard. My dear Quaker mother shot those beasts dead whenever they came close to me and the rest of her brood. She didn't have Grace Kelly's looks—not by a long shot—but she had Amy Kane's *guts*.

As characters, Amy and Helen gave the story more depth and made it more dynamic. And their heroism is distinctly and refreshingly *feminine*. It is resolute, but also rooted in and protective of others. Their purpose is just as strong, if not stronger, than a man's, but pride or ego doesn't dominate; a deep abiding concern for the greater good fuels their determination to do the right thing. And, of course, the story is way more *interesting* with women in it playing such powerful roles, and so is our world for that matter.

After its release, many suggested that *High Noon* was an allegory about Hollywood blacklisting during the McCarthy era, while others were certain it was a parable for the Cold War. And, as the story goes, both Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton held multiple screenings of *High Noon* in the White House. But when you have a great, simple story it's easy to make associations. There's a lesson here, too. We should all be so lucky to create something so powerfully straightforward that it can carry the weight of interpretation, no matter how varied.

Keep it simple. It's a lesson that has to be relearned, and that's okay. You use it like a navigating buoy: look and listen for it when you're adrift and in need of a clear channel. As for me, I've gotten lost in my own stew a few times over the years and, when I do, I remind myself that there's both beauty and direction in simplicity. An uncomplicated storyline is often just the thing to set me straight. When I reframe whatever I'm working on in the simplest terms, it's like a cleanse. I've scrubbed the complexity and I'm back to the bare bones: a hero, a heroine, and a villain arriving on the noonday train. The rest is up to me. And there's no room for cowardice. Like Kane says to Amy, "I'm gonna try... I'll do my best."

LESSON 15

NORMAN ROCKWELL, CARTOONIST

Don't Be a Snob, Lose the Cynicism



In the winter of 2018, I went up to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to the Norman Rockwell Museum to see an exhibition of my friend Tony DiTerlizzi's joyous fantasy illustrations. The show was called *Never Abandon Imagination*, which no one could ever accuse Tony of doing—he's as creative and imaginative as they come. It was also a fitting topic for a conversation with some younger folks who were there. After Tony walked me through his show, we talked with a group of high school students for about an hour. Talking with students is always a highlight for me: I love seeing their faces light up around art. Their eyes narrow as they *scrutinize*, their eyebrows furrow as they *analyze*, and their mouths frown as they *ponder*. Another highlight of the trip is that I got the chance to see some of Rockwell's original paintings, and best of all, his *drawings* in person, and to pay homage to the old master.

Tucked away just off a tree-tunneled country road in western Massachusetts, the museum sits up on a hill and looks out to the ridges and forests of the Berkshire mountains. Down the hill from the museum's main building, which resembles a sprawling white country house, is a barnlike dwelling that Rockwell used as a studio. Out beyond, a low-slung mountain and a sylvan Arcadia as far as the eye can see. The whole scene is picture-postcard. Quintessential New England. All that's missing is a covered bridge.

While Massachusetts isn't Vermont and Stockbridge isn't Berlin, I spent part of my early childhood in this quaint little town. Besides, whenever I'm in New England I feel at home. Something in the air and the light transports me back to my childhood—wandering the woods with only my imagination to keep me company and drawing at the kitchen table, working on *The Adventures of Dough-Boy*. This was an early comic I created at my mother's urging. She said I should base a comic on the doughboys, a name for pilots in World War I, but, because she was kneading and pounding dough for home-baked bread at the time, I thought she meant that I should create a character *made of dough*. So that's what I did. Dough-Boy had superhuman stretching powers—expansion and contraction, his mode of escaping or trapping villains. He could grow into a giant, just as yeast makes baking dough swell into a loaf of bread. And his weakness was heat. It

made him brittle enough to break. I can at least claim to have created the first superhero whose body chemistry contained yeast.

So up there in the wintry hills looking at the Rockwells I got a double dose of nostalgia. Like so many others that came of age in the fifties and sixties, I grew up with his art all around me—in books around the house, reprints in restaurants and in friends' kitchens, and old *Saturday Evening Posts* in plastic sleeves for sale in the antique stores so prevalent all over New England. Rockwell illustrated covers for the *Saturday Evening Post* for *fifty years*—322 of them. So there were bundles of these covers and they were everywhere. Because of this, it took me a long time to appreciate his work. I thought he was a just a bromide, rehashing the same old stuff that I felt I was drowning in when I was young and desperate to leave the country lanes of Vermont for the streets of New York City. While I had a joyous childhood in the pastoral idylls of Vermont, I never thought of setting my stories in paradise. So the idyllic American subject matter Rockwell cherished bored the hell out of me. It wasn't until I learned a lot about drawing myself and was doing it for a living that I began to realize what a terrific draftsman he was, to admire his range (all those characters he portrayed, with such deftness and tenderness), and, ultimately, to reevaluate him as a master cartoonist.

My opinion is not a popular one among artists. When people think of Norman Rockwell, they think Mr. Americana, the popular illustrator who painted scenes of everyday life in the bygone days of the good ol' US of A. And the first thing that comes to mind are all those images he created for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the ones that have shown up on calendars, mugs, and Cracker Barrel walls for decades. His art is scorned as kitsch, and many "serious artists" and bloviating art critics reflexively classify his work as provincial and saccharine. Many thoughtlessly consign his work to the dustbin labeled "cliché," or worse, "commercial."

But Rockwell's art is so much more than that.

As an illustrator, he was outstanding. He was world-class in every sense. When I look at his illustrations, I see a commanding craftsman at work. He captured the essence of his country and her people throughout his life, and he did so with great care and deep affection. Like most artists who reach the collective popular mind and achieve some fame, he's often remembered for those *Post* illustrations that may *now feel* hackneyed and oversaturated, even though they weren't remotely trite at the time. They weren't clichés until Rockwell created them and the wider public embraced them. In a big way. For decades, they were so widely loved, lauded, and imitated that Rockwell became an institution unto himself: "Rockwellian" became a word. But you have to remember that when he created these works they were fresh and original, and if you peel away the labels our culture has pasted over him, you'll see they still are. Keep in mind one man's *cliche* is another man's *iconic*. It's all in the words.

You must understand, after all, the societal function of Rockwell's works. America was a war-battered people, craving peace and stability, and making babies so fast you'd think the species was threatened. As big wars gave way to smaller ones, and centuries-old injustices boiled over into marches and riots, Rockwell used his talents to craft an idyllic American paradise.

Much of the stigma and sneering comes down to America's long-standing confusion about art and commerce: the fact that, as a culture, we often regard anything that's not painted in oil and wrapped in an ornate frame as lesser art. Consider: Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling is great art, by any worthy measure. Yet it was (1) a commission paid for by the papal treasury, and (2) a bit of a comic book itself, telling, as it does, a story by means of *pictures in sequence*. It's not a stretch to draw a connecting line from the prehistoric cave painting to the ancient Greek frieze to Michelangelo's Cappella to *Superman*.

Is Steven Spielberg a bad director because he packs them in at the theaters? Is Hitchcock unworthy because you can't take your eyes off the screen? Of course not. A generation adores Rockwell because, with a master's skill, he painted a lovely portrait of them and their world. Or, at least, the world they *wished* they lived in.

Popular art is popular because it speaks to a wide audience. You want your art to touch people, so I have to ask, in what world is reaching a wide audience and keeping them for fifty years a bad thing? The pop art giant Andy Warhol disdained facile delineation between art and pop culture and commercial art as much as I do. As soon as he had the money to acquire art, he bought a slew of Rockwell originals.

Wish he could spare one of the sketchbooks...

Beyond the fact that Rockwell's illustrations are beautiful to behold and fun to look at, they were also socially significant during much of his lifetime. There are a lot of smiles and buoyancy in his everyday-America scenes, and there's a reason for this. Among others during his time, Rockwell made art during the Depression and World War II, and part of his motivation for doing so was to lift the spirits of his fellow Americans during back-to-back crises—to cheer up the country. I don't see any pandering in his work, only sincerity. He created scenes for distraction and uplift, reminders that the American story was far from over. He created a version of American life that gave people hope at a time when it was in short supply. He had a deep abiding love of his subject matter and it shows. There is no elbow-in-the-ribs irony here; his characters don't smile coyly. Their smiles are genuine.

When I arrived at the museum in Stockbridge, I admired his illustrations and paintings and took a turn around his studio, but what I was really after was a chance to spend some time with his drawings. The staff pulled out stacks of original drawings for me, and then the Pearly Gates opened. They won my heart more than anything else there. In the same way that etchings by Goya completely

transfixed me when I saw them for the first time, Rockwell's drawings really captivated me. They're so well-crafted, so beautifully drawn—they exhilarate. Drawing is, after all, the starting point for the many visual arts—the sculptor's studies, the architect's blueprints, the movie director's storyboards. Indeed, for writing as well. The written language as a series of *pictographs*. This is especially evident in Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, where every word is a highly stylized graphic icon. Rockwell's drawings are revelatory because they show his process at work (the *layers* of work, drapery worked out across the nude, just as you'll find in originals by Yoshitoshi and other samurai printmakers; this methodology was and is used by many comics and cartoonists as well, myself included) and how he mastered the basics before doing anything else. As a practitioner of the craft, I love investigating the tricks other artists use, and, like any great artist, Rockwell employed every trick in the book.

And in these drawings, I also got to see a cartoonist at play. It is true that Rockwell drew from photographs a lot of the time (most cartoonists do), but it's what he did with them that makes them so unique. Like a good cartoonist, he gives his characters big ears and pointy noses and goofy, floppy hats. Cartoons emphasize the differences, not the similarities between subjects. So by doing just that, his drawings allowed me to feel how Rockwell observed them before rendering them on the page. As much as I admired the full-color illustrations, the pencil drawings let me feel like I was in his head. They crackle with life and good humor.

He may have started with a photo, but it's his impressions of his characters that elevate the work. His observations, and thereby his own personality, become part of the representation. This is how cartooning works. If I'm drawing someone and my impression of that person is that he or she has big ears, the tendency is to then draw them *much* bigger. They now become gigantic ears! If someone is short and squat, I make them much shorter and squatter. Once I start including my personal observations and exaggerating them, I'm cartooning. And my goal: I want you, the viewer, to spot those ears and be as intrigued by them as me. I want you to see him as the "big-ears guy" just like I did. This leaves you feeling like you've met somebody who was actually alive.

As you can see, we're rounding out Rockwell as quite the Renaissance man here. Norman Rockwell, drawer, illustrator, and cartoonist. But he was also a hell of a storyteller. I tell stories using words, multiple panels, and pages. But Rockwell's mastery as a storyteller lies in the fact that he tells a tale using only *one* image. He tells an entire story through simple human gestures and props placed in *just* the right place. He's a master scene-setter, particularly in the *Post* covers, where he instantly dropped viewers into a time, place, and circumstance, one that implies a before and after.

One of his most famous *Post* covers, *The Runaway*, tells the story of a little boy who's run away from home. The boy sits on a stool in a diner and his bundle

is below him on the floor, holding his belongings—all tied up in a red handkerchief at the end of a stick, a hobo in the making. On the next stool over is a policeman, who is talking with the boy, while the man behind the counter leans in on the conversation. What's wonderful is that you get the sense that both men are listening to the boy as he recounts his reasons for running away. The policeman is in no hurry to get him back home or drag him out kicking and screaming; the man working at the diner is not eager for the boy to leave. They want to hear him out, give him his due, treat him with respect. All of this taken together—the diner setting, the bindle, the friendliness, the patience, the smile on the face of the man behind the counter—drops you into 1950s small town America, right into a scene of quiet drama. The before: the boy left home in a huff and got as far as the diner before he started to have second thoughts. And the after: the policeman won't need to do any convincing. Soon the boy will be ready for him to take him home. The boy will remember this moment for many years to come. The man working in the diner will wipe off the counter, chuckle to himself, whistle a little, and then turn up the old radio behind him. In one simple image, rendered to perfection, Rockwell tells us a story about community and everyday heroics: just hear a person out before you try to change their mind.

Whenever I think about the power of a story told in a single image, I always go back to Michelangelo. He told a complete story in a sculpture of one person—a majestic piece of art carved out of one massive piece of Carrara marble. Commissioned for the Florence Cathedral in 1501, the *David* statue represents the Old Testament fable about how a teenage Israelite shepherd named David uses only a sling and a rock to take down the sword-wielding Philistine giant Goliath. The metaphors are endless here!

Michelangelo's statue doesn't simply give you a portrait of the young David, it tells you the entire story—it explodes out from one figure. As with Rockwell's *The Runaway*, you get a before and after, a backstory and a future. You immediately glean that David is courageous, someone who is stepping up in a time of need, the man for the job. A young warrior who answered the call and is now full of purpose. Not only because of his physical strength—Michelangelo certainly put that on full display—but because he's built for it *internally*: you see his faith and his confidence. He's got his rock and sling draped casually over his shoulder. He's all set, he has no doubts. And as a viewer, you *feel* it: He *knows* he's going to slay the monster. It is his *destiny*. The Philistines will flee their land and David's heroism will serve as inspiration for generations. The story's all there, in one beautiful piece of sculpted marble. To see the statue in person is to witness a living thing. An immortal.

Because of Michelangelo's artistic skills and his astounding works of art, many in his time referred to him as "Michelangelo the Divine." His art seemed like it sprung from the heavens. Exhibit A: the Sistine Chapel. But, in truth, Michelangelo was one of the hardest working guys around. He was a stonemason

by trade and he spent long hours in the marble quarries, selecting his blocks for his sculptures. He even helped build roads to transport the pieces back to his studio. Legend has it that he worked so fast and furious on his sculptures that some of his students reported that sparks flew from his mallet and chisels. This is hard to imagine when you walk into the domed room that holds *David* in the Accademia Gallery of Florence. He stands above you in a radiance of light as if he were dropped from heaven. But knowing an artist, a craftsman, hewed and molded it from a single stone only adds to the sculpture's aura. That story is in there, too—*David will not fail. Goliath will die.*

Just as it is in Rockwell's work. Behind his illustrated snapshot tales of America and its people there is evidence of a hardworking craftsman at work. He produced over four thousand pieces of art and illustrated dozens of books. He was dedicated and worked in service of the stories he wanted to tell. And he was humble about it. He is quoted as saying, "Some people have been kind enough to call me a fine artist. I've always called myself an illustrator. I'm not sure what the difference is. All I know is that whatever type of work I do I try to give it my very best. Art has been my life." All this I learned after jettisoning my hang-ups and preconceived notions about his work. A gift that came from giving the art a chance, hearing Rockwell out, as it were—fruit born of investigation, not judgment.

A gift that still gives, an abundant one throughout my career. When I was given total artistic freedom to create *Ronin*, I synthesized many of my disparate influences to realize my vision, from the manga artist Goseki Kojima to the expressive chiaroscuro of José Muñoz and Hugo Pratt and the colorful fantasy of Moebius.

Look everywhere. Reach far and wide and mix it up together and see what works. And if it doesn't work just crumple it up and start over. Nothing is precious.

LESSON 16

FOR THE SAKE OF THE EXPEDITION

The Joy of Exploring



“Maybe she just has to sing For the sake of the song.”

—TOWNES VAN ZANDT

“Because it’s there.”

—SIR EDMUND HILLARY

Looking around my “Beachhead,” I realize that—after all these years of collecting models, figurines, masks, and toys—my studio now looks like a prop museum. Not a quiet one, though, ready to gather dust and cobwebs. It’s stirring and interactive—the props hold promises and wishes. They urge me to explore. They suggest I travel to new places and return to old ones, and they hint at new adventures. The model cars are revving up for another chaotic spin around Basin City with Marv, or perhaps they’re gunning for new roads with a rough-and-tumble heroine who’s had just about enough. The toy guns seem poised for more hard-boiled drama on sultry nights and in grimy streets, while the replica swords cry out for another exiled ronin and more young knights ready to answer the call. The masks are prepared for duty: to stride into more ancient heroic battles, more glorious defeats. The *Dark Knight Returns* figurine, well, he’s always ready. His saga is never over.

And then there are my dinosaur figurines. I’ve collected dozens over the years, most of them from the Natural History Museum here in Manhattan. Not only are they cool to look at and study, they remind me that our world is an ancient and mysterious one, full of wonder and brimming with things we can barely understand, including out-and-out monsters. Our earth is vast and multitudinous—a place to explore and imagine, and *to imagine exploring*.

The dinosaurs remind me to seek and venture out, both backward and forward in time. I love that old saying “When dinosaurs roamed the earth.” In just a few words, we’re reminded that so much has come before us, but we’re also prompted to use our imagination to grasp all the wonders and horrors of that which did. And to go see for ourselves some of the places where these giants wandered, battled, and met their cosmic demise—a crater in the Yucatán, evidence of an extinction-making comet. This storybook phrase is a jolt of perspective and an insistent entreaty, all this in just five simple words.

I've been answering this plea since childhood. My first New World was right outside my front door in Vermont. There were maples with huge, knotty eyes and limbs that bent down in an invitation to climb. Nature's magical chemistry created heart-rotted tunnels in fallen trees, offering up hiding spots and dark berths for daydream travels. When, each spring, she overflowed her banks, the narrow Dog River became the wide and orphic Amazon, and along her banks were ancient tribes and painted warriors. And in her rushing water? Monsters. There be monsters. In the eyes of a little boy, a tiny crawdad can be a city-destroying behemoth.

Even when I returned to the house at dark, my expeditions were far from over. All my books were there. These stories took me on all sorts of journeys, including magical ones. And then came the comic books. Before I knew it, I was off traveling the universe with Superboy. I could use a tired old cliché like "the rest is history" here, but the truth is that the discovery of comic books didn't lead to a straight path of motivation and ambition and creative focus, it simply reinforced something that was already circulating through me: restlessness. An instinct to explore and discover and unearth. I got right to drawing—and to making up stories that were packed with stuff that was fun to draw.

Later came the creative impulse to kick down doors and push on walls. The rebel joined the explorer, one riding shotgun while the other sped through the night into wild new places. Rebellion and exploration: twin engines that propelled me forward. First, to make comics look and feel like crime stories and mash-ups of my dreams and influences, then to make comics look like movies, and then to create comics that only look like *comics*: not bound to the rules of prose, stage, or cinema. To be only what they are—comic books. Powerfully so. Uniquely so.

The rebel kept pushing and the explorer kept looking. And the collaborator kept learning and listening. Life kicked me around some over the years: the unforeseen ripped and destabilized, demons lured and swindled, and loved ones came and went. But with these three along for the ride I never lost sight of what matters, never lost my reasons for being on the planet: drawing, telling stories, puzzling out my pictures and words.

Once your voice has been heard, your influence felt, you are a player in the game, not a rebel. Better to grow up and don *that* hat. It's much more worthwhile to do and to show than to complain. It's the collaborator and the explorer that do the most driving these days. And oh the places we've gone, and all the joy that resides there. The joy of going and returning, struggling and succeeding, of regaining after failing. As that great voice of New England, Robert Frost, put it, these are the pleasures of swinging from birch trees. When we think and create, we climb to the top of a tree with the "same pains [we] use to fill a cup / Up to the brim," find the right limb to ride, and then fling ourselves "outward, feet first, with a swish, / Kicking [our] way down through the air to the ground." The tree

dipping its top to drop us down to the earth again. Frost reminds us that it is “good both going and coming back.”

After many years of taking it head-on and climbing and riding my fair share of birches, I’ve realized that maybe it’s simply about the joy, not the pursuit of making a grand, cosmic point. It’s all in the looking and striving, and the making. And the lessons we learn from hard work. Maybe it’s as simple as we sing for the sake of singing, even more than for the song. It’s about the doing, the minute-to-minute decision-making, the total focus, the mind and the eye and the hand all joined in dance.

Bob Dylan often referred to himself as a “musical expeditionary” and I’ve always loved that term. So much so that I like to think of myself as an artistic expeditionary. If it’s out there, I want to hunt it down and look at it—feel it, examine it, size it up. Because nothing ever looks like you think it does. Whether it’s the faraway cold and eerie expanse of the Arctic Circle or the drama unfolding on the stoop across the street. Whether it’s the art of the old masters or the humble drawings of someone just starting out. Surprises await if you take the time to look. There are revelations just around the corner.

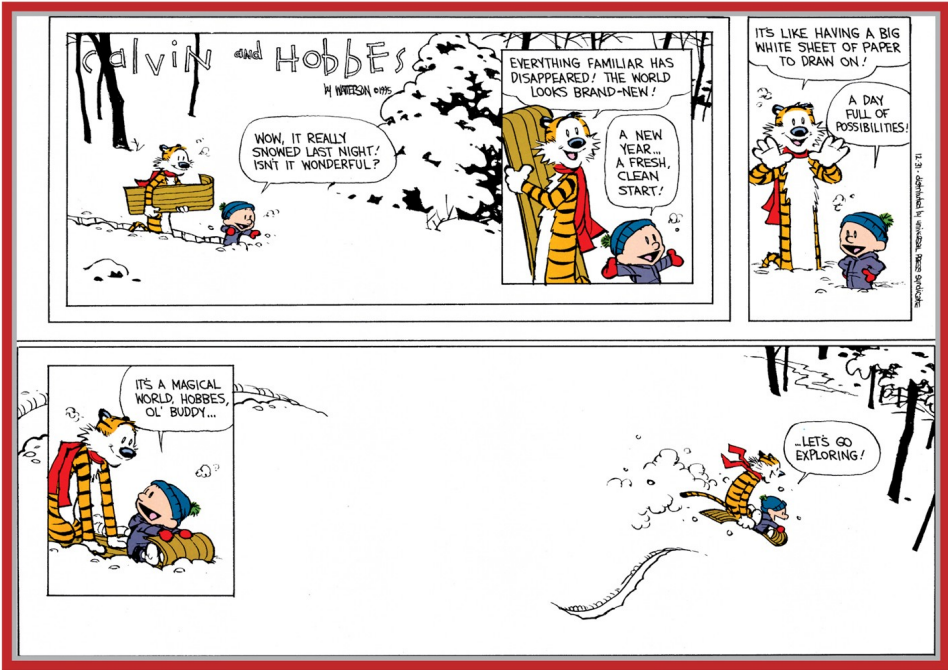
I’ve always been driven to seek and dig and turn over stones, sometimes just for the sake of it. A drive to discover. That’s it. And it led me into a wormholed tunnel in a hollow tree, across the swirling waters into Manhattan, into the clouds and then down into Tinseltown, and back to my drawing board in my studio, where, like the poet Billy Collins, I continue to sail alone around the room.

In a nod to my old friend and mentor Will Eisner, a few lines from Saul Bellow seem fitting here. At the end of *The Adventures of Augie March*, the wandering Augie, Bellow’s streetwise but introspective hero, has this to say: “Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze.” The unknown is always out there, often so spooky-close that you can almost taste it. There’s joy and wisdom that comes from seeking it, but also from knowing that some of it will always remain unexplored. This is the game. This is just how it goes.

But imagination is boundless, there are no stone walls or steel walls there, except the ones in your own fears you handcuff yourself to. Be restless. Rediscover your sense of awe. Journey out into the world and into the chasms of the mind. The streets and mythic lands are full of sinners and saints, lowlifes and warriors, heroes and flameouts, some just plain lost, some predators, some just trying to make some sense of life. They’ll help you make some sense of yours, too. So, charge ahead. Take that chance. Scare yourself. Dig deep for all those raw emotions that make the blood pound in your ears. *Live* your drawings. *Live* your stories.

You just have to lace up your boots and get out there. In Watterson's final *Calvin and Hobbes* strip, the inseparable duo wander out into a snowy morning with a sled in hand. Looking out at the snow-covered world, Hobbes remarks that the "familiar has disappeared" and everything looks brand-new. After they're on the sled and ready to ride, Calvin looks up at his friend and says, "It's a magical world, Hobbes, ol' buddy." As the sled goes up and over a bump and sails into the air and Hobbes's scarf takes on a cape-like shape, Calvin exclaims to the wide-open world before him, "Let's go exploring!"

So, *explore*.



Epilogue: From Vermont to the Louvre... and Back to the Studio

It's a long way from my childhood kitchen table in Vermont to the Louvre Museum in Paris, France. In the fall of 2018, I flew to Paris for an exhibition at the renowned and beautiful Louvre—a major jewel in the cultural crown of Paris and the largest art museum in the world—that was titled *Archaeology Goes Graphic*. The show's focus was on how the comic book art form (the “ninth art,” as the French call it) draws inspiration from archaeological discoveries. I was honored that the curators highlighted some art from 300 in the exhibition, including images of the ancient Spartan helmet. I wanted to see the exhibit in person and mark this milestone: comic books at the Louvre. For only the second time, I might add—the first wasn't until 2009. There is no doubt that this moment would have pleased Will Eisner to no end. And so many others that came before me, including Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster: the two unsung heroes who started it all. Without them, no *Superman*. And without *Superman*, what then? (A possibility worth mulling. No comic books at all? Or maybe an art form that grew up a lot faster? Who knows?)

As I looked at the comics under glass in the hushed environment of the Louvre, I couldn't help but chuckle a little. Recalling all those boisterous lunches and endless cigarettes and coffee with other comic artists in the early eighties, I couldn't help but feel that maybe we got away with something here! Somehow we did it: we showed others that our visions and creations mattered, and that they carried weight. See, folks? It's not just kid stuff after all. Many now consider the comic book medium “art.” Many others call it literature. And still others call it “movies on paper.” When the truth is that the form really is its own distinct breed. It is related to other art forms, but it is not a simple imitation of anything.

I appreciated seeing my work at the Louvre, but mostly I felt good for comics. We were here—and we had been *invited* here. It was also surreal. I had a hard time squaring the guy who had pieces on view in this prestigious place with the young man who set out on the streets of Manhattan with his portfolio tied in baling twine. For a moment, I couldn't connect the sixty-one-year-old artist, creator, and film director with the seventeen-year-old aspiring artist who watched a cockroach crawl out from said portfolio as then-president of DC Comics, Joe Orlando, politely told him that his stuff was no good. I was amused and perplexed

and astonished by all this, like the *Mona Lisa* herself, who was also wryly smiling under some glass of her own, just down the way from where I was standing.

But it didn't take long to remember that my success didn't happen overnight and that my career didn't come easy—there was no magic wand, no *deus ex machina* in my odyssey. The cockroach and the baling twine and the work for hire are as much a part of my story as those pictures in the Louvre. My career is the result of hard work, persistence, and good fortune. There is the day-in-day-out labor of drawing and writing and the confidence that comes with that. Confidence that my ideas are worth pursuing, word by word, picture by picture, book by book, for as long as it takes, or that, *worthy* or not, right or wrong, I have to pursue them. That's who I am. That's what I do. It's the result of feeding on the energy that comes from a life's quest for artistic freedom.

Whether it got men into a spot at the Louvre or not, it's good to see that my American comics colleagues and I have got even the haughtiest cultural watchdogs out there to sit back and take notice. But most of all, it comes from loving my job.

Enough of this rearview mirror, though, because I'm still forging ahead. There is still work to be done. Heroes and heroines to follow. Words to write. Pictures to draw. Tales to tell. This brings me around to some midlife lessons learned. To keep thundering ahead in the *making* and the *doing* takes a willingness to change and keep a clear head. A creative mind is a clear mind. Many of us who choose a life of creating are tempted by a life of excess, and I'm here to tell you this is a fool's errand, an illusion, a trail to nowhere. It leads only to the dead end of wasted time. And drained energy. Two elements the artist can't come up short on. There is nothing glamorous about dissipation. Squandered opportunities show up like ghosts at the feast.

And a creative mind is an open one, one that can change. And this is one of life's best gifts: it's never too late to change. Always be open to new ideas and stimuli. Old habits and fixed-up opinions calcify the mind. And a closed and ossified mind breeds cynicism, antipathy, and laziness. These are three of the deadliest enemies of art. And they are hostile to living any life *worth* the living. Remaining open to ideas naturally leads to an openness toward others and to a generosity of spirit that makes for better work and a better life. Remember, the path you are cutting in the woods isn't just for you. You leave a path.

The City of Lights called again in 2024. This time it was an exhibition at the Parisian architectural marvel, Centre Pompidou, called *Comics, 1964–2024*. A magnificent, full-on celebration of the comic book art form, the show included some images from *Sin City: The Big Fat Kill*. Again, the honor of being included was gratifying, but what I loved most about the exhibit was how I felt after taking it all in. Looking at all the comic art represented there, from the French and Belgian masters to the Japanese manga to the new underground stuff from all over, I was energized and motivated. Facing forward. Just as I was decades ago

when I was living the brutal combat and tortured love of Marvel's *Daredevil*, and when Forbidden Planet opened their doors and my wandering ronin exploded onto the page. Just as I was when DC gave me the keys to the Batmobile. Just as I was when Marv donned his trench coat for the first time.

And I was ready to get back to work. Ready to get back to my Beachhead, and back to my pencils and inks.

I was ready for my drawing board. And all the stories yet to be told.

And those stories, they are endless. They are everywhere.

Back to it!



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Jim Lee
Stan Lee
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David Mazzucchelli
Steve Miller
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Denny O'Neil
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Jim Shooter
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Jerry Siegel
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Dick Sprang
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Bob Wiacek
Al Williamson
Wallace Wood

About the Author



Frank Miller is an award-winning comic book writer, artist, novelist, inker, screenwriter, film director, and producer best known for *Daredevil*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Sin City*, and *300*. He also coauthored with Thomas Wheeler the YA novel *Cursed*, which was adapted into a Netflix show. His projects have been nominated for the Palme d'Or and received several Harvey and Eisner Awards. In 2015, Miller was inducted into the Will Eisner Award Hall of Fame for his lifetime contribution to the industry. Miller resides in New York City.

SagaPress.com

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**WORKS BY
FRANK MILLER**

300

Xerxes

Bad Boy

The Big Guy and Rusty the Boy Robot

Frank Miller's RoboCop

Give Me Liberty

Martha Washington Goes to War

Hard Boiled

Tales to Offend

Spawn/Batman

All Star Batman & Robin, the Boy Wonder

Batman: Year One

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns

The Dark Knight Strikes Again

The Dark Knight III: The Master Race

The Dark Knight Returns: The Last Crusade

The Dark Knight Returns: The Golden Child

Daredevil

Daredevil: Man Without Fear

Daredevil: Born Again

Elektra: Assassin

Elektra Lives Again

Ronin

Frank Miller's Ronin Rising

Cursed

Spider-Man Annuals

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Suggested Viewing and Reading List

These are the films, books, and comics that have influenced me and my art the most, in an obvious way or another. These lists do not cover my collaborators or even many of my contemporaries who have had an immense influence; instead, these works are the ones that helped form me.

FILMS

High Noon
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance
While the City Sleeps
This Gun for Hire
Unforgiven
2001: A Space Odyssey
Citizen Kane
Touch of Evil
Rebecca
Strangers on a Train
Psycho
North by Northwest
To Catch a Thief
Vertigo
The Birds
Marnie
Notorious
Dial M for Murder
Shadow of a Doubt
Suspicion
Two Mules for Sister Sara
The Godfather trilogy
Tucker: The Man and His Dream
Close Encounters of the Third Kind
THX 1138
Star Wars
The Empire Strikes Back
Mildred Pierce (with Joan Crawford)

The Big Sleep
Murder, My Sweet
Sunset Boulevard
The Maltese Falcon
Kiss Me Deadly
Dirty Harry
1984
Monty Python and the Holy Grail
Monty Python's The Meaning of Life
The Outlaw Josey Wales
High Plains Drifter
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (original)
King Kong (original)
Gorgo
He Walked by Night
Pickup on South Street
Gilda
Unforgiven
Seven Samurai
This Gun for Hire

BOOKS

The Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White
Joe Kubert's *World of Cartooning* (A six-book set: *Penciling*, *Inking*, *Story-
Graphics*, *Horror*, *Heroes & Superheroes*, *Super Villains*)
Complete Guide to Drawing from Life by George Bridgman
Figure Drawing for All It's Worth by Andrew Loomis
Red Harvest by Dashiell Hammett
One Lonely Night; *I, the Jury*; and *The Twisted Thing* by Mickey Spillane
Mildred Pierce by James M. Cain
Arthur Rackham, complete works

COMICS AND COMICS AUTHORS

Will Eisner's *The Spirit*, and other works
Jeff Smith's *Bone*
R. Crumb, complete works
Jack Kirby, complete works
EC Comics crime and suspense stories featuring the work of Johnny Craig
Wallace Wood, complete works
Jean Giraud (Moebius), complete works

Hugo Pratt, complete works
Milo Manara, complete works
Enki Bilal, complete works
Lone Wolf and Cub, written by Kazuo Koike and illustrated by Goseki Kojima
Hiroshi Hirata, complete works
Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo*
Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*
Alex Toth, complete works
Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy*
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