

## **Pop Comics**

From The Desk of Warren Ellis  
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### **Pop Comics: a series of rants from the Warren Ellis Forum.**

There's a notion that's been bugging me for a while, that sort of crystallised while I was in New Zealand. For lack of a better term, I'm calling it Pop Comics.

I'm already working in serious longform adult comics with my political Science Fiction novel TRANSMETROPOLITAN, and in a sequence of graphic novels and short story collections with HELLBLAZER. Once I eventually finish out my time on THE AUTHORITY and PLANETARY, I'm really not going to want to leap into more long pieces. And, besides that...

I like buying comics. I like going into comics shops and seeing new comics. And I like the little charge of creators I like starting something new. Coming in on the ground floor of new Alan Moore books these past few months has been great -- just grabbing these beautiful objects off the shelves to read new ideas from him, see what he's thinking about, see where his mind is and where he thinks the culture is (the best working definition of good fiction: a writer telling us where he/she thinks he/she is today, and what he/she thinks it looks like). And it doesn't happen often enough.

Comics are way too geared towards the ongoing series, to things never-ending. Even Alan is intending his four new ABC books as ongoing titles. The status-quo comic is a comfort thing; something the reader is supposed to sink into with relief after dealing with an unquiet, unpredictable real world. This is the essential appeal of the X-Men; a family of outcasts for the outcast comics reader. No-one really dies. But, you know, as an adult, I demand more than that from the medium. I think, deep down, most people do.

I want a bit of excitement from the medium, a sense of constant novelty and invention. I want the equivalent of a new single by your favourite band every three months. I want Pop Comics, if you like; my favourite writers inventing something brand new every few months, working with artists to create fun and beautiful comics that I'm not afraid to pass on or lose or even stuff in a bin, because I know that if I like it there'll be, as with a single, an album not far down the road, a TPB collection.

This is my current intent. Beginning this winter, I'll be arranging the release of a string of new three-issue miniseries. My Pop Comics. Every couple of months, in addition to my long works, you'll be able to see something brand new from me, produced with the most interesting artists I can find.

The audience splits fairly neatly into two, in my estimation.

This is an imaginary audience; rather like Imaginary Time, it does whatever I says it does. It is also, by and large, the audience I address in my work, as opposed to the entire potential audience. I can't legislate for people who read fucking AQUAMAN or something.

There's the (usually) older reader who's prepared to spend more money on an original graphic novel, who will probably be receptive to thoughts and themes concerning politics and culture and sexual innovation. The TRANSMET and HELLBLAZER audience. They'll put the books on their shelves.

This audience will be best served by original graphic novels. This audience is prepared to consider leaving the world of the infinite, never-ending "ongoing" title. This audience is, in fact, ill-served by the ongoing series, for ongoing series tend not to be hotbeds of innovation, energy or creative ambition.

There's the (usually) younger reader, who wants their slab of culture quick and cheap(ish) and disposable, who will normally read the comic a few times and then chuck it on a pile or leave it on a table or give it to a friend. This audience, too, couldn't give much of a toss about the ongoing book, because they're after the adrenaline and innovation and eyeball kicks and chrome nipples and big explosions.

And I want that audience, the Pop Comic audience, as well as the GN audience. I've got them right now -- I've got them with PLANETARY, with THE AUTHORITY, and with Wizard. And I want to be able to continue talking to them once I've finished with AUTHORITY and PLANETARY. And, in the longform TRANSMET and the novel and short-story-collection structures of HELLBLAZER, I have an in with those people who'd consider buying original GNs (especially if they were reasonably priced, instead of those damn \$30 hardback wankfests that come shrink-wrapped so you can't even see if it's any good before you buy it)...

I'm working both sides of the coin. The Pop Comics, and the original graphic novels (of varying lengths). These, as far as I'm concerned, are the two ways forward.

Yet another painful musical analogy; There were always singles bands, and there were always albums bands, and they tended to have two different audiences.

Death to the "ongoing" title. Death to works of no ambition. Death to all who don't want to make their own futures. Fuck mediocrity, fuck cosiness, bugger the consistency of years. I want my comics INJECTED.

### **The Delivery System: The Direct Market, Pop Comics, and Warping the Culture**

It's become painfully apparent to everyone, at this juncture, that none of the major publishers are interested in opening up alternative avenues of distribution and sale. Everyone's got too much time, money, hope and face sunk in the direct sales market to abandon it. And yet, it's been equally clear to all concerned for years that the Direct Market (DM) is failing. Every damn month, there are fewer comics stores than there used to be. Every damn month, fewer people walk into (most) comics stores than there used to be. This is old news.

This is the situation. The DM really is all we've got, the main and often exclusive avenue of distribution for our work. The comics stores are the only way we have to get comics into people's hands. (Unless you're doing SUPERMAN and BATMAN, which I believe are also on the newsstands, if not in a major way, and presumably also the DC Cartoon Network books.)

From my estimation, having spent time in comics stores all over the world, the remaining readership is largely teenage-up. Very few kids in most comics stores anymore. You buy kids' comics on the newsstand, I suspect maybe the prevailing wisdom, and probably cheaper, too.

Mostly, the direct market is just surviving. And that's tough enough. The stores are trying to survive with what we, the creators, give them, and we're trying to keep our books alive through them.

It would seem only to make sense to put our weight, as creators, towards energising the direct market as best we can. Because if it dies, we have serious problems at the very least.

The Pop Comic and the Original Graphic Novel are movements towards the goal of energising the mainstream comics culture, and therefore the comics stores. And I think they've got a chance of helping because they embody novelty (in the good sense, not the perjorative), ideation, energy, pace, drive, ambition, fast conclusive experiences, all that. They ask a limited contract with the reader, a limited demand of the reader. You don't have to come in every bloody month for them.

Here it is, now, like a book, instant. Or, at the very worst, it'll come out in three monthly parts -- which most people who read for recreation can probably cope with anyway.

With the right promotion, and our best and brightest doing such works, we can drive new footfall into the comics stores, we can expand the audience for this kind of work, we can get some energy going in the comics stores... we can take focus away from the plain ongoing titles and put it on the complete works and even the limited runs by creators within otherwise ongoing titles. We could conceivably change the comics store from an archive and repository for ongoing titles into a place for... singles and albums.

Yeah, yeah, I know. I opened a bottle of 31-year-old Springbank Campbeltown tonight. Like you couldn't have guessed.

But steps must be taken. Comics must undergo some kind of change in order to strengthen DM stores. And it shouldn't be forgotten that it's the existence of the DM that stimulated the creation of the short miniseries as we know it today.

And wouldn't it be nice, as that man said, to see people go into a comic shop clutching a newspaper or a clipping or a name written down from the TV or net saying, "Where can I find the new Alan Moore?"

It's time to change comics. And it's time to change the places they're sold in. Or we're all dead.

### **Conclusive Screaming**

A comics store that puts PROMETHEA #1 under, not P in the new Comics section, but under a header card with a logo reading "Alan Moore."

Finding uncollected issues of THE INVISIBLES or DOOM PATROL under, not I and D in the DC Comics box, but under a divider reading "Grant Morrison."

These are aspects of a changed comics culture; one that's more confident, more energetic, a bit sexier, a bit more like a 20th Century commercial artform (which is a bit sad, considering the date, but on the other hand the best work in the medium has been thoroughly C21 for a few years now, so we'll forgive ourselves our otherwise slightly backwards culture).

Pop Comics provides work produced with the same energy as it is devoured with. Fast fiction, three-minute singles, broadside ballads, the pop comic. I'm not advocating dumb comics, nor empty mind candy. I'm talking about smart comics that are dressed well and walk fast. Comics that strut. Across genres. SF comics, crime comics, horror comics, comics about life and relationships that rattle and burn like TRAINSPOTTING or HUMAN TRAFFIC... Christ, even superhero comics, if you have to, though I could personally really do without that, and would point out that a Pop Comics aesthetic and approach is a fine way to deliver other- genre and literary-mainstream works into the commercial mainstream.

**Notes:**

When I rail at the ongoing comic form, note that I'm not also railing at superhero comics. That's another argument entirely. I'm talking about format and approach, not genre.

I'm talking specifically about DM-aimed works. Getting children's stuff available on the newsstand is vital, yes, and I support it, as I do alternative formats for newsstand-intended works, but it's not today's argument.

The Pop Comics notion does speak directly to my constant screaming about getting stuff trade-paperbacked.

This is all a bit half-formed and half-baked, yes. I'm busy both adding to and refining these thoughts all the time. Eventually I'll stick a Pop Comics Manifesto on the website for people to laugh at.