

## **Writing For Comics; Or, How to Blow Up Your Own Head**

Since I stopped accepting unsolicited scripts for reading, I've been inundated with letters asking if I have any general advice about writing for comics, breaking into the industry, and such. This column is a vain attempt to head off such queries at the pass, because I'm losing too much work time in replying to all these damned emails... in fact, it started life as an answer to just such a query... Michael, if you're reading, this is a slightly expanded version of that letter, with some examples. Hope it helps. And say hello to Liz for me.

### **Breaking In**

We'll assume for the moment that by "breaking in," we mean achieving a professional sale to a comics company that obtains you an advance payment or page-rate payment upon acceptance of the script.

There are several ways to go about this, all of which are equal in the eyes of the Lord (or the Devil, or Scott Dunbier, who's a bit of both these days).

### **Using Submissions Guidelines**

Most major companies have a form handout for inquiring new writers, called Submissions Guidelines. These pamphlets briefly detail the form and format that any unsolicited submissions to their offices should take. You can obtain these by placing a request in writing to those companies, enclosing a stamped addressed envelope. To my knowledge, DC and Dark Horse currently offer guidelines.

Upon receiving your guidelines, the first thing to do is to work out how to get around them without pissing the company off.

A usual suggestion from the company is to limit your pitch to one page. Once you've gotten your story title, name and full address on there, you've eaten up a quarter of that page. I don't believe it's violating the spirit of the guideline to include a top sheet—what I call a Shout Sheet—a separate piece of paper that carries only the title and your name and address. This leaves the actual pitch page clean—it's bought you maybe another paragraph's worth of space, and space is vital. You've only got one page to prove your worth, after all.

Anyway, think along these lines. If you've got a high concept line (loathesome, I know, but some people think this way), maybe you could lay that on the Shout Sheet too. See what you can do with it. I tend to lay possible advertising lines on my shout sheets; the pitch for SATANA had on its Shout Sheet a dictionary definition of "succubus" and the tagline "Death Is Not The End." The TRANSMETROPOLITAN proposal just had the three-eyed smiley on the Shout Sheet.

The crucial thing to remember is that editors are creatures of low boredom thresholds and little patience. No-one likes going through the submissions pile, because—frank truth—95% of all submissions are shit. If you can grab their attention, you’ve won half the battle. So half your time, at least, should be spent on crafting the first paragraph. That paragraph should be relatively short, and should encapsulate your idea, or throw something out so crazed and wonderful that they just have to keep reading the bastard.

In the TRANSMET proposal, I decided simply to communicate the tone of the book; the first paragraph is actually the first line of dialogue from Issue 1. “So that ignorant, thick-lipped, swinish whorehopping editor phones me up and says, ‘Does the word contract mean anything to you, Jerusalem?’” Not something I would strictly recommend—and, remember, established pro writers can get away with a lot more in their proposals than can first-timers—but, hell, it worked...

Now comes the horrible bit. Outline your story. I’ve never been any good at this. What they want you to do is detail your story, hitting the beginning, middle and end without using up the page. This, you’re going to have to beat out for yourself.

I’ve never, ever used a submissions guideline, you see...

Some guidelines will suggest you send in a sample of your scripting, others won’t. I would always recommend it; I usually cite the old story of the British writer who would write crystal-clear, dazzling synopses and proposals, would be hired on the strength of them, and then would turn in scripts that gave gibberish a bad name, no incoherent and shattered were they. Enclose at least six pages’ worth of script with your proposal (stapled or clipped-up separately from the proposal, so they don’t think you’re sending in a ten-page treatment), I’d say. Again, this isn’t a hard or fast rule, just my personal feeling.

Submissions guidelines will, I believe, include the name of a submissions editor or other staffer to whom your proposal should be forwarded.

### **Not Using Submissions Guidelines**

Alternatively, wing it. Write to the length you feel is right and proper (but for Christ’s sake try to err on the side of conciseness). Package it in the way you feel is best. And mail it out. You have two choices; locate the name of the submissions editor at the company you feel like attacking, or—ohmygod—attack an editor directly.

This takes research. You need to find an editor whose track record reflects the kind of work you’d like to write. Some are no-brainers—if you really really want to write Disney comics, then you aim your stuff at Heidi McDonald at Disney. (Though God knows if Heidi, who only produces twenty pages of comics a month, really needs your proposals!) You get the idea.

Aim the work directly at that editor, with a SASE for reply. Be sure to write a good cover letter.

Do NOT expect a quick response. Hell, don't expect a SLOW response. It could take months for an editor to get round to reading your treatment. Gives you plenty of time to write another new story and shoot it off to a different editor. If you hear nothing after, say, four months, it might be an idea to resend the piece. If you hear nothing four months after that, give it up.

## **Forget Money**

What counts in this business, like any other creative enterprise, is first publication. Therefore, you may want to consider taking your project to a “minor” independent publisher—that is, a publisher that doesn't pay a page rate upon receipt of the commissioned script. These publishers—Caliber, Slave Labor Graphics, Jim Valentino's non-line at Image are examples—instead pay a royalty a set number of days after publication of the book. “Minors” sell a lot less than “majors”, so the royalty will often be correspondingly small. The bonus is that you're in print, and have been given by common courtesy ten or twenty copies of that book. Don't dole them all out to friends and relations. These are your proof that a publisher thought you were worth taking a risk on, worth putting into print with their money. These are evidence that can be shown to other editors—look, see, someone thought I was worth taking a risk on. How about you?

Indies tend to pride themselves on preserving the primacy of the creators; there will be little or no editorial interference. Some people prefer to stay in indy publishing because of this, either taking a day job to support their art, or gambling that they can maintain a small livelihood on the small royalty. Their work remains free of commercial influence—and work is always better when it comes pure and unalloyed, from the gut. You might find you prefer this option.

## **Self-Publishing**

There was a guy—I think it was Paul Pope—who created a non-existent “publisher” whose name he appended to his self-published works so it didn't look like Pope himself was self-publishing. I know how he feels. Self-publishing feels like a left-handed pursuit to me, a masturbatory option taken largely by losers and mad people who can't get anyone else to publish their magnum opus about how Jesus is a space alien currently resident in Basingstoke waiting for his chance to take over the world along with Hitler and James Dean. But that's a stigma that comes out of book publishing, and, in truth, self-publishing in comics is less a scarlet letter than a red badge of honour. Lots of people consider it the purest form of expression in the medium.

And, more importantly for the scope of this essay, self-publishers have often obtained paying work on the strength of their self-published works. Off the top of my head, I know that Paul Pope, Terry Moore and Paul Grist have taken brief paying jobs at DC, Image and Marvel.

However, it should be noted that for self-publishers this is almost always secondary to the goal of publishing their own work, in the form they choose, without interference. That is the point of self-publishing.

Special note; when casting around for companies to pitch to, don't bother the self-publishers. They have enough to worry about with publishing their own work, let alone publishing yours.

## **Writing For Comics; Formats**

### **Full Script**

My preferred form of writing, and the one I would recommend you master. Or mistress. Or whatever.

Full script is, to my mind, the mode of choice for the author who has a complete sense of their story. The author who requires specific effects in pacing, layout, visuals or composition can do nothing else. It is the form used by writers who want or need to project their voice. I like to keep a handle on my own pacing and storytelling. Many artists have kindly told me that they find my storytelling instincts are normally right. Other artists have requested I go to Marvel Style because they find full script intimidating or otherwise psychologically limiting. I had one artist passionately and specifically plead with me to write full script because he couldn't face another vague quickie Marvel Style plot. Everyone's different. For me, full script is the only real way to do the job. This is because I am a fucking tyrant.

Everyone moulds full script to their own needs. Alan Moore can take a page or two to describe a single panel. John Wagner and Garth Ennis write in telegrams, nailing a panel in one line. James Hudnall uses codes derived from camera directions to abbreviate his scripts, providing a lexicon on the top page. Neil Gaiman writes slightly meandering, conversational scripts much like extended letters. There is no single right way to write full script. Find your own way.

### **Marvel Style**

A form of scriptwriting whose invention is credited to Stan Lee. In the early Sixties, Lee was writing something upwards of eight titles a month. I cannot imagine a human that could turn out upwards of eight full scripts a month. Neither could Lee. So, in association with several artists, he created an abbreviated form of script that could be banged out a hell of a lot quicker. Rather than break the story down panel by panel by page in a steady, formal and detailed

manner, he'd break it down by page, or by groups of pages, or even, according to legend, describe the whole goddamn story on a single page of typescript. This is now known as The Plot. This would be given to the artist to tell, basically; he'd produce a visual story based on these notes. The art would then go back to Lee, who would write dialogue to match the panels—this phase of production becoming known as The Script.

This form survives today as the traditional way to write Marvel comics. Many other companies accept and use the form. I don't like it—you can't legislate for a lunatic artist who thinks to itself, "Screw these two pages where the plot needs explicating, I want to draw a double page spread of a dinosaur." (And that has happened, to a friend of mine.)

As with full script, there is no single form of Marvel Style. Some writers treat it as a short story, and write detailed works that wouldn't look out of place as film treatments. Others whack out four pages written in a Very Large Typeface and call it a plot.

Script phase is done with full-size photocopies of the art. You go at it with a marker pen; as well as writing the dialogue, you are expected to indicate on the photocopies where each balloon and caption should be placed—known, unsurprisingly, as Placements. I'm apparently mildly legendary for my hatred of and refusal to do placements. Placements are the letterer's job—that's where their expertise lies, and I couldn't do the job as well. Should you sell a Marvel Style job, make a point of discussing placements with your editor—chances are your editor could do it better.

### **Neo-Screenplay; an alternative to Marvel Style**

I've found that some jobs just have to be done in Marvel Style, due to artists' preferences and other situations (On WOLVERINE, for instance, artist Leinil Yu had only really been exposed to the Marvel Style form used by Larry Hama, so I adapted my working form for Leinil's comfort). I'm deeply uncomfortable with the form. I found an answer in my friend Steven Grant's writing format, which he partially cribbed from the screenplay format. I mutated this further, into a form that serves the purposes of both Marvel Style and full script. If you've got a copy of WOLVERINE #119, released in October, compare it with this;

We're going to start off this issue with a longish conversational sequence, guys. I know, not terribly exciting. But it brings the right feel to the piece—in a lot of ways, NOT DEAD YET is a movie cut into four parts. So it needs to start off fairly slow, establish the tone, get all the pieces into place, and lull everyone into a false sense of security before the explosions and Ultra-Violence start. Okay?

Now, about the method I'm using to produce this; it's a hybrid of Marvel-style plot, full script and screenplay. It gives all the description you need to know where we are and what's happening, provides all the dialogue so you know what's being said and can therefore coax the necessary performances from your "actors", and breaks the sequences down into groups of pages (One "block" of pages containing a complete scene). The idea is that we can

combine the best parts of Marvel-style and full script. I get the control of the areas I need (that full script normally provides), and you, Leinil, get to break down, stage and direct the action in whatever ways you consider best. In other words, we both get the freedom and control where it counts. At least, that's the general idea. But I have been drinking, so fuck knows... anyway, on with the stunt...

PAGES ONE to FIVE

OPEN ON; A look down on HONG KONG streets in the morning, TWENTY YEARS AGO. All bustle and noise and clash and tempers. Watch some Hong Kong movies, Jackie Chan and stuff, to get a sense of it. If you can get some set in the late Seventies, great—if not, fake it (!). Important to get it to feel right, though, Leinil—if we can convince readers that we are actually in the setting, make it feel real to them, then half the battle is won...

DISPLAY LETT. (NOT BOXED);

TWENTY YEARS AGO; HONG KONG

MOVE TO; down on the street, seen through the constant quick jagged crocodile of people on the street, a BAR. Its frontage is rotting and sleazy, windows boarded shut, dark inside but for a glimpse of grimy lamplight. Not a bar you'd want to walk into off the street. Which is precisely why the proprietor keeps it looking like that. The only identification it has is a lopsided, inoperative neon-tube sign hanging above the door from one nail, that reads, simply, BAR.

FROM INSIDE;

SO, ANYWAY, I CHOPPED HIS HEID OFF WI' THE BIG TREE  
SAW AN' FLOATED HIM DOONSTREAM LIKE A LOG.

MOVE IN; to the BAR, a dark place lit here and there by small cheap table lamps wth bare bulbs. Only a few people in here; all Hong Kong natives, been drinking all night and into the morning. But there's a pair at the back of the bar, sitting at a table opposite each other, faces lit by the bare-light-bulbed lamp between them...

FROM FIGURE ON LEFT;

AN' DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE STUPID ACID-HEAD COW  
SAID TO ME WHEN I TURNED UP WITH HUBBY'S HEID?

FROM FIGURE ON LEFT;

“I WANTED THE WHOLE BODY, MR McLEISH—OTHERWISE HOW CAN I BE SURE HE’S DEAD?”

CLOSE IN; On the figures, our POV facing the table so’s we’ve got one on the left of the pic and one on the right, both of them facing into the table.

On the LEFT is McLEISH. McLeish is a big, solid-oak Scotsman, about fifty years old. His hair is stone grey, receding badly at the front but grown down into a ponytail at the back, tied with a leather thong. He keeps a white moustache and beard, short and relatively neat. He’s seen a hell of a lot—plenty of lines around his piercing, very pale blue eyes. He wears white; white shirt, white padded tunic with plenty of pockets on it, like something a safari ranger might wear, thick white trousers (pants!) and heavy white boots, scuffed as hell. A white hat, placed on the table, completes the image of some white jungle hunter come to the streets of Hong Kong for bad reasons.

On the RIGHT is LOGAN; not substantially different from the man we know, since he is effectively ageless. Wearing cowboy boots, blue jeans, plaid shirt, a wide-brimmed black hat on the table and a leather biker’s jacket hung over the back of the chair. He doesn’t feel the heat, ever. He smokes a cigar, smiling as his drinking partner continues his anecdotal rambling.

And by Christ, they’ve been drinking, Leinil; empty bottles of whiskey all over the place, loads of them. They have a shot glass each, and plenty more smashed on the table and around their feet. They’ve been drinking all night, drinking hard. Logan neither displays nor suffers any ill effects—but McLeish is badly drunk.

LOGAN;

OKAY, SO THE MISSUS THINKS CUTTIN’ THE GUY’S HEAD OFF DON’T PROVE HE’S DEAD—SO WHAT DO YOU DO?

McLEISH;

AH, WELL, I’M GLAD YOU ASKED THAT, LOGAN.

McLeish, grinning, picks up his hat and balances on his wrist, trying to make it look like his hand is wearing his hat. he keeps his fingers together to form a flat surface, and brings his thumb underneath...

McLEISH;

IT’S A LITTLE-KNOWN FACT THAT, BACK IN MA GOLDEN EDINBURGH CHILDHOOD, I DID A VENTRILOQUISM ACT ON THE STAGE TO HELP PAY THE COAL BILLS.

McLEISH;

SO I PUT THE HEID ON MA KNEE AND SET IT TAE TALKING  
TO HER...

McLeish starts flapping his fingers and thumb together, trying to make it look like his hand is talking, the way people do when they indicate someone's talking too much...

McLEISH;

“I WANNAE MARRY YE AGAIN! I’M NEVER GAUNY LEAVE  
YOU, MAUD! I’M GAUNY MAKE YOU DUST ME EVERY  
SUNDAY AND WASH OFF ME STUMP WI’ WEE COTTON  
BUDS!”

Logan breaks up laughing.

McLEISH;

SHE OFFERED ME AN EXTRA FIFTY THOUSAND TO TAKE  
THE HEID WI’ ME.

McLEISH;

I TELL YOU, LOGAN—BEING THE BEST KILLER IN THE  
WORLD, IT’S A TOUGH BUSINESS, MAN.

Logan sobers slightly, looking over his drinking partner with a wry, suspicious smile—as if he’s remembering again who he’s drinking with.

LOGAN;

MUST BE.

LOGAN;

HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE YOU KILLED, McLEISH?

McLeish starts counting on his fingers comically, wobbling a bit.

McLEISH;

WELL NOW.

McLEISH;

I'M FIFTY YEARS OLD THIS WINTER, AN' IT'S EIGHT-FIFTEEN IN THE MORNING NOW...

McLEISH;

...AROUND FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY PEOPLE.

LOGAN;

GOD ALMIGHTY. NO WAY. NO WAY, McLEISH...

McLEISH;

NOW, LOGAN, THAT'S A RELATIVELY MEAGER SCORE. I KNOW PEOPLE OF LESS CLASS WHO COULD DOUBLE THAT FIGURE.

McLEISH;

I KILLED MA FIRST MAN THREE DAYS AFTER MA THIRTEENTH BIRTHDAY.

McLEISH;

I KILLED ANOTHER FOURTEEN PEOPLE THAT YEAR, AND HAVE KILLED ABOUT TWELVE PEOPLE EACH YEAR SINCE.

McLEISH;

TWELVE PEOPLE A YEAR IS NOT EXACTLY TRYING HARD, YOU KNOW?

McLEISH;

AND IT GETS HARD, LOGAN. IT GETS HARD.

A native BARMAN manifests from the gloom behind the bar counter with two more bottles of whiskey. He grins, and his teeth glitter in the gloom. Sinister, feeding McLeish's death and probably his paranoia too.

BARMAN;

HEY! GWEILO! YOU WANT MORE WHISKEY?

McLEISH;

LOGAN?

LOGAN;

SURE.

McLEISH;

MORE WHISKEY, THEN! I BLOODY NEED MORE WHISKEY!

LOGAN;

Y'KNOW, McLEISH... I KNOW THAT THE CANTONESE CALL ALL WHITE MEN GWEILO, IT'S THE WORD FOR US... BUT WHEN THEY USE IT ON YOU, IT MEANS SOMETHING DIFFERENT. WHAT'S GOING ON THERE?

McLEISH;

GWEILO, GWEILO... ITS EXACT TRANSLATION, LOGAN, IS "WHITE GHOST". DID YOU NOT KNOW THAT?

The BARMAN manifests at the side of the table, putting more bottles of cheap whiskey down. McLeish studies the barman with a wry smile.

McLEISH;

WE'RE WHITE GHOSTS TO THE NATIVES, LOGAN, JUST ETHEREAL PALE FARTS PASSING THROUGH THEIR HOME...

The barman departs back into the gloom, walking backwards, keeping his sinister eyes on McLeish and smiling his terrible smile.

McLEISH;

BUT THEY KNOW WHO I AM, YOU SEE. ALL O' THEM. THEY RECOGNISE ME ON SOME BASE LEVEL.

McLeish opens up the whiskey; hungry, shaky, wet-eyed.

McLEISH;

TO THEM, I AM THE WHITE GHOST.

(A panel on its own, I think)

LOGAN;

THE BEST KILLER IN THE WORLD.

(then)

McLEISH;

RIGHT.

LOGAN;

AND YOU'RE SAYIN' IT'S HARD? KILLIN' MUST BE LIKE  
BREATHIN' TO YOU NOW.

McLEISH;

IF I WASN'T FIFTY, PERHAPS.

McLEISH;

SOON, LOGAN, I WON'T BE THE BEST KILLER IN THE WORLD  
ANY MORE.

McLEISH;

I'LL GET SLOW AND CREAKY, THE BIG CONTRACTS WILL  
STOP COMING MY WAY, I'LL HAVE TO QUIT FREELANCING,  
AND THEN, ONE DAY, SOMEONE WILL REMEMBER THAT I  
SAW SOMETHING I SHOULDN'T'VE ONCE, AND...

McLeish draws a finger across his throat in obvious pantomime.

McLEISH;

MAYBE IT'LL EVEN BE YOU WHO DOES IT. SOMEONE  
YOUNG AND HARD AND TALENTED...

LOGAN;

NOT ME. WETWORK AIN'T MY GAME.

McLeish isn't entirely sure he believes Logan. He draws a knife from one chest pocket—not threateningly, not yet. More of an idle thing. The knife is special; carved ivory handle, a whitish sheen to the blade.

McLEISH;

WHAT IS YOUR GAME? WE'VE BEEN TALKING AND DRINKING HERE FOR THREE MONTHS NOW, AND I STILL DON'T KNOW.

LOGAN;

I DON'T HAVE A GAME. CAME HERE FOUR MONTHS BACK, MET A NICE GIRL, DECIDED TO STAY A WHILE, IS ALL.

LOGAN;

AND QUIT MOANIN' ABOUT ME, ANYWAY. YOU DON'T SAY WHAT YOU'RE DOING IN HONG KONG NEITHER.

McLeish lays one hand palm down on the table. He spreads the fingers very deliberately, spacing them as far apart as he can.

McLEISH;

HOLIDAYING, LOGAN. BETWEEN JOBS, WAITING TO SEE WHAT SHAKES OUT. DRINKING A LOT.

He very carefully places the sharp tip of the blade in the space between his thumb and first finger, chewing up the wood with the steel a little as he twists the knife.

McLEISH;

YOU KNOW I CAN'T KILL WITHOUT DRINKING FOUR BOTTLES OF SCOTCH NOW?

McLeish begins to quickly stab the knife in the spaces between all his fingers. The idea is to do it both quickly, and to avoid cutting your fingers as you do it—a test of hand-eye coordination, of a steady hand, of skill. Tiny divots of splintered wood fly up as McLeish works the knife, eyes narrowed, sweat breaking across his forehead. Hard work; he's too drunk for this, too old, too ruined.

McLEISH;

Och, BUT WHEN I DO KILL... IT'S A BEAUTIFUL THING, LOGAN. YOU SHOULD SEE ME AT WORK.

McLEISH;

THERE'S NO-ONE ON THIS PLANET LIKE ME.

He slips—the blade slices into one of his fingers, carving out a small wedge of meat. Blood jumps.

McLEISH;

NAAAA!

McLeish drunkenly shakes his agonised, bleeding finger. Logan considers this a good cue to leave; stands up, stone cold sober.

McLEISH;

BUGGER IT! NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE—

LOGAN;

I GOTTA GO, McLEISH. PROMISED I'D TAKE AI-CHIA TO THE MOVIES.

McLEISH;

IT'S THURSDAY, THEN? AYE, SO YOU DO.

Logan nods, leaves.

McLeish swigs his whiskey hard. Wipes his mouth, turns to look at Logan's retreating figure with mad, drunken eyes.

McLEISH;

SO YOU DO.

Comparing it to the finished article, you'll note that I overwrote a bit in this sequence, and had to chop out a little dialogue in the end. The end result was otherwise pretty much indivisible from what a full script gives me, with the bonus of Leinil Francis Yu's excellent staging.

This is pretty much all I have the energy for right now. I hope it's of some use to you. Perhaps another time I'll get into subjects like Editors, Approval Systems and the like.

Warren Ellis

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