Interview: Alan Grant on Wasted

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Alan Grant descended on the London-based comics industry from his native Dundee in the late sixties before returning home to team up with fellow ex-D.C. Thompson editor John Wagner (who would ultimately go on to co-create Judge Dredd with the artist Carlos Ezquerra, and help found the host comic 2000AD).

The creative force behind sci-fi strip classics such as Strontium Dog and Robo-Hunter, Grant went on to co-helm Judge Dredd through the 'Apocalypse War' and much of Dredd's considerable 80s success.

Grant's new involvement with Batman comics was to stretch into the 90s, and to survive the ending of the writer's split between himself and John Wagner after the commercial disinterest in Epic Comics' The Last American. Grant retained Strontium Dog and popular Dredd spin-off Judge Anderson.

In this decade Grant has moved into anime and scripting, but also notably into a more direct expression of his dark humour with his work for underground comic Northern Lightz.

2008's Wasted find Grant re-committing to the black humour that hall-marked the best of his Dredd output, and DoG was lucky enough to have a chat by e-mail with him recently…

What was the catalyst to make you change your focus from superheroes to the more comedic Wasted stories?

I've never been what you'd call a "superhero fan". If you look at the genre stories I've written, very few of them could be classed as "superhero". None of our 2000AD or other UK comics were about superheroes - Judge Dredd, Ace Trucking, Strontium Dog etc...all were peculiarly British, and all involved liberal doses of humour.

On my DC titles, I never considered Batman to be a superhero - my take on him was always that he was an ordinary man who made himself into something extraordinary. Anyone could emulate what Bruce Wayne did, if they had the necessary motivation and endurance, without the need for radioactive spider bites, birth under a red sun, being splashed with unknown chemicals or being given an alien magic lantern that's powerless against the colour yellow.

If anything, characters like Lobo and Etrigan the Demon are supervillains - but I couldn't have written them at all if DC had asked me to NOT make them funny. Both books enabled me to not only have a laugh, but often to have a laugh at established superhero characters.

Humour has always been an essential part of almost every story I've ever written...so it wasn't really much of a leap from DC or 2000AD to Wasted. I'd been sporadically involved with the Scottish dope humour comic Northern Lightz, and became friendly with its production crew. It was a small step to start writing the odd story for them - and it was this tiny beginning that eventually led to Wasted. Through Bad Press, you've already been involved in a few similarly underground humour titles, such as Shit the Dog and Northern Lightz; what draws you to this genre? I've been a comic fan as long as I can remember. My grandmother taught me to read, pre-school, using the Beano and Dandy as her textbooks. I was lucky enough to have parents willing to buy me the Beezer, Topper, Buster, and Boys' Own Paper. I discovered Marvel Comics when Stan lee announced the Golden Age, when I was 11, and I built up a massive collection.

When I left school and started work, I retained my love of comics - but widened it to include The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, Robert Crumb and all of the other alternative material that was produced in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 70s. I much preferred the humour material, like the Freak Bros, to all of the over-the-top sex-and-violence comics that were put out at the same time. Basically, I like to laugh - and comics is my preferred medium for discovering laughter.

Have you experienced any adverse reaction/controversy over the book's sexual and/or drug-related content?

Not yet. But my fingers are crossed - we could use the publicity. Actually, it would be easy for me to provoke extreme adverse reactions, but I've held back from doing so (at least till now) because I'm not sure Bad Press is strong enough to withstand an assault from the tabloids, organised religion and the anti-drugs field.

Keep watching the news, though..!

Were there challenges in getting an 18+ comic published? If so, how did you get past them?

The major challenge has been finding a distributor willing to handle the comic. Retailers don't particularly care that much about what they sell - if it makes a profit, they'll put it on their shelves. But although all of the distributors we approached claimed to find Wasted funny, they all wanted various financial "sweeteners" upfront: like £15,000 for "in-store publicity". As a small independent comic, we couldn't afford to buy distribution in this way.

It's depressing that these people are so short-sighted - no doubt they're the same ones who refused to stock Viz, until Viz started to sell in such huge quantities that the distributors were calling them up and begging to be allowed to handle the comic. Nobody ever knows how to handle something that's new and unique, which is why so many small press products fall by the wayside, no matter how strong the material or whatever their other merits. It's rare for something to make the breakthrough to mainstream, the way Viz did. We believe that Wasted has that same capability.

(As an addendum - the strict but vague British censorship laws might also have had a part to play in the difficulties we had getting Wasted off the ground. In the UK, if something is judged to be "obscene" or "a corrupting influence", then everybody involved becomes guilty - the writer/artist, publisher, wholesaler, distributor, and retailer can all be sued. We found this out on "Shit the Dog" - our lawyer told us all it would have taken was one parent to complain that the front cover of issue *1 (a dog taking a dump) was obscene and had corrupted or upset their 11-year-old child, and we'd have all been in court faster than the Flash with the runs.

The morons who run our society are quite happy to accept the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people as they invade and occupy foreign countries on the slightest excuse; but they baulk at the thought of a dog having a shit. I think this says quite a lot about the rotten-to-the-core madness in which we live.)

The website for Wasted mentions a fairly open submissions policy, and I also notice you've done work for/supported fan-run titles such as FutureQuake. Is the discovery and development of upcoming

talent something you're particularly keen on?

Well, I wouldn't put it quite like that. When I first started as a journalist working for DC Thomson way back in the 1960s, I very much wanted to be a writer. A particular boy's comic editor seemed receptive to my ideas, and so I wrote an 11-episode series for his comic. Having no self-confidence in my work, I left it on his desk one morning...and a week later, I came in to work to find it back on my desk. Attached to the front was a standard DCT rejection letter - "Dear X, Thank you for your submission. It was not of interest to us."

No criticism, no help offered, no insights into why my work was "not of interest". I felt sick to my gut, having - as I saw it - been encouraged to write in the first place. Obviously the guy was a crap editor. When I became an editor myself, I decided that I'd answer every single submission fully, trying to tell writers/artists honestly and objectively if their material was great, average or crap. Over the years a long list of writers and artists have expressed their gratitude to me in print for "giving them a start." Of course, it was their own talent which fuelled their careers - but if you don't have that little bit of luck to begin with (or an on-the-ball editor) your potential career - and confidence - can be destroyed with your very first submission.

I've always been a supporter of the underdog, having been an underdog myself for many years. So if it's within my power to help someone who needs it, I don't usually need to be asked twice.

Is Wasted more fun to write than your previous titles?

It's the most fun I've had since DC Comics cancelled Lobo. Which, by the way, was in my opinion a bad mistake. Although Lobo's sales had fallen in the US to less than the break-even monthly figure of around 18,000, the comic was selling strongly in all Spanish-speaking countries that had a comics market. I suggested to a VicePres that we continue producing Lobo, but sell it as an original in Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Chile etc etc and then put it out as a reprint in the USA. I was told dismissively that "that isn't the way we do things." Very reminiscent of the short-sighted folks who turned down VIz.

Actually, one often finds this kind of attitude amongst people who are salaried - they get paid the same whether they succeed or fail, so why take a chance? I'd like to see everybody required to work for a year or two as a freelance, completely dependent on their own abilities to make a living; I'm pretty sure it would bring about a sea-change in publishers' and distributors' attitudes.

Where do you draw your inspiration from for Wasted?

We're living through the insane times that I take to be a forerunner of the complete breakdown of human society. Inspiration in the form of unprecedented madness is ubiquitous.

Weather forecasters can't tell us what the weather will be like next week, but they're happy to tell us we'll all be cooked to death by 2050. Astronomers don't know exactly where the moon will rise tomorrow night, but they're happy to claim they've got photos of the birth of the universe. Bankers get paid billions in fantastic bonuses, and march the entire financial system off the edge of a cliff. Regime change - i.e. "we don't like you, you bastard" - is an acceptable reason for invading a sovereign country and killing hundreds of thousands of the very people you claim to be trying to save.

You couldn't make this shit up!

There are some specific parodies in Wasted, such as the Doctor Who one; that's a tradition in humour comics that goes back at least as far as Mad and the like - is that something you've particularly looked to uphold when commissioning this stuff, or just the way that the writers happened to take it? No, I've tried to avoid parodies as far as possible. In my opinion, a parody only works once - then you're retelling the same joke over and over again. I've been snowed under by submissions, and the vast majority of them were superhero parodies. I've written to many would-be contributors explaining why I don't want parodies, but it's a hard message to get through...perhaps because writing humorous material is so very hard to do. But if I see another Gnatman, or Fatman, or Gatman, I'll scream.

With all the experience you've had as a writer in the industry, do you prefer working as an editor nowadays? Or is it still the writing side of books like this that you enjoy the most?

I was an editor before I became a writer. I loved editing, but I found the hardest part was working with other people - it's deeply depressing when a contributor, who is also a friend, calls you to say "my dog ate my artwork" or "British Rail have lost my package"...and you know they're lying. It puts a real strain on everything. It was after a major argument with my senior editor that I finally gave up editing; he pointed out to me that my idealism had no place in a modern publishing company like IPC, that the company's only interest was in avoiding trouble and making money, and that if I continued to be an idealist the company would "crush the life out of" me.

I have to say that many of my pet editing hatreds have come back to haunt me with Wasted. I reject a story, and instead of the perpetrator accepting my word and explanation as final, I get a 3-page letter arguing that I'm wrong and explaining why the work i rejected is actually a masterpiece. I try to explain I don't want spoof stories, and people write and e-mail me telling me why I should be buying and publishing spoof stories. This is the aspect of editing I can easily live without.

After 40-plus years of involvement in the business, what's the most important lesson you've learnt, or piece of wisdom you've carried with you? The best writing advice I ever received came from John Wagner: "Take your story to the point of absurdity, then pull back from the edge of the cliff."

My favourite piece of wisdom is "everybody has a story in them..." However, it needs a qualification before it makes sense: "...but the vast majority of people only have one story in them."

Perhaps the most important lesson I've learned is never trust a publisher/TV show/movie producer until the cheque has actually been cleared by your bank.

Your Judge Dredd writing often seemed to revel in brilliant spontaneity. Is that still paramount in the comics industry now that characters and strips can sit at the heart of billion dollar franchises?

I don't read too many comics these days, but those I do read seem to suggest that spontaneity - even of the brilliant type - is no longer regarded as something desirable in a story. I've spent enough time preparing pitches and proposals for editors, TV editors and movie people to have realised that most of them know next to nothing about their business. Their major concern is to cover their asses in case anything goes wrong, so they can't be blamed. Stories and characters very often take on a life of their own, demanding that all rigid preconceptions are dissolved and new pathways opened up. This becomes impossible when an editor demands for instance a complete 4-issue breakdown.

Do you ever allow your writing to be influenced by your fans?

If anyone gives me a good idea for a story, or situation, I'm always happy to use it where apt and where possible. But no, I don't allow myself to be influenced in general - I have very strong ideas on where a story should go, or how it should be told, and I'm fairly impervious to fan desires.

Alan Grant, thank you very much!

Wasted is out now.