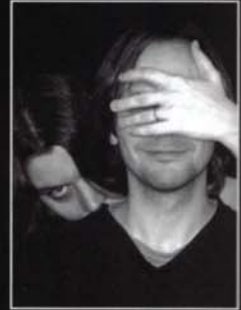


Blood, Schaffer, Sex, Magic...



Resident writer, Secretia, gets a sneak-peek into the fantastical world of "The Comicbook Man" and finds out what drives someone to leave their regular job and embark on the lonely path of a storyteller.

Dan Schaffer claims to come from an average background; working class, divorced parents and an A-level education. So how did he end up writing and illustrating the new Sirius hit series Dogwitch? "It's a hit?" says Schaffer, "But I haven't really started yet. Why aren't I rich?"

"Seriously though, I never received any real art training, and had lots and lots of different jobs between leaving school and writing Dogwitch. Sprinkle in some years of insanity and stupidity and that would probably explain why I'm such an old bastard to be entering the comics field. I really wanted to do this when I was eighteen but jobs, booze, people and booze just got in the way for a long time.

So what made you decide to produce comic books? "I wanted to tell stories while hiding behind the pictures, and draw pictures while hiding behind the words. Sirius told me they'd like to publish Dogwitch in June 2002, so I've officially been doing this nine months. To be honest, I can't stop thinking up weird stuff and it seems a good a way as any to get it out. I coulda writ a book but me gramma ain't what it oughta be," he laughs.



You say you never really had any formal training, how did you learn your techniques? Is there plenty of information to study off your own back? "There are some helpful art books out there. The Burne Hogarth anatomy series is very good. There's a book called "The Art of Comic Book Inking" by Gary Martin that pin points the key elements of inking. Will Eisner's "Comics and Sequential Art" is essential reading. Basically, I just started drawing, and when I got stuck, I'd go read a book, or pick up a comic and see how somebody else did it. Then I'd come back with my newly acquired knowledge, apply it, and continue until I got stuck again. I used to get stuck every two or three minutes. Now it's every two or three weeks."

Is there one person you could say inspired your style of art? "If I had to choose one, I'd pick on Brian Bolland. But I've studied many of the artists who produce precise, clean linework, so there's a bit of Glenn Fabry, Ian Gibson and probably some Phil Jimenez in the mix too."

Can you explain what Dogwitch is about to

those who haven't yet read a copy? "It follows the life of Violet Grimm. She's an exiled witch and home moviemaker. She lives in a large house, deep in the woods with only her toys (that are alive) and a video camera. As tales of bad sex and dangerous voodoo spread her infamy through the Banewoods, she captures the attention of a multitude of weirdos and resigns herself to what she believes is her predestined B-movie lifestyle. Churning out schlock home videos for a berserk and hungry fan base in her pursuit of arcane knowledge, she makes observations on the physical and mental problems associated with dating Demons, the homicidal nature of hero worship, and the dangers of invoking monsters from the abyss for sex magick."

Whoa! This comic has a very dark style with all the references made to kinky sex, paganism, horror movies etc. Where do you source your material? Are your roots in the gothic subculture, paganism or fetish? "You'd think so wouldn't you? I've encountered some people from these walks of life so it's probably just rubbed off on me. I was a big horror movie fan as a youngster back before videos had any certification, so I saw all the good nasty ones. They must've twisted my fragile little mind. That and all the porn and ouija boards, maybe."

Who did you aim the comic at, then? "I didn't think about that at the time. In fact, the first review I read proudly stated: "This is about as goth as it gets", and I thought, "Oh, so it's a goth book?" I am pretty dense, really. I'm just a slave to the muses. Target audiences and demographics didn't come into my mind until afterwards. When I wrote Dogwitch I was still trying to impress Sirius, the readership came later. For the record, I'm very pleased with the demographic. From what I can tell, it's made up of goths, pagans and fetish freaks with the odd lawyer,



teacher and writer chucked in for good measure."

So would you say you're reacting against mainstream culture? Voicing things that it usually shuns? Like "I'm lonely" or "I'm sad"? "No. But after some years of therapy, there's a good chance I'd say yes," he jests.

Why did you feel you needed to tell Violet's story? "She made me do it," he says. If that's the

case, without sounding rude, how can you know what a woman feels? "Nice question, cheeky. I don't profess to know anything about a woman's feelings. But then, I don't know anything about a man's feelings either. I was raised in a female household



by strong-headed women, and, understanding aside, that's left me with enough respect to feel I can attempt to write genuinely from Violet's perspective. I know what she feels, at least. ▶

Fact File

Name: Daniel Schaffer (pronounced shay-fer)
Age: 34
Location: London
Occupation: Writer and illustrator of Dogwitch, a comic book series published by Sirius Entertainment Inc.
Previous projects: Art and design for UK Drum and Bass recording label, Jerona Fruits. Cartoonist for the Construction Workers Guild. Writer/artist of cyberpunk future thriller Bedlam James, sadly unpublished. Cartoonist for UK Teacher's Union.

DOs and DON'Ts for someone that wants to get started in comics.

- DO target publishers that suit your specific style.
- DO find out submission guidelines first.
- DO have some kind of hook. You're one submission in twenty that week.
- DO prove to them that you are a committed worker and not just a wannabe.
- DO take note of any advice they give you and send more work that shows you did.
- DO be prepared to get knocked back a few times until they appreciate your worth.
- DO package everything professionally. That means no scraps, no spelling mistakes and no grammatical errors.
- DON'T expect a response for a few months.
- DON'T take anything personally. Some work just doesn't fit what a publisher is looking for at that time no matter how good it is. Professionals still get their work rejected all the time.
- DON'T give up.

Is Violet actually based on anyone? "Visually, she looks like my girlfriend, Jen. She's got the cheeky smile and the Marvel eyebrows for it. Violet's attitude may be a combination of Jen's no-bullshit, sarcastic approach to everything and my perverse need to turn it all on its head and make it freaky." In which case, is the Dogwitch you? "Possibly. It's the idea that you're not longer obliged to choose one thing from a pick 'n' mix culture of fifteen minute religions and fashions. It's the idea that you can step back and utilise it all. It's where you go when you no longer give a fuck. It's me in that sense." He pauses. "But I don't do magic tricks." Historically, comic books have had

a strong male hero-type lead character. Recently, however, there have been more and more stories dipping into darker/more fantastical subjects with female lead characters and anti-heroes etc. Where do you feel Dogwitch fits in with this picture? "I think that the autonomous, confident, self-justified female protagonist figure has been creeping its way to the front for a while now. Xena, Buffy, Tank Girl, Samantha Jones (from Sex and the City), Ripley (from the Alien movies). There's no new ground being broken here. Just a different angle. A more obvious one, probably, as Violet brandishes what I would class as a strictly female potency!"

Dogwitch is sold overseas, too. Are people getting your subtle humour abroad? "You mean you get it?" he laughs. "A lot of it is pretty obvious and taken at face value but I think some of the subtleties may be getting overlooked. Maybe they're too subtle. Maybe they're not funny. Maybe they're not there." What does the future hold for you, Dan? "I've got art duties on some issues of Poison Elves for Sirius. There are some guest-writing gigs coming up with a few magazines, but nothing really solid yet. I'm not chasing anything as I can barely keep up with what I'm doing now. I'm planning on getting a cup of tea in a minute, though."

Secretita

