

## **An Interview with Charlie Adlard Conducted by Skype, May 2012**

**Julia Round**

*So I was looking at your early 1990s work on Judge Dredd and Armitage and I was wondering if you could start by telling me a bit about that, if that was quite formative stylistically, how you felt about British/American superheroes...?*

The early stuff was funny, actually, cause I broke in when it was kind of *de rigueur* to do painted artwork; everyone was painting at the time. It was the time of Dave McKean and Simon Bisley and people like that. I actually got work originally from doing painted stuff, which wasn't really my sort of thing. I didn't really paint that well, to be honest. And then I spent the first year of my career painting – the first *Judge Dredd* strip and then the first *Armitage* series. Pretty much the first year of my life in comics was doing something I wasn't really used to...it was a bit of a baptism of fire to be honest. Also, I was brought up, from the age of seven or eight, on the old Marvel comics re-prints, the Marvel UK titles, so...I did get into *2000AD* but it wasn't until I was a teenager. Actually, I got into it through *Starlord*. I remember buying that and seeing that for the first time, getting excited about that and then moving on to *2000 AD* obviously when it amalgamated with *Starlord*. So I read that for a while but it was much later so it was interesting.

But of course, professionally, a lot of people saw *2000AD* as a bit of a stepping stone, to be honest, into working for the Americans. It's hard to put into words really, cause you don't want to say 'That's all this is', cause it's certainly *not* all this is. But for a lot of professionals, you can't make a living just out of working for one comic. So a lot of people did think 'This is a way to get my work seen'.

*That kind of answers another of my questions too – I wanted to ask you about the move to black and white and the heavy shadows and ink that you use now. Was that largely led by The Walking Dead? – what happened with the move from painting to that?*

Charlie- Well, obviously I started reading a lot of Marvel UK comics, which were printed in black and white so I wasn't kind of *au fait* with colour comics so much. I don't know if that was an influence. But also my first main artistic influence was Michael Golden. I remember first seeing his work in the back of *Star Wars Weekly* when he was doing 'The Micronauts' and, because that guy was one of the first sort of American artist who used more blocky blacks and more design-orientated artwork, I think that resonated with me more than some of the more classic American artists of the time. So, all of these little influences came together and, like I say, when I was working on portfolios before I became a professional most of my artwork was black and white. I definitely had an interest in the heavy blacks and the more design-orientated elements of drawing a comic rather than a nice rendering of something like that. So, like I said, it was a weird thing to eventually break in and then find myself painting. But, you know, I managed to turn it around.

*So when you're producing comics artwork, what is the most important element? Is the layout or the detail or the high contrast – what are you trying to look for? Does it depend?*

I think most comic artists would say – and I like to think it's true of myself – the story is the most important. That kind of goes without saying. But after that I am probably slightly more interested in the design and the page, how the page looks as a whole. Cause they always say you have to get your figures right and things like that, perspective, blah, blah

blah. But I've got a big interest in late 60s-70s classic American illustrative art as well. Which, the older and later it gets, before unfortunately everyone did photography and stuff, well those guys had an incredible interest in layout and design and arranging the picture. Basically people hanging around, talking, looking interesting. So I hope those sorts of influences rubbed off on me somewhat.

*That brings me nicely to the question about The Walking Dead – do you like doing the 'talking heads' and more slow-paced scenes?*

Charlie- Yeah, I do actually. I find it more interesting than the action stuff. Action by its very nature is hard work because it takes longer to draw. It's just more composition-heavy, shall we say. But with talking heads you kind of get that...it's a challenge cause obviously you have to do perhaps three and a half pages of just people sat in a room talking so it's an interesting thing to sort of work out. One of my other influences is European comic book art. I'm very influenced by that. And they're very into backgrounds and so on. And I think backgrounds just give your characters a sense of place, a sense of where they are and everything, rather than just having large heads and nothing which is not interesting. I try to incorporate things like that as much as I can and make it as realistic as I can. So, yeah, stuff like that will get thrown into the melting pot and you can go to town a bit more on the design doing talking heads. Because you've got a bit more freedom, because you have more still figures to work with.

*Do you have a lot of control over the page layout in 'The Walking Dead' and things like that? Is that all you?*

Yeah, Robert's scripts are fairly free; his descriptions are fairly loose. Certainly I add more script. It suits me fine. I think the problem when you get a really detailed script is you feel almost obliged to change it because otherwise you think you're just slavishly going with what the writer's doing. You don't feel like you're contributing your fifty percent. So of course then you change it and you question whether you're changing it for the better or whether you're changing it just for the sake of changing it cause you want to have at least some sort of input. Robert's scripts are basically just dialogue with a few bits of description, and they just tend to be like 'small panel, wide panel, small panel', that sort of thing.

*So he's a bit interested in the rhythm...*

Yeah, I think you're right, the rhythm – just so you get a sense of what they're after – but apart from that I think the rest should be left to me. (laughs) Then it's my decision and my decision alone and then you stand or fall on what you decide rather than constantly worrying about whether that decision is better or just doing it for the sake of it.

*Yeah, I saw John Romita Jr. talk last year at the Leeds Comic-Con and his attitude was slightly different in that it was 'I'm the bloody artist, I'll decide how this looks'. He seemed to hate working with full script or anything approaching that.*

Well, see I think working in, I'll call it the Marvel style, is more limiting because I think, as an artist, you need more, you've got to have an insight into what the writer's thinking. Cause I think that's the way to tell a story. If you're working from an outline, you draw something and then if what the writer has in mind isn't exactly what he sees he sticks lots of inappropriate dialogue in all over it. It doesn't work out. I don't think that's 50/50. I don't think the writer giving you vague directions on where to go with the story is intruding on the

artist's territory. That's what a script-writer should do. Script-writer, the writer of the book, is not just the guy who does the dialogue. So I feel a lot more liberated with a fuller script because I know that's exactly what the writer wants, then I can play with it.

*And you as the artist have still got all the choices when it comes to perspective and expression and everything else...*

Yeah all that, and you can still play with the story-telling, but you need to have a template of what the writer wants for that page before you can sort of go off on one.

*That's fair enough. So you're obviously really liking The Walking Dead... and you've done a lot of superhero comics as well, like Gotham Nights and other super things. Do you like working in the superhero genre? Are there other things you'd like to do? Or do you prefer the zombies?*

Yeah, it was fun working in the superhero genre. I don't think I'm a particularly brilliant superhero artist. It never sat that comfortably with me. I was always more comfortable doing stuff like *The Walking Dead* or *Savage 2000AD* or *Rock Bottom* or even *The X-Files*, you know? I was much more happy drawing normal human beings rather than pumped-up people in lycra. So, there's no reason I couldn't return one day, but it would be a) under my own terms and b) it would have to be something that I would absolutely kill to do – because once you experience and create your own books, and luckily have the success with them as well, there is kind of no turning back. All I'm interested in now is doing my own thing, but I'm lucky to say that because obviously *The Walking Dead* has paid the bills quite well. So it's a nice position to be in to say that... I'm in the fortunate position to be able to take on a project because it interests me as opposed to 'how much would it pay?'

*Is there a dream superhero project you've got in mind when you're talking about that? A dream writer combo? I mean, you've done Batman...*

Not really because that's the thing, as I said before, it's doing my own stuff. I have favourite heroes, I suppose. If Marvel came to me and said 'Do it! We'd love for you to do something for us. You can do anybody!' I'd probably choose Dr. Doom or Daredevil, something like that. I mean, obviously with my style the more realistic ones kind of suit my artwork so people like Daredevil, Spiderman. Even The Hulk... I should say a darker version of The Hulk obviously would suit me.

*Yeah, I should imagine, back to grey...*

*Madmen* would suit my style rather than being asked to do *The Fantastic Four*, *The Avengers* or stuff like that. It's quite funny talking to John Romita Jr, when he did his run on the Avengers, the writer, Brian Michael Bendis, gave him the world's most talky... That's so not what he draws, but I think sometimes Marvel and DC are very bad at selecting their artists specifically for the books they do. They'll just get them because they're a name but they won't get them because of their skill sets. I just thought his artwork, well, you can almost sense the boredom... He'll draw another ten people just standing around talking.

*Have you got any aspirations to write comics or are you very happy with the illustrative side? Do you want to do the story-telling?*

None whatsoever really. I believe in everyone playing to their strengths. There are certain artists who shall remain nameless who mistakenly went into writing because they weren't playing to their strengths, well, and vice versa...It's even harder for a writer to suddenly decide to start drawing (laughs). Then the effects of that are even worse.

*The page is not sympathetic...*

Precisely. Yeah, also because I pencil and ink, I really don't have time. I do warrant extra time, shall we say, in the field of the artwork – so in terms of time doing an issue of *The Walking Dead* per month plus any other ancillary project, whatever, that is pretty much all my time. I'm not even considering writing. I've been in this business nearly twenty years and it's not been an issue so far... I can't see it being an issue in the next ten, twenty years.

*I was just wondering when you were talking about creating your own stuff if you had a project in mind that you'd always wanted to auteur, get off the ground. 'This is all mine', the story-telling and everything...*

Well, there's a couple of European books that I've been talking to publishers about. Cause I've been sort of connected with two major publishers, coincidentally one has now bought the other so now... Cause I did do a European book a couple of years ago called *Curse of the Wendigo* for Soleil. And they've been asking me to do something else since then. They have given me a really interesting script which I really can't say anything more about but it's one of those sort of scripts that I just thought... Well, no, there isn't a script yet. It's just a plot outline, but just from the plot outline it's just one of those stories that I just thought 'Oh, yes!'. I could just see the imagery straight away so I'm very interested in doing that. I'm actually halfway through doing a book with Robert called *The Passenger* which is another European-style book. And of course it will all now fall under the umbrella of Delcourt. They publish *The Walking Dead* in France and they're the biggest independent comic book publisher in France and they've just bought Soleil so if I do the project with Soleil, that will be under the Delcourt umbrella in the end. But as another aside, I've been talking to Keeno [Thierry Mornet], my editor at Delcourt, and another editor there at Delcourt, about doing another, an actual, French-originated graphic novel. I've already had a chat with one of the writers there who seemed really nice and has got some really good ideas. But it's more like a book deal in France. It's kind of par for the course; you create your own stuff. So yeah, looks like most of my work will come out of France, apart from *The Walking Dead*, but I'm more than happy with that cause I love their industry and I think they're the most professional comic book people I've ever met in my life this far. Sorry America, it's just... (laughs).

*Even with the publishing arrangements it sounds like the French industry is just much more mature in its treatment of who owns what...*

Well, it's a book deal, more like that. They value their creators, and the quality is just leaps and bounds better than the American side. The way they publish, the way it's all books...France, as much as they're in the technical age as we are, they seem to value the shop more than we do, still. You can still go into, well, for instance, they've still got Virgin Megastores. They still value the idea of going shopping, which is great for us, and it's great for bookstores and you go into their big media outlets, the Finac stores, and there's almost half a floor, and we're talking big floor space, devoted to comic books, and you're just thinking 'God, that's right in the centre of these cities; there is comics right in the middle of it all'. It's just an industry which is so different from our piddly little...

*Here the perception of the industry is very like it's mini-America, yeah...*

It's the same in America; it's the same here as it is in America. It's kind of ghettoized and regarded as a bit of a cult... if that. And most people know comic characters from what they've seen in the films, rather than what they've actually read about. It's kind of the opposite in France. And when I go over there I'm treated so well (laughs). It's great! The guys are there, literally, I was going to say outside your bedroom, but they might as well be half the time!

*You mentioned some of the adaptations you'd worked on, like The X-Files and things like that. What's the most important thing to you when you're adapting someone else's characters or series in that sort of way? Do you kind of try to stay faithful or innovate?*

Well, I like to try and innovate a bit because there's nothing more dull and life-suckingly horrible, you know, then just trying to imitate. I mean, again, *The X-Files* and things like that were something I fell into accidentally. I didn't particularly think I'd be having a career arc in doing adaptations, cause I literally went from *Mars Attacks* into *The X-Files* into doing *The Crow*. Three adaptations straight off. And, you know, *Mars Attacks* was great. I mean, it's so loosely based that it doesn't feel like an adaptation because, bearing in mind, this is before the film. *The Crow* was great because James O'Barr specifically said 'Do what you want to do'. And it's a useful character because every time it's a different guy anyway so you haven't really got a template there. But *The X-Files* was a different kettle of fish altogether. For the first year it was quite pleasant to do. For the second year – I think I did it for around two years – the second year it was distinctly unpleasant to do. I think all the worn-out cliches about adapting books and things like that came to the fore in the second year, when you're dealing with people who don't understand comics and all they want to see is Scully and Mulder looking like they do on the TV show. And I personally like to think if I was brought in to do something, I'd like to capture the feel of the show but not necessarily capture the likenesses. I'm not a likeness artist; there's the irony! (laughs)

*On similar lines then, how do you feel about the AMC adaptation of The Walking Dead? Have you watched it? Do you like it?*

It's good, it's really good because it kind of dares to be different as well. And Robert's obviously intimately involved with it as well so a lot of it is down to him. So he's obviously actively encouraging them to kill off certain people and keep certain people alive that we haven't killed off. So it's definitely good in that respect. I think if I was watching something exactly the same to the comic book it would be rather pointless. I think *Watchmen* proved that. If you adapt something literally word for word... I think *The Walking Dead* works really well cause it sort of follows the main template of the comic, it's hitting certain points that the comic obviously has done, but it's also going off on its own little tangent, doing its own little thing, which is great. Cause I think for the small minority of people who have read the comic and watched the TV show it's exciting for them cause it makes... They're not just sitting there thinking 'Oh, well I know what's going to happen now. A's going to do this to B and they're going to go here and that'll happen next episode'. It makes it a bit more unpredictable. And of course for people who don't read the comic book series, they don't know any different.

*Yeah, that's fair enough.*

And that's actually the majority of people who watch the show. I mean, we sell 40,000 monthlies each month and *The Walking Dead* is watched by, what, the first airing of each episode is probably watched by five million people. So you gotta think, 'Well, there's a slight difference there'. The actual comic readers are a small percentage of the general audience.

*I think my response to it has been exactly as you say in that, you know, I really enjoy watching it because it's hitting some of the same plot points but in a slightly different way, in a slightly different order.*

Yeah, it is hard to look at it objectively because, being so subjective to it myself. I gotta admit near the end of the first half of the second season I was kind of thinking myself 'Oh, come on!', it's dragging. But was that just a criticism of the show or was that just a criticism because I know what's coming? I think 'Oh, I want to get to this point now. We've done this!' I'd love to watch it as not being completely aware of the book at all. Just focus on the TV show and then make a judgment. Think 'Is this dragging or is this perfectly acceptable to me story-wise?'

*I think it's a very brave TV series in a way because it really does take its time with what it's doing, you know? And like the comic, there's a long stretch of time where there's no violence and there's no death or action. It's got that kind of soap opera edge to it.*

Yeah, exactly, that's what it is in essence. Both the comic and the TV series. If it was just one long zombie, action, gore chase we wouldn't be here, talking about this. I wouldn't be drawing the book and the TV show would have ended after season one.

*So was this very much how it was pitched to you then? What got you on board? What excited you about it?*

It was sort of pitched that way. Robert initially, when he asked me to draw it, told me that's what it was. But he didn't really say much about it; he just sent me the issues that were already out, and sent me the script, obviously, when I was about to draw. I don't know if my reaction was exactly 'This is the greatest thing I've ever read!' but it was lucky cause he caught me between jobs, literally. I was at a vulnerable point. Don't get me wrong, it was good, but I accepted it, kind of thinking in the back of my mind 'Oh, I'll probably do this for six issues and see what happens'. Here we are ninety issues later. (laughs) I think that's evidence enough of how much it got under my skin. I think it sort of does that. I don't think it has an initial impact on you. It's the kind of thing, you read issue one and think 'That was OK; I'll read issue two' and before you know it, that's it, you can't put it down.

*So are you a zombie fan anyway?*

Not particularly. I never thought I'd be drawing seven plus years on a zombie book, you know, when I first started. I'm not dissing the zombie genre at all. I'm a fan of zombies as a genre as much as I am of vampires, werewolves, they're all kind of... There's no particular monster that rises to the top of the pile for me. I'm as much a fan of horror movies as I am of science fiction, as I am of drama, as I am of comedies. I'm just a, if you're talking in terms of movies, of zombies in movies, I'm just a movie fan – so a good zombie movie is as relevant to me as a really good drama. So I've never really seen *The Walking Dead* as a zombie book anyway. I think if it was a zombie book, as we said

before, I wouldn't be talking now, but it's something so much more. It's the human element that makes it interesting for me anyway.

*Yeah, for me I would say there's a lot of social commentary in The Walking Dead. It's obviously all about the struggle to survive and the dystopian, post-apocalyptic background than anything else.*

Yeah, and actually, you know, that's what makes most good zombie stories. Especially movies; all the good zombie movies are all more social commentaries than straightforward 'Whoa! Look at his head falling!'

*What points do you think it's trying to make about society? Is it a warning to us all...?*

I know these are boring old cliches but they're eternal as well. I think *The Walking Dead* especially plays on the idea that it's the humans who are more dangerous than those shambling corpses. There is one point in the last few issues where Rick comes to the realisation that they've been killing zombies for so long that it's kind of just got ridiculously easy. At that point, I did think 'God, where are we going to go from here now?' But I think that's the interesting point: what it takes to survive, and not necessarily just survive against a pile of unthinking corpses. And actually, to me, I think in a lot of ways the zombies are one of the most scary monsters, not individually, but in terms of their collectiveness. I know it's clichéd, but that loss of identity, the coming of the apocalypse, whatever you want to call it. With most other classic monsters, they tend to be one bad guy or else a small, intelligent group; a group to more likely threaten the individual, rather than the earth. Just from that nature, it's just slightly less scary because, obviously, it's threatening someone other than yourself. (laughs) Rather than when you take something like the apocalypse thing, this is worldwide, this could... Even an old, silly bloke like me starts thinking 'Oh, what would I do to survive?' sort of thing. Or would I want to? Stuff like that.

*I've only got one more, bigger question really. Which is, are you happy in comics? Are there any other creative areas, any different media, you want to work in or work on more? Or can we just look forward to more comics for a really long time?*

No, I'm probably a rarity in that I'm absolutely, totally happy where I am. This is what I've always wanted to do. I sort of got there late. Sometimes I have to sit back and think 'God, how lucky I am' cause I am doing exactly what I want to do. Plus, lucky cause I'm making a good living out of it. I'm quite an ambitious person but I've sort of achieved my ambitions and my ambitions are to just carry on and do what I want to do. I want to be happy in life so that's my ambition and I'm feeling lucky that I am very happy. A lot of people come up to me and say 'What do you do?' and I say 'Well I do this' and they say 'Oh, that's interesting' and then they stop and go 'You must be really lucky to be doing exactly what you want to do'. And I think 'Yeah, I am actually'.

You see, I'm not interested in going into film or anything cause I just know, the beauty of doing comics is you are one hundred percent your own creative, you're on your own creatively. If you go into films, exciting as it may be, you've suddenly got to answer to a lot more people... And I had a slight link to that when I was doing things like *The X-Files* or whatever. You're suddenly dealing with a lot more people and then things start getting complicated and you feel like your creativity's been taken away from you. Whereas with comics, while in our country and the States it might be a relatively poor man's art form, but you are still in charge of your own destiny, which is brilliant. There's not many industries

you can say that about and we're all lucky to be in that. It's great to be part of a thing where you're in control as much as you possibly can be. It's fantastic.