

An Interview with Steve White

Conducted by telephone, 1030am, Monday 25 April 2005

Julia Round

JULIA: I was really interested this whole repackaging of the trade paperback...

STEVE: Yeah, it's something that has definitely taken off, I mean generally now you get to see most graphic novels and trade paperbacks with some kind of added bonus – I picked up a Conan one from Dark Horse and that had like a really nice sketch book, a big feature on Robbie ... I think it's interesting because, talking to some of the guys who have worked, there definitely seems to be an attitude among creators that they're writing for the trade paperback, even though when they're doing the individual issues, people are more inclined to think 'well it'll work better once it's collected', they're not sort of thinking in terms of storytelling per individual issue, it's like 'well, it'll all come together when you read it in the trade paperback'

Yeah, thinking a lot more about the bigger story arcs and the 8-issue story arcs and things like that?

Exactly, it has actually changed the way the comics are written – a lot of the writers don't now think of it in individual terms, they're looking at the bigger picture, and I think there's some people who are saying well, that's not necessarily a good thing, because it kind of puts people off buying the individual issues, and it's gonna raise a bit of a dichotomy really, whether it's worth actually producing individual issues, or whether you just do nothing but produce graphic novels.

Yeah, I think you're right – that's the bit of it that interests me, as I was kinda wondering if it was kind of a reaction to the whole collectors market thing and, from the audience's point of view, that they kind of started thinking 'well maybe we won't buy single issues', because I know that I've got an enormous collection of graphic novels and very few single issues, which is kind of strange...

Yeah, I mean some of it also I think kind of reflects with the publishers, because they think, certainly now that book shops are getting much more interested in housing graphic novels, in setting up graphic novel sections, obviously comic publishers are now kind of thinking, 'well, they're not interested in the individual issues, it's not something that's on their radar, so let's just go for the big guns, let's just do the graphic novels and the trade paperbacks', which sort of cuts out the middle man, the comic buyer.

Yeah, it's kind of turning on your original fan base, I suppose, trying to reach a much wider audience

Yeah

– it's strange, I was reading an interview with someone else yesterday, and they were saying that they found it odd that as the audience has expanded, so now you're

reaching a wider range of people than you ever have before, and it's all much more mainstream, the actual amount that's being bought is diminishing and diminishing, so you've kind of lost this hardcore collecting base, I don't know, I just find it strange...

Yeah... I mean, from my point of view it's been interesting to see the female readership get involved, which I kind of attribute to *Buffy*... it's been interesting that – I didn't go to a convention for a few years because I dropped off the sort of comic radar and didn't go for 5 or 6 years to a convention – and then in 2002 I went to the Bristol convention for the first time and couldn't get over the amount of young girls that were there, and I kind of think science has really opened up for girls, things like *Buffy* and *Xena* and that kind of thing really put females on the comic map, as it were... I remember when I was first going, taking a girlfriend to one of the big London conventions and her asking to leave because she was getting scared of being stared at – it was just that no girls really went, except as girlfriends to a creator or something...

Yeah, I remember similar experiences from going to ones in Cardiff with my boyfriend about 10 odd years ago, and I think I was the only girl there apart from Mark Buckingham's girlfriend

Ah yeah, Bucky

...and it's just quite scary, all these men, it's quite intimidating – and less so, I think now,– because you're right about the whole *Buffy* thing, you've only got to walk into Forbidden Planet to see that half of what they're selling now is being geared towards that market.

Yeah, I mean, it's interesting because I think they're very... I sense a strong female readership in things like Manga as well – I think that the fact that people like Jill Thompson are now doing almost Manga-esque sandman titles, that I kind of think... I can't remember the one that came out recently, but there's another one I know that's due out fairly soon and they're doing it in this sort of Manga style – the way the books are produced, the small format...

Yeah, there's a Jill Thompson *Death* one I've got that's a *Sandman* spin off, that just looks like a proper book, y'know, all black and white line drawings and definitely in the Manga style, which is quite interesting... but, the trade paperback generally, I'm just trying to get a kind of era on this, because I only started reading comics sort of 1990, so I came to comics fairly late anyway, they are kind of fairly new in terms of a development – I mean, when you started at Marvel, 20 odd years ago, was this whole repackaging thing going on then as well?

It was something that, yeah, they did occasionally – I think it wasn't... it was just something... because I remember that a lot of the stuff that I read the first time, the sort of classic stuff, like *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns* and the *Daredevil: Born Again* stuff, I read as trade paperback, so there obviously was a market for it but I don't think it existed outside the comic shop; I think it was more in terms of, like, if you missed the individual issues then you picked up the trade paperback, it was just like 'oh, I missed a couple, I'll just have to wait' – you didn't actually sort of think 'well I'm not going to bother picking up the individual issues', it was just

not something that ever crossed my mind – oh, god, no, you’ve got to buy the individual issues. I mean, looking at my comic collection from that time, I’ve still got all of my *Sin City*s and *Hellboys* as individual issues, where now I think most people would just say ‘well, I’ll just wait for the trade paperback to come out’.

Yeah, well you don’t have to wait very long these days either...

No, that’s the other thing, and again it’s almost like that’s another similarity I think now between the movie market and comics, before you used to have to wait a year or so for a video to come out – you know, when I was buying videos, the rental copies would come out about 6 months after the film, which would be like 90 odd quid, and then they would do the sale through one, and that would be a year or so later, and now you’re getting movies coming out on DVD within a couple of months of the cinema release.

Yeah, and this simultaneously rental and release-to-buy at the same time and everything else, it’s kind of destroyed the video rental market anyway, hasn’t it?

Yeah, it’s interesting how they’re obviously following the same line of thought, as it were, but it was what I was thinking of when we were doing our collections at Titan, that it was interesting that we were parodying what was going on with movies.

Yeah, I think it all feeds into each other, definitely, but that’s interesting what you were saying just now about the comics you were reading, like *Hellboy*, because I got the impression from your *Transformers* interview that you only started reading comics very much at that kind of time, as an adult reader?

Yeah, it was more or less American comics that I was reading – I mean, I started reading comics when I was about – I think the first comic I seriously read – I used to pick them up occasionally, or my mum would buy me comics, I remember my mum buying me US comics – but the first one I started buying seriously was *2000 AD*, which came out, what was that, 77, it was the same year as *Star Wars*, and I picked that up because of my interest in dinosaurs, there was a dinosaur story in it and I remember a friend of mine saying, ‘hey, there’s this comic, and it’s got a dinosaur story in it’, and I started reading that regularly, and that kind of spun off to the other related titles that came out with that, like *Action* and *StarLord*, but I didn’t really read any American comics until about 1982, when I discovered *Forbidden Planet* and the first serious US comic I started reading which – and again I think probably sort of set the tone for me – was *Epic Illustrated*, which I don’t know if you’re familiar with... It was kind of like an anthology magazine, it wasn’t really actually a comic as such, sort of a big format magazine, but it used to have fantastic artwork and artists and stories, sort of very much aimed at an adult audience – as *Epic* was; *Epic* was almost like the forerunner of *Vertigo* at *Marvel*, which I think a lot of people have forgotten, but *Epic* really was the first one, the first attempt to actually bring adults, more serious adults to comic reading.

No, I haven’t heard of that one, so I shall go and hunt for that I think

Yeah, it was interesting because it didn't really have the same sensibilities as Vertigo, but it was definitely their aim, because I knew the guy running Epic pretty well, and I ended up doing a bit of work for them myself when I started at Marvel, doing freelance stuff, but their thinking was to actually do, you know, much more adult stuff, and I think that was when people like Frank Miller were getting involved in comics, and they were doing very powerful, Daredevil, Elektra stuff, which I think was really, for me – and weirdly enough because I've watched the Elektra movie this weekend – but I was just thinking how that whole storyline was for me the first one that I would consider to be an adult sensibility in a mainstream comic – it was before things like *Watchmen* and that came out in the mid-80s.

Yeah, so just in terms of bringing kind of adult themes and ideas to the mainstream then?

That's it, yeah. And I think Epic did it first, I think Vertigo are almost sort of like, saw what Epic were doing and decided to jump on the bandwagon as it were.

Yeah, Vertigo's in a funny position in that sense – I've read interviews with Alan Moore where he says that the whole Vertigo ethos is very much based around what he describes as the bad mood he was in in the 1980s, it just dragged out...

Yeah, and even kind of like what he was doing in 2000 AD with things like Halo Jones – you know, you look at Halo Jones, it would make a great Vertigo comic.

Yeah, it's not a coincidence is it – a huge number of the Vertigo writers came from the 2000 AD stable anyway, didn't they?

Yeah, it was when... I remember being around, that was kind of when I was heavily involved in Marvel and that kind of thing, and seeing that whole thing sort of develop when people like Karen Berger and Art Young used to come over from DC and they were basically coming over to hunt for British writers, and I think a lot of it was to do with the fact that they felt that American writers just couldn't do it – I mean, I don't know whether I'm doing American writers a great disservice, but you did get that feeling, even Epic were doing it, they were using British writers and artists, because there was just a feeling that American writers were so superhero oriented that they couldn't take that step away from spandex as it were.

Yeah, I think you're right in that sense, I think it's probably a case of being able to take a step back from it or just bring a different perspective to it, cos I should imagine the American writers grew up reading comics that were entirely comics-code influenced...

Exactly, yeah

...and had very set ideas about the cheesiness of superheroes, and were probably very bored with them themselves. So having a fresh perspective on it from a...

Yeah, I always kind of wondered as well whether it was to do with the fact that there is a strange American view of the British that somehow we're more intellectual – you know, when

you look at people like NG and AM, that they have these classical themes, Shakespearean and mythological themes that American writers just maybe wouldn't think to use – again, I could be doing them a terrible disservice by saying that...

It's a very literary style, isn't it, I think, that comes across...

Yeah, I think there's probably a lot to be said for that, but in some ways I think it almost worked against them, because I remember thinking, you know when they would use people like Pete Milligan and, oh god, who else, you had Brendan McCarthy, Pete Milligan and I guess when they started bringing in people like Garth Ennis and that kind of thing, and everything ended up starting to read the same – it was just like, 'hey, what can we do... this time let's have some more drunk irish people doing something'...

Yeah, cut all the dialogue right down or make it very wordy and long...

Yeah, exactly.

I was thinking about the length of time you've been doing this now, without meaning to implicitly insult you in any sense, but this is 20 odd years now...

It is, yeah. I started Marvel on April 1 1986.

April first as well, genius!

[laughs]

What started you off getting into that?

It was just blind luck really, it really was just like the luck of the draw, I mean... I had a friend who'd gone to art college, a schoolfriend – we were in the same art class together and I used to think he was a fantastic painter, and he went on to art college and it was kind of expected that I would, but because I'd been so disenchanted with my art teaching that I just decided that I wasn't going to do it, and I ended up following my science nose and went to work at the Medical Research Council instead, and he went to art college and then he saw that Marvel were advertising for colour separators and he got a job and he came over to my place for dinner with his girlfriend. We were sitting talking and that was a Saturday night and I said to him – intensely jealous of the fact he was working at Marvel – and said you know, if you ever see any jobs come up at Marvel, let me know and the Monday night he actually phoned me up and said 'there's a job going', phone Jenny O'Connell who was manager and editor at Marvel [...], so I phoned her on the Tuesday and got an interview on the Wednesday, went for the interview on the Wednesday and they offered me the job there and then, so it was just one of those strange quirks of fate.

It all just came together suddenly?

Exactly, I mean, the Tuesday night I spent running around because I didn't have a portfolio as such, I spent the Tuesday running around in my car to get all my artwork back from people so I could drum up a portfolio, but yeah, it was really just luck.

And never looked back since then?

Yeah, I think there were probably things that I could have done differently in my comics career, but generally I was pretty happy with it... I mean, I was made redundant from Marvel under sort of difficult circumstances because when Paul Neary took over we had very different views on how – I was senior editor of what was colloquially known as 'the boys action department' – and he was very much, he wanted Wolverine and the X-Men in everything, whereas I felt that we should have been taking the Vertigo route, it was known that that was what British writers did. At the time he wanted us to develop a line of US-style comics, and we just obviously developed a serious creative difference over it that led to me being made redundant...

Right, harsh. I think you were proved right in the long run though...

Yeah, some people – I remember Gary Leach phoning me up when Marvel UK more or less folded and saying 'you must feel vindicated', but it was just kind of sad because it needn't have been that way, we could have actually really made a stab at it because we had a really excellent stable of writers and artists, but everything just ended up looking the same, it was homogenized in the worst way that Marvel was doing it at the time.

Yeah, I guess that it quite often – well, not to say quite often the case, that's a bit unfair as well – but it does seem that you tend to get a run... it's like other industries in that sense as well, you tend a run of something, you'll get one sort of horror films and then suddenly everyone's making horror films or whatever...

Yeah, it is a sad thing. I always remember Tom DeFalco, who I knew fairly well, I used to see him quite a lot when he came over to Marvel UK and we used to go out... I remember him telling me that he, I think Marvel had this very high opinion of themselves as being sort of like untouchable in terms of like their success in the comics industry and that, and then when people like, when Todd McFarlane and Jim Lee and all those guys went off to set up Image, he was just like 'it'll never last, it's not gonna happen, because the comic readers are only interested in the characters, they're not interested in the creators' – you know, they were obviously shown the door fairly quickly when the first issues of Spawn and WILDCATS were selling unbelievable amounts of issues, you know, sort of record-breaking numbers...

Yeah, I think it really has changed in that way, so now we have this sort of star creator kind of thing...

Yeah, I still think that was always there, but obviously it got worse as time went on... because even when Todd McFarlane was doing Spiderman, you know, that was generating huge interest, and when Jim Lee was doing things like the Punisher and that kind of thing, I always thought at the time that that never made any sense to me because I used to follow creators, you know, you would pick up a book because it was drawn by an artist whose stuff you really

liked, that kind of thing, so that logic never really rang true with me. I mean, I also remember Tom DeFalco telling me that Dark Horse wouldn't last a year, but again, you know, he was not particularly... looking into the future, the crystal ball thing, gazing left a lot to be desired I think.

I think the industry, the American industry, just got very complacent, around the silver age, the years before it all kicked off with Miller and everyone else starting it all over again; I think Marvel, particularly, just had the monopoly on superheroes didn't they...

Yeah, I mean DC obviously had their own set, but they were kind of like... I think DC seemed to have, there was a general feeling that most people preferred to work for DC because they seemed to treat their creators a lot better, and give them a better idea of what happened, what was going on, whereas it was like Marvel, it was kind of like the decline of the Roman Empire, you know, they just became complacent and decadent, you know, they just thought 'we don't need to do anything, we're fine as we are' sort of thing, and then people like Image came along and just tore the whole thing down.

Yeah, that sounds fair. I was thinking about stuff you were saying has kind of changed while you've been working over the last 20 years – you've gone from doing to the separatists stuff to the colourist stuff, to the illustrative stuff and so on, so you've touched on all of it really, so you were talking in the interview about the technical processes of the colour sorting and the separating, from manual to computerised – have things like that made a big difference do you think?

Yeah, I mean it's kind of like there are certain skills that are now almost extinct, the notion – because, I mean, when we used to do colour separation that was just almost an extension of handpainting, but you see very little in the way of actually painted artwork any more, and the same with lettering, it's a dying art, you'd have people that used to actually... it was kind of strange because I got sent some pages of a series I did with Dark Horse recently by the artist and it was quite old so it had all the old lettering on where we used to use sticky paper and the lines would be hand drawn and hand lettered, and the guy looking at the artwork would just go '[...] what's this?' – you know, they couldn't quite grasp that, no, you don't do it on computers, people actually used to handletter the artwork. It was like the other day, a while back, I was laughing because someone came out and said to me 'what is a [ink] code?' – one of the designers in Titan – and I was like 'you don't know what a [zip tone] is?' and they were like 'no', and I said well, it was like LetraSet, that you used to use to do colour separation and that kind of thing, and I said 'why did you ask me?' and they said 'well we figured you'd be the only person old enough to actually know what it was. And I don't know whether to be insulted by that or not, but it does kind of prove that there are some things now that are almost arcane, you know, you've just got to think that these art forms are now extinct, nobody's going to do it like any more.

Yeah, just this whole technique of combining colours to get the ones you can't match and things like that, I mean, do you get a, not a much more professional-looking product, but do you get a different-looking product from the computerised process?

Yeah, it's interesting because I've just done a review of *Revenge of the Sith* – the 'Art of' book – and one of the things that I've commented on in that was just, like, looking at it – I mean, it's a fabulous book, and gorgeous artwork, but again everything is starting to look the same, the people at Skywalker are obviously using all the same...

How ironic that's Lucas, really!

Yeah, you get the feeling that – someone actually said that to me, it's like, well probably George likes it that way so everybody does it that way – but it just means that now everything more or less looks the same; it all looks really gorgeous, it's really nice artwork and that, but it also looks more or less along the same lines as everything else...

Yeah, I mean when you have people manually doing the colourist's job – I mean, I've got no art experience whatsoever, I'm completely artistically brain dead, and it always kind of struck me as quite odd, I mean that you have somebody writing the script, but then you have a lot of people working on the artwork at once – is there any kind of collaborative thing going on between the illustrator and the colourist, or is it just dictated by...

Sometimes, it depends on the colourist – I remember talking to John Higgins about *Watchmen*, who was very instrumental in getting me into colouring, because he... I remember him saying very nice things about my colouring when was at Marvel and he really pushed me in that direction, and I kind of valued his opinion because he was the guy who had coloured, you know, he'd done *Watchmen* and I think he was... I mean, he was very good friends with Dave Gibbons and I think, you know, because they knew each other very well obviously Dave did give him outlines and if you ever read the *Watchmen* scripts you'll know that Alan Moore had very fixed ideas about what he wanted and very definite views on what would be on every page, and I think that obviously filtered down to John. But generally the colourists was more or less left to themselves – occasionally and artist would leave notes, you know, 'I see this being this colour' or whatever...

Yeah, 'I don't want it to turn out pink, it's got to be red', or whatever...

Yeah, that kind of thing, they kind of... It was all to do, obviously, with the colour separations you were more or less constrained by the technology, there was just some things that you just couldn't do within the realms of the technology, but you know, there was... it was like we were saying about the artists; there were certain artists whose stuff I used to love doing because it was so clear, the artwork was so crisp and open and you knew what you could do, but there were some artists who just didn't bother finishing lines and that kind of thing, and when you were doing hand separations you needed a line to follow. So sometimes it just used to drive me nuts because you'd be colouring away and then suddenly the artwork would more or less stop and you'd be like 'christ, where do I go from here' sort of thing... you'd have to sort of make it up or go back and draw the artwork in yourself. It was a strange process really.

So probably more kind of accidental collaboration back in those days then, just when you were forced to finish off the artwork?

Yeah. The other thing is as well because the colourist – even though, I mean we were doing colour, I started out as a colour separator – I mean, the actual separations were done by freelancers as well, there was a whole sort of other realm of freelancers at the time. We used to have guys – and some of them very strange people who seemed to walk in off the street and you got the feeling they were fuelling some kind of habit doing this stuff – and that was what they did, they would do their 9 sheet separations and then there were people... they'd say 'oh yeah I've got so-and-so doing that page' and your heart would sink because you'd know that, I mean from the editorial point of view, you would have to like go back and clean it up and that kind of thing because they just didn't do very good jobs, whereas there were some guys, if you were doing a particularly important title, there was some separators you would ask for specifically because you would know that they would, like, give it their all. And, you know, things like... we came up with little innovations to improve the separation methods and that – cos there was a thing in America, at Marvel, they basically had, like warehouses full of old women doing the separations; you kind of get the feeling it was some sort of kind of factory process, full of strange American women, and that was what they did all day, whereas we actually... we kind of sort of controlled it much more vigorously, we could sort of pick and choose who you wanted to do it...

OK, so it's become much more free in that sense – and also in terms of the computerisation, meaning I suppose that you've got a lot more options in terms of panel shapes and things like that...

Yeah, I mean that was always something that we used to debate about – the feeling was that there was this school of thought that said 'no no, keep within the frame', there were some artists that used to use the panel layouts almost as part of the artwork itself, but sometimes to the detriment of the storytelling, where you'd have absolutely no idea what was going on within the page – just like, hang on, wait a second, you know. We used to have what we'd call Buscema layouts, because John Buscema was a terrible guy for having strange layout where you couldn't actually... he would actually have to have arrows that followed the storytelling and we always tried to avoid that.

Yeah, I find them quite obtrusive actually, I've seen a couple of comics with little arrows telling you where...

Yeah, and I just kind of think, well the moment you do that you've failed as a storyteller; the moment you're having to point to where you've gotta go next it's like, well, you've screwed up as a storyteller. I think the thing is with things like computerisation is that it has, more or less brought everything in-house, because I remember like, a lot of the letterers, even when they switched to computer it didn't matter because people like Marvel or DC just brought it all in-house, they didn't need to send it out to people who could do it freelance, instead they just set up a computer in the corner and have someone just doing all the lettering, all they needed to do was buy in the typefaces, but people like Richard Starkin – do you know Richard Starkin?

No...

Well he set up ComiCraft, which are like the regular, you see a lot of their stuff in lettering [...SIDE 2 OF TAPE...] and they did very well, and then all of a sudden it all started sort of collapsing when people like Dark House and DC just started buying in all their lettering inhouse, it just became moot. And it's the same with colouring, a lot of people will have colourists on staff as well as editors, they just don't need to send it out any more to people.

Yeah, I suppose what you've got is a lot more creator and artist recognition, as opposed to 50 years ago, but you've kind of lost a lot of the freelance element?

Yeah, it's almost like they've trimmed the tail to sharpen the teeth, as it were, you don't really – there are some colourists that you can look at and it's like digital chameleon and that kind of thing, and you know that gone are the days of an individual colourist and an individual letterer, I think that it's just redundant now. Unless, of course, on those very rare occasions when you get someone hand colouring something... it was interesting when they first started doing computer colouring, because people were saying to me 'are you going to get a computer?' and at the time I was more or less moving away from the colouring anyway and it was just like 'no', and that's one of the things I really regret, I kind of think that I sort of should probably have followed that through.

Right, and that's when you were moving more into illustrating and writing?

Yeah, in a way it was almost like an enforced exodus, I kind of figured that I'm not going to be computer literate so I'll just go in that direction... but it was a lot to do with, as well, the fact that... the big problem I was having with all that was the fact that they were employing people who could use the computer as opposed to people who could colour, it kind of swung both ways. It's kind of like, I have the same problem with dinosaur art now [laughs], because the illustration stuff has more or less ground to a halt in terms of book stuff, because ever since things like *Walking with Dinosaurs* and *Jurassic Park*, people are just only interested in seeing computer-generated dinosaurs.

I guess when you've got the technology, it's like 'now we can make it move', that's what everyone wants to see...

Yeah, as opposed to... a couple of my friends who have written books on dinosaurs, sort of paleontologist types, and they just end up getting so frustrated because, you know, they're just employing illustrators who have no idea, and the artwork they're producing is, it may look OK in terms of computers, but in terms of dinosaurs it's just laughable! I remember there was a big Dawling-Kindersley one came out that this friend of mine had worked on, and he hated it – he hated every second, because he said, you know, the artist just had *no idea*, you'd sort of say, no no no, this is what we want, this is how it should be, and they were just like 'naaah, don't really want to do it that way, I'll do it this way'... and it just makes a mockery of the whole thing. It's like, they're not actually improving the state of artwork. So a lot of illustrators have fallen by the wayside, which is kind of ended up going back to Titan...

Yeah, sure. Just in terms of... I mean, you've said that... writing versus the illustrative side of it, you've said obviously you're more into the illustrating, being an artist and so

on – I was just thinking about what you were saying just now about the storytelling and the arrows from panels to panels, when you're planning – in terms of writing or illustrating the comics - do you plan visually, cos I'm just thinking about your work now?

Yeah, I mean I often used to do sketches for... I mean there was a couple... there was one particular series I remember I wrote with a guy called Andy Lanning, we did a series for Epic and the artist at the time I wasn't particularly enamoured with his stuff, I didn't really want to use him but it was almost like, I kind of got bamboozled into using him, but we ended up doing between us like virtual complete page roughs for him so that he knew exactly what he was going to be getting when he got the scripts, so it was almost like we did the work for him and all he had to do was sort of polish it up... and then there was some... I remember one series I did called *Hypersonic* which was like a fighter pilot type thing, I had very fixed ideas about how I wanted the dogfights to look, so I worked very closely with the artist and I actually drew sketches for him saying this is how I want each individual panel to look, and I think that... the guy who I was kinda writing it with said, you know, my scripts are very visual, and I think that was why, you know, I just had a sort of artistic eye for how I wanted things to look.

Yeah, I think that's probably a very fair assessment isn't it?

Yeah, you'd almost expect it.

I think it must be very hard to write something that you're not illustrating – have you ever written and illustrated anything?

Not really – there's a couple of little bits I used to do, I mean, nothing serious, I mean it's something that I would like to do if I ever got the chance, you know... I mean I still sort of circulate and occasionally things, you know, weird will appear and you think, 'oh well there's a possibility', but nothing has ever sort of come through at this stage.

But that would be something you'd want to do though – because I know you said you enjoy the collaborative aspect of the writing and I can see that just in terms of bouncing ideas...

It's also, like, a lack of confidence... I'm not a confident writer, I have big problems with plotting and that kind of thing, I'm OK... generally, when I was writing with my two regular guys, Dan Apbridge and John Luton, often I was the ideas man and we would be sitting there and I would come up to them and say 'wouldn't it be good if we could do this', you know, and I'd sort of reel off this idea, and Dan would be the one who'd go 'yeeeeeah...', you know, and then he'd come up with a really solid plot, and John was very good at characterisation so in some ways the three of us worked perfectly together because, you know, we'd feed off each other. But I think that, it's been a while... the last time we tried to collaborate it didn't work very well at all, I think we'd all kind of moved on since those days.

Getting set in your ways now?

Yeah, yeah... Dan's obviously very successful, but John is like me, he kind of moved away from it all really and now does other things, you know, he sort of maintains a cursory interest in comics and still knows everybody, but we've kind of more or less resigned ourselves to sort of never, you know, doing much in the way of creative stuff again.

Yeah, moving on... I'll let you go in a second, and thank you for your time and everything – but how is the move to magazines and so on at Titan?

It's been sort of a weird one for me, since books were much more sedentary, you know, you'd be talking in terms of months with deadlines and that kind of thing, and it'd almost sometimes be quite dull because you really didn't have much to do, I mean there'd be periods when it was kind of quiet, but...

Yeah, with the books and the trade paperbacks and that, was that very much the case that you'd just kind of get your instructions and get the whole package deal dictated?

Yeah, often we would do very little, other than occasionally draft promotional material and that kind of thing for our marketing department, but most of the stuff, like from DC and Dark Horse, we had nothing to do with – we were aware of it, but it was only the stuff that we generated ourselves, like the 'classics' lines, the sort of *Dan Dare*, *Modesty Blaise*, *James Bond*, and now we've just started doing very old stuff, sort of 50s and 60s, so *The Spider and Steel Core* collections, *Charlie's War* and that kind of thing, which are just real nostalgia fixes. And they were interesting – in fact I've just done a feature about that for a magazine, that was asking me what it was like to edit that kind of stuff, and the big problem being actually generating the material, you know, because you're talking about comics that were written before I was born. So you'd have to find someone who had the material to start with, and then would be willing to actually give up their hard earned, very rare, and very lucrative collections for us to scan, and you almost sort of became a sort of trader, you know, I was going out onto the internet looking for people and this kind of thing, so... that was interesting, that was a fun thing to do.

Yeah, definitely. But happy now, happy in the magazines?

Yeah, it's much more dynamic and you're working on much tighter deadlines but... people sort of kind of take the piss out of me because I have such a sort of a diametrically opposed set of titles, I'm doing the official RAF magazine, so hardcore aviation and that kind of thing...

...and *Spongebob Squarepants*, yeah?

And I do *Spongebob Squarepants*, which is just about, you know, as opposite as can be imagined!

Oh but that's gonna be huge mate, I have a theory about that, that's only gonna go from strength to strength I think...

Yeah, it's obviously different to *The Simpsons*, which is now the top selling comic in the country, we recently sort of passed *The Beano*, our regular title, and I do the best of...

That's crazy, *The Simpsons*, isn't it – on 4 times a day, and the best-selling comic, and wins every 'Best TV Show' category ever...

Yeah, I mean what's interesting about it is that, because we've got to know people like Matt Groening, and Bongo, who do the *Simpsons* comic, quite well, we've been given some interesting insights and stories about the whole sort of *Simpsons* phenomena – the fact that Matt Groening just doesn't, like, want to do it any more...

Yeah, I've heard this from other people...

Yeah, I mean, he's obviously had enough, and there was apparently, you know, deep resentment between him and Fox about *Futurama*, which he really wanted to carry on, but Fox weren't very keen so they kind of dumped it, and he was apparently very pissed off about it. But it does seem to be one of those things, it shows no sign of letting up, and as I said, you know, the comics that are just rolling ever on, and have now passed Beano and Dandy as the biggest selling comics in the country – even the ones I'm working on, *The Best of*, which is just actually re-collections of the collections that we have done previously, and they're still growing and getting bigger every month...

Re-collections – the next level of collections...

Yeah, it's interesting how it kind of went like that, but Spongebob, it'll be interesting to see how that goes, it'll be one of those things that it might be the case of the light that burns twice as bright burns half as long and it'll just burn out within a year or so, but it could be one of those things that sort of will go the distance.

It's interesting that it's all kind of quite Americanised as well now – is Spongebob American?

Yeah, it is – but it's interesting because it's another one, in some ways it's almost like the *Simpsons* in that it has a very sly humour to it, you know there were some jokes in it that just made me howl because you think 'no kid's gonna get that joke'.

Yeah, definitely.

It has been interesting because we've just had our first issue with a letters page, issue 3 came out last month, and we were just bombarded with letters, and my email inbox is always full of kids' artwork and this kind of thing, it's just become manic – it's definitely, hopefully gonna take a turn for the better. But I mean, we get things like, I printed a piece of artwork from a 22 year old girl, just because I thought 'that's great, you know, I've got to get that in, she's 22, god bless her, you've got to get that in...'

Ah it goes higher than that – I've got a group of friends who are obsessed with Spongebob, so that's an average age of pushing 30...

Really? [...] There is the fact that there is this sort of serious older contingent – in the same way with the Simpsons, I don't think it'll work in quite that way, I don't think we'll get the sort of serious fan base that the Simpsons has, but I think that Spongebob will hopefully do well.

Yeah, I hope the magazine continues to do well...

Yeah, we've got other things as well that I'd quite like to be getting on with now, but we shall see what happens I guess...

Indeed. Well, thank you very much – I appreciate your time, which has turned into a longer time than I anticipated, so I hope I haven't taken up too much of your day off...

No problem [laughs] – oh god no, it's nice – I always kind of feel like, you know, the grizzled veteran when I talk to guys at Titan, they were all sort of Thundercats and Transformers fans... the first day I was there I was walking through one of the rooms and some guy said to me 'are you Steve White' and I was like 'yeeeeeah' and he was like 'oh my god, I used to read *Transformers* when I was a kid' and it's like 'gee, thanks, that makes me feel so much better...'

I think that must be great though, you know, recognition...

Yeah, I mean it's kind of flattering in it's own way, you know, I have pedigree...

My brother collected all of the transformers magazines obsessively...

Yeah, it's funny, cos Simon, the writer, who is a good friend of mine, he keeps getting stopped in the streets and this kind of thing, and of course it's all gearing up for the movie now so, you know, he's hoping that one way or the other he will do well out of it, but it'll be interesting to see what happens, whether there'll be sudden resurgence of interest in it all again...

I would have hoped so, wouldn't you, cos kids' toys today just don't seem anywhere near as good, you know, I'm hoping for a whole new range of transformers...

Yeah, and obviously they're getting a lot better now that the technology improves, you'll be interested to see that... I know that they're obviously hoping to get more comics out of it and, you know, it'll be fun to do.

Yeah, should look great. Genius. Well, thank you very much, I really appreciate it...

No problem Julia. [...] I find it interesting to talk about because I remember when Dark Horse launched their imprint, they launched an imprint called Legends, which was basically people like Frank Miller, Mike Mignola, and various other really high powered comics creators doing this Vertigo style imprint and it bombed... so I kind of think 'there's only so many times you can do something before people start cottoning on to the fact that you're just trying to rip them off'.

Yeah, I think it's a case of getting there first, because I'm thinking of Marvel Max and stuff like that as well, you know, and that's very much along the same lines, to the point where it's got some of the same writers...

Yeah, it's interesting, because obviously Marvel have done fantastically well with the movies, you know, so they've got that cash cow now, it's like the number of *X-Men* titles you see... it's quite unreal, and it gets very confusing because there's a couple I've followed, but there are just so many I've just totally lost track of what's going on now, but I guess... DC are hoping to do well with *Batman* and *Superman* coming out...

Yeah, starting again... I'm quite looking forward to the new *Batman* actually...

Yeah, it looks – from the trailer – very good.

Well it can't be any worse than the last one...

No, no, I think that they realised that they'd really blown it with that one big time...

I just wonder how it happened, how can you get it so wrong... I was watching *Constantine* the other day, have you seen it?

No, I've not seen that.

Don't. If you like *Hellblazer* don't, anyway...

Yeah, that was the thing... it was really weird cos I used to read it originally, I've still got my old Titan collections from the early 80s, when it was Jamie Delano and John Ridgeway doing it and I used to really love it, but I got back into it a little while back and some people have sort of said to me, you know, 'don't go see the movie', you know... various people who I know who have seen *Sin City* say 'oh my god go and see it, it's fantastic'

Yeah, *Sin City* at least, as I hear it, looks absolutely beautiful...

Yeah, the 'Making of' book, which was in Forbidden Planet recently, was just like 'oh baby'...

Yeah, visually they seemed to get it exactly right, it looked absolutely beautiful...

Yeah, I think it helps that they've got Frank Miller directing and Robert Rodriguez is a huge comics fan... it's like the difference between *The Hulk* where I think, you know, Ang Lee was just in love with the idea of comics and he used all those, sort of, terrible screens, the scene breaks and that kind of things, it was just like 'hey, look, we're doing comics...' and it was just like 'no no no no, you're missing the point...'

Totally. I mean, *Spiderman* was OK, I thought...

Yeah, I mean I really enjoyed that, you know, and certainly the second one I thought was great, I thought Alfred Molina was brilliant as Doc Oc...

Yeah, him particularly...

Yeah, and I love the *X-Men* movies as well, and I think *X2* was... Hugh Jackman *is* Wolverine...

Yeah, I think he's managed to redefine that for most people, which is quite impressive...

Yeah, because Wolverine was always my favourite character, I mean... he and Daredevil were always... of course the *Daredevil* movie, let us never speak of it again, sort of thing...

Yeah, I'm inclined to agree there as well.

Yeah, a tragedy really...

Well Ben Affleck really, I'm just not convinced [...] [ENDS]