

An Interview with Karen Berger

Conducted in person, Bristol Comicon, 1pm, Sunday 11 May 2008

Julia Round

JULIA: OK, so just as a starting point really, I was reading some older stuff, and in one of the *Sequential Tart* interviews you gave you were talking about your work on *House of Mystery* the seeds for where Vertigo really started, and I wondered if you could expand on that in terms of specifically what elements were used, whether anthology, or horror, or...?

KAREN: Right, well *House of Mystery* was the first title I edited at DC and I was the new kid there, I was an assistant editor, and I was just sort of thrown the book by Paul Levitz, my boss, really to see if I could edit, and I guess I could (laughs). What was cool for me about that time was that it gave me the freedom to do continuity stories that were not entrapped in any previously known characters or storylines. I'm not a comics fan, I just sort of fell into the industry, so I was essentially just kind of working on short stories with different writers, with a bunch of new writers and a few older writers who I knew who were kind of helping me out, you know, helping me learn my craft. And so for me they were just kind of cool modern horror stories, and so for me it was really just like the germs of what Vertigo became. But I think it was the thought of using horror as a backdrop to tell stories about people in the world and, ultimately, I, you know it's kind of selfish, but as an editor I've always wanted to edit stories that I wanted to read myself. So that's kind of how it started, believe it or not.

JULIA: So you went from there and by the time Vertigo started you were editing five of the six titles, except *Doom Patrol*, and I read that this was included because it was of a similar sensibility, a similar ethos, so I was wondering about the selection of Vertigo titles and creators, was it kind of writer-led as opposed to artist-led?

KAREN: It was totally writer-led, and if anything it was really Alan Moore who changed the perception of writers in comics. He just turned the whole thing around, I mean he brought a respectability to the form, you know, by his sheer genius and talent and storytelling abilities. And such an intelligent and passionate human writer and he really showed that you could do comics that were, you know, literary, but modern and popular, but could really stand next to a great work of fiction, of prose fiction, and that really changed everything. There was really no going back after Alan did *Swamp Thing*, that's my feeling, and then *V for Vendetta* obviously sort of started before, and then finished with us, and *Watchmen*, obviously, was in a class of its own. But even before *Watchmen* he had already changed everything; he had already changed the game and, you know, then writers like Neil Gaiman and Grant Morrison, and Peter Milligan [...] and it just really changed. It was interesting that the Vertigo titles, or the books that became Vertigo, they were led by the ideas, by the writers really wanting to do something different in comic books, really wanting to shake up the status quo, really wanting to take the form and, you know, again, stretch it, stretch the boundaries of what you could do. When we first started Vertigo, the pre-Vertigo titles, they were characters that either were DC supernatural or horror characters, but they were either reinvented or updated for the times. And again, used as a backdrop to tell stories about the real world, the politics, the social issues, you know, relationships, just looking at the world in an odd perspective, and I guess it caught on. But what's really interesting is that the writers on those books became so popular, and the books that they did, Neil and Grant, really changed, ended up changing how superhero comics were done, and if you look at now,

twenty years later, superhero comics are pretty much writer-driven. And it's almost like, everyone saw Vertigo in terms of growing up the medium, and the influence of those writers and the writers that followed them is, when you think about it, is quite remarkable – I mean thinking about it objectively, as if I wasn't part of it, it's pretty cool.

JULIA: Well I find it fascinating that it has, you know, grown out of the dark side of the comics industry, and now it's almost flipped back and re-reflected the whole thing...

KAREN: Yeah, exactly. And it is a visual medium, and again, the artists...

JULIA: Yeah, I wondered whether there was a deliberate decision to create a different aesthetic for the Vertigo stuff, I thought a lot of the stuff, particularly *Sandman* was in the lead for that, but the others I thought had quite a range of sorts of artwork, there were a lot of painted covers and stuff like that, and I wondered whether that was a conscious decision...

KAREN: Sure, that was a very deliberate effort, we really just wanted to show different types of art styles too, and we thought that by using painted covers that really again just set the line apart visually on the stands. [...] And again, at the time, you know, it seems [...] now, especially as so many superhero covers tend to be painted, but at the time it was a big noticeable deal, and we felt like we really had to stand out, because we were competing against the strength of the superhero stuff, and no-one else was really doing it from a major company. There were a few small presses, but you know, that was a title here and a title there. And also to not have the DC bullet, the DC logo on the Vertigo books was a very very big deal and an argument that I won, obviously. And we still had the 'DC', you know, like a type treatment, initially, and then we just dropped the 'DC' and just had the 'Vertigo', because the brand became so strong. But in the beginning it was very important to not, if you put the DC bullet on it, people are gonna think it's gonna have too much superheroes in there, and you've gotta just go there.

JULIA: Sure, because it was quite a different thing to do – because you're DC, and I suppose Marvel would have got the same reaction. I appreciate it was very much in the small presses at the time, but was it different to do it from a large company – because of expectations attached to what you're putting out?

KAREN: D'you mean today, or - ?

JULIA: No, back then – expectations of what DC is, what is a DC comic – even though these comics are already out...

KAREN: Yeah, well I think because we sort of set the stage with the six titles that became Vertigo and a few creator-owned ones, like *Skreemer* and *World Without End*. We did a few creator-owned books, you know, the very first ones, before we even started Vertigo. And so I think people who were kind of in the know in comics were looking at Vertigo as the place where new stuff was spawned from. If anything, though, we sort of were typecast at that time as being very, you know, dark fantasy, or weird horror, and, you know, we all need labels, but I always would say 'Well, we're not really... Yeah, we do horror stories, but in a sense we're really telling real stories about real people'. Well, not real stories, but...

JULIA: ...Stories with a realistic basis, and I think that's the sort of thing that's coming across in superhero stories now as well. But it's interesting that you say that people like to put a label on it; when you mentioned Alan Moore earlier, I've read some quotes from Alan Moore saying that he felt that Vertigo was very much based on the bad mood he was in the 1980s...

KAREN: For fifteen minutes.

JULIA: ...and things like that...

KAREN: Or a stomach ache he had for fifteen minutes (laughs). It's a great line (pauses).

JULIA: But like you say, it's not simply dark fantasy or weird horror...

KAREN: And also what we really did has really expanded in terms of the genres. I mean, crime fiction, science fiction, real lives...

JULIA: And always quite subversively as well. Do you think that Vertigo does much – not meaning to put a label on it again – but, like, 'straight' genre work. Because almost all the genre fiction I read in Vertigo seems to be a twisted take on something or a combination of two genres – or something like *Preacher* which takes in all the genres all at once...

KAREN: If anything, you know, we're kind of going even further now where we're doing less genre work, or fewer genre works – especially in the original graphic novel side. We did this past year a book called *Sentences* [*The Life of M.F. Grimm*] which is a memoir of a rapper who is paralysed and his subsequent arrest for a drug deal, and how he got his life together after jail and stuff. A really remarkable story. And we just did a book called *Incognegro*, which is an original story, kind of like a period piece I guess; actually it's written by a bi-racial half-Caucasian, half-African-American novelist, Mat Johnson. And he wrote a story, *Incognegro*, is about an African-American reporter from Harlem in the 1940s who could pass as white and go down south and investigate lynchings. And that was based on Walter White who was the founder of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People] and actually did stuff like that, and there were reporters who did that, black reporters who could pass as white. So this story kind of takes that concept and, he ends up doing a thriller story, but it's very real-life based and, again, we don't have a genre to hang it on.

Jonathan Ames, who is a very popular contemporary American novelist, has just written a semi-autobiographical comic for us called *The Alcoholic*, with Dean Haspiel, who did Harvey Pekar's *The Quitter* [...] So, you know, we have publishing writers [...] *An Alcoholic*, a lot of it's true from Jonathan Ames' life, some of it isn't, but we're finding that, particularly in America, book publishers are into graphic novels like *Persepolis* and real-life based. And not everything needs to be a memoir, but here is such a hook, such a pull for people who don't read comics and I think, ultimately, if there is anything I always wanted Vertigo to do, even when I was editing *House of Mystery*, is that I've always wanted to get people who don't read comics to discover them, because that's what happened to me. I just fell into it, you know, another English major looking for a job, with a good art history background, and I like indie film, I like all kinds of film, but I love story. I discovered this marvellous medium, and I wanted to show that there were people who could show that you could tell any kind of

story in comics, don't ghettoise it into this adolescent male superhero niche, which was what dominated it. But I think it's finally starting to sink in – you know, in the late eighties we thought it was happening, with *Maus* and *Watchmen*...

JULIA: ...and then it kinda dropped off again...

KAREN: ...exactly. Because there wasn't enough material. There was a few things, you know, obviously Dixon was always doing stuff, but his stuff was more... And then *The Sandman* was obviously just a huge, huge thing. Is that where you started reading?

JULIA: It was, yeah.

KAREN: Yeah, I could tell.

JULIA: Yeah, I read my brother's *Sandman* comics and that's what happened ... So I came into it accidentally too, without any background whatsoever...

KAREN: *Sandman* has done so much, and actually *Y: The Last Man* as well. For a lot of women. And *Preacher*.

JULIA: Which is odd, that *Preacher* pulled in such a female audience – I almost preferred it to *Sandman* by the time I finished it. But it's odd that had such a female audience because, in a sense, it's almost a big kind of cocks-out, arm-waving, gun-toting...

KAREN: Yeah, but I think that Garth's strength as a writer is that he writes real people, he is such a wonderful ... he's got like the best ear for dialogue, seriously, one of the best ears for dialogue...

JULIA: And teamed with Steve Dillon, who is such an amazing artist he can actually make a conversation look interesting.

KAREN: Yeah, Steve as well. The nuances of expression that Steve is able to show, Steve is a brilliant, brilliant artist. And I think that Tulip was such a powerful character, but also I think their relationship, the ups and downs that play through, and ultimately the emotion and the love and the passion, it was so well done I think that's the part that just made the story ultimately as strong as it was, not just for women, but for men as well too. People don't think men respond to relationship stuff when they do.

JULIA: And as well the kind of packaging of it as the graphic novel in the book store, then. Can I ask you about this kind of move... because you've got Random House distributing in bookstores, so it's been quite a conscious move. I read that Vertigo put out more trades than any other label, and now you've been amping up your graphic novel output since 2007...

KAREN: Exactly. We're taking two editors and dedicating 99% of their time just to original graphic novels. Other editors will be doing them as well too, but it's really more out of the box stuff. We're still going to be producing the kind of stuff Vertigo is known for in terms of pushing the medium and really looking at what is working in terms of reaching out to the mainstream, like with *Persepolis*. Even something like, I don't know if you're aware of it,

The 9-11 Report that was adapted to graphic novel and published by Hill & Wang, which is an imprint of Farrar, Strauss & Giroux and it sold plus 200,000 copies when it came out a couple of years ago...

JULIA: Could you tell me a bit about what you have planned for Vertigo's future - will the move to take over the bookstores continue?! Or are there plans for web comics - obviously some older titles are now being offered in this way, but are you planning any online-only comics?

KAREN: Vertigo is seriously amping up its acquisitions of original graphic novels. While we're best known for our heavily character-based and real world explorations in genre fiction, we're expanding our publishing umbrella to include more memoir (the recent SENTENCES; THE LIFE OF MF GRIMM) non-fiction, and reality-based (CAIRO, INCONEGRO) and historical fiction. With our newly signed deal with Random House Distribution, we're perfectly poised to increase our presence in the large bookstore chains, as well as expanding our reach into independent stores and alternative bookselling arenas. Random House has a great reputation and great reach, and we're already seen significant sales increases in just a few months time.

Vertigo makes available first issues free on our website as well as previews of new series, but we have no current plans for producing original content for the web. ZUDA, an online publishing imprint of DC's, launched just last year, and there is some terrific work on the site. Check them out at zudacomics.com.

JULIA: Speaking more generally, in what ways do you think the demands of a new medium (the internet) will affect the evolution of comics?

I really do think that it's possible for a medium like comics to exist successfully in both print and online. Clearly, for creators, the web is a wonderful and egalitarian forum for storytelling and distribution. But it's a different reading experience, both tactiley and physically. I personally prefer curling up with an actual comic or graphic novel in my lap, than reading one online, but I'm sure for many younger readers, it's an interchangeable experience.