

Dan Jurgens is a writer and artist for DC Comics. He is most famously known for his long-running work on the Superman comic book of the 1990's including the award winning, Death of Superman. I spoke with Dan at length about his experience as a writer for the comic book world.

BRIEFLY, HOW DID YOU GET STARTED IN THE COMIC BUSINESS?

As a kid I always had an interest in comic books. Chiefly at that point I was interested in drawing and the art after I went through Minneapolis College of Art and Design, which was about ten years ago. Someone was traveling through town here from DC Comics and I showed them my portfolio and I started as an artist. A year and a half after that I started writing some of my own material as well.

SO YOU STARTED WRITING FOR DC COMICS AFTER YOU GOT HIRED AS AN ARTIST.

Yes, that's about it. The editor who I was working with he and I would talk over plot and story ideas which probably gives them a sense that you have some understanding of story structure. After that as I drew the story, I would constantly write dialogue notes in the margin of the pages for the writers to sort of follow and when that was done, all of a sudden they took notice and said, "well gee, this isn't that bad. Would you like to take a crack at it." And of course I did and went from there.

DID YOU READ SUPERMAN GROWING UP?

Well I'm thirty-three. And at that time by the time I got to be twelve years old Superman was kind of corny to me.

Passé?

I just didn't think the stories were that interesting. And I think even as a kid you have some appreciation of that. Superman wasn't interesting to me simply because he could easily get out of whatever he got into because he was so powerful. After that point I think I was always interested in Batman and some of the other characters.

DO YOU WRITE FOR ANY OTHER BOOKS OR JUST EXCLUSIVELY FOR SUPERMAN?

No. I also write and a title for DC called Justice League.

IS THAT HOW COMIC BOOKS GENERALLY WORK. WHAT YOU DRAW YOU WRITE OR VICE VERSA?

No. Actually its quite atypical. I would say if you pick up one-hundred comics on the stand, ninety of them would probably have been drawn by one guy and written by a totally different individual.

I SEE. YOU HAVE YOU OWN ARRAIGNMENT. WELL LAST YEAR THE COMIC BOOK HERO NORSTAR ADMITTED HE WAS GAY. DO YOU THINK COMIC BOOKS ARE BECOMING MORE POLITICALLY CORRECT OR EVEN RISKE?

I would say that comic books at least for the last twenty-five years have tried to deal with some issues of social importance and relevance. Certainly we've done the same kind of thing with Superman. I think there is that effort by and large to try and address some social issues and to try to communicate some of those ideas.

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD, OR HAVE YOU YOURSELF EVER WRITTEN ABOUT A TOPIC THAT WAS REJECTED FOR ANY REASON?

Gosh. I don't think I have. What happens is well; I've certainly been involved with things that have caused say, some sort of controversy.

ANYTHING IN SPECIFIC?

I didn't write this particular story, but I once drew a story in a title called, "Green Arrow" in which the main character ended up being involved with some sort of drug ring and strippers and all of that. And that just got a little controversial because one of the strippers was killed. In Superman we've dealt with homelessness, wife abuse, drinking and driving. None of which are particularly controversial, perhaps, notable, that Superman does do stories on teens and drinking because that does happen.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS YOU WOULD TONE DOWN OR STAY AWAY FROM WHEN WRITING?

I think the one thing I have always approached with a raised eyebrow is the topic of AIDS. I think I would have a hard time doing a story like that because frankly, I don't think DC would let me do the type of story I'd like to do about that. That perhaps is the only thing.

WELL WHAT LINES SHOULD A WRITER BE AWARE OF NOT TO CROSS WHEN SUBMITTING A WRITTEN PORTFOLIO?

It totally depends on what you want and who your audience will be. There is probably no absolute reader of comics, which means that you can walk into any comic shop these days and you will find fourteen year old kids there. You'll find thirty-five year olds, what we call blue collar workers. I mean there is no definite comic reader today. What you want write then is particularly defined by who you want your audience to be. If you want to write about adult topics, adult issues, in an adult fashion, you're likely to lose some of those fourteen year olds. That's fine. There's nothing wrong with. So I would say your material is governed by, somewhat, who you are talking to.

So if a person were to write a Batman story line or plot they would have to keep in mind which comic character they were writing for so they wouldn't write out of character.

And just other practical considerations such as Superman and the Batman titles as our most main stream comics are submitted to something called the Comic Code Authority which is sort of a, oh, I wouldn't say censorship board, but it was set up that way in the fifties. It's much, much looser than that now. And in order to get their seal of approval on the cover, somewhat like a rating in the movies, you have to be conscious of that. One the other hand, DC also publishes plenty of Batman material without

the seal of approval on it. They don't even submit it to the Comic Code Authority which means that you could, if you wanted to, address topics of a more mature theme or adult nature.

WELL WHO DETERMINES WHEN MATERIAL GETS SEND TO THE COMIC CODE AUTHORITY AND WHEN MATERIAL DOESN'T GET SENT TO THE CCA?

It's chiefly a question of whether or not it's a monthly comic book. For the most part Batman comes out as a monthly format in Batman and in detective comics. Those are submitted to the CCA. They also have another title called, "Batman: Legend of the Night," which is not submitted to the CCA. I don't believe. And they certainly do other things like graphic novels and special stories which are not submitted. If the editors feel it is important they may very well not submit it.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY IMPORANT?

If it's a story they feel they want to publish for whatever reason, if it's important to them in some fashion, they may not want to submit it. And there are certain formats that allow for that.

I SEE. SO THERE ARE CERTAIN GUIDELINES THAT REGULATE WHAT DOES AND WHAT DOESN'T NEED TO BE SUBMITTED TO THE CCA. I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU WRITE FROM YOUR HOME IN MINNESOTA, CAN YOU TELL ME HOW THAT CAME ABOUT?

I've never lived in the New York area. I can tell you the way it works which is just that thanks to the modern inventions of the fax machine, computers, telephones, and certainly Federal Express, it is quite possible to live outside the New York area. I started with DC as an artist. By the time I started writing it gave me all the personal contacts that I needed. In other words, they knew me. They didn't need to interview me or anything like that.

SO BEFORE YOU BOTH DREW AND WROTE SUPERMAN BY YOURSELF, A WRITER WOULD SEND HIS SCRIPT TO YOU AND YOU WOULD DRAW FROM HIS WRITINGS THE PANELS AND, IN TURN, YOU WOULD SEND THEM TO DC?

For the most part the writer would send his plot or his full script to the company first. They go through it, edit it, make whatever kind of changes they want, perhaps send it back to the writer for re-writes. And then it would come to me and I would draw the story. That's how most comics are created.

ARE THERE ANY DISADVANTAGES FROM WRITING FROM SUCH A DSITANCE?

I think there's advantages and disadvantages. Probably the main disadvantage is a sense of, well, let me back track a little bit. One of the realities of main stream comics when you write at one of the major companies is certainly a knowledge of what all the other characters are doing. When you're outside the office your sense of communication isn't as great as it would be if you were walking in everyday to find out what is happening with the other characters. At times it is important and at times it is not.

CHARACTERS AHT COME UP IN SUPERMAN?

No. Characters that show up in different titles in the same company. Like an awareness of what is happening to Flash, Batman, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman – it's somewhat necessary.

WHY IS THAT NECESSARY?

It's necessary because these characters all inhabit sort of a universe, where they constantly cross pollinate and interact. I'm trying to think of a good comparison. Um, certainly there have been times when on a couple of TV shows where one series has crossed over into another series: Happy Days and Laverne and Shirley to name an example off the top of my head. Well that sort of thing happens in comic books. Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, they all inhabit the same world. In other words, if all of a sudden Metropolis would be duped and wiped off the map that should be reflected in the other titles.

I SEE. WHAT ABOUT COLLABORATING?

The way it works on Superman titles is that there are four books, four Superman titles written each month. Yes, we collaborate. So in that sense what happens is we all go to New York, or somewhere in the country, sit down in a room together with the editor and artist and we hatch out the story ideas we have. We write a bunch of stuff on the board, we take a bunch down, put new stuff up. Later, as we go through and actually physically write the books once we're all retreated to our little offices or studios some place, that it's a matter of keeping quite tight contact and reading everything that the other individuals put out.

WHAT ABOUT WRITING ITSELF, DO YOU START WITH AN OUTLINE?

I work a little differently since I draw my own stories. What I write is, first of all, I will discuss with the editor. I'll say, here's what I think we should do for February, blah, blah, blah. We'll toss around ideas and I'll go back and write a plot outline. It's a little more detailed than an outline but it really conveys the emotions, the feeling, and the structure of the story. Once that's accepted by the editor then I actually draw the story and then add the dialogue to the story.

DO YOU PUT THE PLOT OUTSIDE ON INDEX CARDS, A COMPUTER?

What I do is I first take a sheet of paper keeping in mind comic books are twenty-two pages. So I first a large piece of paper and I draw twenty-two squares on it. That separates the story down into twenty-two units. I will write a description of each page into each box with a pencil and I will constantly erase and rewrite to try to chip elements around the story itself. It's important to do it that way because this is a very visual medium. As a writer you're kind of physical looking at what could be the twenty-two page comic book at that point rather than thinking of one long story narrative. Once you're accomplished that then you can start thinking about dramatic moments that occur within the story and that can highlight, you know, like every fourth page if that's what you want it to be. It's easier to visualize and come up with the climax that you are leaning toward or the big moment.

AS A WRITER, DO YOU HAVE TO DETERMINE HOW MANY BOXES THERE ARE ON EACH PAGE?

If I were writing a full script for another artist I would be doing that. Since I end up drawing my story I don't go that far at that point. You see, to me I don't separate the two jobs – the writing end of it and the drawing end. Since I do both I kind of blend them a little bit and I let the creative process fall through from one to another.

BUT WHEN YOU'RE WRITING FOR ANOTHER ARTIST YOU SHOULD BE KEEPING IN MIND HOW MANY BOXES WOULD BE ON EACH PAGE?

The boxes are called panels. And what I would do is that I wouldn't necessarily tie the artist down that much but I would give him a guide for each page that would give him some leeway of, say, four to six panels per page. This is depending on how he wants to draw the story.

HOW MANY REWRITES ARE GENERALLY DONE AND HOW MANY DIFFERENT DESKS DOES THE SCRIPT END UP ON?

Generally rewrites would always come back to the original writer in this industry. Or the editor might do it just for the sake of time. And by rewrites it depends on exactly what we are talking about. Once the plot has been accepted, rewriting of the story structure should never be needed at this point. Then there's just the matter of rewriting some dialogue which could be a major, major deal, or it could be seven words per page. The editor has the final OK.

WHO DETERMINES NEW CHARACTERS OR ANY NEW PERSONALITY TRAITS IN THE MAIN CHARACTER?

That is sort of arrived at by committee. Superman is a big enough character and could have major new traits. Let's say all of a sudden we wanted him to pack an AK47 and start to blow people away, that is nothing I can decide alone. That is nothing that any of the writers can decide alone. If it's a new character that you've created, of course, then there is much more leeway. As the creator you are presumed to, perhaps, know best or certainly have a little more say in what will finally happen.

HOW MANY WRITERS WORK ON SUPERMAN AT ANY ONE TIME?

There are four Superman titles which come out each month; Superman, Superman the Man of Steel, The Adventures of Superman, and Action Comics starring Superman. I do the one that is just plain Superman. I call it the adjective-less book. I'm the only writer. If there are any changes to be made on that series it involves myself and the editor.

SO WHAT HAPPENS IN ONE SERIES ISN'T NECESSARILY REFLECTED IN THE OTHER SERIES?

As a matter of fact it is. In some respects it's really like one long series. It could almost be called one comic book at times because the stories are interwoven that tightly which means we all collaborate a great deal more.

CAN YOU GIVE ME AN EXAMPLE WHEN THE SERIES ARE TIGHTLY INTERWOVEN YET HAD DIFFERENT STORIES?

Recently myself and one of the other books did a two-part story on wife abuse. We did that because it presents Superman with a problem in which he is quite powerless to deal with.

ARE THESE BOOKS SELF CONTAINED OR WOULD YOU HAVE TO READ THE OTHER TO FINISH THE STORY LINE?

In this case you would have to read both the books because where one ends the other story begins again and concludes in the other book.

WHAT ABOUT DIFFERENT WRITING TITLES?

In this business there really isn't any pecking order. There is usually one writer and if there happens to be two then it's simply listed with both writers' names.

DO YOU GET PAID PER PAGE, OR PER STORY?

There's a page rate in comics. Whatever your rate is at any particular company is your page rate on the titles. There are some contractual bonuses and royalties. So pay differs from person to person and from one company to another. Also it depends on who's been there the longest, whatever it might be. Smaller companies have a less per page rate but sometimes try to make it up to the writers in royalties. It's all over the map.

HOW ABOUT REPRINTS? HOW DOES PAY WORK THEN?

If the story is reprinted in the U.S. there are standard reprint rates as well as the potential of royalties if sales warrant. As far as overseas reprints and royalties on Superman, the writers don't get any money. However, if I created a new character called, Popsicalman for DC, in overseas there probably would be some money for that.

WOULD YOU GET ANY MONEY IF YOU CREATED A CHARACTER AND THEY MARKETED IT AS AN ACTION FIGURE?

If you created a character there would be some sort of licensing agreement between the writer and the company.

WHAT KIND OF CONTRACTS ARE AVAILABLE FOR COMIC BOOKS WRITERS?

Speaking chiefly of DC Comics, and I want to make that clear that I can't speak for all comic companies, at DC a couple of contracts are available. One is called continuity. This contract is when they would bring you in and you'd probably write, say, twelve issues of a certain character. At the end of the twelve issues they'd decide if they would renew you under contract. Again, there are a variety of contracts depending on you, your qualifications and the company.

WHAT ARE SOME MISTAKES A WRITER MAKES TRYING TO BREAK INTO THE INDUSTRY?

I think they try to do too much. I think every new writer who comes in has the greatest comic book story to tell and all of a sudden they start fashioning a story that will take a year to tell. I think, in

particular, of new writers in the industry lately that we've become such a visual society in terms of TV, movies and advertising that they come in and think they're writing screenplays and they're not, they're writing comic books. The most alarming thing is that a lot of them just don't understand this medium. They are somehow trying to write screen plays that fit on the page and the two of them are both wildly different disciplines.

CAN YOU TELL ME ASIDE FROM THE OBVIOUS, THE SUBLTE YET IMPORATNT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TV AND FILM WRITING AND COMIC WRITIING?

TV and film tend to be continual narrative. Where if you think about the structure of a comic book someone buys the product and sits down and reads it by turning page by page. The book itself is broken down to twenty-two pages and then subunits of five or six panels per page. That's a difference discipline then writing for a screen play. For example the elements of both time and of room are different. If you write a script of line in a screenplay about an army of three-thousand men marching up a hill, when they sit down to film it, it will take the same exact amount of footage, perhaps as two people talking in a diner. In a comic book to do the same sort of thing takes vastly more time to draw three-thousand men going over a hill then it would take to draw two people talking at diner. So you have to be careful about what and who you write or you will kill the drawer.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY FOR A WRITER TO BREAK INTO THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY?

The most frequent way for a writer to break in is that they found a small publisher to publish a small piece of their own work: usually in black and white and with a circulation of about seven-thousand. An editor would come across it somehow and give the writer a call. He'd ask them how they feel towards, say, Popsicalman and see what kind of ideas they would have for the book.

ARE THERE ANY UNIONS OR GUILDS FOR WRITERS?

No. From my understanding about the industry it's been flirted with from time to time but it never came to pass.

DO YOU FEEL SCHOOLING IS NECESSARY FOR WRITING FOR COMIC BOOKS?

It's like this with all youth, let's face it. Somewhere you have to find the tools to do the job. Chances are that's going to be in the educational form. On the other hand you never know when a twenty year old wonder kid will have all the stuff to just sit down and do it. You don't necessarily need school, however, that being said (laughter). But certainly ninety out of one-hundred do.

DOES THE INDUSTRY HAVE WRITER INTERNS?

I wouldn't call them writer interns, but each publisher tends to have editorial intern types of assistant editors and all of that. A lot of them end up leaving to go to freelancers and onto writers.

IS THE INDUSTRY OPEN TO SPECULATION SCRIPTS?

The have a submissions type of editor who will look at unknown writers works. It gets to be a bit of a long shot. Let's say they have an opening on a book, let's say, again, Popsicalman. The writer quits and the editor needs another writer. Chances are he won't be digging through piles of new submissions to find that new writer. Usually he finds someone in the industry whose work he respects and who he feels deserves the shot. It very well could be his assistant. Most writers tend to stick with a particular series for at least three years. I've been on Superman now since nineteen-eighty-seven.

WHAT ABOUT AGENTS IN THE INDUSTRY?

Agents are coming more and more into play in this industry and I think in a couple of years they'll be playing a larger role.

ARE THERE ANY AGENTS THAT DEAL WITH COMIC BOOK WRITING?

There is a place in California, I believe in LA, which deals with comic book artists. They're called Star Reach Productions.