

MODERN MASTERS VOLUME TWENTY-EIGHT:

ERIC POWELL



By Jorge Khoury and
Eric Nolen-Weathington

Modern Masters Volume Twenty-Eight:

ERIC POWELL

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Part 1 ■ A Guy Walks into a Book Signing...

MODERN MASTERS: How do you look back at your childhood? Is that pretty much what defines what you do today?

ERIC POWELL: I kind of think so. It's weird. I'm sure everyone says this, but your childhood through high school really forms who you're going to be down the road more than any other time in your life. Yeah, I had a pretty good childhood, but it's weird. I grew up in the rural South, and to me this place has always been kind of creepy. It's woods and sheds. Where I grew up looks like a backdrop for a '70s slasher horror movie. But even when I think about it now, this time of year [November] makes me think even more about it. The Fall is a pretty vivid childhood memory, when the trees are all kind of scraggly and dead, and there are leaves on the ground. Just old ramshackle sheds and things like that, and playing around in old barns and stuff. And it's just inherently creepy, and I think that atmosphere probably shaped the kind of content I find appealing.

MM: Do you have other siblings?

ERIC: Yeah, I have an older sister. [laughs] I could tell you a bunch of stories about how I tormented her as a kid. I have a twisted sense of humor, so my older sister took the brunt of lots of teasing. My room was right next to hers, so any time she would walk out I would sneak in there and take this one specific doll and move it around the room. Just subtly, at first, so she would start noticing that the thing had been moving. After a while it got to the point where she was like, "Are you moving the doll?" Of course I denied it. "No, it's not me. I don't know what you're talking about." She ended up throwing it away. But it was my job to take out

the trash, so I saw it and put it back in her room. [laughter] That's a typical story of how I used to just terrorize her.

MM: Would she often babysit you?

ERIC: Yeah. We didn't really have babysitters. Back then you got left home by yourself when you were kind of young and you could go down the highway sitting in the back of a pickup truck, which you can't do now.

MM: So the television became your babysitter?

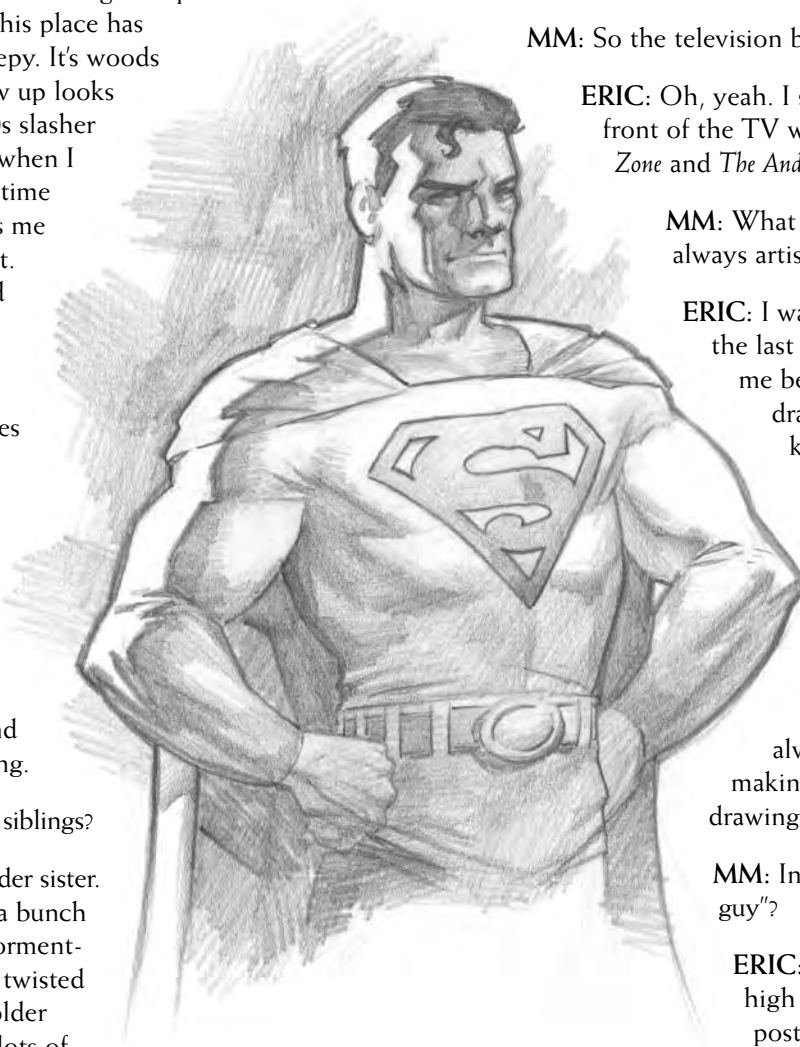
ERIC: Oh, yeah. I spent a lot of time sitting in front of the TV watching reruns of *The Twilight Zone* and *The Andy Griffith Show*.

MM: What got you into art? Were you always artistically inclined?

ERIC: I was always drawing. One of the last things my grandmother gave me before she passed away was a drawing I did as a very young kid. It's the earliest drawing of mine I have. It's Superman flying through the air, and a plane getting struck by lightning, on fire and stuff. I was probably three or four when I drew it. I don't remember a time when I wasn't drawing. I was always drawing and always making up stories to go with the drawings.

MM: In school you were the "art guy"?

ERIC: Yeah, especially in junior high and high school. T-shirts and posters for my friends who had bands—stuff like that. I was always the guy they came to. Sometimes it got me in trouble, because I would [laughs] draw little things I probably wasn't supposed to. I remember one time one of my teachers' rooms had, I don't remember if it was the presidents or something lining the top of the room, but I think I drew Pinhead and stuck it up there with them. She went a long time without seeing it. And when they were electing class





Previous Page: Eric drew this preliminary Superman sketch in preparation for his three-issue run on *Action Comics*. This image was used as a starting point for the cover of *Action Comics* #855.

Left: A Defenders illo from Eric's sketchbooks.

Below: A Spider-Man pencil sketch from Eric's sketchbooks

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presidents I drew Judge Death from *Judge Dredd* in a "Judge Death for President" poster, a kind of gory poster. Some of the students were allowed to work in the school office, so a friend of mine who was working in the office stuck it in the office window with the other posters, and it was up there for a while before any of the faculty noticed it, so we kind of got in trouble for that.

MM: Did you ever think of studying film at any point, or was comics it for you?

ERIC: I really wanted to do special effects make-up at one point, but being in the middle of Tennessee.... When you live just outside of Nashville and you've never really been out of the state very much, going to Hollywood and learning how to do make-up, effects, and stuff didn't really seem very realistic.

MM: We were growing up in a time when there were guys making it look like you could do it. If you look at *Clerks*, you'd think, "Anyone can do that." It wasn't inconceivable. Robert Rodriguez wrote that book [*Rebel without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player*] where for \$5,000 you could make your own film.

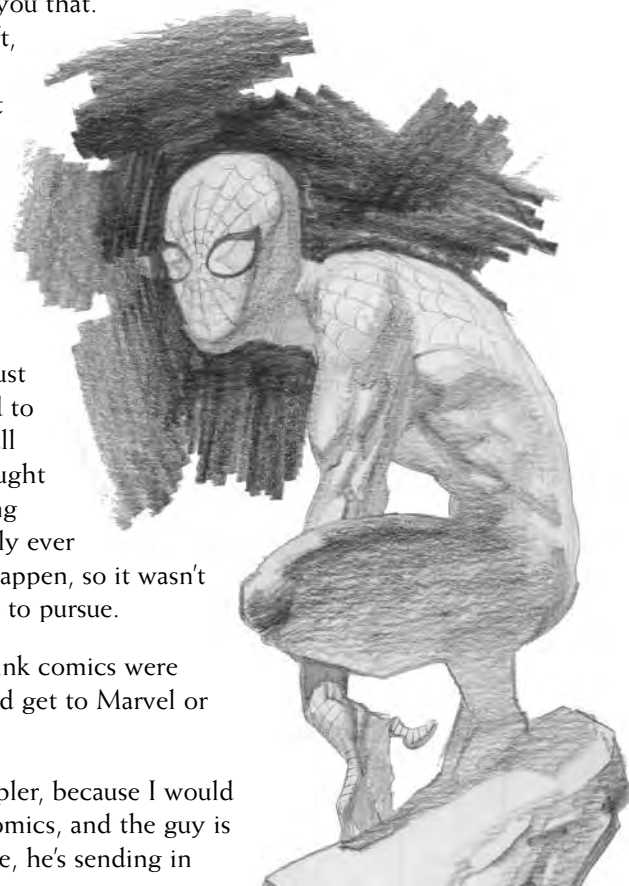
ERIC: That stuff came right as I was getting out of school; I didn't really catch on to any

of that while I was in school. So to me it seemed like making films was just unachievable. I thought you had to have some special "in" somewhere so that you could get into a school that would teach you that.

Or that it was a tradecraft, like you would have to live in the same town that Rick Baker lived in and then somehow know him, and then he would teach you and you would get a job. I felt like it wasn't something that you could discover how to do yourself and just work to achieve. You had to somehow mysteriously fall into it. I never really thought directing a movie or doing special effects would really ever be anything that would happen, so it wasn't anything that I ever tried to pursue.

MM: What made you think comics were achievable, that you could get to Marvel or DC?

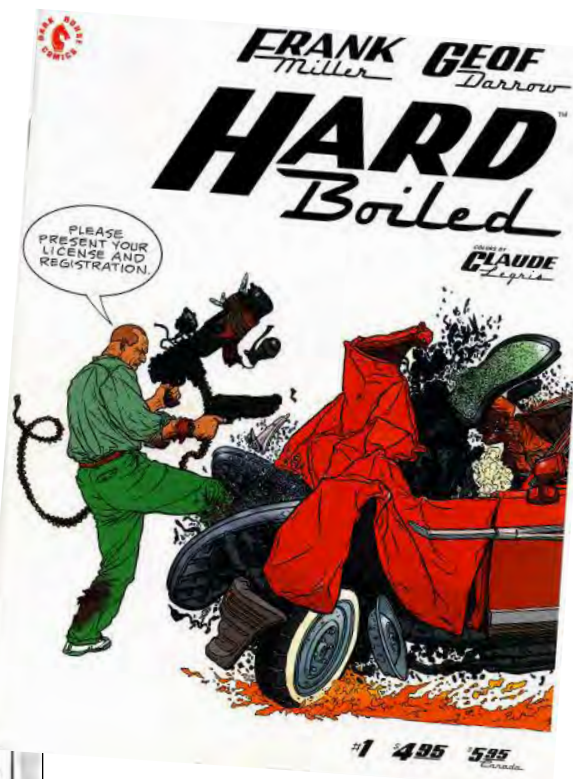
ERIC: It just seemed simpler, because I would read a magazine about comics, and the guy is like, he's working at home, he's sending in



the pages, all that going through FedEx. I could do that. I could draw at home and FedEx pages to the publisher and I wouldn't have to live in New York or L.A. or anything like that. So it seemed more achievable, and the fact that I could do it all by myself—I didn't need a film crew to go out and make something. I could sit at my table and pencil and ink a comic and not need any other assistance. It just seemed like an easier goal to reach. Plus, I loved comics, and I'm kind of introverted, so the idea of sitting in my room by myself and doing a book seemed appealing and less stressful than trying to go out and do something else.

MM: When did it become obsessive that you wanted to get into comics? Straight out of high school?

ERIC: Well, I'm one of those guys that grew up with comics and just let it go and rediscovered it later on. When I was in junior high I had this friend, Andy Day, who was into comics. I can't remember what books he loaned me, but I'm drawing all this crazy, weird stuff, and he goes, "Do you like comics?" And I said, "Well, I don't have any, but,



yeah, I kind of like comics." And he started telling me about this stuff he was reading, and it was so—this was after *Dark Knight Returns* and comics were getting grittier. I found it really cool, so he started letting me borrow some. And then another friend of mine who liked to draw, he let me borrow *Aliens vs. Predator* and *Hard Boiled*. I saw *Hard Boiled* and, just, "Oh, my God. You don't let your parents see this, right? How the hell did you even buy this?" It really blew me away, because as a teenage boy there's nothing better than an über-violent, crazy, oversexed comic, y'know? I didn't even know anything like that existed. It blew me away.

And then I was really getting into the Bernie Wrightson stuff. At that time he was doing *Batman: The Cult*. There are so many great books that I look back on from that time. Even if they weren't done specifically at that time, I was just discovering them then. Like *The Killing Joke* and Brian Bolland's other work, like his *Judge Dredd* stuff, and that Kent Williams and Jon J. Muth *Havok and Wolverine* mini-series.

MM: Who was the first artist you recognized by his art?

ERIC: That was Bernie Wrightson, because an uncle of mine had a bunch of *Swamp Thing* comics just sitting in his basement.

That sounds creepy, but it's not. [laughs] He had a bunch of *Swamp Thing* comics sitting in this little woodworking area in his basement, and I would go down there and play with my cousins and look through these comics. The style of it automatically drew me in. You've got all the light work that he does in there and all the feathering. All of my love for the EC stuff, and Frazetta, and Wally Wood, Jack Davis, and all the stuff that really influences me sprouted from Bernie Wrightson. I really got into Bernie, and I read stuff about him and his influences, and I just started looking for that stuff. It all flowered out from Bernie Wrightson.

MM: You certainly appreciate the way they used to do comics, like, the way Frazetta and Williamson would do comics, in that they'd sketch it out, and then they'd pose and photograph it, and then they'd draw it. It's a long, tedious process, I guess, to the guys today to do comics that way.

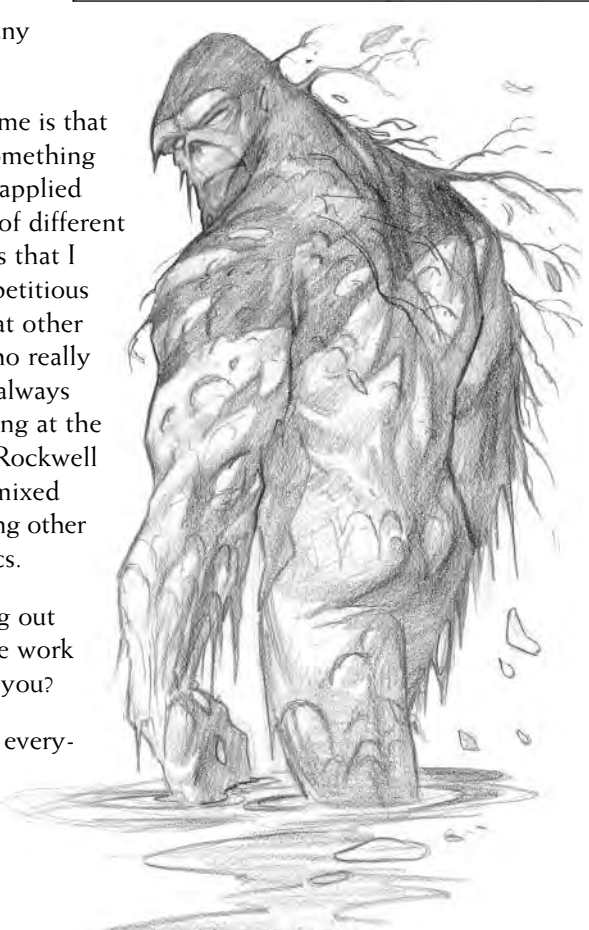
ERIC: I don't even think it's that thought out. The process is not what hits me about it. It's just that immediate impact of looking at the image. People just have different tastes, and that's what I'm drawn to. I don't know why. Will Eisner, Jack Davis, Wally Wood, Frazetta, Williamson, all that stuff. I think I just appreciate that those guys are real artists. You look at their work, they know the anatomy. They distort it, but they really know the stuff, and there's something about the way that they ink the pages. That classic comic art just appeals to me.

MM: You didn't go to art school. Were there any key art books that you read that helped you?

ERIC: Well, I think the thing that really helps me is that I'm kind of overly analytical. I really look at something and try to see how it works, and I think that I applied that to art. I really studied and looked at a lot of different kinds of art. Something that's also helped me is that I didn't just study comic art. I'm not being as repetitious as some people, I think, just because I looked at other types of art. I had a high school art teacher who really got me into the Renaissance painters. He was always letting me borrow his art books, so I was looking at the way they did things. And I'm a big [Norman] Rockwell fan, so I studied a lot of his work. And then I mixed comics with that, just experimenting and studying other people's work and not limiting myself to comics.

MM: What about the comics that were coming out when you were in high school, like the Jim Lee work and the Image style? Did that do anything for you?

ERIC: Oh, yeah, it did. I was right along with everybody else buying all the big stuff of the day, the Jim Lee and Todd McFarlane stuff.



Previous Page: Two of the big, early influences on Eric: *Hard Boiled* (issue #1 shown here) and *Swamp Thing* as drawn by Bernie Wrightson (original art for page 13 of issue #10 shown here).

Above: In 2006, Eric began a nine-issue run as the cover artist for *Swamp Thing*. Shown here are the pencils for the cover of issue #24 of the series.

Left: Sketch idea for the cover of *Swamp Thing* #29, Eric's last issue and the final issue of the series.

Swamp Thing™ and © DC Comics. *Hard Boiled*™ and © Frank Miller and Geof Darrow.

Interlude 1: Tom Sniegoski

MM: What do you remember about meeting Eric?

TOM SNEGOSKI: What's interesting is that when I first met him he hadn't gotten any work yet. I was doing a signing with Bernie Wrightson [in 1995], and I believe Ed McGuinness was there, too. This was one of Ed's first signing tours, and we'd been flown down there. Ed and I were promoting *Vampirella*, because Ed had just done an issue or two of the regular series with me. This guy approached the table with a portfolio. His wife was with him, holding a baby. I believe that was Eric's first child, Gage. He really looked sad. That's the one thing I remember. He'll poo-poo

it, though. He looked as though the world had been pulled out from underneath him. He just looked really bad. I said to him, "Hey, how are you doing? What's going on? Blah, blah, blah." He just stood there for a minute, then

lifted his portfolio and said, "Would you *please* look at this for me and tell me if I have a chance?" He just looked like, "Can you just tell me *something*? Am I wasting my time?" He just had that look. I will always look at portfolios. I love looking at portfolios. I love to see what new talent might be hiding out there, so I was more than happy to do that. But I saw this stuff that was just blowing my mind. It was really, really nice. He would probably say it wasn't all that good, but I gotta tell you something. I had done a lot of work in independent comics, and I'd worked with a lot of up and coming guys. This stuff just blew me away.

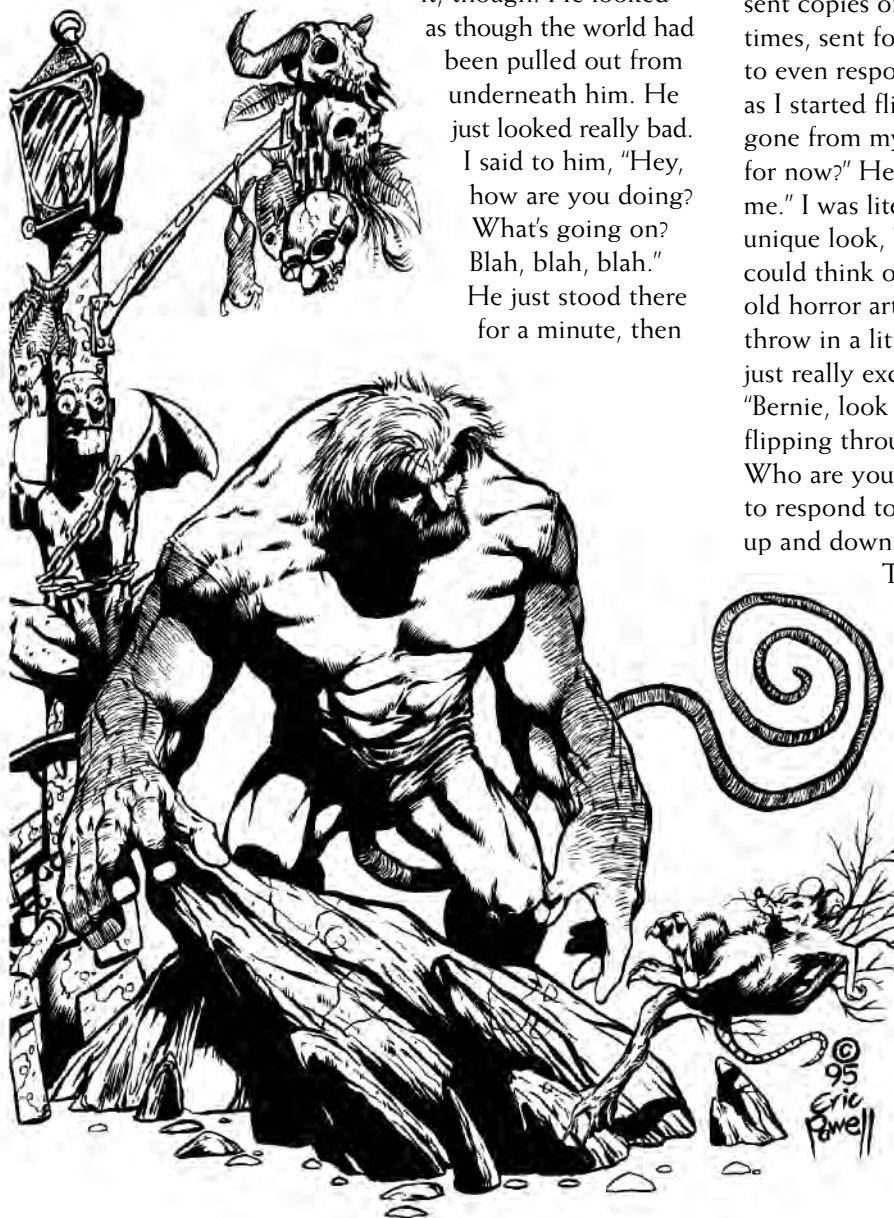
Now, as I'm opening the portfolio, he's telling me he'd sent copies of his work to all the major publishers multiple times, sent follow-up letters, and he couldn't get anybody to even respond. He'd just told me this seconds earlier, but as I started flipping these pages all of that was completely gone from my head, and I was like, "Who are you working for now?" He said, "Nobody. I can't get anybody to talk to me." I was literally dumbfounded, because he had such a unique look, but at the same time ridiculously familiar. All I could think of were people like Mike Ploog and a lot of the old horror artists from EC. Throw in a little Sam Kieth, throw in a little Jack Kirby. You know what I mean? It was just really exciting. Bernie was right next to me, so I said, "Bernie, look at this." I slide it over to Bernie, and Bernie's flipping through it saying, "Wow, this stuff is really nice. Who are you working for?" "Nobody. I can't get anybody to respond to my letters." Ed came over and was praising it up and down. I actually saw a glimmer of, "Oh, my God.

This is great. Somebody's actually talking to me." [laughs]

MM: You gave him hope.

TOM: How could you not? As a writer working in comics and trying to do all kinds of different projects, I saw him as the golden egg. So I gave him all my information right away and took information from him. When I got back to Massachusetts I was on the phone with him a day or two later saying, "What do you want to do? Let's do something." How could I let this go to waste?

We did up all kinds of crazy character designs for original ideas I had, but the first work—I had been doing some work for London Night Studios on a book



Part 2: "It Ain't the Name, It's the Rep"

MM: What's your earliest memory of the Goon? Where did he come from?

ERIC: Well, I remember doing the first drawing. The whole idea actually came from just the word "goon." I was trying to think of a creator-owned thing to do, because I just felt like I wasn't getting to do the stuff that I was good at and wanted to show what I could do. I had this thing I was doing, which was this ogre character that got sentenced to Earth, on probation or something like that, to hunt down monsters. It was a pretty weak idea. At one point I drew a flat cap on him, but it wasn't like a 1930s look, it was more of like a punk rock look. He had a leather jacket on, and I just put a flat cap on him. He had long hair sticking out of it and stuff. I thought that looked cool, but I didn't like the character.

One day I was just doodling around and working on some stuff, and I was thinking of all the stuff that I like—gangster movies, the 1930s, and all that stuff. The word "goon" just popped into my head, and I wondered if there was already a character called Goon. Pretty common slang term for a bad guy. But apparently not. I just started drawing this big, long-armed guy in a wife-beater with a flat cap on. I don't know why, but for some reason I put these giant buckteeth on him. [laughs] It was like, "Oh, no one will have the balls to put buckteeth on their main character, because it looks so goofy and stupid." I did three little drawings on one piece of paper. One was just a back shot, so it was his silhouette. I stole the pose from a Frazetta painting with some kind of a demon silhouette against the moon. I stole that pose and just drew this big, long-armed thug with a flat cap on, and beside that drawing I did a



profile shot of him with the big buckteeth, and then I did another drawing with his giant hand holding out a pistol, and that was the very first drawing I ever did on him.

I did a little synopsis of a story breakdown which was much more serious than what the book ended up being. It was all about this mob enforcer. It's kind of like Luca Brasi from *The Godfather* except in reverse. It wasn't his thug that was assassinated, it was his boss who was assassinated, and then he goes on a killing rampage to get revenge for his boss' death. And I was just like, "That's too serious. I want

this to be funny and fun, and I want to have fun drawing it," so I made it a little bit crazier.

MM: And this was all in the mid-'90s?

ERIC: Yeah, it was somewhere between '94 and '96. I don't remember exactly.

MM: So you spent five years thinking of stuff, developing this character? When you started at Avatar, did you have enough of the landscape ready?

ERIC: With Avatar, I gave them the first issue a year before the book even came out, so by the point that the

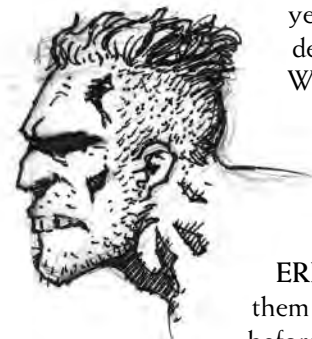
first issue did come out, I already had ideas for stuff. I'd been thinking about it for quite a while.

MM: You waited a year for it to come out?

ERIC: There was some reasoning they had behind it. They were going to do a bunch of new books or something, and I think that had something to do with it. I don't remember the exact reasoning, but I sure remember waiting a long time for it.

MM: Did you pitch them a series?

ERIC: Yeah, it was supposed to be a series, but it didn't go that way, and we parted ways.





ERIC: I didn't think it was given a chance. Three poorly produced issues—not just from a production standpoint, but on my part, too. This was the first book I had ever written myself and put out there. Plus, I was still developing my art. It wasn't the best stuff I'd ever done. It's pretty painful for me to look at those three books. I don't know... I just liked doing it. That's the main thing. I like doing the comic, and I like the characters. And it was the only platform where I could do anything I wanted to do.

MM: You just kept getting ideas for it?

ERIC: Exactly. I have a little notebook, and I get a funny idea and scribble it down. That's the great thing about *The Goon*. If there's something I want to draw—the issue I'm working on now, I wanted to draw a giant, demonic gorilla with glowing eyes. All right, I can work that in there somehow.

MM: Anything goes on Lonely Street, right? You can have zombies, you can have aliens, and nobody's going to be surprised.

ERIC: Not only can I do that, I can do any tone of story I want to do. I can do a really off-the-wall *Looney Tunes* kind of episode, or I can do something like *Chinatown*, which is really somber. It's just a great way to go back and forth and have a lot of freedom.

MM: Do you see the Goon being an extension of your personality? Is he saying the stuff you want to say sometimes?

ERIC: Oh, there's definitely stuff in there I wanted to say to people. [laughs] I've never murdered anyone with a hammer, so I can't say it's too much of an extension of my personality, but I think anyone who writes anything, there's always a little bit of themselves that they put into the characters. I vent in some ways in the comic. [laughs] I know that I vent a lot. There are some jokes in there that are aimed toward stuff that's pissing me off at the time.

MM: The Goon can't ever love a woman, because it will always be a downfall.

ERIC: Yeah, he's cursed. He's cursed. The whole last story arc that I did before we just relaunched was about him realizing and expecting that he's never going to be happy. And he's come to the point where he's like, "All right, that's my lot. So be it."

MM: And Franky is just insane. There are no rules for him, are there?

ERIC: He's Joe Pesci from *Goodfellas*. He's just going to stab you in the face with a pen. He's extremely loyal to his friend and would kill for him. But that's his only redeeming factor. [laughs]

MM: When you started, did you have the idea that, "I could take this concept to a hundred issues"? Did you have your *Goon* stories mapped out?

Above: Design sketch of the giant zombie chimp that appears in *The Goon* vol. 1, #1.

Right: Franky's look didn't come together as quickly as *Goon's*, as shown in these early design sketches.

Next Page Top: The first mention of Chinatown came at the end of the first issue. The basic story behind it was one of Eric's first ideas for the series, though he didn't get to tell the story until several years later.

Next Page Bottom: Unused art intended for the cover of Eric's first foray into self-publishing: *The Goon Color Special*.

The Goon™ and © Eric Powell.



ERIC: No, because it's not a concept book. It's really just the characters, and that's the reason I can do so many weird things with it, because you take these characters who are defined and you look at them. You don't even have to read anything that they say. The first time that you see them, you get the gist of what they're about. You have the big, burly guy and a little, mean-looking sidekick with beady eyes, and you can almost hear the conversations already. It makes it easy for me. You take these two guys and you plopp them down in any situation and you just let it go. The very first issue had a reference to Chinatown in it. The idea for *Chinatown* came from the first time I did a drawing of Goon and put scars on the side of his face. I was like, "Where did he get those? Oh, he got them from this bad thing that happened to him in Chinatown." So stuff kind of snowballs from there, but it's not like, "Here's how the arc is going to go."

Of course, [laughs] I do have a *Goon* project that—I don't know how to put it without giving stuff away. It kind of shows where things are going. It's not like the story has a beginning, middle, and end, because that's not really what I'm doing with it. I'm just letting the thing flow organically. But it is bleak. [laughs] The basis of the whole thing is that this is a town that has a curse on it, so nothing's going to be happy. I'll just say that. [laughs]



MM: Where'd you get the money to self-publish after *Avatar*?

ERIC: I got a \$5,000 loan from the bank. It was pretty frightening, actually, because I had no idea how I was going to pay it back. I was going to start mopping floors or something. Because, like I said, all my other work had dried up, and I got to the point where I felt, "I've got to give this one more shot, showing what I can do, and if it doesn't work, I'll at least know." If I was going to go out, I was at least going to show people what I was capable of. And by that point in time I had become a better artist and a better writer, so the issues that I self-published were much stronger all the way around, and I think that's really what propelled the book.

MM: Did you set a plan for yourself, in terms of marketing, for how you were going to get the word out? Did you have a business plan?

ERIC: Yeah, I did. I did some illustration work for a printer company that was trying to show off this new printer that they had just gotten. In exchange, I told them I didn't want any money, just free printing. So I got a ton of color comics—the *Albatross Color Special*—printed up for free, and I just sent them out everywhere. I found the address of every comic shop I could and wrote a letter and sent those books out everywhere. I think that helped out a lot, because so much independent stuff gets put out there, and I can understand why it's hard for shops to be able to order a lot of that stuff, because, along with all the good stuff that's out there, there's a lot of bad, and I'm sure they get burned a lot. I think it helped that the shops got to see the level of quality of the book before they decided whether they could sell it in their stores or not.

MM: How much work did you have ready? When you got that \$5,000, what did you do first?



Part 3: The Goon Rides a Dark Horse

MM: When I saw Hieronymous Alloy for the first time [in *The Goon* #2], I thought he was a Mexican wrestler. Are you ever going to have something like that in there? It seems like Goon should face-off with Mil Mascaras or someone like that.

ERIC: Yeah, I was actually thinking about doing something like that, but then Mignola did that *Hellboy* in Mexico story, so I'm not going to do it now, because it would just seem like I was copying him.

MM: It would be a natural fit.

ERIC: Yeah. Maybe down the road people will forget about the *Hellboy* story. [laughs]

MM: I liked the Spanish-speaking monster in *Goon* #6. Who does the Spanish dialogue for you?

ERIC: Oh, I do. Me and www.freetranslations.com. [laughs] And this is just me being a jerk. I wanted to get someone to try to translate the Spanish and then not be able to translate it. So it starts out as gibberish. It starts out as, "That monkey swine spanked my chicken." And then I translate it through freetranslations.com, which, I mean, it's a website, so it's not going to translate it perfectly. I take a sentence that doesn't make any sense and run it through a bad translation, so it *really* doesn't make any sense. Some people actually got mad about it. This guy was telling me, he'd taken it up to his friend at work who's Latino and asked, "Hey, what does this say?" And the guy was like,



"It doesn't make any sense. He's a total idiot that can't speak Spanish." I replied, "Yeah, I know I can't speak Spanish. It's supposed to be funny."

MM: It felt like you had a lot of fun with the football issue [*The Goon* #9]? I think that was one of your best stories.

ERIC: Well, I'm a big Green Bay Packers fan, so I thought the Goon's world needed its version of the Green Bay Packers. That was a lot of fun.

MM: That's one where we started seeing your art shift. It seemed like you were beginning to trust your storytelling a little more. You didn't over-render; you gave it a classic and nostalgic feel. Were you aiming for that? Were you looking at old football pictures from the '50s?

ERIC: I was. I was looking at a lot of old leather-helmet era football photos.

MM: They romanticized the game more then, right? They were these tough guys.

ERIC: Well, it's guys in leather helmets and wearing sweaters out there smearing each other in the mud. It was just grittier than today's football.

MM: The Christmas story you did [in *Goon* #10] was all in pencil. Were you trusting your pencils more?

ERIC: It's all just in context of the story and what I'm trying to get across. So if it's like, "This scene would work really well in pencil, because I want it to feel gritty," then I do that. It's all about setting a mood for the story.

MM: Where did Willie Nagel come from? He's a great character.

ERIC: Yeah, he's the only zombie I'm keeping around. All the other zombies are gone. At first, he was a throwaway character. I thought, "I should have a zombie just wander into the bar like, 'Hi, guys,' just oblivious to the fact that he shouldn't be there, and then the Goon kicks his butt and throws him out." It was just a little throwaway gag. And then the next issue, I was laying it out, and I thought I should have that same zombie come back wearing a human mask, like he's trying to sneak back in and get another drink. And then the Goon sets him on fire



and kicks him out again. I don't remember if it was that issue or the next one, I had him sneak into the bar again, and the Goon looks at him and says, "Forget it," and leaves him there. But that's a character that just totally grew out of nowhere. It wasn't like I had an idea for this guy I was going to throw in. It was just a throwaway gag, and I ended up liking him.

MM: Willie never took it personally. No matter how they treated him, he kept coming back.

ERIC: He was also the perfect way to explain how some of the zombies were talking and some of them were just brain dead. It came to me, Willie Nagel's got personality. That's why he's talking.

MM: I think that's one of your best lines, where he says some people were zombies to begin with.

ERIC: Yeah. Willie Nagel is sitting on a couch talking to Franky, and Franky's like, "How come you can talk and you're not a mumbling slackjaw like the rest of the zombies?" And Nagel says something like, "Well, I guess I wasn't a zombie when I was alive. I had personality, I was a free thinker, and it just kind of carried over when I died."

Previous Page: A pencil sketch of El Hombre del Legarto (the Lizardman) for the cover of *The Goon* #6, along with a panel from the story.

Above: An ink wash panel from *The Goon* #9, wherein Goon became the star halfback and linebacker for the local football team, The Cannons. In true time-ambiguous fashion, Eric drew the teams in equipment from the early to mid-1900s.

The Goon™ and © Eric Powell.



ERIC: I don't know. It's funny, I have a lot of really attractive women tell me that they have a crush on the Goon. Even yesterday, one of the burlesque performers who had a cameo in the last issue, Angie Pontani, was like, "Oh, throw me in *The Goon* anytime. I've got a crush on him." I think it's funny. I don't know. My girlfriend's very attractive, and I look like a lump of dirty laundry, so I don't know. Maybe it does happen.

MM: It was at this point when Dave Stewart came on board as the colorist. When you work with Dave, do you have a different mindset? His colors are really starting to come out.

ERIC: Dave is so good about catching an atmosphere that I really don't have to go over a whole lot with him. I gave him very basic, simple direction at the beginning, and then I've given him very few notes since. The only direction I gave him was that nothing should look new and no one should look healthy. I gave him a palette I wanted with lots of browns, lots of sepia, and he just ran with it. I never had to give him any other notes.

MM: When you're inking, do you render a little less now, telling yourself, "Dave can do something here"?



ERIC: I actually do, and we've been working on that lately, because I've been over-rendering. I would go in and do a bunch of pencil shading and washes, and then he comes back in and lays the colors, and separately they look good, but together, when it's printed, your stuff usually prints a little darker. It kind of muddies things up. So we've been going back and forth and talking about it. I've been pulling back a little bit on some of the washes and pencil tone in certain areas just so we're not muddying up the page. And the stuff we've been doing lately is much better.

MM: You can see the progression. It's one of the most vibrant comics out there right now.

ERIC: Yeah, it's all Dave. Issue #36 came out great. That's the one where we really started

Previous Page: Pencils and inks for page 105 of *Chinatown*. The friendship of Goon and Franky is one of the underlying themes of the series.

Below Left: Christmas card artwork featuring Eric and one of the Nashville Roller girls.

Below Right: The Pontani Sisters, led by Angie, track down Roxi Dlite. The Sisters and Ms. Dlite are all well known burlesque dancers.

The Goon™ and © Eric Powell.



Below: Labrazio makes his "return" known in this page from *The Goon* #22.

Next Page Top: Goon's short stint in prison gave Eric the opportunity to reference classic prison movies.

Next Page Bottom: A seven-panel page (a rare sight in *The Goon*) from Eric's collaboration with Evan Dorkin in *The Goon* #35.

The Goon™ and © Eric Powell.

talking about it and figuring out how to compromise our two styles and really meet in the middle, and I think we really started hitting our stride with that one.

MM: In 2008 you had a big marketing push with "The Year of the Goon." How did that come about, and did it work?

ERIC: We hit this level where we got a good readership, a really loyal fan base, and *The Goon* just kind of hovers at this spot. And I was like, "I really want to try to expand and get it out there to more people." I had this return of Labrazio story, a *Goon* story that was not just a one-off. Because this story was going to carry over into multiple issues, and because I felt that the bimonthly schedule was too long of a wait to get the story and

remember it, I decided to do it monthly, both to try to boost up readership and so that story would make a little bit more sense.

MM: You also did a lot of appearances and interviews. Did it pay off? In the end, did the sales bump up? What did you learn from that experience?

ERIC: I don't really know if going to shows helps your sales or not. You can sell a few books at the convention or whatever, but I really don't know. It's a hard thing to gauge whether or not it actually helps your sales.

MM: Basically, you're mostly meeting fans that you already have, right?

ERIC: Pretty much. I mean, they just come up and they want you to sign the books that they already have, so I'm not sure it does very much. I've gotten to the point where I don't really like conventions anymore. You get over them after a while. But when you're first starting out, and you're sitting in your room drawing comics, and you're there by yourself all the time, and then you go to a convention and people come up to you and tell you how much they like the work, it's really rewarding.

MM: "I'm not wasting my time."

ERIC: Exactly.

MM: You're not a *Twilight* fan, I take it. [laughs]

ERIC: No, not a fan of the *Twilight*. [laughs]

MM: You used the baseball scene in issue #34.

ERIC: I don't have Showtime, but they had a free weekend, so I was flipping channels, and they were showing the first *Twilight* movie. I'd heard it was really lame, but I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. I watched about half an hour of it before I had to turn it off. I turned it off right after it got to the baseball scene. I was like, "You have to be kidding me. Vampires playing baseball? Seriously? You thought this was a good idea?"

MM: In the rain!

ERIC: "We have to play in the rain, because we're so strong, it makes thunder!" It was the worst. [laughter] It was uncomfortable to look at.

MM: How did you like working with Evan Dorkin [*The Goon* #35]? It must have been weird for you, working with somebody else's script.



Part 4: Hollywood and the Big Two

MM: Is it true you get a lot of fan mail from prison inmates?

ERIC: Yeah. Yeah, I get a lot of fan mail from prison. [laughs]

MM: What do you think of that?

ERIC: I guess I'd want to laugh if I were in prison. Maybe it's because he's a thug and they can identify. I don't know. [laughs] But it's funny, all the mail I get from prison is the sweetest mail and so nice. It's odd, because I get some mail from regular comic book fans that's—to be honest, some of it's really rude and just mean-spirited and nasty. And then you get a letter from some guy in prison that makes you want to cry. It's an odd thing. It's an interesting little social experiment.

MM: That's why, in this industry, you have to do things for yourself. Because if you just look at the comics fans, all they seem to want is more Marvel and DC books. Reading up about the video you put together, I was surprised to see how many folks were, like, "How dare you speak badly about Marvel and DC?"

ERIC: It was a weird thing with the video. For the most part, it got a really positive response. But the people who got pissed off about it didn't want to hear anything I had to say, and probably don't even read my book anyway, because they're just sucked into the superhero universes and don't want to see anything else. That's where all the crap came from. And the argument got so twisted out of what I was trying to direct it towards. I was trying to get some unity in the comic book industry, to get creators and publishers and everyone to say, "Hey, we need new content. We can't keep just

reselling the same thing to people. Maybe that's why our industry keeps shrinking, because we're selling the same product over, and over, and over again." And I love that stuff. Jack Kirby's run on *Fantastic Four* is probably my favorite comic book series of all time. But we can't keep selling that. We have to create new product, just like any other industry, to keep people interested. In my humble opinion, that's the reason the comic industry has been shrinking for the past few decades is because we're just selling people the same stuff. And then the new stuff that comes out gets no real push. It has to have a movie or some other kind of tie-in to get people to even look at it.

MM: Or to get your story picked up on Newsarama or Comic Book Resources—if you're not Marvel or DC or some big-name creator, you're going to have a tough time getting coverage.

ERIC: Yeah. It's the truth. If you can say, "Well, I worked on *X-Men*, and I'm doing a book over here," then you might get some attention off of it. And there're so many shops out there that won't even carry your book unless it's for Marvel or DC. It's just sad.

MM: I saw a comment in your book where you were trying to get your book into Diamond's Top 100 chart. I would have thought that was automatic!

ERIC: That was a half-hearted joke. It's an attempt to boost my sales, while also making a joke about the fact that there's no way it's ever going to be in the Top 100.



MM: Why not? You're a good artist.

ERIC: Well, that's the sad state of the industry. I'm just using myself as an example, so I don't want this to come off as arrogant or anything, but my book has 13 Eisner nominations. It's a five-time Eisner Award-winner. In any other industry where there's that kind of critical recognition, you see a boost in the sales. And, as much as I think the Eisner Awards are vital to the industry, especially to—as Will Eisner put it—give some recognition to books not based on sales, it doesn't help, because people won't pay attention to it unless it's a Marvel or DC book. You cannot crack the Top 100 comic books unless you have some kind of tie-in, some kind of film or television show, or you have fame in some other way. It just doesn't happen. Honestly, I just bang my head against the wall, because I don't understand this business. Marvel and DC should be publishing creator-owned comics to revitalize the industry, too.

MM: You would think they would, because they have the money for it. But they don't.

ERIC: I understand that it's a completely new regime there, but Image Comics should have never happened. Marvel should have said, "You want to do your own book? We'll publish it." That's what book publishers do, right? They publish books. And instead, these two giant companies which are controlling the industry are really only concerned about making the quick buck and pushing these properties that they own. I'm not sure that even rates as a publishing company.

MM: It's more evident than ever now. They're not even trying anything different.

ERIC: Oh, yeah. Because the industry is in such a bad state right now, and you have comic shops closing left and right, and the amount of shelf space out there keeps shrinking and shrinking, so they're fighting for that limited space, and they're trying harder and harder to push everybody else out of the way.

MM: I think other publishers were concerned that DC's New 52 was going to take away shelf space from their books, because shops were ordering heavy on that and not ordering the independent books.

ERIC: It's true. It did happen. My sales dipped. My sales dipped when that launched.



And it's a shame, because we put out a great issue. It was the issue that Evan Dorkin wrote. I thought he did a great job, and I wanted it to get a lot of exposure and get out there because he wrote such a fun comic. And our sales dipped because it came out during the 52 relaunch.

MM: Are the collections where it's at for you nowadays?

ERIC: Yeah, if I were living off of the floppy comics, I would be broke. The collections are where I'm able to make a living.

MM: Were you surprised when Marvel and DC came calling? Did that mean you'd finally arrived?

Previous Page: A Fantastic Four drawing—complete with a Kirbyesque machine—from Eric's sketchbooks.
Above: A page from *The Goon* #39, which parodies the superhero tropes prevalent in today's comic books.

The Goon™ and © Eric Powell.
Fantastic Four, Reed Richards, Thing™ and © Marvel Characters, Inc.



This Page and Next:

Preliminary sketches and finished pencils for the cover of *Arkham Asylum: Living Hell #5*. A rough background for the image was drawn separately. Eric then combined it with several different preliminary figure sketches in Photoshop until he found the composition he liked best. Using that composition as his layout, Eric then did the finished pencil drawing shown on the opposite page, which he then painted over.

Magpie, Poison Ivy™ and © DC Comics.



ERIC: I remember the first job I was offered. Mark Chiarello called me and asked me if I wanted to do some Batman covers, and I was like, "Oh, my God! They actually called me!" That was a really awesome moment.

MM: You'd never met him before?

ERIC: I had never met him. That was a really nice moment, because someone was approaching me, and I wasn't the one begging for the work.

I just want to touch on this. Some people criticized me for making that video, saying, "Well, you worked for Marvel and DC. You're a hypocrite." No, I'm not. Because I'm sticking my neck out there. If I'm criticizing these guys, I'm also taking the risk that they're never going to offer me work again. I'm doing this because I want to help the business, and that means that I'm putting myself at risk for the sake of other people. So that really irritated me when people were saying I'm a hypocrite for taking work from Marvel and DC. That's not the case. I am very thankful for any job anyone has ever given me, but those guys made money off of my name as well. I can criticize them and still be appreciative that they gave me work.

MM: These are the same people who think if you don't work for Marvel or DC you can't survive as a comic book artist.

ERIC: Yeah, I mean, it's the same thing. I've had people come up to me at a convention and go, "Don't worry. One day you'll get a job at Marvel." That's the most insulting thing anyone has ever said to me at a con-

vention. "Don't worry. Just keep chugging away. One of these days you'll get another job at DC." That is so insulting and condescending. If I wanted to quit working on *The Goon* and go work on a superhero book, I think I could have already done that. I think I have enough name recognition at this point that I could have made the leap, if that's what I really wanted to do.

MM: You worked at Marvel early in your career. What books did you work on?

ERIC: I haven't done much for Marvel. I did some inking work on *Hulk* and *Black Panther*. That was actually on Kyle Hotz—Kyle was drawing that. Then I did some cover work for them, and a one-shot that was Devil Dinosaur versus the Hulk for *Marvel Monsters*.

MM: But before 2003?

ERIC: Just inking work before then.

MM: And it wasn't like they were looking for you, it was Kyle who helped you out.

ERIC: Not as an inker before I did *The Goon*. No, no one was looking for me.

MM: With both the Superman story and particularly the *Marvel Monsters* work, I felt they were capitalizing on you. You were now "Eric Powell."

ERIC: I don't know, that's hard to say. They might have had that project in mind before I came along. In fact, I think they offered the *Monsters* book to Mignola before me. But I was happy to take the job.



Part 5: Storytelling and the Creative Process

MM: Who are the five artists you feel were your biggest influences?

ERIC: As far as modern guys, I think my biggest influences have been Jeff Smith and Mike Mignola for a number of reasons. I mean, their writing and their art and their business model. They really inspired me to try to go out and do my own book. I followed their lead. With a lot of guys, they'll do a comic and build a little popularity, and then they'll jump off and go do some work for Marvel and DC to get a decent paycheck, but then the thing they created loses all its momentum. So I look at what those guys did. They stuck with one thing and kept their focus on that. I've followed that model of, "I'm going to stick with this book, get it off the ground, and make it as big as I can."

Will Eisner is a big influence, the way he really looked at the comic page in a different way. It's not just going to be a bunch of boxes. You see a lot of guys who try to say, "Oh, I'm thinking outside the box. Look at the way I'm designing this page." But you can't read it. [laughs] "Look, I have panels like shattered glass on this page! Isn't this cool?" Well, graphically, that's nice, but I can't read it. I can't follow it. Whereas Will Eisner could break down something and it still reads like a comic, but it doesn't look like a typical comic book page.



MM: That's three. [laughs]

ERIC: I'm narrowing it down. It's hard. Wrightson is definitely one. I was really influenced by him. Wally Wood and Jack Davis have to be in there. This is insanely hard. I'll say Wally Wood, Jack Davis, Frank Frazetta. [laughs] See, I can't narrow it down to five without, "Well, that guy's just as much of an influence as this guy." Then there's Kirby. And Alan Davis—his work has influenced me. So that's way more than five. [laughs]

MM: When you're in book mode, how do you go about your day? Do you follow a schedule? Do you shut off the phone?



ERIC: Well, it depends on which thing I'm working on at the time. When I'm writing, I have to turn everything off. I can't listen to music, I can't have the TV on as background noise. It has to be kind of quiet, otherwise I get distracted. And when I'm laying stuff out, it's usually structured. I have a schedule worked out where I need to get this many pages laid out today, I need to ink two pages this day. When I'm laying stuff out, I usually listen to music or something, but it still is something where I can't be too distracted, because I'm going back and forth between the script and concentrating on turning my stuff out. But once the stuff is on the paper, once there's something for me to go by and I'm just tightening up pencils or inking, I usually listen to audio books or the news or something like that—audio commentary for a movie.



MM: There's a lot of isolation, right?

ERIC: Yeah. If you're not cool with being by yourself a lot, you'd probably need to get another job. It's a pretty lonely existence. I understand why guys start studios, but, unfortunately, I live in the middle of nowhere, and there're not any other comic book artists around. I've actually thought about opening up a tattoo shop just so I would have a studio atmosphere. Starting a comic book studio in Tennessee isn't really a viable option. Now, if I was in Portland, it'd be much easier.

MM: Have you thought of relocating?

ERIC: I have, but the more time goes by, the more I'm just really happy where I am. No place is perfect, but I've been able to travel enough to know that I like the good things about where I live. The good things far outweigh the bad things.

MM: Is there anything you do to loosen up before you start penciling a page? Do you doodle a little beforehand?

ERIC: My day is kind of a slow build. When I sit at the table, it's not like I'm going a hundred miles an hour. I'll just kind of doodle around on a panel a little bit and get warmed up. I don't really pull out a sketchbook and do a couple of sketches to get fired up. To me, that feels like I'm wasting time. I have to get started. I don't dive right into a page and start going at it, but

I'll skip around on pages and go around a little bit to get warmed up. I usually don't start doing anything major on the pages until later in the day.

MM: So you don't doodle outside of your work?

ERIC: Oh, yeah. It's funny, I have a sketchbook compulsion. If I'm out somewhere, a bookstore or an art store, I always come out with a sketchbook. And I've got tons of sketchbooks I haven't even filled up yet, and probably won't be able to fill up, because I have so many.

MM: Do you ever go to the park or the mall to observe the scene?

ERIC: No, I might throw a sketchbook in my pocket if I know I'm going to be sitting somewhere for a while. Like, my girlfriend plays roller derby, so if I'm going to a roller derby bout, I have to be there early because she has to be there early, and I'll put one of the sketchbooks in my pocket and go have a beer and doodle a little something. Or if I'm just at home, a lot of the times I'll pull out a sketchbook.

MM: Have you done any life drawing classes?

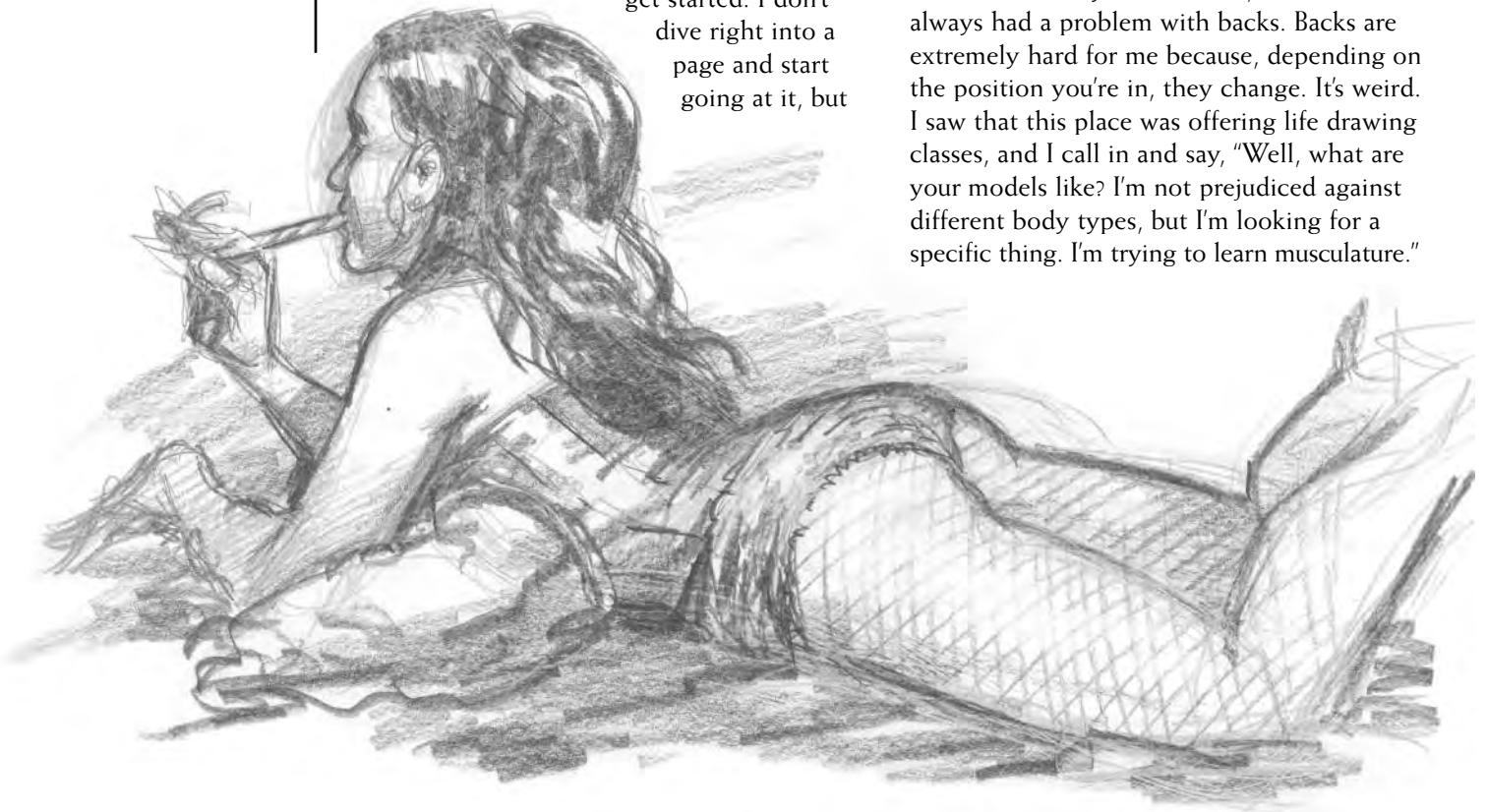
ERIC: I never went to college or anything, so I missed out on those life drawing classes. I have tried to take some locally, but they weren't very appealing. I remember one where I wanted to study muscle tone, and I've always had a problem with backs. Backs are extremely hard for me because, depending on the position you're in, they change. It's weird. I saw that this place was offering life drawing classes, and I call in and say, "Well, what are your models like? I'm not prejudiced against different body types, but I'm looking for a specific thing. I'm trying to learn musculature."

Above: A doodle from Eric's sketchbooks.

Below: One of Eric's life drawings.

Next Page: A study of a woman's back... among other things, along with a humorous sketch of who could have been his model at his first life drawing class.

Artwork™ and © Eric Powell.



And they're like, "Oh, yeah, our models are in great shape." So I went in, and it was a 70-year-old lady. If I was going in to study that body type, that would have been fine. But I was looking for someone who was muscular. I didn't go back to that class.

MM: What's your equipment of choice, pencil and brush-wise?



ERIC: Pencil, I just use a mechanical pencil. Brush, I use Winsor & Newton sable brushes. I use Winsor & Newton ink, which has lacquer in it, which isn't too good for your brushes, but it's the most dense ink I've been able to find. I also use Dr. Martin's watercolors to get some of the effects I want. I use black colored pencils to get some pencil tone over the inks and stuff like that.

MM: When you send the art to Dave Stewart, do you just send him scans?

ERIC: Yeah, I scan everything.

MM: What is the most challenging part of doing *The Goon* nowadays? Just sitting down and drawing it?

ERIC: Yeah. Like everyone else says, it's the blank page, and that's the hardest thing. The easiest thing is when the page is laid out, not even drawn, just laid out, so you have a roadmap of where you're going. I think I waste more time just staring at a blank page than anything else, trying to figure out what the hell I'm doing.

MM: When you write the book, where do you start? You said you don't really write.

ERIC: No, I think I work in a non-typical way. I don't work from a full script. I'll just go through and kind of map out the story. I do



Eric Powell



Art Gallery



Top: Wraparound cover art for *The Goon Fancy Pants Edition* vol. 2, a hardcover collection of *The Goon*.
Left: Cover art for a French collection of *The Goon*.
Above: Artwork for the 2009 DragonCon guest badges.

The Goon™ and © Eric Powell.



Below: Live bands, burlesque dancers, and comic books—now that’s a 10th Anniversary party!

Right: Cover art for *The Goon: Noir #2*. The *Noir* three-issue mini-series featured Goon stories written and drawn by other creators.

The Goon™ and © Eric Powell.



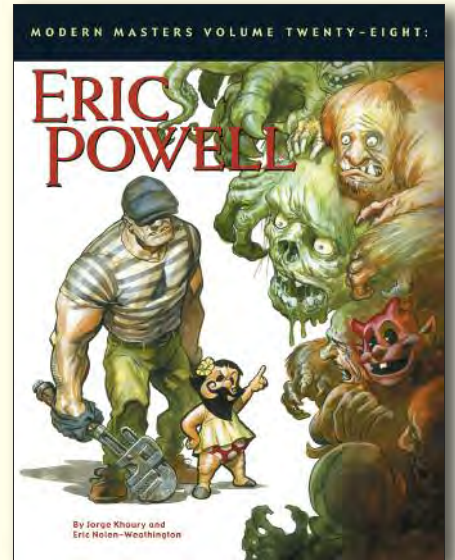


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