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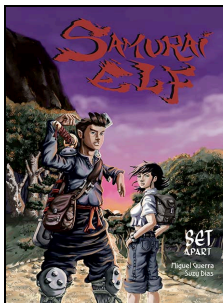


Special Features

Miguel Guerra- Illustrator and Novelist Extraordinaire

by Rico Montana

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I recently spoke with Miguel Guerra, illustrator and co-writer of his first graphic novel, "Samurai Elf: Set Apart." This isn't a story about a "Lord of the Rings" type elf, there is homage to martial arts films, a mix of technologies, and urban influences. Before we get into the details of "Samurai Elf," tell me about your professional background as an illustrator.

PUB:

Before we get into the details of "Samurai Elf," tell me about your professional background as an illustrator.

MG:

I think the term unconventional might be more accurate than "professional." I started out working on tombstones. I would carve the granite to create whatever illustration the family requested on the headstone. The money was good, but as you can imagine it was pretty depressing, although it did put things into perspective. I realized that we're not here for that long, so I decided to chase after my dream of drawing comics. I did a lot of freelancing jobs like designing logos, storyboards for independent films, pin ups, and even a short story. I spent most of my time reading and studying instructional art books. I practically slept with a pencil in my hand. Until the day I die, I'll be working on improving my art skills.

PUB:

What? You actually chiseled these images onto tombstones?

MG:

No, I used an air brushing technique.

PUB:

What was your inspiration for "Samurai Elf?"

MG :

I've spent past 8 years reading history and mythology from around the world. Myth and folklore is a treasure trove of ideas for writers. All of those influences are in the Samurai Elf series. "Set Apart" is the first of 7 graphic novels. As each volume is released, more influences from current events will begin to emerge. From a plot perspective, book one has similarities to Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, and Final Fantasy, but the similarities are more superficial (not that I'm knocking any of them). Those stories, like mine, play with archetypal heroes thrown into situations greater than them.

PUB:

There is a mix of ethnicities and even races in this book, what were you trying to show here, as opposed to a homogenous racial/ ethnic setting?

MG:

There was a conscious effort of a cultural mix – closer to what it was like in the ancient world. As the books go on there is going to be even more racial diversity. This mixing of ethnicities is nothing new. Spain, for example, was born out of a mixture of cultures.

PUB:

Why did you decide to go the self-publishing route?

MG:

In my experience, companies (despite what they say) are going after a particular look and/or a specific type of story. I was tired of writing and drawing stories in the hopes that someone would pick it up, only to be disappointed. I wanted to create my own story without having to worry about whether it fit into another person's vision. My wife, Suzy Dias, and I created our own company called Iberian Press (www.IberianPress.com) in order to publish our own work. She also happens to be my Co-Writer, and together we decided to take control of the process from start to finish. In the end, it was worth it. It's a wonderful feeling to be proud of something we completed ourselves.

PUB:

Since you have self-published, how are you promoting your book?

MG:

Suzy and I realize that we need to get our book into stores so people can actually read the damn thing (laughs). So, we decided to visit as many stores as possible in order to meet the owners and managers, show them copies of Samurai Elf and drop of posters, postcards, bookmarks, etc. So far, we're in major comic book stores in Toronto and New York, and all of the owners were extremely encouraging. In order to reach an even wider audience, we have a free eComic version of Samurai Elf available on www.IberianPress.com. The response has been overwhelming, so we'll have more free eComics available soon.

Things seem to be happening very quickly lately. We were just picked up by Tony Shenton, a Book Rep. who also represents industry heavy weights like Drawn and Quarterly, Fantagraphics, and NBM Publishing (where, coincidentally, Miguel also translates books from Spanish into English). We also have a small press table at the Comic-Con International in San Diego in July and we'll be at the SPX (Small Press Expo) later this year.

PUB:

"Samurai Elf" is set in a fantastical universe. Does that fictional universe develop as a course of the story finding its direction? How much is established from the start?

MG:

I do have an end goal for Samurai Elf. When I write, I tend to map out a skeleton or rough plot, and then flesh out the story. So, the entire story is already there, but I leave a lot of room for new ideas. I don't want to stifle the natural flow of the story. When you start to write and you hit that groove, the story seems to write itself. It's quite a ride!

PUB:

I know that you've studied martial arts, are there any other autobiographical elements here you want to talk about?

MG:

Ardan's training with Master Dwarf is indeed autobiographical. When I was a teenager I trained with my older brother, James. He was a slave driver! I channeled my memories of anger and impatience into Ardan. Too often, books and movies imply that the main character is somehow a 'natural' fighter. That without any training at all, the hero can kill 100 of the best warriors without breaking a sweat. I can't stand that! If you want to be good at anything, you have to work at it. I made sure that all of the moves depicted in Samurai Elf can actually be used in real life (although I don't recommend anyone trying them at home).

PUB:

A graphic novel is very much a balancing act, you have the ingredients of exposition, dialogue, and illustration. How do you handle this?

MG:

You're right, it's definitely a balancing act. I really cut my teeth on this book. Most of what I learned had to do with pacing the story using the panels and page layouts. It can affect the art and the pacing of the entire story. If you have too many panels, it can overwhelm the reader and kill the rhythm of the story. I also had to balance out the amount of dialogue. Luckily, I had Suzy to really narrow down what needed to be said and leave the rest out. We went for minimalism. Suzy edited the book many times to strip it down to only what was needed so the story hit all of its plot points and the characters' individual personalities came through. We both wanted the art to be the dominant force of the book – more show and less tell.

PUB:

You make a dedication to Will Eisner, the father of the graphic novel, whom or what else has inspired you?

MG:

Katsuhiro Otomo, famous for "Akira," and Kazuo Koike, the writer of many classics including "Lone Wolf and Cub," are two of the most fantastic storytellers I've ever come across. They taught me more about pacing and building suspense than anyone else. Masamune Shirow's "Ghost in the Shell" still blows my mind to this day. From Europe I'm always inspired by Moebius, Enki Bilal, and Jean-Claude Mézières.

Jack Kirby was my earliest influence. He created and drew classics like X-Men, Fantastic Four, Silver Surfer, Black Panther, the Avengers, etc. I'm still amazed at the amount of work he did and his incredible imagination. But my strongest inspiration for Samurai Elf was Japanese and European art, especially Osamu Tezuka, who is the godfather of Manga and Anime. I love his clean and rich story telling. He could convey the most complex ideas using the simplest of illustrations. He always reminds me to keep it simple.

PUB:

This is the first of seven books in the storyline of "Samurai Elf." When will the next book be released and what do we have to look forward to?

MG:

As each book is released, the story becomes darker and more intense. For anyone swift enough to notice, there are many clues throughout the entire series as to who Ardan is. I purposely designed the plot so it seems to head in one direction, but then turns into something completely different. So, readers be forewarned. I hate predictable plots and I intend to stay a few steps ahead of you at all times. I hope it's a fun ride.

I just finished the first draft for book 2 called, "Gathering Storm," which will be released in July 2007. As far as what to expect, we give you more background to answer questions from book 1. We develop characters like Master Dwarf, Jarl, Wulfston, and Bone and Clyde, provide more info on how the Horde operates, and explain a bit about the politics of the planet Tyr. I also introduce new characters like a sultry black market pirate called Catalina, and the Caretaker, a mad scientist type who works for Our Fury doing gruesome experiments.

PUB:

What's out there that you like that uses urban elements such as clothing, hip hop references, slang, etc.?

MG:

Well, there are a couple of things out there that catch my eye, such as Kid Robot and Tokyo Tribes. If there was something that used a graffiti style I'd pick that up – it's an untapped market.

To get look at "Samurai Elf: Set Apart" download a few pages of the e-comic version at <http://www.iberianpress.com/e-comics.html>.