

June 2010 - ANDY BRIGGS / Just Imagine

Born in Whiston, just outside Liverpool (“where absolutely *nothing* ever happened”), Andy Briggs has written film and TV screenplays, comic book scripts and novels, often all at the same time. He’s probably best known in the children’s publishing world for *Hero.com* and *Villain.net*, his two ‘parallel worlds’ superhero series from OUP.

Did you grow up a reader?

I grew up *able* to read, but just didn’t have the enthusiasm to do so, the ‘Dick and Jane’ type books I was given bored me...then I began to read *comic* books and *that* was what got me into reading, all the exciting stories. And mostly it was Marvel Comics, mostly written by Stan Lee, that I loved.

When did you realise you wanted to be a writer?

Me and my brother Pete, who’s seven years older than me, we always wanted to get into one of the creative industries - write, produce, direct, anything like that - and there were zero opportunities up there. I was always keener on writing and Pete wanted to be a director, and we were just about getting by when Pete wrote a spec script called *Alien vs Predator*, which started the whole ball rolling. It got him an agent and a lot of attention and he began to panic when the job offers started to come in because *he’d* never really wanted to write. So we began working together on such wonderful things as doing storylines for the *Highlander* TV show.

Around what time was this?

About 1992, 93...I was still at college studying Media Studies and Communications. I graduated and moved straight down to London and

started working with my brother on things like a middle draft¹ of the *Judge Dredd* movie - it was the Judge Death storyline all the fans wanted, but the film company decided to go with something the fans *didn't* want and therefore the film flopped.

We then did a middle draft of *Freddy vs Jason* for New Line Cinema - some of which was used, but the end guy gets all the credits...and then *Hellboy* came along and my brother went off to do that. He wrote the initial draft based on the original comic book characters and he got the screen story credit, along with [director] Guillermo del Toro. We didn't work together again until 2004.

What did you do in between?

I'd been writing, but also running my own multi-media company - Fluid Media - doing TV commercials, mainly for cable TV, as well as corporate videos and pop videos, which were good fun and I got to direct those. And I nearly became a whizz at 3D animation graphics.

No more movie work?

Especially in Britain it was a real struggle to get any film work, which meant I had to have a 'real job'. It was OK, it paid, but it was boring and so I also taught computer studies at night school...

Why?

Because it paid quite well! It was all about paying the bills at that time...and I also, somehow, managed to end up teaching Film Studies to French students...and in amongst all that I was also writing scripts, still trying to get the British thing going.

We had a project called *The Ferryman*, and we had Peter O'Toole and Louise Germaine, from a TV show called *Lipstick on Your Collar*, on board

¹ "A middle draft is where there have been writers on the project before, and there will be writers on after, and that's what happens in films, you get replaced constantly."

and had 80% of the money; but it was so difficult to get that last 20%, which meant it all fell through. The nearest it got to happening was a whole page article in *Hello!* Magazine on Louise in which she talked all about our movie...and then it all fell through - the curse of *Hello!*...

What was it that brought you and your brother back together in 2004?

Another film opportunity - *ForeverMan* for Paramount Studios. The producers were Robert Evans [*China Town*, *The Godfather*, *Love Story*] and Stan Lee...*the* Stan Lee, king of comic books!

You're a big fan of Mr Lee's - was this a project you'd put together so you could meet him?

No, it just happened...one day our agent told us about the project, we pitched and got through a few more stages, and we ended up on the Paramount lot in L.A., in Robert Evans's office, writing the script. Which meant we could pick up the phone [to call New York] and go 'Hi, Stan!' any time we wanted. It was my good fortune and luck to end up working with him...for me that's kind of completed the circle now and everything else is just a bonus.

Have any of these film projects you've been involved with actually made the big screen?

Elements of what we've done are in movies you can go and see, like *Freddy vs Jason*, where we had this very elaborate mix of Freddy and Jason's past and they used part of it. And *ForeverMan* is still in development at Paramount, it's not been cancelled; the problem with it is that it's a big budget movie and still waiting in the wings to go. And you can watch three movies I've done on the SyFy Channel: *Rise of the Gargoyle*, *Dark Relic* and *Ghost Town*, all of which are fun and get some of the channel's highest ratings.

We were supposed to shoot a film called *Legendary* last year in Iowa, but there was a problem with the funding and it now looks like we're going to be shooting this summer in Belfast. All the monsters have been built, so fingers crossed...

Just listening to you talk about all the projects you have on the go makes me feel I'm not trying hard enough - how many things do you usually have 'live' at any one time? A ballpark figure will do...

I've never really thought about it that way...I can tell you that now I'm finishing off a manuscript for a story called *The Irregulars* - I don't own it, I've just written it - and I'm starting the Tarzan book...I'm producing a movie called *Safe House* at the moment and I've recently finished a draft of the script for a movie which I went to Korea for in January. And I've just had a meeting today about a World War II movie I've written various drafts for; I got booted off the project because they wanted to go in a different direction, and now they've come back to me.

[Andy sits back and takes a breath...]

A producer/partner and I are talking to a TV company about developing the *Hero/Villain* TV show, and there's a thing called *Death Mask* which I'm writing; the character was created by Bob Layton [comic book artist, writer and editor, highly regarded for his work on *Iron Man*] and we are co-producing.

In a day, will you work on more than one project?

I try not to work on more than two things in any day. My prime project, the one with an *absolute* deadline looming up, will take all my day; in the evening I'll either try to switch off and move to producer mode, doodle around with some ideas or write a bit of the graphic novel - I'm doing one called *Dinocorps* at the moment - but if there's another deadline, I'll have a break and switch over to that.

Because I've got representation in the States, and most of my work is still out there, I normally *have* to stay awake till 2am because that's 6 o'clock LA; what I've discovered is that I get the work because it's easier for them to get hold of me, stuck in my house here at 2am, than it is to phone someone in LA. I'm probably more reachable than someone there!

What are you like as a writer?

I'm inherently lazy...

Yeah, right! [GM laughs out loud]

...it's true! I see the point, but I'm resentful that I have to write an entire manuscript and then *hope* a publisher will publish it. Buy on the idea! And that's where I really dug my heels in with *Hero.com*, because my agent [Julian Friedmann at Blake Friedmann] didn't want to put it out as I'd only written 60 or 80 pages. He flat refused to start with and then reluctantly he did and we got a bidding war. The writing only really comes in when I've sold an idea.

But the Tarzan thing, that's been *completely* different from anything else I've done...

Tell me about this project...

The creator of Tarzan, Edgar Rice Burroughs, died in 1950, and the law of copyright is a complete mess - different in the US, where Tarzan is in the public domain, like in Australia as well I think, unlike the rest of the world. And then 'Tarzan' is a trademark now, and you cannot do anything with the name. It's a quagmire...a bit of minefield.

I had the idea of re-launching and rebranding the character for a modern audience, and everyone said forget it, it won't happen. But I went ahead anyway and directly approached the Burroughs estate - who are the *nicest* people to work with - and they were interested!

I went over to LA to meet them, at the brilliantly named Tarzana², and they really bought in to the rebranding idea. What I didn't realise at the time [2009] was that 2012 was the centenary of the publication of the first Tarzan story, and we, the estate and I, have been working together in secret on the idea. There were various offers and deals, but now the first new title will be published by Faber next summer.

Weirdly enough, despite the fact that the last live action movie was *Greystoke* in 1984, and then there was the Disney cartoon version in 1999, the kids still know who Tarzan is and can all do the yodel. Despite the fact that it comes from the 1930 black and white movies!

Are you doing all the writing for this project?

I'm going to write the first two, and we'll see where it goes. I don't mind if other people come in, as long as there's something I'm moving on to...for example, were developing the *Hero/Villain* TV show at the moment and I'm quite happy - if I can do the pilot and produce and oversee it - for people to write all the other shows, as long as it keeps within the feel and the tone of the series.

Do you have a writing modus operandi?

I probably write twice as much when everyone else has gone to bed than I do in the day, when the X-box or the TV can suddenly turn itself on...the day I use as thinking time and then at night I like to do shock'n'awe writing and pound it out. If I hit a problem I can't get past, I'll open up a screenplay and carry on writing that. It's not a conscious thing, but nine times out of ten I'll find I've solved the problem while working on something totally different.

What's a standard daily word count for you?

² This was originally Burrough's ranch in the middle of nowhere, bought in 1919; the area is now a district in the north western part of metropolitan LA.

When I was doing the *Hero/Villain* books - we had four out in the first year - I was working on a 15 to 20-page chapter per day...10% of the book a day. I'd go at it and go at it and ten days later I'd have a draft full of mistakes which I wouldn't let anyone else see. Then I'd have a little break and start to re-write, edit, throw stuff out and fine-tune...but I want to know the story's all there when I do that. I'm a planner, I can't just start with a blank page, I have to have a complete chapter list and all the story arcs worked out, so when I go back, 80% of the work's already done and the re-writes are mainly about smoothing things out and making things less obvious. It's essential to do this with screenplays and graphic novels, and I do it with books too.

Do you adhere to the 'three-act' format?

In movies, yes, because that's what everyone's looking for and I hate it. You've got to do it, most producers want it, and then they come back with notes that say 'This is a bit predictable!' and you want to swear at them and tell them that *they* said, on page 30, such-and-such had to happen! But you have to stick with it, and unfortunately it's what gets taught in university courses and people learn it by rote.

So what's the best movie you've ever seen?

Raiders of the Lost Ark. And, just to go against myself, it's your *perfect* three-act structure as well, everything falls on a dime! Also, when I'm in schools I'll say 'Is Indiana Jones a hero - *yeah!* Is he a big action hero - *yeah!* Successful - *yeah!*' and then I'll say think about it: Indy gets the idol, then loses it; gets the girl, loses the girl; gets the Ark, loses the Ark...and then spends the entire finale of the movie tied to a stick while God saves the day.

Indiana Jones is the biggest loser in movie history, because not once is he a hero or successful, but that's why it's such a great movie because it's actually everything you think it isn't. And that's the genius of Lawrence Kasdan, who wrote the script.

Is it true to say that, if it's a bad film the writer gets the blame, and if it's deemed a good one the director does?

Those are the rules! There's an interesting thing, though...if it's a bad film, the writer buys it, gets the blame; however they have this wonderful thing called 'Director's Jail', and once you're in that it's almost impossible to make another movie and you end up doing commercials. A writer might write a bad film, but you can always go on to write something fantastic and get another chance. Writers do get their revenge!

When you first started writing books, what did the difference between publishing and movies feel like?

Freedom. It felt like absolute freedom. Movies are like being stuck in a box, books are like looking out into vast fields where you don't have to worry about budgets - you can blow up entire planets and you can have loads of characters and multiple story strands, and then at the end it's just down to you and your editor to discuss the finer points. Rather than you, a producer, another producer, the director, maybe the star, and possibly the cleaner who's been in and read a page and said 'Ooh! Wouldn't it be good if this happens!' and they go 'Hey, what a stroke of genius!'. You don't have all that interference, and you and your editor can usually iron things out. It's a much nicer working day working on a book.

How many *Hero/Villain* books will there be?

Currently eight, all in all. But with Tarzan coming up we're talking about a pause, and looking at doing an animated TV show, then maybe further books in the series.

Digging around, looking at the bigger Andy Briggs picture, I came across a reference to an adult novel called *Epicentre*...

Yes...*Epicentre* was the first book I ever wrote. It's a kind of Michael Crichton-style techno-fantasy which I first wrote as a screenplay, then a book; neither have sold and I keep on going back to it. And it is one of the reasons I don't like all those months of not being paid [to write a complete a manuscript] before someone will buy it...

Do you think your love of comics is why you mainly write for kids?

My office is covered in toys and fun stuff, that's where my brain is and it's what I like. But what I do isn't really aimed at a younger audience at all, not necessarily; it's aimed at being commercial. I've *never* professed to write anything weighty and meaningful, I've always said I write popcorn entertainment, that's all, and I'm happy with that.

While what I do may feel younger, my TV and graphic novel stuff is much darker, and I've written a lot of horror. I'm lucky enough to be able to cross over various areas a little bit...I've been commissioned to write horror, and commissioned to write for children. But I used to be told that you had to either write one or the other, you couldn't do both, and I just went and did both. Sheer stubbornness has given me a wider range, but I think it's probably taken me longer to get there.

With all the different areas you work in, where does publishing fit into the picture?

It's becoming more and more important, actually. In the movie business, when I've done movie work, I've just been one of a stream of many, many people doing it and you don't stand out in the crowd at all. The moment I'd written the *Hero/Villain* books, aside from the fact that I loved doing them, *everybody* suddenly treated me differently. Because there's this weird thing that if someone else has invested in an idea in a different format it's worth more than if I'd just pitched it to you. Suddenly all my meetings changed and I started meeting people higher up the ladder. Publishing has also allowed me to explore stories I couldn't do in screenplays, and for which

books were the perfect outlet...they give me the opportunity to write something that'll last slightly longer than a film.