

# CHAPTER 1

COMIC  
TALKS  
2005!

Forum held August 6, 2005 at Happy Harbor Comics

Prior to beginning our inaugural Comic Talks forum, the store held a book signing featuring Andrew's first major published work, *PARTING WAYS: THE NEAR LIFE EXPERIENCES OF PETER ORBACH*. The 152-page Original Graphic Novel (OGN) was the top-selling comic in dollars at Happy Harbor during the month of July, beating out such standards as *X-MEN* and the much anticipated *ALL-STAR BATMAN AND ROBIN, THE BOY WONDER* – an impressive show of support for local talent and a wonderful way to begin the series of discussions.

The overall topic was “Comics in the real world how the world sees comics and how comic people live in the real world”. The panel began by discussing the practicality of working in the world of comics.

When asked by Andrew if attempting to make a career of comics was a “wise move”, Gerald said, “Trying to break in as an artist does take a lot of work.”. Trevor agreed: “It's something you have to do with a passion. It's something you have to believe in.” Kasmaya added that a creator has to want to be “sharing their passion.” All three agreed it was wise to keep a regular job, at least to start.

Gilbert, an Edmonton-based journalist, cultural correspondent, broadcaster and poet (not to mention huge comic geek) made the observation that, “In the last 20 years, comics has become more accepted and there has been a dissolving between low and highbrow art. 'Drawing' has become more accepted.” While this is clearly the case in modern society, accepting and understanding are not one and the same. Andrew, who had a spot on the Access Channel's *CAREERS* TV program for *PARTING WAYS*, an admittedly non-action book, was amused when the piece aired with action-themed music.

The topic shifted to the long-standing debate over whether comics are an art or a storytelling medium and if there is a need to

## Panelists:

G. Gerald Garcia  
Gilbert Bouchard  
Trevor Sieben  
Kasmaya Jaxonne

## Moderated by:

Andrew Foley

make them the same. Gilbert began with the observation, “The heart of the comic industry is the narrative function and that’s what separates it from stand-alone art. It’s a hybrid medium. It’s a mistake to focus on it as a visual medium.”

Andrew asked Gilbert if any creator in particular had made the breakthrough from comics to the art world. Gilbert offered two names, artist David Cooper (RIPPLE, UNDERBELLY) and cartoonist Seth (WIMBLEDON GREEN THE GREATEST COMIC BOOK COLLECTOR IN THE WORLD), both Canadian.

Following the conversational tangent, panelists were asked if they perceived their own work as art or craft. Trevor answered with, “It can be both. It depends where your focus lies. The true art of comics is where the art supports the story.”

“People who do fine art dismiss comic art,” added Kasmaya. Gerald sees comics as “an art on its own.” When questioned what constitutes comic art, Gerald had a one word answer, “Storytelling.”

“Comics have so many layers,” added Gilbert, “It can be intelligent in its literature and still be entertaining. That’s the beauty of comics.” Kasmaya said that, “When creating a story I want to put it all in there. I want people to enjoy what they see and what they read.” She considers her method of comic development to be backwards, creating a character first and then developing stories around it. The first issue of her comic, BLIND EYE, underwent three full revisions, each a story different from the others while maintaining the same basic premise. While she wants to keep the book going, she does have an end in sight, not unlike PREACHER and STRANGERS IN PARADISE.

Andrew pointed out a quality unique to comics is that they are usually created to keep going and noted the possibility all comics are created with the character first.

The audience asked what the guest’s priorities were when creating comics: to get a point across, entertain or just blow off steam. Gerald began, saying, “I have to want to enjoy my story first. I have to want to read what I create.” Gerald generally starts with an idea and then moves to visuals. He creates his works “free form”, with no real idea where it’s going to end up.

For Trevor, “Story comes first.” He sees himself as the writer,

director and cameraman of a movie when making comics like his short story POPPA (in his self-published anthology FLEA MARKET) or WAKING CTHULU FOR FUN AND PROFIT, which can be found in HAPPY HARBOR'S 24 HOUR COMICS DAY 2005. "It's the cheapest way to make a short film. There's so much more freedom."

From creation to content, a question arose about the adult content in Kasmaya's book and why she chose to include it instead of potentially making the comic more accessible to a younger audience. She reasoned that her lead character, Xerxes Draco, is not a nice guy, so she had to give him traits people view as "bad". Drinking, smoking, sexual preferences and a poor attitude help convey his character.

When Kasmaya mentioned she put a Mature Readers label on her book, Andrew asked she felt she had to. Kasmaya felt quite strongly that it was only fair to let people know up front who BLINDEYE is for.

From there, the conversation moved to the heated topic of rating and warning systems. Andrew asked if there should be an across-the-board rating system for comics. While Kasmaya said she put the label on her book for her own personal reason, she and Gerald, both parents, agreed that ratings are, "necessary as a parent."

Since community standards vary from place to place, can a system be put into place that will work? Gerald thought ratings and warnings should be decided by the publishers but in today's market, many companies cannot be bothered to label their books, which leaves it up to Direct Market retailers to "screen" buyers of possibly inappropriate material.

The term "Direct Market" refers to specialty comic shops while the phrase "Mass Market" refers to book, grocery, department and drug stores that order their comics through news distributors, making the books returnable if they don't sell. The most common label adorning many comics from the late 50's up to today is the Comics Code Authority seal. Without this seal, comics are seldom placed near checkout counters in most mass-market stores.

The industry's self-censoring organization, the Comics Code Authority arose as a result of Senate hearings prompted by Dr. Fredric Wertham, who believed comics and juvenile delinquency were directly related. With the creation of the Authority, many titles disappeared from newsstands around North America. Horror, crime,

fantasy and other titles containing material deemed harmful to kids stopped being published, leaving only a handful of funny animal, romance and the strongest survivor, superhero comics. The industry's "compromise" nearly killed the medium.

Trevor feels the Code was a form of censorship. Labels are fine, but the development of a set of standards for creators to work in so books can be tailor-made for specific audiences is not something he is interested in. While many have aspirations to work for a big company writing or drawing their favourite character, they should be prepared to make a lot of compromises to achieve that goal.

While it is unfortunate companies have to bow down to specific standards, it makes sense to keep their products viable. As Gilbert pointed out, a company like Wal-Mart can make or break a product with their buying power and thereby quite easily influence what companies produce.

An unforeseen by-product of the Code was the perception it created that comics were exclusively for children, a stigma still being fought today. However, some audience members suggested an across-the-board rating system could help legitimize comics as a medium comparable to movies and television in the public eye.

The debate over ratings, censorship and individual creativity continued, touching on potential liability of retailers selling inappropriate material to minors (and in some cases, to adults as well), why libraries can carry and distribute any material, parental responsibility and education, and other positives and negatives. It was even suggested that without the creation of the Direct Market and the ability for companies to drop the Code from books they wanted to publish, certain books like "Watchmen" might never have found an avenue for sale in North America.

A lot of ground was covered over the nearly three hours of the first forum, setting an amazing precedent of interaction and sharing to be followed in the next five shows.