

INTERVIEW

Rupert Loydell
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From A Story Point Of View: an interview with Rian Hughes

Rian Hughes is a graphic designer, illustrator, comic artist, writer and type designer who has worked extensively for the British and American advertising, music and comic book industries.

He has written and drawn comics for *2000AD* and *Batman: Black and White*, and designed logos for *The Avengers*, *The X-Men*, *Superman*, record label Hedkandi, MTV and *James Bond*. He has edited books on mid-century lifestyle illustration and custom typography, and written on semiotics, culture, and collecting vintage science fiction pulps and paperbacks.

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Rupert Loydell (RL): I first came across your work when I picked up a copy of *The Science Service* (Hughes, 1989), probably in London's Forbidden Planet bookshop or the games and comic shop that used to be opposite The British Museum. There was something very retro and stylish about it, a neat little hardback with a linen spine, and two-tone content. Was that your first individual publication or should we go further back in time?

Rian Hughes (RH): That was my first graphic novel proper. I'd appeared in fanzines before then, both self-published and in Paul Gravett's *Escape* magazine alongside the likes of Eddie Campbell, Dave Hine and Woodrow Phoenix.[1]

RL: I have to confess not being well versed in comics. I used to occasionally flick through American imports in the newsagent when I was teenager, and think I owned the very first UK Marvel comics, but mostly I didn't engage. By the end of the 1980s though even I was aware that there had been some kind of shift in the world of comics and graphic novels. Bill Sienkiewicz's *Stray Toasters* (1988) had piqued my interest, and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* (1989), which came out around the same time as your book, questioned the whole notion of being a superhero.

I guess I was occasionally visiting Forbidden Planet mostly for their science fiction books, but I did love the more painterly art of Dave McKean and Sienkiewicz's. But I got disillusioned pretty quickly because so many comics used great cover artists to sell badly written and drawn stories inside. You've worked on some more mainstream comic characters. What was your take on the comic industry at that time?

RH: It was period of great optimism – articles were being written in the mainstream press about how comics had come of age, that there was this new adult readership, but it very soon evaporated. A lot of opportunistic publishers put out a lot of very ordinary comics, and the reading public who were expecting more work of the calibre of *Watchmen* (Moore, 1986-87) or *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 1986) were not impressed. Today, I hear that graphic novels make up a substantial percentage of book sales, and there is a broad range of subject matter – not just violent superhero comics – so after a couple of decades of treading water we got there in the end.

RL: A year later, in 1990, you were one of the reasons I started buying *Revolver*, a new 2000AD comic (Hogan, 1990-1991) that featured Grant Morrison's and your reinvention of Dan Dare, the other being a comic strip biography of Jimi Hendrix written by Charles Shaar Murray.

Tell me about your take on Dan Dare, and vintage science fiction, which I gather you collect. The original Dan Dare was always a bit 'British' and stiff upper lip, wasn't it? Very different from the New Wave of science fiction or what was later known as slipstream.

RH: Dan Dare is an icon, and comes with all the symbolic baggage any icon comes with. He stands for that optimistic post-war future, unsullied by the harsher realities of the cold war. I see him as a hero of a simpler age, but one that still retains his heart and idealism. *Revolver*, in which the Dare strip appeared, was another short-lived publication that sought to take advantage of the new market but only lasted 7 issues.

RL: Can you tell us why *Revolver* folded so quickly? It seemed such brilliant mix of art, subject, episodic and standalone work. Readers were left in the middle of several storylines unless they started buying other titles (which I didn't).

RH: The sales figures were not impressive. It was simply an accounting decision. Though those sales would be considered respectable today, back then they were used to selling tens of thousands of copies every month, and they weren't

RL: I guess that apart from very occasional forays into comic shops, or looking at graphic novels in bookshops, that pretty much brought my engagement with comics to an end, although I did buy Ted McKeever's *Plastic Forks* (1990). Did you continue to work in the comic industry, or did you move more into design? Or maybe you don't divide up or compartmentalise your work in this way?

RH: I was always interested in design, illustration, typography and comics as a broader remit. The 90s were mostly spent producing illustration for advertising clients and designing record sleeves and book covers. Much of this period was collected in the book *Device. 'Art, Commercial'* (Hughes 2002).

RL: The 1990s were when most of us embraced personal computers. One of the books I bought at the end of that decade was Dave McKean's *Dustcovers* (1998), because I was very interested in how computers could be used to collage images together (and of course, I really liked McKean's covers). I'm assuming you design your typefaces on the

computer, and your novels – which I'll ask you about later – clearly use it, but I'm wondering if there was a point where you decided to stop drawing in the way you had done for your early comics? Your book *Yesterday's Tomorrows* (2007) gathered up a number of comics and seemed to put a line under a certain way of working, yes?

RH: Yes. I bought a Mac in 1993, and it definitely revolutionised the way I worked. This was when I began to draw fewer comics. Most of my work was standalone illustration images: greetings cards, children's books, posters, watches for Swatch, Hawaiian shirts, things like that. Though I did occasionally pick up a comic, I didn't read much of the mainstream output during this period. I'm told I didn't miss much!

RL: Jumping forward in time, I was pretty excited to see *XX* (2020) in a local bookshop with your name on the front, and delighted to find all the design elements you bring to it as I flicked through. The endpapers contain a whole backlist of imaginary editions of *Ascension*, a book that features throughout the book; there are Blast!-like declarations in crazy fonts; interviews, letters and illustrations; computer missives and a map. Everything but the kitchen sink really, and all done by you.

So, what was your thinking and how did you sell the whole package to an agent and publisher?

RH: *XX* – or more broadly, the idea of a 'designed novel' or 'novel, graphic' had been gestating since the early 90s, but I'd never got around to actually doing it. Pressure of commercial work and the feeling that I wasn't primarily a writer meant that it seemed to be an intimidating project to even begin. But then I had an insight into how it might all work from a story point of view – who the DMen were, what the main thrust of the story was – and it came together over a period of about three and half years. I then produced a realistic hardback mock-up via Blurb, and online print service, and that attracted the interest of Picador and another publisher. There was a few rounds of secret bidding, with Picador being the eventual winner.

RL: We've seen things like CD ROMs fail and some resistance to reading onscreen, so do you think this kind of conceptual book is one way forward? I mean there is a long tradition of illustrated books, artist's books and to a certain extent graphic and typographically experimental novels, but you seem to have sidestepped any of these categories' restraints and produced something new, especially from a mainstream publisher.

RH: I remember the CD ROM. I wonder where they all are now? Is there a playable archive of such things? The book, which does not require an operating system to run, has a much longer history, and the typographic book, or a book with design interventions, has a history almost as long. The familiar novel format – text set in a single font, justified – is a product of the limitations of print technology, limitations which no longer apply. I'd like to see more experimental design in books, but I'm aware that unless you're very careful it can seem like an inessential add-on – it needs to function as an integral part of the story.

RL: If *XX* breaks publishing boundaries, your most recent book, *The Black Locomotive* (2021) combines and adapts a number of fiction and non-fiction genres. In my review I suggested that it is 'a heady mix of science fiction, psychogeography, conspiracy theory and urban myth. The book treads a thin line between nostalgia and cold war paranoia, diverting to enjoy a Ballardian exploration of "inner space" and some very English stream train enthusiasm.' (Loydell 2021) Is that fair?

RH: I'll go for that!

RL: I went to school with the son of Peter Laurie, who wrote *Beneath the City Streets* (1970) which speculated about the Corsham train tunnel and bunker in the context of the chain of secret government citadels on the back of research by the Spies for Peace group. Much of that book has, of course, turned out to be true; and the now disused Corsham Bunker has now been explored and documented by urban explorers who have posted their videos online. In itself that seems a little bit like J.G. Ballard's world of concrete and steel, although I always imagined his world as much shinier and newer than the realities of abandoned and crumbling silos, airstrips and shelters. (Or for that matter Cronenberg's grease and oil covered film version of *Crash*. (1996))

RH: I've not read *Beneath the City Streets*, but it sounds very interesting. There are definitely maps, photos and video of people exploring the tunnels online, which I referred to while writing the novel, but I've not visited them in person. Maybe one day. Ballard was a touchstone for the novel, of course, but as you say, *Black Locomotive* is partly an exploration of concrete and steel run through with urban decay rather than a shiny futuristic idealism. I have a fascination with abandoned industrial sites, the aesthetics of function that achieve an accidental beauty. I use the character of Rutherford in the novel as a POV through which I ruminate on this appeal.

RL: My Dad loved steam trains, and as a family we always slightly resented the time he took to look at them when we were on holiday. After he died, and without familial pressure, I've actually slightly bought into that fake nostalgia that seems to exist... I mean, I am too young to have been on any steam trains that weren't heritage excursions or steam specials, but I love watching *Night Mail*, that film of Auden's train poem (Watt & Wright, 1936), and visiting the railway museum when we visit friends in York. How conscious are you of the use of nostalgia in your work? How do you decide to make steam trains and secret societies part of a science fiction story?

RH: I knew next to nothing about steam trains before I wrote this, and though I did my homework I'm waiting for some expert to haul me up over some elementary error. I also have only been on a steam train as part of a heritage line or event, so have only experienced them as well-maintained pieces of history rather than their less romantic workaday use that would have been the norm when they were in service. Still, they come with an iconography and history, a symbolic power. They are the technological high-water mark of their age, which makes them ideal for the story I wanted to tell.

RL: One part of the book I found less successful was the alien voice. I was reminded of China Miéville's exploration of language in *Embassytown* (2011) where his Hosts, an alien species, speak a language that simply cannot imagine the singular, nor lie or speculate; but also of Frank Herbert's tentative articulation of artificial intelligence in *Destination: Void* (1967). It's an amazing undertaking to try and present other forms of consciousness, experience or understanding. How did you decide to write it in the way you did?

RH: I've not read either of these, but will check them out. *XX* is a more fully articulated enquiry into how we might actually understand an alien language – for the purposes of *Black Locomotive* it had to be simplified and stripped down, as this was not the main thrust of the novel. Using the POV of Rutherford as an intermediary helps in that he provides a human bridge to understanding Ki and the anomaly's back story, which allows it to be told in something resembling human form – albeit overlaid with strange sensations and ideas.

RL: A lot of authors I suspect would long to be in the position you appear to be in, where you seem to have total control of how your work is presented. Can we expect more 'novel, graphics' (as you call them) from you? Can you tell us what you are working on at the moment?

RH: Novel three is in progress, but I recently realised it may be two separate ideas I need to prise apart. There will definitely be design elements again – and maybe even comic-book sections too.

RL: Thanks for your time, it's much appreciated.

NOTES

[1] Paul Gravett is a London-based freelance journalist, curator, lecturer, writer, and broadcaster, who has worked in comics publishing and promotion since 1981.

In 1983 he launched *Escape Magazine*, which he co-edited/published with Peter Stanbury, showcasing the cream of the alternative cartoonists of the 1980s. *Escape* lasted for 19 issues before closing its doors in 1989. For six years, *Escape* helped to promote an evolving bunch of distinctive British creators, many of whom were quickly picked up by other comics publishers and by the UK music press, newspapers, magazines and galleries.'

<http://paulgravett.com/site/biography> (accessed 12 October 2021)

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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