

## Jim Hardison Shows Us His Helm

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This week I interview **Jim Hardison**, whose first comic **THE HELM** hits stands from Dark Horse tomorrow with art by Bart Sears. THE HELM may be Jim's first foray into the comics medium, but he has a lot of experience in both story and characters and plenty of wisdom to share on the writing process.

**I understand THE HELM is your first comic. Tell me a little about how it came to be and what, as a writer, attracted you to the medium?**

I hadn't really thought about comics much in a long time, but a little over a year ago, a friend of mine (Will Vinton) did a graphic novel with Dark Horse called **Jack Hightower**. When I went into a comic shop to pick it up, I was struck by how much comics had changed since I was a kid. That got me thinking about comics again. Coincidentally, the project coordinator at my company, Character LLC, used to work at Dark Horse comics and was still friendly with many of the folks there, including several editors. So, I asked her if she could set up a meeting for me to pitch a few ideas.

I'd first thought of the concept of THE HELM several years prior to pitching it at Dark Horse. At the time, I imagined it as a film because I have a screenwriting background. I wrote out a fairly detailed treatment of the story and then put it in a file I keep called "Idea Dumping Grounds" where it sat. When I got the opportunity to pitch at Dark Horse, I re-worked the concept a bit and pitched it along with four or five other ideas. The Helm was the one my editor, Dave Land, liked best.

**How did Bart Sears come to the project?**

I'd just finished pitching Dave on the concept and he asked me if I had any ideas about the look for the art. I told him that I'd kind of imagined it in a "Conan-style" as I thought that would make for a nice ironic commentary on the poor physical shape the main character of THE HELM is in. He was working with Bart on The Scream at the time and immediately thought of him. He showed me some of Bart's work and I was impressed, although I had no idea who Bart was. After that, we sent the treatment for THE HELM to Bart to see if he'd consider penciling it and he agreed to take the project on.



### **Can you describe your creative process, from first idea to completed pages?**

Generally, some piece of a plot or situation occurs to me—with *THE HELM*, I was driving past a garage sale and it occurred to me that it would be funny to do a story about a guy who buys a magic artifact at a garage sale and it gives him superpowers. Once I've got something, I write it down—no matter how vague or sketchy—and then I let it percolate for a while to see if anything else comes of it or if it seems to connect with some other idea I've had. The next step with *THE HELM* was that I started thinking about the few garage sales that I've been involved with and the various kinds of people I'd encountered at them, which got me thinking that it would be pretty funny if the guy who got the superpower was completely unworthy of it. That thought connected the garage sale idea with another idea I'd been playing around with for a while about creating a superhero whose power hated him.

Once I've got a general concept that seems interesting, I play around with what it might possibly mean—what it is my brain is trying to tell me that might be interesting to somebody else. If I hit on something that seems powerful, I start fleshing the idea out into an actual story. I usually begin with a pretty detailed plot outline that contains all of the major events. Once I've got that down, then I tend to riff on the characters a bit—imagining their backgrounds, how they got to the point at which the story starts and why they think and feel the way they do. I'll write pages and pages of stuff—most of it garbage—just trying out different possibilities until I get to a place where I understand who the characters are and how they see the world. By that point, the background material usually gives me lots of additional ideas for the actual story, so I go back and fine tune the outline and turn it into a full story treatment.



Once I've got a treatment I like, I may start writing the story, or more likely, I throw it in my Idea Dumping Ground and let it sit there.

With *THE HELM*, once Dark Horse expressed interest, I started by breaking the treatment into four issues. Since it had originally been thought of as a film, I had to translate it from a three-act structure.

After that, my editor gave me some great background information on writing comics. Based on that material, I did 22-point issue outlines for each book to nail down exactly what was going to happen on every page. With all that done, I finally began writing the first page.

### **What was in your original pitch?**

I think I had a five page treatment and a pitch line—"What if you had a magical superpower and it hated your guts?" The pitch line made my editor laugh, and after he read the treatment he said he thought he could sell the idea at a company pitch meeting—which he did.

### **Do you have "office hours," so to speak: specific set times during the day or week when you write, or is it a more fluid situation? Have any secrets to budgeting writing time to share?**

I don't have any set hours for writing—I wish I was that disciplined. I write in my "day job" so I'm usually shoe-horning my personal writing in around that schedule. I specifically made *THE HELM* a company project so that I could work on it during the work day, but then I wound up doing the bulk of the writing between 4:00AM and 6:30AM before going in to work. Go figure.

I also wish I had secrets to budgeting writing time, but my secret is that I write best under pressure, so I usually

don't write until I have to in order to meet a deadline—or if I've got an idea I'm really hot about. If I've got one that's really working for me, I'll sit down and write it straight through—or until I have to stop. Otherwise, I write just before I have to turn it in. That's why so many of my ideas wind up languishing in my idea file. It's been a problem of mine ever since grade school when I got in the habit of writing my assignments the night before they were due. It would be great if I was more disciplined, but discipline doesn't work very well for me.

### **What is your workspace like?**

I don't have a specific workspace. I tend to write wherever an idea hits me. Consequently, I'm always jotting stuff down on the backs of receipts while driving to work.

### **It's been said that to make writing a career you have to sell more than just a story: you have to sell yourself. Do you find this true, and do you have any insight to share on selling oneself?**

I've found that selling a story is a lot easier if you're passionate about it—maybe because people can get caught up in your passion and feel moved by the things that are moving you. In the event of a face to face pitch, it certainly helps to be excited about the characters, about the concept and about what the story means. Of course, it has to be a really good story and it has to be thought out from all the angles or that passion won't take you very far.

### **What would you say is the #1 mistake you see aspiring writers making?**

Writing about external conflicts rather than internal ones. External conflicts are interesting and engaging, but if that's all you've got (people wrestling with other characters or the

environment) it will be a lot more difficult to connect with the audience. It's much easier for the audience to connect with a character that is flawed and vulnerable than with one that is perfect and aloof. If you've got a great internal conflict for your character, it will lead him into all kinds of external conflict, but if you've only got external conflict, your story isn't likely to mean very much to people unless they're experiencing that exact same situation.



### **What's the best advice you could give on the craft of writing?**

Focus on internal conflict for your characters and think about what your story means—what is the fundamental human truth you're trying to express with the story that will make it worth reading and emotionally resonant for the audience. If you've got those two bits of information worked out, all the details of the story will come pouring out the characters. If you don't, the process will feel forced and frustrating. At least, that's how it works for me.

### **What's the best advice you can give on the lifestyle of being a writer?**

I don't know how useful this will be, but here's what I try to do. I write about what interests me, what I care about

and what I like. I try to amuse myself with my stories so that, even if no one else likes them, I feel good about them. That helps with the inevitable rejections. I try to love every idea (or abandon it), but I don't get so invested in any one of them that I'm not ready to move on if I can't find anybody who wants to publish it. I try to have a thick skin and I encourage the people I ask to read my stuff to criticize it mercilessly.

**Do you have any insight to share about striking a balance between writing and other aspects of life, like family or friends?**

It's hard to find the time to write and I don't really have any good advice on how to deal with that except to make the time. I tend to stay up really late or get up really early to squeeze in writing without taking time away from my family. Not a great solution, but it works so far.



**Back to THE HELM. What lessons have you learned in the creation of this project that you will carry into future projects?**

This was my crash course on writing for comics. Probably the biggest lesson I've learned is that I have to work harder to plot my action for the rhythm of the page turns and stop thinking about comics as if they're movies. Every page turn is a potential cliff hanger and payoff, but it's too easy to mess up the impact of a page by failing to visualize how the panels work together before the script goes out to the artist.

**Every project seems to have a unique set of obstacles all its own, both interior and external ones. What obstacles came with writing THE HELM, and how did you overcome them?**

In my "day job" I do a lot of writing for client projects. Sometimes, this can drain my enthusiasm and energy for writing personal projects—particularly when I'm up all night writing the other stuff. There was a fair amount of that with THE HELM, but by and large it worked out pretty well.

**Are there more comics or other projects on the horizon for you? Want to plug any of them now?**

I'm working up some new pitches and hope to keep writing for comics but I don't have anything actively in the works. I've got plot outlines and treatments for a couple more adventures with THE HELM, but those will have to wait until we see how the audience responds.



*Caleb Monroe writes comics, columns and other things. He is a slightly infectious thought-form generated by the self-aware website [CalebMonroe.com](http://CalebMonroe.com).*