

# CONFESSIONS OF A COMIC BOOK DILETTANTE

by Jack O'Connell

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Comic books have been a part of our popular culture for decades, and in many ways they are a startlingly accurate reflection of the times in which they were written. For Jack O'Connell, author of The Resurrectionist, a lifetime of com-*



Jack O'Connell,  
author of  
The Resurrectionist

I admit it. I'm one of those writers so enamored of fiction that I elevate its needs and its virtues and its abilities above those of history. Should I ever find a way to fashion my sedate life into a memoir, my compulsion to invent would make James Frey blush and shudder.

So, I want to insist that as a kid I was lodged firmly on the extreme and foggy cutting edge. That back in the '60s, when my peers were spinning the Monkees, I was pondering the psychedelia of Roky Erickson. That while my neighborhood buddies were lining up to see *The Love Bug*, I was sneaking into the balcony to witness *Midnight Cowboy*. And that while my pals were kicking back and reading about Superman's latest go-round with Lex Luthor, I was awash in the mystic sputterings of Mr. Natural and the pharmacological safaris of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers.

ics have inspired him to create a world filled with benign, even lovable, sideshow freaks, whose comic book story unfolds as a parallel to the "real world" of a rust-belt city in postindustrial New England.

I want to insist that all of that happened, but I'd cave and admit the truth. Or, at very least, the closest approximation to the truth of which I'm capable.

My novel, *The Resurrectionist*, is chock-full of comic books. Which might lead the reader to suspect that the same could be said of my childhood. In fact, my relationship with comics while growing up was fleeting, sporadic, and haphazard. I would like nothing better than to report warm memories of readings of *The Hulk* and *Green Lantern* and *The Fantastic Four*. But the truth is a little more prosaic, if not less revelatory.

From about 1967 or so, the only comic book I read regularly was *Treasure Chest*—"the Catholic Comic Book," as the slogan baldly proclaimed. I've always believed that *TC* was the product of a rare compromise among the black-habited nuns of my youth. I can still imagine them, encircled like Shakespearean crones around

THE RESURRECTIONIST  
By Jack O'Connell  
ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-576-6  
Hardcover  
Publication: April 2008

a bubbling cauldron, some ancient Mother Superior deciding *All right, if they must read comic books, they'll read our comic book!*

*Treasure Chest* featured the wholesome adventures of Chuck White, an All-American Boy running through the suburbs of the American Century collecting moral lessons. Think *Leave It to Beaver* without the edginess. The fact is, I loved the pulpy thing in all its cheery, dogmatic glory. And to this day, there's a box of them moldering away in my attic.

In general, comic books for me were a summertime phenomenon. But when my father walked my siblings and me up to the beach-front penny candy store, and I stood before those wire spin racks, I'm embarrassed to admit that, unlike so many of my demographic cohorts, I did *not* select the coolness that was Marvel or D.C. I strolled home along the boardwalk, grasping *Archie* and any number of imprints from the Harvey line—*Sad Sack*, *Richie Rich*, *Little Lotta*.

There is an almost unbearable innocence attached to my memories of these comic books. They are so utterly of another era that they feel near archaic to me. And in this way they stand as polar opposites to the comic book that appears in my novel.

That comic book is called *Limbo* and it tells the story of a group of circus freaks and their wanderings through bizarre landscape in search of sanctuary from a murderous pursuer. *Limbo* is a dark, adult, complex story. I like to think of it as what might have devel-

oped had Kafka snuck up on *The Adventures of Tintin* creator Hergé, stabbed the artist to death with his own charcoal pencil, and then highjacked the story.

Which raises the question: how did I move from *Treasure Chest* and *Richie Rich* to the hermaphrodite and the mule-faced boy of the *Limbo* universe?

Well, let's face it—lots of strange things happened in the eighties. And while we might want to forget many of them, I'll always treasure the memory of strolling into a new comic book store and scoring the first issue of *Mister X*, Dean Motter's short-

lived but electric tale of an insomniac architect in a neon-splattered tenderloin. The comic was a trove full to bursting with all the coolest tropes—film noir, dystopian SF, Bauhaus design, German Expressionism. The story was hip, inventive, surprising, and smart. I was hooked by the checkout line.

*Mister X* kicked down a door for me that remains wide-open to this day, allowing a stream of rich narrative to light up my middle-aged melon. Motter's rococo world may not have lasted long, but it gave me a gorgeous map and a hard shove into the work of Neil Gaiman and Art Spiegelman, Grant Morrison and Warren Ellis.

Beyond this, it provided the inspiration of the crucial subplot that would make *The Resurrectionist* a richer, deeper novel about the ways we find meaning in the most unexpected stories. ■

"While my neighborhood buddies were lining up to see *The Love Bug*, I was sneaking into the balcony to witness *Midnight Cowboy*."  
—JACK O'CONNELL