Comics on the Main Street of Culture

by Eddie Campbell

Editor's Note: The following text is a transcript of Eddie Campbell's talk at the 2002 UF Comics Conference. Images referred to by Mr. Campbell have been selected and included at the editor's discretion, but were not part of the original presentation.

1. Alan Moore once said, "We work hard for the mainstream culture wearing our underwear on the inside." Alan used this metaphor to show us what he wanted the comic artist to do. He wanted to reimagine the graphic novel, to create the true graphic novel. This graphic novel got rid of all the superhero nonsense. He focused on the real stuff that the graphic novel can do. He started Big Numbers soon after, but it crashed and burned. This is a horrible story of accidents. I tell the whole story in How to be an Artist, so I won't retell it here. While writing Big Numbers he started another book at the same time, which was From Hell. From Hell started in a magazine called Taboo, which was a quarterly horror comic that came out once a year. The long forgotten comic anthology marginalized what was possibly his next great graphic novel. Having succeeded with Watchmen, his next two graphic novels failed. They were stillborn. They failed to get off the launch ramp.
2. So, why did it go so terribly? This was the history of Ron Howard about ten years before he collected the thing. Nothing ever went right. Three publishers went bust. Three publishers were going bankrupt. The sales were never what they should have been. The original sales were sixty or seventy thousand on the first one, but *From Hell* was always selling less than ten. It was never released properly. It never received the attention I thought it deserved. And, ten years after that I published the thing myself. I had been taking to self-publishing in the mean time. Everything you can imagine had gone wrong with it at some point. By the time I got around to publishing it, we had lost the rights. I had to hire a lawyer to get them back. It was a wonderful contract that we had with Kitchen Press, because the movie had been booked by that time. But the book first came out in 1984. Because of the movie, there was a contract and they let me argue a few extra cents on the royalty. I was so pleased with myself, because I got the royalty up to twelve percent on sales of twenty thousand, which was pretty good. But I missed the backend of a contract where it says that the publishers would have the license five years after publication of the play with my permission. In my stupidity, I didn't think about it. I thought that the publisher might not want to publish a collected edition. At the end of the day it wasn't Kitchen who owned it anymore. Kitchen had been bought out by another company. It wasn't really the comic publisher's fault, but I think he just sat on the thing and collected foreign royalties forever. I completely screwed myself.

3. And I never handle my own contracts. No, I get my father-in-law to do them. He is a lawyer. The last one I gave him was ten pages long. When I gave it back to the publisher, it was twenty-two pages. The publisher said to me, "Uh, Mr. Campbell, Eddie, we don't really like to work this way. We've created our contracts so that
ordinary people can understand them." And I said, "But yeah, if I'm up in court, it's not me you're arguing with, it's my father-in-law." So we finally got the big booking.

4. Another problem we've had to deal with over the years with From Hell is it keeps getting banned by customers in different places. For instance, it was nabbed in South Africa once. And immediately The Sun, the tabloid newspaper, was on to Alan Moore to get comments about how he felt about it being nabbed in South Africa. He refused to say anything. He said, "You just want me to say bad things about the South Africans." He said, "They never buy foreign works. It was nabbed in London." He said, "Anyway, I don't know what the fuss is all about. So we showed an erect penis." He said, "It wasn't even a real one, it was an Eddie Campbell one—just sort of a squiggle."

5. Anyway, the book did bad in Australia. It was seized by customs in Australia in 2000. They picked up a copy in March 2000. I published the collected edition in December 1999, but finally we got the rights back because they owed us fifteen thousand dollars. We had to fight off the fifteen thousand dollars to get the rights back to our own book. We also had to get the document signed. I don't know who the hell's got them. The thing about contracts is the whole history involved so many people and things have changed hands so many times, nobody knows where anything is. I don't know where anything landed. I don't know who's got the movie contract to this day. It's a mess, a terrible mess.

6. From Hell was nabbed in Australia in March 2000. One of the little slim editions that Kitchen put out. We were still finding our way into Australia. They had sold out their stock to somebody. It was really good stock, and had thirty-two pages. Thirty-two pages of Mary Kelly being cut up, which is one of the most harrowing things I've ever had to draw. I'll tell you a funny story about it.

7. When Alan starts a project he sends you all this reference material. When I first got the big packet for From Hell, he sent all this wonderful reference material: two books, there was a pile script. The script was endless. I could write my own script in half the time it takes to read Alan's. By the end of the project, though, you get your pages through the fax one at a time because he's doing something else. His mind's on other things so they're coming through one at a time. Dave Gibbons once told me that at the end of Watchmen, he was sending the pages down by taxi. Two pages at a time in the backseat of a taxi all the way from Northampton, which is fifty pounds one way. It's a one hundred dollar taxi ride, two pages, two at a time. Of course we have fax machines now.
8. So I was getting pages through the fax one at a time. This is a colossal emergency. Alan's got all the references. The bits of Mary Kelly ended up all over the room. I feel bad for making fun of this. It's terrible. And it was all symbolic. Everything was in a place for a reason. This is the basis for the conspiracy theory is that there was symbolism. The inner top of the shoulder. The intestines over the shoulder were part of the Masonic ritual. I can't really recall, but it's in the book. And so on and so forth.

Figure 2. Chapter 10, p. 8, From Hell
9. So he's dividing up and breaking the thing up as we go along. We take the reference book and try to figure out where everything went. The first thing he does is kill the girl. He damages her face and this goes down because the serial killer, he always had to destroy the humanity of his victims. That's the first thing he does, he cuts her face off [Figure 2]. She is no longer recognizable as a human being, which is true if you go see the photos. I think someone had it here today. The photo of Mary Kelly in the bed where she is murdered; she's unrecognizable as a person. Her whole face is cut away. And then he cuts the stomach open, intestines were over the shoulder. He cuts off one of the breasts and he puts that on the bedside table [Figure 3]. Then he cuts off the other one and then the liver is somewhere else.

10. And the script comes in a page a time while I'm drawing it. And the pages are coming faster. Then he realized he made a mistake. He's got one of the breasts in the wrong place. It wasn't on the bedside table, it was over somewhere else. So what do we do? Well, I'm drawing it all in ink. We can't insert a panel. I wouldn't. He comes up with the perfect solution. The guy stops for a minute and he looks around. He rubs his chin and he moves it. That was Alan's solution to that problem. If you look at the book, I tried to make it not too obvious.
11. So with the book coming out on the main street of culture, the task was to get it into the bookshops. We knew the movie was coming out and we knew we had to get it into bookshops. We had to get it this book where everybody would get it and not just the comic shops. Though one option was to go with the book publisher. And my agent who had helped me get the rights back and I owed him everything. We nearly didn't get the rights back. I say "I;" Alan is kind of remote from all of this. Alan said, "Whatever mate. Whatever you say." Alan's lost the rights to so many things, but he's too busy working on the next thing to go hunting up to get them back. So it fell to me to get them back. And my agent was saying you ought to go with the book publisher, you'll sell more. And I wasn't sure about this because we'd set up a deal with LPC, the bookshop distributor, and we were doing really well. I worked with Chris Staros, Top Shelf Productions. And he's a dynamo! This book was so important to him because this is his flagship and he had put so much effort into shifting this book. Everything else he's got travels in slipstream. And I was worried if we give it to a book publisher it would just become another book. You know. You put it out there, and if it doesn't sell you can't make rent. You know the end of the story. Whereas, we can work it just between me and him. We can work every angle. If something's not working we can get down and fix it. So I had the confidence that we could, even if we didn't sell as many. You know keeping forty percent besides ten percent is. You don't need to sell as many. So we didn't go with the book publisher. We did it ourselves. We've done really well. Altogether we've sold over 110,000. I think there are 110,000 copies out there. You're dealing with a group trade so it's harder and there are all the other problems you've got to think about. But that was the American situation.

12. Now getting back to the banning in Australia. The book had been banned in Australia from importation. They banned a little slim edition and logically they
thought they worked it out. Since the little slim one's contained in the big one, then the big one should be banned too. So they seized two copies of the big book coming in through customs in Australia in October, which is like six months after the little one. The little one gone to the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) and they sent them advice that the thing should not be allowed for importation. Not suitable for importation. I got the email from Diamond that there was this problem and since it was my neck of the woods, since it's my book, I probably wanted to do something about it. So I got on the phone to customs. They said, "There is nothing we can do. We've been given a ruling by the OFLC that the book is to be banned. The book is not to be imported."

13. So I phone up the OFLC: the Office of Film and Literature Classification. I talk to the OFLC and they says, "Oh no, we don't give a ruling, we just give advice. It's up to the customs what they do with it if they follow it or not." So I go back to customs and they say, "Oh no, it was a ruling." So I spoke to the papers. I was on the radio about this. I thought I might as well get some publicity out of it. And somewhere along the way it occurred to me that I'm not quite getting all this publicity. I've gone and wasted my time. There're no books for anybody to buy.

14. It lasted for two weeks. I finally came up with a solution. I contacted customs and I said, "Look, you banned the first book, and it is terrible, violent, it's hideous, it's horrible, it shouldn't be allowed, but within the context of the second book, the bigger book, it acquires a different meaning. Its significance is considerably altered." I don't think they completely understood. "All right," I said. "But you haven't submitted the big book. This is a different book. It is a six hundred-page book. You've got a banning on a forty-eight-page book. This one is a six hundred. You should resubmit. You should submit the big book to the OFLC." They wondered if I would stand by a ruling against the book if they resubmitted it. I said, "Yes." I lied. Anyway, the book went out to the OFLC. There's a committee of twelve members. It took them two days to decide the book was all right. Now had any of them read it in two days? They flipped through it and said, "Go away. Bugger off." So the book was cleared. I thought I'd got through them—so I had won.

15. Another problem I forgot to mention is that sometimes the book isn't imported into Australia because of the dollar ratio. A thirty-five page, thirty-five dollar book becomes seventy-five or eighty dollars in Australia. If any of you ever go to Australia you'll like that. If you have seventy bucks, you'll double it in Australia. And a beer is still two dollars. Multiply the beer principle always.

16. So the book goes for seventy-five or eighty dollars and I thought the solution to the whole thing was obvious. We should do a local edition. Do the publishing
ourselves. Australia is a country with the same population as New York State. But New York State is fifty thousand square miles and Australia is three million. Now how do you distribute it? You know, New York State you get in the truck and drive it there. How do you do that in three million square miles? I thought, "I'm going to have to get an Australian publisher." So I go to the phone book and asked somebody who publishes in that area. The three big ones: Penguin, Random House, and HarperCollins.

17. So I phoned up Penguin. You know Penguin, I was obviously from England I thought they might be into this graphic novel. I phoned down. I say, "The movie is coming out in six months. We don't have anything to mess around now. I need a publisher." I said, "We've sold at this time thirty five thousand copies." We were in our second printing. Just out front we've published ourselves. Sold fifty-five thousand copies. The woman from Penguin said, "You'll have to go through channels." I said, "I don't have time. Is there nothing you can do?" "You'll have to send it in like a proper submission." I thought, "Okay, that's no good. We can't do that." I phoned the next one. HarperCollins wasn't there. I phoned Random House. Justin answered the phone. I said "Justin," I said, "I've got a book here that I've already sold fifty-five thousand copies just publishing it myself from the front room of the house." I said, "Have I got your attention?" He said, "You certainly have." I said, "My name's Eddie Campbell." He said, "Are you the Eddie Campbell who does Bauchas?" I was in.

18. I had a man on the inside. I didn't know he was just a guy in the mailroom. Justin. And Justin says, "Well, I can't, I'm just a guy in the mailroom." He said, "I think you need to talk to Natalie." Anyway, he called me back a few minutes later and said, "It's not Natalie you need to talk to, its the assistant to the Australian editor."

19. I like the publishing business already. You know. I'm feeling good already. Things are cooking. Anyway, they are going to phone me back later that day. So two hours later they phone me back.

20. The thing that had sped the thing along was, I thought I was going to have to-- being an old-fashioned sort of guy--put everything on a portfolio case and send it to Sidney. But no, that is what the Internet is for. The Internet is your portfolio; the Internet is your references. You know, your site, your connections. Connect all the group, your site, for previews. They'd read the whole thing online, and they were very excited.
21. I said, "You know I never got a gig by showing a portfolio. I don't actually have a portfolio. I never got an art job by showing one. I always got telephone calls." The famous songwriter Sammy Kahn was once asked what comes first the music or the words. And he said, "Always, always the telephone call."

22. Anyway, we'd sold the book to Random House. The only problem was that they had to get the book printed and everybody prints offshore. Everybody prints in everybody else's country. I print in Canada; they go to Singapore. But they couldn't get it done at the right price in Singapore. They end up getting it printed in India. This is a global empire. I print mine in Canada, my edition. I just couldn't, I printed the States edition through Canada. The Australian edition through India. It's this cross-wired international plot I'm running here.

23. We'd done a limited edition in Canada, so we had to duplicate the negatives. We got the duplicate negatives from Canada sent here. Now everybody produces on a disk. But we started this like twelve years ago before the disk. So we got these cute little negatives flying around the planet. From Hell never looks right when it is digitalized because all the foreign publishers are all digitalized, whereas my publisher in Canada still works the old fashioned way. Straight from negatives to metal plate and I don't know where else I'll go because I don't think anybody else works that way. It's becoming very hard to find. True, isn't it? To find printers that work the old fashioned way. But I need it, because I'm doing those fine lines. These extremely fine lines. Any pixelation will just screw it up completely. For those fine lines you need very high resolution, very big files for that sort of stuff.

24. So anyway, so we publish the book in Australia. Now I thought this was going to be an interesting experiment because this is what we didn't do in America and it was great to do it in a place where it didn't really matter. When I arrived in Iceland last year for a festival they had the Australian flag flying for me. I didn't say anything. My father-in-law wasn't pleased because he keeps saying to me, you should be getting citizenship by now. You can't live here and not be Australian.

25. Anyway, the book, the graphic novel on the main street of culture. Finally the book was published. I got the catalog from Random House and it's full of regular books. It's great! Instead of being in previews, I'm in this book with regular books. I thought, "At last here we are in the main street, we're not on some crummy side street, we're on the main street." There I was. On the inside they had all the color covers of their books for this half-year and there we were in between The Natural Guide to Better Breastfeeding and The Dog Owner's Guide: the main street of culture.
26. The next thing about getting a graphic novel into bookshops is they don't know where to put it. They don't know where to file it. "You know, From Hell?" I suppose you find it under crime. But I don't want to write crime on it to tell people it's a crime. To me it's not a crime book, it's bigger than that. I was interested to watch where different shops put it. One shop put it in the window and sold thirteen in a fortnight. Another shop put it on the shelf with the cover facing out. They sold a few. There was one shop we found that put it in the basement with the sheet music. They didn't sell any.

27. But these are the difficulties. I haven't found or figured out a solution. What do we tell the book trade? How do we get this into the hands of the people that want it? Because this publisher's only got one graphic novel, they can't put it with their graphic novels. They've only got one; it's in a class of one. Which was the root of another problem. Now, part of the contract said that I had to stop my own edition coming in. I forgot to mention we've got an edition in Australia for forty-five dollars. Instead of the imported one for seventy-five or with the change in the dollar it had gone up to eighty by this time. Eighty dollars. That's a lot.

28. No, I told them all where to get the book: "No, you don't get it from Diamond. Now, you get it from Random House." Now what Random House had forgotten to tell me that they had a minimum order for new customers. It was basically five hundred dollars, which I think was twenty copies of From Hell. Not every shop wants twenty copies right off. So I'm going to the shops and saying, "Why don't you and the other comic shop get together and order together." I'm running around to comic shops. I'm phoning them up saying why don't you have From Hell yet? They say, "Oh, it's not available anymore." I say, "It is available. Didn't you read my email?"

29. Anyway, that's comics on the main street of culture.