

Giants in the Earth - Deborah Frizzell

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Deborah Frizzell: Let's talk about how you first began making art.

Charles Fetherolf: I don't really see it as a choice. It was just something I did as a very young boy. My earliest memory is of *Planet of the Apes*. I loved it and I had to replicate it. It seemed like a natural thing to study in college and I never really thought about having it as a career.

DF: Was your interest in both the stories and visual images?

CF: Yes. I would say in high school comic books were probably what I wanted to do and, once I started studying art in school, I realized there was a bigger world out there, and I really wasn't happy with what was going on in mainstream comics—superhero comics. They seemed to be pushing marketing over actual storytelling.

DF: What comics were you reading as a young boy?

CF: *Star Wars* came out in '77. Somebody turned me on to Robert E. Howard. I have a little Robert E. Howard collection with *Conan the Barbarian*.

DF: Then?

CF: I went to the State University of New York at New Paltz. I did my first two years at a community college where there were two guys who influenced me; Leonard Wallace and Ivan Mischo who was a muralist. I owe a large debt to Wallace because he was a fantastic instructor in figure drawing. Every class began with an hour lecture. He pushed me into taking a pre-med science class, which was incredibly rigorous and accompanied by a lot of dissection. Mischo was the guy who got me to think outside the box and to not lock myself in. Henry Raleigh was my adviser at New Paltz; he was the guy who pushed me to think more deeply about what I was actually trying to execute and to not be so tentative about being an artist at all, that it's completely valid; you don't have to feel like you're hellip;

DF: Defending it.

CF: Right. Another guy, Maurice Brown, was the one who pushed me into abstraction—solely as an exercise to make everything else stronger, and I still think in those terms to this day—seeing things as abstract shapes and not getting so fussy about detail. You have to just let it happen and, in mainstream comics, so much of it is too refined and it's very 'assembly line'.

DF: Self-conscious admiration of a certain technique.

CF: Right. That was the thing that I had to get away from. Growing up, John Buscema and Jack Kirby were the comic book artists that I loved and I would have given my right arm to be able to draw just like them. But I think, moving away from them for a good 15 years, you discover your own form of expression, while there are still little bits of it in there. As storytellers, I think they were exceptional.

DF: After college?

CF: When I lived in San Francisco, I continued to paint out there, large abstract expressionist oil paintings. Then I started doing more narrative paintings. And, in about '96, I started drawing comics again; little, short three page stories, and one was published in a hipster magazine out there. Then I rediscovered Manuel 'Spain' Rodriguez. Fantagraphics Books put out this compendium of his artwork. Rodriguez was outside of the superhero comics because he took the superhero look and applied it to history and to his own life, and that was a big influence on me. As Rodriguez grew up, he became a hoodlum in the late 50s and was in a biker gang. In Rodriguez's *My True Story*, he tells his own story and, in the second half of the book, he draws from actual history; the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War and World War II. That's kind of what got me going again; I would take historical figures and try to illustrate things about them. I had a template all of a sudden of everything that had been percolating in my mind.

DF: When did you first conceptualize *Giants in the Earth*?

CF: I moved to New York and had been entertaining the idea of this story from 'Natural History' about the birth of war. I'd always been interested in pre-history as well as in early mythology, especially Celtic mythology, and I thought what a great idea it would be if you could show how some of these ancient myths might have come into

being. I started studying certain myths and I noticed that there was a pattern, always a fratricide or patricide or matricide; an old order passing and a new order coming in. Something being created out of the past, and then there was the notion of the magic weapon. Usually the new, incoming tribe would have magical weapons of some sort. If we're to believe the evidence of archeology, the Venus of Willendorf may have been created in more of a matriarchy and, as groups of people got more settled, society became more of a patriarchy. I thought this idea of a magical weapon at the end of the stone-age would be something made out of bronze, and that was how the story began. This story about Neanderthals was also percolating and I wanted them to be part of the same story. Robert Howard did a few stories where he is in a past life, like a deathbed past life's regression, and so I started doing these drawings one night about an astronaut who's dying in space and who suddenly regresses in time. He doesn't know that it's a hallucination, but he is witness to the big bang and life evolving. The first past life was going to be this Neanderthal and it was going to march through time. I was sitting down to work on it again, and I just decided this isn't how I want it to be. It seems too hokey.

DF: It sounds like 2001: Space Odyssey.

CF: Exactly. So I put it aside for six months. And then I said, "Well, what if we did this... just these black squares somehow leading to something."

DF: That's an eloquent opening passage in *Giants*.

CF: Right, and you're just dribbling ink and you tell a story by just dribbling ink on a piece of paper. It can be your starting point or your ending point.

DF: You realized you were too literal before, too prosaic.

CF: Right, and now I want the readers to draw their own conclusions.

DF: Were you using materials at the Museum of Natural History?

CF: I had the Museum of Natural History and a wonderful book I used heavily, Simon & Schuster's *Encyclopedia Of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Creatures*, and a website, PALAEOS.Com. The idea germinated while reading H.G. Wells's *Outline of World History*. I knew I wanted to deal with prehistory from that point forward. I try to stick to an era per page. It gave me an overview of everything; the flora, the fauna. I tried to stay as accurate as I could. You find out what exists in the next era, what's coming up. I wanted to have them cross over, transition, so we're moving through time.

DF: You're focusing on the transitions.

CF: Right, and trying to research each species and find images. I didn't want to just take that artist's impression of it.

DF: So you have to interpret it in your own way.

CF: And in some cases I went to the Museum and I built the creature out of the skeleton. I fleshed it out from the skeleton forward. Doing it panel by panel gave me the idea that I could switch the scenes and decide what looked better where and if I wanted to redo something.

DF: How did you lay it out?

CF: So each of these panels was hung on the wall and I would add pages and take pages out, and it encompassed this whole room. Some of those images made it into the final comic, and some didn't. This panel is influenced by a diorama of *homo erectus* at the Museum of Natural History. It's really meant as a primer for what comes next and I wanted to wet someone's appetite. But then, it also stands alone; if I'm struck dead tomorrow, then it stands by itself. The reader is left to figure out where we go from here. I think I originally intended to have a page where I explain what everything was, but I decided to cut it.

DF: And now?

CF: I'm working on the next in this series. What I want to try to do in the next comic is to have some text, because people are speaking to each other at this point, and I also want to play up the fact that the main character, who is a Neanderthal, is a bit of a dreamer. He's kind of based on me. But it's also an allegory like the Cain and Abel story. Where Neanderthals are Abel and they're the son who gets the short end; there are no sons of Abel. So I guess we're all the sons of Cain. That's the story and the new title, *Sons of Cain*.

DF: Like ancient Rome's Romulus and Remus, an origination story.

CF: Right, so I want to show he has a dream life and a waking life.

DF: And the first few pages?

CF: What I was trying to get, especially with those first few pages, was that it's what lies between the brush strokes. If you think about life on earth as a tapestry, there is the space in between. As the accident of that first page is just a dribble of ink, maybe that's all that it took to get it going—some sort of happy accident and now here we are. That's what I was shooting for. We're left to speculate on whether someone spilled that ink or whether the ink existed of its own accord. I'm not going to come down on either side. That's a pretty heavy thing to swallow if you're just going to end up worm food. But Einstein says, "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed." So we just return to the fabric.