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## Unabashedly Bookish: The BN Community Blog

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## He is a Camera; Josh Neufeld's Cinematic Take on Hurricane Katrina

by [Jill\\_Dearman](#)

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In



A.D. , Josh Neufeld seems to do it through character, showing us the moment to moment experience of real people, panel by panel, in his compelling new graphic nonfiction book. Josh took the time to give "Writer to Writer" the inside scoop on A.D. The J.N. interview below:

JD: Some of the images of the hurricane in A.D. are beautiful but very scary and nighmarish. How did those images in the early pages (and on the cover) come to you?

JN: Once I settled on the idea of leading into the book with a "god's eye" view of the storm building and then sweeping into the Gulf Coast, I did a lot of visual research on hurricanes. I felt it was my job to establish the pure physical power of the storm, to create context for readers once we get into the characters and their stories. I looked a lot of photo reference, and then I tried to imagine the most ominous or terrifying images and "camera angles" to tell the story I wanted. All the same, I agree with you that there is a weird "beauty" to some of the images; thanks for pointing that out!

JD: How did you choose which characters to focus on in A.D.? Was it hard to give them "equal time"?

JN: The people I chose for A.D. came from multiple sources. It was really important for me and my original editor, Larry Smith (who ran a shorter version of A.D. on his storytelling site SMITH Magazine), to find a cross-section of folks that were a demographic representation of New Orleans -- men and women, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, people with a connection to the music scene, people who were greatly affected by the flooding and even those who weren't. We cast a wide net and did tons of legwork. We asked around, talked to people, listened to the radio, and asked journalist friends familiar with the region. Some presented themselves early on. Others came via articles, radio programs, and various personal contacts. One character I found through the blog I kept when I was a volunteer. Another one I heard on a radio program broadcast shortly after the flooding of the city. Another character is an extended family member of a transplanted New Orleanian friend of mine. Still another character goes to the same college I went to. And another character was recommended by a friend of mine who knew him when he lived in New Orleans.

Obviously, there were some "storylines" regarding Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans that had to be included in A.D: for instance, a character dealing with the flooding from the breached levees, a character who must deal with the loss of all their possessions; and someone who experiences the horrors of the Superdome or the New Orleans Convention Center. So those characters (Abbas, Leo, and Denise, respectively) do take up a lot of

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"screen time" in the book; and stories of The Doctor and Kwame don't have quite as full treatment. All the same, I'm happy with the balance. From a storytelling perspective, I'm not comfortable with symmetry. I think the book reads better with an "unbalanced" mixture of characters and stories.

JD: I agree. It makes your book feel very natural, uncontrived. What's your writing and revision process like?

JN: I come from an "old-school" comics writing approach in that I write full scripts, which detail the action in each panel, as well as all captions, dialogue, and sound effects. I usually start with a straight prose treatment, then break the story into "beats" (which correspond with the individual panels), and then format everything in "script style."

At that point, I usually run the script by my editor -- most often my wife, writer Sari Wilson, though I've also worked with other editors. Sari and I have been sharing our work for nearly 20 years now, so she's intimately familiar with the comics writing process. But it's amazing how few "editors" actually understand comics, and are able to imagine from my panel descriptions the way that the art will augment the captions and dialogue.

Once I get comments back on my script and I make whatever changes, I move onto the thumbnail stage, where I rough out the layouts of each page. Generally these thumbnails show the characters and main "props" as well as (hopefully) lead the eye around the page in an effective storytelling manner. Often, during the thumbnail stage, I see things that enable me to cut unnecessary writing (captions & dialogue), which is always good in comics.

The final -- but most important stages -- are the actual drawing -- penciling, lettering, and inking. This stage also often involves editing and revision, as inking is itself a form of editing. In my opinion, the most important part of inking is the taking away of lines and creating clean, attractive art.

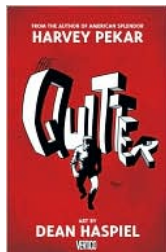
JD: What are your personal obsessions as a writer and artist?

JN: Un-earned sentimentality is my bugbear; the instant I sense it in a story -- as a creator or reader -- my alarm bells go off. I have nothing against emotion or sentiment, but it needs to be earned: a story's characters and the situations need to lead to it in a logical or recognizable way.

Otherwise, my overall goal as an artist is to further the cause of nonfiction comics. I fervently believe that comics have a unique ability to tell stories in the autobiographical, social, and political vein. Recent examples like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Alison Bechdel's



*Fun Home*, Mike Dawson's *Freddie & Me*, Laurie Sandell's *The Imposter's Daughter*, (SEE THE ARCHIVE FOR LAST WEEK'S INTERVIEW WITH LAURIE--jd), Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang*, Harvey Pekar's



*The Quitter*s, and Joe Sacco's *The Fixer* attest to that; while my own previous work -- financial satire in *Titans of Finance* and autobiographical travel stories in *A Few Perfect Hours* -- is part of that tradition as well.

JD: What artists, writers, teachers have influenced you most?

JN: One of my biggest influences is my mother, artist Martha Rosler. Even though she works in a completely different field than I do -- she is a photographer, video

artist, and installation artist -- her engagement with real-world, political issues has played a major part in what I choose to focus on in my comics.

I never formally studied comics, so my teachers have been other cartoonists whose work I admire. The most important of those influences include Harvey Pekar, whose autobiographical work in *American Splendor* has been hugely influential. (I've also had the good fortune to "learn at his feet" by being one of Pekar's illustrators on *American Splendor* for quite a while now.) Another big influence is Joe Sacco, who in my mind is the foremost nonfiction cartoonist not working in the field of memoir. He's like a combat cartoonist, going into international areas of conflict like the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia and telling stories about the people there. Other cartoonists who've influenced and inspired me include Dan Clowes, Alison Bechdel, Peter Kuper, Dean Haspiel, Jessica Abel, Nick Bertozzi, and Scott McCloud. And I can't mention my "teachers" without talking about Hergé, the creator of *Tintin*. I read *Tintin* all during my childhood, and his adventures still form my idea of "perfect" comics.

JD: Could you tell us about your next project?

JN: I'm teaming up with NPR On the Media host Brooke Gladstone on a book about the future of media, called *The Influencing Machine* (scheduled to come out next year from W.W.

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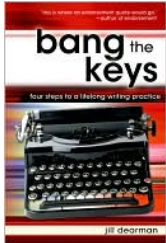
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Norton). I'm incredibly excited to be working with Brooke as she explores issues about how journalism (and books, and TV, etc.) affect -- or reflect -- society, and how they must change with changing technology. Instead of lamenting a golden past, Brooke sees the whole history of media as being filled with these crises, and always being able to adapt. This time we're living in -- with everyone trumpeting the "death of print" -- is no different; it's just maybe more dramatic in pace.

Brooke wants to tell the story in comic-book panels for a number of reasons, one being that she feels speaking through a comic-book avatar (a la Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics) is most akin to her radio voice; and also because she feels it is the best way for readers to take in her ideas in a fresh way. As an NPR- and media-junkie, I have as much to learn about this topic as anyone else.

JD: To learn more about Josh and his latest adventures, check out his site, <http://www.joshcomix.com>. And for more insight into the crafter of writing check out my new book



Bang the Keys and come by my site, <http://www.bangthekeys.com> for tips, clips and Freudian slips. Happy Autumn, all!

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