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## 'You suck. Stop drawing'

BY BRUCE DEACHMAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MARCH 7, 2010 BE THE FIRST TO POST A COMMENT

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Graphic novelist Von Allan's latest book, the road to god knows... is being launched on March 14, at 4 p.m. at Perfect Books, 258A Elgin St. Visit [www.vonallan.com](#) or call 613-231-6468 for information.

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen

Graphic novelist Von Allan on dispiriting advice, the marvel of flight, and how cheaters actually do prosper

1. What was on your bedroom walls when you were a kid?

There was a variety of comic-book posters. The one I vividly remember is a cover for a comic called

DNAgents, by an artist named Dave Stevens, of a really cute girl.

2. What was your first drawing obsession?

I came to art really late, so I wasn't the kid in high school, doodling. I started to learn to draw when I was 24. As a kid, I doodled starships. As an adult, really drawing all the time, it was all like anatomy and perspective. It was the nuts and bolts of doing art -- doing art well -- that I really struggled with.

3. What comment most often appeared on your report cards?

I don't remember, but I'm sure it was something along the lines of "He's too shy. He needs to participate more in classes." I was really, really introverted as a kid, like massively introverted. I was a very lonely, quiet fat kid. I was about 214 pounds when I was 13. And because of that I was really shy, I read comics, I didn't put my hand up.

4. If you could be one comic-book character for a day, who would you choose and why?

Superman, mainly because he can do anything. And particularly the Silver Age Superman, who could fly into space and push the sun around and what have you. But being invulnerable and being able to fly -- that's not so bad.

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5. What three habits or rituals can you not get through your week without?

Coffee in the morning. Reading e-mail and checking online news and what have you in the morning. And working out in the morning -- I have a very slow metabolism, so I can't eat until I'm up for five hours or I work out. I can actually go to bed hungry, and wake up in the morning, eight hours later, and have no appetite, and if I don't work out, I won't eat for another five or six hours. If I had known this in high school, my life might have been a bit different.

6. What three things could you easily do without?

I could do without TV. I could do without a car -- I've basically done without a car all my life. And I can do without snow. I like the winter. I like it cold. I don't like the snow.

7. What advice do you wish you'd received or heeded?

The biggest piece of advice -- it's all art-related -- was I struggled for years to be an artist and what have you, and it's "draw what you see" and all this stuff. Nobody told me that cheating was OK. Nobody told me that whatever gets you to the final image is valid, and if I had known that, I think I would have saved myself a few years of frustration. There was an artist named Wally Wood who did a lot of comic books, and he had a mantra that he posted up on his wall, that was like "Never draw what you can trace, never trace what you can photocopy, never photocopy what you can actually slap down." I tell you, I killed myself taking maybe a reference photo of a building but barely looking at it and trying to construct the house and getting all the perspective and proportions right. But it's totally fine to do every trick you can do to get to the image, and that would have saved me so much frustration.

8. What three songs should everyone have on their iPods?

Sally MacLennane by the Pogues; That's the Way that the World Goes Round by John Prine; and Have I the Right? by the Honeycombs.

9. What is the oddest thing anyone has said about your work?

"You suck. Stop drawing."

Who said that?

I probably shouldn't name names, but because I came to art late, the learning curve that I faced was what most people face when they're 10. I faced it when I was 24 or 25. And after a couple of years, things were getting better, but it was still not very good. My mantra has always been "suck less." Like get better and suck less. Work through it and try to keep your self-esteem up, and I would start to show people early pages from the road to god knows ... and people would be, like, "That's awful. You have no future. Give it up." And you either cave under that stuff or you take it under advisement, try to get the good out of it and get better. But if I had listened to some of these people, I would have just collapsed.

10. What do you miss most?

My mom. My mom died when I was 20, and the road to god knows... actually deals a lot with my memories of dealing with a schizophrenic parent. My mom died pretty young, she was 48, so she never saw me draw. She died before I started, and I have no idea what she would think of this graphic novel, but I hope she'd like it. She was a very loving person, and she died through events that, like, she couldn't control some

of her demons, and it's never been clear if it was a heart attack or if it was actually a suicide. But I miss her and it would be nice to talk to her.

11. If you could repeat any single day from your life, which would you choose and why? (Note: weddings and births are disqualified.)

Probably the decision I made to start drawing in the first place. That was a leap of faith. I was running the bookstore (Perfect Books) and I never thought I could draw, and I started meeting writers and artists and what have you, and I started to realize the work that goes into doing this stuff - - the false starts, the failures -- and I realized that my idea that you're hit by a magical wand when you're born and this is what you're destined to do was totally wrong. And I literally sat down with a copy of Betty Edwards' Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain and started to teach myself to draw. The decision to do that and to actually leave the store and try to do that full-time, like a student again, was cool. Scary, but a really, really cool decision.

12. What useless skill(s) do you possess?

I can tell you more than you'd ever want to know about Tony Dungy and Monte Kiffin's 4-3 Over/Under Cover 2 Defence. (He's not lying. Go to [www.ottawacitizen.com/20questions](http://www.ottawacitizen.com/20questions) and watch him explain.)

13. What makes you squirm?

Heights. I do not like heights, whatsoever. Even being up on a ladder freaks me out.

14. If you were to rewrite one classic book in graphic novel form, what would you choose and why?

It may have been done, but probably 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea by Jules Verne. Mainly because it's 150 years later for that book, but the wonder and the sense of imagination and the sense of exploration is still as true now as it was then.

15. When did you come closest to giving up?

Probably about two years ago, in terms of drawing. That was still when some of the knives were out for some of the comments. My wife and I had tried going to conventions -- San Francisco, Washington -- and nothing seemed to be sticking, so a lot of what I thought about book promotion and what have you as a retailer wasn't working for me, and I was starting to get extremely frustrated and extremely disappointed.

16. If you could meet any three people, living or dead, and ask one question of each, who would you pick and what would you ask?

Mac Raboy was a cartoonist in the late 1930s and '40s who did Captain Marvel Jr., at a comic-book company that no longer exists -- Fawcett. He did some amazing stuff, and looking at his work has changed how I approach my own work. I'd love to know what captivated him about that character. He drew that character for years before leaving to do Flash Gordon.

Second would be Stan Lee, the head of Marvel Comics. What I'd really like to know is "Do you think Jack Kirby was treated fairly?" Stan Lee made millions. Jack Kirby was the artist on Fantastic Four and a number of other Marvel characters, and many people call Marvel the house that Jack built. But he was reportedly treated very badly. Stan Lee was evidently raking in a lot of money while Jack Kirby was still being paid a pretty low page rate.

Lastly, (music producer) Joe Meek. Joe Meek did the Honeycombs and put the Heinz together. He dramatically misunderstood the Merseybeat movement that the

Beatles brought in, and killed his house lady and himself when he was about 37, and I'd love to know what happened.

17. What is the most remarkable thing you've ever seen?

Manned space flight. I still think it's amazing that 100 years ago we, for the history of humankind, didn't know how to fly, and in the span of 70 years we were walking on the moon. I watch it on DVD or look at footage online, and it still blows my mind that we can not only fly, but we can go into space, we can live in space and we can go to the moon. I think it's magic.

18. What is the most remarkable thing you've ever done?

Learning to draw. That's something I never ever thought I could do, and getting to the point where I can do it pretty well is pretty neat.

19. What time will you never get back?

The time I spent learning to draw. I've spent 10 years now, pretty well full time, drawing, jumping in with both feet and hoping to make a living at it. And it's starting to happen, slowly but surely, but it's also much time that I could have been doing other stuff but I didn't. I was here at the drawing board, working away.

20. Who or what will be the death of you, and what would you like your headstone to read?

I have no idea what will be the death of me. Hopefully I'll be at my drawing board or something like that, but I have no idea. The tombstone, I hope it reads something like "He tried."

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