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# Comics and Illustration from the Written; The Conversion of a Story from Prose to Graphic Depiction.

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*Fine and Performing Arts Honors*

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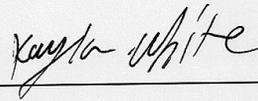
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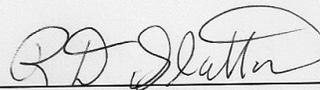
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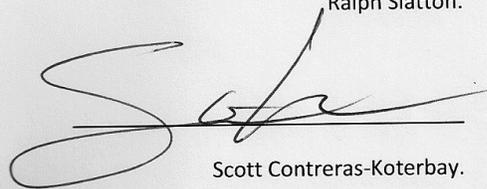
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## Introduction:

This is a thesis that details the process of writing a short 30 page novel, and then converting the subsequent story into a graphic format via illustrations and into a comic book layout. The story itself deals in reworking our learned assumptions of good and evil, specifically in the supernatural and human possibility for both. The comic book format is an exploration of my reader's different responses to the written and the graphic.

I started this thesis four years ago in my freshman year with the beginning of writing my short novel *The Prince of Greed: Mouse Tower*. I worked on the written story for three years until I finished it in the fall of my junior year, and I refined it further in the spring of that same semester by taking a creative writing class with Dr. Mark Baumgartner. When I was satisfied with the written story, I took the images that I had formed in my own mind while writing and then began to translate them into a graphic order in the rough layout pages, which from there, will eventually become my fully illustrated comic.

## In the beginning there was a story:

And that story was about rats. Rats of all kinds and all forms, not just literal but figurative as well. It was a story that stayed with me when I was little as good stories are supposed to do, but because of its nature it also wasn't the kind of story that would have stuck with most of the other kids my age. This story was called *Mouse Tower*. When I was in elementary school my father gave me two of his old books that were written and published back in the 1960s and 70s when he was about my age, which contained strange or weird stories, most of which were ghostly in nature. The first one was *Strangely Enough*, by C.B. Colb and the other was *Haunted Houses*, by Bernhardt J. Hurwood, both I read with gusto and intrigue. And *Mouse Tower* was one of those stories.

To be honest though, looking at them now, these books may not seem to be very outstanding to anyone else who might read them. They may just be vaguely interesting or ridiculously entertaining at the very most. I wouldn't imagine that adults reading them for the first time would find them as fascinating as I did upon my first interaction. Because they were written for children, their writing is for the most part minimal and they don't go into deep details at all and are more or less descriptive facts about the tales. But even, so when I showed my friends in school, they were only temporarily interested in the kinds of stories that were compiled within the pages. But for me the strangeness and unconventionality of the stories grabbed me. The imagery of death and the power of the supernatural drew me in like it has for so many other people. The possibilities of what lies in the unknown and the power that the unexplained can have over people, grew a fascination and a love in me for the darker things in

the world that has thrived all my life. And all my life I have collected stories of all sorts, but none quite so consistently as those of the supernatural and mythological. To this day I can still, and have, related several of the stories from both my dad's books and many more that have made such an impression on my childhood's imagination. In effect, I have myself become haunted by them. *Strangely Enough*, and *Haunted Houses*, weren't my first ghost stories, but they are the best place to start with the telling of the story that came about because of my thesis.

It was in *Haunted Houses* that I read Hurwood's retelling of the old German ghost story of the real Mouse Tower in Bingen, and drew from it the backdrop for my own short story, *The Prince of Greed: Mouse Tower*. This is not the first story I have written, it is actually a spinoff from my main series called, *God Soul*, that I have been working on since my high school days. I will not talk much about that story line except to say that it runs much different than my *Prince of Greed* stories will, but it is important to say that in the larger story line I created the main character for this smaller one.

When I discuss any of my characters I tend to speak of them like I would a real person, especially if I have worked with them for an extensive amount of time and gotten to know them very well. I cannot tell you how it is between other authors and their own characters, but for me it is through my characters that I explore possibilities, ironies, and outlooks that might motivate different people in multiple ways. And in-so-doing I explore myself in ways that I normally couldn't. When creating a new character or developing an old, I have the tendency to do my best thinking when I am drawing them. However, I can't really say that I brainstorm

about them. It is more akin to a meditative listening process. As I draw I ask questions or pose scenarios that I think would be interesting for the character to answer or interact with as if they were there with me, and then I wait for a response to come to me the deeper into the drawing I go.

The main character for the *Prince of Greed* stories is just that, a Prince of Greed. His name is Saala, and he is a demon, but not one you would expect, and defiantly not the kind you would find in a Hollywood movie or any popularized media. That's not his style. He is different from the conventional demonic in that his motivations run more like those of a scientist. He doesn't possess or try and drag human's souls away, though he has made contracts with quite a few before. He prefers to study humans, their emotions, reasons, and reactions, all to discern what 'Free Will' is. Humans fascinate him, not unlike how the supernatural fascinates me, and he observes them, collecting and even sometimes sharing in their experiences and stories, always with varied results. Why would a being of evil do something like this? That is the kind of question that I want people to ask of his character. And my simple response to that question would be, because he gets bored incredibly easy. He can't stand tedium, and even though he is more or less laid back in his demeanor, he is at the same time a possessive and stubborn creature with the kind of temper you'd never want to meet. But the variation in actions, motivations, and beliefs he finds in humans are what keeps his boredom at bay, so he personally rarely ever gets violent.

It would be a mistake though for one to assume that he holds humans in a kind of high regard. On the contrary he can't stand most of them and it is rare if he finds one that he can

tolerate to be around for any amount of time. Because of what he is, it is his nature to automatically see the greed in people, which just adds to the tedium. Being a demon he is several thousands of years old, and all too often he observes situations that he has seen before, it's like watching a set of reruns for a few centuries, and it hardly ever turns out well for his test subject when he gets bored again. His greed is his motivation despite how much he tries to step out of its confines, but basically everything he does, he does neither for his fellow demons, nor for humanity, it's all for himself and his own entertainment. However at the same time, as I've learned more about him through both story lines, it has become apparent that he is not without his own redeeming factors. Children in particular are more or less his only point which could be considered 'soft'. In the very least he seems to hold himself to a better code of conduct when they are involved. I gave him small qualities like this that could be built upon and can with time, branch out into new territory, hopefully breaking the barrier that surround the archetypes of 'Good' and 'Evil. Saala in particular is a very important character to me because of these possibilities we have already been able to explore together, and also because of the potential for so much further exploration that can be done in the future.

So naturally he was the perfect traveling partner to work with in this thesis. When I began this journey in freshman year, I had already made up my mind that I wanted to do one or two spinoff stories from my main one, but I was undecided as to which characters to go with, or even where to take them. So I wound up, as I so often do, retreating back into my collection of books, and comics, and stories for inspiration, and of course landed back in supernatural and mythological territories. I'm still not sure why the memory of *Mouse Tower* cropped up in my mind during my search, but when I tested its well-known waters with my own devil, he fit into

the story so perfectly that it kind of freaked me out a little to be truthful. I started by taking the more universal facts of the story and used them for the bones for my adaptation. There was once an Archbishop named Hatto II who loved money and luxury, his district was hit with a terrible famine that none of the peasantry were prepared for because practically all of their stores of food went to him in taxes, there were pleas and cries and even threats of revolt that spurred him to take drastic wicked action, he tricked the peasants into one of his store barns and then had them all burned alive inside, while in their death throes someone inside cried out a curse on the Archbishop, and that night thousands of river rats came up from out of the Rhine swarmed his castle and chased him all the way out to the Mouse Tower where they cornered him in the upper most room and ate him alive.

That is the very, very hyper-condensed version of the story. But I am a very particular person when it comes to details and I wanted to stay as exactly true to the original story as I possibly could. But to be honest Saala's character fit so perfectly into the precise folklore that I really didn't have to worry as much as I thought I would about accuracy. He naturally settled into the environment of medieval Europe, and when I had him interact with the Archbishop and the other characters along the way it worked so well that I eventually got to the point of having to remind myself that he wasn't actually in the original story. His character traits jived so well with Hatto's own personal greediness, that often times I felt less like I was writing and more like I was spectating. And the further into the story I got the more surprised I was with the way he and my other characters seemed to just evolve right in front of me on the page. It was a growing experience not only for me, but this whole project has served to mold him into a stronger character I believe.

As for the other characters that we encountered along the way, I think I was even more surprised with their developments. Sir Randwin Sheridan, a witch hunter that was hired by Hatto to help take care of the so-called pest problem, is a perfect example of how a good idea sometimes will just pop in unexpectedly, invite itself in, and sit down in your dinner party to stay, natural as anything. And indeed it felt natural when it happened. For the whole story up until the dinner party scene after the barn burning, there was not a thought in my head that pertained to the possibility of Saala having a worthy rival in this first story. I knew that later in this series when I wrote other adventures for him, he would have some, but in my mind they were also either demons or some other supernatural force. Never had I considered having a human foe step up to face him until this one moment when I was trying to devise a conversation for the dinner party to progress the story flow forward. And then literally out of nowhere this broody witch hunter just walks right into my imagination and I immediately type him into the dining hall without really realizing what I had just done. It wasn't until later when he and my demon were showboating mutual distaste for each other that I fully came to understand just how randomly this had come about, and just how many fun and interesting points I could make with these two. It was pure free writing, and the most poetic moment of the creative imagination taking hold through no control whatsoever on my part that I have ever had. It was one of my most confirming moments that writing was what I truly want to do.

From the Imagination to the Literal:

As in how I literally went from having my story pictured out, like a cinema in my own imagination, to being translated into a hard graphic context. For many years now I have been an avid reader of Manga, comic books, and graphic novels, whose influences have been the bases for the second half of my thesis in which I turn the written story into comic illustrations. In my earlier years most of my exposure to graphics and art through images came from television shows like the Looney Toons, Top Cat, Droopy, Yogi Bear, and other Hanna Barbara cartoons. Actually the first franchise I remember becoming really attached to when I was very young was the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles because of the Saturday morning shows and also the two live action movies that came out in the early 90s. And somewhere along the way when I grew up a little, I also started to get wrapped up deep in the cartoons that came on every day after school in a program called Toonami. These shows were a good mix of English dubs of Japanese animation shows such as Dragon Ball Z, and American action animations like the Thundercats. These shows were my paradise retreat once a day with new episodes, like a soap opera for kids, it was great and their influence on me was just as strong as the books I was reading. I do believe that my first real attempt at anything significant in an artistic effort came from being completely raptured by these shows, especially Dragon Ball Z, and I began trying to draw the characters on my elementary school work pages.

It was really only after I had survived and was recovering from a fight with cancer when I was nine that I got my first taste of the comic world. The first comic I ever owned I found at a thrift store in Knoxville when I was ten; it was Jim Davis' 35<sup>th</sup> book *Garfield Feeds the Kitty*. There were very few books that have ever made me laugh as much as that one funny book did. Until that point I had no idea that this kind of story telling was even around because we never

got the newspaper and I had only ever just heard the names of Garfield and similar comics. But that was the one book that opened up the flood gates and from then on I have traversed the comic world starting from *Garfield*, *Get Fuzzy*, *Calvin and Hobbs* and *The Far Side* to the inevitable numerous Japanese manga series, and now to the expansive American comic books and graphic novels.

It wasn't until a few years ago in high school, with the encouragement of some friends, that I more or less dropped drawing 'fan art' of my Japanese animations and manga's in favor of creating my own characters. The more I drew and the more characters I brought to life the more enthralled I became with the creation of stories and comics, and I began writing for several ideas. Eventually I came up with *God Soul*, my biggest story line by far so far. And it was with the creation of this story, this world in its own, that I came to understand what I truly wanted to do with my life, which is to write worlds into existence, breathe life into them through illustrations, and with them tell the most compelling stories I can to people so that I can hopefully influence others in the ways I have been guided and influenced in my own life. That is the whole reason behind this thesis.

### Comic Complexities:

Towards the end of the story writing process I began to experiment in converting the first pages into rough comic panel layouts. And at first it was extremely difficult. Even though I had a clear vision of how the events in the story would play out and how I wanted them to look as a comic form from moment to moment, it was still hard converting my own mindset into one that could effectively work in panels. Comic book layouts are not as easy as most would believe

them to be, and that was something that I already knew going in to this project. But what the full extent of the complexities involved were, I did not fully realize until I began the process myself. The beauty of this format is all in the image flow, the panel movement, text placement, and the simplification of complex ideas down into basic storytelling, while still portraying a believable world. Only instead of descriptive words creating that world for the readers to imagine for themselves, you are literally taking your own projection and transcribing it into visuals that the reader will now depend on. In effect, creating a kind of sub reality through the art and the writing, when if done right, the reader will lose themselves in. Though the panels, text and artistic ideas are the factors that make this kind of storytelling unique, they are also the same factors that make this a complex process to create. The tricky part comes in when learning how they should work together. How to get the panels to flow together coherently to form a line of conversation and events, while at the same time considering where exactly the dialogue boxes should be placed so that the page is readable while still allowing space for the art to depict the environment. That is why the best place to start working out these problems is with layout pages.

My first attempts at creating layouts were the hardest not only because of the different mindset but also because of the very defining choices that I had to make before proceeding too far in planning out the comic. I had to ask myself questions like what format should I set it in, what art style should I use, and consequently what rhythm would I be setting? Every illustrated story has its own rhythm, which is what draws in the reader, and is directly connected to the art and story writing, but the two most dominant formats, the kind read from right to left, and the opposite left to right, affect publishing possibilities. Since I will eventually have this entire story

made in to a fully publishable comic book, it was a tough decision on which to go with for the initial layouts, because each reading format has its pros and cons. I ended up drawing the panels more along the lines of right to left, because of all those years I spent reading Japanese manga it was actually more natural for me than my own English based reading style of the other way around. But I had other reasons for choosing that format, not really because it was easier, but because it is my intention to try and reach as many people in as many places and cultures as I can, so working in a technical 'foreign' format now is good practice for later.

My art style when drawing my characters also had a good deal to do with my decision as well. Since I started out by copying the Japanese styles to get better at art, my characters have always been more like anime than like the styles in American comics. There are a lot of people who would naysay this, but I regret nothing. To me that art style has always been beautiful, and to my eyes, the good anime and manga at least, are the most realistic and complete art forms you can get today. That's just my opinion. So I really did not have to debate with myself as to what art style I should use so much as to what kind of genre did I want to convey. The story is a dark one of course, but I do not believe that there is any story out there, no matter how tragic or overwhelming that should exist with absolutely no humor in it, so I tried to flavor mine with little bites of comedy in the written part, and then when drawing it out the humor worked well in the comic context. Even though it took a few try's to get it right.

Which is why when I went from the thumbnails and layouts to the larger pages, the ones that will eventually become the comic itself in time, I used a non-photo blue pencil to do the rough sketches. They are really good for drafting in ideas because they are also easy to erase

and unlike lead or graphite pencils they don't leave such a dark after-mark. These kinds of pencils are made specifically so that when they are scanned into a computer they won't leave so prominent a mark on the image and can be eliminated entirely with some tweaking. At the beginning of drawing the pages I roughed in the skeletons of where the figures would be and then built the background around them, adding details after everything was laid out properly. Again since I had never done anything like this and not to this scale either, the pages are made by an extension of Canson called **Fanboy** and are 11x17, it was difficult in the beginning and the non-photo pencils helped tremendously.

After roughing in with the blue I went back over everything I'd drawn in a mechanical pencil, refining the lines and adding in details and shading. This is the second step because the darker pencil lines allows for a better hue range and line variation, and is as close to getting to how the page will look after being penned in while still being able to make changes. The penning and inking in of the image is the next step for most comic artists, but as I worked in the lead and graphite pencils I began to really enjoy how they looked. So I made another decision to not pen my pages in with ink. Instead I paid closer attention to the pencil lines and put as much details as I would have if it was the penning stage. However I did not want to use the pencils to shade in all the solid dark colors like Saala's clothes or hair or even the environment, because I have a tendency to go pretty dark when I and pencil sketching. So the problem of darkening up the image I resolved when I scanned everything into the computer.

Once I went digital I used several different programs to refine my pages. The first I used was Adobe Photoshop where I rotated the images upright, put them all on 16 bit RGB, and used

the adjustments levels, curves, and black and white tones to lighten up the white background, work the non-photo blue out entirely, and darken up the pencil lines. The first three pages of the comic, more or less the introduction part, I used as test subjects for different ways to handle the rendering of the images. With one version I did a full spectrum color to the three pages in Photoshop, with another I used a Japanese painting program called SAI to paint in a greyscale with brushes that consisted of different sets of small dots that resemble halftones. I will not be doing this for every page of the comic but I pick the first three pages because it is common in manga to have the first two to three pages in a full color or a full greyscale. The last step in my digital process was to compress everything, save one copy as a PNG. and one as a TIF., and then take it into Adobe Illustrator for the dialogue boxes. For me personally it is easier to do text boxes and spatial organizations in Illustrator because it is a vector program, so I put outlines around the panel boxes, and dialogues in their proper bubbles, and I was done with the digital process. The first three pages were completely ready for printing. And now that I understand how to do the work on the computer, I will give the other pages the same treatment as I progress with the comic.

As I continue with writing my stories and creating my comics, I will employ these techniques and learn new ones along the way. I will hone the skills I have learned while doing this thesis, but I will not forget the reasons why I began this in the first place. Even though everything in my life has inspired me to get to this point, I will always regard this thesis as the real starting point on the road that I want my life to take.

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