

# CONTRIBUTORIA

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ARTICLE INDEPENDENCE

## *Gardening in the shadow of giants - indie comics and the geeks who make them*



By  
**Danny Smith**

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The first wet day of the summer and I'm standing on a corner in the centre of my home town, Birmingham. It's early enough to see the Saturday girls, already bored-looking shop workers meandering to their places of work, mixed with the people who found themselves in hotels last night blinking at the clouds and wishing they'd bought a coat. Occasionally someone, usually a man with an interesting beard, walks past pulling a suitcase and awkwardly manoeuvring poster tubes. Sometimes they're looking at a map on their phone, sometimes a scrap of paper. I presume it's them I'm here to meet. I'm checking out the International Comics Exhibition; it's the first one but it's the spiritual heir to the loss-making Birmingham International Comics Show, which ended in 2011. This one of the organisers, James Hodgkins, would put down to "not expanding into TV and film memorabilia or third wookie from the left territory".

Full disclosure; I've been a big comics fan all my life. From grubbing around car boots as a boy buying all the *Whizzer and Chips* annuals I could, to discovering the graphic novels section at the central library as a teenager and spending days devouring everything they had: manga, the small press autobiographical works of R Crumb, and the mind-bending surrealist visions of Frank.

I've always loved the format and still do, although now I rarely buy the single issues any more and tend to wait for the collected trade paperbacks, or TPBs. If you had told the 18-year-old me that at the age of 35 there would be two Spiderman, an X-men, and a Batman film that had been released that I hadn't seen because I hadn't got around to it yet, 18-year-old me would have been shocked. And probably would have punched you in the mouth. I used to drink a lot back then so you shouldn't read too much into the punching.

Soon enough I see over the heads of the rest of the public the man I'm here to shadow, Steve Quirke. Steve is a tall man, more than six feet and solid. With his shaven head he could look quite thuggish if it wasn't softened by his goatee, glasses and the fact he's always wearing a suit. He looks like he does the books for a security company but in fact is a graphic designer who volunteers for Friends Of The Earth. He is also pulling a suitcase and has a poster tube on his back.

"Alright, Steve?"

“I will be when they arrive – let’s just set up.”

“I thought you had them?”

“No, they should be delivered today.”

Quirke is here to promote his comic, *The Gee Bees*. It’s a Moorcockesque romp through history with a recurrent big baddie and protagonists who appear as different versions of themselves depending on the time and place. The first story arc has finished and is available online, but Quirke is here to present a limited hardback collection, which evidently had not yet arrived.

We find the exhibitors’ entrance around the corner from the main doors; there are four or five people around the signing-in table chatting and smiling. Somebody shouts something down from halfway up the staircase behind the table and laughs. Quirke smiles as he steps forward and says something to the guy on the stairs but he has gone, and the people at the table are already back to chatting among themselves. They check Quirke’s name off the list and look at me. “I’m with him”, I say, and they stamp my hand too.

The exhibition space is two floors; our floor is decorated blandly like a newly built school. There are tables all around the walls and a small ring of them in the middle. Everybody is setting up; placing their comics on the tables, assembling metal stands to fix prints to, or unrolling freestanding banners behind them. Everybody has a freestanding banner, even the professionals who occupy the

tables along the back wall, except theirs are slightly wider. I recognise a couple of the names. Steve Rude is an artist who co-created Nexus, a sci-fi independent comic that started in 1981, and, more excitingly, Bryan Talbot, whose realistic but baroque style I admired — before I even knew the names of the artists — through reading 2000 AD. Quirke says hello to a few people as he walks in; most mumble their greetings or are quick to get back to setting up.

Although the weather is wet, the atmosphere is still a little bit stuffy. Luckily our table is next to the windows. The woman next to us is young and has already set out a huge amount of prints, postcards and posters, all of which are her own work.

“Do you mind if I open the window?”

“That would be great”, she says.

Holly is 20 and has been coming to conventions for a few years, as is evidenced by her impressive set-up. She is an illustrator with a heavy lean towards manga and anime. Throughout the day she will be complimented on a large print showing her interpretation of the female Thor, news of which had only broken a week or so ago. Later she explains that when she heard the news she sat and did the picture straight away in time for the convention: about 11 hours' work.

“The best thing about these conventions,” she says, in between chatting to passing fans of her work, “is seeing people appreciate your work.” Holly works

part-time at a Spar to supplement her income but makes “quite a bit” from doing cons. I ask her what the worst things about doing conventions are and she quickly answers, “the stress of getting everything ready, plus, they happen all at the same time of year”.

Once everything is set up everybody starts to relax a little bit. Some people start to browse the floor and chat about the different events they’ve seen each other at. Quirke is a little nervous at this point and you can feel every part of him bunch up as a man in a three-piece suit and dark brown bowler hat comes to the table. He is introduced as Stuart, “the man you see about getting your comics done”. He tells Quirke that “they’re downstairs” and leaves. Steve tenses up more.

Soon Stuart comes back with five boxes and unloads them at our table. Stuart slits a box open and Quirke takes out the hardbound manifestation of the last couple of years’ work with as much reverence and ceremony as is warranted. He slowly cracks it open and begins to look through it.

“It’s beautiful”, he says, to no one in particular.

Stuart begins to talk to him about margins and bleed and other technical things but trails off when he sees that Quirke’s not listening. I grab a copy and the thing is actually quite impressive, there’s nothing small press or amateur about it.

“Right, we’ve got to number them now”, Steve points to a space on the front

page: "I'll take 1-50, you can do 50-100", and he hands me a pen. There's not much room behind the table, especially with the five boxes of books, so I make a kind of nest behind and begin to number the front pages.

While I'm settled a young lady comes to our table and begins happily chatting to Holly and Quirke. "Have you seen it yet?" She is talking about *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, which came out the night before. Everybody we spoke to would mention it within the first couple of minutes.

She's of an unplaceable age: she could be 17, or it equally wouldn't surprise me to find out she is 32. She is talking mostly through the Frodo Baggins puppet she is carrying. I recognise her as one of the grumpy people who said hello earlier. Relaxed now, she swaps stories of other conventions she's been to this year and compliments Holly on her art. I go back to numbering the books.

A man with a clipboard comes to the table; he's wearing a name tag but to be honest I was too annoyed at the fact his name was in quote marks to make a note of what it said. He approaches Quirke.

"Hi, there's spaces left on the Diamond panel and we're trying to fill them up. Would you like to present to Diamond?"

Attached to the comic fair is a convention for the creators with panels and seminars about the business. Diamond is the biggest comic distributor in the world, serving all the big comic companies and producing the monthly *Previews*,

a brick-like tome sent to all the comic stockists of the coming month's releases. Being in *Previews* is a big step to your comic getting in comics shops around the world.

"No thanks", says Quirke, casually. The man with the sarcastic name badge looks confused.

"Are you sure?" he asks. Quirke looks hesitant. "Mate, you should definitely do that, what harm can it do?"

"I don't know, I've not got anything ready", he says, unsure.

"Don't be silly", I say "you know your pitch backwards and you've got the book and even postcard art."

"I'm putting your name down and I'll come get you when they're ready", says the clipboard guy, deciding it before walking off. Quirke frowns at me.

"What are you worrying about?" I say. "Even if they say no, they'll be able to tell you what to aim for."

"I dunno, just wasn't expecting it." Quirke is still unsure, but resolved to do it.

Without fanfare the public begin to trickle in and I get to watch Quirke from the floor giving pitches about the comic, a task made harder by the lack of floor space and a banner stand that, now in front of the open window, has effectively turned into a sail. Steve makes big gestures when he talks but in between puts

his hands behind his back or in his pockets: an unconscious gesture because his hands shake, I'm told later, due to a medical condition. When he talks about the story you realise how big his scope is and can't help but be drawn in.

Having finished the numbering I run to the local supermarket to grab some drinks. I crack a can.

"Is that an energy drink?" asks Holly, pointing at my little can of gin and tonic.

"It's kind of an energy drink", I say, "just a different sort of energy."

Suitably fortified I browse the convention itself. A couple of people have made it in cosplay, which is essentially fancy dress of your favourite character. I spot a couple of anime and even a "Brit-cop" which is the English version of the judges from *Judge Dredd*. There are a surprising number of female artists and creators and, even more surprisingly, a distinct lack of traditional superhero, tights and fight-themed stories. There is a pointed awkwardness browsing through somebody's work with them standing less than two feet away. The artists selling sketches and commissioned drawings have the advantage here, burying themselves in work while you look.

When I get back, a huge guy in a tight pink anime robot T-shirt is talking to Holly, or rather saying a few words every so often and hovering near her table. Having spent a couple of years working with kids with autism, I recognise him as on the spectrum. He is enthusing about Holly's work and she is answering his

questions. He asks if he can show her his sketchbook as I get there. She takes the book off him and her eyebrows shoot straight up. She inclines the book towards me and shows me the most beautiful intricate pictures, all black line work and in a variety of styles.

“I don’t know what to say”, she tells him. “These are beautiful, your work is better than mine.”

He smiles even more broadly.

Quirke is talking to someone who has hastily set up his comics on the empty table next to us; his name is Eli and he is telling Quirke about the meeting he’s just had with Diamond. He’s been picked up by them, but didn’t enjoy the meeting. I ask him why.

“I didn’t get into this to deal with this sort of thing, it’s hard enough to ask for artists’ and letterers’ time as it is”, he says. He tells me his wife is pregnant and due around the time of the next convention. “I imagine I’ll be quite busy after that. Shame really, I love conventions, they create this safe space where it’s okay to be interested and excited about all this.”

Seeing the mixed reaction from Eli hasn’t calmed Quirke any, so I take his mind off it. Now feeling the effects of the “energy” drinks, I sing *Let It Go* to him a few times, and while he didn’t enjoy it everybody around did enjoy the annoyance on his face. The bearded guys opposite, selling prints showing teddy versions of

popular characters, even joined in at one point.

Steve is summoned and led away, and I get to man the stall for a while. To be honest that doesn't take much. Attendance, I'm assured by everyone, is poor by most conventions' standards, although they all seem quite chipper about it. It is fun to chat to the people that stop by, though; they seem to be split evenly between fans and creators themselves who just want to chat about tips and how to get started. Quirke comes back a little shell-shocked.

"How did it go?"

"I'm not sure. They said they'd take it, but I'm not sure it'd be worth it. The amount I'd have to get printed and what they take is too big for me right now", he says.

"But are you glad you went?" I ask, feeling a little bad about talking him into doing it.

"Of course I can see how that part of the business works, and that's great", he says, brightening up, "but I was speaking to the guys at Nostalgia and they said they would have it in there commission-free."

Nostalgia and Comics is the local independent comic book shop and cornerstone of geek culture in Birmingham.

"Result," I say, and Steve just smiles broadly.

Things have wound way down by now and I nip to the gents. In there is Steve Rude, bending his giant body almost in double to dry his head under the hand dryer. I look at the guy next to me at the urinal quizzically, he just shrugs. When I get back from the toilets, Quirke is talking to a older man dressed all in black.

“Dan, this is Bryan Talbot”, says Quirke.

My brain locks into place, a thousand images flash in front of me: 10-year-old me copying the sleazy adventure images of Nemesis the Warlock with a mechanical pencil onto old printer paper, discovering *Tale of One Bad Rat* and crying reading it as a teenager in the library. And, not a couple of months ago, trying to push *Alice in Sunderland* onto a good friend of mine, describing it as “perfect”.

“Hi Mr Talbot, I’m a big fan”, I manage.

He sticks around chatting for a few minutes with Quirke, but I remember nothing of the conversation. When he leaves, Quirke turns to me and laughs because my mouth is wide open, open so wide I get cramp in the muscles under my chin and am making a “gggnnnnnnn” sound.

Quirke says: “Yeah, I bought him a drink at the last convention, he was making sure I was going to the after-party so he could get me one back.”



## About the writer

*“My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order.”*  
Danny’s work has appeared in *Vice*, *Fused* and *Area* magazines. He typically writes about culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He’s worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.

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