Written by Svetlana Fedotov
Friday, 28 December 2012 10:59

Though Mark Rahner is still relatively new to the comic world, he's been slowly making waves where ever he goes. From his zombie western comic ROTTEN, to bringing back life to old cult favorites such as John Carter and VAMPIRELLA, Rahner has been keeping busy at keeping us scared. On top of writing, he can also be found podcasting, working Crypticon Seattle, and spreading the good genre word where ever he goes. With a sharp eye for both gore and pin-point satire, Rahner is going to be the man to watch. He recently sat down with Fango (over some delicious tater-tots) and shared his thoughts about his work and career.

FANGORIA: How did the idea of zombie western come about?

MARK RAHNER: I wasn't seeing zombie stuff that looked interesting. It was mostly the same and stale. Copies of copies. This was years before ROTTEN's 2009 debut. So my co-writer, Robert Horton and I threw some new wrinkles into the zombie field, and also made it a genre mash-up. A Civil War vet gets stop-lossed and made a reluctant agent by a president who stole office. He investigates outbreaks of the living dead around the country, and finds that they're cropping up in different species everywhere. What's causing it is the ultimate mystery. Along the way, he and his partner don't get a lot of cooperation, because people are angry about the election of "Rutherfraud" B. Hayes.

So it's a zombie-spy-western. Unlike THE WALKING DEAD—whose success is fantastic—ROTTEN is finite, with a nasty trajectory and buildup, and an ending. We also threw in a big dose of the satire and commentary that George A. Romero brought to the game, which has been missing lately. There was no shortage of things pissing me off. Still, ROTTEN plays straight, serious and disturbing.

FANG: Were you worried about keeping the work historically accurate, since you set in a specific time period?

RAHNER: Everything in ROTTEN is researched and pretty accurate, except the reanimated corpses, which are never called “zombies” in the story. Nobody would have known what one is then. Any modern story has to completely—and weirdly—ignore, or somehow acknowledge, four decades or so of zombie pop culture. Horton and I are obsessive about research; freaks. I spent a week on just food poisoning. We’ve even got those old Time Life books in the fake “hand-tooled saddle leather.”

Setting it in the 1870s was also a chance to wipe the zombie slate clean. No pop culture. No mass media. Not much in the way of communication—and what they have is slow. And ROTTEN isn’t a survivalist fantasy like most zombie stories. People are just starting to get inklings about germs and evolution, and they’re still plenty superstitious, or religious. Same thing. The dead rising and killing would freak ‘em the hell out. It could be the apocalypse, a disease, an Indian curse, anything. There’s no knowledge, no context, and no plumbing.

FANG: You've addressed the religious issue some of the characters had of the dead coming back to life, something that would most likely parallel our modern religious views as well if the zombie apocalypse happened today. Was that done on purpose, to make us stop and think of how much influence our religious leaders still have on us?

RAHNER: They still have a scary amount of influence. People rejecting reason and embracing superstition in a time of fear is the obvious main allegory. One of the running jokes of ROTTEN is Wade and Flynn looking at something ridiculous or ignorant or otherwise awful and taking comfort in the knowledge that, surely, a century or so in the future, such things will be extinguished by the light of reason. But we know it hasn’t been, and in some cases it’s gotten even worse.

The “Love the Sinner”/“Hate the Sin” arc is blunt as can be. They’re up against a preacher in control of a town gripped with fear of its undead crisis, with a species that’s devilishly red-skinned and strong. The preacher’s look and rhetoric should remind you of Glenn Beck. And he’s bad enough without the zombies. What it boils down to in an 1870s zombie outbreak

or right now is the same question: “When the shit’s hitting the fan at high velocity and lives are at stake, who do you want running the show?” To Wade and Flynn’s massive, constant frustration, it’s often the mouth-breathing kooks who only make the situation nastier, and greedy corporate types with agendas of their own.

FANG: How far would you like to see the ROTTEN grow? Would you like to see your dead-pan lead character, Special Agent Wade, as a plushie toy hawked at major comic conventions or children dressing up like cowboy zombies pretending to eat the brains of their loved ones?

RAHNER: Yes, there should be a ROTTEN generation of kid, although I’m not sure how you can make a child look that pissed. Wade’s the angriest man alive, but if they can make plush Cthulhu toys, they can make ROTTEN ones; Rotters! Or instead of action figures, some inaction figures. The fact that the comic, itself, is completely inappropriate for children is another matter.

Anyhow, it started as a TV series we were developing, sometime before 2007. A balls-out cable type of show modeled after stuff like ROME and THE WIRE. So it would be great if that finally happened. And movies. And video games. And, of course, a porn spoof of it. The name lends itself to that.

FANG: You’ve had the chance to write some very classic comic characters, such as Vampirella and the classic JOHN CARTER OF MARS series based off the Edgar Rice Burroughs’ work. How did you come about working on these behemoths of the industry and how does it feel to add to their mythos?

RAHNER: That’s all work for Dynamite, and I’m sure that ROTTEN, which is independent and creator-owned, helped open that door. Joe Rybandt at Dynamite has given me a lot of rope—he’s probably a degenerate—and he’s great. It’s lump-in-the-throat-caliber fun to write characters I read as a kid, and then add a layer of unsettling violence and horror to them as a maladjusted adult.

For instance: WARLORD OF MARS ANNUAL #1 is a brutal prequel that fits in seamlessly for anyone who’s read A PRINCESS OF MARS, the Dynamite series, or seen the JOHN CARTER movie. It’s how Tars Tarkas became even more of a badass than the other giant, vicious

Tharks. For the LORD OF THE JUNGLE ANNUAL, I tried something I hadn't seen and based Tarzan strictly on the way Burroughs depicted him: as a brilliant grownup feral child with Christlike tendencies, who's also a pure, savage killer. None of the "Me Tarzan, you Jane" crap.

THE GREEN HORNET ANNUAL draws from my journalism career to put Britt Reid on edge and make him go a little berserk. He's a newspaper publisher in his secret identity. Is he going to tank his dad's Hornet legacy and his newspaper at the same time? It's also got some legit views on the extinction of papers amid all the Hornet violence.

VAMPIRELLA is especially fun because I've been putting her in the other pop culture vampire settings to tear the hell out of 'em. First TWILIGHT—well, I call it "Gloaming"—as a lawsuit-proof satire in her Annual No. 2. Then VAMPIRELLA VS. FLUFFY THE VAMPIRE KILLER, with an ending I guarantee you've never seen in any comic book, ever.

FANG: You have been writing successfully for years, but just within the past five years have dipped your pen into comics. Why did you decide to break into the comic industry?

RAHNER: Because I thought I'd trade the newspaper life for something even more stable and lucrative. Cough.

I was laboring hard on ROTTEN while I was still a full-time hack at The Seattle Times, and wasn't really looking for other comic work. Shepherding an indie comic involves a lot more than writing scripts for a company does. So, after I left the paper, 2012 was really the first year I went full-tilt doing work for a big comic company.

Why, though? We all have sick compulsions, and it's hard to say exactly why we act on certain ones. If we're lucky, we get the right enablers at the right times. I'm a lifelong comic reader. The transition seemed natural. The work is satisfying. I try hard to bring something just a little different to every comic I write, and make it discomfiting enough to make you do a double-take.

[redacted]