

Get me to the “WITCH DOCTOR,” Part One

Written by Jorge Solis
Sunday, 03 July 2011 13:03



Sometimes, you just can't go to a regular doctor for a supernatural illness. Instead, you should ask for a specialist in supernatural medicine. From Skybound, WITCH DOCTOR follows Dr. Vincent Morrow and his medical team as they treat patients with vampirism and demonic possession. FANGORIA spoke with author and creator Brandon Seifert about how the concept came about, the characterization of Dr. Morrow and his involvement with THE WALKING DEAD's Robert Kirkman.

FANGORIA: How did your career in the comic book industry begin?

BRANDON SEIFERT: Like a lot of comics creators, I got my start self-publishing. More specifically, I got my start self-publishing WITCH DOCTOR with artist Lukas Ketner. We put out a couple of WITCH DOCTOR stories by ourselves, starting in 2008. We did print editions with very, very small runs (200 copies each, because that was all we could afford), and we also put the issues up online for free and tried to get people to look at them. We got some attention from a few different publishers, but nothing panned out until Kirkman saw us online, loved our book and got in touch. We self-published the first WITCH DOCTOR story in spring 2008; Kirkman contacted us in summer 2009; in summer 2010 we signed contracts with Skybound and announced the project; and now it's summer 2011 and our first miniseries is coming out!

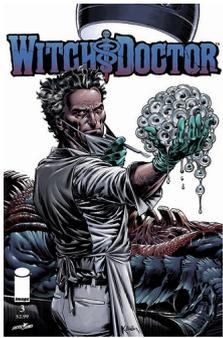
FANG: How did you come up with the concept of WITCH DOCTOR?

SEIFERT: Various pieces of it came to me at different times. Back around 2003, I started thinking about characters like Dr. Abraham Van Helsing in DRACULA, the idea of the occult doctor. Usually when you've got a doctor character who investigates the supernatural, they're used as a generic monster hunter. I thought it'd be cool to see a character like that who actually approached magic and monsters the way he'd been trained, from a clinical, scientific

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view. That idea ended up combining with the idea of a protagonist who was sort of a Dr. House type, someone who helps you out, but isn't very nice to you while he does it. The thing I consider the final piece of the puzzle for the WITCH DOCTOR concept is that all the monsters are crossed with diseases and things from actual science. That was the last part of the idea to come to me, and it just sort of hit me as I was walking down the street one day.



FANG: WITCH DOCTOR has an interesting cast of characters—from Dr. Vincent Morrow, Eric Gast and the mysterious Penny Dreadful. Tell me more about the relationships between Dr. Morrow and his medical team.

SEIFERT: We describe WITCH DOCTOR as a “horror-medical drama,” so it was important to us that Morrow had someone assisting him who belonged in each of those two worlds. Eric Gast is our refugee from a medical drama. He's a paramedic, very competent and capable, but out of his depth with the magic stuff. He's Morrow's right-hand man and Morrow would have trouble getting along without him. But Eric's very trusting and somewhat naïve, which makes him very fun for Morrow to pick on. And sometimes, Morrow goes too far.

Penny Dreadful is the assistant who belongs more in a straight-up horror story. She's a young woman with...something monster-y about her. She doesn't act all that human—and there are reasons for that, but we get into those in the miniseries, so I don't want to spoil the reveal. Penny's physically powerful, hard to injure, and has some abilities that make her very useful in Morrow's line of work. She's also dangerous and not very reliable. How much Morrow can trust her isn't entirely clear yet.

FANG: In an interesting mix of horror and medicine, Dr. Morrow uses medical jargon to explain the supernatural illnesses. How much research was done in this project?

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SEIFERT: Oh, man! I do sooooo much research for this project! Since Lukas and I started working on this in 2007, I've read a whole bunch of books, articles and websites about various diseases, animals and medical issues. In addition to that, I've enlisted help from some medical professionals; right now there's an EMT who helps me out a lot with the medical elements of the stories.

I've also done a lot of research into horror fiction and also folklore. There's a lot of interesting material in the things people actually believed about the supernatural and a lot of the most classic horror fiction has been informed by that; DRACULA had a lot of vampire research in it, and for a more modern example, THE EXORCIST was based heavily on real-world reports of "demonic possession." That stuff is much more interesting to me than horror fiction that's inspired primarily by...other horror fiction. The snake starts eating its own tail pretty quickly in that case.

FANG: The major theme in issues #0 and #1 is the debate between science and religion. In issue #0, Dr. Morrow tries to give a scientific explanation as to why vampires are afraid of crosses. In issue #1, Dr. Morrow argues with a priest over faith and medicine. Is it difficult to come up with both sides of the argument, even while representing your own point of view?

SEIFERT: It's interesting that you point that out, because it wasn't at all intentional. It was clearly something that needed addressing in issue #1, because it's a story about exorcism and possession in a very Christian mode. The argument between the priest and Dr. Morrow was also a good way to show the reader the difference in Morrow's approach and viewpoint from other heroes of the genre. No matter how weird the stuff he deals with, to him it's all just diseases and illnesses. On the other hand, in #0 we were doing a bit of a scientific deconstruction of vampire fiction, and it seemed like the vampires' aversion to crucifixes was something we needed to get into.

I'd argue that science vs. religion isn't really the theme, and that it's dogma vs. an open-minded, evidence-based approach to understanding the world. And dogma comes from lots of places. One thing we'll see plenty in WITCH DOCTOR is Morrow butting heads with other people who think they're right, whether it's religious figures, scientists or more traditionalist members of the mystical community.

As far as both sides of the argument goes, Morrow's side is immediately apparent to me, just because I know him well enough. And in issue #1, the priest's side of the argument was

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basically taken verbatim from the opinions of some Roman Catholic exorcists I've read. (I read several books about exorcism and demonic possession before writing issue #1, and they were pretty fascinating. I recommend THE RITE: THE MAKING OF A MODERN EXORCIST by Matt Baglio and THE VATICAN'S EXORCISTS by Tracy Wilkinson especially.)

It's pretty easy for me to put myself in the shoes of people who have a very black and white view of the world, especially one that's based on religion. The priest in issue #1 is doing what he thinks is best for the kid's soul. The problem is, in this comic he's wrong not just about what's best, but about what souls and possession even are.

TO BE CONTINUED