Continuing our sprawling talk (begun here) with MY FRIEND DAHMER author and illustrator, Derf Backderf.

FANGORIA: Were you worried about any backlash?

DERF BACKDERF: I figured there would be some blowback. It's a controversial premise: Jeff Dahmer as a tragic figure. And I understand there are hundreds out there who still mourn his 17 victims, and who have no interest in seeing Dahmer humanized. I get that. But when we write people off as monsters, with that comes a certain inevitability. He was born a monster. There was nothing that could be done. I don't buy that. If you believe that, then we learn nothing. It lets everyone off the hook and, as I said, mistakes were made.

I expected the initial reaction when people heard about this book—especially those in the media, who always cast a suspicious eye toward comix anyways—would be one of disgust. Because what those people imagined when they heard the title is a tale of murder, necrophilia and cannibalism. In fact, there's none of that in this book. This is the story before that story. There's really no violence at all. So everything people expect when they start this book, assuming they haven't read any of the reviews, doesn't come to pass. That's one of things I'm proudest of, that element of surprise. People start reading with a certain preconception and, when they finish, they realize they've read something completely unexpected. And that goes for someone who was looking forward to a crime novel full of murder and gore. They're surprised where the story takes them as well.

My hope was that the story is so compelling and haunting, and that I've told it well enough, that critical acclaim and word of mouth would make the difference and convince those with doubts to at least give it a read. And that is exactly what has happened. It's been everything I ever

hoped for, both in reception and in sales. It's a breakthrough book for me, in every way.

FANG: Do you and your friends still talk about Jeff Dahmer, or that time in your life? It seems that you guys were pretty close.

BACKDERF: Yeah, we talk and email all the time. Those guys were my inner circle in high school. Together—me, Mike, Kent and Neil—comprised the self-proclaimed Dahmer Fan Club and encouraged Jeff to perform his freaky schtick for our amusement. Mike and Neil, in particular, were a great help in bringing this book together. Their memories are very sharp and both are natural storytellers. Kent is a close pal, but he has no interest in anything to do with Dahmer, or with high school at all. I don't think he's even read the book. I never bring it up with him. Of the four of us, he knew Jeff the longest, all the way back to 3rd grade. The rest of us went to different elementary schools in the district.

Dahmer comes up once in awhile when I talk to Mike or Neal, but no more than any of the other freaks and geeks we interacted with.

FANG: What was their reaction to the comic?

BACKDERF: A curious one! I sent the first draft to Mike and Neal and they both responded the same way. They said "this is the funniest book I've ever read."

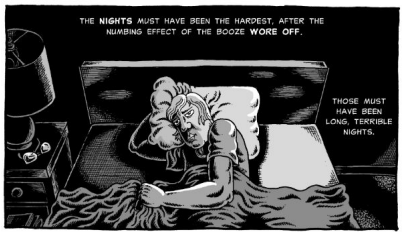
The explanation for that ridiculous statement lies in the way I constructed the story. In the front,

you have Jeff's tale of isolation and the depraved dysfunction that was methodically consuming him, body and soul. That's the story the average reader latches on to, as he should. But in the background, there is a second storyline that intertwines with the main storyline, that of me and my friends and our goofball antics.

I wrote the story this way for two reasons. First, I wanted to give the reader something human to hang on to. As the story progresses, Jeff becomes less and less human. So I give the reader these four very typical teens, and their silly antics and petty concerns. They provide the story with a human soul, and, just as important, serve as a stark contrast to Dahmer, the emerging fiend. The second thing I was doing writing the book this way, was making it fun for me to produce. This is a dark, depressing tale. There's no happy ending. We know what's coming. It's carnage. The thought of spending over a year grinding out page after page was not something I was looking forward to. So what I did, after I wrote the book (and that was indeed a very depressing effort) was detach emotionally from the story; just sort of push all that stuff aside, and concentrate on that background story, that of me and my friends. And that was fun for me.

That storyline I depict in minute detail and only someone in the know would pick up on it. I populate the background with all the weirdos and freaks and band nerds and the crazy janitor and so on; the people we turned to, to alleviate the choking boredom of suburban life in the Seventies. And I lovingly recreate the town we grew up, the mall where we hung out, the beater cars we drove, all that. Regular readers won't pick up on this stuff at all, although they do notice, on some level, the amount of detail in the scenes. But Mike and Neal zeroed in on this right, right away. They looked right through the foreground storyline to that background one and so laughed their way through the book.

As I told them when they made those comments, “you two are among a handful of people who would react to this book in this way.”



FANG: Why did you feel the need to make a comic about Jeff Dahmer, so many years after his death? I imagine for you that it must have been a necessary tale to tell, but do you think that the audience today can still relate to it?

BACKDERF: I'm a storyteller. It's what I do. And this story just fell from the sky and dropped in my lap. There was never a moment's doubt that I was going to tell it. It took this long because that's how long it took. I started working on this project in 1991, just a few weeks after his death. It took me 20 years to pull it together, not that I was working constantly on it, and I was doing other things, other books, of course. Time kind of got away from me, to be honest. But all that matters is that it's done and it's the best book I can do.

As for how readers react to the story and what they take away from it, that's out of my hands. I told the story I wanted to tell, and crafted it very carefully, I think. But each reader will interpret a book based on their own beliefs and experience. That applies to any art form, really.

It was never my intention to make Jeff a sympathetic person. He's anything but. Let's be clear about that. Jeffrey, the serial killer, is a parasitic wretch who spread nothing but misery. So if a reader relates to him, or his teenage experience, I'd say that reader took the wrong things away from this book. Yes, he was isolated, but that was entirely because of his own emerging evil. Yes, he was awkward in the world, but again, that was due to this malevolent depravity that was swirling and churning in his head and erasing everything else. He's not an anti-hero for high school losers, a guy who lashed back at society for shunning and bullying him. This is utter nonsense. He's a cowardly fiend crawling through the shit and rubble of modern life, driven only by a perverse, ravenous sexual hunger.

FANG: How long did it take to gather the necessary documents from the various sources? Did you experience any obstacles while doing the research?

BACKDERF: I have a degree in journalism, which is pretty unusual for a comix scribbler, so I know how to research a story. Most of the material I needed was fairly easy to obtain, the police reports and psychological profiles, the transcripts of interviews with Jeff, that sort of thing.

For the first ten years or so, this project was straight memoir, just my memories and those of a few trusted friends. When I decided to expand the scope and needed to get my hands on documents and files, all those things were de-classified and in the public domain, because by that time Dahmer was long dead. If he had still been alive, the authorities would have stonewalled giving that stuff up.

The interviews I conducted myself weren't difficult either. Remember, I'm a local boy, not some scary reporter from the New York Times that's beating on the door. So, the people I approached knew me and were at ease with talking to me. My interviews were very casual. Some didn't even know they were being interviewed!

The toughest thing was collecting the photo reference I needed to draw some of the scenes in the book. This was a little town, and an era long before the age of digital photography and camera phones. It was a complicated procedure to take photos in those days. Today, a teenager will have 5,000 photos on Facebook by the time they're 18, but when I was a kid, most of us had but a handful of crappy instamatic photos from our entire teenage years! And no one was taking pictures of, say, the inside of the local mall, because who the hell cared about documenting that? I spent years collecting the photo reference I needed. Judging from the reaction and the reviews, that effort paid off.

FANG: You also mentioned that there was play made about his life, based off your comic. How did you react to that? Was there someone who played you? Do you feel they captured the time and place as accurately as you tried to portray it?

BACKDERF: The NYU Theater Dept adapted and staged it for a graduate playwright festival.

2005, I think. Unfortunately, the weekend it was performed, a massive blizzard closed airports in the entire eastern half of the country, so I was snowbound and missed it. They sent me some stills, but they couldn't film it because of Actor's Guild rules. The play was based on some of my short stories, not the big graphic novel. Wish I could have seen it, though. The photos look great!

The graphic novel has been optioned as a film project, so I have that to look forward to.

FANG: Oh, there's a movie in the works? Is there anyone attached to it?

BACKDERF: Yes, the filmmaker Marc Meyers, who does great work. Film is an art to him, and that's what I was looking for in a filmmaker. I knew this book would be snapped up as a film project. How could it not be? And sure enough, I've gotten inquiries from four different companies. But Marc was the first to reach me and I think it's a nice fit.

FANG: Your art is very reflective of the time period you set the comic in and the comic art that was prevalent in the counter-culture of the 70's. It really brought the time and place alive. I read PUNK ROCK & TRAILER PAKRS, and noticed the same style. Did you have any influences on your comic style? Was it something that you carried over from your youth growing up in the 1970s, or something that developed later?

BACKDERF: I've been a pro for 29 years, so what you see is the result of a lot of hard work over a long period of time, constantly working my craft. MY FRIEND DAHMER and PUNK ROCK & TRAILER PARKS are period pieces, so that explains the vibe you're picking up there. My work in, say, 1990, was very much of that time stylistically. At this point, I've moved away from concentrating on mere stylistic impact, as fun as that was, to telling complex stories. The way I draw now is a polished version of the way I drew in the Nineties, which is when I found myself artistically.

My influences are far in the rearview mirror. There's some Mad magazine there, some Robert Crumb, some Will Eisner. Not that I can come close to those guys. But mostly what you see in my work is all me. I may or may not suck, but no one writes like me and no one draws like me.

I'm proud of that.

The comix world is bizarrely Stalinistic about pigeonholing creators. To mainstream fanboys, if you don't draw a certain way, or compose your pages in the accepted style of the day, or draw all women with DDD tits and stiletto heels, you're written off as "underground" and don't really belong in their world. This frustrates and puzzles me. Good gawd, expand your fucking horizons.

FANG: If you had the opportunity, would you like to do mainstream work if they kept your artistic integrity? Would you be willing to do a take on things like superheroes?

BACKDERF: Don't know about superheroes. I'd love to try sci-fi! I've never been approached by one of the mainstream comix companies. I'd be surprised if they even knew who I was. MY FRIEND DAHMER may change that. I'm hoping it opens some doors for me. It already has.

FANG: What are you working on now?

BACKDERF: More comix. More books. Work until you die, that's my motto.

I don't have another MY FRIEND DAHMER in me. I'm mostly a humorist, and my other books are all raucous comedies. All the graphic novels I've done have been very well received, and I've proven with MY FRIEND DAHMER that I can write a serious book, so I won't shy away from one in the future. No more serial killers, though. I'm done.

FANG: Give us a fun fact!

BACKDERF: I once hitched a ride with Mr. Rogers, the beloved PBS kiddie show host!

MY FRIEND DAHMER (published by Abrams Comics Art) is now available where fine books and comics are sold, but if you can, support your local comic book stores.