

Career Q&A: Steve Niles

Written by Svetlana Fedotov
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Steve Niles is the end result of a lifelong love of comics. From running his own company in his early twenties to writing some of the most successful horror titles in the industry, he's come a long way from his days of a starving writer. With such popular series as 30 DAYS OF NIGHT and CRIMINAL MACABRE under his belt, Niles is always looking to push the boundaries and limits of both the genre and medium. He's worked with horror greats such as Clive Barker and Harlan Ellison, adapting their work into, and has shared his own with DC, Image, Dark Horse, and others. With a sharp eye for the horrid and the horrifying, he has kept us at the edge of our seats for years and promises to do even more.

Currently residing in LA, Steve Niles has given FANGORIA a couple minutes of his time to answer some ever burning questions about his work, his inspirations, and life in general.

FANGORIA: Many credit you for reigniting an interest in horror comics. How do you feel about having some of your original concepts becoming influential?

STEVE NILES: The one thing you want as a writer, is readers. That's the one thing I am so very grateful for. I think that's the thing that I still can't get over is that I have people sit around and read the stuff I write. What's funny is that when 30 DAYS OF NIGHT came out, I had in my drawer two Cal McDonald novels, FREAKS OF THE HEARTLAND, all this stuff. All these years I've been writing this stuff and tossing them in a drawer. That was the big shift, I went from writing in this vacuum and tormenting my girlfriends to read my stuff, to actually have people read it. I still can't quite get over it. I'm just so grateful to have anyone out there who gives a shit about what I write. That makes it worthwhile.

FANG: Your work is most widely recognized with the illustrations of Ben Templesmith. How did you two happen to work together?

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NILES: I met Ben on the SPAWN message board. I was writing SPAWN THE DARK AGES and Ben was hanging out, wanting to get some work done. Todd McFarlane hired us both to do a book called HELLSPAWN and we knew no one was watching us, so we did whatever we wanted. I don't think anyone realizes that in the last issue of HELLSPAWN, we freed Al Simmons. We let him leave and still to this day, I don't think McFarlane even knows. Anyway, what happened, is we were working on HELLSPAWN and while we were doing it and getting to know each other, our friend Ted Adams from IDW called and said they had no money but if there was any comics that we wanted to do together, they would publish it for us. I sent him my pitch list and he picked out 30 DAYS OF NIGHT. We actually did the first issue for free. We really wanted to do something different, we were so sick of SPAWN.



FANG: Is there anything we can look forward to from you guys in the future?

NILES: Yes. Formal announcements have not been made but I flew to Chicago last month and Ben and I sat down and talked about some stuff. It's been ten years, so we're going to create some new stuff. We had this long break because we went so crazy between HELLSPAWN and when 30 DAYS OF NIGHT took off. He actually tallied it up and found out we did about 600 pages of comics together. So, we kind of burned out and took a break. But there will be new stuff.

FANG: You've written several sequels to the original 30 DAYS OF NIGHT. What is it about the comic that keeps bringing you back?

NILES: Oddly enough, it's not the concept that everyone was attracted to the series for. I got away from the Alaska concept pretty quick. It was the characters. What I didn't realize was that I was the only one doing comic vampires that weren't having some stupid drama. Every other comic was about some kind of seduction or falling in love, but I was the only one that was doing vampires as monsters. That kept bringing me back. It was the characters, not really the Alaska thing.

FANG: Why did you decide on writing about vampires over all the other supernatural creatures?

NILES: Because I hated them. I remember talking to Ben and was like “what the hell happened to vampires?” I mean, let’s see, vampires that scare me: we have NOSFERATU, then jump fifty years and you have NEAR DARK and I couldn’t think of anything else. It was kind of our dislike of current vampires that made us want to do it.

FANG: You’ve adapted the work of Clive Barker, Harlan Ellison, and Richard Matheson. Was it difficult bringing them across mediums?

NILES: At first, with the Clive Barker stuff, there was a bit of a learning curve because there was already a comic out called TAPPING THE VEIN. They were taking these eighteen-page short stories and condensing them into eight pages. I wanted to do more. It was kind of a weird situation with the Barker stuff because not many people know this, but I own half the rights to the BOOKS OF BLOOD and Eclipse Comics owned the other half. The only problem was that I was nineteen or twenty years-old at the time and I could barely get dressed in the morning, let alone start a company. So, Clive gave me the rights to these things and I wound up working with Eclipse. My big stickler was they had to be graphic novels, they needed room to breathe. So I did RAWHEAD REX, SON OF CELLULOID, THE YATTERING AND JACK. Those were the main three that I wanted to do, and they were full blown graphic novels.

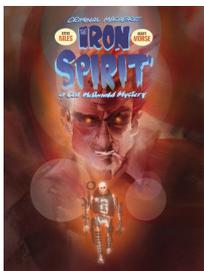
That’s the thing when people do adaptation, they try to condense and my argument was to go the other way. When you work with short stories especially, give them some breathing space. BOOKS OF BLOOD was full of so many beautiful visuals. Why are we condensing that? I adapted I AM LEGEND and the novel was 110 pages long, and the comic was 210 because I had to give it the space to breathe. Whenever I adapt other people’s stuff, my job is to disappear. There should be no indication that I was there at all and make the authors look good. It’s funny, I was nervous as hell working with Harlan Ellison, but he absolutely loved what I did. I see people adapt comics all the time and they try to put their spin on it and I’m like, “no no one gives a shit what we think, so put the story out how it is.” I actually ended up getting the other adapters in trouble. He read mine and was upset that other ones weren’t as good.

FANG: Cal McDonald and CRIMINAL MACABRE has been a staple of your work for a long time, from comics to books and back again. Where did the character and concept of a paranormal detective come from?

NILES: When I was a teenager, I had two favorite authors, Hunter S. Thompson and Raymond Chandler. They were my influences at the time and at first, I tried to write straight noir, but I was doing it in a modern setting and it never worked. All my short stories read like I was doing Chandler. Someone gave me a writing tip to put what I know into it, so I added drugs and monsters. The detective stereotype is that he was a hard drinker, and I was like, well it worked in the forties but today, that's not a big deal. So, I made him a recovering junkie. Alcoholism got romanticized but in a lot of the books, it's not a great thing. It's a coat, so I gave Cal the same thing, but I upped his habits. As soon I added monsters and Cal's opinion of monsters, it made it fun, because he hates everyone. After I established the core character, he's been writing himself for all these years. I love that voice so much. I get such a kick writing him. Luckily, they'll be more Cal coming.

FANG: Would you like to see him get adapted to the big screen like 30 DAYS OF NIGHT?

NILES: I was really lucky with 30 DAYS OF NIGHT getting David Slade and I kept saying that end of the day, I don't want to see my comic on the screen, I just want to see a good horror movie. I really lucked out, and yes, I'm doing that with Cal. We just got it back from Universal, Dark Horse is working with some people, there is a screenplay floating around. The problem with Cal is his little nuances make me nervous. I want to see him on the big screen but I want to see him done right. We had some directors on board early on who really got it. I also suggested about looking into HBO, Showtime, or AMC because really shows like BREAKING BAD are better than any movie that I've seen all year. You can get away with more on TV than movies now.



FANG: CRIMINAL MACABRE: THE IRON SPIRIT, while true to the characters, breaks away from traditional comics and discards panels and word balloons, mostly using blocks of texts such as an illustrated book. Was that something that you had in mind for the book or something that was suggested to you? Will there be more work with that same style of art accompanying it?

NILES: That's something I've been wanting to do for a long time. Essentially, for every Cal story, I write a big block of prose anyway because every story is narrated by him. So, I wrote an 8000 word story and didn't have to break it down to a comic. I just sent it to Scott, and he broke it down and I took a look at it. There's one word balloon in the whole thing. It's something I would like to experiment more and more with. There are so many ways to combine words and pictures, why do we either do illustrated stories or comics? There's a lot in the middle. I would love to see words and pictures done in a way where they are inseparable, where prose leads into comics and comics into prose. IRON SPIRIT was sort of a test to see if it would work. A lot of the reviews say it was too expensive for the page count and one review said it was too wordy, which I thought was really funny. For the most part, it went over well. So, I'm going to do more stuff like that. I want to do more experimentation. It felt good to me because it had so much more of Cal's voice to me.

FANG: You have also worked on staple characters for other companies as well, like SPAWN and HELLSPAWN for Image, and DC characters in GOTHAM COUNTY LINE. How did it feel to work on such established characters?

NILES: You know, DC has always been really cool to me with the Batman stuff. The one thing that really confuses me about comics is the continuity, like Robin is Batman and Batman is dead and this and that. But they've been really cool with me and when I do Batman, they let me do the traditional continuity where Batman is Bruce Wayne, there's Commissioner Gordon, the core people so I don't have to deal with that. Batman himself is really fun. I've been a lifetime fan and I've always liked him. He's the one superhero who has no super power; he's just kind of crazy. He's obsessive. Doing established characters is really fun because if I do my own work, I have to come up with a history and all this stuff and it takes a while to establish, but when you work with established characters you literally have a toy box to work with. It's funny when you are writing Batman and you just start to laugh because your typing "Batcave" and "Batmobile" for the first time, or "the Joker" and all these things we know so well. It's a very different thing to work with established characters. It's not easier, by any means, because you still have to come up with something good. But so many of the toys are already there.

FANG: Is there a character you would love to take a shot at writing?

NILES: I've been lucky enough to be able to touch on the ones I wanted to do, but there's a

Career Q&A: Steve Niles

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few. For Marvel, I would like to take a crack at The Hulk someday. Marvel also has a great collection of B-monsters: Manthing, Morpheus, Ghost Rider, any one of them would be fun to take a crack at. For DC, I love Batman and I already did The Creeper and a Spectre cartoon, which was also fun. He was a great character. He was a hard-boiled cop that turns into a vengeful spirit. I had a lot of fun with him. There's a lot of fun stuff out there, but I'm really focused on my own stuff right now. But given the chance, I'd love any of the monster characters

FANG: Is there any artist you would like to have a chance to work with?

NILES: Oh, there is so many. I love Gabe Hartman and everything he does is beautiful

FANG: What is it about horror that really appeals to you?

NILES: Well, one: it's really fun to scare people and it's really fun to be scared. I really like the characters in horror stories because people have to be true to themselves when they are scared. They're number is up, so they have to be true. I have always loved the roller coaster that comes with those characters.

FANG: Would you ever take a chance on creating your own publishing company again, like you did with Arcane Comix?

NILES: Not to that extreme. I went out and got investors and I did all this stuff only to discover that I was a horrible, horrible businessman. If I found the right partners, like people who knew the business, I would think about it. I already have stuff like my own label, The Bloody Pulp and I'm working with Epitaph records and my friend Matt Pazolo forming a label called Black Mass Comics; but, nothing like starting a company from scratch. I'm definitely a creative person and I have no patience for business. I hate numbers.

FANG: Whats the deal with Black Mass Comics?

Career Q&A: Steve Niles

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NILES: Right now, we're trying to figure out how to finance it. The first book I'm doing is with Chet Zar, who did lots of horror stuff and lots of stuff for *Tool*. He's traditionally considered low brow, but he's never really done comics before. He paints everything, so whatever we do, we're going to do it for Black Mass.

FANG: Also, you were in a band? What's up with that?!

NILES: I was in a band in the eighties on Dischord Records. I was in two, one was called *Gray Matter* that I played bass and the other was *Three* with Jeff Nelson from *Minor Threat* doing drums, but it was still basically *Gray Matter*. I did it for ten years of my life before I fully got immersed into comics. The records are still in print and they are still selling. They talked me into doing another reunion, our 25th, so we're going to be performing in Washington DC in a couple of weeks.

FANG: Do you still play bass regularly?

NILES: Yeah, my fiancée, Monica Richards—who sang in *Faith in the Muse* for twenty years and I knew her from the DC scene when she was in *Madhouse* and all these other bands—I played on her last album. So I play, but I don't tour. I'm too old for all that shit.

FANG: What are you working on now?



NILES: The latest thing that has been announced is a comic with Wes Craven called *COMING OF RAGE* for Liquid Comics, and I have already written three of the five. Wes Craven

Career Q&A: Steve Niles

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is such a nice guy! It's been such a pleasant experience and it's all really his idea. I'm also starting a new series that I started as a joke called VAMPIRES VS. ROBOTS, because everyone is doing all these "versus" comics. I was just kidding, but IDW really liked the idea, so I changed the title to TRANSFUSION and the first issue is out in about two weeks. It's set in a post-apocalyptic world where all that's left are robots, humans and vampires and none of them get along. They're all hunting each other. There is a forced alliance between humans and vampires because there are no humans left, and now vampires can't afford to kill them. It's kind of a neat twist because they share a lot of time together, but there is a very thin thread keeping the peace. I'm enjoying that.

I've been doing the 30 DAYS OF NIGHT regular series and CRIMINAL MACABRE, and after October, we're gonna do a crossover with them and I can guarantee you this: Only one series will survive. Everyone in comics dies and they come back in two months, but whatever happens in this series will be permanent.

Let's see, on Halloween, I'm doing a new comic for DC with Glenn Fabry called LOT 13 about a family that finds themselves in a haunted apartment building. It's just nuts. Probably one of the craziest things I've written and he's a great artist.

I have a monthly book I've been doing with Jimmy Palmiotti called CREATOR OWNED HEROES with four issues already out, and a fifth issue starts a new story with Andrew Ritchie who I did PIECES OF MOM with. Jay Russell co-wrote it with me. Russell is a strange choice for horror. He did MY DOG SKIP and TUCK EVERLASTING, though I think MY DOG SKIP had some horror elements.

I'm just always pushing stuff forward, thinking of new stuff to do. I'm doing a book called FRANKENSTEIN with Bernie Wrightson, but it's a sequel to the novel taking off right where the book ends. There's this great little mistake where the novel ends with the creature taking off the ship and taking off to the wilderness of Antarctica, saying he's going to go burn himself. But, what the hell is he going to burn himself with? There are no trees! So we pick up where he's lost and he's like "well that was a bad idea." He didn't know any of the geography. I actually put trees in Alaska with 30 DAYS OF NIGHT and got letters over it. So, I get called out over the trees, but the vampires are fine.

FANG: Give us a fun fact!

NILES: People are always surprised that I am vegan and that though I write about a lot of drug

Career Q&A: Steve Niles

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use, I don't actually take any drugs. I also have my own garden. We grow a lot of our own food here. I have a 70-pound tortoise living in the back yard and most of what we grow is to keep that monster alive.