

# COMIC MAN!

by Kate De Goldi

WHEN HE WAS A BABY, DYLAN HORROCKS'S FIRST WORDS WERE "DONALD DUCK". SURELY HE WAS DESTINED TO BE A COMIC BOOK ARTIST.



When I visited Dylan, he was about to go to Europe to promote his latest book, *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen*. We sat at the breakfast bar in his kitchen. Tūi sang outside. Dylan's golden retriever, Bailey, barked occasionally at passers-by and cars. It's always excellent talking with Dylan, and my visit lasted the entire afternoon. He has a lovely voice, for a start, and he's very thoughtful and articulate. In the course of a conversation, he sheds light on all sorts of topics: childhood, politics, films, art, books ...

## STARTING OUT

Reading was big in Dylan's childhood, especially fantasy novels. Along with *The Lord of the Rings*, he gobbled up stories by Alan Garner and Susan Cooper. These British writers specialised in Dylan's favourite kind of story: where the fantastic – the magical – enters the real world and changes it, sometimes in alarming ways. As a teenager, "when life was more complicated," Dylan escaped by reading the kinds of books we usually associate with younger readers, things like *Paddington Bear* and *Winnie the Pooh* (Dylan identified with Piglet).

Comics were also constant companions for Dylan. In fact, the entire Horrocks family loved them, which was unusual in the 1960s and 70s. This was a time when many parents (and teachers and librarians) frowned on comics because they weren't "proper" books. But Dylan's dad, Roger, had once thought about being a comic book artist himself. He brought home a steady supply of them, in all their different forms. There were British war comics, the Asterix and Tintin series, American underground comix\*, and the French comic magazine *Pilote*.

Dylan has been drawing cartoons and comics ever since he could hold a pencil. He always knew that he would be a comic book artist. He had natural talent as well as great determination and filled endless notebooks with his work – war stories, mostly. He also manoeuvred cartoons into every possible school project. "I was drawing all the time," Dylan remembers.

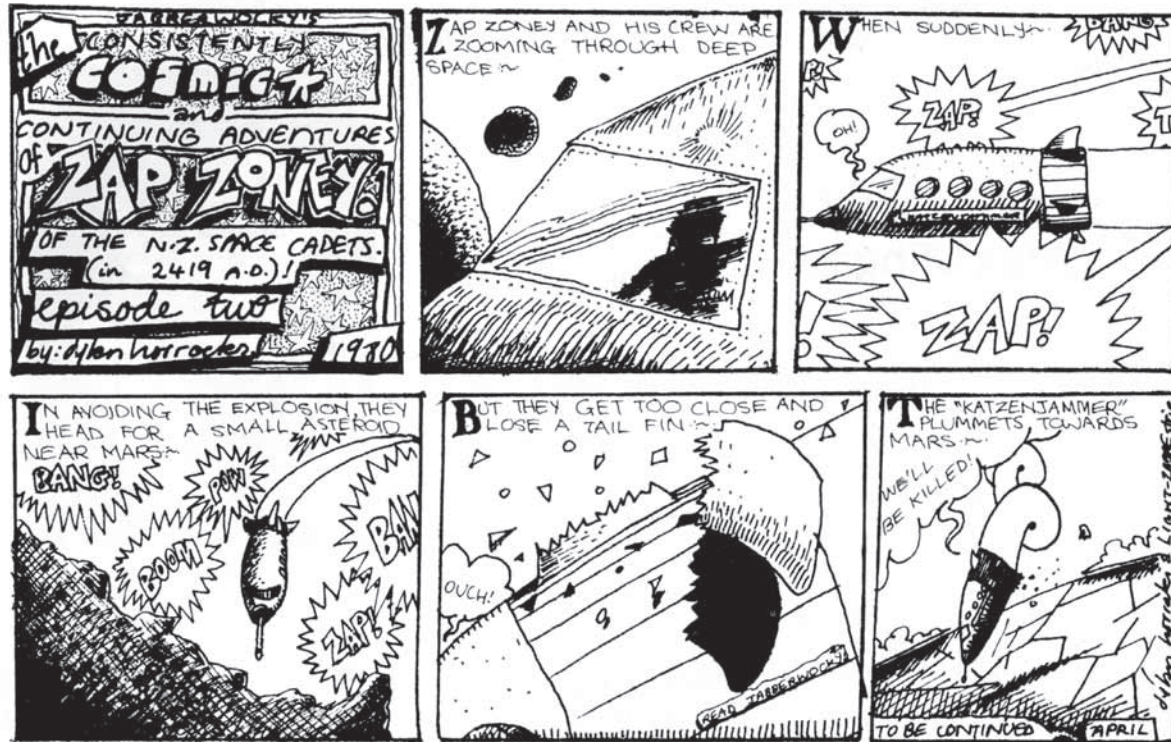


By Dylan.

\* Comics that were often self-published and contained edgy, controversial content

At Green Bay High School, there was drama club and plenty of script-writing practice. Writing scripts helped Dylan to learn about storyline and dialogue. Role-playing games were another big thing. From the age of fifteen, they became an important creative outlet for Dylan – “as important as comics,” he says. Role playing helped Dylan to practise creating worlds and developing characters. He remembers the first night he tried role playing at a friend’s house. “I rang my mother and said, ‘Can I stay here? It’s like being in a novel.’” It’s this creation of an imaginary environment that Dylan particularly loves. “For me, what happens next is less important than being there, of feeling the world. The environment is like a character.”

While still at school, Dylan started getting his work out to different audiences. He drew fifteen-page, full-colour birthday comics for his friends, which worked as a kind of serial. “All the comics made one big science-fiction story,” he says. Dylan also got his first paid gig: a monthly comic strip for the children’s magazine *Jabberwocky*. The strip was called “Zap Zoney of the Space Patrol”, and he was paid ten dollars a month. “I was ecstatic.” (The Zap Zoney strip, greatly transformed, makes an appearance in *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen*. Ideas can have long and interesting lives.)



Dylan’s style – the careful lines and colouring – has a precision similar to that of Hergé and his Tintin books. Dylan says Hergé has always been a very strong influence on him. “As a child, I loved how each panel in a Tintin story looked like a window that I could climb through to be in another world.” He especially admires the verisimilitude of Hergé’s work – the feeling of looking at a real place. “Hergé’s comics are very elegant,” Dylan says.

“He worked hard to get just the right line.” That “line” is known in French as *la ligne claire*, a drawing style pioneered by Hergé that uses strong, clear lines and flat colour. Dylan’s work is very much in the *ligne claire* style, “though my drawings are a little scruffier ... and I do like to use some cross-hatching and shading.”



Dylan also likes the way Tintin books can be enjoyed by both children and adults. “Belgian and French comics always seemed so sophisticated,” he says. “They were intellectual and philosophical.” As well as the Tintin books, Dylan pored over American underground comix from the 1970s. This included the work of Robert Crumb, which taught him something else again. “The underground comix had no rules. They were wonderfully rude, and political, and crazy. And I thought, ‘I can do that!’”

# GETTING PUBLISHED

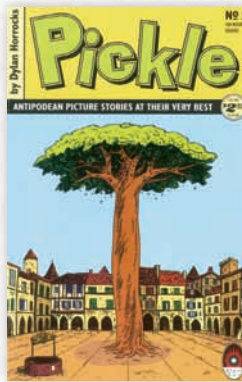
When school finished, Dylan's plan went like this: go to London, get work in the British comics industry, get rich and famous. His actual life went like this: work mostly in a bookshop, do comics every spare moment.

But the bookshop owner was very nice. He let Dylan use the shop photocopier. "So I was able to self-publish my mini-comic *Pickle*. I mostly gave it away to people, but I also took it to comic shops." This was how *Pickle* came to the attention of the right person – a British comic book promoter, Paul Gravett, who introduced Dylan to a Canadian comics publishing company, Black Eye Productions. "Back in New Zealand," Dylan remembers, "I got a fax – a fax!\* – saying they wanted to publish my work!" Happy days.

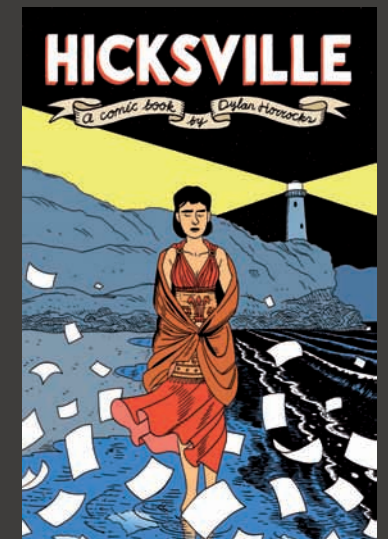
Artists' and writers' lives seldom go in a straight line, though. Black Eye Productions later published Dylan's first book, but not until 1998. In the meantime, he worked to earn money to help support his family.

This included a weekly comic strip for the *New Zealand Listener*. Then there were the long, extra hours he spent on his own stuff, like a comic book called *Café Underground*. Dylan had been working on this book "for years", but then he needed something else ... another project to help him "relax". He describes this second project as "a kind of back-up story, a story about a place". Dylan knew that this place was going to be a town by the sea. He also knew that the story would be about comics.

\* Scanned, printed messages or information that is transmitted through phone lines, with a fax machine at either end (like a very early form of email)



The story was eventually called *Hicksville*, and it would become the book that truly started Dylan's career. *Hicksville* is a black-and-white comic book set in a small New Zealand town. It has multiple stories, a clever use of different narrative techniques, an absorbing cast of characters, and a page-turning mystery. It's smart, sweet, and surprising (and set by the sea!). Above all, it's a celebration of comics and their place in the world of story.



Dylan's second book, *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen*, took ten years to write and draw. "It began as a casual story, just for myself," he says. "I'm always thinking about multiple books, making notes, trying out ideas. Eventually one of these books takes over." The first chapter of the Sam Zabel book took Dylan two and a half years; the second chapter, two years. "It's a very messy process," he says.



*Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen* is once again about the world of comics, but this time, it questions some of that world's publications and values. It's a colourful riot of a story with a diverse cast. You'll find Venusians, monks, an author with writer's block ... even a schoolgirl with a blast gun.



## HOW IT HAPPENS EVERY DAY

So how does all this happen? Once an idea has been chosen (or "takes over" as Dylan puts it), how does it become a comic? How does a comic book artist pull it all together?

"I work on the script in my notebook." (Dylan has scores of these. He's been numbering them since he was twenty.) "There's a lot of crossing out and diagrams, which is how I sort out the infinite story possibilities." The script is driven by the dialogue, but there are also notes about the setting and other details. These notes are a bit like describing film shots. Dylan uses them later on to remind him what he wants each panel to show.

Notebook



Panels and pages



“Next, I break the script down into panels and pages, and I work out where the bits of dialogue will go.” The dialogue usually sits in speech bubbles – and some panels also have captions. Then come the page layouts. This involves some maths to calculate how the panels will fit on each page.

Roughs



“Lastly, I do a quick, rough version so I can read it all like an actual comic,” says Dylan. “That way, I can feel the rhythm of the story and decide whether I need another panel or even another scene.” According to Dylan, this rough stage is crucial because it’s the best time to make changes. “Editing later on – and adding or subtracting panels – has the potential to disrupt the whole layout.”

And then comes final art.

Final inks



“I put a piece of paper on the drawing board. I rule up where the panel board will go. Then I start drawing.” Dylan works at A3 size. Later, at the publication stage, the pages are reduced by 70 percent. This is because it’s easier to draw in a larger scale, but ultimately, the final result looks better smaller.

Final coloured art



Dylan loves drawing because it’s just drawing – not the hard, mental work of writing and layout. He reckons drawing is good, physical work, “like building a chair”. The drawing is also the reward after months – and even years – of thinking and scribbling, of crossing out and starting again. Over and over.

## ADVICE TO ASPIRING COMIC BOOK ARTISTS

There are two important things, says Dylan:

1. Take your work seriously. Do a lot of comics. Do them all the time. And finish them. Don’t just draw your characters hundreds of times and think you’ve made a story.
2. Secondly, get your work out there. Don’t wait for someone to ask for it. Put it online yourself. Or start your own publishing company!

But mostly, just do it.



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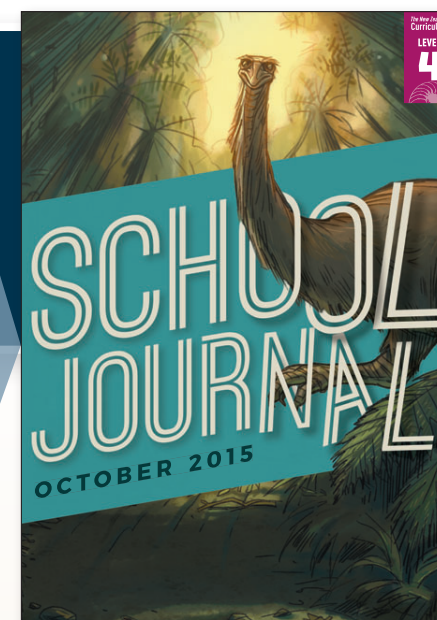
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