

## *The Alcoholic*

Q&A with author Jonathan Ames and artist Dean Haspiel

- Q. Jonathan, you've written for TV, including an HBO pilot you're filming this fall called *Bored To Death*; newspapers, including a column for the *NY Press*; and are the author of numerous books of essays and fiction including, *What's Not To Love?* and *Wake Up Sir!* Now, a graphic novel? How did this happen?**

Ames: It happened because my good friend Dean Haspiel kept suggesting that we collaborate. I've always been a fan of Charles Bukowski and had seen some stories of his which were accompanied by illustrations from R. Crumb, so the idea of doing something similar with Dean appealed to me. Then Dean illustrated Harvey Pekar's *The Quitter* for Vertigo/DC and one day he brought me in to meet his editor for lunch and I don't know what we ate, but over the course of the meal, I suddenly had this idea for a comic about an alcoholic, called *The Alcoholic*; in my mind, it would be a perils-of-Pauline sort of tale—the alcoholic always in danger and getting into trouble, and this idea further blossomed and became the book . . .

- Q. Jonathan, the protagonist, Jonathan A. looks a lot like you, but the work is fictional. How much of the character really is you?**

Ames: Well, we share a lot of the same emotional DNA and we've had *some* similar experiences, but we are quite different in many ways and so he's his own strange person. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote something about how all his characters were like brothers—his good brother, his lost brother, his bad brother, and so on. In a similar way, I have always thought of my characters—though I'm no Fitzgerald—as mad cousins of mine. Also, when I was a student at Princeton, Joyce Carol Oates, whom I was fortunate enough to have as a teacher, told me that I could take one aspect of myself and from this create a character, and I've used that formula quite a bit in my novels, including *The Alcoholic*. And there is one difference between myself and Jonathan A. —he went to Yale and I went to Princeton. You don't get much more different than that . . . though that sounds terribly snobby. I was lucky to get into Princeton and never would have if they didn't need me for the fencing team, which also sounds snobby . . . Oh, well . . . I should point out, to be fair, that Jonathan A. is also a fencer, but, like I said, he's his own tormented soul.

- Q. Dean, the imagery in *The Alcoholic* is often provocative--capturing some the most elemental human emotions and moments. How did you accomplish this? (Is it true you had a shrine to Ames in your studio?)**

Haspiel: I am the proud owner of all of Jonathan Ames's novels and essay collections and, even though his perennial short story, "I Shit My Pants in the South of France," is something I meditate to daily, I have yet to erect a proper porcelain shrine to one of my favorite authors. In fact, if I may be so bold, the best way I knew how to compliment my friend's incredible talents was to mesh his sensibilities with my own, giving birth to a new entity that would not exist otherwise. Ergo, *The Alcoholic*. As for how I was able to visually realize the emotions in the story: that's a two-pronged answer. See, Ames provided me with extensive photo reference throughout his 40+ history, from feathered hair to bald pate. So, that helped me "find" Ames's face and reduce my representation of

his visage to that wonderfully aquiline nose. Also, I'm very aware of human behavior and I study people like a train spotter. Plus, Google and my handy digital camera helps me to iconosize the human condition. I can't tell you how many compromising positions I've put my studio mates and my girlfriend in for the sake of drawing convincing comix.

Ames: I visited Dean a few times at his studio during the making of *The Alcoholic*; he shares a great space with a bunch of other illustrators, it's kind of like a clubhouse, where they all draw, talk, drink whiskey, and draw some more. Above Dean's drafting table was a collage of the images (pictures of myself) I had provided him with and it was rather like a teenage girl's bedroom wall festooned with pictures of her favorite movie star or singer. Dean, who is about as hetero as they come, took a lot of teasing about this wall-collage, but he's a true artist and didn't care what his studio-mates had to say. He was on a mission to capture me and then recreate me as a new person, Jonathan A. —and by the way, the A. can stand for Ames or Alcoholic or Alone or any other word with A, like Anybody—and so he took his teasing, but was not going to be swayed from his task. He worked so hard on this book. It took him a year to draw *The Alcoholic*. No wonder he likes Super-Heroes—his efforts were heroic.

**Q. Alcoholism is a serious issue. Did you have any concerns producing a graphic novel about the subject?**

Ames: I wanted to tackle something serious, and by serious I guess we mean, not silly or purely comedic. Two of the graphic works that I most admire, *Maus* and *Fun Home*, had extremely serious subjects, and I loved those books as a reader and found them to be inspirational as a writer.

Haspiel: Good art comments on all subjects from the banal to the controversial and my favorite forms of expression do it with a healthy dose of levity. Otherwise, morality becomes a message with the subtlety of a tsunami. The creative and editorial team on *The Alcoholic* were acutely sensitive to the subject and I think we did a good job considering the complexity of the matter.

**Q. Tell us about your collaboration. Were there creative differences, any butting of heads? Is there a favorite part that each of you particularly liked working on together?**

Ames: From my standpoint, the collaboration was dreamily sympathetic. I only recall one time asking Dean to change the expression on Jonathan A.'s face to better fit what I was wanting to convey. Dean was extremely intuitive during this process and from my descriptions in the script, he would perfectly recreate what I had seen in my mind's eye. I wanted to give Dean fun things to draw—fight scenes and girls and madcap moments, so that he could harken back to his comic-book roots—but at the same time, he was incredible at capturing very tender and quiet moments.

Haspiel: Each page I draw is a struggle, especially when I'm collaborating. However, Ames and I hardly butted heads. In fact, most of my interpretation of Ames's script was met with compliments and, sometimes, I haunted Ames with kismet. Maybe it was the power of Ames's story or, perhaps, it was the fact that he and I have traveled lateral roads but I believe that, like a method actor, a writer and artist must experience life in order to fictionalize it or the proposed tale reeks of faux-verisimilitude. Fortunately, and unfortunately, Ames and I have enjoyed the pros and cons of a late Friday night where, as

my father once warned me, "People do things after midnight that they wouldn't even consider before." My favorite character in the book is the protagonist's Aunt Sadie, who grounds the book and acts as Jonathan A.'s personal "Yoda."

**Q. Jonathan, you've been known to doodle while you're on the phone. There's a section in *The Alcoholic* where you're at a bookstore and you hand out copies of a diagram of your balding pattern. Is the actual image in *The Alcoholic* drawn by you? Any chance you'd attempt to illustrate a book on your own?**

Ames: The diagram of Jonathan A.'s balding pattern is the actual diagram that I used to hand out at readings when I was first going bald and losing my mind, as well as my hair. As a doodler, it's kind of my Alfred Hitchcock moment in the book, just as Dean makes an appearance as Jonathan A.'s friend in the South of France flashback sequence. I don't think I could illustrate a whole book -- I'm good at faces, but I can't really convey movement too well or draw objects, like a chair, that kind of thing.

**Q: You are both considered Brooklyn hipsters and are well recognized in your respective careers. Where do you go from here?**

Ames: I didn't know I was a hipster. I'm over forty. Can you be a hipster and be over forty? Then again, they say the forties are the new thirties. When I'm fifty, I hope they say that the fifties are the new thirties. Where do we go from here—well, I think, if we're lucky, we'll both keep producing books.

Haspiel: I'm with Ames on this one. I don't know if I'm a card-carrying hipster but I'd like to believe that I have a small catalogue of cool stuff to impart until I reach 50 when I'll really have something to say. Meanwhile, I trudge along and write and draw my super-psychedelic romance comix via *Billy Dogma* and my semi-autobio bruiser comix via *Street Code*, both located for free online, while I develop new projects. In fact, my next Vertigo graphic novel guarantees to be my most challenging and profound book yet.