

INTERVIEW WITH JESS SMART SMILEY

Question:

Tell us about your new book, *Upside Down: A Vampire Tale*.

Answer:

Sure! *Upside Down: A Vampire Tale* is my very first graphic novel. It stars a boy vampire named Harold, who loves candy so much that he ends up losing his teeth! He meets up with mischievous bats, a scientist, and the last witch on earth. It's a family-friendly, spooky-fun tale, colored in black, white and Halloween green.

Question:

Graphic novels and comics enjoy wide popularity these days. Are they worth reading? What's the appeal? Can comics do anything that plain old prose can't?

Answer:

Superheroes are no longer the only subject of comics. I've read comics and graphic novels that are about or deal with history, biography, science, genetics, psychology, the race to the moon, depression, religion, culture, and more. Of course, there are plenty of funny comics, and fantasy graphic novels, as well. I've always loved comics, because I love the written word, as well as pictures. Comics have a way of combining the two and picking up where the other leaves off. A character can say "I love you," but have his back turned and be hiding in the shadows.

Question:

What artists, authors and illustrators inspire you?

Answer:

Where do I even begin? Roald Dahl, Quentin Blake, Bill Peet, and Beverly Cleary

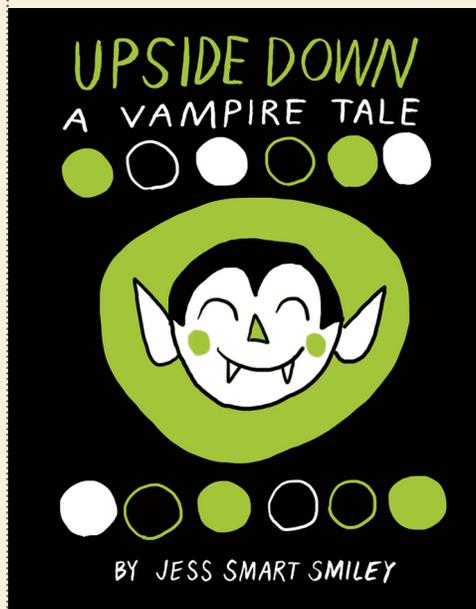
are welcome at any time in my house. Ray Bradbury, John Steinbeck, Pablo Neruda, Miranda July, and Zora Neale Hurston are all favorites, too. As far as comics go, I love the works of Herge, Doug TenNapel, Gipi, and Aaron Renier, to name a few.

Question:

What is your first book memory?

Answer:

My earliest book memory is, I think, from kindergarten. Students were allowed to check out these little black-and-white, xeroxed and stapled booklets with simple sentences on each page. I remember devouring the books and being completely transformed by the magic of how marks on a page became letters and words and sentences, that instantly became characters and experiences. It was exhilarating, to say the least.



Question:

If you could be a comic book character for one day, who would you be?

Answer:

I think I would like to be Walker Bean, from Aaron Renier's *The Unsinkable Walker Bean*. If I were Walker Bean, then there would never be a dull moment - I'd always be sailing through storms, or battling sea witches and coming up with new inventions to rescue pearl skulls. I would also get away with saying fun things like "holy guacamole"!

Question:

What book would you choose to live in for a month? Why?

Answer:

Les Misérables, because it is the only book big enough for me to live in.

Question:

How do you get published?

Answer:

You'll want to have something to share with a publisher. They want to see some writing and drawing. If it's a comic you're making, then you'll want to know what the story is about and have at least several finished pages of artwork or character drawings. Most publishers have Submission Guidelines on their websites that describe the kinds of books they are interested in and how best to send your work to them. The library also carries copies of *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*, which lists page after page of publisher information.

Question:

What's the most important advice you

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have to give a budding young writer/illustrator?

Answer:

Strike straight to the heart of what you love. Nobody asks us to make books, so why make something that we don't enjoy, or that we can't get excited about? Please be genuine, and tell the stories you want to tell. Draw the pictures you want to draw. When you love something, you find a way to make it happen.

Question:

What are a few of your favorite books, graphic or otherwise?

Answer:

Aaron Renier's *The Unsinkable Walker Bean* is worth mentioning again, because it is such an incredible book. It's a graphic novel adventure filled with strange creatures, fantastic inventions, and page after page of some of the richest, best-tasting storytelling and artwork I've ever seen. *Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth* is great in so many ways, and makes a good gift for that person in your life that still thinks comics can't be literature. Yann Martell's *Life of Pi* is a thrilling read, *Green Shadows, White Whale* by Ray Bradbury is a bawdy romp through literature and Ireland, and Michael Pollan's *Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* taught me that plants are selfish and that they fully intend to take over the earth. I also recommend *Talking to Tesla: The Mirror That is the Door*, which is a very unusual book by Alex Bigney, and available at the Orem Library.

Question:

What keeps you writing and drawing when things get rough?

Answer:

I think that the rough parts of life are part of what drive me to create - to focus on what I love about this world and make more of it. There's really something to that phrase "make-believe". It's a call to action, to make what we believe, and to really believe in

what we make.

Question:

What's your favorite thing to draw?

Answer:

Well, I've been drawing a lot of warthogs lately. I don't know where it came from, but I started drawing them and now I can't stop. Are there any books that help a person to stop drawing warthogs?

Question:

What kind of stories do you like to write?

Answer:

I'm writing one that's a kind of sprawling historic fiction. A novel. It's dark and gritty and something that I have to think a lot about when writing. I also like writing essays, short stories, and poetry, and am trying to bring all my wandering interests together into this single story. It still amazes me that the same words we use to talk with a friend can be used to tell an epic tragedy, or tell a funny joke, or to sing a song. Language fascinates me, and I think that anything I make is going to be as much about the use of language, as it is about warthogs, or vampires, or birth or breath.



Jess Smiley is an illustrator, writer, avid reader from Orem, Utah. His first book, *Upside Down: A Vampire Tale*, hits stores this October.