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Comics

Drawn to the Underworld

Sean Ridgeley

Partly-local graphic novel "The Underworld Railroad," to be launched Saturday, has an unusual concept that mixes supernatural themes with history of the Underground Railroad.

Strange? Yes. Compelling? Even more so.

The novel is being published by Texas-based Viper Comics and was written by the company's assistant publisher, Jason M. Burns.

Burns says a lot of the story came from his knowledge of history, and the interest he's had in the subject since childhood.

Fiction from fact

"There is a house in my hometown that was a link in the railroad, so I remember being fascinated with that since I was a kid," he said.

"I wanted to build on that concept and bring in a supernatural element, so I crafted a story around that. I wish it was more profound than that, but really, it's just me trying to turn non-fiction into fiction."

The local connection lies with the illustrations - the work of St. John's native Paul Tucker. The style, Tucker says, was definitely influenced by the work of famed cartoonists like Darwyn Cooke and Tim Sale.

Further inspiration came from horror films, new and old.

Tucker has loved comics since he was nine.

"I was at just the right age to have my curiosity stirred by some Marvel and DC books, only to be totally blown away when Image comics arrived on the scene. I remember lifting my head from the last pages of 'Savage Dragon' issue No. 3 and thinking to myself, this is what I have to do.

"I wouldn't say it's my profession yet, as I am still always on the hunt for freelance work, but maybe someday I'll be able to get by on just the comics stuff."

Burns and Tucker have nothing but praise for each other's work, and the results of their complementary alliance are evident.

"Paul submitted a short story to us for a

Paul Tucker's drawing style was perfect for "The Underworld Railroad," says writer Jason Burns. - Submitted illustration

talent search," explains Burns, "and although he didn't win, I knew his artwork was perfect for this project, and I basically approached him immediately after receiving his submission. It was fate."

The feeling is mutual, Tucker said.

"Jason really knows how to craft a script that pretty much leaps off the page and into sequential images. After some initial back-and-forth on character designs and whatnot, we quickly found a place where it was smooth sailing."

'Blown away'

Tucker said he was "blown away" by the offer to work with Burns.

"It made me a bit nervous to work on such a large scale, full-colour project," he admitted.

"After a couple days of thinking it over I signed on, and I am very happy I did. Viper has been a dream to work with. They have such an infectious passion for

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the medium and I have always admired the quality and care that goes into their publications."

"The Underworld Railroad's" story offers a take on what happens to souls in limbo, those being judged on whether or not they should gain entry into heaven. Bruce Boyd, an older man, serves as a kindly usher of sorts into the next plane for any souls that pass by his home. Peter Kemp happens to fill that role in this particular tale - a man wrongly convicted of murdering his wife. With the state of his nature in doubt, he finds consolation in the old man. Shortly after, the story takes a turn, and a war between good and evil begins.

The material is dark, to be sure, but there is comic relief (no pun intended) aplenty to balance it out. The "villain" in the story, for instance, is the devil, and as with some other conceptions of the entity, it takes the form of a woman - a seductress no less. Almost never taking things too seriously, she goes about deceiving anyone in her path, using people for her own means and slaughtering entire towns, all with a wry smile and sick sense of humour. It's quite entertaining.

"The Underworld Railroad" will be launched at Downtown Comics, 141 Duckworth St., Saturday from 2-5 p.m. Get down there and talk comics, the illustrator says.