



IndieCreator: Insights from a Newbie Comic Creator & Other Industry Pros

This is a series of bi-weekly columns about the travels and travails within indie comics by Bob Heske @ Heske Horror, creator of [The Night Projectionist](#) and [Cold Blooded Chillers](#). Beginning with this column, we'll interview various comic professionals from around the globe to get their take on competing and succeeding in the comic biz.

10 Questions with Shane Chesbey @ SmallZone

Shane Chesbey is the Ambassador of Indie Comics in the UK. He is a tireless champion of discovering and distributing emerging talent with a sweet tooth for horror (my kind of guy!). Entrepreneur, event organizer, comic creator and fan, Shane Chesbey wears many hats – and fulfills each role with passion and excellence. Here's his view of the comics industry, as well as some details about his SmallZone and other comic endeavours:

1. Your tagline for SmallZone is "Welcome to your one-stop-shop for the best in independent comics!!" Tell us what inspired you to create the website and how it's doing so far.

SC: I had inspiration from many sources really. My main inspiration was that when I started self publishing my own comics in 1994, there wasn't any outlet for me. Diamond was a very closed shop for small press, much as it is now, especially for UK small press. Pete Ashton was running the Bugpowder distro around that time, so when he quit around 1998 I started to form the idea for [Smallzone](#) in my head. Then when I visited the first Bristol "Comics '99" festival and met other self publishers like Gary Northfield and Dek Baker who were also looking for ways to sell their work, I thought "If no one is going to do it, I guess I'll have to try myself."



Smallzone has never been a money spinner, but it's something I feel I have to do until someone comes along to do a better job. Otherwise where else can folks buy UK Indie Comics all in one place? I now carry many major publishers like [Markosia](#) and [Random House](#), as well as US Indie publishers like [Moonstone](#), [Top Shelf](#), and [Arcana](#). And I'm hoping I can help some of the publishers left out in the cold by the recent sales threshold increase at [Diamond](#).

2. How do you differ from US-based comic distributors like Ka-blam with their IndyPlanet site and Comixpress?

SC: I'm not a print-on-demand service. That's the main difference. You won't find publishers like Random House or Top Shelf at those places. I also offer a more flexible service to suit every type of publisher, from self publishers to the biggest indies. You can't sell to retailers with print on demand which really limits your potential for exposure.

I think those sites do a very important job though, as they enable self publishers and small press groups to produce a reasonable-looking product to show to publishers, editors, retailers, reviewers, and distributors without having to break the bank with 1,000 copies at a time, so I fully support those sites.

3. How do you work with independent comic creators to promote and distribute their comics? Can you explain how the Frontline catalogue works?

SC: Originally the Frontline Catalogue was a printed item like a mini previews for the indie press; however, I soon realized that this was not a sustainable model. I am currently putting the finishing touches to the New Frontline e-catalogue in partnership with www.myebook.com. It works just like a printed book, except it's free for me to produce, free for retailer and readers to view, and you don't have to turn pages to find what you need because there are short cuts which allow you to go straight to the page you want.

As with any other distributor publishers, I just need creators to send me the specs for their titles along with any multimedia they'd like embedded into their listing such as videos, music or animation. It's really easy for retailers to browse the catalogue, and to place orders they just fill in the online order form. The main Smallzone website has now also been updated so that retailers can place wholesale orders instantly via PayPal.

Another way I promote comics is via convention appearances. This provides a direct line between the product and the customer. I attend all the major UK events and even co-organize the largest one myself – it's called [The British International Comics Show](#).

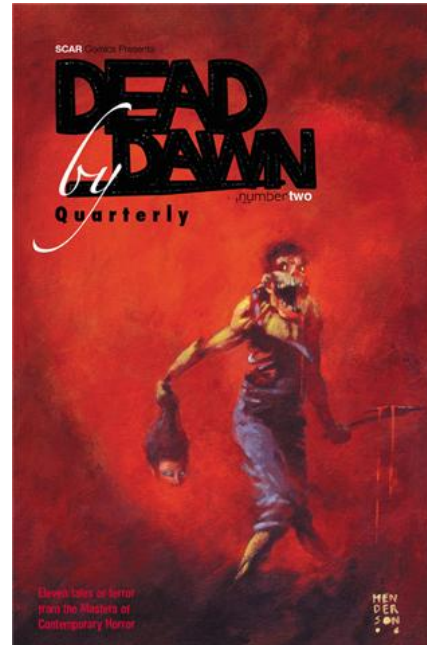
4. What's the monthly web traffic like, and what are your biggest sellers on the site and at comic cons?

SC: Web traffic varies from month to month. It's usually only around 30,000 unique hits a month, but has been higher. The conversion rate to sales from hits is very good though, as I guess most people who are searching for small press comics for sale on search engines don't have many other places to choose from. This theory is backed by the fact that we usually come on top on Google for the search phrase "small press comics." I certainly couldn't give up the day job though.

My best-selling titles are probably the Accent UK books like [Wolfmen](#) and [Zombies](#). Other constant sellers include Top Shelf's [The Surrogates](#) and Vampire FreeStyle by Jenika.

5. I'm a big indie horror fan. Tell us how Scar Comics came about and some of your most eerily intriguing titles on the site.

SC: [Scar Comics](#) was a happy accident really. Myself and Andy Richmond both love horror comics, and decided to create the [Dead By Dawn](#) anthology. We couldn't decide on a name for the publishing imprint so just decided to use our own initials: SC and AR. It must have been fate.



Since then we've worked in all sorts of genres as well as horror, including sci fi and fantasy. We are currently working on a Crime graphic novel with DC artist James Hodgkins and an historical action drama with Eagle award winner Dave Hitchcock, which I think will blow people away.

If I was going to recommend any title on our current list of books it would be the award winning [Falling Sky](#) by Ben Dickson. We are really proud of that one, but hey ... it's all good stuff!

6. What are the biggest "rookie mistakes" you see being made by newbie comic creators? Any advice you'd give to help make creators stand out in an overcrowded marketplace -- in short, what sells and what doesn't?

SC: That's a really important question, and not that easy to answer as everything is subjective. However, there are some inescapable truths that some publishers both new and old can't ever seem to grasp:

- Don't spend more than you can afford to lose on your books.
- Always make sure you consider all your costs, such as printing distribution and review copies etc. when pricing your books.
- If a comic is shoddily produced it won't sell (e.g., crooked stapling, bad printing, unreadable lettering, spelling mistakes, etc.).
- If you can't draw to a high standard, then comics aren't for you.
- If you can't write to a high standard, comics aren't for you. Many so called creatives see comics as an easy option. Boy, are they in for a shock!

- Study your competition ... if someone else is doing what you are doing – and doing it better – what does your book have to offer the reader?

There's lots more, but I'd be going on forever and boring folks silly ... that is, if I'm not doing that already.

7. Other than SmallZone, are there any other comic websites you'd recommend for creators? MyEbook.com is one example that comes to mind.

SC: Yes, there are quite a few: www.bugpowder.com is one, and there's [Read Yourself Raw](#) and the Digital Webbing [forums](#) are full of useful information. There's also an info hub I've created with loads of useful links for creators at: www.smallpress.info

8. What are your thoughts on the new paradigm hitting comics and publishing -- i.e, the pendulum swing from print to digital print on demand and web comics?

SC: I think it's all good. The more ways there are for comics to reach readers, the better. Digital will never replace print so it's not something I'm concerned about. I embrace digital comics as a very useful marketing tool for the real thing.

9. Time to play prognosticator: What 2-3 trends do you see coming in the next 12-18 months? Any strategies to prepare for this change?

SC: Everything goes around in circles, so I guess we are heading for another explosion in comics for kids and, hopefully, another small press boom once this recession is out of the way. I think that superhero comics will start to dwindle once Hollywood ends its love affair with the genre. I'm hoping Crime comics will make a big comeback, as I plan on publishing quite a few of those. >winks<

I think the changes at Diamond may actually be a good thing as it will force the smaller publishers to look at alternative ways to distribute their work other than the traditional routes, and necessity is indeed the mother of invention.

10. What were your favorite comics growing up, and who are your favorite writers and artists today? OK, now give us a final shout about SmallZone and what we can expect from Shane Chesbey's web comic enterprise in the coming months.

SC: Cheeky... that's two questions. 😊

I grew up reading black and white reprints of the all the Marvel classics in *Mighty World of Marvel*. Wally Wood, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and then later Neal Adams and folks like that. I stopped reading comics for a while between around 1977 and 1980 and then I discovered the British *Star Wars* comics and got hooked again. I was a huge fan of Tom Palmer and Carmine Infantino, and once I was able to get a hold of the original American comics I enjoyed creators like Gil Kane, Alex Toth, and John Byrne.

That was a long time ago.

I don't read many superhero books now, but I still dabble now and again. I love artists like Darwyn Cooke, Goran Parlow, Mike Mignola, and Guy Davis. I like artists who like to tell a story rather than over render their panels.

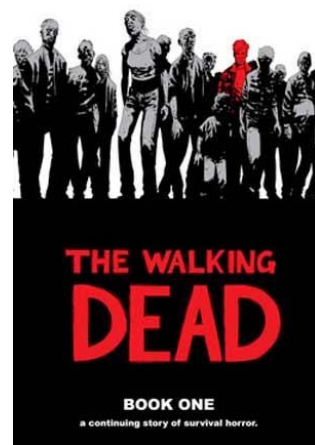
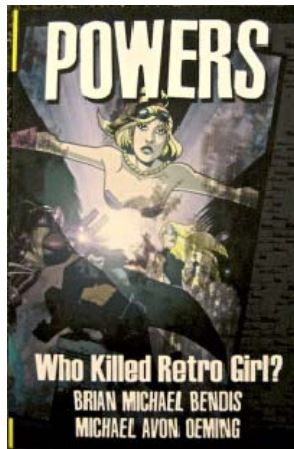
In the future you can expect more of the same from me, I guess. I've just recently re-designed the main website, and plan to do lots more with the Smallzone and Incoming Social Networks. So I'm hoping Smallzone will be fully prepared for all the changes that are coming to the comics industry in the next few years.

Right now my life is being consumed with [BICS 2009](#) ... it's that time of year again!

Bonus question: We know you don't recommend buying comics as investments, as you enjoy them for their pure artform. With that said, if you were starting a collection today, what 2-3 comics would you choose to build your collection?

SC: OK ... as reader rather than an investor, and bearing in mind the choices I make now will probably be three different comics tomorrow:

- **Amazing Spiderman #50** – A pure classic, and the culmination of the title's definitive period of innovation.
- **Powers #1** – This title restored my faith in superhero comics.
- **Walking Dead #1** – This series made me start reading horror comics again and helped to inspire the *Dead By Dawn* anthologies.



Bob Heske is creator of [The Night Projectionist](#), a vampire horror series by publisher [Studio 407](#) with film rights optioned by [Myriad Pictures](#). Through his Heske Horror shingle, Bob self-published his critically acclaimed horror series [Cold Blooded Chillers](#). Bob's trade paperback [Bone Chiller](#) (a "best of" CBC anthology) recently won a Bronze medal in the horror category at the 2009 Independent Publisher Book Awards. Bob's works are available online at ComixPress, IndyPlanet, HeavyInk, SmallZone and DriveThruComics. You can email him at info@coldbloodedchillers.com.