

THREE ROCKS

Three Rocks #2. Published for Capa-Alpha in May 2013 by Rogers Cadenhead, 135 Jenkins St., Suite 105B #244, St. Augustine, FL 32086. Email: cadenhead@gmail.com. Web: <http://cadenhead.org>.

Interview with Zoe Zolbrod



During the early '90s when I took a stab at becoming a comic book writer, I requested submission guidelines from several dozen publishers. One of the people I heard from was First Comics submissions editor Zoe Zolbrod. Her letter of Feb. 5, 1991, shared a new plan the company was undertaking. "First is going to begin to publish black-and-white, limited-series, creator-owned comic books," she wrote. "These would be sent to us by the creator all ready to be shot and printed (scripted, penciled, inked and possibly lettered). ... There would be no page rate for these books; instead the artist(s) would get a predetermined percentage of the profits."

The letter and First's submission guidelines are reprinted on pages 5-6 of this issue.

After being one of the most successful comics companies to spring up in the '80s, First was fading fast by the time of my letter. After it shut down in 1992, Zolbrod stayed in publishing and has become a book editor, essayist and novelist.

In the late '90s she published the zine *Maxine*, billed as a "literate companion for churlish girls and rakish women."

Her 2010 debut novel *Currency* is about a female American backpacker in Thailand who has a romance with a local street hustler that

brings her into the world of exotic animal smuggling.

On an impulse, I looked up Zolbrod on the web and she agreed to answer some questions in email about her days at the company.

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Three Rocks: It looks like you got the First Comics job right after graduating from Oberlin, based on your LinkedIn profile. How long did you work at First and what was it like to comb through the submission pile? Do you recall any of the writers and artists you discovered whose books went on to be published?

Zolbrod: I got the job as editorial assistant for First Publishing in 1990, a few months after graduating from Oberlin, thanks to a tip passed through the Oberlin grapevine that started with Anina Bennett, who was an editor there. One of the things I did as part of my interview process was to review a couple of unsolicited submissions, because dealing with the slush pile was a big part of the job. I was far from a comics geek. I liked a few alternative things like *Hate* and *Love & Rockets*, but I had virtually no familiarity with the world of super heroes, which was a lot of what First published and received as submissions. I remember deciding to just give my honest opinion of the comics I was given to review, including my feminist analysis, because I didn't even know enough to fake something else. I guess the other candidate they were considering had more comics knowledge, but First was mostly looking for someone who could write and think critically, and so they took me on.

I looked at probably hundreds of submissions and dutifully wrote a personal

note back to most everyone, which encouraged a couple people to respond a little too enthusiastically. I only found a few things that I thought were worth passing up the chain based on the criteria I was given, and of those, only one did everyone get excited about. I can't remember the name or the artist now, but there was some discussion with the guy about signing him. Little did I know, though, that I had arrived at the beginning of the end of First.

Within a year of having taken the job, the company decided to move from a monthly publishing schedule to a quarterly one, and the ceased signing anyone new. Soon after that, they suspended publication entirely — actually, *Lone Wolf & Cub* might have limped on for awhile — and laid a bunch of people off.

I kept my job — probably because I was working for peanuts — but things eventually ground down to a stop. I was there for less than two years, but that job really changed my life. I had gotten a little editorial experience, and I also got a bonus for sticking around until the bitter end. The bonus provided me with a nut of money that allowed me to backpack around Southeast Asia for the better part of the year.

TR: The letter I received was from February 1991 in response to a request for submission guidelines. You described how First was planning to start publishing black-and-white, creator-owned comic books that were submitted in completed form to the company. First would only do the cover and possibly redo the lettering. Was this a last-ditch effort to keep the company in business, and do you recall if anything came of it before it closed?

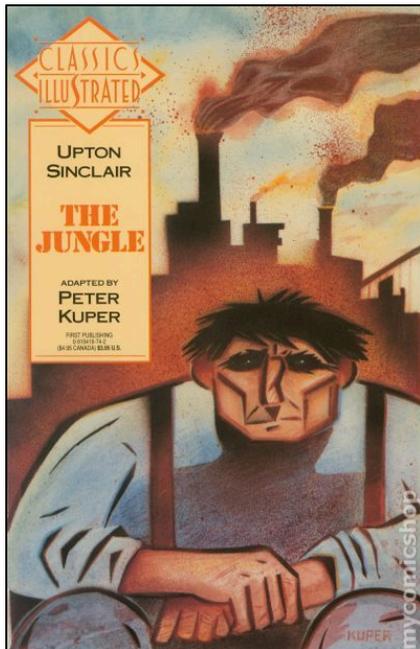
Zolbrod: Oh, I forgot about that. Now that you mention it, I think that was the criteria I was given for what to pass up the chain. The one submission everyone liked was to be part of it. But no, nothing ever came of it. Things started going downhill fast very soon after I sent that letter.

TR: It looks like the final things First published were Eric Shanower's *Blue Witch of Oz*, the final issues of *Dreadstar*, *Grimjack*, *Lone Wolf & Cub*, and a *Classics Illustrated* adaptation of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* by Peter Kuper (I need to find a copy of that). What do you think caused the demise of the company, one of the most successful comic book publishers of the '80s?

Zolbrod: I believe I recall the Peter Kuper art coming in. I had been aware of him before I started the job and was really impressed. It made working there seem glamorous. There was often quite a buzz when the *Classics Illustrated* art came in, and we would all gather

round, but I didn't work with any of those artists. They had their own team, and I was an underling.

Although I hadn't heard of *Grimjack* before I started, that



was the First series that I genuinely got into. I was sad when it went to a quarterly and then ceased. I wasn't in the know enough to have a really clear picture of what happened, but I recall hearing that the licensing of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* had been a huge cash cow for First, and that had ceased by the time I got there in '90. I think the licensing with *Classics Illustrated* and *Lone Wolf* might have been expensive, and their own series weren't doing as well as they had been.

TR: You published the novel *Currency* inspired by your experiences traveling Southeast Asia alone, and now you're working on a memoir about suffering sexual abuse as a child. How did you decide to write about a subject so difficult, and how is it going?

Zolbrod: I'm looking at the memoir as being more about how I interpreted what happened to me as a child at different stages of my life, and less about the actual abuse. It's a situation with a lot of gray area, or at least a lot of psychological gray area to me. I guess I came to writing about it in the hopes of gaining a better understanding, which has eluded me all these years.

Also, I became aware that this issue affects a lot of people in nuanced ways that aren't well represented, and I want to add to the dialogue. I have a strong vision for the book and it's going well, if not quickly.

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To find out more about Zoe Zolbrod's books and read her blog *The Next Youth Hostel*, visit her website zoezolbrod.com. She also is a frequent essayist for the literary site thenervousbreakdown.com.

Alpha Mails

When folks like Tony Tollin, Bob Rozakis and I were starting at DC 40 years ago this month, there were a number of freelancers in their 50s who were being pushed out the door by an ungrateful DC: Writers like George Kashdan and artists like Bernard Baily and Bill Draut. At the time, we thought it was a natural attrition as these older folks weren't "with it" or "modern."

Jump ahead a couple of decades to the early 1990s and Tony, Bob, myself and others were getting pushed out the door by baby editors who only gave work to their buddies. We were only in our 40s and just as (if not more) capable of doing work at the modern

standards as these "new" (or "no") talented freelancers.

That someone as phenomenally talented as Jerry Ordway is not getting work is amazing, since he was such a huge talent in the 1980s and 1990s. I witnessed Joe Rubinstein not getting work (I tried to get him work at Defiant, but Shooter shot that suggestion down), which was sad. Jim Salicrup at Topps got some work for Dick Ayers and Don Heck, but there wasn't much available.

Hope whoever leaves comics last remembers to shut the light off behind him.

— Gaff, March 24, 2013

Mailing Comments for CA 581

Hurricane Heeran: I enjoyed your choice of editorial cartoon from Pat Oliphant's *The Oliphant Book*. Forty five years later, he's still taking aim at the National Rifle Association.

On Dec. 18, 2012, in his first work after the Newtown shooting massacre, Oliphant drew a dump truck pouring an enormous load of assault weapons over a cliff.

Punk, his corner-of-panel penguin, says, "Send the NRA with them."

Gary Brown: Those were cool Russ Manning and Mike Royer Camelot coloring book illustrations from 1967. You know somebody's a pro when he puts that much effort into a project like that.

Your Capa-Alpha clock changed to 46 a month before I turned 46. I still feel pretty

young except when I move comic boxes around.

Jim Korkis: Regarding the demise of the *Comics Buyer's Guide*, it was a shame that Maggie Thompson and her contributors didn't get a chance to say goodbye in the pages of the publication. How do you kill a 42-year-old comics periodical without enough notice to let its own staff pen the eulogy?

However, as someone who hadn't picked up a copy of *CBG* in years, I was part of the reason for its demise. I loved it as a newspaper in the '80s and even became a contributor for a while, but I stopped needing comics-related news from a print publication when the web arrived.

Aside from Capa-Alpha, of course.

FIRST PUBLISHING SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Given the large volume of mail we receive, we often can't respond to submissions as quickly as we'd like to. And even though we have the best of intentions, we're rarely able to acknowledge that submissions have been received. If you want to make sure we receive your package, send it by registered or certified mail, or by a delivery service like Federal Express. Self-addressed, stamped envelopes (S.A.S.E.) are great in theory, but we don't always have the time to write back to you. *Enclose a S.A.S.E. only if you must have your submission returned to you* — and then be sure to affix the correct amount of return postage on your envelope or mailer.

Be patient! Please understand that the review process takes time to accomplish and that the absence of an immediate decision regarding your submission should not be perceived as a rejection. We appreciate the time and effort involved in your submission and thank you for your interest in First Publishing as a potential publisher. Be assured: If we think your submission has merit, we *will* contact you. Good luck!

Send your submission to:
Submissions Editor
First Publishing
435 N. LaSalle Street
Chicago, IL 60610

▼ STORY SUBMISSIONS

- **Don't send original anything!** Send clear, clean, full-size (8 1/2" x 11") photocopies only!
- **Put your name, address, and telephone number on every page.** Especially the latter; It's much easier and faster for us to call you if we are interested in your submission.
- **All submissions must be typewritten, or if composed on a computer, output on a letter quality printer.** Your submission will not be read if it is written by hand!
- **Write a short, clever paragraph that would convince anybody that this is a truly fascinating story worth reading.** Have you ever bought a paperback book because you were hooked by the "blurb" on the back cover? Write something like that describing your story and include it in your cover letter.
- **Write a short synopsis (no more than three pages) of the basic premise of your story.** This should tell us who, what, when, where, and why. Again, write this in a way that will hold us in rapt attention; As soon as we lose interest, we stop reading!
- **Include plot outlines (one paragraph each) for the first six issues of a continuing series or all issues of a limited series.**
- **Include one page of sample dialog.** Select a scene with more than one speaker so we can get a feel for how your characters talk and interact with each other.

▼ ART SUBMISSIONS

- **Don't send original anything!** Send clear, clean, full-size (11" x 17") photocopies only!
- **Put your name, address, and telephone number on every page.** Especially the latter; It's much easier and faster for us to call you if we are interested in your submission.
- **Pencillers should submit pages that demonstrate storytelling as well as drawing ability.** Don't just send model sheets or pin-ups. Send us two or three pages of continuity displaying story and action. If your art tells a story without word balloons or additional explanation, then you're on the right track.
- **If you're submitting inking samples, we also want to see copies of the pencils you worked over.** This is very important! We cannot judge your ability as an inker unless we have samples of what you've inked.
- **If you're submitting samples as both penciller and inker, enclose copies of your pencil art as well as the finished inks.** Maybe your pencilling is great, but your inking needs work. Or vice-versa. Seeing samples of both gives us a better idea of your strengths and weaknesses.
- **Letterers:** Show us a variety of lettering styles, balloon shapes, sound effects, etc.
- **Colorists/Painters:** Send high-quality copies that accurately reflect your original art. Full-size, full color photocopies are preferable, but transparencies are acceptable, too.



435 N. LaSalle Chicago, IL 60610 312/670-6770 TELEX: 282140 FIRST

February 5, 1991

Thank you for your interest in First Publishing. As you requested, I am sending you a copy of our submission guidelines. I would also recommend that you include a cover letter detailing any relevant experience you may have. Any submissions you send will be reviewed by the appropriate people, but please be advised that we receive many such packages and responding to them all often takes a fair amount of time.

Something you might want to consider is this: First is going to begin to publish black and white, limited series, creator owned comic books. These would be sent to us by the creator all ready to be shot and printed (scripted, pencilled, inked, and possibly lettered). First would then commission a cover and would possibly pay for professional lettering. There would be no page rate for these books; instead the artist(s) would get a predetermined percentage of the profits. We are hoping that this arrangement will allow us to publish more unconventional work done by less experienced artists than would be the case if we were publishing only in the expensive graphic novel format. However, I don't mean to discourage you from submitting in whatever form you are most comfortable with. If you want to propose a full color graphic novel, then by all means do so — and good luck!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Zoe Zolbrod".

Zoe Zolbrod
Submissions Editor

Enclosure

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