

Paul Dini



From animated series such as *Star Wars: Ewoks*, *Tiny Toon Adventures*, *Batman and Superman: The Animated Series*, *The New Batman/Superman Adventures*, and *Batman Beyond* where he worked as producer and writer, to the scripts for shows like *Animaniacs*, *Freakazoid*, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, *Justice League* and *Justice League Unlimited*, *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, *Transformers*, *Lost*, and *Tower Prep*, Paul Dini has written some of the most beloved and memorable characters of all time. He has worked on countless books for DC as well as Marvel. His most recent works on the animated series *Ultimate Spider-Man*, *Hulk and the agents of S.M.A.S.H.*, the storyline for the video game *Batman: Arkham City* (the follow up to *Batman: Arkham Asylum* which he also penned), and *Bloodspell*. Dini is also a member of the Academy of Magical Arts.

Can you tell our readers a little about what you were like as a child?

Crazy. Out of it. Nuts. Totally out of step with every other kid I knew. In and out of therapist's offices since I was eight. I had massive trouble trying to focus on anything that didn't involve imagination or storytelling. Terrible student, just terrible. A horror in church, either sleeping, making up goofy lyrics to hymns or trying to get my siblings to laugh or make noise.

Not much better at summer camp. I sat on my bunk and read comic books the entire time. For a brief period I had a lot in common with some of the other boys from my school.

It was that time when we were kind of all into the same things, cartoons, comics, car models, thinking about girls, sports, to a lesser degree. Then I began getting into literature, comedy and different types of music and we suddenly had nothing to talk about. I remember putting on Monty Python or Albert Brooks or National Lampoon albums and laughing hysterically, but my friends at the time just stared at me like I was brain damaged. They liked Cheech and Chong, but only because they talked about dope. Anything other than dope and swear words, they tuned out. One day I put on an album of great old songs by R. Crumb and His Cheap Suit Serenaders. I said, "Isn't that cool? We should get ukuleles and banjos!" That was the last I saw of any of my childhood pals.

What would you say is your fondest memory from that time?

Maybe the time I found a roadkill possum in good shape and took it home to stuff it. We had a babysitter staying with us that weekend and she locked herself into my folks bedroom and wouldn't come out. My folks were in Mexico on vacation and the sitter must have tried their emergency number a dozen times. I don't know if that's my fondest memory, but it certainly is one of my more vivid ones.

Do you happen to remember what the first story you ever loved was?

Probably a Br'er Rabbit story, *the Laughing Place* or the *Gizzard-Eater*, something like that. I got a book of Uncle Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris for my seventh birthday and I spent most of that summer reading the stories as written in the original African-American dialect. They fascinated me and I loved them.

What first sparked your interest in writing?

Reading the story *The Dog That Bit People* by James Thurber, when I was about ten. I thought "I have a dog and a crazy family. I bet I could tell funny stories about them, too."

What was your very first story about?

Around seventh grade I wrote a story about gangsters who all had food for names, like "Beef" Wellington, and "Potatoes" O'Brien. My mom says it's still the best thing I ever wrote. She may be right.

When you first started working freelance on animation scripts did you ever imagine it would have led you where it has? What were your first days of that like?

It was a fun time because I was given the chance at a young age to create something that would actually be shown on TV. Unfortunately Saturday morning TV around 1980 was at a low point, and despite the best intentions and enthusiasm of myself and other writers and artists just

getting into the business, the finished product was pretty lousy. Still, it was a foot in the door and I tried to make the most of it.

What was it like when you were asked to work for George Lucas?

I was a total geek-out fanboy for my first few weeks, then I quickly realized, yes, Lucasfilm is fun, but now it's time to buckle down and get the work done. I learned a lot about pacing action sequences, creating characters and setting a tone that resonates with young kids, both from George himself and from different film and literature sources he told me and the other writers to study. That really helped me out a lot a few years later when I was working on Batman.

You created the characters Jingle Belle and Sheriff Ida Red. What inspired each of those? Do you enjoy creating strong female characters?

I don't think there are enough strong, funny characters out there for both girls and boys, which was why I found creating Jingle Belle and Ida Red so appealing. Ida is a type of gutsy, tomboyish character that I think has all but vanished from contemporary TV animation and comics. She wrestles jaguars, fights evil coyotes and can shoot blasts of power from her fingers. And she's a sixteen-year-old sheriff who is funny and pals around with a talking armadillo. I like her and that world a lot, but I discovered initially she left a lot of people cold. A number of readers who checked out her book shook their heads and said "Shouldn't she be in high school, with girls her own age, and dealing with issues like self-esteem, insecurity and bullies? In a funny way of course, and maybe with some of those desert animals, but as she is now, she doesn't seem very girl-etic." To me that seemed like every other girl and young teen scenario out there. I liked Ida rowdy and rough, like a tall tales heroine. The last thing I wanted was her fretting over trying to make the cheerleading squad.

A few years ago I had some interest in a Mutant, Texas animated series, but all the execs wanted Ida to be a very minor presence in the show. They liked Clint, the cactus cowboy character, but insisted he be aged down to below Ida's age (around 9) and then made into the hero of the show. A younger version of Ida could still be in the show as the boy heroes' back-up best pal, but they definitely DID NOT want her as the star. The thinking at the time was that boys control the TV for animation, and girl characters are sidekicks at best. The exception of course is an all-girl show where they are all witches or pixies or ponies or whatever, and of course, stuck in school where they deal with all the usual pre-teen girl dramas. Many animation execs are convinced that kids will not accept any character that is not a direct mirror of themselves and their own school and family experiences. I don't necessarily think that's true, but I don't see many networks trying anything different, either.

As for Jingle Belle, she came from the idea that the only kid Santa Claus might not get along with would be his own. After all, who would be in a better position to spoil a kid by overloading them with toys? Also, wouldn't his kid grow up feeling some sort of sibling rivalry with every other kid in the world? I like bringing that fractured family dynamic to Santa's traditionally

harmonious world. Also, Jing is fun to write for. She's a real brat and I always find something funny for her to do or some holiday tradition for her to skewer.

Speaking of which, you also created the infamous Harley Quinn. How do you feel about her character becoming such a cultural icon so to speak? Is it fun to create characters that are delightfully...twisted?

I love that Harley has found such a niche in contemporary culture. Girls in particular seem to love her because, like Jingle Belle, she's a character who can get away with anything. In the Batman Animated Series and the comics Bruce Timm and I have done, Harley is almost a sprightly figure among Batman's grimmer enemies. She doesn't have the femme fatale allure of a vixen like Poison Ivy, and there's no romantic link between her and Batman, like, for instance, Catwoman or Talia. She's a girl swept up into the world of the performance criminals whose culture permeates Gotham City. Good or bad doesn't have meaning for her anymore, it's all about making a statement. Usually she's out to get a laugh, either through the sheer outrageousness of what she's doing or as a way of impressing the Joker. And if some innocent people get blown up along the way, enh, that's their hard luck.

Is there any one character that appeals to you more than all others?

I really loved the characters I created for a series called *Tower Prep* that had a short run on Cartoon Network about two years ago. At that time Cartoon wanted to march boldly into live TV with action and drama shows that appealed to a younger audience. The last thing they said they wanted to do were goofy live game shows or comedies with thirty year olds playing teens falling all over themselves. So I sold them on an idea of ordinary kids taken out of their ordinary lives to a hidden prep school where they discovered they were not so ordinary. Each kid had a special hyper-ability, a very low-level power in super hero terms, but impressive if you saw it work in real life. The kids were told as long as they followed the school's rigid program that they would have the chance to develop their skills, but they were never told if these skills were being honed for good or evil. The focus of the series was on four kids who band together to become the school's rebel underground and discover who was really pulling the strings and for what reason. Glen Morgan, from the *X-Files*, came on board as the show runner, and the other writers and I had a great time fleshing out the lead characters and really trying to give the series some substance in a *Lost* or *Dr. Who* kind of way. I was especially proud of our two lead girl characters, who were definitely not there to simply back up the boys and give out with snarky comments. Their stories had a lot of emotion and tragedy to them. All the characters in fact, quickly moved from being caricatures to real characters. We wanted to make it like real high school, where there would be friendships and betrayals, and your arch enemy one day might be your ally the next. Unfortunately drama didn't fly on Cartoon Network, and though *Tower* began to acquire a devoted fan base, it didn't happen quick enough to satisfy the execs, who pulled it after its first run. Turns out they wanted goofy live action slapstick after all, and judging by what's on there now, hey, mission accomplished.

How does it feel to win all those awards for your work? Do you find it humbling?

Yes, as most of the awards I've won were for my participation in a team effort. It staggers me to think of how many talented people I've been lucky enough to work with.

Do you and Misty still appear on Monkey Talk over at Kevin Smith's Quick Stop Entertainment site? Do you enjoy working with your wife?

I love working with Misty. We share the same warped mindset and she comes up with ideas much better than mine. We don't do the podcasts at the Quickstop site, though. Actually I don't think Quickstop exists as such anymore as it's split into Kevin's SIR Smodcast network and asitenamedfred.com. Misty and I still continue our podcasts though. It's posted each week on Sunday at our www.radiorashy.com.

You both share a passion for the Magic Arts. Do you think it is important for a couple to share common interests? Would you say she is better at it than you at this point in time? Do you ever get competitive over such matters?

I could never hope to compete with Misty where magic is concerned. I may know a trick or two, but she's the real deal. The things she's shown me, I don't have a clue as to how they work. It's not that I don't want to know, it's that my brain can't process how to put it all together. But that's okay. I like being amazed.

Can you tell us a little about the Academy of Magical Arts? When did you first develop your love of magic?

I became hooked on magic thanks to my high school English and music teacher, Mr. Smith. In addition to sparking an early love for Scott Joplin, John Steinbeck and Monty Python, he taught me how to escape from both handcuffs AND a straight jacket. That, and learning to ink with a brush, were the biggest things I got out of high school;

How does your work on scripts differ most from your work on the video games?

With scripts, I'm telling one story with one outcome, the one I have predetermined. When I write on a video game, I am writing multiple scenarios for a number of variable outcomes. The player is the one who dictates how the story ends, not me.

Are there any little known things about you that your fans might be surprised to learn?

My first name is actually Pecos. Strange, but true.

Do you ever suffer from writer's block? If so, how do you deal with it?

By playing the ukulele, or going for a swim (excellent) or working through a crossword puzzle. Any physical or mental stimulation is good as long as you keep bouncing back to the

story you're trying to work through. The good ideas will just come pouring out. Poking around on line never helps, that just eats up my attention and leaves me tired. Too much internet is like being the victim of an imagination vampire.

What was the best advice anyone ever gave you? Who was it?

Cesar Millan recently told me you can accomplish anything once you've banished fear from your life. I don't know how much of that I've unconsciously realized or applied in fits and spurts throughout my life, but hearing him say it that clearly and simply was eye-opening. It applies to people training as much as it does to dog training. Fear is the big crippler of the human spirit. Once you stop dreading potential rejection, failure, humiliation, whatever, life gets a lot easier.

Can you tell us a little more about *Bloodspell*? When is it available?

I'm not sure when the *Black Canary/Zatanna GN Bloodspell* will be hitting shelves. I'd like to say later this year, but I don't have a hard date on that. I can say I've seen a lot of Joe Quinones' art and it looks fantastic. What I said before about fun, appealing girl characters Joe captures perfectly.

Is there anything you'd like to say in closing?

Thanks for coming out tonight and please tip your waitress.