



Emily Jones

Independent Press Report

Fall 2011

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Fact Sheet: *Top Shelf Productions*

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Founded: 1997

Founders: Brett Warnock & Chris Staros

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History: Top Shelf Productions was created in 1997 when friends Chris Staros and Brett Warnock decided to become publishing partners. Warnock had begun publishing an anthology titled *Top Shelf* in 1995. Staros had been working with cartoonists and had written an annual resource guide *The Staros Report* regarding the best comics in the industry. The two joined forces and shared a similar vision to advance comics and the graphic novel industry by promoting stories with powerful content meant to leave a lasting impression.

Focus: Top Shelf publishes contemporary graphic novels and comics with compelling stories of literary quality from both emerging talent and known creators. They publish all-ages material including genre fiction, autobiographical and erotica. Recently they have launched two apps and begun to spread their production to digital copies as well.

Activity: Around 15 to 20 books per year, around 40 titles including reprints.

Submissions: Submissions can be sent via a URL link, or Xeroxed copies, sent with enough postage to be returned. They ask you do not send attachments or image files to their email addresses.

Notable Publications:

Blankets by Craig Thompson, *From Hell* and *Lost Girls* by Alan Moore, *Box Office Poison* and *Tricked!* by Alex Robinson, *Owly* by Andy Runton

Why I Chose Top Shelf Productions...

Immediately I was drawn to an indie press focused on comic books or graphic novels because that is where my current interests lie. I think the form is really exciting and interesting and I admire the amount of talent it takes to utilize pictures, narration, and dialogue to move a story.

I started looking for some authors and novels I would be interested in and stumbled upon two that caught my eye. Alan Moore was an immediate contender since I fell in love with *Watchmen*. *Blankets* by Craig Thompson was a graphic novel I had wanted to read since I took Mort Castle's Story in Graphic Forms class my freshman year. When I saw that both of those author's had published things with Top Shelf Productions I immediately checked out their website. Their webpage was extremely easy to navigate, well set up, and covered in graphics that rotated when you clicked on different tabs.

I was instantly drawn in. Once I contacted Chris Staros, I could tell by his laidback email exchanges that Top Shelf was an excellent choice. They were also devoted to promoting new talent, which was a bonus. Top Shelf looked like a promising candidate for my indie press report and I dove into learning more about how they run their company.

Interview with the Editor:

I was lucky enough to get a phone interview with Chris Staros the editor at Top Shelf Productions on Thursday, December 1st, 2011. Staros is co-founder of Top Shelf and currently resides in Marietta, Georgia, while his partner Brett is in Portland, Oregon. The duo teamed up to spread emotionally charged comics that rival literary prose with stellar artwork and strong story.

Emily C Jones: Why did you decide to start Top Shelf Productions with your partner Brett?

Chris Staros: In the mid-nineties, we both were working with publishing. He was publishing mini comics and I was doing some fanzines about comics. At the time we saw real potential for comics to go real literary and real wide. We didn't feel like the literary side was really represented. It was very hard to find the real good stuff. So we decided to jump in and take a stab at it ourselves.

We were on the circuit for a couple years, and then around '97, we formed the company Top Shelf Productions. This was about the time we saw the horizon where the graphic novel became the definitive form of comics. Down the road book trades, libraries, and the media started to get into comics.

We decided we should start trying to package comics and graphic novels like books, so we could compete alongside with traditional books and things of that nature. That was kind of the goal when we started the company to have full-length graphic novels that had the impact that film did. We wanted to stay away from the superhero stuff because that was already being covered really well by guys like DC and Marvel. We wanted to do things that were more literary and things that we thought might appeal to a wider audience through some more mainstream channels.

ECJ: So what is a typical day at the office like?

CS: It's usually pretty busy. I get a lot of emails, at least 100 to 150 every day, and the PO box is generally full. Every morning I get caught up on my emails,

the mail, the bank to deposit checks, and help the guys at the warehouse. Sometimes I have to ship things myself. Some days I'll be on the trucks when books arrive at the warehouse. All that stuff is sort of reactive, and then in the afternoon I'll try to do some strategic things like plan out the schedule for the next few months or the next year, or get a new book proofed. Get a new book going, get a new book ready for the printer, or ready for solicitation. So we handle the distributor interfaces, the PR interfaces, the mass emails, and order fulfillment. Basically we take care of all the things to get a book sent to the market. I try to mix my day with some reactive and some strategic stuff.

ECJ: What are you guys looking for in a story?

CS: Typically all publishing houses have some sort of house style about them. Usually dealing with the personal tastes of the people that run the company. Luckily Brett and I have really similar tastes in graphic novels and comics. That's why we made good partners because we like the same kinds of things. Generally we like things with a unique art style, and things with a lot of subtext and a lot of heart. Stories that are very good and very interesting to look at, and that will resonate with you once you've read them. You'll want to talk about them and share them. So typically the things we do are emotional and very pretty.

ECJ: How many people put in work on a manuscript?

CS: Things come to us in lots of different ways but once we agree to do a project I'm the story editor for the company so people have to work with me whether in script form or thumbnail form to make sure it's really tight. Some stories require very little editing, and some have great artists but need a second set of eyes on it to help them revamp it a little bit. In some cases I may work with an artist on several drafts of their story, until I think its stable and we both agree it's exactly what they intended it to be.

After that's done, we ink it and then turn it over to Brett and the designers and they'll set the whole book into motion: all the interiors, the front matter, and the back matter. They'll work with the artists on the cover. Then we'll go through several rounds of proofing. I'll bring in some guys to proof read all the text and we'll try to make sure there are no typos. Even though there is always one that sneaks in every book.

Once we think it's perfect we send it off to the printer and we go through another round of proofing. It's making sure the printer makes everything exactly how we wanted, like making sure there are no pages out of order and the color covers are correct. Once we've had a couple sets of eyes on it, we see if one of us makes a mistake that another one of us will catch because if we make a mistake on our end it can cost sometimes twenty or thirty thousand dollars. We try to be really careful before we hit the word *Go*, and then once we do, we wait for the books to show up so we can get them out to the marketplace.

ECJ: How long does it usually take to get a book ready to go to market?

CS: A book getting done from design to printing and so forth could take as little as sixty days, but that is the rare thing now rather than the rule. Generally speaking when you are dealing with distributors, stores, and big retailers, stores like Barnes & Noble, Amazon and things of that nature, they require many months advanced notice about when books are coming out. Typically it takes about a year to come out because you have to tell people what's going to be out for the summer already. So then they'll place orders a few months after that. So you'll kind of have to know what you are doing a year ahead of time, even though if you wanted to just get something out you could probably do it in about sixty days.

ECJ: How much say does the author have in the process?

CS: We definitely respect what the authors want to do, and again in the end if they are really hard over on something then we'll let them do it. Usually the relationship between the authors and us is so good that we talk things out and come to some agreement.

Generally speaking though when we see the right cover design we all know it. Occasionally we'll get into Mexican standoffs on designs and somebody will have to pull rank and make it happen but generally it's a real organic process. We're all working to expedite things and fix something we think really works.

ECJ: How many books do you guys put out within a year?

CS: Generally we do about fifteen to twenty new books and about ten to fifteen reprints a year that are perennials and have to be renewed. So about twenty to forty titles including all reprints total. That's probably going to be less because the economy has slowed things down a bit and books are running out slower than they used to. So we are probably going to be printing ten or fifteen. Plus we are also in this shift of having all print, to a mix of print and digital revenues to get ahead.

ECJ: What do you think the future of the publishing industry is?

CS: We just a couple weeks ago launched two apps for the iPad and iPhone. One is called *Top Shelf* and one is called *Top Shelf Kids Club*, which has all the all-ages stuff. *Top Shelf* has everything including our mature and our outrageous stuff. We also have our books available now on iBooks, at Google and Amazon, at Comixology, Graphicly, and I-verse. So we've really made a big push and in fact we were one of the first independent art houses publishing comics to have a full sweep of books up and digital outlets. So we just jumped on that bandwagon a couple months ago and it seems to be working pretty well.

We also really feel that a lot of our books are really well produced and really pretty and we will probably always feel the need to be a print publisher. At least a small amount of books will always be printed for collectors and fans who really want to hold something special and dear to them. So there will be publishers who only put out things digitally, and there will be ones that do both. I feel like the future of graphic novels is kind of like vinyl in the sense that there will always be a demand for something cool to hold on some level.

ECJ: How much do you set aside for marketing books?

CS: We really don't have budgets for those kinds of things. We're very much of a grassroots marketing operation that really tries to get a lot of third party endorsements. For instance, banners on key Internet sites that are frequented by a lot of people that link back to our website where all of the books are featured and organized and available for sale.

Each one of our books is available for purchase in either a physical copy or a digital version. We also have an email list we maintain, a facebook presence, a twitter presence, and somewhere between 500 and 2,000 good media contacts we can reach out to for different books and say, *Hey this book is really special. Would you like to do a review? Would you like an advanced copy?* So we do actually send out a lot of advanced copies in either PDF form or galley form. After the physical copy comes out we'll send out finished copies to key reviewers as well. We also do 21 conventions a year where we are out there promoting the authors and the books all year long. So those are all fundamental marketing things you can do that don't cost a lot of money and can give you a big presence in the media.

ECJ: Do you usually receive unsolicited submissions or do most writers submit through agents?

CS: Generally we don't deal so much with agents. In the traditional book-publishing world that's a lot more common and the film industry too. Most of our books are coming to us through cartoonists around agents. We kind of know everybody in the business already so it's not really necessary for agents to present people to us.

We do get a lot of unsolicited submissions at conventions, in our PO boxes, and so forth. We also do conventions where we meet and hang out with a lot of cartoonists. We see what people are doing, watch them develop, hear the buzz that's going on, and check out their work. Once we've seen what they can do we might have a beer, talk about some projects and maybe doing something down the road together. Of course we have people we've already broke in, established talent, and others who just finished projects and want to continue on projects as well.

We spend at least probably 1/3 of the year breaking new talent to make sure that we are putting new faces out there and taking risks. It's a great thing that doesn't always return a lot of money but it's our mission in life to bring really poignant comics to people and expand people's minds. So we really try not to worry about money because it is the story, the talent, and publishing what we really want to publish that matter.

ECJ: How do you think the editing process differs for graphic novels versus straight prose?

CS: Every medium is great in its own right. They all offer something different. Comics and graphic novels have a different way to tell a story that is very visual, portable, and accessible. Grand ideas can be illustrated and written by one or two people, or a very small creative team. You don't need giant budgets to draw buildings or create a period piece; you just need a pen and paper. So you can create these really visual panels without having to have big movie budgets, which can be as cinematic as film and as literary as prose.

Another difference between prose and comics is that comics are a very visual medium, a very terse medium and a very poetic medium when handled properly so that the images and the words mix together in really collaborative and lyrical ways. In comics there are not a lot of words, or an over abundance of words because you are letting the pictures tell some of the story and layering narrative and dialogue over that to move the story forward.

ECJ: Have you ever come across pieces where the story and the artwork aren't on the same level?

CS: Yes that happens. In comics the story is what keeps you there, but the artwork is what draws you in. Once they bite in, if it's no good, no one is going to stay or remember. So you really have to have both things going for you.

I tend to favor stories over art personally. If the story is great and the art isn't really working I'm kind of more into it than when the artwork is beautiful but the story isn't as good. I tend to be a bit more of a story guy when it comes to my comics.

Book Review:

Blankets
by Craig Thompson

Craig Thompson's second novel, *Blankets*, is an intensely personal account of the author's youth growing up in the Midwest. It is based on his personal experiences. However some places, incidents and characters have been modified in service of the story. Originally published in 2003, the novel revolves around Thompson as he grows up in rural Wisconsin and learns about family, faith, and love.

Thompson grows up in a devoutly Christian household where he shares a bed with his younger brother Phil. He ruminates on the good and bad parts of their relationship while growing up, and how he felt like he never could protect him. Craig hints at a situation that occurred with Phil and their older male babysitter. The images alone show the reader that the two boys suffered some sort of molestation at the hands of their teenage babysitter. Craig reflects on the moment with a text box that reads, "I neglected my protective role in dangerous situations" (18).

As Thompson grows up he is teased and made fun of but he learns to find comfort in drawing and playing games with his brother. However he begins to experience many conflicting ideas about faith, especially each winter while he is away at church camp. On page 78 he says, "Something about being

rejected at church camp felt so much more awful than being rejected at school.” When the other Christian youths are acting sinfully and shunning him Craig begins to wonder if organized religion is really what his parents and pastors have made it out to be. One night while he is studying his Bible he listens to the other boys crudely making sexual comments.

Craig realizes that it’s the personal savior concept of Christianity that appealed to him versus the mass mentality. His time at church camp is spent reminiscing on his previous bible teachings as a youngster, avoiding activities, and studying his bible in quiet, until he learns to seek out other loners like himself. An awkward teenage Thompson meets a group of misfits and takes a liking to Raina, the girl of the group. She is a beautiful rebellious youth that he instantly forges a connection with while they avoid the chaperones and sneak away to play in the snow.

The bulk of the novel centers around Craig and Raina falling in love states apart, with Thompson in Wisconsin and Raina in Michigan. After leaving camp they begin sending letters and care packages to one another. Religion had made Craig lose faith in drawing because of discouraging remarks his Sunday school teachers had told him, but Raina became his muse.

The two become extremely close until one night Craig receives a phone call. It’s Raina and she is upset. She reveals her parents are going to get a divorce and she leans on Craig, who begs his parents to let him miss some school and spend two weeks at Raina’s parents house in Michigan. The two-week period they spend together becomes a pinnacle winter in Craig’s life.

Raina gives Craig a handmade quilt upon his arrival and he paints a small mural on her bedroom wall. However, once Craig returns home he finds that Raina cannot bear to try a long distance romance and it puts a strain on their budding relationship.

Thompson comes of age by the end and learns to reconnect with his brother, follow his heart, and abandon organized religion but not his faith. By the end of the story spring has started to melt the ice and a definite change has come about. Suddenly Craig is a much more sure and confident narrator.

Thompson beautifully illustrates the novel in black and white. Each page is a testament to Thompson's talents as a writer and artist, and his ability to adapt personal material into a moving story. He effectively uses jumps in time to illustrate parallels in his biblical schooling and childhood memories, and then relates them to his current life as an insecure teenager desperate to feel acceptance. While trying to write a letter to Raina, Craig recalls a Bible study teacher telling him that in heaven they will have all the time in the world to sing God's praises. A young Craig proposes he could draw to exalt God instead, but he is quickly shot down. While the concepts expressed in the book are extremely personal to Thompson, they also are universal and easily accessible through the language and clear depictions.

The story deals with some mature content, like sex and some drug use but could be considered for young adults and up. The majority of the book takes place in a Midwestern winter wonderland buried in snow, and it makes a

beautiful backdrop for Craig and Raina to fall in love. Thompson manages to create a beautiful coming of age story all his own.