



Cerebus: An Aardvark on the Edge

(A Brief History of Dave Sim and His Independent Comic Book)

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As long as there have been comics, there have been local authors creating them. These authors may not have been doing something that major comic book companies like Marvel or DC were interested in, but they made comics anyway out of their love for the medium. Dave Sim was one such author trying to make it with a little comic book called *Cerebus*, a parody of other comics such as *Conan the Barbarian*. Rather than catering to a mass audience, however, Sim was happy covering expenses while doing what he liked to do best: writing and drawing an aardvark in a world of humans.

But then something happened.

Cerebus, begun in 1977, started selling to larger and larger audiences. Two years later, Sim proclaimed that *Cerebus* would be a 300 issue graphic novel with a definite beginning and ending and with Sim himself in charge of everything (writing, drawing, and publishing). Nobody believed him. Over twenty years and 250-plus issues later, however, the comic world waits with bated breath as Sim counts down to Issue 300 (scheduled to appear in March 2004).

Sim's self-publishing approach gave him the confidence to try new things and, in doing so, make his comic one of the most literary ever published. When authors Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette gave Sim the title of "One Man Army" (because Sim does everything himself) they were not kidding (Wiater and Bissette 97). Sim's take-no-prisoner approach to storytelling has rubbed many people the

wrong way and led to speculation that, among other things, Sim's comic is really a pulpit for his chauvinistic views. For others, though, *Cerebus* says what the readers have been saying for a long time: that comics can tell complex stories with high quality prose and artwork, and they can even be considered *literature*.

A comic having a long run does not surprise people; *Superman*, for example, ran past the 500 mark years ago. What is unique about *Cerebus* is that Sim is creating the entire comic (with the exception of background drawings by artist Gerhard) by himself. What is even more unique is that *Cerebus* is an adult comic for an adult audience. It does not "dumb down" its writing to attract more readers; in fact, it makes the reader work at reading and understanding the story. Between Sim's styles of writing and layout, *Cerebus* is anything but easy to read. Furthermore, Cerebus is the most unlikable character imaginable. He drinks, swears, picks fights, and will go to any length to get as rich as he can.

A hero usually, among other things, upholds what is conventionally right and moral in a story. A hero captures bad guys. A hero will do things that will defend the law. A hero dies defending others. Cerebus, on the other hand, is an anti-hero—he tries to do none of these things. He drives Jaka, the woman he loves, away time and again; he deceives people for his own well-being, and he even commits rape while he is the Pope. Even though Cerebus is an anti-hero, though, he is still fascinating. That fact is what makes this case of hero/anti-hero so complicated, and so human. Sim creates a love/hate relationship between the reader and Cerebus, and this dynamic keeps the reader intrigued, coming back month after month.

But this is supposed to be a funny comic book, right? About a guy who looks like he is dressed up in a rabbit's outfit, right? Right?

Right... and wrong.

Cerebus did appear at first to be a funny-man's comic book, taking everyone along for the ride for the first year and a half. The fact that Cerebus is an aardvark and everybody else is human, although never mentioned, is just one small thing (although Cerebus is described from time to time as anything from a short midget to a guy wearing a bunny's costume). The early stories were populated with parodies of famous fictional characters and figures from Marvel Comics. These lampoons of standard comic book clichés made *Cerebus* stand out in the early days from the rest of the pack; Sim was thumbing his nose at the corporate comic book machine.

There was Elrod of Melvinbone, a character who was based on Michael Moorcock's famous albino hero Elric, whose speech was patterned after the Warner Brothers cartoon character Foghorn Leghorn. There was Red Sophia, a parody of the Red Sonja character created by Robert E. Howard, and The Regency Elf, Sim's version of Tinkerbell. One of the best was Jaka's uncle, Lord Julius, the ruler of Palnu and an impersonation of Groucho Marx down to his speech, mannerisms and his first name (Groucho's real first name was Julius). Finally, but not least, there was Artemis, who morphed into parodies of Wolverine, Captain America, Spider-Man, Moon Knight, The Punisher, Sandman, and countless others over the years.

With all this parody going on, when did Cerebus get serious?

The seriousness started with Sim himself. He was always serious about doing comics, but it was around 1979—when he declared that *Cerebus* would run 300 issues—that the comic began to show more focus. Sim moved away from sword-and-sorcery tales and started dealing with the more adult themes of politics and society. The comics, collected in Book 2 as *High Society*, told one continuing story and were first published in comic form at around the same time as his announcement. Nobody noticed this connection, but the reader could see that Sim was more focused, as if he had something bigger in mind, and with each subsequent collection the stories and the artwork became more involved and, at times, more serious in tone. These collections, or Books, would eventually showcase the entire series. Sim also declared that the series would be in two overall parts, each with 150 comics. *Cerebus*, *High Society*, *Church and State*, *Jaka's Story* and *Melmoth* (Books One through Six) are the First Half of the series, and the Second Half (unfinished as of this writing) are *Flight*, *Women*, *Reads*, *Minds*, *Guys*, *Rick's Story*, *Going Home* and *Form and Void* (Books Seven through 14; the books got shorter as the years went along because Sim published fewer issues per book).

Two themes that developed as the comic evolved were Cerebus' campaigns to move up the ladder of power and his love/hate relationship with the dancer Jaka, who was introduced in Issue 6. Cerebus wanted Jaka, but only when he could not have her, and when he could have her he was too busy campaigning for power to notice. "You said you'd wait forever for Cerebus..." he says to Jaka at one point, referring to their first meeting when he was drugged against his will so he would not remember her. Jaka replies, "I said I'd wait forever for you to remember [me]. Well you did *remember* and you never *came back*" (Sim, *Church and State I*: 461-63). Cerebus does come back to her in *Jaka's Story*, but unfortunately she is married to Rick (who appears later in *Rick's Story*). Sim's take on the guy/girl romance angle

haunts *Cerebus* through the entire run of the series. *Cerebus* is only truly happy with Jaka at the end of *Rick's Story*, and even that is short-lived. Throughout twenty-plus years of *Cerebus*, he has loved Jaka and driven her away, and when it seems that he has finally learned his lesson, he drives her off again at the end of *Form and Void*. The reader can only wonder if Jaka is to be heard from again.

Cerebus' campaign for power eventually wins him the title of Pope of the Eastern Church of Tarim, which in turn leads to a power struggle and eventually a radical power shift from men (Kelvinist) to women (Cirinist) being in control. While Cerebus' quest for power is at times very funny, it is also very serious. When all is said and done, Cerebus embodies the notion that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." The more powerful he becomes, the more insane he becomes until finally he is brought before The Judge—a being of intense power (though his greatest power is observation)—to prevent the destruction of the entire world through Cerebus' greed. *Church and State* ends with a prophetic warning from The Judge: "You live only a few more years. You die alone. Unmourned. And unloved" (Sim, *Church and State II*: 1212). This prophecy will haunt *Cerebus*, and the reader, for the remainder of the series.

Cerebus' drive to do things his way only mirrored Sim's. When Sim launched his series, there were only two comic companies around: Marvel and DC. Rather than sell his creation outright (the fight over creator-owned comics was still to come), Sim decided to self-publish his work. He had an advantage because he could do everything himself, from writing and drawing to stapling the issue together. However, he also had a disadvantage: he had to do everything himself, from writing and drawing to stapling the issue together...

With his girlfriend's help, he began planning out the comic. He wanted a character that was barbaric like all those Barry Windsor Smith comics he read (Smith had worked on *Conan* for many years before he was let go by Marvel, a move that angered Sim). He wanted a name, something mythological, and his girlfriend Deni suggested the three-headed dog of Greek mythology. Deni, however, spelled the name wrong; Ceberus became Cerebus, and a legend was born (Jones and Jacobs 229). Over time, as *Cerebus* started to attract a reading audience, Sim realized that there was an incredible amount of power in doing everything himself. He did not have to answer to anybody as far as his subject matter; if the readers did not like it, they would stop reading it. The readers' vote was what mattered most, and not the corporate idea of what a comic should look like or how much money it should make. As Marvel and DC were in a constant power struggle over which company was on top that week, Sim was left alone

because, as far as the Big Two were concerned, Sim and his ilk did not matter. Little did they realize how wrong they were.

Comic creators have been abused almost as long as there have been comics. It is not uncommon to work in an industry where one's talents and ideas belong to the company. In many industries, if an employee comes up with a new idea that makes more money for the company, that idea belongs to the company and not the individual. For decades, this was true of the comic book industry, as well. Sim was part of a growing movement among comic writers and artists to retain the rights to their creations and to profit from them. These artists were incensed by industry horror stories, such as the one about Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the two men who created Superman while working for DC Comics in the 1930s. Siegel and Shuster signed all of their rights to Superman over to DC in 1938 for a grand total of \$1,300. Years later they realized their mistake and sued unsuccessfully for ownership of the Superman character. DC Comics not only refused to return the copyright, but as a further insult removed their names from the *Superman* comics (Ellison 174, 222). Through the efforts of other comic artists who were fighting for creator's copyrights, DC finally gave Siegel and Shuster a tiny fraction of the *Superman* franchise—pennies when compared to how much money *Superman* was making in one year (Jones and Jacobs 218, 266).

Another incident involved Jack "King" Kirby who, with writer Stan Lee, put Marvel Comics on the map in the 1960's and 1970's by creating many memorable characters including the Fantastic Four, The Avengers, and Doctor Doom. Eventually Kirby and Marvel parted ways, but when Kirby decided that he would like his art back, Marvel refused, even though the company had started giving other artists rights to work they had done while at the company. Kirby startled the company by demanding co-author credit on every character he worked on while he was employed at Marvel. Kirby was tackling a gray area here since *writing* and *plotting* were, to Kirby, the same thing. To Marvel, writing meant the actual story word by word written by one person, while plotting was a brainstorming session in which anybody could contribute. Kirby argued that a visual story with words was still a story that Kirby had created and, therefore, he should get credit for it. It was a long and hard battle, but eventually in 1987 Marvel gave in and returned—albeit a tiny amount—of artwork to Kirby. It took the *entire comic industry* backing Kirby to accomplish this feat (Jones and Jacobs 251-312).

These are two of many cases. Sim might have started *Cerebus* as an independent early on because there was nowhere else to go, but soon realized that his independence was actually a good thing; he did not

have to worry about rights or royalties because he was the sole owner. He soon started promoting self-publishing as a noble cause. In the late 1980's, Sim began organizing Creator Summits to discuss issues of ownership and copyright with other comic artists, "One of the things I was looking to find an answer for, 'Does a creator have the right to choose how he sells his work, and who he sells it to?'... There was still... a large degree of animosity between some in attendance saying that 'your way is the wrong way,' and my saying 'my way *is* the right way'" (Wiater and Bissette 107). As a result of these discussions, fellow comic creator Scott McCloud came up with the "Bill of Rights for Comic Creators," stating that writers and artists should have full ownership of their work and the right to use said work as they see fit (Wiater and Bissette 83-85).

Sim's success confirms his ideas about self-publishing. Back in 1977 there were two comic companies; now thanks to Sim, McCloud and others, there are many more, many with the Comic Creators Bill of Rights as their motto. Sim published the *Cerebus Guide to Self Publishing* in 1997 as a further statement that people, if their heart is in it, can self-publish and answer to no one but themselves. He argues that a contract between a creator and a publishing company is the creator's death warrant waiting to happen. "I can't put it any more plainly than I already have," Sim says. "If you sign a contract, you have lost control of your work" (*Guide* 52). He sums up his philosophy in the Introduction:

If your motivation in self-publishing is to become wealthy and famous, self-publishing will eat you alive... [But if] your priorities are to keep yourself alive, keep a roof over your head, keeping distractions and intrusions to a bare minimum, and spend most of your waking life getting better at what you do... the odds for your success will improve dramatically as a result. (*Guide* 2).

As Sim campaigned for self-publishing, *Cerebus* became increasingly complicated and involved, with grand stories that took years to wrap up and in turn were part of an overall larger picture that, in 2001, was still going on.

In other words, *Cerebus* became literary.

This process was a slow one, but one that Sim embraced the more he got into the story. "After three years [when *Cerebus* first came out], I was scraping the bottom of the barrel of the handful of sword-and-sorcery clichés... Once I moved from a field in which I had no interest to fields in which I was interested (politics, economics, power,

religion, etc.), I began to find my voice" (*Guide* 22). By the time *Jaka's Story* began with Issue 114, Sim had abandoned the issue-by-issue format he had used in his previous four collections. *Jaka's Story* seemed to be a four-hundred-plus page *story* instead of a collection of twenty-page issues. Sim also began to play around with his artwork, making it seem that *Jaka's Story* was not a series of comic book pages but rather written words that incorporated artwork. Entire pages were taken up with single illustrations, with few or no words, increasing the impact of the artwork on the reader. Many declared *Jaka's Story* the highpoint of not only *Cerebus* but of storytelling in comics.

This balance between story and art is a delicate one. If Sim gives the reader too little story, then *Cerebus* is nothing more than pictures that one can read rapidly (like Japanese comic books, *manga*, which are actually supposed to be read rapidly; hence, no long speeches). If Sim gives the reader too much story, then he is writing a novel. All of this—playing around with text and art, the layout of the book itself, and even some of the characters—places *Cerebus* in another literary category: that of postmodernism.

The four-book story *Mothers and Daughters* (*Flight, Women, Reads and Minds*) is postmodern in structure and content, with slight spillover in the later books. One example of Sim's postmodern approach is the self-reflexive appearance of the character Dave who, for lack of a better explanation, *is* Dave Sim, down to his likeness appearing in *Rick's Story*. Dave first appeared to *Cerebus* in Book 10, *Minds*. He does not make a physical appearance but *is* to *Cerebus* a god that can, and does, make *Cerebus* do anything he wants him to do. At one point, *Cerebus* even sticks a syringe in his eyeball just because Dave makes him do it (241-48). By the time he appears in *Rick's Story*, *Cerebus* has forgotten Dave (the god) and tells his bar mate (Dave the Same Person)—in a classic Beckett moment—that he has been waiting around even though there is no one to be waiting for. "Cerebus is not driving ANYone crazy," he tells Dave who replies, "Well...actually... you might be surprised at WHO you're driving crazy" (195-96). As Dave says this, the reader can see a ruler, pencil, and various issue numbers from comic books that appears over *Cerebus*' head; Sim as creator is making an inside joke about the trials of making comic books.

Another example of Sim's defiance of conventional comic book creation occurs in *Reads*. A "Read" is an old-fashioned word for book, and *Reads* takes the art-plus-story concept to its fruition. As he has done since *Jaka's Story*, Sim plays with story and art in each volume, making the pages appear to be actual old-fashioned book pages with an illustration beside each page. In *Reads*, though, Sim goes further.

There are pages with nothing *but* artwork—no text—and there are pages with text but no artwork. Readers accustomed to seeing text and words joined together, making the comic book very easy to read (again, like *manga*), were in for a rude awakening.

Reads was to become the most controversial volume of *Cerebus*, again because of Sim's supposed use of the story to comment on himself as the creator. At one point, as *Cerebus* is in the middle of a battle, the viewpoint shifts until eventually the reader is looking at a drawn comic book sheet and its creator sitting in front of it (142). Whether it is Sim or another character is debatable, and no real answer is ever supplied. The reader's enjoyment of *Reads* was further challenged by the vast amount of text that Sim had included, and what the text said. The persistent reader would discover "the truth" about Sim: that he hated women and wanted to let the world know it through his comic. Issue 186 of *Reads* became known thereafter as the "misogyny issue." Sim, supposedly writing as the character Viktor Davis, spells out how the male is superior to the female, and the female is the enemy to the Muse that guides Davis/Sim, "Women, he would say, are not Muses. Muses are Muses. To confuse one with the other is to mistake the Devouring Void for the Seminal Light. Earthly Women and the Muses are ancient, sworn enemies" (237). The whole issue, in fact, is a diatribe about this particular topic; a topic, the reader notices, that does not involve *Cerebus* or the comic. Sim just climbed on a soapbox and started preaching about female inadequacy—a charge that has been leveled against such literary greats as Ernest Hemingway.

Never before had *Cerebus* generated so much reaction from its its puzzled and outraged readers. Reader Kristen Brennan, who for years maintained the *Dave Sim Misogyny Homepage* website, asks, "If Sim has a serious argument to forward, especially one which doesn't involve his *Cerebus* characters in any way, is his 'Cerebus' comic book really the best place to do it?" (Brennan). To this day, seven years after *Reads* was released in book format, Sim still continues his attacks, this time in Issue 265 and under his own name. Sim even involves *The Comics Journal* (a well-known magazine for comic creators and fans) by giving them permission to reprint all of Issue 265 on its website (Sim, "Tangents").

Is it all just a publicity stunt or a real misogynistic agenda on Sim's part?

Fellow comic creator Rick Veitch comments that he has seen Sim get "vicious and cruel on a heartbeat (especially toward women)" and that saying that "Tangents" is a publicity stunt to boost sales is a fair,

but highly unlikely, claim (Veitch). Comic writer Peter David compares Sim to comedian Andy Kaufman—who would do anything to get a response out of someone—and says that it might be a PR stunt to get people to read *Cerebus* again (as they did in droves when Issue 186 came out) and that Sim is laughing all the way to the bank (David). Fan Kelley O'Hearn says that it is obvious that Sim is mentally sick, but he is still writing great comics that should not be missed (O'Hearn) (Sim himself has mentioned being mentally ill in the past). Finally, a person posting on *The Comic Journal* message board summed it up this way: "Lots of talk about Sim's rants—barely any talk about Sim's comics. Draw your own conclusions" (Davelot).

When Sim uses *Cerebus* as a soapbox, he draws readers away from what made the comics so interesting in the first place: the characters and the story. His fascination with real-life literary characters, for example, is another reason that *Cerebus* is more than an ordinary comic book. Sim has said that every bit of *Melmoth* is from Oscar Wilde's own life—specifically, Wilde's final years after he was released from prison. He even includes facsimile pages from a real book—the *Collected Letters of Oscar Wilde*—so the reader can see that, other than minor details such as the city names, the text is taken from an actual work (249). Sim said, "Once I actually re-read the 'Epilogue to Collected Letters' and I got to the actual description of Oscar's death, I knew that that was my story" (Usenet).

Along with Wilde, *Cerebus* meets characters modeled on F. Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Sim tells about these characters in scholarly-appearing notes printed in the back of each Book (*Going Home* and *Form and Void*, respectively). However, the astute reader might wonder to what extent Sim has taken creative license with history here—in Sim's universe, something may look like a duck and sound like a duck, but still turn out to be a ham sandwich. Do Sim's notes on Hemingway and Fitzgerald (appearing in his comic as F. Stop Kennedy and Ham Ernestway) represent actual biography or are they largely fictional—another of his tricks in blending truth and fiction? Sim says that all of the notes he took while working on the two Books are real, but unless the reader wants to recreate the painstaking research that Sim says he went through and find out for sure, the reader will just have to take Sim's word on it.

The storyline in *Cerebus* has always been divided by gender. The first 150 issues presented the story from the men's point of view (action) and the second 150 issues presented the women's point of view (reaction). The first 150 issues are as strange to the reader as to *Cerebus* himself, and the second half will reveal or explain what happened in the first half:

Church & State functions as a compressed allegory of the entire revelation part of the story: *Jaka's Story* and *Melmoth* the reaction part. The four books of *Mothers & Daughters* function as an allegory of the First Half; *Flight* (book one) is *Cerebus*, *Women* (book two) is *High Society*, *Reads* (book three) is *Church & State* and *Minds* (book four) is *Jaka's Story/Melmoth*. (Usenet)

This contrast between men and women has been a driving force of *Cerebus* almost from the beginning:

The point of *Church and State* when you get to the end of it was "Poor little seminal female light. She didn't stand a chance. This giant male void beat up on her." When you get to the end of *Mothers and Daughters* (sic), it's "That poor little peckerhead male light. It didn't have a chance against that all-consuming female void." (Spurgeon)

There is also another structure that Sim does not point out. *Jaka's Story* and *Rick's Story* both came after a major story arc (*Church and State* and *Mothers and Daughters*, respectively). In turn, these two preceded Sim's use of literary characters in his storylines. *Melmoth* follows *Jaka's Story* (about Wilde), and *Going Home* and *Form and Voids* follow *Rick's Story* (about Fitzgerald and Hemingway). These patterns give unity to the vast behemoth that is *Cerebus*. There is an even bigger pattern to all of this, one that cannot be analyzed yet: the 150 issue split. Sim has always maintained that *Cerebus* should be viewed as an overall piece. Only when Issue 300 is reached will the readers truly see the complete work and make something of it for themselves. Sim's master plan at the end of the *Cerebus* series is to present the male and female viewpoints together as an overall picture of *Cerebus'* world. What Sim's view of that world is is unclear at the moment, especially in light of the misogyny charges that Sim is facing from his readers. Whether those charges eventually bring a once-great comic book crashing down remains to be seen.

Dave Sim has maintained *Cerebus* for over twenty years and plans to continue until Issue 300 in March 2004. Few comic books tell so complicated a story, and no comic book in North America has ever done it with only one creator doing everything for so long. Along the way, he has given the reader a fascinating read in religion and politics and a unique artifact in the world of popular culture.

Cerebus may be a comic book, but it would not be out of place in a literature classroom.

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