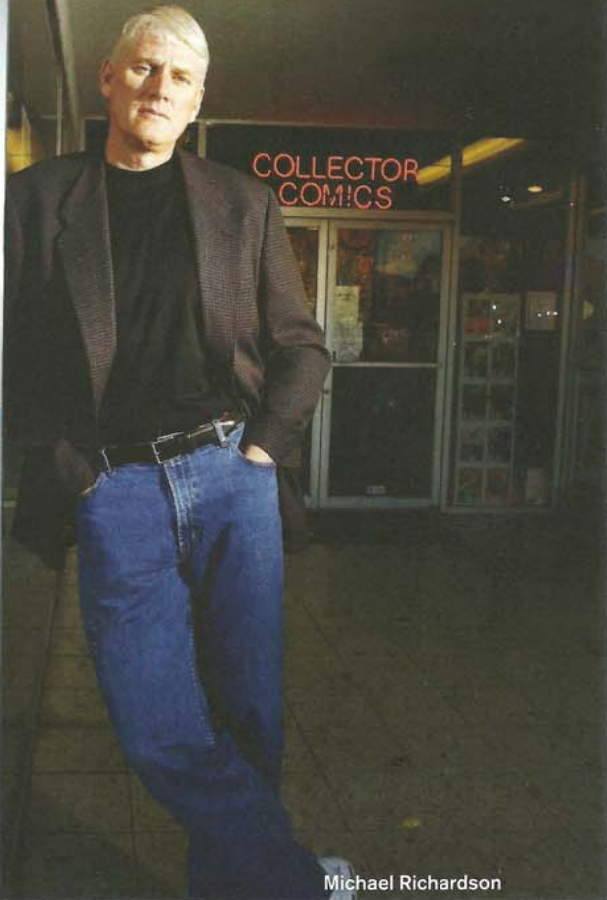


things
FROM ANOTHER WORLD

Conviction with Pulp Fiction

Independent publisher of quality comic books
morphs into an entertainment empire **Jesse McLean**



Michael Richardson

► This month, Universal Pictures will release the big-budget sci-fi comedy *R.I.P.D.*, starring Jeff Bridges and Ryan Reynolds. The story of two undead police officers who patrol the streets to protect the living is the latest in a long line of adaptations from Dark Horse Comics, an empire with humble beginnings that became a Hollywood heavyweight by banking on comic culture.

In 1980, Dark Horse founder Michael Richardson wanted to write and illustrate children's books. To find the time to dedicate to this passion, he decided to open a comic-book store, on credit. Called Pegasus Books and located in the resort town of Bend, Oregon, the store would allow him the flexibility to work on his book when he wasn't tending to customers or stocking shelves. That was the plan.

Before the store opened, grown-ups who wanted to buy comics in the area were obliged to visit seedy convenience stores, where they were granted all the pageantry expected of a plain-brown-wrapper transaction. Pegasus Books provided a shame-free environment in which to buy all manner of comic books. It soon became so popular that not only did Richardson have to put his children's book on hold, but he also had to open up other locations to keep up with demand.

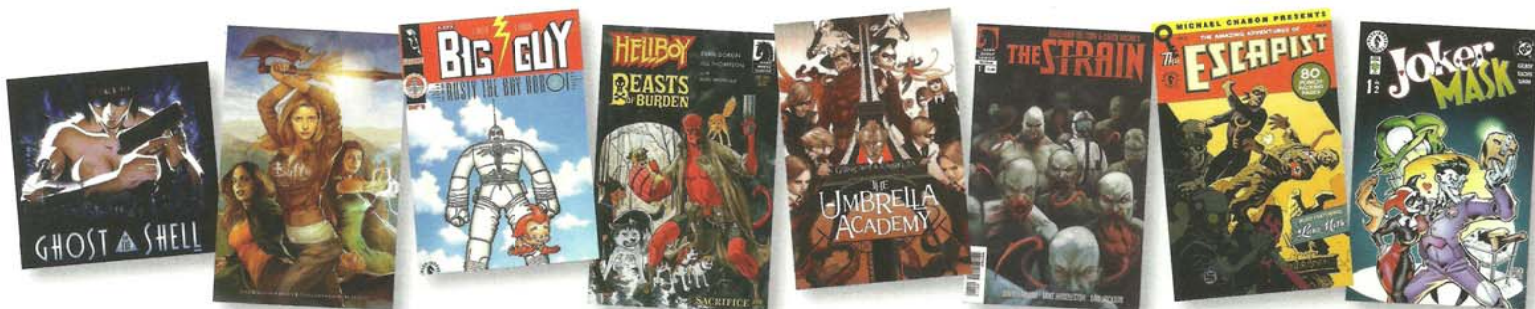
Upon shifting gears to become a full-time purveyor of comics, he quickly grew frustrated by the lack of quality material available for sale. Spotting an opportunity, Richardson hatched a plan to fill the void and become a comic-book publisher.

In 1986, he formed Dark Horse Comics. Richardson's goal was to create a quality

brand while employing a business model that would promote fairness and creativity. Instead of the standard contracts that compelled writers and illustrators to surrender all rights to their work (often for a pittance), Richardson was intent on providing lucrative profit-sharing deals in an effort to attract top-drawer talent.

This innovative approach gained traction, and in 1991 Richardson landed a new title from comic book legend Frank Miller. Until that point, Miller was best known for *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. But he soon became equally famous for *Sin City*, which he published with Dark Horse.

The critical and commercial success of that film-noir-inspired title established Dark Horse in the comic book firmament and paved the way for similar creator-





R.I.P.D.

owned projects under the Legend imprint. Under this new banner, Richardson worked with such visionaries as Mike Mignola (*Hellboy* and the six spinoffs), Eric Powell (*The Goon*), John Byrne (*Next Men*) and Geof Darrow (*Big Guy and Rusty the Boy Robot*, with Frank Miller writing).

But the innovation didn't stop there. Richardson advanced the stateside invasion of Japanese comics under the Dark Horse Manga imprint (*Akira*, *Lone Wolf and Cub*, *Ghost in the Shell*) and blazed a new trail for that creaky comic-book cash-in, the licensed title.

Comic books created for existing movie or TV properties were hardly new in the late '80s, but they held a less than prestigious spot on the wire comic-book spinner (*My Little Pony*, anyone?). Dark Horse took a different approach, essentially offering sequels to existing films like *Aliens* and *Predator*. This model allowed for universe-expanding ventures into such properties as *Conan*, *Indiana Jones* and, most lucratively, *Star Wars* (with almost 50 titles).

Continuing his alignment with creative powerhouses, Richardson provided Joss Whedon the opportunity to produce what was essentially an eighth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, along with continuations of briskly cancelled fan favourites like *Serenity* and *Dollhouse*.

Dark Horse pushed the boundaries of licensing with its inaugural crossover title *Alien vs. Predator*. Like-minded ventures included *Superman/Aliens*, *Batman versus Predator* and *Joker/Mask*, all before returning the licensing favour to 20th Century Fox, which produced two *Alien vs. Predator* films.

In recent years, Dark Horse has continued to attract marquee writers to its ranks, including bestselling novelist Janet Evanovich (*Troublemaker*), suspense author and avid conspiracy theorist Brad Meltzer (writer for *Buffy*) and Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon (*The Escapist*).

Richardson continues to walk the cutting edge by offering digital comic books through a proprietary app available

through iTunes. Dark Horse has also partnered with Gerard Way, lead singer of the recently disbanded emo powerhouse My Chemical Romance, to produce the new comic *The Umbrella Academy*.

Next up, Richardson plans to expand the Dark Horse empire into animation, which he tested with two straight-to-video *Hellboy* offerings. He has launched a series of motion comics (subtle animations that bring existing illustrations to life through voice acting and sound effects) for *Conan*, *The Goon* and Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan's *The Strain*. There are also plans for a feature CG-animated adaptation of *Beasts of Burden*, a story about five dogs that investigate paranormal activity, thus putting Dark Horse into direct competition with the likes of Disney and DreamWorks for a stake in the family film sweepstakes. ■

Jesse McLean is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

THRILLERS LEAP RIGHT OFF THE PAGE Jesse McLean

In his evolution from comic-book store retailer to minor movie mogul, Michael Richardson has provided some of the best big-screen thrills over the last 20 years (along with some direct-to-video stinkers):

Dr. Giggles (1992)

The Mask (1994)

Timecop (1994)

Barb Wire (1996)

Mystery Men (1999)

Virus (1999)

Timecop 2: The Berlin Decision (2003)

Alien vs. Predator (2004)

Hellboy (2004)

Sin City (2005)

Son of the Mask (2005)

Hellboy: Sword of Storms (2006, animated, direct-to-video)

300 (2007)

Hellboy: Blood and Iron (2007, animated, direct-to-video)

Alien vs. Predator: Requiem (2007)

Hellboy II: The Golden Army (2008)

El Zombo Fantasma (2010)

R.I.P.D. (2013)

Beasts of Burden (2013)

Sin City: A Dame to Kill For (2013)



300



Aliens vs. Predator



Sin City



Hellboy



Mystery Men



The Mask



Timecop

Photos: KEYSTONE Canada, Google, Universal, Dark Horse Entertainment

