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Comic relief: Local writer immortalizes 16th and 44th presidents

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Comic books have long stoked imaginations with high-flying tales of Green Goblins, Caped Crusaders and Men of Steel.

A new line of comics is extolling the adventures of a different breed of character. These unmasked crusaders roam the political realm, fighting for votes and seeking high approval ratings.

And a Springfield writer is involved in telling one of the tales.

Bluewater Productions has issued one-off comic books on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, first lady Michelle Obama and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin.

When a fellow freelance writer referred Springfield resident Chris Ward to the comic book publisher, Ward was initially skeptical of the political angle.

“I thought that it sounded like the most boring thing in the entire world,” he said.

His attitude changed after he had a chance to review previous releases and came away impressed. And when Ward heard that a book about President Barack Obama was in the works, he lobbied for the gig, citing his firsthand look as Obama’s run for the White House was officially announced in the town where he spent the formative years of his political career.

“I told them, ‘I stood out in the freezing cold to hear him at the Old State Capitol. I live really close to where he worked downtown,’” Ward said.

Ward, 28, eventually received the assignment and complete creative control over the story. As the writer, he was responsible for the book’s dialogue and describing what should be depicted in each panel. The illustrations were painted by an esteemed comic book artist in Africa, Azim Akberali.

“It was really cool to collaborate with someone a half a world away on a guy (Obama) who’s trying to bring everyone together,” Ward said.

He described the writing portion of the assignment as the easy part.

Researching Obama’s life and conceptualizing a story that would be both informative and entertaining proved more time consuming, especially because the book is expected to reach beyond the traditional comics-reading demographic.

“A lot of people were asking, ‘Does he have superpowers?’ because they don’t understand the idea of a political comic book,” Ward said.

In response to these preconceptions, Ward opened the book with a parody of Obama as Superman before quickly veering off into a direction that will be foreign to readers who have not spent some time in Springfield.

“The way I told the story was me and (Abraham) Lincoln, hanging out, eating horseshoes and talking about Barack Obama,” he said.

Ward, as the book’s narrator, is a character in the book. Springfield and several local landmarks figure prominently throughout. He also used the opportunity to promote his adopted hometown’s proudest culinary achievement, the horseshoe.

“I think it’s just criminal that more people don’t know about our greasy food offering to the world,” he said.

The comic book begins with Obama’s keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and extends through his inauguration. Ward included biographical information about the president, but tried to find little-known facts to pique readers’ interest. In true comic book fashion, he also added elements of humor, fantasy and his own personality to weave a compelling narrative.

“The comic is a way to have fun and do some outrageous things while sticking to the story,” Ward said.

A Rushville native, Ward began writing self-stapled comic books in the sixth grade. After studying broadcasting and journalism at Western Illinois University, an internship at Wizard Magazines in New York City led to a staff position where he helped to write the comic “Twisted ToyFare Theatre.”

Although his job afforded him the opportunity to interview celebrities such as Eva Mendes, Jennifer Garner and Mr. T, Ward said his modest salary made living in New York City tough. At one point, he was renting a room in a house full of ex-convicts and illegal aliens.

Looking for a more stable life, Ward moved back to central Illinois, where he and his wife, Sarah, both found work in the pharmacy at Memorial Medical Center.

Ward is excited for the Obama book’s release in August. He said that some of the previous political comic books have sold out several runs and have even made it into the hands of their famous subjects.

He’s hoping Obama gets a look at his work. A presidential endorsement could prove lucrative.

“I certainly hope that it stimulates my personal economy. I put a lot of work and heart into this one,” Ward said.

He’s also feeling pressure because around the same time the Obama book is released, the publisher is issuing a comic on Bo, the Obamas’ puppy.

“I’m going to have to outsell that dog book, or my family will be shamed,” he joked.

“I do think this is going to be (Bluewater Productions’) marquee book, and I just feel honored to have done it and to have included Springfield as much as I do.”

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Read this

“Political Power: Barack Obama,” by Chris Ward of Springfield and Azim Akberali, will be released in August. It is available for pre-order on Amazon.com for \$3.99.

See a preview of the comic online at <http://splashpage.mtv.com>. (Enter “Obama” and “Ward” in the search box to find the item about Ward’s comic.)

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