

Inked world of dark genius

* A new graphic novel is being hailed as a landmark, writes
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WHEN Matt Coyle made the lonely decision in the early 1990s to abandon his degree and become a graphic novelist, he was already a rare bird: the only artist based in the staid sandstone environs of St Paul's College at the University of Sydney, a traditional haunt of future lawyers, bankers and politicians. Housed in a second-floor garret notable for the elegance of its disorder, Coyle covered his walls with artworks that provided eloquent confirmation of his outsider status. Alongside studies of artists such as Edvard Munch and Francis Bacon -- "anything that screamed", he says -- were images of violence rendered with exquisite skill and gruesome embellishment.

"A young med student I barely knew used to take great delight in borrowing books from the medical library for me to draw from," Coyle recalls. The most notable title? The Colour Atlas of Wounds and Wounding.

After meeting his academic obligations Coyle furnished the university newspaper *Honi Soit* with a weekly comic called *Campus Security*, a luridly violent strip with a scabrous text. It earned him a cult following and revealed him to be a powerful joiner of images and words, reminiscent of poet and artist William Blake: another figure possessed by a singular artistic vision, and another whose execution was as technically brilliant as his subject matter was bizarre.

This extracurricular exercise soon overwhelmed Coyle's scholarly efforts and he left college to work at graphic novels full time.

After several years in Sydney and Canberra, where he worked as a gardener to fund his drawing, Coyle moved to Tasmania, where he ran the box office of a Hobart theatre. Marriage and children intervened.

"Having two babies in quick succession and having to take a full-time job meant there were about four years when I could only find an hour a day to work, invariably late at night," Coyle says.

"There was no time to wait for inspiration to hit; I just had to get on and make use of what little time there was."

As always he worked slowly, spending weeks on a single page, using only the unforgiving fine-tip black Artline pens he favours. "If you make a mistake you can't fix it; you can ruin a month's work." It was in this incremental fashion that he completed his first graphic novel, *Registry of Death*, published in 1996 by the Kitchen Sink Press with accompanying text by Peter Lamb and an introduction by zombie laureate Poppy Z. Brite. A delirious excursion into ultra-violence, it came and went almost without notice.

Back he went to the day job. For six years there were rumours of another work, even more ambitious -- less explicitly violent this time -- but perhaps even stranger in conception. When the initial pages of the new book, *Worry Doll*, were made available online in recent months, even pixilated on a tiny screen they suggested a remarkable achievement, but one so left-field as to be virtually unpublishable. And so it seemed to be. Kitchen Sink Press had folded, while mainstream imprints that had moved into the increasingly lucrative graphic novel market, such as Jonathan Cape, were fascinated but perplexed. There were many rejection letters.

"I was aware from the outset that it would be a difficult book to find a publisher for, but I felt that its 'otherness' could actually work in its favour. It was a risk I never thought twice about taking," he says.

The risk paid off. Eventually the manuscript reached the desk of Liam Sharp, editor at Mam Tor -- a British publisher of graphic novels -- who immediately accepted it for publication. While *Worry Doll* has of necessity been published offshore, it is expected to land in our bookshops and comic stores later this year as one of the few examples of the graphic novel by an Australian artist. (Eddie Campbell, Coyle's most visible precursor in this country, is Scottish, while Shaun Tan's excellent recent work, *The Arrival*, is aimed at younger readers.)

The Weekend Australian's art critic Sebastian Smee has labelled *Worry Doll* "groundbreaking ... so far ahead of anything out there in terms of visual sophistication that it suggests a new way forward for the genre, maybe a new genre altogether".

Graphic novels are big business: in the US sales nearly tripled from \$US75 million in 2001 to \$US207 million in 2004, and have risen by more than 10 per cent a year since. They take up an ever-expanding place on bookshop shelves internationally, with the work of its best practitioners respectfully reviewed in the literary sections of magazines and newspapers.

The simplest definition of the genre -- comics for grown-ups -- does a disservice to the complexity and fertility of the form. The graphic novel is still in its infancy and retains a sense of anarchy and playfulness, much as the novels of Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding did in the 18th century, before the deadening hand of literary tradition shaped the more rule-bound realist fiction of the 19th century.

Yet this flux makes for some curious bedfellows, as Coyle acknowledges. While he admires the work of giants in the field such as Americans Dan Clowes and Chris Ware -- the latter described by *The New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl as the "Picasso-Braque and young Eliot of graphic novels, whose Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth is the first formal masterpiece of a medium" -- he feels a certain ambivalence, too.

"I love Dan Clowes's world," he says. "It's paranoid, internal, precise and utterly contemplative. And, most importantly, his drawings make me laugh. And I love Chris Ware's inventiveness with his composition and narratives." But those artists, he continues, grew up reading comics, and their work represents an ironic commentary on the innate innocence of the form. (Ware's drawings, with their clean, simple lines, recall Herge's Tintin.)

Coyle, on the other hand, was never a comic aficionado. "It was not so much the comic medium that attracted me but more the drama that could be created when combining a sequence of images, especially from page to page. Often in my books I will have a page that has a single scene drawn on it to optimise the drama of the image when one turns the page. It can become a sort of unveiling of a nightmare, for example, which is viewed at the reader's own pace."

Instead, he drew inspiration from his artist heroes and, most potently, from film. He explained that it was "video nasties" of the 1980s that made the strongest impression on him. The gore-fests of the Halloween and Friday the 13th franchises, with their

hermetically sealed nightmare worlds, bleak humour and aestheticised violence, were crucial to his development.

Of all filmmakers, Coyle's strongest influence is David Lynch. Lynch's films are as visually gorgeous as they are psychologically discordant. And in *Worry Doll* Coyle has sought to capture on the page something of that director's mix of weirdness and ravishing sheen.

Worry Doll is challenging, not least in Coyle's refusal to provide narrative clarity. An accompanying precis calls it a "picture book for adults" (the project's genesis lay in a children's book, a collaboration begun with his wife, Yvette Blackwood, in a moment of what he calls "naive commercial speculation" and soon abandoned). And, truly, *Worry Doll* is the grown-up shadow of that aborted children's work, a noir fantasia told from the point of three dolls: a ventriloquist's dummy, a droopy mustachioed chef with an obscenely phallic nose, and a golliwog with a smile fixed in a rictus of inappropriate glee. The trio flee their home for the outside world after witnessing a brutal act of domestic violence.

A chance encounter with a stranger who offers them a lift sends them careening around an Edenic Australian countryside -- "a road movie type nightmare", Coyle says -- lit by a chiaroscuro that would not be out of place in a Caravaggio or a film made from one of Jim Thompson's grimmer fictions.

Each of its 33 pages retains the remnant architecture of traditional comic art: individual panels move the narrative forward in a visual sense. But the reading order of each page is often inverted, turning narrative upside down or back to front, while the few speech bubbles remain empty, pregnant with the unsaid. Events unfold according to a skewed almost-logic, while the accompanying text -- provided on a facing page -- provides verbal counterpoint rather than elucidation.

The effect -- to borrow Wallace Stevens's definition of successful poetry -- "resists the intelligence almost successfully". Which is about where Coyle's genius lies. His ability as a draughtsman is total: with the filigree of a thousand inked lines he records the world in heightened, almost photo-realist detail while embedding in that same space figures and events whose strangeness explodes the verisimilitude he has so painstakingly rendered. It is a style that Coyle has spent 15 years perfecting: "I

draw like this because I love the initial feel of realism, then the unease or the uncanny feeling that it's not real."

The story of Worry Doll resolves itself after a manner, but it is a dream that ends only by waking into another. With its Grand Guignol-esque focus on the horrific potential of ordinary household toys, and the suffering of innocents, insanity and vengeance, Worry Doll is one of the darkest books I have encountered. It is most definitely not for children.

An exhibition of digital prints from the original drawings in the graphic novel Worry Doll is showing at the Damien Minton Gallery in Redfern, Sydney, until March 10.