

BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS The Daredevil

From the underground to Hollywood—that’s been the path of comics luminary Brian Michael Bendis. After getting his start in the gritty realm of black-and-white crime comics and autobiographical humor stories, he’s found his way to the top of the mainstream heap, writing four of the most critically acclaimed superhero books around, including titles starring celluloid heroes Daredevil and Spider-Man. He’s done it all with killer characterizations, razor-sharp dialogue—and more than a little controversy. A&F’s Sean T. Collins spoke with the comics dynamo about his scintillating synthesis of pop and pulp.

First things first: Can you give us a rundown of your four monthly books? I’m best known for *Ultimate Spider-Man*, in which I take the basic premise of Spider-Man—a 15-year-old boy is bitten by a spider and gets the spider powers—but start it over as if it were happening today instead of the ’60s. It’s really a teen drama about this kid Peter Parker who also just happens to have superpowers. *Daredevil*—coming to a theater near you—is the gritty pulp superhero story of Matt Murdock, a lawyer by day and vigilante by night. I have the tabloids “out” his secret identity, and as a lawyer he tries to deal with it: the superhero’s worst nightmare. I also do the only ongoing mature-readers book at Marvel Comics, called *Alias*—and it came out before the TV show of the same name. It’s about Jessica Jones, who used to be a superhero and is now a private eye. She wasn’t very good at being a superhero, and as a private eye she’s got a laundry list of cases that shows the dark underbelly of the Marvel icons. Finally, I co-own a book called *Powers*, which is a homicide detective book in the world of superheroes. We use the superheroes as sort of a VH1 *Behind the Music* look at celebrity and the media. That is going to be a movie directed by Frank Oz.

Do you even like superheroes? They certainly don’t come off smelling like roses the way you write them. (laughs) No, I adore the genre. My job is to make them as interesting as possible. There’s a screenwriter named Alvin Sargent who says, “Always put your characters in the place they least want to be.” So by doing that, I am actually giving them my greatest Valentine by creating, hopefully, their most horrible dramas. But I know it comes off in a negative way, because in *Powers* we’re using superheroes as this cultural symbol of everything that is wrong with the media.

Are you really that mad at the media? Do you think they are as obtrusive as they are portrayed in Powers? I’m not mad at them, because I’m part of them. But I am fascinated by the fact that our entire culture is wrapped around the media—our politics and our culture and our way of life feeds off the media. It’s a never-ending source of material for me. I mean, I can’t say I hate the media, because I Tivo *Access Hollywood*. And, like I feel about myself, I’m in love and yet disgusted. I am a pop culture professor. If a doctorate in stupid crap could be given out, I would have it.

I really feel you “get” pop culture. In *Ultimate Spider-Man*, for example, the villain known as Kingpin is under the impression that Carson Daly is in cahoots with Spider-Man and says, “Find this Carson Daly person and destroy him.” I think that’s the kind of comment only someone who really understands Carson Daly can make. I make a Carson Daly joke, and three months later MTV calls me and is like, “Hey, want to write the Spider-Man cartoon?” That’s always kind of funny. I’m like, “I am officially everything I despise. Great.” But I’m very careful of direct references,

because things fade so quickly. I made a reference in *Daredevil* about Opie and Anthony; the day that collection came out, they got fired and will never work again. So that’s a lesson to all you up-and-comers. But with all this pop culture stuff, it’s all cute and it’s all clever and I have obsessions and things I gotta say, but it’s just the icing on what was hopefully an interesting character drama or interesting homicide detective case—just one part of a larger puzzle some people don’t even know. *Powers* is a cultural mirror satire thing, which some people don’t see at all. One issue had a reenactment of the R. Kelly sex tape, with a Batmanish character doing it to some girl dressed as Robin. Some people think it’s just a joke, and some people go, “Oh, the R. Kelly tape,” and hopefully it works on both levels. Like you don’t have to be disgusting enough to have downloaded the R. Kelly tape to get the reference.

Speaking of controversy, in the first issue of *Alias* you had Jessica Jones and superhero Luke Cage do a very naughty thing. (laughs) Well, we did the naughty thing, and that was weird. That whole first half of the issue was what I handed to Marvel as what I wanted to do next, even though they didn’t do mature-readers books. And here is this woman who doesn’t like herself, and this is how she punishes herself. Here I am using Marvel characters in this situation—this self-abusive adult relationship. I was very surprised when they came back and said, “We’re starting a whole new line”—the Max line—“for this.” That was more than I hoped for. The funny thing with that book was that in the tradition of great crime fiction—not that that’s what I’m making—I wanted the character to be starting off in a horrible mental place. All great crime characters start off just totally unlikable and end up being more likable. But in superhero comics it’s quite the opposite: They have to hit the ground running with all the charisma and charm of a lead character. So I know when people read it, they were like, “Wow, what is her problem?” It is so not what you are used to seeing in a monthly comic book that I did throw people off. But I was glad that people hung around there to give me the benefit of the doubt, and issue by issue came to love her. It’s funny: **I will always have the banner of writing the first monthly Marvel comic book with the work “fuck” in it.**

Finally, anything you want to plug? I want your readers to go to their local bookstore and look at the graphic novels section. There’s *something* in there that’ll interest you. I don’t care what genre, what author, what kind of material you like to read—you are going to find something more exciting, more entertaining, more visceral visually than any movie you’ll see this year. That’s a promise. And it’s cheaper than two movie tickets.

Illustration by David Mack, creator of the award-winning comic Kabuki.

