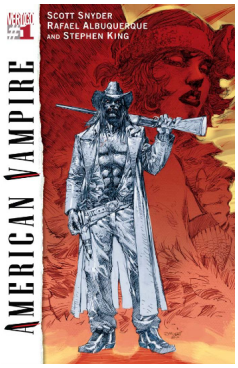
New iterations of famous monsters, legends and myths have been a constant for fans to contend with, their nostalgia often shaping the way they believe their favorite creatures should be presented. Today, one need look no further for an example than the plight of the vampire. Having witnessed the creatures of the night giving way to mopey idols for tweens, horror buffs have been nothing short of mortified at their lack of bite. Inspired by a similar mishandling of the nosferatu—albeit the previous craze—Scott Snyder and Vertigo Comics have created AMERICAN VAMPIRE just in time to help soothe the current generation of disgruntled genre lovers.

“The whole concept for me came during the last vampire wave, back when there were the sequels to BLADE and UNDERWORLD, and QUEEN OF THE DAMNED,” Snyder tells Fango. “I would see these films, and it was always the same: green-lit, looked like THE MATRIX, depressing, gloomy, rainy, vampires in leather trenchcoats and turtlenecks and fighting in the sewers and so on with chandeliers and all that stuff. It made me really miss the vampires I had grown up on and loved, which for me were everything from SALEM’S LOT to LOST BOYS and NEAR DARK, which is probably my favorite. Those vampires were actually scary to me. They seemed like they could be people I knew and could live in a world that was familiar to me. In LOST BOYS, it’s the guy that you look up to, the cool guy. In SALEM’S LOT, it’s your neighbors, in NEAR DARK it’s the trashy people living in the RV nearby—and so the idea that they could knock on your door and be these vicious, feral creatures really appealed to me back then.

“I started thinking about it: Why don’t we ever see vampires who are not so aristocratic or sort of Eurocentric?” he continues. “What about an American vampire? Someone who walks the iconic landscape I love so much? And then it dawned on me: What if that vampire was actually indigenous to America and had different powers? What if it was one of the new species? The whole concept really bloomed from there, where I thought, ‘If that’s possible, why don’t I base this whole series on vampire evolution?’ There would have been different species at different times, and it would be fun to create a whole secret genealogical tree dating back to pre-modern times, with different branches and random mutations. It’s almost like the human evolutionary tree, with all these offshoots that go nowhere and develop into strange variations. “That was the building of the general idea. The specific idea, the pitch itself, really focused on, ‘If there’s going to be an American vampire that’s going to be this new species, what traits can I give it that would set it apart from all these creatures that are nocturnal and anemic, and get staked through the heart and look like strange, late-night clubgoers?’ So for me, he walks in the sun—he thrives in the sunlight, as opposed to them—and that would kind of frighten them and there would be interspecies conflict. And how about we make him more bad-ass? We can give him rattlesnake fangs and that kind of dropped jaw from FRIGHT NIGHT and the Lady

Deathstrike claws. We can really play him up as an evolutionary step forward, something that's really going to intimidate them, because they're the dominant species—the classic vampire."

As if the concept of writing the first truly American bloodsucker wasn't ambitious enough, Snyder's plan involved creating a saga that spanned decades and significant moments in American history. What he needed to figure out was where it would begin. "I started to play around with who this vampire would be," he says. "I'm a really big Western fan, and I started thinking, 'Why not some sociopathic outlaw who's going to cause all sorts of mischief and trouble and be a thorn in the side of all these quiet, elusive European vampires who have kind of insinuated themselves in the bloodstream of American economic and sociopolitical culture?' Why not somebody who's really going to f**k with them?



"So this character, Skinner, started to occur to me as the prince of mischief in the Old West. He hates civilization and feels like it's feminizing the Old West; this Eurocentric development of the frontier, and the modernization of all these cities and places along the outposts. He's somebody who wants to make the West wild again. So then it came to developing a story about how he became a vampire if no one had given him blood—because in this world, in this mythology, they have to sort of give it to you, not just bite you. Why would they allow that, how would that happen and how does he escape from them and begin causing trouble throughout the different decades?"

Skinner also seemed to initially cause trouble for his creator as well, but in the end led to one of the biggest names in horror signing on to collaborate with Snyder and give AMERICAN VAMPIRE a whole new level of excitement. "The pitch was back and forth a few times," Snyder explains. "They really liked it, but they didn't want to start with Skinner in the West. They felt like a Western would be too narrow a focus. Vampires in the West—too pigeonholed, but because I pitched the series as this story you follow through different decades, they asked if I could start at a different place."

At the same time as AMERICAN VAMPIRE was being given the go-ahead, Snyder was sharing his pitch and ideas with one of the greatest writers of our time, Stephen King. “I’m lucky enough to have a mutual connection to him when it came to showing him my story collection, VOODOO HEART. I never thought he’d actually read it, but he was kind enough to, and he even wrote me a quote, which was one of the best days of my life. Ever since then, I’ve stayed in touch with him, and when I told him I was going to do this vampire comic, he offered to take a look at it and give me advice or pointers. So I sent him the pitch after it was basically on the route to being greenlit, hoping he would maybe give me a quote or an introduction if it came out in trade or something like that, which is what Vertigo was hoping. “He read about Skinner,” Snyder continues, “and came back saying he liked the character enough that if I’d like him to do an issue or two at some point, he’d be up for it. I was like, ‘If I tell them that, they’re going to want you do an issue or two.’ He said, ‘I don’t know, I’ve never written a comic, I’m probably not good at it.’ ‘No, no, I would love for you to write an issue, and if I tell them you’re saying that, they’re going to say sure.’ And he was like, ‘Oh, you really think so?’ So I tested it out: I called Vertigo one Friday afternoon and left a message at the office. First thing Monday morning, I got a huge call from everybody there asking, ‘Did you say Stephen King?!’

“So I had rewritten the pitch to start in the 1920s with a character I had really been excited to write about,” Snyder adds. “This young actress, Pearl, who’s sort of struggling in the silent film era, is an extra in all these films and works three or four jobs, trying to be part of something bigger than herself, because she grew up on movies in this sort of Podunk town. I was going to start with five issues about her, and this sort of I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE story where she winds up having a bad night out with two European vampires and then has a run-in with Skinner, who’s squatting at this ladies’ boarding house where she lives. He winds up giving her the opportunity to get revenge on all these other vampires. I wrote that up, and my editor, Mark Doyle, said, ‘Why don’t you have Stephen King, because he likes Skinner, do a teaser about his origin?’ He makes a cameo in my cycle, but you don’t really know who he is. So anyway, he was excited for that, and I wrote him an outline because he had UNDER THE DOME and all this other stuff coming out; I didn’t want him to have to do any more work than he was willing to do. I gave him a paint-by-numbers equivalent of like 16 or 20 pages with beats, but no dialogue, so he could just fill it in.”

What happened next has bowled Snyder over with enthusiasm, since it seems that King simply couldn’t contain himself. “At first, he started doing that, and then about a week or two in, I hadn’t heard anything from him. Then he wrote me an e-mail asking, ‘Do you mind if I go off the res a little bit?’ I was like, do whatever you want. He wound up completely expanding the whole thing and coming up with five full issues of this whole story of how Skinner becomes a vampire and how he begins his journey into the American Century, and it was so much better than anything I could’ve done. I adjusted my cycle to be shorter to fit that. He wrote everything in there, he did edits on it, he reworked it, he did multiple drafts and really went to the mat to make it something that was untouchable for me. I had to do like 10 drafts to approximate the quality of one of his. He definitely raised the bar, and it was inspiring to watch him work. He did all five of his issues

in the time it took me to do two, except his were so exponentially better that it was a little depressing, but very exciting to see. “It was a dream come true for him to do that,” Snyder continues, “and I’m eternally grateful to him for flexing his muscles with it. It was very interesting, too, because I thought he would just be happy with a couple vignettes about Skinner to introduce him, since he liked the series and wanted to be involved. It was almost like he couldn’t work where it was imagined for him already. He made up this whole extensive background for the different characters. It was such an expansion of what was on the page already, and added a whole layer about the legend in the West and fact vs. fiction. I was marveling at how good he is at what he does.”

Beyond King, Snyder and Vertigo also managed to snag Jim Lee and Bernie Wrightson for variant covers, providing VAMPIRE with additional buzz and excitement. “The press that it has been getting, it’s kept me up many nights,” Snyder confesses. “I’m very, very nervous, but I know how lucky we are to have that sort of attention, because we really are very proud of it. With Mark, I really have done multiple, multiple drafts of each issue to make it something worth the hype. So we’re hoping that it is. Rafael’s art alone, honestly, is worth the price of admission.”

You can pick up AMERICAN VAMPIRE issue #1 beginning tomorrow—Wednesday, March 17—and check back here for a full review of the comic as well. If you’re in the New York City area, be sure to stop by Forbidden Planet (840 Broadway at 13th St) as Snyder will be signing copies and chatting with fans from noon to 3 p.m.