

## “IDES OF BLOOD”: Holy Roman Vampires!

Written by Jorge Solis

Monday, 06 September 2010 14:56

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Out in stores now, the first issue of Wildstorm Comics' IDES OF BLOOD packs a wallop of political scandals, vampire action and mystery (see review [here](#) ). The series' writer Stuart C. Paul spoke with Fango about creating a universe where Julius Caesar and vampires co-exist.

**FANGORIA:** What was your inspiration for IDES OF BLOOD? How did the story come about?

**STUART C. PAUL:** Basically, it came out of my frustration with the vampire subgenre. I've never been a very big fan of those stories. I have nothing against them, but at the time I originally came up with the idea—about five years ago—I had yet to encounter one that blew me away. Not that I wasn't impressed with things like INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE or 'SALEM'S LOT, but the mythology in general just left me feeling kind of apathetic. It wasn't until I saw LET THE RIGHT ONE IN that I was truly swept away by a vampire tale. So, I thought to myself, "What would I have to do to make them interesting to me?"



For some reason, Julius Caesar popped into my head. It's one of those things where I really can't pinpoint any logical reason for it. I generally feel like good ideas tend to come out of nowhere, but on the other hand, you can also get kind of Jungian about it, and say that random ideas aren't actually random at all. In retrospect, this sort of seemed to be the case, because later, once I started writing, the thematic parallels between the Caesar legend and vampire mythology became more apparent.

**FANG:** Julius Caesar is the subject of many books, the television series ROME and

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Shakespeare plays. How did you go about creating your own grandiose version of him?

**PAUL:** Grandiose is a good description. The Julius Caesar you see in IDES OF BLOOD is not subtle. He is human ambition personified, even hyperbolized. The first thing I did was research; I read a bunch of biographies on Caesar from both modern times and antiquity. I also consumed as many fictional interpretations of the man as I could get my hands on. I wanted to see what had been done before. I feel most modern interpretations really fail to capture the essence of Caesar's power. ROME is obviously a huge exception. That show is a masterpiece, and while I took a few pointers from it, I also knew I didn't want to try to tread over the same ground, since they'd done it so well. That freed me to be more, as you said, grandiose, and to treat Caesar with a bit more hyperbole. Since I was writing a comic, it seemed a natural choice anyway.

In IDES OF BLOOD, he conquers Transylvania and changes the face of Rome by introducing vampires into society, and aside from the supernatural part, that's exactly what he did. The key was just taking those traits that were already in his character and applying them to the framework provided by the introduction of vampirism. We're talking about a man who fashioned himself after the god Jupiter. But what if Caesar discovered other gods with more power than those of Rome? How would that change his plans? From a certain point of view, ambition is just an expression of fear of death. If a man like Caesar encountered a race of beings that had conquered death, that would radically shake his perception of his place in the world. Suddenly, the stakes are higher. The historical Caesar could only hope to gain immortality through the legacy of Roman history, but if vampirism existed, establishing an empire suddenly becomes small potatoes. And when he learns about how Dracul, the first vampyre, gave birth to the Dacian people, he sees in him a kindred spirit. So you can see how shades of Bram Stoker and Shakespeare come together to create this new version of Caesar.

**FANG:** In a unique twist, the vampires are the slaves in this Roman society. What is about vampire fiction that intrigued you to explore it in a new way?

**PAUL:** It's the scale of vampires that fascinates me more than the tropes of the mythology. The rules as far as silver, sunlight, stakes, fire, decapitation, etc. are always different depending on who is telling the story, so obviously those are not their defining qualities. It's really the consumption of blood and immortality—although George A. Romero's MARTIN is one notable exception of the immortality rule that comes to mind.

Having the chance to explore the concept of immortality as a social phenomenon was definitely

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one part of the appeal, but really, I'd have to say it was less about exploring themes than it was just having fun by seeing how I could take the conventions of the sword-and-sandal genre and twist them by adding vampires. You get things like Roman crucifixion as a punishment for crime, and suddenly it gets a whole new meaning when you add vampires, because of the whole weakness-against-crosses thing. In fact, in IDES OF BLOOD, vampires aren't scared of crosses—just being nailed up on them with dawn coming. And obviously, I had to put in a vampire gladiator match, and we have a lot of fun with what that might entail in issue #3. So it was less about me being intrigued by vampires as it was being intrigued by them in a specific context, and seeing how it would work if we simply treated them as another culture trampled under the boot of Rome.



**FANG:** In the first issue, the vampire Valens becomes a sort of supernatural detective. He even shakes down snitches at a brothel to find clues. Tell me about your interests in the noir genre and how they influenced building Valens' character.

**PAUL:** I'm a big fan of noir. The City is always a huge character in noir, and ancient Rome lends itself perfectly to the kind of seedy underworld of shadows that we all love to watch. *THE FUGITIVE* was definitely a formidable influence, and I was on a bit of a Dashiell Hammett kick around the same time I was writing the comic. However, an early draft of the story wasn't a noir *per se*

. It was way more of a Spartacus tale, even a little bit *GANGS OF NEW YORK*, but I wasn't happy with it. There were already some aspects of noir there, but it was too diluted, and most of the story took place in Dacia—the ancient name for Transylvania and Romania—instead of Rome. It was only when I focused in on the noir elements, and kept all the action in the city itself, that I felt like I had found the story I wanted to tell. With all the political and social intrigue going on, it was important to keep Valens' goal simple, so the innocent man wrongly accused of Caesar's assassination going on the run to clear his name and expose the true killers seemed the clearest and most dramatic way to do that.

The tricky part was that we all already know the ending. I needed another mystery to hang the story on, which is where the Pluto's Kiss Killer came in—a vampire serial killer murdering mortal

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aristocrats. In order for the story to work, it became essential to use a noir structure to preserve the sense of mystery.

**FANG:** The Pluto's Kiss Killer is such a creative yet strange name for a serial murderer. How did that come about?

**PAUL:** Pluto is the name of the Roman god of the underworld—though he is also sometimes referred to as Dis, which doesn't sound nearly as cool. Since he's a vampire who kills by the classic bite to the neck, "Pluto's kiss" seemed an apt way to describe a vampire bite as the method of execution.

**FANG:** There are many layers of metaphor between the characters. There is the political side with Julius Caesar and the Senators. Valens, the detective, is searching for the Pluto's Kiss Killer, which means he's a vampire hunting down his own kind. Then there's the master/servant relationship between Caesar and Valens. With so much subtext packed in the first issue alone, was it difficult keeping track of where these characters were heading in the storyline?

**PAUL:** Not really where they were heading, so much as how they would get there, or who would discover what, when and how. I knew that the Caesar/Valens relationship, though we don't get to see a lot of it before the assassination, was going to be key to Valens' arc throughout the story. Each issue, he gets pulled away from this sort of false identity he has of being a Roman citizen, and back toward his Dacian roots and his true nature. So from a character standpoint, it was pretty easy to keep track of what the different events in the plot would do to push or pull him toward or away from one of those two polarities. But given the various interested parties with their own agendas and secrets, there were a lot of balls in the air, and sometimes, it did get a bit difficult to juggle them all. Fortunately, the structure of comics allows you to somewhat compartmentalize things from issue to issue...but mostly, I just did lots of revisions.

**FANG:** Some writers work closely with their artists, while others stand aside, leaving them alone to do their work. How was your relationship with IDES OF BLOOD artist Christian Duce?

**PAUL:** We ended up going back and forth more as the series went on, but for the most part, Christian took the scripts and did everything on his own. When the first pages came in, I was

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floored by how perfectly he understood what I was going for. He really keyed into the world I wanted to create, and brought it to life in a way I couldn't have hoped for. He is extremely talented, visionary and collaborative. Working with him has been one of the greatest pleasures.

**FANG:** There is so much detail on display in the artwork and dialogue. How much research did you and Duce undertake to create this alternate universe, where the Romans have conquered Transylvania and captured the vampire population?

**PAUL:** I can't speak for Christian, but judging from the authenticity on display in his pencils, I'd imagine he did his fair share of homework. I always do a lot of research, because research is story. If you don't know your world, you can't write it. Research on Rome was easy to find, but information about Dacia was tougher to track down. In the end, though, there was an older anthropological work by this guy named Parvan that was very helpful, and a whole book about the role of wolves in Dacian religion.



My favorite book about the Roman world was called HANDBOOK TO LIFE IN ANCIENT ROME by Lesley Adkins and Roy A. Adkins. Every time I had a question, I turned to that book. There are tons of sequences, characters and beats that emerged from the research. I still remember how excited I got when I learned how rich Romans used an underground system of furnace tunnels, called a hypocaust, to heat their homes and baths, because I knew that was going to end up being a setpiece.

**FANG:** With the first issue now on stands, what can readers expect in the upcoming issues?

**PAUL:** Valens has been warned, and in the next issue [out September 15; cover art pictured right], the Ides of March are coming! In addition to lots of intrigue and action unlike anything you have ever seen, we're going to see the home of the vampire rebellion; go on a Dacian acid trip;

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learn about the Dracul's role in the origin of vampires; find out why Valens is so loyal to Caesar; witness an appearance by Van Helsing; find out what Brutus' master plan is after Caesar is dead; and discover the true identity of the Pluto's Kiss Killer. We'll also get vampire STD's; vampire gladiator cage matches; more Soothsayer bug-eating goodness; crucified bodies used as weapons; insidious Egyptian necromancy; cruelty against animals; swords inserted into various orifices; and yes...vampire cockfighting.

**FANG:** What are you working on now?

**PAUL:** Right now I'm doing some work on the film and TV fronts, but what I'm most excited about is my new comic series, BUSHIDO.44. I don't want to give too much away, but it's another alternate-history yarn but set in modern times, involving the samurai conquest of America. It's sort of like X-MEN, THE DIRTY DOZEN, THE GOOD, BAD, AND THE UGLY, KILL BILL, YOJIMBO and MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE all blended together into a bloody bowl of sake-soaked, bullet-flavored udon.

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