

It's strange driving across the bare expanse of the Midwest. It becomes easy to believe that you are the only survivor of some silent doomsday event. With the shadowy features of mile after mile of this vast nothingness, a kind of unfamiliar fear sets in: there's no one to talk to; no one's ever going to hear your voice again; you are alone in an almost Biblical sense. That kind of silence signals an important understanding that, when the end does come (which in these bad days seems all too easy to imagine), the result will be punishing quiet.

Like no one else I know, Anders Nilsen is not afraid of being quiet—at least not in his work as a comic book artist. The creator of the book *Big Questions*, a nominee for an Ignatz Award for new talent and outstanding comic, Nilsen's new book, *Dogs and Water*, depicts the struggle of one young man and his dog, lost in a strangely lovely but eternally apocalyptic world. Nielsen's art is filled with amazing white space showing a true sense of human loneliness. Above all else, the work echoes our need to be heard, even if it is only by ourselves.

Interview by Joe Meno

**How did you first start making your own comics?**

I guess I started making comics in high school. I had an English teacher who let me do assignments as comics. I did an arty zine in college with comics in it, and started doing narrative paintings as soon as I had the freedom to in painting classes. Those paintings eventually turned into *The Ballad of the Two Headed Boy*, though that wasn't published until a few years later. I still thought I was going to be a "real" artist when I finished college, but without the structure of school that kind of work began making less sense to me, while the comics I was doing in my sketchbooks and the children's book I did for my little sister began making more sense. It was a much more direct way to communicate ideas, and it felt more like play. I started photocopying the stuff out of my sketchbooks and sending it to friends and it ballooned from there.

**Your work synthesizes so many disparate elements together. Who are you drawing from?**

Influence is a hard thing to unravel. My influences comics-wise are anything from the X-

Men and Frank Miller to Edward Gorey, Tintin, Raw, and Chester Brown. As far as the kind of stories I end up telling, the slightly surreal—for lack of a better word—slightly epic and slightly theological nature of things like Grimm's Fairy tales, C.S. Lewis, Greek and Norse mythology, Giotto and other pre-Renaissance painters. I listen to books on tape while I work, too, and some of that subject matter, which leans toward philosophy and religious and political history, ends up in the work.

**Your work both is very novelistic—a slow unfolding of the story with many, many characters—and also very cinematic with excellent point of view shots and a wide sense of physical space.**

You used the word cinematic. I do try to think about enveloping the viewer, sucking them up into the story the way I loved to be completely absorbed in a story as a kid. That's certainly what a good movie does, but I am very interested in provoking thought as well, leaving the reader with something on their mind and something that they can relate to, either about themselves or the world. I hate it when you go to a good epic movie and get completely sucked in and when it's over, you're just spit out into the world again which is left seeming drab and boring. A good story should involve you *actively*. It should inspire you and make you see the world differently. It should help you see the world as being better, or at least more interesting than you thought. ¶ As for the different points of view, I used to think a lot about visual equivalents to the extremely dramatic emo and punk music I used to listen to, and how changes in rhythm or tempo or volume could have visual or narrative equivalents. In a nutshell, I think a more regularized point of view or scale allows for a more subtle, possibly psychological, storytelling—details of gesture or expression will

be noticed. A changing point of view and scale dramatically lends itself to more action and can make something simple seem dramatic.

**Tell me about your new book, *Dogs and Water*. It seems similar to *Big Questions* in the sense of its very mythic loneliness and the very epic pace, but with the character's conversation between himself and his backpack, it seems almost like a monologue. What's this one all about?**

It started as two really simple little strips about how ridiculous it is to be an artist, to think that your little take on the world has any merit and will get you anywhere worth going, but also about the fact that you'll probably end up going there anyway. Years after I did it, I was asked to do a story for a new anthology for Drawn and Quarterly and since I had no other good ideas, I turned to those two little strips, thinking they had some potential to be expanded. Two years went by, the anthology came and went and the strip indeed expanded and metamorphosed a lot. It still has a grain of the original subject, but also deals in a roundabout way with the war and other things. ¶ The idea of the monologue holds a lot of interest for me. I'm working on another thing right now, it will probably be a book next year, that's filled with several interconnected monologues, all set toward the end of the world. Monologues are a little closer to having an actual conversation with the reader and less like setting up this contrived little play-act for them to watch and interpret



# Anders Nilsen

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ing to get started on a story about Icarus, and as I got into it realized that all my stories are basically Icarus stories: People who get a little too big for their britches and then crash; stories about humility and arrogance, or just not respecting your limits. It's a really compelling subject for me for whatever reason, though I've worn out my welcome with the larger aircraft crashes for a while. The airplanes and stuff also have a slightly different cast, though perhaps retaining related subject matter, post 9-11. I actually did the plane crash drawings in *Big Questions* before that, so I don't think of it as being related, whereas with the scene in *Dogs and Water*, while I didn't intend it to relate specifically, if people read it that way, that's fine. ©

passively. It sort of ends up making the reader almost a character in the story.

**What else did you try to do differently with this book?**

There are no panels. All the images float on the page. I'm interested in the effect that has on how the thing is read, but it also just makes composing the page easier—it's not so architectural. Otherwise this story is the longest completely self-contained thing I've done. The structure had to be tighter than, say *Big Questions*, because I had to think about a beginning, middle, and end, all the way through. *Big Questions* tends to sprawl a bit. It has structure too—I know where it's going, ultimately—but I've left myself much more room to let the story go where it will on the way there.

**In both works, there is a massively dramatic aircraft crash either as resolution or the start of the action: any connection between this narrative device and the events of September 11?**

Two things. First: Everyone loves to see stuff crash. It's just the most basic representation of violence and drama you can get. It's all about intensity of experience. Second: A couple of months ago I was try-