

Kevin Eastman's career — odyssey is more like it — is probably the most fascinating, tumultuous, and farcical in comics history. As everyone knows, Eastman co-created, with his collaborator Peter Laird, the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in 1984. The series took off almost immediately and became a global licensing bonanza — with innumerable kinds of merchandise as well as three feature films — making the rather bewildered young men millionaires practically overnight. In this interview, Eastman describes the economic, legal, and emotional roller-coaster ride that followed the *Turtles'* success, but the centerpiece is certainly Eastman's candid perspective on Tundra, the alternative comics company he founded with *Turtles* money in 1990, which he collapsed into Kitchen Sink Press in 1993. Tundra was certainly, not to put too fine a point on it, the biggest and most absurd (as well as the most idealistic) publishing catastrophe in the history of comics — maybe in the history of the print medium.

I had only met Eastman once before years ago and spoken to him on the phone once or twice. Eastman had in fact canceled a *Journal* interview he'd agreed to during the period he "sold" Tundra to Kitchen in 1993; his cancellation was probably a bunker reaction to the *Journal's* dogged attempt to ferret out the truth behind Kitchen Sink Press' disingenuous press releases about the transaction, which, Eastman reveals here for the first time, clearly misrepresented it in both spirit and letter (in fact, Eastman bought a majority interest in KSP and in effect sold himself his own company). But, a year ago, Eastman called me and said he was ready to talk. My impression of Eastman, based on a very long day I spent with him at his Bel Air home in October, 1997, is that he is fundamentally decent and well-intentioned, but his combination of wide-eyed naivete, canniness, and good intentions was unanchored by any concrete philosophical, aesthetic, or intellectual disposition. He wanted to do good but hadn't a clue as to how to do it, and only the vaguest conception of what "good" meant in the context of a publishing company.

There was certainly too much money at Tundra and too little of everything else. About money, the renowned economic philosopher Wyndham Lewis wrote, "Money spoils many things for it seems to most people who possess it so much more important than their poor humble selves, that they cannot believe, or trust their judgment to believe, that it does not overshadow them; and when their personality is called upon to compete with it (as is I suppose always the case with a wealthy person) they feel that it will master them forever." Money was certainly more important than Eastman's poor humble self, a reversal of priorities that proved disastrous. Tundra was both a managerial and a conceptual mess, but the managerial lunacy shouldn't overshadow the fact that the company was editorially rudderless.

In the absence of a guiding editorial vision (or even coherent taste) Eastman glommed onto Creators' Rights as the conceptual glue that held Tundra together. The problem was, neither infinite amounts of money nor a devotion to creator rights could manufacture talent out of thin air, and as a result, Tundra's output was all over the map. Such a variable editorial line-up would have put even a crack marketing team to the test, but to Tundra's relatively untrained staff, it proved hopeless. To this, you can add other detrimental side-effects, for instance, books that could've sold well and been profitable to other publishers (not to mention the creators), were sucked into the Tundra black hole and practically lost. Then, there was the rampant irresponsibility of creators who took huge advances and never turned in the work for which they were paid. Steve Bisette, a close observer and participant at Tundra, lamented that Eastman never learned anything from the fiasco of Tundra, but what lesson could Eastman or anyone else divine from this painful, tragical, and pixilated episode? Surely Eastman is not about to try anything like this again, and no one in his right mind who has the kind of money Eastman had at his disposal would repeat Eastman's mistakes. The sad disaster of Tundra was uniquely Eastman's own.

I had been warned by more than one person that Eastman was as slippery as an eel and that it would be difficult to get a straight answer out of him regarding Tundra; on the contrary, he appeared to be embarrassingly forthright and largely free of guile about his responsibility in the self-immolation of his own company. If you didn't think it was possible to lose \$14 million publishing alternative comics, read on.

Gary Groth

THE LAST BOY IN MAINE

GARY GROTH: *Could you tell me where you grew up, what your upbringing was like?*

KEVIN EASTMAN: I grew up in Maine. In the country outside of Portland, in southern Maine. I attribute a lot of my creativity or imagination or whatever to that time period because there was really not much to do there. I had a paper route. There was a local drug store that sold comic books; that's where I discovered things like Gene Colan's *Daredevil* and Jack Kirby's *Kamandi*, back when they were all still 20 cents apiece. And I used to draw. Constantly. From the time I first saw a comic book, that's all I ever wanted to do as a career... tell stories.

GROTH: *This was a rural environment?*

EASTMAN: Very rural. The most exciting thing to do in the neighborhood was hang around the store and gas station — which just happened to be the same place. We used to ride motorcycles or hang out in sand pits. Lots of fields. Trails through the woods. Build forts.

GROTH: *[laughs] Hang out in sand pits.*

EASTMAN: Hang out in sand pits. You ever do that?

GROTH: *[laughs] No, I have to say I never have.*

EASTMAN: That was a big thing for me. [laughter] It was wicked fun, all things considered; we hung out in sand pits probably until high school, because once you graduate from throwing rocks off the top of sand pits, riding motorcycles in sand pits, and discover drinking, then you hung out and drank in sand pits.

GROTH: *Sand pits are versatile [laughter] places.*

EASTMAN: Such was life growing up in Groville, Maine.

GROTH: *May I ask what your parents did?*

EASTMAN: Well, my parents were separated. They separated when I was about nine, but my father was a tool and die maker and he used to draw a lot. I still have an old folder of cartoons of cars. My grandmother was a painter, so I think my talent is definitely inherited. Or... what I call my talent anyway... is inherited from them. My mother worked as a phlebotomist. She was a nurse in a hospital where she would draw blood from patients. So we called her the *vampire*. But they separated when I was nine.

GROTH: *Was that difficult for you?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, it was kind of weird. I remember coming from school one day and Dad's packing. And he's like, "I'm going to live at Grammie's for a while." Shortly thereafter he moved out of state. For about four or five years, he was completely gone. My mother met a man that she's been with ever since. Twenty-seven or 28 years they've been together. He used to pave driveways... a real intellectual. [laughs] Just kidding, a good hearted person.

I remember Dad calling, he'd call for Christmas and birthdays. It was kind of a weird thing. I really didn't care for him that much then. When he finally decided to come back to the northeast and be with his kids, it was no big deal. I really didn't like him that much for a long time. He used to take us, every Sunday, to do stuff, my sisters and I. Actually, he used to take me to life drawing classes, because I really loved to draw. That was kind of great. Introduced me to people like Heinrich Klye, N.C. Wyeth, and all these old time artists, you know, books he'd seen when he was a kid growing up.

GROTH: *Were you close to him before?*

EASTMAN: Can't recall. It was one of those things that fades away I guess, what do you remember of your childhood? I remember stupid things. Eating Twinkies at the store. The paper route. Buying comics. Drawing. I don't really remember much more.

GROTH: *It almost sounds like he left just at that stage in childhood when you would have become close to him.*

EASTMAN: Exactly, when a boy needs a father figure. These days, all is forgiven, and we have a great relationship, but it was really rough for a while.

GROTH: *So your stepfather took over that position?*

EASTMAN: No, he couldn't. My mother, she was the top dog: she ran the family, she ran the house, she ran Larry's ass off... she was the queen and she was very *strict*. On the one hand, she was supportive, but in a most interesting way. I remember... it is kinda funny now, and still seems very clear today, one of the most inspiring things she said to me, when I was maybe 12 or 13, again drawing all the fucking time — in my room, comic books, everywhere... she came up and she'd say, "Jesus, you better be good at that, because you're not good at anything else." [laughter]

She's very much of the tough-love scenario. But she was supportive, and my dad was, in his own way. When I graduated high school I wanted to become an artist, a comic book artist. Which was silly to everybody on the planet. My high school art teacher was very supportive but not — like, you really got to do something with your comic art. More like fine art. Even when I applied to colleges, like Portland School of Art, or Rhode Island School of Design, and these places were just insulted that my portfolio contained anything comic book-like, that wasn't art to them! My father said he would help pay for college... as long as I didn't go to art school. He said, "I know you love to draw, but it's not practical!" He was very old-fashioned. He was like: "Get a job... a real job."

GROTH: *He didn't think you could earn a living doing that.*

EASTMAN: He was absolutely positive you couldn't. His idea was, you get a job where you can support a family, so you can take care of your family. Then if you want to draw on the side as a hobby, you can do that.

At that age, when you're getting out of high school, you're pretty much, "Fuck you, I'm doing anything I want." So I went to art school for six months. [laughs] They didn't care for me there, either. [laughter]

I went to the Portland School of Art, because it was semi-affordable, and local. They had artists that graduated that could paint their asses off, yet working in 7-11s to pay back their fucking student loans and starving. You know what I mean? They were very much against what I wanted to do... it was insulting that I would draw anything comic book-like. Or refer to that as an art form. And that was very weird to me. So I made up my mind, at that time, that I still knew that that's exactly what I wanted to do. I figured that I will take from them what they can give me and apply it to what I wanted to do with it. A lot of it helped: life drawing, of course, and object drawing...

GROTH: *Can you skip back and tell me a little about your interest in comics? Were you just maniacally interested in comics, did you buy a lot of comics...?*

EASTMAN: Well, there were only one or two other kids in the neighborhood that really liked comics. Most of them didn't care or probably couldn't read that well. Well, I couldn't read that well either. I still can't spell that well, but that's another story — yeah, I loved 'em and as much as I could afford with my paper route money, I would buy comics. I liked weird shit. Well, what I called weird shit. Some kids liked *Superman* or *Batman*, and things like that. The closest superhero comic I liked and bought regularly was *Daredevil*. I liked *Weird War*. I liked *Sgt. Rock*. I liked *The Losers*, a lot of war comics. Not much superhero stuff.

GROTH: *Did you escape into comics?*

EASTMAN: Oh, definitely, big time.

GROTH: *Do you think your fractured family life had something to do with your intense interest in, or escape into, comics?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, I'm sure it did... my room was a pretty safe place. I had all my comics there and all my stuff to draw on. You could sort of hide there for days if you needed to.

GROTH: *You once said, "I remember reading my first Jack Kirby comic when I was very young, and deciding that was what I wanted to do."*

EASTMAN: Mm, that's right.

GROTH: *Kirby had a big effect on you?*

EASTMAN: Huge. The biggest. I think that looking at Jack Kirby's work made me obsessive. I'll dig out, just for fun, if you want to show some of the stuff in the interview, all my early drawings were totally Kirby-inspired. His stuff was kind of manic. It was kind of abstract. It was really powerful. Simplistic, I guess? The stories were really never that complex. But very linear, simple, and I just thought exciting. *Kamandi* was my favorite. "The last boy on earth." I was like, "I wanna be the last boy on earth." Whatever. But yeah, he was brilliant to me, I used to just pore over his stuff. I still have those comics that I bought from that time period today and they're just beat to fuck, barely held together. He was a huge influence.

GROTH: *So you went to art school immediately after high school? What art school was that?*

EASTMAN: It was the Portland School of Art. In Maine, there's not a lot of work opportunities, so I would cook lobsters during the summers in a restaurant, and basically, grew up in a kind of atmosphere where you work all summer long, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, because that's when all the tourists are there, and you save all your money to get you through the winter. For four or five years, I still did that even after the first issue of the *Turtles*, I was still going back to Maine for the summers to cook lobsters. [laughs]

SCHOOL DAYS

GROTH: *You went to art school for about a year?*

EASTMAN: It was six months, actually.

GROTH: *And they tried to indoctrinate you into fine art, or they tried to move you into a direction away from comics.*

EASTMAN: Yes. They preferred I paint things like this; they would tear up colored pieces of paper, put them inside of a box, and tell me to do a painting of that using a palette knife. I'd paint that, or other weird shit. I used to do stuff in design classes where you have this 12-inch by 12-inch grayscale, and these one-inch squares of gray and you're supposed to arrange them in a pleasing, "most" interesting manner. I used to hang out with this kid, Peter Goodman, who also liked comics, and so, we'd bring in gray scales to a Tuesday lesson, and the teacher would critique them: "No, no, you're close, you've almost got it, I think you really need to give it more thought..." and whatever. We'd never work on the fucking things, we'd bring them back the next class, and you'd just say to the teacher, "Well, I really thought it through and I did this, then I added more warms here, and I think the blacks really brought the whole thing together this way." And she'd be like, "Yes, yes, I see it. You've really got it this time." So to me it was kind of fucked up. [laughs]

GROTH: *It was bullshit.*

EASTMAN: Kind of bullshit. I got enough grants and student loans to go for a semester. I applied for grants for a second semester, but my Mom and Larry were at the income level where you were poor enough to get some help, but were just making enough money that you couldn't get more government assistance. I was just making too little to pay for myself. So I couldn't attend second semester. I opted to just take night classes occasionally and work.

GROTH: *Did they teach you figure drawing?*

EASTMAN: Yes. And that was the one thing I stuck with even after school. I had figure drawing classes, and what they call a 2-D drawing class, which is object drawing. Drawing bags and couches and tires and things like that. The figure drawing is something I always went back to whenever I could fit a class in.

GROTH: *So you were taking classes, but you also must have been working as well. What were you doing?*

EASTMAN: Working in restaurants. I had this great philosophy that was taught to me in the first restaurant I worked in, in high school. As a freshman I used to work at this variety store that had a little restaurant in the back, in Westbrook. The owner said, "You know, kid, if you work in a restaurant, and I don't want to catch you doing this here, by the time you get your own apartment, you can eat all your meals at the restaurant, while you're working. On your payday, your day off, you come in to get your paycheck, and then grab a snack while you're there. That way it leaves you more money to spend on beer, chicks, and your apartment, because you're eating all your food there." And I'm like, "Oh, I can relate..."

GROTH: *Words of wisdom. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Words of wisdom from Louie Audet of Westbrook, Maine.

MAKING COMICS

GROTH: *When did you actually start drawing your own comics?*

EASTMAN: In sixth, seventh grade. Me and a friend of mine, Jim McNorton, who was the writer, as he couldn't draw — neither of us could do *either* at that age, but we tried really hard — he would write all these really outrageous scenarios, and I would draw them. Then... remember the old mimeograph printers? You had like these two pieces of carbon paper and you could draw on one side of them these one-page comic strips, print them in the school office, and try to sell them around school. Didn't sell that many, but that was my first experience with publishing. [laughter]

GROTH: *Presaged Tundra.*

EASTMAN: Same thing: we got extra credit, but they just didn't sell.

GROTH: *Just a loss on a lesser scale. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Yes, for sure.

GROTH: *Now correct me if I'm wrong, you published the first Ninja Turtles comic in '84. You would have been about 23-24.*

EASTMAN: 21-22. I'm 35 now.

GROTH: *It sounds like you didn't have much support from parents or teachers or anyone else for your interest in becoming a comics*

artist.

EASTMAN: Not really, but one of my biggest inspirations after Jack Kirby, and definitely the experience in publishing that led me to the whole world of self-publishing was a gentleman by the name of Clay Geerdes. Did you know Clay?

GROTH: *Yeah, yeah. I knew him. We corresponded.*

EASTMAN: He passed away last year, which was heartbreaking for a number of reasons. One, because he passed away. Two, because I really lost touch with him over the years and it makes me sad. I grew up reading comics and wanting to draw comics. I discovered *Heavy Metal* in 1977, when I was still in high school; I graduated in 1980. *Heavy Metal* led me to look for people like Corben, which led to undergrounds by Kitchen Sink, Last Gasp and Rip-Off Press. When I used to work cooking lobsters, this friend of mine, we used to drive to the Million Year Picnic down in Boston and scour the racks for all these old underground comics. So by the time I thought I was good enough to start submitting my work, I submitted all my early stuff to publishers like them. Denis Kitchen was the only one that wrote back a note saying, “You still have a long way to go. Keep trying, you’ve got something there, but you should try Clay Geerdes or Brad Foster... these guys do mini-comics. They may point you, help you along and whatever.” So then I wrote to Clay, and Clay ended up being my first publisher.

GROTH: *He published some mini-comics for you?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. There were just these little 8 1/2 by 11, photocopied pieces, folded twice into mini-comics, but he also did a little bit slicker ones, photocopied also, folded in half, with a slightly heavier cover. I did a series of probably 50-60 drawings for him. Different covers... they’d all have the Clay Geerdes Comix Wave logo worked into them, and all these different artists would do renditions of his logo. Then he used to send me newspaper clippings, of bizarre little anecdotes from the newspaper like “Man Gets Ticketed 113 Times, Even Though He Was Dead And Slumped Over The Wheel Of His Car.” I’d illustrate that, and he’d put it in one of his mini-comics. I remember to this day getting my first check for \$7, for a published drawing on the cover on one of his comics. That was my first paid published work, and it really flipped me out.

ENTER PETER LAIRD

GROTH: *When did you hook up with Peter Laird, how did you meet him, and how did you guys form a partnership?*

EASTMAN: While I was cooking lobsters I met a waitress who was also going to school at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, near Northampton. So once Labor Day ended, there’s not much work left in Maine, and I couldn’t afford school, so I followed her down to Massachusetts. There I found a local free newspaper called *Scat*. It was very similar to Clay Geerdes’ type of stuff, only newsprint, a little bit bigger, 8 1/2 by 11. They had these local artists do these underground-like comic strips, and their offices were in Northampton. So I got on the bus, went over to Northampton with my portfolio of stuff, and tried to sell work to them. Around this time, they figured out that this magazine was supported by local businesses advertising... and that they were starting to make more money designing ads for these businesses than doing comics! So they said, “We’re not really doing *Scat* anymore, but hey, you should meet this guy Peter Laird. He draws the same kind of weird shit you draw: Kirby-inspired whatever, babes and guns and fucked-up creatures, that kind of stuff.” And they gave me his address. He lived in downtown Northampton.

So I wrote him a note. He said, “Yeah, come on by. Let’s get together and show off our portfolios.” I remember going into his apartment, his tiny studio apartment that had 50,000 comics in it, toys, shit, and junk, but the first thing I saw when I walked in was this unpublished pencil page from *The Losers* that Jack Kirby had done. That was the first original Kirby I’d ever seen and I just about wet myself, as you can imagine. He was equally a huge fan of Jack Kirby, and we just hit it off Big Time. That day we said we should really try to work together, we should each go home tonight and pencil something that we’d trade off the next day and ink each other’s work. We published those first two stories that we did in a book called *Gobbledy-Gook* much later at Mirage, back in the black-and-white days when you could sell a whole lot of black-and-white comics.

GROTH: *When would that have been?*

EASTMAN: That was 1981, when I met Pete.

I moved back to Maine that following summer to cook lobsters again, and he ended up meeting the lady who is now his wife, Jeannine. She got a job teaching at the University of New Hampshire. So they moved from Northampton to Dover, N.H. I was working in Ogunquit, which is 20 minutes from UNH. That was 1983. So when I finished work that summer, Pete said, “Come on. Move in. We’ll form a little studio, and try and sell our work together.” At that time, we weren’t thinking self-publishing, we were going to sell things to Marvel or DC. Pacific Comics was just starting up, Capital Comics the same, and there were a few other people publishing, so we thought we had lots of options.

GROTH: *And what was Peter doing at this time?*

EASTMAN: He was supporting himself through his illustration. He was doing gardening drawings for the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, the newspaper back in Northampton. A few greeting cards. A few TSR, Dungeons and Dragons spot illustrations. It was very tight, he was barely getting by, but he was making a living.

I worked in a restaurant, and we drew every night. I’d get off work and we’d hang out and draw. It was in the Fall of 1983 that we formed Mirage Studios, and, as the story goes, it was a *mirage* because it wasn’t a studio, it was our living room. We’d sit there, and Pete’s favorite shows were *The A-Team*, *TJ Hooker*, *Love Connection*, really bad TV shows, but he liked them. My goal in life was to annoy him as much as possible while he’s watching his shows. We’d done some work on a robot concept, sort of a misunderstood rogue robot story, as he was a big Russ Manning fan also — called *The Fugitoid*. While we were working on that one night, I did a drawing to make Pete laugh, of a turtle standing upright. He had a mask on. He had nunchucks strapped to his arms, and I put this Ninja Turtle logo on the top and flung it over to his desk. He laughed, thought it was funny, and did a drawing to top my drawing, changed some things, fixed some things, and then I had to top his drawing. So, I did four of them all standing together with different

weapons, and when he inked it, he added “Teenage Mutant” to the “Ninja Turtle” part, and we had this one drawing. Literally the next day we get up and we said... at the time we didn’t have any distracting paying work going on... “Let’s write a story to tell how they got to be the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.” So we did.

We started working on that. And around February or March we’d finished 40 pages of a fleshed-out story, trying to justify why they got to be these mutant turtles. We borrowed some bits from Daredevil’s origin, and we created the rest. I was getting an income tax return back for five hundred dollars. Pete had two hundred dollars that he cleaned out of his bank account, and my uncle, who used to sell us art supplies during that period, loaned us a thousand dollars to print 3000 copies on newsprint, with a two-color cover of the first *Turtles* book. We didn’t know anything then. We said, “O.K., we’ve got 3000 comic books in our living room.” Some were used as a coffee table, some were used to put a lamp on in the corner, and we had enough money left over to put an ad in the *Comics Buyer’s Guide*, to sell them at \$1.50 plus postage. We sold a few, but from that ad distributors started calling and said that they’d like to carry our book. I guess they’d had some comic stores that called about it. So we’re like, “O.K., we’ll call you back.” We said, “Well, what do we do?” “How about if we try this; I think they usually give a discount so, tell them we’ll give them 10% off cover, and they have to pay up front, and so on and so on...” So we called them back, and when the guy got done laughing, he said, “Well, this is how *we* do it, kids.” And explained to us how *they* work. Within a couple weeks we had sold out of the first 3000 copies, and before paying my Uncle Quentin back, we still had orders coming in, so we printed another 6000, and those sold.

This was in May of 1984. Then I had to go back to work cooking lobsters for the summer. So we took a little hiatus.

GROTH: *So the first issue made a profit, then?*

EASTMAN: The first issue made some money, yes.

GROTH: *You sold 9000.*

EASTMAN: After paying my uncle back and all the other bills, it was maybe a hundred bucks, two hundred dollars profit-wise we split. Maybe a little more.

GROTH: *Did you see the possibility of earning a living from doing this?*

EASTMAN: Not at that time, but to us, it was just amazing. We had our own comic! My parents were like, “Yeah, yeah. That’s really nice.” Then you give copies to your friends and other people and it’s like “Yeah, well, great. Congratulations.” It wasn’t until that fall when Pete ended up moving to Connecticut with his wife, who got a teaching job there, and I moved back to Portland, Maine that we started working on the second issue. That is when we realized the possibilities. I made a couple trips down to Connecticut to visit and work. A long bus ride. You used to live in that area, didn’t you?

GROTH: *I lived in Stamford.*

EASTMAN: Stamford. He was up in Sharon, the Torrington area.

So, I made a couple trips down, and we finished issue #2, then solicited for it through the direct market, and we got orders for 15,000 copies. I remember I was in my apartment in Portland, and Pete called, flipping out. He was like, “Do you realize that we’ll make about two thousand dollars each on a 15,000 press run, after everything’s paid, and if we did six of these a year, we could get by just doing *comics*?” About three days after that conversation, I packed and I moved to Connecticut, and we started. I found a little apartment there. We lived in Connecticut for, let’s see, that would have been ’84 and ’85. I think we did three or four issues that year, and it went from 15,000 copies for the first printing of #2 to a re-solicitation of #1 that sold almost 30,000 copies to a re-solicitation of #2 which was higher than that, to the first solicitation of #3 which was 50-55,000 — it was making incredible jumps like that, and by the end of ’85 into early ’86, we were filthy stinking rich. In our own minds. We were paying our rent, we were putting money in the bank. We were still doing everything ourselves, doing the whole thing, and the dream had come true.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

GROTH: *Let me skip back. How did you guys collaborate? How did it break down?*

EASTMAN: What we did was unusual. I guess Pete was more of an illustrator, very finely detailed, amazing stuff. And I was more into telling stories, he hadn’t done that much of it. So what we would do was sit down and basically flesh out the issue. We’d talk it through, I’d make notes longhand. We’d figure out where it starts, a basic beginning, middle and end, and some detail, and then I would do the breakdowns and the layouts for the entire issue. Some were as simple as a lot of gestures and flow on legal pads for each page, to some more detailed drawings.

So, we would work in this manner, talk out the stories, I would do all the breakdowns, then Pete and I would go through them together, and he’d say, “We should change this, this doesn’t work, we should try to improve this,” or whatever. We’d clean those up, and then Pete would go through and do the final script based on whatever crazy notations I made. Besides, he was a much better speller. [Groth laughs] And, a better writer... probably still is. Then we’d each take half the stack and start penciling. All the early pages were very small because we did them on duo-shade, you know, that graphic tint paper? It was twenty-two dollars a sheet for a 17 by 22 sheet, and especially in the early days, we could get three pages if we made them small. So, we’d each start penciling, swapping back and forth. The idea was to try and get half of each of us on each page. Once it was all penciled, I would letter it all and then we’d again divide up the stack and it would be a race to inking. We’d both go through the pages, again trying to get half of our styles on each page. It was always this manic process as there were these really cool panels and then there were the boner panels — you know, the “nothing going on” panels. And so I’d rush through and try to do the cool poses, and Pete would do the same thing. We kept swapping them back and forth, until the fateful last few weeks when we had to go in and draw scenery and backgrounds. Then we’d duo-shade together. Sitting in the same studio, literally passing the pages back and forth.

GROTH: *A very organic collaboration.*

EASTMAN: Exactly; the Good Old Days.

GROTH: *Is the Ninja Turtles owned 50/50?*

EASTMAN: Yes. It's always been that way. Since the beginning, we had always known that without the other person, it never would have evolved.

GROTH: *So you publish the first issue in '84, and it took off almost immediately. The second issue came out how long after the first?*

EASTMAN: January of '85. So it was a while.

GROTH: *Seven or eight months afterward. Then it really took off after you did #2. And you realized you had something.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, we realized we had something then, and we were sort of figuring it out as we went along. We didn't know how long it was going to last, but at that young age, you sort of go for it.

GROTH: *How long did the sales keep climbing?*

EASTMAN: The sales actually peaked a year later. The biggest-selling *Turtles* issue was *Turtles* #8, which was the Cerebus/*Turtles* crossover. It was a story I wrote. Pete had very little to do with that one. He was working on something else at the time. I did all the layouts and the pencils, and then Dave Sim went in and inked Cerebus throughout.

GROTH: *And what did that sell?*

EASTMAN: 135,000 copies. [Groth laughs]

GROTH: *Image would love that today.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] Yeah, a lot of people would.

GROTH: *DC would love that, too.*

EASTMAN: I think around that time we ended up moving back to Northampton. We really felt that we were making good money, around seven, eight, nine... ten thousand dollars an issue each, black and white, still newsprint with color covers. Actually #5 was the first full-color cover. We could afford to live wherever we wanted to.

GROTH: *And you actually chose to live in Northampton?*

EASTMAN: We chose Northampton. Pete grew up in North Adams, which is pretty close to Northampton, and he'd been to school for four years for printmaking in that area. He had a lot of friends there. I really had no attachments and thought it was cool because that was where we met. The short time I had lived in Amherst in '81 and '82, I used to hang out in Northampton — Amherst was really boring — but Northampton was a hip, kind of cool, kind of grungy, little mini-city. But very small. It's changed somewhat today. It's more like Disneyland, Main Street USA.

GROTH: *I heard it's the lesbian capital of the country. Is that true?*

EASTMAN: If it's not the capital, it's definitely got an inordinate amount of lesbians in it. I think Smith College, which is one of the original seven sister colleges, you know, Wellesley, and all those others. Smith is right in downtown Northampton. Actually, there are seven or eight colleges in a nine-mile radius. UMass is there, Amherst College, Mt. Holyoke, Hampshire College, and there's a very young population. Anyway, there's some statistic that I read, and whether it's correct or not I don't know, but it said 30% of the women that go to Smith end up either coming out as a lesbian or have had a number of experiences but, yes, it's very much a part of downtown. There are a lot of kids, obviously, with all of the schools, there's a lot of tourist traffic. With Smith College being downtown, and whereas it's a very expensive school, there are some nice restaurants to lure the rich parents that come to make sure their daughters aren't becoming lesbians. [Groth laughs] When I was 18 or 19 living there, it was very different. Very grungy. I used to be able to get served in bars downtown. There were some pretty dumpy little bars right off Main Street, which are parks and gardens or more upscale restaurants now.

"LET'S DO LUNCH"

GROTH: *So when did you move back to Northampton?*

EASTMAN: In the first part of 1986, I believe.

GROTH: *Now in 1986 you signed with licensing agent Mark Freedman. Can you tell me how the *Turtles* fortune was built and how you decided — how did you know to sign with a licensing agent?*

EASTMAN: In late '85, with the now more widely-known success of the *Turtles*, we started doing a little bit of licensing. We did a role-playing game with Palladium Books, Kevin Sembieda; we did a couple t-shirt things, these were people that just called us and said, "We want to do glow in the dark *Turtles* t-shirts," so we did a deal. We also did a deal with Solson comics. Remember Solson? Rich Buckler and Sol [Brodsky]'s son?

GROTH: *Yeah, my God.*

EASTMAN: Yeah. We licensed the *Turtles* training manual to them and got ripped off.

GROTH: *You were among one of many.*

EASTMAN: Unfortunately one of many. [Groth laughs] We had been approached by a couple of different agents that were like, "We can make toys and movies if you sign with us for five years exclusive; we'll make you millionaires." For us, one: we were making good money, and two: we had learned a few things. We all remember Siegel and Shuster, and around that time, there was a big fight to get Jack Kirby's artwork back which I think you were pointing a lot of. A lot of the industry people like Frank Miller were doing a lot of speeches regarding creative rights, and creative ownership, which was kind of interesting and weird to us at the same time. We were aware of it, we knew Steve Bissette and what he'd been through and all the evil stuff that had been happening to other people who were trying to retain and own their rights. We started going to conventions around this time, meeting folks like Dave Sim, Mike Kaluta, and many others, all of which had corporate horror stories. We were aware enough to file copyrights and trademarks. Well, we had copyrights just by publishing it, but we filed trademarks to protect ourselves.

But we never experienced their side of it. We always had complete say and complete control over the whole thing. So when

agents came along, we were like, “No. We’re happy. We’re making money, we’re doing what we want. Besides, you feel really slimy to us.” And I know that sounds silly, but you know how you get weird vibes from a person.

GROTH: *Were they real hustlers?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, these guys... New York/L.A. types. “Come on. Let’s do lunch.” Mark Freedman actually approached us in the same manner. It was in ’86, he had heard about us through this person and that person and whatever. So, he called us up and said, “I want to come talk to you about licensing.” And we were like, “Yeah, yeah, sure. Fine. All right, come on up.” He was in New York. To give you an idea of how important this was to us: We had finally moved out of our living rooms, and gotten a little space. We were literally painting it that day. It was two rooms. So Mark shows up and we’ve got paint all over us. We’re in shorts as it’s in July. He does one of these; we open the door, he takes one step and freezes solid. He’s got his thousand dollar suit on, his leather briefcase, the perfect hair, the whole thing and looks, and says, “Eastman and Laird?!” And we’re like, “Yeah, come on in.”

He went through his spiel. “I can make you millions, blah, blah, blah... five year contract... blah, blah, blah.” We said, “Look. Tell you what. If you really think you can do something with our Turtles, we’ll give you 30 days.” And we literally signed it on a napkin. Thirty days non-exclusive to see if you can get any nibbles, and if it works out, we’ll go from there. In 30 days, he had letters of interest and commitment from Playmates Toys. We said, “All right.” He said, “Look, I want to take you to California, we’ll go to Playmates, and hear what they have in mind.” So the toy company paid our way. It was our first trip to California, which was pretty funny in itself.

GROTH: *Why was that funny?*

EASTMAN: It’s just that [laughs] I’m sure we looked like a couple of fucking country bumpkins, you know? [Groth laughs] Which we were. Sitting in this corporate office with all these weasels in suits. But they got it. They got the Turtles, I guess. They liked the moralistic side of them, which I don’t think Pete and I really ever saw in the Turtles in those days. We just tried to make them do the right thing, and we created this little mythology of honor within the Ninjitsu, which there isn’t any. [laughs] Ninjas were ruthless mercenaries. [Groth laughs] They worked for anybody that paid them to kill or assassinate or do whatever dirty deed.

But, they liked the characters and wanted to develop them to see if they could work as toys and cartoon shows. Playmates had had some successes, and this was their first venture into boy’s action figures. One of the reasons why Mark selected them, as he told us, was because companies like Mattel and Hasbro would regularly buy concepts and “sorta” develop them, while intending to bury them for a year or two so they wouldn’t compete with other things they had on the shelf. But Playmates believed that the *Turtles* could be really huge, and they were willing to invest millions of dollars into making toys, and millions of dollars into making an animated five-part TV show. So, we eventually signed with them, and signed with Mark for a three-year contract.

GROTH: *Now let me skip back just for a second. Am I correct in assuming you were influenced by Miller’s Ronin comic?*

EASTMAN: We pretty much blatantly ripped off the cover and its style, the jagged balloons, the Miller style. The roughness of the drawing, I probably pushed that on Pete. Pete... he’s eight years my senior, and he already had a very distinctive style. Very linear and highly detailed. I was without a doubt an absolutely huge Frank Miller fan and I don’t think Frank’s ever forgiven me for that. I mentioned when I was a kid I used to read *Daredevil* when Gene Colan used to do it, and Bob Brown did it for a while, and you had a bunch of other in-house staffers do it, and then Miller came on the scene, I think Roger McKenzie was writing it... it was like #158, and I thought it was just brilliant. Miller always experiments and tries different things and really is one of those people that moves the comics industry along, pushes the limits, and creates new heights that it should rise to, with *Ronin*, and *Dark Knight*, and even *Sin City*. But the coolest thing even today when I look back at the growth period of Frank Miller between #158 and #191 or #192, his last issue on *Daredevil*, it’s pretty phenomenal. He was, I think, very Kirby-esque in that he had a very dynamic style of storytelling. I was very inspired.

Ronin... Pete hates [laughs]... . Pete’s never really liked *Ronin* that much, but I just loved it. I really flipped out over what Frank was doing.

TONING DOWN

GROTH: *According to an article in something called Continental Profiles, July 1989, written by Frank Loveche, it said, “All agreed to soften the Turtles for mass consumption. And so Playmates underwrote a five-part cartoon mini-series that turned the Renaissance Reptiles into pizza-snarling party guys.” [Eastman laughs]*

Is that accurate?

EASTMAN: Yeah, that was the one from the airplane. *Continental Profiles*. An interview from the peak years.

GROTH: *That sounds right.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] I’m laughing because I remember more people saw that than anything else we did! It was one of those in-flight magazines, and we had all these people saying, “Oh, you’re really in the big time now, because we saw you in the in-flight magazine.” [laughs]

GROTH: *A captive audience.*

EASTMAN: A captive audience. But yeah, from day one, the first meeting at Playmates they wanted changes, I mean, in the early issues of the *Turtles*, we had violence but not graphic violence, but there was definitely some hardcore action. We had the Turtles swearing, drinking beer! In issue #3, they go into April’s apartment, and she says, “Do you want something to drink?” And one of the Turtles goes, “Yeah, you got any beer?” [laughs] My influence, I know, Peter never really drank.

GROTH: *And they all pass out.*

EASTMAN: And then they all pass out, end of story. [laughs] Playmates said, “Our specific audience is four to eight year olds, and this is the audience we need to shoot for.” In the origin story there was death, murder and revenge — that was softened consider-

ably. A lot of the violence was toned down, obviously, to fit broadcast standards and practices. When we did the first color cover to *Turtles* #5, the only way you could tell the Turtles apart was their weapons. They all had red masks, they were all green, they all had yellow chestplates. They said, "What do you think about coming up with a way to differentiate them a little bit more?" Pete came up with both the different color bandannas and the belts with the letters on them. I even think it was suggested at one time that they even be different shades of green, which in the world of toys and animation just was not doable. They can't get that finely tuned.

But yeah, we worked literally hand in hand with Playmates and Fred Wolf, who was the animator. We had complete say, and complete approval, under our contract with Mark and Playmates. Every licensee from day one to now goes through us. Nothing gets put anywhere without our approval.

GROTH: *How did you feel about toning down your creations for mass consumption?*

EASTMAN: It probably affected Pete more than it did me. He was really upset about it and even today, he's very much of a purist as far as the Turtles go. I think he has much more of an attachment to the Turtles than I do. I may have had more in the beginning, can't say as I really do now. It's like they never stopped!! I never really thought they would go beyond issue #1. I'd come out of *Heavy Metal*, and Corben stories and underground stuff where every story could be something different and more fucked up than the last one, or more interesting or whatever... I had a lot of other stuff in my mind that I wanted to do comics-wise. To me it felt like that any day the whole thing could just fall apart, and then "boom!" you're on to something else.

So there was some difficulty there, again I think more for Pete than me. But, it was something we both agreed to. We'd have long, long talks, and ultimately say, "We can live with this." You know? All this stuff was done in 1986 and the early part of 1987 while developing the toys and the cartoons, even through that whole period, we never really believed that it was going to happen. So when you get the first *TV Guide* that actually says, "*Ninja Turtles*, playing five days through Christmas Vacation of 1987." It sort of hits you with a hammer. Just like, you know, is this really happening? The show came out, and it became number one, and everybody's freaking out over it. We started working on more *Turtles* shows right away, and the production time with toys, it takes a while to gear up and ship, and the toys finally shipped in like June of 1988, and they're fucking flying off the shelves, and it ends up being this huge hit. Then the T.V. becomes the number one series in the fall, and the toys go crazy, people are fighting over them like Cabbage Patch Dolls. I remember, even though this was going on, it was like, it's outside yourself? It's almost like you're really watching somebody else going through it. You don't really feel it's you, but you're right in the middle of it. So, we walk into the local Toys R Us, in Springfield, Massachusetts, and — I swear to God this is true. We're going down the aisle and there's this kid pitching a fit, "Ma, I want the Ninja Turtles!" Screaming "I want one, I want one, I want one!" And the mother's going, like, "I'm not buying one of those stupid Ninja Turtles." And we're like frozen. Like, this was *weird!* It was very, very, very fucked up.

GROTH: *Do you have any second thoughts about it?*

EASTMAN: There was definitely an "Oh my God, what have we done?" thing. It just sort of like, ripples through your whole body like when you're about to meet somebody you really admire, you know that kind of weird feeling, you get hot flashes, and you're just going like, "Wow, this is really happening. I need a drink!"

GROTH: *But there was never really a strongly held contention that you were not going to violate the integrity of the Turtles? It sounds like you pretty much did what had to be done to mass-merchandise them.*

EASTMAN: Yeah. Absolutely. The resolution at the end of the day, even when Pete and I both agreed that, well, there's some stuff we really don't like, and some stuff that we wish we hadn't said yes to, stuff that *they* wanted to do... But we said, look, you know what? We don't think this will work anyway, and we'll always have our black and white comics to tell the kind of stories we want to tell. So that was that little bit of space where we said, "O.K., we're still O.K., because we still got our comics." Which ultimately, because of the success of the *Turtles*, we could no longer do. Kind of a trip...

GROTH: *Is that true?*

EASTMAN: Absolutely. When the *Turtles* hit, that's when the drawing stopped. We stopped with — we call it issue #15, but in actuality it was 11 regular issues, and then four one-issue micro-series. Because everybody was doing these four-issue mini-series, we did these one-issue micro-series, one on each of the Turtles. Pete and I really couldn't find enough time — because he was handling part of the business, and I was handling part of the business, and we'd be juggling a lot of things as well as trying to work out a regular schedule of sitting and actually drawing together like we used to, which became impossible, and just drifted away. It was like, now, working on a licensing program, working on scripts for shows, working on the movies, working on all aspects, and [knowing] nothing about this kind of business! The licensing world is a whole planet in itself, the world of cartoons and what can and can't be done, that's another completely different planet, with a whole different set of rules. The same with movies, worldwide copyright and trademark programs, working with agents in countries we'd certainly never been to, some we never even heard of, in managing this whole program by the seat of our pants! We asked a lot of questions, and we paid a lot of legal bills, and figured it out as we went along. We tried to create a system out of a lot of things that were beyond us!

TRUCKLOADS OF LAWYERS

GROTH: *Now at some point you had to hire lawyers.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, by the truckload.

GROTH: *You signed with Mark Freedman. Was he Surge?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. He was Surge Licensing.

GROTH: *So you signed with him. Now, you must have had a lawyer to confer with before you even signed with him.*

EASTMAN: Yeah. We actually had two. Pete had an attorney that was working with him and his wife as they were buying a house, a local, small-town Northampton attorney. Interestingly enough, his lawyer, Fred Fierst, used to work in New York in the music

business, as well as TV, so he had some entertainment experience. He moved to Northampton for the quality of life, to raise his family and things, so we started with him. I went out and found an attorney, by literally looking in the phone book. His name is Michael Weiss. I still utilize Michael today for certain things. He's down to earth. They consulted with other counsel, and together we sort of figured it out.

GROTH: *And as it grew, did you acquire more attorneys, more specialized attorneys with greater experience in that area?*

EASTMAN: Some; a lot of them were on Mark's side. The licensing agent. He had two or three key attorneys that he used that did all of his licensing deals, his movie deals, his toy deals, and TV deals. We had a copyright/ trademark attorney in Waterbury, Connecticut, Bill Crutcher, who helped organize and do the whole copyright/ trademark program worldwide. There were a variety of New York attorneys that Fred Fierst and Michael Weiss would consult on certain things that were sort of beyond their expertise. But our lawyers read every contract. Pete and I, in the early days, definitely in the first four or five years or so, were still reading all of these contracts and asking "Why are there 350,000 whereases, and what ifs, and hereins?" And once we started figuring out the contracts, that's when they started changing them, you know. Gotta keep those billable hours up! [laughs]

But at times, especially when the crazies started popping up, the "I created the Turtles," ones we'd use more, to help with those, and all the other lawsuits. We would have anywhere between 15 or 20 lawsuits going at any particular period of time in those days.

GROTH: *Lawsuits... people were suing you?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, seemed like everybody was.

GROTH: *For what?*

EASTMAN: Anything! Buffalo Bob from the Howdy Doody show filed a five million dollar suit because he said we stole "Cowabunga" from him. He used to say it in the Clarabell the Cow segment, I guess — I've never seen a Howdy Doody show, to be honest — but I guess he used to come out and say, "Cowabunga!" Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon used it through all the big beach blanket bingo movies as a surfer term, and I think Bart Simpson — which I hear he also sued Matt Groening for stealing "Cowabunga"... It was what our lawyers called strike suits, basically they come in and they say, "We have grounds for a case, and we're suing you for five million dollars, but after a couple months of due diligence and sorting it out, they'd say, "Look, we'll settle for fifty thousand dollars."

We had a lot of people saying they created the *Turtles*. One guy said that God told him about the *Turtles*, and he didn't act on it fast enough, and we did, so now he's suing us. There was a guy, a street person, that Pete actually helped out a bunch of times. In one instance, he created this thing called *Presidents in Outer Space* that Pete drew for him. He had George Washington in a space suit — that looked like a Turtle to him! So I guess if you put a guy in a space suit, like an Apollo space suit, next to a Turtle, to him there was enough likeness that he said Pete stole the idea of the *Turtles* from him. He filed a suit that went on for years! Then there was Fred Wolf, the animation company, that we worked with, hired by Playmates, a work-for-hire animation studio, that basically said they created *everything* about the *Turtles* that made them such a big phenomenon. So they sued for half the royalties that we'd made in the entire history of the property. That was a big suit. Millions and millions of dollars to deal with that. I mean, this guy's deposition had stuff like "He put the Turtles in the sewer." We put the Turtles in the sewer in issue #1. He put our character April in a jumpsuit. That was issue #2; it was ludicrous! It was phenomenal. Anybody that wanted to sue you could sue you for whatever grounds, and did!

GROTH: *Didn't you vigorously fight all these suits?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. Yeah, we had to. We were told, understood and believed we had to set a "precedent." In a lot of cases, especially trademark suits, you really need to have a legal presence, and enforce these, to show that you are protecting the property or you'll lose your rights! There are still a number of what they call "First to File" countries, a lot of Middle Eastern countries are still this way. There was one guy, and I'm not kidding, this guy's name is Abu Shady. I guess he would look across the ocean to the United States, and if there was a toy concept that was becoming popular, and *his* being a "First to File" country, he would file trademarks to your creations in his territory! So, when a year or so later, we go in as it starts becoming popular there, to license, and the guy says, "Excuse me, you want to license *my* characters here? I own the *copyrights* and *trademarks* of these!" He knew exactly how much it cost to fight it in court, and he had already figured out a settlement which was less than legal battle costs. He said "You want the rights back to your characters in my territory? Pay me x-amount of dollars and you can then license in my territory." I heard he was doing this to *The Simpsons*, Warner Brothers, and lots of other companies.

GROTH: *You told me a funny anecdote over lunch earlier and I'd like you to repeat it: about licensing the Turtles to Russia.*

EASTMAN: Oh, God. I think I was talking about how crazy the Russian program was in comparison to the insanity that we'd already dealt with. We had done a licensing deal there with this sub-licensing agent named Peter Tamm. We said, "Well, we've looked into it and there's no real government system, there's no way we can protect our copyright and trademark or enforce anything to protect your rights as we normally do everywhere else."

He said, "Don't worry about it." Because he had this arrangement where he would manufacture all these goods in factories in Turkey, where we had licenses already, so we'd get percentages of royalties from the increase in factory production in Turkey as well as this guy would import all this *Turtles* merchandise — comics and toys and you name it — drive 'em in big 18-wheelers into these Russian markets, open up the backs, and sell 'em off the trucks. He said that if anybody infringes on his rights as our agent in that territory, I'm going to send some of my guys over there to kick the shit out of 'em. That's how I'll protect the copyright/trademark. Period. [Groth laughs] I found that to be almost as funny as the Abu Shady thing I was telling you about.

GROTH: *Did you find that to be a satisfactory answer to your question as to how to protect your trademark?*

EASTMAN: [laughs] We were like, "Is that really what it's like there?" And he said, "You know what? To describe" — and I guess we're talking 1992, 93, when the *Turtles* were really hot — and he said to describe the climate in Russia after the wall had come

down and all these changes were going on, he said it's sort of like a cross between the wild, wild west and Chicago gangland in the '20s and '30s. It was really a free-for-all that all these capitalist ideas were coming in and people were just going nuts.

So satisfactory? I don't know.

GROTH: *Did you sign with him?*

EASTMAN: [laughs] He was interesting, and he made us a little *nervous*.

GROTH: *Did you sign with him?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, we signed with him. [laughter] We signed with him and he paid us the money. It was pretty decent money. It was a lot of — Christ, you know, are we dealing with Russian Mafia? Who knows? It was kind of scary at the same time.

WILLING VICTIMS

GROTH: *At some point, and I don't know when this was, it seems to me that you got sucked into the Bissettian and Simian orbits.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, but we were willing victims.

GROTH: *And I know that you attended one or two of the Creators' Rights summits.*

EASTMAN: At least two of them, maybe more. There was one in Springfield and then we drove to Toronto to do another one with Bissette, Zulli, Pete and Murphy — Steve Murphy — and most of the Mirage guys.

GROTH: *Earlier you said that at some point you had known Bissette. Can you tell me how you met Steve?*

EASTMAN: I — Oh God, now we're going back, to where those drug years affect me more. [laughter] I believe we met Bissette at a convention or something. There were always lots of little local conventions, like a couple in New Hampshire, some in Boston, and God... we ran into Steve somewhere and got chatting about this and that and figured out that he and Veitch lived just about an hour north of us in Battleboro. They used to come down to Northampton for the record stores and what not, so we just started hanging out. They'd come down to the studio, have lunch, and chat about art, the business, etc. Steve used to come down more often and, as we got to be friends, he'd come to the studio and draw. For a while, when it was in my living room, I'd have a bunch of artists over when we were jamming on an issue deadline. Once Pete and I had done most everything, we'd have Michael Dooney helping with backgrounds, and Bissette would do some duo-shading, and eventually did stories. We probably met Bissette, Veitch, and Sim around the same time. Sim's philosophies were... interesting and bizarre to us in one sense — and the same with Steve's in another — to be honest, we were very spoiled, we *didn't pay dues*. The Turtles were always "ours," we'd never worked for anyone else. I mean, I did some stuff for Clay Geerdes, but the *Turtles* was my *first* comic effort.

GROTH: *You hadn't been fucked over by big corporations.*

EASTMAN: We hadn't been fucked over by big corporations. We were somewhat aware of that going on, we're talking '85, '86, into '87 whatever, and there were a lot of people self-publishing, we had the black and white boom and bust. Which I think there's some people that still kind of blame us for that in some way. Which is kind of funny. I mean, I see it as once people figured out that a couple of guys out of their living room can publish a comic that can be worth twenty-five or thirty dollars on the collector's market, that anybody could do it.

It was the same thing years later when they were selling millions of Image comics and "Death of Superman" — we're still not over that crash — but on a much smaller scale. When people were doing Radioactive Black-Belt Hamsters and Kung-Fu Kangaroos. There were 21 adjective-adjective-adjective-noun titles at the high point there, and they were doing a hundred-thousand plus press runs. The shop owners and the collectors were looking for the next *Turtles*, the next big collector thing. That's always been a problem in our industry, that people have short memories. You know, all those shops that probably went out of business in the black-and-white boom and bust, never came back to live through the multiple millions of double cover bullshit that we came through years later.

So Dave Sim was self-publishing, and he was intrigued by us, I think, because we were successful, and we self-published. We were selling more comics than him, and I remember that's the first thing he said when I met him, "I always wanted to meet someone who sells more black and white comics than I do." Which is kind of a weird thing to say but I grew quite fond of Dave. He has very strong opinions, right or wrong, they were his opinions and I respect that. So with Bissette's extreme difficulties through the *Swamp Thing* years and Veitch was just starting to go through some really difficult shit — again, I'm not positive of the time period, but I know *Swamp Thing* #88 was around then, but maybe down the road.

GROTH: *Yeah, it was: '89/'90, something like that.*

EASTMAN: '89/'90, right.

GROTH: *After Bissette got fucked over, Veitch had to get fucked over.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, yeah. It was sad, heartbreaking. I think Alan Moore was dealing with the *Watchmen* issues around that time. I think he was just getting ready to jump because DC had been selling all these promotional things, saying they were promotional and even though they were making profits, they weren't paying him a royalty!

GROTH: *It was around then, yeah. Much fucking over and much discontentment.*

EASTMAN: I think we felt that it was amazing that this could go on and we realized our good fortune. We didn't go through all that shit. We felt a kinship in that, although we realized that what they had gone through was horrifying, like other people we admired so much, Jack Kirby and many more that had to deal with corporations that were making millions from their creations and they weren't receiving any of the profits. Or even getting their fucking original art back. We felt that we were in a like crowd, we could be sympathetic — even though we'd never been there. That, and it was always interesting to listen to Scott McCloud and Dave Sim argue at great length!

GROTH: *What would they argue about?*

EASTMAN: Everything.

GROTH: *The weather.*

EASTMAN: The weather, what they're gonna order for lunch... no, I'm kidding. Scott, as you probably know — and I have a lot of respect for Scott as well, for many different reasons — but he's equally opinionated. He's very, very set in his ideas, I couldn't name a specific. But Dave would have an opinion "A." Scott would have opinion "Z" and they would never meet. But they would argue... and their arguments were epic U.N.-style debate quality. But relating to points in comics. [laughs]

GROTH: *And that would go on at these summits.*

EASTMAN: Yeah. What we were trying to accomplish, or my understanding of what we intended to create out of the Creators' Bill of Rights, was a manifest of rights we felt creators should be aware that they have! We learned from going to all these different conventions and meeting so many people within the business that already had great difficulties, but had become more experienced in how not to get fucked over, to be careful, what to look for, but there was a whole new crowd of people, younger people like *us* coming through that didn't have a clue! Wanting to live that dream as well. Creators that really would do anything to ink something for Marvel or whoever, to be in the business, because it meant that much to them, like us in the beginning. Or worse yet, give away something that they created, or sell it without being aware of what they were doing. The idea with the Creators' Bill of Rights was to create a list of rights that whether you adhere to them all or not, you were at least 1) aware of them, and 2) if you went into a company, and you decided to give up all those rights, to work for that company, at least you knew them and you consented to giving up all those rights, and that was your decision. I remember it was really badly received for a number of reasons. We put out this Bill of Rights just sort of saying that "This is what we believe in, and this is what we want to make you aware of, and whether you decide or not to adhere to them, this is a statement by us." Just about every artist we sent it to said that they were insulted by it because they weren't part of its creation process and how dare we tell them their rights?! We did not intend it to be "This is the end." It's like with a constitution: it wasn't the end, it was the beginning, something that's still being re-written and adapted today. Not that this is a constitution, but it was intended to be sort of a growing thing, or just a "how to start" thing.

You see, the *Turtles* could have taken a very, very wrong turn if we had been less savvy. There was a time early on, Peter David, and Archie Goodwin took a meeting with Pete and I to consider bringing the *Turtles* in-house at Marvel. Which, you know, there's still that boyhood fantasy thing inside us that was like, "Marvel! WOW!" And even though we knew fucking better we still went down to the meeting. They said, "Well, you know, we'll put it in our Epic line, really glossy covers, full color, very slick, we'll give you an editor, and of course we'd want 50% of the profits, and the merchandising." We were just like, "Fuck that." *But*, if that offer had happened really early on, it's entirely possible that the *Turtles* would have been another big profit center for Marvel to make millions and millions of dollars on, or perhaps they would have fucked that up, too, who knows.

GROTH: *It would be in liquidation today.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] Yeah, it would be in liquidation today.

Yeah, so we had a series of summits that were trying to move this along so we could put it out there for everyone to use or not use. After that it faded away, although a copy hung on my office wall at Tundra. As far as the group went, everybody sort of went on to different things, and even though we still sort of believed in it, and those thoughts were put down for what we thought were good reasons, like a wish list, it never went any further, it was just like, "These are the rights that I think you should have." End of story.

THE GROWTH OF MIRAGE

GROTH: *Rich Veitch says you and Sim got into a pretty pointed argument during one of the summits. He said, "Dave Sim very pointedly began to criticize Eastman and Laird and Mirage Studios. He saw the studio set-up they were building, which was bringing in a lot of young artists from all over the country to Northampton and hiring them to do Turtles comics and merchandising. Dave saw this as a dead-end road. He thought they were getting away from being self-publishers, and it got really intense. And Eastman and Laird took it very personal, and didn't want to hear it. And the meeting kind of broke on that sour note."*

EASTMAN: That's probably entirely true, and I think that I'm sure Dave was very vocal about that stuff, and he's very much a purist that there is no other option than self-publishing, and he's always believed that even though he's veered off himself a couple of times, [with] some of his own publishing ventures, which he sort of corrected or whatever. You know you sort of fall off the wagon, you go to Betty Ford, you get back on, and you're O.K. again as in, no publishing other than your work. Dave believes self-publishers should be "You write it, you draw it, with or without an assistant, you publish it and that's it, period. You have complete say and complete control." The End. There should be no variation or deviation. When some of the artists originally came on board at Mirage Studios, it was because we were expanding publishing, evolving. Michael Dooney would want to do a *Turtles* story: "I have this little *Turtles* story I want to tell." And we would put it in *Turtle Soup*. But at the same time, Michael was doing *Gizmo*, Jim Lawson was doing *Babe Biker* and a couple of other projects. Ryan Brown was doing *Rockola*. This was in the days when — I mean, the first issue of *Gizmo* sold like 100,000 copies or something, black and white. It was very profitable. By issue #6, when we stopped publishing it, it was only selling 3,000 copies. The end of the boom and bust. A lot of these guys ended up moving into the area to work with us, doing this and that, came into Northampton just when things, publishing-wise, were collapsing for projects other than the *Turtles*.

GROTH: *Were these Turtles spin-offs, or were these completely separate projects?*

EASTMAN: These were completely separate. At first Michael Dooney created *Gizmo* and we published it through Mirage, Jim Lawson created *Babe Biker*, and we published it through Mirage, and Ryan Brown's *Rockola* as well. And a lot of these guys, we'd become friends with, they were living in our area, they were our *bros*, and their books were now getting to the point where they weren't profitable for them to even do. Because at first we didn't pay them page rates. They did 'em, and we gave 'em, whatever, half or better of the royalties and that was plenty. Everyone was making out. This was at a time when the *Turtles* licensing stuff was going

through the roof and we needed quality control. We designed or assisted with the licensing art for the whole *TMNT* program whether it was a t-shirt designs for somebody in Paris, or toy designs at Playmates, or a number of other products that came through the studio. They all came through our office because we had full approval rights. Even though the licensees would have their own in-house artists, a lot of times they'd send us really shitty drawings. So we figured our own guys could do much better work, and that's where we sort of evolved into this company that would not only approve this stuff, but we'd also provide art creation services as well. If you want a six-page comic for Turtles Cereal, we would do that in-house, and it would be pre-approved, and the process would be quicker for everyone. It would be done under rates that were *their* industry standards, which was a lot higher than any comic company page rates, so the guys were very happy. Mirage would take like 10% as a sort of trafficking fee, and then the bulk of that fee for doing that service would go to the artist. So they ended up being able to make a lot more money doing *Turtles* licensing art.

GROTH: *But that certainly would have compromised you among the Creators' Rights purists. Because all this work is work-for-hire, right?*

EASTMAN: This is where it gets complicated, and starts getting fucked up. They were, we were caught in the middle. They knew they were drawing Turtles but didn't own them, and we know they were starting to create characters that we didn't own which lead to a variety of agreements and work-for-hire contracts. This was all new turf for us. So we just did what we thought was fair. As an example of how we handled the licensing art work was; if there was a t-shirt that was done for a guy in Paris that they would pay five hundred dollars on, and then that same t-shirt was used by somebody in Brazil, the artist would get paid again. And then if it was used in Japan, they would get paid again. We kept paying them for re-use of their stuff, trying to be fair. They would be paid reprint fees, almost full page rates for reprints of the comics, both Mirage and the Archie versions, even letterers got a full reprint fee when we did collections of *Turtles* books. Artists that penciled an issue or did other stuff on the *Turtles* were paid full page-rate fees up front, plus royalties, plus full reprint fees. It sort of evolved into a system from there. Dave, I think, once said, but to me it was very awkward argument if you think about it, that "Well, these other cartoonists aren't doing their own stuff any more, they're doing all this *Turtles* shit." And I'm like, "Yeah, but we're not putting a gun to their head and saying 'Do this Turtle Shit.' They were making really fucking good money." Most of them were on the company payroll, and we helped with their taxes if they were on a freelance status. They had health insurance. A lot of them had families now and houses and in the really successful days, they were paid lots of royalties, and outrageous year-end bonuses. Hell, we cared a lot for the guys then!

They were also given a lot of creative freedom and around this time we started this program. They were bringing a lot of great creative elements into the *Turtles* universe, and when you have to start drawing "lines" of ownership, and copyright and trademark protection, it's starts getting really kind of crazy! When things are done within the universe of the *Turtles*, we have to work out in painful legal detail "These are things that are created within the *Turtles* universe that we own, and that we don't own." Ryan Brown, Steve Murphy, a lot of the guy created characters within the *Turtles* universe that they *still*, to this day, own, and they can go do whatever they want to do with them. But there are so many other issues that when it becomes a toy, or a cartoon show, you have to do to legally authorize "around the world" our rights to license it! It costs better than a one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to do a worldwide copyright and trademark filing on a toy concept and name of a character in multiple classes. You have footwear and apparel, you have toys, you have books and other publications, you have movies, there are dozens of classifications! And in order to warrant to the toy company, or to the movie company or the TV company that they can utilize this on a worldwide basis, you have to take all these protective steps or get sued! You have to search it, and you have to file in a hundred-plus countries, and protect it and make sure it's being utilized properly. So what we devised was this plan, it said, "Look, you create characters within the Mirage Universe, fine, but you have options. If they're going to become a toy, which means if they're usually going to become a toy, then they usually become part of the TV series, and so on and so on." Because those 22 one-minute commercials sell a lot of toys, you know? The plan was, "At the point that it goes from your creation to becoming part of the Mirage Universe, the toy line, you have a decision to make, you can either say 'Yes, I want it to become part of the toy line, and I'm giving up all rights to my character, but I'm getting 50% of everything that's earned on that character in royalties' or, if you don't want to do that, then you keep the character yourself, it doesn't become a toy." So they chose and these guys did very well. Ryan Brown designed 20-30 things that became toys and made... well, do the math. The numbers were phenomenal. We were selling a lot of fucking of toys. These guys could get thirty, forty, fifty thousand or better royalty checks on just their share, four times a year. So of the money that came to Pete and I on any specific toy, the toy company accounted for each separately, and we'd cut a check to the creators for their share. So, like I said, out of the multiple characters that are in the *Turtles* universe, when Steve Murphy, Ryan Brown or any of the guys who were packaging, or designing in-house, producing the Archie comics series, they had options and there's still a lot of those characters that they still own! Sorry, I'm starting to repeat myself!

GROTH: *It seems to me that with a mass phenomenon like the Turtles, and the fact you have to hire God knows how many artists to crank out the comic books, the newspaper strip — wasn't there a newspaper strip?*

EASTMAN: Yep. Dan Berger was one of the few who used to do the newspaper strip.

GROTH: *Character studies for various merchandising, you're on a real slippery slope that eventually you can't control. I mean, Rick Veitch said, I don't know if you read his interview...*

EASTMAN: No, I missed that one...

GROTH: ... he said, "I'd just gotten an after-the-fact work-for-hire contract from Mirage. Some crazy maniac at Mirage I never met in some strange position of power down there was calling me up and threatening me that if I didn't sign over work I'd done years before I would never see any more royalties. Worse, the contract is more wretched than anything that even DC had ever done to me." Bissette said, "The fact that Mirage necessarily embraced work-for-hire contracts towards the end says it all for me." I think what he means by that is that eventually the *Turtles* became part of the corporate system that employs work-for-hire contracts...

EASTMAN: That's correct and there were a couple of reasons why that was done. Even when I think about that now, there was probably — not probably, it was definitely done — inappropriately. In the sense that Pete and I sort of passed it on to Gary Richardson at Mirage to send out these documents that — it's pretty pathetic — these were people that were "our friends," and it was very difficult for us to be an asshole. To be a real boss, I guess, whatever. To do that to them. But at the same time, there was a very specific reason, at least in my mind. I think it was because we were doing so much "business" work and back-tracking because the company had grown so fast, and we were spending so much fucking time dealing with just the most minute details. Every day, the drawing board got further away, and there were a million issues like trying to put more real corporate structure to this organic thing. With the case of Rick Veitch, and I think Bissette as well, they did work for the black and white comics that we needed to track so they could be paid. For example, each time we reprinted *TMNT* #8, Dave Sim was paid a fee and royalties, but then Dave forbid us to do any more reprints of *Turtles* #8, which had Cerebus in it. Because he didn't want us to do it any more, period. We were doing lots of reprints, and collections, around the world, and we agreed to pay these guys, the original time out, then they were paid again for reprints, plus royalties, if any, but we were getting scenarios where there would be deals in multiple countries where people wanted to reprint the "original comics" and it just got to be a nightmare of keeping track of all that stuff. Like with Veitch — there was a 500-page book printed in Italy that Veitch's three stories were a part of, that now had to be divided out of this 500-page book, figure out what was owed him, as well as every single other person in that collection down to the letterer, and pay them those amounts. So we tried to create a simpler system. So a lot of these people were sent work-for-hire contracts, and if they didn't sign the work-for-hire contract, it was their option, then we would not reprint their work ever again in any territories. So, no money for anyone because it was just too hard to track.

GROTH: *But their signing a work-for-hire contract wouldn't make it any easier to track. There must've been a legal reason apart from that.*

EASTMAN: Both in the sense because then we'd only have to track fees for "us." I'm trying to remember this clearly. There were two kinds of contracts, work-for-hire type stuff that we used that related to specific areas of creation, and, hopefully I won't fuck this up too bad because, for example, there was a buy-out contract for incidental characters. It was a way of saying to certain artists that had created characters, say, for the Archie series. [laughs] You have to keep in mind that here are Pete and I, sitting in a room, trying to figure out how to do this, and to do this fairly. All the while, you have the lawyers, on the one side, saying "We've gotten so many lawsuits, over the most insane things you could ever imagine; we have to protect you." We were probably paranoid beyond belief — I mean, who the fuck is the next lawsuit coming from, a family member, for Christ's sake? It was that paranoid and pathetic. We wanted to clearly delineate which characters the creators owned and which characters were part of the Mirage Universe, period. No gray areas. We would be like, okay, there's two characters fighting in a scene, and there's these three guys standing in the background. Now if those three guys, and it could be a guy in a business suit, a guy with a weird hat, and something else, showed up in something else, is that theirs, or is that ours? And who owns the rights to it, and could we get sued for it, could this be a problem?! Fuckin' "A"! Lawyers are great for doing this, freaking you out, and I think our paranoia was getting this better of us so we tried to delineate everything after the fact. These are things that you own, and again, under the concept of "if they become toys," then you have to option to decide. But everything else is ours, just so that we have that said and agreed to in writing. I think one of the types of contracts was for comics artists and I think the other one was a full buyout on licensing art, t-shirts, package designs, etc. I know, it's really fucking nuts. Had we become corporate assholes? Seems so. Was Bissette done with us? Or me? Seems not.

GROTH: *But didn't it at some point become obvious that it was simply impossible to honor the ethos of creators' rights once an economic infrastructure had to be created to accommodate this kind of enormous mass phenomenon?*

EASTMAN: Absolutely, but I'd like to think we tried...

GROTH: *A single creative vision is at odds with this kind of franchise culture that you had gotten involved in.*

EASTMAN: Absolutely. A million percent. It was an organizational nightmare in a way that fairness didn't always apply, and I say, "against our better judgment," We did the wrong thing and sent out creator work-for-hire things trying to clean up everything and wipe the slate clean and say, "O.K., now we know what is ours, and what is yours. And maybe we can sort of re-start from there and go ahead." And it just ended up getting really more fucked up.

GROTH: *Obviously one of the reasons corporations insist upon ownership is pure, unmitigated greed but the other reason is probably because it's impossible to divvy up anything fairly. It's just impossible to determine what's fair and what's unfair when you start trying to determine whether some guy in the background with a hat on is owned by some schlub in a studio who drew him on Tuesday.*

EASTMAN: Right. And again, I'm certainly not trying to justify it, but when you have goofy shit like a guy saying that a president in an astronaut suit is like a Turtle and can sue you and have you spend hundreds of thousands — well, that one was a small one, probably only about a hundred thousand dollar lawsuit, only Pete and I couldn't bear one more deposition, one more settlement issue. We used to do weekly partnership meetings with three lawyers, and an accountant, and Pete and I, who would sit in the fucking conference room for ten hours and be bludgeoned by worldwide copyright trademark issues territory by territory for starters, and would move on from there. So yeah, I think it was definitely trying to apply corporate attitudes for perhaps the first time to this thing. It was wrong.

Where we've ended up today is that we aren't reprinting Veitch's three stories for that reason, without permission, and under terms that are fair to him and to us on how to do it. A lot of the artists that designed toys that became cartoon characters that Mirage owns, if those things are re-launched or re-sold as toys, still get their 50%, forever. Some of the guys that work for what we call Turtle Style Guide these days, are paid a large fee up front — say, five or six thousand dollars — for something that could be sent out as a tool for licensees to use around the world, the t-shirt people, or Frisbee people or whoever, use that drawing without a fee, but we paid our artists up front so we wouldn't have to track the use of that image on a Frisbee in Jamaica, a sock in Italy, and who knows

what in Haiti.

GROTH: *So there's a huge accounting department somewhere in this country, that sorts out all this stuff.*

EASTMAN: [laughter] NASA does it for us.

GROTH: *It'd really get screwed up then.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, we had a lot of accounting people for a while there that tried to keep track of all this stuff.

NO MEANS NO

GROTH: *You said that Dave Sim forbade you to do any more reprints of *Turtles #8*, which has *Cerebus* in it. Why was that?*

EASTMAN: I never really knew exactly the reason why. We'd done reprints, we paid him for all of the reprints. At that time we were selling very well and he was getting some nice checks, and he just said, "I think people have seen enough of that issue, and enough of that story, and I really don't want to see it out any more." And that was it, period. So whatever reasons he had, he had 'em. And it was just, "O.K., that's banned." And you know, when a creator or Dave Sim or whoever is involved in it has say and they say "no," it's "no."

GROTH: *No principled opposition to the *Turtles* or to your work-for-hire policies with regard to the *Turtles*, though?*

EASTMAN: No, I don't think he said "no" because of something else we had done or were doing or anything like that. I guess I don't want to believe that that was why he did it. I think it was just one of those things. He's an interesting character. [laughter] An interesting personality, and he just, for whatever reason, he just decided, "No, that was enough." And that was it.

It'd be a good question to ask him, though. I'd like to know. It was one of my favorite issues. [laughter]

HIRING OUT

GROTH: *I don't know exactly when this point was, but at some point you made the decision to hire writers and artists to actually write and draw the stories.*

EASTMAN: Yes.

GROTH: *Now, interestingly enough, I interviewed Charles Schulz last month, and no one has ever done that strip but him. So why did you make the decision to actually have other people do the comic as opposed to you and Peter doing the comic?*

EASTMAN: Two reasons. One is that it actually slowly evolved with Pete and I that it was too hard for us to both get together for both the business schedules because of the amount of work we were doing, and to do the comic together like we used to. So we decided you do an issue, with perhaps somebody you want to work with, and I'll do an issue with somebody I want to work with, and then we can still keep one person on the pulse of the business, I guess, if you will, and the other person spends a little extra time drawing that month. And we'd stagger them, so I would do some, and he'd do some. So we could try to keep the books on a regular schedule. Because we always wanted to try and keep this regular schedule of the *Turtles* issues coming out because that's what started this mess. Then as we met other artists, like at a convention, in the bar or something, somebody'd be like, "Oh, man, I'd love to tell a *Turtles* story!" For example, Zulli proposed: "I want to do this *Turtles* story that has this totally realistic take. They look like *real mutant turtles*," and so on and so on. We started getting excited by the idea of what other people saw within our characters, as well as being admirers of their styles. Having Corben do a *Turtles* story to me was like... .

GROTH: *Ultimate fantasy.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] Ultimate fantasy. So we started that to enable the issues to stay on a regular schedule and continue coming out, since Pete and I couldn't do it anymore.

GROTH: *If someone told Charles Schulz that he really wanted to draw a realistic Snoopy, I'm sure Schulz would have said that's completely preposterous, because his vision of Snoopy is what it is, it's inviolable and no one else can do it, because it's his creative vision that animates that strip.*

*And I get the impression, I mean, I think we both know the *Ninja Turtles* is not Krazy Kat.*

EASTMAN: Right.

GROTH: *What I'm trying to ask you is, was the *Turtles* always nothing more than a malleable commodity?*

EASTMAN: That's a good question. I see what you're saying. I think that it probably wasn't so malleable early on when Pete and I were drawing 90% of the time and dealing with distributors and ads in the *CBG* 10% of the time. When that was completely reversed, we were drawing less than 10% of the time, the rest was all business, we loosened up. We had already, probably, made the biggest jump: allowing them to be transformed into another entity in Hollywood, so it's like we had two schools of *Turtles*: the animated school, and the black and white comics school. Then when the movie came along, you had a merger — part of the animated world and the black and white world sort of met in the first movie. The second movie completely sucked, the third movie was a little bit better, but that's a whole other boring story. I think that we, for the lack of a better analogy, opened the floodgates and agreed that there were all these different worlds of *Turtles*, and I think we got excited seeing different people doing all kinds of exploratory things with them. There were guys in the studio, like Jim Lawson, who had ideas for *Turtles* stories that we really liked. We were like, "Wow, that's really kind of cool." And with Veitch and Bissette with some of their stuff, all of this applying *Swamp Thing* "Anatomy Lesson" bizarreness to the genesis of this creation, it was like this whole other twisted take on our characters, and it was enjoyable to us. At least until the legal side fucked everything up.

GROTH: *I don't want to criticize anyone's motives here, but the whole context seems to me to be corrupted by money. Did Bissette do *Turtles* stuff, too?*

EASTMAN: Bits and pieces. I mean, a lot of it, much of it was never finished [Groth laughs] Some was actually drawn in his car on the way down, which is a really funny! [laughs] Bissette is probably the first to admit how slow and deadline dreadful he is.

[Groth laughs} He's at least a realist in that way. For sure. He would do these nutty things, like when he was delivering this eight-page story for this *Turtle Soup* thing we were doing, he held up production about three months doing this, and we'd call him and say, "You gotta bring that story in." And he'd say, "I'm bringing it down tomorrow." And every trip from Battleboro to Northampton, there'd be a mysterious breakdown or there would be a huge delay in why he couldn't get there. When he'd actually make it down and have only two more panels done than he had the two weeks earlier. So, we sort of figured out after a while that he was pulling off the side of the road [laughter] and probably inking a little bit on the way down, and then showing up and saying, "Next week, it'll be done for sure."

GROTH: *That's one of the best Bissette stories I've ever heard. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Once there was a big snow bank in the road that he ran into. And then, the next day, a car broke down and he stopped to help and time ran short... And then something else... God bless him, we love him for that. Because he wasn't fooling us as well as he wasn't fooling himself.

GROTH: *I guess my question was, there seems to be a law of sorts that creativity is corrupted in direct proportion to how much money's involved. Specifically, it's hard for me to believe that all of these artists were so enthusiastic and so excited about doing something specifically related to the Turtles that they couldn't do elsewhere. This strikes me as rationalization. It seems that Veitch and Bissette or whoever could have done what they wanted to do in a different context had they really wanted to do it. It seems more likely that there was a lot of money involved and that this was simply an easy way to make money.*

EASTMAN: Yeah. I would not disagree at all. I think that we paid as good or better page rates than they had been getting. We had a full repayment on reprints at that time, I believe. Plus I think there was a royalty share of sales for artists that did issues that went into profit. I'm not sure how many other companies were doing that.

GROTH: *So for the labor they put into it, they probably made more money doing this stuff than they could doing anything else.*

EASTMAN: Probably, yeah. I mean, I couldn't say for sure. But yeah. Probably. It was a very aggressive program, and I think Veitch did the *Turtles* story after he had just had a big exhaustive cluster-fuck over at DC with the *Swamp Thing* #88 and the *Turtles* story was a no-brainer. We liked these guys, even Bissette who had a billion problems, and who fucked up a lot, we considered these guys great friends. We cared about them, and we cared about their families. We were taking care of our own families and doing things for them that were important to us. We had the dough so we probably looked the other way. We paid Steve very well for certain things, and that probably carried on into the whole *Tundra* thing. But it was definitely a different set of rules there. But we cared about these guys, the whole strange lot!

GROTH: *Let me follow up on the thesis that all this money was corrupting.*

EASTMAN: It was insane, totally corrupting!

GROTH: *Bissette said about Mirage: "The business interests that come in and oversee most publishing entities, it is the nature of the beast that they are driven to push the creative individuals to the periphery of the publishing company. As those business interests insinuated themselves into Mirage, they began to seize more and more control of the company. Those business interests were given more and more control by Peter and Kevin. Meanwhile, the guys who were actually doing the nuts and bolts work were being pushed further and further to the periphery. This started crippling the friendship between all these people. Crippling the friendship between these guys and Peter and Kevin. The genuine ethics and issues became lost amid the chaotic, ever-expanding business demands." Is that pretty accurate?*

EASTMAN: I think it's pretty accurate to a point. I think that for a variety of reasons, Pete and I were spending 90% of our time running a business that was completely overwhelming. You could never fucking comprehend what we had to do and how we had to do it. And it was our responsibility: these were our creations, we controlled them, and if we wanted that control, we had to spend the time we had to spend. It started getting to be that the guys that were drawing a lot, and they were making great money, were like "Come on, come on, come to the movies with us." Or "Let's go hang out." And it's like, "Well, that would be really great, but I've got seven fucking interviews, and I've got to spend the next four days in meetings with lawyers because I'm getting sued by four different people this week," all the while wondering why am I sitting in this room with these fucking lawyers getting sued by these fucking assholes that have no right to sue us!?! It was eating us up, and we were both getting extremely tired, and extremely pissed off, and were drawing little or none, and probably jealous of the guys having the free time. And it wasn't showing any signs of slowing down. Sure, we had two legal advisors plus Gary Richardson, Jim and Cheryl Prindle, and a couple other assistants to help run all those worldwide licensing programs. Tim and Deb Toffee were overseeing the publishing thing, but there were a million other issues resting only on our shoulders. If we broke down, everything right down to their lunch money broke down. We were dealing with day in and day out, the details, and it was killing us, to an extent... Did we allow more control by these business interests?! We really needed help, so sure, bring on the help.

GROTH: *Did you and Peter share these responsibilities?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. We were there every day. You'd leave the office and ten minutes later your ass would follow, because it was there from morning until the night. Occasionally, if you valued any personal life, which neither of us had much of at that time, you'd make some time for that. Then again, maybe you'd get caught up on a couple of memos or something that night instead, and if you were really lucky, maybe do a little drawing. But I think that perhaps to us, we thought we were being incredibly fair. There were business demands we had to deal with for the good of the whole machine. The process you have to go through for each character to exploit it on a worldwide basis is so complex, and we were trying to be fair to everyone on the artist side and be professional on the business side, all the lines started to blur! This process is critical so we could warrant all rights or we would get sued, especially if the property wasn't researched or protected properly. This wasn't their problem, it was ours, and we were starting to hate it. If we lose, it could be big enough to wipe us out — to them it would be "Bummer Dude. Catch you later!" Through this all, we were trying to be fair, but what is "fair"!?! I definitely think that animosity started to grow on all sides. They were making really, really good money, but

Pete and I were making insane money. [Groth laughs] It was off the scale. It was silly.

GROTH: *What kind of money were you making at this time?*

EASTMAN: There were years, probably in the peak years of '91, '92, that we probably grossed, pre-tax, \$50 million.

GROTH: *\$50 million.*

EASTMAN: \$50 million probably over those years. That's probably pretty accurate. Figure you lop off half of that for taxes and we were spending ten percent of that money fighting lawsuits, and there was probably five or six or more percent that was used to run a 21-person office staff with full benefits and aggressive royalty and bonus programs. Today, it's down 90% from what it was then, [laughs] and I think there was just a lot of envy. I can't remember when and where, but to me it started to feel like, despite what they were making, they still felt that they were slighted, because they didn't have their own Turtles, they weren't making enough. Even though they were making more than any other person in the entire industry, in probably what I would debate would be the fairest, aggressive royalty-sharing program to date, it wasn't enough. I don't think there's anybody else that really — perhaps there is now, I don't know, that does or did it that way. The sad thing was I used to think about that Joe Walsh song, where, I forget how it goes, where he says, "All this money, fortune and fame/everyone's so different, I haven't changed." I would look at things in that way, and the way that he was parodying it, and the way he was saying it. "We changed, they changed... money changes everything." Money fucks up everything. I'd have people approach me over the most fucked-up stuff. For example, I had somebody come up to me in a parking lot at a gas station in Northampton that said, "Hey, remember me?" And I'd say, "No." And they said, "I was one of the carpenters that put the roof on your garage. I was wondering if you'd re-mortgage my home because I'm having a little trouble with the bank..." And I was, like, *stunned*. I didn't know what to say. There was always lots of this kind of thing, I know it's pretty sad.

Today I wouldn't say I have a friend left from that period. I see some of the guys around Northampton. And it's like, "Hi, how's everything going. Good, I hope." A lot of them still hang with Pete. But I wouldn't play the games any more.

GROTH: *Why do you think that is? Was the only thing you had in common basically employing them? The "friendship" was purely financial?*

EASTMAN: Perhaps. And I wouldn't want to put words in their mouth, because they may perceive it differently... but perhaps I don't. I don't know, they may say it was a great friendship, all I saw was us doing a lot, a lot of things which I thought were way above and beyond for anyone. Perhaps they didn't see it quite the same, perhaps they did. But that's my opinion. I don't talk to any of them or care to. I don't see them much. I don't write. It's all water under the bridge now. They don't call once a week, and if I see 'em around, it's nice, and it's "Hi, how you're doing?" "Great. Take care." Some of them are still doing piecemeal work for Mirage, a lot of them are working with Pete in a toy scenario called "Fanatics."

THE CRAZY FILES

GROTH: *I assume that kind of money-saturated context could create a lot of specious camaraderie. When the money runs out, so does the camaraderie.*

Veitch said, referring to you and Laird in the early '90s, "the buzz was all about how much money they made, and within weeks they were inundated with every kind of lowlife, rip-off scumbag and legal beagle in all of New England, if not the whole country." Is that pretty much true?

EASTMAN: That's true. And probably times two.

GROTH: *So did people just call you with screwball projects, with requests for money?*

EASTMAN: There was probably a time when we were tracking 25 to 30 requests each day of pleas for money.

GROTH: *What kinds of... ?*

EASTMAN: From every known real charity on the planet, to the guy who wants to add on to his house. Letters, letters, letters, mostly completely ludicrous but everyone, whether it was, "I'm losing everything, and I need help," had an angle. God, I'm trying to think of the most bizarre ones. Let me think... I'll come up with a good one.

GROTH: *Did you keep a file?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, we did. It's immense! [laughs] Some of the other files we kept were the crazy files. We used to have a psycho of the month club. A couple actually showed up at the office...

GROTH: *What?*

EASTMAN: Crazies. Like they would call up and say... actually one of the worst ones, still pops up today. His name is Chris Vigrin. He has a story that goes like this: He was riding on a bus with Peter Laird and our licensing agent's wife, Renee, and he told Pete and Renee about the *Turtles*, and they gave him a hundred thousand dollars in cash on the spot. He had no idea they were going to be this successful, and he's coming to Northampton to get half his money. "I want a check for 40 million dollars, I expect it when I show up." And made a bunch of other threats. Then he showed up in Northampton. Actually, he made it as far as a bar and grill right on the corner near our office we used to frequent a lot — it was kind of a sports bar. So he was walking around asking questions, saying, "I'm the president of Mirage, I forgot where my office is." They were looking at this guy, because they knew all of us, and they were like, "This guy's fucked up," and they told him to get out. Then he pulled half a sharpened garden shear and started waving it around. A couple of guys tackled him to the ground, the police came, arrested him, took him to jail and he called Mirage for bail. [Groth laughs] And he still to this day calls or writes crazy notes — in the last one he wrote, he was the President of General Motors!

There was another guy, Alan Goldman, that was writing letters. He had a crush on Pete. There was this girl from France that had all these sexual fantasies who we ended up meeting later on. She showed up State-side and Molly Bode ended up befriending her! This girl had these explicit sexual fantasies with the Turtles. She would send drawings and these really detailed letters about what she and this Turtle were doing. We used to pin those up. Those were pretty funny.

GROTH: *[laughs] She didn't want money. She just wanted sex.*

EASTMAN: Just wanted sex. Yeah. Sex with a mutant.

GROTH: *That's probably easier to accommodate than money.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, so we kept files on that kind of stuff. You know, the fun stuff. For example, the first proposal for a *Turtles* movie we got was from Roger Corman's New World video. And this guy, and I can't remember his name, had this idea that he pitched which was Gallagher, Sam Kinison, Bobcat Goldthwait, and perhaps Billy Crystal — I think they were all sort of young, upcoming comedians at the time — they were going to have these characters in pseudo-Turtle suits, like a Turtle shell and chest-thing, then they'd paint their arms, legs, and faces green, and the movie would be those comedians cracking jokes! We also have a treatment that was to be R-rated. There'd be all these rollerskating, semi-nude nuns with guns, battling the Turtles!

GROTH: *That doesn't sound bad. I mean, [laughter] I saw the first Turtles movie, and that might have been better. Semi-nude nuns, did you say?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, pretty cool actually...

GROTH: *Can't really go wrong with nuns on roller-skates.*

EASTMAN: Maybe we should have put the rollerskating nude nuns with guns, and Gallagher all in the same picture! I'm probably incorrectly telling the story, but it would be one of those things that if I could dig it out and show it to you would ... well, we found it funny, anyway.

GROTH: *During the period where it sounds like things were becoming more and more difficult at Mirage and more and more pressure was put on you and Peter, was there ever a point where you thought, "This is no longer worth it"? A point where you felt the quality of life was not what it should be, and that you had to tame this beast. "We'll stop merchandising, we'll stop licensing, we'll whittle this thing down to a manageable level."*

EASTMAN: If there was, it was probably more from Pete's side. Like I said, he's about eight years older than I am, and definitely eight years wiser. I think when he wanted to start slowing things down, and even though, I think we were starting to get a better handle on the business by trying to put some structures in there that would perhaps make it easier for us to go back to drawing, I wanted to expand. This is the humorous part because after everything I bitched about above, that was around the time I started Tundra.

GROTH: *Which did not get you back to drawing.*

EASTMAN: Which did not get me back to drawing. It was actually completely fucked in one sense, but made perfect sense to me in another. I felt I had this great education with the *Turtles* where we learned self-publishing and then we learned licensing in planet Hollywood, as well as TV shows and its rules, movies were a whole other kind of deal, animation being another one... I really felt I could apply all this to other projects, and they too would be successful. Combine that with this complete say and complete control and complete ownership Bill of Rights stuff and you've got a way to change everything! Ta da — Tundra! Mirage was part one, and I was paid very well to learn, Tundra was where I paid severely and dearly for the second part of my education. Now I'm onto my third part. Hopefully, it won't be as expensive. [laughter]

GROTH: *I was going to say. By the eighth part of your education, you're going to run out of money. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Looking back at the point when things were out of control, we tried hard to make it simpler so we could get back to drawing. Pete opted to go back to drawing, and I opted to do Tundra, and the nightmare began...

GROTH: *You're saying that at some point Pete made noise to the effect that maybe you should slow this thing down, and you were opposed to that? Because you were young and full of piss and vinegar?*

EASTMAN: [laughs] I was young, with probably a lot more piss than vinegar. As I said, about the time that we were getting control and a better handle on it as a business, if you will, I wanted to expand and do some other kinds of publishing. I thought there was a lot of other cool stuff going on out there and wanted to be part of it so this was the time to expand the publishing company and put that education to good use. Especially where I felt we could afford to do that. Pete said "No, I don't want to work that hard. I don't want to have something else come through Mirage that I have to worry about every legal thing, things I might have to spend another two weeks in depositions over, or get sued over, or have to account for or be responsible for." And he begged off. He said, "No. I don't want that for our company." And I said, "I respect that. And that's great. And I'd like to start this other company." And he said, "Go west, young man! Go ahead." Sort of with his blessing.

GROTH: *About the period you're talking about now, Veitch said, "The accountants had told Kevin to invest his fortune or pay out in taxes and profit. Kevin really took that to heart. He started Tundra, and he bought into a number of other companies. Kevin was also planning his museum, so it was a way of funneling more money into the community that would have gone to taxes." Was that a fair summation?*

EASTMAN: No, that's probably a view from an outsider looking in! That's a really good guess with the museum where there were definitely a lot of tax advantages to starting that, but I didn't really look at Tundra as a tax advantage. More as something I believed in and had enough money to do. I started a company with money that came through Mirage, that we'd already been taxed on it. To the extent that you invest it and start another business, there are tax advantages to putting capital into a company but the intent was that this company would make more money. It was intended to be a company that I would put x-amount of millions to start up, that would then be profitable and be able to support itself. Much like my hopes with the museum: to start it up, send it on its self-supporting way, and be able to spend the time to enjoy it, I guess!

Tundra ended up being an accidental, incredible tax write-off when it went down, as a complete loss. [laughter] But again, that was not the intent.

GROTH: *Next up is Tundra. I'm not sure where to begin with Tundra.*

EASTMAN: Let's skip the whole Tundra thing! [laughs]

GROTH: *Let me start off by asking you this. You had virtually unlimited resources, at least relative to what an alternative comics publisher needed. And yet Tundra crashed and burned in three years. I'm not sure how that's possible.*

EASTMAN: With me, anything's possible. No, that's a bad joke. Where to begin, like you said, it's a good question. Tundra was started as a follow up to the Creators' Bill of Rights, coupled with this concept I had mentioned to you earlier, like when I would meet artists at conventions — comic creators, artists, writers — that were always sort of hacking out all this stuff for other companies to pay the bills, to support wives and families. They'd say, "I really just wish I could get ahead enough where I could devote the kind of time I want to do the ultimate thing for me, the most creatively satisfying thing of my career!" And I really started to fall in love with that concept of "What if?" So after a lot of these same kinds of examples, that's where I decided that I had the financial resources, and I felt that I had learned so much from Mirage, and I felt I knew everything, which was obviously the first mistake. I had resources to put in place a first-class facility with the ability to bring in qualified key people that could run it, instill a "philosophy," to give the creators a home, a place to go to, where they could get the financing to explore this great creative novel that was inside of them, and see it through to completion in a well-done, potentially well-publicized sort of venue! They would have approval over very nearly every aspect, and they would be totally involved. They would realize that if we wanted to run a series of ads, then those ad costs would come out of the share of the profits, until the book recouped its costs. I wanted them to feel in control. They would sign off on everything, every step of the way. They approved everything from pre-press to ads. They would have total say over their projects, and profits. All of the earlier contracts were an 80/20 in their favor —

GROTH: — *this is 80/20 of net?*

EASTMAN: ... 80/20 of net, at recoupment of cost. What they wanted, for the most part, and what we tried to do, was make them aware of every cost. "Everything in the front window." It was like, O.K., we've got a couple bids on pre-press, and this is the lowest one, and this is the one we recommend, you choose one. It's going to cost a hundred and twenty dollars a page for that bid, and we want your O.K. now that you know it's going to cost that much. This is what we're going to spend on advertising, and it's going to cost this much. Do you approve? Because it's "your money" as well that we're spending here.

GROTH: *You would tell creators this?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, in nearly every case. That's how Rick [Veitch] worked on *Brat Pack*. All of the early ones were done that way. Steve [Bissette] worked like this on a number of his projects. We did the same with Dave McKean, with everyone, all the creators. Tundra was something I created — I wanted it to be the Apple Records of comics, done with that kind of a philosophy of giving complete creative freedom to the artists. You allow them the best studios and support to put out these great things and it should succeed, right? But I didn't want it to end like Apple Records ended. Well, it's still around today but you know, when it ended the first time or whatever.

GROTH: *Yeah. For all intents and purposes, it ended.*

EASTMAN: What basically happened was, I let it get out of control, in every aspect. I took on way too many projects, way too soon. With the staff — I had this great idea, and even today, as stupid as it sounds now, I still think that it had some merit. I thought if I found people that would be put into specific positions within the company that had experience in outside business, but not experience in comics, then they wouldn't know the limitations that "comics" people know. If you went around and got Bob Schreck from there and you got so-and-so from here, they would only know comics stuff. So if you said, "O.K., Bob, we need to promote this." Or whomever. And they'd go, "O.K., we'll go to the *Journal*, we'll go to *CBG*, we'll go to *Wizard*, and who's the other one? End of list." Those were the limitations I wanted to move beyond. I felt that someone that wasn't from within the industry wouldn't stop there. What would stop them from going to *Rolling Stone*, or from going to other places that might really find this work interesting and find us that "new" audience. So, I hired my uncle Quentin, as the president — I mentioned him earlier, he lent us some money to start the *Turtles*. As much as I might say that I know it was a wrong choice now, for sure, I'd like to think I made the decision on the guy for his qualifications. He had been a sales rep for printing companies, he knew the printing industry, he knew pre-press, he'd been in those business for four or five years. Then he'd been in computers for a few years. He was running an office of 70 people when I hired him away from a consulting company. I feel and believe that I hired him because I felt he brought in some real world business knowledge, and not just because he helped us out and I wanted to thank him. But even in my own mind, it's a pretty fine line there.

GROTH: *It's hard to know.*

EASTMAN: It's hard to know. Ultimately he came in and he had a set of his own rules on how to run a company. He'd say "You can't give 80% of the profit to the creator, because we can't run a company on the 20%." I said, "Well, look. We're going to monitor all the costs. We'll be able to recoup those costs, all of them, so why can't we be satisfied with 20% of the profits!?" I really threw him into an environment and set up rules that no normal business can survive under.

GROTH: *Did he explain that to you?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, a lot of times.

GROTH: *He told you that no business can survive adhering to these rules?*

EASTMAN: Mm-hm, but "I knew everything," right?!

GROTH: *So then, what did you do with that advice?*

EASTMAN: I believed that it could. I said, "How do you know?" He said, "You know, you're just not leaving enough margin for errors." And I said, "These books are going to be really successful. And these books are going to be really profitable. These books will be able to, through this company that we're building, be taken into Hollywood, and we'll be able to exploit them into properties where we can receive a portion of the revenues if they become movies, T.V. shows, or toy concepts.. It'll all work out. It'll balance

out.” [laughs]

GROTH: *So you hired someone for his knowledge, and then refused to use his knowledge. [laughs]*

EASTMAN: Exactly. I really crippled him. A lot of this was — and I certainly take all the blame for it — a lot of this was Steve Bissette, and Rick Veitch and other people, who were helping design this new thing that would break all the rules. With me leading, and saying, “Well, what else should we do, guys? How should we make this really fair?” And they would give input, of like, “Well, this is all the bad stuff that happened to us. Let’s find a way around this. Let’s find a way to do it right this time!” Now there’s no fucking way possible you can give a freelancer in Minnesota health insurance from a corporation in Massachusetts. We tried to do stuff like that, and it was just... [Groth laughs]

GROTH: *You tried to do that?*

EASTMAN: We tried to insure these people, and give them benefits, things they needed but couldn’t get with any other company.

GROTH: *I guess in retrospect it’s better you didn’t or the company would have only lasted two and half years.*

Tundra’s fascinating. I want to go through it, and I don’t want this to be just a litany of horror stories. But one thing I don’t understand is why... it appears to me that from the very beginning it was disastrous. But what surprises me is that steps could not be taken over the course of three years to slow down this runaway train of losses. It’s just hard for me to comprehend at some point that you, or someone you hired wouldn’t step in and say, “O.K., this has got to stop. And these are the concrete steps you have to take to stop it.” I guess you know that we have a lot of internal documents from Tundra.

EASTMAN: Oh, cool! I have all of mine as well!

GROTH: *Minutes of meetings and year-end reports and things of that nature... and they’re grimly hilarious in the sense that everyone is floundering around. Everyone knows there’s a crisis, but no one knows what to do about it. Let me just start from the beginning. One of the criticisms I’ve heard is that there was a lot of nepotism involved.*

EASTMAN: There was a lot of nepotism because I hired my uncle?

GROTH: *Well, you hired your uncle to be president. And then you hired your cousin Michael to be production assistant.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, that’s correct.

GROTH: *And then you hired your brother-in-law to be in charge of sales and distribution.*

EASTMAN: That’s correct also.

GROTH: *And your sister to be the director of the Words and Pictures Museum. And none of the relatives had any experience in comics or publishing. That seemed like a bad move. [laughs]*

EASTMAN: Not to justify any of those moves, because I made them and still stand by them, but in the case of Kelly Meeks, who married my sister Maryann, besides being an extremely bright, hard worker, Kelly was troubleshooting computers for Union Mutual and major companies like that. He knew how to set up systems, how to manage systems, he’d been an office manager where he worked, and yes, because he was related for sure. But, he had the exact skills we needed for Tundra, “computer networking,” big time.

Michael Eastman, he was actually brought in in a different way, as a summer intern at first, and it evolved from there to a full-time office position, and it wasn’t working out. At the point when he was going to be fired, Mark Martin said, “Look, I really think Michael has some merits, and I like him as a person, and I want to try and make a place for him in the company.” So Mark moved him to the art department.

Maryann, as far as hiring her for the Words and Pictures Museum, it’s something that she approached me on and I was very excited to work with her. I had started actually with another person that wasn’t working out, it was floundering around. I basically felt she could do anything she put her mind to and she grew up around my art. She was the best person for the job in my mind. The Museum would not be here if it wasn’t for Maryann or Fiona Russell. They pulled it out of my dreams and made it a reality. But yeah, there was some nepotism there for sure.

For Tundra, whether there’s nepotism or no nepotism, you have a leader that’s unclear about his message and is saying yes to projects when people are screaming at you that you have too many already! Tundra was growing in a way I thought was appropriate, but in reality it was way too fast, and I never got the foundation solid. Under any rules, it just doesn’t fly.

I had this crazy plan of building this empire that would ensure success. We’d have *Heavy Metal* in the States, that would reach *one* specific audience, a big one, of older comic readers. Plus, there were a lot of European creators that I wanted to work with as well as to be able to sell Tundra’s projects overseas for reprint rights that would help offset some of the costs. There also were a lot of British creators that I was already working with, when I met Dave Elliot, and founded Tundra U.K. There was a recording studio in Maine, the story of my life: when I looked at it, it was making money so I bought it, and suddenly it became something that was *losing* money! I bought it to interact with some “comic meets music” projects I wanted to do to reach another *new* audience. We were going to work on this project with George Pratt called *See You in Hell, Blind Boy*, which would have a blues track recorded along with it. A graphic novel not unlike the *Voodoo* project Bill Sienkiewicz did. We were also doing some adult audio books, we wanted to do some children’s audio books. We were trying to look at things that worked in the real publishing world. Christ, we had Ian Ballantine, who was consulting for us, pointing to things that were working “out there,” and I desperately wanted to do something to make the jump into bookstores, which was probably the biggest fucking joke.

The only Tundra thing that I actually got through to bookstores was the first printing of *Understanding Comics*. But, fuck. I believed I was armor plated and unstoppable. I thought I would have all the resources I needed with some of the finest work from some of what I thought were some of the best creators in the field, and that this would be the “comics company” that would break down some of those barriers. By the time I arrived at the cold “reality” of my “fantasy,” I’m killing myself for something that’s never

going to work, it's too late! This whole time, as long as I'm physically awake, I'm working. Either related to Mirage or related to Tundra. In a bed that I made myself, for sure. And I was just getting fucking tired. I really thought that Tundra would be something. But it was ludicrous. I thought I would spend a year forming this brilliant company that would break all the rules. I'd bring all these talented people in and then expect them to climb inside my head, read my mind, and try to make these impossible things happen. At the same time I'm a poor leader crippling them. Quentin would say to the staff, "We can't do this and this and this," and the staff would come and see me, and say "Quentin said we couldn't do that." And I'd say, "Fuck it, go ahead. Yeah, you can do that." And it crippled his ability to be a president, to do his job. So there I was in the middle of it, fucking it up, but still thinking I'd spend a year, and get it underway, and then I could go back to drawing, and be one of the creators working for this amazing company. It was an epic clusterfuck.

FROM DAY ONE

GROTH: *Let me skip back for second. When you first were forming Tundra. The first thing you did was hire your uncle Quentin.*

EASTMAN: Yes. Quentin then hired Susan Alston, who went on to the Comic Legal Defense Fund, and Dave Sim's better half. [laughter]

GROTH: *That's redundant. [Eastman laughs]*

EASTMAN: And then Kelly. Kelly Meeks was brought in. He was there setting up the computer systems. Then I hired Mark Martin who was definitely one of the first four or five. I wanted somebody that knew the process of finish art to finished book, and he could do it all.

GROTH: *At this point, you were pretty hands-on. You were hiring people, you were telling them what you wanted done...*

EASTMAN: Yes, and I was working out the brilliant business plan mentioned above.

GROTH: *Because I'm curious as to how hands-on you were throughout the three years, versus what was delegated.*

EASTMAN: I would bring in employees and artists. The creators would talk to me, and we'd set a deal. And I'd pass it off to legal, and for various reasons it wouldn't get done, so then I wouldn't hold up the creative work, I'd pass it off to the crew — we didn't have an editorial staff. I had this idea that we'd have people that would be straw bosses, that would help shuffle the project through the "process" the way the creator wanted to see it done, without giving editorial comment but they ended up becoming editors if the creators wanted feedback. And that was clearly fine. So I'd bring them in and try to make everything agreeable and then sort of pass it on, probably ill-informed, and without enough detail, without enough personal follow-up, to a staff that I expected to do miracles.

GROTH: *One of the things that Steve Bisette said in his interviews was "Some things were askew from day one. Much of what was set up at Tundra was set up with this kind of fishing rod philosophy. 'We will take ideas that sound good, or look practical from different sources. For instance, Dave Sim says editors are bad. We won't have editors.' That's clearly nuts." And I guess you discovered that it was indeed clearly nuts after a while. [laughs]*

EASTMAN: Yeah, that's one of my favorites, and Dave Sim wasn't the only one complaining about editors, by the way.

GROTH: *You actually thought that you didn't have to have editors?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. I didn't think we needed that "intrusion" on a creator's work, and the reason for this was how many horror stories have we all heard from somebody that's working for DC, or whoever, that would describe this; "You're dealing with an editor that's a fucking frustrated writer because they're not good enough to become a writer, so what are they? They're an editor. So then you have this editor person who is perceived to be, in their own mind, a very talented writer." Then you have this writer who has to deal with this, say, "Man, I had to put in three sex scenes, and two other crazy scenes, that I knew the editor would take out so they could justify their salary and wouldn't fuck with the rest of my story. Now, if you just let me do it without an editor, I would get the exact kind of story I wanted."

So I said, "I don't want an editor as far as what the traditional comics sense of the editor is. I want somebody who's going to proofread the work, to make sure that there's no spelling mistakes, that all the pages are in the right order, that this work is shepherded from creator to pre-press back to creator for approval, to printing with their approval, to advertising with their approval, and out the door." So we called them straw bosses. I didn't want an editor saying, "Jeez, Dave McKean, I really hate that scene on page 24 of *Cages* #3, where you have this character saying, "Blah, blah, blah... You've really got to change that, or I'm not going to let it go through." That's what I perceive as an editor. And I *don't* agree with that. Dave can write his own stuff. Period!

GROTH: *So it took you a while to realize you needed straw bosses: to get the work in, organize it, move it through production, and so on.*

EASTMAN: Well, there were straw bosses from early on. Mark [Martin] was a straw boss for a number of projects. Paul Jenkins was brought in to be a straw boss for certain projects. Quentin shepherded *Brat Pack* through. That was one of the first ones that went through our own pre-press company, we bought ourselves part of a full blown pre-press operation because we were trying to save money and doing this pre-press thing in house would be cheaper, so there'd be more profits all around! Have you got notes on that?

GROTH: *Oh, yeah.*

EASTMAN: That's a good one, too! But, anyway, that's the straw boss thing. Also, F.Y.I., there were a lot of different kinds of straw bosses. Steve Bisette was a straw boss, at least for *Taboo* and a couple other projects he brought in; so he was editor, art director, and called himself the publisher.

GROTH: *But clearly not a centralized... one person to report to the production department to say, "We have four books we need to do." It sounds like you had four people all descending on the production department saying "Here, here's my book."*

EASTMAN: Exactly. I'd have a meeting in my office with somebody, and I'd really love their book and say, "O.K., you're in.

Let's do it." So I'd go out and say, "Here, you guys, it's all yours, so make sure it happens and put it on the schedule."

GROTH: *And then you basically wouldn't have the support staff necessary to do that.*

EASTMAN: Not even close, so then we'd start hiring more people to create a support staff, which then caused the office overhead to go through the roof. But I'm still like, "It's O.K., it's O.K., we know for the first year there's going to be a lot of investment, and a little bit of a learning curve, but once the books start getting out there, then our "percents" of the profits will help offset those losses, and we'll run hopefully even-steven." But, by now it's 70 projects and counting. Fucking epic.

GROTH: *Getting back just briefly to hiring your uncle Quentin, Bissette told this anecdote about Quentin. He said, "The first month of Tundra operations in their new offices, Quentin said to Veitch and me. 'You know what? What Tundra needs is a good superhero property that we would own.' Rick and I went to great lengths to explain to Quentin that the notion was contrary to Tundra's whole creator ownership promise. This schism continued to eat at the shaky foundation of the company. On the one hand, you need to publish profitable comics in a superhero-driven industry, which was, you'll recall, absolutely opposite Kevin's original stated intentions, became more and more attractive and by the second year imperative." It sounds like one of the problems is that the president of the company didn't fully understand the mission, as you saw it, of Tundra.*

EASTMAN: Right. Well, it's two-fold. It's actually he didn't understand completely the "unrealistic" mission [laughs] I wanted for the company, but also, as I said, he was trying to bring in some "basic/evil" corporate structure. He felt if we had a superhero thing and stuff that we owned, like the *Turtles*, it would help bankroll all that stuff that wasn't working. So again, I would cut him off at the knees. I'd say one, look, we have the *Turtles* already, and that's helping fund "this" company so don't worry. Now, I have two projects that I own, *Melting Pot*, number one, and *Underwhere*, number two, that I'm putting through this company. "Look how brilliant I am" — thinking, "I did it with the *Turtles*, obviously my next two things are going to be fucking huge, right?". We won't even need the *Turtles* because we'll have my "really profitable" new stuff!

GROTH: *Uh-huh. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Hello! And so I said, "These two projects of mine will be that foundation, like the *Turtles* are for Mirage. I will have those for Tundra and Tundra will "own" my projects and keep all the profits because I'm already filthy stinking rich, and that will help make everything okay. So, we're O.K., because they're my properties, and it's my company, and they'll support and offset all these losses for all the other things that we were doing and it's Fat City time. But, that's where Quentin came from perspective-wise, the corporate world. He understood that if you have something like the *Turtles* that the company owns, a structure like DC or whatever, plus he was trying to learn a business that he didn't know. The first logical thing was to apply some 666 Madison Avenue-style practices, when they used to be there, anyway. And I'm like, "No, no, no! We don't want to do that. We want to do something kind of similar, but it's with my stuff, not with the other creators' stuff. We want to keep their stuff off to this side so only they own it. That is the what we do with their stuff. But my stuff will be the 'part' of the company. You know what I mean? Its cash cow."

MUST HAVE!

GROTH: *About the very beginning of the company, Bissette said, "In our first meetings, Rick and I understood that Kevin intended to start a small, select roster of projects and build it slowly, year by year, without needing to turn a profit to nurture Tundra. By the time he went to his first convention as Tundra, he returned with something like 70 projects. It was mind-bogglingly out of control in its first few months." And Veitch basically corroborates this by saying, "Steve and I and Kevin sort of worked out a plan for what we thought Tundra could be. The original plan was to do five titles the first year, and ten the second year, and then cap it at 15. Kevin lost control of it very early on."*

EASTMAN: Totally, that's totally correct.

GROTH: *"That first summer at San Diego he bought into 65 projects." [laughter]*

EASTMAN: That's right. I blew the fuck out of that plan.

GROTH: *Didn't you realize... wasn't there a sense that if you brought back 65 or 70 projects that that would overwhelm the modest infrastructure you had built?*

EASTMAN: I guess, but you know, it was like this. O.K., Dave McKean comes to you with a project and it's *Cages*, and you flip. "Fuck. This is amazing. All right. This is a name and we'll look great with him on board!" Then Neil Gaiman comes to you with *Violent Cases*. "Holy fuck! That's really amazing. We can't pass on this. We really can't." Then George Pratt comes to you hot off the success of... the... *Enemy Ace* book, why can't I think of the title? And he wants to do *No Man's Land*. It's beautiful and I'm like, "Must have!"

GROTH: *How can you turn it down?*

EASTMAN: If it's not going to go to me, it's going to go to somebody else who'll publish this — I want it! So I said, "Look, all right. We can staff up to handle this in my mind, and I don't want to see these slip to another publisher. Yeah, let's take it on. We'll figure out a way to make it work." I mean, we got this pre-press house to save costs, and, all these other pieces are coming together, we'll make it work. Besides, these are guys that are selling great number of books for other publishers. I'm saying, "Look what they're doing elsewhere in the business, if we apply that thought to the Tundra world, how can we lose?" You justify it almost logically, like O.K., it'll work the same here. We're going to lose more money the first year than I intended by investing in all of these projects, but when they start coming out on a regular schedule in the second year, we're going to be twice as rich! Or 65 times as rich and profitable because you've got this base of so many amazing things that are all going to work!

GROTH: *You just said you didn't want it to go to another publisher.*

EASTMAN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Why is that? Because if it went to another publisher, it would get published, and the purpose of Tundra was to publish work that*

would have trouble finding a home elsewhere. Right?

EASTMAN: Right, for the most part.

GROTH: *So why did you care if it went to another publisher?*

EASTMAN: Uh, probably greed or “project” envy or something. I thought this Tundra thing is going to be amazing and I wanted it to be the coolest fucking company on the planet as well. I thought those projects embodied what I wanted coming out of Tundra. I didn’t want people to say, “Tundra is *this* kind of company, or, Tundra’s a superhero company, or no, no, no wait, Tundra’s a company that does really fucked-up, esoteric art books.” No, no, I wanted Tundra to be a company that was doing all of the above. I didn’t want to pigeon-hole it. Thus we did things like we never put the logos on the front cover like an Image or Marvel or DC book. Our logos were on the back, or on the inside or not on the book at all at first. We did all these different things that I thought were important. And they were important, they were important because I wanted a Tundra book to help define what I wanted Tundra to be, not its logo. And ultimately, they all suffered because of my over-zealousness.

GROTH: *When you say “greed” you don’t mean greed in the economic sense.*

EASTMAN: No, I wasn’t saying, “Let’s do this because we’re going to make a load of money.”

GROTH: *You just wanted to be...*

EASTMAN: Tundra to be really cool and yet self-supporting. Also to be looked at and respected. I’m certainly not saying it because you’re here, but Fantagraphics, Kitchen Sink, a few other publishers were doing stuff that was original and cool. The stuff that I was buying. They were doing the stuff that was of true merit and artistic quality and that was interesting. They were pushing the boundaries of what comics were. They weren’t selling for shit, but they were winning awards. And I said, “Well, you know, I have a place in here.” Perhaps there’s a way that we can all continue to age up our audience by putting out such great work. But “they” didn’t want comics to grow up. When *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize, it was down played by critics of its origins by saying, “Well, that’s not really a comic.” Well, it’s a *fucking comic*. You know? And I’m thinking, “Well, let’s put this all together.” And I wanted to be part of the “changing tide.”

GROTH: *It sounds like you were a kid in a candy shop.*

EASTMAN: That’s correct, and with all my Christmas money to boot.

GROTH: *When you started Tundra, you would have been 28.*

EASTMAN: Close; I was 27. I’m 35 now. I turned 35 last May.

GROTH: *Let me ask you this. I don’t mean to criticize you, but do you think you had a clear conception... a really concrete conception of the kind of material you wanted to publish? I was looking over the Tundra list, and it’s all over the map. You’re publishing Paul Mavrides sketchbooks, a lot of horror stuff, underground stuff, quasi-superhero stuff, I couldn’t see a cohesive aesthetic.*

EASTMAN: No, there wasn’t. The aesthetic was that it was creator-owned, creator-driven, something that they believed in. I tried not to set any boundaries or limitations. I would try to look at things that I liked and publish them, because I liked them. I would say, “I would like to read this.” I read a lot of different and weird shit. What I think is cool stuff, cool shit, weird shit, whatever, it’s the same thing. And I didn’t really want the company to be pigeon-holed as a specific kind of publisher. I wanted people to be intrigued like, “Jeez, what are they going to do next.” So I would publish things like Barron Storey’s *Marat/Sade*.

GROTH: *[laughs] That must’ve sold 12 copies.*

EASTMAN: I bought six of them, I think. No, I’m kidding. It sold very little, but I loved that book. I love that book to death. I love *Rain*. I love *Bonesaw* and *Cages*. I loved all of them a lot, and you combine that with the feeling of having someone I admired like Bernie Wrightson doing *Captain Sternn* again. It was incredible. It was very much a high. It was hard for me to say, “No.” When I’d have George Pratt hanging around the studio working with one of the designers putting together *No Man’s Land*. You could feel the excitement in the air, that sort of thing.

GROTH: *I guess what I’m trying to get from you right now is a sense of what it was like to live through this. Trying to deal with this runaway train.*

EASTMAN: Here’s a good analogy. We just stole a bank truck full of money, we’re going down a really steep hill, drunk, the breaks are gone, and it’s like, “No point in steering now.” [laughter] No, I may be kidding but sometimes it felt like that.

About the time I realized what I had done [laughter] a lot of people that were working hard at Tundra really believed in what we were doing, even though they weren’t exactly clear on what it was beyond losing money, at times, and that’s because they didn’t have a very strong leader. By then I was starting to lose it. By this time, I had let Quentin Eastman go, and I was in the president’s chair myself, trying to bring under control a *wide* variety of projects, and each one had a million individual problems, whether it was delays, artists not turning work in, artists that were pissed off and needed extra T.L.C., so many things that needed attention, and the proper amount of catering to. That plus the process of getting projects in the door and out in a timely fashion to create a “following” and it was impossible! We would have to bring in another 50 or 60 people, you know what I mean? The legal stuff wasn’t getting done, the accounting stuff wasn’t getting done. It was too big. I had created something that was too fucking big.

Not to fast-forward into the second half of Tundra’s history, but well into the first 24 or so months, it was, “I need some help here,” and I need somebody because one, I had gone through with this thing because I had this “damn the torpedoes” idea but I wanted to eventually get back to the drawing board which was now light years farther away than it was when I only had *Mirage*. But you know, even to this day I debate whether I created Tundra because I was scared to get back to the drawing board. I was doing all this business stuff and Tundra was certainly no way to get back to drawing. I started feeling those pangs that I want to be a creator again. I want to make things simple again. But at the same time, I want Tundra to work. And I had a brief meeting with Mike Richardson at Dark Horse to find out if we could bring the two companies together. Mike never cared for me for whatever reasons, I don’t know why, but I just got that weird vibe from him, it’s like, “I really don’t like you, you little pissant.” But whatever. Not that he ever said

that. It was a feeling and it was probably my own paranoia. But I got a very bad feeling from him. He was like, "I only do stuff for profit. And that's it. None of this esoteric shit." So I was like, "Next." Probably because I was embarrassed — if he ever looked at our year-end statements, he'd shit purple Twinkies!

GROTH: *That was pretty much the end of that conversation?*

EASTMAN: That was pretty quick. A breakfast meeting at San Diego. Over at the Westin. Then I thought about Denis [Kitchen]. I knew that he was scraping to keep his business going, but at the same time, like yourself, he'd been in the business for a long time, and I felt that a lot of people respected Denis, that perhaps, I felt, he was the figure-head I couldn't be. A survivor. I thought that if we brought the two companies together, he'd be able to fix everything and set it right and then carry on to see this dream completed. And I still felt I owed him something. Denis turned me on to my first publisher, he was one of the few people that wrote me back. Maybe this was an omen, like, my chance to pay him back for that inspiration so long ago. I don't know, but I felt he was the right guy for the job. So that's when I started talking with him. I flew out to Wisconsin, and started a series of meetings with him. And that's where it started.

SIX MONTHS IN

GROTH: *Let me ask you this: by my reckoning, about six months into Tundra, you must have realized things were chaotic, that you required better organization and so on. But, six months later, you actually started expanding the Tundra empire to include Tundra U.K., a movie production company in L.A. that might be called Limelight...*

EASTMAN: That's correct.

GROTH: *... a recording studio in Maine, invested in a pre-press house called Pro-Media, as well as something called Cleare Communications, or Cleare-Com.*

EASTMAN: Cleare Communications. It was a PR and design company that was helping with our catalog and advertising work.

GROTH: *And buying Heavy Metal. Now that all sounds insane. [laughter] Or at least imprudent, when you're already in over your head.*

EASTMAN: Shock therapy, help me please, really. Actually it was —

GROTH: *Why would you actually increase the bureaucracy and multiply the labyrinth of problems at that point when you couldn't even manage the ones you were being overwhelmed by?*

EASTMAN: You can't see the forest through the trees sorta thing. It's like when you're in the middle of the fire, you don't realize you're burning to pieces. But at the same time, I justified in my own mind doing those things. *Heavy Metal* was the best thing to come out of that [laughs]. How it came to be is a good story. Ferishid Bharucha, do you know Ferishid?

GROTH: *Yeah, and love him.*

EASTMAN: He's great. He called me from *Heavy Metal* one day and said, "I'm sitting here with Howard Jurofsky, and did you know *Heavy Metal* was for sale?" And I was like, "No way!" I bought *Heavy Metal* for five hundred thousand dollars. It was making three hundred thousand dollars a year at the time. Net profit. A company called J2 Communications owned both *National Lampoon* and *Heavy Metal* because they were joined at the hip, so to speak. He had a video company, and wanted to use the *National Lampoon* name to do more *Animal House*-style movies and that kind of stuff. But the crazy part was that *National Lampoon* was losing money, quite a lot at the time. Geez, I should have got into business with him... [chuckled] No, just kidding. So, *National Lampoon* was losing money, and *Heavy Metal* was making money, but he didn't want both. He was like, "I just want *National Lampoon* for my movies, I don't want this *Heavy Metal* thing." That was around the time I stepped in and started looking at it and I thought, wait, there has to be some legal problem hidden somewhere, some massive lawsuit, because I wondered why is this guy selling this so cheaply? It turned out he didn't know what he had. So *Heavy Metal* has been not only satisfying for me as a publisher, and as an editor, but it's been a profitable thing. Actually, it supports half of the Museum today.

But my big idea was that we've got x-amount of projects in here. And this is what we want to accomplish, exposure to a wider audience! So I think, we've done some work in Hollywood with the *Turtles*, and we know that some of these things that we've contracted could be potential movies, or T.V. shows and could be exploited in so many other ways. We've got to jump on every option and, in Hollywood, there are sure to be plenty! It was around that same time I was pitched by the director and the producer of the first *Turtles* movie, Steve Barron and Simon Fields, to invest in their company Limelight, which they were trying to expand. It was a company that was grossing \$33 million a year at that time, with four to five million dollars in profit and they wanted to expand to TV, and they were looking for new properties. It seemed a natural fit for me to invest in this company, and try to get some of Tundra's properties on the "fast track" in Hollywood, and exploited with the creator's approval. Those would profit the company and the creator. So I justified it in my mind as a good thing and could already smell the bank account swelling! The purchasing of *Heavy Metal* was already perfect, which then in part led to, or ran parallel, to the investment in Tundra U.K.

There were two reasons for Tundra U.K. We were already working with Alan [Moore], Dave McKean, Neil Gaiman, and a few other British creators, and it was a long way across the ocean. I felt that Dave Elliot, who I had known for a short while, a year or so, and who was working for *Deadline* at the time, had some respect and he'd be perfect to head it. Dave knew all the British creators, he brought Simon [Bisley] to me. He said he wanted to start a publishing company that could have access to a support company in the U.S. and at the same time I wanted support for our British creators, to have an office they could go to get things done there, whether it was pre-press, or funneling checks through, or approvals. I also thought a support staff in the U.K. for properties from the States would help because perhaps they could get better distribution by being there than we could from here, and it would again, "up profits all around." I also wanted to reach across the channel into the European markets for reprint book rights and selling serializations of projects like *Cages*, *From Hell* and all these others that we thought would work well in foreign territories. We were already doing business with a lot of these publishers through *Heavy Metal* and I really thought...

GROTH: — *it was a good idea at the time.*

EASTMAN: It was a great idea! To me it seemed to be perfect. We can solve our British creator issues, expand our penetration, and we'd have somebody that can sell our rights all over Europe.

It sort of evolved on a number of different levels all at the same time, in the sense that we already wanted to work with these guys, and it was a long way across the ocean. It was difficult. It was very expensive [laughs] which sounds funny, but Fed Ex-ing a lot of approval stuff back and forth... etc.

GROTH: [laughs] *Uh-huh.*

EASTMAN: I recall there were some issues where there were a variety of issues. For example: there was some more adult-oriented stuff, and there were some creators, like Melinda Gebbie, who was doing *The Lost Girls* for us, was very concerned about taking her work of an erotic or more adult nature in and out through [British] Customs, because she was afraid it might be seized for whatever reason.

GROTH: [laughs] *So start a company in England. That's the solution!*

EASTMAN: It goes further. We started seeing a lot of — around this time you had Steve Dillon, you had Garth Ennis, you had Neil Gaiman, you had some of these British creators who were doing stuff for DC and a lot of other companies here, and we wanted to have access to those creators. Then also I looked at this bizarre system of distribution vs. publishing. You had companies like Titan, for whatever reason, were publishing instead of distributing. They'd take rights to a *Swamp Thing* graphic novel or some other American already-printed in English novel and re-print it there, and exploit it there, and sell copies there. I said, why does it have to be that way, why can't we have our own company there to handle our distribution there instead of "rebuilding" an already finished book? It might be wiser to know why, "let's talk to this distributor, that distributor," and perhaps that would up our orders, and increase our sales and penetration throughout the U.K. Make some business sense, right?

GROTH: *Did you own Tundra U.K.?*

EASTMAN: Yes.

GROTH: *You didn't just invest in it?*

EASTMAN: No. I owned Tundra U.K. And so, again, hindsight's 20/20, and I know that all of this could have been done with a smaller, more well-managed company or with persons within our office, but...

GROTH: *Can I ask you how you went about opening an office, or how you structured it? You hired Dave Elliot to run the office.*

EASTMAN: Yes. He was president

GROTH: *Did you have an annual budget drawn up? How did you proceed to open an office 3000 miles away?*

EASTMAN: Um... [laughs] in the same glorious [Groth laughs] fashion that I did it in the United States.

GROTH: *Hard to believe.*

EASTMAN: Hard to believe, you know? This was towards the end of year one that we started pulling together Tundra U.K. So I still hadn't figured out how fucking bad everything had gotten yet. That we again started with a concept of "O.K., we're going to have a few people here... three, four, five people, max, that would have a few projects to start. And slowly we'd build from there." And again, like I said, in the very same pattern that we'd get this project, and then that project, and then the floodgates opened. It seemed like every artist in all of the U.K. suddenly had something they wanted to do and I at first didn't have as much control over Dave as I should have. I said, "Look, you are the best, because this is your home, this is your country, you've been in comics most of your adult life, in the business, you've been reading them, that you know what's going to work and what's not going to work and you'll make decisions on projects that would be profitable for the company."

GROTH: *So he had a lot of autonomy.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, he had a lot of autonomy. So we took on too many projects too quick, the budget got out of control... on and on, you know? The same story, different country. [laughter]

GROTH: *Thank God there were only so many English-speaking countries in the world.*

EASTMAN: Thank God there's only 180 countries in the world, right? [laughter]

GROTH: *Was Tundra U.K. meant only to publish U.K. talent, or was it also going to reprint American talent printed in Tundra U.S.A.?*

EASTMAN: It went sort of like this: They were to be "on the pulse of the hot existing and upcoming British talent." They would bring in projects to be published by them, but distributed by us in the States. In the States, it was just in reverse, we wanted everything that we published here handled/distributed through Tundra U.K. or at least more tightly oversee its distribution through existing companies, to insure everyone who wanted to buy one, could. Titan was one of the big distributors and we wanted to ensure that they had the right information, in the right way, so that advance orders, as well as back stock, would be available. One of the things we were finding in the U.S. was that a lot of times our initial orders through Diamond or whoever would sell out because they only ordered four [laughs] and we'd get some calls from people, "Well, we can't find the second issue to this, or the first issue of that," or whatever, and would like to get it, so we started this mail-order company. We'd sell back issues through this, or if a store somewhere needed five copies of this or six copies of that they could get them, as we desperately needed faithful customers. We wanted to have that same type of thing in the U.K., that would be able to get them, and that would already be there, and would make them available for the 11 people that wanted to buy them.

GROTH: *Now you were aware that the U.K. market for alternative comics was considerably smaller than even the U.S. market for alternative comics.*

EASTMAN: Um... I didn't then.

GROTH: [laughs] *I guess you do now!*

EASTMAN: I guess I do now! [laughter] It was one of those things that I didn't know, and I trusted Dave to let me know what

would work there and what wouldn't.

GROTH: *What is your assessment of the job he did?*

EASTMAN: Um... the company went out of business. [laughter]

GROTH: *Doesn't sound like you want to elaborate on that.* [laughter]

EASTMAN: Well, I'll elaborate in the sense that I put Dave in a position that was similar to mine. I think he felt that there were unlimited funds. That he was a kid in a candy store. I think he felt that he had a lot of friends in the business. I think he took on projects that even though he wasn't sure if they would do well or not, probably took them on hoping they would do well. God knows I did a lot of that, too. I think he probably really believed and liked them. I guess sometimes I look at my tastes for what it is in comics... I grew up reading *Daredevil*, *Kamandi*, whatever; *Weird War*, and that evolved into *Heavy Metal*, and then into undergrounds and my taste was on a different level when I grew up. The kinds of things, like I said, that I was reading were Kitchen Sink or Fantagraphics or other type of stuff that was written for an older, more [laughs] mature reader, intelligent reader. Somebody that had outgrown superheroes but still loved the medium of comics. I think that perhaps Dave was on that level, that some of the stuff he was selecting was stuff that he really liked, but wasn't selling at all.

GROTH: *About how many books did Tundra U.K. ultimately publish?*

EASTMAN: Um...

GROTH: *Because I know nothing about their publishing output.*

EASTMAN: Yeah... I think, actually, to be honest, it was probably less than a couple dozen, you know. Probably under 20.

GROTH: *Under 20.*

EASTMAN: Maybe a little bit more, because what ended up happening is Tundra died, Tundra U.K. died at the same time that Tundra U.S. died. But it was started almost a year or so later than Tundra U.S. So what you ended up having happen was a lot of stuff was started there, and we only published a third of it before it closed up shop, at which point, most of the rights were returned to the creators. It was like, "Look, it's over. I'm not going to hold up your project, I'm not going to hold it hostage, go take it wherever you can find a home for it." And that's pretty much it.

GROTH: *There was a column in a British fanzine by someone named Clive Scruton, where he talked about Tundra U.K. and he levels a number of charges as to how the company was run, and there's a nationalistic fervor to it, so I feel I owe it to the guy to read this to you and see if you can answer some of the questions he asked, or respond to some of the accusations he levels.*

He writes, "And what did the dear chaps given the job of running Tundra U.K. allegedly do with the money that Eastman donated? They decided they were going to be super-cool and set up shop in a plush, high-rent London-based office block. They took on loads of staff, even though there wasn't a need for them yet, as there wasn't enough product in the pipeline. It's said that some of the 'staff' were even provided with company cars. Allegedly, 50,000 pounds was spent on a Press Launch, with lots of yummy goodies and plenty of bubbly for those thirsty press types, even Kevin Eastman himself turned up. Of course, once the crisps and booze were finished, those 'journalists' buggered off and forgot all about the reasons they were invited in the first place, mainly to give Tundra U.K. some publicity!"

EASTMAN: Yeah, that's not far off the mark at all. [laughter] Here I go, trying to justify it. Initially, we had an office space in this run-down section of London that was awful. There was water coming in, and so on and so on. So we started off with this very small office with a very few people. The bunch of times... I used to go over every six or seven weeks...

GROTH: *To not eat the food.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] To not eat the food. "To go to the theatah." [Groth laughs] The project list was growing, the staff was growing, you had people, three or four people stuffed in these little rooms, and I really felt that the office, much like with the Tundra U.S. office, should represent the high-brow seriousness of what we were trying to do. So I had to do something. I figured that Tundra U.K., much like Tundra U.S., was going to last for a long time. So why don't we invest in more of a condo-type office space under one of these long-term leases that we'd end up owning. So we did that. We then re-located to another place, which was a lot more expensive. Neither Helen nor Dave had a car at that time, and they needed to get around for business reasons, so, O.K., we have a company car. There was a big press launch for the first couple books that came out from Tundra U.K. We wanted to announce "we're here" in a big way. We invited all the British creators to show them that we were very serious. So [laughs] we leased a night at the Museum of Natural History [Groth laughs] A lot of U.S. artists were there because there was a convention going on.

GROTH: *UKCAC?*

EASTMAN: UKCAC, right. It was in coordination with UKCAC, or...you know what? It was Fred Greenberg, actually, who was starting a convention over there to compete with UKCAC.

GROTH: *Good God.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] Poor Fred, he tried hard, right? [Groth laughs] He was inspired by Tundra.

GROTH: *Yeah, I was going to say.*

EASTMAN: So he was starting a convention. He got a lot of American publishers and artists to go over there. We coordinated it with this launch for Tundra U.K. So there were U.S. and British creators and they could all mix and mingle. And yeah, pretty much the journalists left really quickly [laughter], I do remember that. [more laughter]

GROTH: *Did that party actually cost 50,000 pounds?*

EASTMAN: I don't... you know, it's quite possible. Sure. I mean, 50,000 pounds is what? A hundred...

GROTH: *It's almost...*

EASTMAN: No, no! 50,000 pounds, Christ, that's a hundred thousand dollars.

GROTH: *That's almost a hundred thousand dollars, yes.*

EASTMAN: I don't think... [laughter]

GROTH: *Maybe. What the hell?*

EASTMAN: Maybe, what the hell... [laughter] I mean, that sounds like a God-awful lot. I can't imagine.

GROTH: *That's a lot of food.*

EASTMAN: That's a lot of blood sausage. [laughter] But I could have totaled that, there were a lot of flights and hotels. I'm sure I flew a number of U.S. artists for the convention. There was a lot of advertising, and office staff. And yeah. Right in the Natural History Museum. And I don't know how cheap that comes, but I'm guessing it's not that cheap. [laughter]

GROTH: *O.K., you did the party, you bought him a car, or leased him a car or something like that, you had reasonably...*

EASTMAN: Bought it. It was cheaper than leasing. And you'd own it at the end.

GROTH: *Now, did you expect Tundra U.K. to eventually reimburse those costs?*

EASTMAN: Yeah.

GROTH: *You did? [laughs]*

EASTMAN: I expected them to recoup those costs from the profits of their distribution, from the profits of their percentage of foreign sales, and from their profits of the books they were publishing — whatever profit share they retained. I expected all those costs would be 1) recouped, and 2) covered on a month-to-month basis. Yeah.

GROTH: *Jesus. That starts to make Tundra U.S.A. look positively sane and frugal by comparison.*

EASTMAN: No, it was pretty much the same. [Groth laughs] I expected the same miracles as my intents and thoughts with Tundra U.S.; we would, after recoupment of costs and our share of profits, I expected we would cover Tundra U.S.'s week-to-week, month-to-month nut and my capital investments to stop as the company grew in value or profitability, that eventually those could be recouped in some corporate, fucked-up manner.

So if Tundra U.K. was insane, they were both insane. We certainly have established that Tundra U.S. was insane.

GROTH: *You were an optimist. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: I should get a special optimist award.

GROTH: *Or something.*

EASTMAN: But I don't know if I will or not.

ANOTHER INVESTMENT

GROTH: *You invested in a pre-press house. Let's get back to that.*

EASTMAN: I skipped that one.

GROTH: *Pro-Media.*

And apparently, that was a disaster.

EASTMAN: Oh, yeah. I'm batting 1.000 at this point...

GROTH: *Now, you didn't own Pro-Media. You just invested in it? Explain why you did that.*

EASTMAN: My idea was, considering the volume, and wide variety of what we were doing, we were looking at options that saved time and money with our pre-press. Around this time, a lot of neat machines were coming on the market, and the closest decent pre-press company, with high-quality reproduction abilities for the color stuff that we wanted to do was in Hartford [Connecticut]. An hour away. We also had this local little pre-press house that only had very outdated mechanical sep capabilities. They were helping do little things... The simple stuff. These two guys that ran it said, "You know, if you invested in a Syquest Machine" — which was like a five hundred thousand dollar machine — "we can use it at least half the time to do outside business that could help our company grow, plus, these other clients could help us pay off the machine. At the same time, we can provide to you on an *at-cost* basis, all of your pre-press service." To us, the best price we could get for a pre-press was like \$140 to \$160 a page for full-color in Hartford. With this deal, it could be done for like \$60 a page with proofs in-house including all costs and labor. I felt that that made sense. You balance the time they spend doing separations where they can make money, and the time they spend to give me cheaper pre-press which lowers the costs of my books which will help the books become profitable! Ultimately, they did start to make money selling services for the Syquest machine to other people, they were getting some big jobs, which was great, but then they wanted to dedicate all of their time to do those jobs right, which then started fucking up schedules on all our stuff, and now our stuff was running late. So now, the yelling, the "we misunderstood" and the threats started. What ultimately killed the company was they fucked up a couple of *major* jobs, like blew huge deadlines for two catalogs, and the company was being sued, it was going down, it was a done deal. So I ended up losing everything there also.

GROTH: *Did you own the Syquest machine?*

EASTMAN: No, it was purchased by them, I loaned them the money. The idea was I loan them money to do this and when they made the money back on the machine, I would get paid back. Their idea was to own the machine so it would be part of the assets of their business. But, when the company's filing for bankruptcy, everybody loses. I was one of the people in line as a creditor. So much for cheap pre-press. [laughter]

What's even funnier is I actually thought about buying a printing company at one time.

GROTH: *Is that right?*

EASTMAN: Mm-hm.

GROTH: *You mean a web press? [incredulous]*

EASTMAN: Like a web printer. Yeah. I was looking for something like that, that could lower the printing costs, and again up those profits!

GROTH: *How did you go about looking for a printer to buy?*

EASTMAN: I looked at some local printers that we had dealt with. None of the major ones or anything like that.

GROTH: *Local web printers?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. The *Daily Hampshire Gazette* was one of them, and they did both publishing and printing. They had their newspaper/editorial side, and they owned presses to print the newspaper and outside stuff. They could upgrade to a higher quality paper on the same web press for color work, plus they had offset for other things that we did, like posters. I was thinking about half the time having a company make money the other half of the time lowering the cost of us printing stuff in house like the pre-press deal. Our production department said, "Look. The best printing prices we're getting are in Hong Kong, Canada, and Europe, which were half of the *Gazette best price*." So it just made no sense for us to do that.

GROTH: *You also bought or created a recording studio.*

EASTMAN: Yes.

GROTH: *I think this was located in Maine.*

EASTMAN: Yes. That's correct.

GROTH: *But it was connected somehow to Tundra, right?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, exactly. A separate sub-company within the empire. At the time we looked into this recording studio in Maine. It came through a friend, that had a recording studio that was doing these wonderful things with local bands. At that time, it was profitable. "The story of my life." It was profitable at the time that I looked into it. It was covering all its costs, and it was putting away like five thousand bucks a month or something like that. [Groth laughs] So at the same time we'd actually been talking with George Pratt and this children's book artist also from Maine, a guy named Rick Charette, and both of these things had a music side to them. There was another one, too. Jon Muth had done *Mythology of an Abandoned City*, and had proposed this music soundtrack to go along with the graphic novel. So we had a number of compatible projects and we thought this might be a way, in the never ending quest to find a new audience — because Goddammit, I knew that they were out there — to play with both mediums.

The idea was that *See You in Hell, Blind Boy* was this graphic novel about a blues guitarist and George had shown drawings and things to Johnny Winter, who was interested in recording some stuff for it. George himself was a musician and he had written some songs for it so it would be a graphic novel by George, with a soundtrack. Rick Charette was one of these Raffi-type guys. A children's story telling/music performer type. And in the Tundra's publishing format, we wanted children's books to adults-only books and everything in between. So Rick Charette ended up bringing us a project. This kid's book/record/tape that we thought would be a great, profitable thing to get into, as well as a few others.

So going back to the studio purchase, I said, "Here's a safe investment." We'll buy a recording studio that's covering its costs, we can utilize it for a couple of projects and perhaps more, and we're going to conquer yet another whole new audience that we can funnel all our other books to. Because they'll probably want a whole Tundra library once they see this [laughter] one CD and graphic novel combined."

GROTH: *Of course.*

EASTMAN: I was trying to create a new market. And the frustrating part is I'd like to think it was brilliant because the *Voodoo* book, the Jimi Hendrix/Bill Sienkiewicz painted graphic novel that was accompanied by a CD, was very successful. But that came after we tried to put together the George Pratt project but the recording studio instantly started losing money for some reason after I had purchased it, and it died before we could get *Blind Boy* off the ground.

GROTH: *The magic Eastman touch.*

EASTMAN: The magic Eastman touch. [laughter]

Man, imagine if George Eastman, who started Kodak, had my luck; it would be a different world today. [laughter].

No. Actually, I've been very, very lucky. Obviously, the *Turtles* were a blessing, and Tundra wasn't.

GROTH: *It's like ten steps forward, one step back, so it's not too awful.*

EASTMAN: Or one step forward, ten steps back. [laughter]

GROTH: *That's what it might have felt like... but...*

EASTMAN: [laughs] I'm not hanging around L.A., on street corners, trying to pick up extra cash in a hat, [Groth laughs] but certainly there's more days than not that I wish I had the money in the bank I spent on Tundra.

LIBERAL POLICIES

GROTH: *Certainly one of the things that crippled Tundra financially was your liberal policy toward creators. You paid enormous advances. And sometimes never even saw the work.*

EASTMAN: I felt bad about that sometimes. It felt really like a personal insult. And it didn't make sense. I want to say on one hand it was an exception to the rule, there were certain people that were paid, say, a ten grand advance for a book, and they would have that book done in seven months, because they poured themselves into it but others, six, seven months go by, and nothing is showing up and we find out they haven't even started it. By then they've gone through the advance and they have to do other work to support their lifestyle again but at the same time they haven't completed the work for me, which then delays the project longer. But I operated under the concept if somebody tells you they are going to do something, I believe them — and that's probably one of my greatest character flaws, I guess. I take somebody at their word, because I want to believe that's good enough. If you told me, "Look, I really want to do this," and you seem to have the heart and soul that says, "I really, really want to do this, and if you give me this money, I will produce something that is my dream that you can publish it; it's going to be fabulous." And I would say, "You know, I believe you. Why would I not?" Then you get fucked and then you start toughening up your heart a little bit. That's probably what made me, at times, feel bitter about Tundra, because it forced me to become more of an asshole. I didn't feel that I deserved that

lesson, but in every sense I guess I did.

GROTH: *One of the Journal news stories reported, “For Eastman, the worst part of the job became calling up creators he respected and muscling them over projects. He agonized over how to approach such matters and ‘lost many nights of sleep when he mapped out what he was going to say to these people.’” Did you have to do a lot of that?*

EASTMAN: Yes, some... I tried to, anyway, because I felt that if it came from me, it might mean more to them. But for some of them I guess they could lie as easily to me as they could lie to a straw boss, you know? Which made it more of a personal insult. I felt that if somebody worked out a deal with me, I'd like to think that I'm a man of my word, and if I tell you that I can deliver something, then I will put everything I've got into doing that for you, because you put your trust in me. So I would feel bad and would think, “Jeez, I really thought that we had an understanding.” And sometimes it was just a handshake deal, because the contracts continued to be fucked around with in legal, and a handshake deal should be as good as a contract, better even, right? A contract is just something you can use to figure out what you didn't cover when you sue each other. So that the same lawyers who wrote it can find loopholes. Contracts completely suck for the most part, but not as much as it sucked to have to call somebody that I respected and say, “You broke your word. What's the deal here?”

GROTH: *Now, I understand your motivation for doing this, giving creators money: you wanted to support them. But it does seem that after a while, that after you've done that enough times, and not gotten the book, you would say, “Well, this practice has to stop. Because Tundra can't keep losing money like this, and this is a wasteful strategy.” But that doesn't seem to have happened.*

EASTMAN: You know, in a small way it did. In the sense that we started doing, say in the year two, as I recall, much smaller advances and more “paid on delivery” kind of deals. Panic probably started setting in to a point, because a lot of the books that we funded in year one were drastically behind schedule with no hope of publication any time soon. So we've tied up a lot of money. Then, the ones that had come out have had such disappointing sales. I'm talking extremely disappointing sales. To the point where we had to get a bigger warehouse for all the unsold copies and I was getting pissed off! It seemed that everyone that sold a hundred thousand copies of a book through other publishers were now doing ten thousand or less through Tundra. Of course, at the same time, I didn't think, “O.K., they were doing *X-Men* before and now they're doing a story about a guy living in a trailer park that quotes Russian poetry and likes to shoot gerbils.” You know what I mean? I didn't think anything about the content. I just sort of went on what I liked and the merits of the artists. So, we started doing more contracts that were a 50/50 profit split, as well as started looking for more mainstream content. Superhero stuff. Trying to look for things that could be more profitable, but still be fair. Still be done under the same Tundra system. We tried to toughen up on advances and page rates. It was very difficult. We had set a lot of precedents, something I couldn't sit and explain away to a creator was, “Well, I'm paying somebody else this, and you're the same level creator and I only want to pay you \$300.” So you dicker, and I'm not good at it. It was dreadful. [laughs] It was very hard. We tried to make some changes and I couldn't be strong enough to one, either stop it, or two, bring projects in under a more traditional sense. It was like trying to do something traditional in a completely non-traditional company, which was spiraling sideways, and in full panic mode. We had to stabilize the ship, and stop the bleeding, and try to get things on a regular schedule. We'd have crazy shit going on like creators calling in, saying, “Why isn't my book coming out monthly?” And we're like, “Well, because you've been turning it in every three months is one of the reasons.” [laughs] There was tons of fucked up stuff like that going on. I was just like, “Oh my God. Help!”

BIG NUMBERS

GROTH: *Tundra seemed to attract projects that were just insane. Big Numbers was one. Can you talk a little bit about how Big Numbers evolved? Bill Sienkiewicz did the first two issues which I think were published. Didn't Alan publish them himself?*

EASTMAN: Yes.

GROTH: *And at some point he went to Tundra.*

EASTMAN: Yeah. What happened was, or what my understanding of what happened is [Moore's self-publishing company] Mad Love launched its first project — and I was someone who bought *Big Numbers* issue #1 and then waited a year for *Big Numbers* #2, and that caused some problems — I think we all remember there was a long gap there between the two. That really made it difficult for Alan, who really wanted to make a difference and to self-publish, only to watch his premiere book with his new publishing company fade away. Obviously you can't survive on a book a year. I guess, not privy to anything Bill said to Alan or Alan said to Bill, they had a parting of ways. Bissette was doing some work with Alan on *From Hell* for *Taboo*. I said, “Hey, *Big Numbers*. What's up with that? I loved the first issue, I loved the second issue. Is there any way we can pull this back together and try to re-launch it?” So, we started working with Alan to clear the deck, so to speak. He had an existing deal with a French publisher, so we paid them off to get all the rights back so Alan could take back full control; then, through Tundra, we'd be able to re-launch it and re-license it to new foreign sub-publishers once it was underway. We started talking with Bill and tried to patch up what had broken down. We tried to be a middle man to get Bill and Alan to agree on working together again, which was difficult because Bill was considered one of the co-creators, but Alan created the concept. So Alan writes a 500-page script, and Bill was co-creator because he created the “look” of all the characters, and the environments. So we're treading very carefully because we don't know the ins and outs of their agreement. I said, “Look, let's try to work this out, as a company we can support its re-launch if you agree to work for a lesser page rate, and share the profits with three partners, including Tundra, we'll treat it like a very traditional thing. We'll pay you the money on a per-page basis at your industry rates so you can afford to do it.”

GROTH: *Bill?*

EASTMAN: Bill Sienkiewicz.

So we paid Alan to start working on the scripts again, and Bill agreed to do issue #3, and I really hope this is correct because this one is kinda “gray” for me, but I believe Bill did issue #3, and was doing the covers for #3, #4, and #5. So the ball started rolling

again. Bill was turning in the work. But he stated, and all agreed, he wasn't going to continue on with the series after that. So we found Al Columbia, who was Bill's assistant, and could draw Bill like Bill and would keep the look consistent. We started talking with Al about stepping in and completing the project. We flew Al to meet Alan. And we got Alan's approval. We got Bill's approval, and it wasn't an easy thing, Bill was really uncomfortable with it. Understandably so, it's like having someone else raise your child, but at the same time, he wasn't going to do it, and he said, "All right. You know what? Out of respect for Alan, I'll let Al step in and do this."

GROTH: *Al was Bill's assistant.*

EASTMAN: Al was Bill's assistant for a period of time. I'm not sure exactly how long. But he had a very similar style to Bill's.

So we started working with Al on issue #4. By this time Alan was up onto issue #5, script-wise, and Bill had completed the covers for issues #3, #4, and #5, and Al's working away on issue #4. To make a long, boring story short, Al took a couple months or so extra to finish the work, which was okay until he got up to speed.

GROTH: *On #4.*

EASTMAN: On #4, and the more it went along, Al became more aggravated and started saying that we didn't really want Al, we just wanted a Bill clone. Which is the whole point of the whole thing, and I thought was clearly understood. [Groth laughs] It went all down hill from there, and he kind of got more bizarre towards the end. About the time he turned in all the pages for the work, he was sitting in Paul's office. Paul Jenkins was the straw boss on it, and [Columbia] said, "I want to take all the art work home and give it the final once-over before we send it off to pre-press." And then we never saw Al again. I had heard through Marc Arseneault, who was an assistant under Mark Martin in the art department, that he saw Al Columbia tear it up! Then we heard from someone else that Al said he never tore it up, he's got it somewhere. And I'm like, "Well, fuck it. I want it."

GROTH: *You paid for it.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] I paid for it. I paid not only to have him do the work, but I also paid to buy the original art. I had already bought a bunch of original art from Al, the same as I was doing with other creators, like Simon Bisley. I was on the one hand, paying them to create stuff for Tundra to publish, and on the other hand, I was buying the artwork from people that I respected to exhibit in the Museum. So I lost on both, page rate and page purchase on that one. [Groth laughs] I know I told you this story when we were at lunch, but I found one tiny little drawing in the studio we provided Al, above Tundra. For the twenty thousand dollars or more I paid out to Al Columbia on this *Big Numbers* project, I found *one* little cut-out drawing of a character that I later glued onto a cover of a twisted little book I did called *Infectious*. It's my twenty thousand dollars worth of *Big Numbers*, tribute!

GROTH: *A twenty thousand dollar Al Columbia drawing?*

EASTMAN: My twenty thousand dollar Al Columbia drawing!

GROTH: *I think Al told me that Paul Jenkins threatened him with a baseball bat at one point.*

EASTMAN: Really? That's interesting... but, I guess I'm not surprised.

GROTH: *Do you know anything about that? [laughs]*

EASTMAN: Well, if Paul didn't, I would have. [Groth laughs] And I better not have a bat close by the next time I see Al, either. No, only kidding I've forgiven him... *mostly*...

GROTH: *So Al just literally vanished with the pages?*

EASTMAN: He turned up like three months later working as a hostess —

GROTH: *A hostess?*

EASTMAN: A host. [laughter]

GROTH: *That's a revelation. He went to Sweden, and then he came back a hostess...*

EASTMAN: What do you call somebody that...

GROTH: *Maitre'd?*

EASTMAN: Maitre'd. Thank you. He used to seat people in a Northampton restaurant called the Brewery. I understand Paul went into it because he heard that Al was working there. He went in and was like, "Where's the fucking artwork?" I'm sure Paul wanted to kill him. Because Paul really worked very, very hard to make that project work, because he loved Alan as a writer, and he really respected Bill, and Paul is the one that really smoothed everything out and got everybody going on it again.

GROTH: *And you never learned, really, why Al did this?*

EASTMAN: No. All I can say, towards the end he just used to say, "You want a fucking Sienkiewicz clone, you don't want Columbia." And it's like "Al, this is why you were fucking brought in, and this is why you agreed to the project. Because you could do it like Bill. That you could keep it consistent with the first three issues. You were totally into it. It's not a fantasy we had here. It was you! [Groth laughs] We paid you, and you accepted the money, and blew it on lingerie to be a hostess." [laughter] No, no, no... I'm really kidding this time.

GROTH: *Let me get this straight: Bill finished the third issue, and that was never published.*

EASTMAN: Yes, I believe that's correct. I still have all the originals.

GROTH: *So why wasn't that published?*

EASTMAN: Why? *Because*. That's not fair.

GROTH: *You forgot, and you'll publish it tomorrow.*

EASTMAN: Oh shit! Bring Tundra back! We didn't lose enough on that one.

Actually, it would have been great to have it see the light of day — maybe in some lifetime... I purchased from Bill all the original art for #1, #2, and #3. I have it in its entirety. Maybe a museum exhibit could show it.

GROTH: *That's a lot of square footage of art!*

EASTMAN: Well, I'd been buying art from Bill for years. I bought all of the *Elektra* series ... to name only a little..

GROTH: *Really?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, the entire thing. All eight issues. It's an absolutely amazing body of work.

GROTH: *What do you do with this art? You can't display it all.*

EASTMAN: Not personally. It was bought for the Museum. My collection of artwork, thanks to the *Turtles*, is probably valued at about \$8 million. That's what's on permanent loan to the Words and Pictures Museum. I still own it, but it's considered the Museum's collection. I've never sold a single piece of artwork I've ever bought. My thought was that instead of seeing something like *Elektra* sold off, page by page, and whereas I had the financial ability to purchase such a historical body of work in its entirety, that can be shown the way it was published — as a “whole work of art.” My idea for the museum was to exhibit works, in theory, “as they were intended.” A comic page is just one of a number of comic pages for a whole story and they should be shown “complete” whenever possible. So, instead of seeing *Big Numbers* piecemealed out to different collectors all over the country, it was an opportunity where I could buy it and keep it together. I did that with as many artists and situations as I could — for example: I have 35 Jack Kirby stories complete. *Kamandi* stories, *Losers* stories, *Demon* stories, *Captain America* stories, bought only from the Kirbys. I've got exhibit possibilities for years to come.

GROTH: *Wow.*

EASTMAN: Julie [Strain]'s and my home in Northampton, is in an old bank building, complete with bank vaults. The art is very well-protected and archivally stored, it's safe and secure, and it's for the Museum's use forever.

GROTH: *So why didn't you publish Big Numbers #3? When you had the work and everything? It would have made some money, I think...*

EASTMAN: [laughs] Well, how do you put it out and go, “Here's #3, but we can't finish the series because Al tore it up, and although we tried to find someone else that would have interest in committing a huge part of their life to complete seven or eight more issues, actually 12 issues total in a similar style, we had no takers. So sorry, readers!”

GROTH: *You could have finished the series as a fumetti.*

EASTMAN: [laughter] You could have. I know a lot of photo reference was used.

GROTH: *It would have been a lot easier.*

EASTMAN: Or just publish Alan's scripts. They're so beautiful.

GROTH: *You actually tried to find another artist for the series after your experience with Al?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. We still tried. We talked to people like Jon J Muth and Kent [Williams] and George [Pratt] and some other people to see if they would be interested, but they were doing their own projects that they enjoyed, so we sort of threw up our arms in just ultimate frustration.

I'll send you some pages from issue #3 and we can put them in the article.

GROTH: *That'd be great. That is just one of the great demented stories of our time.*

EASTMAN: It's very sad, and very devastating. I mean, I went in and I think Alan got real excited that this thing was finally going to happen because it was really like completing a dream for him. I felt that it was important for our industry, and I really wanted to see it completed, only to let him down again. You know? Although I don't feel directly responsible, I was responsible for raising his hopes and then destroying them again. I was right in the middle of it.

GROTH: *How did Alan take this setback?*

EASTMAN: He just said, “Fuck. Sorry. I know you really tried with this one. And I'm sorry it went this way.”

GROTH: *He's a man of admirable equanimity.*

EASTMAN: Yeah.

FALL OF CTHULU

GROTH: *Another one of my favorite stories was the Lovecraft project. It appears to be another book that spiraled out of control. Here's what Bissette says about this: “The Lovecraft project became prohibitively expensive. In the wake of Kevin's impulsive negotiations with Craig Russell, without much knowledge or regard for my prior conversations with Craig, or what his revised negotiations would mean to the project as a whole. Kevin returned from, I believe, Mid-Ohio Con, having negotiated a page rate that was significantly more expensive than what Russell had previously agreed to. What Kevin had done, then, dramatically inflated the entire book's budget. Craig's rate became the new standard. On top of that, Craig's agent, Mike Friedrich, then negotiated an additional rate for Digital Chameleon's computer-generated coloring for the story. The page rate attached to Russell's story became the yardstick for the rest of the contributors of new material, and the budget became simply obscene.”*

EASTMAN: You know, that's entirely possible. I couldn't say that yes, that's exactly the way that happened, but you know what? Yes, that's probably exactly the way it happened. Although Steve was pointing the Lovecraft project and coordinating it and working with the creators, I probably met with Craig and said, “What do you charge, and what have you agreed to with Steve?” Or something in that fashion. And I said, “Fine. Done deal.”

Who's to say? It's like, I don't want to get in a pissing contest with Bissette over this one. But the Lovecraft project really is one that embodies the madness of Tundra. It was *its own* life form that started at 48 [pages], went to 64, then became 128, with no sign of stopping there. I wouldn't point the finger at Steve here, because around this time we were desperately trying to find a way to get into bookstores and this seemed like a perfect vehicle. Ian Ballantine was doing a lot of *free* consulting for us. I guess he liked the company, although he probably just thought I was out of my mind, and wanted to be around when I exploded ... or something...

GROTH: *I can't imagine why. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Me either! So, seriously, we were talking about a guy that changed the face of publishing, you know? With the paperbacks and all that stuff, and he perhaps felt we would, too. I don't know for sure, but it's funny because he would roll his eyes

when I talked about these creators' rights, and he would say, "I understand, and I think it's nice what you're trying to do for these creators, but you've got to run a business." I didn't listen to him, either. But we really felt that the Lovecraft project was something that would make that bridge. I thought, this is great, with Ian behind it to shepherd it through the corporate world, it could be something that may open the doors for a relationship with a big brother publisher. A big publisher being like Ballantine/Doubleday/Dell — the big boys who would take some risks because we knew we wanted to be in the bookstore market, but we didn't want to print 200,000 books to get 190,000 of them back, and eat those costs. You know what I mean?

GROTH: *Yup.*

EASTMAN: Standard bookstore rules, win big or lose big.

So we said, "Well, jeez, we'll package it, and put it together, and Ian will put us with somebody that will publish this and bridge this gap between our two worlds and two companies." I know Bissette had some conversations with Ian, but I think about the time I had a series of meetings with Ian on *Lovecraft*, he was working on another project — James Gurney's *Dinotopia* — and was too busy to really help us, although he tried. Regardless, he loved Tundra, and some of our projects. We had a project he was totally into called *Gnemo* that we wanted to do with a bigger publisher. We had *Lovecraft* which he thought was brilliant. We were looking to do a book called *The Art of J.K. Potter*, which was part of *Lovecraft* that he thought could be a great stand-alone art book. I hear it has since come out and is beautiful. We thought all of these things might be the thing that would create this great alliance with a publisher like that. Towards the end we couldn't get a partner, we couldn't get a commitment. The projects were huge in expense, so no mainstream publisher would touch them. They were too risky even for them so they went on the shelf. I said, "When we get a little more time, when we straighten some things out, we'll try again and, if at that time, someone takes on a Tundra book and the door gets opened, we'll offer up these other options as well. And ultimately it just faded away... these bookstore dreams.

GROTH: *What Bissette told me was that the real reason the project died is because you paid the money to an alleged Lovecraft rights holder, but never signed a contract. And then never came up with contracts for the creators. And Bissette told you that you couldn't publish the book until the contracts with the creators were sent out. And the contracts with the creators were never sent out.*

EASTMAN: Well, fortunately for the entire comics world, Bissette can do no wrong; but in this case, I'll take the full blame... the legal side of the company was in a terrible state. They couldn't keep up with the workload that I demanded of them. Obviously. As far as the contracts with creators, that's probably true. As far as I can remember, and again, you make me almost want to go back and look at the files, or find some minutes from some lost Tundra meeting, because I remember there was some confusion over whether of this person that Steve had made the original deal with had the rights to even enter into a contract on behalf of the Lovecraft estate. You know who we used as an attorney?

GROTH: *Yes.*

EASTMAN: Mitch Berger.

And you know... [laughs] He was Bissette's attorney at the time. Steve brought Mitch to a couple of meetings, and Mitch was just like, "I am the legal God's gift to the comics publishing world. I know this stuff inside and out, and I do all Steve's stuff." From what I understand, he in fact did kick some ass for a few creators that were up against a wall, so I went for it. I said, "This is the kind of guy we could really use to help straighten out this legal clusterfuck that we have going on here and get on top of all this stuff." And Steve says, "O.K., I'll step aside. You can have Mitch, and I'll find another attorney who will work for me so there's no conflict of interest." We used Mitch as our in-house attorney. Not in-house, but main counsel, and I unleashed him on my behalf. I don't want to say anything that would get me sued for slander, but that's the way it went: some good, some not so good.

I believe, thinking back, we discovered this guy, Scott Cunningham, I think was his name, was representing he had the rights. But there was a question there, because somebody else was saying they had the rights. So, we couldn't get an answer and didn't know what to do, the whole while we were spending a shitload of money on the project. I don't think it was ever signed or ever sorted out, by the time Tundra collapsed.

GROTH: *Mentioning Mitch Berger reminds me that Susan Alston told the Journal your hiring practices were not the most scrupulously observed. She said, "Mitch Berger, Steven Wardlaw, Kevin Russell, and Greg Baisden, as far as I know, did not go through any significant interviewing process. They were hired because they were friends and from word of mouth. And I had no idea. And in all the personnel files, I never saw a resume from Wardlaw, Baisden, Russell or Phil Nutman." Was that another problem: your hiring practices? I was expecting a call when you hired Greg Baisden, just to check his reference.*

EASTMAN: Well, out of respect you should have called me and said he was a fucking nutcase. No, no, I'm teasing. Greg was a hard worker. Did he work for you before he worked for us?

GROTH: *Yeah.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, that's right. I remember that now...

GROTH: *I think I learn you hired him after the fact. I remember wondering why someone from Tundra hadn't called me.*

EASTMAN: Again, I made that decision to hire certain people with very little back story, except what they told me, and I trusted them, and this is how it usually happened, I took people at face value — what reason would they have to lie to me? Steve Bissette brought Mitch Berger as his attorney, and I said, "This is the kind of guy we can use." And Steve said, "Fine, I'll step away. He can probably help the situation." So Mitch came through Steve. Phil Nutman came through Steve. Phil Nutman was this guy that had done everything on the whole planet. "I was the PR guy for the BBC." Ultimately we found out he did work for the BBC, but he was like a lower level office worker. He was a friend of Steve's, and he came down to Northampton on one of Steve's many visits. Around the time we needed somebody to help with our PR. We weren't getting enough press releases and stuff out beyond the direct market. I was like, "Steve, is this guy good? Is he a good guy, reputable guy?" "Yeah." So I hired him. I took it on Steve's word. I should have checked it out. I'm not blaming Steve, much as I'd like to. At the end of the day it was totally my call. Kevin Russell

worked as a consultant with Kelly Meeks in the computer business up in Maine. He was a sales rep, so he was brought in to help Kelly with marketing and sales, and to work with the distributors. I authorized Kelly to hire Kevin Russell. Kelly hired Steven Wardlaw to run the warehouse. He was hired to fill orders but wanted to learn other parts of the business, and was willing to start at the ground floor. We didn't have time to put out an ad in the papers and review resumes and do a long interview process. I was throwing bodies at problems, and we tried to make the best call. All in all, I thought I had a pretty great crew, and most of them gave me blood when I asked.

NEVER-NEVER PUBLISHED

GROTH: *One of my favorite stories is the Peter Pan project. Which I don't know very much about, but my understanding is you spent vast sums of money to get this project underway, and that somehow there were two artists working on it, and the artists had a falling out, and therefore never completed the project even though you spent God knows how much money on it.*

EASTMAN: Almost in a nutshell, that's it. Basically it was at another publisher. There were difficulties there and they had a falling out. They felt they were being mistreated, and underpaid. I want to say that it was for First Comics, because I believe it was intended for a Classic Comics line. I believe we bought the rights, and then did a retroactive page rate for the work completed thus far, about half the book, and then upped the page rate for Craig Hamilton — who's a brilliant artist — to do the rest. The work is breathtaking. Then we paid some additional money as an advance, so Craig could afford to restart the project. He was very slow and wanted to take his time to make it perfect, which I was totally into.

Then Craig and Rick Bryant — the inker — had a falling out somehow. They wouldn't work with each other any more. It was between them, so I don't know what happened but we tried to figure out a way to get it away from Rick — we said, "Look, let's find another inker, and we'll give you [Rick] a percentage of the royalties." He said no, he wanted to be bought out of the project up front, and it just completely broke down from there. It was already too expensive to make the costs back, and now it was too expensive to continue. A total lost cause. So I let it sit on the shelves at Tundra, in hopes that perhaps some day we'd reach an agreement and it could be finished. The last thing I heard about it, and this was around the time that Kitchen came in, was that the art was given back, or Craig Hamilton had somebody that was willing to buy a bunch of pages or something, so stats were made in case it was ever to be completed.

GROTH: *Did you feel betrayed in a sense by creators behaving unreasonably or irresponsibly?*

EASTMAN: There was a time I was definitely bitter about that kind of thing, especially with *Peter Pan*. I mean, they have a disagreement, and I'm sorry that happened, but they won't let their egos get out of the way so it could have a happy ending. I guess in this case, it was very frustrating and it was upsetting that, "Look, I understand. Let's work it out. I paid a lot of money. And I did it because you sold me on the fact that this was going to be your project of a lifetime. This was going to be the most amazing thing you've ever done, and you would have this great feeling of accomplishment for doing that." Then suddenly it's like, "Sorry, we were just kidding!" And I would say, "Why? I paid you everything you asked for. I believe in what you said, and now you can't agree, and at the same time one of you won't let it go so it could still be completed so at least I could recoup my investment." You just turn your backs and you say, "Fuck you." And "So fucking what, you've got more money. Too bad." And it was hurtful. But at the same time, it's hard for me to turn and say I blame them for that, in that particular instance or any other instance. Because I allowed it to happen. It's like I chose to bend over and say "line up, guys" so what right would I have to complain of a sore ass the next morning!

GROTH: *Did you have a contract with them?*

EASTMAN: It was probably another one of those glorious things that money was paid while the contract was in the process of being worked out.

GROTH: *I'm surprised you didn't hold a publisher's rights summit. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: It probably would have turned into my lynching, with me all the while saying, "What did I do?"

GROTH: *Because it looks like you had no rights when it came to artists abusing your generosity.*

EASTMAN: Well, it slips into that gray area, you know, where you say, "Well, we had a handshake deal." But I have a perception of one deal, and they have a perception of another, which is why I guess you ultimately agree in writing which at least lays out some of those parameters. When a contract wasn't done quick enough before the relationship broke down, you had two sides pointing the fingers going "It was your fault, your fault, your fault." And nobody wins.

FIXING TUNDRA

GROTH: *Bissette in his interview described the reorganization attempt on his part. And I don't want to read you this whole quote, because it's long and tedious, but basically he said that he and Mark Martin proposed to you that they would have a series of closed-door meetings with every employee at Tundra. And during those meetings, the employees would outline organizational problems they're having, define their role at Tundra, define their position at Tundra, and then Bissette and Mark Martin would go back to you and tell you what they hammered out in terms of each employee's position. They said they did that, and that every time they did that, you said, "O.K., that's the employee's position. This is carved in stone." He says, there was, however, one serious omission. "One employee, whose job was most elusive, who was related to Kevin, and who did not participate; he was away on business. They then called off business operations for the week following that in order to carve that into stone. During that week, all of it was thrown away. They completely missed all the work that was done, and confusion reigned again. I don't know what bend in the nature of the people that were in charge of the company at that time that would allow that kind of work to be done, would allow and subsidize that kind of time away from the office, just to dismantle it afterwards." Which really is a puzzle, if what he's saying is accurate.*

EASTMAN: It is a puzzle. Well, I'll say that I believe that is accurate. I believe that a number of people really tried hard to fix

Tundra. I think that Mark especially, although it's probably a toss up between Mark and Paul, as to who believed the most, or cared the most. I will say Mark first and foremost was definitely the spine of the company. He was the most stable. None of the books would have come out as good as they did without Mark breaking his back on them.

Probably the biggest crime I ever committed at Tundra was to hire Mark Martin as an art director, instead of hiring Mark Martin to draw all day long and create beautiful stories for us to publish. I know Mark was desperate to create organization and to try and institute policies like more editorial say, more control, more of a focused way of running things through. He and Bissette were close, to the point that I believe that would be something that I would say, "Yes, please. Help with that and organize that." As far as carving it in stone or its breakdown, I don't want to sound stupid — which is probably too late for that — but, I can't say for sure that when they brought it to me, I said, "Yeah, let's carve it in stone," and then it broke down that quickly, but, then again, I'm sure I directed its failure. Most likely it was brought to me and then poorly implemented from my chair. Who was strong enough to enforce the structure? Mark tried, and Paul tried, and I think at this time Quentin was...

GROTH: *Quentin wasn't there at the time.*

EASTMAN: Quentin wasn't there — I had either let him go because I was frustrated with his inability to fix my mess, so that just left me — and we're all aware at this point in the interview how well I can fuck stuff up — so it died on the vine. If I had a business manager or somebody that would create a structure like that and see that it was enforced, there may have been a chance, although that too is questionable because there was this "president" who knew everything... *me.*

GROTH: *The way Steve describes it, it was implemented and you actually had to de-implement it.*

EASTMAN: I don't know how it could be implemented and I could de-implement it.

GROTH: *Bissette does imply that the relative who was away at the time, and then came back, might have sabotaged the organization.*

EASTMAN: It's possible, but it seems ludicrous — I don't want to say ludicrous, because nothing is ludicrous if you put in the context of Tundra, [Groth laughs] but it was an extremely hectic time as well. What we tried to do was to put Mark Martin, Paul Jenkins, and Kelly Meeks in a position where they would handle and control specific key areas of the company for overall better management and structure. Each one was responsible for the staff underneath them, and was to create a system where they could all three productively, and efficiently, interact. They would have their own meetings and structure-wise smooth out all the bumps, so everything would flow.

GROTH: *You actually created department heads.*

EASTMAN: Department heads, exactly. I'm sure whatever I wanted them to create, I also inadvertently derailed. I wouldn't allow an upper or middle class thing at Tundra. I wanted everyone to be equally important, if you will, so if somebody did an end run around a department head, and came to me with a problem, I would be like, "Yeah, yeah. O.K. Let's do that." And that probably helped destroy the power of the department heads. If their employees could come around them and complain about something that was being done, for whatever good reason that department head was trying to institute a set of rules and parameters and laws, I was breaking it down, I wouldn't be surprised if that was how that happened. But I don't think anyone specific destroyed it. I would probably say I did.

GROTH: *Kelly Meeks is who Steve I think was hinting at as sabotaging it.*

EASTMAN: Ooh. Really? I'm not seeing that at all...

GROTH: *No?*

EASTMAN: No. I'd be surprised. I'd be very surprised. I don't see why, because Kelly was one of the key advocates to have a structure. I don't see why he'd act that way and I think Steve is way off on this one.

HOLLYWOOD BOOKKEEPING

GROTH: *Here's something Steve said that's actually less lunatic and more serious. He referred to "Hollywood Bookkeeping" going on at Tundra. He said, "After the fact, when I got all the accounting on Taboo, I was finally allowed to see the books. And then I went in for my meeting with Kevin to pay back what had been invested. I saw things there like ads in Billboard Magazine being charged to the Lovecraft project. Hollywood Accounting was obviously happening at that point." [Eastman laughs] "I have no way of verifying this, but the ads in Billboard suggested that losses they had taken in the Tundra music division, they were going to have a record division, were being scattered in the bookkeeping, affixed to projects that had failed or had been abandoned."*

EASTMAN: Absolutely not. I would say one, there wasn't Hollywood bookkeeping, and two, there wasn't any cross-collateralization between the ads in *Billboard* relating to some other company that was now being billed to Steve's project. What most likely happened in this case that is that Phil Nutman was running all the ads, ad placement and PR-related stuff. There would be instances where, on a specific advertising situation, there may be two or three Tundra projects listed in the same ad. The process was supposed to be this. If there was going to be an ad advertising three different projects going into *Billboard*, or *Cinefantastique* or wherever, the creators had to agree that their money would be spent, and they would approve to sharing the cost of a third of that ad. And that "third" share would be billed to their project. We ended up having some difficulty [because] Phil Nutman, for a variety of reasons, was not processing the paperwork through, probably not getting approvals, probably not getting correct documentation, and was piecing it together after the fact. So, we had a rule that if it was questioned, and you could ask a lot of creators, if they questioned certain things, and we couldn't reach an agreement, it was taken off the account, and Tundra would eat the cost as it was considered Tundra's fault for not getting proper approval. This type of thing happened several times, which is why Phil eventually was let go. But no, my losses on Tundra U.K., Tundra Studios and Tundra Publishing were kept apart.

GROTH: *So how do you account for Steve seeing a Billboard ad assigned to the Lovecraft project?*

EASTMAN: Mainly because there was a Lovecraft ad in *Billboard*. I can show you the ad! Then what I would assume is that

John Paresky, who was our key accountant, tracked the projects and assigned costs to them based on what paperwork different departments gave him. Say for example, when ads were done, Phil Nutman would have to pass information back to Paresky, saying, "I got approval from three creators to do this ad for *Billboard* which then would be divided up among these three projects." That was handed on a form back to John Paresky, so John Paresky could then attribute that cost to the project. And I would guess either one, it was a misunderstanding, or two, Phil did it without approval, or three, back to one, it was probably a misunderstanding. I wouldn't do Hollywood Accounting. I had certainly been "there" and I despised it. I could see where selecting that memory and having that perspective I'm sure helps him sleep better. I think at this point, there's no better explanation and I apologize to Steve. Unless Steve was the accountant and looking over Paresky's shoulder, that could have been an honest mistake. But all the creators had complete access, as timely as we could get the paperwork from accounting, to look at all of the costs attached to their project at any time. Hell, we were trying to get them to approve costs before hand. We tried to make it 100% accessible. I felt I had nothing to hide and we wanted it to be that open. Again when you've got 70 projects going through, there could be a few mistakes, right?

GROTH: *Yeah, yeah.*

EASTMAN: Again, sorry, Steve.

GROTH: *I feel like I'm just hammering away at you. but the overriding question in my mind is "How could this happen?" How could this and this and this and this happen and continue to happen?*

EASTMAN: It's a fascinating study in my inability and patheticness. [laughter] No. Seriously, this happened because I allowed it to happen. I wish it had turned out differently, but it's my bed and I'll sleep in it. And I don't regret anything. I was bitter for a time, but I'm not [now]. I'm actually glad for what I learned there. I'm proud of a lot of the things we did, book-wise. In hindsight, I think Dave Sim, I actually went to Dave Sim when I was putting together Tundra, and I proposed the idea of Tundra, I was supposed to go stay in Kitchener for a couple of nights to visit and talk and go over some of this brilliant concept I had in mind, a 100% creator approved company run by a very successful "one of them." Ten minutes into my pitch, he said, "You should make your plane arrangements to leave now." And I think I called him a narrow-minded, something-something or other because I wanted him to believe that Tundra was a good thing and this was something he should support and that it was giving creators' rights, and it was honest, and it was going to be done under the Bill of Rights and under this noble cause, and he basically said, "You know what? For better or for worse, I'll give you my blessings, but don't do it." He said, "*Don't do it.*" If hindsight was 20/20 I wish I had done something like Pete had done, which is the Xeric Foundation. It would have been something that would be still around today. It would be benefiting the struggling creator today.

GROTH: *Dave is probably not the best person from whom to seek advice about starting a publishing company. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: No...

GROTH: *He thinks all publishers are evil by definition.*

EASTMAN: I think he said, probably, "Look, why don't you give these guys each a bunch of money and let 'em publish their own book. And if it makes profit, they'll give you some back."

GROTH: *I'm sure that he would have considered you much more evil if you had succeeded. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Probably. Probably. But perhaps he's wiser and has been around the block. Maybe he knew it was doomed all along.

HANGING OUT

GROTH: *I want to give you a chance to reply to something else Bissette observed.*

EASTMAN: Please. He's batting pretty good right now.

GROTH: *And voluminously.*

EASTMAN: It's a pretty good average right now. He doesn't sound like he was that fucked up, but that's a whole other long debate.

GROTH: *He said, "Tundra never quite understood what went wrong with Neil Gaiman. A couple of things went wrong. I saw some of what occurred first-hand. One thing is Neil would show up at the office and Kevin wouldn't be there after arranging a meeting. This is when Neil still lived in England. Here he is, coming in from England, and the person he's there to meet isn't there. That's a problem." [laughs]*

EASTMAN: Well, if that's true and could be verified without having the amazing power to go back in time and see how that exactly played out, I can't say for sure. It was creators in and out of that building constantly. Steve and Rick were doing stuff there all the time with all levels of staff and they would bring people in left and right, throughout the whole process. Christ, they knew and seemed to hang out with everyone. If Neil had set up a meeting with me and I blew him off, I don't recall — if I did, I apologize to Neil. But I really don't recall that specifically happening. I was very fond of the creators, I was very fond of Neil. He still gives the ol' bear hug when I see him today. Neil used to come to Northampton because he liked Susan. [laughs] That's not going to surprise anyone who used to work for Tundra in those days, but for Neil's sake, we better strike that comment!

GROTH: *Ah! [laughs]*

EASTMAN: No, to be honest, I really don't recall blowing Neil off like that.

GROTH: *It probably didn't really make any difference that you didn't take the meeting, while Susan was there. [Eastman laughs]*

EASTMAN: Everybody had a crush on Susan.

GROTH: *When I dwelled on that passage, I was worried about coming to L.A.*

EASTMAN: That I would not be here when you showed up? [laughs]

GROTH: *It was in the back of my mind.*

EASTMAN: Oh, funny, funny.

Like I said, I apologize to Neil if that's in fact what happened.

SEX SELLS

GROTH: *I heard a rumor years ago that you were going to start a line of X-rated comics. Is that true?*

EASTMAN: That's absolutely true.

GROTH: *Tell me little about that. What prompted that, what was it going to be, and why was it going to be?*

EASTMAN: Sex sells, man.

GROTH: *Really? [laughter] I better look into that.*

EASTMAN: Would you? I was thinking of calling the company Eros, and you know...

GROTH: *I could have sold you a profitable porn comics company that you could have turned into an unprofitable one within weeks.*

EASTMAN: It was my personal taste in comics coming up through the company. No, I'm kidding. Actually, it started probably similarly perhaps to how — or maybe not — to how Eros may have started. Through my connections with foreign publishers through *Heavy Metal*, there was the stuff that we couldn't print, because we "knew our audience": they wanted stuff that was sexy, but not too explicitly sexy. And then at the same time, marketing and distribution-wise, that... if there's too much sex in *Heavy Metal*, we get put behind the counter at certain places with the sophisticates as "adults only," and it hurts sales. We also sell a lot of copies of *Heavy Metal* in Canada, and they have really strict pornography laws, which is weird because you can't ship them in from the States, but you can buy the same pornography shipped in from other countries. So we didn't want to taint that audience.

So anyway, through that exposure, I was seeing all this stuff that would appeal to a specific audience that hung on the *Heavy Metal* fringe. *Druuna* is brilliant but we had to censor quite a lot and even then we would barely get it through Customs. Manara's stories we had to censor quite a lot, and there was a lot of other material by very talented artists that I thought was erotica, not porno. And thought it was definitely worth publishing. So I started this sub-line called "Diva." And we took on a couple things, I'm trying to think what actually came out: *Flesh Wounds*, a book called *Flesh Wounds* by Mike Maldonado.

GROTH: *I'm not sure I heard of that.*

EASTMAN: We had others. *Naughty But Nice* and *Secret Passages* were two other hardcover books we came out with, which were basically direct European material. And we had a few other things that we were looking at. *Cherry Poptart* we looked at and actually did, I think, a couple of *Cherry Poptart* issues.

GROTH: *Right, right. Could've saved Tundra. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: No comment. I don't know what would have saved Tundra.

HIEARCHIES AND ANARCHY

GROTH: *I'm trying to get a sense of just how Tundra functioned structurally and what the hierarchy there was, and what the bureaucracy was like. And one thing that occurred to me when I was reading some of the minutes of the meetings that I have, is that there seemed to be this encroaching fear and desperation on the part of your employees. And this emerges throughout the minutes of the meetings with regards to Tundra's financial losses.*

My inference from reading these things is that no one person was in charge of Tundra's financial decision-making. But I realize that can't be true because you were obviously in charge of it.

EASTMAN: Right.

GROTH: *But there's a sense throughout these meetings because of the comments in them that the company was either a complete anarchy or a communal economy. I can give you a couple of just examples of what I mean. These are quotes taken from minutes of the meetings which I assume are in turn quotes or paraphrases taken during the meetings' discussions. One of them is from May 28, 1991, and says, "There was a great deal of discussion of how projects were selected for production. It was proposed to the group that the costs of a particular project should be as equally important as the project's artistic value in deciding whether to do a project or not." Another one reads, "It was brought up that it does not make good business sense to keep losing money." [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Rocket science there.

GROTH: *Yeah. Another one is: "Theoretically, a print run should never be less than a break-even number. It has come to the attention of team members that we have produced books that even if Tundra sold every copy, Tundra would lose money." Another one is: "It has been brought to the attention of the team, that out of eight books that were printed in 1990, only three of them could possibly make money, and that's only if all of the copies were sold." And one last one says, "It was discovered that in certain cases, Tundra was actually losing money on each book we sell." [laughs]*

Now, the references are always in the plural — as in "we" and "the team" and "the team members." If the company wasn't an employee-owned company — which it wasn't — I don't understand why the employees were involved in handwringing over the losses. Wouldn't it have been your job to fret?

EASTMAN: Yes and no...

GROTH: *So why were they...?*

EASTMAN: I had a very open door. A very open mind. I felt that if you were me, or if you were somebody that was *lugging* boxes around the warehouse, you were part of the company, and it was sort of communal in a sense that it's "all for one, and let's all work together and do everything we can to make this work." That kind of team spirit, I guess. It's not brain surgery to have, say, your straw bosses who are getting print quotes and pre-press quotes, and your PR people, who are getting ad budgets and ad quotes, meshing that all together with the actual orders being received, to not being able to figure out that the book was seriously losing

money. I guess I felt that knowledge is power. That I was very open with problems like we weren't getting enough accurate information assembled prior to agreeing to do a book, of a break-even scenario or a total cost involved in doing a book before agreeing to do it. As I clearly stated earlier, I would see something at a convention, or see something presented to me, or it was pitched by an artist or a creator, and yeah, I really love that, and yes, we're going to do that. And bring it in house and pass it on and say, "Here, make this happen. And by the way, would you make it sell a hundred thousand copies as well?" When the straw bosses evolved into department heads, I wanted them to have more power in trying to create policies in how something was brought in. [By this time] things are seriously bleeding and hemorrhaging expenses into year two when we would bring a project in, we'd look at it, I would have Mark Martin or Paul Jenkins or whoever do evaluations of what it would cost to do pre-press, what it would cost to print it in the style and format the creator wanted it to be seen in. We'd put an ad budget on it, and then run some numbers, and say, "These are all the costs that we can come up with attached to this project, and we'd have to sell x-amount of copies to break even and go into profit." And now we could look at it, and say, "Do we think this book will accomplish that or not?" Half the time, depending on the results, I would then destroy their system by saying, "Well, fuck it." I see the numbers in front of me, I don't see this making a profit, but it's a worthwhile book to do, and really should be done. Let's do it anyway." I think the sort of communal aspect that you're referring to just came out of them really trying to make it work under my dictatorship.

GROTH: *Did you continually express your frustration at your economic hemorrhaging?*

EASTMAN: Oh, I'm sure.

GROTH: *Your employees were well aware...*

EASTMAN: But I think a lot of it was in reference to, it sounds funny [laughs] as I'm saying it... [laughter] I'm sure you've had to deal with this before. But why the fuck didn't this book sell more copies?

GROTH: *Sure.*

EASTMAN: It's brilliant! This is something that should have done 20-, 30-, 40,000 copies. I mean, *Madman* as an example. That was a project that we took on because we loved Mike Allred's artwork, his story, his premise, his concept this was a winner. A little trivia here, when he brought it to us, it was called *The Spook*. We took it on for those reasons as well as, equally important, that this is something that is mainstream that's going to sell a lot of books. This is something that is going to hit the audience that's reading superheroes, and this is something that's going to hit the audience that's not reading superheroes. Because they're going to find the humor and the storytelling here. And the first issue didn't even break even. And consecutive issues did less.

I don't think he started doing really well with it until he went to Dark Horse. And then for some reason he started selling a lot more copies.

GROTH: *I assumed that you were the only one who could make decisions that would either make things profitable or at least cut losses. And I was surprised... and of course I don't know who is being quoted, but I assume it's production people, and editors... a variety of people.*

EASTMAN: It's actually what I would call my right-hand people that really believed in Tundra, that really believed it could work, really believed it should work, and despite all my fucking it up, that worked very, very hard to try and make it work. They were raising those issues, people like Mark Martin, Paul Jenkins, and Kelly Meeks. They really put everything they had in it for me. To this day I still got a lot out of them I didn't deserve. If you catch my drift. They poured into it and not until you can step back and look at it that I wish I had the knowledge I have now then, because it probably could have been a bit different.

GROTH: *It sounds to me that you were more distraught over the emotional damage it was inflicting on you than the economic damage.*

EASTMAN: I think that's right, yeah.

GROTH: *It sounds like you were emotionally at the end of your rope rather than economically at the end of your rope.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, it was definitely that. I learned some painful lessons, ones that surprised me. I just... they just surprised me. The emotional side of that. I used to think we were being blackballed by the distributors, that they were purposely, because of me, underordering our books and I'm suffering and the company's suffering, and all the creators are suffering just because of their association with Tundra. And you had that emotional thing. And then there was...

GROTH: *A little creeping paranoia.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] I know. And I wasn't even doing that many drugs, either. [Groth laughs]

GROTH: *Here's something that again I can't quite fathom how this could happen or be allowed to happen. In the minutes of a May 21, 1991 meeting, you record the following. "Cages is presently selling at \$3.50. It has been determined that Tundra loses five cents on every copy of Cages that it sells. Greg will speak with Dave and let him know that Tundra wants to increase the cover price to \$3.95 starting with issue #4." And then a little later, "It has been brought to the attention of the team, that out of eight books that were printed in 1990, only three of them could possibly make money, and that is only if all the copies were sold. It was discovered that in certain cases, Tundra's actually losing money on each book we sell."*

EASTMAN: Right.

GROTH: *Now, it just seems the most rudimentary kind of business practice, to determine if the costs are going to exceed the plausible income.*

EASTMAN: Sure, for the rest of the world.

GROTH: *Who was supposed to do that there? Or why wasn't it done? Because you worked at Mirage, so you had to know that had to be done.*

EASTMAN: Yes, yes. It was — is complicated...

GROTH: *That's just unfathomable to me.*

EASTMAN: It is unfathomable, and I think that... Jesus, you know, I don't know if there's really an explanation beyond the

point that it was another fuck-up. [laughter] I think that what had happened in an instance of something like that, is that we got, supposedly, all the costs related to a specific project, then we did a “break even” for projects to try and confirm the validity of doing them, but not until the last part of year one. So in the early days the conceptual projections, break-evens vs. actuals were not in-line. We missed things and miscalculated many more. Like for example, say if we got a pre-press quote for a book, it didn’t account for it having to be corrected three times, attaching additional costs to the project. This was an important creator issue for us, and I’m not referring to any specific high-quality book, we sent all of them proof sheets that they pored over and approved. Often times we’d do one set of proofs which was x-amount of dollars. And they would come back from the creator with corrections. “This is too light, this is too dark. Fix this, change that, so on and so on.” That’s another cost, another separation and more costs. The reality of knowing that if you price the book at \$3.50, knowing you’re selling at 50-60% off to distributors, and you budgeted and solicited at a competitive market price, but you didn’t account for an approval process that would allow the creator to adjust it multiple times to correct it to his or her standards, as a cost factor. That then piled on cost after cost to the book that you’ve already advertised for at a set price. Also, I think, as well as we could, we would promote a book on an approved budget, but say we budgeted a thousand or fifteen hundred dollars for advertising, but the book sold only 3000 copies. “All right, let’s bump up the advertising and we’ll eat the additional cost, because one, the creator is not going to approve any more costs related to this project, although they are going to look at us and say, ‘You must have done something wrong, because my book’s not selling right. It’s certainly not me and my book, it’s that you’re not publicizing it in the right way.’” So we’d say, “All right, we’ll eat the costs and put out some additional ads to really bring the right attention to it, and that hopefully will help it make the difference.” So a lot of these actuals that were probably discussed in this meeting were those kinds of additional expenses — ads and what not — that put the project into a losing money on a per-issue basis situation. We didn’t factor that; and that’s part of the growth, you know? The dreadful learning curve.

GROTH: *Well, there are some projects that you actually spent more money promoting than what they grossed.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, we were desperate, as in “we’re here, we’re here, we’re here!”

GROTH: *A really blatant example is that you actually paid Mike Allred \$12,000 as an advance for an issue of Madman.*

EASTMAN: Mm-hm.

GROTH: *And according to your own figures, which I think are conservative, you would have to sell 20,000 copies to break even. But you only printed 13,000.*

EASTMAN: Because that’s what we had orders for —

GROTH: 6500.

EASTMAN: Right.

GROTH: *So you couldn’t possibly have broken even on that.*

EASTMAN: No. In our evaluations, we tried to estimate what we thought the industry standard for this kind of more mainstream book might be, how many we’d have to print, and how many we’d have to break even. We felt that the book would easily go beyond 20,000 copies and it didn’t. The standard policy that we tried to uphold was that we’d print double the initial orders, assuming that once it went out there that people would fall in love with it, and it would sell out in reorders, and perhaps even go into a second printing. So by the time you commission the work, pay Mike, you’ve done your projections, he’s gotta turn in several issues before you want to solicit for book #1 if you want to keep it on a regular schedule. So we’d already invested fifty thousand dollars. So we bum out over the low initial orders, but it’s a point where we’re like, “Yes, we’ll lose money but, we still love *Madman* and it will catch on. The world still loves *Madman*. *Madman*’s still out there and will be coming soon to a theater near you!” It’s a chance I took on a book that I loved and believed in and wanted to do it in an industry preferred timely fashion. We had to invest what we had to invest, and it lost money.

GROTH: *Looking at it from the outside during the time, I heard all the rumors that you were losing money, and I realized just looking at the books you were putting out you had to be losing money, and I just figured that you planned on losing money. In fact, I assumed you had the kind of scenario as was in Citizen Kane, if you remember the famous line in Citizen Kane —*

EASTMAN: — haven’t seen that in years —

GROTH: — *Welles just bought a newspaper, and the accountant comes up to him and says, “You know, you’re losing a million dollars a year on this newspaper.” And Orson Welles turns to him and says, “Yes, that’s right. We’re losing a million dollars this year, and we’ll lose a million dollars next year. At that rate, I can keep running this newspaper for the next 92 years.” [Eastman laughs] And the accountant frowns disapprovingly.*

EASTMAN: It’s like the “legend” of Howard Hughes in a way... and you should have seen the look on my accountant’s face through out those years! Horrified!!

GROTH: *I figured that’s pretty much what your attitude was, that you planned on losing money, and figured you were going to lose money, but looking through the minutes of these meetings, there seemed to be an increasing panic within the company.*

EASTMAN: Well, first off let me say that the intention was that I knew that to start up this company in a first class, all-around way — even under the initial concept and business plan that had been put together of starting slowly, a few projects, so-on and so-on, that there would be definitely a certain amount of investment that would be considered a “capital infusion” into a new corporation. I expected that to become the “asset foundation.” I also expected to invest a definite and sizable amount of recoupable cash to launch a publishing line. I don’t want to say I had an exact figure in mind at that time, but I didn’t think it would be an insane investment. Maybe a few million dollars to bring the kind of top-level creators in the business to do projects and to have the capital to do it right. If you’re doing a 12-issue series, you’ll want to have four to six issues in the can before you start soliciting them. So there would have to be a variety of “up-front” investments. Project wise, the same — there would be a sizable up-front investment that would then be recouped when the books sold, and as well as we would share in the profits of those books to support everything else. But as I said, in

year one, I blew the fuck out of that concept when I had already taken on too many projects, and the financial commitments were extensive on all levels to support it. At the same time, the *Turtles* were still doing financially very, very well. And I said, “You know what? This is within the realm of my financial ability to support this until it takes off.” Again, always hoping and believing that it would take off and be a self-supporting publishing entity. That it would then be able to be supported by the profits of the projects that were produced. At year two, as the investment got bigger, we had to up the staff to support the number of projects, we tried experiments — again, all of which I felt [were] justified, [such as] Tundra U.K., which would help the business grow and become profitable, and the pre-press company would help the business cut its costs. [We were] looking at trying to synergize and link together a number of companies that could ultimately all work together and succeed together. One by one, they broke down, and I’m sure I was panicking as much as anybody else. I think there were people in the company that still believed in the company that were starting to fear for their jobs, and wondering how long can Kevin keep this up at this level of investment. At the same time they’re hearing from me, saying, “Every one of our books is selling one quarter of the projections I thought they would, what the fuck is going on here?” It certainly can’t be me that made all of these bad calls! But it was, and now we’ve got to figure out ways that could work. Or break open a new market which lead to “what’s the industry looking for” and that’s the direction to take the company in, as opposed to letting creators’ projects direct company. So we looked at more superhero stuff, and other things that were selling. Stuff that was working out there because no one wants what we’re doing and, those projects may be able to offset the losses on some of the artists’ book that we really want to do but can’t afford to do. So, I said, “Well, let’s try to create a scenario where 50% of the line would be profitable enough to help support 25% of the things we’re doing that would only break even and, perhaps there’d be enough profit left over to support another 25% which were done just because, “Goddammit, these books just have to be done even though they will never make money, like *Marat*- [pause].

GROTH: Marat/Sade.

EASTMAN: *Sade!* Thank you, I’m getting tongue-tied. *The Marat/Sade Journals* was taken on because it was just simply the most beautiful book I’d ever seen. There was no way in hell that book was ever going to make money and I knew it from day one.

So I felt, “This seems to be a solid plan, let’s call it ‘law.’” And then, everyone panicked, me including. It was like, “Let’s try to stabilize, let’s try to stop the bleeding now. I know, I know I fucked up, I know that I took too much on or whatever, but let’s try to fix what we’ve got.” It was irreparable at that point, going down for the third time and I ran for a KSP lifeboat.

KSP TO THE RESCUE

GROTH: *One obvious solution occurs to me, which would have been to have downsized. Reduce your ambitions down to the company’s original plan: five, ten, 15 titles... was that ever an option you considered?*

EASTMAN: Around that time I said to myself, “O.K. Yes. That is what we should do.” I know this will probably sound ludicrous, it does to me even saying it — I’d given my word to a number of people to support their projects. For the ones that it did really mean the world to. And they were turning the stuff in on time, and were desperately hoping Tundra would really work despite my shortcomings. They realized that this was an amazing shot for them, and they had a chance to be published and fulfill a dream. To me, that strength and that belief in those few helped me overlook, say, some of the less caring ones. Around that time, I knew that downsizing and acting more like a traditional publisher in a sense would help, but I still wanted to maintain part of the dream that we initially started out with, *a la* the Creators’ Bill of Rights, but to do it in a little more realistic way. This was also around the time I started talking to Denis Kitchen, and felt that, literally the merger of the two... if these two companies were pulled together... I would then have a person that wants to be a publisher that will take over the publisher/director/presidential duties that I’m one, doing badly, and two, be willing to spend the kind of time, in my opinion, to do them correctly. Plus, he had the respect of a lot of creators in the industry. So I would pull the two together and use Denis as the way to say, “Look, we got off on the wrong foot and now we’re going to look at this realistically. Here’s a guy we all know can do it.” We’ll then let Denis decide what projects stayed, what projects went, what staff stayed, what staff went, what location the business would be in, and I would commit to two, or three things. One is financial support. Like \$1.5 million for the first year, to allow him to make the transition as well as to competitively bid for previously financially out-of-his-reach top talent and projects he thought he would solidly rebuild Kitchen Sink/Tundra into an industry power. Then a half a million dollars for year two as padding for mistakes, and further project investment.

GROTH: *How much for year two?*

EASTMAN: Five hundred thousand. Additionally, I would, if there were any projects that Denis said he did not want to do for financial or creative or editorial reasons, and they were something that I personally wanted to see completed, then I would fund [them] personally, off to the side, out of my own pocket.

GROTH: *What were you funding with the \$2 million? One-point-five million in the first year and five hundred thousand in the second? What was that supposed to fund?*

EASTMAN: That was supposed to fund the re-structuring/stabilization, acquiring profitable properties, that he could pay people like Mark Schultz a more standard industry fair page rate, for a change, or if he wanted to bring a talent in from another company that could produce a better-selling, profitable book for his company, that he would have the resources to do that. That was my commitment to the new company.

GROTH: *Jesus. Well, that proved ultimately disastrous. Because nothing of Tundra remained, I don’t think.*

EASTMAN: What do you mean? There was a lot of Tundra that remained.

GROTH: *What books remained?*

EASTMAN: There was *Captain Sternn*, he completed. *The Crow*, he completed, which turned out to be one of his most profitable books. A whole lot of things stayed.

GROTH: *But those were profitable books; they didn't need \$2 million worth of capitalization to continue.*

EASTMAN: No, no, no. A lot of Tundra projects stayed but only a very few became profitable under the Kitchen Sink imprint, to all our frustration. And again, separately the big money losers that I wanted finished were completed. I personally funded the ones I knew would never make money, like the collection of *Rain*. John Bergin's *Bone Saw*. Denis was like, "Send it back to John. I don't want it." And I said, "No, I carried it through this far, and I want to see it done as a collection. And I'll pay for it."

GROTH: *I'm talking on a long-term basis. Once these finite projects were finished, nothing of Tundra remained.*

EASTMAN: Right, after a while nothing that was started by Tundra remained.

GROTH: *Except maybe The Crow. No ongoing series remained.*

EASTMAN: Well, *Captain Sternn* was around for five issues, but, right — everything ended.

GROTH: From Hell *remained for a while. But, of course, that would've been profitable.*

EASTMAN: *Madman* remained for a short period of time before Mike Richardson acquired it. Also a lot of the contracts were not assignable, and Denis had to re-negotiate with many creators to keep them within the company. As you know, everything was intended to favor the creators in my Tundra, so as the president of the new company he must call all the shots. And rightfully so. It was all his now. He wanted to put everything across the board in the "real world." He said that we can't operate under the standard Tundra contract anyway, nobody could. I think even *Madman* was, if it wasn't an 80/20 split, it was definitely a 50/50 split. Denis said that we need to renegotiate with some of these creators to make these work profit wise, and editorially. At this point, Denis had made a selection of what staff stays, what projects stay and what goes. It was his baby, and I'm going to Disney World.

GROTH: *I still don't fully understand what you gave Kitchen two million dollars for. Since it doesn't take two million dollars to move to Northampton and fire people and cancel titles... I'm not sure exactly what that was meant to pay for and why you even did that. You could've canceled titles and fired people for, oh, nothing.*

EASTMAN: It was very straight-forward. I know it may not sound like that, but what I wanted to accomplish was two things. One was to facilitate the move, but that was, in my mind, to be the smallest part of the expense of the relocation. And overall it wasn't a huge expense to relocate. But it was definitely an expense. The most important thing, in all the discussions with Denis, as far as where does the company — companies — go from here, and how do we put it into a position to be successful, one of Denis' complaints was never having the financial resources to be competitive and bid on a certain project page-rate wise, or whatever. To bring, say, more mainstream, successful, typical to what was working in the industry at that time, kinds of projects. So the million and a half that was committed for the first year was for that, to bring in new projects, give the company cash in the bank, a safety net, of four or five or six months, eight months of really bad sales, at least they wouldn't be completely wiped out or strapped for cash where they'd have to start firing people or remaindering books or whatever. But it was really more intended to be for proactive activity of acquiring projects that would be more financially profitable for the company as a whole. Then my thought being that year one, there could be, at least I'd learned through the Tundra years, there were so many surprises, let's have a little padding here, so there was a larger amount in the first year to get situated, take care of any surprises, bring in some new projects, invest in them, because if you're going to do a four issue series on time as our industry demands, you want to get three issues done and in-house before you solicit for it. That takes an investment of three hundred dollars a page, soup to nut, plus pre-press, plus etc., etc. It was for that padding. And then the five hundred thousand dollars for the second year was again assuming that in the first year you'd have stabilization, you'd have investment in new properties. By year two, you'd be launching a lot of things that would be successful so you'd need less money to, say, wrap up some things or invest in a few other new properties. And you'd be on your way.

GROTH: *Does the proposition that you need a lot of money to outbid others for hot-selling properties accord with the aesthetic goals of alternative comics publishing? It's my experience that there's just not a lot of money in alternative comics publishing on either end: the expenditure involved in publishing them or the income derived from publishing them. So, how could Kitchen even have pragmatically and shrewdly spent all this money on alternative comics?*

EASTMAN: I'd agree. And I think Denis knew this, I certainly, at least [laughs] began to realize that you don't need a lot of money for alternative comics. And at the same time, alternative comics aren't selling enough to keep a creator and a publishing company alive. And so if you wanted to put a marquee name — a Simon Bisley cover or a Bill Sienkiewicz cover, or the same "name" artist on the interior of a book, and you have Bill or Simon or an artist of that same caliber that is getting large page rates and large cover rates, and they have their lifestyle and their families or whatever to support, they're going to go to places that pay what they're worth. As opposed to going to somebody that can only pay 'em... pennies on the dollar. If they're used to getting a thousand dollars for a cover, and we can only pay a hundred and they have the same level of bills each month, and the same 30ish days to make it in, it's not a hard choice. So that money was to be used to be competitive.

GROTH: *Now you're talking about a strategy of, for example, putting a Bill Sienkiewicz cover on a book drawn by someone else in order to help sell it?*

EASTMAN: It was some of that, yeah. It seemed to be working for everyone else.

GROTH: *But isn't that...*

EASTMAN: It was trying to be more commercially minded, so you could create a scenario, say, that perhaps if you established an editorial publishing policy that 50 percent of the books published, they'd have to be in a commercial vein that could be profitable so that they could support perhaps the 50 percent of the books would be published for artistic reasons or creative reasons or other reasons. But we'll be O.K., perhaps it will break even. Perhaps the profits will offset the losses from doing other kinds of books. More ground-level books.

So that sounded like a sound business plan at the time.

GROTH: *Now did Kitchen follow through and essentially do what you guys had talked about?*

EASTMAN: To my recollection, yes. To a point. I'm trying to think, I can't actually think of one project that he brought in, commercial or otherwise...

GROTH: *I can't either. That's why I asked. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: That's a good question.

GROTH: *No comics, but a lot of Crow hats.*

EASTMAN: A lot of *Crow* hats. [laughs] *The Crow* was something that was working so do more of it. It was one of the few things that was actually working very, very well. I think a lot of money went into the *Captain Sternn* series that was thought to do very well commercially. I think that only completed work and payment on one of them. And that was a total of five, 48-page books, that were very commercially disappointing. There was the *Crow* stuff. I think there were a couple of other things that were talked about, discussed, internally and with creators that for one reason or another didn't pan out. I can't recall, I kinda bailed A.S.A.P.

GROTH: *Let me make sure I get this straight. In addition to two million dollars that you gave Kitchen within a 13-month period, you actually also paid for the completion of certain projects?*

EASTMAN: That's correct, yeah.

GROTH: *Wow.*

EASTMAN: You know, it's one of those things regarding my commitment for financially disastrous comics that, is it stupid? Maybe. Did I honor my word with people I felt strongly about, like Rolf Stark and John Bergin and I wish I could think of others because there were a few more. Like we completed a couple additional issues of *Trailer Trash*. We completed the final issue or two of *Hyena*, mainly because those were Mark [Martin's] babies, and I really respected what Mark was doing there. I still felt I had to resolve some creative commitments for my peace of mind, and to truly pass the mantle onto a company that was going to fix everything else by acquiring Tundra. Taking over all of its properties, its creators, its staff, and I got the best of both worlds. I had the feeling that I was able to say I kept my word to a number of creators even on things that I knew would lose money, and really sent it on its way with, in my opinion, in the best possible way to succeed.

GROTH: *Let me ask you one important question. It is my understanding that you told people who worked at Tundra that you were going to commit to Tundra for five years. But you actually committed for no more than three years. Susan Alston said, "A lot of people moved from great far away places. The Martins came up from Birmingham, Alabama. People got married, bought houses, had babies, based on the fact that Kevin was going to give it five years. That's what he told me on more than one occasion. Even in January, 1993, before the deal was finished with Kitchen Sink, I specifically asked him in a meeting, "Are you committed to this company for two more years?" And he said, "Yes. Absolutely. I'm in it for the five-year plan."*

EASTMAN: Yie. That's probably something I said. And if I did, I apologize. [laughs] I lied! Just kidding!

GROTH: *Why do you feel like you couldn't commit for another two years?*

EASTMAN: I think at this time I'd just had it. It was end it or die. Really, I felt like I had allowed myself to be drug around behind a truck for a period of time. Although, it was my own decision. I know I was trying to resolve in my own mind, what to do with someone like Mark and Jeannie Martin, who sold their house, moved to the Northampton area, on my word, and I felt fucking awful that I let them down. Kelly Meeks actually left a great job in Maine when he moved to Northampton with the same expectation. My uncle Quentin did the same thing. He moved his whole family. He ended up divorcing shortly thereafter. So I guess I felt like the biggest piece of shit in the universe on a thousand levels. But yes, it's a good question, because at the same time I want to say I felt like I justified all of my actions to see this company on its way the best way I could, and would make everything all better. I did let a lot of people down. And that was wrong.

TUNDRAGATE

GROTH: *Well, let me ask you if I can a few questions about the merger.*

EASTMAN: Sure.

GROTH: *I don't know how you want to characterize it today.*

EASTMAN: It's a Watergate! [laughs]

GROTH: *Tundragate.*

EASTMAN: Tundragate.

GROTH: *Why was there so much weaseling and dissembling about what actually happened? I never understood that. Of course, the more weaseling there was, and the more Kitchen evaded questions, the more interesting it became, the more intriguing it became, and the more buzz there was in the professional community, who realized it couldn't possibly have happened the way the Kitchen press releases said it happened.*

So why all that? I never understood why there was all this smoke and mirrors.

EASTMAN: I would say two things. One is that a contract between two parties can be written to say anything you want it to say. So on the contractual side, a contract was written where Kitchen Sink acquired Tundra. I agreed to a number of provisions, as part of the deal, which we just discussed, funding the company, supporting the company for a period of time. Ownership participation [by me] actually initially was 51%, but for control issues with Denis as president and publisher, we re-worked it so it was actually 49%. Another person, I would like [them] to remain unnamed, took 2%, so it put me at 49%, and Denis had this control position, which I fully supported. That was the whole idea. From that point on, it was simply Denis' baby. Whatever he chose to do for whatever reasons, in early discussions he said — and I agreed — he said we will stage it as Kitchen Sink will acquire Tundra, as we want to make it clear that I am the president, and I am the publisher, and I am now taking over control, so that we can perhaps get over the stigmas of what everybody thought... and was true... Tundra was a fucking nightmare. I wanted Denis to have the full power to try to

straighten it out. Put him in a position of strength to bargain with creators, and deal with it on every level. The world needs to know that he's the guy in charge. I'm not saying this because this is a great opportunity for me to say "Blame it on Denis," but when Denis came in, it was a complete fucking mess, and I was like, "Fuck, man. I'm out of here! And it's all yours. Go, brother. And good luck."

GROTH: *Now Kitchen told me in a letter that this was your idea. [Eastman laughs] What he said was, "Whether it was Quixotic or playful on Eastman's part, or a simple and modest desire to misdirect attention from himself, Kevin asked and required in our contract that our transaction be described as KSP's acquisition of Tundra."*

EASTMAN: I'm not going to say, "Denis, you fucking liar." I will say that my understanding of what we agreed upon, and certainly not wanting to get into a pissing contest, but it was Denis' position from day one that he should come in in this total control capacity and to make it clear up front for PR, creator relations, media attention, whatever, to reinforce his position of strength as president and publisher, that we agreed that this was the best way to word it, so people would know he wasn't a Kevin Eastman puppet.

In fact, when we discussed it, in reality-based detail, again I'm reaching back a few years here, that Denis had just launched *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs* in Hollywood. It was going to be a toy line, it was going to be a TV show, and so on and so on. I vaguely remember discussions saying "Well, no one will think it's completely unrealistic. We will have *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs*, and that's sure to be the next *Turtles*." You know what I mean? That public opinion would be that KSP will have all kinds of money from licensing, and this won't be an issue. You also have to realize that my business frame of mind was thinking that, with my money and Denis' savvy, the company would be properly re-launched, combined with the potential success of the launch of *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs*, if those had both played out, bringing revenue into the company, they would have been theoretically in a very strong position. A stable, financially sound publisher that could compete with some of the biggest, I guess. Denis has always said he was under-capitalized. You are, he is, so having an opportunity to have some real support to compete with all the "market share" publishers, that for the first time in its history, KSP would really be in the game. So, off he went, with my cheering him on. In the meantime, or years later, Denis is saying it was my idea, I'm saying for the record it was his idea. So. [laughter] We can have a big public debate and pull out all kinds of graphs, chart, evidence, and documents to prove who is right, for the one person out there who gives a fuck, my friends, sisters, pets, you know? Who cares? I know Denis keeps very good records, and I'm probably at minimum as big a packrat as Denis is, and I've got very detailed records as well. So we can get a team of specialists in, we can all sort through the papers but probably should end up just arm wrestling for it.

GROTH: *We'll assign an independent counsel to investigate this.*

EASTMAN: Jury of arbitration. Twelve creators, we can get Scott McCloud and Dave Sim on the panel, and ultimately we'd decide it by Denis and I arm wrestling. Then we all get really drunk.

GROTH: *So what really happened, then? Finally, to set the record straight. You bought 51% of Kitchen, and then Kitchen technically bought Tundra?*

EASTMAN: Yeah.

GROTH: *For a dollar or something like that?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. It was, I can't exactly remember but, say I bought 51% (which then as discussed above was adjusted to 49%). Two points were given to another person so that Denis could have control, which was important, but at the same time my lawyers convinced me I should have a strong position, in case he did something really fucked up, and decided to take acid for a year, I could step in and fix things. Which is pretty ludicrous if you think about that concept. Him taking acid and me coming in to fix things. He was brought in to fix them.

GROTH: *At least half of that is ludicrous.*

EASTMAN: Let's wait 'til the polls come in to decide which is the ludicrous one...

GROTH: *Right.*

EASTMAN: So, that's basically how the merger or the acquisition/merger, however you want to put it, and I don't care either way, because it's the same thing, happened. I committed to x-amount of funding, Denis then came in and selected between his own staff, my staff, his own projects, my projects, cleaned house, re-located everything in Northampton, had taken over the commitment to sell and account to creators anything that was in the warehouse so that royalties from previously published books were honored and paid. If there was anything he didn't want, the inventory or that responsibility, at that point it was offered back to the creator to purchase at printing cost, or then, if the creator did not take them back, they were pulped or recycled. He took over the management, completion, re-negotiation, and ongoing interest in projects that he selected for Kitchen Sink from the Tundra library. End of story.

GROTH: *So basically you coughed up two million dollars, plus a fairly substantial amount of money, no doubt, to complete some projects, and in return you got 49% of Kitchen. Essentially.*

EASTMAN: Right.

GROTH: *Was that a good deal for you? [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Sounded like a good deal at the time. In the sense that one, I had a publisher with a 25-year history... was it 25 at that time? No, because they turned 25 during this time. Well, anyway he had a very long history, a well over 20-year history, that was well-respected in the industry. They had a property that was just going Hollywood, that could be financially rewarding. He was willing to come in, was dedicated to the art form, the medium, and he wanted to see some of these projects completed in a fashion that he felt was better structured in logical business terms and that eventually the company, if it was put on the true and narrow road, could possibly be a profitable company, which at that point, I hoped to be bought out for a fair price and perhaps recoup a tiny percentage of my total Tundra/KSP investments. Never expecting to recoup more than a quarter of whatever I'd invested in both at this point, which is about 14 million.

GROTH: *Holy shit.*

EASTMAN: Holy fucking shit. Yes.

It was respectable, yes.

GROTH: *Tundra cost you \$14 million?*

EASTMAN: That's including Tundra U.K., and that's including Tundra Recording Studios, that's including Pro-Media, that's including the investment in the Hollywood company, where we had the affiliation I told you about. The investment in the company in Hollywood alone was a million dollars. It was epic... I was trying to build an empire, and thought I had the skill and the money to do it. For a while there I at least had the money and I watched it all go. All the money I made with the *Turtles*, and I could tell you almost to the penny where every bit of it went, was reinvested in the medium, at least 70%. Which is nice on the one hand, because I can account for it, but extremely sad on the other.

GROTH: *O.K. Well, moving right along. Fourteen months later, Ocean Capital Corporation bought Kitchen Sink. So I guess what I'm... and I don't even know if you can shed any light on this, you gave Kitchen 1.5 million dollars the first year, and committed yourself to a half-million dollars the second year, which apparently he'd blown through.*

EASTMAN: What had happened was that with my luck of all luck, I think that the market started taking a major downturn at this point. The great stigma of Tundra continued on through Kitchen Sink in the sense that projects that creators did for other companies that sold well, for whatever reasons, sold a lot less through Kitchen Sink/Tundra. Even things that Denis took on fairly confident that they would be profitable were not profitable. The company continued to lose money at a fairly alarming rate. There was a learning curve of merging the two staffs, there was some people he brought from Wisconsin that ultimately ended up departing, which caused production gaffes and problems. There was definitely a lot more holes than he anticipated, the bleeding continued, the money flew out the door. It was hard. I think he tried very valiantly to stop the bleeding.

GROTH: *You refer to a downturn in the market at about the same time as Kitchen and Tundra merged. And that the new Kitchen company continued to lose money notwithstanding the fact that he was canceling unprofitable books and so on. Nonetheless, how could Kitchen have lost two million dollars in 18 months even with a bit of a market downturn? That strikes me as utterly impossible.*

EASTMAN: If you... [laughs] Well, we did it, Goddamnit. [Groth laughs] No, of course...

GROTH: *But he was supposed to not do it. That was the whole point of his taking over Tundra.*

EASTMAN: I think some of the problems Denis faced as well as he probably traveled down some of the roads I did with respect to, say, if you do a series of color books that you're paying respectable industry standard marquee name creator prices for. Which then brings expensive printing and expensive pre-press, so what you lose on something like that you lose big, and if you want to blame it on a downturn of the market, I guess there was one. Either way, they just didn't sell. That if you looked at it in the sense that books he thought that would really sell well, didn't sell at all, or very little, and so you combined the two and the losses were epic. You know? That's where I thought he ended up with some of that left-over Tundra residue or bad apple stigma that you would literally lose money just about on every book sold. Perhaps it wasn't evaluated properly, perhaps the break-evens weren't done properly...

GROTH: [laughs] *The Tundra curse!*

EASTMAN: This is the Tundra curse, continued. [laughter] So if you look at like, say, five... I'm sure that Denis could cut you a deal on a bunch of *Captain Sternns* that are still in the warehouse. I figured that each *Captain Sternn* issue lost thirty thousand dollars or more per issue, times five, I mean, bam! You're over a hundred thousand dollars in fucking losses right there. Believe me, Tundra cost me \$14 million. I was aware of every penny I was losing. And it's amazing how quick it goes. It's like, it's like a rock star with a nasty coke habit. It's like, "Fuck. Where did all my royalties go?" It's scary.

THE NEW KITCHEN

GROTH: *Whose decision was it to move to Northampton?*

EASTMAN: Denis'. He had lived in Wisconsin for a long time. He felt that for the way that his company was moving business wise, that the option of being close to New York, close to Boston, was important, as was the quality of life, time for a change, all of the above reasons. He just felt that it was time for him to leave Wisconsin and try out Massachusetts. Besides, he liked our offices, which I'd spent a fortune on. I don't know if you've ever been to his Wisconsin [offices], they were beautiful as well. They had a great barn that was really beautiful, and in this rural country side plot that he owned. So anyway, it was his decision to come. So at a point when my commitment of two years worth of income had been used, it was my decision to either come up with more money to fund it or say, "Find your own sources to keep the company alive, or continue to downsize, do whatever you need to do to restructure this entity so it can continue. It's your baby." I had shoved in his lap, so to speak, from day one when he set foot in Northampton. Prior to packing his trucks in Wisconsin the contract was signed as a done deal. So, the company's back in a tough spot and he talked to a number of investors that he had an association with in Hollywood, without much luck. I had an attorney that had done a lot of work with the *Turtles* that had connections with investors, so I introduced this attorney to Denis, and Denis negotiated the deal he ended up with, with Ocean Capital. All I agreed to was that I had a position of stock, and to restructure this company to bring in other shareholders my stock was required to be diluted down, it went from 49% to, eventually, five or less percent.

GROTH: *Forty-nine percent of nothing —*

EASTMAN: — is nothing! Yeah. But Ocean Capital came in, and they were like, "We love what you're doing. We love the projects. We love the possibilities. We have offices in Hollywood. We see ways that this could be a big thing, with your library, so on and so on. We're going to give you financial support, and get behind this and give this the push that's going to put it over the top. They saw all possibilities, in publishing and a world of possibilities within Hollywood. They had *The Crow*, which was going great at this time. Kitchen Sink made three to four million dollars off of *Crow* merchandise I understand from the occasional report I would get

from my lawyer, who I had proxied to sit in on the Board of Directors meetings. *The Crow* was a very profitable program they put together. Denis and Scott Hyman created this merchandising and support program that was unparalleled to anything Hollywood had ever seen. They were putting out t-shirts and posters, and they had deals with Musicland, and they were getting penetration into bookstores now with the *Crow* graphic novels, and they were selling them by the truckload. To a company like Ocean Capital, which says, "Holy shit almighty! Look how smart we are! We'll take things like *Captain Sternn*, *From Hell*, whatever, and those things can be shopped in Hollywood and potentially become hugely profitable vehicles, then you can take the company public and everyone just bathes in money." You know what I mean? And ultimately —

GROTH: *But this was all an illusion, right?*

EASTMAN: Yes and no. An illusion in the sense that what I've learned in Hollywood, trying to launch some of my own properties since the *Turtles*, and you'd think that some "kid" with a track record like mine could sell anything. Like, "I did the *Turtles* and so my next thing is probably going to be amazing." Needless to say, I've never sold anything. It takes months and months of development. I developed this project *Underwhere* and did this deal with Sony Wonder Entertainment and for four years that project went fucking nowhere. They wouldn't commit money, there were contractual misunderstandings, it was labeled as dead in the water and no way am I going to fuck around with Sony's army of lawyers. So to put together anything, fast track deal wise, is a joke, unless you're Spielberg. It's an absolute miracle that any movie ever gets made in Hollywood, if you consider the fucking suits in these corporations that lamely try to justify their salary by stomping all over anything that comes through the door.

My philosophy on Hollywood suits is that if "you don't make a decision, you can never get fired." What you do is, as you arrive in an executive a position, and say you're getting a hundred thousand dollars a year, a car, phone and benefits from Company A, you run around for a year, trying to look good, and if you never make a decision, you can't get fired. But if before that year is up and before they really figure out you're not doing anything, what you do is you go over to Company B, and you tell them anything good that ever came out of Company A, you did. Then you make the jump to Company B, with a higher salary, keep your car and your car phone, and you're alive in Hollywood for another year.

So the point is that the development term on projects is huge. Years, years... *Forrest Gump* was kicking around for six years, I understand.

GROTH: *Did the Ocean Capital Corporation not realize this, not understand this? Weren't they insiders in this field, so that they should have known?*

EASTMAN: They should have known. I honestly believe that they tried to look at it realistically, but they also tried to believe that they could perhaps speed things up by saying, "Look, it's the company partially owned by the *Turtles* guy so there's some successful clout, and we've got some additional clout with investor-types, and we've all got a few projects that have been successful in the entertainment industry, and we've got *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs*, and we've got this *Crow* thing happening. We've got tons of other stuff here. Come on, we're taking bids!" They got some bids, and got in development, and it got turned around, and their plan to launch a bunch of projects, and take the company public was really shaping up. It seemed to be working. Christ, they had *From Hell* at Touchstone for a while, and something else was over here, and they had *The Crow* with Paramount, which then went to Miramax, and then they had all these things coming together. It just seemed like a natural vehicle for them to take it public, raise a whole lot of capital, and really go into the 21st century with this amazing company. All the while, losses continued at the company, they were unable to stabilize, and Denis was caught up in a corporate nightmare. At minimum, they thought these projects would only take nine months to negotiate and get underway because in Hollywood everybody says, "Yes, this is great! Let's do it!" So KSP has to fork money out of their own pockets, to protect their project rights, and corporate shares, and keep the company going, until some of these things hit. Then, as bad luck continued, deal after deal sort of fell through. The company was then forced to restructure further with another financial corporation thing.

GROTH: *Thing is the right word.*

EASTMAN: Eventually, Disappearing Inc. stepped in and the company was saved.

GROTH: *A great name for a company that's been disappearing regularly for the last three or four years...*

EASTMAN: A great name sure, as good as any. [laughs] I was forwarded some documents saying that the company was being sold and they legally had to send me notice. I had an interest and a share in the company that was nothing at this point. It was just a letter saying, this means it was taken over... goodbye. So Denis for the third time has backers, has people funding his company, and believing in him to carry on with it.

GROTH: *What was your involvement, if any, with Kitchen after you sold it? Did you still remain in contact? Were you involved in any way?*

EASTMAN: Little or none. I mean, I was at least aware of the damage I had done in the Quentin years, if you will, or even in the department head years where if I had any say, there wasn't one person that was in control. Except me screwing stuff up so I would do damage to that person's ability to be an active president. So if Denis made a decision "yes," it was "yes." And if Denis made a decision "no," it was "no." He was the final line. You know what I mean? The line had to be drawn there. I hung around the Kitchen Sink/Tundra scenario mainly to see through some of the projects that I personally funded there were a number of projects once Denis had decided, "Yes, I want to continue with these Tundra books under the Kitchen Sink imprint. And these I don't." And if I had already invested, say, one, a substantial amount of money in them, and two, still wanted to see them done for personal reasons, I hung around to see those books through. But I would deal with an editor, I would deal with whoever, just to see it through. The front office, when a bill came in related to the pre-press on one of those projects, they would pass the bill to me and I would pay it. But as far as direct involvement, there was little or no hands-on... Denis was a friend and a publisher from Wisconsin. So when I would see him, sometimes it would be for a beer. Or go to lunch, and just say, "Well, how's everything going?" I think, at a time that I sort of started

getting down on Denis' shit is when things weren't panning out. It's like you've gone through...

GROTH: *When did you realize things weren't panning out?*

EASTMAN: I'm taking a wild guess at probably... maybe a year into it?

GROTH: *A year after...*

EASTMAN: The year after he took over. Maybe a little less, but I can realistically say it was about a year.

GROTH: *And what would you mean by "not panning out"? How was it supposed to "pan out"?*

EASTMAN: Well, that the company would be publishing books that would be more profitable, that would offset expenses to run an expensive office.

GROTH: *And you realized at that point that was not happening.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, that it wasn't happening.

GROTH: *Of course, you weren't at any risk, but was it disappointing that it wasn't happening?*

EASTMAN: It was disappointing and frustrating. I'm sure as much for Denis as it was for me. Again...

GROTH: *Well, you still owned 49% of the company.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, I owned 49% of the company, exactly, and I saw my ownership participation in KSP as one of those business practices that is good to have, to have an ownership if Kitchen Sink become something, majorly successful, if I wanted to sell it, I could recoup a percentage of my losses overall at Tundra, and my capital investment at KSP.

GROTH: *Which would have been nice — to recoup something from Tundra.*

EASTMAN: Which would have been nice. Yeah. I kept thinking [laughs] each time after that, at the time I realized Denis had gone through my commitment to the company, and I wasn't willing to subsidize it any more, he was on his own. It would have to go into another investment company situation by taking over ownership of stock, at which point my piece was steadily diluted down to nil. Even in those transitional days of going from one scenario to the next, I still wanted to see it survive. And probably believed that more and more as time went on that I wasn't going to see that money back anyway, and it was just a matter of KSP's survival or not.

GROTH: *Now why did you agree to continually dilute your ownership, through one sale after the other?*

EASTMAN: Mainly to support Denis. To support Kitchen Sink.

GROTH: *I'm sorry, how would that have accomplished that?*

EASTMAN: Because I could have been a real asshole, and said, "No, I don't want to dilute my stock down to that. No, I want a bigger percentage." I was removing myself from it and said, "Look, whatever you need to do to close this deal, to get people that are willing to spend money and invest money, into the company, is good for the company. The company will be capitalized, and it will continue on until it gets out of this rut, if you will, to something that would be successful. But I said, "O.K., I'm not going to make any waves, just do it. Just do what you can to see that it's going to survive." Now I'm not getting x-amount in return when it's taken public, I'm only getting a third of that, but a third of that is better than a third of nothing. [Groth laughs] And then a third of a third is a third... you know. I just wanted to see it survive.

GROTH: *Were you essentially giving up ownership for nothing? I assume you weren't being compensated...*

EASTMAN: No, I wasn't paid for them. When you re-organize the stock percentages of who owns what stock, it gets diluted so new investors can own bits. I was willing to do what it took so, you start at 49, and then you do a deal where you end up at 20, and then somebody else comes in and it's further diluted, and then suddenly you're down to five, and then whatever.

GROTH: *Let me just re-capitulate what seems to an outsider like me this ludicrous financial history. You gave him \$2 million when he took over Tundra. You said he made between \$3 and \$4 million in Crow merchandise subsequently. The Ocean group presumably pumped in money. He got a bank loan in 1996 for \$1 million. Now that's \$7 million plus whatever Ocean gave him.*

Now previously this was an alternative publisher that survived off his cash flow. But within the space of three years he had at least seven million dollars or more to play with and blew through it and more.

EASTMAN: I want to say that I wish I could pull out the exact numbers so I could give you exact amounts. Whether they specifically made those amounts, or what he was given, I'm not one hundred percent sure, but at the same time, I'm also not sure what Ocean Capital put into it, or the other investment group, I'm not sure what they put into it, financially...

GROTH: *Probably more than \$1000.*

EASTMAN: That's a safe bet, sure. [laughter] At the same time, when these additional partners came in, I think they also brought in additional expenditures. I think they opened a west coast office of KSP. KSP Entertainment, perhaps? To handle some of the KSP properties in Hollywood had, I'm sure, significant expenses to it. I think they tried to do other things like that, investing in other business things, that probably cost more money equal to what they put in. The Crow merchandise I know did very, very well for them and was something that helped cover some of the losses of the company, but after license fees, productions costs, and taxes... what was the net? All the while you still had the week-to-week, month-to-month losses on sales of other books or overhead or whatever, was the probably \$4 million in gross enough to cover all that?

GROTH: *That's astonishing.*

EASTMAN: I don't know the costs involved to create \$4 million in gross over that period.

GROTH: *Still, \$4 million gross must yield a decent amount of net.*

EASTMAN: I'm sure, yeah. But as far as what you're asking, I'm not exactly sure or clear.

GROTH: *What I'm asking is where did all that money go? You owned part of the company. How does one spend \$7 million in three years?*

EASTMAN: That's... [laughs] it's really, I guess, a question for Denis. I know this probably sounds ludicrous from a point of view that I had a stake and share or whatever in the company, but I was so far removed from whatever they were doing day to day,

month to month, week to week. They would have Board of Directors meetings, a couple of times a year, I sat in on some, but mostly I would proxy my attorney to sit and listen to whatever they were talking about. I had no interest in what they were doing or how they were doing it. If it was a major emergency, I'd be made aware of it, or whatever, "They now are doing this." And it's like, well, "Good luck. I hope it works."

GROTH: *It certainly seems once you have to start generating enormous sums of money, you have to continually keep coming up with schemes that get farther and farther removed from publishing comics based on their artistic merit.*

EASTMAN: That's probably true.

GROTH: *And this is a disease in publishing in general these days which is rampant.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, look at some of the properties that are supporting some of the companies that are struggling: *Aliens* and movie adaptations and the *Star Wars* license. I also think that when Kitchen Sink and Tundra merged, Denis was getting his first taste of intellectual property licensing and merchandising and what potentially those revenues can do. And what they can mean. With his *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs* project. I was trying to do a number of things in Hollywood — which if they worked they could have been very lucrative, and very profitable for the company's bottom line, and make even a company that's losing money in three or four other areas of business, if you have a hugely profitable property, it can put the company into profit, still. It can take all those losses and still be profitable. I think that was a direction that he was eager to explore more of.

GROTH: *I heard a rumor that Kitchen bought your Ferrari.*

EASTMAN: Yes, he did. I made some money on the deal, too. [laughter]

Actually, at one time I got into collecting a few cars with my dad, and I was around that time looking to sell a few of them. And yeah, Denis bought a Ferrari from me. And I think he later sold it.

GROTH: *Well, enough expenditures like that and I can see where that seven mil could go. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Now don't you allude to him doing something illegal with the company's money.

GROTH: *No, no, no. Certainly not.*

EASTMAN: Certainly not.

GROTH: *I would never do such a thing. [Eastman laughs]*

Have you kept a five percent share through to the present?

EASTMAN: No. God, no.

GROTH: *So you're actually completely out.*

EASTMAN: Oh, yeah. I'm completely out.

GROTH: *Congratulations.*

EASTMAN: [laughs] Am I going to get a plaque or something?

GROTH: *You deserve one.*

EASTMAN: So I'll wait by the mailbox...

GROTH: *How'd you get out of it? [laughs] With Disappearing Inc.'s acquisition?*

EASTMAN: If my recollection is correct, even during the Ocean Capital days, my stock had been reduced to a point where I could easily be outvoted by any one or a number of persons within it. So it really didn't matter. I think at the time that it was sold I was literally sent a notification saying, "Oh, by the way, it was voted that everybody's going to lose whatever interest they have in Kitchen Sink because it's been sold for whatever agreed terms." End of story. I wasn't asked. I was just notified that this had happened. And I was like, "O.K. There you go." End of story.

GROTH: *Let me ask you something slightly more serious. Isn't buying a Ferrari a bit profligate?*

EASTMAN: What?

GROTH: *A bit profligate?*

EASTMAN: What's profligate?

GROTH: *A bit... um... well... [groping for a synonym] a bit excessive.*

EASTMAN: Well... God, you know, I'm probably the wrong person to ask.

GROTH: *But you have it. [laughter] If I went and bought a Ferrari, my employees might start worrying about the company, which they would be well advised to do.*

EASTMAN: Or if you bought a tank. I can cut you a good deal on a tank.

GROTH: *Do you own a tank?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, I have a tank. I'm currently selling it.

GROTH: *After this interview comes out, I might need a tank. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: Maybe after the interview comes out, I should keep it.

GROTH: *I was going to say, you better keep it.*

EASTMAN: No, I don't... I'll really need it. You know, it's funny. My desire in talking to you in this interview was to be as brutally honest... I would want to answer the questions to you as I would answer them to myself or anyone else. I certainly don't regret anything I said or how I said it, because in my opinion, it's the hundred percent truth of that's what I felt or that's what my knowledge is. And if anybody has issue with it, then they're either going to write you and it's going to appear in the next or subsequent issue or they're going to call me directly, and I'd be glad to talk to anyone about any discrepancies or any concerns they may have.

But going back to the Denis and the Ferrari situation. [laughter]

GROTH: *As it will be called.*

EASTMAN: “The Great Ferrari Scandal.” No, seriously, when KSP and Tundra came together, it was just prior to the launch of the *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs* TV series and toy line and a number of other things that, in my opinion, he believed were going to be very, very profitable. And whether it be going through a mid-life crisis or “I always wanted a Ferrari,” whatever, that he thought that he would 1) have the money to do it, and 2) it’s something that he really wanted. And it wasn’t a big deal to me. I didn’t force him to buy it. I said, “I’m letting go of a couple of cars. If you see anything you like...” “And he liked the red Ferrari.”

GROTH: *Sounds a little extravagant for an alternative comics publisher.*

EASTMAN: Extravagant. Well, yeah, I guess. You may look at that in a number of different ways. As buying an original Harvey Kurtzman that’s a five thousand dollar painting. Is that extravagant? Or is that really cool? For somebody that always wanted a Ferrari, it’s probably really cool.

GROTH: *Well, one thing that occurs to me is that by moving to Northampton, he must have increased his overhead substantially.*

EASTMAN: I’m sure he did.

GROTH: *In your opinion, would he have been in financial trouble if he had stayed in Wisconsin?*

EASTMAN: I’m sure Denis has thought about that a lot himself. You’re going from a rural Wisconsin setting to what we lovingly call “Tax-a-chusetts.” I’m sure it posed some problems, which is why I barely charged him rent for the period that he was in Northampton. That was sort of my final “please continue the good fight” wish, sort of like, “Look, I know you’re struggling, I know you’ve had to give up ownership shares and you had to work very hard to restructure the company, and you really had to take some hard knocks to keep this company alive, and I respect that. I know that you do want to see Kitchen Sink survive, and you know what? I won’t charge you rent if it will help.” We had a contract for rent that he was supposed to pay small to start and build so on and so on, that was during the Ocean Capital days, when they were going to be going public in 12 months. Then we would up the rent to above fair market value, sort of for taking low rent in the initial, amortize it, and make up for it when they got loads of dough. And I said, “Look, it’s the least I can do.”

There were periods I’d get angry, and I’d say, “Fuck you, I’ve got my own financial problems, I’m going to charge you rent,” and get a few checks and then I would feel bad, and I’d say, “Look. I’m sorry. Look. Just do the best you can to straighten yourself out and we’ll worry about it later.”

GROTH: *I can’t figure out why he would move to Northampton.*

EASTMAN: He needed the change, and it made some business sense.

GROTH: *He could have bought a penthouse in Manhattan cheaper than what it costs to relocate an entire company to Northampton.*

EASTMAN: You’re probably right. He relocated several key people as well as his brother Jim, his wife and their whole family. She quit her law practice to follow Jim to Northampton. Jamie Riehle came and I think a few others.

GROTH: *The cost of living is greater, so the salaries are greater...*

EASTMAN: Salaries are greater, yes.

GROTH: *Everything costs more.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, I’m sure, Northampton is a different world. They don’t call it “Tax-a-chusetts” for nothing. It’s not a cheap place to live. But I think, again, it was a Denis call, I think he was just ready to get out of the farmlands, cheese country.

GROTH: *[laughs] There’s gotta be a cheaper way to do that.*

EASTMAN: *[laughs]* Yeah, like I said, I’m sure he’s probably thought about it a lot.

GROTH: *Well, you must certainly be happy to be out of there.*

EASTMAN: *[laughter]* Um... well, it’s funny. Of course, I want to make a great joke here, *[Groth laughs]* but to be honest, for the last year or better of Kitchen Sink before it became part of Disappearing Inc., I had really given up on it, since before the Ocean Capital days. I never really expected to get anything back out of my investment. It was long since gone, I’d really already written it off, and it was like really down to a matter of wanting to see Kitchen Sink survive. So at the point when it was taken over by Disappearing Inc., I’m sure that the company was probably not in the best position, and probably was teetering day-to-day whether they’d be able to stay open. And it was probably a blessing that it got this chance through Disappearing Inc. to continue. I’m of the mind of “God bless you, go ahead and I hope that something works for you down the road. Maybe you’ll own another Ferrari someday.” *[laughter]*

So there’s the joke. But I really hope that it works.

GUILT

GROTH: *You told me before that you admired Kitchen Sink as an alternative publisher and looked to that company as an exemplar of what you wanted Tundra to be.*

EASTMAN: Mm-hm. *[giggles]*

GROTH: *Do you feel any guilt over what’s happened to Kitchen over the last four years?*

EASTMAN: Yeah, I do. Honestly, I do. In a... but it’s a weird kind of guilt.

GROTH: *It’s got to be hard to feel guilty about something after pumping \$2 million into it.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, you’re right. And that’s why I said it’s kind of weird that I would feel guilty. I can’t help running Tundra, Tundra U.K., Tundra Records, Limelight, all those things through my mind, and trying to actually pinpoint at each different day where it went wrong, or where I fucked up or where I said “yes” when I should have said “no.” Hindsight is 20/20, that I feel guilty about what I did at Tundra. Because I feel I let myself down in a way, because looking back I know that I knew better even when some of those decisions were made. And it was this armor-plated, invincible, you know, “Fuck everyone, damn the torpedoes, this is going to work because I’m so incredibly fucking lucky. And rich.” And felt that’s what damned those companies. And maybe the residue of that

or that attitude spilled over, whatever, I have guilt for perhaps having been part of what brought Kitchen Sink, from cheese country to this level where they, where he, I don't even know what he owns or if he owns anything in the company anymore, I only know that he's been on the front lines of for almost 30 years to arrive at its current state today. And that makes me feel bad.

And of course, at the same time I want to say, "Well, I had nothing to do with that fucking mess." You know? [Groth laughs] But you know...

GROTH: *Which technically is probably true.*

EASTMAN: Which, you know, is certainly debatable. I'm sure that perhaps from Denis' chair, he may have a very different opinion. Even myself, I sometimes wonder, I don't know how much of a direct hand I had in its evolution to its current state, but I'm sure there were some side effects. People may have started looking at Kitchen Sink the way they probably were looking at Tundra: "Wow, look at Denis now. Now he's got a big fatcat rich guy sitting on the Board with 49% of his company that's going to support some really crazy antics." And that stigma, I think, turns people off. If you're struggling you're a hero, everybody loves an underdog. But they only love an underdog when they think the underdog has a chance to win. After they win, it's a whole other ball game. I think they saw Kitchen as an underdog before the merger. I think a lot of people see Fantagraphics as an underdog. It's somebody that they want to win.

GROTH: *Until I find somebody to give me \$2 million, I will remain an underdog.*

EASTMAN: Would you buy a Ferrari with \$2 million...? [laughs]

GROTH: *I might hold off for a year, or so. To see if I still had it.*

EASTMAN: Or at least lease one for a couple of months. Try it out first. [laughter]

GROTH: *I'd ask to borrow yours for just a little while. [laughter]*

EASTMAN: But um... it's a difficult question, and it's a difficult, you know, it's one of those stupid things I think of late at night when I should be sleeping sometimes. [Groth laughs] There's always "What if?"

GROTH: *I think that's a great title for the interview. "Kevin Eastman: Guilty."*

EASTMAN: [laughs] As long as I can't be taken to court on it.

GROTH: *Right, right.*

EASTMAN: That's actually kind of funny.

GROTH: *Um... so the Ocean Capital Group basically bought a pig in a poke.*

EASTMAN: Yeah, in hindsight...

GROTH: *This company didn't really have a realistic chance of making millions and millions of dollars from their investment.*

EASTMAN: In their minds, and on paper, they really believed they did. Corporate posturing for a public offering is way beyond me, so, if they did have any reservations, perhaps they sort of looked the other way.

GROTH: *If somebody came to me, and said "I'll give you millions and millions of dollars for part of Fantagraphics," I would know that these poor bastards were not about to get this investment back.*

EASTMAN: Right. But what would you do? Would you take the millions and millions of dollars?

GROTH: *I should hope not.*

EASTMAN: It's a bridge you'd have to cross if you ever came to it. Much like any other crazy, outrageous deal until it's in your face, what would you do? I know we talked about over lunch, it's like some days I fucking never want to see another mutant turtle as long as I live. Other days, I still think I've got some fun stories to tell. But if there was an opportunity to sell the *Turtles*, both Pete and I have agreed to do that. For the right price, it's shit or get off the pot. I would say the same for *Heavy Metal*. I adore *Heavy Metal*, it's one of — besides my wife — it's one of the greatest pleasures in my life, as is the Museum. The magazine was such an inspiration to me when I discovered it growing up, and to be running it today, and having the sales increase since I purchased it, has given me a nice sense of pride. But at the same time, if there was an opportunity to get a fair price for *Heavy Metal*, I would sell it. Why? Because I just would, I guess. There's other things I want to do.

GROTH: *Such as?*

EASTMAN: Well, if I get rid of some of these other businesses, there would be no more excuses for me not drawing. [laughter]

ART VS. COMMERCE

GROTH: *Every time Kitchen was sold, you were quoted as saying that it's sold because you want to get back to the drawing table.*

EASTMAN: Yeah! Which is really sad, and a big personal issue for me. I think if I had a therapist, they'd have a fucking field day. Because every time I've created a scenario where quote/unquote it's going to get me back to drawing, I've avoided it like the plague. I've filled it in with other shit that consumed all my time, and that's certainly my problem. I know this will sound funny, I don't consider myself that much of an artist.

GROTH: *I wanted to ask you about that.*

EASTMAN: Sure.

GROTH: *At this point, aren't you more of a businessman than an artist? Was there a point that you felt that you had become a businessman [Eastman laughs] and relinquished being an artist? It seems like there had to have been.*

EASTMAN: I'm just laughing because if you think about a businessman with my track record [laughter] Good Lord...!

GROTH: *Well, it's a good thing those Turtles made money!*

EASTMAN: It's a good thing, yeah, well, God bless the *Turtles*. At times I think I do enjoy parts of the business. I believe I've learned some things from the Mirage days and the Tundra days and beyond, particularly with respect to certain things I'm doing today. I'm doing those a bit more intelligently, and trying something like spending other people's money to make a project happen, all the

while keeping control of it but then again, look at the *Underwhere* example. Old bait. I do like the business sides to a number of different things I'm doing right now. But at the same time, I really created a bizarre scenario in my own mind regarding my art, and artwork. It's that I'm such a fan of what I call "people with real talent." And, trust me, I'm not sitting here saying, "Woe is me" and belittling myself and my art or whatever. I do enjoy what I do. But I enjoy it for me. And only me. I've had the chance to work with people like Mark Martin. I did story layouts and breakdowns for the *Underwhere* graphic novel that Mark Martin made beautiful. When you see my drawing that then became Mark Martin's artwork, it's night and day, it's something I never could have done or dreamed of doing. The same in working with Simon Bisley, that there's no way I'll ever be able to draw like Simon. And I have a huge amount of admiration for what Simon does. Besides him being a completely fucking lunatic wacko that I adore and value his friendship, because he makes me laugh. We have a good time, even though he fucks up a lot of stuff. He's not much on consistency [Groth laughs], and some day I'll point out to you with *Melting Pot* some of the greatest fuck-ups ever. But that's a whole other thing. Another interview. So when I have somebody like Simon Bisley finishing things that I start, I feel like I really need to start all over, almost make myself go back to square one and learn to draw again. Learn to tell the kind of stories I want to tell not ones influenced by any *Turtles* or work-related scenario or deadline, anything but the pure enjoyment of drawing. I started doing that a little bit the last year and a half. I've been doing storyboards for the *Heavy Metal: F.A.K.K.2* movie. I did about, I guess 500 pages of drawings, but not all new drawings, they were some cut and paste from the original *Melting Pot* layouts. *F.A.K.K.2* and *Melting Pot* storylines were merged into what's become *Heavy Metal: F.A.K.K.2*. I've sort of started getting the feel for drawing again. Doing layouts, doing roughs. I was always very safe in my layouts, because they were gestures, they were extremely simplistic because I knew that Mark was going to fix things and Simon was going to fix things, or even working with Pete, things would be corrected — a way of getting around my inabilities to draw so many things well. I've gotten too comfortable in that zone. For me it would be a dream to get to a point where I could really have the time and go back and start all over. And I will. [laughs]

GROTH: *Right. Well, to bring this full circle, there seemed to be an incongruity between a lot of the rhetoric surrounding Tundra and your own work on the Ninja Turtles. And I couldn't reconcile these two things. I don't know if you can. There was a press release specifically that came out about Tundra, and it was headlined, "Kevin Eastman announces the Creator's Edge." And it read, "Words and Pictures, the sequential art popularly called comics, mean and increasingly are more than genre-bound sub-literature. A rich combination of a mature narrative and accomplished illustration can produce works of remarkable scope and depth. Wedding the instant visual gratification of television and film with the resonant satisfaction of literature. Imagine the astounding rewards if Brueghel the Younger had complimented his work with that of Cervantes. And not just with single illustrations, but with a symbiotic synthesis [Eastman laughs] of significant image with significant word."*

EASTMAN: That had to be Greg Baisden! [laughs]

GROTH: *I was going to ask you if that was Greg Baisden.*

EASTMAN: I don't know what half that shit means. [Groth laughs]

GROTH: *Well, I had a list of questions here that I wanted to ask you about that. One of them was, "Do you believe that?" [laughter] "Is that what you tried to do with the Ninja Turtles?" And so on. But you created the Ninja Turtles, and there's an incongruity between all of that rhetorical posturing — which I really couldn't believe you wrote.*

EASTMAN: Oh, absolutely not, I can barely spell, for Christ's sake.

GROTH: *I've only talked to you a few times on the phone, but you don't seem the kind of guy to bring up Cervantes and Brueghel the Younger when talking about comics.*

EASTMAN: I think I saw the video on both of those things, but I missed them at the theater. [laughter]

GROTH: *Did you ever feel that there was a conflict between the kind of stuff you loved and the kind of claims your press releases were making under your name? The kind of posturing that was going on? Under the Tundra rubric?*

EASTMAN: Wow. Yeah, I guess that's a hard one to answer. You know, look, you got a 22-year-old kid, me, and a 30-year-old kid, Pete, that both loved Jack Kirby, that loved comics, that wanted to tell stories, the kind of stories that we'd enjoy reading. Whether nobody ever bought 'em or whatever, that was the kind of stories that we could tell. They're very simplistic, probably crudely-drawn, but they were the best of our ability at that time and throughout that time. Probably the thing that amazed me the most was that I was actually getting paid to learn. I was making enough money to pay my rent and eat and draw, and that to me, no matter what else has happened, or whatever else will happen, that was when the dream came true. I look at what I've learned, and I've learned countless things— what I learned from Pete Laird alone as an illustrator and of storytelling and drawing, I couldn't have learned in college. You can see a growth from issue #1 to the time that we stopped working together. And I think that I continued to grow somewhat when I was doing it semi-regularly thereafter. But I did more drawing in one early year of *Turtles* than I've done in the cumulative years since. From the success of the *Turtles*, to whatever I wanted Tundra to be, and whatever the person who wrote that text thought Tundra was, probably thought and believed my lofty and noble although unrealistic goals and dreams might work. I thought I could and it sounds so corny, but I thought, could change our industry. And perhaps make it a little bit better with Tundra. Whatever "that" says, and if that means the same thing, then that kind of posturing is correct for Tundra. But I would never put it in those terms. It was just I wanted to take the embodiment of Mirage, the fact that myself, and/or myself and Peter could sit down and we'd control every single aspect of our creation, through to its success or non-success. I tried to apply that dream and the feeling of that dream with Tundra so others could feel it as well. It was a good idea at the time. But the way it was handled, my handling of it, it was doomed.

And there's times, "If I knew then what I know now," looking back at the Tundra adventure, perhaps a whole different thing could have happened. But then I wouldn't be the person I am today. Which, aww, fuck it... Whatever. It's crazy.

GROTH: *Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?*

EASTMAN: I'm just rambling at this point. I've talked about stuff with you that I haven't talked to anyone about since the days

at Tundra. Between all the Mirage years, and my relationships with the guys and the relationship with the people during the Tundra days, it's sad sometimes that it's all changed so much. But I guess it's as much me as them, that's probably changed. I may have put distance between myself and them as much as they may have put it between me and them. Because maybe it's something we both want, we've lived it and now we both want to forget and move on. Today I'm grateful for *Heavy Metal*. I still get enjoyment out of working on the new *Turtles* live-action series, and doing some of the things we're doing with the *Turtles*, and I dearly want to see the Museum survive. That to me is probably my biggest commitment right now: to try and figure a way for the Words and Pictures Museum to survive. It's tough for everyone these days. I don't want to see the Museum of Cartoon Art in San Francisco pass. I don't want to see Boca Raton pass. I wish we had 25 more museums in the country of this type. But Words and Pictures, if ultimately I can't continue to fund it, we can downsize it, we can do some things to keep it intact, but ultimately if I can't singularly fund it, I will be the one to take the responsibility to close it. Like the people that I hired at Tundra that Denis opted not to continue on in Kitchen Sink, I personally fired. It wasn't a very happy day in my life, especially considering Mark Martin was one of the ones that had to go.

GROTH: *You said earlier that this statement, notwithstanding its pomposity, does more or less represent what you think, but on the other hand, Simon Bisley isn't remotely, even by popular standards, an equivalent of Cervantes and Brueghel, as ludicrous as that combination is.*

EASTMAN: If Cervantes got really stoned and really drunk, he may be something remotely as cool as Bisley.

Bisley's my hero and he's a fucking maniac. He's an explosion of this twisted, fucked-up energy that gets blasted out on his canvas, derivative of Frazetta and even a bit Sienkiewicz and sprinkle on some Corben, and sometimes he'll even admit to that. Other times he'll say it's all him. But he's the greatest. I love him to death. He's a total, original character. We need more Bisleys. And I know that sounds funny. Whenever I try to explain to somebody what kind of person Simon is and why I like him so much, it's like your best friend. You have a best friend for a certain reason, undefinable, but it's there.

GROTH: *But you like his work, too.*

EASTMAN: I love his work. I own as much as I can get my hands on.

GROTH: *I'm not sure I understand that.*

EASTMAN: What's that?

GROTH: *I said I'm not sure if I understand that. What is it you like about his work?*

EASTMAN: His ability to me is astounding. Unearthly. And as much as I would put him sort of at the very top, I can't because one of my biggest idols is Richard Corben. But with both of them, I can't fathom how that ability can come out of human beings and look that amazing. I look at Bisley's work that way. To me he's one of the best ever.

GROTH: *He's sort of Corben taken to the nth degree.*

EASTMAN: Corben on steroids and acid!

GROTH: *Right. [laughs] Right.*

EASTMAN: And to watch Simon paint is breathtaking. A lot of people don't realize how incredibly fast he really is. It's like paint, paper, shit, cigarette butts, junk strewn from one end of his studio to the other. Cigarette hanging out of his mouth. A plate of curry, eating while he's painting and talking, looking like it's as natural as breathing. For me, every painting's a fucking war, a struggle of an almost painful nature to try and accomplish one-sixteenth as good. And he's just doing it by accident. And goofing around while it's all happening, just flowing out of his brushes.

GROTH: *You see him as the quintessential wildman.*

EASTMAN: And natural artist. It's very easy for him. I've been able to purchase from Simon amazing bodies of his work to preserve it, all of *Judgment in Gotham*, most of the pages of *Slaine*. All the stuff he's done for me, through *Heavy Metal*, *Melting Pot*, a hundred-page *Body Count Turtles* book, which is the best ride I've had in a long, long time. All of it will show up in the Museum exhibits some day.

LIFE'S BEEN GOOD

GROTH: *This must cross the mind of someone in your position, but do you ever worry that you were liked for your money and not for who you are or what you are?*

EASTMAN: Yeah. And that's a tough one. A lot of paranoia to deal with.

GROTH: *Because Tundra almost seems like it could have been the institutionalization of that dynamic.*

EASTMAN: Yeah. I guess I would totally agree. That's probably what I meant when I spoke earlier of that Joe Walsh song, "Everyone's so different, I haven't changed." The joke is me, when I have to say, "Well, does this person like me for me, or like me for my money?" And it definitely has changed and affected how I look to new people I meet. And it definitely has changed and affected the way I look to new people I meet, so who's the fucked up one here? Old friends that I've had and lost. Like I said, I've probably left them behind from the Mirage days or the Tundra days because that distance is the best for everyone involved. And it's not like I hate any of them, why would I? I love to see George Pratt when I can at conventions and stuff, and I love George, he's great, and I think he was really a friend, and I think he believed in the Tundra thing. But I'm not saying that Jon Muth didn't or Dave McKean didn't, or Kent or any of those guys didn't. And I don't respect any of them any less. They're going to be doing some of the most important stuff out there. There's a lot of people out there doing really important stuff, and it's very frustrating, especially I'm sure for you as a publisher right now, for stuff that I believed in at Tundra, that I found the stuff had great merit, and so few wanted to read it.

GROTH: *No, it's awfully frustrating.*

EASTMAN: And when it doesn't sell, it just breaks your heart. I'm glad to have... *Heavy Metal* it is this really great little safe

working entity that I enjoy as much as it seems, to the people that seem to be reading it. And as far as publishing goes, that's about as close as I'm going to get to it. You know?

GROTH: *[laughs] Can't say I blame you.*

EASTMAN: At least I've learned something, Goddammit. All right? ★