

# THE MARTIAN'S ARM

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...I had no methodology for creating imagery on this scale and no practical experience with book production. I'd been told that all books conformed to signatures, i.e. pages had to be combined in multiples of 8, 16, or 32, and based on that idea I'd come up with 120.

To go beyond that number meant adding another signature. Which would amount to a more expensive book to produce and one that would take that much longer to create. A concern that doesn't bother a writer, since text is edited when it's considered complete. At which point there are all kinds of ways it can be made to 'fit'. Type size can be increased, leading changed, and if necessary, end pages can simply be left blank. Above all, straight text is far, far cheaper to produce.

To make *Ah Puch* at all practicable therefore, I had to 'edit' the text at the start in order to come up with an overall layout. Having sketched out every scene, and combined it with the text, I then had to try and stick to it. Bill didn't give specific direction or descriptions. He might discuss a character or aspects of a scene, but I was left to my own devices for coming up with the images. Certainly with respect to the overall design. He also had no experience with illustrated

books of this nature and whereas he acknowledged the parameters, he naturally continued to add, subtract and improve on the text for the next couple of years. Sometimes these changes were minimal, but often they weren't. And even when they seemed insignificant, they could still amount to huge revisions in the artwork:

His fascination with guns is well documented. Descriptions, when they appeared in the text, were therefore usually precise. This entailed specific image research and once the appropriate gun had been placed in the right hands, necessitated a complete overhaul if he decided to switch models.

The owner of a porno/raygun store initially "clutched a Webley Bulldog" - something I was able to find a physical model of for reference. Later Bill decided to change it to a, "crude propulsion weapon, long ago rejected by the conservation department."

What *that* looked like exactly was anybody's guess, but it certainly didn't look like a Webley Bulldog. Meaning I'd have to replace it. And if it required two hands to operate it, I'd have to replace the owner as well. In this instance I never got around to it, which in the long run was just as well, since Bill ultimately changed it back again.

That was merely an item. Nothing compared to entire scenes.

Sometimes these were short, such as an additional sequence of narcotics busts: half a page of copy that led to only three more pages of imagery. Long after the project had begun though, Bill came up with a completely new incident in which the heroes travel back in time to the Island of Queimada, to help Jose Dolores defeat Sir William Walker\*. An army of slaves, aided by mutant boys, fighting British redcoats in a Carribean jungle. A scenario involving pages of complex imagery and a staggering amount of research.

When the project began the sets were minimal and there were very few characters. Over the next couple of years though, as the project expanded, I found myself dealing with a cast of thousands, sometimes moving back and forth between time periods in the course of one or two sentences. On one occasion, a train full of Mayan Gods emerged from a landscape of diseased boys in steaming flesh gardens, to stop alongside a carnival in a red-brick southern town. Then got out!

In those days looking for reference was an analogue process, involving travel, weather, money and above all, time. Sitting at home in your skivvies and just clicking a couple of times with a mouse to find it, was an option yet to come. The right picture of a Mexican bandit say, or an atomic bomb, meant a trip to a library, a bookstore, or another illustrator and sometimes days could go by without finding it. Multiplied by the amount of imagery that Bill was cooking up, it became an ongoing, frustrating and sometimes impossible task. Most significantly it affected

the order in which I was able to complete the work. When I couldn't find adequate reference for train exteriors for example, I had to jump ahead and start working on something else.

It was this discrepancy between words and images and the escalating pile of image reference it entailed, that led to the conversation about the Martian's arm:

I said to Bill: "If you write, 'The spaceship landed in the field and the Martian stepped out and waved.' that's fine. You've created an image in my mind that's very clear. But it's completely unspecified. If I have to make a tangible image of the same scene, I have to figure out what kind of field it is, what time of day it is, what kind of spaceship it is, how it works, how it lands, what kind of door it has, and what the Martian looks like. I even have to figure out how long his arm is."

Bill thought for a moment, then he said. "You're right Malcolm. So how long *is* a Martian's arm?"