

A Q&A with Author Gary Northfield



When did you first develop a love for comics?

I've had a love of comics since I was at least three or four years old; I remember enjoying a *Pink Panther* annual well before I was able to properly read, figuring out the story just by looking at the pictures. I lapped up any comic I could find—*The Beano*, Marvel, and Disney—and I drew my own comics and wrote many stories about funny animals or monsters. My mum was particularly supportive, encouraging me to write stories on rainy days during the summer holidays.



How did you get your professional start in the industry?

When I left school, I studied illustration, learning printmaking among other things. However, it was tough to find any work in such a crowded market, so I worked in an art shop and my dad's furniture factory for a few years. But I was never despondent, and in my spare time I made comics, which I would then photocopy and sell to comic shops in London and at comic fairs around the country. It was at these fairs that I met like-minded cartoonists who also created homemade comics, and through that talented network became connected with many magazines where I worked for several years.

Was it difficult making the transition from writing comic strips to the long-form narrative of books?

All my stories in comics until now had been short stories, so the narrative structure had to be an entirely different approach. I had to make sure there were definite story points along the way, holding everything in place, and around those I could then have my usual fun. Keeping all the different story threads heading in the right direction was a little bit like herding cats, but my brilliant editor was on top of it all and made sure I kept on the straight and narrow.

The actual writing was great fun! I hadn't written anything of great length since I was at school, but creative writing used to be one of my favorite subjects alongside art, so I didn't have too much fear on that score. I have a philosophy of keeping things simple and clear, in my art and my dialogue, and this fed neatly into my writing style.

Why did you decide to base this story in ancient Rome?

I write and draw a regular comic for *National Geographic Kids UK*, and in one particular strip, I wrote about the history of the Colosseum in Rome. In one panel I talked about the various weird and wonderful animals from around the empire that the Romans used to show off to citizens in the arena. Then they would kill them all, showing off their prowess as hunters. In my panel I drew the animals fighting back, which I thought was great fun, and this directly inspired *Julius Zebra*. I really wanted an unusual underdog to be at the center of the story, as opposed to a lion or tiger, and I thought a lowly zebra would be the perfect choice!

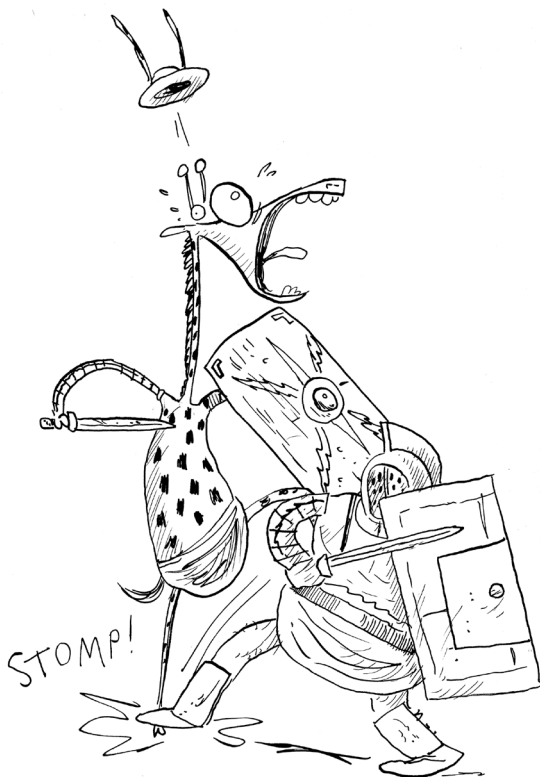


What is your favorite thing about writing the title character, Julius Zebra?

He's very fallible, yet still quite bullheaded. He's young and naive, and I enjoy exploring characters who go on journeys of self-discovery and figuring out their place in the crazy world they live in. Life isn't black and white, and there isn't always an obvious right or wrong way of doing things, so I enjoy steering him down those rough paths we all have to navigate in our lives.

What has been your favorite response to the book so far from a young reader?

The response from young readers has been phenomenal! Lots of reviews say how they've read it in one sitting because it's so exciting. One young reader even said, "It is a bit like *Diary of a Wimpy Zebra!*," which made me chuckle.



What books did you read when you were a child?

Comics, such as *Asterix*, *Peanuts*, and *Marvel*. I also enjoyed plenty of nonfiction from the library, especially dinosaur encyclopedias or books about mysteries like UFOs or ghosts.

If you could be a storybook character, who would you be?

I love the idea of time travel, so I'd like to be the time traveler in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. I'd go backward in time, though, and check out eighteenth-century London and stalk my ancestors.



What is the best thing about reading?

Being lost in a new world and being excited by the unknown. Wondering where the narrative is going to take you and how the author is going to resolve story threads.

How do you know when a particular joke (visual or text) is a keeper?

If it makes me laugh when I'm writing it, that's normally a good indication that I'm onto a winner. The stupider and more absurd the better, I always say!

What is your all-time favorite book?

Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Here is a great example of a beautifully realized world, perfectly and simply narrated by a master of the English language.