Fiona Staples and the Long Horizon

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It is May 21, 2013. Cool, spring sunlight strikes though the windows of the downtown Calgary, Alberta coffee shop where Fiona Staples, Calgary-based comic artist, sits across from me. As the intensity of the light through the windows fluctuates with the passing clouds, Fiona's eyes transition between dark brown and translucent amber. Moving her hands very concisely as she speaks, Fiona forms repeated sets of elegant gestures, emphasized by her immaculate, vivid, pink fingernail polish.

The collected volume of the first six issues of *Saga, Volume 1* [Image Comics], Fiona's collaboration with American comic writer Brian K. Vaughan, was released in late 2012 to great acclaim. Fiona is increasingly acknowledged as a singularly innovative and technically skilled artist. At the time of this interview, *Saga, Volume 1* had just been short-listed in the Hugo Award "Best Graphic Story" category, an award which it subsequently won. In July 2013, *Saga, Volume 1* was nominated for and won three Eisner Awards in the categories of Best Continuing Series, Best New Series, and Best Writer. Vaughan consistently credits Fiona for her skill as an artist and a full collaborator in the shaping and enhancement of the narrative in *Saga*.

In 2014 Fiona won the Eisner Award for Best Painter/Multimedia Artist (interior art), the Harvey Award for Best Artist, the Harvey Award for Best Cover Artist and the Joe Shuster Award for Artist for her work on *Saga*, as well as sharing the 2014 Eisner Award for Best Continuing Series and Harvey Award for Best Continuing or Limited Series for *Saga* with Brian K. Vaughan.

This interview has been edited for length, clarity, and continuity.

Matilda Roche: How did your experience with the program at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, Alberta (ACAD), and your experience of working at a comic book store lead you to want to do this kind of work?

Fiona Staples: It probably actually starts a little bit before I went to ACAD. I first got

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the idea in my head that I might want to be a comic book artist when I was in high school. I didn't read comics much as a kid, but high school is when I started buying them for myself, actually going to the comic book store and picking things out. I was in the IB art program in high school. We were given studio space in the basement of the school and told to be creative. I definitely wasn't ready to do a self-directed program, so I was just messing around doing comic-like, anime stuff and I couldn't really get much approval from my teachers for anything that I was trying to do. I don't think the problem was that I was doing comic-book-style work. The problem was that I was a lazy student and didn't know what I was doing. But, yeah, my teachers discouraged me from doing anything resembling comic books, cartooning, and animation. I applied to ACAD and I got in. I managed to put together a portfolio. I don't know how... I had enough mixed media and figure work at that point that I was able to get accepted.

But I thought, "I don't want to mess this up. I want to do well as I can in college so I just want to forget all this comic stuff." Just create a little compartment for it in my mind and put it away for now—just put it on the shelf—and I tried to focus on being a well-rounded student. But after foundation year I applied to Visual Communications, which is the design major; design and illustration. It's the program that earns you a Bachelor of Design, rather than a Bachelor of Fine Art. I think that was probably the best thing I ever did, because it was a really difficult program but super-rewarding for me, and I think that the strictness of the program gave me the motivation and direction that I needed at that point.

The program really equips you with a lot of technical skills that fine arts majors, maybe, aren't so focused on. It's definitely geared towards commercial art.

So my courses were stuff like anatomy and technical drawing, information design, advertising; fairly practical stuff. Then, as you get further along in the program, you specialize a little bit more, and you choose whether you want to be in design or in illustration, and you choose between graphic design, advertising, editorial illustration or character design. There are four direct streams by the time you get to the end of the program.

MR: Did you feel clearly that you knew what you wanted to pursue?

FS: Pretty clearly. I'd done some editorial illustration projects and I was doing a little bit of freelance illustration on the side, stuff like that, but the character design stream was calling to me because it was focused on comics as well as on film and video games. It's designed to prep you for those industries specifically. One of the courses that we took was actually called narrative illustration, and one of the projects was a comic book project, as well as storyboard work and children's books. That's the kind of stuff that I love, and that's what I've always loved. I wrote in my entrance essay for ACAD that I love visual narratives.

MR: When people ask you what your influences are, you do focus on illustrators, and some of them are classic children's adventure illustrators. You've mentioned Howard Pyle. He was a very adaptable, vivid and dynamic children's illustrator, but

very much in the Victorian style of children's illustration. Do you feel that style of illustration contributed to the visual language that you derive your work from?

FS: I think so. Maybe because I didn't read comics very much as a kid, they didn't make those deep impressions on my soft, squishy childhood brain that other things did, like picture books, especially, and art books. My parents were elementary school teachers, so our house was well stocked with art books and really nice picture books. So those are what had the deepest impression on me and I've always carried that with me.

MR: We were talking earlier about how your father was a British expat. Do you think that informed his sensibilities and the sort of illustrated children's books that he might have chosen, and was there a similar, analogous, level of influence from your mother?

FS: It probably mostly came from my mom, actually. I don't know which one of them to give more credit.

I guess I had a taste for British stories when I was a kid. There is this book by George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*; it's sort of a Victorian, short novel fairy tale. It might have had occasional illustrations—there were little pen illustrations throughout it. When you read it, you feel like there is a bigger picture. You feel like the story is a powerful metaphor for something, but you're six and you don't know what. *The Princess and the Goblin* is a novel about a princess who lives in this isolated castle with her father, the king, and no one else except her nursemaid in the mountains. They don't say where it is, maybe Scotland. And these goblins come out at night, goblins that live under the mountains in the mines, and they are hatching a plan to kidnap the princess and take over the castle. It's such a weird, atmospheric little story —the loneliness of the landscape and the weirdness of the goblins. She makes friends with a miner's son named Curdie and they team up. The strangest part is when she is exploring this giant castle that no one lives in except her and her nursemaid, and she finds this tower that no one has noticed before and she goes up the tower, forty stories, and she meet this beautiful, ancient old lady who says she is her great-great-great-great-grandmother. You don't know if this woman is actually real or not, but she sort of helps the princess.

MR: It sounds full of ambiguous symbols that seem portentous—that suggest there's a greater metaphor at work in the narrative.

FS: There were some really interesting ideas. I'm not sure it's relevant to anything.

MR: But I get the sense that when you think about things that sparked an interest in making creative work or created a certain kind of sensibility in you, that *The Princess and the Goblin* is still framed in your mind as having this certain, significant quality to it.

FS: I think it was that I became interested in visual storytelling because I always loved stories, and when I read them, I visualized them really, really strongly and I wanted to draw them. I wanted to illustrate them.

MR: I'm fascinated with the idea that there are these unspoken delineations

between how people read and the ways they experience written text, and for you to talk about being a person who visualizes things very strongly, I think, is resonant. Because even if you aren't reading an illustrated text, you are still experiencing an intense, intuitive response to the text and the narrative is actually forming itself into images in your mind.

FS: And I think it helped that I had really nice illustrated picture books when I was a child to form the association between words and wonderful imagery.

MR: As a person who enjoys illustrated narratives, was working in the video game industry of interest to you?

FS: Yes, and I love video games. Not all of them, but a handful I am super, super into. Most of them I can take or leave, but the ones I do like, I really like. Mostly the *Final Fantasy* series and some of the old LucasArts point-and-click adventures like *Monkey Island* and *Sam and Max* that are just hilarious and whimsical, but also have really strong settings. They're about their environments, which I think is really cool. *Monkey Island* is about exploring the Caribbean, or at least, this wacky Disney-theme park version of the Caribbean. And *Sam and Max* are a dog and rabbit who call themselves the Freelance Police—private detectives, I suppose—and they are hired to find a missing Sasquatch who has disappeared from the circus. So they go on a road trip and the whole thing is inspired by the creator's experience of the road trips across North America that he used to take with his family. It's weird to be playing a video game and be seeing things that are really familiar to you, like roadside family restaurants and cheesy parks and attractions. Anyway, that's one of my favourite video games.

I know it sounds like I'm twelve or something, but I'm super-inspired by video games and their design. Not just the character design, but especially the environments.

MR: I think when the collaborative teams that make video games really invest themselves in creating a sense of immersion for people, then we are actually talking about something that is similar to the experience of reading if you are an immersive reader and you really visualize while reading. It's tapping into that same sense of wanting to really be completely absorbed. I think as game design gets more substantive aesthetically, it's a great place to draw inspiration because it's creative work that is about drawing you into a particular sphere and keeping you there mentally and psychologically.

FS: I'm not that interested in games like *Call of Duty*, which is just a worse version of real life. Even *Uncharted* doesn't really grab me, where they are just trying to replicate reality as closely as they can with real-life buildings and environments. I like games that show you a more spectacular version of real life. So, that's what grabs me about *Final Fantasy*, as well as decent storylines and character work.

So, I did consider pursuing video games and that's one of the reasons that I took the character design stream. At that point I was working part time at the comic store though. I had given them my résumé while I was still in high school and they had never called me, until a few years later when they were, like, "hey, are you still inter-

ested? We need someone part-time." At that point I was doing well enough in school that I thought it was safe to stop denying my love for comics. I felt pretty secure. I was getting good grades and I thought, "You know what? I do want to do comics." But, you know, people always tell you how hard it is to make comics; how it's so unrealistic to expect to have a career or even get published. So I thought I should hedge my bets a little bit and try some other stuff—try to get other types of freelance work, apply at Bioware [an acclaimed video game design company located in Edmonton, Alberta]. So, I did all that. I didn't get the job at Bioware. I got a few interviews in and that's it.

But by the time I was in my last year of college, I had met, online, this writer from Edmonton, Andrew Foley. One of the other guys at the comic store, Gerald Garcia, had set up a message board, a forum for local creators, called Maple Ink. Just a place where people interested in comics—writers, artists—could just talk and collaborate and critique each other's work. It was a really nice space, actually. And I was posting my art there and that was when Andrew messaged me and said, "Do you want to work on a pitch together? I have a bunch of ideas for comics. Tell me if any of these grab you." One of the pitches was a vampire story, a black comedy, called *Done to Death*. It's about a young guy who got turned into a vampire and hates it. He sought out a vampire to turn him because he thought it would make him really cool, glamorous and sexy. This is pre-*Twilight*, so it's mostly satirizing Anne Rice, whose vampire novels Andrew felt really strongly about. So, it was this fat, dorky teenager who got himself turned into a fat, dorky vampire, and he was really angry about it, and made it his mission to go around murdering vampire writers.

The other main character is a woman named Shannon, who was the editor at the Anne-Rice-stand-in's publisher. Her job is to go through the slush pile and review all the manuscripts, and she is just so sick of reading really terrible vampire stories that she goes on a killing spree. So it's just a bloody, violent, irreverent book. It was going to be a five-issue miniseries, and I started working on it in my last year at school during my free, portfolio-building class. Andrew knew more about the industry than I did. He previously had a graphic novel of his own published, so he had a few contacts here and there. So it was his job to pitch it; to take it around and show it to people and he managed to find a publisher for us. By the time I graduated, I was already doing a published comic, my first comic. So, I thought, that was easier than anyone said it would be—maybe I could make a go of it.

MR: And, obviously, that would have given you a template right from the start, of collaborating with a writer and being the sole artist working on a comic. I assume you did all of the colour and layouts, and that is, functionally, what you are doing now.

FS: I didn't know what I was doing, but it worked well enough for us to get the series out there.

MR: Was there something in the narrative in *Done to Death* that appealed to you, and do you think there are any elements you took forward with you? And, to say something a little bit leading, it seems like you have a grasp of how to really effectively

work within the horror genre and bring elements of that genre into your work in other genres. Is that because of an affinity for horror, or due to a sensibility you have for the horror genre? Is horror a genre you enjoy, or is it the intensity of the narratives that interests you?

FS: I definitely have an interest in the horror. I guess I just always try to make the reader feel something, whether it's a sense of horror at war, violence or in a more, quiet intimate moment. I think I'm clearly sensitive to that stuff because I'm really terrified of horror films. I'm not immune to horror at all. I feel that I have a good grasp of what terrifies me.

MR: That's interesting, because I think that, for some creative people, horror is a genre they really like and have consumed a lot of and, being used to seeing representations of horrific things, that's where they draw their sensibility and inspiration.

FS: I've tried to train myself to become a little bit more inured to it. I was never able to watch horror movies—it was too scary—but once I started doing *Done to Death* and getting more horror work in comics, I really need to learn more about the genre to figure out what I'm doing. I just made it my mission to watch horror movies—as many as I could stomach…

MR: Does your sound level of training in anatomical drawing contribute to your ability to draw something [the human body] being deconstructed because you know how it's structured?

FS: Well, that's just a matter of research, I think; looking at diagrams of innards. I guess when I was first designing Izabel, I definitely looked up what an intestine looks like. Now I just make it up. Now I just fake it. [Izabel is a character from *Saga*: the ghost of a teenage girl who manifests with a tangle of exposed entrails, her lower body having been destroyed by the landmine that killed her.]

MR: What were some of the films, art or other comic books that, as a sensitized reader of horror, you actually liked? There is a lot of schmaltzy horror out there. I know that sounds narrow-minded...

FS: I think that very few American horror comics are actually scary. They are fun, in a visceral kind of way.

MR: Right, they may be depicting things that are horrific, but the tone of the narrative is not particularly atmospheric or meant to evoke a deep sense of fright or revulsion.

FS: You're just meant to just enjoy it; where it's hard to take it seriously enough to be really scared?

MR: Absolutely. Do you try to create something that had a deeper, resonant tone to it?

FS: I don't think I've ever done horror work like that. Even the horror books I've done have been comedies, really.

MR: I think you have the skill and sensibility, from what's evident in *Saga*, to be able to illustrate that sort of weighty horror genre narrative, but the tone of *Saga* doesn't emphasize that aspect of the narrative.

Figure 1. Izabel, from *Saga* Vol. 2, No. 10 (8).
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FS: I would really like to try that at some point, actually—to try to do an actual horror comic—because there aren't very many that I find really scary. One of the best is the manga by Junji Ito.

MR: Junji Ito is terrifying. Like, primordially scary.

FS: Exactly. I didn't know a comic could do that until I saw his work. I didn't know it was possible to startle someone with a comic, because the reader is in control of the pacing and you can't startle them with a loud noise. With a novel, you can create suspense in prose because the reader can't glance ahead visually and can't potentially see what's going to happen in the next paragraph. But in a comic, you are looking at the whole page—all you really have is the page turn to surprise the viewer. And Junji Ito uses the page turn really well, but it's not his only trick. I think one of the most scary things in his work is people's reaction shots; when they see something horrific and it's reflected in their face. He does that super-well.

MR: Is there any other aesthetic element that came out of working on your first project? Any aesthetic ideas that you might have started to form at that time, or work methodology you developed?

FS: I think one of the most useful things about in doing *Done to Death* was finding out just exactly how much work a comic is. You know an issue is twenty-two

pages, but you don't really expect the sheer volume of work that you are in for and how long it's going to take to do. So that was a useful wakeup call that made me realize that I do need some kind of process that I could stick to. Each page can't be an experiment. When I started out doing *Done to Death*, I started out doing everything mixed-media, just playing around with paints and inks and stuff, but I quickly realized that I needed to find a more efficient process and to make the whole thing look more consistent.

MR: So you didn't start out doing everything digitally?

FS: The only digital stuff I was doing was the colouring, which I'd been doing since high school. Drawing, scanning the drawings, and then colouring them in Photoshop using a Wacom tablet.

MR: How did you develop the entirely digital process you use now? [Fiona's work methodology is described in generous detail in the "To Be Continued" [Letters] section of *Saga*, Chapter 8. Note: "To Be Continued" [Letters] sections are only available in the print and digital formats of the individual issues of *Saga*, and are not included in the trade paperback graphic novels.]

FS: It took me a few years to get there. For *Done to Death*, I was inking everything with a quill and dip pen on sheets of acetate. I wasn't doing pencils because I didn't know how to be fast enough, so I went straight to inks. Working on the acetate, I found I could just wipe it off if I messed up. I started out doing the colouring with acrylics on the reverse side of the transparencies, which turned out to be really impractical because I didn't have much control over how it looked and because I didn't know what I was doing, so for the last half of the series I just started doing the colouring in Photoshop. And I guess my next job after that was *Trick 'r Treat*, which was an adaptation of a horror movie that I did for Wildstorm. That was my first job for a major publisher, so I thought I really need to clean up my act a little bit, tighten up the artwork, do more details. I just tried to copy what other artist were doing. Wildstorm sent me a stack of DC brand comic book paper and I thought, "I might as well use this and try to do this properly." It was a full issue, I think, twenty-two pages. So I just did it with the quill and pen and ink.

MR: So you were still finding that the physical inking was working for you?

FS: Yeah, well enough, especially because this was only one issue, so the deadlines weren't too terrible and I didn't have to keep it up for too long. And at the time I was doing this and that: some other freelance work, some design work, some illustration, some covers, and I just started getting more work from Wildstorm. I had a good relationship with one of the editors there, Scott Peterson, who held my hand through the whole process and got me a lot of work and taught me a lot about how to make comics: about layout, about storytelling; stuff that I hadn't even thought about before.

MR: Do you think that mentoring you received was kind of exceptional? Can artists expect that kind of support?

FS: No. I don't think that you can expect it. I think that Scott was just an exceptional editor and Wildstorm, while it was still around, was really good at fostering

new talent, partly because they couldn't afford that many really established artists... But a lot of the artists they did hire, the rookies, went on to have really great careers in DC proper or other companies. I think that Scott was just a really decent person. I thought he had really good taste and choose really good projects to support. He was so encouraging and supportive of me, and I was always grateful whenever he sent notes back and suggestions. So, he gave me more work at Wildstorm. The next book I did was a superhero book, which I never thought I would be doing.

MR: And why was that? Was it just that what you have been working on up until that point wasn't part of that genre?

FS: Well, I never had an interest in superhero comics, and my style was super-rough and weird and sketchy. I didn't have the really clean, detailed style that you see in superhero comics. Although I was trying to add more clarity into my work, my abilities just weren't there yet.

I got this job doing a Jack Hawksmore book, which was a spinoff of *The Authority*.

Warren Ellis had created this team, The Authority, for Wildstorm, which was almost satirical in a British writer's sort of way, and kind of a takedown of the whole idea of superheroes: making them brutally violent and kind of fascist. Jack Hawksmore was one of the characters; they were doing origin stories. I didn't know anything about it when I got this job. I was the third artist they had hired to do the book; the other two had bailed…It was getting really close to the publishing date and they were running out of time and they didn't want to push the schedule back. I think I got the job because Scott figured that I would be fast and I was new, so I would take the job. I think it was going to be six issues and they needed each one done in three to four weeks in full colour. I did both penciling and colour work, and would be faster than keeping three different people on schedule. One of the only things he asked me was, "How do you feel about drawing tech?" And I actually hate drawing tech and I can't do it at all, but I lied and said that I could... He had me do a test page of Jack Hawksmore fighting a giant robot. So, I did the test page and it was kind of awful. He replied with, "You need to redo this and fix some things, but I'm putting you on the book." And that's when I started doing everything digitally. I was actually in England at the time, visiting Fraser Irving, and he was a digital art work pioneer. He had a small 12" Wacom Cintiq that he let me use while I was over there, and I just took to it immediately. That was in 2007.

MR: Do you think a lot of your contemporaries were using tablet monitors like the Cintiq at the time?

FS: Only a handful; not that many. Brian Bolland might have been one of the first ones to use it. Probably some colourist were using it, maybe some inkers. Digital work for a long time looked really digital. People were using these cheesy airbrush effects or they were doing vector-style line work. Stuff that looked really precise... There were tells—it looked like it was created by computer. But Fraser's work was a huge influence on me because it looked so organic and was so beautifully painted, because he was laying down every stroke by hand on the Cintiq. That was the model that I tried

to follow. I was really familiar with Photoshop because I'd been using it to colour for years. I felt that doing the inking in Photoshop as well was just a really good way to streamline the whole process.

MR: You use interesting colour contrasts that often aren't delineated by any line work, and in your cover art, particularly, you use fields of raw colour behind your illustrations.

FS: I definitely use colour as a tool to create mood or atmosphere. I don't have a really comprehensive background in traditional painting. Most of the colour work I've done has been digital. I think a lot of how I use colour is because of how easy it is to edit and change colours once I have them down.

It's having the ability to experiment as you go along without spending two or three days doing various colour comps. You still have to think about it and visualize the effect you are going for, or you can still get mud or something that doesn't quite work, but it's so easy to try different things. I don't think I'm that adventurous with colour the way some people are. I do try to keep the colours natural-looking, and a lot of the time they are fairly muted. I want to keep them subtle, for the most part.

MR: Did you feel that the transition to using the tablet monitor took you away from line work or made your work more painterly in any significant way?

FS: My interiors are still very much line-based. Covers, I usually do a really painted style because I'm able to spend more time on them, and also it's okay for them to be a little more static. When you fully render and paint an image, it doesn't look as dynamic as a simple line drawing. For *Saga* I had come up with a new style. It's my first ongoing book; my first monthly series that I might be doing forever, so I was really nervous about whether I'd be fast enough. I'm barely fast enough.

One of the things I really like about comics is the pace: how quickly you can finish it and get it to print, as opposed to most other types of media. With comics there is a real immediacy. I don't like to spend too long on anything, anyway. I like to work on things quickly, and then get them out the door and move on to the next thing. I think comics are a good fit for me that way. Even if I feel that I never have enough time, I also wonder if I had all the time in the world, how long would I really want to work on something. Probably not much more than a month anyway…

MR: What influences did you look at in developing your new sensibility for *Saga*?

FS: I was looking a lot at animation; a lot of Hayao Miyazaki movies, especially *Spirited Away*, which is my favourite for its dark, whimsical atmosphere. There is such a sense of place: such a fantastical but detailed setting with the most beautiful background paintings. And there is another anime feature film, *Tekkonkinkreet*, which is based on one of my favourite comics, *Black and White* [by Japanese manga artist, Taiyo Matsumoto]. Once I saw movies like that, I realized how beautiful the backgrounds could be, and how much flavour and atmosphere that they bring to the story. I don't have time to do that kind of detail in a monthly comic. If I ever could, it would be amazing. But the basic idea of doing a painted background and then line-drawn, cel-shaded characters in front of it is adapted from animation. I thought it

would work because I've always wanted to do a painted comic, but, as I said, I didn't want the characters to look too static, which they can if you don't paint them exactly the right way.

Clarity is really important in comics because I don't think you can really engage with a comic unless you can look at it and immediately understand the action and understand something in the character's faces that you can relate to. Ashley Wood [an illustrator and comic artist with an impressionistic, highly stylized and painterly illustration style that utilizes a very muted, monochromatic palette] was a big influence on me, especially in college. I love his paintings, which are usually ladies and robots. But while I love the look of his work, I don't really care about the stories. You can't see anything in his characters' faces; the work is about their poses, bodies and designs. But to do justice to Brian's character-driven story, the characters had to be easy to read above all else, so I decided to do them in a more simple, linear way.

I try to think about how each character reacts in a different way to the same situa-

tion. They each have a different way of expressing the same feeling: they don't all get angry in the same way; they don't all laugh the same way. I try to get into character when I'm drawing.

Figure 2: Special Agent Gale, from *Saga* Vol. 2, No. 12 (6).
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MR: Do you have a favourite character in *Saga*?

FS: The one that I find the most entertaining and fun to draw is probably Special Agent Gale, who is Prince Robot's liaison. So he only appears when he's yelling at

Prince Robot, but he's always fun to draw because he's just a sarcastic dick.

MR: When you design your backgrounds, are you aware of leaving what I would describe as a long horizon? A sense of expansiveness in the field of vision you are creating when you are framing a scene?

FS: Do you mean like a really deep visual field? I definitely try to do that. My backgrounds are something that I'm constantly working on. They are kind of roughly painted in a lot of the time, and that's just a matter of the time I have to work with. I'd like to get faster so I could do more finished backgrounds, but even if I do manage to clean them up a bit and add more details, I would probably still leave a lot of open space. It's important to give a sense of scale—it's important to zoom out sometimes - to give a sense of where we are as readers or as the characters, in the wider universe. I just don't think that a big, sweeping, galaxy-spanning story like *Saga* can feel too claustrophobic. You need to open it up and just look at where you are in relation to the bigger picture.

MR: I see you using a lot of landscapes, and sometimes even interior spaces, that employ a blank field that seems to sit back from things and has a sense of capacity to it. I just wondered if you were aware of that and if you were creating that consciously. An example I stumbled across when I was thinking about this was Steve Ditko's work on *Dr. Strange*. Dr. Strange is always traveling into these amorphous dimensions, where the laws of reality as we know it have come apart at the seams, and he's often jumping from a checkerboard platform onto a big squiggle, or something like that. When Steve Ditko draws these things, what he's often doing is drawing objects that are part of the middle ground or immediate fields of emphasis, and then he's just leaving the rest blank. But Ditko's scenes like that have a sense of enclosure to them, which seems to actually be part of how he's structured and placed the shapes in them compositionally. So even though there is this blank space behind Dr. Strange and these structures he's moving through, you don't get the sense the space is going on forever. You get the sense that maybe it's a really big room of some kind and that you just can't see the parameters. If you think of the constraining space of the frame on a comic book page, or actually the page itself as being the frame, where the artist decides to place elements of composition can really communicate a sense of enclosure. You don't have a tendency to do that. Even when you have placed a lot of frames within the page, your work still has a sense of expansiveness, long horizon.

It sounds like the idea of leaving space for space is something you're consciously pursuing. How aware of this are you and how much are you controlling it?

FS: For me, the appeal of a fantasy world, or any kind of speculative fiction, is that the world itself is like a character. You don't know what's going to be around the corner, but you want to give the readers a sense that there's something there; what you are seeing in the panel isn't the whole story; it's just a little sliver of this universe. You should always have the sense that there is more going on in the background. We know that there is a whole vast landscape of war and millions of other characters in the background, but we're just focusing on this relatively unimportant family. I want

to create the idea that there is probably more beyond the borders, but this is where we've cropped it.

MR: Do you think part of your ability to create that sensibility is that you are working here, in Western Canada? Do you find our big landscape to be a resonant aspect where you live, and do you think being a Western Canadian artist and a Calgarian makes you more sensitized to, and able to convey, expansive spaces?

FS: That is something I really love about being here. I feel that anywhere else you go, the sky isn't as big. It should be, but it's not. It's smaller. I think the quality of light that we have here, the sunlight, is just different. I love experiencing the mountains, the prairies and meadows, and that's why I haven't left Calgary, which sometimes shocks and disappoints people. I think people are still just surprised that I choose to do my work here. My family has a long history here on my Mom's side. My great-grandfather was one of the first Chinese immigrants to Calgary and really made his mark on the city, in Chinatown especially. My grandfather, my mom, and her siblings were all born here. I feel like I have community ties here.

I don't think that it's fair for me to say that my work has a specific Western Canadian influence because a lot of the artists who have really influenced me, I really love and identify with, are from all over the globe. I feel like being Western Canadian and Calgarian is a huge part of my personal identity, but I don't know how much of that comes through in the art. That's all I can honestly say. And with a project like *Saga*, which is a collaboration, it's not just my personal work. My first job is to tell the story. It's not just me in there.

MR: Is there anything in your work that you think makes you a specifically Canadian artist? Being from Western Canada has made you who you are, but has it also shaped your sense of aesthetics or your career?

FS: I think being from Western Canada has shaped my career path more than my artwork itself, just because I draw from so many things for the art, a lot of my influences come from other media. But, yes, it definitely influenced my career path. My experience at ACAD was really important. If I had gone anywhere else, I would not be doing the work that I am. I think it made me a more well-rounded artist than I would have been if I had only focused on comic books. The people I've met, the people I've worked with and local organizations like certain stores that have been really supportive, like Happy Harbour in Edmonton. Just feeling that there is a good sense of community amongst the artists here has been really huge.

"Fiona is a genius, yet she has no idea how to correctly spell the word 'color'."
—Brian K. Vaughan, "To Be Continued" [Letters], *Saga*, Chapter 8, December 2012

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