

Brought



To Book

GRANT MORRISON

Shifting identities: the comics star tells us about their debut novel

Words by Jonathan Wright // Portrait by Allan Amato

THE LAST TIME GRANT MORRISON completed a novel – at least, until Covid-19 hit – they were 18 years old. Set in Glastonbury, and imagining the Arthurian world colliding with the present day, it was, says Morrison, “super [Alan] Garner-esque”. Nothing wrong with that – most novelists have juvenilia locked in a drawer. Yet, despite enjoying a glittering career in comics, it has taken Morrison over 40 years to finish another, *Luda*.

In part, it seems, this gap is down to Dennis Potter. “He had this amazing withering quote,” says Morrison. “He said, ‘The novel, it’s just ‘he said, she said’ and descriptions of the sky.’ I was like, ‘Oh my god!’ And that kind of described my writing, frankly. So that’s why I was much happier to work in comics and media that had pictures, where I wasn’t actually responsible for descriptions of the sky.”

Morrison’s laughing as they say this, but an interest in the form endured. The problem was that they would embark on novels that would “get to page 250 and then die on the vine”. What was different about *Luda*? The pandemic for one thing. Where usually Morrison spends time travelling for work, they found themselves at home, “focused”. And while Morrison is careful to acknowledge the horrors of the pandemic, the scale of loss, a part of them nonetheless enjoyed the weirdness of lockdown: “It was like being in an eclipse. Something was edited out of the world.”

UNDER THE GLAMOUR

The dreamlike strangeness of this time seems to permeate the theatre world-set *Luda*, the story of how ageing drag queen Luci LaBang teaches a dangerously beautiful protégée, the titular Luda, about The Glamour, used to mesmerise audiences. Perhaps in reaction to being written during austere days, it’s also a novel that delights in its own extravagance. Morrison mentions Oscar Wilde, Quentin Crisp and Hunter S Thompson as influences, larger than life writers who each challenged convention and authority.

The book is also largely autobiographical, “just shifted over to a parallel universe”. In 2020, Morrison told *Mondo 2000* they had “been non-binary, cross-dressing, genderqueer” since they were 10. They spent “a lot of time in the ‘90s in drag”, they tell *SFX*. Plus the world of the theatre, including the seediness of this world, is partly based on time Morrison spent in a band.

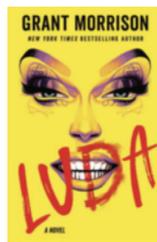
“On top of that, I wanted to talk more about performers and people like me who’ve never felt of any fixed identity,” they say. “You just put on clothes: put on a suit and be a

BIODATA

From
Glasgow

Greatest Hits
Where to begin? Morrison’s most successful and/or influential comics include *Doom Patrol*, *All-Star Superman* and *The Invisibles* for DC. Morrison was also a producer and writer on the recent US TV version of *Brave New World*.

Random Fact
Morrison pitched ideas for *Doctor Who* to Steven Moffat, including a story featuring a child version of the Doctor. None were commissioned.



gangster, put on leather and be in *The Matrix*, put on a dress and be a dominatrix. Because I was lucky enough as a kid to have a slender figure, I could get away with clothes that looked pretty good from either sex in the store.”

What the book definitely *isn’t* about, they add, is being trans. Rather, it’s about people who were inspired by David Bowie, and the idea of “having many selves you want to express – and there’s a lot of ways of doing this”.

The mention of Bowie serves as a reminder that Morrison, now in their 60s, began exploring these identities in the wake of glam and as punk was breaking, in the days before the internet when, around the UK, people built micro-scenes from shared obsessions.

FINE AND DANDY

“You form an aesthetic around that,” says Morrison, talking of their formative years in Glasgow. “We were into Michael Moorcock, Jerry Cornelius and *A Clockwork Orange*. We had this idea you had to be dandies. We were just working class kids, but looking fucking good became the thing.”

These micro-scenes developed slowly, at snail-mail pace, with people connecting via fanzines, mixtapes and live shows. There was a political element too. Morrison has spoken often about kicking against Thatcherism, and the politics of the time inevitably played into the work of the comic creators who made up the 1980s British Invasion of American imprints: the likes of Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman and Morrison.

Even now, it seems mind-boggling that American comics editors were so open to leftfield British writers, but they were. “By the time I came along, it was really laissez-faire,” says Morrison. “It was a very exciting atmosphere.” Figures such as DC editor-in-chief Jenette Kahn were forward-looking, progressive. “She didn’t look at comics in a fanboy sense, she was interested in what ways they could be developed – could we emphasise the literary or artistic qualities? And she was really serious about that.”

Today, by contrast, the sheer value of franchises makes it more difficult to take such risks. Although, as Morrison notes, these things go in cycles, so who knows what the future holds? Meantime, Morrison is established enough not to worry too much. “I have more ideas than I know what to do with, and some will probably never make it to fruition,” they say. “So there’s no sense of drying up so far, as I commence my flamboyant dotage!” ●

Luda: A Novel is out now, published by Del Rey Books.

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