A Method to the Madness:
One Graphic Novelist's Process

by Matt Phelan

It begins with words, although I know it will end with pictures.

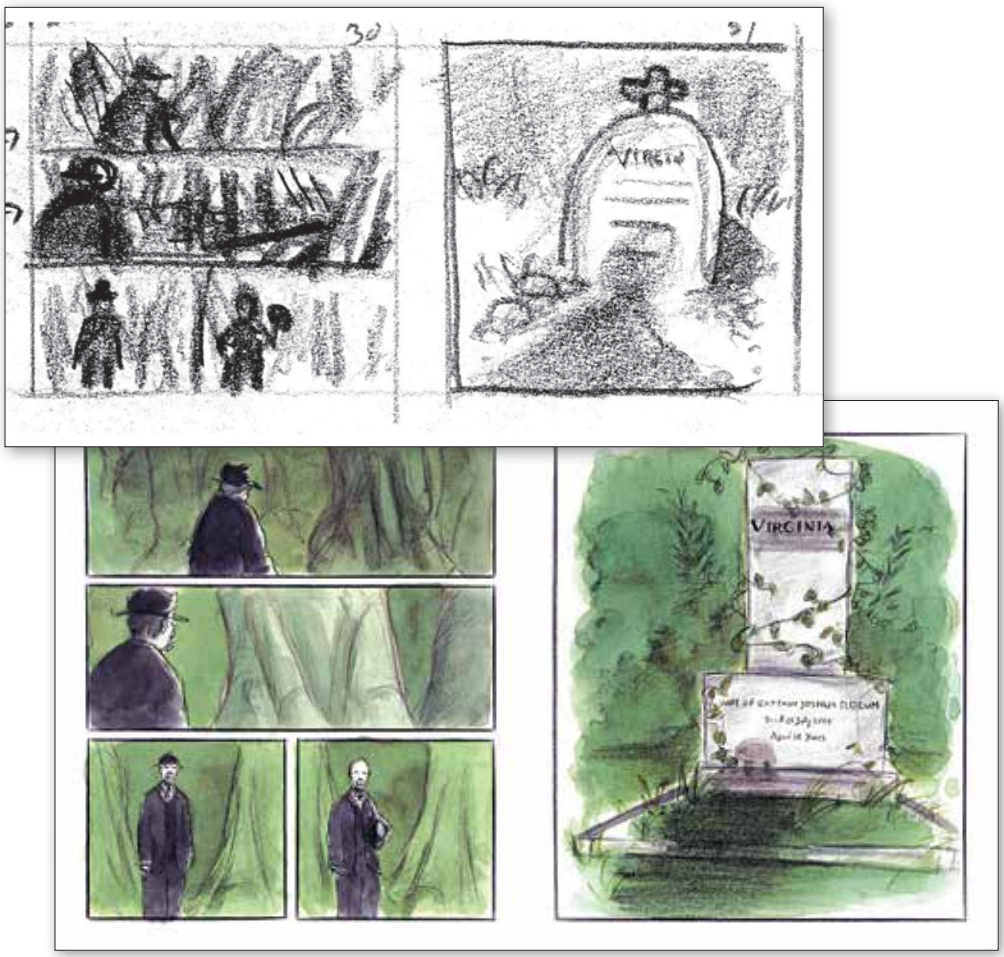
Each of my graphic novels (or comics, or sequential stories, or insert-your-own-label-here-because-nobody-really-likes-any-of-them) starts as a manuscript in which I describe, panel by panel, what the reader will eventually see. Dialogue is included, but I leave out technical details such as "Page One, Panel One, Bird's-Eye View," which I find clunky and tedious. The script should be readable, entertaining. It should inspire images in the reader's mind. Initially, by "reader" I mean my editor Deb Noyes at Candlewick. I also mean myself. I started my career illustrating for other authors. In a way, I do the same thing here. I split myself in two. Writer Me writes the story to the best of my ability, and then I hand it over to Illustrator Me to visualize the world. Here is an example from the *Bluffton* script:

> Pg. 3
>
> Henry leans against the wall of the station.
>
> The train pulls to a stop, steam blowing.
>
> Henry is about to take a bite out of an apple.
>
> Men open a cargo car of the train and push up a ramp.
>
> Henry freezes.
>
> The apple drops to the ground.

EACH OF THOSE sentences is a separate panel. And each panel is a moment in time. Writing a graphic novel is slowing down time and freezing the most essential moments. It is about economy and precision.

Writing the script first allows me to focus entirely on the story and characters without worrying about pesky details such as "Can I actually draw this?" Many graphic novelists write and draw as they go, working the story out visually from the beginning. Personally, I feel that I would self-edit if I worked this way. I wouldn't write anything I feared I couldn't draw. Writing first, I focus on what the story *needs*. I worry about drawing it later.

Which brings me to the next stage, which is my favorite part of the process: thumbnail sketches. It is with these tiny, scribbly, energetic



Around the World. © 2011 by Matt Phelan.

Above, thumbnail sketches for the eventual finished art, below, from *Around the World*.

doodles that I begin to jettison all the nouns, verbs, and adjectives I used in the script and begin to translate the setting, the mood, and the emotions of the characters into drawings. The only detail you can fit into these tiny sketches is the essence of your composition; i.e., everything important. If you can follow the story with simple stick-figure doodles, then the story will work in the final art. If you can't express the story small and simply, it won't work later, no matter how skilled you are with technique.

Most of the major decisions of the graphic novel are made at the thumbnail stage. Chief among them is the size and shape of the panels. I can't control how fast or how slowly you read my books. But I can indicate the pace I think you should read the story by the size of the panels. A sequence of small panels might indicate quick action; a large panel means "slow down" or "take this moment in." A full-page panel might be the key dramatic beat of the scene or its cymbal-crashing climax. In many ways, the varying panels act like a musical score. The reader of a graphic novel takes in the pictures, the words, and the pacing suggested by the panels.

THE FINAL ART is the last stage. I use traditional media for each of my books, whether it's a picture book or a graphic novel: pencil, ink, watercolor, and gouache, for the most part. I like the imperfections that I get from painting. If I worked digitally, I would spend most of my time trying to teach the computer to surprise me the way watercolor always does. This would add time to an already-lengthy process. Typically, it takes me up to a year to finish the final paintings after the sketches have been approved.

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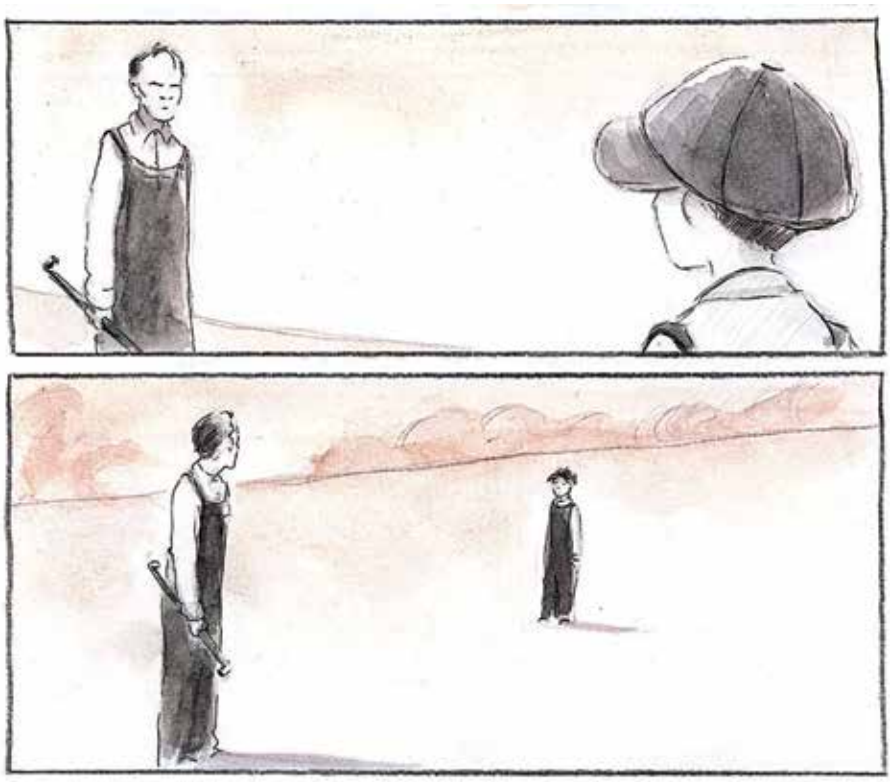
Whenever possible, I like to drop the dialogue out entirely and tell the story with the pictures alone. This preference springs somewhat from my lifelong love of film, particularly silent film. I refer to these passages in my books as silent, not wordless. "Wordless" seems to imply that something is missing.

The power of an image to convey so much is a great part of the appeal of the graphic novel. There is something about a drawing that can instantly tell readers all they need to know. I used this to particular advantage in *The Storm in the Barn.* In that story, the father and son do not communicate. They don't talk much at all, let alone share their feelings. Because it's a graphic novel, I can *show* that. I can make that silence deafening. By simply changing the angle and showing the same moment in two panels, I can prolong and strengthen that silence.



The Storm in the Barn. © 2009 by Matt Phelan.

From *The Storm in the Barn*: the silence is deafening.

THE CREATION OF a graphic novel is a like a marathon. Someone with a passing interest might make one graphic novel, but unless you fall in love with how the pictures, words, and panels work together, you'll never make a second one. I've now made four, and each time a new idea pops up, a part of my brain conveniently forgets the massive amount of work the book will require. I fell for this unique, challenging medium—a way for me to tell stories that are longer than picture books but still rely primarily on the pictures. I'm glad I did. ■

Matt Phelan's *The Storm in the Barn* was the first graphic novel to win the Scott O'Dell Award for historical fiction. His upcoming graphic novel—a noir retelling of "Snow White" set in 1933 New York City—will be published by Candlewick Press in fall 2016.