

ODESSA



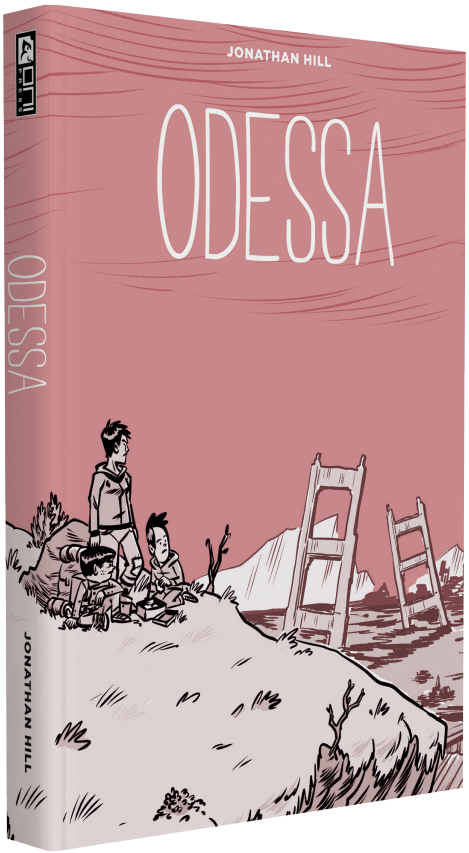
AN INTERVIEW WITH CREATOR JONATHAN HILL

ABOUT *ODESSA*

Eight years ago, an earthquake—the Big One—toppled cities, changing life forever. But for Vietnamese-American Virginia Crane, the biggest shock occurred shortly after the earthquake, when her mother left and never came back. Now on the verge of her eighteenth birthday, Ginny and her two younger brothers have gotten used to life without a mother, until the arrival of a mysterious package sends tremors through the Crane family's complacent existence. For the first time, Ginny wants something more than to survive—she wants answers, even if it means leaving her family behind.

ONI LION FORGE: For starters, wow! For your first solo project, *Odessa* was quite an undertaking, coming in around 300 pages. Can you tell us more about what the process of working on this book was like?

JONATHAN HILL: My previous books were written by my good friend MK Reed. During our first book, I learned a lot by just being the artist. I think it gave me a chance to roll my sleeves up, let go of my perfectionism, and work on storytelling. I carried those ideas with me into making *Odessa*. Comics are such a marathon, especially a big book like this… I tell my students all the time: it's still a job. There are times when you hate it, but you still need to get the work done. I can fuss and fuss over a page, but it doesn't do me any good. I do the best I can and learn from that page and try to improve on the next one. What's that saying? "Finished is better than perfect."



OLF: What led you to choose a monochromatic color palette for *Odessa*? How did you land on the final color?

JH: I think comics really work best when there is the opportunity for the reader to really participate and fill in the empty spaces. So much of that already happens in the gutters and the sounds and movement. Those things aren't ever shown, they're all implied. Using a single spot color opens up so many design opportunities to show form, shadow, depth, etc., without having to commit to working in full color, but it also allows the reader an opportunity to engage and fill in those empty spaces.

As far as the color, it was a blend of practical need and artistic choice. When picking a spot color, you want something in a mid-tone between a full black and the white of the paper. It shouldn't be too dark or too light. I picked the pink because I wanted to stray away from the drab browns, greens, and grays that we often see in post-apocalyptic stories. The pink seemed as far away from that as possible and created a nice juxtaposition to the harsh world in the story.

OLF: Ignoring the story's setting for a minute, out of all the natural disasters that could have left the world irrevocably changed, is there any special reason why you chose an earthquake?

JH: Living in the Pacific Northwest, we're all waiting for the REALLY BIG ONE to hit along the Cascadia fault line. There was an article in *The New Yorker* in 2015 about it. That's sort of the realistic grounding to it. There is also this idea of separation or loss of a parent and how that affects a child's life. It's like the literal ground being shaken from underneath you. It's not a very subtle metaphor, but it's an apt one.

OLF: How does *Odessa* address the need for change in our actions?

JH: There is such strong imagery in the world being torn open like a wound that can't be healed. The world we knew has ended…but it hasn't. Things don't end, they just change.

My production assistant, Xan, pointed out to me how the grown-ups constantly remind the Cranes that these are the rules of the world. But the kids, Ginny in particular, are constantly pushing against this. Are things this way just because that's the way it is? Or because people have just accepted it and not tried to change it?

As I write this, we're in the middle of a global pandemic of COVID-19. One of the big things we're seeing now is that so many of the systems we have in place just don't work. They never really worked. We've accepted them for so long because "that's the way it is," but we're finally realizing that isn't the case. People are pushing up against that, and it's hard and it's scary, but the hope is that there is a better world on the other end. That problems like climate change, social justice, and other inequities can be challenged and changed. The world isn't inherently a cruel, violent place. It's like that because we've chosen to make it like that. We can also make it different.

OLF: You've mentioned before how important your own family is to you. What aspects of the Crane family dynamics remind you of your own?

JH: I think a lot of the dynamics between the siblings and the parents are inspired a lot from my own family. The constant fighting and bickering is VERY much me and my brothers. And yet, there's a lot of love there, too. There's also this attitude of if someone gets picked on by an outsider, you instantly have their back. It's like, the only person that can pick on my siblings is one of the siblings. I think that's the case with almost all siblings, ha-ha.

OLF: Staying on that topic of family, throughout *Odessa*, we see the family Virginia was born with, the family she's lost, the family she makes along her journey, and the family she leaves behind. Readers can sense her grappling with how all these different people contribute to her identity. Can you elaborate on the sometimes tricky ties between family and self-identity, especially in regard to Ginny?

JH: Our relationship with our family, present or absent, can define us in so many ways. We try to reflect the qualities we admire or try to reject and push against the ones we don't. Those relationships can change—I think they do, especially when we get older, and we learn to see our family in different ways. I think we see that a lot in Ginny and the people in her life. It's messy and it's complicated, and it's so hard to untangle who you are with and without them.

I would definitely say that *Odessa* is as much about family as finding yourself. I think in a lot of ways finding one helps you find the other.

OLF: If you could meet Virginia Crane at any point along her journey, what advice would you give her?

JH: Appreciate your brothers. You won't always be as close, and they might not always be around. You'll wish they were.



OLF: In your letter to readers, you talk about how *Odessa* grew out of the feelings you and your siblings went through during your parents' divorce and how it metaphorically destroyed your world. What do you hope that readers who have gone through, or are currently going through, a parent's divorce find in *Odessa*?

JH: I think it's really about loss. That loss can be divorce, or any separation, or even death. When something like that happens, we have so many questions.

Ginny and her brothers go searching for answers, but maybe the answers don't matter. Who are the people that are there for you in that journey? Who can love you and show you kindness? The world will change, but there are people who are there to help you through it.

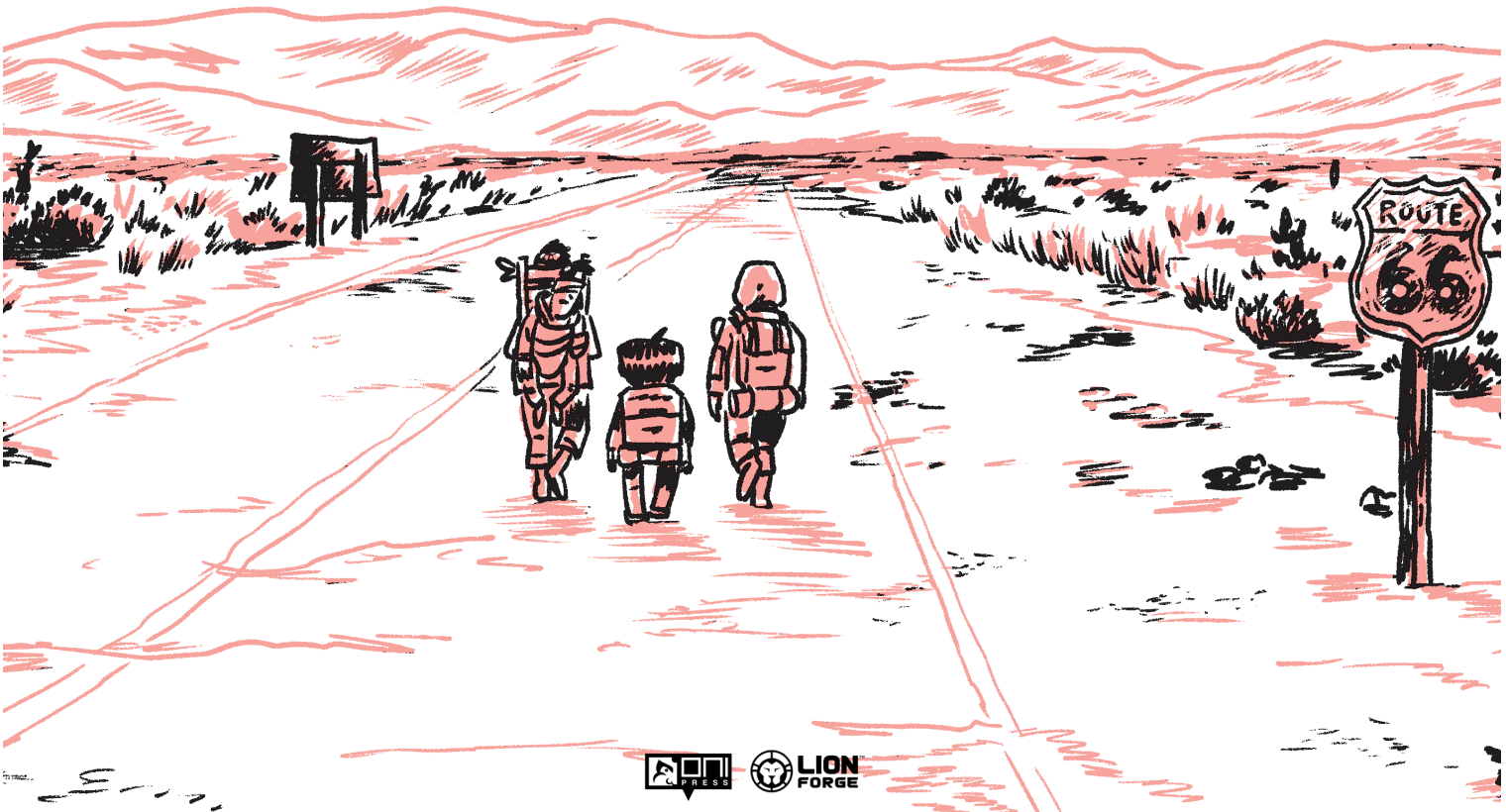
OLF: Have you ever set out on an adventure (big or small) only to find yourself questioning if your goal was worth it? What did that experience teach you about yourself?

JH: When I graduated college, I had no plans. I had a BFA in Sequential Art and no idea what to do with my life. For the first time, academics weren't directing my life. It's scary to be so rudderless, but it's also exciting to see what you can make for yourself. I got together with two buddies of mine and we decided to move from Savannah, Georgia, to Portland, Oregon. I had spent some time there when I was in high school, and it seemed as a good a place as any to not know what to do.

The adventure itself wasn't as epic as I wanted it to be. We were driving a U-Haul towing a car and could only go around fifty miles an hour. We wanted to stop at all these places along the way but decided very quickly to just get it over with as fast as we could. But it was totally worth it. Here I am sixteen years later and Portland has become home.

OLF: If you were traversing a destroyed America in search of your family, what one unexpected item would you bring, and why?

JH: The artist in me says a beat-up, old picture of my family that I keep tucked away in my jacket or shirt pocket. There's nothing more iconic and nothing else that will give you the grit to get through any narrative pickle.



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