

Josh Gad and the Berkowitz brothers talk penning ‘The Writer,’ a Boston-set comic book rooted in Jewish folklore

The creators explain how Massachusetts and Indiana Jones inspired their new comic book miniseries

By Matt Juul, Globe Staff, June 20, 2024

Josh Gad teamed up with Benjamin and Max Berkowitz to pen "The Writer," a new comic book featuring art by Ariel Olivetti. As kids growing up in Wellesley, Ben Berkowitz would often drag his brother, Max, to the comic book store, where he'd spend hours flipping through pages of "Hellboy" and other superhero titles. On Saturday mornings, they'd nerd out over cartoons like "X-Men" or "Batman: The Animated Series."

But looking back on their childhoods, the brothers point to their maternal grandfather, Nathan Glick, as being the true inspiration behind their love for the arts, which has since blossomed into careers in storytelling — and now comic books.

"Every Friday at our papa and nana's house, we would sit in front of the TV drawing superheroes," Ben recalled in a Zoom interview Monday. "He would be drawing in the back sitting on his chair and our nana would be reading a book or playing cards or telling us to turn the TV down while we were playing 'X-Files.'"

The Berkowitz brothers have teamed up with Grammy-winning and Tony-nominated actor Josh Gad to pen "The Writer," a new comic book released Wednesday by Dark Horse Comics. Featuring artwork by Ariel Olivetti, the four-issue miniseries follows a professor and writer named Stan Siegel who ends up in a Nazi-occult nightmare after coming into possession of a magical book that imbues him with powers.

The brothers — whose paternal grandfather, the late George Berkowitz, founded Legal Sea Foods in 1950 — drew upon their connections with the Boston area while writing the comic book, setting the series in the city and neighboring Brookline, where their mother grew up. The first issue features a ton of fun Easter eggs for local readers, including appearances by Brookline High School and a deli that, as Max notes, was inspired by Coolidge Corner's Zaftigs Delicatessen.

"For us, it was really important to showcase and celebrate Boston," Ben said.

The first issue of "The Writer" includes several Boston-themed Easter eggs, including nods to Brookline High School, the Boston Marathon, and more.

DARK HORSE COMICS
Gad, who's originally from Florida, says he is "obsessed with Boston" and has been ever since he first fell in love with the city during a sixth-grade field trip and subsequent stays for speech and debate competitions. Boston served as the filming location for his first-ever movie role in the 2008 heist drama "21," he noted.

"We primarily shot in Boston, and that became kind of a seminal experience for me," Gad said in a Zoom interview Tuesday. "It was the first time that I had ever relocated to another city to make a project."

A "giant comic book fan" who has "always consumed but never dared to dream of writing one," Gad says he grew up reading graphic novels like Alan Moore's 1986 classic "Watchmen" and the work of writer and artist Frank Miller, whose credits include "The Dark Knight Returns," "300," and "Sin City."

"It was like completely being immersed in a world that was so unfamiliar to me as a reader," Gad said. "I didn't know you could

marry amazing graphics with text that would take you to new places and let you imagine worlds that you never knew were possible.”

Gad decided to team up with the brothers to write the miniseries two years ago, agreeing to the project because their concept was “different.” Although comic book creators have a long history of adapting various mythologies, such as Marvel with Thor and the pantheon of Norse gods, Jewish folklore has rarely received the spotlight. The Berkowitz brothers wanted to change that with “The Writer,” hoping to tap into both their heritage and their love of ‘80s action flicks.

“We had always wanted to take a story that took Jewish folklore and mythology and kind of make it our own, but also make it a very commercially viable story,” Ben said. “Like how do we take this deep folklore that’s been around for thousands of years and make it exciting like an ‘Indiana Jones’ or a ‘Ghostbusters’ or even ‘Back to the Future’?”

"The Writer" draws inspiration from Jewish folklore.

The brothers spent a lot of time researching various aspects of Jewish folklore, amassing a spreadsheet with “thousands of lines” just for the different magical sources like the mystical Sword of Moses book.

“We researched so much that Ben is going to get a tattoo of the Sword of Moses,” Max noted of the legend, which is featured in “The Writer.” Ben plans to enlist the help of a tattoo artist from Berlin who specializes in Hebrew calligraphy.

With the rise of comic book movies, Ben says he’s noticed a troubling “trend of Jewish characters, identities getting erased or

thrown to the sidelines as they made the jump from page to screen” — for instance, the Fantastic Four’s *The Thing*, whose Jewish identity hasn’t really been explored in live-action — which also inspired them to make their own superhero tale.

“It was incredibly important to showcase a story that was nuanced and not niche, that was also a celebration of our Jewish identities, our Jewish experience, and couldn’t be taken away,” Ben said.

The brothers’ unique take ultimately swayed Gad to sign on; he says the idea for the story “felt so personal” and “familiar.”

“My grandparents were both Holocaust survivors, and I have a proximity to the traditions and the faith and some of the mythology that’s involved in the storytelling that really excited me,” Gad said. “One of my favorite movies of all time is ‘*Raiders of the Lost Ark*,’ and that sort of magical mysticism of the Old Testament is something I’ve always been fascinated by narratively.”

The brothers praised Olivetti, whose past work includes “*Superman*,” “*Daredevil*,” and other iconic DC and Marvel titles, for creating scenes that felt “cinematic” with a “classical, painterly” touch. “Every time we would get page submissions, even in the sketch, it would make us all so emotional because he was able to take everything from our page and make it come alive,” Ben said.

And while the comic features plenty of fantastical elements, “*The Writer*” doesn’t shy away from taking on real-world issues like antisemitism.

“I think there is, obviously, a gigantic rise in antisemitism right now,” Gad said.

“So I think a lot of it became relevant,” he added. “Even if we didn’t, at the time, anticipate its relevance in the way that it’s kind

of come to the forefront.”

The Berkowitz brothers also wanted to use “The Writer” as an opportunity showcase the “diversity of what a Jewish person looks like,” according to Max, as the comic, for example, features characters who are both Black and Jewish.

“Judaism is a spectrum of people from around the world because of the diaspora,” Ben said. “I think that’s incredibly important to showcase.”

Inspired by Jewish folklore, protagonist Stan Siegel is imbued with superpowers when he eats pages from a magical book.

While there are no plans at the moment to adapt “The Writer” to screen, the brothers are open to the idea and wouldn’t mind seeing Gad in the title role.

“Josh is a legend on screen, too, so,” Max joked, with Ben adding that Gad “does kind of look like” Stan, the main character.

For now, they are focused on the comic book’s launch and cultivating a community of fans. Gad believes that the “universal” themes of “The Writer” will resonate with readers this summer.

“I think that this is one of those rare pieces that hopefully transcends the genre and allows for, like I once was, first-time explorers in this space to discover something that is completely different than they’re used to reading,” Gad said. “I do think that we’ve created something pretty magical.”