

# GRIPPING YARNS



Art from James Bama: American Realist by Brian Kane

**FLESK PUBLICATIONS has become the established boutique publishing house for adventure aficionados. We spoke to its publisher John Fleskes to find out how he got started and the company's ethos... WORDS: JOEL MEADOWS**

**TRIPWIRE:** How long has Flesk Publications been in business for?

**JOHN FLESKE:** I started working on my first book, Franklin Booth: Painter with a Pen in the fall of 2001. I established Flesk Publications as a vehicle to self-publish the Booth book, then ramped up the business later. With the book's release in April 2002, Flesk was born. After the book came out, and I got more into the business side, I realized how much I enjoyed the challenge of self-publishing as much as actually putting a book together.

The interesting thing is I never considered submitting my Booth book to a publisher. I wanted to maintain full control and enjoyed the challenge of doing everything myself. My thinking was why should I turn over my book to someone else, lose control over it, when I can do it myself exactly the way I want to? I have the attitude that if someone else can do it, so can I.

I started working on my first Joseph Clement Coll book in the summer of that year. By then, I was thinking more and more about Flesk as a business. I put together a plan of what I wanted to accomplish and worked feverishly until I accomplished those goals. How am I going to get my books distributed? How am I going to promote

them? My goals then were looking forward a few months at a time, whereas now I look ahead five to ten years.

**TW:** What is your professional background?

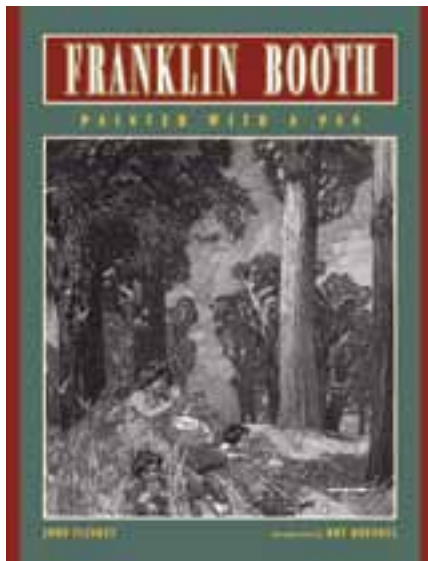
**JF:** I don't consider myself to have a professional background. I've been working since I was about eight, and done a variety of things. One of the more interesting ones is when I started working for a commercial bungee-jumping company when I was seventeen. For five years, we jumped people off of bridges, out of hot air balloons, and off of cranes. I was also involved in a few stunts for TV shows, and special events. One time we did the half-time entertainment for a monster truck show. My jump involved leaping at 100 feet from a crane, coming down close enough to the ground to just put one foot on the ground and take a soda can out of my buddies hand, then shooting back up fifty feet. We were all highly competitive and were always trying to outdo each other doing wilder stunts, all without showing any fear. The same goes with my surfing and rock-climbing, and other sports. This all dominated my life for years. It was all about how far you can push yourself and beat the other person. I took this confidence and

competitive nature into running my own business.

As far as a creative background—something that would apply to book design and publishing—I have no experience. I had to learn Photoshop, InDesign, and all aspects of publishing from scratch to do the Franklin Booth book. My friend Jim Vadeboncoeur, Jr. was instrumental in providing me with the Adobe application basics to get started. Bud Plant was extremely patient and forthcoming in providing book business advice. Most of my family and friend's are business owners, so it was only natural for me to do my own thing, too, at some point.

Something that ties into the field I chose is that





**“I do like it if an artist gains exposure as a result of a book I publish. On a personal level, it is important for me that the illustrators of our past have greater visibility.”**

**JF:** From when I was growing up, I would say Jack Kirby, John Byrne, Mike Mignola, and Arthur Adams. If you were to ask me for my favorites now, I wouldn't be able to do it. The list would fill up your magazine. It would extend primarily through comics, strips, illustration, fine art, and photography. My interests are very wide.

When it comes to strips, I favor the ones that combine great art with excellent storytelling. And by storytelling, I don't necessarily mean the text.

I've worked for two of my friends' at their comic shops. Also, for Jim Vadeboncoeur, Jr. packing books whenever a new catalog would go out at Bud Plant Illustrated Books for about five years. I did a lot of rare book scouting for years for Jim as well. I've always loved old comics and, art and illustrated books. The years spent around Jim and an assortment of hard-core collectors allowed me to see a large assortment of tough to find ephemera. I received a lot of exposure to material from about 1880 on up at a young age.

**TW:** What was the initial impetus to set it up?

**JF:** Do you ever sit around with your friends and ask each other what book they are dying to see, and wish someone would publish? I finally got tired of waiting and starting doing them myself.

When I choose which book to do next, I find an artist who I am passionate about and make a book. Then, I figure out how to sell it. Since I do the books for myself, and the artist (if they are living) first, no book is ever a failure. I judge a book's success by how happy the artist is with it. If someone chooses to work with me again, that is the ultimate reward.

**TW:** Have you always been a reader of newspaper strips and adventure material?

**JF:** No, I wouldn't say that I have. We never got the newspaper growing up, so I rarely read the comics sections. Still, when I was a kid I was more interested in the humour strips. I also got my fix through Marvel super hero comic books. I wasn't exposed to Hal Foster and Alex Raymond until I was about 19 or 20, so I caught on a little late with the adventure material. But, by then, I was catching on fast. I'm a late bloomer.

It was at this same time, in my early twenties, that I was exposed to Mark Schultz's *Xenozoic Tales*. Frank Frazetta's book covers were instrumental in introducing me to Robert E. Howard and Edgar Rice Burrough's.

**TW:** Do you have any favourite artists or strips from when you were growing up that you enjoyed reading?



I like art that can stand alone without the written form—that can be absorbed and appreciated sans text. With this in mind, as far as my favorites go, I'll begin with the aforementioned Flash Gordon by Raymond and Prince Valiant by Foster (as well as the current ongoing storyline by Gary Gianni and Mark Schultz), and *Secret Agent Corrigan* by Al Williamson. Noel Sickles' *Scorchy Smith* and Will Eisner's *The Spirit* are great reads. I go nuts for *Krazy Kat*, as well as Winsor McKay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*.

**TW:** Could you pick, if pushed, a favourite artist or illustrator and a reason why?

**JF:** There's no way. I could name my top 30 and consider them tied for number one. Let's see, I'll just throw out the first name that comes to my mind... William Russell Flint. Besides being a phenomenal artist, his diversity and longevity make for a storied career. He illustrated classics, did beautiful landscapes, his drawings of women are gorgeous, and he could use a multitude of mediums. I enjoy Frank Brangwyn's work for much of the same reasons. I still go crazy for Jack Kirby.

His storytelling and creativity is astounding.

**TW:** It seems that we've always had adventure in literature, on film and in the strips and in comics. What is it do you think that makes characters like Robin Hood, Prince Valiant, Ivanhoe and others continually appeal to readers and audiences?

**JF:** They're honest, help the needy, beat up the bad guys, and get the women at the end. They always know what to do and are praised for doing so. They're everything we're not, but wish we were. I enjoy the excitement and thrill of a good adventure story.

**TW:** Your line has brought the work of many important artists back into print in titles that examine their work. How essential was it for you to increase people's awareness of creators like James Bama and Franklin Booth?

**JF:** That is a goal of mine. I do like it if an artist is raised from obscurity, or gains exposure as a result of a book I publish. I think Franklin Booth was already well known, but just by the artists, not necessarily by the public. On a personal level, it is important for me that the illustrators of our past have greater visibility.

For the living artists, increasing people's awareness is important to me for another reason. The books help allow them to express themselves by sharing their art, and help to promote themselves.

**TW:** I've noticed that interest has grown in illustrators over the past five years. How much of a fair comment do you think this is and if it is, why do you think this is the case?

**JF:** The exposure has increased, allowing people to enjoy their work. The problem has always been accessibility to the old magazines and books. Many of these artists were lost in obscurity. It's not that they are not good, it's just only a handful of people knew they existed.

Now we have a few books and magazines on illustrators trickling out. I think Dan Zimmer's *Illustration Magazine* has helped tremendously. He



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has brought awareness to many obscure illustrators. I commend him for not always focusing on the well-known masters, and bringing forth people you never knew existed. Many of these illustrators were household names for a good reason. Their work is great. I hope, in a small way, some of my books have helped as well.

The cool thing is young people are enjoying people in their early twenties supporting us at the shows. I enjoy it when people of all ages are appreciating the books, and not just a narrow demographic.

**TW:** How have you found reader’s reactions to your titles have been?

**JF:** Very positive. It’s extremely fulfilling to receive kind emails and letters from people. That someone would enjoy a book enough to take the time to write

means a lot to me.

The shows are a nice venue to receive direct feedback from those who support us. When people think your stuff sucks, they let you know really fast. You can tell just from their mannerisms if they like or don’t like something. Also, the web provides blog areas for individuals to provide the most honest feedback all while remaining anonymous. It’s totally unfiltered. So far, I’ve only seen a few crummy remarks. I never try to please everyone and expect some negativity. That’s just a part of life.

I will say this. Sometimes you’re going through a hell of a week working twelve-hour days trying to get some work done. I’m beat and grumpy. Then, a nice email rolls in and makes all the hard work worth it.

**TW:** Is there one particular artist whose work Flesk has reprinted/covered who has attracted greater attention than the others and if there has been, do you have any idea why this is the case?

**JF:** James Bama: American Realist by Brian Kane



Art from 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea by Gary Gianni

is our bestseller. Bama’s art appeals to such a wide variety of people, and most importantly, tugs at that nostalgia string for many who grew up in the sixties. Paperback books he illustrated the cover for sold millions of copies. Due to the amount of exposure his work had, I often hear the remark that someone fondly recalls a book cover, but never knew who the artist was. The Doc Savage covers alone have made him an icon to modern day fandom. Then there is the Universal Monster model kits, and his fine art. His art moves people, and is combined with an appealing place in time for fans. Adventure, horror, men’s magazines, western art—all genres are done to the utmost perfection.

The interesting thing is I was exposed to Bama’s fine art work first. I picked up his two western art collections, one from Bantam (the first and revised edition), and *The Art of James Bama* published in 1993. It’s these works that are ingrained in me with nostalgia. I wasn’t around in the sixties, and too busy learning how to jump over garbage cans with my bike in the late seventies. Outside of his Doc Savage covers and monster model kit box art, I didn’t have much exposure to his illustration art.

This all changed when Brian Kane started sending me samples of his James Bama book in 2003. It was amazing to see all of this material that I didn’t know existed. When I asked Brian if he would consider me to publish the book, I was thrilled when he trusted me enough to publish his book. Brian did a terrific job of showing off Bama’s entire career, while providing a good dose of the material the hardcore fans wanted to see.

I’ve become good friends with James Bama in the process. He makes anyone feel like his long lost little brother. Something of note is that we are working on two new books on Bama’s work. One is a collection of his studies, preliminaries and sketches. The other is a collection on his personal unpublished paintings inspired by his travels. These are extraordinary pieces of subjects in China, Turkey, Mexico, and more. It’s an honour to have the opportunity to publish his works, and to know him.

**TW:** You have become associated with the

**work of Mark Schultz and Gary Gianni. What was it about their work that made you and them natural bedfellows?**

**JF:** I feel very lucky to publish both Mark Schultz and Gary Gianni's work. Despite their artistic styles being very different, they both have a lot of similarities. Both of them are perfectionists. They work tirelessly to improve themselves. They are both good businessmen, and they know exactly what they want. I've been a fan of their respective work for a good decade before I met them. It was nice to discover they are genuine, friendly, and humble. These are guys who, if they weren't artists and I wasn't their publisher, I would still consider myself fortunate to know as friends.

I would say what has made us work well together is a naturally formed relationship. Publishing a book on Mark Schultz, then Gary Gianni—it all just happened. It wasn't forced. I got to know them, we got along, and we made some books together, and we are doing some more. I feel the same way about James Bama and William Stout, too.

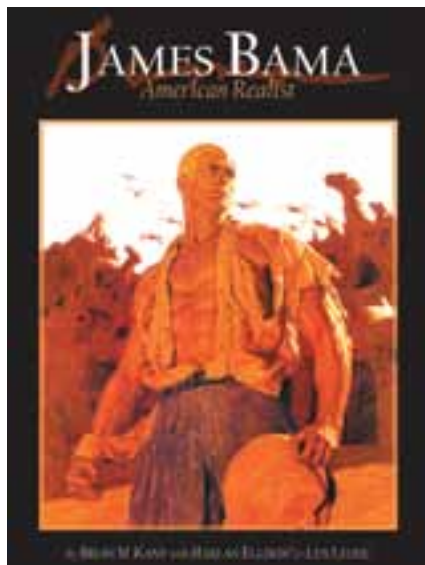
They know I focus on every nuance in regards to the quality of our books. I am always thinking about their reputation and how their art is presented. A bad book reflects very poorly on both the publisher and artist. I'm always thinking of the long term, and know how it can affect them if I screw up. I am always trying to improve upon each new book.

I also like to collaborate closely with them when we put together a book. I want each book to be an extension of the artist, in that they were a part of the design and decision making of the book.

I think both Mark and Gary appreciate this.

**TW: A number of the artists whose work has been published by Fleck are masters of pen and ink. What is it about that particular medium that appeals to you as an aficionado/publisher?**

**JF:** I think my affinity towards comics starting at a young age, has made me appreciate line art. I'm amazed at what an artist can do with a pen, or brush and ink. From a thin line to the spotting of blacks, I am amazed at what can be done with the absence of color. Mike Mignola is a modern day king of spotting blacks. The Bernie Wrightson



Frankenstein plates made a profound affect on me early on, which led me to Franklin Booth. Gianni's work helped steer me towards Joseph Clement Coll. Then, I began devouring books with line-work. Daniel Vierge, Dan Smith, Heinrich Kley, T.S. Sullivant, and Orson Lowell—they all make an impact on me. I can't really explain exactly why, but I do tend to favor black and white art.

**TW: All of your books are produced to a very high standard in terms of their production values. How important is it for you to present these creator's works in a suitably durable format?**

**JF:** One of my bosses while working at the bungee jumping company, an incredibly smart mechanical engineer, always told me, "What's worth doing is worth overdoing," and, "Don't do something unless you're going to do it right!" I still hear his words echoing in my head to this day. I can't cut corners, and I won't turn in a book to the printer to meet a deadline. My books often come out later than expected because I believe once it is out you can't make any changes. I think customers will forgive me if the book comes out late, but looks great. As I expressed earlier, a poorly produced book reflects bad on yourself and the artist. It is my responsibility to do my best work on everything I handle. Plus, again, I am very competitive. Even though we are relatively small, I want our books to stand alongside anything put out by a major art book publisher, like Abrams.

**TW: Are you still a fan of the work you have published even though you have gotten to know some of the artists whose work you have collected or represented?**

**JF:** More so. Definitely. I am more stoked now than I was when I started. Every artist I have worked with has been a pleasure. Mark, Gary, Bill Stout, Steve Rude, and James Bama, have all been inspirational to me. I appreciate them more now. I still marvel at seeing a new piece of art by any of them.

**TW: Do you run Fleck as a full-time job?**

**JF:** Starting on Jan. 23, 2009 I began running the business full-time. Up until then I was working at a

high tech job for 10 years. Combined with family responsibilities, every waking minute, seven days a week, was booked solid. Things were starting to fall between the cracks. The stress was turning me into something I was unhappy in becoming. Not having the responsibilities of the day job and being able to focus entirely on my family and book publishing has been very rewarding.

**TW: What are your longterm plans?**

**JF:** First of all, now being able to focus full-time on publishing, I will be putting out books more frequently. This summer we have three new titles coming out. Mark Schultz: Various Drawings Volume Four is first, followed by Al Williamson's Flash Gordon: A Lifelong Vision of the Heroic. This book collects Williamson's complete works on Flash Gordon. Major Thrill's Adventure Book by Gary Gianni is a fun collection we are doing for the conventions. This is a 32-page book featuring an assortment of Gianni's adventure art.

I have a few pen and ink books that I am working on. The first one is on T.S. Sullivant and will be out early next year.

I also want to focus on more books on the master illustrators. To start, I am publishing the new Harvey Dunn book by Walt Reed. The Dunn book will be a highly important book in the illustration field. No book of this scope has ever been done on him.

We are producing a new book by William Stout titled, The New Dinosaurs A-Z: Dinosaur Discoveries of the Last Two Decades.

In regards to more adventure type material, I've been talking to Gianni, Schultz, and Stout about them picking out a classic adventure book of interest to each of them to illustrate. So far, Gary and Bill have expressed interest, and I'm hoping to use them as leverage against Mark! Actually, I joke with Mark a lot, but he's focusing on his new book, Storms at Sea for now. This illustrated novella will have 32 new pieces of art accompanying 32 pages of text.

We have ten books in the oven right now. I also want to expand the type of art books we do. I have a few photography books I would like to get to in addition to our line on comic and illustration artists. Overall, you will see some expansion in the artists we publish, and the genres we cover. □



# THE MODERN ADVENTURERS



**GARY GIANNI is an artist in the classic mould of 20th century illustrators while MARK SCHULTZ has carved a niche for himself as the modern successor to artists like Frank Frazetta and Al Williamson. As Flesk has published a number of their books, we thought we'd talk to them about creating adventure comics and illustration in the 21st century, working with each other and much more...**

## GARY GIANNI

**TRIPWIRE:** What is the appeal for you as an artist/ creator of adventure material?

**GARY GIANNI:** I hope I'm not changing the playing field here too much but the term "Adventure Material" is all encompassing. For me, the label includes stories of horror, mystery, and science fiction. Even authors generally not thought of as adventure writers like Hugo or Hemingway fall into this category. It's the sense of Romanticism that appeals to me.

**TW:** What was the first adventure comic you read as a kid?

**GG:** The pre-super hero Marvel comics like Tales to Astonish and Strange Tales helped me learn how to read. The pictures themselves told the story (often drawn by Jack Kirby or Steve Ditko) and it seemed every week the world was threatened by some space invader or a giant monster. Very entertaining- even after all these years, the material holds up.

**"The idea of looking over the line of our comfort zone will always be intriguing. Adventure is as relevant now as it was in Homer's time"**

**TW:** Why do you think that adventure comics and fiction continues to grab reader's attention even into the 21st century?

**GG:** The idea of looking over the line of our own comfort zone will always be intriguing. It's as relevant now as it was in Homer's time. The readers of the future will have to be a dull lot indeed not to be stirred by tales of adventure. If future readers were not "grabbed" by heroic literature then I'll have no part of the future. I'm going back to my own time to live and die among my own kind-readers of courage and imagination!

**TW:** If you had to choose, who is your favourite adventure writer and why?

**GG:** That's a tough one. Robert Louis Stevenson would be high on the list. I read his work at the right age and his stories left an indelible impression.

**TW:** Again if you had to pick one artist whose work you admire above all others, who would you name?

**GG:** It would have to be Rembrandt. Every artist I admire, past or present, owes something to this man. Arguably, He was the first great teller of stories with pictures and his technical skills were extraordinary.

**TW:** Which writer has had the biggest impact/ influence on your work and your career?

**GG:** I don't really think in those terms but, commercially, it would probably be R.E.Howard. After all, I spent six years illustrating his work. However, my



influences or, maybe a more suitable word, philosophy, concerning Heroism and Romance stems from other literary sources like Hemingway, Kipling, London even Ayn Rand.

**TW:** You've worked on a number of adaptations of other writers' work. What is it that you enjoy about adapting other people's work?

**GG:** As with most readers, I look for the thing that strikes me at a personal level. Any good author will have some aspect to his work which compels the reader to leap up and ejaculate, "He knows just how I feel!" This is the quality I wish to illustrate.

**TW:** You have written for other artists and written your own work. Is there a difference in the way you approach writing for other artists than if you were writing something you will be drawing yourself?

**GG:** I have never written material for another artist. I've written a lot of things for myself but I don't think of myself as a writer.

**TW:** You've been drawing Prince Valiant written by Mark Schultz. Is that a straight scripter/ artist relationship or is it more flexible than that?

**GG:** Mark and I work together on the general story arcs and we try to have fun with it. The week-to-week scripting is crafted through Mark's gifted yarn-spinning skills.

**TW:** You are known as quite a slow artist (although with the results, that is certainly not surprising) but have you worked out a method of drawing faster than you would normally for Prince Valiant?

**GG:** "Slow-thinking" might be a more apt way to describe me. Prince Valiant has extremely tight deadlines but that's the nature of a newspaper strip. While I'm always worried about next week's page and the ghost of Hal Foster coming to get me, the broad strokes applied at the eleventh hour sometimes surprise me. If I had more time, I'm not sure the strip would be any the better for it.

**TW:** You illustrated two of Wandering Star's Robert E Howard books. What is it about Howard's work that over seventy years after his death, his creations continue to fascinate readers?

**GG:** Actually, I illustrated Three Volumes ; The Bloody Crown Of Conan ,Bran Mak Morn And the Savage Tales Of Solomon Kane.. Howard wrote

# MARK SCHULTZ

**TRIPWIRE:** What is the appeal for you as an artist/creator of adventure material?

**MARK SCHULTZ:** That's a big question. Part of the answer is rooted in my affection for the genre as a fan. "Adventure" is a very broad storytelling term and covers a lot of possibilities, but I guess what I respond to is the idea of men and women placed in extraordinary, challenging circumstances and prevailing gracefully. On that level it's pure wish fulfillment coupled with a taste for representations of physical danger in exotic situations. As a professional, I like working with conflict that has strong graphic possibilities. Adventure works very well in visual mediums such as comics. Of course, the best adventure stories use their action and locales to externalize conflicts within characters and to make abstract concepts relatable and entertaining.

**TW:** What was the first adventure comic you read as a kid?

**MS:** I'm not sure I can remember what exactly that would be, but I was picking up Dell's Tarzan and Joe Kubert's Hawkman stories early on. Turok, Son of Stone was an early favourite, too.

**TW:** Why do you think that adventure comics and fiction continues to grab reader's attention even into the 21st century?

**MS:** For the same reason I was attracted to adventure as a fan—it's very entertaining and allows us to envision ourselves as more capable and heroic than we actually are—simple wish fulfillment. Beyond that, if done right, it can pack an emotional punch and teach us something about ourselves and what we value.

Adventure stories have been with us since at least the beginning of recorded history. It seems that all cultures



respond to dramatic conflict, to the quest, to exploration of the unknown, and to sympathetic characters dealing with those elements. The elements and situations have been common no matter when or where. Adventure storytelling isn't likely to disappear anytime soon because, I suppose, we'll always need these stories to learn about ourselves.

**TW:** If you had to choose, who is your favourite adventure writer and why?

**MS:** An unfair question! Probably, if I had to pick one who I consider to be a pretty much a pure adventure writer, it would be Robert E. Howard.

**TW:** Again if you had to pick one artist whose work you admire above all others, who would you name?

**MS:** That, too, is really impossible to boil down to one name. But, if we're limiting the question to comics, I'll say Hal Foster, who did so many things so well, who always got the details right, and who more or less invented dramatic storytelling for the comics.

**TW:** Which writer has had the biggest impact/ influence on your work and your career?

**MS:** I really can't reduce this to one person. A partial list: From prose, Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft and John Steinbeck (believe it or not). From comics, Harvey Kurtzman, Will Eisner and Hal Foster. From the cinema, the stories and themes developed by Howard Hawks have had a major impact on my storytelling.

**TW:** What is the next fiction project that will see the light of day that you have written and drawn?

**MS:** I'm in the midst of completing illustrations for my Storms at Sea project. It's a novella in which, if I do things right, the prose and the images will carry something close to equal storytelling weight. It's a mixture of adventure, crime fiction and speculative world history—sorry, that's the best description I can come up with—and should be ready for publishing by Flesk next year.

**TW:** You have written for other artists and written your own work. Is there a difference in the way you approach writing for other artists than if you were writing something you will be drawing yourself?

**MS:** I always take into consideration with whom I am working, and what are that artist's particular strengths and interests. That will affect the themes, locals and characters that I use in a story.

Whether I am writing for myself or for others, I like to do a full script treatment. In an ideal situation, when I know the artist with whom I'm working, I'll discuss my initial story ideas with the artist and get his/her input. A second opinion from a good storyteller isn't usually a bad idea and can help push things down interesting paths I may have not have myself considered.

**TW:** You've been writing Prince Valiant drawn by Gary Gianni. Is that a straight scripter/artist relationship or is it more flexible than that?

**MS:** As mentioned in the above question, while I'll generally come up with the basic storyline, Gary and I will discuss that and throw ideas back and forth to refine it. Sometimes the results are only minor changes from my initial thoughts, but sometimes our talks result in the story veering off in much more interesting directions.