

# The BiblioFiles: Jeff Smith

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents, The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Jeff Smith, creator the epic comic, Bone. The story begins with the three Bone cousins-- Fone Bone, Phoney Bone, and Smiley Bone lost in an uncharted desert.

Shortly after they discover a rudimentary map, they are separated by a massive swarm of locusts. As they try to find each other, they become enmeshed in a larger story, one that involves a girl named Thorn, dragons, prophecies, a kingdom called Atheia, and the menacing and sometimes very stupid rat creatures.

Bone is the perfect comic. The characters are intriguing. The artwork is captivating. And the story is completely absorbing. Smith is a master of timing, both with the pace of his panels, and the tempo of his storytelling.

The blend of humor and drama creates an instant connection with the reader and makes the comic virtually impossible to put down, which is no small feat considering that the full run of the comic is over 1,300 pages. Bone has been published internationally and translated into over 20 languages. It won 11 Harvey awards and 10 Eisner awards, including best cartoonist and best humor publication.

It was named Best Comic Book by the National Cartoonists Society. And Time Magazine called it one of the 10 greatest graphic novels of all time. Jeff Smith joins us from Columbus, Ohio. Mr. Smith, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

JEFF SMITH: Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

DR. DANA: What comics did you read when you were growing up?

JEFF SMITH: When I was very small, I loved the Sunday comics in the newspaper. But even before I could read, my Dad would read them to me. And I loved everything from Blondie and Peanuts and Milton Caniff's Steve Canyon-- all that kind of stuff. Loved it.

And also MAD Magazine. MAD Magazine had a lot of stuff that you read even you before you could understand the lettering. But my Dad loved MAD Magazine, read that to me, too.

That kind of like spurred me into the art form. And then once I could read on my own, which I learned to read from comics-- it was my passion and desire to understand what Charlie Brown and Snoopy were saying. It forced me to learn to read Peanuts comics. It was still comics that

really caught my interest. And I think after that it was more like Uncle Scrooge and newspaper strips like Pogo.

DR. DANA: What about watching cartoons on television?

JEFF SMITH: Well, in the '60s when I was a kid, the cartoons on TV were mostly kind of reruns of theatrical animation, like eight minutes shorts that used to run in between feature films, like Bugs Bunny and Heckle and Jeckle. So that's what was on TV. And they were-- I mean, yeah, I remember Scooby Doo and some of these more limited animation type things. But they're crap compared to Heckle and Jeckle and the old Tom and Jerry's and Bugs Bunny.

It was great stuff. So really strong character-driven animation is what I remember from the '60s. And yes, that had a big influence on me for sure.

DR. DANA: Tell us about the beginnings of Bone.

JEFF SMITH: The beginnings of Bone, well, it's a stretched-out story that starts when I was a kid, trying to make up my own characters. I was looking at Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny and Heckle and Jeckle-- these characters I was just talking about. And I was looking at them and thinking, well, I want to make up my own character.

But I was trying to figure out what the elements were, what made up the construction of these characters. Not sure I thought about it in those terms as a little kid, but it is what I was doing. And I remember this one little guy, who eventually I named Fone Bone, kind of popped onto the page. And that was it. He just never left.

I always wanted to draw him. I was always interested in the problems, the construction problems. And how do you make them look like he's feeling mad, or he's feeling angry or he's scared or whatever that was? The funny thing that I look back on with some perspective is I didn't realize that all the characters I love so much like Bugs Bunny and Snoopy and Pogo and Mickey Mouse what they had in common which was that they were all animals.

And I didn't realize that was what a cartoon character was supposed to be. I just knew they had to have big noses and big feet. And so by the time, I realized my little character was supposed to have dog ears and a tail, it was too late. He was a little bone.

[LAUGHING]

DR. DANA: And the other characters? Did they sort of develop along the way?

JEFF SMITH: Well, yeah, they kind of just followed suit. The first time I drew Fone Bone, he was really angry. And then like I was saying, I began this process as a young artist of some kind trying to make his mouth closed and make him smile and give him different emotions. But the angry version of him kept coming back. And that became Phoney Bone.

So then I had the two main characters-- the happy character Fone Bone and the angry character Phoney Bone. And then they got joined by this kind of Art Carney, goofy character, Smiley Bone. And then those three, even by the time I was ten, they were pretty solid.

Then leap forward about eight years to when I'm 18. I'm reading more. I'm reading Huckleberry Finn. I'm reading Moby Dick. I'm reading Heavy Metal magazine, which is a bunch of European fantasy cartoonists doing their own magazines.

I'm reading Lord of the Rings. And I saw Star Wars for the first time. And then also I started to get interested in the concept of fantasy and storytelling. And I don't know at what point I decided I needed to put these little Bone characters in a giant Homer-like epic, but I did. And that's what Bone is.

DR. DANA: So when you write a story, and then you draw the panels, I'm imagining that it's a lot harder to draw the panels. They take more time. I mean, writing does take thought. But to actually ink in everything-- the contrast, the expressions, and the balloons-- is it frustrating how a story might proceed faster than the art, or vice versa?

JEFF SMITH: Well, what it is, is that you have to go over a story multiple times. That's the weird thing. So you like, think of-- as I approach the issue, I look at my notebooks and I go, OK, this is what has happened in the chapter, which is an issue of Bone or RASL.

And I say OK, this is what has to happen. And then you write it out as an outline, just like you would for a project in school or something. And then the next step is you've got to start thinking in pictures. You've got to start writing little scripts that have little quick thumbnail drawings of the people talking to each other.

And then you have to draw it a little better. Then you have to start drawing it for real where it's like on a piece of two-ply Bristol board that's 14 by 17. Now you have to draw it. And you have to pencil it for real.

Now at this point, it's probably the third or fourth time you've been over every single panel. Then you have to letter it. Then you have to tighten the pencils. Then you have to ink it.

So you have to do it, I mean, it's like seven or eight times you have to go over the entire story-- every inch of it, every word balloon, every facial thing. You go over it over and over and over like eight times. And that takes a certain kind of personality, I guess.

But I mean when you see somebody like Chester Brown or Dan Clowes, I mean these are people that are doing it. They know that's part of it. That's just in their gut.

They can do it. And they'll get it done. So yeah, it is hard. But yeah, it's part of the job.

DR. DANA: Did you sneak portraits of people you know into Bone?

JEFF SMITH: In a way. Grandma Ben was kind of based on this real grandma that I knew. I was dating a girl in high school. And her mother raised steer, not cows like Grandma Bone. But she raised steer. And she really used to run like crazy.

It's this old lady with white hair. She just used to jump fences and run like across acres. I was like, o my God, she can have a heart attack. And the girl I was dating at the time, her Dad just did not like me. And that was his mom who was Grandma Ben.

So kind of to tweak him a little bit-- his name was Ben-- I actually put his face on his mom's body. And I was like making fun of him a little bit. But that's about it.

[LAUGHING]

DR. DANA: Originally, Bone was published in black and white. Later it was republished in color. Was it difficult for you to reconceptualize the story in color?

JEFF SMITH: It was work. It wasn't difficult, but it was work. It was first suggested to me by Art Spiegelman, who is a friend of mine, but also somewhat of a hero of mine.

He's the guy who did Maus. And Maus was one of the inspirations for Bone. I mean, that was where I begin to see, oh, the comic book medium is capable of telling stories of weight, with beginnings, middles, and ends.

So I got to know Art over the course of a few years and a little better as we went along. And then at some point, Scholastic-- as Bone was wrapping up, and it had already proven its popularity in libraries and in children's libraries, Scholastic wanted to publish it. And they were talking with Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, his wife, who's the Art Director of the New Yorker, about what comics should we launch a kid's imprinting with. And Art and Françoise wanted to do Bone. And so they called me.

And they were like, we want to do Bone. We want to launch it. We want to put it in the schools.

We're going to treat it like a real book. It won't be treated like a supplement to Dungeons and Dragons. It'll go with real books, as if it wasn't a comic.

We'll put it right next to Harry Potter. We'll put it right next to Lord of the Rings. And that's what I wanted to hear.

And then Art, of all people, wanted it to be in color. And I was like, what are you talking about, Art? I mean, you're an underground guy. I'm an underground guy. We have street cred.

What are you talking about? It's black and white. Maus is in black and white. Why shouldn't Bone be black and white?

Art said, well, Maus is about the Holocaust. It's about war. It should be in black and white. But Bone is about life. And it won't be finished until it's in color.

And I thought, OK. Well, that's a pretty good argument. I'll do some experiments. And I did actually try a couple of issues of Bone in color, just for myself. And they looked great.

And then I realized, yeah, color would be all right. And Scholastic didn't care one way or the other. They were like, hey, you want to do it in black and white? Fine, it already sells great in black and white. Kids like it.

You want it in black and white, cool. Art thinks it should be in color? It's up to you.

So I went with color. And Art was right. Kids love it.

DR. DANA: Bone grew tremendously in popularity while you were still creating it. By 2004, when you inked the final page, it was huge. Did its growing popularity affect your work on the stories, the character, the art?

JEFF SMITH: Not in any way that changed it. But it absolutely affected it in that it didn't change. And I'll explain that.

I mean, I was very, very lucky that I got the support of my peers and of the readers and of the comic book store owners. Because without that support, I don't know how you would do something like Bone, which feels kind of very Disney-like and obvious in retrospect. But at the time, believe it or not, Dana, everybody was telling me, this can't work.

You can't do this. Nobody likes cartoony. Nobody likes fantasy. Everything about what I was doing was bad, very bad. But with the support of the entire industry-- and by that I mean, comic book store owners and people that run the awards or whatever, other creators-- it was that support that allowed me to do Bone uncompromised.

And so the answer to your question is no, nothing about Bone changed from what I wanted to be at all. But it couldn't have happened if I hadn't gotten such resounding support from my people. I don't know what to call it-- my peeps, my comic book people.

DR. DANA: What was it like to finish it?

JEFF SMITH: It was awesome. Are you kidding? I was a little slow on the last few issues. And I remember my wife, Vijaya, who's my business partner and who set up the company with me before the first issue came out.

I mean, she was my partner. We wrote a business plan. And we figured out, here's what we're going to do.

We'll do six issues a year. And once a year-- since it's a giant story, and we need people to get their own chapters, we'll do collections. And we'll do graphic novels.

Remember this is in 1990. The graphic novel as a concept barely existed. So Vijaya was with me the whole time. And as I was having difficulty finishing it, I remember Vijaya thinking, you don't want to let it go.

You've been working on it for over a decade. You don't want to let go. But what it really was, was just a really complicated story. And he knew it was like a lot of story threads. And I didn't want any of it to feel cheesy or pat.

I wanted everything to be as organic and exciting as my favorite books, like as I've mentioned earlier The Iliad and The Odyssey and these big epic stories. I wanted it to be like that. And doing that was just really, really hard. Once I got it, I was like, yeah.

[LAUGHING]

JEFF SMITH: That was good. It was good. I was extremely happy. I never once thought, I'm sorry to leave these things, or I don't want to. I was just like extremely happy and very pleased that it actually worked out.

DR. DANA: What are some of the most interesting things you've received from fans over the years?

JEFF SMITH: More interesting things? Hmm, well, I've gotten a lot of things as you can imagine. I mean, I'm actually looking at one right now, which is-- I don't know if you'll think this is interesting. But some guy took some little Bone figurines and he made them into like TinTin characters and Star Wars characters. And that's kind of cool. And, of course, I've seen lots of tattoos over the years.

I would never get a Bone tattoo. But I've seen like rat creatures with every hair detailed on people's necks. It's amazing.

DR. DANA: Does it make you feel weird to see your art work on someone permanently?

JEFF SMITH: Yeah, yeah it does. Well, it used to. I mean, I've kind of-- this is weird, but I've kind of gotten used to it, a little bit. But I'll see guys with like Phoney Bone chasing a dollar bill, like on a calf.

[LAUGHING]

DR. DANA: That's pretty crazy.

JEFF SMITH: That is crazy.

[LAUGHING]

JEFF SMITH: But like I said, I don't have any tattoos. I don't know. But it's clearly a sign of love that someone wants to do that. And I recognize that.

DR. DANA: At any point when you're first starting out, did you ever feel like you had to apologize for being a cartoonist? Getting caught drawing in school-- I mean, that's what happened to me. It was, Dana, stop turning in these C-grade tests with doodles in the margins.

JEFF SMITH: Oh, I'm going to give you two answers here. The second one's for you. But the first one is yeah. I mean, when I first started in comics, comics were still completely disrespected.

I practically got chased out of art school. I went to the Columbus College of Art and Design here in Ohio. And it's a very well respected school. But in 1978, you do not do comics. That is a bastard art form. I was told that very specifically.

This is a bastard art platform. It's not art, and it's not literature. It's just do-do.

[LAUGHING]

JEFF SMITH: But that's what they said. This is not a real art form. And I was practically chased out of school.

So recently because of Facebook, I had some friends from when I was like in elementary school. This woman Sally-- I mean, she was just a little kid when we knew each other. But Sally wrote me on Facebook and was like hey, my kid's reading Bone. And he loves it.

And he just thinks it's the greatest thing. And he draws all the time-- fantastic. And he creates whole worlds out of his imagination. And she said, but could you please write him a note and tell him to stop drawing on his math tests?

And I wrote her back and I said, I'm sorry. I can't do that. That's where I did my best work.

[LAUGHING]

JEFF SMITH: That's it. I mean, if you're a cartoonist-- which maybe you are, Dana. I'm wondering now. You can't stop yourself.

It's not like the kind of thing where you think, oh, well, I'm going to grow up and be rich and have a fast car and be Mitt Romney. If you draw comics, you're going to be poor. That's pretty much it.

DR. DANA: Art doesn't pay.

[LAUGHING]

JEFF SMITH: Art still doesn't pay.

DR. DANA: Well, Jeff Smith, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles.

JEFF SMITH: It's been great.

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