

CREATING THE IDW-VERSE

IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN BARBER



The Definitive G1 Collection's Simon Furman lends an objective ear as TRANSFORMERS writer and editor John Barber offers up his manifesto for the flagship IDW ongoing series *Robots in Disguise*.

SF) What came first on IDW's TRANSFORMERS – the writing or the editing?

I was hired to write the series that became *Robots in Disguise* first. I'd written a bunch of movie tie-in comics for editor Andy Schmidt, and he liked them enough to ask me to pitch for a new series in the ongoing comic universe. Anyway, James [Roberts] and I got hired, we started writing, Andrew Griffith was onboard to draw the series, and then Andy quit to go work at Hasbro. Andy – who I'd worked with when we were both editors at Marvel – reached out and asked if I'd be interested in coming in as an editor.

I got the job. Which meant moving across the country from New York to San Diego with my wife and three-month old baby. I'd written up through the Wheeljack issue when I came on as editor. It was a little weird that I wound up being James' editor – not bad, just unusual – but he said he was relieved it wasn't some random person who might not have been on-board with what he was doing. I was lucky that Carlos Guzman took over editing my stuff. He never went easy on me. He really had great insights that made the series what it was

SF) You co-wrote *The Death of Optimus Prime* one-shot with James. Did you more or less carve up the writing duties on that?

We talked about the story. And I guess we must have divided up pages... but I think we each had a hand in every page. That's funny... I remember how we did *Dark Cybertron* but DoOP was so long ago. There were a bunch of things that you'd think one of us came up with but the other had a hand in. NAILs was James' name, but the idea of them coming back I think was mine. Or maybe we both had it; I didn't see his pitch when I wrote mine and I think there were some things we both wanted to do, like the war being over, that made Andy think – correctly, I hope – that James and I would work well together.

SF) Do you see DoOP as the end of the previous ongoing or the beginning of RID/MTMTE?

The real problem is both James and I thought Optimus Prime was going to be in another,

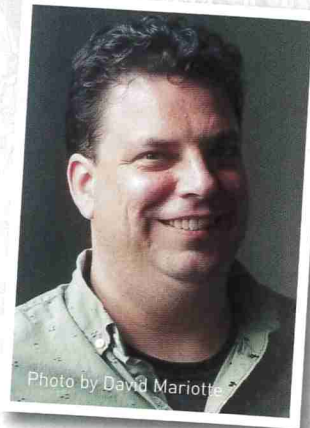


Photo by David Mariotte

third, series. When we realised that wasn't happening, we had a problem. If you dropped Optimus in either RID or MTMTE it was going to throw things off – at least in that original run of issues. So we kinda had to figure out where he'd go and how to get Bumblebee and Rodimus out in front. We wanted to get Optimus out of the way (at least for a while) and wrap up some loose ends, but it really is the beginning of the next phase. Even the "loose ends" we "wrap up" were sort of us framing events in a way that took us where we wanted to go.

SF) Did you find it liberating as 'the new writer on the block'?

Yeah, but I sort of mucked that up pretty fast by introducing things from the past of the stories. My thinking was I could take earlier events and expand on them, making them important to the narrative I was telling. There was a thing in *X-Men* comics where Magneto raises this submarine he'd sunk years earlier and he's confronted by the bodies of all these sailors he's killed. The sinking of that submarine had been a key event when he went on trial at the UN, but when you go back to the comic where the sinking actually happened it was just a couple panels. I wanted to try and do that with the past – build things up so past events became more important... without requiring people to have read it.

SF) RID feels socially and politically relevant. Were you consciously trying to tell a 'different' kind of TRANSFORMERS story?

Yeah, I think so. The stories I liked most were the big head-twisting epic ones you wrote, like 'Target: 2006' and the Unicron stuff around issue #75 of the Marvel series. I think eventually I got to stories that were at least my version of those. But as you say, I wanted to do something different right off the bat, operating under the assumption that this would be the one TRANSFORMERS ongoing series I'd ever get to write.

I wanted to tell small stories about post-war life and establishing a civilization in a hostile environment – both in terms of personal animosities and the planet's nature, all coming to a head when the past returns to reassert itself and the ultimate battle (of the first year or so) is whether progress could survive. Those themes reverberate through TRANSFORMERS fiction; I was just hoping to tell them in a slightly different way.

SF) Did writing RID, which (no offence to MTMTE) feels like the flagship title, come with its' own pressures?

It's weird... being American and growing up with the cartoon on TV and with the American comic book, I didn't see any of the UK comics (or even the US comics you'd written) until I was an adult, professionally making comics. But the characters I was really attracted to were the 1985 movie cast, who of course played a bigger role in the UK comics than in America. So my instinct was to use those characters more. I got Arcee, so it's not like I can complain. I'd wanted to use Ultra Magnus but James had plans that really required him specifically. I just needed a tough guy who could investigate so the Magnus role was filled by Ironhide

and Wheeljack. I would have much preferred having a small cast aboard a spaceship or something; something where you could spend more time with fewer characters, but I wound up with more of the core G1 characters and the home planet. Not that I'm complaining! There is a big part of me that wants to use the biggest characters and take advantage of the fact that people like them.

SF) You fashioned a harder line Bumblebee and a more shaded Starscream. Did you set out to confound knee-jerk expectations?

Well, I felt like poor Bumblebee was stuck in a role that he wasn't really suited for, but he was doing his best. Starscream was interesting – I'd pitched him being the big antagonist to Bee's government, but Andy Schmidt was the one who said, "what if he's really good at politics?" That was when I locked into my version of him, or at least how he was in RID – he was pure ambition with no moral gauge at all. Which, unfortunately, works in politics.

SF) How far ahead did you plan at first?

I wrote a 12-issue outline as a pitch and then made issue #12 into two issues in the hope they'd pay me for 13 issues before we got cancelled. That was long-term thinking to me... I mean, a year on a series is a long time in American comics. I don't think I've ever said this before to anybody, but before *The Death of Optimus Prime* came out (but after it had been done) there was some casual talk at IDW that maybe we should have rebooted the franchise. But once the issues were out, and people were really excited, I started to feel like I could plan stuff out more. Things didn't really coalesce until after *Dark Cybertron*, when I had a multi-year/multi-series plan I would have hated to see fall apart.

SF) 'Syndromica' feels like you reconnecting more to what had gone before. Was *Dark Cybertron* already on the table at this point?

Well, we had Optimus/Orion Pax off the table, so we had to have him do something else. I actually recently found a pitch I'd written before I was editing for an Optimus Prime limited series that didn't pan out. I volunteered (happily) to have Orion in RID as these cutaway issues where we'd leave the main action. I loved what you'd set up with the Regeneration Ore and thought – I mean, this wasn't particularly a deep thought at this point – if Earth had Ore-13 maybe that wasn't just the 13th experiment, maybe there were twelve other Ores with other properties.

So we had Shockwave and his group going out to harvest Ores for some sort of a grand plan. At this point, that would have been the second big RID story, but *Dark Cybertron* came about so it made sense to turn the Shockwave-plan into *Dark Cybertron*. Shockwave's exact plan was nebulous in the early days of RID (some would say it remained so, forever) but the angle of him pulling at the fabric of reality was there. I think we probably would have wound up on Earth when Shockwave launched his plan, but nothing was really solidified.