

# Mike Richardson

by Jodi Helmer

Illustration by Gabriel Bá

As a college student in the '70s, Mike Richardson would race into 7-Eleven at midnight, grab his favorite comic books off the newsstand, and quietly ask the cashier to stuff his stash into a paper bag before anyone could see his purchases.

Tired of hiding his predilection, Richardson has led the charge to redefine the genre. His company, Dark Horse Comics, is the third-largest such publisher in the country, with a list that includes such titles as *Aliens*, *Predator*, and *Concrete*. Richardson is also the creative force behind Dark Horse Entertainment, a film studio that has produced a series of blockbusters, including *The Mask* and *Hellboy*.

*ReadyMade* recently caught up with Richardson to hear how he's pushed the superhero envelope, allowed artists to retain rights to their work, and used social networking sites to keep his company's comics on the cutting edge.

**READYMADE:** Hi, Mike. How did you get that f\*&%ing awesome job?

**Mike Richardson:** After college, I was working as a commercial artist, but I knew I wanted to own my own business. In 1979, I convinced my wife that we should empty our bank accounts and open a comic-book shop. I knew that if I didn't do it then, I'd never do it, so we moved from Portland to Bend, Oregon, and opened a store called Pegasus. Everyone thought we were nuts. I was ordering comic books [for the store] and started noticing that the quality wasn't that good; the stories were stale and weren't appealing to the audiences that had grown up with comics. I felt like the industry was in danger of crumbling, so I sold the store and, in 1986, started a publishing company.

**RM:** Was it really that simple? Did you know anything about the publishing industry?

**MR:** I understood how the sales process worked, and I'd met a lot of the comic-book creators at conferences, so I had a network. It grew from there. I knew that I could publish comics that people wanted to read, so I focused on that passion and trusted that the rest would fall into place.

**RM:** What was your first taste of success as a comic-book publisher?

**MR:** One of the first titles we published was called *Concrete*. It's a series about a guy whose brain was transplanted into a concrete body by aliens, and the things he goes through on Earth after he escapes. It

was created by Paul Chadwick and has won more awards than any other series we've published in the last 20 years. It proves what I knew all along: Readers want comics with smart stories and characters that have real emotions.

**RM:** How does Dark Horse differ from other comic-book companies?

**MR:** We're focused on reaching a lot of different audiences—from teenage girls to middle-aged men who grew up reading comics. Instead of publishing standard superhero stories, we publish comics with different types of characters and varied story lines. We also allow artists to retain the rights to their work.

**RM:** How did you get into movies?

**MR:** I got a lot of calls from Hollywood because we had original characters that they wanted to option. I said, "If you want to make movies with these characters, I want to produce." They just hung up on me. I didn't know anything about producing. [But] just because the opportunities weren't available to me didn't stop me from wanting to be there. I just kept waiting, and eventually I got the chance to produce *The Mask*.

**RM:** What's the biggest challenge in publishing a genre that's now so popular?

**MR:** The competition is getting fiercer, there's no question about that. The industry keeps growing, and even though we're a well-known company, we still have

## VITAL STATS

OCCUPATION	Owner of comic-book publishing house Dark Horse
LOCATION	Milwaukie, Oregon
AGE	57
FIRST JOB	Picking berries
BEST JOB	Can't pick just one
GREATEST PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE	Keeping employees engaged in the company
SALARY DURING 20S	\$3 per hour

to remind people who we are and what we're all about. The other challenge is staying relevant. We're constantly looking for new ways to reach our audience.

**RM:** How are you doing that?

**MR:** We're focusing on using technology instead of just print. We've partnered with MySpace to create original content for the web; we've re-created the magazine that started Dark Horse, *Dark Horse Presents*, and lined up creators to revive the series in a digital format; we've also started dealing directly with creators from other countries. We've partnered with CLAMP, a group of female creators from Japan who are like the Beatles of manga and anime. We're working with them to produce monthly books called *manettes*. Basically, they're short novellas that are aimed at teenage girls—the last group anyone thought would be interested in comic books.

**RM:** Are comics still your passion, or do the embers burn down in the nine-to-five grind?

**MR:** Comics are still very much a passion. I'm never bored. We're constantly growing and expanding and finding new ways to tell our stories. 🍷