



Legend of the Mantamaji

There has been a lot of discussion in recent months about the need for more diversity in YA literature; we've also seen more strides toward greater diversity in comics for children and teens.

One creator, Eric Dean Seaton, met VOYA editor, RoseMary Honnold, at ALA Annual 2015 and talked about his graphic novel series, *Legend of the Mantamaji*. When RoseMary told me about Mr. Seaton and his work, I checked online, liked what I saw, ordered the books, read them, and then asked Mr. Seaton for an interview. This column is devoted to the interview and my review of his books.

LEGEND OF THE MANTAMAJI REVIEW

Elijah Alexander, a New York assistant district attorney, has been winning cases in court and his career is hot. He's also a publicity hound, full of himself, and out for what he can get; his hard early life with a struggling single mother has caused him to focus on gaining prestige, power, and material wealth. His girlfriend, Detective Sydney Spencer, thinks the cases he has won have come too easily, and then his mother, Mariah, arrives in town and hands him a bombshell of truth: he's not just Elijah Alexander, son of a single mother, he's the last of a long-lost race of warriors called the Mantamaji, who had protected humanity thousands of years before. One of their own, a friend of Elijah's father Candor, betrayed the Mantamaji; Candor's allies thought they had killed Sirach, but descendants of his followers have brought him back to life. As Brother Hope, leader of a popular cult, Sirach is trying once again to change the world to the one he wishes to rule; his followers have committed the crimes for which other criminals have been convicted by Elijah. He learns that Sydney was right all along, and now Mariah and an old friend, Noah, say Elijah must train as a Mantamaji in order to stop Brother Hope. Naturally, Elijah has difficulty believing that the stories his mother used to tell him—fantasy stories—are actually the truth. When Brother Hope kills Mariah, Elijah wants revenge and submits to Noah's training. His power comes from an ankh that can become any weapon he chooses, and it provides him with armor that protects his body; he basically has superhero powers, which he will need to go against Sirach's large operation. Is his desire for revenge enough motivation? Can Elijah ever go back to his life before the revelation? Does he really have what it takes to be a Mantamaji—a hero?



ERIC DEAN SEATON

Seaton has created an epic story that spans millennia. He takes the reader back and forth in time so the reader can see the seeds of Sirach's murderous rebellion and ambitions and how that affects the present time. The three volumes depict Elijah's journey as he reluctantly takes the mantle of responsibility and sacrifice as a Mantamaji and becomes the hero. Seaton has built an entire mythology for his story, rich with details and adventures that help to inform Elijah's role. The author and the artist (Brandon Palas) fill the story with lots of action while keeping the violence at a level suitable for most middle school readers, and without resorting to foul language. Reading this series reminded me of my love for Greco/Roman and Norse mythology, with the same flawed heroes and antagonists in a magical, mystical world. Palas's art is dynamic and expressive and makes the story come alive; Andrew Dalhouse's rich colors make great use of light and dark to indicate place and time.

Because Seaton is a television director, he has the resources and colleagues to do more than a book trailer to promote *Legend of the Mantamaji*. He put together a crew of actors, stuntmen, special effects creators, cameramen, and everyone and everything else he needed to make a short live-action film showing Elijah as the Mantamaji in action with a fight scene from the first volume. Go to <http://www.legendofthemantamaji.com> to watch the short film. I highly recommend watching all of the behind-the-scenes segments, which give readers a very good idea of the tremendous amount of work and planning that go into making a movie. It's fascinating and informative and lots of fun for those who enjoy learning what goes into making a movie, or in this case, making a great fight scene. Seaton's blog also has great information for anyone who wants to write comics, with advice on how to create different kinds of characters and more. Please read on for an interview with Seaton, conducted by telephone.

THE INTERVIEW

KK: You say on your video that you grew up reading comics, and the pop-up frame on the screen mentions that *New Teen Titans* by Marv

Wolfman and George Perez was your favorite comic book. What other comics did you like to read?

Seaton: *X-Men*, I loved that they were underdogs, and the team representation of minorities and women. And I liked *Batman*; I saw the television series when I was a kid. *Batman* had the best graphic novels, and **Batman: The Cult** was the best one. I made my villain a cult leader partly because of that book. I also liked the Avengers, Ironman—a lot of the popular characters who've been in the superhero movies, because they were popular back then, too. I've gone back and forth between Marvel and DC.

KK: You wrote a *Spider-Man: Stop the Violence* comic book story for Marvel, but what happened?

Seaton: Marvel went into bankruptcy right around the time the comic was published, so I never saw it. At one comic book convention, someone who came to my table said he had it, and I told him I would pay him whatever he wanted for it, but he never came back. I was hooked from that time, and wanted to write my own comics stories. What I did was finish all three books before putting them out. I didn't want to do a monthly comic and then get trapped by something I wrote several months later. I did them like TV shows and movies that shoot everything first then put the story together. I wasn't tied into things; I could adapt the story to the artist's work. I never threw out anything the artist sent me. **Book 2** was the easiest one to write because [Elijah] is already the hero. **Book 1** was hard because it was the origin. We were halfway through **Book 3** before we locked down **Book 1**. Then we had to rework some of **Book 3** to give more dimension to the story and added more scenes.

KK: You are a successful director on television. What other factors caused you to want to create *Legend of the Mantamaji*?

Seaton: It was the lack of representation of people of color as heroes, not just the guy who saves the neighborhood from drugs. I liked James Bond and Indiana Jones—they saved the world. I wanted a person of color hero who was not just the friend, the sidekick of the world-saving hero; I wanted the person of color to save the world. Because once one person of color, or woman, becomes the hero and others see that and say, "yeah, we can be heroes," it becomes the norm, and anyone can be a hero. I wrote Elijah as an unlikable person, as far from a hero as he could be, and the story shows his journey from just wanting revenge and then going back to his shallow life to choose to be a hero. The next set of books will carry on from there. He's the hero, so now what? I want to show him juggling his responsibilities in life with his hero work; he's an attorney, but he won't be able to win so many cases because of his other work. How does he make his life work now that he's a hero? How does he pay the bills?

KK: The process of writing and producing your story took a number of years. How did you fit in this creative work with your directing and your life with your young family?

Seaton: I did it at night. I'd work all day, spend time with my family, then late at night I'd work at least an hour writing or going over notes. The artist would send an image and then I'd make notes about that. I'd also work in the morning. I'd spend the early morning on my television script, then work for half an hour or

more. I had to set a routine to do this every day, and that's how I could finish the three books.

KK: How do social media and digital formats help you, an independent creator, promote your work? Do you see a positive effect on readership?

Seaton: Oh yes, word spreads. We have a **Facebook** page, and when the live-action short hit on August 4, we saw more than 10,000 hits within a few days and increased book sales on **Amazon**. With the **Facebook** ads, we see people tagging others. The short film helped us use a different platform for people to see our work. I talked with some directors from South Africa, and they said they couldn't read the print books, did I have digital formats? They have their phones loaded with every app you can think of, they read books, they do almost everything with their phones.

KK: On the video, you talked about how *Captain America* and *Batman* have 50-75 years of story, so you need digital platforms to get your story out more quickly.

Seaton: Yes, with digital comics, we can reach an international audience more quickly, and hopefully build a greater audience for the books.

KK: *Voice of Youth Advocates* reaches out to library professionals and educators who work with teens, so my last question is, what would you say to a teenager who wants to do creative work in comics or in film, or in both, as you do?

Seaton: Your phone is a video camera. Nothing stops you from shooting what you want to shoot. If you're inspired by something, shoot it your way, with your own twists and touches, and then check your source. If you like *NCIS* and you want to do a crime scene, shoot it your way, then check back with the show episodes and see if you juggled the camera, or did you get the details right? You do it your way, but you still need to follow rules for the tone and the look of a scene. It's the same with comics—what inspired you? What did you like most about what you read that

you can put into your own story? Then go back to your source for reference. You want other people to like your work for the same kinds of reasons. ■

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Kat Kan has been reading comics for half a century (even though she doesn't feel that old) and writing about them for almost two decades. She works as a collection development librarian specializing in graphic novels and young adult books for Brodart and as a freelance graphic novel consultant. She also reviews children's graphic novels for *Booklist* and conducts workshops on graphic novels and young adult services. She also works part time as a school librarian in a pre K-8 private school, where she enjoys telling the students, "I get paid for reading comics!"



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