Things That School Couldn't Teach Me: Writing a Kick-Ass Manga

Shane T. Lucas

Shane T. Lucas discusses his process for writing a Manga after finding out that his school writing has not prepared him to write one. After reading Manga, watching anime, and using his art background, Shane begins to discover what he needs to do to write his own.

Manga, the Japanese word for comic, is a form of writing that I became interested in when I was in 6th grade. Reading was really not my thing, and I couldn't seem to find anything I liked reading until a friend turned me on to Manga. I think I was drawn to these comics because of the artwork. I have been drawing and creating my own stories through pictures most of my life, and Manga gave me something to read that brought both artwork and story together in the same book, not to mention the fact that reading right to left rather than left to right is pretty cool. After tearing through Manga series after Manga series, I decided to attempt to create my own. I have drawn several Manga and Anime style characters in the past, creating life stories for each, but I had never attempted to write an entire book. I decided that trying to do this would be difficult. But I knew I would learn a lot if I did it, and it would help me with my future goal: attending art school in order to become a cartoon and Anime artist.

Before I could begin writing my own Manga, I sat down to think about everything I knew about them. My list was pretty long. I kept coming back to the idea of having pictures being the main focus of telling the story in a

Manga with the words playing a second role. In Manga, most of the story's action is told through the artwork. On some pages, it is possible to avoid words and still get the story being told. The pictures usually show a fight scene, which would not have as much talking. Or during a flashback, there might be one or two words, but the art goes into much more detail in order to show something dramatic like the death of someone important. The words seem to focus on dialogue between characters, the thoughts of a character or the sounds being created in the action, like the swishing sound of a sword. I knew that I would have to find some way to move the story forward using both the art and the words in a way that made sense. I felt confident about knowing what a Manga was about, but this could be difficult.

From my list about Manga I also knew that I would have to move the frames of art in such a way that they would move right to left across and down the page. The first time I tried to read *Naruto*, I opened it like a normal book. There was a page that said you are reading this the wrong way, and it showed you an example page with numbered frames so you knew how to read the book. If you begin reading a Manga and you don't follow the frames the right way, the story won't make sense. Although I would be writing in English and the sentences would be moving left to right, I had to place the dialogue bubbles moving right to left. This seems odd when you think about it: I would be writing left to right in the dialogue bubbles since I am writing in English, but placing the frames and movement of the story from right to left like a traditional Manga.

The last big thing from my first list was the fact that even though Manga takes away a bit of your own imagination as a reader since the story is shown in pictures, most Manga I have read still leave some things out and this lets you imagine some of the story on your own. This would probably be the hardest thing to create in my own Manga. For example, in *Deathnote*, when something important is going to happen, like one of the characters dying, the author will leave you hanging. You eventually find out what happens in the next volume through a flashback, but it is not always revealed all the way. What should I show and not show to the reader? If I show everything up front, then the series is pretty much screwed. No one would want to read the rest of the series. But if I don't foreshadow enough, then the series will be dull, and the reader would become bored as hell.

After I created my initial "what I know" list, I had to decide what type of Manga I wanted to write. Manga come in all sorts of themes. They can have romance stories, ninja-based stories, magic-based stories, vampire stories, etc. The choices seem almost endless. Although I read a lot of traditional Manga with science-fiction or fantasy storylines, I didn't really want to go this route. It would have been easier to do this though, since I have the Manga

series *Bleach*, *Naruto*, *Dragon Ball Z* and *Full Metal Alchemist* sitting on a shelf in my room—all traditional science fiction and fantasy Manga. These seemed pretty old school to me, and I wanted to aim for something different.

I had recently been watching Anime shows that were based on a more realistic storyline, with a bit of the impossible thrown in. These Manga seemed more like James Bond, spy, double agent, covert operation stories. This was the type of Manga I decided to write. I needed to read more Manga like this in order to make sure I was understanding the types of storylines they included. A trip to Borders in order to buy copies of *Gunslinger Girl* and *Golgo 13*—two great examples of covert operation stories—was a bust. They are both out of print according to the bookstore, so I decided to watch the Anime versions of both through an on-line Manga site for free Anime. I know that this is not the same kind of text as the written Manga, but at least it would give me a way of knowing the storylines, themes, problems and types of characters found in this type of Manga. However, the Anime version is often not written by the original author, so the story can change. There are also no frames in Anime, so the action is all one movement, but in the Manga, frames move the story and some actions are left out. For example, in a Manga, a character's arm movement would be shown with three arms drawn in one frame, and each arm gets lighter. This implies movement.

Figure 1: Sample Manga

I spent four days watching episode after episode of both *Gunslinger Girl* and *Golgo 13* and taking notes. I noted the basic attitudes of the characters and how both stories opened. I also noted how characters acted in different situations.

I felt ready to begin my Manga, which is titled *Hitman*. Before I began the actual page layouts, artwork and writing, I sat down to create a theme and story for *Hitman*. I wanted this Manga to be centered on a teenage boy in high school from a family of CIA assassins. When the main character arrives home from school one day, he discovers his entire family has been murdered by four Mafia groups who have been the victims of CIA operations. I wanted *Hitman* to include a double life of problems for the main character, both his life as an assassin problems and his life as a teenager in high school problems.

After I had a central theme, I began designing my main character. I wrote down the characteristics I wanted him to have—his attitude, personality, features. From this list, I drew my first draft and from this drawing, I created his name: Kaoru Yuki Cloud. I then began a list of other characters, their traits and names, and began rough drawings for each. This was a long process, but I felt that without themes, problems, characters, storylines and settings laid out, I wouldn't be able to begin the actual writing of *Hitman*. The work so far pretty much gives me the entire layout in a big picture, but not in great detail.

It was time to sit down with my sketchbook and pencils and lay out the first page. I had with me several other Manga, like *Bleach* and *Full Metal Alchemist*, to use as references for panel layouts, picture size, showing emotion, and text layout. This part was much more difficult than I thought it would be. Two problems kept occurring: trying to perfect my artwork and dealing with backstory for the characters and storyline.

Figure 2: Kaoru Yuki Cloud Character Sketch

The artwork issue is something that is not new for me. Because I want to be an artist, I obsess over my artwork and this often gets in the way of my drafting a piece of art. I want it perfect the first time. After struggling with the art aspect of the initial page, I decided to rough sketch the first few pages, sometimes using stick figures in order to get a feel for the art layout. I could then go back to a new page in the sketchbook and do proper drawings. Sketching the art or the layout made me think about new ideas or new problems, which made me have to go back and change parts of the Manga.

I am still stuck on backstory and plot. I have never been taught how to construct a plot or deal with written storytelling. We talk about plot with short stories in school and we have to pick out the pieces from someone else's story, but writing one of your own is so different than recognizing one. When you are the author you have to think about what you want, what the reader wants and if what the reader wants can still go along with my thoughts. I don't consider myself a good story writer, but a good story teller. I am Dyslexic, and physically composing is very difficult. Spelling, grammar and all that jazz are huge problems for me. If I could have talked out my entire *Hitman* Volume I and drawn it at the same time, this would have been so

much easier. But how fast to move through the story, what to leave out, and how to make characters sound different when they talk to each other, are much harder than I thought.

At this point, I have two pages of my Manga laid out and written, but I'm not sure how to move ahead without the tools for writing a story. I know what it has to have, and I know where I want it to go, but I don't know how to get there. None of the writing I do in school has prepared me for writing *Hitman*. We write essays or we write endings to short stories. We never come up with entire stories of our own. I've never had to write more than five paragraphs in school, but I need to write anywhere from 130 to 140 pages to complete a Manga. I also need to find some way of teaching myself how to write effective plots, where to include backstory, and how to make the text and the art work together. I don't feel like I can move forward without this knowledge. I can read a million more Manga, but I don't think this will help. I asked my mom if there was a college class on writing plot I could take, but I don't think that is an option for a high school freshman.

I'm not going to give up, though. I might have to sit down and write the entire *Hitman* story as a regular short story first and then pull the pieces out to use in the Manga version. I don't know if this will work, but it's worth a shot.

Shane T. Lucas is a high school freshman who believes the only tests given in school should challenge students' knowledge of Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix lyrics. In his spare time he creates art, researches Parkour, and hangs with his friends. He plans to attend the School of Visual Arts in New York City when he escapes high school.