

10 QUESTIONS WITH KEVIN EASTMAN

KEVIN EASTMAN AUTHOR

Born in 1962 in Portland, Maine, Kevin began drawing as soon as he was able to hold a crayon. His discovery of comic books gave meaning to his crazed doodling. When Kevin discovered and studied the work of Jack Kirby, Russ Heath, Richard Corben, Vaughn Bode, and John Severin, he began to hone his craft. His first published work appeared in 1980, a year or so before he met Peter Laird. In May 1984, he and Laird published *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #1, creating the hit heroes in a half-shell.



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Where did the story idea for *The Last Ronin* originate, and how did it come together?

Kevin
Eastman:

The original concept for the story, a "final" TMNT story if you will, was developed by Peter Laird (TMNT cocreator) and myself in 1987. We had our origin story in issue one, and we felt having an ending story set 30 years in the future—we'd have a "lighthouse" to navigate "the years in between" toward. As 1987 was also the year we started developing the animated series, along with the toys and other merchandising—we never got to complete that original idea.

Thirty-one years later, as brilliant IDW TMNT series writer Tom Waltz and I headed toward completing 100 issues of the new series, we discussed where to take the storyline "next" and I dusted off the old 1987 idea and presented it to Tom, and together we developed it further/updated it and presented it to Nickelodeon, who gave us the green light to finish it after all those years.

hd: This story is great for old-school Turtles fans but also accessible to brand new readers. How did you maintain that balance?

KE: This might sound a little funny, but being lifelong TMNT fans ourselves, creating this kind of balance, as tricky as it is, comes down to us writing the kind of story we would like to read, knowing all that we know about them. What I have always liked about working with Tom is he is always willing to put in the hard work to get the story right; we have our own high standards, so when we write these stories, we truly write them for ourselves first. It seems to have worked well for the last 12 years, so we're going to keep it rolling as long as the fans are digging it.

hd: Why Michelangelo?

KE: I had always imagined it as Michelangelo, not only was he the "first born"—the first Turtle I drew standing upright with a mask on and nunchaku strapped to his arms—but as a character he also was the most creatively interesting to transform, from the fun-loving laid back jokester to

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the battle-hardened warrior needed to complete the deadly, lifelong mission of vengeance and redemption for his family. Tom and I discussed it for a little bit to make sure we weren't overlooking anything, but he too readily agreed Mike was the best choice.

hd: **The story is packed with Easter Eggs from past comics, the movies, and so much more. Are there any you think fly under the radar?**

KE: Of all the TMNT universes out there, and I love them all, this one leaned heavily on the original Mirage Studios series as that was the timing of the original creation timeframe, as you would imagine—however, over the four decades of iconic characters and moments, we couldn't help sneaking in bits and pieces that tied into the larger TMNT history, as well as other pop culture references, as Peter and I often did in the old days. Unfortunately, as clever as we think we are, our fans are more so, and called us out at every attempt.

One of the ones I thought we might get away with, as it was a bit of a stretch, was the Fugitoid quoting Gandalf's "You shall not pass" from the scene in the Mines of Moria, when he's protecting April and Mike in the Baxter attack in the third chapter—as we wanted that to tie into the attack on Baxter when the Fugitoid is awoken in chapter four—but yeah, they caught it pretty easily.

hd: **TMNT has been around for nearly 40 years; that's literally generations of fans. What do you think it is that makes TMNT so appealing?**

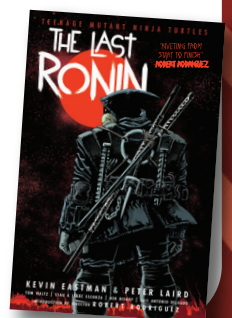
KE: This is a generally tough question to answer, as I think there were many reasons people, at least initially, did a double take on this idea—and I think it was the title. It was very different, bizarre, which made people pick it up when it was first released, and whether they put it down after that first glance, or bought it, they took that first look.

Beyond that, I feel it felt familiar in many ways, as Peter and I put a LOT of our favorite themes and concepts from comics and pop culture characters and genres we loved growing up in the story we were building. Everything from the reluctant hero, teenager or otherwise, the misunderstood misfit/mutant idea, and family (adopted or real, the family bond was important)—wanting to find that safe place, a home if you will, to be part of. Lastly, but far from least, they were mutated turtles—they weren't specific to any race or visual stereotype, so no matter who you were, or where you lived, you could imagine yourself as one of them.

hd: **Looking back after all that time, what are you most proud of?**

KE: The childhood dream of it all, really. I never wanted to do anything else but write and draw comics. My parents were mortified when I told them at nine what I wanted to do with my life, being called a "geek" in high school for liking comics, at a time when being called a "geek" wasn't as positive a term as it is now. I cocreated an idea that shouldn't have gone beyond the first issue, to something I have spent my entire adult life doing. The greatest gift I could have hoped for, but I never really imagined I would be this lucky. Humbling, really.

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- hd:** The comics industry and even the process of making them has changed so much since the Turtles were born. Is there any advice you would give to young creators?
- KE:** As much as the industry has changed, and you can include many other forms of entertainment here, books, TV, movies, and games, it all comes down to the idea. You need to create something you truly love, then the blood, sweat, and tears come—the hard work to stick with it above all odds—everything will be against you, but I honestly believe hard work and passion will help you win the day in the end. Never give up on yourself, or your ideas.
- hd:** What should fans expect from the prequel, *The Last Ronin—Lost Years*? Do you have any other projects coming up (*Turtles* or otherwise) that you can talk about?
- KE:** *The Lost Years* series as Tom, myself, and the IDW/Nickelodeon team designed it, it really is a bit of a "prequel, sequel, prequel"! Over the course of the development of the original *Last Ronin* universe, we saw many places we wanted to go back and explore more throughout the tale, and we wanted the ending to give us the room to continue the story if the fans enjoyed it as much as we did telling it. We could not be more thrilled that they did!

With that in mind, the main story we're telling here is what Michelangelo went through in the 16-year journey after he traveled to Japan to find his father and brother (as seen in flashbacks from *The Last Ronin*'s fourth chapter), that then brought him to NYC in *Last Ronin* chapter one—our prequel. The sequel/prequel part of the series is in each issue of *Lost Years* (a five-issue series plus a Lost Day special one-shot), covering the 16 years after the end of the *Last Ronin* series, where we introduced the four new turtles, as April and Casey Marie raise and train them.

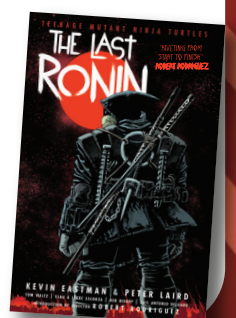
We are very excited.

- hd:** Looking back at 40 years of the comics, what are some of your all-time favorite moments?
- KE:** Besides the first issue, it really was the second issue that was quite monumental. We had enough preorders where we decided, if we can keep that level of sales up and do six issues a year, we could actually make a living drawing comic books. That was the childhood dream for both Peter and me, to try and follow in the footsteps of our creative heroes, mainly Jack Kirby, so we quit all other side jobs, and for as long as it might last, we were going to live that dream.

Beyond that, it was really the creative process of building the TMNT universe with Peter. April O'Neil, Baxter Stockman, Casey Jones, Fugitoid, Triceritons, and so many more. We had our own creative space to tell the kinds of stories with the kinds of characters that were all our own. What a gift.

Nearly 40 years later, thanks to the most incredible fans on the planet, we're still living that dream. Cowabunga indeed.

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hd: How about favorite moments from other *Turtles* media?

KE: There are so many, and for many different reasons. The first five episodes of the original cartoon series that aired at the end of 1987, for example; we never thought there would be any more after that, and as we had full creative control, taking our original idea of a more gritty black and white comic designed for an older audience, basically ourselves, and transforming it into an idea for a much younger audience was a very exciting creative challenge.

Beyond that, if I boiled it down to a few more specific highlights: working with Steve Barron, Todd Langdon, and Jim Henson on the first TMNT movie. Writer-director Kevin Munroe's 2007 animated feature was also one of my favorites, and lastly I loved what Ciro Neli did with the 2012 Nickelodeon animated series—really clever, written for both the older and younger audience at the same time. Very well done.

hd: The art in *The Last Ronin* is incredible. How do you communicate your visual ideas to artists? Does a story always start with a script?

KE: In many ways, over many discussions, but it really comes down to the visuals. Yes, the story and the script Tom and I built was critical, and then, in my opinion, you direct it like you would a movie: as you build out the full and complete story through the designs and storyboards, you are able to direct the artists you are working with in a visual way—a picture really does say a thousand words, an immediate transfer of the full scene you need them to understand as a piece of the story we need to tell, beat by beat through to the end. We also give them the creative freedom to adapt what we're looking for, which is why we wanted to work with them in the first place, their creativity, all the while remaining true to the complete vision we had in the first place.

Working with the incredible Escorza brothers, whose first language is Spanish, and mine is English—and neither of us speak the others' first language very well—it really was all about the visual communication that made it all go and flow perfectly—a true artistic sign language.

Ben Bishop, a fellow artist from my home state of Maine, was the third artist for our story; he did the flashback sequences, but both the brothers and Ben were directed through our final working script and my specific storyboards, and then everything was masterfully colored by Luis Antonio Delgado, wonderfully bringing it all together. A true dream team.

Hands down, it was one of the most challenging TMNT projects I have ever worked on, and none of it would have been possible to complete without the incredibly talented and gifted team I got to share the experience with, and the fans who supported it.

A tale for the ages.

