

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

>> This is Jennifer Gavin at The Library of Congress. Late September will mark the 12th year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, DC to celebrate the written word of The Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will be 2 days this year, Saturday, September 22nd, and Sunday, September 23rd, 2012. The festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets on ten National Mall, rain or shine. Hours will be from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Saturday, the 22nd, and from noon to 5:30 p.m. on Sunday the 23rd. For more details, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now it is my pleasure to introduce graphic novelist Craig Thompson, whose latest book is, "Habibi," a 672-page tour de force in the genre. Mr. Thompson also is the author of the graphic novels, "Good-bye, Chunky Rice," "Blankets," and "Carnet de Voyage." Thank you so much for joining us.

>> Craig Thompson: Thank you, Jennifer. It's a pleasure to be here.

>> Could you tell us a bit about how you got into not just novel writing, but graphic novel writing? Are you an author who happens to draw beautifully, or an artist with a story to tell?

>> Craig Thompson: Well, as a child I was really into comic books, and in a sort of natural adult progression fell out of love with the medium around high school, and was really obsessed with film and then animation, and was sort of mapping out possible career animation, and became disillusioned with that for a number of reasons. And maybe the biggest one is that I recognized that at best I would just be a clog in the machine. I might be at best like a tea [phonetic] animator at an animation studio, but I wanted to write the stories, do the acting, do the character design, paint the background, do every element I guess of the film or animation. And that's when I rediscovered comics, and that there was this great autonomy for an author to, you know, realize all parts of the process. And it overlapped with sort of like 1990 sort of generation. [Inaudible] in many comics and punk rock music movement, where people were -- it was a little bit before the internet took off, and people were making these homemade books. And so it was the perfect like entry point where I just started by making short, you know, 24-page handmade photocopied mini-comics, and those were the first baby steps towards what later became a 700-page graphic novel.

>> Oh.

>> Craig Thompson: But as far as if I'm more of a drawer or a storyteller --

>> Yes.

>> Craig Thompson: -- I feel like one of the reasons that comics appeal to me is I've never felt exceptionally proficient in either form, perhaps a little bit more towards drawing. But, you know, I feel sort of -- you know, I'm mediocre writer, I'm a mediocre artist, but somehow when the 2 are fused, there's this new eloquent medium that I feel graceful with.

>> I think you're perhaps being a little bit modest there, because I have seen many of the reviews of "Habibi," and it seems to me that the beauty of the art, and of course I've seen it myself, I think it's quite good.
So --

>> Craig Thompson: Well, thank you, but --

>> -- let us be the judge. [Laughs]

>> Craig Thompson: -- that's a matter of just drawing every day for several years too, you know.

>> Yes.

>> Craig Thompson: I do think anything that you do and put that many hours into, you just start to improve so --

>> Yes.

>> Craig Thompson: -- [inaudible] to all like the young artists that you've just got to put in the hours and create the pages, and there's going to be hundreds of bad ones before you start getting to the ones that are more esthetically appealing.

>> Yes, that's certain true. I've heard that from other artists. Also, it seems to me that graphic novels as a genre are on the rise. We certainly at the book festival put in a pavilion for them last year because we were cognizant of that. Is the audience for storytelling getting more visually oriented, do you think?

>> Craig Thompson: Yes; that's probably quite likely. I know like meeting with the librarians and going to like the American Library Association like meetings are -- there's a lot of talk about how graphic novels, at least on a sort of child development level, are more accessible to a lot of male readers who seem to respond to the visual storytelling first, or to dyslexic readers. I know speaking for myself before I could read, you know, prekindergarten level, I was first drawn to comics, and that's where I learned to read words. You know, you would start just imagining what each character is saying in a panel, and then you start to recognize words, and it was really the beginning of literacy for me. But as far as everything now, you know, just being at every single meal and realizing that every single person has their smart phone out, and [laughs] that they're engaged in this monitor and this -- I guess essentially a panel.

>> Yes.

>> Craig Thompson: There is definitely a shift culturally into a more visual media. And it's not something I'm necessarily celebrating. I think there's also some sort of old-fashioned tradition about cartooning, because, you know, we act as illustrators before even the rise of photography. You know, when illustration -- there was a time in like American culture when, you know, illustrators were celebrities.

>> Yes, that's true.

>> Craig Thompson: And so part of that's -- I remember just trying to keep this old tradition alive. But I do think there's something about -- and then again think about like a new media and old-fashion sensibilities. I think there's a potential for graphic novels to keep a foothold in print longer than prose; because prose has always been like sort of filtered through typography, or at least there's like the flare of technical separation between the author and the reader.

>> Yes.

>> Craig Thompson: So graphic novels just seemed like the artist's handwriting on the page. And the handwriting isn't just the lettering, it's the drawings are a form of calligraphy.

>> Yes.

>> Craig Thompson: There's this great intimacy and I still think there's a really broad appeal about having a paper [inaudible], and holding that in hand. It's like a letter from the author to the reader.

>> I love that image. Let me ask you about "Habibi," which is your most recent book. It's so sweeping. Did you visualize that length and scope when you first conceived of that story? I mean, even though it took you years to complete at nearly 700 pages, you must work pretty fast.

>> Craig Thompson: No; there's -- I did not imagine it would be that big of a book, and I think if I had known that, you know, what they always say is that if you knew what you were getting into probably the fear would have stopped you or crippled you. [Laughter] I was setting out to do approximately a 200-page book. That was my initial intention. And I was going to veer much more towards the fantastical fantasy realm. I just wanted after "Blankets" to do something that had that sort of playful fantasy elements, and as I got deeper and deeper into the process, um, a lot of the fantasy fell away and was replaced by -- I don't know, I was creating a fantasy. I mean, it's a sort of 1,001 night sort of, you know, it's a fantasy in that sorts. But it draws on so many contemporary topics around sexuality, and religion. I got very obsessed with the connections between [inaudible], and Christianity, and Islam.

>> Yes.

>> Craig Thompson: And those were the details that started dominating in favor of what I initially thought of as a sort of light fantasy epic.

>> Well, what are you working on now? Are you trying to do that now?
[Laughs]

>> Craig Thompson: I am trying to do that now actually. So after working on, you know, 6, 7 years on "Habibi," a very sprawling serious work, and dark in many senses, again, I'm in this space where like, "Oh, I want to do something lighthearted and fun." But also, you know, back to the child in me that first discovered the medium, because most of my career has

been creating adult-oriented, you know, graphic novels, or, you know, serious, quote, unquote, "literary" sort of graphic novels.

>> Yes.

>> Craig Thompson: And for the medium to, you know, thrive, or grow, or continue, there still has to be children discovering it. And there are some great comics out there for kids, but I want to dabble in that a bit myself. So I'm attempting to do a very humorous, whimsical sort of spaceship epic that's still in a sort of typical Craig Thompson manner, draws on some contemporary issues around class warfare and environmental crisis.

>> [Laughs] Sounds like fun actually, with an edge.

>> Craig Thompson: Yes, exactly.

>> Well, I'd like to thank you for joining us, and we are looking very much forward to having you at the National Book Festival on Sunday, the 23rd. We will have a wonderful lineup in the pavilion, which will be titled this year, "Science Fiction, Fantasy and Graphic Novels." And I hope you are braced for a whole lot of people coming. We had great attendance there last year, and we got by the estimated count almost 200,000 people out to the festival last year. [Laughs]

>> Craig Thompson: Wow. Wow. [Overlapping] --

>> So please stand by for your fans.

>> Craig Thompson: All right. I'm excited; looking forward to it.

>> Okay. We've been hearing from graphic novelist Craig Thompson, who will appear on Sunday, September 23rd in the Science Fiction, Fantasy and Graphic Novels Pavilion at the National Book Festival on the National Mall. Mr. Thompson, thank you.

>> Craig Thompson: Thank you, Jennifer.

>> This has been a presentation of The Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.