

The Development of *The Almost Legendary Shannon* Graphic Novel

David Wise

by [Kat Avila](#)

"Cowabunga, dude" is a David Wise invention, as well as the pizza obsession. David is best known for his work on the original animated adaptation of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* comic. For eight years, on sixty-nine episodes, he earned his paycheck as a *TMNT* writer, sometimes as a story editor and executive consultant for scripts. *The Transformers* and *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* are additional TV series he has been significantly involved with as a writer. He was the writer and producer for the movie *Beastmaster III: The Eye of Braxus*.

More recently, as an editor, he and writer/wife Audry Taylor have been developing the graphic novel *The Almost Legendary Shannon* in collaboration with esteemed Japanese manga artist You Higuri (see my *Sequential Tart* write-up on You Higuri at *FanimeCon* 2004, August 2004). *Shannon* will be published in Japan, then in the U.S.

What is *Shannon* about? In an October 2004 interview for *JADE Magazine*, Audry elaborated, "A modern-day American teenager pulls Excalibur out of a stone and becomes the future king of the world. Only she'd rather read a good book, or watch paint dry, or get her teeth pulled. Excalibur and the legendary Merlin the Magician have great plans for her — which Shannon will do everything she can to screw up. Especially when she falls in love with the man

whom she is destined to kill in order to save the world."

Sequential Tart: *How involved are you with **The Almost Legendary Shannon** graphic novel?*

David Wise: This is a really bizarre undertaking, seeing as how the writer and the artist live 5,500 miles apart and don't speak the same language. So for starters I've had to play facilitator — finding the translator, getting us to Japan, dealing with the business end of things, so that all the extra baggage doesn't get in the way of the creative process.



I'm also a very hands-on editor. (No jokes about my being married to the writer, please.) I am very involved with shaping and plotting the story and keeping the writing on track. I'm especially involved with the action scenes, since that's something I know pretty well after writing, producing, and/or story editing eighty-gazillion action-adventure shows.

Since I have a background in art and writing for visual media, I give notes on the artwork, page layouts, etc. That was more of an issue during the two years we were trying to work with American artists; now that Higuri's onboard, quality is no longer an issue, since she's so phenomenally talented. The main thing now is dealing with the cultural differences — we have to make sure that American behavior and the mindset of American characters are understandable to her. I'm trying to back away and let Audry do most of the interacting with Higuri, since **Shannon** is so much a product of her sensibility. The more Higuri gets to know Audry, the closer she'll be to the story.

And we've always known that **Shannon** would have a life outside the comic — the story is highly marketable — and eventually that's where most of my efforts will be involved.

What we're doing is very different from past American-Japanese collaborations (such as **Princess Ai**), where a story idea is basically handed off to the Japanese artist who then writes and draws the finished work. **Shannon** is scripted in great detail — right down to the descriptions of props, settings, and costumes. Of course, Higuri adapts things to her way of paneling and breaking down dialogue. Just as the script is influencing her approach to the art, Audry has adapted her approach to the story to play to Higuri's artistic strengths. So it's an artist/writer collaboration in the truest sense.

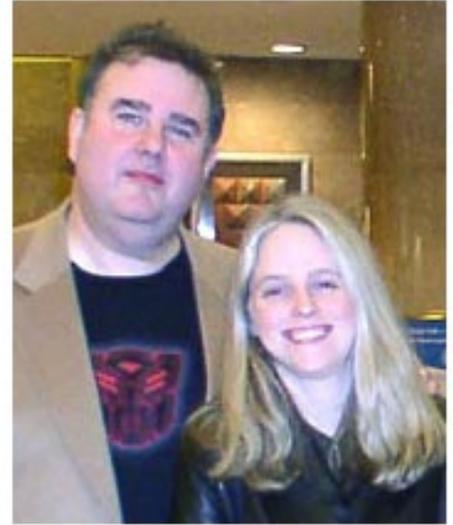
ST: *What kind of experience are you able to bring to **Shannon** that makes you the best choice for editor? It seems to me a female editor might be a more sympathetic choice since I'm guessing the target audience is teenage to college-age girls.*

DW: Hey, I wrote for **Jem**! I wrote for **My Little Pony**! I'm totally in touch with my feminine side!

Seriously, you may be right about my gender disadvantage, but I do bring thirty years of writing and story-editing experience. I know a lot about structure, about character, about how to keep a story exciting. I know all the pitfalls of writing something like this. I'm able to shortcut Audry to solutions when she gets stuck and warn her when she's writing herself into a dead end. I have a whole bag of tricks at her disposal — ways to establish character, to slip in exposition, to get in and out of a scene quickly. So hopefully I help free up Audry to deal with the real heart of the story, and speed up the writing in the process.

Additionally, I bring some yang to compliment Audry's yin. We've always thought of **Shannon** as a girl's story that would be boy-friendly. There are a lot of fight sequences, and

we felt that every fight had to move the story forward — no gratuitous battles. We decided early on that each fight needs to top the one that came before it, to up the ante on terms of excitement and threat and surprise. And that's something I have a lot of experience at.



David Wise and Audry Taylor

But working with Audry has been a learning experience for me. In spite of being the "Cowabunga, dude" guy, a lot of female script supervisors, voice directors, actresses, even network execs have said they were very impressed with the level of sensitivity I bring to female characters. I got my first screenwriting job (an adaptation of a famous young-adults novel) on the basis of my ability to write the 14-year-old heroine. So I always sort of prided myself on being able to write female characters.

Now, in the early stages of writing *Shannon*, we had a problem: Shannon's an outcast whose only friends are gamers and geeks, and she's just made a decision to try to fit in with the popular crowd at school. Then, wham! She pulls Excalibur and her life is ruined. But how do you get from "I'm going to be normal" to pulling a sword from a stone? I felt she should deliver a sort of monologue where she yearns for a normal life and then yanks the sword (which she assumes is a Ren Faire prop) to prove to her geek friend Brian that he's living in a fantasy. Audry wasn't so sure about the idea and suggested I write the scene. I did three drafts, but she didn't like any of them. By now we only had a day to fix the script before it went to the translator, so I threw up my hands and told her to write it herself. And Audry sat down and in less than five minutes bashed out a scene that absolutely nailed it. It was brilliant and heartfelt and *only* a woman could have written it.

That was a revelation for me. I realized I'd always been writing women from the outside, while Audry was obviously writing from the inside out. Since then I've felt my most important job as editor is to help develop situations where she has to write at the very peak of her abilities and then just get the hell out of her way.

ST: Will **Shannon** be rated "Teen Age 13+ "? What is your opinion of the rating system for graphic novels?

DW: In the manga world, there really is no standardized rating system. **TOKYOPOP** uses their own designations, which are different from **Viz's**. Everybody does their own ratings in-house. It's all done mainly to appease the retailers, especially the big chains, who are very wary about mature content. I don't have a big problem with ratings — they're basically a pre-emptive strike against censorship and they're far preferable to actual censorship. And if I were a parent I would want some kind of guidelines so I'd know what my kids are reading.

Shannon would qualify as a "13+" rating. There's some bloodshed, but nothing horrific. There's sexual content. Most of it is fairly innocent — Audry loves putting Shannon in unbelievably embarrassing situations. But there's also some pretty twisted stuff. There's a potentially incestuous relationship, a bit of bondage, some boy-boy stuff (some of which involves Shannon — don't ask, it's very complicated).

ST: Is the process for taking a graphic novel from idea to book form much different from the way you have worked in the past?

DW: You have no idea. In TV, things move really quickly, and one of my specialties is being a very fast gun. I'll take over a show that's in trouble and behind schedule and bang out scripts at an insanely fast rate. I did a series for **Disney** where I had to write two completed half-hour scripts a week, for 13 weeks straight. I once wrote an entire season of **Turtles** while developing, writing, and story editing **Jim Lee's**

Wild C.A.T.S., and writing a feature for **Universal** all at the same time. Oh, and by the way, they only gave me eleven days to write the feature film! So I'm used to working at a very fast clip.

Shannon, on the other hand, has already taken two-and-a-half years and it's just barely begun. Admittedly, a huge chunk of that time was taken up with finding the right artist, but I have never worked on a project for this long. It speaks to the quality of Audry's story that not only have I not gotten tired of it, but it seems to be getting richer and deeper and more exciting as it progresses.

On the other hand, the work process itself is very much like producing an animated series: when you're happy with the script you send it off to the art department — which in this case is simply You Higuri; you get back character designs, key prop designs, costumes, and rough layout, you give notes and make changes. Then the art department takes over and it's completely out of your hands. In that sense the process is very similar.

ST: *What other projects are you currently working on?*

DW: Audry and I are developing other manga ideas, and we have met with several other artists in Japan. Once **Shannon** is up and running we'll be proceeding with those series full-bore.

I'm not particularly interested in writing animation anymore. I really dislike most of the stuff on TV right now — the mainstream cartoons are bland beyond belief, while a lot of the creator-driven shows seem like they're made by people who are only interested in amusing themselves. That may be why anime and manga



**David Wise at
Anime Expo Tokyo 2004**

have become so popular.

They're deeply emotional and wildly imaginative and completely sincere. Ever since I first went to Japan in 1980 and met Osamu Tezuka, I've always wanted to be directly involved with creating that type of work. (In 1985 I got down on my knees in a Studio City sushi bar and literally begged the heads of **Nippon Sunrise** to let me bring over the first **Gundam** series). Now I'm finally getting my chance. I'd rather be doing this than anything.

ST: *You were creating animation at the age of seven using 16mm film. What kind of animation does a curious seven-year-old boy create?*

DW: Well, obviously not polished, **Disney**-style animation. I tried just about every technique imaginable. Before I even had access to a camera I painted directly on film, and took black film and scratched patterns all over it with a metal scribe. Later I would animate moving cutouts, clay, wet paint, and even cotton balls. You name it, I threw it in front of an animation camera and tried to do something with it. I also did little bits of pencil and cel animation, totaling maybe a minute — that's 1,500 individual drawings, which is a pretty tall accomplishment for a seven-year-old.

Then my dad cut all these little experiments together, I recorded a soundtrack by banging on my mom's pots and pans and making all sorts of noises and voiceovers, and the result was a 13-minute film called **Short Circuit**, which was shown all over the world and won several awards. Watching the film is like taking the top off a boy's head and looking at all the stuff that goes on inside. There are all sorts of rockets and explosions and things whizzing around, and little parodies of TV commercials, and stuff that looks like a kid's notebook doodles come to life. It's very fresh and unpolished.

ST: *You started writing seriously as a teenager, twice attending the highly respected **Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop**. Do you still enjoy reading*

science fiction? If so, who are you reading these days?

DW: Remember what I said about animation being bland these days? That goes triple for SF. Virtually none of the SF writers I know read the stuff anymore, except Larry Niven. A while back I sat down with a half-dozen best-of-the-year anthologies, and by the time I was done I realized that SF was never going to be as exciting for me as it was in the early '70s when I first got into it. Again, manga and anime are so much more interesting. Much of what I read these days is manga. I also read a lot of nonfiction and classic literature.

ST: *Your house is supposed to be packed with SF models. What does your home office look like?*

DW: My office is a total disaster. Last year we moved into a cozy little house just outside the San Fernando Valley; there were two spare bedrooms, which could be used as offices. The one upstairs was big and bright and roomy. The one downstairs was small but it was right off the living room. I like to be close to the rest of the house when I work, so I took the smaller one. Big mistake. Once I got my desk and display shelves and CD shelves moved in, there was barely any room. And now that Audry and I work together all the time, she's moved in with her laptop and a big overstuffed chair opposite my desk. So this little 12' x 12' room is crammed with me, her, 3,000 CDs, all sorts of action figures and Godzilla toys and old tin robots from Japan, a couple of guitars, two file cabinets, and huge stacks of manga. (Not to mention Dudley the dog, who always lies down directly in the only usable walkway.) There is barely any room to move. So I'm inspired to work simply to ignore the huge mess surrounding me.

ST: *You're in the future — ten years from now. Can you tell me what you're working on?*

DW: Ten years in the future? Well obviously I'll be flying around in the skyways of Science City in my own personal

rocket-pack. (I also predict we'll all have personal communicators that play stupid little tunes when people try to contact us.)

Well, whatever I'm doing, I hope it's with Audry and I hope it's as fun and original as what we're doing right now.

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