



Sample file

BUTTON MAN

THE KILLING GAME

BUTTON MAN CREATED BY JOHN WAGNER AND ARTHUR RANSON

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THE KILLING GAME

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ARTHUR RANSON

Artist



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YOU ARE A BORDERLINE PSYCHOPATH

There are no good guys in this book. Cold-blooded murderers, yes, plenty of them. Venal seekers of vicarious pleasure, no few of those as well. Brave men, sure, men with nerves like tensioned steel, but no good guys, no heroes in the traditional sense, not in Harry Exton's world.

And Harry himself, as chilling and merciless a human being as you could meet. The game he plays is murder, the Killing Game, and he's good at it. Death doesn't bother him, because deep down inside there's something dead about Harry. All told, not the kind of guy you want to take home to mother, or see your sister dating.

That was the challenge, to take a hero with no redeeming qualities, a man who kills without compunction, and put you, the reader, in his place. Forget the morality of the situation, you are Harry Exton. What do you say when the voice on the phone asks if you want to play The Game? What do you do when they dangle the big money in front of you? What do you do — a man without compassion — when your victim is lying broken and begging for his life and the contract says take it all?

And what do you do when things go wrong, when this sick and dangerous world you've made your own turns upside down?

Button Man is a story of today. The Game could be going on right now on our streets, under our noses. To work best I felt the art required an intense realism, and for that there was never anyone else in mind but Arthur Ranson. I'd admired his clarity and clean lines since we'd worked together briefly some years earlier. What I didn't realise was how much extra Arthur would bring to the presentation of the story. He took a typically miserly Wagner script and turned in a stylistic tour de force, each page beautifully crafted. Arthur was the director and choreographer, deftly arranging his cast off stage,

coaxing the characters into life, changing the flow where it didn't fit with his vision — daring to argue motivation with his busy writer! — creating a little artistic gem.

Button Man was designed for a comic called *Toxic* — like one of Harry's opponents, now no longer with us. For reasons of their own, *Toxic* editorial — after much had been written and drawn — decided it was not for them. We were left with a half-drawn story and no place to go. For its eventual publication we have to thank then-editor of *2000 AD*, Richard Burton.

2000 AD is a science fiction and fantasy comic and *Button Man* qualified in neither respect, but Richard recognised the quality of the story and bravely decided it was the kind of material he wanted to make available to his readers. Devotees of *2000 AD* know that it is a comic that has never been afraid to take risks. As an anthology, the attitude is if one story doesn't please the readers, never mind, there are another four that will. Richard asked for one change only, an opening caption — “30 seconds into the future...” — and we were glad to oblige.

His faith in the story was justified. In 1992 *Button Man* was nominated for Best Strip by the Society of Strip Illustrators, and in 1993 was voted Best Strip in a *Comic World Readers' Poll* in which Arthur, strangely, was voted top penciller. The story went on to be reprinted in America and optioned for a motion picture, and has since spawned two further series.

Here then is the collected edition. Read it as it reads best, in one sitting. Curl up in your armchair, load up your gun — and do remember to wrap up warm... it's going to be cold out there as you pound the streets with Harry Exton, searching for your opponent, primed to kill.

John Wagner

INTRODUCTION

Button Man was originally written for a British creator-run comic called *Toxic*. Its policy was to be as controversial and “in-your-face” as the name implies. My lawyer, if I had one, would advise that the less said about my relationship with the comic, the better. After I had drawn six seven-page episodes, *Toxic* decided not to publish my work. That was in 1991.

In 1992, Richard Burton, editor of the UK’s most influential comic, *2000 AD*, agreed to take *Button Man*. Since *2000 AD* is primarily a sci-fi/fantasy comic, I was impressed by the courage Richard showed in taking a contemporary thriller.

From the outset, I felt I had been taking risks with the storytelling techniques. Simply put, these had to do with my perception of how comics were read and an expectation of just how intelligent comic readers are. I had been nervous about the response to these ideas. And it was one in the eye for *Toxic*, who had upset me by dropping my contribution. They had gone bust, by the way. Which honestly didn’t give me much pleasure, because after all, more comics are more comics.

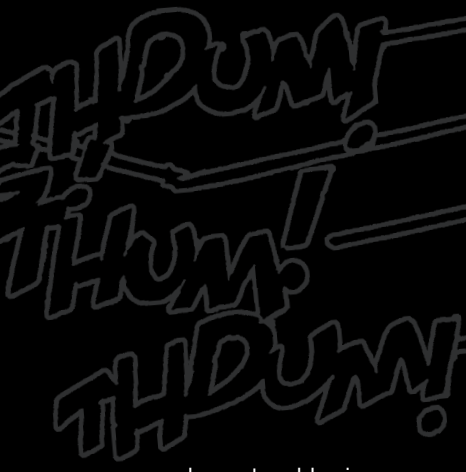
John Wagner and I first worked together on a *Judge Dredd* story in 1989. He had an international reputation and

many professional and popular awards. I had the “Danger Mouse and Penfold Good Grief Oh Crikey Award” and the 1983 S.S.I. Best Humour Strip Award.

During the years John was becoming a star, I had worked on a children’s comic, *Look In*, drawing scripts based on TV humour, adventure, science fiction, and animation programmes, as well as pop-star biographies. *Look In* was a bit bigger, but never influential, despite its good artists and one great writer, Angus Allen. I learned a lot from him about storytelling.

For *2000 AD* I did some long *Judge Anderson* stories, about a female psychic cop whose concerns about the ethics of violence suited me. These were written by Alan Grant. (I’ve been very fortunate with writers). Then through John Wagner’s involvement with *Toxic*, we began to work together on *Button Man*.

John had long had the idea for *Button Man*, wanting some hard, gritty material in reaction to much superhero stuff. I had, and have, reservations about violence in comics. The heroes now are more vicious and heavily armed than the villains they battle. John, though, wanted his story “real”. The possibility of depicting violence as



unpleasant and having consequences attracted me and seemed to tie in with my scheme to play with narrative technique.

The way John and I worked was pretty normal, I guess — for me, anyway. John outlined the story and we talked about intentions. John would write scripts for five or six episodes with frame by frame action, background description, viewpoint, captions and dialogue. I read this and formed ideas on how to visualise it. This can mean altering the number of frames, the sequence in which information is presented, and which frame the caption will appear in — not altering the words, though, or sequence of events. I might change viewpoints or background, but not the words.

At first I would phone John, tell him what I had planned, and get his okay. Having better things to do, I often talk to me, though, soon he found himself saying, “If you have a better idea, just get on with it.” This was after he had seen some pages and, I suppose, thought I wasn’t harming his story. Seeing the artwork and my approach would influence what John wrote next.

This system worked for us, where the artist and writer share feelings about the mood and direction of the story.

References to shared experience of film or books act as shorthand in the exchange of ideas. John’s willingness to let me choose the pictures got him accused of “pretentiousness” by another writer, whose name I forget. The sequence objected to was, in fact, all mine. (Except for the words. When it was complete, John went through the artwork and made any caption or dialogue changes he felt necessary.) So he had the first and the last word.)

Apart from the visual narrative concerns, there was also the matter of Harry Exton’s psyche. We both knew Harry, so we didn’t get into any “he wouldn’t do that” arguments. John, however, didn’t know until I told him that Harry and Carl, who met in the Army, became friends when Harry sided with Carl against race abuse.

Button Man was published in seven-page episodes, but from the first we thought of it as a graphic novel, and I certainly made no concessions to its serialisation in layout or timing. In fact, I was drawing it to split anywhere, seven, twelve, or even one-page instalments, if it had to be divided. This is how I wanted to see it, though. In one nice package.

Arthur Ranson

CRASH
KIDON
THUM
THUM
DIZING
VADKING



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BUTTON MAN: THE KILLING GAME

Script: John Wagner
Art: Arthur Ranson
Letters: Tom Frame

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