



Introduction

Omaha brought us all together, and after all these years, we're still here. And it's still because of *Omaha*.

The first time I laid eyes on Reed Waller and Kate Worley was at the Chicago Comicon in 1988. Kitchen Sink Press had begun serialization of my graphic novel *Kings in Disguise* only a few months before, and as it was the first comics work I'd ever done I didn't know anyone there and had no idea what to do with myself. I remember wandering the floor of the convention with a "Now what?" expression on my face until I gave up, retreated to a table at the hotel restaurant and ordered the cup of coffee that would change my life.

I was still morosely topping off the caffeine when Kate materialized in front of me – someone with Kitchen Sink, our mutual publisher, must have pointed me out to her after I arrived – and invited me over to the Big Kids' Table on the other side of the restaurant. The table was ringed by comics pros, faces that were strange to me but many that came with famous names. The only ones who made a lasting impression, though, were Reed and Kate.

Reed seemed so reserved, chuckling quietly and nodding with the flow of conversation but contributing little, that at first I thought him as ill at ease as I was...until I looked more closely and caught the gleam in his eye, saw the wheels turning as he took everything in, biding his time until he could drop the perfect wry one-liner into the conversation and leave everyone in stitches.

Kate, tall and magenta-haired and armed with a killer smile, had already made a tremendous impression on me. She seemed almost the polar opposite of Reed, chatting and regaling and occasionally holding forth passionately when the conversation struck a chord. It was clear that she was the glitzy and voluble face of their collaboration, but she was also the only member of the Big Kids contingent to take pity on the sad sack from *Kings in Disguise*. She further impressed me by turning out to be a serious artist who chose to step away from the group at one point that afternoon to engage me in a serious one-on-one about writing.

She had me at a disadvantage that day, for this newcomer to the scene had never read a single page of *Omaha*. But from the contemporary comics press, I knew already that *Omaha* was a popular and beloved series, and that Waller and Worley had become poster children for the First Amendment after shop manager Michael Correa was arrested in 1986 for selling *Omaha the Cat Dancer* and other titles at Friendly Frank's comics shop in Chicago.

After the convention I made it a point to read *Omaha*, and it was immediately clear why publisher Denis Kitchen had mounted the effort to battle Correa's conviction for selling obscene material. *Omaha* was clearly for adults, but the explicit depiction of sex in its characters' relationships was so sweet, funny and frequently touching, so fully integrated in the overall storyline that it seemed the very opposite of obscene. Yes, it's possible that Kitchen wouldn't have gotten involved in the legal battle (an involvement that eventually led to his founding the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund after winning Correa's appeal) if none of his publications had been seized – but there was no doubting his sincerity when he later told me, "When they picked on *Omaha*, they picked the wrong fight."

What struck me as more important than the political significance, though, was the sheer excellence of the book. It was a revelation to see how quickly Reed's artwork developed over the first few installments, his characters with animal exteriors becoming increasingly human in their expressiveness while his brush line grew lush and

beautiful...and all within the most traditional of layouts, a 6-to-9-panel grid that sniffed at childish pyrotechnics and kept the focus firmly on the lives of the characters it contained and the story they were living.

At first glance, Kate's work was harder to pin down. It was obviously smooth and professional, but there was a lot more going for it than simple competence. It takes rare talent and skill to create the kind of overheard realistic dialogue that was a commonplace in *Omaha* – just try to find a single conversation in most comics that resembles authentic human speech, and still retains dramatic interest and entertainment value. There are comics writers who rarely, if ever, manage it at all, let alone succeed in making verisimilitude a constant, almost casual, hallmark of their work. And the pacing she achieved with Reed was as impressive as it was transparent, lulling the reader into the easy rhythms of their naturalistic scenes until the moment you realized that they'd been quietly steering you toward an unexpected moment of revelation or heartbreak.

What a class act they were – each immensely talented, each unique and irreplaceable.

And what a terrifying prospect when I had to step into Kate's role to bring *Omaha* to a conclusion.

Life had changed since I'd ordered that lonely cup of coffee in Chicago. Kate and I had moved from being friends to being an item, and eventually we were married. In all, we had about 10 years together. We had two brilliant children and continued to write, both separately and together. Those collaborations were a joy, and just as the process proved that she was the dedicated and conscientious artist I'd always suspected, it also revealed her to be an encouraging and generous partner.

But for virtually our entire time together, there was no *Omaha*. Kate and Reed had tried to keep the series going after they split up, doing their best to put hurt feelings behind them and working long distance...but it just wasn't possible at that time. They'd been the stars of a great love story, and something valuable in the partnership had been bruised when their relationship ended. We'd managed to remain friends; there were evenings when Reed would drop by to amuse and astound us with some bizarre and obscure video he had to share, and the two of them still sang together at various venues, something they'd always done beautifully. But there were times, too, when the strain would show through, and by the time Kate and I had moved to another city, the strain had become too great.



There would be no *Omaha* for ten years, and no one hated it more than I did.

So I was thrilled when Reed and Kate began to discuss the possibility of collaborating again. A publisher with an international reputation had put forward the idea of reprinting the entire series to date, with new state-of-the-art coloring. The only condition was that the story would have to be concluded at last. Reed and Kate agreed that they were not only up to it but pleased to be working together again, Kate started writing, and all seemed well at last in Mipple City.

Or it would have been, if Kate hadn't been diagnosed with cancer around the same time. She faced it with more courage than I did, but the treatments hit her cruelly and slowed down her work on the new *Omaha*. Lacking the strength to attack the script directly, she kept her hand in by writing isolated scenes that would take place here and there throughout the story, and scribbling notes that would further refine her outline. After the children were in bed, she would bounce her thoughts off me, shaking her head in bemusement over the obligatory elements she'd have to include and expressing her determination to throw in a surprise or two anyway, obligatory elements be damned. On those nights, it was still possible to believe that my strong-hearted and immensely talented partner would beat the cancer and live forever.

On one of those nights, during a lull in the conversation, she looked up and said in a matter-of-fact tone, "If I can't finish this book, I want you to take over for me." It chilled me, of course; but of course, I understood. She'd recently begun to refer to *Omaha* as her legacy for the children, her way of continuing to support them after she was gone. And Kate just wasn't one to leave things undone; the thought of her long-running story remaining incomplete – especially after what it had cost her to take it up again – was simply unacceptable. So of course I agreed, fervently hoping that I'd never have to make good.

When she died, I spoke to Reed and told him what Kate had asked of me. He was, after all, the man who'd created the whole thing to begin with. If he'd wanted to write the conclusion himself, or even chose to call it off entirely rather than have anyone other than Kate do the writing, I would have understood and agreed without argument. What Reed said was, "If Kate couldn't do it, you're the only one I would have asked." It was a kindness that I'll never forget.



I'd been an *Omaha* fan before, but now I immersed myself in it, re-reading the entire story from the beginning, meticulously recording the progress of each character and learning the subtleties in their distinctive speech patterns. At the same time, I was assembling Kate's original outline and her later notes into a cohesive working synopsis, and determining where those individual scenes and fragments she'd written fit into the overall scheme. I was concerned that the 120 pages the publisher had stipulated wouldn't be enough to comfortably contain all of Kate's story, but that situation resolved itself in an unexpected way.

I'd barely begun writing when word came that our big-name publisher had one other requirement before the contract could be finalized: that in exchange for the honor of appearing under their imprint, we were expected to give up all ownership of *Omaha the Cat Dancer*. I was shocked, Reed was livid, and our first act as partners was to tell that publisher to go to hell. In fairly short order, Terry Nantier of NBM offered to be our new publisher, a deal that allowed *Omaha* to remain the creator-owned property it had been since 1981. Terry and I negotiated an additional 30 pages for the story, giving us the extra room we needed to do justice to Kate's vision.

At first, collaborating with Kate in this way was nerve-wracking – I'd seen just how intensely she worked to craft that trademark spontaneity, and I was determined to meet her standards. It was made no easier by the knowledge that pages written by me and passages by her would fall next to each other for easy comparison at points throughout the book. I sought answers in intimate conversations conducted with her in my imagination late at night, and hoped to take inspiration from her example. I was ridiculously grateful when Reed casually complimented the characterizations in an early sequence, but it wasn't until I began to see the finished pages that I was able to believe that *Omaha* was truly back in business.

Seeing those new pages by Reed was a joy. It was instructive to note the subtle ways in which his style had evolved, streamlining his familiar flowing line at certain points and returning to the older, lusher brushwork when nothing short of gorgeous would do. If I was occasionally aware that the famous *Omaha* pacing was by necessity a little less leisurely in these final pages, Reed's lovely character work kept the scenes on-model and the ambience consistent with everything that had come before.

Over the years, the *Omaha* storyline accumulated a large number of subplots, and Reed and I agreed that, just like in real life, a few simply wouldn't be resolved; long-time fans of the *Cat Dancer* are welcome to imagine what comes next in the characters' lives. There was one vital plot point which Kate, for all her planning, hadn't resolved in her notes, leaving it for Reed and me to work out together. I hope that solution would have met with her approval. Otherwise, throughout the process, Reed never pulled rank or second-guessed the script. The final page, incidentally, is all his, both art and script. It seemed utterly right to me for the man who created the world of *Omaha the Cat Dancer* to have the final say.

So here, over 30 years after it began, is the conclusion to the story – envisioned and partially written by Kate Worley and completed by the two men who loved her most. And here you are, joining us for this final leg of this amazingly long journey...all of us brought together by love for *Omaha the Cat Dancer*.

James Vance
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