

Rue Morgue Magazine, September 2007

Blood in Four Colours by Gary Butler
Worry Doll Review

When it comes to horror, there is arguably nothing better than having something to worry about. And Matt Coyle's *Worry Doll* certainly offers readers plenty of cause for concern – the best kind, the fully immersive kind. It is nothing short of a graphic masterpiece that takes sequential-art storytelling in a new direction. Roughly based on the Guatemalan legend of an under-the-pillow avatar that siphons one's troubles, *Worry Doll* succeeds on many levels but deserves plaudits most for its uniqueness of presentation, bolstered by the fact that it could only be properly orchestrated in the comic-book medium.

The story of *Worry Doll* is complicated. That said, it's still easily summarized without spoiling its contents: three (possible conscious) dolls discover the family with which they are living brutally butchered and embark on an apparently aimless road trip that, go figure, only deeper immerses them in the very madness they are trying to deny/escape. Literally living in a suitcase, the question of who possesses the luggage becomes central to the dolls' story – not to mention the question of whether the valise itself is possessed or haunted. While not exactly qualifying as a *Rashomon* narrative (where several observers of an event have different but equally plausible recollections of it), *Worry Doll* nonetheless involves perspective-within-perspective and in its reading, the question of identity becomes key.

"The original inspiration came with the murder scene," Coyle offers, "As the book evolved to explore ideas of multiple selves and split personalities, the dolls began to represent the conflicting components of a troubled soul."

We've revealed too much as it is, but it quickly becomes clear that *Worry Doll* is more Lynch than *Child's Play*, more *Strangehaven* than Full Moon Entertainment. It's not surprising since Coyle is an avowed Lynch fan, and while he says *Lost Highway* and *Eraserhead* are his favourites, his book has more in common with *Blue Velvet* (albeit featuring evil toys), if only because *Worry Doll* makes sense if the reader is willing to put in the much-needed effort. Coyle additionally cites *Evil Dead*, *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, plus the works of the Brothers Quay, as inspirations. Certainly, *Worry Doll*, could accurately enough be described as the Quay's *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* gone slasher, though there's a great deal more to it

than that. The core criterion here: “tapping into dream imagery like nobody else.”

The layout has text on the left-hand pages and images on the right-hand pages; it’s simply written in the style of an old fashioned kids’ book, but oh-so-darkly and maturely interpreted, making it all the more atmospheric.

“The idea of having something that looked like a children’s book go very wrong appealed to me,” confesses Coyle.

Interestingly, the narrative and the visuals in *Worry Doll* can read separately to form two different stories. While neither narrative is “correct,” each can function independently. The prose involves the interview of a man who may be a prisoner, a patient or something else altogether, while the visuals follow the surreal journey of the dolls. Taken as complimentary pieces of the same puzzle, their complicated end result astonishes.

Released this spring by upstart British imprint Mam Tor – publisher Liam Sharp, best known for DC’s *The Possessed* and *Testament* – *Worry Doll* was completed in 2004, after Coyle devoted some seven years to drawing its 33 astonishing plates “mostly an hour a night here, a couple of hours in the morning there.” In other words, the man had a day job, two kids and a wife studying for a Ph.D.

But talk about dedication to vision: Coyle estimates that he spent 60 hours per plate, hand-inking each photo-real page with a fine-tip pen, an approach that allowed absolutely no room for error. It’s an astounding visual accomplishment and, not surprisingly, Coyle reports that many readers refuse to believe that the layouts are not Photoshop manipulated.

“Why couldn’t I have been blessed with a more economical style?” he asks. “That’s just the way it turned out.”