
me a while to realize that I'd need a day job as well.) It gives me a chance to process the random thoughts running through my head in a controlled way, and in a quiet environment... except for when I've cranked up my stereo to blast orchestral film scores or AC/DC albums for inspiration and/or rocking out to power chords.

Catherine: Your books have attention-grabbing titles, how do you come up with the subject of your books?

Jeff: Of the three books I've written for Maple Tree Press, only *They Did WHAT?!* was my original idea. *Gross Universe*, the first in the series, really began when I finally realized that Maple Tree published non-fiction, so I should stop submitting stories and focus on something they might actually have a need for. (It generally takes me a while to clue in to obvious things like this.) *Fear This Book* was initially going to be my kid's guide to science fiction, but Maple Tree thought that a book on fear would be better – and it gave me the chance to delve into all of the horrific and gruesome things that fascinated me as a kid.

The sensibility of *Mad Magazine* and Gary Larson's *Far Side* were a big influence on shaping the style of the books, as well as my experience working on college papers at York University, particularly when I would get frustrated with writing facts and want to come up with goofy jokes. A favourite recurring gag in the books is to use a "black square" on the page – in *Gross Universe*, it's a bona fide "Dandruff Landing Pad," while in *Fear This Book*, it's a sample of "Pure Dark." The fun is getting away with having a substantial section of the page without any actual text on it, although providing the

context for each of these black squares means I usually end up writing twice as much as I would normally. But it's worth it for the joke.

Catherine: You obviously do thorough research. Do you have a plan at the beginning of the research process, or does it evolve?

Jeff: There's always a plan, but I find the best ideas emerge more organically. As you can tell from my answers to these questions, I naturally go off on tangents. Research tends to begin with a fairly rigid structure, but I have the most fun when I veer completely off-course and stumble across a fact or idea that wasn't in the original plan.

Generally, my editor and I establish the number of spreads a book will have, and how many bits of text will appear on a given spread. Usually 5 or 6 paragraphs on various subjects can flesh out a page, once you factor in design and art. The goal is then to come up with a spread on the theme of the book with enough interesting facts to warrant it in the first place. Sometimes this is a breeze – with *Gross Universe*, I had to double up the pages on vomit and urine due to the wealth of material.

As I collect facts from various sources (public and university libraries, the Internet, magazines, and other media), I get a sense of how much to concentrate on a specific area. But the writing process isn't simply a cut-and-paste job. Often the best pages are the most spontaneous ones. For *Gross*, I ended up contacting a paleontologist at American Museum of Natural History who was so enthusiastic and had so many interesting things to share with me that it led to an entire spread on various gross facts from prehistory.



Jeff Szpirglas