



**A Conversation with Max Brooks, author of
The Harlem Hellfighters
(Broadway Books, on sale April 1, 2014)**

Q) Most people know you as the bestselling author of *World War Z* and *The Zombie Survival Guide*. Your new book, *The Harlem Hellfighters*, is a graphic novelization about one of the first African American regiments to fight in World War I. Quite a departure from the world of zombies! Why did you want to tell this story?

A) I wanted to talk about a group of what I consider to be unsung heroes. I say unsung because outside of New York and certain military circles, most people have never heard of the Harlem Hellfighters. We know about the Tuskegee Airmen and the Buffalo Soldiers, but not these World War I soldiers. I've always been fascinated and awed by their story and I'd like more people to know about them.

Q) When did you first hear about the Harlem Hellfighters?

A) I was about 11 years old when I first heard their story. That was 30 years ago.

Q) This summer marks the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I. Why is it important that we continue to talk about and share these stories, and why do you think stories about World War I, including the Hellfighters' story, have, for the most part, fallen through the cracks of history?

A) I think World War I, in some ways, is even more important than World War II. The "Great War" changed everything about the world we live in. It ended the global reign of Europe, it sparked the rise of American power, and it planted the seeds of the second, even greater, war that would follow. Most of the issues we're still dealing with today can be traced to a few fateful decisions made in the summer of 1914.

Q) You wrote a screenplay of the Harlem Hellfighters' story years ago and pitched it to multiple Hollywood studios—all of whom turned it down. Why do you think they were so resistant to it? How did you end up with the idea to tell the Hellfighters' story in the graphic novel format?

A) I think the story was seen as a money loser in Hollywood. World War I is not a popular subject and a World War I movie starring black people, I think, did not dangle dollar signs in front of moviemakers. The nice thing about a graphic novel is that it's still a visual medium without any economic restraints. It costs just as much to draw 100 soldiers as it takes to draw 1. There is a tremendous amount of freedom in that.

Q) Acclaimed illustrator Caanan White has inked some very gritty and incredibly detailed illustrations for this graphic novel. How did the two of you come together on this project, and what was it like working together? What kind of research did you have to do to get all of the period details right?

A) I found Caanan through Avatar Press (the company that produced the actual book). I was impressed by his attention to detail and his talent for realism. I think when you're telling a historical story, those two factors are paramount. Caanan is the real star of the project. No script,

no matter how good, would be successful without a great artist. Caanan was able to capture the minutest detail, from weapons to uniform buttons to hairstyles of that period. He was also able to draw actual historical figures.

Q) You and Caanan come from very different backgrounds, yet you both share some common ground. Can you explain? How did that background help you as you collaborated on this project?

A) Neither myself nor Caanan were what you would call stellar students. Neither of us were best friends with the school system. We both had a particular passion though: with him it was drawing, with me it was writing. We both knew what we loved and we pursued that love from an early age. We're definitely kindred spirits when it comes to creative expression.

Q) The story of the Hellfighters is quite fundamentally a story of racism. Was it difficult for you towing the line of telling this story credibly while being mindful of your own very different upbringing?

A) I can't help being born white. I also can't help being interested in the Harlem Hellfighters. All my life I've been waiting for a fictionalized story of these American heroes, and, like with all my other work, I wrote what I wanted to read.

Q) Your graphic novel doesn't shy away from violence—the horrors of war are clearly illuminated on the page. Were you at all worried that this might turn some readers off?

A) On some level I hope it does. World War I was a true nightmare, and I think that nightmare has to be shown in all its graphic detail. All the violence in this story is grounded in real research. Nothing is gratuitous. I also think the horrors of "The War to End All Wars" further magnifies the heroic deeds of the Hellfighters.

Q) Who do you think will be drawn to the *The Harlem Hellfighters*, and what do you hope they'll get out of it?

A) As much as this is an African American story, it is also a story about the strength of the human spirit. Human beings are the same all over the world and no group is genetically different from the other. We all have the capacity for cowardice and courage, and this story is an amazing example of the latter.

Q) What's next for you?

A) Right now I'm halfway through my comic book series "The Extinction Parade." On the surface, it's about vampires going through a zombie plague, but in reality, it's about how privilege, and how a lack of struggle, robs us of the strengths we need to survive.

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