

L'Amour, Mon Amour

A New Medium for the Old West

Thomas Yeates & Co. present the first graphic novel adaptation of Louis L'Amour

by JON B. COOKE *CBC Editor*

I'm in Southern California this past summer, moseying down artists' alley at Comic-Con International 2013, and I'm a sad, sombre hombre. This here's my first San Diego in a few years and the aisles might as well have been the dusty dirt roads of a ghost town. Oh yeah, there are plenty of creators there, but few I knew from the good ol' days and most of 'em not but young greenhorns. I was one lonely desperado.

Suddenly I hear a "Hey, you!" and yonder there's my pal from cons of yesteryear Thomas Yeates waving me to his booth. Thomas is one of the finest comic book artists I know, an expert delineator of *Swamp Thing*, *Tarzan*, *Zorro*, *Time-spirits*, and — *yee-hah!* — current artist on maybe the most revered Sunday newspaper strip, *Prince Valiant*. And he's also one of the kindest, warm-hearted dudes I've ever met, compassionate and a nice guy. Well, cowpokes, he wanted to know if I knew of any mags who might help promote a new graphic novel he had just finished drawing. "Well now," says I, tugging at my whiskers and eyes roaming up to the hall rafters, "let me chew that one over a bit, Thomas..."



Tales of the old West, whether dubbed Westerns or, as the late legendary author Louis L'Amour preferred them called, "frontier stories," have been a staple of the American comic book since the dawn of the form. Particularly popular during the 1950s, when cowpokes and gunslingers abounded on black-&-white televisions nationwide, Westerns are still, at present, a viable if somewhat scarce category. Today, it's apt to be a mash-up with other genres, as with *East of West* (science-fiction), *High Moon* (horror) or "Jonah Hex" (weirdness). Rarer is a straight story of those frontier times, straight in setting, with the characters and in the telling, with no dystopian landscape or lycanthropic howling or hyper-violent weirdness... But suddenly there comes along *Law of the Desert Born*, the first graphic novel adaptation of a Louis L'Amour story, an authentic, understated and, well, *dignified* comic book story of posses and rustling and lingering resentment.

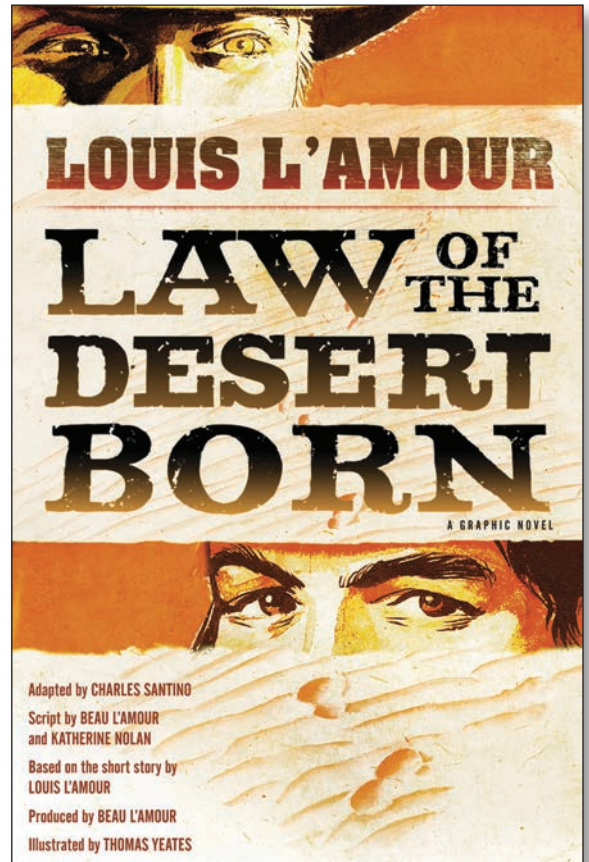
This writer, prompted by a desire to help out a good pal

and terrifically impressed with the book, set out to talk with the famous author's son, Beau L'Amour, who was intimately involved with the project since its inception.

"My father wrote the short story, 'Law of the Desert Born,' in the late 1940s and it was published in a pulp magazine," Beau said. "I think it was the third Western he'd ever written." After Louis' phenomenal success — with over 200 million copies of his novels in circulation! — it was decided to produce audio books as if they were oldtime radio plays and that was when the junior L'Amour came into the picture. "I was producing and writing the scripts to some of these and I had several writers working for me who were doing even more," Beau explained.

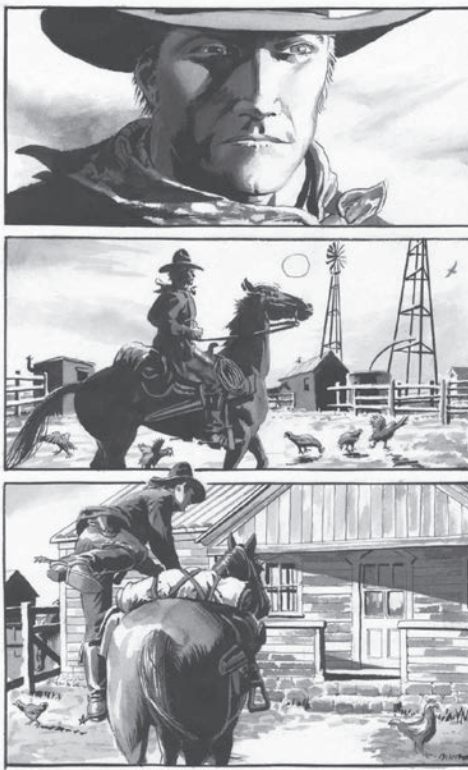
"I had handed *Law of the Desert Born* off to Katherine Nolan but, although she was a really competent writer, she wrote a script that was quite a bit too long. At first we were sure we could cut it but, ultimately, the two of us had to recreate the entire story in a completely new adaptation. It was a very exciting process because we had very little time before we had to be in the recording studio. A few years later, we decided to try the story as a screenplay... it was only years after that, long after the program where Kathy and I worked together had been scaled back, that I rewrote it as a comic book."

Okay, Westerns have been a longtime staple in comics, but L'Amour had never been adapted, so why now? "To start with, we hadn't done one," said Beau. "It's one of the markets that my dad [who passed away in 1988], so far, hasn't appeared in. Also, the marketplace for comics seems like the paperback book business did in the heyday of genre fiction, the 1950s through the '80s. That sort of bookseller enthusiasm and customer feedback is infectious. A great deal of the rest of today's entertainment landscape is very jaded. On the aesthetic side, I like telling stories in pictures. I was trained as a filmmaker and worked in the movie business on and off for quite a few years. *Law of the Desert Born* was a film script at one time and I wrote it with a great deal of care as to how it would be shot... making the switch to a graphic novel was really not at all like laying out a movie, but there *are* similarities. It's still telling a story in pictures and I find the efficacy and subtlety of that appealing. In many ways, I now like comics better than film, once you have accepted the realities of the medium, the compromises are far fewer."



Above: Thomas Yeates' cover art for the new graphic novel — the first adapting a Louis L'Amour story, *Law of the Desert Born*. *Ye Ed calls it a perfect coupling of artist to story. The humanity and sensitivity of Thomas Yeates shines through the expert storytelling.* **Inset left:** Thomas' pencils to a panel from the book, courtesy of Beau L'Amour, Louis' son and a major creative force behind the project. **Below:** Louis L'Amour [1908-88] as painted by Fred Pfeiffer.





Above: Triptych of pages from *Law of the Desert Born*, art by Thomas Yeates. This scene depicts the opening to the graphic novel, told in sober, documentary style (befitting the black-&-white presentation) and yet not with dispassion.



Below: April 1946 edition of *Dime Western Magazine*, published by Popular Publications, the pulp which featured Louis L'Amour's first Western story to appear in print, "Law of the Desert Born."



Law of the Desert Born, about a posse on the trail of a killer, is remarkably poignant in a quiet way, more the tale of how impulsive decisions of neighbors can escalate into life-changing, and life-ending, events. Thomas, "Year One" Kubert School graduate, is the perfect artist for the job, imbuing his characters with a humanity and dignity that adds nuance to the simple, if ambiguous story. The graphic novel is an expert matching of the right artist to the right story.

"I knew Thomas was the guy as soon as I saw his artwork," Beau reveals. "Cartooning and caricature plays an enormous role in comics, but we were telling a story that exists in a very real world, with delicate emotions and no larger than life characters. Thomas tells stories sequentially, but he can produce images like an old-fashioned illustrator, a truly dying breed. I have worked a good deal as an art director for book covers and really knew what I wanted to see."

Produced in fitting monochrome, "Thomas used a technique that is essentially a black-&-white watercolor," continues Beau. "It allows for beautiful graytones and that really helps him focus the reader's attention and create a sense of distance and atmosphere... literally, atmospheric distortion. Far too many current comic books crowd the frame with information, all of it having the same value. It can be a bit like 'Where's Waldo?' So, allowing different parts of the image to have more or less black density really helps when used by a master like Thomas... especially in a black-&-white book."

The story of the graphic novel is not a faithful adaptation of the original short story. Through the process that started with the audio play, it morphed over time, quite likely into something better. But Beau has written, "Clearly, Louis was the creator of the entire environment in which every version of this story exists." And the author's son shared, "The amazing thing about *Law of the Desert Born* was that, back in the days when it was an audio script, we didn't have time for that. We created the story starting with the end, sort of writing it like we were watching the movie *Memento*, and throwing ideas at one and other in a fast and furious manner. Later drafts were more relaxed, solitary affairs."

Beau also revealed the creative process working with the comics writer of *Toplin*, *Conan*, and *Ayn Rand's Anthem*, among others: "Once I pulled together a deal with the people at Bantam, I worked with Charles Santino to adapt the script into a blueprint that an artist could use to illustrate a book. He broke down all the pages into panel descriptions,

often sending me back to rewrite or condense sections as we discovered how it was going to play out visually.

"Charles had warned me that we might end up using an off-shore artist and I was concerned that any one we hired would only know Westerns through the lens of crummy TV shows or old movies. So I started creating a 'bible,' careful descriptions of characters, costumes, tools and the locations they would travel through. I documented all these descriptions in about 300 photographs I had taken over the years."

But on-shore artist Thomas Yeates was chosen and, "Once Thomas came on," Beau said, "the bible only added to his knowledge of the West. Thomas grew up riding horses near Sacramento and hiking the Sierras. The two of us were often on the phone to each other two to three times a week. We would discuss upcoming scenes and sketches he had completed. Once in a while, I went out and hiked around the actual places I had envisioned as our locations bringing back maps and video, anything to add to his reference materials. Occasionally, we rewrote sections of the script (a process that didn't end until the final documents were sent to the printer), he followed Charlie's adaptation closely yet made changes when he needed to and they were always an improvement."

After the artist handed in his pages, "I followed on the heels of Thomas's work with my old friend and Photoshop jockey, Paul O'Dell," Beau said. "We got every scan cleaned and exposed perfectly and made needed changes in the artwork, sometimes compositing in elements that Thomas would send to us. The amazing thing about the project was that I got to supervise every stage, from beginning to end."

Beau added, "I think that my work (scripts adapted from my father's work or other projects) tends to respond well when challenged by changing the medium several times. During each change, from short story to audio script, audio to film, and film to comic, the story has grown and deepened. Changing the medium allows me to approach the material in a fresh manner, to gain perspective as if I was a new writer who just came onto the project yet still retaining all of the project's history. It's a good way to stay fresh!"

There you have it, partners, a behind-the-cactus peek at the first graphic novel adapting a Louis L'Amour story. So, saddle up and git along now down the trail to the town bookstore or comics shop. *Law of the Desert Born*, she's a'waitin' fer ya!

