

Deconstructing Turok: The Kiowa Dinosaur Hunter in Comics and Film (1954-2014)

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The Dell and Gold Key Comics series *Turok: Son of Stone* (1954 - 1982) were groundbreaking in their introduction of a Native American protagonist who starred in his own adventure series instead of serving as the marginalized sidekick of a white male adventurer. In the imaginative comic, the title character was marooned in an undiscovered region of the American southwest populated by vast numbers of dinosaurs and cavemen who were inexplicably alive in the pre-Columbian era. The series is about the challenges Turok and fellow exile Andar face in their efforts to find a way back home from this preserved prehistoric world. While the comic presents Turok as unfailingly honorable, intelligent, and likeable, he tends to fit the broadly stereotypical mold of the square-jawed Silver Age comic book hero, so few of his emotions or motivations register as authentic or complex, especially within the comic's outlandish fantasy context. Indeed, because the action takes place in, essentially, Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World*, it serves to perpetuate the image of Native Americans as belonging to a mythic, past America that is as extinct as the Jurassic period.

In 1954, comic writer Gaylord DuBois conceived of the Turok character as Young Hawk, a member of the supporting cast of Dell's *Lone Ranger* comic series. Charged with creating an unofficial spinoff of *The Lone Ranger*, DuBois changed his creation's name to Turok and transported the hero from a western setting to a fantasy one. Stories and imagery from *Turok: Son of Stone* were clearly derivative of those found in earlier, cinematic works with dinosaur stars, such as Willis O'Brien's *King Kong* (1933) and Hal Roach's *One Million B.C.* (1940). In turn, the *Turok* comic likely inspired later, dinosaur-centric fantasy narratives. Ray Harryhausen's 1969 film *Valley of Gwangi* featured cowboys as the principal dinosaur fighters – and inexplicably replaced all Native American characters with Eastern European gypsies. In 1974, the cult television series *Land of the Lost* premiered, replacing the Native heroes of *Turok* with the Marshall family – an all-American father and his two children who were trapped in an alternate realm of dinosaurs, lizard men (the Sleestak), and primitives (the Pakuni), hoping to find their way back home through an inter-dimensional portal.

The original *Turok* comic was written and drawn to be “clean and wholesome entertainment” for children that “eliminates entirely... objectionable material.” This Dell Comics “Pledge to Parents” appeared repeatedly in the 1950s issues of the series. As David Hajdu documented in his 2008 monograph, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book*

Scare and How It Changed America, 1950s comic books were at the center of several high-profile senate committee hearings on juvenile delinquency. Expert witness and child psychologist Frederic Wertham testified that horror, crime, and superhero comics promoted homosexuality, adultery, divorce, necrophilia, and extreme violence. Responsible parents were urged not expose their children to the corrupting influence of comics. In 1954, the comics industry created its own self-regulating censorship board, the Comics Code Authority, to forestall government-led censorship initiatives. Around the same time, EC Comics cancelled their violent *Tales from the Crypt* and *Crime Suspense Stories* comics and replaced them with the politicized humor periodical *MAD Magazine*. When horror and crime comics vanished from newsstands, *Turok: Son of Stone* was created to fill the void with less overtly gory and scandalous entertainment for impressionable young minds.

The 1950s Turok comics took place during an unspecified year “before the arrival of the white man.” Turok wore iconic Hollywood Indian garb straight out of John Ford’s cinematic Western universe – a patterned vest over a shirtless chest, a single white feather worn in his long, braided, black hair, and leather pants. He had never seen a firearm and never used one, so he carried a spear, a bow-and-arrow, and a dagger at his hip. The first issue of the 1954 comic book begins when Turok, a Mandan Indian, wanders so far from his tribe while on a hunting expedition with his young charge Andar that both men are in serious danger of dying of thirst before they can return to camp. (How they strayed so far from their tribe in the first place was not disclosed, nor was it explained why Mandans suddenly found themselves in New Mexico instead of the Dakotas.) The two hunters take shelter in the Carlsbad Caverns, where they hope to find water. They do, but soon become hopelessly lost in the cave system. When they finally find their way back to the surface, they realize that they have emerged on the other side of an impenetrable rock mountain range and are now marooned in a self-contained “Lost World” ecosystem. Their new home comes complete with dinosaurs, giant iguanas, panthers, rabbits, saber-toothed tigers, and dire wolves, as well as cave men and hunter-gatherer tribes more akin to their own. The earliest issues, which will be discussed here, are all reprinted in *Turok: Son of Stone Archives, Volume 1* (Dark Horse, 2009).

Turok’s dialogue is earnest and consists mostly of the uttering of plot points and the underscoring of details that should be obvious based on the artwork alone. Some examples of his expositional dialogue include: “This rock-fall has blocked our path, so we need to find another way around the mountain,” or “We are all out of supplies,” or “I’m not sure that we can trust this cave man.” While this may be bland, children’s comic dialogue typical of comics of the 1950s, it is miles away from the stilted, broken English of Jay Silverheels’ Tonto.

Another interesting facet of Turok’s characterization is the absence of dramatized interiority. There are no thought balloons because there’s nothing for Turok to ponder. He and Andar are merely faced with a series of physical crises – such as imminent dinosaur attacks or natural disaster – that demand instinctive, immediate action, and little contemplation. The lack of interiority could be a function of the action nature of the comic book, or the plain vanilla writing style of 1950s comic books. It could also reveal the writers’ perceptions of the “primitive” nature of the protagonists. (For example, Roy

Thomas, the most prolific writer of *Conan the Barbarian* comic books, made a point of *never* giving Conan thought balloons.) The lack of thought balloons could also suggest that Turok and Andar belong to the kind of oral cultural tradition explored by Walter Ong in *Some Psychodynamics of Orality* (1982), or the Greco-Roman heroic tradition of action-in-place-of-interiority described by Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture* (1976).

Like Robin (a.k.a. Dick Grayson from the *Batman* comic books and Adam West television series), Andar tends to grunt or utter bizarre exclamations of surprise and consternation while his mentor can remain cool and collected in a crisis and avoid pseudo-swearing. Other native characters they encounter in the lost land are frequently inarticulate or talk much like Tonto. Considering the then-recent scandal Frederic Wertham stirred up over the gay subtext of the Batman and Robin relationship, it is surprising how similar a dynamic exists between Turok and Andar. Both men wander the lost land shirtless and spend very little time expressing interest in the beautiful, scantily clad native women they encounter during their trek across the savage jungle. As with Batman and Robin, the sizable difference in age and maturity between Turok and Andar defuses some of the claims of gay subtext – but only some.

One of the most interesting recurring themes of the earliest issues of *Turok* is the changing way Turok and Andar react to the cave men and indigenous peoples they encounter. Since the lost land combines animals and peoples from various stages of history and evolution, when Turok and Andar meet peoples who are less socially or even physically evolved than themselves, the result is a class system that positions Turok and Andar at the top and all other natives they meet beneath them to one degree or another. In one early adventure, they encounter a pretty young woman foraging for food. She leads them to the women and elders of her tribe, who are all starving because their hunters had left camp several days ago and never returned. Turok and Andar seem completely uninterested in this young girl romantically, but they feel compassion for the starving people and head out in search of the lost hunters. They find the hunters trapped in a deep pit. First, they free the hunters by creating a rope attached to a make-shift grappling hook. Then they demonstrate how the hunters can make a similar climbing apparatus in case they find themselves in a similar situation again.

In the fourth issue, from 1956, Turok and Andar face a striking moral dilemma. They have to choose between following a newly discovered path that will take them out of the lost land and home to their tribe, or help their new friend Lenok return to his rightful home in the lost land. The situation is framed as if the choice will be irreversible and will leave either Lenok stranded in Turok's world or Turok stranded in Lenok's. Though it is hard to understand why Turok feels such loyalty and moral obligation to someone he has just met, he and Andar instantly choose to return Lenok home because it is the right thing to do, and waste no time lamenting their misfortune afterwards when they cannot rediscover the path home.

In a story written by Paul S. Newman for 1957's *Turok* #10, Turok protests that the members of one swamp tribe are sacrificing too many captured animals that they need for food to a non-existent "God of the Bog."

Turok: If you are taking that to the spirit-God, you can stop here. Eat it yourselves.

Lead Hunter: No! First spirit god must eat!

Turok: But there is no spirit god!

Hunter: You not say that! Make spirit god angry! (137, v. 2)

Not giving up, Turok demonstrates that their angry god is merely a patch of quicksand lurking at the bottom of a lake; the quicksand can be avoided and a clever, strong man can extricate himself from its pull. Turok's clever performance does not rob the natives of their belief in the God of the Bog, but he does strip them of their fear of it. And so, they stop dumping vital food reserves into quicksand.

In the second *Turok* comic (1954's *Dell Four Color* #656), Turok and Andar meet sympathetic, besieged stone-age men who make easy prey for dinosaurs. Turok and Andar help these men by showing them how to make and use bows and arrows to better defend themselves against the prehistoric beasts that prey upon them. In issue five, Turok and Andar face a similar situation. They save the members of a particularly primitive tribe from a saber-toothed tiger. The primitives honor Turok and Andar with a feast. The food impresses Andar, but not the society.

Andar: I like eating better, Turok. Honor is alright, but...

Turok: but these men are only savages, you mean.
Remember, they are friends, Andar.

During this same issue, Turok considers arming their new friends with the same poison-tipped arrows he and Andar use to help them more effectively slay saber-toothed tigers. However, he fears that showing a clearly less civilized tribe where to find the plants to make the poisonous concoction would make them too dangerous to the surrounding tribes – *and* would consolidate the political control that corrupt shaman Anaki holds over his people.

This is exactly the kind of dilemma that would be faced frequently by charismatic white colonialist James T. Kirk in the 1960s *Star Trek* television series – should Kirk violate the Prime Directive and arm a Third “World” culture with advanced weaponry so that the neutral alien natives can protect themselves against the aggressively Communist Klingon Empire? While it would be tempting to provide a similar Cold War reading of the 1950s *Turok* comics here, what is striking about delving into these comics today is how easily one can read against the literal grain of the narrative and mentally replace the dinosaurs – not with the Communists who loom so large in any and all cultural studies articles examining popular culture artifacts of the 1950s – but with white colonial aggressors. This manner of reading, which owes something to both post-colonial theory and the fairy tale criticism of Bruno Bettelheim, probably does not reflect the authorial intent of Gaylord DuBois. Nevertheless, it is striking how easy it is to see Turok as spending each adventure making first contact with a new tribe and gradually forging a coalition of native peoples. In each story, he seems to be training and arming a new group

for a coming full-scale war against the dinosaurs (read: white colonialists who – very significantly – *never* appear in the comic).

Since the cancellation of *Turok: Son of Stone* in 1982, various publishing companies have attempted to revive the character, including Valiant and Dark Horse, but the revivals have been short-lived. The Valiant sequel series debuted in 1992. Primarily written by Tim Truman, the Valiant storyline changed Turok's heritage from Mandan to Kiowa, killed off Andar, and relocated Turok and his dinosaur archenemies to present-day America. This transition allowed Turok to arm himself with high-tech weapons – including Rambo-like explosive-charged bow-and-arrow sets – but he retained his iconic Native American garb. While some of these changes might be considered positive, in many respects the revival series replaced a dated, 'stoic' stereotyped hero with a trendier, vengeful Indian stereotype that is equally dull and offensive. Truman claimed in interviews that he did what he could to change Turok's appearance and behavior to make it more reflective of contemporary Native American culture. However, the marketing department of Valiant comics would only let him tweak the character so much because they felt that deviating too sharply from Turok's traditional look would damage his brand recognition.

In 1997, Acclaim released the video game *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* for the Nintendo 64 and home computer platforms. Its popularity was so great among the gaming community that it arguably granted the character Turok the greatest amount of fame and exposure he had ever enjoyed. However, as first-person-shooter games in the style of the *Castle Wolfenstein* and *Doom* franchises, these games were problematic because they enabled players to "be" Turok without having to actually "see" Turok on screen. Since the experience of playing Turok in a first-person shooter was little different than the experience of playing James Bond in a first-person shooter like *GoldenEye*, one wonders how much gamers felt connected to the Native American hero they were controlling.

In 2008, the Weinstein company released the straight-to-DVD cartoon film *Turok: Son of Stone*, written by Tony Bedard and Evan Baily. Adam Beach, who played Victor in the film *Smoke Signals*, provided the voice of the eponymous character, and other notable Native American actors – including Graham Greene, Adam Gifford, and Russell Means – were hired to lend the material a measure of credibility. The animation, both in style and gratuitous adult content, was reminiscent of anime films such as *Ghost in the Shell* and *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust*. In stark contrast to the original 1950s comics, which were specifically designed to be child-friendly adventure yarns, the message to parents on the DVD box reads: "Warning: Contains Graphic Violence and other material not suitable for children."

The cartoon movie begins with an adolescent Turok and his brother Nashoba courting the same teenage girl, Catori, by engaging in horseplay by a riverbed on the edge of their land. They are accosted by a militant group of youths from a neighboring tribe, who bully Turok and threaten to rape Catori. When Turok kills the leader, his people exile him in the hopes of preventing a full-scale retaliation from the other tribe. After Turok's expulsion, Catori accepts Turok's brother as a husband. Twenty years later, Chichak, the leader of the militant rival tribe, arms his people with rifles for the first time and leads an unprovoked attack on Turok's people. They have never seen rifles before, are not prepared to fight them, and are slaughtered.

Catori and her teenage son, Andar, are the sole survivors of the massacre. They escape into the woods and race to find the brooding, misanthropic Turok in his nearby hermitage. Chicak still in pursuit, Turok, Andar and Catori flee still deeper into the woods, accidentally stumbling upon the gateway to the Lost land. After surviving several dinosaur attacks, Turok and his nephew and sister-in-law find shelter with the Cliff People, descendants of members of Turok's tribe who had previously discovered the gateway to the lost land and remained trapped there forever. The peaceful people have a female chief, Sepinto, and appear to be a matriarchal, matrilineal culture. Sepinto is clearly interested in Turok, romantically, but he is too bitter about his failed relationship with Catori to ever fall in love again.

Chichak, meanwhile, discovers a hostile clan of shark-toothed Neanderthal men, kills their current leader, and assumes control. Eager to wipe out all of Turok's kin, included his newly extended family and tribesmen, Chichak orders the Neanderthals to attack the Cliff people. When Sepinto is killed, Turok overcomes his antisocial tendencies and becomes protector of the Cliff People. In planning a counter-attack, he figures out that his embittered, savage heart gives him a special affinity with the dinosaurs. He is able to empathically control them. He tames a tyrannosaurus rex, rides it as a steed, and unleashes it upon the Neanderthals. Turok kills Chichak and routs the Neanderthal army. When relative peace is achieved after the final battle, Turok, Andar, and Catori decide to cease their efforts to escape from the lost land. After all, they have no home to return to, and the Cliff People are long-lost relations who have made them feel welcome and loved. In the end, Turok has regained the tribe and the family he lost, and the Cliff People lose a matriarchal society and gain a patriarchal one.

While this cartoon film adapts the original comic in many interesting ways, it is not entirely successful in its efforts to brand itself as progressive and authentic Native American entertainment. The cruelty of the action scenes, the undertones of male chauvinism, and the cop-out inherent in the storytellers' use of aggressive Native villains as proxies for what should have been rifle-bearing white colonist villains all make the film too unpleasant a project to champion. The special features also go out of their way to point out that members of the voice cast are bona fide indigenous peoples, and include historians who vouch for the quality of the historical research the production team has done. However, the public relations gloss of the production team's interviews, coupled with the heavily edited – and likely censored – contributions of the historian interviewed has the opposite of the intended effect. The interviews make the film seem even less “authentically” native than it would have had the DVD included no special features.

As flawed as the self-congratulatory straight-to-video cartoon film was, one of the more recent comic book revivals may come far closer to presenting an interesting Turok to the world. In 2014, Greg Pak, a popular contemporary comic book writer and longtime champion of racial and ethnic diversity in comics, wrote his own reimagining of the Turok story, also named *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*, for Dynamite Entertainment. This new limited series takes place in a counter-factual history in which dinosaurs never became extinct and were domesticated as weapons of colonial warfare by the Medieval Europeans. According to the storytelling conceit Pak devised, in 1215, King John ordered his Crusaders to conquer the Middle East mounted on feathered, domesticated Velociraptors. They

unleashed T-Rexes as weapons of mass destruction whenever the tide of battle turned against them. After conquering the Holy Land, the Crusaders were ordered to the New World to claim it in the name of King John.

The first issue of *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* is told from the perspective of Turok and his tribesmen, who live on a lush, forest-covered Manhattan Island in 1215. Turok's family has been disgraced by an undisclosed crime and he is forced to live on his own in the woods from the time he is a small child, communing spiritually with nature and putting him psychically in tune with all wildlife. Andar is Turok's age and a bully who continually torments Turok for taking shamanistic quirks too far. The first issue ends with the shocking revelation that King John's forces have landed on American shores for the first time and they have brought dinosaurs as weapons to help them conquer the New World. Turok's tribesmen are run out of their village and driven into the woods.

The wily Turok captures the religious fanatic daughter of the knight commander of King John's forces. She smells rankly because Europeans never bathe, she does not speak Turok's language, and she is arrogant, but she makes excellent leverage against the invaders. Impressed equally by the kidnaping maneuver and by his ability to create deadly booby traps for the invaders to fall into, Turok's tribesmen look to him for leadership and protection against the knights and dinosaurs. Turok thinks that they can succeed in pushing the invaders back into the ocean if he can capture some of their dinosaurs and train them to turn on their former masters. And then the final contest for control of Manhattan begins.

If one were to dislike this comic book, it would likely be because of Turok's characterization, which evokes some of the broadly comic aspects of Johnny Depp's iteration of Tonto in his widely despised *Lone Ranger* film. If that is so, then this may simply be the third stereotypical iteration of Turok: he began as a stoic Indian, morphed into a radical and bloodthirsty Indian, and then became a kooky Shaman Indian. One might well argue that these are changes, but they do not represent progress or evolution. And yet, while Turok's quirks make him a less-than-instantly accessible character, there is much to love in this subversive retelling of the 1950s *Turok* comic. The anti-imperial subtext that some readers might see glimmers of in the original comic – the notion that the dinosaurs make excellent antagonistic stand-ins for the white colonists – has been made the surface meaning of this odd comic. Pak has written a wild adventure yarn that is great fun. It has the potential to urge white readers to contemplate the evils of imperial conquest and genocide.

The question remains: does this version of the seventy-year-old comic book character come closest to depicting a Native hero worth reading about? Compared to the other *Turok* comics and the DVD cartoon film? Certainly. However, what Turok would really benefit from is a full-fledged native creative team. As respectable a job as ethnic white writers did writing the African-American superhero Luke Cage during the first several decades of his comic book existence, the character felt brilliant, explosive, and subversive when he was finally handled by black writers, directors, actors, and producers the moment he was given his own Netflix television series adaptation. In this form – played by Mike Colter and written and produced by Cheo Hodari Coker – Cage crackled with an energy and vitality he had never had before. Similarly, the *Luke Cage* comic books written by African-American writer David F. Walker that were released concurrently with the

series simply feel far more authentically “black” than the issues written by the comic writers who created Luke Cage (and even by his best and most long-standing Caucasian writer, Brian Michael Bendis). Similarly, Wonder Woman benefitted *a lot* from finally getting stories crafted by women writers and artists such as Jodi Picoult, Gale Simone, Shea Fontana, G. Willow Wilson, Jill Thompson, Colleen Doran, and Trina Robbins after nearly seventy years of exclusively male creators. Considering the precedent set by Luke Cage and Wonder Woman, Turok could, conceivably, benefit just as much from having full-fledged Native American writers and artists handle his storylines, draw him, and write his dialogue.

And yet, one might understandably believe that Turok is not as easily redeemed by a diverse set of creators as Luke Cage because Cage was a better character from the outset than Turok. Indeed, for those who see *Turok* as an irredeemably silly “franchise” – a five-year-old boy’s action-figure game come to life, not a piece of narrative art worth taking seriously – there is another option. There are comic books and graphic novels produced by genuine Native American and indigenous artists around the world. Some such works may be found in the *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection* books, and some may be found in comic book conventions specifically geared towards promoting the work of diverse creators (see Indigenous Comic-Con or Indigipop X). Until indigenous creators are brought in to make Turok seem more authentic, the best option left open to comic book fans would be for them to leave Turok behind and seek out the characters and universes created by native and indigenous comics creators. These newer works have the further benefit of being crafted with a far more modern and relevant sensibility, unlike Turok, who was born from the reactionary sensibilities of the 1950s. The original *Turok* comic book was created in the wake of the great comic scare that pushed all comics, *Turok* included, to be 100% “safe” for white suburban children to read. As long as Turok stays *that* safe, there’s not all that modern readers can learn from immersing ourselves in his adventures.

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