

# Contraband explores an uncomfortable-yet-possible future

## bookpreview

### Contraband

Written by Thomas Behe  
Art by Phil Elliott

Available now as digital download;  
6 February for print edition

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When people think of contraband, they typically picture illegal goods such as street drugs or guns. But in today's society, where portable digital technology is commonplace, the distribution of explicit, violent reality content is the new contraband of the 21st century. Writer Thomas Behe and artist Phil Elliott explore this emerging and disturbing underground world in a new graphic novel of the same name.

Set in the near future, *Contraband* follows Toby, a young "citizen journalist" documenting this amateur underground scene and coerced into working for a black-market cellphone network known as "Contraband." Given the task of locating an anti-Contraband activist, Toby finds himself walking a dangerous edge between preserving his own safety and the well being of others. The dark, twisted underbelly of this uncomfortably familiar world of constant voyeurism is as thought-provoking as it is ominous in its implications.

"The type of voyeur camera-capture coming through in *Contraband* is

taking place in a number of different regions throughout the world," Behe, the novel's writer, explains. "Eastern countries have had video cell phones for several years; although, social networking doesn't seem to have taken off as much as in the West. In the UK, there have been isolated examples of the government taking action against people secretly filming others. Much of this has been associated with mobile bullying, youth fights, and other anti-social behaviour, but I feel this is just the beginning."

The artist of *Contraband*, Phil Elliott, got some first-hand experience with aggressive youths and mobile phones just prior to being contacted by Behe about the project.

"That experience was very strange; these kids were demanding money and filming me," Elliott says. "I was thinking at the time, 'What's going on here?' The kids were quite young, and this was taking place outside the town hall where I live. I still don't know whether they were trying to provoke me or why they were filming and whatever happened to the footage. This experience was still pretty raw when Thomas first got in touch," Elliott recalls.

As Behe elaborates, Elliott's artistic style was perfect for his script.

"Initially, I was checking out professional artists who could create a cool indie graphic novel—there's lots of new manga and cyber-punk styles out there, but I like Phil's more European style," he says. "I guess it's a bit like what the



French and Belgian artists were developing in the '60s and '70s. And he's clever; he knows how people live their lives today. His art is filled with warm characters, vivid scenery. It's easy to see why Phil is so well-respected as a pro comic artist."

Looking at the cover—which depicts a cell phone being converted into a functioning handgun—it's clear that the story presents many ideas and concepts that will force the reader to view everyday technology in ways they may never have considered before.

"Tucker, a key character, refers to how

Croatian police officers once busted some drug dealers who had a small gun modeled into a cell phone. I'd read this in an office email attachment a few years back, and thought it was the most twisted use of a mobile ever," Behe says.

As for why the voyeuristic drive in society seems nearly insatiable, there are no clear answers—but Elliott has a possible theory.

"Perhaps people have just got used to, or bored with, some of the sensationalist, gross-out stuff that's in films like *Hostel* or the *Saw* series. They want to see real violence—kids beating each

other up or abusing their teachers."

It's somewhat fitting that *Contraband* is being serialized in digital installments before it's collected in a print version next February. However, Behe's confident that print still has some advantages and appeal over pixels and bytes.

"I feel people who buy and enjoy graphic novels will always want something they can hold in their hands. A computer screen is no match for a physical book containing a fun story and artwork—it's just something you're going to want to keep."



DAVID RIDLEY

WEAVING A RAINBOW Art installations, including the one above, are in "Get Bent," a free exhibit currently up at the Alberta Gallery of Art. The show is part of Edmonton's queer arts festival, Exposure.

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