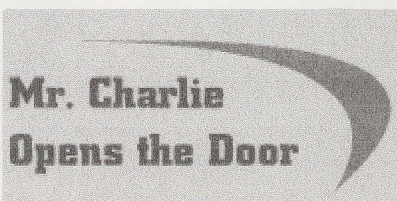


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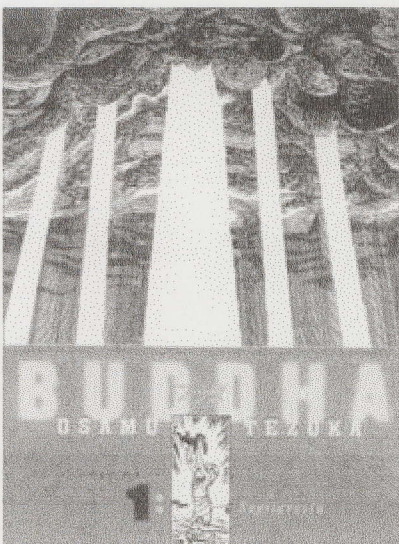
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Mr. Charlie Opens the Door



Interview with Anne Ishii

December 24 2003



Welcome the seventh trip through the door. This time we listen to **Anne Ishii**, Publicist for Vertical, Inc. Vertical, Inc. is one of the newer players in publishing contemporary Japanese books for the North American market. Thus far, they have already published a diverse line of books including two volumes of Osamu Tezuka's manga epic *Buddha* and an English language translation of Koji Suzuki's horror novel, *Ring*, which spawned several hit Japanese films and lots of merchandising, as well as a hit film remake from DreamWorks. According to its website, Vertical also plans to publish Suzuki's prose sequels to *Ring*, *Spiral* and *Loop*, with the former reaching stores sometime in Spring 2004.

What makes Vertical unique is that they will publish English language editions of not only manga, but also popular Japanese novels and non-fiction. The company has also attracted renowned graphic designer **Chip Kidd** as the company's art director, and Kidd has designed the company's eye-catching dust jackets and book covers. Ms. Ishii's co-worker, Marketing Director **Micah Burch**, also contributed a few words (where noted) to the conversation.

Can you give us a little of the history behind Vertical Inc.?

Vertical Inc. started in 2001 when president, Hiroki Sakai, and editorial director, Ioannis Mentzas, decided that a venture in translating and publishing best selling Japanese entertainment fiction (i.e. not Nobel-prize winning literature, OR fetishistic geisha tales) in North America, was worth the challenge. They talked to **Chip Kidd** about the Vertical project. Kidd was gung-ho for the idea and his designs have really helped to put our foot in the door of publishing, so to speak. His designs are amazing! Then, Vertical hired **Micah Burch** as our Marketing Director, and he is also on the NY state bar, making him an automatic badass. We have a Japan rep

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who takes care of publicity in Japan, among other things, Takae Okuma. She has the most experience in business and marketing. Now, a production manager, Kenji Ishimaru, and publicist later (yours truly), Vertical Inc. is complete, making us a small company with a lot of character. And fyi, we are an American company that deals with Japanese texts. People get confused about that because everyone at Vertical has their odd network of origins etc.

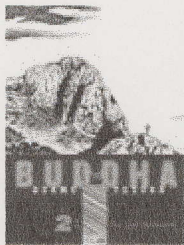
What sets Vertical, Inc. apart from other manga publishers, and is the company looking to distance itself from other publishers of translated manga?

Publishing is in such a slump everywhere, that to distance ourselves from other publishers would be sad and mutinous. We're pleased that anyone reads, and if the market for what we publish grows via other companies, we can't complain =). However what essentially distinguishes us as a manga publisher from the rest of the manga crowd is probably our bottom line of durability. Which mangas we publish (now and future) is determined by its "classic"-ness (these are Micah's words). Like with BUDDHA, by Tezuka...it's a classic! You can just tell by looking at it. And that's the other thing - we *packaged Buddha* as a classic; hard binding it into collectible volumes that create a beautiful set when complete.

We're not trying to do the "pop" manga - which is the opposite of our strategy re: fiction (Micah's words), which we pick up based on their viability in the US (those are Yann's words), not necessarily their "classic"-ness. But all of our books are good =). This season, there was an underlying theme of the outcast or rebel, in all our stuff. The Buddha himself is a great example. Next season will be a little more politically themed. SAYONARA, GANGSTERS by Genichiro Takahashi, for example, is a farcical story about global terrorists in the US, simply called *gangsters*. And ZERO OVER BERLIN by Joh Sasaki, is a speculative historical fiction about Japan's presence in Germany during WWII.

Is Vertical, Inc. going to make its publications available in all countries where English is the dominant language?

The short answer is yes. We make the presence of a book felt everywhere just by translating it into English, and producing it in its Vertical-package. A lot of these Japanese writers and their works would not have been known to the same scale as in Japan were it not for our translations. But, as you may be well aware, rights to publish are specific to localities. For example, with the RING trilogy, by Koji Suzuki, we only have North American rights for it.



Is Vertical, Inc. going to aggressively enter the U.S. Direct Market for comic sales, or do you look at American comic book stores as a lost cause considering how little those stores contribute to manga sales?

American comic bookstores are *not* a lost cause! Mangas are currently taking up 7 of 10 places on the best selling graphic fiction lists, according to PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, and those sales are determined in part by comic book stores. As for aggressively entering the US Direct Market, we're a yearling company, so any effort we make to enter any forum is aggressive (otherwise we sink as a start-up), but how much power we actually have is another story.

The American comic book industry (as much as we are acquainted with them) has been very cool to us so far. Maybe that's because we don't pose a huge threat to their sales, but maybe it's as I mentioned before, the fact that publishing is in a slump so it's nice work if you can get it...we can only be nice to each other. Not to mention the fact that publishing megaliths are making a lot of our jobs very difficult, even for folks at semi-megalithic places like DC/Marvel. I think the thing to keep in mind is that we're young and still learning, but not naive.

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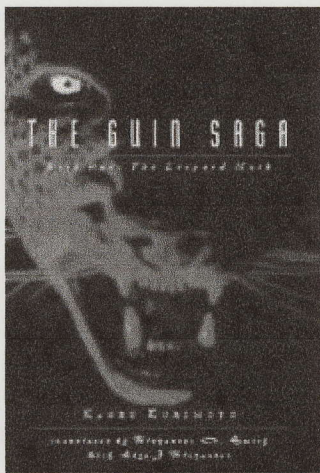
Are there people within the company familiar with how the Direct Market works enough to make any headway against the DC/Marvel hegemony, or do you see your real competitors as being Viz, TOKYOPOP, and Dark Horse Comics?

Of course we pay attention to what our comic publishing peers are up to, but since right now, *Buddha* is our only manga among several other fiction titles, well, I guess you can say we aren't acting the competitor's part. It's ironically kind of Buddhist - we can't get caught up in the fetters of competition.

Are you making headway into the U.S. book market? How receptive have stores and chains been to your publications.

I hope we're making headway! A lot of stores have been pretty cool. I personally check in on *Buddha* at random stores, and I'm proud to say the shelves are usually occupied with our proud creation. I also send out catalogs to comic book stores across the nation as their names come up, and some of them write back saying, "yeah! awesome!". The big chains technically speaking, *have Buddha*, but they're not putting it on the tables at front, or whatever. I guess Vertical isn't that big yet.

On that note, I went to my local independent comic bookstore (where I always buy my comix), and they had the Diamond PREVIEWS with our ad on the first page, and it was all big and in the front of the store, but the store itself didn't have *Buddha*! I went up to the guy at the counter and complained (poor guy...he has nothing to do with what's on the shelves, I'm sure), and he said, "Yeah, I guess the buyer doesn't know about it. Sorry." All of this to say that there are middlemen everywhere, so I'm not sure about the actual reception of our books in the bigger picture. But I'll just say that whenever I don't see *Buddha* in a store, I will personally call the manager and let him/her know of its existence. Pesky me. Does that mean we have a chance against the bigger publishers? Are we direct marketing efficiently and successfully? I have no idea.



What are the specific reasons Vertical, Inc. is opening with titles like THE GUIN SAGA, OUTLET, STRANGERS, and BUDDHA?

Technically speaking, we opened with not the above titles, but with these: RING by Koji Suzuki, a blockbuster phenom in Japan and North America (via Dreamworks, starring Naomi Watts); TWINKLE TWINKLE by Kaori Ekuni, a modern love-story about a mentally unstable and pseudo-alcoholic career woman and her gay doctor husband; ASHES by Kenzo Kitakata, a hard-boiled yakuza thriller, compared by THE VILLAGE VOICE, to something Beat Takeshi would write; The GUIN SAGA: BOOK ONE: THE LEOPARD MASK by Kaoru Kurimoto, info for this book is more or less the same as what we've provided at our website for its successive installments.

Though a bit by accident, Vertical books seem to be thematized per season by elements like "thrill and shock" - Spring '03; "outcasts" - Fall '03; and "political intrigue or philosophical musing" for next season - Spring '04. As for why we chose the titles you mentioned above, our first motivation is, as I mentioned in the last Q&A, viability in the American market. After that, the titles are determined by (obviously) their narrative quality - the stories have to be good, after all; lack of meaningless cultural fetishization; and to consumerism - right now we are paying attention to what will possibly cater to the X-Mas slew of purchase, for example.

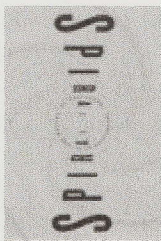
I'm curious about the format in which Vertical, Inc. published Buddha. The production is beautiful, and while it's the same size as most U.S. manga, the book is much thicker. Is this publishing format meant to make the books

stand out as more "grown up fare," or are there other reasons? Do you think Buddha's higher cover price and higher page count will turn off teen readers?

Hmmmm, teen readers...Well, if it means anything, a lot of people who respond to Buddha are older adults, yes (for example **Art Spiegelman**), but they almost always say "my kid(s) loved it! They would hardly let me read it before they went through the whole thing!". That said, the more "professional" production of *Buddha* is definitely meant to signify the classic-quality of the book, which means that inevitably, *Buddha* won't be treated like a flimsy paperback, or for that matter, a fifty page installment of the typical American superhero comic. I suppose you [The Comic Book Bin], as a retailer, would have a better idea of what's selling to whom, but I honestly don't think our format turns off teen readers in general. The size-to-price ratio is significantly in favor of the purchaser (\$25 for 400 pages hardback, or \$20 for 200 pages paperback...you do the math), which makes it buyable for anyone who has any initial interest in manga goods. Also, I believe that with stuff from places like Fantagraphics, Top Shelf, and Pantheon, which are also formatted very "adult-like," and succeeding in the book trade for younger readers, *Buddha* is going to do all right. However, people who go out of their way to talk to us about how much they liked *Buddha* tend not to be teenagers (I mean, I would actually be scared if a thirteen year-old called me to express their opinion), so I'm not entirely sure about what any of them think...except, as I said at the top, when their parents tell me. =)

The initial titles seem like "boy manga." Are you going to publish lighter fare, like some of the TOKYOPOP titles, for juvenile female readers, or is my question ignorant and sexist?

Hmmm, boy manga...I don't think your question is ignorant or sexist, but it does attest to the difficulty of marketing manga as anything other than oriented for sexist stereotypes. I suppose there's a reason superheroes have abnormally muscular or sexy bodies, after all. But just FYI, Vertical is not excluding the possibility of publishing mangas based on their "juvenile" qualities - if we are on the brink of closing shop, for example, and need fast cash. However, if that happens, it won't be until we really feel like we need to. Besides, there are already plenty of people who've taken care of that field anyway, and successfully at that. Why fix it if it ain't broke, as they say...



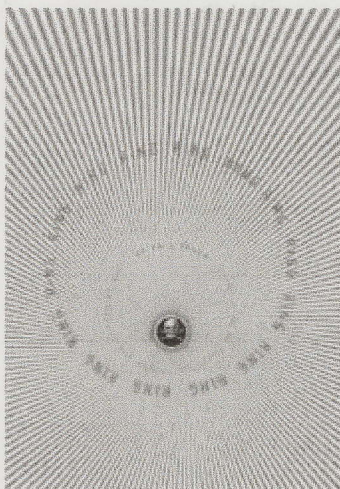
Earlier I asked if Vertical, Inc was going to aggressively target the Direct Sales Market. Is Vertical, Inc. going to woo a magazine like WIZARD, that has completely whored itself out to Marvel and DC, and to websites like NEWSARAMA and COMIC BOOK RESOURCES that constantly pimp mainstream comics? They're pretty much the big boys of superhero comics print and electronic press, or do you think that your time would be better spent on a serious and thoughtful news magazines like THE COMICS JOURNAL or THE COMICS INTERPRETER.

I learn more everyday about the Direct Market, and I seriously don't know what to make of it. Let me go about this question obliquely....In the non-graphic fiction market, there are people who cringe at the thought of Stephen King being awarded "literary" awards for his "popular" genre-fiction. But at this point, he has successfully breached the barrier. On the other hand, superhero artist Alex Ross is rightfully treated with accolades by more haughty art and cultural critics at The [NEW YORK] TIMES, despite his enormous popularity with what is pejoratively referred to as the popular market. Vertical honestly, is in no position to lambaste anyone who likes us. We're just so damned happy to get any kind of attention. But I understand what you mean by outlets that "pimp mainstream comics". You know, that's their schtick. Let's just say we aren't bedding anyone who mentions us in the same breath as "Sailor Moon" (though you can't put it past me personally to watch S.M. once in a while).

Is Vertical, Inc. looking at getting the attention of comic book reviewers on

the Internet who write for some of the better known review and critical sites like SILVER BULLET COMIC BOOKS or The Fourth Rail? Have they or any like them approached Vertical, Inc. about reviewing your books?

THE FOURTH RAIL has approached us, and I would be delighted if Silver Bullet did as well. Our best review yet is at timecomix.com, where **Andrew Arnold** writes purely critical assessments of comix that he enjoys. So the answer is, yes, we are looking at and indeed getting attention from online reviewers.



Do you mind discussing your strategy if any to attract the attention of mainstream media magazines and newspapers like ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY, TIME, and THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW to cover Vertical's titles? Or websites like Salon.com?

God, if only we did get more attention from them...My strategy so far is to offer them bribes...just kidding.

Is there anything you want to tell readers and retailers or anyone for that matter? Come on. Freestyle!

Ummmm, last comments?

READ DIFFERENT. READ VERTICAL.

Heh heh. it's not our motto for no reason.

THANK YOU. I really appreciate Ms. Ishii for granting this interview, especially since she had to go out of her way to access communication with me. Vertical has a wonderful selection of books, so you can visit them at their website, www.vertical-inc.com to get information on the company and on purchasing their books from retailers like Amazon.com and Barnes & Nobles.

LJ DOURESSEAU.

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