

## INTRODUCTION

After my film *Crumb* was released in 1995, I was spending a lot of time in Los Angeles, trying to get the money to make another movie. Late on a Friday afternoon after a really horrible time-waster of a day spent in such pursuit at several "important" meetings, I found myself once again at LAX a little more beaten-down than even the week before (if that were possible). This film business is tough. Everyone is eager to *talk* about making films; no one, it seems, wants to actually *make* one. It takes courage and that's hard when they don't seem to know what's good and what's bad; they don't even trust their own judgment.

I only had an hour flight home to SF but I couldn't handle it without something to read, and after those meetings I just couldn't stomach the latest issue of "Premiere" and "Entertainment Weekly" I'd brought along for the flight home. I had five minutes to find something else at the newsstand before boarding. I saw a copy of *Below the Line*, opened it to a page at random and read something that seemed truthful about the film business, and because it was so true, seemed incredibly funny to me. If I could get one or two more such laughs out of the rest of the book, I'd be happy, I thought. I bought the book and didn't put it down (except for the cab ride home) until I finished it later that night, countless laughs later. What a great book! This guy Helton could be the next Bukowski! A couple of days later I was on the phone trying to track down two more copies to send to some friends of mine. No luck - no store seemed to carry the title. Finally I wrote the publisher trying to buy a few more - some publisher I'd never heard of in the middle of nowhere, Texas.

Days later I got a call from the author, J.R. Helton. He was thrilled anyone liked the damn thing. He only had four copies left, he'd self-published only 1,000 copies, and somehow they were all gone. He offered to sell all four to me (he was really broke), but I convinced him he should keep one for himself. I sent him money for the other three, and lamented the fact that such a terrific book was out of print. Surely he could get some publisher interested, couldn't he? Nope, he'd been through it too, it seemed. None of the publishers he'd sent it to thought there was enough Movie-Star gossip in it to make it commercial enough. Add some Sex and Drugs and Gossip and they'd be more interested. Either that or make it more "upbeat" somehow! I told J.R. I'd call around and see what I could do.

Meanwhile, Robert Crumb showed up at my house for his annual visit. He found the book on my couch and also couldn't put it down. The next day he offered to paint a new cover for free in hopes *that* would interest some publisher enough to publish it. A month later he sent me the painting he'd slaved over for a week, and I started contacting prospective new publishers. They were all dutifully excited of course. They all loved Robert's work, my films, etc., etc. They all couldn't wait to see the book and the new cover.

One after another they turned Helton down. "It's too negative," "too critical," "too downbeat," too this, too that. Crumb and I even had dinner with a publisher who was an old acquaintance of ours in an attempt to get him to take it on. All through the meal Robert browbeat him into having the courage to publish the book. (This was something most out-of-character for Robert to do, by the way.) Finally, three bottles of wine later, we had a deal. A deal that lasted till the next day when the publisher called and made up some excuse why he couldn't do it. At least this guy could give us a "no." All the others stalled us with, "Well, I loved it, but the other two partners have to read it also," or "I have it on my desk--I'll try and get to it next month." Clearly, none of these pampered cake-eaters would have the foresight to publish William Faulkner if he weren't already famous.

However, Robert took the book to Ron Turner who publishes some of his comics at Last Gasp Publishing here in SF. Ron agreed to publish what you now hold in your hands. To his credit, Ron told J.R. Helton on the phone, "It won't be the first book I've published without reading."

Terry Zwigoff  
June 4th, 1999

**Publisher's Note:** However, Terry, I read this one and was only disappointed when the damn thing ended. I wanted more of Helton's surgical insights and jarring observations. I'm sure you readers will agree.

-Ron Turner