

CHRIS HOWARD INTERVIEWS

JEFF HIRSCH

THE *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *THE ELEVENTH
PLAGUE*, ABOUT HIS EPIC NEW
NOVEL, *MAGISTERIUM*

Q: *Magisterium* is such a visual book, and it would be cool to see it adapted into a graphic novel. Were you ever influenced by that medium, or other visual arts, while writing the story?

A: Absolutely. Comics have always been a huge influence, from my early obsession with Batman, Spiderman, Daredevil, and the X-Men to my more recent love of writers like Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, and Bryan K. Vaughn. Later on in life I ended up studying theater, which like comics, is a hugely visual medium. I think my experience with both forms always gets me thinking about how I can use images to help tell a story. There's definite wisdom in the "picture is worth a thousand words" cliché.

Q: Even when people share physical space in *Magisterium*, they're often worlds apart in terms of their beliefs and abilities. I'm curious if that theme of "divide" was something you went into the story with, or was it something that kept coming up as you brought the characters to life?

A: A little of both. The inspiration for the book came from thinking about how we're so divided in this country—politically, religiously, etc.—that it's like we live in completely separate realities. I just took that idea and made it literal.



Once I had that central idea I tried to move through the book looking at everything through that lens. How can characters, relationships, and plot points all relate back to that idea of division or duality in some way?

Q: *Magisterium* tells a complete story, but you left things open for more. What three words best describe what happens next?

A: Infiltration. Fusion. Transformation.

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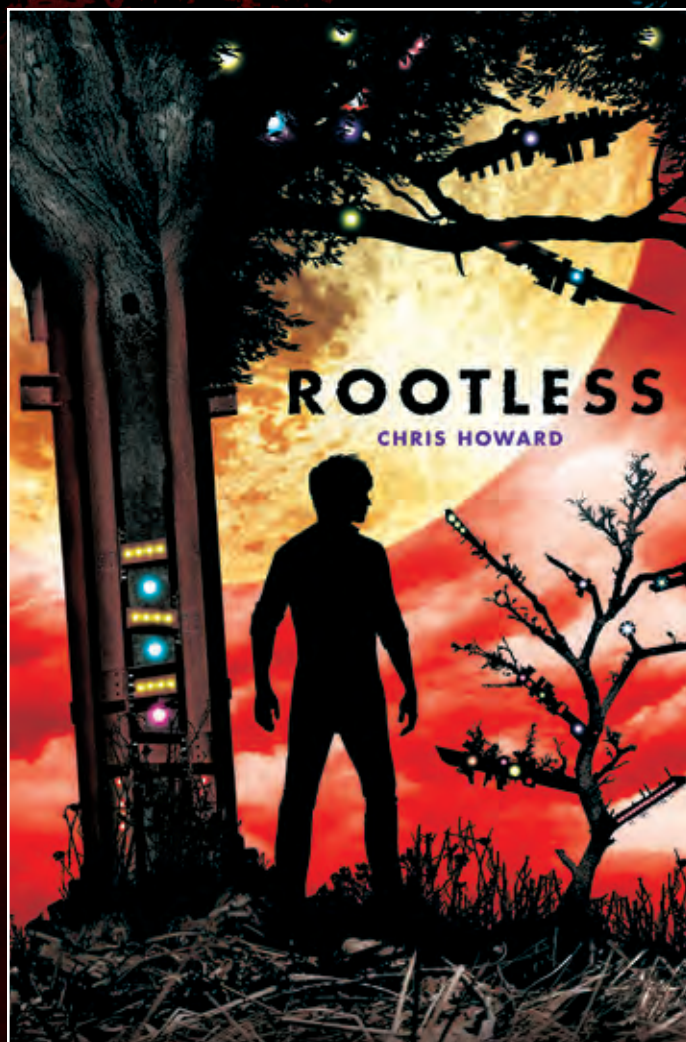
ABOUT HIS DEBUT NOVEL,
ROOTLESS

Q: Dystopian and post-apocalyptic stories are on everyone's mind right now. One of the things that's so refreshing about *Rootless* is how it doesn't rely at all on what have become the conventions of the genre. It really charts its own course. How familiar were you with popular YA dystopians as you worked on this? Did any inspire you? If not, were there other works of speculative fiction that did?

A: I set out to write something unlike anything I'd read, and actually wasn't too familiar with the genre as a whole. I love *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Road*, and I grew up reading 2000 AD and watching *Blade Runner*. But my initial inspiration was actually more *The Catcher in the Rye* than anything else. I had this image of someone wanting to catch all the dead trees as they were falling, and it reminded me of Holden's image of wanting to catch the children at the edge of the cliff. I immediately wanted to write a story about trees being a "lost" thing, because I love stories where something important has to be found again.

Q: There's just a staggering amount of world building in *Rootless* and all of it is incredibly unusual and detailed (Rasta bodyguards, flesh-eating locusts, punk rock land pirates, a society that lives on a 100% popcorn diet). How did you go about putting it all together? Did it come all at once? Or in layers over the course of several drafts?

A: I imagined a strain of locusts devouring every living thing except for genetically modified corn. And I pictured a strip of cornfields



where the plants were thirty feet high...but out on the dusty plains, a young guy was building trees out of metal. So, I had some of the big components in place right away, and the rest I filled in during the first draft. Later drafts were more about working with what was there and fleshing things out.

Q: You're a musician and talk about how a lot of your influences are musical. Do you see writing a book as being similar to writing a song?

A: Man, that's a huge question! Lyricism, rhythm, tempo...OK, so I don't get lost answering this, I'll just say that I can imagine the main characters of *Rootless* as a band, and sometimes they're bickering backstage, but when they're firing on all cylinders, there's no place I'd rather be!

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