

The creator of *Dirty Pair* and *Livewires*, Adam Warren has carved out a space for his manga-inspired art style and biting wit in the modern comics landscape. In the mid-2000s, Warren was approached by a fan who commissioned a series of damsel in distress bondage commissions. Though he was willing to draw the pieces, Warren's discomfort with the dynamics of the commissions led him to give his damsel a little bit of pluck and a few years later *Empowered* vol. 1 hit the shelves. Though the shrink-wrap around the book and the similarly clingy costume of its heroine have likely convinced more than a few comic store patrons that they're looking at porn, *Empowered* is one of the most thoughtful and funny examinations of the superhero genre I know. Described by Warren as a "sexy superhero comedy", the series follows Elissa Megan Powers, a low ranking member of the Super-Homeys, whose incredible powers depend on her dangerously fragile supersuit, and even more fragile self-esteem, staying intact. The series has spanned eight graphic novel volumes and a half-dozen one-shot stories. I was very excited to meet Mr. Warren at Emerald City Comic Con and especially with the release of *Empowered Unchained* and the announcement of *Empowered* vol. 9's release date, it seemed like a perfect time to shine some light on one of my favorite superhero gems.

WCBR: *Empowered: Unchained* came out last week, collecting the six *Empowered* one-shots you've done so far. Reading some of them for the first time, I was struck by how some of the one-shots grew out of elements present in other stories, while others connected quite nicely to each other. What determines what's a chapter in a main volume and what's a one-shot?

Adam Warren: Well, all the one-shots so far have been tailored specifically for the skill sets and inclinations of the individual Guest Artists—so the story "Animal Style", for example, was written specifically for the jawdropping automotive and mecha-design proclivities of artist John Staton. Given that I intensely dislike having to draw cars myself, I would never, ever have drawn that story for a regular *Empowered* volume. I should clarify, though, that a few of the one-shots did kinda "spin off" from events in the regular series. The story for the Takeshi-Miyazawa-drawn "Nine Beers with Ninjette" was originally intended as a chapter in the Ninjette-centric *Empowered* vol.7, but I ran outta space in that already oversized volume. When I mentioned this orphaned story on Twitter in passing, awesome Toronto retailer Chris Butcher (of TCAF and *The Beguiling* fame) happened to know that Takeshi was between gigs, and thus put us in contact and made the one-shot possible. Thanks, Chris! (Never let anyone tell you that Twitter is always a waste of time... though, I admit, it certainly can be a lethal timesuck on occasion for slow artists such as myself.)

What's it like getting to see other artists working on *Empowered*?

Always a great experience to see other, better artists' takes on *Empowered* characters and situations, bringing unique techniques to the challenge that I myself lack. That could mean, say, John Staton's previously mentioned "mad mecha skillz," or Emily Warren's beautiful, full-color approach to artwork, or Ryan Kinnaird's luxurious fleshtones and crazily detailed CG renders. I'm particularly fond of techniques at clear variance with my own, such as the stark difference between Brandon Graham's highly organic, loosey-goosey, "noodly" and improvisational artistic approach contrasted with my own tighter, literalistic, lamentably inflexible drawing style. Speaking of the story "Nine Beers with Ninjette", Takeshi Miyazawa drew a version of Ninjette's exceedingly sinister father that, in my humble opinion, is actually quite superior to the version I draw! My own depiction of her "Otō-sama" is rather goofy and cartoony, looking like an unholy cross between the X-Men's Wolverine and Riding Bean from *Gunsmith Cats*. Takeshi's depiction, by contrast, is wonderfully scrofulous and dissolute, the perfect look for a character who is a very, very mean drunk indeed. The *Emp*verse is full of some pretty wild characters. Besides the main cast, there are super-powered tv hosts, maid-themed vigilantes, a seemingly vast ninja

underworld, and even DR. BIG MCLARGE HUGE. Are there any Empowered side-characters you really want to develop more? Honestly, pretty much any member of the ever-expanding menagerie of Empowered characters could be ripe for further exploration. A friend of mine has rather unkindly pointed out I have a gift for wildly overthinking concepts that appear half-baked at first blush, if not outright goofy. (Y'know, like underdressed disaster magnets or distress-prone superheroines. Even Livewires, the series I created for Marvel a while back, was based off the little-loved "Mannites" from X-Men, a somewhat unpromising source material.) I can say that damn near anybody from the books' cast could, in theory at least, be developed further. What's up with villains like, say, Glue-Gun Gill or Rum, Sodomy and the Lash? Could Were-Giraffe by Night carry his own spin-off story? What are Heavy Artillery's dating options like, given the slightly problematic fact that he has a cannon for a head? (And so on, and so on.) Is there some advice that you wish you could give to yourself when you were starting out? I'd likely advise my younger self to progress towards doing fully creator-owned work as soon as g-d possible. While it's a good thing to be enthusiastic and professional about work you don't necessarily own, you really do need to keep an eye on your prospects for the long term, and not squander valuable opportunities out of misplaced loyalties to properties you don't fully control. Way back in the early 90s, the mangaka Kenichi Sonoda (Gunsmith Cats, Cannon God Exaxion) told me that I should be doing my own thing, as opposed to working on licenses like Bubblegum Crisis or The Dirty Pair. Not surprisingly, he was absolutely right about that. While I really did enjoy all the work-for-hire comics I wrote and drew for Wildstorm, DC and Marvel, I didn't fully grasp the reality that all that work would go eventually out of print and never, ever be seen again. The corollary to that fact: As handsome and much-appreciated as the page rates were on all my mainstream work—and the money from those jobs kept me afloat for some time after my career stalled out—the truth is, out-of-print comics don't earn you any royalties. By contrast, creator-owned comics are a long-term investment in yourself—Empowered vol. 1 earned me very little at the start, but nowadays remains in print and keeps earning me royalties every damn quarter. On the other hand, I might want to sagely repeat to my clueless younger self the oft-mentioned Stephen King quote, "Life isn't a support system for art. It's the other way around." Then again, that sentiment actually was expressed to me fairly often back when I was starting out, but I wasn't yet ready to hear it. Alas, by the time I was ready to hear and appreciate those words, it was already too late for me to do anything about 'em. Oh, well. Empowered, especially "Angry Hoodie College Emp", likes to point out a lot of the sillier conventions of the superhero genre. Do you have a favorite superhero or one that particularly inspires your writing or worldview? As a wee lad, I was big fan of a handful of Marvel superheroes, mainly Iron Man and the Fantastic Four, and was happy to have had a short-lived opportunity to write stories for both properties. As a teenager, the work of Moore/ Bissette/ Tottleben/Veitch/ etc. on Swamp Thing was a key reason for me getting back into comics, first as a reader, then as a wannabe creator. I can't, however, say that any superhero particularly inspires my writing or worldview, despite the seemingly contradictory fact that I produce a superhero-based comic. Then again, maybe that's not entirely true, as Empowered (the character) basically derived from one simple question: What goes through the mind of someone who has to wear one of these glaringly, brutally revealing costumes? Does she feel good, bad, or neutral about the experience? Any of those viewpoints would say something about the character, as opposed to the oddly amusing default position that superheroes in general—and superheroines in particular—seem almost comically oblivious about what the hell they're wearing. And lo, in an instant, Elissa Megan Powers sprang to insecure, self-conscious,

body-issue-plagued life! Despite being a parody, or perhaps because it's a parody, Empowered has ended up with a pretty tight-knit world with all kinds of interesting details about living alongside capes. Part of the fun of a new volume is figuring what are jokes and what's foreshadowing. How much of Empowered is all part of the master plan and how much was going back and thinking 'I could get something out of that'? Pretty much a mixture, really. Even my long-term plans for Empowered plotlines evolved from thinking—and overthinking—about where throwaway jokes and casually tossed-off scenes might someday lead. The (ahem) “worldbuilding” in the series is a very organic, “bottom-up” process in which simple ideas gradually complicate themselves into deeper and more complex characterization and events. Sounds pretentious, I know, but it's true. Really! While superhero stories full of gorgeous “Super-Chicas” sounds like a fanboy's dream, the vast majority of Empowered fans I've met are women, who love that it's a story of a badass woman that deals with her fears and insecurities. I don't know how representative that is overall, but were you surprised that Empowered is so popular with girls and, if so, has that changed how you approach the series at all? I wasn't entirely surprised about that, as I'd assumed the character would be somewhat relatable, given that Emp is based in part on several different friends of mine. Most of the more off-putting elements of Empowered were, alas, kinda baked into the premise, as the series evolved and developed from throwaway, cheesecake-y pin-up illos of, ahem, a “superheroine in peril.” I'm very pleased indeed that so many women readers have been able to appreciate the series, despite its problematic elements; would've been nice not to have placed quite so many obstacles in their way, but *c'est la vie*, unfortunately. If I had grasped even the slightest clue that Empowered would wind up being the longest and most ambitious project of my entire career, I would've approached the series very, very differently from the start. For good or ill, of course, I had no such clue. One thing I did not anticipate was that most—in fact, pretty much all—of the harshest criticism of Empowered would come from male critics. Well, gosh! Then again, gotta admit that I do not, shall we say, overly privilege the views of male readers on certain of these points. Vaguely related: I also kinda wish that I hadn't drawn Emp with a costume that's so extraordinarily resistant to cosplay! So far, the most impressively accurate take on Emp's supersuit involved ace Toronto photographer Paul Hillier painting a model in liquid latex, a feat which clearly went far above and beyond the call of cosplay duty:

<http://www.paulhillier.com/?p=811> The most common approach to Emp's suit, a largely featureless blue body stocking, probably isn't all that compelling a challenge—or rewarding a result—for aspiring cosplayers. Bit of a flaw in the design, I must admit, that Emp's suit is only visually interesting when it's torn and tattered! Sorry, cosplayers; maybe, down the road, I might change up her costume's appearance to make it more appealing to portray. Part of Emp's struggle is dealing with her own self image, something that her ‘teammates’ in the Superhomeys do nothing to help with. However, I think most readers, and her boyfriend, would say that Elissa actually has a pretty superhero-worthy physique. Obviously no one would be thrilled to have to show off every detail of their body and titillation is kind of a natural part of the series, but, in your mind, do you think Emp is actually a heavier girl or is that mostly her low self-esteem talking? More the latter than the former, though I admit it's a bit “on-the-nose” to have a person most would view as conventionally attractive nonetheless be so utterly convinced of her own physical inadequacies. Then again, given Emp's dubious origins as a series of “superheroine in peril” commissions, I did kinda start with a beautiful girl in a skintight supersuit and work backward. Gotta say, though, I've known a surprising—if not dismaying—number of conventionally attractive women who harbored deeply and profoundly alarming ideas about their

own appearance. Some of the more unfortunate sentiments Emp expresses about herself aren't all that dramatically fictionalized—or, in some cases, not fictionalized in the slightest. A multi-issue Empowered project next year, drawn by yet another badass Guest Artist, will delve into Emp's body-image issues in more detail. Hint: Emp grew up with extremely specific conceptions of what the body—and costume—of “a real superheroine” should look like, and her own appearance is definitely at odds with those conceptions. (Note: This story will, I swear, be considerably more fun and enjoyable than this description makes it sound. No, seriously, you guys!) Confusing the issue just a tad is the fact that, in recent volumes, I've started drawing Emp a bit softer and, uh, “fleshier,” in an admittedly belated attempt to differentiate her physique from that of, say, Ninjette or Sistah Spooky. I can't claim, however, that she's becoming more zaftig in the “real time” present tense of the series, as now she also looks a bit heavier in all her flashback images. Yeahp, it's true, folks: “Retconning” isn't just for origin stories, any more; it can even apply to characters' body types! Though you've continued to do work for various companies, it seems like you've been pretty focused on Empowered lately. While I'm sure fans are plenty happy to have you working hard on the series, is there anything else you're dying to explore that just doesn't suit Empowered? At this point, I have a few pitches out there that are more strongly science-fiction-oriented than Empowered tends to be, as that's a direction I haven't really explored in quite some time. (In fact, we're coming up on ten years since I wrote the SF-skewed Marvel miniseries Iron Man: Hypervelocity, which is rather disconcerting.) Empowered does occasionally nod towards science-fictional concepts, but I have no intention of getting too crazy with the ol' Big SF Ideas during the series. Then again, that's one of the neat things about the superhero genre overall, and Empowered specifically: The premise is so plastic that you can warp and twist it to suit any narrative that appeals to you, be it SF or horror or romantic comedy or tearjerking tragedy. That being said, keep an eye peeled for some non-Emp, SF-skewed original projects down the line. Are you working on anything else that you can talk about? Right now, I'm wrapping up script and roughs on the aforementioned Empowered Guest Artist project, slated to “drop” next year. As much as I enjoyed the one-shot stories collected in Empowered Unchained, I've been itching to branch out into more ambitious—that is, multiple-issue—Emp side projects, of which this would be the first salvo. Beyond that, I've been considering producing an Empowered one-shot entirely by myself, to serve as a “mission restatement” for the series. I'm a bit unsure if that's gonna happen, though, as I need to get cracking on Empowered vol. 10 very, very soon, if I'm gonna get that sucker on the shelves during 2016. (The ever-advancing timeframes required by the book market's solicitation process are the bane of my g-d existence, alas.) Last year, I wrote and laid out a very fun two-part Knight Rider story for Lion Forge (drawn by Iron Man: Hypervelocity's artist, Brian Denham), which might be seeing print in the near-ish future as part of their deal with IDW. I worked up a frankly ginormous Airwolf/ Knight Rider crossover project as well, but I have no idea when that sprawling epic might be seeing the light of day. And finally, you just announced that Empowered vol. 9 will be released later this year. Can you give a hint of what fans can expect from the new volume? Well, lets trot out the ol' solicitation copy, shall we? Already under suspicion by the distrustful superhero community, costumed crime fighter Empowered finds herself the bewildered target of every major supervillain in the cape-and-tights field for her supposed access to alien technology. Underestimated as she is, can our long-suffering but plucky heroine outwit her tormentors—and escape the sinister Fleshmaster's revenge? For readers who might have viewed Empowered vols. 7 and 8 as too heavily focused on (respectively) Ninjette and Sistah Spooky, Empowered vol.9 is all Emp, all the way through,

as our beleaguered heroine goes from frying pan to frying pan (to fire, at the end). The book's listed as being a mere 208 pages long, but wound up clocking in at a brawny 232 pages by the time I was done, making it the longest installment since Empowered vol.1's 248pp. I definitely needed the extra pagecount, though, given the action-packed, twisty, reversal-intensive 120-page(!) story that closes out the volume. Empowered vol. 9 lands August 19th and Empowered Unchained is out now. You can check out my review of Unchained here and you can follow Adam Warren on twitter, tumblr, or DeviantArt. The post Self-Image and Superheroics: An Interview with Adam Warren appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

**Read more:** <http://weeklycomicbookreview.com/2015/04/11/self-image-superheroics-interview-adam-warren/>