



Canadian Comic Book Artist Guy Delisle Wanders Down a New Path to A Lonely Room in Muted Colors



By [Olivia Snaije](#)
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The Canadian comic book artist Guy Delisle was trained in animation and has published a multitude of books for adults and children. He is best known for his travelogues, which include *Shenzhen*, *Pyongyang, a journey in North Korea*, *the Burma Chronicles* and *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City*, for which he won the prestigious Fauve d'Or comic book prize at the Angoulême comics festival in 2012. He also writes books for children and has penned several comic treatises on parenting. So his recent, 428-page tome in which he puts himself in the shoes of a French hostage in Chechnya, is a real departure from his previous work. Yet Delisle had been thinking about this book for over 15 years, from the time he met Christophe André, an administrator for the NGO



Doctors Without Borders, in early 2000. In 1997, André, who had been working for a mere three months in a new posting in the tiny Republic of Ingushetia, next to Chechnya, was kidnapped. For the next three months he was kept handcuffed and in solitary confinement. Delisle, whose wife also worked for Doctors Without Borders, recorded André's story in 2003, and saw him regularly over the years to come, with the book project always at the back of his mind. Delisle said he didn't begin the book right away because he took a job in North Korea (working in animation), where he continued his travelogues and began gaining notoriety with them. But the time it took for *Hostage* to become a reality may have been a blessing in disguise. Perhaps it was the years André's story was percolating in Delisle's subconscious, that made him able to convey, as Joe Sacco said, "great, slow-burning tension in this sublime account of what Christophe André endured as a hostage in Chechnya. Delisle's controlled handling of claustrophobic physical and mental spaces – and the rhythm he generates – is the work of a patient master."

You met Christophe André in 2000 and his story stayed with you for all these years?

It was at the back of my mind for a long time, I kept postponing it for various reasons. It was a very different kind of book, I wanted it to be in the first person and I had never done a book with someone else other than myself in it. I also left for North Korea. I did work on a first version, which was cleaner and more classical. I sent it to [French publisher] *Dargaud*, they liked it, but I thought I could do something different later. All these reasons led to 15 years, we became friends in the meantime, (my wife worked with him), and he has children the same age as mine. We saw each other once a year. I kept telling him, 'One day I'll do the book', I guess after all that time he didn't think I would do it. Once I began, though, he read the pages as I worked.



What about Christophe André's memory from 20 years ago? What was it like working with him, was it an emotional experience for him?

It was many different things. He didn't feel his experience was traumatic, because he had escaped, and he felt stronger for it. He said he succeeded at doing things he didn't think he could. He said he was like a football player who marks the final goal. This is why he wanted to do the book. Concerning his memory, well I am very attentive to detail, and at one point I knew more about the small details than he did, because I had the recording that I had made with him in 2003 and I also had a debriefing document from when he was first released. As I went along, he had a few comments here and there, and sometimes he had some corrections to make to the official document.

I met some of the people who helped him when he escaped, but because the angle I chose was just his, I stuck closely to his account. I had a photograph of him a few days after he had escaped. He spoke very freely about his experience.

And yet at the time he turned down appearances on television talk shows?

Twenty years ago it was easier to avoid TV—today it would be harder to refuse. He was invited to a few shows but he felt like he didn't owe anyone anything because he had escaped, and had taken care of himself. He really enjoyed his job and after he regained his health and a few pounds, six months later he asked the NGO if he could return to work for them. They were very surprised. He went on to work with the same NGO for 19 more years. When the book was published he came with with me to some book signings and he enjoyed it, I was there with him, he felt comfortable.

Not only is the story different from what you usual do, but your drawing style is different as well...

The artwork was different because when I thought about the story it came to my mind like that. My drawings in the Jerusalem book, for example, are more cartoon-y. For this book I wanted the drawings to be very simple, to reflect the nudity, the emptiness. I wanted them a bit raw, and more realistic, because it was a very serious story. I used a few photos, I didn't draw full pages, there was a group of drawings and I would scan them and put them together. I would draw freely on the paper so you had a more sketch-like feeling. The printing process was quite problematic, we had to be very precise, we had to get the paper right; so we did a first test run. There is a double inking process, with blue and black.

The tension builds in the story, yet it's the opposite of a classical thriller—the protagonist is an anti-hero, he hesitates, he doesn't dare...



He's not adventurous, he's doing what anyone would do, but his adrenaline was always going, he was on the alert, thinking about escaping. But he's a very calm guy, he always thought twice about doing things, and measured the pros and cons. He's very stable, and it was important for him to keep track of the days, for example. I put a little bit of myself in him, we do look a little alike but he's more serious than me. One thing that impressed me, that I could never do, was that he would decide in the morning what he was going to think about that day. He was very afraid of collapsing mentally. He was aware that he had to keep his mind alert. Ultimately, he's a guy who doesn't ask for much—he smokes his pipe and reads books about Napoleon.

When André was held captive, to keep himself occupied he told himself stories about historical battles. Were you familiar with military history?

No! I didn't know anything about Napoleon. We chose the battle of Austerlitz for him to relate, and I spent several days on the Internet to research this, I needed a lot of information.

How did you decide on the length? Did you have to edit it down?

I put every little detail in. I thought every tiny detail was important. The only way to do it was to have everything in chronological order, showing how the situation was getting increasingly serious, and he was getting more and more tired. I had even tried to write his story as a book before—I wrote 300 pages. But it didn't really work. My

third attempt worked and I drew one page per day, almost as if it were in real time. I did the writing in the morning and in the afternoon I drew the whole page. It was good because I got into a rhythm and I had an overview of the book. Someone described the book as ‘minimalist suspense’ and that’s what I wanted to do. If you feel for the guy you will turn the pages until the end. That’s why it’s a thick book, because I didn’t want the reader to turn the pages too fast and escape too quickly. I wanted the reader to feel like the prisoner and when he escaped, the reader escaped with him.

You used a technique similar to actors, putting yourself in his shoes. You even wore handcuffs and attached yourself to a radiator?

I did, and a friend photographed me so that I could use the photographs for my drawings. I thought about locking myself in for 24 hours, but I didn’t have time, I have two kids.



***Hostage** was published in French in 2016 and will be available in English in May 2017.*



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