

A Piggy's Tale:

An Interview with Comic Book Creator Tod Emko

by Lavanya Sunkara

Piggy is no ordinary dog. As a stray puppy in the Dominican Republic, he survived getting hit by a car, braving the streets on his own for three weeks after the accident until he was rescued. He lost his left hind leg and made it all the way to New York, thanks to his rescuers, one of whom is Tod Emko. Now, Piggy, named because his bare pink skin resembled a piglet when he was found, is a comic book hero in the newly released *A Piggy's Tale*, written by Tod Emko and illustrated by Ethan Young.

Piggy—in real life—possesses the intuitive, compassionate nature of most pets, a trait which writer Tod Emko uses to create the fictional version of Piggy in the comic book. In *A Piggy's Tale*, Piggy uses his superpowers to save animals who are just as helpless and afraid as he was as a pup. Simon, the smart kitty, helps him on his adventures. In this comic book for all ages, Emko draws from his experiences with Darwin Animal Doctors (DAD), a veterinary clinic he founded after rescuing Piggy. DAD brings veterinarian volunteers to the Galápagos islands to provide much-needed medical assistance to all animals, especially stray cats and dogs.

In this interview, Emko talks about the inspiration behind *A Piggy's Tale* and what he hopes to accomplish for animals with the comic book series.



Piggy's story continues to bring awareness to animal rescue and the work of Darwin Animal Doctors (DAD).

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LAVANYA SUNKARA: What was the inspiration for starting this comic series?

TOD EMKO: Piggy was the ultimate inspiration for this project. He's overcome more than I could ever imagine surviving. As a tripod puppy in the Dominican Republic, going

for weeks without medical care after being hit by a car, his survival alone is an amazing story. But his journey didn't end there. After he came to New York City, he developed the ability to detect the suffering of others, and he dazzled countless people with his compassion. I thought his

tale could inspire others, in addition to spreading awareness of rescue animals to a wider audience.

LS: Why did you choose to tell Piggy's story via a comic book?

TE: I chose a comic book as the means to tell this story because I always loved comics growing up, specifically ones starring animals, like *Bloom County* and *Calvin and Hobbes*. Animals can teach us, refresh our perspectives, and make us think. But there wasn't a superhero rescue animal that could inspire us the way characters like Superman or Spider-Man could. Piggy is the type of hero who could!

LS: Have you always been an animal lover? What's your earliest memory of helping furry friends?

TE: I've always loved animals. Even as a little kid in elementary school, I'd pick up worms from the road after a rain and put them back into the grass. But I never grew up with companion animals. So when I went to college, I compensated for my upbringing and lived in an apartment with seven rescue cats. Any cat who came up to me on the street found a home with me, and it never ceased to amaze me how wonderful, unique, and personality-filled each individual was. Ever since then I've tried to spread the praises of rescue animals.

LS: Tell us a little bit about Darwin Animal Doctors, and its role in the Galápagos.

TE: Darwin Animal Doctors is the only animal hospital in the Galápagos. We spay and neuter invasive domestic animals for the government there, all year round, providing a humane alternative to the mass street poisoning campaigns that preceded our existence there. We also teach humane education to pet owners in Galápagos, giving the locals the tools to be stewards of the environ-

Tod and Piggy have been inseparable since Piggy's rescue in 2009.



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LS: What is your proudest moment in your service to animals?

TEB I've been extremely lucky in that I've had a lot of proud moments. Moments as a Sea Shepherd Australia crew member, fighting to protect whales in the Southern Oceans. Moments running an animal hospital that saves lives each day. But the proudest I am is when I'm playing parent to a happy Piggy. A Piggy who loves me back, which tells me that I'm indeed a good parent to furry children!

LS: What do you think most people misunderstand about rescue animals and how does this book dispel those myths?

TEB I think the most serious misconception about rescue animals is that they're going to be difficult or wild, when it's the fact that they come from rough beginnings that makes them wonderful. Their gratitude, their knowledge that they could have had it so much worse, that often makes them so well behaved—often much better behaved than purchased animals. In *A Piggy's Tale*, we see rescue animals feel relief, appreciation, just like they do in real life. I think that can open some eyes out there.

LS: What did you learn from the whole experience of doing this comic book?

TEB I can't even tell you how much I've learned. I was fortunate enough to have Ethan Young collaborate on this project with me. He created the amazing comic book *Tails*, and he's the illustrator on this project. But he's a lot more than just that. He's an experienced comics creator who's been guiding me through the process of envisioning characters fully, of writing out their stories and their conversations. And he's close to Piggy, which gives him an intimate perspective on this comic. It gives him an extra special eye for illustrating this wonderful dog's expressions and actions. His drawings have taught me just as much about my dog's story as the written dialogue can teach.

LS: Share a little bit about the Kickstarter campaign you launched to fund *A Piggy's Tale*.

TEB In addition to Ethan Young, all of DAD has been helping with this project. Because this is DAD's first creative work and something to show our work to more people, DAD members have been helping to publicize the Kickstarter, providing creative input, and finding resources to bring it to life. Book sales will help fund DAD.

LS: What do you wish to accomplish with this comic series?

TEB I want to create a successful, widely read adventure series that entertains as well as educates people on the wonders of rescue animals. Something that gets more audiences thinking about rescue animals and how great they are. Something that proves that an ethical, compassionate story can thrill readers as much as any dark or bullet-filled action story.

LS: How do you see the book inspiring others to help animals in need?

TEB Every rescue animal has a story. Every animal that's given a chance, will inspire those who watch them come into their own. Piggy and Simon are just two of the countless rescue stories out there, but they're as inspiring as any story can get. I think that once people read about Piggy and Simon, and realize how amazing rescue animals can be, they'll want to share that wonder too. At the very least, it can get people thinking of rescue animals. 🐾

ment through better animal care. Every day we see intense and moving cases of animals that need our help, who would have suffered unabated if we weren't there.

Simon is a little yellow cat who was our first patient. He was a tiny kitten, filled with parasites and other troubles, but he pulled through his health problems in the end. I brought him back from Galápagos, and he's become a brilliantly impish little fellow. He serves as a reminder every day that there are wonderful animals everywhere waiting to be rescued. Simon in the comic serves as Piggy's smart-alack sidekick.

LS: Did you rescue Piggy before starting Darwin Animal Doctors?

TEB I found Piggy in the Dominican Republic on a volunteer veterinary campaign, before I created Darwin Animal Doctors. I went with a group that sets up temporary veterinary clinics in developing countries. When we left the Dominican Republic, I started to think about all the animals we were leaving behind. About all the animals like Piggy, wonderful creatures who deserved a chance, who needed vet care. Piggy inspired me to create a permanent veterinary clinic, and I decided to make one where it would count the most: the Galápagos.



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