

Already well respected for his nearly Quixotic attempts to bring sanity to the Transformers movie continuity, John Barber's tenure over IDW's mainline Transformers comics has been viewed as something of a renaissance period for the brand. Besides writing a tense sci-fi political thriller in the form of Transformers: Robots in Disguise, Barber has also served as the editor of the award-winning Transformers: More Than Meets The Eye as well as the Transformers: Windblade mini-series. Since then he's added even more to his plate by writing Angry Birds Transformers and co-writing the latest Transformers vs. G.I. Joe series. As the man behind one of my favorite shared universes in comics, I've been eager to meet Mr. Barber for some time. Little did I know how deep we'd get into the current Transformers line-up. Mr. Barber was incredibly gracious with his time and considerable knowledge so please enjoy and, if so inclined, check out the newly renamed The Transformers #35, on sale today! WCBR: What are the differences between writing IDW's mainline Transformers and then going and co-writing Transformers vs. G.I. Joe? John Barber: It's really different. It's a really different process. I mean, I guess the line I say with Transformers vs. G.I. Joe is...it has to be a Tom Scioli comic at the end of the day. So, if he's Wes Anderson, I'm Noah Baumbach. I can go do Noah Baumbach movies, but this one has to be Tom Scioli. So, it's really interesting, y'know, 'cause on the main line books I've co-written with James Roberts; we've co-written a bunch of stuff. Now with Mairghread as well, on "Combiner Wars", but we came up with the outline together and we worked on the stories together, even though we're each writing our individual issues. And they're all very different processes, but, with Tom, it's kind of especially different because it has to feel like his stuff and he's the one that is drawing it. He's the one who's putting the whole thing together. I've had people come up and ask, "Is it like, he writes the plot and you do the dialogue or vice versa?" and it's absolutely not that. Every issue's been a little bit different, so like issue one or the zero issue, Tom had written an outline. I took the outline and turned it into a full script, sent it over to Tom, he laid out in pencil a completely different story, there was absolutely a completely different tale. He turned that into a script and we kind of bounced that back and forth. Like it had pieces of the script, pieces of the original outline, and we did like maybe twelve drafts of it. Wasn't very efficient, but it really got it to the point of being a really good comic, I think. So there's a lot of kind of just boiling it down, of bouncing ideas back and forth, but, yeah, it's really great. We have a fun relationship and I think it's starting to kind of settle into something that is making a little sense as we go along. A big part of it is keeping it spontaneous and then keeping it where if all of a sudden a better idea comes up or a better way to do an issue comes up we'll do it. One thing that I was definitely curious about is that one of the weird figures for IDW in Transformers has been Galvatron, in that you couldn't fall back on a G1 interpretation. Yeah. But so he was kind of Nova Prime's Starscream for a while and then he kind of had this very 'glorious leader against D-Void' period. What made you settle on 'Galvatron the Barbarian' for your take? I was kind of intrigued by the story that Simon [Furman] had set up of these characters being of a different age, y'know? These people that were there, that took off on the original Ark? I just kind of latched onto this idea of, 'what was society like before they had the Golden Age?' For me, it went back to doing the Robots in Disguise Annual and I had this idea of like Game of Thrones with Transformers, of this idea of these different tribes. And I played with that actually a bit in the movie universe stuff, but it was different in the main line stuff. And Galvatron was one of those characters, kind of like Soundwave, where even within the IDW universe different writers had radically different takes on where he was. So, thinking about how you can sort of unify those, what kind of person would do all that stuff? And I came to the idea of 'what if Galvatron's kind of Conan' and you had this guy who's kind of really

a rough guy, really a barbarian, but who becomes king? I mean the story of Conan isn't just Conan the Barbarian. There's all these eras of Conan as he goes on; he eventually is King Conan. And the idea that Galvatron kind of went through all that, so he's been different places in his life, appealed to me. And, in [issue #34] we'll get kind of a larger grasp of how those early days with him and Nova functioned. We'll be seeing some stuff, that I think may be surprising to some people, that we sort of hinted at. There're definitely some hints that have been going on, but some of the ancient Cybertronian lore and history is gonna come up. But, in short, it's kind of the idea of this guy who, in his own mind, he's noble, but it isn't the usual nobility you get from a villain because he's really, really brutal and he's- he's- like he's genuinely not a nice guy, y'know, where, Soundwave, to me, he's the good guy Decepticon. Yeah. Like he's the guy that genuinely believes in the Decepticon cause and everything they had to do that was bad was a compromise that he had to make to a greater end goal, where Galvatron isn't like that. He's less compromising, but much more brutal and, like, the underlying...like- He doesn't feel like a guy who's like thinking very much into the future. Yeah. Like he does in his way. So, there are moments where you're going to see him kind of doing stuff toward a larger goal, but it's a very distinct, direct barbarian way of doing it. He's not doing the Machiavellian playing guys off of each other the way Starscream does. Even when he does like straight up lie, his duplicity is a little more honest. Sure. I know you are a huge fan of Prowl. And it shows. Heh heh heh. He's really kind of taken over Robots in Disguise. It's kind of becoming his book. But Prowl is kind of the famously rational one and that's starting to slip. Yeah... I kind of- You can't see it, but I'm nodding. Huh? Ah, yes! But I was just kind of curious. There's been a lot of stuff for Prowl lately. Megatron's trial was something that hit him very hard. He's had a complicated relationship with Chromedome over in More Than Meets the Eye. He's had the feeling of no one recognizing that he wasn't himself. Yeah. And then there's Spike. With all of these different things bumping around in his head, what do you feel is really driving this change in him? Yeah, I mean... first, finding out what Chromedome had done, that's definitely a big piece. The whole idea that, like, he more than anybody- maybe not more than anybody, but more than the average Autobot or Cybertronian has a lot against the Decepticons. But even though he was sort of using them as his police force, he certainly doesn't think welcoming Megatron into the fold is the right thing to do. The sort of forgive and move on or... I mean, to me that's the ultimate Optimus Prime move: to make your enemy one of you, to win him over ideologically. The original shared ideology between all of those characters was to overthrow the corrupt Primes. And when they overthrew the legacy of Primes, and then Megatron's next move was to take over Cybertron, that was a betrayal to Prowl. And he felt that very deeply. So did Prime, of course, but just the nature of Optimus Prime, I think, is that he's taken with that ideological way of getting him on your side. Prowl, I don't think cares quite as much about winning the ideologies as much as punishing Megatron for what he did. Uh huh. The other like really big factor though is merging with the Constructicons, that he's the only functioning Combiner now. I mean Monstructor is, but they're crazy. Nobody else has actually successfully combined in any real way. And he's the first one of them that isn't one of the original Constructicons. And that has psychological ramifications. Combining isn't just a physical thing, y'know? That idea when he was mind-controlled nobody noticed and, even when he wasn't, the Constructicons liked what they saw in there. All that, I think, kind of wears on him. And the Prowl story is definitely going somewhere. He's a big player in the "Days of Deception" arc that's coming up and "Combiner Wars". I think it goes without saying that Devastator's going to play a big role in what "Combiner Wars" is all about. He's certainly the instigating factor in anybody wanting Combiners. Right. And Starscream definitely

does not trust that Optimus has Prowl on his leash. Yeah. I think it's kind of fascinating that there's a guy out there that Starscream doesn't trust. Yeah. Yeah. That's kind of been his schtick. Yeah, in a way, Prowl's an Autobot combination of Starscream and Shockwave. He's got the logic and the reasoning of Shockwave, but he does have the Autobot ideology. Just taking a step aside from Robots in Disguise for a second, I was just curious. You are not only a writer, but you're an editor for IDW. Yes. As someone with that very unique experience, what do you think that -whether it be professionals, aspiring, anywhere in the process - what do you think that writers need to know about editors and editors need to know about writers? You have seen both sides. That's a good question. Ideally, everybody's out to make a good comic. And there are good fits with writers and editors, y'know? It's funny because I have friends on both sides of the table. So, every once in a while you'll sort of hear somebody, a friend of mine, complaining about, y'know, that editor didn't work out. Then there'll be people who are having a great relationship with that editor. So it's like any other relationship in life. There are fits and there are non-fits. When you're putting a creative team together for a comic, it's sort of like putting a band together, y'know? Like everybody has to get along. You have to know what parts everybody's playing and what everybody's doing. On the Transformers books we're really lucky, everybody gets along really well, I think, between James, me, Mairghread, Chris Metzen, Flint Dille, plus like Alex Milne, Andrew, Levio, Sarah, everybody; we all interact really well. But, yeah, if you're aspiring to be a writer, or I guess an editor too- This is a silly thing to say, but one of the things I always tell people is: imagine the person on the other side was a human being. Don't lose track of that. Keep that in mind. People go "Well, what are editors looking for?" Well, every editor's different, but you're looking for that thing that's exciting. You're looking for something that's fun. So, if you're trying to break in as a writer, like do something that makes you unique and that makes you an interesting person, as opposed to just doing something that fits in with a genre, that you think the editors want. You're much more likely to get a job doing any kind of comic if you have something to say and you yourself are a unique commodity. Very cool. And then, I guess, kind of the other side of that question is, whether as a writer or an editor, is there something you know now that you think would have really benefited you to hear when you were a little earlier in the process? Oh, man, probably everything. I don't know. It's a constant learning experience, y'know? I mean, like, I've been editing comics for ten years now and you still learn stuff. So, I want to do a couple questions about "Combiner Wars", but I feel like I have to ask about "Days of Deception". Oh sure. Like I said, Prowl is obviously a huge thing. Galvatron's got a spotlight issue coming up. Soundwave has kind of like a weird tenuous control over the Decepticon faction. Other than that, who are the other players that people should keep their eye on as we look towards "Days of Deception" and "Combiner Wars"? Well, "Days of Deception" is focused entirely on earth and "Combiner Wars" we're over to Cybertron. So, Optimus Prime is - not to give anything away - Optimus Prime, following the next issue, the Galvatron the Barbarian issue, is heading back to Cybertron. Oh? Not permanently- it's not like a- they're not an insurmountable distance away from each other anymore. Right, but I mean if Devastator's going to be on Cybertron for "Combiner Wars" someone has to go back. Yeah, but that's not the impetus for him going back there. That's where the Punishment story fits in. Oh, right. So, he goes back and the print collection will actually be out when it takes place in the comics. Very cool. So, Optimus Prime will be off, sort of leaving Prowl on his own, and he and Galvatron will both be in search of the same person and object. They both think that perhaps Spike Witwicky knows something that he hasn't let on about. Spike makes a public appearance in a way that he hasn't for a while, and that leads to the uncovering of an ancient secret that will

cause some friction between the two of them. So, it's sort of a hunt for Spike. Arcee and the other Autobots on earth are very much involved. The Constructicons are very much involved. And there'll be a surprise return of another human character. And I don't think we've even said who it is, but someone many fans have been asking about for a while will be back in the mix. But don't misunderstand. We're not turning the book into 'The Humans'; it's still called The Transformers. So, y'know, I told you: I came onto the book with your Starscream and I love Starscream and kind of finding the meat of that character. One thing I thought was really cool, like right from the get-go when you launched Robots In Disguise, Starscream's evolution for that series was kind of trying out honesty. Right, right. So, in this issue with Wheeljack, he flat-out says, "I need one person I don't lie to." If he's telling the truth to Wheeljack - that there's a public need for a Combiner and that this is not a power play, that it's for the good of Cybertron - how honest is he being with himself? Well, yeah. I don't think, to Starscream, a lie and the truth have any difference. I don't think he thinks of them as being different things. And that's kind of the way I write him. So, in terms of him being able to be honest with himself, I don't think he can be. I don't think he understands that, which is sort of the fatal flaw of him: that he's sort of not able to understand himself. He's not able to understand these feelings, where I think he, y'know, he really does like Wheeljack, and that's not something he's used to. Y'know, he saved Wheeljack- he had Wheeljack in the CR unit for a year or whatever. And...he didn't need to. There were other people that could have filled that role; there were other scientists. But, Wheeljack was the guy [who gave him a shot when no one else would.] So I think he's correct that he needs somebody. I think he actually happens to be saying the truth about himself. But I don't know if he's aware of it. And that's maybe a weird way to view a character- No- And that's as honest as he is, but he's definitely wrapped up what he thinks the good of Cybertron is with his own self-interest in a way that the two are inseparable- that you can't do something that's good for Cybertron- "I am the State." Yeah, exactly. So without massively destabilizing Cybertron, you can't knock him out of a position of power. And that's why you can't have Optimus Prime go in there and push him out of the way and become the leader. To be honest, it's a reasonable position, though. If Devastator's on earth and Monstructor's out there somewhere, you're- like both of these things have attacked and destroyed Iacon in the last year, y'know, in real time. You do need something to defend against that. So, the Phase 2 of IDW began with the reformatting of Cybertron and that sent out a pulse that brought the NAILS home. Windblade's big reveal was that there are other colonies out there with their own Titans. Did they receive that pulse and, what made them stay where they were? And what's their relationship to Cybertron? That's a very good question. The colonies tend to be- Well, we'll get into this a little bit more, but Windblade's is probably geographically the nearest. I mean, like, that might not be entirely true, but it's relatively close to Cybertron. A lot of the other ones are further away. A Spacebridge kind of let's them move much further in a vast amount of time than other forms of travel. So, where the Lost Light is traveling towards an end goal, like, it takes time to get there. If there were a Spacebridge on both sides of that, it would not take anytime to get there, you're right. So, in my head, the pulse that went through space was a quantum-entangled pulse that was moving faster than light that was allowing instantaneous communication, despite distance. But I think there probably was a limit to how far it could go. So, the further out colonies- either would have not received it or have received it, but it's like getting a phone call saying, "Hey, walk over to my house" when you're in Los Angeles and we're here in New York, y'know? I guess I could do that, but I'm probably gonna die on the way, y'know? Fair enough. Alright, and then one thing I think is interesting is there- in a lot of different

ways, Transformers is a little daunting as a property. Yeah, yeah. It's, uh, y'know- there's a lot of names... Yes there are, yeah. And there's a lot of multiverses and- and it has a certain way that it's perceived. Do you feel that there's been an effort to make it welcoming to fans and what do you think of as the way forward from here, after such success with things like Windblade? Yeah, I mean, Windblade specifically I think brought in a lot of readers. I think that was a great, like, first Transformers book for somebody. I mean, it's a great book period. But, in addition to that, it's also a great book that if you didn't know anything about Transformers, I think Sarah's art was very welcoming, Mairghread's story was very welcoming, and it introduced you to the world. And doing something that brings in new readers doesn't mean dumbing it down because I think you do want to have the stuff that's intriguing to 'em. Y'know, I think James's stuff has also brought in a lot of Transformers fans and a lot of Transformers fans to reading comics. And a lot of people into being Transformers fans that, even though his stuff gets very very complicated and is very multi-layered and you'll see things coming much later and all these things go together, it's in a way that's attractive to readers, y'know, it's something you get into the characters. You understand these are people not just machines and all that stuff. I mean, I try to do that as well. I can't speak as well for my own stuff because I'm right in the middle of it, y'know, right on the inside. But we like to have stories every once in a while that let people jump on and see what's going on. So at least there's issues where it doesn't always feel like you're stepping in twenty minutes into movie. They give you a little bit of a way in without, y'know, boring the fans and without getting stuff that's not progressing the story forward or adding to the lore or adding to the world. So I think we've been pretty successful at it. I think there's been a switch in the perception of Transformers books in the last three years among comic book people. Stuff tends to get covered a little more by mainstream comic book sites, you definitely see writers and editors and other publishers that are aware of what we're doing that are reading the books and, y'know, I think before there was a little bit of a, if not a stigma, there was a little bit of a, "Whoa, that's a lot to take in and I don't know if I can do it." A lot of that worry that it's a whole different world. So, I think without sacrificing the complexity or the vibrancy of the world, hopefully you've made it a little less confusing, without being less complex, or at least opened the door and shown them, y'know, here's a good place to come in, here's an anchor I think you can hold onto, here's a good character that you'll like. Yeah, I think that's very true. And also just to say it, I think there's a lot of people who really appreciate the efforts you've made to open [the brand up] - that can be introducing characters like Windblade and Nautica and having Rewind and Chromedome be the first openly gay Transformers. Oh, yeah, no- That sort of thing was something that I don't think that your average non-Transformers reader was going to expect to find in a Transformers book. "Oh it's just robots shooting each other?" No! Y'know, these are characters that love each other, these are characters that have emotions. And I remember when that came up. I asked our contract at Hasbro, like- "Is that okay?" Well, yeah. Like the word 'love' I don't think had ever been said before in a Transformers book. And so he said, "The mandate is you wanna make these real people." And that's exactly what it does. But yeah, y'know, absolutely. There wasn't a moment of hesitation on it. It was just absolutely the right way forward for the story. But I think that the outside perception is that that's not necessarily there. But again I think that's changing and that's changed in the last few years. I think that's something that's brought in a lot of readers. Like, 'no, these are people I can care about, the same way I can care about the X-Men or I can care about Spider-man.' For other people 'these comics care about these Transformers characters just as much as I do.' So, I think it works both ways. My last question for you is - whether Transformers or not, licensed,

anything - is there a character who you love who you wish you could play with? Like who would you get out of like the endless toy chest if you could? Wow. To ask for one of the Endless like Dream or Destiny- I'm just kidding- Sandman characters. I'm just joking. Man, there's a lot of characters I would really love the chance to work with. I'm really excited that we have Jem! Jem was one of the first comics when I got into IDW that I wanted to have happen. It's taken three years and- and everybody wanted to have it happen, it just took a little while, so that's coming. So, I'm excited about that happening, y'know, I'm gonna be editing that book and I'm thrilled about that. Y'know, for non-Hasbro stuff, for stuff outside of there, someday I'd love to get a crack at the Hulk. I would love to write Blackhawk, like, as a WWII aviation series. I love those comics. Mark Evanier and Dan Spiegel did a great run in the 80s. The Howard Chaykin series in the mid-80s was one of my favorites. But I also grew up like loving airplanes and Black Sheep Squadron and stuff. So, y'know, that would be a fun one to get a crack at. I don't know if the market would bear a WWII aviation series, but that would be something that would be a lot of fun. I don't know, Fantastic Four, I love that. There's a lot of stuff I love. I've had a chance to play in a lot of good sandboxes between IDW and Marvel. Y'know, There's a lot of pieces that I've gotten to have some part in and, y'know, I certainly can't complain with what I've gotten to play with so far. Well, as a fan of Transformers and all that, I think right now, you're right. It's a great time for the brand and it's one where it's becoming more understood. And I think that's partially because readers can feel the love that you and James and Mairghread have for these characters, so thanks a lot, man. Well, thank you. Thanks very much for having me. The post More Than Meets The Eye: A Interview With John Barber appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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