

# NACAE

National Association of Comics Art Educators

STUDY GUIDE:

ABOVE AND BELOW by James Sturm

## Introduction

James Sturm's career in comics, publications and education embraces a breadth and depth of interest unique to the field. After studying visual art first at The University of Wisconsin then at New York's School of Visual Art, Sturm's diverse pursuits went on to include a stint with the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, part ownership of the Seattle-based alternative weekly newspaper *The Stranger*, work on Art Spiegelman's groundbreaking alt-comix anthology *Raw*, a professorship at The Savannah College of Art and Design, establishment of The National Association of Comics Art Educators, and most recently, the founding of The Center for Cartoon Studies, a two-year cartooning school in White River Junction, Vermont.

First and foremost, though, James Sturm is a cartoonist. Like many cartoonists of his generation, his childhood love of Marvel superhero comics gave way to a near-abandonment of the medium in adulthood and then later to a rediscovery and renewed interest in comics through exposure to the underground comics of the late sixties and early seventies. Sturm's narratives cast tales of moral and social commentary against a rich and laboriously researched Americana backdrop; his artwork is spare yet evocative, combining the stark graphic sensibilities of early twentieth-century woodcuts and etchings with Japanese baseball manga, Thomas Hart Benton, FSA photographers, and Art Spiegelman.

Sturm's major work is a trilogy about America begun in 1996 and completed in 2001. They are: *The Revival*, *Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight* and *The Golem's Mighty Swing*. The first two stories make up *Above and Below*; both take place on the American frontier. *The Revival* is set at the Cane Ridge camp meeting that occurred in rural Kentucky in 1801. It examines the role and limits of faith. *Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight* takes place in 1886 in the small isolated mining town of Solomon's Gulch, Idaho where the last remaining citizens violently struggle to strike it rich.

James' interest in historical fiction is also manifested in the 2003 graphic novel *Unstable Molecules* (Marvel Comics). This book, set in 1958, examines the life and times of the four individuals who were supposedly the model of Marvel's Fantastic Four.

## Study Questions

- 1) Do you feel *The Revival* is an indictment of religion or does it come out in support of it? Why or why not?
- 2) Is the preacher Elijah Young sincere or a charlatan? Explain your reasons.
- 3) In *The Revival* what important piece of narrative information is presented later in the book and how does it make the reader reconsider previous scenes?

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- 4) *The Revival* promises to be a “thorough inspection into the power of faith.” Does it fulfill this promise?
  
- 5) Both stories take place on a frontier setting. What aspects of a frontier lend themselves to the telling of these stories?
  
- 6) In *Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight* Dr. Horatio James, like *The Revival*'s Elijah Young, is a morally ambiguous character. Do you feel he is more or less trustworthy than Elijah Young? Why?
  
- 7) Why do think the author chose not to reveal the mystery of the origin of Skinny's money?
  
- 8) At the end of *Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight* Althea literally winds up “holding the bag.” How do you interrupt this ending? Is it ironic? Optimistic?
  
- 9) What are the different reasons people are brought together in each of the stories? What is the organizing principle of each community? How does it define the dynamic between the characters?
  
- 10) The Cane Ridge camp revival was an actual event, whereas Solomon's Gulch was a fictional town. Does *The Revival* seem more believable as a result or doesn't it matter? Why? Does the historical accuracy of these stories lessen or strengthen the narratives' impact?
  
- 11) In what ways do the stories and events in *Above and Below* resonate with our current social, cultural or political climate?

## Exercises

- 1) *The Revival* and *Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight* could be said to be morality plays about faith and greed respectively. Choose one of the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, sloth) and write a short story that explores this sin. Have different characters represent opposing viewpoints in relationship to the sin.
  
- 2) James Sturm has said that reading descriptions of the Cane Ridge revival reminded him of attending Grateful Dead shows. Find a historical event that mirrors a current event. Research the historical event and write a story about it drawing parallels to the present.
  
- 3) Draw a half dozen cartoon personalities: a fool, an arrogant bully, a little kid, a wealthy aristocrat, a poor beggar, a sexy young woman or man, etc. Now research the costumes of three different cultures (ex: 19<sup>th</sup> century France, 17<sup>th</sup> century Iroquois, modern China). Place tracing paper over the characters and redraw each character as they would have dressed in each of the three chosen cultures.