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National Association of Comics Art Educators

STUDY GUIDE:

LOCAS: THE MAGGIE AND HOPEY STORIES by Jaime Hernandez

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Introduction

Comic books were in the midst of change by the early 1980s. The Marvel, DC and Archie lines were going through the same tired motions being produced by second and third generation artists and writers who grew up reading the same books they were now creating. Comic book specialty shops were growing in number and a new "non-returnable" distribution system had been created to supply them. This opened the door for publishers who had small print runs, with color covers and black and white interiors, to emerge with an alternative to corporate mainstream comics.

These new comics were often a cross between the familiar genres of the mainstream and the personal artistic freedom of underground comics, but sometimes something altogether different would appear. In 1976, Harvey Pekar began self-publishing his annual autobiographical comics collection, *American Splendor*, with art by R. Crumb and others, from his home in Cleveland, Ohio. Other cartoonists self-published their mainstream-rejected comics, like *Cerebus* (Dave Sim, 1977) and *Elfquest* (Wendy & Richard Pini, 1978) to financial and critical success. With proto-graphic novel publisher, Eclipse, mainstream rebels produced explicit versions of their earlier work, such as *Sabre* (Don McGregor & Paul Gulacy, 1978) and *Stewart the Rat* (Steve Gerber & Gene Colan, 1980). Underground comics evolved away from sex and drugs toward maturity in two anthologies, *RAW* (Art Spiegelman & Francoise Mouly, eds., 1980) and *Weirdo* (R. Crumb, ed., 1981). Under the Fantagraphics Books imprint, Gary Groth and Kim Thompson began to publish comics which aspired to an artistic quality that lived up to the high standard set forth in the pages of their critical magazine, *The Comics Journal*. That standard was met in 1982 with the publication of a comic book by three Mexican-American brothers from southern California, called *Love & Rockets*.

Jaime (HIGH-may) Hernandez was born in 1959, one of the youngest of four brothers and sisters. He grew up in the ethnically mixed, southern California town of Oxnard. His father was an immigrant from Mexico and his mother, a Chicana, had been born and raised in Texas. He had a sporadic Catholic upbringing that he claims helped his imagination and also instilled a fear of the devil. Drawing was encouraged in the Hernandez household as both his parents had dabbled in the arts. Their father would rip open a shopping bag and to let his children "cut loose" with crayons and markers.

Jaime was born into a house with comic books. His mother had read and loved *Archie* and Golden Age comics like *Blackhawk*. Oldest brother, Mario, brought most of the comics into the house. At first, he brought home funny animal, DC superhero comics and *Mad* magazine, with the Marvel comics and monster magazines soon to follow. By the late sixties he was bringing (if not smuggling) into the house counter-cultural/hippie publications like *Rolling Stone* and underground comics, complete with obscene language, sex and nudity. His younger brothers, Gilbert and Jaime sucked up this material

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like a sponge. As a kid, Jaime read and enjoyed book collections of newspaper strips like Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* and Hank Ketcham's *Dennis the Menace*. Among the comics, he was drawn to and later influenced his work: *Archie* by Harry Lucey, *Little Archie* by Bob Bolling, *Betty & Veronica* by Dan DeCarlo, *Tarzan* by Jesse Marsh, *Superman* edited by Mort Weisinger, and the exploding dynamics and high melodrama of Jack Kirby & Stan Lee's *Fantastic Four*. The artist, Alex Toth, who drew *Zorro* for Dell and *Hot Wheels* for DC as well as many other myriad short stories, was also a favorite.

As a teen, Jaime preferred listening to music than reading comics. He became a part of the Los Angeles punk scene attending rock shows, wearing studded leather and sporting a mohawk haircut. Bands like The Sex Pistols, The Clash, X, Black Flag, and the Replacements were favorites. He began to take art classes in high school. He went to a Junior College after graduation where he learned classical drawing skills from a tough, old-school teacher. He also took graphic design and art history courses. He now would apply his newly acquired knowledge to the comics of his childhood discovering how they were put together and how they worked.

In 1980, Mario had the idea publishing a comic book of his own work and his two younger brothers: Gilberto and Jaime. According to Jaime, "When Mario asked me (to contribute), I had no idea of what I was going to do. I just did it as I went along." It took almost a year for the brothers to draw the book. The comic was called *Love & Rockets*. It had a black & white cover and interior, was 32 pages and sold for \$1.00 a copy. The brothers sold them at a local comic book convention and sent a review copy to Gary Groth at *The Comics Journal*. Groth and partner Kim Thompson offered to publish *Love & Rockets* under the new Fantagraphics Books imprint. Groth asked that some additional material be drawn to expand the comic from 32 to 64 pages and was printed in an 8 1/2" x 11" size magazine format. The additional pages took another year to draw. The first issue of the new edition of *Love & Rockets* appeared in 1982.

Love & Rockets had a fifty issue run until 1996. In that time, there was a small explosion of new artists, new titles and new publishers. Many took Los Bros Hernandez's lead and followed their own idiosyncratic muse. There was a great deal of cross-pollination as most artists read each other's books and learned from them. All enjoyed a small but expanding audience for these new comics. Fantagraphics expanded their line with new comics like Peter Bagge's *Neat Stuff* (1985) and its spin-off *HATE* (1990), Daniel Clowes' *Lloyd Llewellyn* (1986) and its follow up *Eightball* (1989), Jim Woodring's *Jim* (1987) and *Frank* (1993) and *Acme Novelty Library* (1992) by Chris Ware.

The Hernandez brothers followed *Love & Rocket* with many short series. First, Jamie produced the three issue women's wrestling mini-series *Whoa Nellie* (1996). Next was the *Maggie and Hopey Color Fun* (1997) one-shot special that acted as a link from *Love & Rockets* to the next series, *Penny Century* (1997-2000) which featured more of Maggie and Hopey than its titular heroine. The brothers joined together again, in spring 2001, with the publication of *Love & Rockets* Volume 2. The adventures of Maggie, Hopey and the Locas universe still continue.

Study Questions

- 1) The relationship between Maggie and Hopey is the central relationships in Jaime's universe. How would you describe their relationship? How does it evolve throughout the course of the book?
- 2) Jaime mixes different styles of drawing in his comics. What are some of the different styles of drawing Jaime uses and to what effect? What role does graphic design play in Jaime's drawings?
- 3) Jamie is a master at setting mood in his story. What formal elements does he employ to set mood?
- 4) In what stories does Jaime use silent panels effectively?
- 5) Jaime's stories range from slapstick to more somber and introspective. Does he employ different visual styles depending on the type of story he is telling? If so please elaborate.
- 6) Hopey is generally an active character and Maggie is generally passive. Can you find examples where the reverse is true? Discuss.
- 7) LOCAS has one of the most well developed supporting casts of any comic book series. Discuss the lives, histories and characters of Izzy (Isabel Ortiz Ruebens), Penny Century (Beatriz Garcia), Danita Lincoln and her son Elias, Doyle Blackburn, Ray Domingues, Esther Chascarrillo, Joey Glass, Vicki Glory and Rena Titanon.
- 8) Maggie has three mature female figures in her life: her friend Izzy, her Aunt Vicki and Rena Titanon. Discuss each character and tell how their wisdom and guidance affect Maggie's life for good or ill. How does each character look after her? Conversely, what is Hopey's relationship to another mature female character, Nan Tucker?
- 9) Maggie has had a number of male love interests over the course of the book. Discuss Rand Race, Casey, Speedy Ortiz, Ray Domingues, and El Diablo Blanco. Who are these men? Are they interested in Maggie? Discuss the effect these characters have on her personality and behavior. Contrast with Hopey's influence.
- 10) There was a gradual shift in the LOCAS stories when Maggie gained weight and Jaime abandoned the science fiction/adventure trappings. Discuss these changes and Maggie's own reaction to that era (p. 388-389).
- 11) Maggie disappears for a long period of time, after she explodes in anger at Hopey, in chapter one of "Wigwam Bam" (p.443). She turns up again in the first chapter of "Chester Square" (p. 550). Although she is absent for most of the story her presence is still strongly felt. Discuss ways Jaime achieves this. Discuss what might have happened to Maggie in the lost period of time that may have driven her to prostitution at Chester Square.

12) Often at times of great sadness, Jaime will flashback to happier, more simple and innocent times such as after Speedy's death (p. 323-325) and the multiple slapping sequence (p. 699-704). Discuss this contrast of the present and the past. Why does Jaime use a motif such as this?

13) Jaime often jumps back and forth in time with no warning yet we know we are in a flashback. What visual cues does he use to let us know there was a shift without interrupting the flow of the narrative?

14) Jaime is, at times, very frank in his depiction of sex in LOCAS. He can also be subtle and matter-of-fact. Discuss the many ways sexual mores and situations are handled.

15) One of the most controversial things Jaime drew was a menage-a-trois with Hopey, Penny and Tex (page 349-panel 7). What do you think about Hopey's behavior? Is it in character? Penny's behavior? This incident has further ramifications (page 410-411). How does Jaime take one blackout panel and weave it into a major subplot?

16) Why do many of the characters from Maggie's past take a turn slapping her at the end of the book (p. 699-700)?

17) Jaime uses oblique motifs such as:

-the horns H. R. Costigan.

-the mystery of 100 Rooms.

-Hopey on the milk carton

(p. 424, 430-431, 443, 461, 468, 478, 481, 493-494, 511, 517, 521, 527, 543, 546).

-the meaning of "Wigwam Bam" (p. 535-537).

-the mask of the wrestler El Diablo Blanco and the mystery of his true face.

-the stray dog (p. 655, 657, 666,670, 677, 687, 690, 693, 697).

Discuss each motif. How are each used and what may they mean in the context of the story?

Studio Exercises

1) Jaime's story "Easter Hunt" (p. 584-589), is a redrawn story from his childhood. It has the manic energy of a child with the polish of an adult. Take one of your childhood comics and redraw a few pages. How does this alter your way of thinking about comics?

2) Maggie changes a quarter of the way through the book when she gains weight. Draw a new character or take an existing character of your own creation and change something substantial about their body: add/subtract weight, change race, change age, change height, change sex, etc. What new narrative possibilities present themselves as a result of these changes?

3) Jaime's stories are very tightly edited. Often scenes are only three panels or fewer.

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Sometimes scenes are only one panel. Take an existing scene of a comic, or create a new scene of six to eight panels. Now condense the scene to no more than three panels. Get rid of information you don't need. Combine several elements into one panel. Condense the number of characters and background in a panel. Does the scene play better condensed or in its original state? Did you find elements that were unnecessary to the advancement of the story? What do you want to keep and what do you want to discard?

4) Jamie is excellent at silhouetting his characters and environments. A well-designed character should be identifiable by silhouette. Silhouetting a panel is a good way to set mood, elongate time and give the reader a beat: a place to rest. Make a copy of a few of your comics pages. With a marker or a brush and ink, create several silhouette panels. Are your characters still identifiable? How does the mood change? What moods and emotions are evoked?