Palomar and Beyond: An Interview with Gilbert Hernandez

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Perhaps no one has done more to energize the field of alternative comics—graphic narrative and cartoons that do not follow a superhero or traditional genre formula—than Gilbert Hernandez. In 1981 he, along with his brothers Jaime and Mario, self-published a highly eclectic and off-beat comic book, Love and Rockets, a work that quickly caught the attention of the Seattle-based publisher of comic art, Fantagraphics Books. A year later, the publisher began putting out what was to be the first volume of Love and Rockets in a magazine-sized format, a series that ran until 1996, when Los Bros Hernandez—as the brothers had become known—decided to end the title and pursue their own individual projects. Over its fourteen-year run, Love and Rockets exemplified what alternative comics, and comic books in general, could actually achieve. Their work betrayed an unlikely mix of influences—including the 1970s punk rock movement, South American magic realism, Hollywood filmmaking, and their own southern Californian Chicano experiences—making Beto (as Gilbert Hernandez is known) and Jaime Hernandez heirs to the underground comix scene made famous, and notorious, by such figures as Robert Crumb, Bill Griffith, Gilbert Shelton, and Jack Jackson. The brothers revived the Love and Rockets title in 2001, this time in standard comic book-sized issues, and the series continues to this day.

From its self-published debut, Love and Rockets has comprised a variety of ongoing narrative arcs as well as one-shot strips. One of the most significant of these is Gilbert Hernandez’s novelistic series of tales that revolve around a mythic Latin American town, Palomar. These narratives have been collected in the monumental
Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories (2003), a work that has garnered more than its share of critical praise and a small but growing body of scholarly attention.

Hernandez has spent the better part of his career fleshing out the personal histories that populate Palomar, most notably those of Chelo, the town’s aggressive female sheriff; Pipo, a striking and confident entrepreneur who creates her own line of clothing and eventually her own media empire; and Heralcio, a school teacher with a flair for philosophy and a passion for Gabriel García Márquez and Franz Kafka. But perhaps Palomar’s most prominent resident is Luba, a sexually promiscuous and hard-edged member of the community who constantly wields a hammer (as a symbol of her power) and who eventually becomes the town’s mayor. Her stories make up the bulk of Hernandez’s work to date, and he has just recently concluded her and her family’s adventures after moving to the United States. The world of Luba and her half sisters, Fritz and Petra (which also includes Petra’s daughter Venus, and Luba’s own daughters, including Maricela, Guadalupe, Doralis, and Casimira) functions as an empowering matriarchy that has been lauded by a variety of critics as revolutionary in the field of comics. Through these female figures, Hernandez gives voice not only to ethnic American concerns, but to women’s issues, gender politics, and even gay rights, topics that rarely come to the fore in American graphic narrative.

In fall 2006 I talked with Gilbert Hernandez about his work as well as about issues of race and ethnicity within the field of comics. What follows is the result of a phone conversation, along with a series of email-based correspondences in early 2007, in which we discussed his Palomar stories, the significance of Love and Rockets, the influence of popular culture on his writing, and the social function of graphic artists who take on the issues of ethnicity, class, and gender in their work.

Derek Parker Royal: You and your brothers were the first writers to give a real voice to the Hispanic community in comics. What do you think, in your view, is the current state of ethnic or racial representation within this medium?
Gilbert Hernandez: I see more of it in the mainstream comics. There are just more Latino writers, mostly artists, working in the field, simply because the big companies are in New York and they get Puerto Rican young people to work, and other ethnics as well. There are a few independent cartoonists out there, but they’re doing different kinds of things, like wrestling comics and that kind of thing. But I’m not aware of too many, if any, other Latinos doing comics in a more—I hate to say—ambitious way. My goal is to tell stories that are engaging and entertaining for a general audience, but specifically to humanize Latinos, to give a different angle on Latinos from what is normally given in pop culture. And I don’t really see too much of that. Here and there you find a few political cartoonists taking little stabs at the status quo, but as far as dramatic fiction, I don’t see a lot of it. I could just be isolated, I don’t know.

DPR: That’s interesting what you say about Latinos working in the mainstream comics, but not writing about their own experiences. In terms of ethnic writing, you can be a Latino but not write about Latino subject matters. On the other hand, you can write about this material, as you obviously do.

GH: Yeah, it’s kind of weird. I just think that in pop culture—I’ll limit my comments here to popular culture—even Latinos haven’t seen things in the mainstream that represent them in any kind of humanistic light. You can go back to television and movies, and Latinos are more or less a joke. Originally it started out stronger in silent movies with Latin lovers, but all of that waned and now Latinos are relegated to goofy parts. Once in a while you get a Desi Arnaz on I Love Lucy, and even though he was kind of a goofy character, at least half the time he was just a regular guy, which is pretty cool. (Interestingly enough, that’s the most popular television show of all time. But for some reason they just can’t figure out the magic of that.) But I think that the younger kids don’t really see themselves in the culture. They grow up just like I grew up, reading mainstream comic books about Anglo characters—which is fine, there are some great comics—but I just don’t see
them thinking, “How can I put myself in these comics?” without it becoming cliché.

DPR: Do you think that’s changing in comics?

GH: Yeah, it’s changing, because it’s a different world from when I grew up, and something small like Love and Rockets existing for the past twenty-five years has made people look at it like, “Oh, okay, I didn’t know this could exist.” I mean, I was flabbergasted when I first started my Palomar series, about a mythical Latin American village. It was basically an excuse to have a bunch of funny characters running around living their lives, with dark sides and humorous sides. But I was really surprised by intelligent people that I knew saying, “Wow, I didn’t know Latinos were like this.” I thought, “What? You mean human?” But they had to stop themselves and realize that this was something they hadn’t considered. It was something to think about. That was a little surprising to me, but at the same time I was happy that I made some kinds of bumps on the road.
DPR: *Love and Rockets* has been around a long time, and I’m sure you’ve seen a number of changes in the industry. Have you found, since you and your brothers started the comic book, that publishers in general have become more sensitive to multicultural issues than they were twenty-five years ago?

GH: Oh yes, definitely. It was also great timing for us because in the early 1980s when we started—and I hate to give them any credit—the MTV generation came around, and the music video network was forced to become ethnic, if you’ll recall. At first they wouldn’t play black artists, they wouldn’t play Michael Jackson, they didn’t want to offend the heavy metal crowd. Then they got so much crap for it that they eventually started putting that music in, and they realized that the audience tripled and quadrupled, and they saw that there was a lot of money to be made there. So eventually you saw a lot of ethnics in rock videos and short films, and the kids had never really seen anything like that before. Not at a relatively positive level, I mean.

DPR: So music videos helped to spawn ethnic comics?

GH: Yeah. This was at the same time *Love and Rockets* was coming around and we were making our little stamp. And it also applied to the mainstream comics because publishers saw this MTV phenomenon. Once young people see themselves in pop culture—see themselves in comics, see themselves on television—all of a sudden they get inspired. They think, “Oh, okay. I’m here too.” So all the kids start coming out. Remember, when they are very young, kids have no racial barriers in mind. Kids just like kids, and it’s only when they get older that they start learning about the divisions. And I hate to say it, but it took something like rock videos to increase ethnic awareness. Kids saw multi-ethnic acts, and that was normal to them. Whereas it was the older folks who thought, “What’s going on here? They’re taking over!” But that’s the whole point of youth culture, to push the older generation out of the way. If I start screwing up, and I stop forgetting what it’s like to keep moving, then the youth have to push me out of the way. I’ll *fight* them, but they’ve got to do it too. They’ve got to
keep moving forward. I just don’t see that happening at the mo-
ment, the culture just seems to be going around in circles. But at
the time we were creating Love and Rockets, it felt like a move
forward.

DPR: You said that things seem to be stuck in terms of youth
culture wanting something different, that they’re not pushing
things like they once did. Could you elaborate on that?

GH: I was referring to pop culture. That has so much of an impact
on young people as far as role models go. I have a theory about
this. The twentieth century was the first century to be recorded on
film and on tape, and I’ve noticed that many times artists and
clothes designers and musicians keep going back and listening to
the older stuff. And that’s not bad, but it’s always regurgitated
material. They have to keep constantly looking to the past, at older
films and music, to inspire them to do new stuff. That’s my little
pet theory. The kids have started seeing all of these older bands,
rock music, comics, and films, and now that they’ve come to a
certain point, they just don’t know where to go anymore. They’re
just going around in circles. I mean, the last five to ten years you
have so many Latino/a actors making it in Hollywood, but they
keep doing the same things in their work. We see the Jennifer
Lopezes and the Salma Hayeks, but we haven’t seen them go into
anything new or anything that you could call really great film
work. It’s mostly Hollywood’s fault because they don’t know what
the hell to do with anybody Hispanic. That may be part of the
problem of why people aren’t able to create something new for
themselves. I just saw this rock band on the David Letterman
show, I can’t remember their name, but they’re playing music from
1970. These guys couldn’t be any more than twenty years old, but
they were aping rock and roll music from the 1970s, and they were
the new, hot, happening band for kids. . . . But there doesn’t seem
to be an underground anymore, people crawling up from the
bottom to do things differently, because everything becomes
instantly known due largely to the Internet and cable TV.
DPR: What do you think of the label “ethnic writer”? Is it too limiting a term, too restrictive? Or might it be a usefully descriptive way of defining who a writer might be?

GH: It might help if there’s an audience looking for that kind of writer, and it might help the writer get a job because of it—“Oh, he’s an ethnic writer, we need an ethnic writer. This guy might help get people off our backs”—and in a small way, that’s probably a good thing. But I don’t know how that works in the long term with art, if that’s just putting things back into a kind of ghetto. I think it’s an easy handle, but it’s hard to say if it’s actually a restrictive thing.

DPR: You said that you consider yourself a writer for a more general audience, and that’s how you attempt to work. Would you consider yourself an ethnic writer in the field of comics or would you resist that designation?

GH: I feel that’s how I’m looked at, perhaps, but I don’t think of myself that way. I’m just writing stories. I forget that they’re Latino. I write a character with a Hispanic name, but sometimes he looks like a black person, sometime he looks like a blond-haired, blue-eyed guy. That’s the thing about the mix of Latinos around the world. The skin color ranges from the palest to the darkest. So I’m able to have this sort of parallel universe with the mainstream where I can create a world that looks just like the one we live in, but it’s actually made up of Latinos, at least in blood and spirit. I don’t really think about it as an ethnic thing too much. Maybe I should, because the more ethnic I am, the more attention I get.

DPR: When you do write about Hispanic subject matters, have you felt any pressure, either from others or from yourself, about the ways you represent the ethnic community?

GH: Early on I did, and that wasn’t too bad. Once in awhile I’d get someone freaking out and saying, “Hey, this is not me. You’re not doing me.” But I didn’t get too much of it because I made my Palomar work reflect a more general Latino culture. It looks close
to Mexico, but I really just wanted any Latino from anywhere to feel like they belonged there. That’s why I never located it specifically in the real world. It was sort of a parallel universe where anyone could fit. It was a little town in the desert where the desert ends with the ocean, so on the one hand I could have a tropical side to it and on the other side of the town a dry desert atmosphere. It’s all mythical, and I think that readers of all Latino backgrounds could place themselves there.

DPR: When you started, did you get any mail from people telling you that you don’t write them well or that you’re not being true to them?

GH: I got mostly positive feedback. I would get letters from Puerto Ricans, Columbians, people from Cuba, and they would all ask, “How did you know?!” But that’s the trick, to help readers project a part of themselves into it, and that’s why they enjoy it so much, I think. They project. That’s what I did when I was a kid. Because when there are no Latino role models when you’re growing up, which was my situation—at least not in the pop culture that I was pursuing with movies, rock and roll, and comics—you project yourself into it. I did so much of that, eventually it became the norm for me to put that in my comics. I basically changed Cary Grant into a Latino character. That’s all. Just a simple, slight transmogrification to suit the needs of my stories. And it became such a natural thing to do because I thought about it for so long as a kid. I remember when kids from the neighborhood would talk about seeing a movie, and they weren’t sure about the hero who had dark hair and dark skin, they would always speculate that he was Latino. It could have been Robert Evans, we didn’t know. It could have been a Jewish actor. But the kids were so desperate to project themselves onto these heroic characters and role models. That all stayed with me, and that’s why I was going to skip the projecting part and have my characters just be Latino.

DPR: So I guess the way you’ve created the fictional Palomar community leaves it open for others to see themselves in it, so that it does become mythical.
GH: Yeah. I’ve heard a theory somewhere that the more ethnic a piece is, like a film, the more universal it is. And there’s a lot of truth to that. Because I’ve seen some Ingmar Bergman films, Swedish films, where the people were just so down to earth that I thought, if you just change the actors, this could be set in Mexico. I remember seeing certain films that way. They were just as Swedish as you could get, but I still related to them.

DPR: Some critics have called you the William Faulkner of comics, someone who has written his own Yoknapatawpha saga in the creation of Palomar. How do you feel about this, your comic work being compared to this novelistic heavyweight? For that matter, how do you feel about comics being read as serious literature?

GH: As long as it promotes the work to a larger audience, I’m all for it.

DPR: In general, what kind of market do you see there being for “serious” comics that are more ideologically driven and have some kind of social or political message to them? Is there much of a market for that, from your standpoint?

GH: There’s probably not a market, but there are certainly a handful of intelligent readers who are able to absorb it. There’s a cartoonist, Joe Sacco, who is of Maltese descent, and he just loves going to war-torn countries and reporting, then coming home and doing a comic book on it. The hard part is that you have to be a really good cartoonist for this kind of political writing. If the reader doesn’t like the cartooning—doesn’t like the look of the comic, isn’t invited into the book—then it’s going to be a tough sell. To be a reporter like that, to tell the truth, and to deal with really serious issues you’ve got to engage the reader. And part of that is just looking at the work—does the reader want to look at it? Even though my work isn’t overtly political most of the time, I have to make sure that when the reader opens that book, no matter what I’m writing about, they want to read it because it looks nice. It’s a weird thing.
DPR: So you try not to work too many political ideas into your comics? Are you more concerned with the craft, and then if the social message finds its way through there, then that’s fine?

GH: Yes, that’s how I work best. I have looked into doing overtly political stuff, but it’s just not my bag, man. It’s just not my strength. I don’t have a journalistic or reporter’s bone in me. I feel things out more. I’ll respond to certain political issues, but I don’t go after them directly. . . . I have put political views into character’s mouths that I didn’t agree with at all, but I put them into sympathetic characters so that I could give the readers some balance. I will not make black and white characters; they’ll always be grey. So even if I wince when I put what I think is a bad political view into an endearing character, I’ll do it, because that’s the way the world is. At least, that’s how I see it.

DPR: Well, do current political debates find their ways into your work, perhaps even unintentionally? I’m thinking, for instance, of the recent controversy surrounding American immigration policy.

GH: Actually, I’ll confess that if this immigration debate was happening earlier in my career, I probably would have been more susceptible to placing it in my work. But right now, in the stories I’m writing now, I’m just not doing that kind of thing. That’s why I’m wondering, where are the youth? Why aren’t other Latino cartoonists doing this?

DPR: So this is something that they could pick up on.

GH: Yeah, you’re right. They could pick up on this and go forward with it and even do a better job than I could. There was a period in the ’80s when I felt pressured to do everything. Any issue would come up, and my brothers and I were expected to deal with it. It was a lot of pressure, since there were many political issues like that. And some of them we’d pick up, and some of them we’d have to let go, because writing comics is such a slow process. For us, at least. You’re right, that’s a big deal, the immigration thing.
But it hasn’t found its way into my work, just because I’m doing other things.

**DPR:** Many characters in your Palomar stories are very conscious of being inside or outside of certain social circles or contexts. They’re crossing borders every now and again, like the borders between Mexico and the United States, and they are very aware of that. Does the theme of borderlands or border regions—such as social borders, ethnic borders, physical borders, borders between communities—play a part in your work? Do you see it that way?

**GH:** Yes, I think it shows up, even though it’s not necessarily a conscious thing I put in. When it’s there, I see it in terms of human borders. I may describe geographical boundaries, but it’s really about the human borders and what happens to you when you cross those borders. It’s never an intentional effort, but I do see it when I go back and reread my work. It’s there, even though I’m not exactly sure of the point I’m making.

**DPR:** You mentioned earlier that in terms of underground or alternative comics, you don’t see much coming up from “below” now, and you would link that in some ways to the changes in the media. Do you think that there are not as many alternative comics as there were twenty or thirty years ago?

**GH:** There are, but they’re a little different. At the moment we have the sensitivity issue. All of the cartoonists right now who are popular on the alternative scene are very sensitive. They’re talking about their sensitive lives, their sensitive girlfriends, and their sensitivity towards their girlfriends. And this is sort of an offshoot of the autobiographical phase that comics were going through for awhile. At least to my mind. But I don’t see a lot of it, since I’m always working and doing other things.

**DPR:** This is interesting what you say about the “sensitivity issue” of autobiographical comics. Do you find at times that these kinds of comics are too limited in scope, too solipsistic, or perhaps even too self indulgent?
GH: All of the above. That’s not to say the work is not good. It’s just repetitive storytelling. Got a tragic biography or autobiography? Know anybody who has? Just tell it in a graphic novel and get noticed in *Time* magazine, folks!

DPR: So what about issues of technology and comics? Would you consider putting your work up on the Internet on a semi-regular basis?

GH: I would if I could do it my way, if I could just draw it out and someone could scan it and put it up. That would be fine. We always need better ways of getting the work out there, because it’s just a shame that there are probably only six thousand people in the United States who are reading serious comics. So the Internet could help a lot that way. I certainly wouldn’t discount that. I know that there are a lot of online comics that are very popular, but I wouldn’t even know how to log on to those things. I barely know how to work a computer. I’ve seen actual comics drawn on the computer, and they looked a little creepy to me. But maybe I’m just not able to see it. I’ve heard so many generations before me, old guys saying, “I don’t get it. It’s terrible. In my day. . . .” And I might be turning into that without knowing. So I really don’t want to put it down right away, but at first glance comics on computers look pretty artificial.

DPR: Your work was considered the next wave of underground comics in the early 1980s. Would you still consider your work part of the “underground” or alternative scene?

GH: It’s probably stayed there. There was a period in the late-1980s that it was considered as just comics. And this is all we wanted. For me and other cartoonists, these are comics. We’re not “alternative” to be cool, we’re not doing this to be hip in our little niche here. These are just comics. You pick it up, and it’s a comic book. The bad comics are the bad comics, and those are usually the mainstream ones, as far as I’m concerned. That’s how the underground cartoonists of the late ’60s saw it. They didn’t feel they were being underground. They just thought they were doing
comics, and that’s how they wanted their work to be read. Theirs were just comics for an older, more receptive audience.

In the 1980s, though—and I can strut my stuff a little bit here—we actually had the mainstream companies worried for a short period. This was something I was told. Love and Rockets became so popular, at least within the comic book industry, that the mainstream didn’t know how to rival a comic book like that. They didn’t know how to make people love their comics the way these alternative comics were being loved. . . . There was this period when the interest caused by Love and Rockets and other upcoming alternative comics was discussed a lot, and in so many positive ways, and the mainstream companies tried to imitate it but couldn’t do it. They were so pissed off at us that they didn’t even want us to write for them. They would say, “Well, if they came over here, we’d show them how to do comics.” So for a little while I thought that was pretty cool. We didn’t expect to shake up the industry.

DPR: Regarding your work with larger comic books publishers, you’ve done quite a bit of work with Dark Horse and DC Comics. I’m thinking here of the mini-series Girl Crazy and Grip: The Strange World of Men, or more recently with the graphic novel Sloth and the brand new series Speak of the Devil. How did these relationships come about and what kind of differences in your work, including any restrictions, have you noticed regarding this?

GH: I’m fairly well known in our little comics pond, so they often ask me to do something for them, or if I need a job, I’ll go to them. The bigger the company, the more they want to know every little detail of the work you haven’t done for them yet. That’s difficult because few writers know exactly what their work will be until it’s done.

DPR: And what do you feel are the benefits in working with these larger publishers?

GH: More money.
DPR: Let me return to the issue of your audience. Is there a difference between your intended audience for the individual *Love and Rockets* comic books and the longer, more novelistic works that made up *Poison River* and *Love and Rockets X*, or the much longer work collected in *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories*? Or even more recently with *Sloth*?

GH: It turns out that way. My brothers and I resisted trying to grab different parts of the audience. We just thought that our work, whatever we’re doing, would grab everyone. Well, it didn’t happen. So now I’ve just finished up a whole series of *Luba* stories and single issues of other comics that are basically for the fans of those kinds of comics. Whereas with *Love and Rockets* we’re still trying to push it to a larger audience, doing our damnedest to figure out how to get this comic out to Joe Sixpack. What’s great about the collections is that people seem to be more satisfied with the large books right now. So many of those things will sell better. It’s weird. The bigger and more prestigious the format, the more interest there is in it, instead of the other way around with people thinking, “Well, comic books are cheaper. We’ll buy cheap comic books.” No, they go after the multi-volume editions.

DPR: Why do you think that is?

GH: I imagine that a lot of buyers went to art school, and they’re into packaging. There was a period when some of the artists started emphasizing the packaging of their art, and that was a coup, it really worked for them. Also it’s just a nice thing to have on your shelf, you know? It’s a good book; you have it on your shelf, and it looks nice.

DPR: I was thinking of your longer work that came out a few years ago, the collected *Palomar*—speaking of packaging, that’s a very nice volume. Had you always conceived of the Heartbreak Soup stories as eventually becoming a novelistic saga? How do you think collecting all of these pieces in one large volume changed the nature of your work, if at all?
GH: It did help a lot because it reinvigorated my spot in comics. People look at *Palomar* now as the best thing. They tell me, “Wow, I can’t believe you did this. This is great! I read it in three sittings.” I’m thinking, yeah, it took me twenty years to do. But that’s fine if I’m talking to new readers all the time who’ve read it the first time and enjoyed it. That makes me happy because it’s got a little bit of longevity. But it’s old stuff. I was still learning to do comics when I started writing it. Once again, giving kudos to youth culture, youth forges ahead, and however many mistakes they make, they eventually get it right. So however many mistakes I’ve put in my work, as well as the stuff I’m proud of, it all balances out into something I’m pretty pleased with. Like a lot of artists, as I get older I wish I could maintain that quality of work, but that’s not always the case because the world changes every five years. I’m just hoping I can keep it up.

DPR: Do you envision doing more of these longer novelistic collections?

GH: Yeah. In terms of collections, I’ve been doing quite a few because I have a lot of comic book series that are just ending and they can actually make up several collections. But I’m actually looking forward to doing more original pieces that are longer and will fit in a graphic novel, because I think that’s where my strengths are: telling a longer story where I have more room to let the characters live and breathe. Normally I’m editing things down to nothing. I have fourteen pages in each issue of *Love and Rockets*, and I’m usually whittling down twenty-four-page stories into fourteen, or even into ten. I’ve been doing this for so long that I’ve gotten sick of it. So I’ll just be doing short stories in *Love and Rockets* and then longer original ones in short graphic novels. Hopefully, that will work out.

DPR: Back in 2001, after the original *Love and Rocket* series ended, what prompted you and your brothers to bring it back after a five-year hiatus?
GH: One of the reasons—and I’m going to sound like a cynical old fart here—was that it was difficult for readers to find our new work. We had the *Love and Rockets* umbrella title, and it worked so well for us that all the reader had to do was go into the comic store and ask, “Where is the new *Love and Rockets*?” And that was it. That’s where they found our work. Then we got itchy and wanted to do our own comics with different titles, just because it was time. We wanted to stretch our elbows out a little bit. And we did our own comics [*Luba, Penny Century, and New Love*], but for some reason it just didn’t get the same response *Love and Rockets* did. The work was the same—it was still us, with a lot of the same characters we had been using—but people just couldn’t find our comics. Even to this day, I’m signing books for people, and they’re saying, “I never saw this.” This comic book is ten years old, and they’re telling me they never saw it and asking when I did this. We heard this kind of thing so much that we just got tired of it, of doing all this work that wasn’t getting much attention.

DPR: And this led to the resurrection of *Love and Rockets*.

GH: Yeah, we brought *Love and Rockets* back, and then boom, the attention was right back on it. The comic book stores were happy because they could now sell *Love and Rockets* to those readers again, and we were happy because we were able to do shorter pieces at a quicker pace. (We were starting to get slower with the longer page count in the other comics.) But although *Love and Rockets* is back, it looks different. We changed the format from the magazine to comic book size. This was one of the complaints about why the original *Love and Rockets* magazine didn’t sell as well as it could: it didn’t fit into the readers’ comic book boxes. Yeah, you’ve got to consider things like that in the market. It’s ridiculous, but you do. Some readers won’t buy comic books because they won’t fit in their boxes. So we just went down to comic book size, and so many readers were happy. “Great, now I can fit it in with my *Superman* and *Batman* comics.” That’s okay. Just keep buying!
DPR: And you’re back with your brothers on the new volume of *Love and Rockets*. What have you found are the benefits of working with Jaime and Mario? How has this collaboration strengthened your own work, or possibly restricted you?

GH: I haven’t done much collaborating on single pieces with Jaime except for “jam” illustrations. Our work has complemented one another’s when printed in the same book, and I guess sibling rivalry helps to get the stories up to snuff so that one doesn’t lag behind the other. I have worked with Mario, and that lessens the load for me to have to do everything as I normally do. And it’s freed me from stress because I always know I’m doing my own thing next.

DPR: Part of your next thing appears to be the ongoing saga in the current issues of *Love and Rockets*, “Julio’s Day.” This seems to bring you back into “safe” ethnic territory, the kind of writing that you say won you recognition in the early days. Will this be your next longer-form work, like the collected *Heartbreak Soup* stories, where you will assemble the stories into a novelistic whole?

GH: So far, “Julio’s Day” has fallen short of the 100 pages it was slated for, but after some more of it in the next couple of *Love and Rockets* issues, it’ll be collected. These stories are in the Palomar vein, but it was a conscious effort to tell that type of story without the “magic realism” and “thriller” aspects of the earlier work. It’s only about a lonely man’s life, and not adventure.

DPR: In the broadest sense, who are some of the biggest influences when it comes to your art?

GH: I would say that the direct influences, when I put pencil to paper, would first be cartoonists and second would be filmmakers. Both sort of complement each other. Comic books leave out a lot that movies do, and film leaves out a lot that comics do. It’s interesting how Hollywood, with the way that action is told—not in just the superhero movies—has finally caught up with comic books. And not necessarily doing a Spider-Man movie, but just the
way action is done, this very over-the-top cartoony level of films. A popular Hollywood movie now, no matter who’s in it, is like a comic book.

**DPR:** You mention that film is a big influence on your work. I remember that Luba owned a movie theater back in Palomar. And is this one of the reasons why several of your characters such as Pipo, Doralis, and Fritz become involved in filmmaking and television?

**GH:** I suppose. It also gives me the chance to put the characters in “fantastic” situations in the way of visuals, as when they’re in costume and performing in a film. Often the visuals in the post-Palomar stories are static, in accordance to the mundane world. Movies and TV give me the excuse to make it look more fun with the characters.

**DPR:** I’ve noticed that every now and again you like writing about artist figures, such as Humberto in your longer story *Blood of Palomar*, or with characters who appreciate comics as an art form, such as Petra’s daughter Venus. Do you feel that you’re writing more directly about yourself in these characters?

*from Blood of Palomar (36).*
GH: That and making fun of the whole artist’s ego trip thing. With Humberto, his ego got the best of him; with Venus, her lack of confidence, and possibly talent, keeps her from producing anything.

DPR: Are there any individual comic artists who have been of particular influence on you?

GH: Boy, that’s a tough one because there are so many. It’s like putting the Atlantic in a funnel. But right off the top of my head I would say Charles Schultz with Peanuts because he brought an intelligence that was never seen before in comics. And a way to communicate it. That’s an important thing. My biggest desire is to communicate. There were probably more abstract or obscure comics before Peanuts, but they only had small audiences because they were so “artsy,” whereas Schultz just completely and absolutely communicated with us on an intelligent level. So he’s one. Then there’s Robert Crumb, who simply just blew the doors open. He raised the bar so high for comics that we’re still trying to catch up to him. Even though he’s done a lot of indulgent stuff, when he’s on, he’s on. And he’s been doing it since the ’60s. These are people who are natural talents. You cannot learn to become these people. They are who they are. We’re lucky to have had them in comics instead of somewhere else, like writing or painting. And the third would be the greatest mainstream artist to me, Jack Kirby, who was a superhero artist. He’s basically the reason superheroes are justified in comic books. They are completely inane creations, ridiculous versions of the Greek myths. But he was able to bring such vitality, imagination, and fun to this concept and make it worth our time. I mean, I enjoyed the superhero comics as a kid, and Jack Kirby made it something that has never been matched. When it comes to all these influences, all my heroes, I’m thinking that they’re patting me on the back saying, “Go for it, kid!” At least that’s how I feel. Most importantly, though, is that I’m putting my life into it. This is what interests me, this is what I think looks good or bad. And I’ve been doing it for so long that I’m very spoiled, so when I have to do a job that doesn’t require me putting myself into it so much that way, it’s very difficult.
DPR: Earlier you said something about Hollywood giving a more cartoony look to its movies. I was curious to see what your thoughts are about the cross-fertilization between comic art and other mediums. Between, say, comics and film or even between traditional novels and film. I found it strange, in a good way, that we had a new comic book called *The Escapist* that was spawned from Michael Chabon's prize-winning novel. What are your thoughts on this?

GH: Well, I think about it mostly in terms of the artists themselves. *Now* maybe the artist can make some money because comics is an industry where artists, with few exceptions, never made any money. I've heard that since the beginning of comics, with the horrible Superman story where the young boys who created it, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, were basically shut out of the comic's success and had to be compensated for it years later. That's one horror story. I always think about the artists themselves. If somebody loves comics and can write about them in other media, then I say more power to them. But I don't know how that works in the larger scheme of things, as far as it's improving pop culture.

DPR: Has anyone ever come to you about, or have you even considered, taking your characters from the comics into other media such as film, or even a novelization?

GH: For me, a film version of my work would be very important, because basically I have fifty-seven characters in the Palomar stories, and that means fifty-seven Latino actors will be working. That's very important to me. People are always asking me when I'm going to do the animated *Palomar*. I'm not that crazy about animation—I don't dislike it, but I'm not crazy about it. A live-action *Palomar* would make me so happy because it would take what I did with the Heartbreak Soup stories, humanizing Latinos and giving them a face, and bring that to an international film audience—that is, if I could control it and make it good.
DPR: I see the Palomar stories as making a great film. Of course, you’d have to use only a small portion of it, but any part of it could be put to film quite easily.

GH: I think so too. There’s enough material there to make a nice little movie, and if it’s faithful to how the characters are—I understand you have to change a lot of things to make a film—and that’s maintained in the film, then I couldn’t be happier.

DPR: And who would you get to play Luba? Can you imagine the casting call for that roll?

GH: Oh boy, that would be interesting. I could imagine the horror you’d see, too. But maybe you’d see a courageous young woman who could act the part. That’s another thing I wanted to bring up, the one critical obstacle that I’ve encountered in my work: it’s too sexually driven. And at times, I think that’s hurt me along the way. I feel my work hasn’t found a larger audience because of the sexual content. I think that turned off a lot of readers or potential readers.

DPR: That’s interesting, because earlier I had asked if there was any reaction to your representation of Latinos, and I was approaching it from the ethnic angle. I wasn’t referring to the potential gender problems that might have come up. You have had some resistance there in the way you represent women?

GH: Yeah. But not early on, because I was being a little more generous with different types of people. The Palomar stories are all about different looking people. In recent years I’ve been focusing on the more attractive ones—at least, attractive to me—and it turns out that a part of it was Luba’s family. Well, when you have women genetically predisposed in terms of certain body parts, it’s going to be emphasized in these stories. And it turned out to be a little too much for some readers. They felt the stories didn’t progress because I was obsessed with these characters. I’m going to be doing less of that now just because I’m focusing on a different audience. That criticism hurt, after awhile. I think readers could
accept Luba in the early stories because she was just sort of around, but when the stories started to emphasize her and her family, then people started to back off a little bit.

**DPR:** You say that some readers have been a bit turned off by the sex and large-breasted women. Yet at the same time you are someone, along with your brother Jaime, who has been lauded as a writer who is more sensitive to women's issues and who writes with a more realistic sense of gender politics. How do you think these two divergent attitudes are related?

**GH:** Well, I think it's difficult for some folks to accept a pretty, busty woman as one of them, and sex seems to make everybody nervous still in this day and age. I'm a weirdo because I think of all things being equal regarding those two subjects. It's my job to humanize those normal things—at least, normal to me—to the reader.

**DPR:** You've recently come back to your original Palomar characters and setting with the new comic for Fantagraphics's Ignatz series, *New Tales of Old Palomar*. What caused you to turn back the clock, so to speak, and revisit these stories set south of the US border?

**GH:** Money. All right, all right; I was asked to do this for the new Ignatz series. Also it was a chance to see if there was a larger audience for these stories after the big *Palomar* collection. It's hard to tell if there is or not, but there won't be any more new Palomar stories after the third issue of *New Tales*. I think I've finally outgrown the place.

**DPR:** With this latest issue of *Love and Rockets*, number twenty, you seem to be saying goodbye to the post-Palomar stories of Luba's family. Are you planning on ending these stories, at least for now, and focusing on other things?
GH: The only character I’ll be focusing on in the next year or so will be Fritz, Luba’s younger sister and B-movie queen. And maybe her lover Pipo here and there. Pipo was my first “heart throb” character in the first Palomar story. Her story begins pages before Luba’s does, but she’s generally thought of as a newer character. Professionally, Pipo is my first and longest lasting of all my heroines! She’s rarely looked at that way. And oddly enough, Fritz was the first female hero I created when I began to do comics seriously. I didn’t get a chance to use her until Birdland, but I like her because she’s my most flawed character despite her good fortune in life. I’ll be writing and illustrating her films as graphic novels for the next ten years.

DPR: You just mentioned something about writing or “translating” Fritz’s movies as graphic novels. Is this what you’re doing in the new Speak of the Devil mini-series and in your brand new book, Chance in Hell? This is a very postmodern move, something like a
metatext where one graphic narrative comments on the function of comics in general. Maybe even pointing out the “cinematic" quality of your comics. Is this something you originally planned to do when you made Fritz a B-movie star?

GH: I'd been wanting to do original graphic novels for years, but couldn’t find a story I was excited about telling. In the Love and Rockets comics I had been developing my Fritz character to be a B-movie actress, and I wanted to show parts of her films in the comic books. But as I began working on them, they got longer and longer, and I decided to do a couple of them as full-fledged graphic novels. Problem solved! Now, ideas for graphic novels would be applied to the Fritz “films” and vice versa. The books work as extended Fritz stories for fans of the character, but for the most part, they stand alone as new stories for readers interested in graphic novels.

DPR: You say that you’re wanting to move on with your writing. What kind of direction is your work taking now?

GH: I have just finished writing the adventures of Luba and her family living in America. Now, in Love and Rockets, I think I’m going to emphasize more the experimental side of doing comics. I’m pretty schizo about that. I’ll do the naturalistic stuff in the Luba stories, then I have this abstract, wacky part of me I like to indulge. And I have a fan base for that too, for just doing visually abstract and wild stories. The only trouble with that is that in doing this, I lose my ethnicity, I lose what I grabbed with the Palomar stories. I don’t have that with the abstract stories. As long as I’m doing a fairly representational imagery of Latinos, there’s serious attention to my work. If I back off of that a little bit, there seems to be less interest. But the chance to return to Palomar in the New Tales and do classic-style Heartbreak Soup stories was another opportunity to be more “ethnic.”

DPR: This brings us back to where we started, your desires as an artist and your perceived responsibilities as a Hispanic author.
GH: There are certain expectations of my work and things people really need from me. I hate to toot my own horn this way, but if I’m not going to do it, nobody else is. And that’s what I tell every young aspiring cartoonist who wants to do ethnic comics. I’ve got black kids coming up to me and saying, “I want to do comics like you.” But that’s not how it should be. I tell them, “Just write comics about you. Do it about your family. Do it about people like you. If you’re not going to do it, nobody else will.” And that kind of shakes them up. I know of ethnic cartoonists who don’t do the ethnic thing because they don’t want to be typecast. But I ask, typecast what? This is not Hollywood, this is comics! You can do anything you want to do! There’s nobody over your shoulder telling you what you can or can’t do in comics. It’s one of the last bastions of freedom in visual art. Basically, Jaime and I do what we do in our comics because nobody can tell us not to. Boy, but when I go over to the mainstream for a job . . . whew, all they do is tell you what to do, let me tell you.

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