Review of Recent Books from Gilbert Hernandez

By Derek Parker Royal


_Marble Season_. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013. 127 pp. $21.95

1 Over the past eight years, and roughly from the point that he and his brothers were wrapping up the second series of _Love & Rockets_ (running from 2001-2007), Gilbert Hernandez has demonstrated a seemingly unflagging ability to generate new narratives. In addition to the volumes of _Love & Rockets: New Stories_ that have appeared annually since 2008, he has published over eleven books or completed series (some of which were previously published in periodical form), including _Chance in Hell_ (2007); _Speak of the Devil_ (2008); _The Troublemakers_ (2009); _High Soft Lisp_ (2010); _Love from the Shadows_ (2011); _Yeah!,_ with Peter Bagge (2011); _Citizen Rex,_ with his brother Mario (2011); and the recent four-issue miniseries, _Fatima: The Blood Spinners_ (June-September 2012). Indeed, his output appears to be growing exponentially, with three new works published since fall of 2012—_The Adventures of Venus_ (2012), _Julio's Day_ (2012), and _Marble Season_ (2012), the subjects of this review—and the promise of at least two other books by the end of 2013: _The Children of Palomar_ (originally appearing in the three-issue series _New Tales from Old Palomar, 2006-2007_) and _Maria M., Book One_. To call Gilbert Hernandez one of alternative or indie comic's most prolific creators is, without question, an understatement.

2 What is most striking about his most recent books is their return, in many ways, to a milieu that best defined his early career: the kind of characters and settings associated with the Palomar stories. Hernandez said in a 2007 interview that after the publication of _New Tales from Old Palomar #3_, he would be through with his mythical Central American community—"[T]here won't be any more new Palomar stories. … I think I've finally outgrown the place" ("Beyond Palomar" 242)—and much of his subsequent work has born this out. His contributions to the brothers' annual _New Stories_ have been much more experimental and less realistic—or as some would describe it, less magical realist—than his classic Palomar comics, and most of the books he has published on his own have been genre-bending and/or futuristic, far from the setting inhabited by Chelo, Tonantzín, Heraclio, Pipo, and of course Luba (although Fritzi, Luba's half-sister, has been the pseudo protagonist of many of these narratives). But with his three most recent publications, Hernandez revisits Palomar, if not directly, then by proxy through figures connected to Palomar, such as Luba's family, or in narratives that bear the markings of a Palomar-like world.
The Adventures of Venus is one such example. It is a welcome addition to Gilbert Hernandez's oeuvre, in that the entire volume focuses on one of the notable characters within the younger generation of the Palomar universe, and in this sense, the book is a long time in coming. Venus is the precocious daughter of Petra, one of Luba's half-sisters, and both mother and daughter make their first appearances in the final issues of Love & Rockets, first series (1982-1996). Venus is introduced in the story "Chelo's Burden," interestingly enough Gilbert's final contribution to the original Love & Rockets series, and in that piece she appears a little older than she does in the recent Adventures stories, a minor figure who functions more as an outside observer and a familial link to the United States. This more mature representation may be due to the somber nature of "Chelo's Burden," where the town of Palomar is recovering from a devastating earthquake that brings with it a military presence as well as the execution of looters and riot-like conditions. (An even older Venus is presented in the final issue of Love & Rockets, second series.) The Venus we see in Adventures is younger in both appearance and spirit, and it is this character we see in the pages of the short-lived series, Measles, an all-age comic anthology edited by Gilbert and running for eight issues (1998-2001).

In fact, with the exception of the book's first story, The Adventures of Venus reprints Gilbert's stories that originally appeared in Measles, almost his entire Venus output in that series. There are two Venus stories that were originally published in Measles but that did not make their way into the recent collection. At least one of those has been collected elsewhere, but one wonders why Hernandez chose not to include these in Adventure. This is especially the case with the "New Adventures of Venus" story that appeared in issue #1 of Measles, where her youthful character, her love of comics, and her penchant for adventure are first introduced and set the stage for the Venus we have come to know. Yet even without the addition of this early story, The Adventures of Venus presents a fully rounded and intriguing figure whose antics can be enjoyed by both younger and older readers.

The brand new story in the collection, "The World of Venus," serves as an introduction to the book's eponymous character and sets the tone in ways that the Measles #1 story could have performed. In this brief episodic narrative, we see Venus engaged in a variety of activities that best define her: playing soccer, visiting a comic book shop, and grappling with her feelings for her best friend, Yosh. This new story also reflects the more fanciful or surrealistic side of Hernandez. Here, and in an otherwise straightforward tale, Venus encounters the Blooter Baby, a specter-like presence with a love of figs who only appears to child-less females, and then the official Blooter Baby wrangler who subsequently captures the kid to save it from itself: "The Blooter Baby's sad cravings for affection always backfires on it, y'know?" (Adventures 27). Hernandez is quick to undercut this fantastical turn, and in a self-reflexive or metafictional manner, having Venus bring this encounter back into perspective by stating, "Aw, all this was all so fake. … All fake. But so exciting!" (28). This tenuous balance between the real and the imaginary is sustained throughout the rest of Adventures, and it is a feature of the Venus stories that brings to mind similarly positioned Love & Rockets characters, such as Fritzi (Luba's other half-sister) and her cinematic exploits as well as Jaime Hernandez's Penny Century. The final story in the collection, a reprint from Measles #8, finds Venus in an even more nonsensical—yet highly intertextual—environ. Wandering from her room one morning, she sees Henderson (a reference to Fantagraphics artist Sam Henderson) embedded in a tree, (Jim) Woodring melting on the pavement, (Steven) Weissman selling cupcakes, (Joost) Swarte shouting from a low-flying plane, (Johnny) Ryan endlessly changing television channels, (Rick) Altergott having his studio vandalized, (Lewis) Trondheim policing the crime, (Eric) Reynolds signing up people to vote, (Ariel) Bordeux selling tacos, (Peter) Bagge with spider-like arms, (Gary) Groth and (Kim) Thompson repairing a fax machine, and the two Hernandez brothers nowhere to be found. These are all references to the artists who contributed to the eight Measles issues, or in the case of Groth, Reynolds, and Thompson, editors who worked on the title. As the stories in Adventures clearly demonstrate, Venus is a narrative space where Hernandez firmly establishes his links to the socially engaged world of Palomar while at the same time indulging in his love for the kind of free-form, experimental writing found in his very first Love & Rockets story, "BEM."
Julio's Day is another book comprised of previously published work. The story was originally serialized in the second series of Love & Rockets (2001-2007), appearing in every issue except for #15 and #16. The subject of Julio's Day is almost out of Palomar, a rural community (although this one apparently in the Southwestern U.S.) of interlocking characters, the primary focus of which is Julio. We see him from birth to death, a life spanning the entire twentieth century—he is born in 1900, dies in 2000—but one that in many ways is divorced from its major wars, cultural markers, and catastrophes. (Many of the lives of those surrounding him, however, are directly affected by these events.) In this way, Julio functions as touchstone by which to measure the century's progress. This stasis is underscored by the circularity of his existence. The book opens with a page of four long panels that begin in black and then visually pull back to reveal the open mouth of the crying newborn being held by his mother in bed. It closes with a similar page layout, but one that inverts this progression, four long panels starting with his mother (now well over 100 years old) holding him in bed and then visually closing into the dying Julio's open mouth, ending with a single black panel.

All of the original serialized segments are collected, but Hernandez adds a number of new pages to Julio's Day, substantively fleshing out his narrative and making it more fitting of the designation "graphic novel." The most significant additions involve Julio's father, his Uncle Juan, and his great-great-nephew, Julio Juan. The expanded narrative of Julio's father (Julio's Day 17-31) not only helps to better explain the death of Julio's brother, Benjamin, but it also more fully underscores a number of themes found in the text, e.g., the cyclical nature of life and the problematic nature of inheritance. Uncle Juan and Julio Juan—both of whose names suggest an interlinking chain with the protagonist—receive similar enhanced treatment. What is most notable about these characters is that both deviate from the community's sexual norms, ultimately occupying (and ironically so) a position diametrically opposed to the other. His traditional family relations cloak Uncle Juan's unsettling proclivities—child molestation—yet it is these very relations that end up nurturing his abusive actions, resulting in his "outing" as a pedophile. Julio Juan's behavior, on the other hand, is defined as "weird" (81) early on because of his standoffish attitudes around girls. Yet his decision to give into his homosexual desires ultimately leads to a successful relationship and a fulfilling life, one of the few such examples in the narrative. These two characters, and their sexual positioning, are significant in that Julio's own desires are ambiguous, and one is never sure how to read him. It is largely through this new material, not available in the original serialization, that Hernandez is able to explore fully the nuances of these characters within the larger tapestry of Julio's life.

Other new pages included in Julio's Day provide atmospheric transitions between scenes (16, 36, 91), enhanced character motivations (8, 34, 56), and more fully realized death scenes (41, 66, 68, 85), making it a more novelistic and interconnected narrative than the serialized original. Indeed, in this new edition the author found it necessary to add a cast of characters, an entire page devoted to images of the characters in the book, so that readers could better keep track of the multi-leveled action. This is similar to the "score card" approach he used in Human Diastrophism, another epic narrative with a cast of many. Thus, Julio's Day not only recalls Hernandez's earlier tales though its setting and character types, but also possesses a narrative sweep reminiscent of the Palomar saga.

Gilbert Hernandez's most recent book, Marble Season, although standing apart from the world of Palomar, nonetheless gives us a similar kind of community, complete with interconnected lives and unresolved relationships that reflect a more realistic tone. According to its publisher, Drawn & Quarterly, and as stated on the back cover, this is Hernandez's first semi-autobiographical work. One wonders, though, if the "delicately intertwin[ed] moments of childhood trauma and … goofy logic" (as described by Corey K. Creekmur in the book's afterword) that make up Marble Season share the same origins as do the younger days of Pipo, Vicente, and Toco growing up in Palomar, or the whimsical meanderings of Venus in her narratives. In this sense, "semi-autobiographical" becomes quite relative, leading one to wonder if in fact she or he had not been catching glimpses into Gilbert's life all along. (At
At the center of this book is Huey, the middle child of three, much as Gilbert stands as the middle member of the *Love & Rockets* team, along with the older Mario and the younger Jaime (although Gilbert actually has more than just two siblings). As in *The Adventures of Venus*, the action in *Marble Season* is episodic, with Huey moving casually from one encounter to another: reading comics, shooting marbles, playing with his G. I. Joe, avoiding bullies, playing army with his friends, and trying to make sense out of his weird and erratic new neighbors (perhaps one of the highlights of the book). Huey's activities are deeply embedded in the era in which Gilbert himself grew up, the early 1960s, and many of the textual references are steeped in the popular culture of the time. A neighbor teases Huey about his love of Superman, pointing out (incorrectly) that his hero (George Reeves) died jumping out of a window. Huey tries to create a play based on Captain America, complete with his own homemade shield. He sees teenage girls walking down the street, listening to "The Beatos" singing "She Loves You" from their transistor radios. He wants to join a secret boys-only club called "It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World Club." Jerry Lewis is one of his favorite comedians. He collects *Mars Attacks!* and Marvel superhero trading cards. And Huey also reads *Creepy* comics, likening them to *Mad* magazine, "except serious and scary. And bloody" (93). These cultural markers are what help give the book that semi-autobiographical tone, and they function as empathic narrative devices between Hernandez and his audience. Readers around Gilbert's age will certainly recognize the references and feel grounding in his fiction, while younger ones will feel compelled to look up the allusions and become more enmeshed in the narrative by doing so.

At the same time, *Marble Season* provides a larger canvas than the simple world of Huey, including the decisions and dilemmas faced by the children who populate the neighborhood. (And as in Charles Shultz's *Peanuts*, one of Hernandez's influences, adults in this narrative world are nowhere to be seen.) This is what gives the graphic novel a more mature and even cinematic feel, taking in the social world surrounding Huey and making *Marble Season* more than just an innocent story of youth. We see, in addition to the counters of Huey, the predicaments facing his older brother, Junior, as he negotiates masculine rivalries and relationships with young girls. And there are similar undercurrents running throughout the text, such as the shifting gender expectations facing Lana, a tomboy about Junior's age, as well as those of Elvin, a burly and athletic-looking adolescent who decides not to play football, as his parents expect him to, but instead wants to become a chef. Unlike the identities forged in *Julio's Day*, and especially those found in the earlier Palomar narratives, sexual awareness or performance never rises to the surface in *Marble Season*. Instead, and as one might expect in a tale surrounding youth and adolescence, sexuality simmers just below the surface and has not yet cracked the mantle of typical middle-class childhood concerns, e.g., what comics to read, what games to play, and what kids to befriend. In this way, *Marble Season* can be read as a semi-bildungsroman, giving us through Huey a truncated portrait of the (future?) artist.

All of these recent works by Gilbert call to mind the kind of narratives found in his original Palomar stores, where youthful and carefree adventures overlapped with the many problems and hardships—some of which may eventually evolve into dark directions—characterizing the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The stories of Venus, Julio, and Huey represent a side to Hernandez that may have lain dormant over the past several years, but has never gone away. They contrast sharply with the surreal, violent, and heavily sexualized narrative worlds found in many of Gilbert's *Love & Rockets: New Stories* contributions or his original graphic novels based on the acting career of Fritz, such as *The Troublemakers* and *Love from the Shadows*. Last year marked the thirtieth anniversary of *Love & Rockets*, and the Hernandez brothers' publisher, Fantagraphics, has spent the better part of 2012-2013 building up to this milestone (with plans to publish critical retrospectives on the brothers' work in late 2013 and early 2014). In marking such an occasion, it is important to note the multifaceted nature of Gilbert Hernandez's work and his abilities to shift and effectively manipulate different narrative tones.
The publications of these three latest books should remind us of this mastery.

Works Cited


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