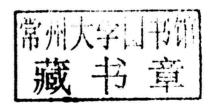
Contemporary Literary Criticism

**CLC** 378

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

Lawrence J. Trudeau EDITOR



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# Contemporary Literary Criticism

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#### **Preface**

amed "one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years" by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 3,000 authors from 91 countries now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Before the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially necessary to today's reader.

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CLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors of the twenty-first century. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 covered authors who died after December 31, 1959. Since January 2000, the series has covered authors who are living or who died after December 31, 1999; those who died between 1959 and 2000 are now included in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. There is minimal duplication of content between series.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science-fiction writers, literary and social critics, world authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

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- The Introduction contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

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## Mario Hernandez 1953-Gilbert Hernandez 1957-Jaime Hernandez 1959-

(Also known as the Hernandez Brothers and Los Bros Hernandez) American cartoonists and graphic novelists.

#### INTRODUCTION

Often considered the progenitors of a new wave of comics that is more literary and complex than mainstream superhero tales, brothers Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime Hernandez began creating their signature work, Love and Rockets, in 1981. The comic was striking for its presentation of culturally diverse modern life in southern California. Gilbert and Jaime, to whom the phrase "the Hernandez Brothers" most often refers, released new Love and Rockets comics regularly until 1996; they resumed the project in 2001, initially with Mario; in 2008, they began publishing a trade paperback series, Love and Rockets: New Stories. Gilbert and Jaime contribute independently to Love and Rockets and take turns creating the front and back covers. The brothers tend to populate their own individual comic universes with strong women, people of color, and themes and situations that address key social issues of their time. The characters of both brothers' works are often shared and utilized in stories that make up larger narratives, which creates a sense of cohesion for the series as a whole. The Hernandez Brothers were almost immediately recognized by their peers and comics scholars as innovators in the comics field. Critics have praised their richly detailed characters and settings and discussed their work from a variety of viewpoints, most often focusing on the sociopolitical elements and innovative use of the comic-book form.

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

Mario was born in 1953, Gilbert in 1957, and Jaime in 1959. They were raised in Oxnard, California, an agricultural town near Los Angeles. Following the death of their father, a native of Chihuahua, Mexico, Gilbert, Jaime, Mario, and their siblings were raised by their mother and maternal grandmother. Like their artistic mother, the brothers were enamored of comic books from an early age,

reading voraciously and often drawing together. Stan Lee's, Jack Kirby's, and Steve Ditko's Marvel comics particularly fired their imaginations. When Mario introduced his younger brothers to works such as R. Crumb's Zap Comix (1968-2005), they were impressed by the narrative possibilities found in "underground comix," as the counterculture art form was called. In contrast with mainstream comics, underground comix diverged from action-based superhero or fantasy stories into sex, drugs, rock and roll, and tales of everyday life. The brothers soon embraced the form in their works, and some critics have claimed that they created the first true alternative comic. Evolving from the underground comix, the brothers wrote comics for adult audiences that portrayed their own experiences and interests.

The brothers were also heavily influenced by their love of music, particularly rock and roll and punk. Some of their earliest work includes fliers and album covers for bands. They have attributed their entrance into the comics world to punk, noting that the punk attitude helped give them the motivation to publish their early work. The reverberations of punk music can also be felt in the content of their created worlds: the interplay of the punk scene and culturally diverse geographical settings is one of the most frequently discussed elements of their comics. Just as their art has been shaped by music, the music world has felt the impact of the brothers' work: former members of the punk band Bauhaus formed a new group in 1985, which they called Love and Rockets.

The three siblings worked together in the 1980s on early issues of *Love and Rockets* and *Mister X*, which first appeared in 1984, though Mario contributed sporadically. Both Gilbert and Jaime have received several Harvey Awards for comic excellence, which are named for famed comic-book writer and artist Harvey Kurtzman. Gilbert has received a United States Artists Literature Fellowship (2009), the PEN Graphic Literature Award for Outstanding Body of Work (2013), and a Will Eisner Comic Industry Award for Best Short Story (2014). Jaime also received an Eisner Award in 2014 for Best Writer/Artist, and he won the Ignatz Award for Outstanding Artist in 2012.

#### **MAJOR WORKS**

The Hernandez Brothers are primarily known for *Love and Rockets*, but the prolific siblings have worked on a variety of projects, some of which, including Gilbert's erotic *Birdland* (1990-94), have revisited story lines and characters from *Love and Rockets*. Both Jaime and Gilbert have published some of the tales originally featured in *Love and Rockets* as stand-alone volumes. Chief among them are Gilbert's *Heartbreak Soup* (1987) and *Poison River* (1994) and Jaime's *Locas* (2004).

One of the most frequently discussed story lines to come from *Love and Rockets* is Jaime's *Locas*, which follows the characters of Margarita Luisa Chascarrillo, better known as Maggie, and Esperanza Leticia Glass, more often called Hopey, through the vicissitudes of love, friendship, and life over several decades in the fictional town of Hoppers. Jaime often ages his characters naturally, moving them away from punk lifestyles and altering their youthful visages over the years. He does so notably in *Wigwam Bam* (1994), a collection that traces Maggie's path away from the life depicted in the early *Locas* stories. He follows Hopey's experiences as she transitions from punk to kindergarten teacher in *The Education of Hopey Glass* (2008).

Gilbert's work is sometimes considered to be darker and more political than Jaime's. It frequently deals with murder, psychosis, drugs, and despair. The epic and experimental *Poison River*, for example, chronicles the life of a woman named Luba from her childhood through her marriage to her mother's ex-lover and her escape to the fictional Latin American city of Palomar. Although published in earlier issues of *Love and Rockets*, the stories that make up *Heartbreak Soup* pick up where *Poison River* leaves off but expand to other locations in California and Latin America. *Heartbreak Soup* also includes a broad community, in contrast to *Poison River*'s concentration on a single individual.

Gilbert has been more active than Jaime outside of *Love* and *Rockets*. His projects include *Fear of Comics* (2000), a volume that collects tales about a ghost searching for her dead children; *Yeah!* (1999-2000), a comic he created with cartoonist Peter Bagge featuring an all-girl band popular throughout the galaxies; *Chance in Hell* (2007), a dystopian comic that records the destruction and despair resulting from unmet human needs; and *Julio's Day* (2013), the comic portrayal of one man's entire life and its challenges, travails, and joys. Gilbert's use of magical realism, a form that combines fantastic elements with everyday life, has resulted in frequent comparisons to the works of Nobel Prize-winning writer Gabriel García Márquez.

#### CRITICAL RECEPTION

When the Hernandez Brothers sent the first issue of *Love* and *Rockets* to the *Comics Journal* hoping for a review, editor and founder Gary Groth offered to publish their work

through his newly formed publishing house, Fantagraphics Books. From their first foray into the comics scene, the Hernandez Brothers have been warmly received and even credited with the revitalization of the comics genre. According to Charles Hatfield (2005), in the time between its genesis in 1981 and its division into separate projects, Love and Rockets "broke new ground for comics in terms of both content and form" and "fused underground and mainstream traditions, in the process reaching new audiences for whom such distinctions were moot." As Douglas Wolk (2007) observed, each brother offers a distinctive style and voice in his contributions to the series. Jaime's "sense of line and composition is exquisite, and he draws extraordinarily pretty people," Wolk contended. However, he found that Gilbert's comics "look like the work of an iconoclast—he's got a rough, wobbly line and a pervasive interest in grotesquerie, [and] he highlights the wrinkles and flaws in everything he draws." In his 1995 interview with the Hernandez Brothers, Neil Gaiman noted that they treat dialog in different ways: whereas Gilbert is "almost transcribing how the sounds sounded," Jaime's approach is more straightforward, offering clear and direct conversations among his characters.

Jaime especially has drawn praise for the variety of body types he draws and his depictions of desire, sex, and romantic relationships that deviate from traditional narratives. Esther Saxey (2006; see Further Reading) identified Jaime's unbounded and unconventional use of romance in *Love and Rockets* as the primary reason that the comics were banned in South Africa. Saxey noted that Jaime not only avoids more mainstream notions of romance but also often refuses to provide narrative closure, giving readers "permission to elaborate their own interpretations" while also showing "the negative fallout of the romance myth." With its more realistic approach to sexual and romantic relationships, Saxey suggested, *Love and Rockets* provides a space for readers to explore different narrative strategies for understanding love, desire, and fulfillment.

The brothers have frequently been cited for bringing a broad and realistic perspective to independent comics. Furthermore, they have been lauded for how their work diverges from stereotypical portrayals of characters. Both regularly depict diverse populations in US and Central American settings. Frederick Luis Aldama (2006; see Further Reading) declared that the "stories at once complicate and simplify the everyday experiences of multiethnic and multigenerational Americans and continue to be hugely inspirational for other Latino/a and Chicano/a comic-book artists." In an interview with Gilbert, Derek Parker Royal (2006-07) commented that the brothers were "the first writers to give a real voice to the Hispanic community in comics."

The Hernandez Brothers' work is seen as creative, innovative, and politically aware. It is often described as having changed the wider world as well as the landscape of comics. Hatfield postulated that Gilbert's *Heartbreak Soup* "seems nothing less than a profound meditation on the

social responsibility and political efficacy of comics." Hatfield insisted further that Poison River epitomizes "the political implications of comics." F. Vance Neill (2013) maintained that central to Gilbert's politics is an "overarching message" advocating "a magical, phenomenological vision of reality and the values of *la familia*, integrity, acceptance of identity, the normalcy of the supernatural, and the sanctity of secrets" that values the community over the individual. Gilbert, however, disagreed with those who have read deeply into the politics of his comics, telling Royal that he considered being overtly political in his writing and visual art but prefers to create a nuanced world in which each of his characters possesses an eclectic range of opinions and values. He elaborated: "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."

Katherine E. Bishop

#### PRINCIPAL WORKS

#### **Hernandez Brothers**

- \*Love and Rockets. Port Hueneme: The Authors, 1981. (Comics)
- †Love and Rockets. Vol. 1. 50 issues. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1982-96. (Comics)
- Mister X. 4 issues. Toronto: Vortex, 1984. (Comics)
- The Complete Love and Rockets. 24 vols. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1985-2008. (Comics)
- The Return of Mister X. With Dean Motter. New York: Warner, 1987. (Comics)
- *Love and Rockets.* Vol. 2. 20 issues. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001-07. (Comics)
- Amor y cohetes: A Love and Rockets Book. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2008. (Comics)
- Love and Rockets: New Stories. 7 vols. to date. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2008-. (Comics)

#### **Gilbert Hernandez**

- Heartbreak Soup. Westlake Village: Fantagraphics, 1987. (Comics)
- The Reticent Heart and Other Stories. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1988. (Comics)
- *Birdland.* 3 issues. Seattle: Eros and Fantagraphics, 1990-91. (Comics)
- Birdland. Vol. 2. Seattle: Eros and Fantagraphics, 1994. (Comics)
- Poison River. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1994. (Comics)
- Blood of Palomar. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1996. (Comics)

- *Girl Crazy.* 3 issues. Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 1996. (Comics)
- New Love. 6 issues. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1996-97. (Comics)
- *Measles.* Et al. 8 issues. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1998-2001. (Comics)
- Yeah! With Peter Bagge. 9 issues. New York: DC Comics, 1999-2000. (Comics)
- Fear of Comics. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2000. (Comics)
- Luba's Comics and Stories. 8 issues. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2000-06. (Comics)
- Luba in America. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001. (Comics)
- Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003. (Comics)
- Luba: The Book of Ofelia. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2006. (Comics)
- Luba: Three Daughters. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2006. (Comics)
- Sloth. New York: Vertigo, 2006. (Comics)
- Chance in Hell. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2007. (Comics)
- Human Diastrophism. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2007. (Comics)
- Speak of the Devil. 6 issues. Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2007-08. (Comics)
- Citizen Rex. With Mario Hernandez. 6 issues. Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2009. (Comics)
- Fatima: The Blood Spinners. 4 issues. Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2009. (Comics)
- Luba. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009. (Comics)
- *The Troublemakers*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009. (Comics)
- Love from the Shadows. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2011. (Comics)
- The Adventures of Venus. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012. (Comics)
- The Children of Palomar. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2013. (Comics)
- Julio's Day. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2013. (Comics)
- Marble Season. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2013. (Comics)

#### Jaime Hernandez

The Lost Women and Other Stories. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1988. (Comics)

The Death of Speedy. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1989. (Comics)

Flies on the Ceiling. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1991. (Comics)

Wigwam Bam. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1994. (Comics)

Chester Square. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1996. (Comics)

Whoa Nellie! 3 issues. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1996. (Comics)

Maggie and Hopey Color Fun. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1997. (Comics)

Penny Century. 7 issues. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1997-2000. (Comics)

Locas in Love. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2000. (Comics)

Locas: The Maggie and Hopey Stories; a Love and Rockets Book. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004. (Comics)

Ghost of Hoppers. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2005. (Comics)

The Girl from H.O.P.P.E.R.S. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2007. (Comics)

Maggie the Mechanic. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2007. (Comics)

Perla La Loca. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2007. (Comics)

The Education of Hopey Glass. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2008. (Comics)

Locas II: Maggie, Hopey and Ray. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009. (Comics)

Esperanza. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2011. (Comics)

God and Science: Return of the Ti-Girls. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012. (Comics)

\*Reprinted by Fantagraphics as issue 1 of Volume 1 of Love and Rockets.

†Issue 1 includes "How to Kill a ..." and issue 9 includes "Frida."

#### **CRITICISM**

#### Gilbert Hernandez, Jaime Hernandez, and Neil Gaiman (interview date 1995)

SOURCE: Hernandez, Gilbert, and Jaime Hernandez. "The Hernandez Brothers." Interview by Neil Gaiman. *Comics Journal* 178 (1995): 91-123. Print.

[In the following interview, the Hernandez Brothers talk with fellow author Gaiman about the popular reaction to their work, the differences in reception between their fans in the United States and the rest of the world, and the evolution of the Love and Rockets comics.]

It was Oscar season in Hollywood, the weirdest of times in the weirdest of cities. The hotel in which I was staying had become the hotel of choice of a number of minor English celebrities, out there for the awards, which meant that while I sat in the hotel courtyard with Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, having lunch mid-interview, our floor show was what appeared to be the final sad disintegration of the marriage of a minor British pop star and his minor British television personality wife, at the table next door. I was there because Gary Groth had called me several months before and asked me if I'd be interested in interviewing Los Bros for the Journal. They had already been interviewed once, extensively in TCJ #126 by Gary, Thom Powers, and Robert Fiore and he felt that he wanted a fresh point of view. He knew I interviewed them in front of an audience at a UK Comic Convention in 1988, and knew I was (I make no bones about it) a fan of the brothers' work. We'd met since at conventions, said our hellos, but were not by any stretch of the imagination friends. I hadn't done an interview for print for many years, and did not have the time; but there were questions I wanted to ask Jaime and Gilbert, both as a Love and Rockets reader and as someone who makes things up for a living. So I had agreed, and I had arrived in Los Angeles hoping that Jaime would be less taciturn than he had been on the UKCAC stage in 1988. When the interview began we were all of us a little nervous, and a little unsure of what to expect. In the end, our only regret was that we didn't have more time. What follows careens from interview to conversation, and from art to career.

#### THE NAME GAME

[Gaiman]: So what was your reaction when Gary said, "I'm thinking of having Neil do the interview?"

[Gilbert Hernandez]: We said, "We're going to sell a lot of copies!" [Gaiman laughs] No really, that was our first reaction! Because things are going well for you.

[Jaime Hernandez]: Also it didn't hit me for a long time but Gary can't interview us anymore.

That was why he came to me. He said, "Look, I can't do it again." He knows that I'm a fan, he knows I did the famous awkward UKCAC interview with you guys ... And also there's a level on which, at least this way it's not necessarily seen as being incestuous.

[Gilbert]: Well Gary can't do it again and Ezra Pound is dead, so there was Neil Gaiman. [laughter]

You mean you really want Ezra Pound? Wonderful poet, but very strange.

[Jaime]: It is "Gaiman," isn't it? (Gay-mən)

Yes, it's Gaiman.

[Jaime]: We've heard "Guy-mon ..."

I hear all sorts of things.

[Jaime]: All my life I've been Jamey, Himey, Hamey . . .

[Gilbert]: I don't think Gary pronounces your name right still.

[Jaime]: And he *did* the first years I met him ... Mr. Growth! [*laughter*]

Yeah, somebody should do a best-selling title, "Pronunciation Guide: How to say 'Gilbert' right."

[Gilbert]: I had an easy out because my name is actually Gilberto (Heel-bear´-toe), which sounds a lot nicer than Gilbert, but it got me through.

[Jaime]: You had it a lot easier in elementary school, I had the hard part.

Did you tend to become "James" for a while?

[Jaime]: I was James for a year, and I look back at that and hope no one noticed! [laughs] It's kind of the selling out, being the white boy when you're not, and where I come from that's kind of a no-no.

Last time I interviewed you guys was on-stage at the UKCAC. I remember you weren't talking.

[Jaime]: It was jet lag and culture shock because we hadn't had such a warm reception in the States as we had there. Simple as that. We filled an auditorium, and we had never seen that before.

You were stars. I didn't realize or understand that wasn't the case out here. Yes, of course you filled an auditorium, you were the Hernandezes, this was Love and Rockets. Did you never get that reaction out here?

[Gilbert]: Not on a large scale like that.

[Jaime]: It just seemed like here all our fans were too "cool" to do that kind of thing. They don't come to get their books signed because "that's so geeky," that kind of thing. I'm not saying all of our fans but... They don't like crowds, so they don't want to come where we're going to be mobbed—but then they don't know that five people came.

[Gilbert]: Another thing might be that they don't feel they have to *pay* to get our autograph or to hear us speak. They can go to a book signing at a comic book store. Our fans are intelligent and independent.

The recording will miss the facial expressions. [laughter] I wonder if to some extent that part of it, in England, Love and Rockets is simply perceived as being an American thing. It's an American comic. It's hipper because it's good, but it's not hip in that strange sense of, "I've discovered something small and hip and I cannot let the rest of the world discover it, or even admit that I like it because if other people find out, then I'm going to have to stop liking it."

[Gilbert]: Also in the States, there are just so many distractions. Everybody's got their interests elsewhere. It seems, as far as I can tell, that most things that do catch on in a big way are things that make a lot of money. And God bless the college student, because the college student is the one who creates the alternative music scene, the alternative comic book scene, because they're always hungry for alternative entertainment. And the rest of America could give a hoot. They're just plugged into all the various big things out there: big Hollywood movies, big MTV bands, big video games, whatever is big and makes a lot of money and makes a big stink, at least superficially.

They seem much more impressed over here by success. The other thing that is weird about success is it doesn't necessarily seem to have any correlation to what you do. It seems to have a correlation to simply how many people know your name or your face.

[Jaime]: Yeah, and they won't speak up unless the person next to them goes, "Oh, you do Love and Rockets?" Then they light up and say, "Oh! Great!" They don't know what the hell you're talking about—

[Gilbert]: —But they want to be in there, in the know.

#### TIMES HAVE CHANGED

What is the readership right now with Love and Rockets? Not sales necessarily, but . . .

[Gilbert]: You probably know as much as we do.

[Jaime]: From the mail that we get, that's dwindled quite considerably. I think a lot of the readers just don't know what to make of *Love and Rockets* anymore. I think the old readers are still there but I think times have changed, the book has changed, we've changed, the readers have grown.

The point at which I started having problems with Love and Rockets was that period during which you guys were doing Poison River, Wigwam Bam, Love and Rockets ... It was coming out very infrequently, so that