

## How to Kill a By Isabel Ruebens

Jaime Hernandez



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Heralded in the comics community for his stories about punk rockers, lesbian aliens, and rocket-repair mechanics, Jaime Hernandez continues to publish fiction for Fantagraphics Books. His tale of writer Isabel “Izzy” Ruebens reproduced here is the stuff of comic legend and a remarkable piece of storytelling from one of a pair of gifted American artists who Chicano theory guru Ramon Saldívar has called “the best read Chicano writers in the United States.”

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## After Thought/s

### Jaime Hernandez and the B/ordered Psychocultural Terrain of a Latina Writer

William A. Nericcio

Jaime ("How to Kill a By Isabel Ruebens) and Gilbert Hernandez ("Errata Stigmata") have transformed the comic book medium via their serialized graphic narratives in production since the early 1980's. While Los Brothers Hernandez (as they are known to their readers/spectators) have been influenced by developments in their own field, they are as likely to cite Picasso, Nietzsche, García Márquez, Klee, Kahlo, or Modotti as they are Disney or Archie comics (in particular Dan de Carlo of *Betty and Veronica* fame) as figures who have influenced their development.

Crossing the checkpoint markers indicative of "high art" and so-called low-brow culture, the Hernandez Brothers spin their California and Central American-based versions of a universe to a decidedly *conjunto* beat, with the counterpoint of speed-metal, rap, and punk laced generously throughout. As the Hernandez's work has been linked with the mythic project associated with the name William Faulkner, it seems fitting to see their works as curious ciphered apocrypha that arrive via Yoknapatawpha translated into pictographs, reinterpreted in cinema, then rendered as a black and white comic book.

Southern Californian (Oxnard, CA) graphic storytellers of Mexican descent, the Hernandez Brothers map the contours of diverse, contentious and organic bodies populating and defining the border regions. With "How to Kill a By Isabel Reubens," Jaime Hernandez explores the most common problem confronting a writer: the writing block—a lurid cinematic exploration of this theme is to be found in the Coen Brothers's tasty cinematic offering *Barton Fink*. The first version of this short story appeared in 1981 in a self-published comic distributed by Jaime, Gilbert, and Mario Hernandez. It then appeared in *Love and Rockets 1* (Fantagraphics Books, Fall 1982).

In this four-page opus, Isabel "Izzy" Reubens's writing block is merely a telling establishing shot as Jaime Hernandez's illustrations and words (strategically limited perhaps so as to underscore Izzy's inability to produce them) interrogate what we might call *la quiebra* between words and images.<sup>1</sup> Here, *la quiebra* designates an instance of fracture in the literal sense of tearing while

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<sup>1</sup>See "Of Half-Breeds and Mestizo's: Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*" in *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*, ed. Chon Noriega (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 52-53.

also communicating figuratively a state of bankruptc—it goes without saying that the figural and literal meanings of the term share more than a storefront; to put it plainly, they are in cahoots. Among the many conflicts to identify in this shortest of short stories is the fractious dialogue—one might call it a war, reall—between all things linguistic and all things graphic. With Isabel Reubens's enchanting and disturbing writing block functioning at the level of allegory, readers/screeners of thses pages are as immersed in the complexity of borderline textuality as they are the *mestizo* cultural traces of author/artist Jaime Hernandez.

Graphic narratives are bordertexts incorporating the dynamics of cinema, prose fiction, fine art, and cartooning. That the form is finding its most eloquent development in the talented hands of a *border-infiltrated* author just adds to our fun. The irony here is as delightful as it is significant: a *mestizo-text* produced by a *mestizo* artist/illustrator.

#### Brief Semiotic Gleanings



In panel 4 (p. 3), Hernandez pictures the contours of Isabel Ruebens's unconscious. Here emotional pressure brought on by, among other things, a writer's block, is subjected to the absurd and absurdly powerful forces of what Freud called condensation and displacement: Ruebens imagines herself trapped underwater (she is "530ft" beneath the surface), writing ciphered clues ("How to Kill a Wri[ter]") to herself on the glass window of a deep pool, through which we, readers and "passive" voyeurs, gawk. The diagnosis for the armchair analyst here is clear: Izzy is both despondent and suicidal. What is exegetically more crucial however is the relationship between artist and medium—

Hernandez, writer/illustrator, *pictures* a writer's inability to *write* a story in a pantomimed comic largely without words, utterly free of dialogue.



Ruebens cannot write so she travels to a wrestling-magazine reading magician/sage/wizard who helps transport her to an "altered state."

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Here, prior to this meeting, Ruebens flees her teetering house. Note how Hernandez accentuates doors, frames and passageways so as to underscore the young writer's magical, mystical travel.



The writer, her psyche, her self: in Hernandez's short graphic tale, the title of the story becomes the fabric of the person it mocks. Recall that this short tale is about a woman writer who cannot, for whatever reason, finish a story. All the more ironic, then, that her body should be made out of the unraveling fabric of the interrupted title that heads this very story: text/textile; fabric/self. Hernandez, in short, digs paradox.