

MMI: Your work has the potential to interest a larger audience than those that regularly buy comics, and more serious comics have recently gained higher exposure in mainstream press. But there is a large potential audience that probably takes no notice, even though everyone has had some exposure to the art form. From your perspective, how can the market and awareness of non-genre material be grown? Or is it just that the form of comics only appeals to a small group of people?

JL: Broadening the North American audience for comics is a long, slow process which began with the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and will continue for a very long time to come. Only by the increasing appearance of diverse, mature, and -- most importantly -- accessible comics work, and the sales of that work through retail bookstores, will the readership expand. I emphasize "accessible" because, in my opinion, the greatest obstacles comics present to the uninitiated are a lack of clarity in storytelling and artwork that is off-putting to the average reader. Bookstores will only continue the current trend toward stocking more comics work if the amount of quality comics work continues to grow, so the main responsibility lies with the cartoonists and their publishers.

MMI: One problem I have read you mentioned in a past interview is that people do not always take enough time to appreciate the still picture or drawing. They will read a comic through, with minimal breaks to appreciate what the art form is capable of. Your pacing is slow, which is great, because you almost have to be aware of the panel-to-panel moments. The moments you choose to show are often the small moments of life, which are often where our optimism comes from. Though dealing with serious stories, a certain love of life really comes through in your work. Is that intentional? Do you want your work to be infused with those small, optimistic moments, even if the larger story is dealing with some grimmer issues? Or is it just your love of the art form coming through?

JL: First of all, thanks for the attention you've paid to my work; I greatly appreciate it. It is that attention that is hardest to take hold of in comics, because the form lends itself to such rapid consumption. I think what you are noticing is my desire to slow the reader down and get him or her to focus on the smaller moments, to feel a slower rhythm and then have access to the emotions and thoughts that can only come at that pace.

Your mention of finding optimism in those moments is interesting, because I think it shows what you yourself are bringing to those moments as opposed to something I have overtly injected into them -- and that very interpretation is one of the great strengths of the restrained still image. Although I would also guess that some of what you detect is, as you say, my love of the medium itself.

MMI: As an artist and writer, I count you as one who does both really well. Many people discount those who only write comics. Does the problem with writing

comics come when the writer doesn't let the pictures tell some of the story?
Should writers who can't draw just go write somewhere else?

JL: All that is required for a writer to write good comics is a thorough understanding of the medium -- how to exploit its strengths, avoid its weaknesses, and explore its wealth of untapped expressive possibilities. Essentially, to be able to think in the unified language of words and pictures. Of course, in the end, it turns out to be a tall order that few seem able to fill successfully. But I'm convinced it's because most people fail to work with comics on its own terms, instead bringing to it too many of the conventions and approaches common to other media, like prose or cinema. The art of comics can certainly benefit from the lessons these other forms have to teach, but it will live or die by the ability of its practitioners to make use of its particular capabilities.

MMI: With the increased attention you have received with a work like "Berlin", can you detect any sort of response from a new audience? Has your audience grown, in any substantial way, past the comic shop customer?

JL: Jar of Fools first appeared in a weekly newspaper that had a circulation of 60,000, so even at the first signing for that book I was lucky to find a readership that ran the gamut from comics readers to middle-aged housewives who had previously known nothing of comics outside of four-panel gag strips. Berlin has some potential appeal outside of the "usual comics readership," specifically to people who read books (in the end it will be a 600-page novel), people of German or Jewish descent, people with an interest in European or Weimar history, etc. So far, it's hard to say that my audience has grown substantially beyond comics readers, but I am encouraged by the positive sales of Berlin in bookstores and correspondence from readers who have had no prior experience with the form as I use it.

MMI: When will "Berlin" #9 be out? Are you working exclusively on "Berlin", or do you have any other projects in the works?

JL: Berlin #9 is currently scheduled to be out by December of 2001 at the latest. I tend to shift back and forth between working only on Berlin for months at a time and short stints on other, more commercial projects that help pay the bills. I have one short "side project" close to completion right now and several others in the wings, but currently Berlin is the main focus, as it will continue to be if I want to finish the damn thing before I'm forty!