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JOE SACCO

[COMICS JOURNALIST]

“WHEN YOU DRAW, YOU CAN ALWAYS CAPTURE THAT MOMENT. YOU CAN ALWAYS HAVE THAT EXACT, PRECISE MOMENT WHEN SOMEONE’S GOT THE CLUB RAISED, WHEN SOMEONE’S GOING DOWN. I REALIZE NOW THERE’S A LOT OF POWER IN THAT.”

Things to consider when creating comics journalism:

History

The journalistic imperative

The “nice comics balloon” imperative

Comics journalist Joe Sacco was born in Malta in 1960 and subsequently lived in Australia, Los Angeles, and New York before settling in Portland, Oregon. In 1991 and 1992, Sacco spent two months in Palestine and Israel, interviewing about one hundred people on both sides of the conflict for his American Book Award–winning Palestine (2001). His next two books focused on the Balkans. Safe Area Cora?de takes place at

Warriors, Salt and Soda, all takes place at the end of the Bosnian war, and The Fixer, set in Sarajevo, jumps between 1995 and 2001. Sacco's comics are characterized by a painstaking attention to visual detail, especially evident in his breathtaking, wide views of refugee camps and swarming village streets.

Footnotes in Gaza, Sacco's second book on the Middle East and his first with a mainstream publisher (Metropolitan Books, 2009), runs over four hundred pages and, as with his previous work, its word-and-image narrative is built on his interviews with witnesses to the war. A seven-year project, Footnotes in Gaza investigates two massacres of Palestinians in November 1956 in the wake of the Suez Canal crisis: one in the town of Khan Younis, in which a presumed 275 people were killed, and one in the neighboring town of Rafah, in which a presumed 111 people were killed. Little has been written, especially in English, about either event, and Sacco conducted extensive research of U.N. and other documents, and hired Israeli researchers to go into archives in Israel. He captures the testimony of the many living survivors he tracked down from both events.

Sacco has done numerous shorter comic reporting pieces for venues including Time, the New York Times Magazine, Details, Harper's, and VQR. When I sat down with him in the Thompson Hotel in New York City last winter, where we drank mini-bar bottles

of whiskey, he conjectured about his next project, for which he wants to travel to India. He also mentioned one of his longtime ambitions, a work provisionally titled The Gentleman's Guide to the Rolling Stones. "I'll get the India thing done, and see how I am," he told me, "but then I'm going to do my Rolling Stones book, damn it!"

– Hillary Chute

I. NOW WHAT HAPPENS TO THE DEAD?

THE BELIEVER: Were you in a total zone working on this last book?

JOE SACCO: When I was working, yes, I was in a total zone. But, I mean, I have a life. I have a social life. I have a girlfriend back in Portland. So...

BLVR: I wasn't implying you were some freak who never saw sunshine.

JS: That stuff really helps. It's important. But, yeah, I was in a zone. I think I needed that momentum. I needed to be in one space and just keep with it until the end. I'm sure if you looked at the dates on each page of the book, the last part happened at a much more furious pace than the first part.

BLVR: The research sounds exhausting. And four years of drawing sounds really exhausting, too.

JS: It was. But, I mean, any cartoonist can tell you that.

BLVR: *Footnotes in Gaza* seems even more brutal than your other books, just in terms of what you're drawing. There are so many bodies in this book. What was it like drawing that? Even the part with the bull was, for me, almost unreadable.

JS: There's an early scene in which a bull's being taken out, and he's basically given the coup de grâce in the street, and that made my head swim. I've never seen anything like that. It was very difficult to watch. I mean, I was queasy. I wanted to confront the reader with those images, but then show the reason for it. I mean, it's shocking if you're a Westerner, seeing kids with blood on their hands, and putting them up and making blood prints on the wall. It was for me. My nephew would have keeled over and fainted, you know, if he'd seen something like that. But I want to show it, and also that there's a tradition behind it. A number of families have bought this bull together, they're working on it together. They all have to share in the butchering of the animal. Whether they know how to do that or not, they're still all participating. Then they divide the meat and give a third of the meat to the poor. What starts as sort of a hard event to watch ends up being part of a tradition. I was showing how people are still hanging on to things despite what's going on. It matters to them to keep that tradition going, and to do it in the right

way.

way.

BLVR: I thought it was a really interesting look into how a community structure functions.

JS: Right. It started to make me think about doing anthropological comics.

BLVR: I was about to use the word *anthropological*, and then I somehow felt like it would sound awkward, but then you used it. [Laughs]

JS: You know, drawing that was the most fun I had. Even though it was very difficult to watch it, and to look at all the photographs, it was the most fun because I think it said something about the Palestinian culture.

BLVR: For a couple of pages there's this super detailed focus on the actual butchering. The book really slows down in that part.

JS: People are making jokes: "We slaughter the bull, Sharon slaughters us." Or "One day, you'll come and talk to the bulls about their slaughter, and you'll have a bull as a translator." I show the whole process from beginning to end, and that's kind of what the book is doing. It's showing everything. I don't stop the book with the people dying. To me, it's important to show: so now what happens to the dead? I want the reader to get a sense of the breadth of it, what it means in its entirety, and not leave out any steps, as difficult as it is to read, and—believe me—as difficult as it was to draw.

BLVR: That scene transitions right into a Palestinian man saying, "I can't do it."

JS: He has this soft thing for the animal. He couldn't bring himself to eat from it. However, he isn't averse to the idea of suicide bombing and killing Israeli civilians. So I'm trying to show the different facets of a personality, too.

II. "WHAT AM I GOING TO DO AFTER THIS? KEEP DETAILING MASSACRES?"

BLVR: The notion of what history is, or how history moves, was implicit in your other books, but it's explicit here. You talk about capital-H "History."

JS: History is a combination of a lot of things. You can't isolate events today and say, "Oh, well, this happened—those awful people." The acts might be brutal, but there must be a context to it. I certainly didn't want to drop the reader into those incidents without telling the story of, well: Why are there refugees? Why were the Israelis and the Palestinians battling along the border? Who were the *fedayeen*? What was the Israeli response to that? But more than that, I think, for me, the book ends up being—this is going to sound strange—a dead end. Because I don't know where to go from here, except to delve into human psychology. I think I understand how history works. I understand why one people

are battling another people. I understand that they both want land. But ultimately there's a level that I haven't really got to yet. I'm touching on motive in places, like what makes someone pull a trigger? What makes one person beat another one to death? I know we can dehumanize people. Obviously, that's the main thing. And I know we can fear them enough that we'd kill them before we think they're going to kill us. There's all that going on. But I think I need to go in another direction after this book. What am I going to do after this? Keep detailing massacres? For me, personally, I think I'm not going to get anything out of it anymore. I've come to the end of that.

BLVR: You mean in the arc of your career?

JS: In the arc of my understanding of why people do things and how things develop the way they do. It's not that there aren't other incidents I could detail and make a great book about—an interesting book. It's just that for me, personally, it won't lead me anywhere new, and it's kind of about me on some level. If you're a creative person, it has to be, I think.

III. ONE BIT OF HISTORY BLEEDS INTO THE NEXT

BLVR: One thing I liked about Patrick Cockburn's review in the *New York Times Book Review* was that he was saying there's a

real contribution here in terms of journalism and unearthing these events. The documents the Israeli researchers helped you work with—were they previously closed and classified, or was it just that no one had dealt with them?

JS: Perhaps no one had dealt with them. I had read bits of Ben-Gurion's testimony, but one of my Israeli researchers found a newspaper that reprinted his entire response to the incident at Rafah. In a Chomsky book, I read a snippet of the story of Mark Gefen, the eyewitness soldier who talks about a "human slaughterhouse." It was footnoted to a magazine back in the '80s. Someone found it, and then my editor translated the whole document for me. There is some new stuff in this book, definitely. I wish there was more.

BLVR: How did you find the people you interviewed?

JS: I went and I spoke to Israeli historians in Israel. You can go and look at the IDF archives, but it's all in Hebrew. I did talk to military men, brigade commanders. One of my research assistants looked up people who are mentioned in different press accounts who were there, who died, and talked to their families. I mean, there was an effort to try to find something. But definitely I think an Israeli historian needs to really step in and take another look at this. One person alone cannot write a history of this sort of thing. I think you need many angles.

BLVR: It seemed like what you're emphasizing in terms of the movement of history is the continuousness of the past and the present. That's something that's always fascinated me.

JS: You're talking to people who remember it but get it confused with other incidents. It's almost as if history bleeds. In people's minds, one bit of history bleeds into another bit of history. Some people have a very hard time keeping straight what happened in '67, what happened in '56. And it gives you this idea, especially in the particular case of the Palestinians, that history hasn't really stopped. They've never had the luxury of looking back and isolating things, and thinking about it and coming to terms with it. Whether it's pure anger, or a feeling that they want justice... I mean, there are Palestinians who even said, "You're wasting your time doing this. You're wasting *our* time doing this, because the Israelis are bulldozing homes a few hundred meters away."

BLVR: We seem to have a really clear sense, in those moments in the text, that what you are interested in is the fifties.

JS: I think it's important to isolate things, because then you can understand how one generation, if not subsequent ones, were brutalized. You've got to stop it sometime and have a look at it. What happened in '56 is not like the Battle of Britain, where the British can almost look back with romantic nostalgia to that time.

BLVR: Palestinians don't have the luxury of reflection?

JS: They don't. Every generation is somehow brutalized, and their parents are transmitting bitterness and frustration. Even if you don't tell the specific stories clearly, you transmit things to your children.

IV. CAN YOU DRAW WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND?

BLVR: There's one scene toward the end with teenagers who don't want a photographer to take their pictures....

JS: Oh, yeah, Asim.

BLVR: But we get your drawings of them in the book. Moments like those call into question: what does it mean to take a picture of something versus what does it mean to be drawing something?

JS: There are very few photographs—and we know them very well—that capture an exact moment, and that image is always with us. The guy getting killed in the Spanish Civil War, the Vietcong suspect getting shot by the Saigon police chief... Now, when you draw, you can always capture that moment. You can always have that exact, precise moment when someone's got the club raised, when someone's going down. I realize now there's a lot of power in that. It's a bit scary in a way,

because you're capturing moments like that constantly from panel to panel. You have to put yourself in everyone's shoes that you draw, whether it's a soldier or a civilian. You have to think about what it's like: What are they thinking? What are they feeling? The truth be told, that's part of the reason I don't show Israeli soldiers' faces. I couldn't understand it. I couldn't always put myself in their psychology properly, so in a lot of cases, I refrained from drawing their faces.

BLVR: In some images a gun or some other implement is actually obscuring some part of the face of some of the soldiers—

JS: —or their caps are obscuring their faces. Yeah. That's why it's human psychology I've become sort of interested in now.

BLVR: You've mentioned "Joe Sacco Trauma Syndrome." Was it depressing to be drawing, or were you upset when you were drawing...?

JS: I like to draw, generally, but it was not a pleasure. I did not want to go to the drawing table. But I knew, OK, just keep going, just keep doing it. It felt like an incredible chore. After I finished the book, I think it caught up with me. When you're in the middle of it, you don't like doing it, but it's your job. You know you have to get through it, you have to show this. You made that decision to show it. But afterward I was a little repulsed by the whole thing.

V. THE ASHTRAY IS FULL OF BALLOONS

BLVR: I see the book as literary not just at the level of prose, but in the way that pages move. It's the rhythm of the narrative—that's what codes as literary to me.

JS: When I'm laying out a page, it usually takes me seconds to figure out where the panel's going to go. I sketch it on the board—

BLVR: Wait. That's crazy. Seconds?

JS: The initial thing has to be impulsive, because storyboarding will kill future creativity. I want something I'm going to work with on a day-to-day level, where I can be sort of spontaneous. So the basic layout of the page takes seconds. Where the individual figures go, the composition of each panel—that takes an enormous amount of time.

BLVR: So in a matter of seconds, you say, "Unbordered top tier, three boxes here..."

JS: Yes. I have a script. I'll say, "OK, this page probably starts here and ends there. This will be a panel." I'll make that decision very quickly. Then I'll write out the captions on a piece of scrap paper. I cut out a balloon about that size, and I place it. I think, How much room do I have? Where can elements go? I don't draw something and then lay things on it. I get the text and lay it down first. My ashtray's always full of these little word balloons that I've drawn....

BLVR: This is the stuff that blows my mind about cartoonists. They have to be good at so many things, including having a rigorous, special design sense, right?

JS: That's like walking, if you're a cartoonist.

BLVR: The page-dating is something that I don't see in a lot of other cartoonists' work.

JS: I've done that since I've been cartooning. It's one of those habits that I just kept going with. It's sort of a weird, anal thing, but I want to know that I'm producing. It's sort of a spur to produce, and it reminds me sometimes that I left a certain page for a while. For example, there's a page early on that was penciled for a long time, but I didn't have an Egyptian uniform. I finally found a book for that. It took a year. I didn't actually date the page until I was finished with that panel.

I'm always trying to demystify the whole thing, and that's part of it, letting people know your pace and your rate. Some people say, "It must have taken you a long time to draw that page, because you didn't draw the next one for a month." Well, maybe I was in some other country doing another assignment. Maybe I was on vacation.

BLVR: But surely you drew some of the pages out of order, right?

JS: It seems like no matter how finalized my script is, at the beginning I mess up a bit.

Some were drawn out of order, but mostly they weren't. Mostly I try to be consecutive, to understand it a bit more.

BLVR: There are footnotes in your other books, but there seem to be more here.

JS: At one point one of the characters talks about Israelis becoming soldiers at age sixteen or something. Well, that's incorrect. But I didn't want to sort of trip up what he's saying by correcting him in the body of the work. I thought I'd just put in a footnote to indicate, well, actually, it's *this*. In many ways, the book is based on eyewitness testimony.

BLVR: I also noticed that in this book more than others, in the testimonies you cite, you use brackets to show where you alter a sentence even slightly.

JS: Someone else said that to me.

BLVR: That seems very responsible to me. [Laughs] It seems like a measure of your meticulousness or something....

JS: Yeah, well, it's funny, because I talked to Art [Spiegelman] about this, and he doesn't like the brackets. I understand his point of view. I do agree that this is not what I want to see if I'm reading a comic book, for god's sake, but on the other hand, the journalistic imperative means more to me when you're quoting someone than the "nice comics balloon" imperative.

BLVR: I appreciated the brackets, actually.

JS: I'm glad.

BLVR: I'll be on the brackets side of the ledger.

JS: You're the only one who's voted for the brackets.

VI. "ONLY PULL THE RABBIT OUT OF YOUR HAT WHEN YOU NEED TO"

BLVR: Would you say that you were working with a lot of comic-book conventions in *Footnotes in Gaza*?

JS: I see myself as a traditionalist in a way, like an old-school cartoonist. I'm influenced by people like Crumb and by basic storytelling techniques. To me, the important thing is to get the story across.

BLVR: I see what you mean about Crumb and straightforward storytelling, but the way you tell it on each page—your pages are so dense, there's so much going on—

JS: Yeah, maybe sometimes too much—

BLVR: But also on a formal level.

JS: I feel like I know what I'm doing, but I have intuition about things. Every now and then, I'm pulling a rabbit out of a hat in my own mind. My feeling is, only pull the rabbit out of your hat when you need to. When you look at *Palestine*, I'm pulling rabbits out of

LOOK at *Palestine*, I'm pulling rabbits out of hats that shouldn't be there.

BLVR: Really? What do you mean?

JS: I just think it's overdone. A lot of the drawings I was doing were to amuse myself at the drawing table, so I wouldn't get bored. Over time, starting with *Safe Area Gora?de*, I realized you can only use these techniques when it's going to advance the story or heighten it. You squander that sort of thing when you do it all the time.

BLVR: In *Palestine*, there's an instance where you're talking about yourself as a cartoonist. This comes up in various places in your work—your status as a cartoonist and reporter. You wrote the introduction to the book *A Child in Palestine*, by Naji al-Ali. Is there a history of respect for cartooning in Palestine?

JS: Well, there's a history of respect for Naji al-Ali, who was a Palestinian cartoonist assassinated in London in the late '80s. On my first trip to Palestine, whenever I was not so self-conscious that I couldn't bring up the fact that I was drawing their stories—because in those days I was a little more reticent—they would say, "Oh, well, we have this cartoonist, he's a big hero...." People had pendants of his main figure, and even pictures of the cartoonist himself on the wall. He was revered.

BLVR: What was the deal?

JS: He basically did comics, or spot cartoons, in Arab newspapers hitting out at everyone who... everyone, basically: the Israelis, the P.L.O., Palestinian factions, corrupt Arab regimes—everyone who he felt was putting the boot down or exploiting poor people, refugees, and the poor Arab person, who is always represented by this same child. He was just really well loved for that. And the child was always looking at some scene, like the cartoon is just sort of recording what's going on.

BLVR: Do you like the comics?

JS: Technically, they're not beautiful drawings. They're very rough drawings. But they're very powerful. And Arabs certainly are drawn to his work. Mainly because he's really speaking truth to power.

BLVR: What's the sense of why he was assassinated?

JS: It's not quite known. I mean, some people say it was the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence organization. It could just as well have been a Palestinian faction he rubbed the wrong way. I've heard that also.

BLVR: Have you sent *Footnotes* to people you talked to?

JS: In Gaza, they're not even getting bread, so they're not going to get books. There's an incredible blockade. That's something I'd like to figure out. A lot of the men I talked to have died since, which is a shame. So I'd like to get

it in the hands of at least some of the people I talked to.

BLVR: Do you ever worry about that?

JS: That they won't get to see it? Yeah, I do. I knew I couldn't rush the book. I worked very hard on it to get it done as soon as I could. But there was definitely that feeling. Man, seven years... it took a long time. And you know what's happening in seven years. People are getting older and older and dying.

BLVR: And a lot of these people were old to begin with.

JS: It was one of the things that motivated me to keep going, especially in the last few years of the book.

BLVR: I want to ask you about the ending of *Footnotes in Gaza*. The last four pages are silent—it's really striking.

JS: In finding out a story, you become so involved in dissecting it and pulling out its component parts and concentrating so much on specific things that the bigger picture loses its impact. There's this part at the end when a guy mentions that *fear* is the thing he remembers the most. It sort of brought it all back to me. I'm trying to talk about my role in a way, my role as a sort of quasi-historian. In the end, it was a realization: Had I sterilized this whole event by the process of looking at it? Sterilized the component parts for myself? In a way, I just kind of wanted to give the whole story back to the people who suffered

more story back to the people who suffered, and that's why I have that last scene.

It's easy for me to say, "I know more than they do." In some ways I did, because I heard many different stories, and I kind of knew the grander picture. But those individuals are the ones who went through it.

BLVR: So by taking your narrative voice out of it, yet drawing their experiences...

JS: It gives it back to them. And I want the reader to feel it, too—you know, the fear of it, the randomness. You worry because you realize it's a responsibility. You're trying to convey something that you weren't there for, and other people's emotions. But that's—

BLVR: —the whole point?

JS: Well, that's the advantage of comics. When does journalism start, and when does art start? There's a blending.

BLVR: Is New Journalism a rubric that has been meaningful to your work?

JS: It definitely has been. *Dispatches*, by Michael Herr, which is considered New Journalism—the strength of that book is in the atmosphere it creates. It gives you a taste of Vietnam in your mouth. It's not about "On April 12, 1965, the Americans landed and I drank...." or something like that. It's about mood, in a way. I've read many books about the Vietnam War, because once I was doing a comic about it, which I scuttled.

BLVR: Which is still unpublished, right? I feel like I've read about it.

JS: You did. Probably in some old interview. I was doing that around college. I was in my early twenties....

BLVR: Isn't it about fifty pages long?

JS: Fifty pages, then I gave it up, and then I did another fifty pages.

BLVR: Time to bring it out!

JS: Oh, brother. You should see that stuff. No one wants to read the complete Joe Sacco, believe me.

Hillary Chute, an English professor at the University of Chicago, is the author of *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (Columbia University Press, 2010), and associate editor of Art Spiegelman's *MetaMaus*, forthcoming from Pantheon in the fall.

Illustration by Charles Burns

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