

“A portrait of the world through my eyes”

An Interview with Miss Lasko-Gross

TAHNEER OKSMAN

Published in 2006, *Escape from “Special”* is Miss Lasko-Gross’s debut graphic memoir, and it is followed by a second memoir that continues the story chronologically, entitled *A Mess of Everything*, and published in 2009. The “semi-autobiographical” books trace the main character, Melissa, from her earliest memory to her high school years. Lasko-Gross is currently working on a fictional graphic novel, *Henni*, which explores religious fundamentalism.

In the following interview, conducted on Manhattan’s Lower East Side on April 15, 2011, Tahneer Oksman speaks to Miss Lasko-Gross, who discusses the impetus behind her creation of these memoirs, as well as the importance of the themes of identity and Jewishness both in her works and in her own life. Lasko-Gross points out, not once but twice, in the interview that the memoirs are a portrait of the world through her eyes—or works that hold, over and above the importance of maintaining verifiable particular truths, the cardinal concern of representing the more universal “Truths” of human experience—those embedded not in any definitive or ultimate location, but instead in the winding and often painful pursuit of the unanswerable.

In a recent interview on the Jewesses with Attitude blog you said you didn’t think your Jewish identity influences your work—is this true?¹

It [my work] reeks of Jewishness, but I didn’t set out to do anything [like that]. I’m non-religious, very much secular. But at the same time, I’m such a Jew. I especially notice that in relation to my husband, who’s not a Jew.

On the back cover of *A Mess of Everything*, it says that the book is part of a semi-autobiographical trilogy. Is there a third book in the works?

I never said I was doing a trilogy. Somewhere along the line, someone decided that it was a trilogy, but it was not. I always planned to continue doing books up until old age. I thought it would be great to have a series that starts from my very earliest childhood memories, which are kind of sketchy and flash memories that make no sense, and going up to when I’m horribly old and cranky and just miserable. But at the same time, I would never

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have said that I was doing a trilogy because I want to do the whole life. And also, as much as people have asked me to do the third one, I want to be, probably, forty before I do a book about my twenties. You need the time to have perspective about what was actually significant.

A lot of autobiographies get into minutia, where it's not interesting, it's more self-indulgent, and you don't really see the themes. You're still so close to the perspective you had at the time [that you are writing about] you can't laugh at yourself in the same way that you can ten years later. You have to understand that [certain events are] not significant in order to write about them. Otherwise, it's a bit too much like a diary.

You work has been compared to Harvey Pekar, which seems an unlikely comparison.

I think someone probably thought they're both Jewish and they're cranky—go! It's a nice comparison. But at the same time, I don't think it's apt.

What does semi-autobiographical mean to you? Did you use that term to describe your work?

No. I would have said it's an autobiography. But now, in retrospect, I'm glad that they put it on [the cover] because it gives you this kind of plausible deniability when it comes to people.

Now, all of a sudden, all of these people I went to school with have realized [I wrote these books]. Someone told someone else and now I'm getting emails from people who are randomly wanting to catch up, and they say to me: "Oh! I haven't read the book or anything, but I heard this exists..." It makes some people really angry. They say: "It didn't really happen like that *or* your personal view of things is not what mine was *or* you had that thing happen then, and it really happened then." It's people who don't understand that you need to edit, otherwise it's just a long-winded conversation with a very boring person.

Some characters are basically a composite. If you're trying to be literally 100 per cent true-to-life, then you'll constantly be introducing characters who show up for a week and then disappear. There are so many people who come in and out of your life that it would be unwieldy. The names are all changed. And appearances are changed too, but there were still some complaints. People ask: "Why didn't you put me in the book? And, why did you put me in the book?" No matter what, you'll never please everyone. There will always be some who will be angry and hate you, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Is Miss your legal name?²

No, it's Melissa. But Miss is short for Melissa.

Which do you prefer?

Miss. Only my family calls me Melissa.

Do you consider Melissa—the character in the book—an alter ego or a character?

Just me ... I think I'm pretty fair in showing the bad and the good. Lots of female artists draw themselves a lot prettier than they are, a lot younger than they are. I think I'm pretty honest with the physicality of the character and the personality.

Why do you think female cartoonists have a tendency to draw themselves as less attractive than they are, for example Aline Kominsky-Crumb or Julia Wertz?

With Kominsky-Crumb, I think she's intentionally exaggerating the giant ass and big Jew nose... It's a totem, more than it's meant to be her.

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The opening of *Escape from "Special"* feels like it has a different tone from the rest of the book, almost like it's a prelude. There's a close-up of Melissa with what looks to be a tear or a drop of sweat rolling down her face, and her thought bubble reads: "I always want to know everything true" [Fig. 50]. Is this your impetus behind writing both these books? Is it about capturing the truth?

I don't know whether it's something I set out to do. But you can see yourself more clearly when the book's done. You can see things about yourself that you didn't know ahead of time. I wouldn't say I set out to do that. I want to tell entertaining stories, to make good artwork. It's not so self-indulgent that it's really about me and a personal exploration. It just happens to be that I am my own source material. I think in the end it's more of a portrait of the world through my eyes than of me as a person.

Do you have to go back to source materials for your memories, like journals and photos, or was it more of a cerebral experience?

I tried to make it organic. I've actually been a lot more truthful than I set out to be. When my mother looked at the book, she said: "Oh, that's so-and-so." Whereas, I was thinking that this is just a woman who was like the one I remembered. But she can look at it and say: "Oh yeah, that was so-and-so." Or: "That's the wallpaper at so-and-so's house." It's a little fuzzy with the younger memories. Everything is a little bit less specific because I didn't want to make things up and I didn't want to tie things up with a beginning, middle, and end for all of the vignettes. I wanted it to be just pure memories... So they kind of begin and end the way your own childhood memories do. Very few people remember what happened when they were five or can pinpoint *the day started out like this, I was doing this, and I was wearing this*. I don't think those details are important ultimately. If this was the biography of an important historical figure, then it's important to know the details—the temperature was this, they were wearing plaid... But it's not really about me. It's a portrait of the world through my eyes, so it doesn't really matter.

So, it's more about tone than about the actual events?

Yeah. And it ends up being more true when you don't research something to death.

Alison Bechdel did a lot of archival research to produce *Fun Home*.

I love that book and it was the opposite [of what I do] because it was very literal. Everything was well researched, well written. She narrates the hell out of it... For that book, it works. It's a masterpiece.

Your work is reminiscent of Vanessa Davis's journalistic and autobiographical comics, especially the way you piece your story out of seemingly unrelated vignettes.³

It's what's unsaid. There's an unspoken philosophical point behind every one of those short stories. I didn't just put the most interesting things that happened, or the most horrible, or the best. But there's a meaning behind every story. One review said, the stories just begin and end for no reason. When someone says that, I know that they don't really understand what the books were about.

You mean like with the turd story from the "Graphic Details" exhibit?⁴ [Figs. 37–38.]

That's a good example. The point of that story is that you can look at that and it's a scatological story. It's funny. Or you can think: Oh that story's really about how as a teenager everything seems so intensely important. And then you read it as an adult and you realize it didn't matter. There was a giant log in the toilet and you left it, and so what? It's so clearly not important when you put it into the perspective of adult existence.

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Fig. 50. Miss Lasko-

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Why does the theme of institutional religions and organizations come up so often in your work? In *Escape from "Special"* Melissa experiences her parents putting her in different schools, feeling like an outsider and being told she's an outsider [Fig. 51].

For so much of my life—and I'm sure a lot of people feel this way—your identity is revealed to you in relation to your struggles with whomever or whatever you're coming up against. And for me, it was always whatever order I was rebelling against, where there was a rule, it didn't seem reasonable to me, and I didn't see why I had to do it. Whether it was wanting



Fig. 50. Miss Lasko-Gross, "Kidnapped," *Escape from "Special"* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2006) 5.



Fig. 51. Miss Lasko-Gross, "Of Little Faith II," *Escape from "Special"* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2006) 115.

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to graduate early from school, or having to go to religious services or classes when that's not really what I wanted to do and I thought it was a ridiculous waste of my time... As a kid, you don't really have any control over your life. You go to school where your parents put you in school. You can only wear, for the most part, what they give you. You can only read what's around you. So it's about those kinds of conflicts with rules, and it just happens that I organized my childhood as a struggle against religion, school, and buffoonish authority figures.

In the comic entitled "Of Little Faith II" (*Escape from "Special"*) Melissa sits next to her friend in Hebrew school. Her friend says to her that the miracles in the Bible "are all crap," which perks Melissa up. But then she adds: "But of course I believe in God!" and Melissa thinks to herself: "I really am alone" [Fig. 51].

That's something I actually still feel. For example, when you're having a very rational conversation with someone you feel is very intelligent and you're on the same page about everything—neither one of you believes in unicorns, for example, or you're talking about politics... You think you've made a connection, and then they'll say something like natural disasters are just God's way of keeping us in line. And you think, whoa—we're really not even the same creature. It is disheartening. Because in one second that sets you apart from the other person, it puts up a wall... It's a horrible end to any kind of dialogue when someone is a fundamentalist (is "fundamentalist" too strong a word used for the example given?). The book I'm working on now [*Henni*] is almost entirely about religious fundamentalism. I'm still drawing it. It's probably going to be a long one.

This is a fictional work?

Someone who's familiar with my work would recognize themes from the first two graphic novels, but at the same time it doesn't even involve humans. It's a very important way to make my point... It features cat-like humans, who look like foolish people running around in fur suits. It's in the format of an epic quest, but a lot of it is about religious fundamentalism.

Why are you still focused on religion? Do you feel like you haven't said everything you wanted to say on the topic?

It's impossible to look at what's going on in the world and not think that one of the biggest conflicts we have is against fundamentalist thinking. It doesn't have to be any particular religion, but fundamentalist thinking... That absolute, unreasonable, irrational type of thinking. It was something I really wanted to do a book about.

The theme of identity often comes up in your work. In "Child Psychology," an early comic in *Escape from "Special,"* Melissa is talking to a child therapist: "I don't want people to know my identity." The therapist asks her: "Well, what is your identity?" and she's frazzled. This story reflects the tension between wanting to be an individual, "special" and unique, but also needing to know where you fit in. Can you tell me more about this issue of identity in your comics?

It's about how you define yourself by what you're struggling against... There are also the labels that are put on you from birth, like being Jewish—someone tells you something like that and you think, *well, what does it mean? I don't feel a particular way.* Being a non-believer from such an early age didn't matter, it didn't remove that Jewish label... And then there was being a special education student. Those are labels that are applied to you, and you have no say in them whatsoever. You end up with an identity that's a composite of what everyone else calls you.

Do you think that happens to you as a woman who creates comics?

Sure. I'm generalizing here, but many people have certain expectations for female cartoonists. They assume that you'll be a bad artist until they see your artwork... When my husband and I are introduced at a party to someone and they're told, *oh, they both do comics*, all the serious questions, any questions about cartooning, go to him, and they assume automatically that he's the professional and that I'm the dabbler and I'm doing a little fanzine and it's scribbly and it's cute and it's going to be about, *oh darn, my favorite shoes, I can't find them*, or something like that. As a female cartoonist, what happens often is that you are almost automatically put into that category of people who can't draw.

There is the preconception that comics are only meant to be read by children. Would you say that *Escape from "Special"* is for young readers?

The touchy thing is parents and what they think is right for their children. When parents come up to me at a convention and they ask: "Is this okay for my eleven-year-old girl?" I put it back in their hands. I say: "Well, is she mature? Is she smart?" And then they say: "Yes, of course..." If they're trying to coddle their kids, then no, it's not the right book for children because they'll just look at specific words, isolated nudity, that kind of thing and make a decision based on that, which is a shame because I think it's more about context than about words or images. But that's what people do—they take things out of context and then get outraged.

What made you decide to turn to writing a fictional work [*Henni*]?

I never did anything autobiographical until I did those two early graphic novels. I did a series called *Aim*, which was kind of based on some of my experiences, but it was a fictional series.⁵ And I like to write stories that are fiction. So I think it's more the autobiography that was the deviation from the norm.

How has your working process been different with this book?

I don't think the process changed, although, artistically, I didn't put as much time into the first book because I didn't know if it was going to have a publisher. When I started the first book, it was just for myself, I didn't think there *was* a book. I ended up throwing away a lot of the artwork when I realized I was going to be doing a book. With the second book, I immediately knew that I was creating a book, that it had a publisher and an audience, so I went right into it seriously. I didn't have to throw anything away for the second one, but for the first book I had to throw away a good chunk because it didn't fit what it became.

What about your process in general? Is it true that you draw things to scale because you draw as you're going about your life?

A large chunk of those first two books I drew on the subway. Anytime your hand gets jostled or something, you can fix that in Photoshop and just give it a little nip-tuck. I don't do that anymore. I like to have more control, and more polish. But at the time I was working so many hours and that was the only way I could fit in drawing a book. It was any spare moment. I was working full time. I was pretty busy. Being a cartoonist doesn't pay... Most of us have day jobs.

Do you still draw to scale?

No. I'm doing a standard comic-size page now. Not 100 percent. It's larger, so it will be reduced.

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Who influences your work?

In comics, the most influential works have been Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1982). I read those comics religiously when I was in high school, as they were translated. So my collection stops around issue 40, whenever there was that break in the translations. Also, Jaime Hernandez in particular from Los Bros Hernandez and *Love and Rockets* was a huge influence.

Outside of comics, I'm a huge film buff. I love silent film, I love early film, expressionist film. Alfred Hitchcock, as you know from the books, was a favorite of mine when I was a little girl. Alfred Hitchcock Presents was one of my favorites. I think my storytelling visually—is cinematic.

Where do you get most of your comics?

I go to Bergen Street Comics in Brooklyn or sometimes I go to Jim Hanley's Universe. The House of Twelve Comic Jam is a few doors down.⁶ They have a drink and draw about once a month. It's been going on for about a decade. They put out anthology books. House of Twelve books. That's been a chance to do some stuff that's very different from the autobiographical work.

The comic you're working on now is framed as an epic, not as vignettes...

Yeah, it's one sustained narrative. And there are no thought bubbles. That's something that I set out to do for myself. If someone has any kind of internal monologue, it's spoken out loud. That's the extent of it. I still did not include narration because I hate narration. I see narration as giving up, as assuming that the audience can't understand your visual narration so you have to explain what's going on to them.

Outsider themes are weaved into both of your memoirs, notably an image of your persona's face with two Jewish stars, which looked like they'd been tattooed on.

That's what I'm saying about being branded with an identity, whether or not it fits you. It's the visual representation of the branding.

But it doesn't seem like a completely negative thing... At certain points, it's almost like that "special" is helping you think through who you are...

Yeah. I think all my very strong Jewish qualities are not bad qualities. I'm all the things you would stereotypically expect: I'm notoriously cheap. I over-intellectualize everything, as my husband likes to say. I'm hopelessly neurotic or just crazy and very much a Jew. And this is why I still call myself a Jew, even though I've gone out of my way my entire life to do nothing in that direction and to do everything against it. But it's still an inescapable fact that I'm a Jew. It's out of my hands because I just *am* that character. There's no getting around it. Someone might say, you're not a "Jew's Jew." You don't believe, you don't practice, you don't do anything. I often make the joke that I'm a bad Jew, enjoying delicious bread during Passover. Because I don't do any of that... It's much more of a cultural identity than anything else.

We're going up to my family to celebrate Passover. I like the food, I like the family. But it doesn't matter. We could celebrate Kwanza or anything. Everyone gets together, there's food, everyone loves food, there's family. Everyone thinks their cultural identities are so different from everybody else's. It's only in these tiny little details that you see any differences. There's a lot of that in *Henni*. Everywhere she travels, everyone is the same. Everyone has their own creation myth.

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NOTES

1. *Jewesses with Attitude* is a blog run by the Jewish Women's Archive. The interview, conducted by Leah Berkenwald and posted on February 14, 2011, was part of a series of interviews of the 18 artists featured in the "Graphic Details" exhibit.
2. The name on the cover page of Lasko-Gross's graphic memoirs is "Miss Lasko-Gross," whereas the name of her persona in the comics is "Melissa."
3. Vanessa Davis is another young and Jewish cartoonist who publishes autobiographical comics, including diary comics. She has published two full length works: the graphic journal, *Spaniel Rage* (2005), and the graphic memoir, *Make Me a Woman* (2010), which includes sketches, long-form narrative comics, and diary comics.
4. This nine-page comic, "The Turd," was published in *A Mess of Everything* and featured in "Graphic Details." It pictures Melissa as a teenager hanging out at a coffee shop with a friend, Terry. After a few minutes of discussing politics with her friend, she goes to the bathroom and, to her horror, the toilet does not flush. The story recounts in detail the anxiety of that incident.
5. *Am* was Miss Lasko-Gross' very first comic series published by the independent Cryptic Press between 1993 and 2001.
6. House of Twelve Comics is an art collective started by "Cheese" Hasselberger and various friends. The collective publishes digital and print comics, including the House of Twelve anthology, which has often featured work by Miss Lasko-Gross. For more, see their website, <http://houseoftwelve.com/>.

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Lauren Weins
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