

# jam! tales from the world of roller derby

HARRIET THE SPIKE, ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROLLERGIRLS

I couldn't have been more surprised by how much I loved *JAM! Tales from the World of Roller Derby*. When it arrived on my doorstep – with its brightly covered color and CAPS-PLUS-EXCLAMATION-POINT-TITLE! – I was skeptical. Its publisher, Oni Press, classifies its content as “Youth” level, another strike. After watching *Whip It*, I got pissed that the protagonist in the only large-scale, mainstream media representation of derby was a teenage girl. Obviously, derby has a place in teenagers' lives (let's face it, junior roller derby is possibly the coolest thing ever), but one of my favorite things about the derbs is that it consists of a sisterhood of women – women with or without families, careers, and so on, who make sacrifices and dedicate huge chunks of time to derby anyway. Women that run shit. I worried about how derby would be depicted in *JAM!* and groaned inwardly.

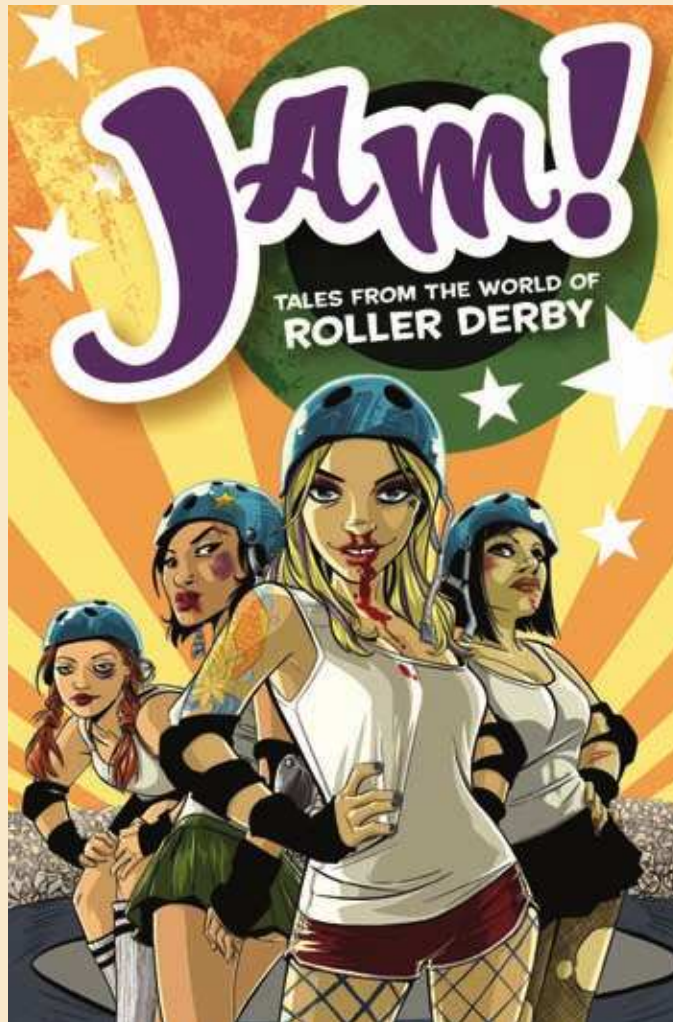
Published in collaboration with the Rose City Rollers out of Portland, Oni Press (of Scott Pilgrim fame) calls *JAM!* a graphic novel, but it's more a collection of graphic fictions, often written and illustrated by derby girls themselves, plus refs, volunteers, and fans. Edited by Jill Beaton, the book consists of 16 stories, punctuated with “Pinups” (one-page illustrations that could serve as just that), and also features derby-focused writer/illustrator bios.

Because I am a total geek who has to read all the front and/or back matter in books before settling down to read, I loved the contributor biographies. In addition to their professional accomplishments, contributors were asked things

like “Best Injury,” “Favorite Video Game,” “Best Compliment,” “Favorite Quote,” and “First Time You Tried Manic Panic” (I was never brave enough), plus their skater name and affiliation. Contributors include skaters like Apocalipstick, Gonnolea, Olive Turmoyl, Rhoda Perdition, Go-Go Gidget, and Chewblocka, and at least ten leagues are represented, including Charm City, Dallas, Burning River, Windy City, and the Rose City Rollers themselves.

All this variety is one of *JAM!*'s biggest successes. The artwork is a comic collector's wet dream, in as many different styles as there are illustrators. In addition to the pinup-labeled pages, many of the story panels themselves are worthy of framing and hanging.

I particularly enjoyed “Maybe It's All a Dream” by Angela Joy (Antidote) Moscoso and illustrated by Ray Fawkes. One of the shorter pieces, Dream is only four pages, with what looks like ink and watercolor art. The text around the art is sharp and to the point, including lines like “A whistle blows” or “Breathe dammit breathe.” My favorite panel (p. 117) says simply, “With



all my might, one skate after the other, faster and harder..." I just might frame and hang that panel myself.

The various authors also allow for wide, authentic-feeling derby coverage, featuring experiences that seem universal – learning to skate, putting your weight into a hit, skating in front of a crowd, a real fear of injuries – to some derby-specific tropes (knee socks, PBR, derby wives, “falling is learning,” afterparties, etc.). While other derby writing incorporates these things, this book is better than the few “Intro-to-Derby” books I’ve encountered. *JAM!* captures the spirit and experience of derby so much more vividly – it’s impossible to read this book without becoming excited about derby; getting the feel of derby versus just having information about it.

Because *JAM!* consists of illustrated comics, it also features some of the traditions of comics, making the stories themselves a lot of fun and not simply straightforward narratives describing what it’s like to become – and keep skating as – a derby girl. Inside you’ll find time travel, energy-sucking vampires, a “Clownquistador” (scary as shit), a team of freaky-deaky, zombie-looking nuns, and a superjammer named Galzilla (“Thunder lizard go boom.”). “Time Jam” by Dennis Culver features a post-apocalyptic future where derby girls have to rescue the human race from robots. You’ll also find highly entertaining personal details, including a woman wearing a license plate and a hair-pulling fight on a pool table. What’s not to love?

The aforementioned inclusivity that’s so important to derby is, actually, prominent throughout the book (hooray!). At least three different stories list and illustrate the many careers of derby girls, and the illustrations were balanced with regard to race, body size/shape, age, and sexual orientation. Many stories also felt like self-transformation, discussing how derby can improve confidence and build friendships.

Like any work, *JAM!* isn’t without its flaws, although they feel slight. There are a couple references to fighting being awesome, which I personally don’t believe and also think isn’t representative of where derby is as a sport today. Also, while the pictures are diverse, most of the protagonists are white, or at least look pretty white. Finally, there are a couple of references to female friendships being a challenge to attain, which seemed to just reinforce competition among women – and not the good kind of competition like the derbs.

Overall, however, much like the Independent Film Channel Portlandia series, this collection of derby comics is one of the coolest things to come out of Rose City other than the Rollers themselves. I loved it. Treat yourself or the (potential) derby girl in your life and buy it! [onipress.com/title/jam](http://onipress.com/title/jam) ●

