



BOOK REVIEW

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"What -- me worry?"

Children of

MAD

COMPLETELY MAD

A History of the
Comic Book and Magazine
By Maria Reidelbach
(Little, Brown: \$39.95; 208 pp.)

Reviewed by Randy Cohen

Americans can't read. We can't do math. We have no sense of history. And all those who still believe George Bush is the education President could be crammed into a single underfunded classroom.

Fortunately, one national institution continues to promote learning, ethics and critical thinking in our youth: Mad magazine, the brightest, most moral children's magazine in America.

In the early 1960s, when I was in junior high, Mad was my guide to postwar America. It taught me that our nation's discourse was shaped by ADMEN on MADISON AVENUE gulping down MARTINIS on COMMUTER TRAINS, to soothe the UL-

From Don Martin's January, 1962, cover



CERS brought on by the unrelenting CONFORMITY demanded of morally bankrupt YES-MEN whose job is lying to their fellow citizens. I had to learn all this if I was to get the jokes. Or maybe this was the joke.

"Completely Mad: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine" is a refresher course in this brand of Americana. Author Maria Reidelbach, sifting through decades of Mad, has concocted a medley of cartoons, story excerpts, profiles of contributors, an account of a staff vacation trip, an appendix of foreign editions. (Sadly, the Argentine version is defunct, but the Finnish endures.) Overkill? Absolutely, but there is something charming about an index where *Laven, Linda* is followed by *Lawsuits; Ku Klux Klan; Ulysses*. Please Turn to Page 5

Cohen won Emmy Awards in 1985, 1986 and 1987 for his work as a writer on "Late Night With David Letterman." His most recent book, "Diary of a Flying Man" (Alfred A. Knopf), is a collection of humorous stories.

'Mad'

Continued From First Page
by *Uncle Nutzy*. It is a dizzying reminder of how much of my earlier education I owe to "the usual gang of idiots."

Mad introduced me to literature—Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dickens, Poe. To enjoy a parody, Mad's primary comic form, you must know the original. I can recite "The Raven" from memory thanks to Mad, where it seemed to be travestied annually, although I mix in lines from the hipster version ("rapped upon my beat pad door"). Mad's devotion to "The Raven" found its most brilliant expression in Issue #9, when the poem ran exactly as written, accompanied by Will Elder's preposterous drawings that undercut its meaning, commented ironically upon it, and made me laugh myself sick. What was that? Modernism? Deconstruction? A poetry magazine for 12-year-old boys?

Before I ever saw an actual Broadway play, I learned about Eugene O'Neill through "Strange Interlude With Hazy," the 1964 Mort Drucker-Stan Hart parody of the television show "Hazel." The characters, including the goldfish, held masks before their faces; the cartoon-balloons at the top of the page showed their actual speech, those at the bottom their inner thoughts. I am only slightly embarrassed to admit enjoying "Strange Interlude With Hazy" more than "Strange Interlude"—less self-conscious, more playful with the form, bigger laughs.

International affairs? Drucker and writer Frank Jacobs taught me the names of the Warsaw Pact nations and outlined their differences with Tito in "East Side Story," a musical tale of a rumble at the U.N. "Completely Mad" reproduces Drucker's witty two-

page spread of Khrushchev dancing and singing: "When You're a Red, You're a Red all the way/ from your first party purge to your last power play!" Drucker's characters were drawn over actual photographs of the United Nations. I'd never seen anything like it.

Imaginative art was always a strength of Mad, where images were favored over language. The word-play, particularly in the early issues, ran to the sophomoric—Superduperman, Mickey Rodent, Howdy Dooit. Mad briefly attracted a few comic writers of note—Ernie Kovacs, Jean Shepherd—but it was a home for cartoonists, not writers.

The lack of sophisticated writers may account for Mad's adolescent political perspective. Its essential premise, as central to Mad as the concept of surplus value to Marxism, is publisher William Gaines' injunction: "Don't believe in ads. Don't believe in government. Watch yourself—everybody is trying to screw you!" A childish world view, but it is certainly a more cogent analysis of America than that provided by Boys' Life, my other magazine of choice in 1959.

Mad taught me about ethics. Magazines are their entire contents, the ads as well as the articles. The real message of Seventeen or Glamour is every problem has a solution, and the solution is to buy more makeup. Mad accepts no advertising. Its message? There is no solution, and some jerk is conning you. Mad was not designed by market testing. It is that rare thing, a magazine with its own

voice (whiny), its own vision (paranoid suburban), its own visual style (Don Martin), its own language (potrzebie, axolotl, blech). It offers no fawning profiles of celebrities, no perfume samples, no gushing Browns—Tina or Helen Gurley Brown—to hype each new issue, just the idiot grin of Alfred E. Neuman asking "What—Me Worry?" To an 11-year-old in Reading, Pa., life seemed narrow, confining. Mad was the first place I saw a persistent rejection of the status quo, and the implication that there were other possibilities. Heady stuff.

My generation of comic writers grew up reading Mad, and it shows in the Zucker brothers' movies, "Airplane" and "Naked Gun," in the parodies of "Saturday Night Live" and in the National Lampoon. There is a pleasing parallel between editor Al Feldstein's pseudo-cynical assertion "We approached MAD editorial with the fact that these kids were reading trash, and if they wanted to waste their money on it, OK," and David Letterman's oddly modest advice to his writers: "We're not doing brain surgery, here. We're just filling holes in the NBC schedule." Letterman's savvy mockery of the talk-show form had its precursor in Mad's satirizing magazine formats. For instance, each article, even a one-shot, is labeled a "Department," whose name includes a lame pun: Spy versus Spy runs as the "Joke and Dagger Department."

Mad began in 1952 as a comic book spoofing other comic books. It was produced by EC, the company

started by Gaines' father, Max. EC also published Saddle Justice, Moon Girl and Crypt of Terror. In 1955, amid anti-comics outrage and congressional hearings, distributors agreed to handle only comics that adhered to the rules of the newly created Comic Codes Authority, which meant, among other restrictions, that "Policemen, judges, government officials and institutions could not be presented in a way that created disrespect for established authority." It was Mad's job to create disrespect for established authority, and so to circumvent the code, Gaines transformed the comic book into Mad magazine.

"Completely Mad" sketches a lively history of both Mad formats, excerpting old favorites such as Sergio Aragone's Marginal Thinking Department, Dave Berg's Lighter Side, Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions, Scenes We'd Like to See, Passionate Gun Love magazine, and innumerable ad parodies. Reidelbach is particularly interesting describing Mad's early days and its struggles with the code. She is less effective providing a social context for Mad, relying on clichés like: "... the children of the 1950s generation rebelled heartily against their strait-laced parents, taking up first with Elvis Presley and other rock-and-rollers, then moving on to involvement in leftist politics and experimentation with psychedelic drugs." But she has assembled a goofy scrapbook of Mad features that vividly remind me of how I wasted my youth, and for this I am grateful. ■