

### Society's Mockingbird

COMPLETELY MAD by Maria Reidelbach  
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By STEFAN KANFER

In the summer of 1952 a new publication hit the national newsstands. The staff members had previously written, illustrated or published comic books, and they wasted no time baiting the hand that had fed them. *Superduperman!* was one of the first send-ups, followed by *Starchie* and *Mickey Rodent!* Before the year was out, the magazine was the center of a cult; by the end of the decade it had become an institution. For almost 40 years American

creased, the *Mad* parodists took on other targets. Television icons were overturned in obituaries: JOHN-BOY WALTON SLAYS OWN FAMILY, THEN KILLS SELF.

Hollywood producers were reduced to tears of laughter—and sometimes just to tears—when their movies played in the *Madhouse*. Since 1952 no feature has been safe, from *High Noon* (*Hah! Noon!*) to *Hannah and Her Sisters* (*Henna and Her Sickos*). Politics and journalism provided even larger targets. In a celebrated issue, *Mad* was



Steinem founded *Ms.* magazine. Ernie Kovaks was a contributor. *Mad* was the obvious inspiration for the TV series *Laugh-In*, as well as almost every over-the-top film comedy from *Airplane!* to *The Naked Gun*. In *The Making of a Counter Culture*, historian Theodore Roszak cited two modern American “landmarks in affairs of the spirit”: Allen Ginsberg’s reading of the poem *Howl* and *Mad*.

Not everyone went along. According to critic Dwight Macdonald, *Mad* speaks “the same language, aesthetically and morally, as the media it satirizes; it is as tasteless as they are.” Humorist Jules Feiffer maintains that in the pages of *Mad*, “everything stinks. Everything’s a gag, a joke, a put-on

TEEN-AGE COMICS DEPT.: OH YOU LUCKY MAD READERS!... MAD HAS DONE IT AGAIN!... NOW MAD COMIC BOOK CAN BOAST ANOTHER 'FIRST!' FOR MAD IS THE ONLY COMIC BOOK THAT NOW CARRIES THE SEAL OF DISAPPROVED READING! BUT FIRST, A STORY ABOUT PULASKI STREET'S TYPICAL TEEN-AGER.



Make Beautiful Hair  
**B L E C C H**  
THERE ARE THREE BLEECH SHAMPOOS FOR THREE DIFFERENT HAIR CONDITIONS

Are you a teenage boy with Beautiful Hair? Well no wonder the girls hardly notice you. Today, you've got to be a teenage boy with Bleech hair. Then the girls will scream with delight, roll on the floor and kick their feet when they see you. So why waste another minute? Shampoo your hair with Bleech tonight. Bleech comes in three special formulas:

- For oily hair—loosens up that slick-combing stuff so it spills down over your eyes.
- For normal hair—gives it proper body so it mushrooms all over your head. Get the shampoo that's right for you, and make your hair "Bleech"! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!
- For dry hair—a special formula that takes neat crew-cut type hair and lays it down over your ears.

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adolescence has been incomplete without a case of acne or a subscription to *Mad*.

As social historian Maria Reidelbach points out in this bright chronicle, two factors contributed to *Mad's* outrageous success: economics and impudence. The 1950s were a time of increasing GNP and relentless promotion: “Automobiles grew fins, and cigarettes were hawked by a bevy of personality types. This was the opening for the wise-guys at *Mad*, who were beginning to realize that there was more to poke fun at than other comics.”

Breck shampoo became Bleech; Crest toothpaste turned into Crust, with a youth happily bragging “Look, Mom—no more cavities” because fellow gang members had knocked his teeth out. As audiences in-

printed before the election returns came in. The front cover showed John F. Kennedy; the back, Richard Nixon. Both read: WE WERE WITH YOU ALL THE WAY!

The impresario of these entertainments was William Gaines, a second-generation comic-book man whose father Max had published *Little Orphan Annie* and *Dick Tracy* in the '30s. From *Mad's* earliest days, the younger Gaines was a hard man with a dollar—he paid flat fees instead of royalties. But he was blessed with an infallible eye for talent. Two generations have been influenced by the people he hired. Harvey Kurtzman, one of *Mad's* first creators, went on to work with Terry Gilliam, animator of *Monty Python*; R. Crumb became the creator of *Zap Comix*; Gloria

... so there are no changes to be made and no reason to be involved.”

They have a point. From the '50s to the present (when it has become part of Time Warner), *Mad* has not advanced beyond the sophomoric. Then again, it never wanted to. The magazine’s symbol, Alfred E. Neuman, the grinning “What—Me Worry?” kid, encapsulates an enduring attitude. *Mad* has always aimed to be society’s mockingbird, not its owl. Indeed, serious praise tends to make the founder nervous. “We reject the insinuation that anything we print is moral, theological, nutritious, or good for you in any way, shape or form,” says Gaines. “We live in a corrupt society and intend to keep making the best of it.”