



John Isaacson

Portland, Oregon

LAURA MOULTON

John Isaacson is a cartoonist and writer living in Portland, Oregon. A California native, he began his creative career making zines, T-shirts, and playing in bands like *Rain Makes Applesauce* and *Galaxy Drive*. He has published zines and comics, and his book, *Do-It-Yourself Screenprinting, a graphic novel on the art and science of screen-printing*, was published by *Microcosm* in 2007. He makes comics and posters and teaches screen-printing and comics through *Writers in the Schools*, *Em Space Book Arts Center*, and the *Independent Publishing Resource Center*.

He recalls that as a child he saw his parents drawing and this seemed to him a kind of magic power, being able to take the picture in their heads and render it on the page, visible to others. He decided at a young age that it was something he too wanted to be able to do. (And he reports that his first successful drawing was a "Lego Man.") This interview took place by phone in Portland, Oregon, in April 2011.

Laura Moulton earned an MFA from Eastern Washington University. She has taught writing workshops in high schools, universities, and the women's prison in Wilsonville, Oregon. Her art project *Object Permanence* was commissioned by Portland State University in 2009. Her stories and essays have been featured in *Hip Mama*, *Portland Tribune*, and *Brain, Child*. Her essay about visiting slums in Brazil appeared in *Street Roots* in 2010. Moulton recently finished a novel. She was awarded a *Regional Arts & Culture Council* grant for her project, *Street Books*, a bicycle-powered mobile library for people living outside in downtown Portland. Her library will be open for business in June 2011. Visit lauramoulton.org for more.

Laura Moulton: *You've been teaching comics for about eight years. What drew you to teaching in the first place?*

John Isaacson: When I was in sixth grade this poet named Perry Longo came from California Poets in the Schools and she encouraged us to write poems. I was writing them and drawing things on them too, and that really got me going. I hadn't written poems before, and I was really excited about that. Later I kept writing through high school when I needed to, when I was upset or heartbroken about something (*laughs*). Eventually when I got out of college I wasn't so sure what I was doing but at some point I met up with the poet teacher I had had when I was in sixth grade and I did a training with her to be a poet-teacher with California Poets in the Schools. Then a friend of mine who'd heard there was an opening asked me if I wanted to be a cartoon teacher once a week at a nearby school and I right away said yes. It just seemed perfect for me.

LM: *What kind of strategies do you have for combining writing and comics? What is an example of a lesson you would use?*

Jl: I focus a lot on outlines and brainstorming and lists and generating ideas, usually based on a theme. Just today I did a lesson on obsessions. We were writing about obsessions we have, and it was based on a couple of different comics I'd brought in. Since

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Art Spiegelman is coming to town, we were reading part of his book *In the Shadow of No Towers*, looking at the post-traumatic stress disorder he had from seeing the towers collapse. I talked to the students about what their obsessions were and asked them to list all the different obsessions they had. Their lists included things like a Queen song or jelly bellies, or a particular sport. After that they picked one obsession and talked about where it came from and how it had changed them. Then I had them make an outline of a comic. This process—making an outline of a comic—is kind of like a writing a poem. Poems and comics are really close because of the economy of language that is valued in both. You have limited space, especially, trying to fit words into panels and so they can only really have six or eight sentences in a comic. I’ve always tried to stress in comics that the pictures tell a different story than the words tell. It’s very different from illustrated text. In comics you are not writing something and then drawing a picture of what you just wrote. The drawing has to be its own sentence and have its own message, and it can even contradict what the writing says. There are technical aspects to it, like putting the writing into the panel first, and then putting the drawings in afterwards. But it all starts with writing. I often use poems as models for the writing in comics. There’s a Raymond Carver poem called “The Car,” where every line starts with something about this car: “The car that broke a gasket, the car that hit the dog and kept going, the car that left the restaurant without paying.” It’s a long list of things this car did, and after we read it I have my students list different things about their obsessions and then use the form of “The Car” as a model for writing their comics.

LM: *Have you put other poems into comics? Is that something that’s interesting to you, as a practice?*

JJ: Yeah, it is. *Poetry* magazine has had a couple cartoonists adapt poems and it is really interesting. I have a list of poems I want to adapt as comics. There’s probably like half a dozen or so, but I’ve adapted a story that my uncle wrote, and some song lyrics from a Metallica album into a comic, but I haven’t done any other poems yet. That’s a project on my to-do list.

LM: *You also do a comics writing residency in a global studies class. Is the approach you take with this class different from the approach you use in your writing and art classes?*

JJ: For writing and art classes I bring in comics that show some principles that I want to get across, like a certain drawing technique, or close-ups of characters’ faces or images showing action. For the Global Studies class I look for the same sorts of examples in books such as *Maus* or *Persepolis* or the work of Joe Sacco or Sarah Glidden. Sometimes the comics I use may have a more intimidating drawing style, like Joe Sacco’s drawings. They are really detailed and he spends a lot of time on them. It’s hard for students to look at them and feel like it’s something they could do. So that’s a little bit of a down side, but the upside is that he’s talking about the subject matter and places in the world the students are learning about in class and offers different perspectives on these. There’s no shortage of comics that deal with the Middle East, which is really nice to be able to report—the subject matter comics deal with has expanded so much. There are tons of biographical comics and comics about historical figures coming out, so there’s plenty of material even for a global studies class.

LM: *Do you think that comics have the power to reach*

certain students who would tune out otherwise?

JJ: I think so, yes. They grab students on a visual level first. I had this really great animation teacher who made me realize how visually hardwired humans are just through our evolution. We can notice things with incredible detail and read things without even trying. It's neat to see students begin to approach comics, especially high school students, because comics have the stigma of being a kids' medium, but there are a few kids who will go out on limb and say "I like *Calvin and Hobbes*" or "I like *Garfield*." It lets teenagers bring out their childlike side for a minute, which is always fun to see. There are also usually a few kids in each class who do read comics and enjoy it as a kind of marginalized art form, like they read Manga or these zombie comics that aren't really recognized by their school or by their parents but it's this weird pop culture thing they're into. So I think they appreciate it being recognized in a classroom, and it does generate some excitement because it does have that new, edgy feel to it, which I definitely benefit from, as a teacher who's trying to get them into it.

LM: *Who are some of your favorite comic artists and who are favorites among students? Any recommendations for people who are new to the genre and want to bone up on their comic artists?*

JJ: Anything by John Porcellino. He's been publishing a zine called *King Cat* for years, and people see his work and feel like they can draw comics. People who don't consider themselves good at drawing. Because his drawings are so profoundly simple. I think he's into Zen Buddhism too, and that adds to his aesthetic, he is only drawing what he needs to draw to get the story across. A few leaves, or

the curve of someone's back. I've always liked Saul Steinberg also, and some of the *New Yorker* cartoonists. I love the old Tintin comics. Another book that I'd recommend for younger readers is a book called *Smile* by a cartoonist named Raina Telgemeier. It's about her getting braces when she was in elementary school, after she fell and broke her two front teeth. I got it for the after school program where I worked because a bunch of the kids were getting braces, and I thought you know, they probably can relate to this. The kids were fighting over it. I love all kinds of comics, so it's hard to narrow it down.

LM: *Have you got anything to add that I haven't asked about?*

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JJ: I'm really excited to be teaching comics. It was only sixty years ago that many comics were being set on fire and banned in certain schools, and so it's exciting to get to teach comics in the schools now, and even to talk about censorship and comics. It's great to be kind of opening up this territory for students. 🤪

Classroom Snapshot

JOHN ISAACSON

Tina Friesen created this comic during a 2011 residency I had at Lincoln High School. Tina is always quiet but enthusiastic. Her hand often goes up when I ask the class if he have heard of a certain graphic novel, type of comics, or film based on a comic book character. Her drawing style clearly demonstrates time spent practicing, which is also the subject of this comic.

The assignment is based on a prompt about obsessions. I often use one of my favorite comics, “How I Quit Collecting Records (And Put Out A Comic Book With The Money I Saved)” written by Harvey Pekar and drawn by Robert Crumb. Pekar’s narration describes how a healthy interest becomes a passion, and then an almost-debilitating obsession involving sacrifices and questionable choices. Another example I use is the chapter “Chemistry” from Ariel Schrag’s book *Potential*. *Potential* was written and drawn by Schrag about her junior year in high school, and this chapter is about her favorite subject. During the year of this residency, Art Spiegelman, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Maus*, was coming to Portland and Lincoln High School was given tickets by Literary Arts to go see him speak. So we read his latest book *In The Shadow of No Towers* about witnessing the World Trade Center disaster on September 11, 2001. In this book, Spiegelman mentions post-traumatic stress disorder and illustrates the recurring vision of the burning towers, which haunts him.

In this case, Tina chose to write about her obsession with drawing. After filling out a few prompts and pages of pre-writing, students write narration and dialogue and then draw in pencil, filling in the blank comic panels I give them. Lastly, the students ink the comics. Tina used pencil as a mid-tone for her character’s hair and jacket. The character addresses the reader directly, using dialogue rather than narration. The only indication of a dialogue bubble is the minimal arrow pointing to the character as the source of the words. A variety of facial expressions indicate the character’s warm feelings as she reflects on the growth of her interest in drawing. From off-panel, she’s handed paper and pencil and begins to draw. These actions are communicated only through the drawing, without any textual support, a hallmark of comics. As the paper and pencil anthropomorphize and run off together, the character becomes aware of the panel box surrounding her, introducing a meta-narrative.

Needless to say, Tina’s longstanding interest in drawing has fueled the quality of her comic, but her use of these specific techniques makes this comic successful, engaging the reader on multiple levels.



mm, I'd have



I remember watching TV at 3 years old & wanting to draw it, too.



I then started going to libraries, looking through artbooks, trying to understand how they were able to bring reality to their drawings!



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ons to photos,
nd.



And then there
are comics!
They're ...



...They're...trippy.



Tina Friesen

Comic by Tina Friesen