

# Poetry Comics

## Taking Poems Out of Church

DAVE MORICE

### The Birth of Poetry Comics

ONE autumn night in 1977, I went over to the apartment of a friend who was in the Iowa Writers Workshop. She had hundreds of poems stuffed into twelve black binders on her writing desk and I had about as many of those same binders filled with poetry at home, so what else could we begin the evening with but a discussion of poetry? At one point she said in a serious tone, "Great poems should paint pictures in the mind." And I said, partly to tease her, "Great poems would make great cartoons." After a short pause, she smiled and said, "Hey, you know you're right. You should draw some."

The following week I went to Oskaloosa, Iowa, for a writers-in-the-schools (WITS) program sponsored by the Iowa Arts Council. By day I worked with fifth- and sixth-grade students, and by night I drew an eight-page long cartoon version of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot. I used Eliot's words in the cartoon balloons, but I distorted their meanings in my drawings. Each panel had different characters, most of whom talked—a guitar, a musical note, two balloons, a doctor and a nurse etherizing the moon, a couple getting mugged, two shadows, and three buildings. I learned more about Eliot's poetry that week than I ever had before.



Self-portrait by the author.

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*Dave Morice was born in St. Louis and attended the Writers Workshop in Iowa City, where he became an anti-workshop Actualist and wrote the shortest thesis in workshop history, and later, as Dr. Alphabet, composed poetry marathons. He has published more than twenty-six books, including four from Teachers & Writers Collaborative: The Adventures of Dr. Alphabet, Poetry Comics and Poetry Comics: A Literary Postcard Book, and The Dictionary of Wordplay. For the past twenty-two years he has edited "Kickshaws," a wordplay column in Word Ways magazine. For seven years he taught Children's Literature at the University of Iowa, and has run creative-writing workshops for people ranging in age from four to ninety-six. Someday he hopes to be ninety-six, teaching to a four-year-old.*

Over the next few weeks, I drew cartoons of poems by other people—"Daddy" by Sylvia Plath, "The Little Lame Balloonman," by e.e. cummings, and "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams—and I showed them to friends. Then I filed them away. A year later I featured these cartoons in the first of seventeen issues of a magazine I started called *Poetry Comics*, printed by the University of Iowa's photocopy service. I had never had so much fun with the classics before. Previously I was a spectator, but now I was a teammate of the superpoets of history. In addition to those mentioned above, I drew cartoons of poems by Whitman, Dickinson, Shakespeare, Blake, and others. As time went on, I made cartoons of poems by my contemporaries, too.

One lazy Sunday afternoon, soon after issue #16 of *Poetry Comics* came out, the phone rang. I answered it. A voice said, "Hi! My roommate gets your *Poetry Comics*, and they've been piling up in the bathroom. I'm a writer for the *Village Voice*, and I'd like to do an article on the magazine." He talked to me for an hour about the magazine and a month later, the article came out. It reprinted six of the cartoons, and it included my address. Over the next month or so, I received an average of twenty-five letters per day from people ordering subscriptions and sending their comments. Three were from editors who wanted to publish the cartoons in book form. In 1980, Simon & Schuster came out with the first collection, *Poetry Comics: A Cartooniverse of Poems*. (Teachers & Writers Collaborative issued the third collection, *Poetry Comics: An Animated Anthology*, in 2002.)

## Poetry Comics In The Classroom

While I was publishing the magazine, I was also teaching creative writing through various organizations in Iowa and elsewhere. My teaching methods usually incorporated poetry with other art forms. It was inevitable that poetry and comics would come together in my classroom as well. In those days, the country was experiencing an explosion of WITS programs. Kenneth Koch's *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* paved the way for teachers to use poetry with kids of all ages, and teachers were thrilled to be able to excite kids with poetry, of all things, in the classroom, of all places.

I first taught poetry comics in a class called The Poetry Class for People Over 60 (PCPO-60), sponsored by the Iowa Arts Council, and then in week-long WITS programs throughout Iowa, where I worked with many different age groups, ranging



from first-graders to college students. Teachers weren't always receptive to poets using wildly nonscholastic teaching methods, but students enjoyed the revolution. After hearing that I used *Poetry Comics* in a few schools, the Arts Council sent a representative to the school in which I was currently working. In an apologetic tone she told me that the Council wanted her to find out if I was really serious about using cartoons to teach poetry. After sitting in on my class and seeing how much the kids got involved in being creative with words, she was convinced that *Poetry Comics* were "serious."

At first I had thought of my poetry comics as underground, anti-poetry-establishment creations, and yet there I was using them as successful teaching tools. How could this be? There are several reasons, but perhaps the most important is that students learn best when they are enjoying the subject at hand, and cartoons have always been a fun medium. Cartoons and poems, as some writers have noted, also share an important structural element; cartoonists have to carefully place the words within their strips just as poets have to carefully place their words in lines and stanzas. Perhaps the success of poetry comics in the classroom also has to do with what Dylan Thomas called "the common fun of the earth"; that is, poetry and cartoons are two things that everyone, given the opportunity and the freedom, can do and enjoy. Neither writing poetry nor drawing

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When I teach poetry—well, I don't teach poetry. I don't go into schools with the intention of showing kids how to write a sonnet or craft an image or this or that. I go into schools to show kids that writing is another way to have fun. I don't expect them

to become little Whitmans and Dickinsons. The most important thing I can do is give students an experience with language that they won't forget. Iowa City is a small town, and I've taught at four schools here. On several occasions I've run into people, now in their thirties, whom I taught in grade school, junior high, or high school. They tell me that they remember my visit to their school, that it showed them how to enjoy poetry, and that it helped them see that poetry wasn't something to fear—or to ignore. Sometimes a student might actually become a little Whitman. One ex-student of mine, now a high-school senior, attends the open poetry reading series that I organize at Uptown Bill's Coffee Shop. When he first came to the reading, he told me that I had visited his junior high class five years ago, and after that five-day program he decided to become a poet.

Let's face it: cartoonists have a big advantage over poets. Cartoons are known to be fun. They are for people who like to goof off, clown around, stare out the window, and daydream. We all like to goof off sometimes, but it seems that cartoonists are experts at it. Cartoons are always present in the classroom: they hide in the margins of

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spiral notebooks. One student is furtively doodling a picture of a space-man, and another is quickly cross-hatching the image of her pet cat. Kids sometimes dream about being cartoonists. What a terrific job! Who wouldn't enjoy meeting Stan Lee, the (former)

head of Marvel Comics? On the other hand, how many kids can name the poet laureate of America? And what does "poet laureate" mean anyway?

In mixing the "high art" of poetry with the "low art" of cartooning, something magical happens. The words augment the pictures, and the pictures augment the words. A student might say "I can't write" in response to a poetry exercise, or "I can't draw" in response to a drawing project. So instead of helping the students do one or the other, a poetry comics exercise heaps on both at the same time. I believe that the combination works extremely well partly because the student no longer has to focus on one form. There is a bigger challenge now: how to combine two forms. And yet the student doesn't get stressed out. Why not? Because he or she doesn't know the rules. Now the focus shifts to inventing new rules instead of worrying about breaking old ones.

When I put out *Poetry Comics*, I was doing it partly to make people laugh and partly to shock people. My slogan was "Abuse the Muse," but most people seemed to be laughing along with the muse. As Robert Pinsky (former poet laureate!) put it, in a 1981 letter to the Muse's Mailbag (*Poetry Comics*' letters column), "I'm glad to see you taking poems out of church in this friendly, appealing way."

As Pinsky noted, putting poems in comic-book form allows us to explore other ways of interacting with poetry: A poetry comic can realistically represent the poem, or it can distort the poem's intended meaning. It can parody the seriousness of the poem. It can criticize the poem or harmonize with it. It can show how flexible poetic language is. It can show how powerful comic art is. It can explore the possibilities of words and pictures. It can open up another door to the imagination. And it is fun. Poetry—when viewed only as a serious, respected, intellectual, cerebral undertaking—is often rejected by the uninitiated as being aloof, boring, difficult. Comic books are fun, playful, lively, gory, zany, freewheeling, colorful, and exciting. Poetry can be exciting and playful, too. One of the greatest things about poetry comics is that the combination of pictures and words allows the two art forms to communicate through a kind of game. And the game of poetry comics is wide open. 