



# The Answer is Yes

## Teaching Cartooning

J. KATHLEEN WHITE

I HAVE TAUGHT ART AND WRITING RESIDENCIES in major cities, one-room schoolhouses, and the Blackfoot and Crow reservations in Montana; in every borough of New York City; and to Navaho high-school students at the College of Eastern Utah in Blanding. From 2005–2007 I taught after-school cartooning to sixth- and seventh-graders at Forward School for Creative Writing, in the Bronx. Almost all my residencies, whether they be for art or writing, have included cartooning.

My introductory cartooning lesson is the same no matter what the age or location. I make a template: six boxes on 11" x 17" paper, leaving room for a title at the top. I show the students the template and tell them that everyone is going to get one and we are going to make cartoons. It can be about anything they like, I tell them, and they can use drawings and words any way they want. "Don't worry if you think you can't draw," I reassure them. "You can use stick figures or shapes."

Then I riff about ideas. "This can be a story about something that happened yesterday, or about something that never happened but you wish had happened. It can be very true or not true at all. This can be about taking your neighbor to court, or how your refrigerator at home has an alien life-form inside it, or about what you see when you look in the mirror." I throw out ideas off the top of my head. I don't plan what I'm going to say but make it up in the moment so the class is fun for me too. I try to throw off sparks. "Who out there has an idea?" I say and then riff on ideas expressed by the class. Eventually I say, "Any questions about what we're doing?" Usually the question is a variant of "Can I...," and my answer is "Yes."

Now I explain the process a bit more, "You are going to make your drawings and words in pencil, and when you are finished, I have black markers you can use to go over your pencil lines." (Ideally, I have an assortment of black pens with different widths of tip.) I also bring blank 11" x 17" pages with no boxes, in case anyone wants to design the layout for themselves. If students seem stuck I see what I can do to encourage them individually.

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*J. Kathleen White has published a number of books that combine writing and drawing, most recently, Meaning Upon Waking, 2008. (It Is and It Isn't). Over the years, she has time and again leapt into the fray and taught writing and art residencies with: A.I.S. Montana and Washington; Very Special Arts; Poets-on-the-Prairie; Turner Youth Initiative; and currently, Teachers & Writers Collaborative.*



"Second Graders Working on Their Cartoons,"  
by J. Kathleen White.

My idea for what's possible in cartooning class draws on the work of a wide range of artists, such as Saul Steinberg, H.C. Westerman, Sue Coe, Lynda Barry, George Herriman, Ray Johnson, Cy Twombly, Hannah Cohoon, Jim Torok, and myself, among many others. I enjoy looking at what kids invent for themselves, the stranger the better. On longer-term residencies, I bring cartoon books, art books, and presentation binders full of all kinds of examples I have collected.

When the cartoons are finished and black lines completed (this can take anywhere from one period to six weeks), I shrink the pages on the school xerox machine to 8-1/2" x 11" size, either for them to keep, or to create an anthology and I explain that's how professional cartoonists work—they draw big and shrink it to size.

Sometimes, with special education classes, I have printed prompts with the boxes. For example: "Who was it? Where were they? What did they say? What did they do? What did the people say? What happened in the end?" With some groups the questions help everyone to participate.

One time in eastern Montana I was working with a boy in a special education class and he drew scribbles in all the boxes. The scribbles sort of looked the same, but then there was something different in each box also. I kept studying his cartoon, and then, *gestalt*, I saw it, it became clear:

"Is that a boy with his thumb up?"

Yes!

"Is that you?"

Yes!

Each box was a different thing he had done (like wash the car), for which someone had told him "Good boy." I probably can't explain why this was so exciting for all of us—his teacher, his helpers, and me—that he "got it" and that we "got it." You can't tell where and how your feelings of success will come.

In another eastern Montana residency, a "Raisin Cowboy" was created (he looked like a wrinkled raisin with a cowboy hat on) who had been "raisin' hell" for one hundred years, with poker, drink, and in red-light districts (represented by a wrinkled raisin wearing a hat with a flower on it). This cartoon still makes me laugh to think about it, and no one censored it. As a matter of fact, it was included in a statewide anthology of student writing.

To teach cartooning, from my perspective, is to help students see how they can make a piece of paper their own. I'm a wedge in the schedule; I hold a time-space open where students get the chance to try out their own ideas, using paper and pencil.

"Can we do whatever we like?"

"Yes!"

