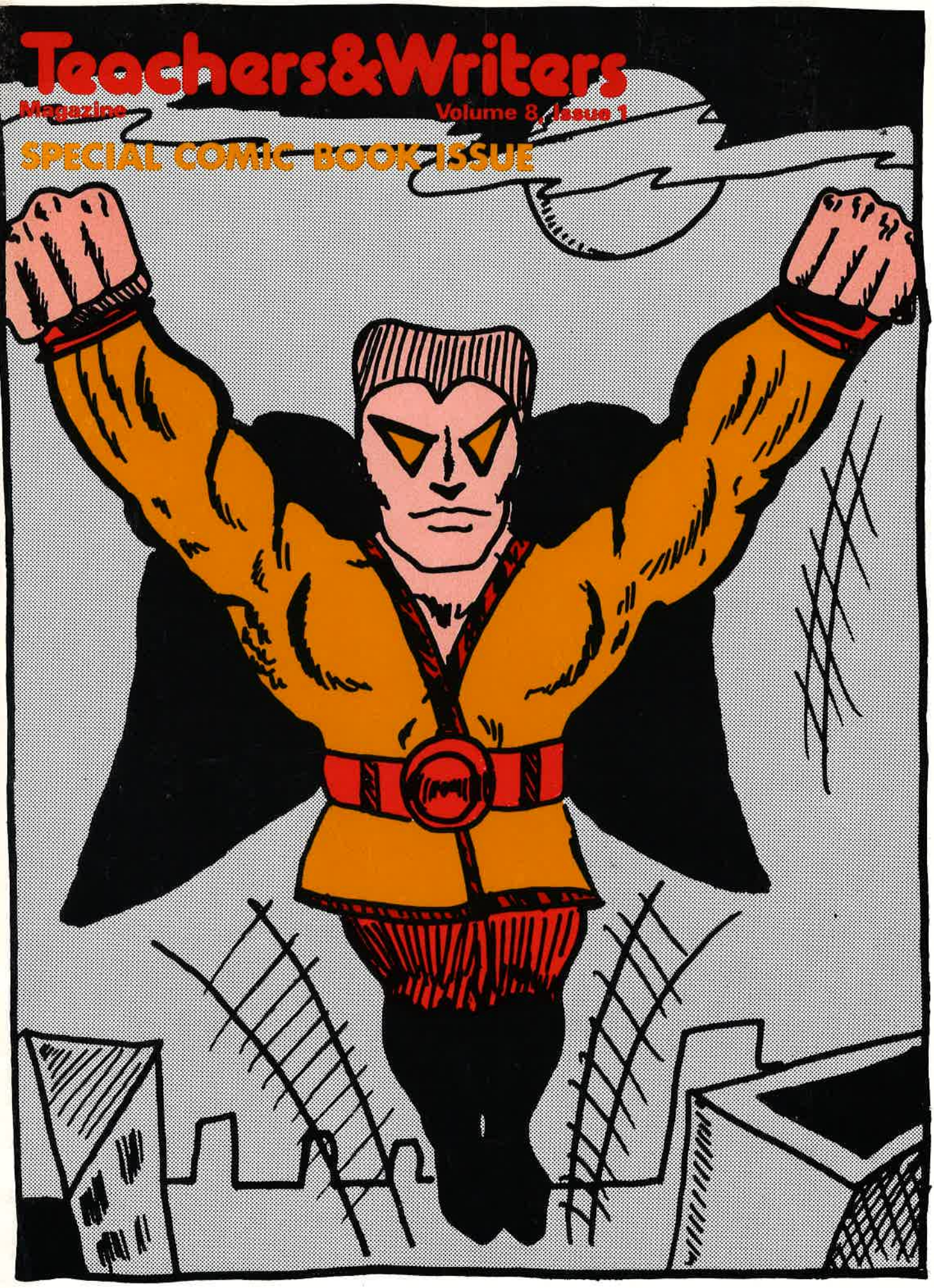
Teachers&Writers

Magazine

Volume 8, Issue 1

SPECIAL COMIC BOOK ISSUE



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Special Comic Book Issue

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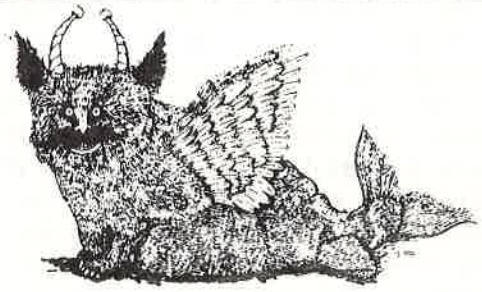
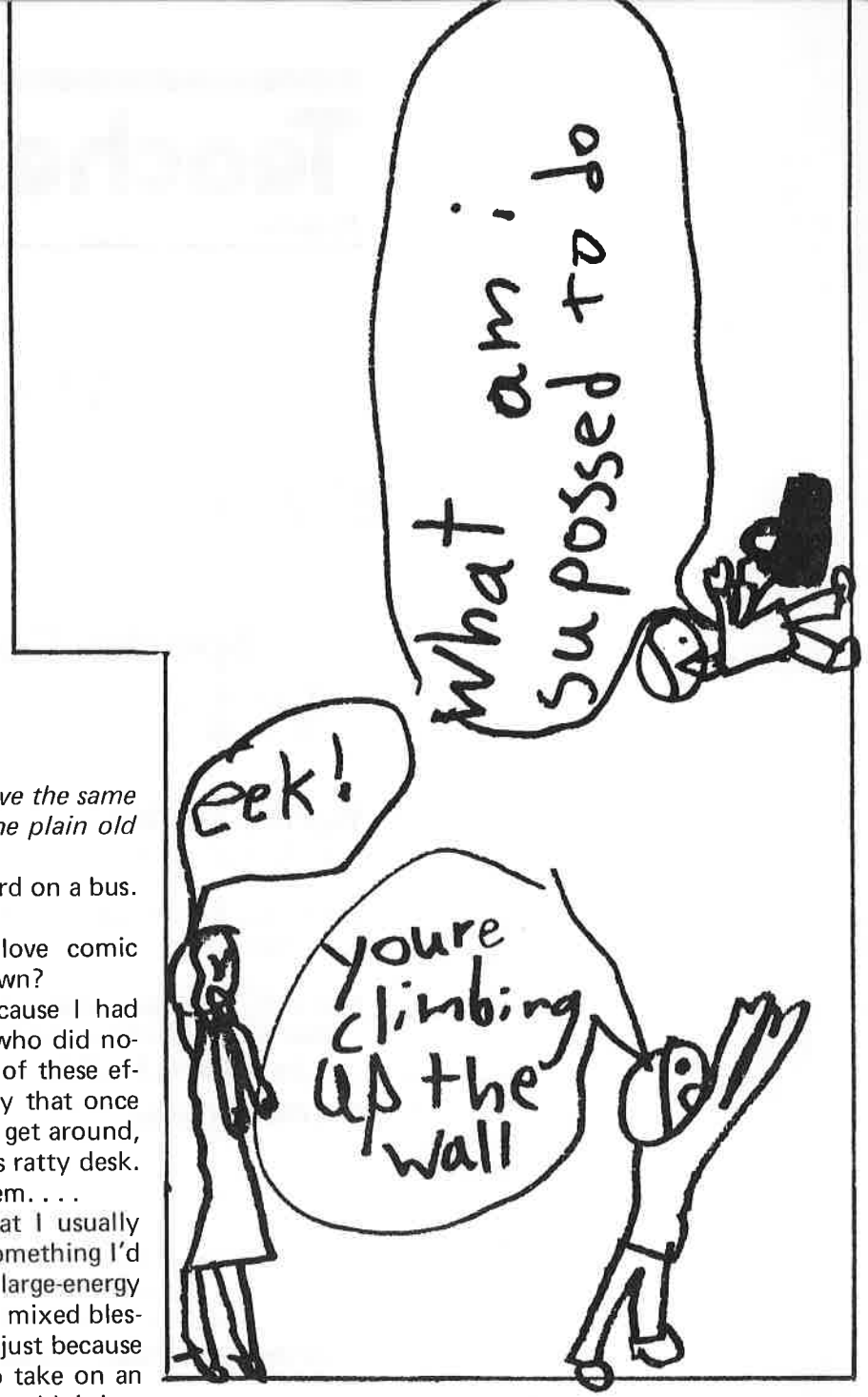


fall '76

The Comic Book Project

Phillip Lopate



Andrea Newman

1. An Idea Whose Time Had Come

"You know what's gross? Both comics have the same sort of guys—one super super guy and one plain old guy who's a crimefighter."

Conversation between two kids overheard on a bus.

It seemed such a natural: children love comic books, why not make and print up their own?

I knew that the talent was there because I had already stumbled across groups of kids who did nothing but draw their own comics. Some of these efforts were so elaborate that it was a pity that once they were done the comics had no way to get around, but ended up deteriorating in somebody's ratty desk. It would be nice to find a way to print them. . . .

My problem with natural ideas is that I usually have to carry them out. Even if there's something I'd rather do more. This capitulation to large-energy schemes whose time has come has been a mixed blessing for me and my co-workers. After all, just because a proposition seems logical and begins to take on an inevitable allure, doesn't mean that one couldn't just as easily do the unnatural, the slightly less ineluctable. . . . But it doesn't work that way. I can succeed in holding off a natural idea for years, and then I crumble, I go quietly.

The idea had been lying quietly for some time when, the spring before last, I was introduced at a party to Mark Solomon, Teachers & Writers Collaborative's new printer. Mark seemed intelligent, likable, and he won me over right off by telling me that he had enjoyed reading our Newsletter articles, especially mine. I had always assumed that printers would do anything rather than be forced to read the things they run off. But Mark was clearly one of a different, new breed of printers. He said he envied us our ability to work so much with children. And I said, almost as a dare, why didn't we do something together that would involve him in the school. Like—oh, like printing up children's comic books.

We had had several glasses of wine, and we both got very excited, and we were in that euphoric, loaded state anyway that makes one willing to entertain large, deferrable ideas. We "brainstormed" for a bit, shook hands, and told Steve Schrader, the director of Teachers & Writers, our scheme to work together. He listened with an obliging suspension of disbelief.

I went home and forgot the whole fantasy.

However, Mark and Steve didn't. They arranged an evening meeting for all of us to work out the details

of a proposal, which Glenda Adams, our associate director, would write and send off to the foundations. Having started the idea, and infected others with it, I was now curiously repelled by the whole business. My comic-book czar ambitions had deserted me. Nevertheless, I dutifully went to the meeting, and we drew up a list of suggested activities that such a dream project might involve. These projects always start with a vision which is so perfectly and poignantly realized, that it almost seems a bother to have to do them.

It's amusing for me to remember some of the noble and sound educational ideas which we had every intention of carrying out, and which were forgotten once the juggernaut got rolling. For instance, not only were we going to run a schoolwide comic book club (which we did), and teach kids how to do color separations and publish four comic books in runs of 3000 apiece (which we did), which would raise reading scores (who knows?) and which would be distributed throughout the district; we were also going to take the children on field trips to the major comic book publishers (never happened); we were going to bring in visiting artists like Jack Kirby or Charles Schultz to lecture to the comic book club (never happened); and we were most definitely going to involve the children in the production process of their own comic books, down at the plant. As originally conceived, the project would not only be about creativity but about labor and production, and would bridge the lamentable separation between the school and the working world. Some of these things would have been great to do, but weren't done because the project took off on its own autonomous roller coaster. There was never any time for field trips, it was too hectic and sprawling to bring in experts, and there were very real safety questions about engaging children in any kind of work around a printing plant.

But I'm getting way ahead of myself. I had no doubt in my mind that the comic book project would never be funded. In the depressed economy, with foundation money getting tighter every day, who would expect so "frivolous" a project as child-made comic books to be funded? I looked forward with complete calm to the rejection of our proposal, and the regrettable death of an authentically natural idea.

Evidently, one foundation was willing to take the chance. Starting September, we would be in the comic book manufacturing business.

2. More Reluctance

Maybe this is the proper time to say what my attitude was toward comic books. Neutrality bordering on indifference. I can't pretend to be an aficionado of the medium; I stopped reading comic books about the age of thirteen. When I think back to the comics I used to read as a child, I especially remember the Black Hawks, a collective of superheroes anticipating the modern Marvel gang, who would fly off in their planes in the last box, singing "We're the Black Hawks! . . ." Why the dopey repetition of this song should have appealed to me says something about the nature of children's pleasure in comic books, which I think has more to do with the enjoyment of recognizing ritually repeated codes than with originality. In any case, I read Little Lulu and Tales of the Crypt and Classics Illustrated, indiscriminately, without ever feeling that even the most "violent" comic books could harm me. And after a certain age, which I think of arbitrarily as thirteen, my appetite for comics went away.

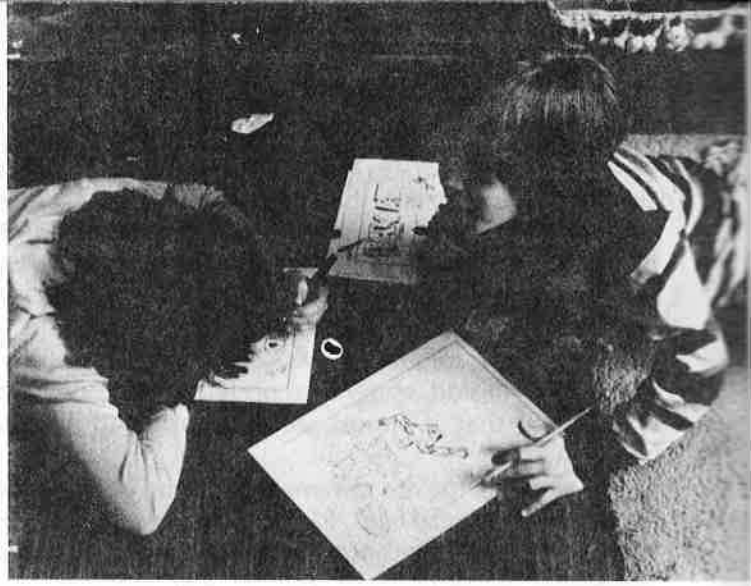
I never had the urge to stop a child from reading one, but on the other hand I never was tempted to take it out of his hands and gobble it up myself. It's *their* culture, I thought. When kids go wild about a new kind of yo-yo that glows in the dark, or whatever, I feel I'm permitted a detached yawn.

This is an important distinction for those of us whose job it is to encourage children's imaginations. It's one thing to give children plenty of sympathetic room to express their favorite culture and its heroes, be it Road Runner or the Fonz; it's another thing to try to trick ourselves into thinking that their enthusiasms need be ours. It's lovely when the aesthetics of children and teachers happen to coincide, but when they don't someone has to give. Neither side should have to give all the time. If some kids want me to help them make a film, and the one story they want to do is a scene-by-scene copy of Willie Wonka And The Chocolate Factory, I'm going to have to get them to change their plans, or find a perverse way to make it interesting to me; because otherwise, if I'm too bored, the work will suffer. That's where the deals start being made.

We faced this issue often in the comic book club. None of the three adults involved had any real love of comic books. Instead we were motivated by a kind of logistical curiosity to see how we could bring this thing off, as if it were a carpentry problem.

3. A Visit to the Professionals

As soon as he found out that the grant had come through, Mark Solomon began investigating how comic books were actually made. Although he was an experienced printer, he had never yet done a comic book. Comics are printed on large, fast web presses which are geared to handle massive runs: the normal run for a commercial comic book would start around 100,000. We however could not use more than 3,000 copies, which meant that our cost per unit copy would inevitably and unfortunately run much higher. Mark located a large web press where the job would still be done for us "within reason."

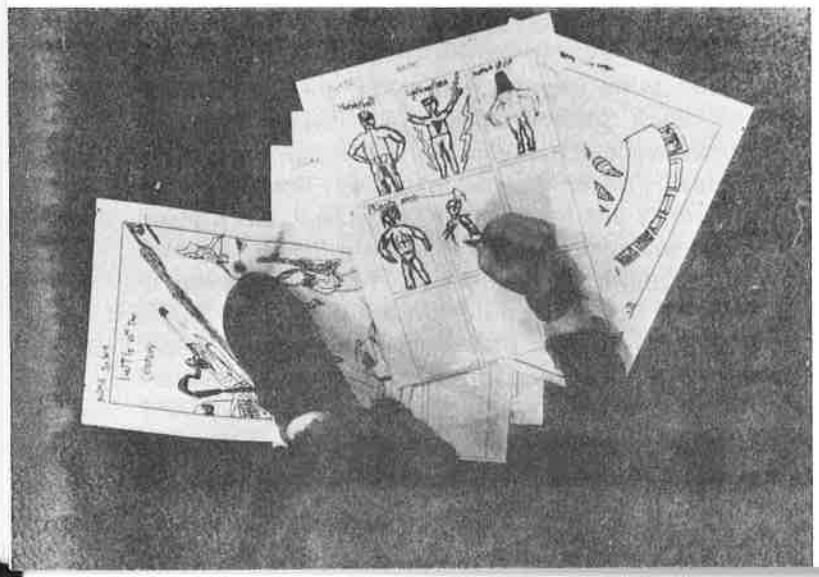


Next, Mark and I visited a big comic book company to see how the artwork was prepared. It was D.C. Comics, but it could have been any of the giants in the field, and I think our experience would have been similar. The man who spoke to us, Mr. T., greeted us with a philanthropical, what-can-I-do-for-you manner. We told him that we wanted to make comic books with children, and that we were toying with the idea of bringing some children to the offices to see how it was done, if that was all right, or of having their artists and production people give workshops at the school. Also, we needed some technical information about preparation of artwork for press. (We were also frankly feeling him out to see if he was willing to make any volunteer gestures "for a good cause.")

Mr. T. spoke of himself as a man with a big heart, who would be happy to cooperate in the fullest. He had always had an interest in young people and schools, he said. Did we know that D.C. had just published a line of comic books for slow readers, plus a handsome giantsized comic of The Bible and a *Superman Salutes the Bicentennial*? He would be happy to help us—if D.C. were given public credit. And maybe there was even a way for our school to order some quantities of his comic book readers.

I saw we were in the game of: you scratch my curriculum tool, I'll scratch yours. I had the impression comic book manufacturers were not exactly ingenuous about their potential growth in the reading-industry market. Comics are "relevant for Johnny," so the argument goes. Mr. T. phrased the situation more in altruistic terms as a sense of responsibility toward their customers (mainly children) who had made them prosperous. The industry was aware of its tarnished image in the eyes of educators, and was trying to do something positive about it.

All this was understandable. The intent was still to be helpful. But things got cloudier when we started asking printing questions. Mr. T., when he was not being interrupted by phone calls, took an amused, enigmatic attitude toward our questions, as toward babes in the woods. His answers seemed mostly designed to demonstrate his vast grasp of the interconnections involved, and to discourage us from thinking we could ever understand until we had put in many years of apprenticeship.



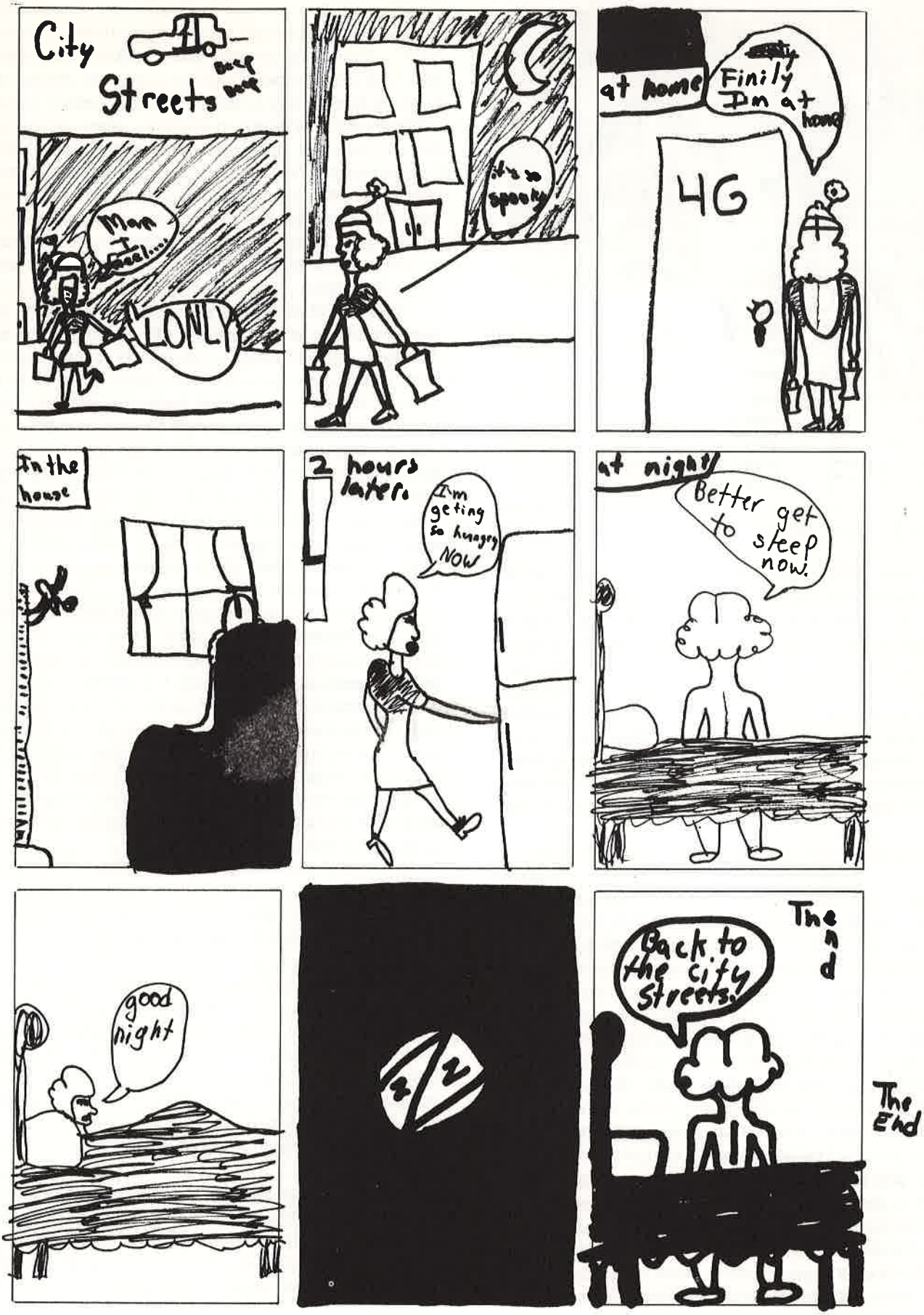
The key misunderstanding seemed to be his impression that we wanted to turn out D.C. Comics. He cautioned us that it would take a long time to learn how to draw Superman correctly—there was a right way and a wrong way. When we declared that we wanted to get children to come up with their own original comic book characters, his eyes twinkled from behind his bifocal glasses, and he gave us to know that in the end we would come round to Superman. There was no better comic book character in the world than Superman. The main work of originality had been done; it was our job, like novices in the Japanese flower arrangement ceremony, to copy the patterns. And that held for the production end as well: there should be a fairly precise division of labor between storywriters, letterers, inkers, colorists, artists for different characters, office managers, errand boys, etc. etc.

That most of this could not be applicable to a classroom situation, and that we simply wanted to know those bare elements that were necessary physically to put out a comic book, was extremely hard to get across to the benevolent Mr. T. I think he wouldn't believe that anyone could go about it in any other way than the exact conveyer belt procedure that his corporation had evolved.

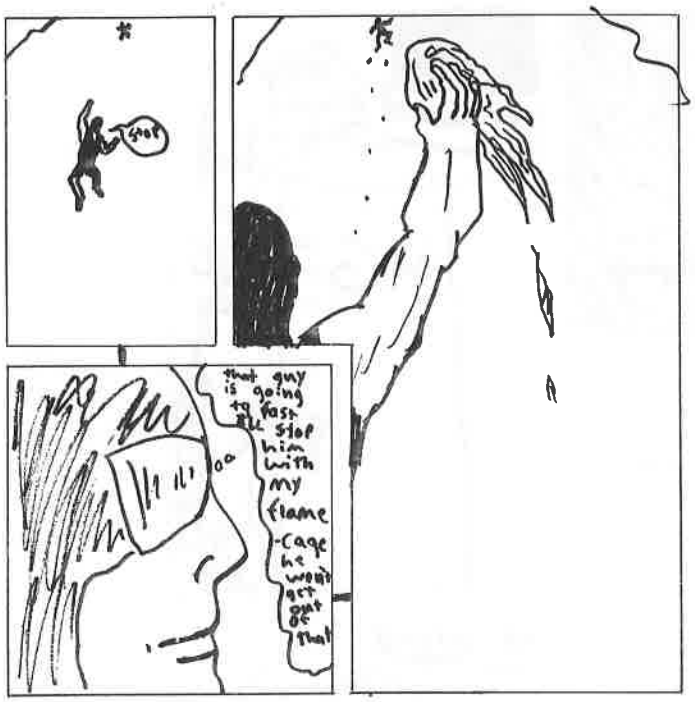
We came away feeling that it might be better to stay out of the major publishers' orbit. There seemed a real danger of being swallowed up, if we became dependent on them for small favors. Better to stumble through the process our own way, learning as we went.

4. The Format Paper

We knew now that comic book pages were drawn on large, folio-sized sheets or boards and then photo-reduced. These sheets were what we needed to start, especially since kids often draw larger than adults in the first place. Mark printed up some legal-sized blank



example 1: Elissa Vecchione



example 2: Barry Brenig

sheets with little blue markings on the sides, which would divide the page into halves, thirds, quarters or eighths if someone took the trouble to connect these markings with a ruler. It seemed a clever way of teaching fractions at the same time as having kids make art. But we tested it out on a few kids, who did not take the trouble to connect the lines, drawing boxes free-form instead. And when they did rule off boxes, they invariably disregarded the second marking a quarter of an inch below the first, and drew their boxes contiguously, without any breathing space.

It's curious that children stare at comic books all day long, and yet when they divide a page into boxes to draw their own, they forget the rim of border between the boxes. The result is usually more messy, crammed and hard to read. In any case, this false start convinced me that we needed to start with a more fixed structure, of paper with predrawn boxes. I asked Mark to print up six sets of paper, each having a different pattern of boxes already drawn on it. They were heavy enough (like a card) to absorb the children's inks, and we called them "format paper." Now the task for the child was much easier. He had merely to choose a piece of paper with an arrangement of boxes that appealed to him, and fill it in any way he wanted. A degree of neatness and standardization—and therefore, readability—was assured from the start. Moreover, the papers had the advantage of all being the same size, 9½" X 13", which was the same proportion as a regular comic book only slightly larger. So they were instantly ready to be printed offset, without our having to cut and paste at the last minute. In the jargon of the printing trade, they were "camera-ready."

Our goal was to set up our preliminary materials in such a way that, months later, when the contents of the first comic books were chosen, we would merely have to run off the originals without having to tamper with the kids' artwork in any way. Mark, knowing the headaches with half-tones that come from trying to reproduce pencil drawings, declared a rule that only black-ink pens could be used. That way all art would be dark enough, and would be line work. We would buy grosses of black Pentels (magic markers with thin points) and distribute them to the kids who came to the comic book club.

Though we didn't know it then, the key to the success of the comic book club would be this simple formula: format paper + pentels. It was not only that they resulted in camera-ready copy. The format paper was an instantly graspable form, understood by first graders as well as fifth and sixth, and as such, enabled everyone attending the club for the first time to enter immediately into the activity, as if shooting down a sliding pond. If a teacher was too busy to welcome a new child, the other children enjoyed explaining the setup. Just take a piece of paper from one of those piles, get a pen from the box, and draw any kind of comic you feel like.

The formats were designed to accommodate different varieties and fields of action. For instance, a sheet divided into nine small even boxes had more to do with an even, domestic story, the world of Little Lulu or of everyday hopes and fears; while a page with a large irregular-shaped box suggested action, adventure, like Submariner climbing up the walls or plunging underwater. (See Examples 1 and 2). A page which suddenly opened into a large horizontal box invited a panoramic scene, like a bazaar with lots of people and background detail.

The black pens were another story. They were resisted at first by some children, particularly the more self-aware artists, who were already used to correcting and erasing in pencil. We made it clear to them that they could use pencil initially, so long as they went over it with a black pen. But I must say that we did frown on pencil and encouraged the pentels, for more than one reason. They made for a bold line, and a consistency of look from artist to artist, which would help give the printed comic book an overall coherent style. Also, in some cases I think they helped children who had been too fussy and tentative in their drawing, to commit themselves to a freer, more rhythmical line.

We had a few white-out bottles available for the compulsive I-made-a-mistakers, but they were expensive. Over the long haul we encouraged the abstract expressionist premise (at least for this project) of turning an accidental spill into part of the picture.

5. Membership In The Club

How was the club to be organized?

It would certainly have to include those children (boys, mostly) whom I had already identified as hard-core comic book artists. But I had a strong intuition that it should be thrown open to the whole school, grades one through six, maybe even advertised, to draw in kids I didn't yet know about.

I sent out notices to all the teachers asking them to choose two or three children whom they thought might get something out of regular attendance in a comic book club (specifying not just boys), and to send them to the Writing Room each Monday afternoon. Since P.S. 75 has about thirty classrooms, I estimated that, what with absences and forgetfulness, a maximum of sixty children would show up. We had about seventy the first day. How the children were chosen, what criteria were used by their teachers, I'm not sure. Side by side with children who loved to draw, there were children who could not draw a stick figure. Some of the kids chosen, I imagine, had been rewarded for being good, and others exiled for being bad. I noticed an unusually large proportion of James Dean types, kids with reputations for being introverted loners. If there was a "type" that predominated in the C.B. Club population, it was the kind of private child who would rather be left in a corner alone or with a friend or two, than made to socialize en masse. Or maybe the club's atmosphere brought that trait out in everyone, including otherwise extroverted children. The very populousness of the club offered a protection to each member's privacy. The Writing Room is the same size as a normal American classroom: i.e. not intended for groups of more than thirty-five children at a time. To have crowds of fifty, sixty (once I counted close to eighty) jammed into that room, making art under each other's elbows and noses, meant that we simply had to learn to live with each other. Extreme decentralization became the territorial principle. Those early enough to grab the few chairs or desks were lucky. Everyone else would lie on the floor or the beat-up carpet. Stretched out on the rug, dreamily drawing, taking their own sweet time over every box, fantasizing away, they seemed to forget sometimes that they were in school. It was eerie to watch the way quiet, dreamy little children like Chersteen would continue drawing, untouched by the angry fuss Fritz was making two feet away because someone was shaking the table. No one so much as mentioned the one-room schoolhouse situation of throwing six- through thirteen-year-olds in the same workspace. We had some bullies and tough kids, but the miracle was we never had any real discipline problems. The entire year, everyone coexisted peaceably in that same crowded space, the majority of the children not necessarily considerate as indifferent, self-absorbed. It was a wonder that they did not all

step on each other's drawings or fingers. There were inkspills and occasional cries of "OUCH!", but most of them operated on that big-city sixth sense of threading somnambulistically through crowds.

I can only speculate that the lack of disciplinary problems might be due to some of these factors: 1) luck; 2) the children were doing something they enjoyed and that kept them involved; 3) they were permitted a fair amount of freedom to talk to each other and walk around and goof off, which obviated much of the need to defy; 4) the presence of three strong males (Mark, me, and later artist Bob Sievert) may have deterred some misbehavior; 5) they were aware that it was a privilege to be there—a privilege that could be taken away from them and given to others who would be only too happy to fill their place.

The club had become popular. No sooner had we met once than I started receiving notes from parents asking if their children could be allowed to join. We already had our hands full. Teachers reported that other students were complaining and putting pressure on them. We talked about the possibility of rotating groups. A good idea, except that the original children whom we had already started to become attached to, would be excluded on the grounds that "they had already had their turn," just at the point when they were beginning to benefit from the continuing experience. So I took the hard line, that we couldn't accommodate everyone in the world; it would have to be the original members. Then I took the soft line, answering "Sure, send them in—but just this time." Then I forgot what I had promised, I backtracked, stalled, equivocated, made individual deals with kids and teachers. It was all unfair, from the viewpoint of organizational justice, which I did regret. But in the long run, all these inconsistencies and double messages had the not undesirable effect of cutting chinks in the membership wall, so that eventually the children guessed that anyone could get in if he or she really wanted to. I couldn't keep track of who was or wasn't supposed to be there. Any attempt at keeping attendance would have been insane. A system of pragmatic natural selection took over: Whoever showed up, belonged there.

I wouldn't be surprised if our little Monday club was used at times like the Casbah, as a place to hide miscreants and evaders. It was easy to disappear in that mass. Yet, once inside the door, whatever their motives, they had to become involved. That was the deal.

Some of the originally-picked children found that they had only three or four weeks' worth of interest and ideas, and asked to be excused. No problem: there was always someone eager to take their place. Why make them feel guilty about losing interest when, in strictly objective terms, their leaving wouldn't hurt the club?

For better or worse, the comic book project became a *club* in its classical sense: a voluntary association of like-interested individuals. Our own terminology had boomeranged: calling it a club at first but really intending it to be a class in comic-book making, we realized that we had inadvertently set up a clubhouse used by and for children. It was hard to start lecturing them when the club was in full flow—it would have been like getting up in the middle of a bowling alley and starting to shout advice. And like a bowling alley, whose purposive roar the club sometimes approximated, the customers arrived whenever they had a mind to, picked up a ball they liked at the rack (the radiator, with its piles of format paper), and "threw" till they were tired.

There was no one time when everybody arrived. Children on early lunch hour might drop by at 12:30 and stay till 3, while those on late lunch schedule sometimes came in at 12, left at 12:30 and returned at 1:40. Meanwhile, other children would be drifting in as soon as they had finished a project in their classroom that interested them more or that they had to complete. Each artist would stay as long as he or she had the inclination. Sometimes they would hit a blank wall, and say, "I'll finish this next time." Again, while in a smaller workshop I might have tended to challenge them to take it further, in the comic book club there were so many other, needy kids pressing for attention that I usually took them at their word, and let them be the final judge of their own stamina.

6. What To Teach?

I have spoken already of the comic book project as a success. We had this feeling very early on. Kids kept coming back and brought their friends with them, an enormous bulk of work was being turned out, there would be no problem picking enough good material for the issues, there was a friendly, cooperative tone in the room . . . what more could we ask?

Yet success can be anxiety-provoking, especially when you feel you have no control over it and almost nothing to do with it. The club was basically the kids' thing; their interest in comic books gave it the drive, the week-to-week momentum. Oh sure, Mark and I were helpful and necessary, but at times we felt like nothing more than supply clerks in charge of giving out materials. It didn't seem like enough to set out papers and pens till the end of June. I wanted to *teach* something. But how could I teach them a form they knew so much more about than I did? What they needed most of all was someone to help them improve their artwork, and I was not a visual artist.

The addition of Bob Sievert to the club, at first as a visiting artist, and eventually as a regular, had a healthy impact on all of us. Bob is a painter who works for Teachers & Writers Collaborative in other schools; I was happy to borrow him and his massive competence for our project. I had been familiar with his creative teaching since 1970, when we both worked together in East Harlem. He has wonderful amounts of energy, humor, sass, sensitivity, knowledge of materials, and respect for young people. Besides our being good friends, I consider him professionally one of the strongest workers able to pull creativity out of children I have ever seen. We love each other, and we are outrageously competitive. Neither of us is afraid to be nasty about the other's efforts: he had no sooner arrived at the comic book club than he began questioning the quality of the art that the children were producing, and groaning about the monotonous superhero stories. Bob Sievert's criticisms mirrored many I had been secretly thinking but was afraid to bring out; his saying them aloud, besides making me feel defensive, prodded me into a competitive discontent, and started me thinking about what it was I actually should be teaching the kids:

Diary Entry (late October)

I am now a little more ready to step back and look at the work which has been flooding in on us.

I have not fed the kids any content ideas for sever-

al weeks because I wanted to see how long their momentum would take them. I don't know. Maybe forever. . . . They certainly respond with almost Pavlovian quickness to the task of filling in the blank boxed pages with pictures and words. Some of the results have been charming, surprising, perfect. But I must admit that all too much of it has a sameness. Bob Sievert complained of this from a visual point of view: and it's true, if you stand back and squint your eye, it all looks the same. Nothing has greater or lesser visual weight. Only Jon Bornholdt had the idea of blacking some backgrounds to achieve contrast. The rest have single-lined characters flying through largely white, undifferentiated space. Bob's suggestion was to print up larger format paper so that the kids would have more room to pack the frames with rich detail.

*I'm willing, but my sense is that that's not the problem. The problem is narrative. The kids are burning up the paper, rushing from box to box to get to the end, with simple stick-em-up stories where the hero punches someone in Box 3 and the crook is put behind bars in the last box. * I don't know how much the format paper itself is responsible for this sameness. I suspect not that much. But you'd be amazed how many of their stories reduce to crime and apprehension. The superhero is either flying through the air or on the ground—in neither case is the locale delineated. But then, why delineate a background when the narrative itself has so little use for objects, props and settings? In short, the problem isn't an accidental barrenness of background detail, but a fogginess or thinness of narrative which fails to generate a use for things and settings.*

Why?

Most of the kids have responded to the task (which was left largely undefined) by setting out to make comic books. *I mean long stories with set characters and lots of kinetic action. In most cases they have not invented a whole new character or situation (this is hard enough for professionals like Stan Lee to do) but have simply expropriated the ones they are familiar with from the world of comic books or TV: Superman, Mr. Spock, the Hulk. Some of the kids are obsessed with these characters, who constitute what Bob Sievert called "their pre-fed private imaginations." The club, for them, is a perfect opportunity for them to think about what they are trying to think of all the time anyway but are forced to conceal from parents and teachers. These kids are perfectly content to draw and re-draw the paraphernalia and portraits of their superheroes. As might be expected, their comic strips are impoverished in narrative line, thinly conceived, and either static (frontal Egyptian worshipful tracings) or ridiculously kinetic (crash—bam—POW!!!), with no underlying story. All of their energy is drained off by the fantasizing and very little of it gets onto the page.*

I did not expect much progress from these kids at first. (And I'm not getting it.) What bothers me is that some of the other kids who are not particularly obsessed with comic book heroes have fallen into the same trite story(?)-lines. Faced with the enormous challenge of having to generate a whole cosmos for each comic book venture, the kids have naturally borrowed heavily from the nearest comics at hand. At that, not even Charlie Brown, Little Lulu or Mary Worth have been tapped, only the superheroes. Very few kids have availed themselves of the option of doing comic strips *that begin and end on the same page, and whose characters need only exist to make a simple point (like Jules Feiffer). Not a single kid has yet done a one-box cartoon, à la New Yorker.*

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* For instance, see pp. 50-51 in the Black Cat Comic Book. All page references in this article will refer to the numbered pages in the bound comic book, Black Cat, and not to the Newsletter pages.

I think we can move in two (opposite) directions to resolve this problem. One is by scaling down: to one-box cartoons or three-box jokes; concentrate on the single frame. (It's the same problem as kids making films: they always over-plot at first, and very shallowly, which is where the one-shot movie should come in).

Second is by opening out: accepting the challenge to create new characters and worlds. Teach detail a) of character b) of setting, place. Encourage them to place the action in exotic locales—Africa, the North Pole—or bizarre nearby ones—a graveyard, a warehouse.

Narratives should become either more realistic or more fantastic:

a) encourage more real-life experience comic strips. Funny true occurrences, diaries, heartbreaks

b) dreams

c) real fantasy creatures—bring in Hieronymous Bosch. Work with imaginary worlds. Utopias, mutant creatures, flowers, moles, mice.

d) Open up the genres. What about love comics, mysteries, schoolboy Archie-type, kids' worlds (Little Lulu).

e) Other assignments:

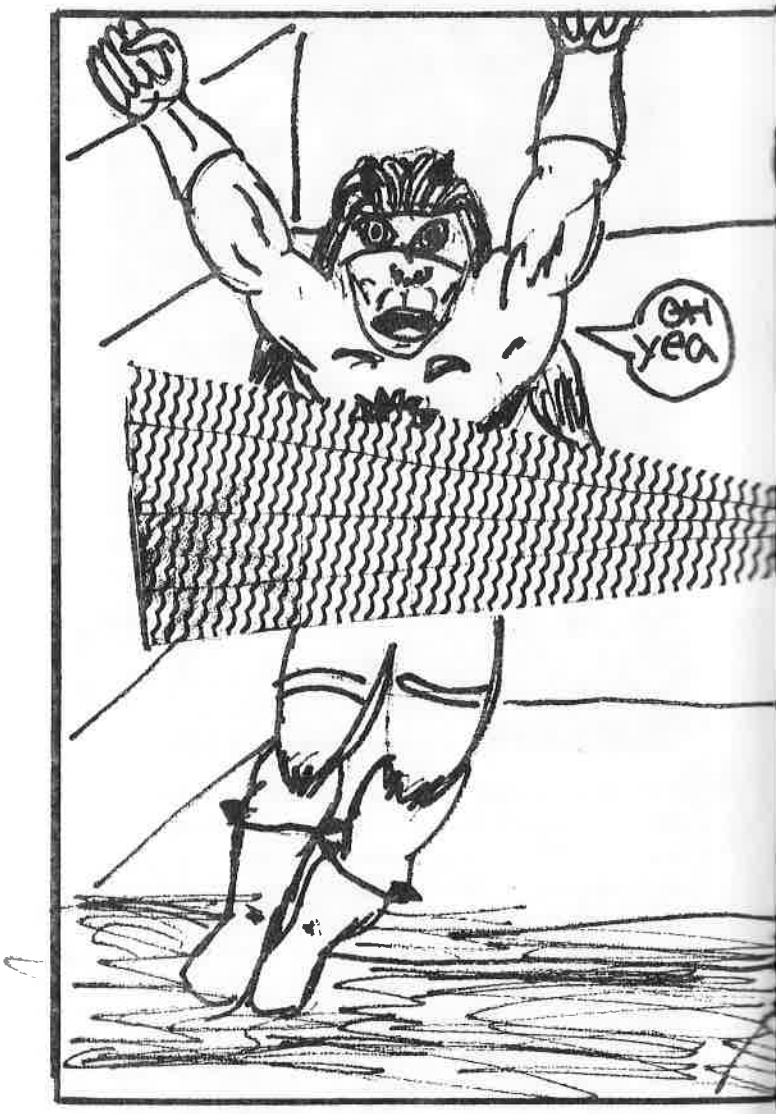
Draw a comic strip without any people, just furniture and objects. Make them talk.

Concentrate on changing the feel of the backgrounds from box to box.

Draw a cartoon where everyone is thinking but no one is talking. Or where someone is both thinking and talking, but opposite things (to show hypocrisy).

Draw a comic with all closeups.

Draw a non-violent comic book.



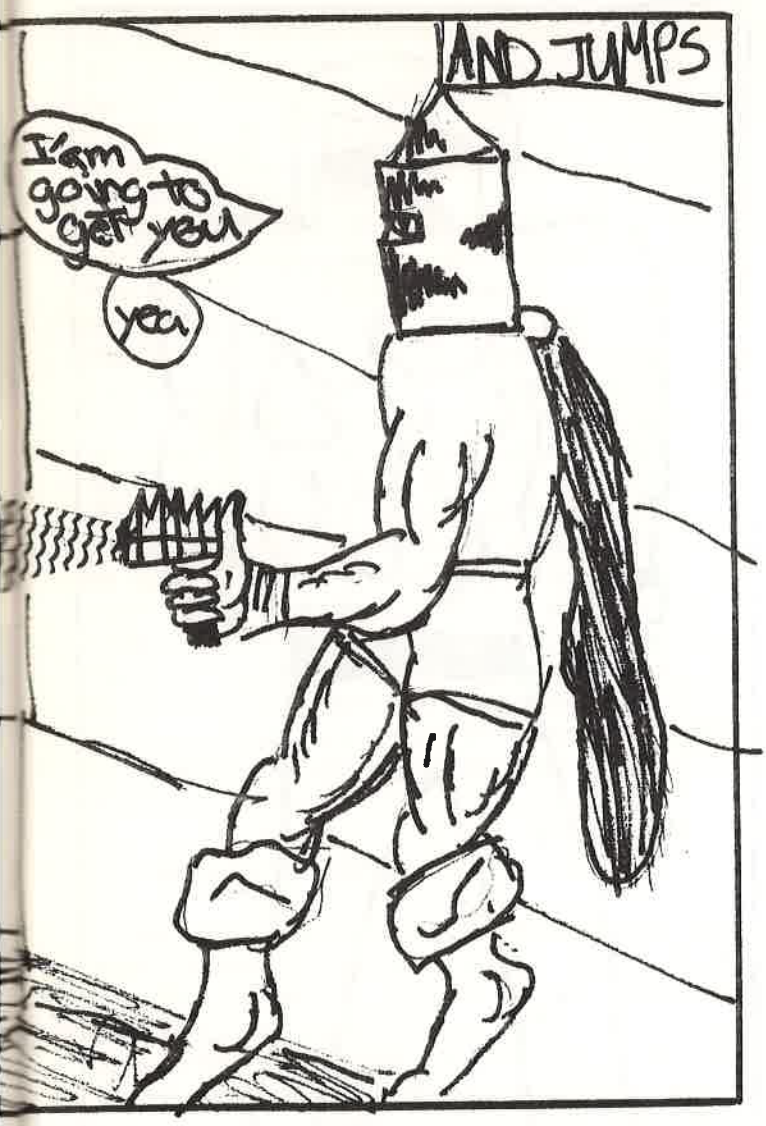
example 3: Lee Ross

The next session, I made a speech telling the kids my thoughts on their comics—the sameness of plot, locale and inking. Granted, they had no responsibility to entertain me, but their superhero stories were so derivative that they were boring the pants off of me. Couldn't they come up with some new characters? There was a whole wide world to draw from—the candy store owner, the lady next door, their friends and teachers, the cleaning lady. *Anyone* could turn up in a comic book. And the corollary to that was even more at the core of my ambitions for them: Any idea which could be expressed in a poem or story could also be expressed in comic book form.

The work that day was tremendous. Either they were ready for something new, or my pep talk had helped, because they responded with quantity and variety. Some of the kids went to work quite literally on my suggestions: for example, when I pointed out that they could use exotic locales, like the Arctic, the desert and so on, Rebekkah set about to draw an Eskimo story, and her next comic was transplanted to the Sahara (see pp. 19-23 Black Cat). With other children, my request to take more material from real life exerted a subtle, low-grade pressure, which showed up eventually in things like Loyda's family dramas (pp. 41-3), Michael Thomas's church setting (p. 8), Tony's The Waterfall (p. 16) or Deron's exam cartoon (p. 7).

And of course many children ignored what I said and went right on drawing Superman. I didn't mind that, as long as their were other experiments going on—as long as it wasn't the only genre in town.

I brought in older examples of comic book art: large-sized paperback reprints of Windsor McCay's strange *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend*, a Betty Boop book, Edward Gorey's phantasmagoria, DaVinci's caricatures, Bosch's paintings, Steinberg's surreal cartoons, the Tintin series. Soon we had a shelf-full of comic book literature that children pored over until it was all utterly dog-eared. I found some Japanese-language jumbo comic books and encouraged the kids to write in their own captions next to the Japanese (which they didn't, but they loved staring at the mysterious pictures anyway). Kids began bringing in more

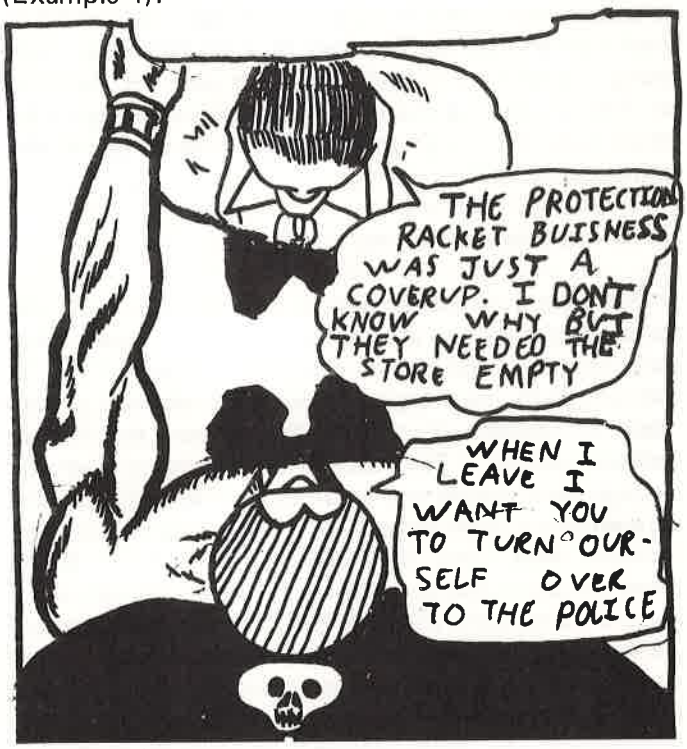


of their own comic books, and trading or showing them off during club hours.

The "pep talk" experience emboldened me to make one presentation a week, during which everyone had to look up from his artwork and face front. Bob and I spent several weeks on backgrounds, drilling specificity of environment into their heads. Where is this Superman standing? In front of a building? What kind of building? Where is he flying? What else could be in the sky? Clouds, birds, planes? Even a sky needs a personality. Bob showed them how a single object—a lamppost, a garbage can, a telephone, a palm tree—could symbolize a place. There were times also, Bob pointed out, when you wanted only a suggestion of a background, some dark cross-hatchings for an alley, or an abstract backdrop. To show them how to do it, he brought in brushes and ink for washes, and drawing pens with thick and thin points for hatchwork. The ink table became a regular part of the comic book club and changed the look of some of the artwork (see Theo's washes pp. 2-6).

For more textural variety in backgrounds, Bob also brought in sheets of Zipatone, each one a different pattern of zigzags or dots, which commercial comic book artists use. The sheet is laid over the artwork and the area desired is cut away with a knife, adhering to the surface like Presstype. It was exciting when someone came up with a narrative function for the Zipatone, like Lee Ross's light-gun (Example 3). His sister Jenny liked using Zipatone for wallpaper, or to give a weave to her characters' clothes (pp. 61-62).

We also stressed variety by introducing the vocabulary of film: close-up, long shot, wide-angle, overhead/bird's-eye, split-screen—and encouraging the artists to vary their angles and their distance from the action. An extreme close-up of an eyeball or a finger, say, could be very dramatic, or a shot from overhead very mysterious in its drastic foreshortening (Example 4):



example 4: Mark Friedberg

Finally, we attempted to upgrade the quality of the drawing itself. Bob gave lessons in basic human anatomy; how to draw a horse, or other animals; how to draw a face; how cartoonists routinely convey different emotions and facial expressions. I was keen on getting the kids to draw from life. We took turns posing for them on a number of occasions (see Todd's portrait of me, p. 64) and also encouraged them to make caricatures of us and each other. Some of these portraits were among the most satisfying artwork to come out of the project.

There was one frantic, funny session when we got everyone to make fast gesture drawings. Mark was tearing off and distributing newsprint sheets for dozens of kids, while Bob and I were trying to get everyone quiet and explain the problem. We chose volunteer kid models. Then Mark made a big show of

consulting his watch, began them at a given signal, and everyone raced to complete the pose in three minutes. The results were charming and showed a freeing-up of line and an ability to catch bodies in active poses, so necessary for comic strip art.

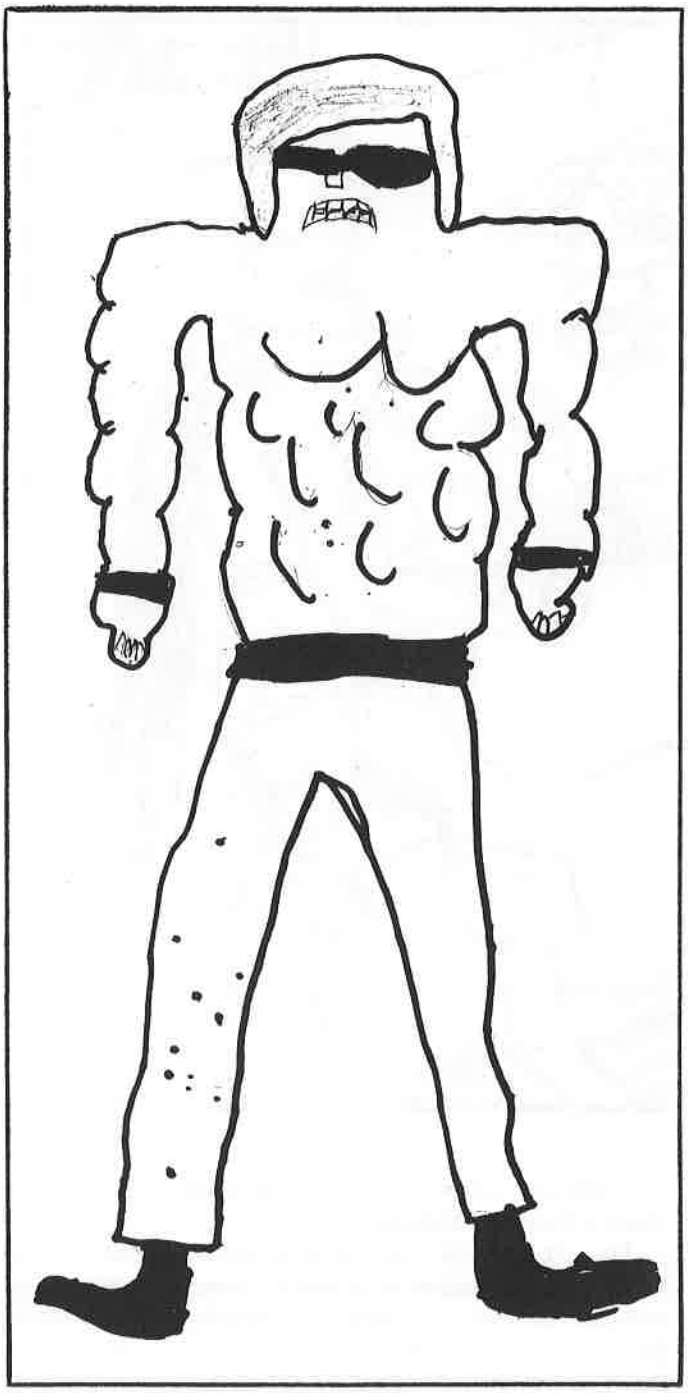
We also spent a few weeks getting the children to work large: transplanting their comic book figures to mural scale. Those who were not too busy with their stories made posters using poster paints. The floor took a beating, but it was worth it. Afterwards, some of these posters were hung throughout the halls of the school. It seemed to me that, little by little, quietly, gently, and with no one being the wiser, the comic book club was evolving into a traditional Arts Club. The natural ease with which the children took to this change (some of them had been calling it an Art Club all along) proved that the school had need of such a club, was hungry for a place where children could go and paint. The fact that the New York City budget crisis had forced all of last year's art teachers at P.S. 75 to lose their jobs made it clearer why the need was so strong; and we were happy to be able temporarily to fill that gap.

7. Artists Without Stories

Progress in artwork seemed to move at a faster clip than improvement in storytelling. There were some talented draftsmen who, even after repeated discussions, hadn't the foggiest how to put together a story-line, or develop characters. These were the "artists without stories." They would sit in a back table and engage in impassioned arguments about the superior strengths of their superhero, while practicing devotions to that hero by drawing every bicep in his strained rigid body, with such muscular armor as would have made Wilhelm Reich break out in a cold sweat (Example 5). Obviously, to these boys caught up in the drama of manhood and macho assertion, these drawings were deeply felt. But I couldn't help wondering why these offerings to strength seemed to cut off the narrative capacity, and if it necessarily had to be so.

I had the notion that it might be good to pair a talented writer who couldn't draw, with a fluent artist who lacked plots. Some of these collaborations worked out very successfully, as between Amy, a confident artist, and Alma, a witty idea-person (see pp. 52-55). Most of the collaborators, however, were children who were pretty good at both, and were simply looking for a little more expertise. I also found girls in general, perhaps because they were not as tied to the superhero mode, more apt to come up with fresh, untried, surprising uses of the comic book form. Meanwhile, the heroic-devotional school continued turning out fierce poses in the Egyptian frontal mode.

After a few weeks of stressing characterization, plot and the use of personal experience, I stopped



example 5: Fritz

talking about it. It seemed that those children who were ready to pick up on that information were doing so. We began getting stories of four to fifteen pages length. And the artists without stories—they were too happy for me to risk disturbing them.

With little children, I often found that the stories had stayed locked in their heads. They had assumed that everything was on the page, but without any word-explanations it looked to the outsider like nothing but a set of disconnected child-drawings. For instance, Frankenstein by Evan (p. 60). I said to him, "What's happening here?" I had no idea it was even Frankenstein. A complicated tale started tumbling

out of him. I slowed him down, took it box by box, and wrote down the words he dictated to me. The same was true for The Cat That Went Ruf! (pp. 17-18) and My Classroom (pp. 57-58). All these stories by first graders gained immeasurably by the addition of a dictated text.

Again and again, Bob, Mark and I found most of our teaching happening on this one-to-one level, either helping kids with "blank minds" to get started, or helping kids who had "finished" to clarify their intended meaning. Sometimes a word-balloon, title or explanatory legend was all that was needed; sometimes a detail or two added to the drawing itself. We also had to teach the rule that boxes are usually read left to right. Therefore, the first person to speak should either be on the left, or else his speech-balloon should be higher than the other speakers. There was so much to do just in clarifying the intentions of the piece on its own terms, that the problem was no longer, Is this an interesting story? but something much less grandiose: Is it even communicating? Is it clear? And if not, how can we make it clearer? After all, comic books are a mass art form: they're meant to be understood and swallowed at a glance; clarity is their calling card.

8. Four-Color Separations

Our first two comic books, BANG! and PEST, were finished by the end of January and distributed, free, in February to every child in the school. Both were sixty-four pages, in black and white, with color covers. The insides had been printed on the same grainy newsprint as commercial comics, and the covers on the same slippery stock, and they were the exact size of the standard newsstand product. A tribute to their authenticity was that they were instantly digested by the kids as just another comic book, without much fanfare. But their value to the ongoing work of the comic book club was immense. They established our credibility. Children who were becoming skeptical that their stories would ever see the light had the real thing in hand, and those who had not been lucky enough to get anything of theirs included had something to shoot for.

We had promised that at least one of our Spring issues would be in color. We had made that pledge first in the grant proposal, and there were times we thought of reneging, especially when we learned how costly it would be. Mark Solomon calculated that all that was left of our budget was enough money to print up a sixteen-page color insert in one of the two last comics. Then sixteen pages it would be. Color was part of the experience we had promised ourselves; it would have felt cowardly to dodge the challenge. I especially felt this way since I wouldn't have to do it. The whole task fell to Mark. He was the only one with enough printing sense to know how to set up a production line.

Mark explained to us that there were two main ways of printing color. The first was to take already-colored artwork or color transparencies and make separations. This is done by photographically separating out the three primary colors and black by using a combination of filters. This method is used for most color work. Commercial comic-book color is, on the other hand, usually created by first preparing artwork in black and then indicating on a colored rendition of this what colors to use. These colors are created by combining various percentages (called bendays) of the primary colors. This process is generally done by platemakers. The combination of various percentages of the primary colors gives the full range of colors we see in commercial comics.

Both of the above methods could be used by us but neither involved the kids in the preparation and separation of color. To involve the kids we set up a method of using tissue overlays for each color (red, blue, yellow). This method limited the variety of colors we would achieve but enabled the kids to do their own separations.

Now, unfortunately, the natural tendency for children is to add color directly onto their original drawings. We would have to frustrate or inhibit that tendency, and get them to work with transparent overlays.

Mark found a handy book, *The Story of the Three Colors*, which used plastic overlays to demonstrate how all colors are a mixture of the three primaries, blue, yellow and red. Most children had already had some empirical contact with this phenomenon, from finger-painting onward, and were ready to grasp it. Then Mark set up a table for color, with masking tape, overlay sheets and colored magic markers. As soon as a child came to him with a finished black-and-white page, which the child wanted to turn into color, Mark made a kind of sandwich of three overlays on top of the artwork, and advised the child to put all the yellows on one sheet, all the reds on the second, and all the blues on the third. If a mixed color was desired, for instance green for the grass, the child was to place first the yellow overlay on the black-and-white drawing and color the grassy area yellow, then the blue overlay on the drawing and color the same area blue.

Mark wanted me to say that he discovered this was a mistake when he came to the printing stage. It would have been easier to shoot if, after having labeled the overlays red, yellow, blue, they had simply inked each one in with black pen. I'm sure he's right, though I think that some of the children would have had a much harder time grasping the concept that they were making something come out red when they were actually coloring it, at that moment, black.

You can see that this was something of a technical headache. We made a curious discovery, when it came

time to pick pages for our color insert, that the pages done with color separations were some of our less interesting from the standpoint of content. The reason for this is that the kids who were making long elaborate stories in black-and-white found the term had run out by the time they were ready to transmit them to color. On the other hand, some other child would do a hasty page of cartooning and be at a loss for something to do for the rest of the hour, and he or she would be sent over to Mark's coloring table. As a result, many of the kids who had short-winded ideas ended up working in color. Just as well. Their artwork, which would not have been strong enough to stand on its own in black-and-white, was so bolstered by the addition of color that it made a big hit when the issue came out. There is something magical about color. Readers had liked our black-and-white comics, but they were much more enthralled with the color. Mark's patience in carrying everyone through the color-separation process had paid off.

One of the satisfying offshoots of the project was that Mark became more comfortable in a teaching role, and realized he had something to give children. I was never in doubt of that; but there were times during the year when he felt discouraged, inadequate as a teacher next to Bob and me. After the club when we went out for coffee, Mark would tell me he was thinking of quitting because he doubted his value to the project. The truth was, there were certain children who would work only with Mark, attracted as they were to his gentleness and his sweet, low-key strength. But it took a long time to get him to see beyond the mystique of professionalism, and to understand that the biggest part of being a teacher is just responding humanely to children's needs as they arise.

9. Spinoffs

The impact of the comic book project began to spread over the whole school, especially as some of the classroom teachers took the initiative of fitting it into their regular curriculum. Many of them kept a supply of format paper as standard art materials. Whenever a child was at loose ends, the teacher might encourage him to try making a comic. Asaye Takagi had her children do book reports in comic strip form. Ruth Lowy introduced drawing from live models, portraiture and short gesture drawings (which we later copied). Mike Tempel gave comic book work as a regular option on his homework sheet, like this assignment:

MAKE UP YOUR OWN SUPER HERO

1) What is your super hero's name?
2) Describe your super hero's special powers, abilities or qualities.

example 6: Mark Friedberg

3) What weaknesses or flaws does your super hero have?
4) If your super hero has a secret identity, tell what it is.
5) Write the story of the origin of your super hero.
6) Do drawings of your super hero:
   a) Draw a profile of the face. (close-up)
   b) Draw a full face view (front view), also a close-up.
   c) Draw several long shots showing the whole body. Draw different poses from different angles.

Out of this cartoon work grew an all-year animation project in Tempel's class. Sue Willis, one of our writers, worked with bilingual Spanish classes and helped them do comics and even a photo-novella. Perhaps the most ambitious work was done by Esther Rosenfeld, who gave comic book assignments each week and whose class made a bound volume for their art, the Six Million Dollar Comic Book. Esther was the first to teach caricatures, bringing in David Levine's political cartoons and Steinberg's drawings,

which she loaned to me. She also tried successfully certain ideas that I leaked to her, like the comic strip with only thought balloons, or one with only furniture and objects. Esther not only exploited the interest in superheroes but got her children writing about the relatives of superheroes. Most of her kids bestowed super-powers on the cousins or brothers, but one girl who had invented a Super Cat, had Super Cat's cousin confess that she was quite ordinary "because nothing happened to me when I was born" (i.e. no gamma rays).

All during the week there was a steady trickle of visitors to the Writing Room to borrow format paper. I heard that some of the comic book members were even meeting on their own in an after-school splinter group. Not only did they talk, argue, and swap comic books, but they had also gotten their mothers to make xerox copies of the stories they had drawn in the club, and were selling these xeroxes to other kids for a brisk 15¢ a copy.

Finally, word of the project even got out to alumni. An ex-student of mine, Mark Friedberg, had been the most talented comic book artist at P.S. 75 in the old days; and rather than be left out just because he had graduated, he borrowed a pile of sheets and came back several weeks later with his own sixteen-page comic book, The Black Savage. It was so lovingly drawn that we decided to put it out as a separate publication. (See Ex. 4 and 6)

10. Some Kids

The best part of the comic book project was getting to know certain kids. The technical production questions may have engrossed us, but it was the kids in the club, especially a handful of regulars who stick out now in my mind, who made it a deeper experience.

There was Lee, whose teacher had said at the beginning of the year, "You're taking Lee? GOOD. Just get him away from me!" His bossy intelligence and restless activism found a perfect home in the comic book club, where he became a most valuable artist, organizer, and monitor, who cleaned up the room and put out the materials. And his friend Barry, an equally talented artist, who, sensitively, shyly, well-behaved, drew the most gruesome stories of annihilation, mutilation and deadly scorpions. One of his previous teachers, who had helped him discover himself as an artist, begged me to "get him away from violence." Dubiously, I paired him with another, more easygoing child, and the result was even bloodier. So I assigned him to do a "non-violent" comic strip. His idea of a non-violent comic turned out to be two monsters walking toward each other and deciding not to fight.

There was Fritz, the husky handsome Haitian boy with a black mole on his cheek, who took a liking to Bob Sievert and the ink table. And Jean, another Haitian, who walked around with a baseball cap, and whose teacher sent me a note midyear: "Jean is new in school. There are two things in this life that he likes—to read comics and to draw. Can you take him?—C. Dworman." He became one of our regular monitors. Mark Solomon's favorite was a first grader with a gap in her teeth, named Chersteen, who covered thousands of pages with cheerful drawings in a creative burst that rivaled Picasso's peak years.

My favorite was a pig-tailed girl named Alma, with a sly sense of humor and a teasing manner. But I also liked Rebekkah, the whimsical creator of "Boss Lady," who always helped out whenever asked. She was cooperative, sensitive and spunky, she could hold her own—the closest you could come to an ideal child.

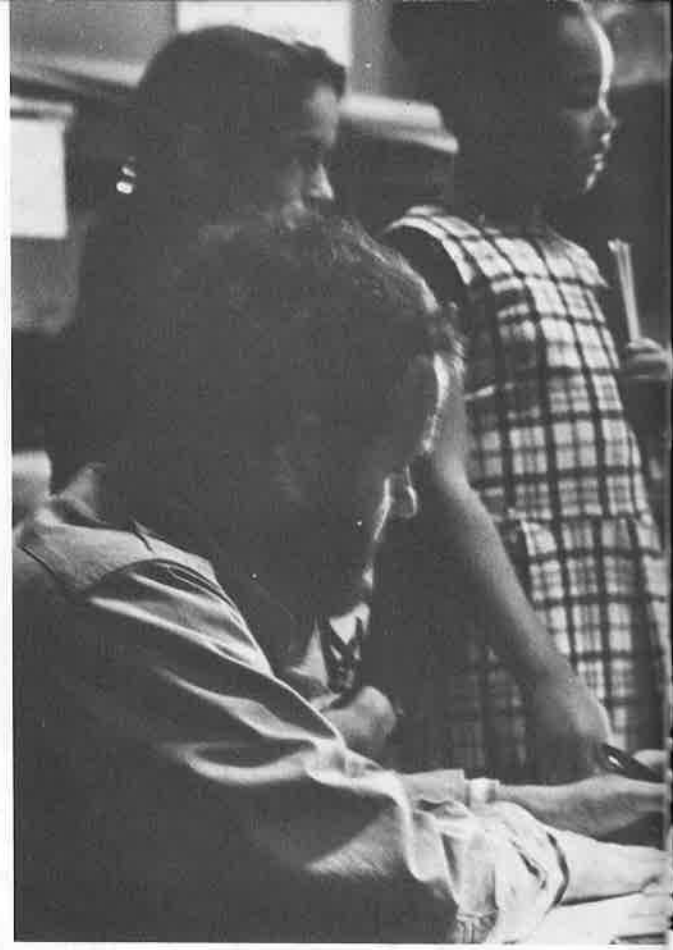
Brilliant Theo was so far advanced artistically that he refused to take suggestions from Bob. His cranky reply to anything you told him was "I know that already!" But you had to forgive him his arrogance when you saw the work that came out of him.

Jared was the opposite of Theo, so backward artistically that it was a triumph for him the day he drew

in a neck separating the head from the shoulders. Insecure yet bright, stammering as if too many ideas were trying to come through at once, he kept confessing that he couldn't draw very well (he actually couldn't!), but that didn't stop him from coming back week after week. He finally hit upon a design style exploiting his drawing limitations, and made things like the beautiful UFO story in color (p. 36).

Two more stick in the mind: first, because they were so lovable and second, because the comic book club seemed to make a real difference in their lives. Michael is a gentle black boy who, at first glance, seems to have some kind of speech or thought disorder. Last year he almost never spoke. This year he has been coming out of his shell. He re-invented himself as a comic book hero, Super Michael, and drew a stack of comic strips about cowboys, armies, ladies in distress, and that most peculiar piece, The Church (p. 8) which comes more directly out of his own experience. All during the week he wandered into the Writing Room, not just on Mondays, and whoever was there let him sit in the corner and draw.

And finally, who can forget Geraldo, a freckled albino boy whose lack of pigmentation made him near-blind, so that he had to hold the artwork an inch from his eyes, which didn't prevent him from turning out first-rate paintings (p. 40). He and his friend José worked with Bob Sievert on large painted posters. I would always feel guilty when, forgetting he had such weak eyesight, I would tell him to stand back from the blackboard because he was blocking everybody's way.



The Comic Book Convention

11. The Comic Book Convention

Lee and some of the other collectors had been urging us for months to have a comic book convention, like the kind they dragged their parents to every other weekend at places like the Commodore Hotel, sponsored by Marvel or D.C. These conventions are such a recent phenomenon that at first I had a little trouble understanding what it was. I gathered it's essentially a flea market for comic books. Some of these kids were dealing in real money, buying and selling "mint first editions" for prices around $20 to $50. I knew that that price range would alienate most of the school, but a clearance of cheap comic books, like an all-day bake sale, might be nice.

"Who gets to keep the profits?" a kid asked.

"Does it go to you—I mean the comic book club?" asked another, already used to the school convention of impounding profits from a school sale to use for some worthwhile cause, like buying classroom materials.

I couldn't for the life of me see how I could take the profits, when it was their comic books they were putting up for sale. "No, you keep the money."

"Wow!!"

I could see their eyes light up with avarice.

We went ahead and scheduled it as an end-of-year celebration. If everything broke correctly, we might even be able to hand out the last two comic books at the fair. Mark Solomon twisted arms and worked double-time getting the job on the presses. A day before the convention, twenty-four cartons arrived with both issues, CRIPPLED COMICS and BLACK CAT, the one with the color insert.

We had decorated the Writing Room with large posters, and with a display of the various stages of printing in comic books, from original art to color overlays, page proofs, color keys and blueprints. But on the big day, no one was looking at the walls. Lee had signed up twenty-five junior collectors and assigned each a table, taking the largest one for himself. The merchants put out their wares. Bob Sievert and Mark Friedberg (the junior high student-artist) set up sketchpads at different tables, to draw cartoon figures on request. And the entire school trooped through the convention, thirty classes, staggered two at a time in fifteen-minute stretches, from 10 o'clock to 3. It was Istanbul. Wherever you looked someone was standing on a table yelling "Ten cents!" "Here it is—real buy!" Some children who had brought their own comics were trading at the tables, bargaining down prices. And those children who had no money were still given two free comic books at the door (P.S. 75's own) and took in the spectacle, milling around, watching Bob Sievert drawing Wonder Woman. The merchants were so intense and absorbed that they forgot to break for lunch. An enormous wave of energy took us through the fair day, and it was *their* energy, their event, a real kids' show. We teachers looked on, ready to break up any arguments or comfort if someone's feelings were hurt, but essentially it was their event. I had cautioned the dealers beforehand not to over-charge: that in fact it was in their best interests to slash prices, since they would make more money in volume than they could with big markups. The experience of half an hour convinced most of them that this was true. It was breathtaking to watch their excitement at having real money to work with (the usual school sale works on a system of paper tickets), and to see the dealers, some of them, scrambling from behind their tables and squandering their profits immediately to buy new comics from each other, while others cannily, greedily stockpiled their coins. The roar of a Baghdad market-place was the last sensation as the curtain went down on the comic book project.

Photographs on page 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11 by Mark Solomon.
Photographs on pages 16 and 17 by Miguel A. Ortiz.

The New York Times

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At P.S. 75, It's the 3 R's and a C—for Comics

Look! Up in the classroom! Somebody's giving away comic books! Free!!! Is this a sinister plot to make people read????

Sinister, no. Clever, yes. The comics that were being handed out as part of a comic-book convention at Public School 75 were drawn, written and edited by the children in the West Side school's comic book club.

Professionally produced comics were there, too. But they were for sale or for barter, and to get one you had to have the business acumen of a commodities trader.

So it was good that some books were free. That way even if the haggling proved too fierce, nobody would walk away empty-handed. That way, too, everyone who came to the convention would be introduced to this approach of the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, a nonprofit group of artists that, in addition to its other activities, has been helping children in three city schools create comic books.

The result has been that not only have the children found a school activity that involves them body and soul but the books they make are also being used as readers by children outside the clubs. And the idea has been employed by teachers in surprising ways—one teacher had her class do book reports in comic form.

The comics convention at P.S. 75 the other day gave official sanction to an activity that had been going on all along in private.

"The kids were making their own comics and keeping them in their desks," said Phillip Lopate, a writer who works with the children. And then they would trade or sell their own creations as well as commercial comics they had collected.

Michael the Superhero

"We gave them the structure to do it in school," Mr. Lopate said. "We're tapping into their obsession."

Although the child-made comics were free at the convention, that didn't stop some artists from selling the original drawings that were used in the comics. One of the most successful entrepreneurs was 10-year-old Michael Thomas, who sometimes puffs up his chest and clenches his fists as he talks. He says that he often wakes up in the morning under the impression that he is a superhero. One of the heroes he draws is called Super Michael.

Buyers at the convention could have an original of Super Michael for 10 cents.

While Michael was raking in the dimes, Lee Ross, 11, the creator of Laser Man ("Watch out world, here comes the Laser") was making his fortune by selling commercially produced comics from his collection of 500. He had close to $10 as the day wore on.

But it was his own treasured Laser Man that was on his mind. He said he invented the character because he knew the "laser was a powerful thing that could destroy buildings and stuff."

When he draws that character, he said, and sees his story in print, he realizes that "Everybody in the school will know I did this and nobody else."

The stories and drawings range widely in sophistication, of course. But Bob Sievert, the painter who helped the children with technique, said he found they didn't need much help.

"The kids just came in with such good ideas that there was very little teaching," he said. For example, many children, from years of attentive study, already knew how to draw a fist going through a wall.

Ellen Energy's Powers

They had a good notion of how the story line was supposed to go, too. Gillian Horvath, 10, describes the history of Ellen Energy in an "origins" section. It seems that Ellen was hit by lightning, the doctor managed to keep her alive and Ellen soon discovered that she had "special powers."

The four comics produced by the children so far—each one contains many of their stories—can be obtained free from the collaborative at 186 West Fourth Street, New York, N.Y. 10014. They are glossy, colorful and good humored.

They contain hints supplied by an adult from the staff on how to draw comics. It's suggested, for instance, that the artist use a doll with movable limbs as his model.

The comics also contain many misspellings, but it's the collaborative's observation that, if the children get deeply involved in the work, their reading, writing and drawing improve.

The stories are often profane and violent. But Steven Schrader, executive director of the collaborative, says that "what the children were doing was the opposite of violence—you can't hit when you're drawing."

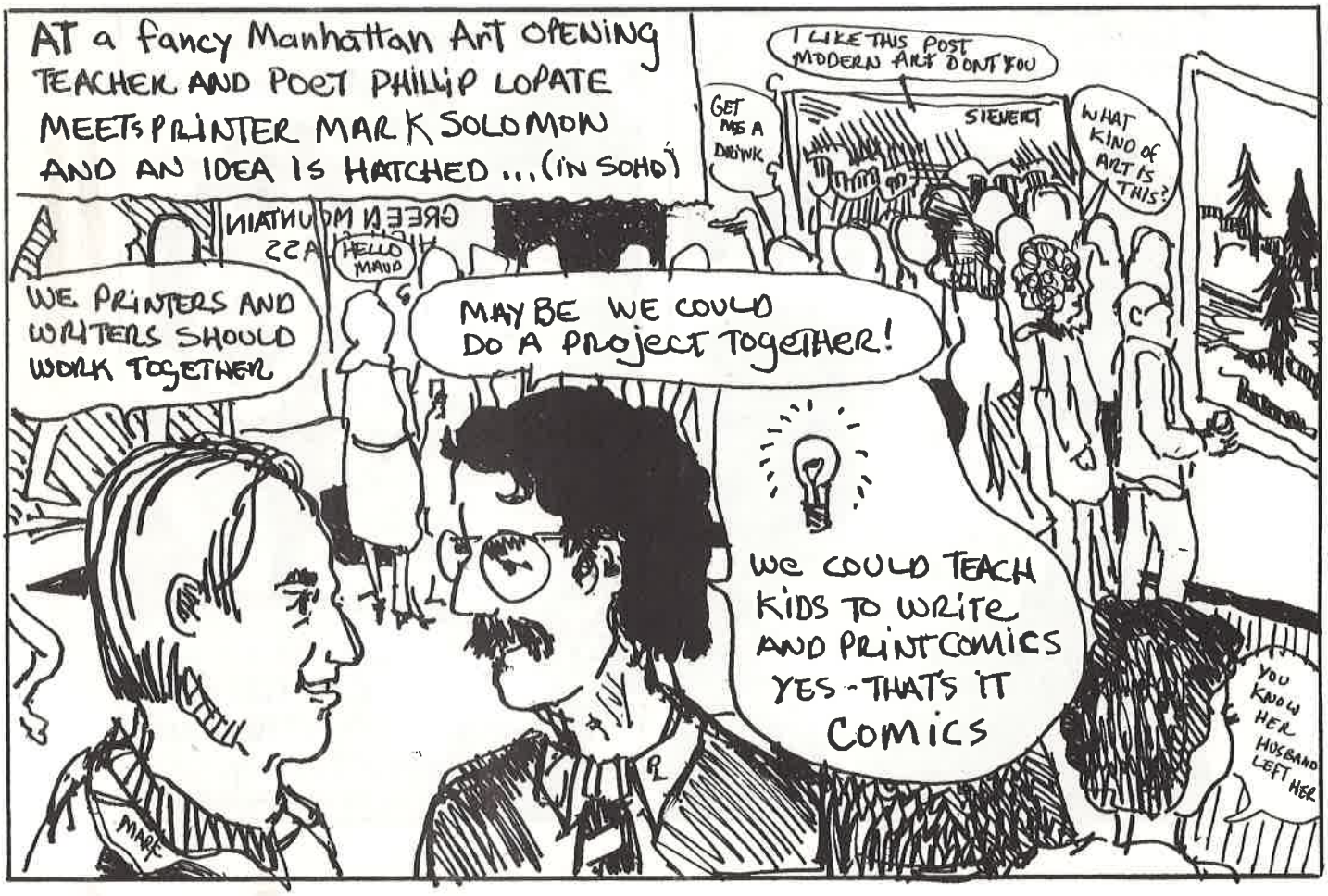
Anyway, Mr. Lopate thinks violence in the comics is not a genuine concern. He sees it merely as an exciting element. The children, he said, are not, after all, "refined, serene creatures—they're always looking to be drawn toward climactic things."

Nevertheless, once he did ask the group to try drawing comics without violence in them. "You know what their idea of nonviolence was?" he said. "Two monsters are walking toward each other, and they decide *not* to fight."

It was dull. And quickly the siren song of clash, smash and slam beckoned again.

The Comic Book Project – A Comic Strip

Story by **Phillip Lopate**
Drawings by **Bob Sievert**



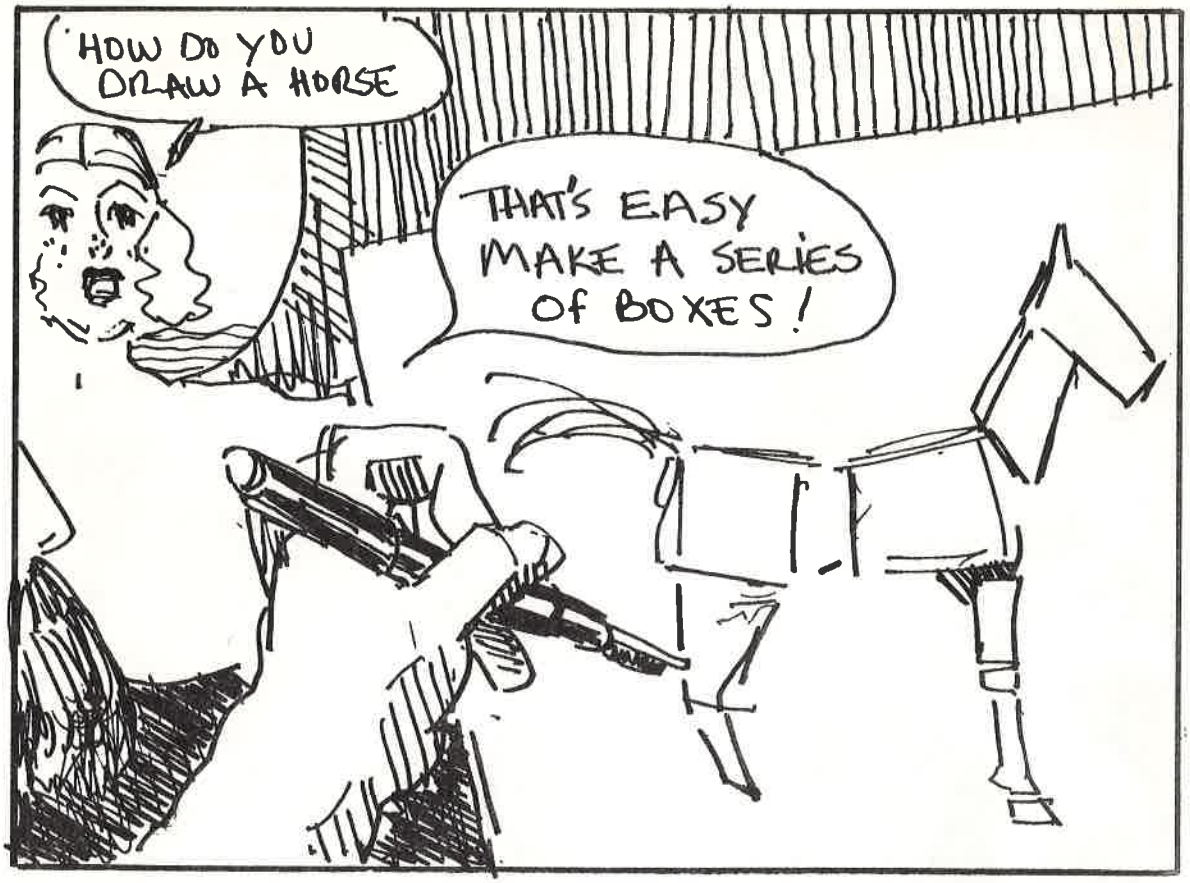

I'LL JUST WRITE THIS PROPOSAL AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS!
SURDNA FOUNDATION
PROPOSAL
LATER
SURDNA
THIS ISN'T HALF BAD!
BUT PHILLIP HOW CAN YOU TEACH KIDS TO MAKE COMICS
DON'T WORRY NO ONE WOULD EVER FUND SUCH AN IDEA!
HELLO PHIL! THIS IS THE BOSS WE GOT THE GRANT YOU CAN START TEACHING COMICS

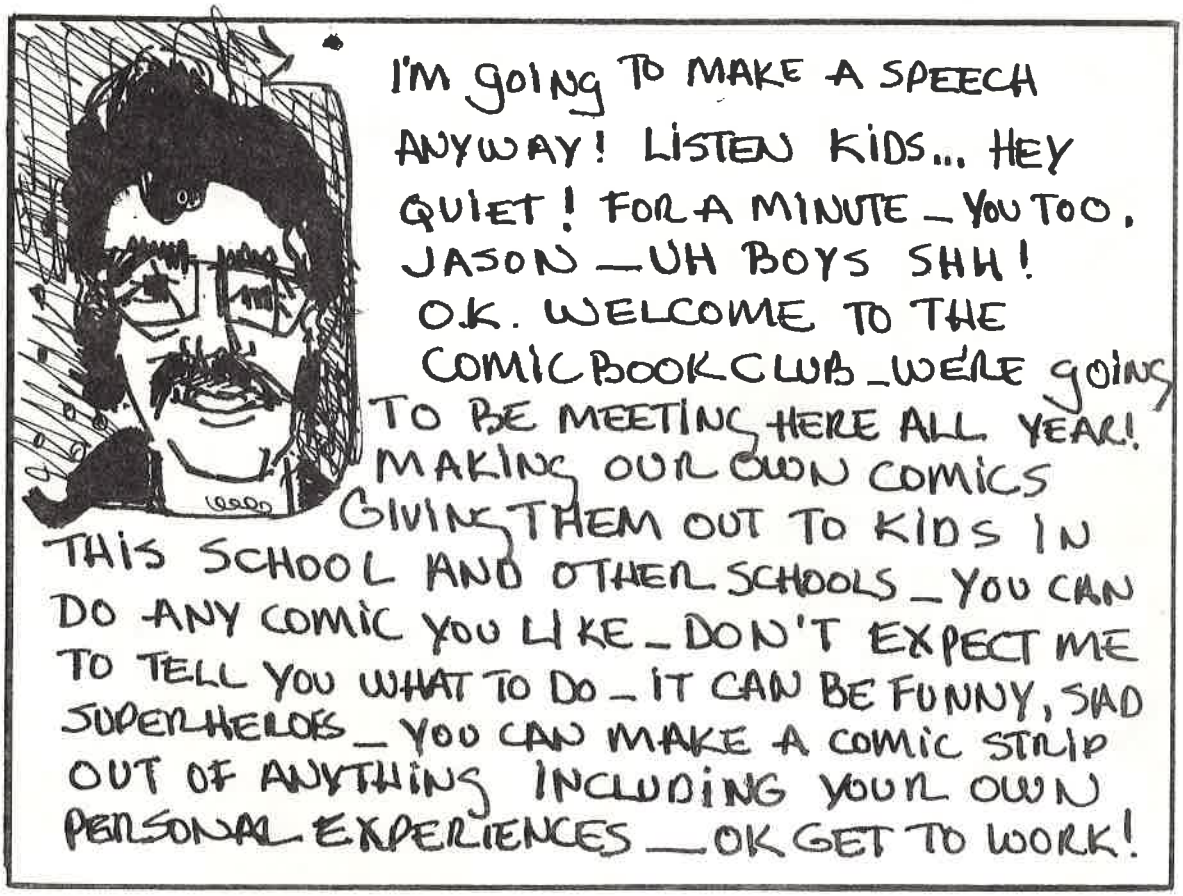

NOW I AM REALLY GOING TO HAVE TO WORK THIS OUT
WHEW
THESE ARE THE FORMATS (PREPRINTED COMIC SHEETS) THEY DECIDED ON
HOW SHALL WE START!
WHY DONT YOU PRINT UP SOME FORMAT SHEETS MARK?
WE NEED BLACK MAGIC MARKERS — PENTELS, BECAUSE THEY WILL PRINT BETTER!
WHAT ABOUT PENCILS
LETS DISCOURAGE THEM FROM USING PENCILS. THEY WOULD BE HARD TO REPRODUCE
THE IDEA WAS THE KIDS COULD DRAW DIRECTLY ON THESE SHEETS WHICH WOULD BE CAMERA READY FOR OFFSET!


THE ONLY PROBLEM IS WE KNOW NOTHING ABOUT COMICBOOK ART
WE NEED AN ARTIST TO GIVE US SOME VISUAL KNOW-HOW!
WHAT ABOUT THAT GUY WHOSE OPENING WE MET AT?
OH SURE! SIEVERT! YOU THINK HE'LL DO IT?
DOWN ON THE WATERFRONT
THERE'S SIEVERT NOW!
HEY ARTIST WOULD YOU LIKE TO HELP KIDS MAKE COMICS
MAYBE IT WILL MAKE ME RICH AND FAMOUS


IN SEPTEMBER
P.S. 79
I'LL SEND THEM THE MEANEST KIDS I GOT
ATTENTION ALL TEACHERS
WE WILL BE HAVING A COMIC BOOK CLUB MEETING MON. AFTS. PLEASE SEND A FEW STUDENTS. NOT JUST BOYS!
PHILLIP
UFT
D.C. SUPER HEROS COULD KILL ANY MARVEL EASY
AFTER I TURNED THE HAMSTER CAGE OVER MY TEACHER MADE ME COME HERE
IS THIS WHERE THE COMIC BOOK CLUB MEETS
WRITING ROOM
WRITING ROOM
WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO-HERE THEY ARE!
ALL WE CAN DO IS LAY OUT THE MATERIALS AND PRAY

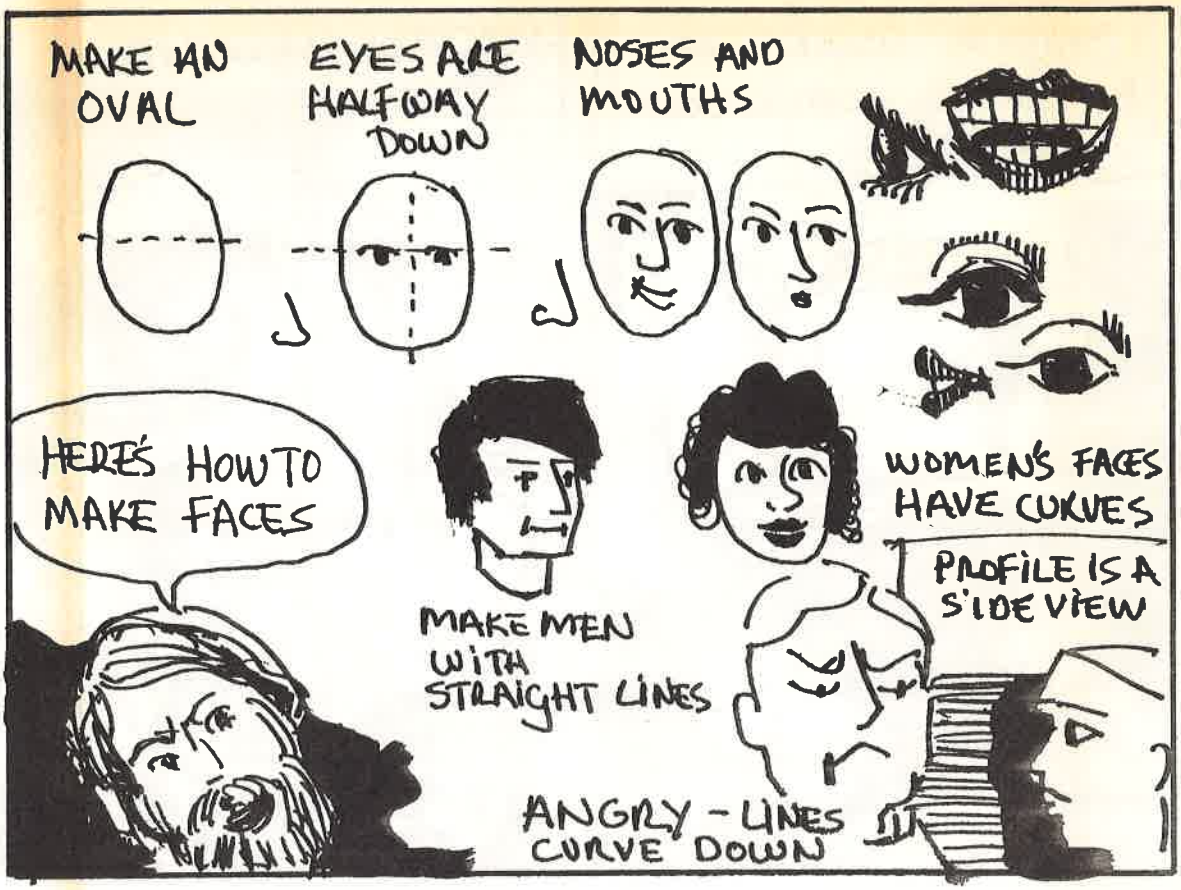

15 MINUTES LATER
THERE MUST BE 60 KIDS IN HERE! THEY'RE ALL WORKING! I HAVEN'T EVEN GIVEN THEM MY SPIEL YET
MAYBE WE SHOULD JUST NOT INTERRUPT THEM
HOW DO YOU SPELL INTERGALACTIC
MINE'S UGLY!
OH NO I THINK ITS GOOD
HOW DO YOU SHOW BLOOD DRIPPING?
CAN WE DO IT IN PENCIL AND THEN MARKER
WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?
HOW DO YOU SPELL "HURRAY"


HOW DO YOU DRAW A HORSE
THAT'S EASY MAKE A SERIES OF BOXES!

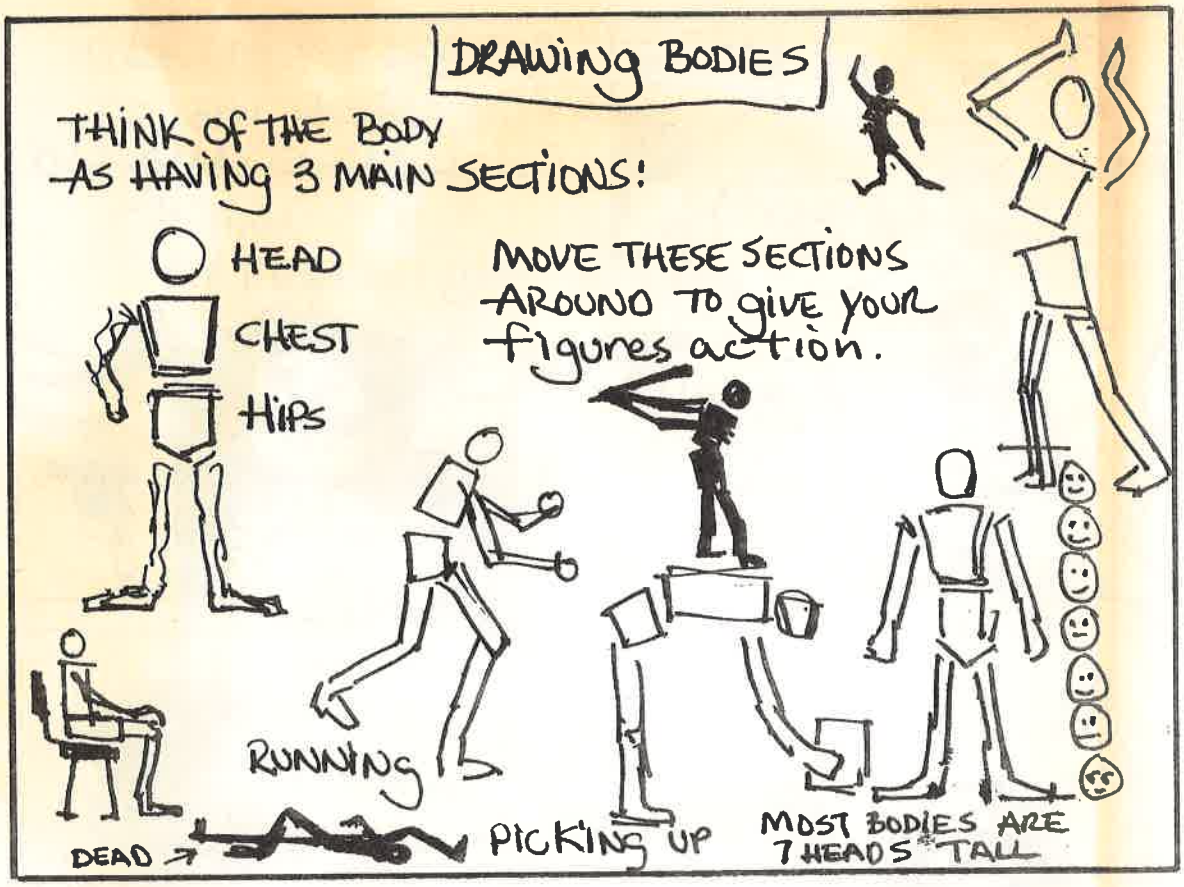

I'M GOING TO MAKE A SPEECH ANYWAY! LISTEN KIDS... HEY QUIET! FOR A MINUTE _ YOU TOO, JASON _ UH BOYS SHH! O.K. WELCOME TO THE COMIC BOOK CLUB _ WE'RE GOING TO BE MEETING HERE ALL YEAR! MAKING OUR OWN COMICS GIVING THEM OUT TO KIDS IN THIS SCHOOL AND OTHER SCHOOLS _ YOU CAN DO ANY COMIC YOU LIKE _ DON'T EXPECT ME TO TELL YOU WHAT TO DO _ IT CAN BE FUNNY, SAD SUPERHEROES _ YOU CAN MAKE A COMIC STRIP OUT OF ANYTHING INCLUDING YOUR OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCES _ OK GET TO WORK!


AT DAYS END
WOW LOOK AT ALL THIS WORK
IT WENT FANTASTIC DON'T YOU THINK
I DON'T KNOW! THESE SUPERHEROES BORE ME
LETS CLEAN UP FELLAS
SO LONG I GOT TO CATCH THE 4PM FERRY
SEE THAT! ARTISTS ARE SO IRRESPONSIBLE!


SEVERAL WEEKS GO BY IN THE COMIC BOOK CLUB.....
I'm reading you!
PEACEFUL PRODUCTIVE WEEKS..
THE STRANGE THOUGHT STRIKE HIM TOO-
Oh yes I could get you!
UNTIL ONE DAY
I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO
ME NEITHER
WELL HAVE YOU HAD ANY DREAMS?
I THINK THEY'RE RUNNING OUT OF IDEAS. THEY NEED SOME ADULT INPUT
AGREED!



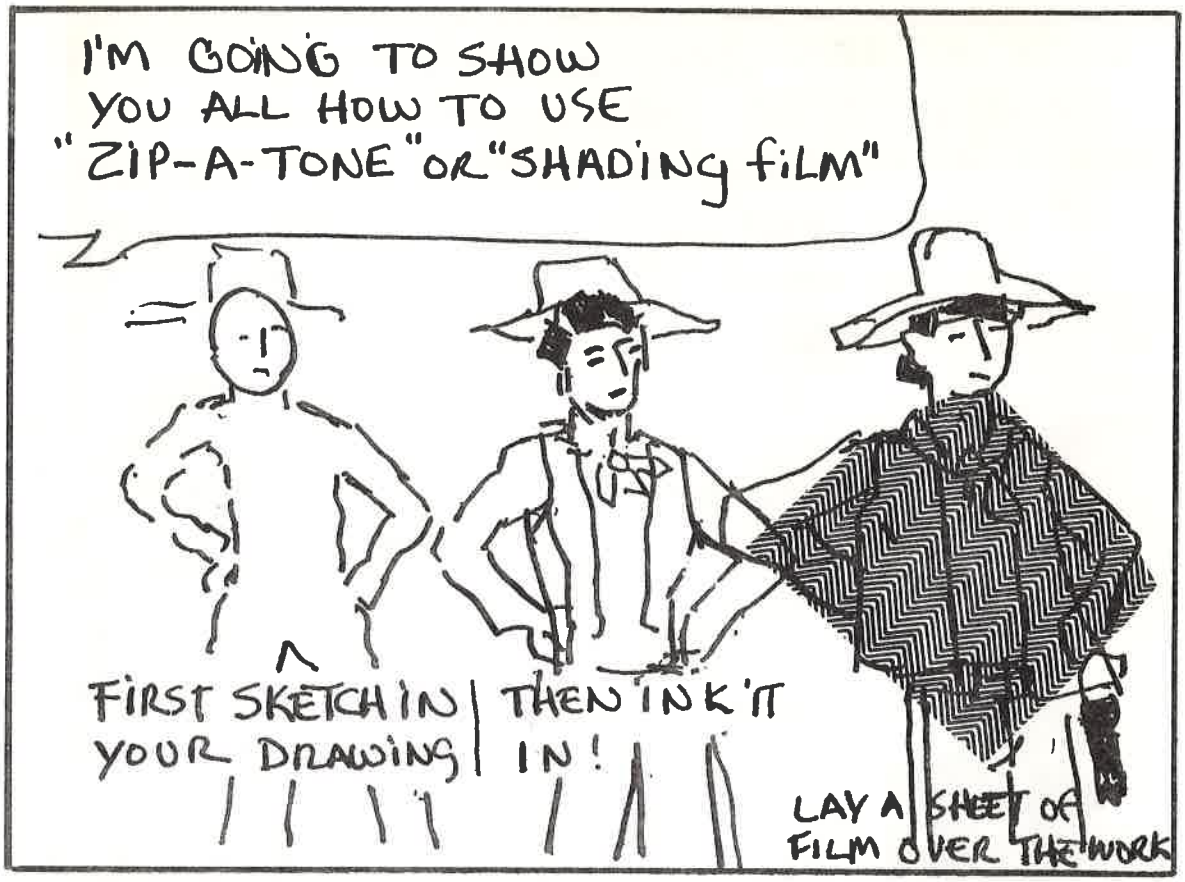
ATTENTION... I'VE GOT SOMETHING TO SAY TO THIS GROUP... YOU TOO!.. SO FAR EVERY ONE'S BEEN WORKING HARD! SOME NICE WORK HAS BEEN TURNED OUT... BUT TO BE HONEST — A LOT OF IT IS TOTALLY DULL — IT'S ALL THIS SUPERHERO JAZZ — EVERY PAGE IS THE SAME — A BANK IS BEING ROBBED, THE SUPERHERO SEES THE ROBBERY — THEY HAVE A FIGHT AND IN THE LAST BOX THE ROBBER IS PUT IN JAIL — BIG DEAL! THERES A WHOLE WORLD OUT THERE ASIDE FROM SUPER HEROES — YOU CAN USE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES — MAKE A COMIC STRIP OUT OF INTERESTING THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO YOU! USE YOUR FRIENDS FOR CHARACTERS — PEOPLE AROUND YOU — THERE MUST BE MORE TO LIFE THAN KILLINGS AND ROBBERIES — HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU BEEN KILLED — SOMETHING ELSE MUST HAVE HAPPENED TO YOU TO MAKE COMICS ABOUT — COME ON — LETS HAVE SOME HUMOROUS STUFF — LOVE — REAL LIFE!

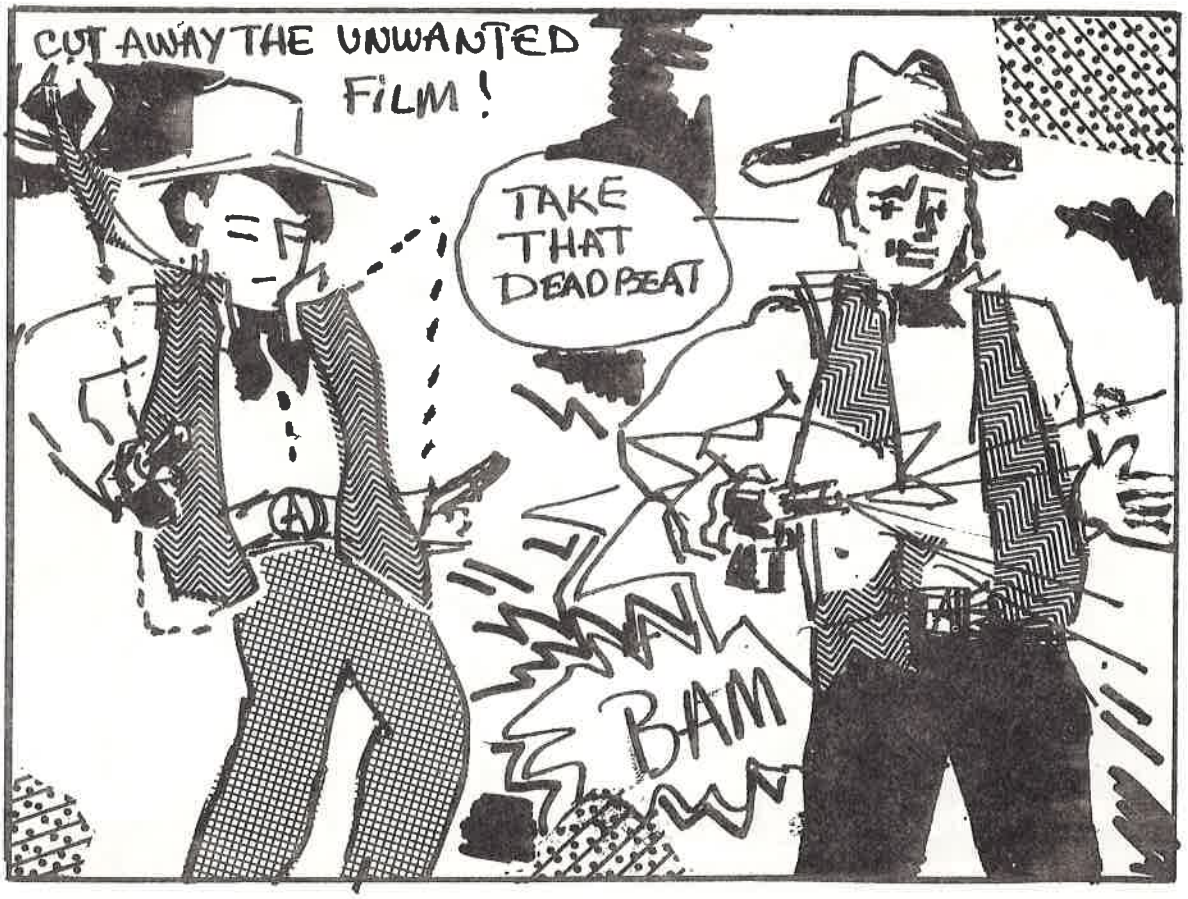

DRAWING BODIES
THINK OF THE BODY AS HAVING 3 MAIN SECTIONS:
HEAD
CHEST
HIPS
MOVE THESE SECTIONS AROUND TO give YOUR figures action.
RUNNING
DEAD
PICKING UP
MOST BODIES ARE 7 HEADS TALL


MAKING BACKGROUNDS:
If your figures are LIGHT MAKE BACKGROUND DARK AND VICE-VERSA - DARK FIGURES ON LIGHT BACKGROUNDS
SOME OBJECTS CAN TELL A WHOLE STORY
DOWN IN A HOLE
DIFFERENT TREES MEAN DIFFERENT PLACES
MOUTH-EYE VIEW


AT 3:00
HOW DO YOU LIKE MY SUPERMAN
VERY NICE
STUPID KID DIDN'T HEAR A WORD I SAID
BUT MANY KIDS DID PICK UP ON THE CHALLENGE AND DID COMICS WITH ORIGINALITY!
I THINK I'LL GO TO THE DENTIST
I STILL DON'T TRUST THIS PLACE
COME ON, WHAT'S TO WORRY ABOUT?
WELCOME TO THE POTATO PLANET
I'M ENCOURAGED! THEY ALL SEEMED TO HAVE TAKEN WHAT I SAID TO HEART!
SURE I THINK IT WENT GREAT TODAY
THE PROBLEM IS IT STILL ALL LOOKS THE SAME AT A DISTANCE THERE'S NOT ENOUGH CONTRAST!


LOOK HERE'S SOME WAYS TO USE INDIA INK!
FIRST SKETCH IN LIGHTLY WITH PENCIL
GO OVER THE LINES WITH PEN AND INK!
WATCH OUT FOR INK SPILLS & FLOODS FROM THE PEN
* KUNG FU KILLER
TAKE THAT FOOL
SPLAT!
USE SHADING LINES THAT CROSS OVER EACH OTHER "CROSSHATCHING"
OR INK STRAIGHT FROM A BRUSH!
OR BRUSH AND INK DILUTED WITH WATER "WASH"


I'M GOING TO SHOW YOU ALL HOW TO USE "ZIP-A-TONE" OR "SHADING FILM"
FIRST SKETCH IN YOUR DRAWING
THEN INK IT IN!
LAY A SHEET OF FILM OVER THE WORK


CUT AWAY THE UNWANTED FILM!
TAKE THAT DEADBEAT
BAM


WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THIS STRIP SERGIO?
CAN'T YOU SEE! THE S.S. ENTERPRISE IS LANDING AND THEN CAPTAIN COOK — BLA BLA BLA — MR SPOCK IS HURT BLA BLA...
WAIT A SECOND YOU'RE GOING TOO FAST! WHAT WORLDS SHOULD WE WRITE IN THE FIRST BOX
WRITE THE ENTERPRISE BLASTS OFF!
THE ENTERPRISE BLA
WE KEEP TRYING TO MAKE THE KIDS COMMUNICATE MORE LUCIDLY... TO MAKE THEM SEE WHAT PART OF THEIR STORY IS COMING →
ACROSS IN THEIR DRAWINGS WHAT PART IS JUST IN THEIR THOUGHTS AND NOT YET ON THE PAGE; WHEN SPEECH BALLOONS AND NARRATIVE WOULD HELP!


SAMPLE
BOO HOO
WHATS THE MATTER JAY?
I JUST LOST MY GLOVES AND I JUST GOT THEM!
GOOD! I HATE THAT KID. HE'S SO. OBNOXIOUS
WELL LOOK AROUND
O HERE THEY ARE
A WEEK LATER
HERE'S THAT OBNOXIOUS KID
WHAT IS IT?
CAN I HELP PUT OUT THINGS BEFORE EVERYONE COMES
OKAY
I'LL GET EVERYTHING READY!


I BOUGHT A MINT CONDITION "X-MEN" FOR ONLY $5.
WOW! HEY PUT THE BLANK PAPER ON THE WIDOWSILL
WHERE DOES THE FINISHED WORK GO
XMEN

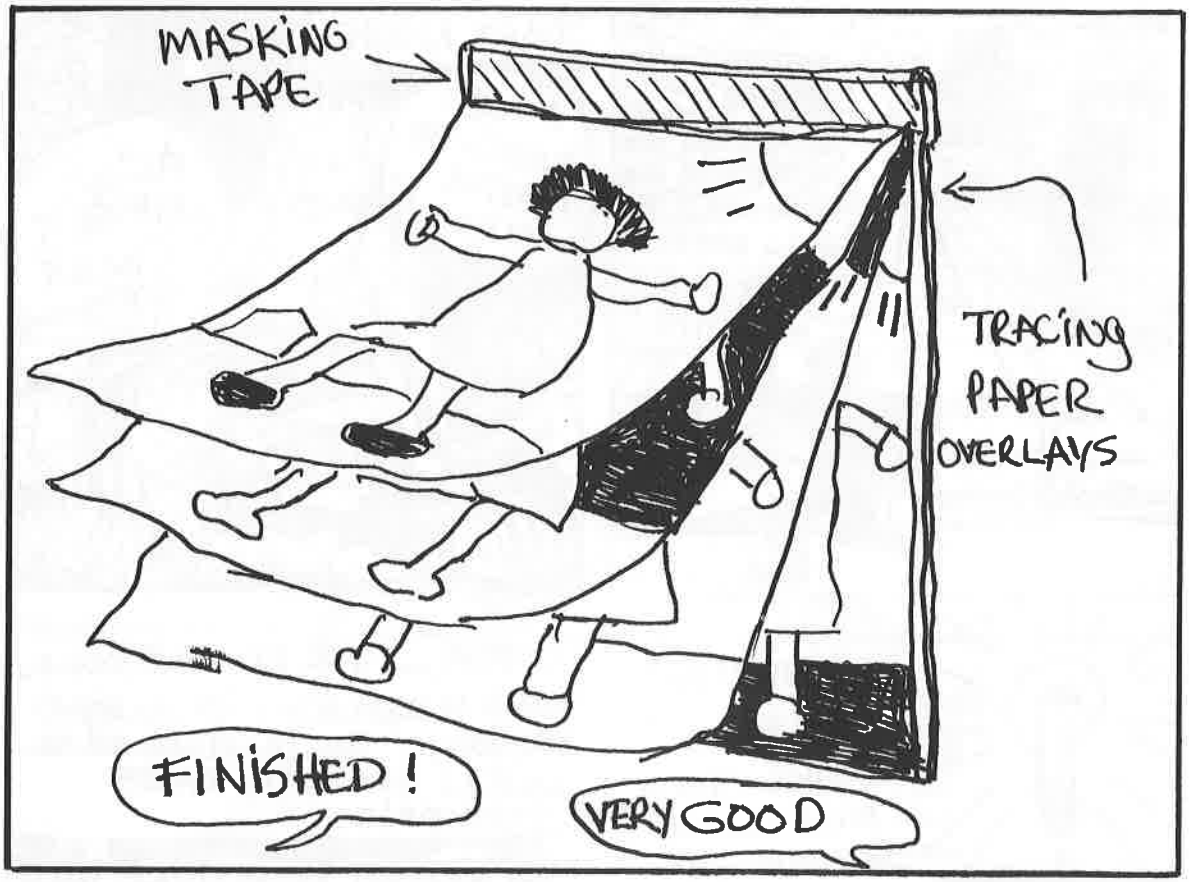

YOU KNOW THAT KID JAY FINE TURNED OUT TO BE OKAY
HE'S ABOUT THE BEST ARTIST IN HERE AND HE'S TOTALLY INVOLVED


SDSI
PHILLIP CAN YOU USE SOME BILINGUAL MATERIAL?
SURE!
WELL KIDS TIME TO PUBLISH!
MINE
TAKE MINE
I CAN'T WAIT
WHEN ARE THEY COMING?
HURRY
I WANT MINE!
HERE THEY ARE!
GOO
P.S. 75
PEST!
ALL NEW
BANG!
comic
P.S. 75 COMIC
THE FIRST ISSUES!

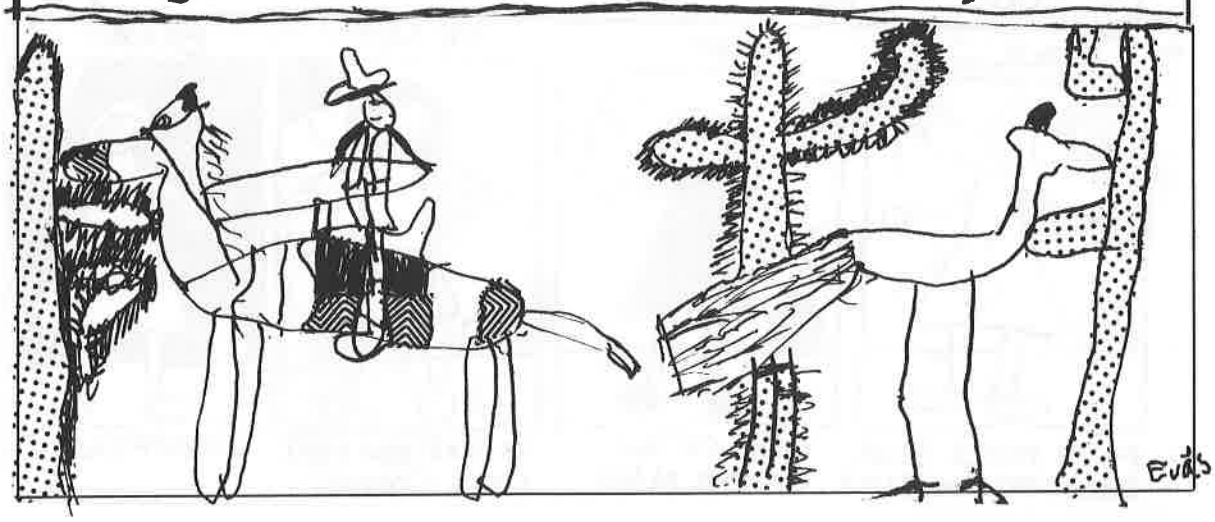

WOW! THIS IS GREAT!
I WANT ONE FOR MY GRANNIE
IT LOOKS LIKE A REAL! COMICS
YOU GOT SIX PAGES! SOME KIDS ARE LUCKY!
I ONLY GOT ONE
PEST
THE CHILDREN WERE SO DELIGHTED SEEING THEIR OWN WORK I SPENT THE WHOLE MORNING READING THE COMICS TO THEM
BAN
TERRIFIC COMICS!
BANG
PEP

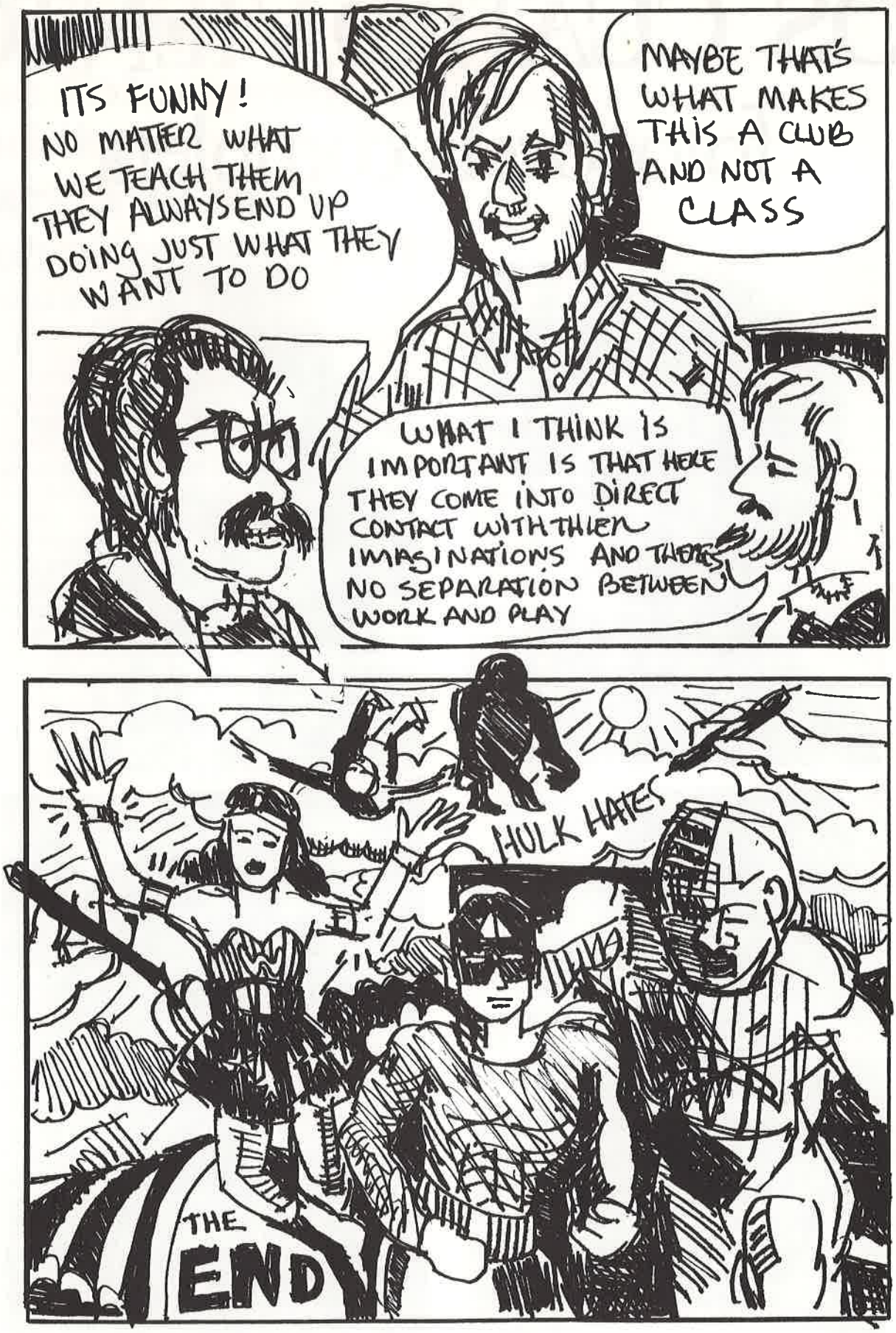

THIS IS MY FREIND JEAN! CAN SHE BE IN THE COMIC BOOK CLUB
HUH
YOU SPILT THE INK, DUMMY!
I DID NOT! SHEILA PUSHED THE TABLE
WHERE'S THE ZIP-A-TONE?
MARK, WE SAID WE WERE GOING TO TEACH COLOR ITS EVEW IN THE PROPOSAL
OI! THAT'S GOING TO BE DIFFICULT
COMICS COMICS COMICS


HOTEL
HOW AM I GOING TO DO THIS?
THAT NIGHT
MARK WHAT'S THE MATTER WAKE UP
☆COLOR ☆HMMM COLOR
I KNOW! WE'LL HAVE THEM MAKE THIER OWN COLOR SEPARATIONS ON TRACING PAPER OVERLAYS
LATER... HE FINDS A BOOK WHICH EXPLAINS IN CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE THE MIXTURE OF ALL COLORS FROM THE THREE PRIMARIES.
RIZZOLI BOOKSTORE
THIS IS JUST WHAT I NEED
THE STORY OF 3 COLORS
SEE NOW YOU COLOR EACH SHEET WHERE YOU WANT THE COLOR TO BE...
BLACK
RED
YELLOW
BLUE
FIRST MAKE YOUR DRAWING FOR BLACK
NEXT ON AN OVERLAY MAKE
WHERE YOU WANT EACH COLOR
TO APPEAR!



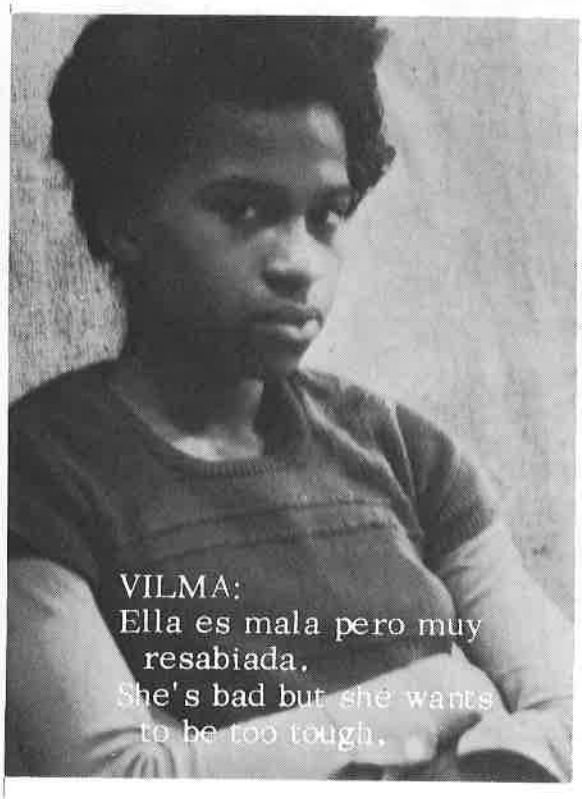
SOME KIDS JUST MADE DRAWINGS AND GOT INTO THE ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE OF INK, COLOR, AND "ZIP-A-TONE," BUT MOST WENT BACK TO DRAWING THEIR COMICS IN THE SAME OLD WAY WITH BLACK MAGIC MARKERS... JUST ENJOYING THEMSELVES.




ITS FUNNY! NO MATTER WHAT WE TEACH THEM THEY ALWAYS END UP DOING JUST WHAT THEY WANT TO DO
MAYBE THAT'S WHAT MAKES THIS A CLUB AND NOT A CLASS
WHAT I THINK IS IMPORTANT IS THAT HERE THEY COME INTO DIRECT CONTACT WITH THIER IMAGINATIONS AND THERE'S NO SEPARATION BETWEEN WORK AND PLAY
HULK HATES
THE END

LOS CUATRO VIENTOS

fotonovela completa



Spin-Offs: The Fotonovela and the Marriage of Narrative and Art

Meredith Sue Willis

These notes describe a few more activities that grew out of the comic book project that Phillip Lopate writes about in this issue's lead article. At least three of the schools participating in the Teachers & Writers Collaborative program this year have been involved in the excitement over comic books. Writers, painters, and classroom teachers have been sharing ideas and resources. Comics seem to offer a solution to all kinds of motivation problems; their popularity with children is unmistakable. When I was five or six the first stories I ever wrote were comics; and the first book I ever claimed to have read cover to cover was "Uncle Scrooge Goes to the Klondike" from Dell Comics. There is something about the combination of pictures and writing and the familiarity of the form that is appealing to all kinds of young people at all skill and interest levels. As a teacher, I thought it might do as a substitute for the other type of creative work that delights everyone—the movie and video tape making. Children don't have to be convinced that they would like to make a movie or a comic, but comics take less expense and less time spent dealing with complicated mechanical devices and techniques. I was particularly looking for aids to my work with children whose first language is Spanish. I have made some good films and done writing with the bilingual classes, but I never feel satisfied with the quality of the writing I get with my limited knowledge of Spanish.

The Fotonovela

The four girls in Isabel Cruz's class wanted to make a movie, but I wanted to do writing, and meanwhile there was the comic book club happening up on the third floor every Monday afternoon. I had been making a big production of a video tape or movie with this class every year for three years: once a war movie, once a cowboy saga, last year a karate epic in which a family is slaughtered and the surviving brothers wreak terrible vengeance on their enemies. In all these projects boys were the prime movers, and now Lourdes, Dania, Rosa, and Vilma accused me: "How come you always make a boys' movie?" Finally I sat down with them and asked for an idea for a plot. They suggested the story of four sisters who study karate and their family gets killed and the girls get revenge. I burst out laughing, and said it sounded a little too much like something I'd heard someplace else before, and they all laughed too. Even before this, Rosa had written a story in Spanish that I recognized as an outline of an episode of a Spanish soap opera called "Una Muchacha Llamada Milagros." These serials on Channel 41 and 47 are full of dark-eyed anguished lovelies gazing at the camera in pregnant silence. I sometimes watch them to practice my Spanish, and I also practice with another popular genre, closely tied, that uses some of the same actors and plot types, the *fotonovela*. Fotonovelas are pulp magazines that combine *True Story* and a comic book format, but instead of drawings, they use photographs. Each photo of the actors is accompanied by speech balloons; the style is static and stagey; the stories mix a little gothic horror and betrayal with a lot of the mushy stuff, and the long-suffering girl is always vouchsafed a husband in the end. This, I thought, was just the thing to try with Rosa, Lourdes, Dania and Vilma.

It was not the girls' idea; I was bored with action movies, looking for a new genre to conquer. The students want always to make what was made last year. They get their ideas from what they know is already possible. They tend to be less interested in the form or media, more in the particular fantasy or experience they want to act out. So they dictated a story in Spanish to Rosa, not fully believing I would come through on the promise and give them a real fotonovela. Lourdes made an English translation for me. It was an interesting combination of a cautionary tale and a story about the fun of "being bad." Four sisters smoke cigarettes, steal, generally drive their mother crazy, and defy their teachers. One gets in a fight with a teacher who doesn't speak Spanish (me) and gets sent to the principal. All the sisters join her and attack the principal, get expelled from school, and

later start a fight with a girl on the street who stabs one of them. They beat up the girl; the wounded sister survives, and they vow to their mother to be good from then on. The main point, of course, is getting to act out the being bad part, the defiance and running through the halls. One interesting moment comes when the mother, who knows what a problem her daughters are, stands up for them against the principal. The highest morality seems to be personal loyalty. There is also a tacit recognition that the "badness" is mostly high spirits, and that when the time comes, the girls will settle down to the next phase of their lives. I had a kind of envy for how comfortable they seemed with themselves, their bodies, their acceptance of changes coming now and soon. There is nothing tacked on about the end of their *novela*—it is the natural next step. Their choice of a story seemed to have little to do with the usual themes of fotonovelas—or perhaps it did; perhaps it had a more realistic view of the struggle into womanhood than all the tales of passive suffering. I do know that their book came out looking almost too lively and active for the genre.

The girls were not too interested in the technical production. Two boys from the class became the production staff, and they helped me shop for an instamatic camera, the cheapest we could get, some black and white film and flash cubes. We experimented later with movie lights, but found the best quality pictures came from out-of-door natural light or from the flashes. Close-ups were more satisfactory than longer shots. With such simple equipment we could set up our shooting situations anywhere, quickly and easily. We would dash quickly into an unoccupied office where the girls threatened the boy who played the principal, and he waved a chair at them. The girls slid down bannisters, kicked open doors, stood on their heads in the hall. All the things they really do anyway and get in trouble for doing. I kept telling the custodians who saw us in the halls, "It's for a book, you understand." Ha! say their eyes, We know you crazies who can't even control the kids. Lourdes and Rosa were moderately interested in what came next, selecting the pictures and organizing them, writing captions. We would work out in the hall, with two hundred photos lying in stacks, big sheets of white paper laid out, taping the pictures to the sheets. Dania would pick out the pictures she wanted to have when the book was done, while Vilma did handstands and Rosa scolded them for being impolite to the teacher. Meanwhile Lourdes wrote captions. I had to keep reminding her to write the words the characters were saying, not simply to describe what was obvious from the picture.

At this point we showed it all to Mark Solomon, the printer, and he told us that we would have to have the photos converted to Vee-lox before they could be printed. If you look closely at a regular photograph you find that black is a solid area of color like paint, and gray a solid gray. A photograph reproduced in a newspaper or a book, on the other hand, is made up of dots, the densest, most closely packed dots for black, fewer dots for gray, none for white. This process is fairly expensive, and after it, you begin laying out the actual material from which the plates for the printing presses are made. We pulled in more help now—Mrs. Cruz to correct the Spanish, some children who enjoyed detailed work to use rubber cement and help with the paste-up. The professional lay-out people at the print shop ultimately squared and regularized our work—mine as well as the children's.

The girls were delighted with their book. When I showed them the first copy, they immediately dragged me out into the hall and Rosa read every word of it aloud, stumbling over my English translations, a little displeased that they had been inserted so prominently. Afterwards, they carried armloads of the books around the school, distributing them to all the classes, taking generous helpings for mothers, grandmothers, sisters and brothers.

About a week after this triumphant flurry, Dania accosted me in the hall: "Susi, when are we going to start our *movie*?"


Las cuatro hermanas se diverten antes de ir a la escuela....
The four sisters playing around before going to school.


Me costó trabajo conseguir los cigarrillos pero los conseguí.


Eso no es nada. A mi no me cuesta mucho trabajo porque yo me los robo.


Las muchachas se asustán al ver a su madre entrar con una compra en los brazos.
Mi hija, por favor dame el asiento que estoy muy cansada.

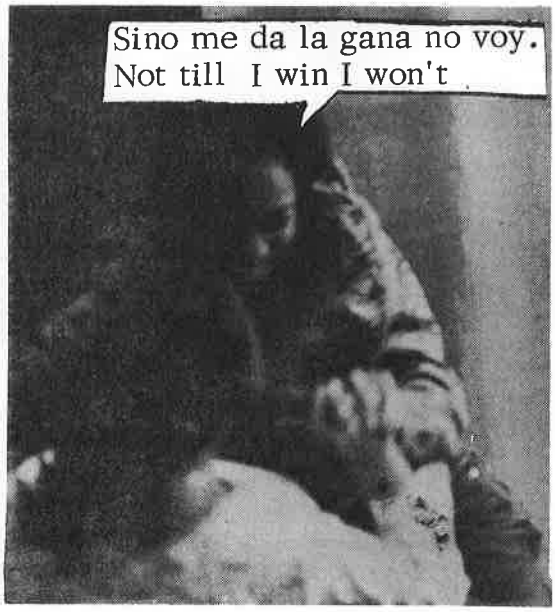

In comes their mother.
Entra la madre cargada y cansada pero muy tranquila.


¿Y este humo que hay aqui?
What's this smoke?


Es que se nos quemaron las tostadas.
We just burnt the toast.


Let's go to school.


Dania comenzó a darle a Rosa, pero Rosa no se dejaba dar golpes.
Quitáteme de encima o te doy de verdad.


Sino me da la gana no voy.
Not till I win I won't

Que manera de estar peleando es ésta?
What is this fighting?

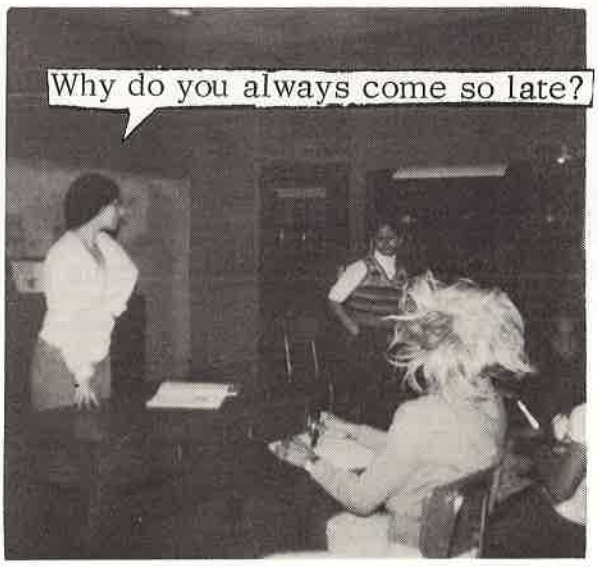
Lourdes y Vilma también pelean.

Quitáteme de encima o te doy de verdad.
Get off of me or I'll really give it to you. .

La madre separa las dos hijas que están peleando .

Las hijas salieron corriendo porque la madre les iba a dar.
The girls leave running because the mother is going to hit them.

Lourdes entra a su clase como sino hubiera pasado nada.
Lourdes comes in her class as if nothing had happened.




I never knew I had two mothers.


La maestra se puso rabiosa porque Lourdes le contestó mal.
The teacher is furious.


Oh no!
¡PLAT!
Y le quita la gorra.
And pulls off her hat.


¡Vieja estupida!


I don't speak Spanish!


I am going to take you to the principal's office.

The Marriage of Narrative and Art

I had been making comics with groups from Juanita Panisse's class for several months; I tried to cover the whole class, the kids who forgot to put arms on their figures as well as the girl who sold commercial comic books for a profit and made beautiful full-color copies of her favorite characters. I had tried all sorts of assignments, ideas gleaned from the comic book club and from Bob Sievert the art consultant.

– Make a comic strip of your dream; of the things you do on an ordinary morning; a comic introducing your family; a comic with no people, only objects; you in your room and what you are thinking about.

– Instead of starting by drawing the figures in the comic strip, cut them out of a contrasting paper and paste them to the boxes where you've already drawn backgrounds. This at once makes for a consciousness of the different possibilities of the actors and the setting and it forces the beginning artist to give his figures a fullness instead of depending on single lines. Sometimes we drew a cut-out of a large head, like a close-up, or of an object that is important to the story—a watch, say, to indicate that time is passing.

– Start with a character instead of a plot or an assignment. Take a whole sheet of paper and begin with a circle or oval, then give it features, hair, clothes, a name. The comic strip will be developed as the story of this character, its life, a dream it might have had etc. Bob Sievert had agreed to visit Panisse's class with me to give a series of lessons of figure drawing and faces: How to indicate a man's face versus a woman's, how to show angry or frightened face lines. I encouraged the kids in the character-developing comic to do something along the lines of what Bob had demonstrated, something more interesting than a neutral or a pretty face. I asked them as they drew to think about this person they were drawing. There was thus an atmosphere of thoughtful preparation before the comic strip was ever begun.

The idea of having an artist visit to give what amounted to drawing lessons proved to be a big success too. Bob came to two bilingual 3-4 classes for three sessions each and taught certain basic principles about drawing bodies in motion. There were some satisfying breakthroughs among the children as they *saw* something for the first time—where a body bends, for example. Both Juanita Panisse and Pilar Delago, the classroom teachers, participated in these drawing lessons and found they advanced their own knowledge and technique—drawing really is a skill

Bob Sievert:

One of the more interesting times I had with all the comic book projects of this year was working with writer Sue Willis, known in bilingual circles as SUSI. Sue and I were talking a lot in the beginning about ways to generate narratives and drawings. Sue wondered if my participation as an artist would stimulate the flow of drawings and comics. After one or two visits to her bilingual groups at P.S. 75 I began to see that most of the students were involved with stick figures and simple static schematics to convey their stories.

What I tried to do was promote the use of fuller figures by making the task look simple. I showed the students how to construct figures out of box-like shapes, simplifying each body mass to a rectangle or circle. Once this ideas had been established I began to show how one could make figures in any position by moving the various boxes just a bit. What happened was very exciting. Suddenly we were getting pages in which series of figures were strung out across the page showing how one gesture could occasion a whole line of drawings to record the position each limb and mass took to make it.

At a certain point Sue and I realized that this might be the basis of a whole project with a class. We decided to attempt it with Norma Becker's class at P.S. 84, another school where we both worked. Norma's class was resistive, and it was an uphill struggle. Still we managed to get a lot of kids into creating series of drawings accompanied by a series of verbal ideas. Some were original and some were very expressive. As an idea it still can be developed, but we were pleased to have scratched about with it a bit.

that can be learned, and even if you aren't lucky enough to have available a vibrant, bearded, in-person New York painter, there are still plenty of self-help drawing books around.

In the course of the drawing lessons, I began to regain an interest myself in drawing for itself, not necessarily within the conventions of comic books. One tiny girl from South America, Ingrid, had always politely ignored the influence of comics; she wrote and illustrated stories, using only the most regular format pages, or, if I left her alone, using plain paper with text and lovely drawings. There was an admirable wholeness to her work, an equality of text and pictures; they needed one another. It brought me back to the comics I made as a child; I couldn't write very fast in first grade, and there were a lot of words I couldn't spell at all, so I needed my pictures to get my story down. I had to show the bodies and trees and chunks of mountains and houses flying through the air in an explosion. On the other hand, I needed the text too, or certain things wouldn't be clear. The working together of printed word and picture has always been a treat to me—I used to love old editions of Dickens that allowed me to take a little rest from the closely printed text while I scanned the pictures and dreamed a little. *Alice in Wonderland* without Tenniel is still a good book, but the Tenniel Alice is special and whole. Think too of the close relation of traditional Chinese landscape painting and the calligraphy that frequently shares the same scroll. In all of these cases there is something far more important going on than the mere illustrating of a text or captioning of pictures.

Bob and I came up with a project together that started with the figure-in-motion drawings he was doing. We had the students make these on big sheets of newsprint folded once to make a strip longer than it was tall. The same figure was to be repeated across the paper, gradually, step-by-step completing an action: dancing, dribbling and shooting a basketball, diving, climbing a cliff, leaping an obstacle, etc. Bob spoke of analyzing the movement, of breaking it down into a kind of slow motion. When the children were well into the work, I added the next part of the assignment. Above or below the figure, for each picture, they were to write what the character is thinking at that precise moment. I wanted a stream of consciousness as detailed and broken into stages as the moving figure. One fourth-grade boy who wrote in Spanish had made a figure simply running and leaping an obstacle, very competently, but the accompanying series of thoughts gave it new emotional depth: "I'll never make it," the boy thinks, "It's too high! Here I go, I'm going to fall—Aiii! Hey, I made it! I did it!" The multiple drawings force several written entries, and thus a more complete sample of a character's thought or speech pattern. Variations on this basic assignment included:

— Something other than a human figure, an inanimate object or animal in action. A flower growing, an atom bomb exploding: What would its thoughts be?

— Instead of words, have a second layer of drawings, the thoughts in pictures. One girl in Norma Becker's sixth grade at P.S. 84 drew a bunny hopping, and above it drew a carrot, then a head of lettuce, then more carrots, more lettuce, and finally a bunny with a grossly swollen stomach.

— Two figures interacting. One asks the other to dance, or mugs the other, or they box etc. An added attraction would be to write what they are saying to one another on one line and above that, what they are simultaneously thinking.

— A more elaborate drawing or mural, perhaps done by a whole group, in which the background takes on more importance. A city street with certain characters moving along from place to place, interacting. There are a number of wonderful medieval paintings that use this technique, often to illustrate the lives of saints. There will be a continuous landscape, and the same figure will reappear at various dramatic moments in his or her life.

— A words-first exercise. Write along the bottom of the page the thoughts of a person jogging, or pursuing or being pursued, or worrying over a boyfriend or seeing an unwelcome acquaintance across the street. Then do the figure series when the writing is complete.

All in all, drawing helped writing. Children's narration tends to leave out too much. The drawing forces a slowing down, a taking into account of more possibilities. They seemed able to feel the character and situation more fully as they experienced the kinetic pleasure of drawing.

PLUGS

The Comics: A Cultural History, a new sound filmstrip set, is now available from EAV. For a complete description of this and other film strips please write to Educational Audio Visual Inc., Pleasantville, New York 10570.

The Teacher's Choice is a catalogue of curriculum materials comprised chiefly of reviews by teachers of materials they have used in their own classrooms. The reviews cover all major school subjects from pre-k through grade twelve. The catalogue also includes twenty teacher-made activities for immediate classroom use. Price $4.00. Available from: Institute of Open Education, 133 Mt. Auburn Street, Cambridge, MA 02138.

Twelve Porringers is a book on the history of Guilford, Connecticut, written by students at the Elisabeth C. Adams Middle School. Write to: Lareine A. Kassabian, Elisabeth C. Adams Middle School, Guilford, Conn.

Several interesting pamphlets on nature study written and published by Edith F. Bondi have come to our attention. They include *Bayou Bound, Nature Study Course*, and *Nature Fair*. For further information on these and other materials relating to nature study write to: Mrs. Edith F. Bondi, 3534 Sunvalley Road, Houston, Texas 77025.

The Center for Open Learning, a group dedicated to curriculum development and raising the political awareness of teachers, offers material relating to third world students and open classroom technique. Some of their titles include: *Your Move*, non-western games for the elementary classroom; and *El Frijol Magico*, a bilingual reader for Chicano children. For a complete brochure write to: Center for Open Learning and Teaching, P.O. Box 9434, Berkeley, California 94709.

Poemmaking, a book edited by Ruth Whitman and Harriet Feinberg, describes some of the experiences and teaching ideas of poets working in Massachusetts schools. Copies may be obtained for $3.50 from the Massachusetts Council of Teachers of English, 205 Hampshire Street, Lawrence, Massachusetts 01841.

TEACHERS & WRITERS COLLABORATIVE PUBLICATIONS

THE WHOLE WORD CATALOGUE (72 pages) is a practical collection of assignments for stimulating student writing, designed for both elementary and secondary students. Activities designed as catalysts for classroom exercises include: personal writing, collective novels, diagram stories, fables, spoof and parodies, and language games. It also contains an annotated bibliography.

IMAGINARY WORLDS (110 pages) originated from Richard Murphy's desire to find themes of sufficient breadth and interest to allow sustained, independent writing by students. Children invented their own Utopias of time and place, invented their own religions, new ways of fighting wars, different schools. They produced a great deal of extraordinary writing, much of it reprinted in the book.

A DAY DREAM I HAD AT NIGHT (120 pages) is a collection of oral literature from children who were not learning to read well or write competently or feel any real sense of satisfaction in school. The author, Roger Landrum, working in collaboration with two elementary school teachers, made class readers out of the children's own work.

FIVE TALES OF ADVENTURE (119 pages) is a new collection of short novels written by children at a Manhattan elementary school. The stories cover a wide range of styles and interests—a family mystery, an urban satire, a Himalayan adventure, a sci-fi spoof, and a tale of murder and retribution.

BEING WITH CHILDREN a book by Phillip Lopate, whose articles have appeared regularly in our magazine, is based on his work as project coordinator for Teachers & Writers Collaborative at P.S. 75 in Manhattan. Herb Kohl writes: "There is no other book that I know that combines the personal and the practical so well. . . ." *Being With Children* is published by Doubleday at $7.95. It is available through Teachers & Writers Collaborative for $7.00.

TEACHING AND WRITING POPULAR FICTION: HORROR, ADVENTURE, MYSTERY AND ROMANCE IN THE AMERICAN CLASSROOM by Karen Hubert (236 pages). A new step-by-step guide on using the different literary genres to help students to write, based on the author's intensive workshops conducted for Teachers & Writers in elementary and secondary schools. Ms. Hubert explores the psychological necessities of each genre and discusses the various ways of tailoring each one to individual students. Includes hundreds of "recipes" to be used as story starters, with an anthology of student work to show the exciting results possible.

TEACHERS & WRITERS Magazine, issued three times a year, draws together the experience and ideas of the writers and other artists who conduct T & W workshops in schools and community groups. A typical issue contains excerpts from the detailed work diaries and articles of the artists, along with the works of the students and outside contributions.

Back issues of Teachers & Writers Magazine are still available. See next two pages for contents.

- ☐ The Whole Word Catalogue @ $4.00
- ☐ Teaching & Writing Popular Fiction @ $4.00
- ☐ Being With Children @ $7.00
- ☐ Five Tales of Adventure @ $3.00 (10 copies or more @ $2.00)
- ☐ Imaginary Worlds @ $3.00
- ☐ A Day Dream I had at Night @ $3.00
- ☐ Subscription(s) to **T&W Newsletter**, three issues $5.00, six issues $9.00, nine issues $12.00

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Between the Survivors and the Stars
Anthology of poetry by students of John Oliver Simon

spring 1975 vol. 6, issue 3
Special Issue

This special issue of the *Newsletter* presents some of the experiences of writers working with film and video. These articles explore the connection between drama, as captured by these media, and the writing process with which we attempt to familiarize children. We hope to convey to the reader some sense of how film and video, major art forms of our time, can be used in the classroom to expand the understanding of arts in general.

Film History Course—A Diary
Phillip Lopate
How to Live Without a Father: The Making of a Videodrama
Theresa Mack
Notes on Fiction Scripts for Film and Video
Meredith Sue Willis

fall 1975 vol. 7, issue 1

Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl
by Dan Cheifetz
From The Other Side of The Desk: The Teacher as Student
by Anne Martin
Outside I Feel Mad, But Inside I Feel Mad—A Diary
by Vicki Finder and Lillian Moy
Trusting The Imagination
by David Fletcher
The Lives of Parents
by Phillip Lopate
Writing as Meditation
by Phyllis Tashlik
The Loves and Hates of Mrs. Jones
by Theresa Mack
Johnny Can Read Johnny: A Text Written by Kids
Looking Back
by Meredith Sue Willis

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History Is Your Own Heartbeat
by Wesley Brown
Animating the Revolution
by Theresa Mack
What Happened on Curtis Street
by Annette Hayn
This Book's Got Taste: The Variety and Pleasure of Literature
Written by Children
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Iroquois Rehab Center
by Neil Baldwin
Reality Next to Imaginary: Poetry Writing With Children
by Andrea Lynd Nold
Bugs: One Insect Leads to Another
by Bob Sievert
Writing With Prospective Teachers
by Lois Kalb Bouchard
Bowlarama School
by Christine Smith

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An Interview With Anna Heininey
by Theresa Mack
Why Genre?
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Egyptian Diary
by Ron Padgett
Super Heroes
by Bob Sievert
Letters that Can't Be Delivered
By Alan Ziegler
Rechanneling Negative Energy
by Dan Cheifetz
Linguistics and Creative Writing in Elementary Schools
by Meredith Sue Willis
Would You Kill a Porpoise for a Tuna Fish Sandwich?
by Christine Smith

Contributors' Notes

PHILLIP LOPATE is the author of a volume of poems, *The Eyes Don't Always Want To Stay Open* (SUN Books) and a novella, *In Coyoacan* (Swollen Magpie Press). His works have appeared in the anthologies *A Cinch, Equal Time*, and other magazines, including *The Paris Review*. He is co-ordinator of Teachers & Writers Collaborative's special program at P.S. 75 in New York City. A book about his teaching experiences, *Being With Children*, is now available through Teachers & Writers.

BOB SIEVERT is currently working at P.S. 84 in Manhattan and at P.S. 152 in the Bronx. He regularly exhibits his paintings at the Green Mt. Gallery.

SUE WILLISspent twenty years in West Virginia and has now completed another ten in New York. Her fiction appears in various literary magazines. Most recently a short story has been collected in *Mademoiselle Prize Stories*. She teaches at P.S. 48 in Queens, and P.S. 84 and P.S. 75 in Manhattan.

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