

## Blame The New Yorker

by Walter Kirm

THE COMPLETE CARTOONS OF THE NEW YORKER

Edited by Robert Mankoff.

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Now that America's urbane sophisticates have had to acknowledge their status as a fringe group so out of touch with mainstream moral values, tournament bass fishing, Nascar and Christian rock that their electoral and cultural clout is marginally less than that of Casper, Wyo., legions of self-doubting highbrows are asking themselves how this decline into decadence occurred.

Because of what enfeebling bad habit did the proud and potent thinking class that gave us F.D.R. and J.F.K. fade into a cynical, ironic, smirking bunch of spiritual weaklings headed up by Al Franken and Michael Moore? Was the problem attending movies instead of church? Deserting Burger King for Whole Foods Market? No, I've concluded. The blame lies elsewhere. The seduction of America's elites by the vices of humanism and skepticism can only be blamed on the New Yorker cartoon, an agent of corruption more insidious than LSD or the electric guitar.

For proof of this theory, please obtain and study "The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker," a coffee-table book so broad and thick that it doesn't need a table under it because it's its own table—just bolt on legs. And the book might have been even larger, its editor, Robert Mankoff, writes. Of more than 68,000 pieces of art that could have been included in its pages, only about 2,000 have been printed on paper, while the rest are reproduced on two CD's attached to the inside of the front cover. The book is an astonishing object, still. The thought that all (or even just all the best) New Yorker cartoons can be gathered in one volume means that the set isn't infinite after all. It's like finding out there are only so many sad songs or only so many attractive blondes.

The subversion of ruling-class piety by wit dates back to the mid 1920's and a cartoon by Peter Arno, the form's first master. A scantily-dressed flapper with heels like black daggers, endless legs and perfect posterior cleavage is pressing herself into the padded abdomen of a stuffy older gentleman in tails. He's dancing, but she's on the verge of copulating. "Good God, woman! Think of the social structure!" Funny? Sort of. Not really. It's something else; a smirky, gently cynical something else that will characterize the form for decades to come, right up until the present. The key phrase in this instance is "social structure," of course, which the fellow has presumably picked up from some asinine conversation at his club or some best-selling history of Western Man, and the key visual detail is his mustache, so walrusy and pompous and well-brushed. The girl stands for jazzy Freudian libido, the man for repressed Victorian lust. Hers is the irresistible new attitude, and all the old gent can do to hold it off—in her, but chiefly in himself—is sputter high-minded jargon.

By the 1930's and 40's, the New Yorker cartoon had adopted two basic modes. First, it made fun of its readers' aspirations—social, intellectual, economic and romantic—by satirizing their language, their professions, their pastimes, their dress and their physical mannerisms. This was the humor of self-recognition, but also of self-congratulation, since a fool who can laugh at his folly is not a fool but something rarer and finer: a self-ironist. Under drawings of dance parties, cruise ships, tennis matches, clothing stores and theaters the artists set captions—usually bits of dialogue—that showed up their speakers as posing, posturing, preening, pedantic pretenders. James Thurber, whose influential innovation was to draw as crudely as a 5-year-old, making only the most cursory effort to individualize his figures (because, really, why bother; we're all just

talking apes), gives us two couples seated at a table, holding up glasses of dark liquid. The fanciest of the drinkers—he wears a bow tie—says: “It’s a naive domestic Burgundy without any breeding, but I think you’ll be amused by its presumption.” Thus did the wine snob get his donkey tail, and his kind has worn it ever since.

The second, less common species of cartoon relied more heavily on visual gags and traded in featherweight absurdism. Two politicians and an engineer stand at the edge of a massive and sweeping Western dam. “The other side!” one of the politicians bellows. “The water’s supposed to be on the other side.” In a mute, seven-panel sketch by Otto Soglow, a generic male figure appears first in a crib, then in a playpen, then behind various grates and fences, and then, in the next-to-last image, inside a bank cage under a sign: “Receiving Teller.” The motif of bold vertical lines pays off with a picture of the poor everyman in jail, probably as punishment for embezzlement, the sole act of rebellion in his dry and pent-up life.

Toward the 50’s this second, more graphic, laconic style started to predominate. The captions got shorter, or vanished altogether, while the drawings grew louder, cuter, trickier. The Jazz Age, its Great Depression hangover and World War II were all behind the country, and the cartoons seemed to lack a subject for a while, substituting trickiness for punch. This enervated spirit of the early cold war is crystallized in a creation by Chon Day: A pudgy, tie-wearing nonentity of a man holds a pistol to one side of his head while plugging a finger in his opposite ear. He doesn’t want to hear the shot, he doesn’t really want to fire the shot—he just wants a respite, a little peace. He’s spent. (The cartoon rather closely reprises an earlier piece done by Saul Steinberg in 1946 that shows another suited sad sack aiming a revolver not at his temple but at an apple perched on his bald scalp.)

The morbid streak that emerged around this time made a pop-culture sensation of Charles Addams. Memories of “The Addams Family,” the campy TV show spun off from his work, make it hard to assess his cartoons’ original impact. They certainly didn’t resemble their predecessors. To begin with, they were darker in hue, their objects and characters often framed in a barren, timeless gloom that’s closer to Sartre and Beckett than Hollywood horror films. Instead of the dapper, devilish good fun offered by the TV show, a disquieting cruelty keeps cropping up. In a 1949 cartoon, an automobile pulling a travel trailer is parked alongside a high, sheer cliff. A man in a raincoat stands next to the car, facing the trailer’s door, which faces the cliff. “Oh, darling,” he says, “can you step out for a moment?” Gothic fun-house spookiness? Not quite. The tone of blandly vicious marital malice feels troublingly real.

By dividing the collection into decades that begin and end at the five-year mark, and by adding brief topical and historical essays, the editor seeks to convince us that the cartoons represent a progression of some sort linked to current events and social trends. One of the better essays, by John Updike (the other two good ones are Calvin Trillin’s and Ian Frazier’s), notes a lag between the subjects of the cartoons and the headlines of the day, particularly in regard to heated issues such as civil rights. In the decade from 1955 to 1964, Updike observes, only one cartoon features a black face.

That’s more than a lag; it suggests that the cartoons were, for the most part, a refuge from reality—or an antidote, like a stiff cocktail—rather than a trailing reflection. Just because more and more drawings included TV sets and other period accouterments doesn’t mean they engaged the the larger culture at any interesting level—with some exceptions. One work of art, yes, art, by William Steig (who, with Steinberg, was one of the magazine’s licensed weirdos) uses shaky psychedelic lines that thin and thicken and curl around themselves to give us a lumpy, not-quite-human creature standing glumly under a tall flower. “The Burden of Self-Consciousness.” It’s perfect. It levels the era’s turtlenecked existentialism with one decisive comic blow, but after its point is made it keeps on moving, burrowing through the eye to the subconscious and lodging there like an abstract parasite.

Depending on the reader's age, a point will come in the book when the cartoons stop representing The New Yorker's history, let alone American society's, and start recalling bits of his own life. For me, this happened on Page 382 with a William Hamilton cartoon from 1972. I was 9 years old when I first saw it, growing up in a Minnesota village that had changed in four or five short years from a sleepy ma-and-pa farm town to a hip colony for outdoorsy Twin City professionals. This new crowd, which included my parents, was on a tear just then, drinking, dancing and divorcing. When my parents threw one of their smoky, noisy parties (many featuring fondue) a terrible sense of moral peril floated upstairs to my bedroom. Please save us, God. My fear that my family, and all of civilization, was about to collapse in some swinging, groovy orgy that would leave me and all other young children homeless merged somehow with certain objects: the bottle of Smirnoff vodka in our pantry, the copy of "The Happy Hooker" in my father's sock drawer and, most frightening of all, the stack of magazines beside the toilet in our downstairs bathroom.

I'd opened one of them once and seen a drawing—angular, snappy and very mod in precisely the manner I found so menacing—of a strange man and a woman seated in a restaurant in front of a crowded, lively bar. The man had long hair, big glasses, a droopy mustache and a flowery wide tie. The woman had a plume of frizzy hair, chunky earrings and startlingly thin arms. He was leaning back, smoking. She was drinking wine. She was saying something, but I didn't get the joke. It hardly mattered. The picture's feeling, its vibe, was disturbing enough. It haunted me. Seeing it again, I got the chills. ("It's hard to believe," the forgotten caption reads, "that someday we'll be just so much nostalgia.")

In the 80's and afterward, the cartoons tended to loosen up and grow freewheeling, branching out from ingenious visual jokes and the light comedy of upper-middle-class manners into more idiosyncratic terrain. Roz Chast's 1981 three-panel piece titled "The Three Certainties" begins with a faux-naïf skull and crossbones, "Death." A check made out to the I.R.S. and surrounded by disembodied angels' wings signifies "Taxes." The final panel shows a clown in a curly wig and a ruffed collar—"Bobo." Get it? Of course you don't. Such humor can't be gotten, in the old sense, only inexplicably chuckled at. Chast and her quirky contemporary counterparts practice a sort of comic expressionism that depends for its effects on the reader's ability to recognize, identify with and mysteriously anticipate the habitual, signature movements of individual artists' minds. The most one can say of a good Chast cartoon is that it's deeply Chast-like. And that's sufficient.

Such recent cartoons don't make a point, they are a point—a sign, perhaps, that the genre has reached maturity. It's playing with its own traditions now and milking the expectations of a fan base whose tastes have become slightly jaded, even perverse. The appearance of this encyclopedic anthology, though it's nominally linked to the The New Yorker's 80th anniversary next year, can only feel a bit final and funereal, just as the volume's slablike heft makes it feel like a tombstone. And though it would be foolish to suggest the medium has run its course and that renaissance and revival aren't still possible (America might elect another Democratic Senate someday, too) one does sense that the cartoons have done the job they first set out to do: purging any lingering puritanism from their relatively well-heeled audience and replacing it with a smart-aleck self-awareness that suddenly—just look around—feels useless, lonely and crippling.

But still amusing.