Out of the Trash and into a Treasury

A WORD (AND SOME PICTURES) FOR GROWN-UPS

At last it's possible to test our idea that some of the best twentieth-century literature for kids appeared in lowly comic books that deserve an honored place next to the more traditional classics on every well-read child's bookshelf.

To gather the gems for this *TOON Treasury of Classic Children's Comics* we obsessively sifted through thousands of comic books published between the 1930s and the early 1960s, that golden time when comics first blossomed in the cracks of American culture and cost only ten cents. We plowed through piles of comic books the way a generation of kids once did. Like Carl Barks's Uncle Scrooge cavorting in his money bin, kids loved to dive around in them like porpoises, and burrow through them like gophers, and toss them up and let the comics hit them on the head. The adult world saw comics as junk culture—toxic, or at best, harmless. But today, in hipster clothing and Clark Kent glasses, the once disreputable comic book confidently strides into bookstores, museums, and universities cleverly disguised as the upwardly mobile "graphic novel." Librarians—no longer fearful that comics will blunt children's ability to appreciate more traditional kid books—are today among the greatest champions of the form, as they see young readers skip past the computer terminals to curl up with objects that look a lot like books.

Newsstand, summer 1948

The first comic books were born in the mid-1930s. They gathered together popular newspaper comic strips in family-friendly collections that offered good value for a Depression-era dime. Reprint anthologies like *Famous Funnies* and *Popular Comics* achieved a fad-like appeal. Soon, having run out of existing comics to reprint at low page rates, publishers turned to pulp illustrators and writers, down-at-the-heels painters, failed comic strip artists, and even green teenagers to fill their magazines with cheap new material. Reflecting the medium's kinship to pulp fiction, genre anthologies like *Detective Comics* and *Western Picture Stories* began to sprout until, in 1938, two teenaged science-fiction fans from Cleveland who had been rejected by all the newspaper strip syndicates, found a home for their creation, Superman, in *Action Comics*. Superman introduced a new genre that came, for many, to define the whole medium. In truth, the super-hero fad crashed after World War II—comic-book-reading GIs, not caped crusaders, had won the war. Jungle, crime, romance, war, and horror genres now came to dominate the newsstands alongside the immensely popular "funny animal" comics that had started appearing in 1940 to appeal to the youngest readers and continued to flourish after the war.

Comic book burning, Binghamton, New York, 1949

Comic books were the first large-scale medium to appeal directly to kids as consumers a decade or more before rock and roll got grown-ups all shook up; while guardians of the culture could tolerate—if sometimes barely—the funny animal and humor titles featuring animated film stars like Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny, they became increasingly alarmed by the ever more lurid titles that competed for youngsters' dimes. Without even the fig leaf of a ratings system for guidance, comics came to be seen as the Grand Theft Auto of their day. In the years leading up to the 1954 Senate Hearings on Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency that almost killed off the form, parents, teachers, and church groups had literally dumped comic books into giant bonfires. In 1953 there were over 650 regularly published titles with a combined monthly circulation of between 70 million and 100. By 1955 half the titles and many of the publishers had disappeared from the newsstands.

By the early 1960s comic books had become relatively marginal. Super heroes—gelded to live within the strict standards imposed by the Comics Code Authority that grew out of the Senate hearings—made a comeback, but it was the end of an era. The ten-cent price that had held for nearly three decades was raised to twelve cents. Television had come to dominate the landscape. Only anodyne adventure stories and comics for young children were left standing. Ironically, it was in the "kiddie" comics filled with talking ducks and mischievous tykes that one could still find the nuanced characters and memorable stories that helped nurture today's graphic novels.

One branch of the comic book family tree often obscures the other, and the kiddie comics are usually overlooked by comics fans in love with the darker reincarnations of the super hero that now fly into the world's multiplexes; but Carl Barks's acerbic duck adventures, John Stanley's character-driven tales of Little Lulu and Tubby, and the lyrical nonsense of Walt Kelly are at least as sophisticated as the Dark Knight and the X-Men—and a lot funnier. These comics had as direct an effect—arguably as strong as the influence of *MAD* and the horror comics—on many of the underground cartoonists of the 1960s who made comics come of age. The melancholy in many of today's more emotionally resonant graphic novels can be found right below the manic surface of John Stanley's work; Jeff Smith's Bone characters are clearly first cousin to Walt Kelly's Pogo; Uncle Scrooge's pince-nez seem to come from the same optician as Vladek Spiegelman's eyeglasses in *Maus*.

Still, we didn't put this *Treasury* together looking for works that may have influenced the course of comics history—this is hardly a book directed at historians, cartoonists, adult-comics fans, or scholars of the form, though some of the best of these were gratefully consulted every step of the way in our selection of this material. We set out to find great work that could be relished by kids of all ages.

The only trouble is there's no such thing as a "kid of all ages"... they're all at some *specific* stage of development while morphing quickly into another. Only grown-ups contain that "kid of all ages." As adults, you are invited to nostalgically revisit or discover all these stories with wide-eyed wonder. But we made this book for kids, selecting stories that can be read to very young children, then savored independently by kids mastering the secrets of reading—and then revisited often by them as they make the long march to adulthood when they contain their own "kid of all ages." We focused on comics for the younger set, steering clear of the highly charged sexual and horrific content that once got comics in such hot water. We avoided melodrama, concentrating instead on the funny end of the funnybook spectrum, a zone that of course includes the poignant, poetic, and revelatory as well as the silly. We rummaged through large piles of bland, condescending, and half-baked stuff—the predictable result of work made for low wages in a low-prestige field, often made anonymously and on tight deadlines—and ran into lots of work land-mined with the now painful negative ethnic, racial, and gender stereotypes that are part of our cultural heritage.

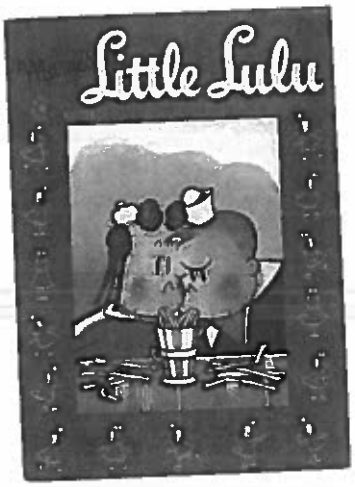
All the pieces here were chosen to stand the test of time and to reward re-reading (a seeming paradox when sifting through a medium as ephemeral as comics), and we found way more than could ever fit in one volume. Nevertheless, in studying the rich heritage, we kept returning to a small handful of great storytelling artists and finally ceded a large part of our treasury to four giants who tower over our corner of the comic book landscape: Sheldon Mayer, Walt Kelly, John Stanley, and Carl Barks. All were writers as well as illustrators and were able to express themselves fully in comics. Often we chose to offer more than one example of work by the other creators we selected as well, to give a better sense of the breadth and intensity of their achievement. Though designed for little kids, all our stories take on big themes, exploring the nature of the self and the other, love and death, revenge, greed, loyalty, and the demarcation of fantasy and reality. The common denominators for the stories we chose are a strong narrative thrust, a great sense of humor, and a distinctive authorial voice.

Cartooning was built into Sheldon Mayer's DNA, and his lifework is embedded in the DNA of American comic books. Barely past his own childhood when he began working as an editor on the very first comics, he recognized the potential of Superman when the crude submission first crossed his desk and he convinced his dubious bosses to give it a shot. His own first significant creation, *Scribbly*, was one of the earliest series drawn specifically for comic books, back when they still mimicked the format of the Sunday newspaper strips. Telling of a lower-middle-class New York teenager's passion to become a cartoonist, it is among the first overtly autobiographical comics ever made. In the 1939 sequence we selected (pages 61–67), the boy cartoonist's collision with school and authority echoes themes that harken back to Tom Sawyer.

Mayer's raffish J. Rufus Lion story (pages 285–91) carries the lowlife scent of vaudeville that permeated many of the early humor comics. It manages to smash the fourth wall to smithereens years before Harvey Kurtzman's *Hey Look!* feature (pages 284, 292, 332, and 345), and later *MAD*, atomized the smithereens, while painlessly introducing the notion of the unreliable narrator to

Dell Comics advertising, *Saturday Evening Post*, November 1, 1952 (left), and January 10, 1953 (right)

young readers. Mayer put aside his editor's visor to become a full-time cartoonist in 1948; his many funny animal comics that followed—best exemplified by his first Three Mouseketeers story on pages 115–20—still have the rhythms of vaudeville, but they now resonate with a sweetness, an engagement with character, and a sheer love of cartooning that shine through every panel. In most of the ninety-nine issues of *Sugar and Spike*, Mayer's definitive creation, parents exist with their heads lopped off by the tops of those panels. The endearing toddler sweethearts with a rug's-eye view of the world (conceived decades before TV's *Rugrats* was born) offer up stories about negotiating friendships and navigating the baffling adult world—themes explored further in many of the selections in our *Treasury*.



This divide between adults and kids is bridged, for example, in Walt Kelly's original coming-of-age fairy tale, "Prince Robin and the Dwarfs" (pages 177–90). Young Prince Robin's dwarf pals take the true measure of the king's childish scoffing by shrinking him and his men down to kid size; the prince then displays his competence, defeating a giant-size ogre and teaching his father a lesson in tolerance. Kelly did some of the most sumptuous and charming comics for the very youngest readers in his adaptations of Mother Goose rhymes and fairy tales for several of Western Publishing's Dell comics titles in the 1940s and 1950s, stylistically looking back to the great children's book illustration of the late ninteenth and early twentieth centuries. The winsome quality that permeates his Hickory and Dickory (pages 87–94) was perfected at the Disney studios, where he had worked as an animator on features like *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, and *Fantasia*. Kelly's rollicking and idiosyncratic *Pogo* was born in Dell's *Animal Comics* in 1942, and at the end of the decade matured into one of America's most highly regarded syndicated newspaper strips. In *Pogo*'s strip incarnation, Kelly added political and social commentary to the heady brew of virtuoso cartooning and whimsy that he'd already perfected in the comic books.

"Funny animal" comics are virtually synonymous with the kid comics genre, an outgrowth of the marketing of Mickey Mouse and other animated screen stars. Many of the comic book artists represented in this collection—like Walt Kelly, Dan Noonan, Woody Gelman, Dan Gordon, and others—were moonlighting or ex-animators glad

of the relative autonomy that came with comic book work. Carl Barks, after spending his early years working as a logger, riveter, printer's assistant, mule driver, and cowboy, was hired by the Disney studios in his thirties, first as an animator and then as a story artist on Donald Duck cartoons. He left in 1942, launching into a thirty-year career as a freelancer, a self-described "duck man," the definitive artist and writer of Donald Duck comics for Western Publishing.

In the course of a career that made him the most-read comic book artist in the world, Barks created Duckburg, a richly imagined world fully populated with archetypal characters he invented, like Uncle Scrooge, Gladstone Gander, Gyro Gearloose, and Magica De Spell. The Donald he inherited from Walt Disney was a choleric quacker, hardly the subtle and coherent personality Barks developed in his ten-page stories. As in our examples (pages 131–40 and 241–50), Donald is a well-intended but misguided parent, sometimes a buffoon, occasionally competent, though rarely as preternaturally level-headed as his nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie. In Barks's longer duck adventures, informed by the literature he'd absorbed since childhood—ranging from Jack London and Robert Louis Stevenson tales to cowboy pulps, historical tales, and mythology—the far-flung exotic stories are tautly written, scrupulously researched, and psychologically astute. The thrilling and often laugh-out-loud funny narratives are as rich as anything children's literature or cinema has ever offered. Drawn with precision, imbued with a crusty view of human (and duck) nature, his stories often reflect a flinty economic determinism, as in the astonishing "Tralla La" on pages 252–73. Though revered around the world, Barks's work still seems underrecognized in his home country, outside a wide circle of comics fans. That he worked anonymously under the broad Walt Disney corporate flag—and was known for most of his career only as "the good duck artist"—may have made it harder for many Americans to locate the singularity of his comics genius.

John Stanley, one of Barks's few equals as a comics storyteller, also produced most of his lifework for Dell comics under at least as large a shroud of anonymity. Over his years in the business he wrote comics scripts for many licensed characters, including Woody Woodpecker, Raggedy Ann, and Nancy, that displayed some of his idiosyncratic charms, but his most renowned work was a fifteen-year run of *Little Lulu* comics that began in 1945. Stanley transformed the licensed series of popular *Saturday Evening Post* gag cartoons by Marge Henderson Buell about a young hellion into a rich tapestry of comic stories about an uncannily convincing society of neighborhood kids. His competent and inquisitive little girl was more than just a tomboy: She was a ladylike proto-feminist, at least the equal of the boys who repeatedly try to keep her out of their "No Girls Allowed" club. Stanley's "Five Little Babies" story (pages 45–60) is a classic of escalating comedy and humiliation, a perfect prepubescent equivalent to James Thurber's epic battles of the sexes. Stanley's other Lulu story in our collection, "Two Foots Is Feet" (pages 79–83) shows off his relish for language and its absurdities—his verbal playfulness is as funny and sophisticated as his visual slapstick. Stanley wrote and visually planned out his Lulu stories, but most were simply rendered by journeyman cartoonist Irving Tripp, without the deftness of touch visible in Stanley's own drawing, as seen in the literally haunting Tubby story we selected: "The Guest in the Ghost Hotel" (pages 207–16). This dark and fantastical side of Stanley is also on view in his own later creation, Melvin Monster (pages 317–22), where he manages to build sympathetic comedy around something as genuinely horrific as child abuse in a mode that parallels Roald Dahl's contemporaneous children's stories.

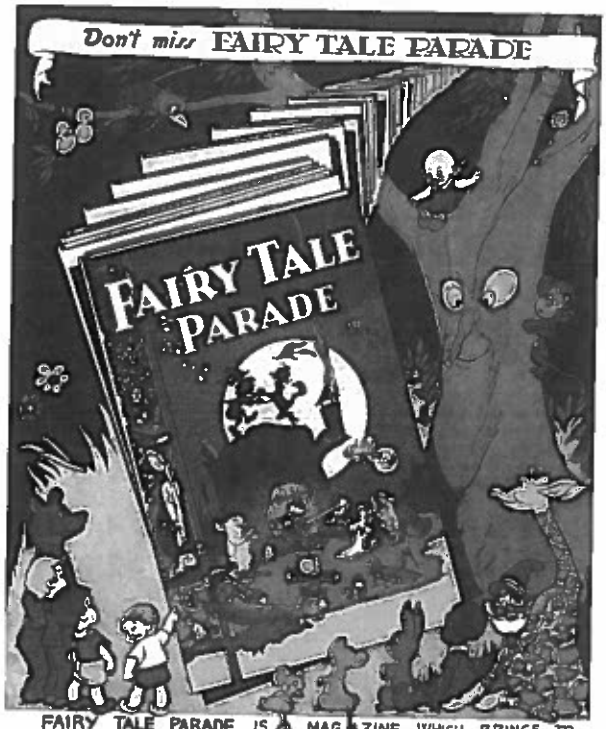
Though Stanley's Lulu stories ran variations on a

few recurring themes, they are far from the carefully delineated sitcom world that Al Wiseman and Fred Toole elaborated from Hank Ketcham's *Dennis the Menace* newspaper feature (pages 29–37 and 75–78). The widely imitated *Dennis the Menace* comics offer the exuberant pleasures of a specific time and place; they seem to carry the smell of mid-century suburban American barbecues. Stanley's Lulu stories seem to be set in an earlier and less opulent small-town America that's far less specific in its details. The stories actually take place in a self-contained dreamscape that feels persuasively real, yet timelessly abstract.

It's no accident that so much of the material in our book was published by Western Publishing's line of Dell comics. In the first half of the twentieth century Western had played a significant role in democratizing (or "dumbing down," depending on which librarian you asked) children's literature with their low-priced, mass-produced Big Little Books and Little Golden Books as well as comics, mostly based on Disney's and other licensed properties. They exuded the monolithic mainstream wholesomeness of the entire Walt Disney enterprise. When the rest of the comics publishing industry was mowed down as a result of the 1954 Senate hearings, Helen Meyer, then Dell's vice president, offered testimony in the hearings, and seemed almost as disdainful of the rest of the comics industry as its most severe critics. Instead of running for cover under the Comic Code Authority's stamp of approval that allowed surviving publishers to limp toward the future, Dell—with the luxury of a strong distribution arm—unfurled a Dell Pledge to Parents on the back of each comic, that proudly stated:

Though this notion of wholesomeness did sometimes lead to treacly and dull Dell comics, it also managed to offer protection to some artists—like the ones we selected—to pursue their own visions unencumbered by the culture war that raged around them. It led us, as editors, to grapple with rather heady questions about the whole notion of childhood, our own psyches as ex-kids, and our own roles as parents. The idea of children pictured in the Middle Ages as miniature adults gave way in modern times to the idea of childhood as a zone of innocence to be protected. The Victorian idea of childhood, to vastly oversimplify, grew out of the need to allow the time and space necessary for our kids to learn to read and write rather than just hold a plow. This encouraged the kind of family values that led to the Dell Pledge on the one hand and the vision of comics as the defiler of youth on the other hand. The comic book exists in the no man's land between old-fashioned concepts of literacy and the more recent awareness of the need for a visual literacy; it exists somewhere between the Invention of Childhood and the End of Childhood—between the traditional and the transgressive.

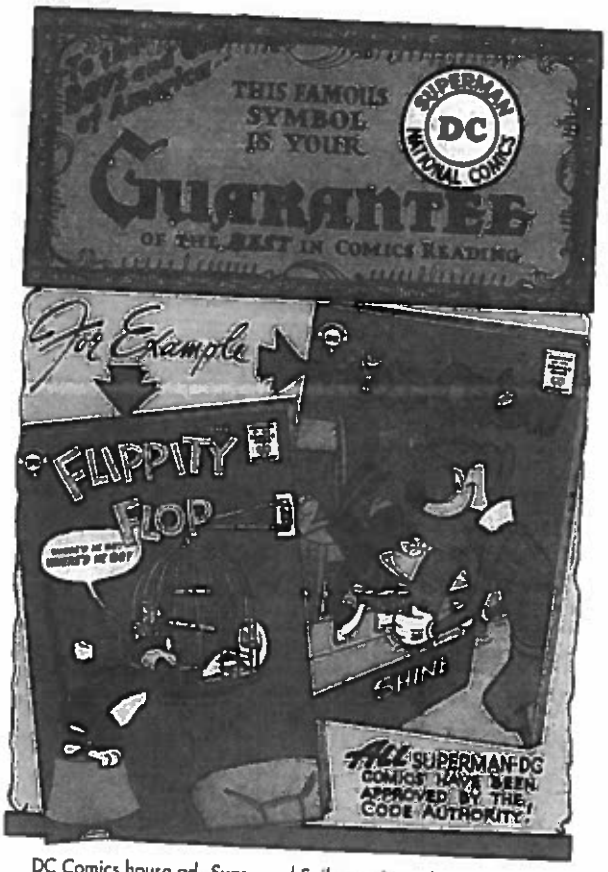
As adults with that kid of all ages inside us, we can remember the thrill of tasting the forbidden horror comics and the wising up that came with *MAD*'s skepticism—we loved the irrational universe



House ad, back cover of *Animal Comics* no. 4, August–September, 1943

comics opened up for us, where men could fly and nutsy squirrels could insist they're really airplanes. But as parents we've desperately wanted to keep our kids safe on the ever-shrinking island of childhood, protected from the dangers of, say, Internet porn and the horrors of the nightly news, while still preparing them for the Real World. As evidenced in so many of our selected stories, adults can act very childishly, kids can be remarkably clear-eyed, and the battle between the rational and the irrational is more like a dance.

As editors, we ultimately leaned toward a traditional vision of childhood as a time of prelapsarian innocence and curiosity. We took our role as guardians seriously: Some of our favorite comics and cartoonists barely made the cut. We reluctantly excluded the ironic satire of Harvey Kurtzman's *MAD* that demands and encourages the kind of media savviness that marks the end of childhood, giving only a taste of his self-reflexive humor in the "Hey Look!" one-pagers that led to *MAD* Magazine (and eventually to the glories of *The Simpsons* and *The Daily Show*). We wrestled with the "teenage" genre invented and defined by Archie a few short years after the *concept* of teenagers was invented; we finally decided that the category became of most interest to kids whose hormonal changes were just about to kick in and instead opted for a *Little Archie* tale by Bob Bolling. We did an end run around the super-hero genre, nodding to the form with Supermouse, a funny animal variant, and a wacky Captain Marvel tale. C. C. Beck's *Captain Marvel*, with its emphasis on magic and cartoony humor, was not only the most popular, by far, of the first generation super-hero comics, it was the one most clearly directed at the youngest readers. And we sadly resisted the giddy and libidinous go-for-broke hilarity of Jack Cole's Plastic Man as somehow not age appropriate, though we did include a taste of his unique sensibility in the almost unknown Burp the Twerp pages. Acting *in loco parentis* we happily introduce some of the best of the unbridled "loco" wildness of comics as well as widely consensual classics. After all, the loving but somehow funny uncles, who might take junior out for an evening of poker and booze before tucking the kid in for the night, are part of the comics family. Milt Gross's doodly slapstick spritz (pages 293–99), Basil Wolverton's gleeful grotesquerie, Dick Briefer's gentle Frankenstein monster, and George Carlson's punch-drunk poetic nonsense so reminiscent of Carl Sandberg's Rootabaga Stories (pages 167–74) are all a proud part of our mix.



DC Comics house ad, *Sugar and Spike* no. 13, February 1958

In burrowing through our piles of comic books, we found that the gems in our treasury can take their place comfortably next to the justly lauded jewels on the more traditional picture book shelves. Books like Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings*, Crockett Johnson's *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, William Steig's *Shrek*, Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, Dr. Seuss's *Cat in the Hat*, and P. D. Eastman's *Are You My Mother?* are all by cartoonists or comic book artist manqués who were working in tonier neighborhoods than the low-rent precincts of the comic book. In fact, the last story in our collection, "Gerald McBoing Boing," on pages 333–44, is P. D. Eastman's ingenious comic book adaptation of the Academy Award–winning animated film by Dr. Seuss. The ephemeral comics we selected from the 1930s to the 1960s are, of course, rooted in the time they were made, but they withstand the test of time very well. We invite you and the kids in your life to dive into this *Treasury*, toss these comics stories up in the air, and let them hit you on the head.

Art Spiegelman &
Françoise Mouly
Manhattan, NY
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