

It's just plain

# MAD



The zaniest, goofiest, brashest magazine in America, published by screwballs in bedlam, is one of our most successful periodicals and a favorite of teenagers

BY RICHARD GEHMAN

**T**HE ERRAND BOY at *Mad* magazine, a comic publication preferred by many U.S. high school and college students to all others, is named Anthony. Nobody there, except the bookkeeper, knows his last name. This is par for the highly unbusinesslike *Mad* office. For six years, anonymous Anthony himself believed that the publisher of *Mad*, William M. Gaines, was really twins.

Gaines, a good-humored, mannerly, scholarly man, had a "twin"—Rex Gaines, who was surly, profane and rude; and had a scar on one cheek. Once or twice each year, Bill Gaines would come into the office made up as Rex, wearing a rubber-cement scar. He would demand to see his brother William, and when Anthony would say the publisher was out, Rex would fly into a tantrum and threaten to fire the boy.

"Gosh," Anthony would say to William Gaines, "your twin brother sure isn't like you."

Finally, last summer, Anthony learned it was all a hoax. He was not especially miffed. After six years, he had become accustomed to the practical jokes that are part of the everyday life at *Mad's* incredibly

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cluttered offices, south of Greenwich Village in New York City.

Once a friend asked Gaines what *Mad's* current print order was. "We keep that in here," Gaines said, reaching into a wastebasket. His interoffice communicating system is housed in his larynx. When he wishes to consult with his editor, Albert B. Feldstein, he leans back in his swivel chair and bellows, "Hey, AL!" Feldstein uses the same method to reach Gaines.

This noisy and personal approach has helped *Mad* become one of the most successful magazines ever published. It sells more than 1,000,000 copies every issue. It comes out monthly, eight months of the year; not in February, May, August or November.

According to a survey of the magazine reading habits of the younger set, this brash, goofy publication is read by 43 percent of all U.S. high school students and 58 percent of all college students. The kids even have deserted their own campus humor magazines. "They won't pay for amateur efforts when they can get *Mad*," one college magazine advisor says.

The main reason for *Mad's* popularity is its nose-thumbing attitude. An editor of another magazine has observed that *Mad's* habit of deflating everything may indicate that the organization-man, conformist wave is not engulfing the younger generation.

George Lea, one of the foremost among Chicago's Beat Generation writers, sees great meaning in *Mad*. "*Mad* puts everybody and everything on," Lea says.

Translated from the Beatese, this means that *Mad's* untrammelled editors believe that anything, even death and destruction, can have a humorous side. *Mad* cocks a snoot

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at all things and everybody—at public figures (from President Eisenhower and Queen Elizabeth down to the lowliest TV star), at our national institutions, customs, entertainment and advertising.

On one occasion, *Mad* nearly caused an international incident in a comic-strip satire in which Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip discussed raising Prince Charles. A London newspaper, outraged, ran a reproduction of the strip under the headline: A STUPID INSULT.

Another time, when a picture of Prince Charles celebrating his birthday appeared in U.S. newspapers, hundreds of *Mad* readers wrote to the magazine to say that the prince bore a startling resemblance to *Mad's* trade-mark character, a silly-looking boy called Alfred E. Neuman. *Mad* printed some of the readers' letters. Later, a letter written on Buckingham Palace stationery came from England. It said:

*I jolly well do not look like Alfred E. Neuman.*

*Charles, P.*

The *Mad* staff verified the stationery as authentic, but nobody knows who the writer was.

There have been more serious complaints. An F.B.I. man strode in one day at the order of J. Edgar Hoover, who requested that *Mad* refrain from printing his name. *Mad* had run a facetious article on games, including a section on "How To Become A Draft Dodger." "To get your official Draft Dodger card," it concluded, "write to J. Edgar Hoover." Too many readers had followed this suggestion.

*Mad* once urged its readers to subscribe to the "Crime-of-the-Month Club," and to write to "Mafia, Italy." This brought a visit from a postal inspector. The

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Italian Government had protested through the State Department which had asked the New York Post Office to investigate.

*Mad's* favorite targets are advertisements. Each issue contains at least two full-page cartoons which are all-but-exact replicas of familiar ads. Public utilities especially stimulate *Mad's* editors. One 1959 *Mad*vertisement showed a roadside telephone booth, crammed from top to bottom with snarling, writhing, kicking, shoving human beings, their faces contorted, their arms and legs entwined. The caption said, "Stop pushing—you'll all get a chance to talk to Grandma." This was an ad for "Cell Telephone System."

Sometimes *Mad's* advertisements spill over into the realm of questionable taste. A parody of an ad for "Hames" male underwear was headed, "One kind of husband . . . two kinds of underwear," and showed caricatures of Debbie Reynolds and Elizabeth Taylor, each holding up a pair of men's undershorts, while a skinny Eddie Fisher crouched in the background.

The face of Alfred E. Neuman personifies the *Mad* view of the world—a grinning boy, one tooth missing, hair tousled, with the caption, "What-Me Worry?" This face first appeared on the American scene on a 1900 nickelodeon slide that was used as a dentist's advertisement. Nobody knows who the original artist was. The way the face turned up on *Mad* is this: *Mad's* original editor, Harvey Kurtzman, who has since left, visited Bernard Shir-Cliff, an editor at Ballantine Books, to confer about the first *Mad* anthology. Shir-Cliff had

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the boy's picture pinned to his bulletin board—it came out of a mailing piece that someone had sent him. Kurtzman saw it and asked if he could use it. It turned up on the first *Mad* pocket book, *The Mad Reader*; and later in *Mad* itself as the “What-Me Worry? Kid.”

Kurtzman, according to Gaines, is responsible for the development of *Mad* as a comic book and for the first four issues of *Mad* magazine. He wrote a lot of it, laid out pages, drew pictures, etc. In a dispute with Gaines, he left. But the face of the kid remained, grinning, to become the magazine's trade-mark.



**BOYS WILL BE BOYS!** by Bing

**I Wonder How Safe I Am In This House?**

by Kathryn Grant Crosby

**They're All Cashing In On My Fame** by Bob

**AN OPEN LETTER TO DAD**

**Stop Stealing My Singing Style** by Gary

**EXCLUSIVE Floor Plans of Chorus Girls' Dressing Rooms at Las Vegas Hotels**

(Including the names of the men to see for the keys)

**MAD** mocks the Crosbys on fantasy cover of nonexistent magazine (left) and harpoons typical teenage periodical, confusing bald “Mr. Clean” with well-combed “Kookie” Byrnes.

Neither Gaines nor Feldstein can remember why the boy is called Alfred E. Neuman nor which staff member gave him the name. Nor do they know the origin or meaning of the mysterious word *POTRZEBIE*,

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which occasionally appears in various two-page spreads and on the cover. In the December, 1959, cover, Alfred E. Neuman, wigged and dressed as a drum majorette, is beating a drum on which is the face of Alfred E. Neuman with a purple-black eye. This is the drum of Potrzebie High School, the Latin motto of which is "*Quid, me vexari?*"—which, of course, means "What, me worry?"

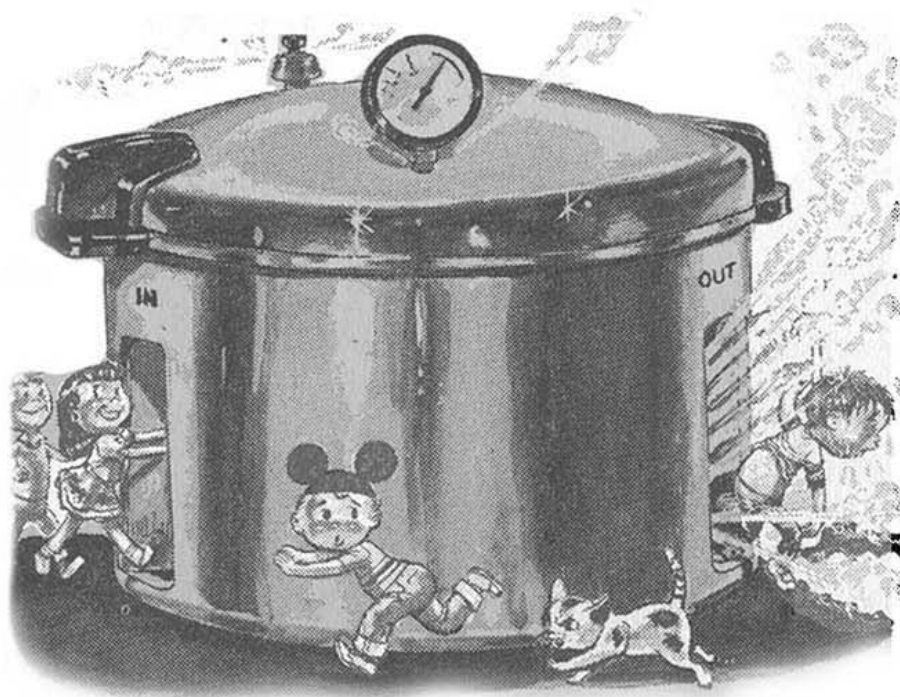
Another thing the editors cannot explain is the frequent use of the proper name "Melvin" in many strips. "It's just a kind of house name," Gaines says.

You never can tell where the idea for a piece will spring from. Years ago, in a comic strip called *Shock Suspense Stories* published by Gaines, one of the clearly bad guys referred to Puerto Ricans as "Spicks." This came to the attention of Dr. Frederic Wertham, the indefatigable foe of comic books. "He stood up in a Congressional Committee," Gaines recalls, "and cried, 'Look at this!' He didn't bother to read the whole thing. The kids got the point. It didn't get through to him." Gaines and Feldstein felt that Dr. Wertham had gone too far. Years later, they ran a satirical piece in *Mad* called BASEBALL IS RUINING

## MAD PLAYGROUNDS— TO PREPARE KIDS FOR ADULT LIFE

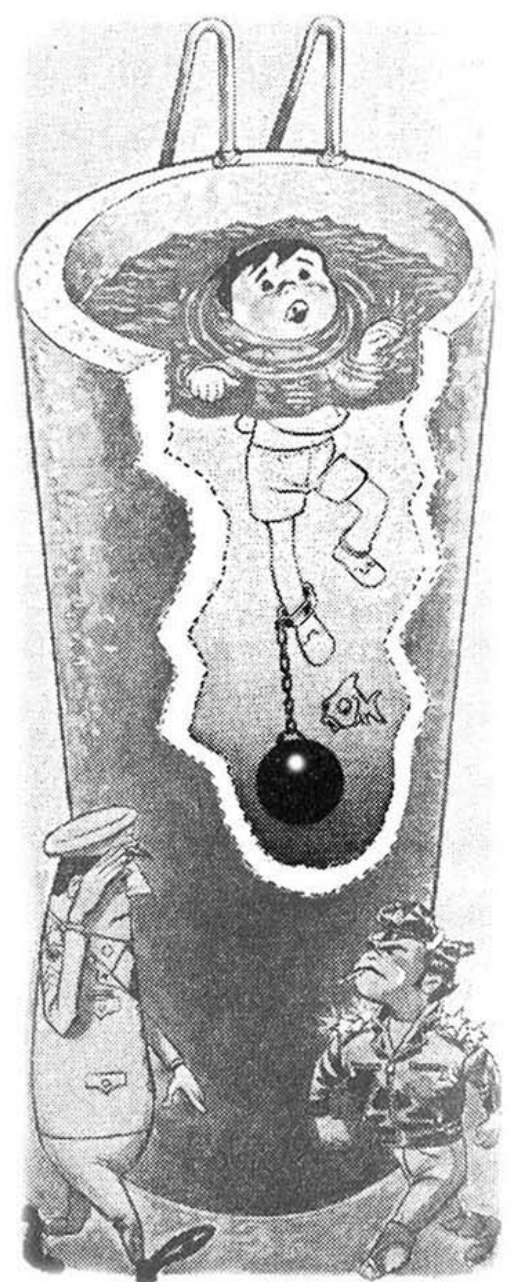
Kids grow up thinking life is all play, MAD says, because of their playgrounds. So, the editors designed some equipment to disillusion children while they're young.

## THE STEAMER Prepares kids for today's PLAY HOUSE "Pressure Cooker" society.



## THE TANK OF SURVIVAL

Teaches kids how to keep their heads above water.



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OUR CHILDREN, in which the cartoonist proved that exposure to baseball could make any boy a delinquent. The narrator bore a distinct resemblance to Dr. Wertham.

The majority of *Mad* ideas originate in the shop and are assigned to free-lance artists and writers for development. Feldstein and Gaines work closely with their contributors, most of whom are as youthful as they. They call them in for frequent conferences and sometimes spend hours debating the right funny twist to a single line of dialogue.

Both Gaines and Feldstein keep notebooks by their beds. They often dream ideas for *Mad*, then phone each other—at any hour—to discuss them. One of them sometimes will call Jerry De Fuccio, whom they term the Ideas Editor. De Fuccio makes up the sayings of Alfred E. Neuman; sample: “Even a castanet doesn’t click every time.”

After *Mad*’s contributors have finished a piece of work, Feldstein, a man of incredible energy, runs every line through his typewriter and adds his own touches. This accounts for the consistency—and, in some cases, the monotony (it must be said)—of style.

None of *Mad*’s readers find the magazine monotonous, however. The *Mad* staff says many teenagers have every copy since Vol. 1, No. 1. Collectors are said to be willing to buy these early editions for as high as \$5, presumably with *Mad* money. And readers like to drop in to talk to the editors. They astonish the staff with their prodigious recollection of features that appeared years ago. Some also put out their own magazines, all devoted to their devotion to *Mad*.

This is as much a phenomenon as *Mad* itself is. There have been



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## What is Potrzebie?

Four *Mad* anthologies, in magazine format, have sold around 600,000 copies each. There have been seven *Mad* pocket books that have sold about 3,000,000 copies in all. There have been two hard-cover collections from *Mad*. One has sold 35,000 copies, the other, 17,500, at \$2.95 each.

*“What’s the good of anything?”*

*—Nothing!”*



Teenagers and college readers often say that their parents snatch copies. One wrote, “Couldn’t you put in less stuff of interest to adults?” Steve Allen, the TV star, is a regular *Mad* reader despite the fact that *Mad* has, on occasion, ragged him unmercifully.

Some TV stars even write for *Mad*. Allen has contributed. So have Sid Caesar, Ernie Kovacs, Orson Bean and comedy team Bob and Ray. Readers who try to contribute to *Mad* are seldom welcomed. This does not deter them. *Mad* gets around 1,500 pieces of mail each week. “Most of it,” Gaines says, “is good-natured, smart-alecky. They love to catch us in mistakes. Sometimes we put mistakes in deliberately. For instance, we did a ‘dream’ car without doors. Hundreds wrote in telling us we forgot the doors.”

Readers also send dead animals,

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insects, birds—and, occasionally, live ones. When George Metesky, the Mad Bomber, was terrorizing New York, a package arrived one day that looked as though it contained a bomb. Feldstein hastily put it in the Men's Room and called the police. It was, indeed, a rudely-constructed bomb—without explosives. A letter shortly arrived from a boy who explained that he was sending the bomb as a joke. As

evidence of his sincerity, he signed his name and address. The police went and gave him a scolding.



The mail comes into an office decorated with old *Mad* covers including a picture of a giant coil spring, the cover of a spring issue. In a bookcase are bound copies of *Mad* and other comic magazines, various figurines sculpted by readers, plus a genuine shrunken human head. The latter is Bill Gaines' proudest possession, a birthday present from his wife.

Gaines never intended to be publisher of a comic magazine—certainly never one like *Mad*. He inherited a once-prosperous comic-book publishing firm from his father, M. C. Gaines, in 1947. The firm was around \$100,000 in debt. Young Bill, who had planned to be a chemistry teacher (he holds a degree in education from New York University), felt that there was room for a comic book that would satirize the horror comics. He began publishing a series of horror comics more humorous than horrible. They were instantaneously successful. Within three years the firm was out of debt.

“We just did what we liked to do—things that amused us,” Gaines says. “And we were sure kids would respond to it.”

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Not only kids responded. Serious writers, like the distinguished Ray Bradbury, offered Gaines the right to reproduce some of their stories. When Feldstein, who had been freelancing as an artist, joined the staff, he and Gaines discovered that their ideas on satire meshed perfectly. They have been running the books ever since, with the help of an associate editor, two production men, two secretaries and one errand boy—plus, of course, the regular contributors, who are characterized on the *Mad* masthead as “the usual gang of idiots.”

*Mad* was gradually evolved by Kurtzman, then working as a freelance comic-book editor for Gaines. *Mad* first appeared in its present format in the spring of 1955. Almost at once, imitators sprang up. There have been 60-odd imitations, nearly all of which have vanished off the newsstands.

From time to time, Gaines merchandises various articles, such as *Mad* T-shirts bearing the face of Alfred E. Neuman. He also sells *Mad* strait jackets—but not many, because they cost \$4.95 each and most kids can't afford them. Recently, in order to get itself more widely known, the magazine hired a press agent. His name is Larry Gore, and he is as mad as his employers. He once planted a column item that said that *Mad* was going to be published in French. Not true. Then he said that the *Mad* staff is paid in \$2 bills. Also not true. Then he said that Gaines was going to put out a totally waterproof *Mad* which could be read in the shower or while skin diving.

“I didn't think we needed a press agent,” Gaines says, “but Feldstein did. What Gore says embarrasses me. I can't communicate with him. He's even madder than we are. But

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I suppose if we've got to have a press agent, we might as well have a *Mad* one."



WHAT - ME WORRY ?

**Coronet**  
*May, 1960: p. 96*