

# Part One



WHAT ARE LITTLE  
CARTOONISTS MADE OF?



*Cartoonist Jerry Robinson drew this picture of me at my first cartoonist's convention in 1976.  
(I've changed a lot since then.)*

# Introduction

I was a newspaper editorial page cartoonist from 1975 until 1984. From 1980 to 1986, I was nationally syndicated. After that, I did cartoons for smaller markets through 1988. This book is my first political cartoon collection. Though I'll probably never stop doing cartoons, I'm finding that writing and illustrating picture books for children is great, too. You still get to draw a lot of pictures—without all the death threats.

Most of us cartoonists started out the same way: as class clowns trying to entertain our schoolmates, always at the expense of whomever happened to be in charge. Those of us who wound up doing political cartoons for a living simply moved on to bigger classrooms.

When I was growing up, it was not unusual to be punished for such subversiveness—if you were a boy. For a girl, it was scandalous.

As a regular practitioner of subversive humor, I did a lot of time in detention hall, the only girl in a room full of boys. It wasn't easy on my family, but it was the best preparation I could have received for my chosen career and eventual ties with the AAEC (Association of American Editorial Cartoonists).

Growing up cartoonist is difficult for anyone, under any circumstances. But it used to be more difficult than it is today. When the Baby Boom unleashed hordes of marauding students on the public education system around 1951, the only thing teachers could do was send the troublemakers (like me) out of the room so the others could learn.

Today's lower student-to-teacher ratios and more enlightened educational methods enable school systems to better accommodate the various learning styles that students bring to the classroom. Now we recognize that individuals learn and process information differently from one another and that intelligence can manifest itself in many ways. Modern school systems can identify learning disorders early in a student's educational progress and can deal more effectively with the vast diversity within the student population.

None of these things make future cartoonists any easier to teach or even to have in the classroom, but I believe the absence of modern theories of education during the 1950s and '60s makes a great excuse for me to use when recounting my own rocky passage through the education system.

Once, in Nashville for a cartoonists' convention, I appeared on a local TV show as part of a panel of cartoonists discussing our work. We explained that we'd had similar experiences as kids in school—frequently called down by teachers, sent to cool our heels in the hall, and required to stay after school to atone for the havoc we'd wrought that day. In fact, more than one of our teachers had seen it as his/her duty to announce that “Life is Not Just a Big Joke, You Know,” or that if we didn't get serious, “You Won't Amount to a Thing.”

Latent cartoonists are not the team players or company cheerleaders destined to be rewarded by schools and corporations. We tend to be difficult, annoying, and seditious. But we can't help it. Really. When the host of the Nashville TV show asked how many would-be cartoonists had been lost to the world because of stifling treatment by authority figures, we panel members exchanged amused glances and answered, practically in unison: “None!” Official disapproval is something you *have* to go through to be a cartoonist, we explained. You have to butt heads with Authority. Anyone who allows herself to be stifled by the consequences of that head-butting doesn't have what it takes to be a political cartoonist in the first place.

If the TV host had asked how many cartoonists had been lost to the world because *jobs* are so rare, the answer would have been: “Hundreds!” Not every born cartoonist gets to practice his calling. Some are forced into show business, politics, or crime. It is no accident that one sees very expressive cartoons drawn by famous actors, comedians, rock stars, heads of state, and mass murderers.

For a girl, being born a cartoonist in the post-World War II South was to face densely tangled uncharted territory without so much as a machete. Lucky for me, I was the oldest of three daughters and one son born to a father who was voted “Biggest Clown” and “Wittiest” in high school and a mother who was voted “Best Sport.” (Mama’s senior superlative described her athletic accomplishments as well as her sense of fun.)



*Daddy and Mama on a successful pre-war fishing trip.*



My father was the first person ever to suggest that I become a political cartoonist. Daddy had loved Bill Mauldin’s cartoons in *The Stars and Stripes* during World War II when they were both in the army—Mauldin in Europe, Daddy in the Pacific. My father talked about Mauldin’s cartoon soldiers, “Willie and Joe,” as if they were friends of his. I know Daddy hoped that I’d be able to use art and satire in a humorous way to help folks trapped in impossible conditions not to feel so alone—the way Willie and Joe had helped my father and the other “dogface” soldiers of World War II.

Humor has a way of holding off the scary existential loneliness that haunts people like me and my father and soldiers at war. I believe those of us who use satire and humor in our work are, contrary to observable evidence, extremely sensitive souls—too horrified by random catastrophe to take life straight. Without our work, we would probably do drugs, go insane, or become the aforementioned actors, comedians, rock stars, politicians, or criminals.

Maybe we think too much. Maybe we feel too much. Flannery O’Connor is said to have declared that she wrote to “find out what I think.” She spoke for many artists with that line. Finding out what you think is not as easy as it sounds. Once, when our adult Sunday school class was studying the nature of art and artists, I was asked to address the group. The class book had stated that man, like the primitive caveman, produces art to say, “I was here!”

I told the class that I didn’t think that had been written by an artist. People write their names on bathroom stalls to say “I was here,” but that is not generally considered to be art. I could only speak for myself, I told them—but I use art to quell a cosmic loneliness that follows me. I think most artists crave small moments of perfect understanding that are rarer than shooting stars or four-leaf clovers. With our art, we try to create optimum conditions for those moments. We are like those people who make landing strips for UFOs: we don’t know what’s out there, but we suspect we are a part of it. We know it’s big, and we are both frightened and thrilled by it.



*In a famous Bill Mauldin cartoon, Willie turns to Joe and asks, “Why th’ hell couldn’t you have been born a beautiful woman?” I drew this cartoon in imitation of Mauldin’s style in 1980, when they started letting women into the military—as soldiers, not just nurses and secretaries.*

James Thurber, in his book *My World and Welcome to It*, describes writers of short humorous essays of 2000 words or so (like himself) as jumpy, nervous individuals, afraid of meeting themselves walking around the corners of buildings—people who aren’t sure where they fit in a world that others find so unalarming. “In the living room of Life,” he says, “they have not removed their overcoats.”

That is the truth of why we cartoonists do cartoons, and why it means so much to us. (Which is not to say that some of us don’t fall victim to a variety of other crutches, as well.) Those of us who are interested in and/or alarmed by politics become political cartoonists. We do it to make ourselves feel better. If we make you feel better, too, that’s wonderful. But, really, it is ourselves we are trying to save.



*Daddy as an Army private in the Pacific during World War II.*