

“Mad was a revelation: it was the first to tell us that the toys we were being sold were garbage, our teachers were phonies, our leaders were fools, our religious counselors were hypocrites, and even our parents were lying to us about damn near everything”<sup>1</sup> -

## I. History of Mad

To Mad nothing was off-limits. By the 1960s it was read by most American college students and almost half of the country’s high school students.<sup>2</sup> Mad eventually reached its peak annual sales in 1974 selling approximately 2.5 million monthly issues.<sup>3</sup> The story of Mad magazine, and it’s usual gang of idiots, starts not with its founders, William Gaines, but with his father Max Gaines. In the early 1930s, Max and his wife were struggling to feed their two children, Elaine and William. Max had tried everything from working in a munitions factory to producing ties emblazoned with the slogan “We Want Beer.”<sup>4</sup> Things were so bad that the Gaines family eventually moved in with Max’s mother in law while Max figured out how to make money.<sup>5</sup> One day while rummaging through the attic Max found a stack of Sunday funnies.<sup>6</sup> While absorbed in the stories, Max had an

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Siano – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad\\_\(magazine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad_(magazine))

<sup>2</sup> Mikics, David, Mad Files page xviii

<sup>3</sup> Sauer, Patrick – The Madcap History of Mad Magazine Will Unleash your Inner Class Clown, page 1

<sup>4</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine (1991), Page 5.

<sup>5</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine (1991), Page 5

<sup>6</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine (1991), Page 5

inspiration for a new business venture.<sup>7</sup> Gaines approached Eastern Color Printing about reducing the size of the comics and publishing them as a small book that sold for 10 cents.<sup>8</sup>

The books were an instant success, yet Eastern fired Max without warning. Shortly after being fired Max learned that McClure Syndicate had a pair of idle two color printing presses.<sup>9</sup> He struck a deal with McClure where Max could use the printing presses and would split 50 percent of the proceeds with McClure.<sup>10</sup> Eventually Gaines' operation expanded and he produced well known comics such as, Superman, The Flash, Hawkman, and Wonder Woman.<sup>11</sup>

Despite all this success Max was unable to enjoy it. On August 27, 1947 Max Gaines, friend Sam Irwin, and Irwin's son were boating on Lake Placid, when their boat was unexpectedly struck by another boat. While Max had enough time to throw Irwin's child to safety, Max was unable to save himself.<sup>12</sup> In an instant Max's

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<sup>7</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, *Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine* (1991), Page 5

<sup>8</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, *Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine* (1991), Page 5

<sup>9</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, *Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine* (1991), Page 5

<sup>10</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, *Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine* (1991), Page 5

<sup>11</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, *Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine* (1991), Page 7 and 8

<sup>12</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, *Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine* (1991), Page 10

son, William (“Bill”) went from being a twenty-five year old in his final year at NYU to running a comic book publishing company.<sup>13</sup>

Bill soon realized Educational Comics was \$100,000 in the red. Bill finished school and eventually jumped into the comic business. Bill created new titles and took EC comics in a new direction. By 1950, Bill changed the company name from Educational Comics to Entertaining Comics, and adopted the motto: “A New Trend in Comic Books.”<sup>14</sup>

By 1951, Gaines had pulled EC Comics out of the debt and was running a small yet profitable comic book publishing company. He was working with Al Feldstein and Harvey Kurtzman producing a wide variety of science fiction, horror, suspense and adventure comics with titles such as “Ants in Her Trance”, “Tain’t the Meat, It’s the Humanity”, “Ooze in the Cellar”, and “Coffin Spell.”<sup>15</sup> Stories dealt with marital relations, family life, love triangles, crimes of twisted passion, murderous offspring, social inequality, misguided patriotism, and prejudice against African Americans, Jews, and Mexicans.<sup>16</sup> In late 1951, Kurtzman

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<sup>13</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, *Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine* (1991), Page 10

<sup>14</sup> *Id* Page 14

<sup>15</sup> *Id* Page 14

<sup>16</sup> *Id* Page 14

convinced Gaines to produce a satire magazine, one that would lampoon the comics themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The first 32 page issue of *Mad* reached news stands in the summer of 1952.<sup>18</sup> It contained four stories, all written by Kurtzman, and each spoofing a different EC comic.<sup>19</sup> Initial sales were slow, but *Mad* quickly developed a following. By November of 1952, just as things were looking up for EC comics and *Mad*, *Ladies Home Journal* ran an excerpt from a forthcoming book that would set the comic book publishing world on fire. The author, Frederic Wertham, was an influential liberal psychiatrist, director of a “mental hygiene” clinic at Bellevue. The doctor was ready to publish the results of seven years of his observations of the ravages of comic books on youth, the fearsomely titled *Seduction of the Innocent*.<sup>20</sup>

Wertham’s book was a scathing indictment of almost all dramatic comic books, but his main targets were horror and crime comics. He saw them as having a bad effect on literacy and pointed to the dangers of such words as “yeow, arghh, thunk, and blam.” He cited case after case of children committing crimes,

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<sup>17</sup> Id Page 20

<sup>18</sup> Id Page 21

<sup>19</sup> Id Page 21

<sup>20</sup> Id Page 23

murders, injuries, and suicides, all after reading comics. He attacked superhero comics as well. Batman, he claimed, was having a homosexual relationship with Robin and Wonder-Woman was a perfect lesbian role model.<sup>21</sup>

It would take a few years, but by 1954 publications such as *Reader's Digest* were warning against the evils of comic books, while communities and church groups began to sponsor comic book burnings.<sup>22</sup> The city councils of Oklahoma City, OK and Houston, TX passed ordinances banning crime and horror comics.<sup>23</sup> The issue was taken seriously enough that in April of 1954, the Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary open at the Foley Square Federal Court House in Manhattan.<sup>24</sup> With Wertham as the star witness, the hearings did not go well for the comic book publishers. With public sentiment turning against comic publishers drastic action was needed. The comic book publishers formed the Comics Code Authority (“CCA”).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Id Page 23

<sup>22</sup> Id Page 26

<sup>23</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comics\\_Code\\_Authority](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comics_Code_Authority)

<sup>24</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, *Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine* (1991), Page 26

<sup>25</sup> Id Page 30

The CCA was headed by former judge Charles F. Murphy and represented 90 percent of the industry.<sup>26</sup> The code was ruthless; no walking dead or torture was allowed to be depicted and only classic vampires, ghouls, and werewolves were to be shown. Policeman, judges, government officials, and respected institutions could not be presented in a way that created disrespect for established authority, and all lurid, unsavory, and gruesome illustrations would be eliminated. Evil could only be used to illuminate a moral issue. Distributors agreed that only comic books displaying the seal of the code on their covers would reach wholesalers, newsstands, and drugstores.<sup>27</sup>

The CCA regulations effectively neutered much of the EC line up just as EC was becoming a real success.<sup>28</sup> The solution was to turn Mad from a comic into a slick magazine.<sup>29</sup> The new Mad Magazine, a 25 cent, bimonthly, black and white magazine, appeared in early summer of 1955.<sup>30</sup> Because the new Mad was a “magazine” rather than a “comic book,” it had no problem at all with distributors or the CCA.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Id Page 30

<sup>27</sup> Id Page 30 -31

<sup>28</sup> Id Page 31

<sup>29</sup> Id Page 32

<sup>30</sup> Id Page 32

<sup>31</sup> Id Page 33

## II.

## SATIRE

At Mad, nothing is off limits. There are no sacred cows, not hippies, beatniks, advertising executives, movies, fame, the military industrial complex, sex, pollution, politics the list goes on.

### Advertising

The 1950s through the 1960s saw the US GDP soar. The great unsolved problem of American business became selling products to a populace accustomed to depression-era lives of frugality.<sup>32</sup> Companies eager to maximize the potency of their advertising and packaging consulted psychologists to encourage consumers buy products they knew they wanted.<sup>33</sup> Researchers pinpointed “hidden needs” that consumers valued: emotional security, reassurance of worth, ego gratification, creative outlets, love objects, a sense of power, a sense of roots, and immortality.<sup>34</sup> These emotional tie-ins solved a company’s problems of selling products like gasoline, cigarettes, and cosmetics that were virtually identical to those of its competitors. This was the opening for the wise guys at Mad, who were beginning to realize that there was more to poke fun at than other comics.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Id Page 44

<sup>33</sup> Id Page 33

<sup>34</sup> Id Page 44

<sup>35</sup> Id Page 50

Mad liked to focus on a single pretentious or ridiculous gimmick of an ad or ad campaign. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s ad parodies in Mad continued to deflate the most ridiculous excesses of Madison Avenue.<sup>36</sup> In doing so Mad armed its readers with a crucial weapon against the onslaught of advertising: awareness. As one commentator pointed out, “In virtually all situations we still have a choice, and we cannot be too seriously manipulated if we know what is going on...when we learn to recognize the devices of the persuaders we build up a recognition reflex.”<sup>37</sup> Over time Mad began to phase out advertising parodies. According to former editor Nick Meglin, one of the biggest reasons for the change was a response to Mad itself, “bright young people who were Mad fans went on to careers in advertising and wrote funny ads that were satires of themselves.”

Because Mad took aim at advertisers, it refused to publish ads. It is unclear if advertising contributed such a small part of Mad’s income that Gaines didn’t care about the lost profits, but he didn’t want to be beholden to advertisers. Gaines would tell 60 Minutes, “we long ago decided we couldn’t take money from Pepsi- Cola and make fun of Coca-Cola.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Language**

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<sup>36</sup> Id Page 52-53

<sup>37</sup> Id Page 55

<sup>38</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad\\_\(magazine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad_(magazine))

In addition to parodying advertising Mad was known for satirizing poetry and literature. Mad famously parodied a “cool” version of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. The one page piece ran the old version in a column on the left and line by line translation of the Address on the right in what was then known as “bop talk.”<sup>39</sup>

Fourscore and like seven years ago our old daddies came on in this scene with a new group, grooved in free kicks, and hip to the jazz that all cats make it the same. Now we’re real hung up in a crazy big hassle, didding whether that group, or any group so grooved and so hip can keep on swinging<sup>40</sup>

The Mad version was quite accurate in content, and the tendency is to compare each new sentence with the original – encouraging most readers to spend more time willingly studying the Address than they ever would otherwise.<sup>41</sup>

## **MUSIC**

Despite the popularity of the parodies not everyone was a fan. In 1961 Mad published “Sing Along with Mad” a book of 57 parodies of popular songs. The writers transformed songs such as “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” into “I Swat you Hard on the Skin” and “When They Begin the Beguine” into “When They Bring in the Machine.” In each case the reader as advised that the song could be sung to

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<sup>39</sup> Reidelbach, Maria, Completely Mad, A History of the comic Book and Magazine (1991), Page 60

<sup>40</sup> Id Page 60

<sup>41</sup> Id Page 60

the tune of the original compositions titles'. Following its publication, Mad was hit by a suit for copyright infringement for 25 of the 57 songs by music publishers representing Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and Richard Rodgers. In *Berlin v. EC Publications, Inc* the composers charged that the copyright owners had the exclusive right to make a parody version of their work.<sup>42</sup> For the twenty five takeoffs the publishers claimed Mad was liable for one dollar per song per magazine printed. Since over a million copies of Mad were printed, the publishers claimed Mad was liable for 25 million dollars.<sup>43</sup>

The trial court ruled for Mad and established a legal precedent protecting parody known as the so called Mad Magazine exception. The music publishers appealed to the Second Circuit Court, which ruled in Mad's favor. Plaintiffs appealed this decision to the United State Supreme Court which refused the appeal without comment.<sup>44</sup>

## **Television**

The power of movies and television is undeniable. They teach us how to think, dress, what to say, what to listen to, what to buy, etc. Mad talks back to these all powerful icons, argues with them, and exposes their imperfect mirrors.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Id Page 61

<sup>43</sup> Id Page 65

<sup>44</sup> Id Page 67

<sup>45</sup> Id Page 72.

For years, the anchors of Mad have been lampoons of motion pictures and television programs. A movie parody almost always begins the magazine and a television parody usually falls on the last black and white pages.<sup>46</sup> While most people view television as an entertainment product, Mad writers remind us that the real product of television is not the programming but us, the viewers, and we are being sold to the actual consumers of television, the advertisers.<sup>47</sup> Early shows, movies, and radio programs were not written by writers, but by advertising executives with plots – or rather formulas- tailored to the products that sponsored the shows.<sup>48</sup> As critical viewers and satirists, Mad writers were driven by the gut feeling that both movies and television programming had a strange lack of depth, and portrayed a world that was far from what most viewers recognized as reality.<sup>49</sup>

As a result, editors, writers, and artists worked out a variety of formats to spoof both television and movies. There were short format sequences like “Scenes We’d Like to See”, spoofs at looking into the wallets of celebrities like Frank Sinatra (he had photos of himself in war movies and his draft decrement

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<sup>46</sup> Id Page 72

<sup>47</sup> Id Page 72

<sup>48</sup> Id Pag 74

<sup>49</sup> Id Page 76

card), Elizabeth Taylor (a receipt for a wash and wear wedding gown),<sup>50</sup> Howard Hughes, (whose home address was listed on his ID card as, Texas, Las Vegas, The Bahamas, Nicaragua, a car parked somewhere in the Western Hemisphere, a tree house in Brazil, and a summer home in Atlantic City, NJ).<sup>51</sup> Mad also wrote longer stories based on a specific movie or television show. These allowed the writers to do a point-by-point, merciless dissection of the plot, characters, and acting, often including references and comparisons to other shows.<sup>52</sup> These parodies revealed how each show fits into the cultural context of the times and how they were received by the smart alecks at Mad.<sup>53</sup>

### **Politics**

At Mad politics is always a gift that keeps on giving. While Mad's political satire may tend to favor a liberal point of view, the main targets are extremists of any stripe.<sup>54</sup> John Birch Society, the Klu Klux Klan, communism, unions, and hippes etc. I

Former editor of Mad, John Ficarra, said, " We've been chastised regularly by some very conservative members of the writing staff that Mad has gone too far

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<sup>50</sup> Id Page 78

<sup>51</sup> Minkis, David, Mad Files, Introduction xxi

<sup>52</sup> Id Page 79

<sup>53</sup> Id Page 80

<sup>54</sup> Id Page 130

to the left. They just don't understand that Mad attacks whoever is in office. The more fanatical or more strident they get, the more our criticism heats up, because we always attack extremes. So when they say we've gone too far to the left it's because Republicans and conservatives have been in control...If Dukakis had won the election, we would do Dukakis jokes.<sup>55</sup>

One of the best examples of Mad's political satire was the 1960 issue that hit newsstands the day after the presidential election which showed president elect John Kennedy on the cover. This was quite a feat given that this issue was printed four weeks prior to the national election. A closer examination revealed that the flip side of the magazine bore the image of Richard Nixon- each magazine had two covers. Both covers were emblazoned with banners proclaiming, "We were with you all the way."<sup>56</sup>

### **Spy v. Spy**

One of Mad's most recognizable features is the ongoing battle between two espionage agents. One dressed in white and other in black, but they are otherwise identical and are known for their long and beak-like heads and their white pupils and black sclera. The duo are always at war with each other, using a

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<sup>55</sup> Id Page 134

<sup>56</sup> Id Page 135

variety of booby traps to inflict harm on the other. The strip is a parody of the political ideologies of the Cold War.

The strip was created by Antonio Prohias, a prolific cartoonist in Cuba known for political satire. In 1956, Prohias was given the Juan Gualbero Gomez award recognizing him as the foremost cartoonist in Cuba. Originally a supporter of Fidel Castro, Prohias eventually soured on Castro for muzzling the press. Eventually Castro accused Prohias of working for the CIA. On May 1, 1960, three days before Castro's government nationalized the last of the Cuban free press, Prohias fled Cuba.

Prohias cryptically signed each strip on its first panel with a sequence of Morse code characters that spell "By Prohias." Of his strip, Prohias stated, "the sweetest revenge has been to turn Fidel's accusation of me as a spy into a moneymaking venture."

III.

### **MASCOT**

#### **Alfred E. Neuman**

No report on Mad would be complete without addressing Mad's most famous character, Alfred E. Neuman. Playboy had the rabbit, Esquire has Esky, the fat dirty old man, and Mad has Alfred E. Neuman. He's been described as, "the guardian gargoyle of Mad", "a grinning nebbish", "more mental defective than a

lunatic.”<sup>57</sup> Alfred E. Neuman was everything that parents prayed deep down their kids wouldn’t turn into – and feared they would.<sup>58</sup> Neuman is Mad’s mascot and spokesman, having appeared on the cover of virtually every issue since 1955 and been running for president each election since 1956.<sup>59</sup> But he’s best known for his motto, “What me worry?”<sup>60</sup>

Despite being so widely recognized as the face of Mad, Alfred E. Neuman’s origins aren’t as well known. Fans were known to write in claiming to know the origin, but by the late 1950s, Mad found itself embroiled in a series of copyright infringement charges for its use of Alfred E. Neuman.<sup>61</sup> By 1965, one of the cases, a claim by Helen Pratt Stuff regarding her late husband’s copyright of “The Original Optimist,” had moved through a lower court and reach the Federal Appellate Court for New York.<sup>62</sup> Harry Stuff’s original copyright had been filed in 1914, and, although the image had not been reprinted after 1920, his widow had renewed the copyright in 1941.<sup>63</sup> Stuff had sold about two thousand copies of a popular

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<sup>57</sup> Id Page 136

<sup>58</sup> Id Page 136

<sup>59</sup> Id Page 137

<sup>60</sup> Id page 137

<sup>61</sup> Id Page 147

<sup>62</sup> Id Page 148

<sup>63</sup> Id Page 148

postcard of Alfred E. Neuman, and between 1941 and 1948 the widow had won six claims of infringement.<sup>64</sup>

Mad's attorneys went to work trying to prove that if the Stuffs had, even once, failed to protect the copyright or if Mad could prove that the image existed prior to 1914, the widow's claim would be invalidated. Researchers found pictures prior to 1914 and pictures copyrighted by other publishers. By the time the case got underway, Mad's attorneys were able to prove that even though the Stuffs had won several cases, they had abandoned their copyright by not contesting every subsequent copyright of the boy's picture, and that they also had no case based on originality, since the picture had been in use prior to 1914.<sup>65</sup> The court found that Harry Stuff, "had been most derelict in preventing others from infringing his copyright."<sup>66</sup> Stuff appealed to the United States Supreme Court, which declined to accept the case and Mad established its right to its adopted mascot.<sup>67</sup>

Evidence from the case established that the face was a favorite of artists for well over one hundred years.<sup>68</sup> While many people claim to know Alfred's origin

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<sup>64</sup> Id Page 148

<sup>65</sup> Id Page 148

<sup>66</sup> Id Page 148

<sup>67</sup> Id Page 148

<sup>68</sup> Id Page 149

story, no story yet has satisfactorily established his origins.<sup>69</sup> The earliest known reproductions are from the late nineteenth century and representations have been found in England and Germany.

Despite Alfred E. Neuman's recognizability Mad refused to commercialize the moronic character. As Gaines put it, "There's no Alfred E. Neuman beach towel, no hamburger, no candy bar. You'll never see any of that junk. Maybe a watch if it ran backward."<sup>70</sup>

By the early 1990s, much of the staff had retired or died. Gaines died in 1992 and through layoffs and corporate restructuring, Mad became more ingrained in a more traditional corporate structure. In 2001, the magazine broke its long-standing taboo and began running paid advertising.<sup>71</sup> The last regular issue came out in April of 2018.<sup>72</sup> In 2019, the magazine relocated to California. The first California issue was renumbered issue #1. The California issues began to consist mostly of curated reprints and new covers and fold-ins, although some new articles are produced.

Mad's demise coincided with the rise of such factors as cable television and the Internet. In many ways, Mad's power was undone by its own success; what

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<sup>69</sup> Id Page 150

<sup>70</sup> William Gaines: Founded Mag Magazine, LA Times – June 4, 1992.

<sup>71</sup> Mad (magazine) - wikipedia

<sup>72</sup> Pogue, David, How Mad Magazine's Humor Created a Revolution, CBS News September 26, 2024

was subversive in the 1950s and 1960s was now commonplace.<sup>73</sup> In 2009, The New York Times wrote, “Made once defined American satire; now it heckles for the margins as all of culture competes for trickster status.”<sup>74</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Before Mad there were the funny papers, which were calculated to make you smile or crack you up, but not to dangle you upside down and show you the sheer dimwitted lunacy of everything from advertising, politics, movies, tv, books, celebrity, etc. As a cornerstone of American satire, counterculture, and humor, Mad helped shine a light on the absurdities of the power brokers at Madison Avenue, government officials, media, and anyone in power. Mad encouraged readers to question authority and conformity. Mad was punk rock before punk rock. Although Mad is no longer a regular fixture of mainstream satire, its DNA lives on in The Simpsons, The Daily Show, and The Onion. Mad influenced satirists, musicians, journalists, critics and will continue to inform and inspire anyone who seeks to speak truth to power, thinks critically, and exposes the phonies and hypocrites that surround us.

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<sup>73</sup> Mad (magazine) – Wikipedia

<sup>74</sup> Mad (magazine) - Wikipedia

