

# Al Jaffee, Mad magazine's cartoon maestro, dies at 102

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By Ali Bahrapour

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Al Jaffee, the ingenious Mad magazine illustrator who was as adept at creating wacky cartoon gags as he was at producing caustic social commentary, and whose drawings, he cheerfully suggested, helped corrupt the minds of generations of young Americans, died April 10 at a hospital in Manhattan. He was 102.

The cause was multiple organ failure, said his granddaughter Fani Thomson.

Mr. Jaffee was Mad's longest-serving contributor and one of the defining voices of the magazine as it grew to become a countercultural must-read from the 1950s, through the Vietnam War era and beyond. He continued to draw for Mad into his 90s and was responsible for some of its signature features, including the fold-in, "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions," and "Al Jaffee's Mad Inventions."

His inventions, including the smokeless ashtray, multi-roll toilet-paper dispenser and a razor with an imposing number of blades, rollers and motors — were just this side of implausible when he conjured them in an effort to lampoon Madison Avenue hucksterism. Mr. Jaffee said he was delighted when "something that I thought was a joke" — multi-blade razors, at least — "turned into reality."

Mr. Jaffee's clear line work, inventiveness and wicked sense of humor earned him a spot on Mad's team of regular artists and writers (a.k.a. the "usual gang of idiots"), as well as the respect of his peers. He won the National Cartoonists Society's highest honor, the Reuben Award, in 2008. Arnold Roth, an illustrator whose work has appeared in Punch and the New Yorker, called Mr. Jaffee "one of the great cartoonists of our time."

The monthly fold-in, Mr. Jaffee's best-known Mad cartoon, is a one-page picture with a question above and a caption below. When the page is folded vertically into thirds, the two outer sections join to form a new image and a new caption, which answers the question.

Conceived in 1964 as a poor-cousin parody of the multi-page foldouts that were appearing in glossy magazines such as Life and Playboy, the fold-in became a regular feature and often provided the sole note of direct editorializing in the pages of Mad.

One 1968 panel, done at the height of the Vietnam War, showed students outside a job center and asked, “What is the one thing most school dropouts are sure to become?”

It folded to depict a student in a cannon with the caption: “Cannon fodder.”

A picture showing 1972’s presidential candidates splashing around in a swimming pool promised to reveal what the public could expect this election. When folded, the image became a giant toilet with a caption reading “The same old stuff.”

Mr. Jaffee traced another of his popular cartoons to the day he was perched precariously on his roof trying to fix an antenna after a storm. The artist heard footsteps coming up the ladder and then his son asking, “Where’s Mom?”

Mr. Jaffee replied that he had killed her and was stuffing her in the chimney.

Thus was born “Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions,” in which an inane query is met with three possible sarcastic responses.

“Are they twins?” asks a kindly old woman in one panel, looking at two identical little boys.

Their mother answers: “No, they’re a pair of identical strangers”; “No, they’re nine years apart. Smoking stunted the older one’s growth”; and “No, he’s an only child. Who’s your eye doctor?”

A spirit of contrarianism also guided Mr. Jaffee’s non-Mad work. His syndicated newspaper comic strip “Tall Tales” (1957-1963) subverted the horizontal form by producing a vertical cartoon whose gag is revealed as the eye moves down the panel.

As an antidote to Superman, Mr. Jaffee conceived of Inferior Man, a hapless superhero who at the first sign of trouble runs into a phone booth and puts his civilian clothes back on. This satirical impulse stemmed in part from his sense of being a perennial outsider.

Abraham Jaffee was born in Savannah, Ga., on March 13, 1921, to Jewish immigrants from Lithuania. His father managed a department store and embraced American life, drawing comic-strip characters for the young Mr. Jaffee and bringing him in to work on Saturdays to run wild in the toy department.

He described his mother as an eccentric who missed the old country and was dismayed that her husband worked on the Sabbath. When Mr. Jaffee was 6, she uprooted him and his three younger brothers, taking them back to her childhood shtetl in Zarasai, Lithuania. Their father stayed behind.

The young Mr. Jaffee found himself in a world of mud streets and horse-drawn wagons. He learned Yiddish and won over the local children by drawing comic-strip characters, sometimes with a stick in the dirt when paper was unavailable.

The instability of his childhood years encouraged in Mr. Jaffee a lifelong suspicion of authority that helped shape the Mad magazine ethos. “I became aware that I could not trust adults,” he said. “My father let me be schlepped to Europe. My mother did the schlepping. . . . I developed my own brand of anti-adultism.”

In the 2010 biography “Al Jaffee’s Mad Life” by Mary-Lou Weisman (with illustrations by Mr. Jaffee), he recalled a childhood not only of poverty, hunger, antisemitism and maternal neglect, but also of adventure and resourcefulness. He and his brother Harry designed and made their own toys. Some of their contraptions, such as a stick fitted with a wire hook and basket for stealing fruit from orchards, presage the crazy inventions he came up with in Mad.

After Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, Mr. Jaffee’s father reappeared in Zarasai to take the children to America. Their mother remained in the shtetl, and Mr. Jaffee never saw her again. He said she was probably killed in the Holocaust along with most of the town’s Jews.

In the United States, Mr. Jaffee’s artistic skill won him a spot at Manhattan’s newly created High School of Music & Art. Two of his friends and schoolmates included Wolf Eisenberg, who became the comic-book artist Will Elder, and Harvey Kurtzman, who became the first editor of Mad.

During World War II, Mr. Jaffee used his illustration skills to help develop art-therapy programs for shellshocked soldiers. He got married and had two children and was living a suburban life in Long Island, drawing the teen humor comic Patsy Walker, when Kurtzman contacted him.

Mr. Jaffee’s first piece for Mad — about a golfer whose secret to a successful swing lies in the extra fingers he sprouts — appeared in 1955. Two years later, he followed Kurtzman to his new magazine, the short-lived Trump, financed by Playboy founder Hugh Hefner, and then to Humbug, which also folded.

Fearing he had burned his bridges at Mad, Mr. Jaffee contacted Al Feldstein, Kurtzman’s replacement as editor. To the contrary, Mr. Jaffee became one of the magazine’s regular contributors, coming up with his best-known features under Feldstein’s editorship.

His first marriage, to Ruth Ahlquist, ended in divorce. In 1977, Mr. Jaffee married Joyce Revenson. The couple divided their time between Manhattan and Provincetown, Mass. She died in 2020. Survivors include two children from his first marriage, Richard Jaffee of Sebastopol, Calif., and Deborah Fishman of Petaluma, Calif.; two stepchildren, Tracey and Jody Revenson, both of Manhattan; five grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Mr. Jaffee continued to draw for Mad through recent years. He also contributed cartoons for the Moshiach Times, a children’s magazine put out by the Hasidic Lubavitch movement.

Much of his work has been collected in book form, including “Mad’s Vastly Overrated Al Jaffee.” In contrast to the self-deprecating title, Mr. Jaffee was widely regarded as an eminence of humor. On his Comedy Central show, the comedian Stephen Colbert paid homage to Mr. Jaffee’s 85th birthday with a fold-in cake.

In 2013, Columbia University acquired Mr. Jaffee’s archive. Despite the Ivy League imprimatur, the cartoonist was still happy when people called him “the retching jackal guy,” a reference to his Mad illustration showing that animal mid-vomit.

“It may be my most successful drawing,” he told his biographer. “It’s utterly silly, I know, but I’m utterly silly. Serious people my age are dead.”