

# **JERRY** *Ambassador of Comics* **ROBINSON**

**N. C. Christopher Couch**

INTRODUCTION BY

**Pete Hamill**

FOREWORD BY

**Dennis O'Neil**



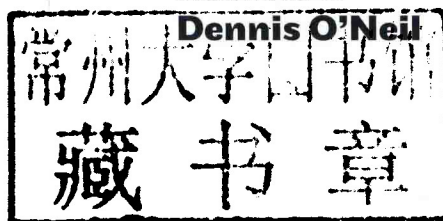
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Abrams ComicArts, New York

I dedicate this book to my dear parents. —J. R.

To my daughter, Mora Couch, a patient, enthusiastic, and insightful observer of comics and of the people who make and love them. —N. C. C. C.

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**Lewis Goren:** 29

**Walter Hanel:** 180 (top)

**Rudolph de Harak:** 65

**Holger Keifel:** 2

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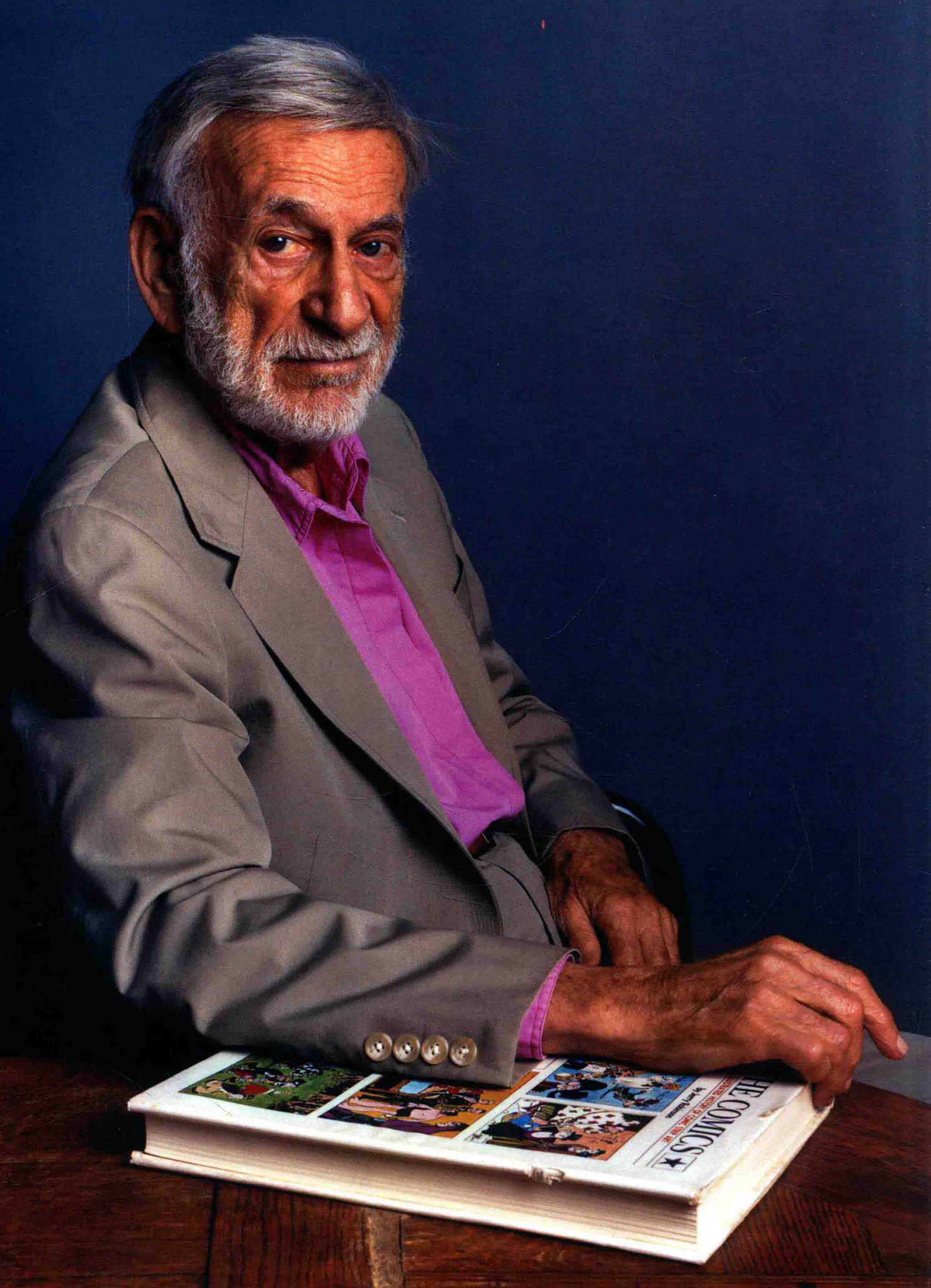
# CONTENTS

7	<i>Introduction: Pete Hamill</i>
11	<i>Foreword: Dennis O'Neil</i>
15	<i>Preface</i>
17	<i>Boyhood to Batman</i>
31	<i>Batman Begins</i>
65	<i>Comic Books: An Ever-Expanding Universe</i>
105	<i>Books, Broadway, and Becoming Professor Robinson</i>
133	<i>Cartoons, Comics, and Op-Eds</i>
171	<i>Cartoons for International Understanding</i>
183	<i>Ambassador of Comics</i>
199	<i>Portfolios</i>
221	<i>Sources</i>
222	<i>Index</i>



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Abrams ComicArts, New York

## **Acknowledgments**

I was most fortunate to work on this book with special people who have earned my deep respect for their talent and professionalism: Charles Kochman, executive editor of Abrams ComicArts; Sheila Keenan, senior editor; and Mike Essl and Alexander Tochilovsky, who created the handsome design. Charlie believed in the book from the beginning. Sheila is a brilliant editor and was a joy to work with. I am grateful to Chris Couch for telling my life story. It is an honor to have the contributions of two great literary talents, Pete Hamill and Dennis O'Neil. I am indebted to my friend Paul Levitz, former president of DC Comics; Michael Uslan, executive producer of the Batman films; and my agent, Denis Kitchen, for their invaluable help and continued support. This book could not have been possible without my son, Jens Robinson, editor of CartoonArts International, whose knowledge of the field and whose special contributions to the project were invaluable. My assistant, Kevin Miller, was essential throughout. Many thanks also to my cousin and family historian, Jay Robinson. I value my many rewarding collaborations with the United Nations, the Breman Museum in Atlanta, and the Comic-Con International in San Diego. Thanks also to Metropolis Collectibles and Dr. Michael J. Vassallo for making available their vintage comics collections. And, most important, thanks to my wife, Gro, who has been my collaborator and love for fifty-four years and counting.

— Jerry Robinson

Thanks to the ambassador himself, Jerry Robinson, for cheerfully answering my eternal question, “What would you like to talk about today?”; to Kevin Miller, for grace, good cheer, and mastery of the Robinson archives; to Charles Kochman for faith, patience, and making the world take comics seriously. Sheila Keenan’s diplomatic skills would make her a top ambassador, but then we’d lose her wonderful editorial pencil and her fine eye for book design. Special thanks to Professor John Lent, Temple University, for insight into Jerry’s role in international comics; to Jens Robinson, for sharing the history of CWS and many stories about his father; to Gro Bagn, for her hospitality and insight; to Dr. Michael J. Vassallo for timely instruction in Atlas Comics; to comics historians Tom Andrae, Steve Weiner, Jim Amash, Bill Black, and Michael Uslan; to Denis Kitchen, artist, agent, author, and curator; to my dear sister Lesleigh Luttrell; to Dr. Donna Gilman for her wise advice; and deepest appreciation to my wife, Jackie Southern, who always cuts to the heart of the matter—everything I write is infused with her subtle understandings.

—N. C. Christopher Couch



# CONTENTS

7	<i>Introduction: Pete Hamill</i>
11	<i>Foreword: Dennis O'Neil</i>
15	<i>Preface</i>
17	<i>Boyhood to Batman</i>
31	<i>Batman Begins</i>
65	<i>Comic Books: An Ever-Expanding Universe</i>
105	<i>Books, Broadway, and Becoming Professor Robinson</i>
133	<i>Cartoons, Comics, and Op-Eds</i>
171	<i>Cartoons for International Understanding</i>
183	<i>Ambassador of Comics</i>
199	<i>Portfolios</i>
221	<i>Sources</i>
222	<i>Index</i>









# INTRODUCTION

I first traveled into the world of Jerry Robinson in 1943. The occasion of my journey was opening a copy of *Batman*. I was eight years old, living with my parents, my younger brother, and my little sister in a cold-water tenement flat in Brooklyn. For months, I'd been reading newspaper comic strips in the *New York Daily News* and the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and so was familiar with the form. My mother's favorite strip was *Terry and the Pirates*, and I loved looking at it, but couldn't really understand it. I loved *Dick Tracy*, too, with its scary villains and beautiful snowstorms, and wished I knew Punjab and the Asp from *Little Orphan Annie*, or could have the powers of Invisible Scarlet O'Neill. But they all moved through distant, exotic worlds: mysterious caves, the battlefields of China, bases in the South Pacific.

When I started reading that first *Batman* comic book, I saw the world where I lived. A right-angled vertical world of deep shadows, sinister warehouses, tall buildings that scraped the sky, and a brooding sense of menace. I had read a few copies of *Superman* by then, but his Metropolis had no shadows in it, no real menace or even peril for the hero, since Superman was bulletproof. Captain Marvel was more fun, but he was pretty dumb. My friends and I agreed with Doctor Sivana that the Cap really was a "big red cheese." And Captain Marvel's city was about as scary as *Mutt and Jeff*.

Batman's Gotham was New York.

Including Brooklyn.

I started searching for old copies of *Batman* in a used bookstore a few blocks from where we lived. I devoured them. We had no backyard so we often played on our tar-papered roof, which extended an entire city block. It was full of chimneys, air vents, clotheslines, small structures where the interior staircases ended, and one pigeon coop. A rooftop in Gotham. Wandering through the cobblestoned alley in the factory across from our

PREVIOUS: Portrait of Jerry Robinson by Holger Keifel (2008)

OPPOSITE: Variations on a Theme: Number 39, lithograph, signed artist proof with pencil remarque (1978)



tenement, with its deep shadows and windows made blank by thick mesh, I could swear I sometimes heard laughter from within the redbrick walls. Mad, berserk laughter. The laughter of the Joker.

The newspaper comics had taught me that living men actually wrote and drew the comics. Milton Caniff wrote and drew *Terry*. Harold Gray gave us *Annie*. Chester Gould signed *Dick Tracy*. And *Batman* came from someone named Bob Kane. I was certain he must be from Brooklyn. Years later, I learned he was from the Bronx. I also learned that most of the writing was done by a man named Bill Finger. And that the first image of the Joker was drawn by Jerry Robinson, inspired by a playing card that Robinson turned evil. This marvelous book tells that story, and much more.

Robinson was part of an extraordinary band of very young men who were inventing a genre that went far beyond the newspaper strips. They created a graphic language that adjusted their narrative art to the vertical pages of the books themselves. The splash page was born, introducing each story with a logo and an often surrealistic sample of what was to come. Robinson led the way in creating pages of great variety: Small panels strung in a row, vertical panels, immense culminating panels. This range of panels was impossible in the rigid, horizontal newspaper strips.

Jerry and crew also aimed their creations directly at kids. (Caniff once said that he wrote *Terry* for “the guy that buys the paper.”) Many comic book heroes added young sidekicks to get the young audience more involved. Robinson, Finger, and Kane created Robin, the Boy Wonder, to work at the side of *Batman* (and to provide him someone to talk to). Captain America had Bucky. The Human Torch had Toro. Kids who felt small and weak in a world of tough people (men and women shaped by Prohibition and the Great Depression) could imagine themselves into the great dramas. Kids living at home while older guys from their neighborhoods were off fighting a ferocious war could battle Hitler and Tojo, too. In our imaginations, of course. No small thing.

We didn’t call these comic book characters “super heroes” then. And part of the appeal of *Batman* and Robin was that they had no super powers. They were humans named Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson, wearing costumes that made them special and heroic. Bullets didn’t bounce off them. They couldn’t fly, and so depended upon a convenient cable to swing through the air, or a fire escape or a crane. They weren’t from a distant planet. They had no magic words to utter, or secret potions to throw down their gullets. They were human. Like us. Super or not, millions of us looked at this dynamic duo in capes and masks and suspended our disbelief.

*Batman* grabbed us because its creators understood one other important truth in popular narrative art: To have great heroes, you must have great villains. And so it wasn’t only the Joker who challenged *Batman*. It could be the Penguin, or Two-Face, or Clayface, or the Scarecrow or, a bit later, Catwoman. Robinson was inspired too by certain examples of expressionist cinema: F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (a brilliant but blatant rip-off of Bram

Stoker's *Dracula*), Fritz Lang's *M* and *Metropolis*, and Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. Along with some other artists (most important, Will Eisner), Robinson and his peers were making frozen movies. Film noir on paper, long before that label was invented for movies. No surprise that many decades later, when cinematic technology was fully developed, their youthful ideas were unfrozen into sometimes brilliant movies. The comics came first.

But Jerry Robinson is more than the young man who worked with such exuberant verve and imagination in the streets of Gotham. He worked on other comic books, in those years before television arrived in full force.

The Korean War, with its ambiguities, its lack of a Pearl Harbor-like attack that must be avenged, changed comic books. Harvey Kurtzman and his crew gave us stories of combat in which nobody wore masks or capes. Love comics came along, often as insipid as Doris Day movies (but providing subject matter a decade later for the pop artist Roy Lichtenstein). Robinson did more straight illustration. And he began teaching at the Cartoonists and Illustrators School, later to become the School of Visual Arts. His subject was the art of the comic book and he was a perfect teacher. Jerry knew how to explain the gathering power of narration, the sense of surprise, the graphic language of expressing character, the visual syntax, and the joy of working in comics. After all, he helped invent the form.

In the years that followed, Robinson continued to teach us all, through his books about comics, through his activism on behalf of cartoonists imprisoned by dictatorships, by his decency as a man and his fidelity to the power of the human imagination. He began drawing the brilliant *Still Life* panels for the men and women who bought the papers. I was privileged to meet him during those years, and always came away from our encounters smarter than when we met.

At the same time, Jerry was inspiring several generations of apprentice graphic artists, through his books and classes, and through the example of his work. During those years the newspaper narrative strip virtually disappeared, slain by television, and the comics pages shrunk to the visual equivalent of stamp collections. Super heroes made several comebacks for new generations of readers, but looked increasingly like paralyzed figures on steroids. But underground comics showed other directions to the young, wilder, and more anarchic, filled with sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll; and soon the graphic novel was born. In 1986, Frank Miller went back to the origins of Batman, when Jerry Robinson and Bill Finger and Bob Kane and the character they created were young, and brought new life to the pulsing darkness of the streets of Gotham. All great art survives its creators, including great popular art.

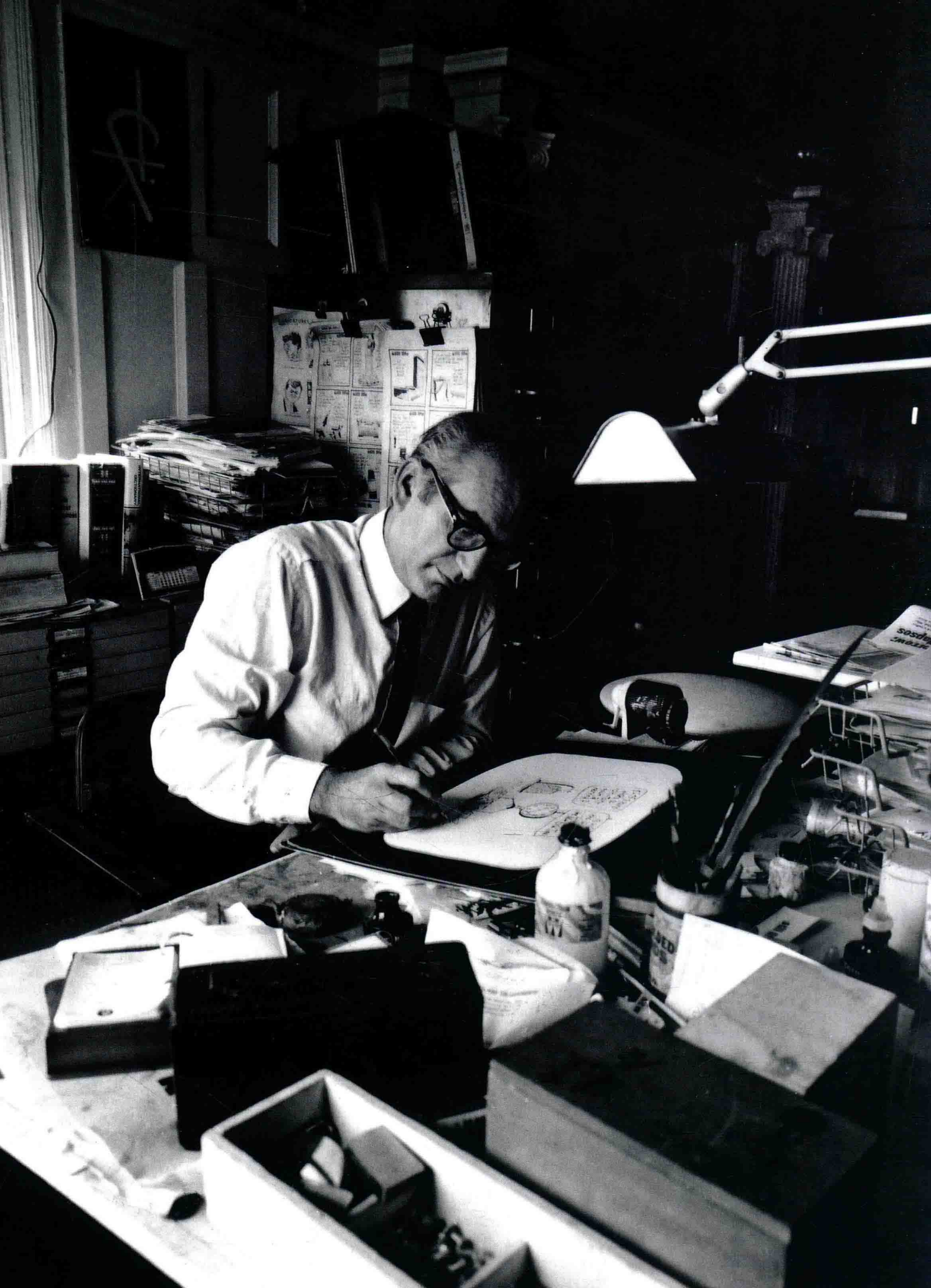
As a master of graphic creation, as teacher, historian, and roving ambassador of comics, Jerry Robinson has ensured that future generations of talented kids will continue to imagine, and then put marks on paper. Some of those marks will be his.

**Pete Hamill**

New York, New York

January 2010







# FOREWORD

**T**he Jerry Robinson I've known for about thirty years probably hasn't spent ten minutes in all that time thinking of himself in weighty terms. I very much doubt that he considers himself in an historic context or mulls his sociological significance or wonders what place in the history of popular culture future chroniclers will accord him. He's probably too busy doing all the things he's been doing so well since 1939: writing, drawing, socializing, and helping his fellow human beings. Jerry's gregarious—I don't know of a better person to share a lunch table with—and he's knowledgeable enough to talk intelligently and engagingly about a lot of topics. But he's not a boaster; while Jerry'll tell stories that involve him as a character, it's never to emphasize his own importance or prowess. *He* won't be the one to tell you who created Batman's trickster foe, the Joker, or who got Superman's creators some of what was due them. Jerry's had an interesting life, and he knows it, and, with a little urging, he'll talk about it. But he'll be discussing what he's seen, what he's been a part of, rather than focusing his narrative on himself.

So let us do for him what he would never do for himself: proclaim that he is a pretty darn thorough example of an archetype. The archetype we have in mind may not yet be recognized by people who concern themselves with identifying archetypes, but it should be. The archetype Jerry exemplifies is the Modern American Artist.

First of all, let's remember that ours is a nation of immigrants, and so our Modern American Artist can't have generations of forebears who lived on this continent. As you'll learn in the following pages, Jerry's father, Benjamin, came from Russia as a teenager with empty pockets and no English; therefore Jerry is first-generation American and qualifies as immigrant stock.

OPPOSITE: Jerry Robinson in his studio in New York City (1970s)

Next, our Modern American Artist must be self-reliant, a person largely self-educated, someone Walt Whitman might have rhapsodized, and again, Jerry qualifies. Although his formal education may have been a bit better than that of some of his colleagues—he attended a good high school—it did not include any time at an art academy or a university degree. Jerry was, for all intents and purposes, an autodidact who, like Mark Twain, got his education in museums and libraries and *used what he learned*. The books he read, the paintings he looked at weren't just curiosities to be crammed into some cranial storage bin and left to molder; they were to be enjoyed, sure, but they were also to be applied to whatever was on Jerry's board. Our most identifiable homegrown American philosophy is William James's pragmatism, which insists that an idea's validity is measured by its usefulness: Does it work in real life? Does it accomplish anything? From here it's an easy leap—really, just a small step—to using whatever you happen to learn, anywhere, anytime, in what you're doing to put food on the table.

Jerry applied his learning to a medium that was, like Benjamin Robinson's citizenship, something new. Some of the earlier generation of newcomers, particularly Jews, had sought fame and fortune in vaudeville, which certainly had old-world predecessors—all those music halls in Merry Olde London—but was fresh-minted for a new century and a new world; and in an odd entertainment just beginning to be popular in New York in which photographs were projected onto a white screen and *moved*! These newcomers, these refugees, couldn't afford art for art's sake—they were James's pragmatists—and they wanted opportunities; they wanted something that would pay. It's not hard to imagine young Jerry, had his life shuffled itself a bit differently, making his way in the movie biz; his father, Benjamin, after all had operated Trenton's first movie theater, and Jerry admits to liking movies and being influenced by them. But instead, Jerry happened into another new form of amusement: comic books.

Comics were a congenial place for him. He liked to write—he still does, and he's good at it—but his most salable skill was his self-taught ability to draw. Jerry was a natural storyteller and a natural graphic artist, and comics are about using drawings in the service of narrative. The timing of Jerry's introduction to what would become a major part of his life's work could hardly have been better. Comic *strips*, carried by virtually every urban newspaper, had been around for almost a half century, but comic *books*, pulpy, flimsy magazines that used the word-picture narrative tools of the strips to tell original stories, were just beginning to exist. It was a new medium so anyone entering it would be, by definition, a pioneer, and nothing is more central to the American mythos than pioneering. We fancy ourselves a nation of innovators, of brave souls not afraid to broach the unknown! So our archetypical artist could not laze in some pre-upholstered niche, obeying rules; he'd have to stride forward.

Anyone seeking work in the comics industry of the late 1930s and early 1940s was certainly not interested in staying with the known. What these kids—Jerry; his mentor, Bill Finger; Bob Kane; as well as Stan Lee and Joe Kubert and Will Eisner and all the other first-generation comics guys—were doing was extraordinary. At tender ages, with few resources and no help from any establishment, they were, on deadline, creating an art form and refining a language, a means of using images and words in conjunction to tell stories. And they were very seldom admired for it—in fact they were often scorned. Everyone seemed to know that comics were for semiliterate dumb clucks . . . everyone except the few who actually *looked* at what was being belittled and saw an original American art form. But, hey! Pioneers aren't bothered by a few slings and arrows.

Although Jerry and the other young comics pioneers may not have venerated art—make that Art—the way it's venerated by today's culturati, that isn't to imply that they did not value it nor that they slighted their involvement in it. Let's posit that our Modern American Artist must have a workman's pride in what's being produced, by himself and others, and a willingness to work as hard as necessary to make the thing as good as it can be. Evidence? Look at the comics produced by Jerry and his contemporaries and imagine the effort and thought that went into creating those entertainments. They may have been working on deadline for pay, but the pioneers of comics wanted to produce quality stuff. They cared.

Finally, our archetype, our Modern American Artist, has to be a Good Samaritan. We cherish the self-image of us Americans as a generous folk, always willing to help. And here Jerry Robinson improves the archetype. With no hope of personal gain, often without any significant credit, Jerry has given time, money, and enormous effort to rescuing, rewarding, and gaining recognition for fellow artists who have been badly treated. He is the most benevolent man I have ever known, in or out of comics, and one of the most decent.

So can there be any question? We have our archetype. Behold and celebrate! The Modern American Artist! His name is Jerry Robinson. Read this book and be convinced.

**Dennis O'Neil**

Nyack, New York

October 2009