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William Steig, A Master of Comic Art

by Lillian H. Heil

Comic book fans may be surprised and pleased to learn that comic or cartoon art is a recognized art style, even in art museums; two artists whose comic art is frequently exhibited in art shows are Paul Klee and Roy Lichtenstein. The characteristics of the comic art style are economy of line, and of course a humorous slant on all aspects of human existence. Many comic book illustrators start as cartoonists for magazines and newspapers. William Steig, our featured children's artist, began his career in 1930 as a freelance cartoonist. He did much of his work for The New Yorker, the sophisticated magazine about the Big Apple that is known for its offbeat humor. (If I could understand the humor in The New Yorker, I always felt like I was part of the "in" group for at least a day.) Comic art for adults, and particularly political cartoons, often takes a cynical view of those in the public eye. Steig's comic art for children is more whimsical and lighthearted, as you'll see in the illustrations that accompany this article. But let's start at the beginning. William Steig was born in New York City in 1907. His creative energies were stimulated in early in life: both his father and mother painted in their spare time, and his older brother, Irwin, gave Steig his first art lessons. Steig loved the fairy tales recorded by the Grimm brothers, Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, Charlie Chaplin movies, Pyle's Robin Hood, legends of King Arthur, the opera of Hansel and Gretel, and Collodi's Pinocchio. Steig's comics began appearing in the high school newspaper. After his graduation, he spent two years at New York City College, three years at the National Academy of Design, and five days at the Yale School of Fine Arts. He once told an interviewer that if he had his choice he'd "have been a professional athlete, a sailor, a beachcomber, or some other form of hobo, a painter, a gardener, a novelist, a banjo-player, a traveler, anything but a rich man... but the Great Depression put me to work as a cartoonist to support the family" (David Allender, "William Steig at Eighty," Publisher's Weekly, July 24, 1987, pp. 116-118).

Many of us who never have enough time for all the things we would like to do, people and places we'd like to know, or talents we would like to develop, can sympathize with Steig's dislike of routines, schedules, and deadlines. He told another interviewer that "the more projects and plans I have, the less I produce.... I find I function best when there's nothing that needs to be done.
... There must be a long prospect of peace" (Sally Lodge, "PW Interviews William Steig," *Publisher's Weekly*, Oct. 15, 1979, pp. 6-7).

Somehow Steig has managed to find those long periods of time. Even though his career as a children's author and illustrator began thirty-eight years later than his career as a cartoonist, he has written more than twenty children's books and illustrated an additional eight. The list of honors his books have been awarded is longer than his list of books. Many parents and children are familiar with his 1970 Caldecott award winner *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, his 1977 Newbery Honor Book *The Amazing Bone*, and his 1984 Newbery Honor Book for *Doctor Desoto*. Since 1969, he has received recognition every year from reviewers such as the American Library Association, *The New York Times*, and *The Boston Globe*; and he has been the recipient of several awards such as the Children's Picture Book Award by *Redbook*. Steig has not only produced a book or two each year since 1968, but has also produced quality books recognized by readers, publishers, and reviewers.

It was only by chance that Steig began writing children's books. A fellow cartoonist working for Harper and Row suggested that Steig try writing for children. The result was a book you'll want to look up if you missed it: *CDB* is a letter-puzzle book that is as entertaining to adults as it is to children. Children's literature expert James Higgins writes that Steig's "work reaches beyond the specific confines of a child audience. . . . He writes not out of a remembrance of childhood, but out of the essence of childhood, which no adult can afford to give up or deny. . . . Positive themes recur throughout Steig's works: the abundant world of nature, the security of home and family, the importance of friendship, the strength that comes from self-reliance" (James E. Higgins, "William Steig: Champion for Romance," *Children's Literature in Education*, Spring 1978, pp. 3-16).

The first of Steig's illustrations that accompany this article come from *Abel's Island*. In this story, a Robinson Crusoe-type mouse, Abel, is separated from his wife, Amanda, by a flood; he has to survive on an island until he figures out how to get back to her. The illustration depicts part of his adventure: an owl has planned to have mouse for dinner. Notice how few lines Steig has to use to show the terror in Abel's face and body. Steig's language is as much fun as his drawings. After Abel escapes by slashing the owl's toes with a penknife, he cautiously peers from his hollow log home to make sure "there was no dealer of death on his roof." Steig's use of alliteration and interesting sounding words, such as in the title of his second book *Tiffky Doofky*, is intriguing to the minds and ears of readers. Tiffky, a dog, is a garbage collector whom fortune teller Madam Tarsal informs will find his lady love before sunset. The story is a mad race of impossible adventures, like meeting a lunatic who is hunting for butterflies and falling off cliffs. You'll love the part where Tiffky dreams of being embraced by his true love: "Her embrace was
gentle, sinuous. But it began getting stronger. And stronger." Tiffky awakes to find himself in the coils of a boa constrictor.

Finally, book number three, *Spinky Sulks*, is about a boy whose feelings have been hurt by his family members, who are supposed to love him. Readers can identify with Spinky’s feelings of indignation and with the feelings of his family members, who try in vain to make up for their thoughtlessness. Spinky’s whole family takes turns at trying to cheer Spinky up—his sister, his brother, his friends, his mother, his father, his favorite grandma—but to no avail. Finally everyone holds an umbrella over his hammock to keep him out of the rain; Spinky begins to consider forgiving them. Look for this picture as you read through the rest of CBR and notice the range of feelings Steig can portray in a few lines and the universal truths he can make his readers aware of through his comic art. Take time to read Steig’s books and enjoy the wit and humor of his language and illustrations.