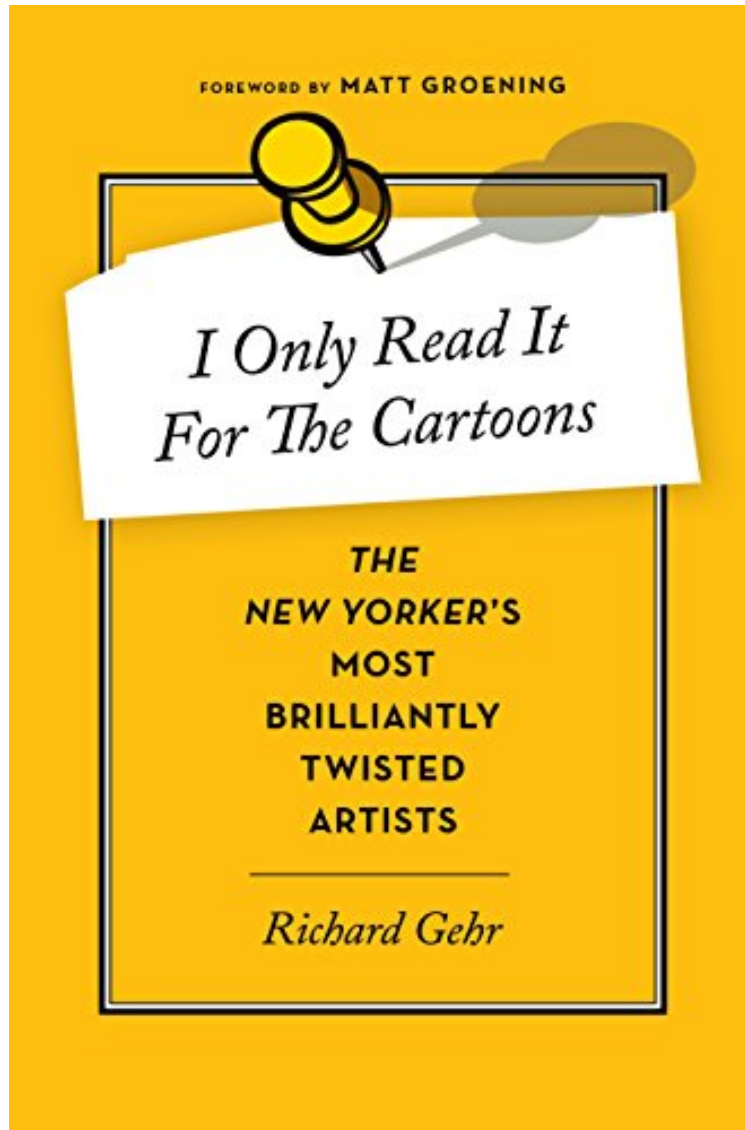


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I Only Read It for the Cartoons: The New Yorker's Most Brilliantly Twisted Artists

Richard Gehr

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Available for the first time to The New Yorkers's one million-plus readers: a volume dedicated to the individual careers of the magazines's cartoon superstars.Widely considered to be the pantheon of single-panel cartooning, The New Yorker cartoonists's styles are richly varied, and their personal stories are surprising. For example, did you know that Arnie Levin is a seventy-three-year-old former Beatnik painter with a handlebar mustache and a back decorated by Japan's foremost tattoo artists?Gehrs's book features fascinating biographical profiles of such artists as Gahan Wilson, Sam Gross, Roz Chast, Lee Lorenz, and Edward Koren. Along with a dozen such profiles, Gehr provides a brief history of The New Yorker cartoon itself, touching on the lives and work of earlier illustrating wits, including Charles Addams, James Thurber, and William Steig.

"If you think you are funny and could do what New Yorker cartoonists do, you are wrong. To get a glimpse into the lives and working habits of these artists is a great gift. They are a rarified breed living in places like Connecticut and Westchester. They blend into the background, but they are the great philosophers of our time. Don't try this at home." —Maira Kalman, New Yorker cover artist, author of *My Favorite Things* and *The Principles of Uncertainty* "Everyone who's ever had their mind blown by a New Yorker cartoon has wondered about the twisted, perforated, skewed, and fizzy geniuses that create them. This book is our Rosetta Stone. It explains who these wonderful weirdos are, how they acquire their odd, delicious ideas, and how those ideas migrate fantastically to paper and then press. We are in enormous debt to Richard Gehr for tracking these artists down, for charming them, disarming them, and translating their lives and work into wise and elegant prose. Books like this should cost a fortune." —David Shenk, author of *The Genius in All of Us* "A great New Yorker cartoon goes deeper than it looks, and Richard Gehr's masterful profiles of the magazine's artists reveal the rich weirdness and intense craft behind their doodly bursts of wit." —Douglas Wolk, author of *Reading Comics* "Gehrs's knowledge of the history and culture of the magazine, and his incisive, revealing interviews, make for great reading." —When Roz Chast, George Booth, Ed Koren, and all the rest read this book, I think they will be delighted —as will you." —Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, from the foreword "Gehr is sure to delight any New Yorker fan with this look at the pantheon of cartoonists; the book, brimming with New Yorker history and the idiosyncrasies of its contributors, is successful at what it sets out to do —provide a first-of-its-kind paean to some of the magazine's most consistently popular contributors." —Publishers Weekly "There's no purer distillation of a sense of humor than the single-panel gag cartoon, and most of the good ones appear in The New Yorker. This book profiles twelve of the magazines's cartoonists, who prove to be as funny, odd, and sometimes enigmatic as their artifacts. Whether you are stranded on a desert island, free-associating on a psychiatrist's couch, sitting on a park bench hearing out a winsome wino, or trying to stop the Grim Reaper from getting a foot in the door, this book will help you see the humor in your situation. It also help you understand the arcane process by which life is converted into laffs." —Christopher Miller, author of *American Cornball* and *The Cardboard Universe* "Fans of the magazine and cartoon aficionados will enjoy Gehr's entertaining writing." —Library Journal "This slender book is very much one the world needed and looked for." —Buffalo News, Editor's Choice "About the Author Richard Gehr has been writing about music, books, film, television, and other aspects of popular culture for more than two decades. He has contributed to several books and written for *Rolling Stone*, *Vibe*, *O*, the *New York Times Book*, and *Spin*. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction How to Read a New Yorker Cartoon If you think entering The New Yorker's weekly Caption Contest is a hoot, try competing with a roomful of cartoon fans and an open bar. A live version of the Cartoon Caption Contest is among the more popular events of the annual New Yorker Festival, and in 2012 I found myself sitting at one of several tables in Conde Nast Publications's executive dining room, where participants enjoyed executive snacks and the opportunity to have their captions judged by the pros: George Booth, Harry Bliss, Kim Warp, and New Yorker editor-cartoonist Robert Mankoff. The tables competed against one another for copies of the recently published *The Big Book of Dogs*. Not coincidentally, all three of the captionless images we were required to enliven also involved canine situations. A captioning newbie, I quickly got the hang of this cartoon karaoke and was soon amusing myself, if no one else. (The one about Laika and the dating service was especially killer.) What is wrong with these people? I thought, as lesser efforts were rewarded. The Caption Contest is an immensely popular feature. Some five thousand entries a week suggest that a good portion of the magazines's readers imagine that they could step up to the plate and knock gags out of the park with these Yankees of Yucks. But, of course, that's only half the battle, insofar as relatively few of us can draw as well as

quip. For much of the magazine's run, outside writers supplied artists with their material. Today, however, drawing a New Yorker cartoon is rarely a two-person proposition. In reality, cartooning for The New Yorker is mostly an exercise in rejection. Cartoon editor Mankoff and editor in chief David Remnick nix hundreds of cartoons for every one they publish in the magazine. One regular contributor, Matthew Diffie, has taken the iniquity in hand by publishing a series of Rejection Collection volumes devoted to "Cartoons You Never Saw, and Never Will See, in The New Yorker." And when I asked staff writer Calvin Trillin for his thoughts on the state of New Yorker cartooning, he prefaced his response by saying it would be prejudiced by the fact that not a single one of his many cartoon ideas had ever made it into the magazine. Two days after the festival, I was in Lawrence, Kansas, recounting my afternoon of shame to Jack Ziegler, one of The New Yorker's more inventive and frequently appearing cartoonists. I suppose I expected a little sympathy. Instead, Ziegler went about as straight-faced as I'd seen him get all afternoon. "Now you know how I feel," he said. "But there's a lot more to a New Yorker cartoon than a clever caption, and it takes an artist like Ziegler to complete the equation. Like a pop single, every cartoon creates its own little universe in which you can linger. In fact, says single-panel virtuoso Dan Piraro, whose Bizarro comic appears in some 350 outlets daily, a cartoon is the only way certain ideas can be expressed. "You see a small slice of time, and a few words, and your mind must put together what has just happened to lead to this, or what is about to happen moments later. If you take almost any given single-panel gag and spell it out long form, be it a comic strip or actors fleshing out the scene on video, the joke is completely ruined." Ivan Brunetti, a cartoonist and a comics scholar to boot, insists that "whether it's minimal or dense with detail, a cartoon instantly puts you somewhere, and you're picking up so much narrative without even realizing it. You're entering a world the cartoonist creates." A cartoon is a collaboration between artist and reader and a tiny vacation from sad, boring reality. The timing of the first New Yorker cartoons couldn't have been better in this respect. The Roaring Twenties were about to give way to the Great Depression. In the magazine's first issue—dated February 21, 1925—founding editor Harold Ross wrote, "The New Yorker starts with a declaration of serious purpose but with a concomitant declaration that it will not be too serious in executing it. It hopes to reflect metropolitan life, to keep up with events and affairs of the day, to be gay, humorous, satirical but to be more than a jester." Little could Ross have imagined that he would be publishing an entire issue devoted to John Hersey's "Hiroshima" just twenty years later. Or, for that matter, imagine Hersey marrying Charles Addams's first wife, which he did. The first New Yorker cartoon appeared on the same page as Ross's credo. In Alfred Frueh's drawing, a disheveled subway rider wearing an overcoat and fedora holds on to a strap with one hand (a lunch bucket draped over his arm) while the other assiduously wipes a clear view through a dirty window. Beside him, a sign implores please! help keep the "and subway clean. The cartoon's caption consists of a single word: "Co-operation." With a couple of small changes, that image might have been published in this week's issue—perhaps swapping in a handlebar-mustached nostalgist from Williamsburg carrying a bento box. There's a timeless appeal to the best cartoons, which this one, filled as it is with local meaning, still possesses. Cartoons are essential to The New Yorker's identity. They're what—admit it—you look at first upon opening its pages, and they constitute what Roz Chast calls "a magazine within a magazine." They're a gateway (drug) to both the magazine's long-form journalism and the world at large. Growing up in Oregon during the fifties and sixties, I learned everything I really needed to know about New York City from New Yorker cartoons and Howard Smith's Scenes column in my closet-bohemian father's copies of the Village Voice. Charles Addams's famous drawing of a skier's legs creating a umlaut; parentheses around an obstructing tree shattered my notion of reality as effectively as Jack Kirby. And here in Brooklyn, where I've lived for seventeen years, I fondly recall my two young daughters leafing through each week's issue, annotating every image according to the quality and/or comprehensibility of its humor—e.g., funny, not funny, don't get. Sadly, however, The New Yorker is the only general-interest magazine that still publishes single-panel cartoons on an ongoing basis, and the world is less charming for it. Modern cartooning's roots lie in Egyptian hieroglyphs, Greek friezes, medieval tapestries, and the British and French satirical-art traditions. At the turn of the twentieth century, cartoons and Sunday comics—the funnies—composed a mass medium that cut across age and class. By 1950, cartoonists could make a decent living drawing for the stag and wholesale gag mags and for general-interest outlets, such as Look, Collier's, and the Saturday Evening Post, with The New Yorker at the top of the ladder. For its first year or so, the magazine published illustrations large and small, caricatures, and cartoons. The latter consisted mostly of sequential narrative cartoons, with and without captions, and full- or half-page drawings. These included art director Rea Irvin's Social Errors series, e.g., "The Man Who Used the Wrong Spoon" and "The Man Who Actually Ate Dinner" (at a nightclub). John Held Jr. translated old American songs into ironic wood engravings, and Carl Rose employed proto-expressionist techniques. It was fun stuff, but it ran its course quickly. By the following summer, Harold Ross and Rea Irvin began concentrating on the special hybrid of word and image the magazine would become renowned for. Captions shrunk; art and text

synergized in ironic fashion; and drawings appeared in novel shapes and proportions, often leaping from page to page. During the thirties, the wit of early humorists such as Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, and James Thurber extended more forcefully into the cartoon realm, often thanks to ideas provided by the magazines' writers and editors. In one famous New Yorker cartoon, written by E. B. White and drawn by Carl Rose in 1928, a very proper mother informs her equally prim daughter that "It's broccoli, dear," to which the child replies, in words that have echoed through the decades, "I say it's spinach, and I say the hell with it." Peter Arno (born Curtis Arnoux Peters) was the magazine's clown prince. Arno, Robert Benchley wrote, "may not have been the first to make use of the overheard remark as a basis for a drawing, but he has made himself the High Priest of the school." Arno's decades at the magazine produced some choice interactions between Harold Ross and his art department. In a 1949 memo, Ross informed art editor James Geraghty that Arno "is going to lay in for the next two or three weeks and finish fifteen or twenty drawings, he says, and that would mean we would have to use almost one drawing a week . . . I said 'I'd buy him an unlimited meal if he'd do this.' The artist-editor relationship remained a work in progress, even after twenty-five years. "In other words," ran another 1949 memo, "the Arno caption sheet goes through the regular procedure, except that Ross IS NOT SUPPOSED TO CHANGE ARNO CAPTIONS AFTER THEY'VE BEEN BOUGHT." The process was solidified the following year, when art department staffer Louis Forster suggested the following procedure to Geraghty: All captions for Arno drawings are to be O.K.'d by Mr. Ross before Mr. Arno begins work. Mr. Geraghty is to give Mr. Lobrano sheets bearing the tentative captions for drawings that Arno is to do. Mr. Lobrano will take these to Mr. Ross with the regular batch of caption sheets that he takes in to Mr. Ross on Wednesdays. When Mr. Ross initials [sic] and releases the Arno sheets, we (in Forster's dept.) are to copy them. We are to send copies to Mr. Geraghty and hold the originals ourselves. When the drawings are completed by Mr. Arno and initialed [sic] by Mr. Ross, we are to make sure that the captions on them are the same as the ones Mr. Ross O.K.'d.