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Book Review: 'How About Never—Is Never Good for You?' by Bob Mankoff

The cartoon editor of the New Yorker began as a psychology graduate student but quit when his lab animal died.

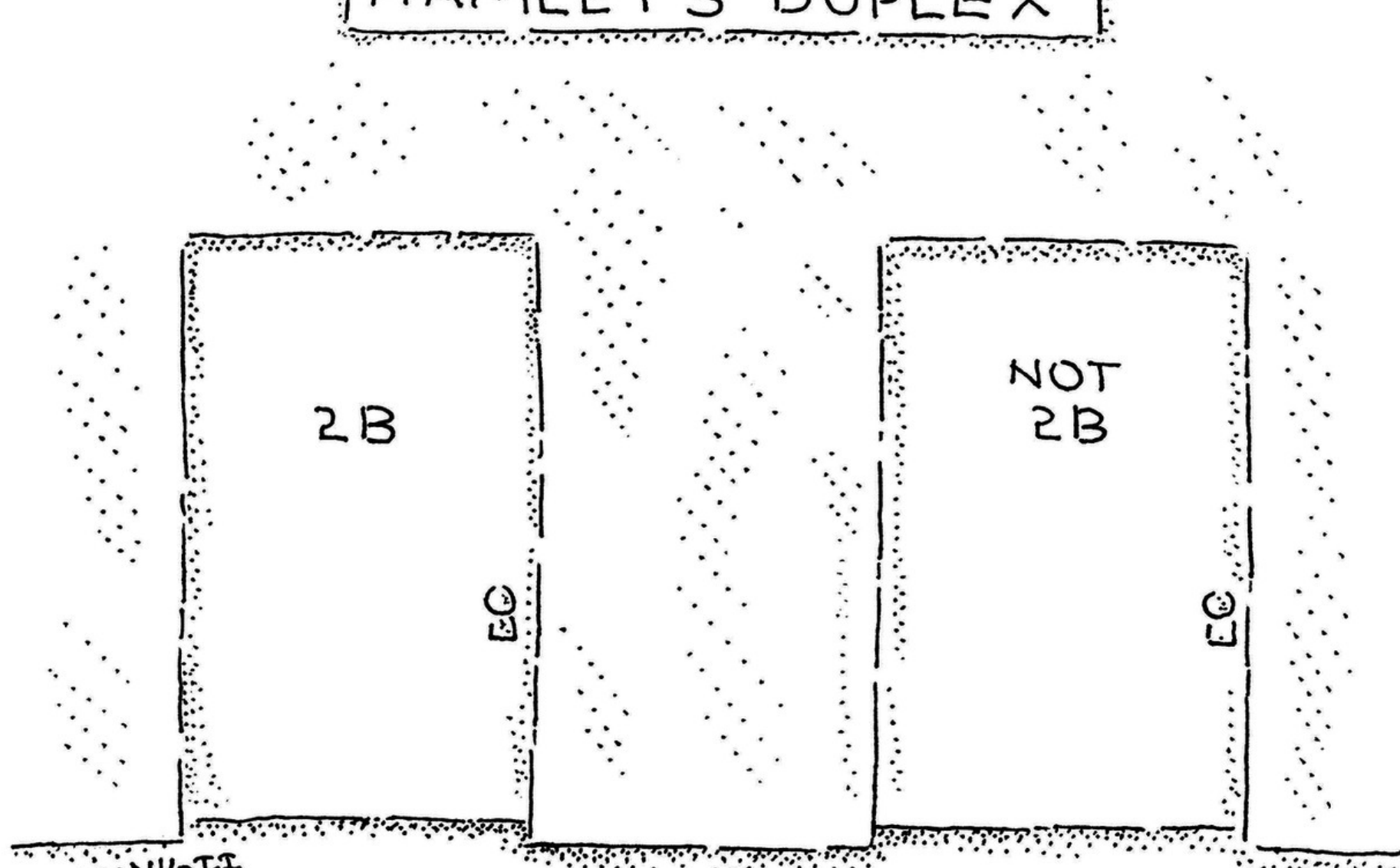
By Edward Kosner
March 21, 2014 4:32 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT

If the eyes are the windows of the soul, New Yorker cartoons are the funhouse mirrors of the American psyche. Week after week for nearly 90 years, the magazine has presented a cavalcade of linear commentary on love, sex, death, heaven, hell, bosses, pets and other concerns of sophisticated Americans, plus enough riffs on desert islands with single palm trees to cheer the loneliest heart.

HOW ABOUT NEVER—IS NEVER GOOD FOR YOU?

By Bob Mankoff
Henry Holt, 285 pages, \$32.50



BOB MANKOFF/THE NEW YORKER COLLECTION/CONDÉ NAST

The New Yorker has published more than 78,000 cartoons since Harold Ross's first issue in 1925, and everyone has a favorite. Most readers can also remember a drawing, with or without a caption, so inscrutable that it was impossible to tease out the point—which often was the point. There's even a "Seinfeld" episode in which Elaine beards the whiskey cartoon editor of the magazine in his lair and demands that he explicate a drawing with a cat for her. He phoomphers around until the finally admitting, that he doesn't get it either. "I liked the kitty," he finally confesses. So the result is, to put it charitably, is enigmatic: Roger Ebert, the late Chicago film critic, had to send 107 entries to the magazine's finicky weekly cartoon-caption contest before finally scoring a winner.

Older cartoon connoisseurs remember the golden age of James Thurber's anarchic whimsy, Peter Arno's soused lechers and leggy chorines, Charles Addams's family of fetching ghouls, and the virtuoso Saul Steinberg. Those masters had plenty of company, including Chon Day, Whitney Darrow Jr., Sam Cobean, William Steig and the peerless draftsman George Price. Another generation brought Ed Koren with his endearingly fuzzy West Siders, William Hamilton's pitch-perfect Upper East Side WASPs and George Booth's scraggly dogs.

The progression of the cartoonists reflects the New Yorker's own editorial evolution from Ross's Midwest faux-sophistication to his fastidious successor William Shawn's genteel perfectionism and on through quirky Robert Gottlieb, Tina Brown's high-wire act and the uber journalism of today's David Remnick. Over time, much of the old-school blithe fun got leached out of the cartoons, to be replaced by the twitchy angst of Roz Chast's family dramas, Bruce Eric Kaplan's 2-D gorgons, P.C. Vey's depressos and Robert Mankoff's pointillist confections. There are few laugh-out-loud drawings, but the humor has become more topical. "He's not gay, but he's often gay-adjacent," a man tells his female companion as two metrosexuals pass by in a recent cartoon by William Haefeli, a frequent contributor.

The story of how the Addams Family morphed into the Chast family chronicles is told in Bob Mankoff's jokey and entertaining memoir, "How About Never—Is Never Good for You?," with page after page of vintage and fresh-drawn New Yorker cartoons. Mr. Mankoff is the man for the job: He has been the magazine's cartoon editor for the past 17 years and was a contributing artist for 20 years before that. More than 900 of his drawings have been published in the magazine, including the iconic cartoon of a chilly executive blowing off a caller from which his memoir takes its title.

Mr. Mankoff has recruited and tutored the latest iteration of New Yorker cartoonists and showcases their work in his choice (along with editor Remnick) of the 17 or so cartoons that appear in each of the 47 issues published each year. He was the inspiration for the bearded editor Elaine confronts in the "Seinfeld" episode, but he is much less oracular than his sitcom proxy about what makes New Yorker cartoons funny. By his own testimony, Mr. Mankoff knows a lot about cartoon art, and he knows what he likes.

As it happens, Mr. Mankoff's own comedic gestation was more Borscht Belt than Algonquin Round Table. Born in the Bronx and raised in Queens, he was a Jewish mama's boy who loved watching his idol Jerry Lewis perform at Brown's, the big-time Catskills resort. He was drawing at 8 and went to high school at Music & Art in Manhattan, where he encountered people who could sketch and sculpt much better than he could. Later, at Syracuse University, he seems to have majored in being a wise guy—"as in Jewish from Queens, not Italian from Little Italy."

But he did come across a handy text called "Learning to Cartoon" by the New Yorker's Syd Hoff and submitted portfolios to the many magazines of the day that published such work. None wanted his, so he became a graduate student in psychology. But his experimental animal died just as Mr. Mankoff was in sight of his Ph.D., and he bagged the lab to return to the easel. He tried to console his heartbroken mother: "Instead of being a psychologist, I would be a cartoonologist."

With true graduate-student industry, he parked himself at the New York Public Library and studied the cartoons in every back issue of the New Yorker he could get his hands on. He developed a distinctive stippling style, using a Rapidograph mechanical drawing pen to ink in his panels with countless dots—a Seurat of silliness. Still, it took him years until his first cartoon was accepted in 1977 and anxious weeks until the next OK. Eventually, he drew himself into what he thinks of as the Yankee Stadium of the cartoon leagues—a contract with the magazine.

Finally unleashed, Mr. Mankoff turned out to be a prolific contributor. He also recognized that he and his fellow artists submitted about a thousand cartoons each week only to have 98% of them rejected. At least some of those rejects had to be pretty good, he reasoned. Thus was born the Cartoon Bank, a digitized library of work by New Yorker artists (and later, others) available at a price to newspapers, other magazines, ad agencies, book publishers and anyone else looking for a graphic laugh. The enterprise turned out to be so successful that, with a boost from Tina Brown, Mr. Mankoff sold it to Condé Nast, the New Yorker's owner.

The sale opened the way for Mr. Mankoff to replace the magazine's longtime cartoon editor, Lee Lorenz, and to reshape the sensibility of the New Yorker cartoon in his own dotty fashion. The change has been evolutionary, not revolutionary, but any committed reader of the magazine can recognize the difference.

The veteran New Yorker artist Sam Gross classifies cartoonists as "heads" or "hands." "A 'head' cartoonist," Mr. Mankoff writes, "needs a strong idea to have a good cartoon. No idea, no cartoon. It's not that the drawing doesn't matter; it does, but it's a bonus. For a 'hand' cartoonist, it's tilted the other way. The drawing is the main show, the raison d'être." In the Mankoff era at the New Yorker, most weeks it's "heads" up.

The editor thoughtfully supplies his criteria for choosing cartoons, with helpful diagrams displaying "degrees of playful incongruity," ranging from "confusion—too incongruous" to "too close to normal—less likely to be perceived as humor." His dicta are so rudimentary and contradictory—"Originality is over-rated," "It's been done," "No news is good news" and such—that they can veer toward "I liked the kitty."

He also offers a tutorial on how to win the cartoon-caption contest, which draws 5,000 entries each week, with a sample drawing of a chicken and a duck embracing on a sofa. Mr. Mankoff recommends free-associating from the sketch, as in "duck, goose, honk, Donald Duck, the Donald, duck soup" and then writing endless caption variations. Some of his better offerings: "Just so you know, my safe word is 'quack,'" "What if the Donald finds out?"; and "Wait, are you kosher?" He even provides an equation to figure your odds of winning the contest, which turn out to be infinitesimal.

Mr. Mankoff is a fierce advocate of the New Yorker cartoon's place in the American cultural spectrum and is justifiably proud of the captions that have become enduring catchphrases. There's the 1929 Carl Rose drawing of a mother and child seated at the dinner table with a caption supplied by E.B. White: "It's broccoli, dear." "I say it's spinach, and I say the hell with it." And Peter Arno's 1941 cartoon of an aviation engineer walking away from a training plane crash with a blueprint tucked under his arm: "Well, back to the old drawing board." Mr. Mankoff's own snarky exec telling his caller, "No, Thursday's out. How about never—is never good for you?" is a worthy companion to the other two and evidence that the New Yorker's cartoons can still unerringly reflect the texture of our times.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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