

Completely Mad: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine (1991)

[Maria Reidelbach](#)

Reviewed by [Stuart Klawans](#) | Nov 22, 1991

Details Writer: [Maria Reidelbach](#); Genres: [Coffee Table](#), [Comic Books/Graphic Novels](#), [Comic Novels](#); Publisher: [Little](#)

As every college student now knows, the so-called "Chicken Fat" School of American Art (also known as the Echh Movement) crawled into the daylight in Mad comics, circa 1952, in the pictures of Will Elder, Wally Wood, and Jack Davis. Apart from their talent for imagining women with enormous breasts, these artists excelled at dispersing stupid little drawings all over the page, kinda like blobs of chicken fat on the top of your soup. Hence the term "Chicken Fat" School, first coined — and in true art-critical fashion shamelessly promoted — by Mad's founding editor, Harvey Kurtzman. Of course none of this explains why anybody would publish a 40-buck coffee-table book about Mad comics and magazine — except maybe that the author, Maria Reidelbach, had already helped to write a book about miniature golf, so as an art historian she didn't have much farther to sink.

Anyway, as all the original Madmen knew — I'm talking about the publisher, William Gaines, and Al Feldstein, who became the editor after Kurtzman left the magazine — chicken fat is known in Yiddish as schmaltz, which is also the word for bleecch-inducing sentimentality. Of this latter type of chicken fat, Mad had zilch. It was preachy, sure — which distinguished it from parallel phenomena such as Looney Tunes and the "music" of Spike Jones. But Mad, unlike most of the mass culture of the '50s and early '60s, did not traffic in happy endings. It celebrated body odor and zits and marriages in which unshaven, potbellied guys screamed at women in hair rollers. It spread the wisd-up culture of Depression-bred New York Jews to a general and generally unsuspecting public. It also was the first satirical publication in world history to be read mostly by children.

Now those children have grown up, and though they might not have learned much in college, they do have coffee tables. What can they cover them with for 40 bucks? For starters, Completely 'Mad' will give them a lot of choice artwork from all of the magazine's eras. They will also get little reproductions of every cover; profiles of the artists, writers, and editors; an investigative report on Alfred E. Neuman, Mad's grinning-idiot mascot; historical information, thematic analyses, a bibliography, archival odds and ends; but not too many laughs in the text.

For instance, Reidelbach is the sort of writer who can say that Mad satirizes "extremists of any stripe." Yak yak yak. A sharper commentator might have done better by pointing out that the federal judge who ruled in favor of Mad in a landmark 1964 copyright case was Judge Irving R. Kaufman, the same judge who fried the Rosenbergs. There's a piece

of real cultural history, of the sort that gets past Reidelbach faster than a speeding axolotl (to use a word that used to grace the margins of Mad's pages; oh yes, it's a small lizard).

On the other hand, Reidelbach has dug up this quote from Andy Warhol: "Mad made me fall in love with people with big ears. That's a good influence, isn't it?" So I guess she can't be all bad. **B+**