INTERVIEW

Behind ‘The Glowing Belly of the Little Beast’: an interview with Kim Deitch

Conducted by Derek Parker Royal

Encountering the comics of Kim Deitch is like stepping into another world, a region where the façade of reality is tenuously thin and easily punctured by the surreal. What at first appears grounded and intelligible turns out to be, on closer inspection, a mere ruse, a necessary fiction masking a deeper realm – a subterranean system as fascinating as it is sinister – that actually sustains the everyday. In Deitch’s world, a legion of grey-bearded pygmies can maintain long-forgotten pop cultural lore, French-speaking beavers can develop a vast underground culture, and undetectable space aliens can record for posterity all the happenings of our lives. The characters that populate Deitch’s storyworld are an assorted lot and reflect the carnivalesque nature of his narratives: con men, sideshow performers, psychic detectives, silent-film heroes, Disneyesque animators, kiddie-show entertainers, bottle cap collectors, and highly eroticized clowns. What binds these seemingly disparate figures is an impulse to entertain, a propensity they share with their creator. Most of Deitch’s comics are set in the entertainment industry – Hollywood films, travelling carnivals and sideshows, animation studios, jazz and ragtime, children’s television programming, screenwriting, theatrical brothels – a world with which the artist is quite familiar.

Kim is the son of Gene Deitch, an illustrator, animator, film director, and creator of Terrytoons’ animated series, Tom Terrific. As he reveals in the following interview, Kim was strongly encouraged by his father and was influenced by the abundance of art and music, particularly jazz, that permeated the Deitch home. (Ragtime and early twentieth-century popular music function as a soundtrack to Kim Deitch’s comics, and he is an avid collector of old blues and jazz recordings.) Artists and musicians were frequent guests of Gene and Marie Deitch, so Kim grew up surrounded by the kind of colourful and off-beat figures that would later populate his comics. It was an influence that also rubbed off on his brothers, Simon and Seth, who became artists in their own rights and with whom Kim has occasionally collaborated.

Yet, while comics and animation were a big part of Deitch’s young life, the real direction of his career did not take form until he was around 21 years old. Although he had always had a creative streak, Kim Deitch drifted for the first few years of his adult life. He briefly attended the Pratt Institute before dropping out, and then followed this with a short stint in the Merchant Marine. Afterwards he worked a series of straight jobs, and in 1965 ended up working as an attendant at a mental institution in White Plains, New York. There, one evening, he had what he calls his ‘nut house epiphany’. While on late-night duty, reading a collection of William Blake poetry, he came across ‘Auguries of Innocence’ and was struck by its opening lines:
To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.

This understanding of art and its potential, of how a writer can create multiple worlds within a single imagination, has become the template of Deitch’s comics. It is what has propelled him to construct vast narratives that interconnect one with the other, where one strip becomes the backstory of an earlier comic, and a graphic album serves as a springboard for subsequent characters and storylines. Such elaborate, interdependent, and even self-reflexive worlds is what comics educator Bill Kartalopoulos has aptly identified as ‘the Kim Deitch Universe’.

Deitch has sketched out the contours of this universe for over four decades. He began in the underground comix movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, working alongside such figures as Spain Rodriguez, Art Spiegelman, and Robert Crumb – one of his heroes, he reveals in this interview – and contributing to New York’s premier underground paper, The East Village Other, and then later Gothic Blimp Works. Since then, his work (sometimes under the pseudonym Fowlton Means) has appeared in a variety of magazines and comics books including High Times, Arcade, Heavy Metal, Raw, Prime Cuts, Zero Zero, Weirdo, Mineshaft Magazine, LA Weekly, and Young Lust. While he is a celebrated artist – the recipient of an Eisner Award in 2003 and an Inkpot Award in 2008 – Deitch prefers to call himself a ‘writer who draws’, his love of literature, especially the nineteenth-century British novel, heavily infiltrating his many comics. His prodigious output has been collected over a series of nine books (some of which include original material): Hollywoodland (1987), Beyond the Pale (1990), All Waldo Comics (1992), A Shroud for Waldo (1992), Boulevard of Broken Dreams (2002), Shadowland (2006), Alias the Cat (2006), Deitch’s Pictorama (with his brothers Simon and Seth, 2008), and The Search for Smilin’ Ed! (2010). And nine is an apt number when it comes to the work of Kim Deitch.

Perhaps his most famous, and most notorious, creation is Waldo, a mysterious blue cat reminiscent of Felix and other anthropomorphic felines from early animated films. Waldo is one of nine clones – the Waldo we know is the first, with the number 1 on his chest, and the other eight have been killed off – his hard drinking and wild lifestyle have required all of a cat’s fabled lives. He is a mischievous character with a demonic past, a present-day trickster figure, and he only appears to individuals who are mentally unstable, high, or intoxicated. He can be read as Deitch’s alter ego, his Id, his antagonist, his mouthpiece, and his bane, all wrapped up into one. Wherever Waldo appears, chaos and psychedelic revelry are sure to follow.

I recently had the pleasure of talking with Kim Deitch about Waldo and other aspects of his art. My first encounter with him was the result of reading the first issue of his miniseries, The Stuff of Dreams (May 2002–August 2005), later collected in Alias the Cat. On one of the last pages of that comic book, he and his partner, Pam Butler – in true metafictional form, Kim often appears as a character in his own comics – are addressing their readers and asking if they have seen a stuffed cat toy that looks like Waldo. Deitch provides an email address and invites his audience to respond with information. Knowing the story in which this appeared to be pure fiction, I had assumed the email to be as well, and on a fluke I decided to try it. I was in the process of writing an essay on the narrative levels in Deitch’s comics, and thought I would ask him a few questions. Much to my surprise, the email address was real, and Kim responded the very same day. He kindly answered the questions I had asked him, and our correspondence eventually turned into a much longer interview. What follows is the result of that correspondence, which began
in email format in March 2009 and wrapped up in March of the following year. During that time, I had the opportunity to ask Kim about the origins of his art, his history in the business, his experiences in the underground comix scene, the style and aesthetics that define his art, his approach to storytelling, how popular culture always finds a way into his comics, and the trajectory of his career.

**Derek Parker Royal:** This might sound like a conventional question to begin, but how did you come to comics?

**Kim Deitch:** I’d studied graphic art at the Pratt Institute for two years, 1962 to ’64, but I took a leave of absence to ship out in the Norwegian Merchant Marine. After I’d quit again six months later I did not feel like returning to Pratt and drifted through a series of straight jobs culminating in one as an orderly at a posh nut house in Westchester, NY. After capturing an escaping nut one day, I was finally promoted to the night shift, a thing I had been trying to achieve for a while. (Most guys who worked that job wanted to get on the night shift because you didn’t have to do all that much work, except occasionally when somebody died and you have to help move the body down to the morgue in the basement, or nights when the moon was full and the nuts acted up.) And I started to think, really for the first time since I quit art school, what the hell was I doing with my life? Where was I going? After mulling this over for a month or so it occurred to me that maybe I should give art another shot.

**DPR:** So this motivated you to go to art school?

**KD:** I’d essentially gone to art school in the first place because, as I neared high school graduation and my mother asked me what I wanted to do with myself, I told her I either wanted to become some kind of a hobo and see a bit of the world or else perhaps join the Army or Navy and see the world that way. Neither of these options struck my mother as acceptable. My marks in school weren’t great. In fact I’d failed Elementary Algebra three times which almost all colleges required you to pass before accepting you. A buddy of mine had been at Pratt for about a year when I was a senior in high school so I knew that Pratt did not require applicants to have an algebra credit. Pretty much on the strength of this one thing I ended up in the foundation art programme at Pratt in 1962.

**DPR:** What was your experience like at the Pratt Institute?

**KD:** I wasn’t a good fit there. I didn’t think much of the kind of art they were teaching, and I was unmotivated and lazy to boot. I knew laziness was a personal defect in my makeup and working all those jobs after Pratt was one way I was trying to overcome that defect. Anyway, while lazily thinking about things, I decided that I would give art another shot, only this time I would do it on my own terms using the inspiration inside my own head as my motivating force and not what someone in art school was telling me. With this idea I started painting in my spare time at the nut house. I was still at it when I had the better job at an orphanage in Westchester in 1966, taking care of little girls ages 8 through 13. While I was there, I was doing artwork in my spare time (Figure 1).

**DPR:** You come from a creative family. How did growing up in that household influence your development as an artist?

**KD:** Your question is good and something I have even been thinking about lately, particularly with doing seminars and such where I’m trying to show others how to kick it in creatively. I’ve been asking myself, well, what is it sets me apart? I have come to the conclusion, or suspicion at least, that it has a lot to do with the creative bee my
folks planted in my bonnet from, really, quite an early age. They were telling me, and showing me almost from birth, that the highest calling a human being could have in this world was to cultivate and follow a creative muse. They were very opinionated and had very specific ideas about what was good creativity and what was not, so ultimately I had to get free of them before I could cultivate my own specific ideas about all that. But there is no doubt that they instilled the original driving force, and beyond that, the almost cosmic idea that such a thing was my birthright and my destiny. They were rather rabidly anti-religious, so this sort of thinking ended up functioning in me as an alternative kind of religion of its own. My parents were young and very idealistic about this, and I got a very large dose of it in my formative years. I also believe it was a lot of this formative positive reinforcement that kept me going in darker hours of my young adulthood, and even now I have this almost adolescent streak of idealism in my approach to things that I really do regard as a great, living functioning gift within me. I’m pretty sure this comes from my folks.

DPR: Your 2008 book, *Deitch’s Pictorama*, is a family affair, jointly authored with your brothers Seth and Simon, and in many ways is different from anything you’ve done before. What do you think are the strengths of collaborating with others in your comics, especially when it comes to working with family?
KD: Sometimes the combination of more than one mind can make a better whole. By sifting through the ideas of others, we can better ourselves and the quality of the work produced. In my case, I have found my brothers to be very creatively gifted, and often in ways that I am not. So one strength I have gained from collaborating with my brothers, and with others, is that I have learned things from them. My brother Simon directly influenced me to get into comics. Once that happened he became, in an informal way, a sort of editor of my work. However, and ironically, when I attempted to eventually make this official and turn us into an actual team, our personal relationship deteriorated under the strain.

DPR: How do you compare your own work with that of your brothers?

KD: My brother Seth’s writing has a certain element of sophistication that my work generally lacks. Utilizing this element in *Deitch’s Pictorama* was stimulating to me. But, again, the actual act of working with him put a strain on my relationship with him. Never actually personally close to him, I now find myself officially estranged from him. In my defence, and I’m not trying overly hard to defend myself here, I often have collaborated with others without having this polarizing effect on personal relationships. Sometimes the price of collaboration, in personal terms, is high, but even in the case of my brothers I do not regret having indulged in it.

DPR: Most of *Pictorama* is prosaic or text-heavy, and this is markedly different from your previous works. In fact, your contributions are the most comics-like of the collection, while those of Seth and Simon are more like short fiction with some illustrations. Do you think this difference in storytelling style contributed to the strain you mention?

KD: No. It has more to do with temperament. I am hyper by nature, while they are both more phlegmatic. There is also the obvious sibling rivalry in play. I admire their talent more than I admire them.

DPR: What about your collaboration with other artists? Have you experienced a similar difference in temperament, or perhaps clashes of style?

KD: Well sure. These things definitely happen, though it is not always as testy as it generally has been with my brother Simon. Speaking of Simon again, though, it is interesting that in the later stages of our collaboration on *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (2002), our personal relationship had deteriorated so badly that we were no longer on speaking terms, though weirdly we were still able to work together successfully on the project. In the various times when Art Spiegelman was my editor, we had one big blow up at least on every project (not unusual for people working with Art). Interestingly, these dust ups never really got personal. Working with Art and Simon certainly wasn’t fun, but I value these experiences and learned more in my involvement in them than I ever learned in art school. Fighting for something of an artistic nature can at times cause personal clashes. At times the adrenalin is up. It’s not a happy thing, but adrenalin can be useful. I try to use adrenalin even when it comes from an unpleasant situation. In this racket you learn to try to use everything that comes up, good or bad, in the name of keeping the creative flow going.

DPR: You talk about the uses of adrenalin and your interactions with others, and for some reason (or perhaps naturally) it reminds me of Waldo, one of your most ramped up and memorable creations. How much of your own personality, professional or otherwise, is wrapped up in that character?
KD: While I was initially kind of a sheltered kid, we moved around a lot, and at some point I guess you could say Simon and I got into, ‘bad company’ to some extent, Simon more than me. For an artist I was more of a tough guy than that breed usually is, though tame enough by broader comparison to the general population. But I get along with cruder types of humanity easily enough; have more fundamental empathy with them so to speak. That probably feeds into the Waldo character to some degree. Really, though, he’s more like my brother Simon than myself. But he’s more his own man than either Simon or I am. He is the reincarnated soul of Judas Iscariot tempered by centuries of living as a demon in Hell.

DPR: I’m sure you get these kinds of questions often, but I’ll ask them nonetheless: what is the genesis of Waldo, and how did he come about?

KD: Around 1966, when I was working at the orphanage, my brother Simon was showing me recent developments in the world of comic books. I had read comics as a kid but gave up reading them in my teens, as many kids do as they get older. Not Simon. So when comics began to get more interesting again, Simon had kept me apprised of these developments. I saw the first issue of Spider-Man when it hit the newsstands; ditto The Fantastic Four. Also one night on the nut house night shift I happened to pick up a copy of Redbook that someone had left lying around. By pure chance this particular issue had reprinted in colour two pages of Winsor McKay’s beautiful turn-of-the-century Sunday comic strip, Little Nemo in Slumberland. It was very odd and unusual for this slick woman’s magazine to run a thing like this. Nevertheless, I was dazzled by the comic’s wondrous elegant beauty. The next year the Metropolitan Museum of Art had an exhibition of these Sunday pages. I went to it twice and was floored by them in a way that nothing I’d ever been exposed to in art school had done. Under these influences my spare time art had gradually morphed into tentative primitive comic pages. I showed two of these, along with other art I’d been doing, to a co-worker at the orphanage. I told him I was struck by the untapped artistic potential of the comics medium but that my problem was that while I knew something about design, from an anatomical standpoint I really couldn’t draw very well. Because of this, the two sample comic pages I showed him featured a cartooned black humanoid cat. He looked similar to the black cats that proliferated the animated cartoons I used to watch on television when I was a kid growing up in the 1950s. In those days most of the cartoons they used to show on TV were from the 1920s, mostly a series called Aesop’s Fables that featured, among other animal characters, these cartoon black cats. They used them for the same reason I was now experimenting with using them. They were easier to draw than it is to draw a human figure. The black cat in my first comic experiments developed into the character Waldo over time.

DPR: But you point out many times, even in your black-and-white comics, that Waldo is blue, and that this colour gives him a strange otherness, something a little inexplicable that you can’t really put your finger on.

KD: At the very beginning Waldo did not have a name, and since the strip was inked in black and white, it was not yet known, even by me, that his colour was dark blue and not black. All these refinements came over time. In 1969 I was editor of an early underground comics publication called The Gothic Blimp Works. It was a job that was thrust upon me, and not something I sought out. We were potentially able to print a certain number of interior pages in as many as three colours. I realized that if I used red, yellow, and blue I could get a kind of washed out colour. After
a few issues, I noticed that if I used a dark blue, the colour effect got even better. As I was the editor and in charge of doling out the colour, as one of the perks of the job I doled most of it out to myself and started a Waldo serial called ‘Deja Vu’. Cutting the mechanical colour separations was very labour intensive, but this was during a period when I was taking speed, so I just weighed in and made them. Since there was no black in the colour mix, black things became blue, and that is when Waldo got his blue hue. In the story Waldo, through some sort of science breakthrough, gets converted into all nine of his cat lives. (I still hadn’t discovered that he was not really a cat, but actually a demon from Hell, so there is actually a contradiction here! Fiction can be like that.) Anyway, in ‘Deja Vu’, Waldo was converted into nine versions of himself, each entity with a number, one to nine, on its belly. In the story all but one of the nine cats gets killed. The last one standing has the number one on his belly, and I decided to keep the one on as a souvenir of this rite of passage. To me this one represents two things about Waldo. It can be regarded as a sort of everyman symbol. More crassly, it symbolizes that he is out for number one. Also, I thought the blue coloration was kind of distinctive, so I decided to also keep it. Perhaps it was an early hint also of his non-catness and actual demon identity (Figure 2).

**DPR:** So where does Waldo’s personality come from? He stands apart from the kind of early cat cartoons you mentioned earlier. There’s something mischievous, and even devilish, about him.

**KD:** Waldo’s personality just came to me by degrees over time and grew like Topsy (as people used to say about things that slowly evolve over time). In the first Waldo comic, a square-shaped, single page made in 1966, Waldo, while talking to a man of the cloth, pulls back the dark skin of his arm as if it was a shirt and says, ‘Jack

![Figure 2. Waldo’s first appearance in the story ‘Deja Vu’ from a 1969 issue of Gothic Blimp. Source: This illustration originally appeared in Gothic Blimp (1969) and is collected in All Waldo Comics (Fantagraphics, 1992, p. 16). © Kim Deitch.](image)
I’m so evil I’ve got [the word] shit tattooed on my right arm’ (Figure 3). So he was a bad ass going out the gate. In terms of Waldo’s personality coming from actual influences in real life, well, there is the more base and crass side of my own personality. I’m not a bad guy, but needless to say, like the rest of us, I’m not all good either. There’s also a lot of my brother Simon in him. Simon is more of a bad type than I am, but like most types who run more to the mischievous, he’s not all bad. It’s this intriguing mix of light and dark that makes for interesting personalities in stories, and in life itself.

**DPR:** From your perspective as Waldo’s creator, in what comics do you see him as really coming to life, or at least taking on the characteristics that define who he is now?

**KD:** In the 1970 story, ‘Blue but True’, Waldo crashes out of jail just before he’s about to go to the electric chair with some help from Santa Claus, a well-known force for good in the world. Here I was riffing directly on some movie influences to further flesh out Waldo’s personality. A lot of that plot comes out of a Humphrey
Bogart movie, *The Big Shot* (1942) – the jail break, and the girlfriend’s death in the process. Plus there’s some of that James Cagney satanic quality in Waldo’s facial expressions in that story. Even badasses have some good in them and are often very charming.

In ‘A Shroud For Waldo’ more of Waldo’s backstory comes out. He is apparently born around 1905, the spawn of an old witch woman as she makes a magic incantation. But he doesn’t stick around to get acquainted. So there he is, on his own in early twentieth-century America. Also in this story he becomes involved with Jesus Christ, an even greater icon of good than Santa Claus, and we find out for certain that, yes, he is a demon from Hell and the reincarnation of none other than Judas Iscariot. These are the perks of fiction, I suppose. Being a demon, he is invisible to all but extremely gifted and/or deranged types. This aspect of Waldo first saw the light of day in a three-page story called, ‘Mishkin’s Folly’, where he pushes an alcoholic on furlough from the nut house over the line and back to drinking. Incidentally, that story, outside of Waldo’s presence, was inspired by a real incident I witnessed while I was working in a nut house in 1965. So there’s the dope on the genesis of Waldo’s personality. He’s interesting, even charming and certainly not all bad. But I don’t really like him.

DPR: In fact, what’s the deal with you and cats? In the first issue of *The Stuff of Dreams* (later collected in *Alias the Cat* (2007)), you mention your wife’s passion for stuffed cats, and I’ve heard that you actually do have an apartment filled with cat objects.

KD: Well, it is not entirely my deal. Yes I did grow up with cats. My mother had some pedigreed Siamese cats that were in place in our rented Los Angeles bungalow before I was born. I believe the first reported word out of my mouth was ‘Kitty’. But all the stuffed cat toys in the house belong to my wife. It’s her hobby. And there are two living black and white cats, Zippy and Roscoe. They are her babies. That picture, ‘Pam Butler and All Her Cats’ in *Alias the Cat*, is a fairly accurate representation of her collection at the time I drew it. Of course it has grown a lot since then.

DPR: You mentioned Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney earlier. Have you ever been approached to do an animated film based on Waldo...or on any of your work, for that matter? I ask because Robert Crumb has had that experience (unsuccessful though it was) with his Fritz the Cat, and because much of your book *Alias the Cat* is centred on film and comics (Figure 4).

KD: I spent a year in 1982 as art director for Artboro Films in North Carolina developing storyboards for film versions of several of my comic stories. It would have been mostly live action with one sequence in animation. Brian Yuzna hired me. Nothing came of it except I banked a bunch of money. And I also ended up playing a bit in his highly successful film, *Re-Animator*. I continued doing some story concept work for Brian, too, (now on spec) in Hollywood, while I worked on my first book *Hollywoodland* (1988), using the money I made with Brian in North Carolina to finance it. Around 1994 I managed to get a five grand option from Paramount, which I split with Simon, for a movie based on a comics feature I was then doing for *Nickelodeon Magazine* called ‘Southern Fried Fugitives’, for which I wrote a treatment and created mood drawings. This also would have been some kind of live actionanimation combo deal. I have kind of a been-there-done-that feeling about the movies except – now addressing your question directly – I’d love to see a Waldo film because I think he would be utterly ideal for the Pixar stuff. Waldo
as invisible companion animated in three-dimensional Pixar. Boy, oh boy, could I ever get behind that! The mind reels.

**DPR:** And I noticed that you also did the animation for the They Might Be Giants music video, ‘Dallas’, part of their *Venue Songs* collection where they create a new song for every venue they visit (this one being the club, Trees, in Dallas, TX). Your surrealist animation seems to fit perfectly with the band’s strange and unique sound. In fact, I think you even used Waldo in that short video, didn’t you?

**KD:** I was, and pretty much am, unfamiliar with They Might Be Giants. But a guy approached me and offered me $500 to storyboard this 50-second piece of music. I liked the music and felt inspired by it to do the storyboard, which was all my original concept. I had hoped that my childhood friend, Tony Eastman, with whom
I used to make animated cartoons as a kid in the 1950s, could be gotten to do the actual animation. In our adult lives Tony has animated several of my storyboards into brief animated spots. He knows my style well enough to instinctively know when to take it literally and when to add his own professional touches. They Might Be Giants offered him up to $500 to animate it. But doing so would have taken him way longer than it took me to storyboard it, and he turned it down. They hired someone else, a good man. But to make it pay he used my exact (rough) storyboard art for actual animation extremes. This explains the scruffy look of the thing. It was done for next to nothing. And you’re right, I did use Waldo in the video. It all happened so fast I didn’t reason that decision one way or the other. I just did the thing and got back to my own work, probably something featuring Waldo. I think it was the comic book, *The Stuff of Dreams* #3, the last third of the *Alias the Cat* book.

**DPR:** So it seems that Waldo does indeed ‘haunt’ you, showing up when you least expect him. Sort of like what happens with Ted and Nathan Mishkin?

**KD:** Yeah. I guess so! Sometimes. I really dislike that little putz Waldo.

**DPR:** You’ve said this before. Why do you dislike him?

**KD:** I dislike him because he’s an opportunistic schmuck, one of the gimme guys. He’s smart, witty, entertaining but strictly out for number one as the number on his belly so loudly and inconveniently (for him) proclaims. He’s all about what he can get out of the world rather than about what he can contribute to it.

**DPR:** What does Waldo bring you that other characters or yours do not?

**KD:** I suppose there is a ‘realness’ (weirdly) to Waldo in spite of his blatantly fantastic unrealness. At one time while dissembling on that subject in my pseudo memoir, ‘The Glowing Belly of the Little Beast’ – printed in *All Waldo Comics* (1992) and later in *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* – about the alleged origin of Waldo, I did make one true statement in that piece, which is, at worst, a tissue of lies and, at best, a snappy piece of fiction. The true thing I said in that piece was that ‘the reason I haven’t done more Waldo stories is I’ve never tried to force one’. In other words, I never decide, ‘Hmm, today I think I’ll write me a Waldo story.’ I never do that. I only do one or use him in a comic when a good idea for something including him comes to me. Therefore, the stories with him tend to not be stale the way they might inevitably come to be if I used him all the time. I’m pretty ruthless with all my characters. There’s no star pampering at Deitch Studios. Once a character outlives its usefulness as story fodder, out it goes. Waldo has lasted longer than the others because he has evolved in interesting ways.

**DPR:** You mention the evolution of Waldo and have told me where he comes from. It seems that much of your work has its roots, not only in early twentieth-century popular culture – such as Tin Pan Alley and Depression era animation – but in the social commotion of the 1960s as well, which you can certainly see in the chaos of Waldo. And you’re almost always associated with the underground comix movement. How do you see those cultural moments playing out in your comics?

**KD:** You know, to some extent I tried to blow off that aspect of the hippie thing. When I first moved down to the Lower East Side I was still a Republican. In Westchester I used to hang out at the American Opinion Bookstore, which was connected to the John Birch Society, and I subscribed to Buckley’s mag, *The National Review*. I got over all of that but always looked with a fish eye at that New Left stuff. I resented the way they seemed to be trying to co-opt the hippie movement. The first ‘Human Be-In’ in Central Park in 1967 seemed to me to be a moving and
elevating experience. The one in ’68 was to a large extent taken over and, to my thinking, cheapened by Abbie Hoffman’s Yippies. This was disappointing to me and left a bad taste in my mouth. I had a ride to the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago but declined to go. I was set to go to Woodstock, too, but passed on that as well. My cat was having kittens that night, and I decided to stay home and see how that came out instead. The only real dose of hippie religion I did get was through Timothy Leary and the whole psychedelic thing. I was very thrilled when he showed up one night at the East Village Other (EVO) office and I got to meet him. As far as that goes, I met both Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, but pretty much felt that they were a couple of opportunistic four flushers. Later, I did do a couple of illustrations for Rubin’s book, Do It! (1970), but only because his wife asked me, and she seemed nice. I took a liking to her, and I’m guessing that she was the real brains of that power couple. Those illustrations paid and paid and paid, too. On the other hand, when Hoffman approached me about being in a comic book he was putting together called Konspiracy Kapers – and for no dough – I passed. I’d heard stuff about Hoffman from a guy who worked with him, and that led me to believe that he was not altogether on the up and up. I already knew from the ’68 ‘Be-In’ what a pushy bastard he was. The psychedelic thing did play out in my comics. The way it specifically manifested itself was that I always worked stoned back then – pot mostly, but even a bit acid on occasion and a little beer to take the edge off the acid. What a pathetic bum I was. Of course, we were right on the cutting edge of new freedoms of expression, but I never personally felt like much of a muckraker. I was more interested in being artistic and in attempting to tell good stories.

DPR: The EVO was a legendary publication in the underground comix movement. What was it like working there, and what kind of relationships did you establish with other writers and artists?

KD: Getting in at the EVO was huge for me and the place where I got my first real break. It only happened by degrees, though. Initially the EVO was run by a cluster of hippie types. Its leader was its founder, Walter Bowart, who was good looking and a real type A personality; lots of loud wild-eyed declarations. He’d tell you any old pie in the sky thing when you had his attention, but he wasn’t all that reliable. Of course, the other side of the coin was that I wasn’t really all that hot of an artist yet. Bowart started publishing my work, for no pay, and I started cranking it out. The person there who did show me the way to make some money was the art director, Bill Beckman, who also drew an occasional comic strip called ‘Captain High’. Beckman was also a dope dealer, and he started me off dealing marijuana, hash, and a bit of acid. This made me a little money and got me all the grass I could ever smoke. It was the beginning of my dependence on grass. For three or four years while I worked at the EVO, I didn’t feel like I could work unless I was stoned. (Spain Rodriguez succeeded Beckman as art director shortly after I began to contribute strips. When I first met him and greeted him as the new art director he said, ‘Hey Man, that’s just a title they laid on me’, and this was essentially true.) There may have been a communal aspect about the EVO in its original location, a storefront on Avenue A and, I think, Ninth Street, but Bowart was in charge. He drew and painted some himself and made all decisions about what went into the paper that he felt like making. He had already published a tabloid-sized comic book by Spain called, Zodiac Mind Warp. After my strip, ‘Sunshine Girl’, had been running for a while, he offered to publish a comic by me (Figure 5). I was thrilled
by the prospect. Meanwhile, the paper moved to a new location on Second Avenue. It was now up above The Village Theater, later taken over by Bill Graham and renamed the Fillmore East. When I began to be plagued by break-ins, robberies, and vandalism at my cheap $38.50 a month pad, I was encouraged to come over and do my strips at the EVO office. Things were getting bigger at the paper. The amazing thing about the EVO was this: for a dinky counterculture paper, it had great distribution. A typical issue sold 20,000 copies, sometimes more. The guy who seemed to be in charge of the business end of things was a preoccupied loud-mouthed individual, Joel Fabricant, sometimes known as Jay Fab. I met him during this time but didn’t have much else to do with him just then.

**DPR:** Did you feel at the time that the paper would be your big breakthrough?
KD: What with good sales, the EVO soon went from bi-weekly to weekly. I still wasn’t getting any pay, though. On one occasion, after one of my apartment break-ins, Bowart raided petty cash, handed me 50 bucks and continued to paint glowing pictures of what the future might hold for me some sweet day. But when I had my ‘Sunshine Girl’ comic book ready, I was soon informed that, owing to the poor sales of Spain’s Zodiac Mind Warp, they didn’t want to take a chance on publishing my book. This was a blow and the whole situation seemed to be going stale on me. But a guy connected with local distribution, Ron McDonald, took pity on me. He was a gruff no-nonsense older guy, kind of an old beatnik type, who, up until finding out that I was the guy who drew ‘Sunshine Girl’, had regarded me as something of a pest. After that, he began to give me a 100 copies of each issue when it was printed so I could go over to Washington Square Park and sell them. That gave me 15 bucks I could count on every time the new issue came out.

DPR: Earlier you mentioned that while working at the EVO, you began using drugs. What kind of impact did this have on your work? How involved did you get into the scene?

KD: Well, I wasn’t much of a dope dealer. You end up selling a lot to your friends, and they all want a deal because they are your friends. Long story short, I never made as much as I should have. And then there was all that dope that was going up my own chimney. The fact is, I was just generally beginning to come apart at the seams. My girlfriend at the time, who worked at the New York Times, broke up with me because of this. That was bad. My strip was getting smarmy, but I hung in with it.

DPR: But your work at the EVO was still opening up for you, right?

KD: They were giving me about half of a tabloid page at first, and I yearned for a whole page. I started inching it longer until I had magically given myself about three quarters of a page. But when I made the bold leap to a full page, they started printing it at large postcard size. One Wednesday night, which was paste up night and a time I was sure to find Bowart, I went over to talk with him about this thinking maybe I could at least get back to three quarters of a page. Mechanicals of the new issue were hanging up clothesline style as the issue came together. I made my pitch for a guaranteed three quarters of a page to Bowart. I couldn’t have picked a worse time. He pointed to a full-page strip hanging on the line. It was a page by Robert Crumb that I had seen not long before in an out-of-town underground comic called Yarrowstalks. The strip was called, ‘Life Among the Constipated’, and of course it was great. ‘Give me strips like that’, said Bowart, ‘and I’ll give you a full page!’ He went on awhile raving about how Crumb was the very thing he’d been looking for, an acidhead cartoonist. In effect dismissed, I slunk away. A few weeks later, the EVO’s official mild-mannered editor, Allen Katzman, said that Crumb had actually stopped by and left a whole pile of strips in a portfolio with a gorgeous full-colour picture on its cover. It was a drawing of an insecure looking guy standing over a toilet trying to take a leak; doesn’t sound like much, but it was gloriously, heartbreakingly beautiful. I had come face to face, almost anyway, with the real thing. Crumb was, and is, just that; make no mistake about it. The bar had been raised and I had a sinking feeling that I was no longer up to the challenge.

DPR: So how did getting ‘nudged out’ by Crumb change things with you at the publication?
KD: Well, things were happening at the EVO. Walter Bowart quit and was marrying Peggy Hitchcock, granddaughter of Andrew Mellon and heir to the Mellon millions. (Since I was on the outs at the EVO I did not attend his farewell party, but I heard there were butlers there passing out trays of rolled joints. By all accounts it was a larger than life, legendary affair.) Joel Fabricant, the business manager, emerged as the new top man. Under his leadership the quality of the paper soon tanked. But there was one thing that was keeping people, including me, coming back for each issue. It was that portfolio of Crumb strips being dolled out at the rate of one a week – Crumb, the thing that intimidated me right out of the game. Forget Jules Feiffer, Charles Schultz, you name ’em. This man was, and is, a walking, talking, writing, drawing miracle! He may have intimidated me out of a business I had barely even been in, but I was also fast becoming one of his biggest fans. It was like Charles Dickens coming among us. Later, the great Crumb came to town. I was sitting at my board working on that week’s strip in early 1968, when Spain came in with Crumb in tow. He even crashed with us for the next few days. This was heady stuff, and no mistake. Crumb was wearing his hair then about as long as he ever did. He carried a little banjo ukulele around with him and was rather good on it. He also carried that legendary never-ending sketch book of his, which blew me away and made me all the more aware of my unworthiness, even as I thrilled at every priceless page of it. More than one week after Crumb showed up, I was honoured to be sitting next to him and Spain at the EVO as we cranked out our weekly pages. I knew I was not really worthy of such glory but was doing what I could to get there as fast as I could. I remember one week early on, I went back over to my mother’s place where Simon was still living, and said to my brother, ‘Robert Crumb is in town. I need a real razzle-dazzle of a strip. Help me out.’ He helped me write, title, and lay out something called, ‘Shake It but Don’t Break It’, which got a laugh out of Crumb. Be still my heart! (Figure 6.)

DPR: You said that with Bowart, you were on the outs at the EVO. But you still remained at the paper, right?

KD: I used to drop in at the EVO to get mail, mostly orders for Sunshine Girl buttons I sold through an ad in the paper’s classifieds. Soon the inevitable happened. EVO ran out of Crumb strips and apparently no new ones seemed to be coming. Sales during the height of the weekly Crumbs had gotten up to around 50,000. Now that he was gone, they were sinking again. So one day when I showed up to get my mail, I was waylaid by Joel Fabricant, who said he wanted to talk to me. He told me he needed to get the quality of the paper back up, and he’d decided the way to go was to get more comics. If he couldn’t get Crumb, well, he had to get somebody... me for instance. He bellowed out for someone to find Spain and get him in there with us. Spain sauntered in. Spain had recently started a full-page strip. ‘Spain’, said Joel, ‘don’t I pay you forty dollars a week to do a strip and otherwise help with getting the paper out?’ ‘Yeah Man’, says Spain. Joel looked at me meaningfully and told me this, too, could be my situation. I was sceptical of this arrangement; I’d been there, done that. But Joel wasn’t taking no for an answer. He went on about this all being strictly a business proposition, one I could count on. He told me he was a Republican – weirdly, so was I at that moment in time, and it might even have been what was perversely starting to make me listen to him. He went on to say he did not even read the EVO. This set less well with me, and later, when I was working for him and got to know him, I even took him to task over that. The encounter ended with Joel asking me if I had any unpublished strips on hand.
Figure 6. Cover of *Corn Fed Comics* #1 (1972).

I thought of one, and Joel said he’d pay me 15 bucks spot cash for it. So began my real career at the EVO under the strange leadership of Joel Fabricant. He seemed like a pretty weird duck to me, and I couldn’t say I liked him. However, over time I grew to love him. For all of his obvious faults, he seemed to have a strong streak of personal decency underneath it all. If he ever made you a promise, he kept it. When he spoke, you might not agree, but you knew he was speaking his mind. If nothing else, I think it proved, to me anyway, that good things sometimes come in unexpected packages. I try to honour him at any and every opportunity I get. Hail Joel Fabricant! (No sarcasm intended.)

DPR: You’ve mentioned a couple of times your relationship with Spain Rodriguez, another legendary figure in the comix scene. How did that evolve?

KD: Soon after Fabricant took over the EVO, Spain moved into my new and fortified apartment. (I had gotten a better place than the first, installed a police lock and window gates; even painted the damn place in snappy decorative style.) This happened just before I got mugged walking up the six flights to my apartment. They couldn’t get into my apartment anymore, so they got me on the outside. Someone had left a loaded five-shot 32-calibre pistol at my place some months before. From that point on, I started packing it and gave the next mugger a little surprise when he tried to repeat his success a few days later. I knew that would happen. They always came back when they succeeded. So now I was a gun-toting cartoonist. So much for peace and love. Eventually, Spain and I were hounded out of our apartment. There had been a fire in an apartment next door to ours. I wasn’t there when it happened, and Spain did not know where the key to our window gates was. The firemen came into our place and ripped out the gates to get at the place next door through the fire escape. After the apartment was abandoned, a bunch of glue heads came in and were squatting there. One day they burrowed a hole from their apartment into ours and robbed us. Unlike junkies, these glue heads seemed to have an aesthetic streak. They stole all my paintings, all my LP’s, and all my rock-and-roll 45s, leaving only a small stack of 78s. (It was the official end of my rock-and-roll collecting, although I hung in with 78 collecting for another decade or so.) I plastered up the hole. In fact, the day my girlfriend at the time, Trina Robbins, showed up with Vaughn Bodé in tow, I could not shake hands with him because of my plastered hands. The glue heads burrowed through several more times. On one occasion they got our gun. Spain and I looked at each other and knew it was time to get out of there.

DPR: Don’t you write about this gun, albeit fictionalized, in your comic, ‘Two Jews from Yonkers’? (Figure 7.)

KD: I do. It was a five-shot beat up nickel-plated 32-calibre revolver. I guess what you might call a Saturday night special.

DPR: Most people tend to link the comix scene to San Francisco, which is where you eventually ended up. How did this come about?

KD: Spain soon migrated to San Francisco, and Vaughn Bodé, after setting up a Sunday comics tabloid called Gothic Blimp Works [published by the EVO], fled the city as well. Bodé just wasn’t cut out for the hippie life style. When he re-embraced it a few years later, it ended in his own early demise. Into this breach, Joel Fabricant promoted me into being the editor of Gothic Blimp Works. I resisted, but, again, Joel would not take no for an answer. This now meant I was pulling down 90 dollars a week, but the workload was too much for me. I started taking speed to keep up with it. Even so, I only occasionally collected the full 90 dollars because every
Figure 7. The fictional Kim Deitch confronts a mugger in the autobiographical ‘Two Jews from Yonkers’.

Source: This image is a scene from the story ‘Two Jews from Yonkers’, which was collected in Beyond the Pale: Krazed Comics and Stories (Fantagraphics, 1989, p. 123). © Kim Deitch.
time I failed to deliver my weekly strip, Joel would dock me 40 bucks, and rightly so, saying, ‘I don’t know what you believe in, Kim, but my god is the dollar.’ I was getting harder to take at that point, I guess, because at some point Trina got so fed up that she told me she was going to go to San Francisco for a while to get a break from me. Somehow I talked her into taking me along on this ‘getaway from me’ retreat, and suddenly, there I was, in Mecca! The comics community treated us like visiting royalty. Crumb was in Detroit doing *Motor City Comics*, but his wife, Dana, offered to put us up. My God! There I was in the holy of holies, within the very walls where *Zap!* had been conceived. We decided that we were definitely coming back. I returned and got out some more issues of the *Blimp*, but things were beginning to get hairier on the Lower East Side. The non-hipster part of the neighbourhood was starting to get dangerous, and anyway I could not get San Francisco off my mind. Near the end of the year, the *Blimp* was running out of gas (People wanted comic books like the ones coming out of San Francisco, not a big unwieldy tabloid comic magazine that was hard to store.) Gilbert Shelton had come to town, and Trina and I were putting him up in a nice storefront we were now living in. He told us he was planning to drive back to San Francisco soon, and if we wanted to chip in on gas he’d take us with him. That was it. We were as good as gone. San Francisco really did seem to be everything it was cracked up to be, a real comic book El Dorado. I kicked my speed habit on the week’s ride out and felt like a new man when we got there.

DPR: What about your East Village connections? Did you still keep those?
KD: Although now we were in San Francisco, the *EVO* kept sending us issues every week. Many times I saw in the paper old doodles of mine that I had left around the office. They used them as illustrations, my abandoned strips finished by other hands, and I was touched by this. It was as if they actually missed me a little. I sure did miss Joel. I guess we were about nine months in San Francisco when one day an amazing issue of the *EVO* arrived. On the cover was a photo of Joel Fabricant, his face dripping with the remnants of a pie that grinning Robert Crumb had just shoved in his face. What apparently went down was that Joel had called a meeting of the staff and was ranting away, when Crumb, who was there for some reason, stepped forward and shoved a pie in Joel’s face. Clearly somebody was tipped off to this because there was Joel and Crumb on the front page of the *EVO* moments after the deed was done. Crumb did not hold Joel in the same high esteem that Spain and I did. Joel quit over it a few days later, and it was the end of an era. Don Lewis, the art director, told me that this really affected Joel. He was said to have muttered shortly after this that maybe money wasn’t everything after all. I saw Joel one more time a few years later on a visit to New York. Don Lewis took me over to his apartment, and he was so glad to see me. He had framed art by me and by Spain on the wall. I had to leave early, and I could see by his face how disappointed he was. And that has been haunting me ever since. A few years later I heard that he and his girlfriend had died of a heroin overdose. I don’t know the details surrounding this. I’m not sure I need to know. He was an easy target for detractors, and maybe they had valid points, but he was my good angel, make no mistake.

DPR: You have mentioned several times your use and experiences with alcohol, grass, and other mind-altering drugs. I’ve noticed in many of your comics that these substances play a large part of the narrative (for example, Nathan Mishkin’s demon pipe and visions of Waldo brought about by drunkenness or madness). How do you think the drug culture of the time worked its way into your comics, and does it still do so today? (Figure 8.)
Figure 8. Ted Mishkin haunted by his demon, Waldo.

Source: This image is from Boulevard of Broken Dreams (Pantheon, 2002, n.p.). © Kim Deitch.

KD: The drug culture worked its way into my comics the same way it was working into the larger society when I was growing up. Combine that with what must be a hereditary predilection for these things, not to mention curiosity to have those and other life experiences, and that is the kind of stewing pot that my brother, Simon,
and I were in. We probably stood out a little in that way, but we were nothing compared to many in the current drug culture, I suppose. For the record, I first got drunk when I was about 12. I didn’t start smoking pot till I was 18, only because I couldn’t get my hands on it until then. Early in life I was somewhat sheltered by my parents, but we were always moving, and as a result, I didn’t make too many close friendships with other kids that lasted very long. By the time I was a teenager, I was very painfully shy and repressed. Alcohol was a source of Dutch courage that opened me up, got me started with girls; made me dare to do things that I might have otherwise shied away from. It also gave me a pretty serious drinking problem by the time I was 21 years old. I was kind of a loose cannon, but girls seemed to like guys who lived dangerously. In my case I was also lucky. I also seemed to have a desire to make something out of myself that was every bit as strong as my desire to experience everything and to really live.

DPR: Are you sorry you got involved with drugs, or perhaps afraid they negatively affected your work?

KD: Well, life is a confusing proposition. It is still confusing to me that all that drinking, at least at first, probably helped me to step away from the sheltered path at just the time when it may have been exactly the right thing for me to do. However, by the time I was in my late 30s, it had become more and more of a liability. By then I seemed to be succeeding and failing at the same time. I was also starting to see some other very talented people hitting the wall from drink. In 1983, while working for a movie company in North Carolina, I joined Alcoholics Anonymous and have never taken a drink since. I had been on the wagon for about eight months when it happened. I had been getting better and better at going on the wagon for increasingly longer periods of time. It was the achiever side of my makeup fighting back, I guess, but every time I fell off, the drinker in me was worse, which is a typical enough pattern. The AA members also wanted me to give up smoking grass, but I didn’t sign up for that. So that, briefly, is how the drug culture worked its way into my comics. Outside of grass, which I still smoke sometimes, I am now drink- and drug-free. I don’t smoke grass all the time and have mixed feelings about my use of it even today. But I do enjoy a certain mental stimulation from it when it isn’t just totally wiping me out. I try to tell the truth about these things in my work, and I hope it does not come off that I am celebrating them; perhaps it does. See, part of the mystery in all this is that my parents idolized musicians and artists who were, in some cases, inspired by drugs, even though my parents themselves were fairly straight-laced. There were lots of parties going on at our house, and I saw plenty even before I really understood what I was looking at. I don’t think human beings, in general have figured out the right way to live yet, but I also think it is a good idea to never stop trying. I believe I am still actively trying. Please bear in mind that self-improvement means more to me than any of this other stuff. I think it is the fact that I am service oriented in my approach to life that seems to help me overcome and more correctly identify personal weakness in myself. I believe that I can probably learn to help others overcome these same things, and indeed, I am eager to do so.

DPR: It’s interesting what you just stated, that self-improvement and helping others is where you are at right now. How do you feel your work in comics may allow you to do this? Or another way of putting it, do you approach your comics as a way of working through your own issues and even as a way of reaching out to others?
KD: It can be that, I think, among other things. To try to lead with that; however it’s risky. You could end up coming off sanctimonious. Even so, I think I have definitely reached a point where I like to have my stories be about something, and no one could be more surprised by that than me. However, I think the real place where my desire to help people improve is manifesting itself is from my being exposed to a lot of young aspiring art students with whom, in general, I seem to enjoy good relationships. For a person like me with a distinct curmudgeonly turn, with obscure cultural non-trendy tastes, it is not a little surprising to me that this seems to be the case. I think there is a spark in younger people that I don’t often find around people my own age, and that naturally attracts me to them. Sure, most young people are jerks, as are most people in general. I speak here of the exceptional ones. One of the things I am actively trying to do is keep that ‘youth’ spark alive in myself. One way of doing that is to keep tabs on the source.

DPR: You allude to a younger generation. What younger comics artists do you find most fascinating right now? Who seems to stand out to you, and why?

KD: Well, out of the ones 15 to 20 years younger than me, there are the obvious: Chris Ware, Dan Clowes, and Seth. I thought Seth’s *Wimbledon Green* (2005) was a classic, and it has influenced me on lots of levels. For one thing, it made me renew my interest in old comics. It did an entertainingly uproarious good job of exploring what is often so fascinating about the best of them. Another Canadian I really like is David Collier. His long story about an Englishman named Grey Owl who becomes an Indian [collected in *Portraits from Life* (2001)] is a particular favourite. I am always eager to see something new from him. He strikes me as a comics artist with real integrity concerning his ongoing creative work, one of the very best. Of the newer newcomers there is Ed Piskor who is, I guess, still in his 20s and who is an artist I really admire. His actual drawing, in some ways, reminds me of Will Elder at his best. Zak Sally is a great drawing talent and getting better as a writer all the time. Sammy Harkham’s drawing style is not so original, but it’s good, and his writing does seem to show interesting originality. Adrian Tomine draws like a son of a bitch and writes contemporary stories that read like good movies. Of course when I said that about young people I was referring to more than just comics talent, but also to the sort of people I prefer to spend my time with. Hell, my wife is 20 years younger than me and knows about a lot of things I don’t know so much about, including art. Teaching classes and doing talks, I run into a lot of aspiring artists and see plenty of good developing talent. Some will make it and some won’t. That is a thing that is not always so easy to know from who’s hot and who’s not among the latest crop of art students. But that aside, it is always a thrill for me to see new talent, comics or otherwise, blooming and developing.

DPR: How much of your own personal life – matters that occur on a daily basis – finds its way into your work?

KD: In comics, dealing with personal issues is natural enough since they are on my mind. I guess the big trick there is to make sure you have a good narrative going on that makes the story being told more than just a daily blog of one’s own peregrinations. You have to make it larger than life. And I have to make it a real yarn so I don’t bore myself to death telling it. I entertain myself while trying to put it off, first to me and then, with any luck, to my dear readers. After being alive this long, seeing people come and go, the art of living does strike me as a large, and from our perspectives, a key issue of existence. A story that can show you how to
live without coming off as sanctimonious is a great thing. It’s not the only thing to consider, but something that is attractive to me.

**DPR:** Your comic that appeared in an issue of *McSweeney’s*, ‘Ready to Die’, had a very different feel from the kind of comics you usually create. It wasn’t fantastical at all, no Waldo anywhere, and you were dealing with some heavy issues of life and death. Is this the kind of writing you were referring to when you mentioned the expanded perspective in your comics?

**KD:** Yes. That certainly was a turning point in that the story was completely true. I did all the interviews and edited it into a cohesive comic strip (with some expert help from my editor, Art Spiegelman). I was just a little surprised at how good of an interviewer I turned out to be, the knack I seemed to have at getting people to open up to me. It is a thing that has given me more self-confidence in general. Beyond the sheer novelty of the situation, I think that really was about the time I began to consciously want my strips to be about something, you know, to have an identifiable theme over and above just having this new non-fiction approach to comics in my repertoire. Right or wrong – in my own mind at least – I think I have begun to search out the meaning of what life is actually all about in my work as I try to figure out how to live right in this strange world we exist in. As I said before, life is a confusing and tricky business. It is so easy to come off like a jerk writing about my ideas, and the main trick is to do my best to entertain while speaking my mind – and to not get carried away by confusing fiction with actual fact while doing so, where I end up with another half-baked version of Scientology on my hands. There is only so much we can actually know about life’s mysteries, but if we are paying attention, we can learn better how to live as we each continue to evolve as human beings. (Yikes! Pompous!)

**DPR:** In some of your comics, you become either a central character in the action or a figure who narrates the story. Would you consider much of your work to be ‘autobiographical’, or are you more comfortable with calling it ‘fiction’, or something in-between?

**KD:** If I were going to try and be cute about it, I’d say the use of me in my stories is more pseudo-autobiographical. But it is fairly true in my comics (with the occasional exception of say, ‘Ready To Die’, which was totally true). Outside of that one I can’t think of too much else containing me that isn’t largely fictional. Even a non-fiction follow up to ‘Ready To Die’ called ‘Chasing Melissas!’ contained a certain amount of made up stuff. These two stories both originally appeared in *Details* magazine and were billed as ‘reality’ comics.

**DPR:** Do you find it easy to switch back and forth between a more autobiographical mode, with you as narrator, and a fantastical one with the likes of Waldo?

**KD:** Yes. It’s even helpful. Going into Waldo’s voice seems to breathe a new energy, to pick up the slack so to speak.

**DPR:** Yet even when you use your own voice with yourself as narrator, how much of ‘Kim Deitch’ is fictionalized?

**KD:** Plenty. It is just another time-honoured vehicle for telling fictional stories; the first person narrated alleged true story. A relatively recent example of this in fiction would be the way W. Somerset Maugham used himself as a character in *The Razors Edge* (1944).

**DPR:** You make a similar move in your fictional comics (or comics I take as fiction). You begin both *All Waldo Comics* and *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams* with a story we’ve already discussed, ‘The Glowing Belly of the Little Beast’ – a story of how
you learned the ‘facts’ that make up narratives – and I was wondering where this fit on a sliding scale between ‘reality’ and ‘imagination’.

**KD:** ‘The Glowing Belly of the Little Beast’ is entirely made up. What is true about it is that Kim Deitch, Gene Deitch, and Simon Deitch are real people. Also true, by way of influence, is that I grew up around the animation biz and met many old pioneer animators that might have been partial prototypes for the character, Ted Mishkin. Also the disfunctionality of his nephew may to some extent reflect a certain disfunctionality in myself at a similar age to that character. Also, my brother Simon did influence my direction toward comics, but it did not come about in the theatrically mystical way that it does in that story (unless, of course, we take this story as a kind of allegory) (Figure 9).

**DPR:** So in ‘The Glowing Belly of the Little Beast’, you intentionally blur the lines between fact and fiction. You seem to do a lot of that in your comics, create faux histories. Where does this kind of narrative playfulness come from?

**KD:** I think there is a long, sometimes even distinguished, precedent for faux history, as you call it. What is fiction after all? And where does it come from? History becomes legend over time. Things get buffed and polished until they are another creature altogether. What about that great author who may not have even actually existed, Homer? The material in his two books, whoever wrote them, probably had some basis in fact once upon a time. The historical figures in the Old Testament, Abraham and Moses, may not have actually existed, and yet, they are there as protagonists describing events in history that happened in some way or other.

**DPR:** And how does this frame your current approach to writing?

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**Figure 9.** The fictional Kim Deitch getting high (literally) on his art.

KD: First of all, some of it comes from a fairly staid historical precedent of writing flat out fiction as fact. In the nineteenth century you have William Henry Hudson’s *Green Mansions* (1904), the books of H. Rider Haggard, books written in the first person and strung out for the reader as absolute amazing fact. Of a more recent vintage there is Maughan who was no doubt familiar with Hudson and Haggard. As I’ve already mentioned, *The Razor’s Edge* features himself as a character, is written in the first person, but is flat out fiction. I think that in format at least, *The Razor’s Edge* is an homage to Hudson, Haggard, and similar Victorian writers of fanciful fiction with their artful first person singular ring of truth. In more contemporary fiction, there is a new flourishing genre of faux history that seemed to begin with E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975). This has spawned other similar novels such as Caleb Carr’s *The Alienist* (1994) and Glen David Gold’s *Carter Beats the Devil* (2001). Neither of these three novels strike me as very good, and there are probably other examples that are better. Well, there is the earlier *Man in the High Castle* (1962) by Philip K. Dick, a ‘what if’ novel, the what if in this case being, what if the Axis won World War II. And there is Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004). What if Lindbergh had become president?

DPR: Have these historical fictions directly influenced your comics?

KD: I have been personally inspired by *Ragtime* and the books it spawned, not so much by what they are, but by what they point towards in terms of the possibilities this emerging genre presents. I think you’ve seen hints of it in my work. Another place I was directly influenced in this direction was when I briefly did total non-fiction comics such as ‘Ready to Die’, where I covered an actual execution of a condemned criminal. As I said, I discovered I was rather good at the actual interview process, had these latent people/person skills that quickly emerged. The experience of those jobs directly influenced the interview format of *Alias the Cat*. I kept up with the interviewing but now was inventing the subjects interviewed.

DPR: Are you saying that the ‘Glowing Belly’ story was another important turning point for you?

KD: I think ‘The Glowing Belly of the Little Beast’ could be viewed as something of a miniature pointing toward the work I have now embarked upon. In ‘The Sunshine Girl’ [one of the stories in Deitch’s *Pictorama*] I created a 78-page story in which I am interviewing a 26-year-old woman who agrees to talk to me on the condition that I record my interview with her completely intact, editing nothing. I even appear peripherally in the story. It is illustrated but not in comic format. In my next project, *The Amazing, Enlightening and Absolutely True Adventures of Kathryn Whaley*, I am really close to this *Ragtime* genre. It is a novel, though illustrated and with (probably) comics sequences at times. In this I am somewhat influenced also by Phoebe Gloeckner’s novel, *Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002).

DPR: How is your new project different from your previous work?

KD: *Kathryn Whaley* is a spin-off rather than a flat out sequel to ‘The Sunshine Girl’. In it, Ellie, the protagonist of ‘The Sunshine Girl’, finds a manuscript in the form of a long, book length letter to her. This letter is a memoir of Ellie’s aunt Kathryn. She tells her story of growing up in a small mill town in upstate New York. It goes on to tell of her meeting of a strange man who affects eighteenth-century garb and seems to be a fanatic devotee of the French Age of the Enlightenment. He claims to have discovered seven ancient urns on the sides of which have been recorded, cylinder style, the actual voice of Jesus Christ. In the World War I era in which the early part
of this story takes place, he wants to star the girl, Kathryn, in a silent movie serial that will publicize the discovery of these recordings of Christ and their humanist philosophy, which is much less mystical than the Bible. More like the Jefferson Bible. Thomas Jefferson was enamoured of the human philosophy of Christ but disdained the supernatural aspects of the four gospels, feeling that stuff was added later by others. He created his own small Bible by editing out all supernatural aspects of the gospels and combining what was left into a shorter narrative. In my story I follow this woman’s life right through to her death in the 1980s. Along the way, doubt is cast on the authenticity of the alleged recordings of Jesus, but many other interesting things occur. I have even written a 15-page comic strip prequel to this upcoming novel in my latest book, The Search for Smilin’ Ed (2010). The title of the 15-page prequel is ‘Consider the Beaver’. It tells from another perspective things about Kathryn Waley’s mentor in my novel, a man named Charles Andreas Varnay. So, as you see, Derek, I have been a busy old beaver myself.

DPR: How do you feel the new book, The Search for Smilin’ Ed, fits in with your other comics?

KD: I feel pretty good about the book version of The Search for Smilin’ Ed. It makes the third book I have done with art director Adam Grano along with my editor at Fantagraphics, Kim Thompson. Those two together are already a great well-oiled machine. I feel very comfortable working with them and the net result is that Smilin’ Ed is the nicest looking book that the three of us have worked on together so far. It is a highly attractive volume and has all kinds of interesting bells and whistles as well. Smilin’ Ed is probably my most experimental book to date.

DPR: In terms of its experimental elements, what do you feel distinguishes Smilin’ Ed from many of your other comics?

KD: There are many stories within stories, similar to the way The Pickwick Papers (1837) does at first. While it was carefully pre-planned – if you didn’t know it you might think I was making it all up as I went along – it has a feeling of spontaneity that often seems to skirt on the very edge of narrative chaos. I don’t think it ever completely falls all the way into actual chaos, but it has to be the most complex longer story that I have done.

DPR: The bulk of Smilin’ Ed was first serialized in the comic book, Zero Zero. When you were creating those initial instalments, did you have in mind a sense of your overall narrative trajectory, or did that evolve over time?

KD: Yes. I had the entire thing pre-planned before it was serialized. Of course, that does not count the last 15 pages of the book that were more recently written.

DPR: As we were just discussing, some of your previous works are certain autobiographical elements. Is this the case with Smilin’ Ed (Figure 10)?

KD: There was a real Smilin’ Ed. He was a kiddie show host, first on the radio starting in 1922 and later in TV starting in 1952, so he really was a pioneer in both of those mediums. I watched the TV show. It was bizarre and anachronistic, which were traits that already appealed to me even as a youngster. He died suddenly in 1954, and there is a legitimate touch of mystery about that fact: a rumour that his body may have never been found. Also beyond that – and especially when I wrote the bulk of this story, which ran as a serial in the 1990s – there was very little actual information to be had about him. So, except for most of the book’s beginning, it is not only made up, but also very strangely so. To cover my butt a bit on that aspect, the book has two alternating narrators, me and my cartoon demon cat character, Waldo.
DPR: Near the end of *Alias the Cat*, your character ‘Kim Deitch’ says something about ‘the wild beauty of this comics thing’, and that his art is ‘half remembered, half imagined’. How much of your work is anchored in your past (memory, etc.) and how much of it is fiction? And is it difficult at times, as you’re writing, to distinguish one from the other?

KD: Well, I think I have already demonstrated how the fiction of my stories is anchored in fact. This is true in my work to varying degrees, depending on the story. I think, over time, my stuff has become more identifiably anchored in real fact. Early on I tended to tell more stories that fell into the ‘go where no man has gone before’ category as opposed to the writing in the ‘what you know’ theory of storytelling. This is a key reason why I have tried to develop my drawing skills over the years: to be able to tell more realistic sorts of stories. I always clearly understand that I am writing fiction, but a big criterion for me in writing is that, on some level it at least, it needs to seem true and make logical sense to me within its fictional context.

DPR: One way to create that sense of realness, I would think, is to keep elaborating on some of the stories you tell. Many of your comics are interlinked, with certain characters, places, and events that have appeared in one comic showing up or being referenced in another. There’s the obvious example of Waldo, sure, but what other figures or events do you like to keep coming back to and alluding to in your comics?

KD: I think the answer to this is the logical result of what was dealt with in the last question. Over time the logical fictional context takes on its own convincing reality. There are so many examples of this in fiction. Just to name one by way of example, the comic book world of Donald Duck – Duckburg and its denizens Donald, Daisy, Huey, Duey, Louie, Scrooge McDuck, the Beagle boys, and so forth. A similar thing seems to be happening in my work to the extent that there is an emerging term coming from readers of my work, ‘The Kim Deitch Universe’. In fact, my editor commissioned an introduction for *The Search for Smilin’ Ed* addressing this particular phenomenon in my work. In an effort to run with the ball and be a good team player, I actually illustrated this universe as an extra in the new book.
DPR: So in many ways, you’re using new stories to explain your earlier stories. And in the upcoming Kathryn Whaley, Ellie tells the story of her aunt Kathryn who tells the story of an Enlightenment devotee. These multiple narrative levels also appear in Alias the Cat and The Boulevard of Broken Dreams. In fact, many of your comics concern storytelling, where characters meet people to share their narratives, and then those stories include others who tell stories as well, and so on. Do you consider storytelling a central theme in your comics?

KD: Yes. My comics are all about storytelling. I am in no way a ‘natural’ artist. I was raised to appreciate art and saw a lot of it growing up, but I don’t really have an inborn facility for it. I have pretty much broadened my drawing skills over the years to enable myself to tell stories better and to be able to tell a greater variety of types of stories. Over time I have grown to love the drawing side of things, but my work is certainly more about storytelling.

DPR: Where does this interest in storytelling come from?

KD: My love of stories? Well, everyone loves to hear a good story. That’s a pretty solid common denominator among us humans. My love of them probably fed a lot initially from TV. I was a TV addict almost from the inception of that medium, and from that became a movie fan. Still am. Then came comic books, and later, ‘real’ books (novels and histories). I have been up to my ears obsessed with storytelling, practically from the cradle. At first all this was gluttonous and fairly indiscriminate. Over time I became, and still am, a connoisseur of narrative.

DPR: So how does your addiction to TV, film, and even novels play into your fascination with storytelling? I don’t mean your need to tell good stories, which I assume every narrative artist aspires to, but your apparent obsession with the theme of storytelling. Many of your protagonists are storytellers, and your comics are made up of multiple narrative frames, stories within stories within stories.

KD: I guess it all goes back to that Scheherazade factor, the girl slave in A Thousand and One Nights who keeps delaying her imminent death by stringing a continuous story along night after night. It’s asking that big story question of yourself again and again, how is it going to come out? (As a kid watching TV, the storyline might have been, is Howdy Doody going to win the election and defeat Mr Bluster to become the mayor of Doodyville? Later it was the old movie serials they used to play one episode at a time on different TV stations. How is it going to come out?) Then for good measure, and before you’ve answered the first story question, you learn to ask yourself other questions, which can start other stories. After a while, it becomes a way of life. So you see it’s just like old Scheherazade. You crank out yarns year after year. You keep it going any and every way you can; and then you die. Clearly the fear factor also seems to play into this ongoing mental psychodrama. I was encouraged by my parents, who were telling me at quite a young age that I had talent for writing. Perhaps it was inventive lies I told them, but that is pure speculation. When I was about to enter art school years later my father [cartoonist Gene Deitch] told me, ‘You know, Kim, when I was your age, I could draw circles around you. I doubt you can make it as an artist. On the other hand you seem to have a pretty good way with a story. Why don’t we send you to college instead of art school and we’ll try to make a writer out of you?’ So you see, seeds were planted.

DPR: You mention your father and his reactions to your young talents. How much influence did his art have on your work? Or put another way, how much of his style and his aesthetic philosophy do you see in your own comics?
KD: I see little or none of his method in my work. His influence on me is huge, but it has more to do with attitudes toward work. He has very specific ideas about what makes up good taste, what’s corny and what isn’t, and that never concerned me at all. I was exposed to aspects of modern art at a very early age, much of which I still look upon with a certain amount of deep suspicion and little real interest. We probably have more common ground in music. I see eye to eye with him that Louis Armstrong was probably the single most influential musician of the twentieth century. My father is a great man, and I don’t feel comfortable knocking him or his tastes, but mine are very different. I really had to get out from under him in order for my own tastes and attitudes to develop. I had to come up with my own original point of view about such things, although I didn’t realize how much under his thumb I was until it was no longer the case. Weirdly, getting away from him was just as beneficial in its turn as being dominated by him was before that. On the other hand, basic things he taught me were nothing less than golden gifts. As a kid he really hammered it into me the importance of finishing the things I started. If I was making a crummy plastic model and got bored while making it, he’d land on me and wouldn’t let up until I finished it, even badly, just to make the point that when you start something, you finish it. Today I have that quality to a fault. He always told me that when you do a job for somebody, always make it better than what they’re expecting. I try to adhere to that idea as well. He set me up to have good values and attitudes about work, but I needed to develop my own ideas about what made my work good. He made it clear what I lacked, and he also gave me some basic ideas about how to overcome that lack. Over time I worked out the details of how to do it on my own.

DPR: Did he have influence whatsoever on the way you tell your stories?

KD: Possibly so. He’s a good critic, the best kind really. He never, or nearly never, knocks something without having a solution to offer as to what to do about it.

DPR: This is interesting, you getting feedback on how you tell your stories. I’ve always thought your storytelling was rather involved and intricate. There’s not much simple or straightforward about it, which I find fascinating.

KD: The thing is, to some extent, I consider the complexity of my storytelling style to be something of a fault or a liability. When you can’t tell a story in a simple straightforward manner, there is a tendency to compensate with a lot of grandstanding. I’m not sure I completely believe this, but there could be more than a grain of truth to it. Stories within stories, boxes within boxes. It can definitely be carried too far. I think I definitely did carry it too far, for instance, in my latest book, The Search for Smilin’ Ed, which, by way of more compensation, I have thrown in even more extras. I prefer ‘The Sunshine Girl’ which, for me at least, was fairly simple yarn.

DPR: But in Shadowland (2006) and Alias the Cat, your stories become quite intricate. In both, there are at least four narrative levels, where characters tell stories about characters who tell stories, and so forth. Did this just come about as you were writing them, or did you intentionally plan on creating these structures? Do you set out to have so many story levels placed one inside the other, or is it something that just happens, growing more organically as you write? It can become quite complex at times.

KD: Things just have a way of evolving and pretty soon you’re in the soup. No. As I said, I’m always shooting for the simpler straightforward story, but usually end up with that convoluted many-faceted other kind. It’s a slightly dubious virtue, though sometimes fun enough. Overall, my goal is to try and keep things simpler, but
more often than not, the exact opposite happens. I often think my stories are complex to a fault, but in the end it’s all trial and error, and like most personal faults, many seeds of virtue emanate from very similar sources. To some extent in this kind of work, you have to play the hand that you are dealt (Figure 11).

Figure 11. One of Deitch’s illustrations of the ‘Kim Deitch Universe’, where his narratives intertwine and characters from his various stories congregate.

Source: This image is from the book The Search for Smilin’ Ed (Fantagraphics, 2010, n.p.). © Kim Deitch.
DPR: Do you think that the rhythm or the frequency of your work plays a big part in how elaborate your stories become? Many of your books marketed as ‘graphic novels’ were originally serialized in various comics and magazines such as Gothic Blimp Works, High Times, Raw, Weirdo, and more recently Zero Zero, Mineshaft, and The Stuff of Dreams. I’m wondering how the demands of serialization and the nature of instalments influence your storytelling.

KD: It has to. As soon as a part of a story becomes charged into being an episode, a certain requirement for zinginess also kicks in. A partial ‘stand aloneness’ is suddenly called for. Inevitable repetitions work their way in sometimes. I regard these things as a challenge and only a minor problem. After all, our very lives are serials continued in every tomorrow. I think there is something interesting about serial writing, and I have paid a good amount of attention to writers whom I would characterize as serial writers – hacks if you will, though not all writers in this category are hacks. Serial writers are the ones like Scheherazade who just seem to be incapable of not writing. Such people, writing fiction, loot their minds on a fanatic ongoing basis. A big plus to serialization is that it is a routine that can be cultivated and is vastly preferable to periodic creative slumps. It’s like working a mine through thick and thin. The great example of this kind of writing is one of my key idols and influences, Charles Dickens, who literally made his novels up as he went along. In books such as The Pickwick Papers (serialized 1836–1837) and The Old Curiosity Shop (serialized 1840–1841), you can witness them evolving right before your eyes. On a more pragmatic level, serialization gives a creator the opportunity for some ongoing paydays while actually doing the work, so lets not knock serialization. Other novelists, many of them hacks, have followed, filling the pages of dime novels, pulp magazines, and paperback novels. (Even many of the paperbacks often started out as magazine serials.) Serialization has always been an ongoing fact of life in fiction writing.

DPR: What does serialization give you that longer form and more self-contained comics don’t? And vice versa?

KD: Well, there’s another point about serialization. It does give you more room to move around and experiment and get to know your characters better. Of course it can also make for built-in defects; the need for de rigueur cliffhangers, for instance, to keep your readers coming back. These can be good, but they can also seem like an awful cliché as they became in the once-a-week movie serials of a bygone era. What’s bad about such an approach to writing is that it can never be completely successful. Unevenness just naturally goes with such a vastness of seemingly never-ending territory. However, at their best such compulsive serial writers also have a way of yielding, at the very least, occasional veins of real gold that might not make it through, or even arrive, in more carefully screened and policed forms of writing. This, I think, is why surveying serial writing can become such a fascinating experience. After a while you really feel like you are in another person’s mind. If it is a good mind, it can become one of the truly most amazing rewards of reading fiction.

DPR: You mentioned earlier that you’ve already published an instalment or two of the Kathryn Whaley story. Since your recent string of long-form comics, such as Boulevard of Broken Dreams, Alias the Cat, and now Smilin’ ‘Ed, do you find yourself still preferring to do serialized work or instead wanting to focus more on longer self-contained narratives?

KD: It is not altogether a matter of preference. Doing serials is an enabling strategy that allows a person to do longer stories, even when a certain amount of redundancy may creep in, while he works in a more novelistic format. Maybe it is also a
manifestation of the desire to keep things going in the same way we try to keep things going in our lives, in units of days, weeks, and years. Isn’t there a soap opera that went on just this side of forever, called Days of our Lives?

DPR: What do you think of the term ‘graphic novel’ as a descriptive label, not only for your comics (in book form), but for other comics as well?

KD: I think the term graphic novel, purportedly coined by Will Eisner, is, like the man sometimes was, rather pompous and pretentious. But really, that’s neither here nor there. Everyone knows what is being referred to when they hear the term. I think my attempt to finally embrace it came from my discovery that there really have been graphic novels for longer than there have been comics, strictly speaking. I would consider Thackery’s Vanity Fair (1847–1848) – when seen as it was meant to be seen with its 190 illustrations, all by the author – to be something pretty akin to a graphic novel. Ditto most of Dickens’ novels, whose works evolved out of writing text for a cartoonist/illustrator and who always personally chose the subject matter of the frequent illustrations in his books. These and other lavishly illustrated novels of the nineteenth century have been a big influence on the work that I am doing.

DPR: In looking back over your vast body of work, which has spanned over 40 years, what would you say are the most significant changes you’ve seen in your comics, both in the writing and in the art?

KD: The most significant change I have seen in comics is the way it has gone legit, so to speak. And, lucky for me, I seem to still be here, as a player in it all. This is totally amazing to me. I dropped out of art school, shlepped around in various dead end jobs, had awful work habits, a bad drinking problem, drugs, and no really clear plan in life. In other words, by doing all the wrong things I, nevertheless, seemed to end up in exactly the right place at the right time to find my way in life as a creative person. Go figure! And don’t tell me there ain’t no God. Well, maybe not, but I sure do have the distinct feeling that some one or some thing has been watching over me and guiding me. It fills me with wonder and humbles me. I’ve been so damn lucky it makes me want to bust out crying some times.

DPR: So where do you see your work heading right now?

KD: Well, I do feel that I have at least one bona fide, genuine, graphic novel in me. I think there has been a natural progression in that direction in my work the last few years and I feel that the time has come to pay it off. I actually have written one, my first real graphic novel. It’s all laid out, 170 pages of words and pictures. So I think, indeed I fervently hope, that’s where my work is heading next. After that, who knows? But if fate sees fit to spare me a while yet and I continue to feel as full of beans as I do right now, I will do my best to continue to make the best possible contribution I can to this our universe as a creative person who has, I think, something unique to offer.

Publications by Kim Deitch