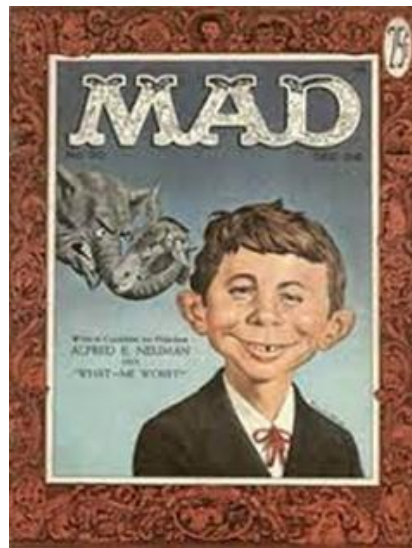


JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Alfred E. Newman: Bay Rat Spiritual Guru

By David Frew
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Decades before most Americans had heard of the Dalai Lama or the Beatles' Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Bay Rats understood the importance of having a spiritual mentor. Going to a Catholic (as opposed to a Protestant) school helped to raise the important, cosmic questions that we were all asking: Who am I? Why do I exist? What is my purpose on Earth? But the 23 classroom minutes

dedicated to matters of theology each day somehow never seemed enough to provide satisfactory answers. Daily religious instruction had to quickly transition to other critical 23-minute teaching units: English, math, science, geography, reading, history, civics, and more. Is there a God was quickly replaced with diagramming sentences and memorizing state capitals. This left us searching for theological answers in “whatever places we could find.”

Toward the end of grade school years, “the answer” finally emerged. As was often the case, mystical truths presented themselves in the strangest of places during those days. It was the window of a neighborhood convenience store. There, staring at us with eyes that spoke of truth incarnate, was the image of Alfred E. Newman, spokesperson for a new periodical: Mad magazine. Once one of us had encountered him, “the word” spread quickly (among the boys but not the girls). The answer to our mythic queries could be purchased for only 25 cents. A lot of cash in those pre-inflation days, but worth every penny.

Newman helped us to understand politics, religion and other 1950s realities. In his unassuming, but sarcastic way he poked fun at almost everything that parents and teachers took seriously. It was his special gift.

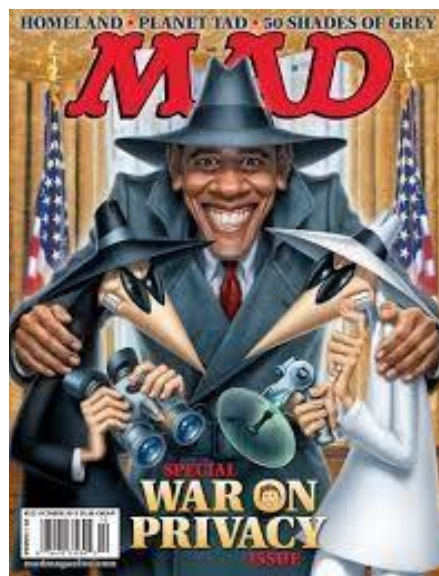
It did not take long for the “authorities” to learn of his charismatic presence. Their discovery of Mad magazine soon led to our being forbidden to read it and what could possibly be more enticing to kids? We had to find out why he was so objectionable. Newman and his “What me worry?” philosophy almost immediately became a forbidden sin. Not venial but mortal. Anyone caught with a Mad magazine in school was summarily punished and the publication was confiscated. Our First Amendment rights were being violated and we knew it. None of us had been to law school yet but we had learned civics.

Mad magazine was first published in 1952, but in the form of a comic book. It did not “catch on” until 1955 when it became an irregularly published magazine (several times per year but on no schedule). Why would anything about Mad magazine be conventional? It was released when its editors and writers were ready. Not before. The essence of the new forbidden publication and its spokesperson Alfred E. Newman was sarcasm. The magazine and its semi-regular features, like Spy vs Spy, Darnold Duck, and G I Schmoe, were “speaking truth” about social institutions. Politics at every level, the church, parents, and product marketing were all fair game. In an odd way that featured a multiweek lag, Mad magazine was detailing contemporary news. If there was a “breaking news event” in the country or the world, Mad magazine’s writers would retell it in a way that seemed to split the differences between reality, humorous and critical.

While the magazine’s circulation peaked during the early 1970s at 2.2 million and eventually disappeared in 2017, its influence continues. It has been noted by students of media that Mad magazine spawned an entire new generation of

humorists who have skillfully adapted “Mad” methods to new and more powerful platforms. The writers of such iconic institutions as Saturday Night Live, The Simpsons, Monty Python, Stephen Colbert, and the Daily Show have all credited Mad magazine with their seemingly unique approaches to storytelling.

Film critic Roger Ebert once wrote that Mad magazine had taught him how to understand and dissect films. “Mad’s parodies persuaded him to look for the ‘machine’ that was hidden inside the apparent meaning of film; to find the hidden, dumb old formulas that were being recycled.” Terry Gilliam of Monty Python called Mad magazine “a bible for his entire British generation.”



White Spy versus Black Spy with a political twist

A 1977 New York Times retrospective noted that “the skeptical generation of kids who read Mad magazine during the 1950s became the first generation who opposed a war (Vietnam) and did not mind when the United States lost. It was also the generation that ‘turned out’ an entire government administration (Nixon) and did not mind that, either. Mad magazine’s consciousness of itself as a trashy enemy of parents and teachers thrilled the kids who read it.”

To cement its reputation as a counterculture voice, Mad magazine managed to find itself criticized by both the Roman Catholic Church and the FBI. It almost seemed like the magazine wanted to be vilified by establishment voices. Probably because it did!

Now that I realize how extremely valuable my confiscated Mad magazines were, I wonder if it is too late to get them back. Does St. Andrew School still have the huge

box filled with squirt guns, marbles, jack knives, and contraband literature that our teachers dumped all our stuff into?



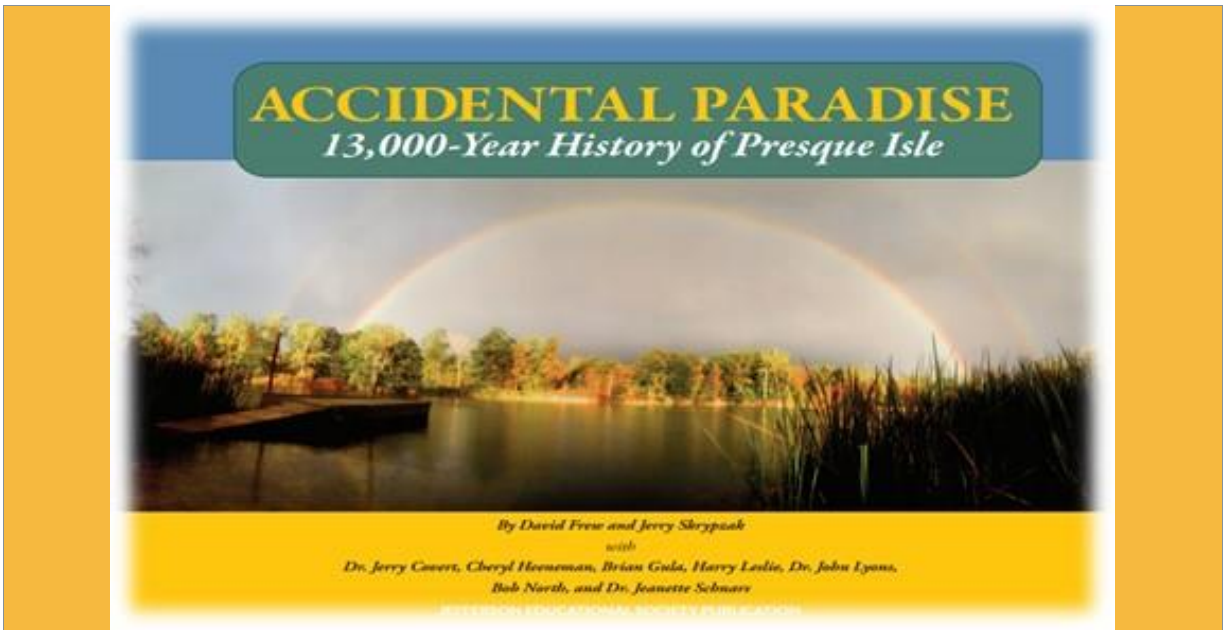
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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