



Riddles of Engagement: Narrative Play in Children's Media and Comic Art of George

By Daniel Yezbick [citation](#) [printer friendly version](#)

- 1 In the earliest and most celebrated appreciation of George Carlson's comic book Ellison christens him "a cartoonist of the absurd," a cross between Walt Disney and Pirandello, whose work stands alongside that of Winsor McCay, Rube Goldberg, Herriman, or Gary Larson (Ellison 241). The few critics who discuss Carlson of associations and influences – from Hieronymus Bosch and Lewis Carroll to Irving and Andrew Wyeth, from Lautréamont and Dali to Kafka and Beckett, Gruelle and Dr. Seuss to Monty Python and Matt Groening. Taken all together as a magpie palimpsest of 18th century fairy tales, 19th century illustration, and 20th-century cartooning as expansive as it is inscrutable.
- 2 Carlson's distinctive reputation arises from two landmark comic-book serials in the mid-1940s. His fanciful Pretzelburg stories featured the misadventures of Prince Dimwitty, Princess Panatella Murphy, Old King Hokum, the Green Dough the Baker, and Sir Razzo Razzherri. Carlson's other comic book vehicle, a revisionist "jingle jangle" fairy tales, ran alongside Dimwitty's quirky exploits in an issue of Famous Funnies' *Jingle Jangle Comics*. These always eclectic and whimsical stories boast titles like "The Very Royal Lion and the Sun-burnt Cheese

Rocketeering Doodlebug and his self-winding Horsefly," or "the musical Whi the red hot music roll." Harlan Ellison likens the profundity of these idiosyncr that of cotton candy, calling them "very sweet, very good for you, and totally ur dissolving whenever you try to grasp" them (Ellison 243). Yet, it's the slick, solu Carlson's creations that makes them not only special, but downright inimitabl focus not on plot or character, but on a succession of relentlessly random slippages, puns, mis-associations, exaggerations, and literalisms that n appropriate, debunk, and dishevel the conventional usage of visual and rhe symbols, metaphors, and euphemisms. In short, Carlson's comics are "d beguiling puzzles that erupt into weird and wondrous evocations of the s churns beneath the surfaces of established lingual rules and codes.

3 Despite Ellison's warnings against critical inquiry into Carlson's manic world, be witticists have dared to grapple with his peculiar themes. Most are satisfi concoct their own colorful estimations of his distinctive style. In fact, crit describing the idiosyncratic material that Carlson applied to the 42 issues of *Comics* between 1942 and 1949. For example, Ron Goulart's many capsule app Carlson generally refer to him as an "eccentric" and "funny" artist who united fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and swash-buckling adventure stories to produ individual type of nonsense" rooted in "burlesque, fantasy, and wordpl *Encyclopedia* 73). Pat Calhoun's 2003 tribute dubs Carlson the "Madcap maste improbable" of comics whose *Jingle Jangle Comics* constitute "a richly texture of supremely surreal silliness" (Calhoun 32). In a similar vein, Franklin underappreciated 1979 survey of "Surrealism in the Comics" finds Carlson "on eccentric artists in or out of comics" whose "outlandishly original" sto impression of having emanated from another planet" (Rosemont 69). Dirk D *Comics Journal* simply crowns Carslon "an exemplar of the Golden Age of Ch illustrators" who "cheerfully threw reality out the window, only to replace it quilt of delightful surreal props and setpieces" (Deppey 136). Lastly, Mar introduction to Carlson's segment of the esteemed *Smithsonian Book of Comics* recognizes a "wonderful silliness and follow-your-nose whimsy" that l

to America's great tall tale-spinners (Williams 127). All this consideration as Leonard Carlson an appropriately skewed slot in the pantheon of comic-book children's illustrators who produced – as one blogger has labeled them – "the and truly comic contributions to the comic-book medium, ever!" (Vadeboncoe

4 Yet, the actual history behind Carlson's wry fusion of juvenile whimsy and remains obscure and uncertain. Despite thirty years of involvement with book illustration, game and puzzle design, and the comics and cartooning Carlson's relatively short-lived *Jingle Jangle Comics* series remains his best known. Like most of Carlson's superlative inventions, the "Jingle Jangle Tales" and Pie stories were never popular favorites, and were only recovered decades after the neglected, iconoclastic landmarks of comic-book history. Celebrated as a prototype "Comic of the Absurd" by Harlan Ellison in the back of the now seminal pioneering essays in comic-book studies, *All in Color for a Dime*, the relative Carlson and his forgotten Pie-face protagonist suddenly shared the critical stage and Schuster's Superman, Parker and Beck's Captain Marvel, and E.C. Segar. Ellison later described it in a 1990 follow-up essay, Carlson's singular experimental comic book form were "swept away with the silt and persiflage of a world whose constantly being diverted to wrest the buck from its grasp" (Ellison "Roses" number of capable creators and charming characters "dwindled into the forgotten" with the cancellation of *Jingle Jangle Comics* (Ellison "Roses" 3). A celebrated but suitably frisky features like Dave Tendlar's talking bird serial "Cl and Johnny Jay," Larz Bourne's Popeye-like "Aunty Spry," and Woody Gelman the Lovable Brat," Carlson produced one parodic nursery rhyme or "Jingle Jangle one installment of his zany "Pie-face Prince of Pretzelburg" series in almost. Only numbers 2 through 4, 8, 17 and 18 contain no new Dimwitty episode, but contains one Jingle Jangle Tale or Carlson-designed puzzle. It's also assumed originally developed the concept as an anthology series for younger readers and edited the title himself. According to Ron Goulart, Carlson convinced *Fan editor Steve Douglas to run the book as a bi-monthly companion to more compilation titles (Goulart "Poet Laureate" 24).*

5 The extent of Carlson's actual involvement with the series and with comics in general remains uncertain. In fact, the oddball maestro seems to exhibit less interest in *Comics* over time. He produced only the first six covers, and halfway through the series he himself supposedly conceived, Carlson stopped signing his stories, suggesting a possible collusion of ghost artists. Later episodes of both "Jingle Jangle tales" and "Pie and Prince" are also more carefully plotted with less visual punning and pop culture association, perhaps pointing to the increasing involvement of other writers besides Carlson. Some evidence in the George Carlson estate, currently in the hands of his ownership, also supports the possibility of unnamed collaborators. Carlson's *Jingle Jangle* work includes "typed synopses illustrated with little colored drawings" which may have been used as style guides for assistants (Goulart e-mail). A theory requires further inquiry, Carlson was also no stranger to ghost work. In the 1950s years as one of many uncredited artists alongside Burr Inwood and Tack Knickerbocker on Byrne's syndicated feature *Reg'lar Fellas*. Yet, regardless of how many episodes he actually drew or what quotient of the stories were wholly his own, every "Pie and Prince" and "Jingle Jangle" installment exhibits Carlson's signature emphasis on arcaic and anarchic events, pointing towards his consistent involvement with the series at a high level.

6 Carlson also inspired the fanciful ingenuity of young children and, in the tradition of a forerunner and influence Lewis Carroll, he was closely connected to children's drawing activities and the discourse surrounding art instruction. Carlson produced several distinctive guides to illustration, cartooning, and caricature beginning with the 1950 volume entitled *Cartoon Comics and How to Draw Them*, but his expanded guide *Draw Comics! Here's How* provides an especially rich and rigorous series of drawing exercises, and examples concerning every aspect of career cartooning. The book includes strategies for enhancing the fluidity of moving figures, applying spatterwork to pacing sequential narratives for newspaper strips, comic book stories, caricature, and advertising contracts. The book has recently returned to print in a Dover edition entitled *Learn to Draw Comics*, but the obviously grassroots quality of the original work retains a certain Carlson-inspired enthusiasm for cartooning's unique function.

thought, and skill. In it, Carlson counsels the aspiring cartoonist, "Aim first for speed develops with experience. Patience, practice, and perseverance, together with happiness in one's work are bound to bring the rich rewards that a world of offers" (Carlson 1). This "spirit of happiness" mirrors the whimsical homages and silliness that define Carlson's *Jingle Jangle* stories, but it also reflects challenges and mental rigor that define the pleasure of learning to draw. Carlson's third cartoon textbook, *I Can Draw*, offers eight separate units of exercises for extremely young artists concerning the construction of basic shapes, objects, cartoon caricatures, and backgrounds. Carlson authored at least two people's guides to cartooning in the late 1930s, including *Points on Cartooning* and *Draw Funny Pictures* for the HobbyCraft series published by Treasure Chest, illustrating his amusingly practical hands-on approach to children's drawing.

7 Most of Carlson's comic art projects – from his many primers on drawing and the *Jingle Jangle Comics* series itself – invoke the forms and traditions of children's literature, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and related juvenile pastimes with which a short critical biography explains just how fervently Carlson fused the visual arts of his childhood with the expanding art forms of comics and comic-books.

8 To add perhaps the only analogy left to make with this particular cartoonist, many aspects of George Carlson's life have remained as mysterious as Shakespeare's. Goulart and Vadeboncoueur all scrape together pieces of his biography, agreeing he was born in 1896 and died in 1962. A longtime Connecticut resident, his earliest work as an illustrator has been thought to date to the mid-1910s. Recent research has revealed that Carlson was a tireless and inventive commercial artist and a happy, unassuming family man who commuted to New York City from his home studios in Fairfield, Connecticut, where he spent most of his adult life with his wife, Gertrude Jorth Carlson, who ran a greeting card business in Southport, and their two daughters June and Alice. From all available evidence, Carlson's Connecticut lifestyle seems as peacefully mundane and sedately conventional as his art creations were frenzied and fantastic. He and his family were regular attendees at the Baptist Temple of Bridgeport, and Carlson served as historian of the George A. Easton Post of the American Legion. Carlson also plied his trade to support numerous

services including art contests and fundraisers connected with the Bridgeport Commerce. Around this time, he even contributed a comprehensive illustrated "communications" to the "Crypt of Civilization" time capsule project at the University that was projected to remain sealed until 8113 A.D.! After Carlson's death on June 26, 1962, several obituaries and family reminiscences described the comics artist as a "very modest" and "quiet man" who sold his creations to various publishers "outright" with "unpushy" professionalism.^[1] At the same time, *The Bridgeport Times* reported that Carlson had grown up the son of a Swedish immigrant mother who came to the U.S. from England, and worked for much of her life as a servant for Ulysses S. Grant. Before 1900, Carlson himself lived in New York City working in a variety of jobs, including bookshops while he studied art at Dan McCarthy's National School of Caricature, the Art Academy of Design, and Art Students League of New York.

9 From his first published newspaper cartoon in 1903 through his busy career as a cartoonist in the 1910s and 20s, Carlson worked as a free-lance riddle writer, spot artist, gag writer, and puzzle maker for numerous periodicals including *St. Nicholas*, *Youth's Friend*, *Judge*, *Scribner's Magazine*, *Child Life*, *Famous Funnies*, and *Jingle Jangle Conundrums* (see *Peter* 5-6). He also served as the editor of the puzzle feature "Our Puzzle Pack" in *Scouts' American Girl* magazine for twelve years between 1924 and 1936.

10 His painted plates for Blanche Elizabeth Wade's 1917 *The Magic Stone: Riddles and Stories* were thought to represent his first successful contact for a complete book. More recently discovered 1916 illustrations for Mary Dickerson Donahey's *Prince and the Princess of a Country* and his 1917 renderings for Chandler A. Oakes' charming anthropomorphic animal fantasy *Tobytown* push our catalogue of Carlson's early works one year further into the past.

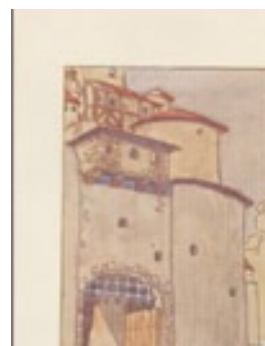




Figure 1. Carlson's cover design for Mary Dickerson Donahey's 1916 *Prince Without a Country*.



Figure 2. The Frontispiece to Donahey's 1916 *Prince Without a Country*.

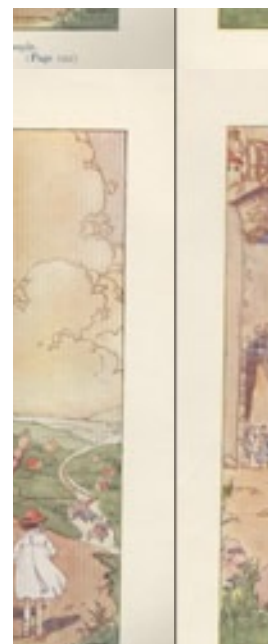


Figure 3. Carlson's "The Prince Without a Country," also from 1916 *Prince Without a Country*. Note the resemblance to the work of Arthur Rackham and Caldecott.

After these early contracts, Carlson illustrated a steady stream of editions including leading children's authors including Gene Stone, Johanna Spyri, J.L. Stoddard, and Mark Twain (Gardner *John Martin's Book* 153).

11 For the most part, Carlson's early book illustration favors light and lyrical but traditional interpretations of fairy tales and chivalric pageantry. His youthful shining knights, shimmering fairies, and epic quests would later lend echoes of charm to the scrappy "Jingle Jangle" hybrids set in what one critic compares to a "European pocket kingdom...lost in an alien landscape" (Markstein). Through Carlson's illustrations evoke the fine art traditions established by the most successful and celebrated 19th-century children's artists. By mid-decade, however, he had embraced two different genres: cartooning and puzzle design.

12 Carlson's early cartoon and puzzle work exhibits a wide range of styles, interests, and influences for a relatively unknown commercial artist specializing in children's illustration. Early on, Carlson uses cartooning, caricature, and sequential design as a form of ornament or decoration. His vibrant caricatures of fairytale folk, sweetfaced youths, sunkissed villages, and ethereal women all draw heavily on



the languid Romantic traditions of the Pre-Raphaelites, as well as later artists like Arthur Rackham and Randolph Caldecott. At the same time, he appears well versed in more Modernist Deco styles that employ heavy silhouette, flatly colored solid shapes, and bold figure-ground contrasts.



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13 Beginning in 1913, Carlson produced an incredibly vast and quirky body of illustrated work for the innovative children's monthly, *John Martin's Book*, which "in its time was the most entertaining magazine published in this country for boys and girls aged five to eight" (Gardner Peter 1). Collaborating with his friend and editor, the incredibly named Morgan von Roorbach Shepard, the two worked to develop material that would serve "the imaginative needs of very young children" under the lyrical pseudonyms John Martin and Gookel (Gardner Peter 1). As Martin Gardner observes, "Gookel" Carlson became "the most important artist" associated with *John Martin's Book* for which he produced "more than fifty covers" and "almost all of the magazine's puzzles, activities, jokes, riddles, and an enormous variety of 'gimmick' pages of a sort never before attempted in a child's magazine" (Gardner Peter 6). Besides cover illustration as diverse as tall ships, medieval castles, biplanes, holiday scenes, and optical illusions, Carlson's many feature assignments include a serial "History of Railroads," a series of nonsense cartoons based on puns entitled "Did You Ever?" which combined the wacky confluences of *Jingle Jangle Comics*, and a fascinating group of Deco-style illustrated stories that also embrace Modernist and Expressionist print-making techniques he probably encountered as a student at the New York Academy of Design.

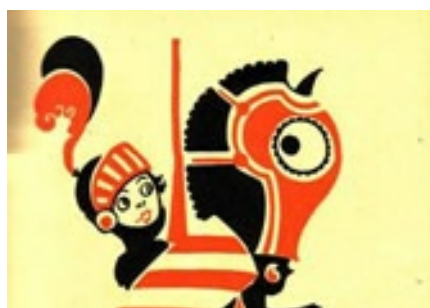
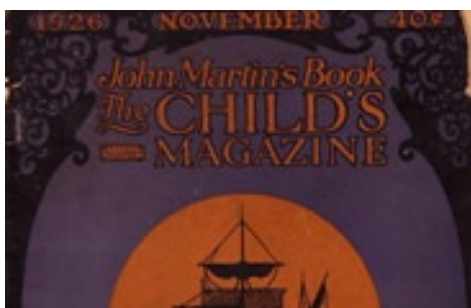




Figure 5. Carlson's November 1926 cover design for *John Martin's Book*. Carlson designed approximately 50 covers for *JMB* on various themes in numerous styles. This nostalgic silhouette invokes both 19th and 20th-century modes of design.



Figure 6. One of a pair of Deco illustrations on themes of chivalry and poetry that Carlson developed for *JMB*. Note the extreme change in style from his earlier lyrical work with Donahey, Oakes, and Wade.

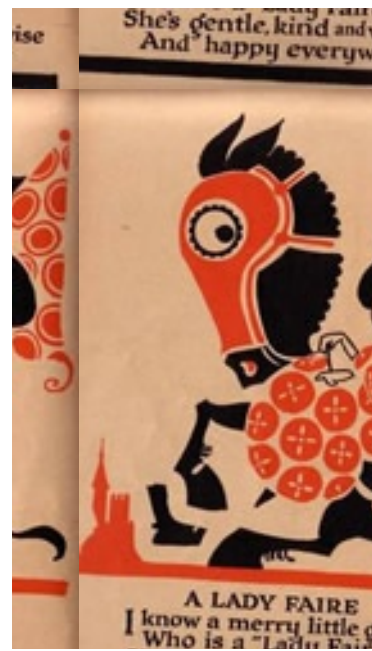


Figure 7. In the matching page, we see how Carlson's work also used book design and graphic matches to simultaneously appeal to both boys and girls.

14

During his tenure on *John Martin's Book*, Carlson also became a virtuoso designer, experimenting with the shapes and forms of books and periodicals still considered contemporary innovators. His lyrical end-pages for *John Martin's* hard cover merged 19th Century fairies and elves with Art Deco backgrounds. His graphic work with *John Martin's* specials like *The Happy Hands Book*, *The Book Plate Book*, *Out Up and Down Door Book*, and the *Tell Me a Story* series also produced a series of unique games, activities, and projects rooted in the juvenile appreciation of a book's physical interactive qualities. As Martin Gardner reminisces, "there were puzzles with captions that could be read by holding the pages to a mirror. There were instructions for folding origami animals and for making ink-blot pictures and for simple wooden toys. There were connect-the-dots, rebuses, anagrams, ciphers, picture puzzles, [and] science experiments" (Gardner "*John Martin's Book*" 154). In showing his ingenuity as an artist was hardly limited to piquant illustration or clever wordplay, Carlson's designs and creations encouraged children to play with and learn from every element of the texts he created. Carlson's covers, end-papers, creased pages, matchbooks, cut-outs, and even bindings could become sources of imaginative fun and amusement.

With *John Martin's Book*, Carlson also took his first steps towards notoriety as the still-enchancing character, Peter Puzzlemaker. As Carlson's first enduring both character and puzzle design, his Peter Puzzlemaker games reveal a mastery of imagetic and prosaic codes and systems. Without equal in American riddles, they clearly build on the fanciful nonsense worlds of Lewis Carroll, Edw L. Frank Baum – all authors that Carlson had previously illustrated within early *John Martin's Book*. Designed as single page or gatefold cartoon activities, Peter Puzzlemaker installment features "a short bespectacled Peter, dressed in the pilgrim" who presents "a simple, entertaining word or mathematical problem (*Returns v*). Puzzlemaker's baffling devices are legion; ranging from word games to geometrical puzzles and intertextual word-image "mix-ups."



Figure 8. A typical example of Carlson's Peter Puzzlemaker feature for *JMB*. This installment encourages children to toy with the arrangement of letters and the meanings of words through interactive sequences, a device that would later inform the chaos of his *Jingle Jangle Comics*.

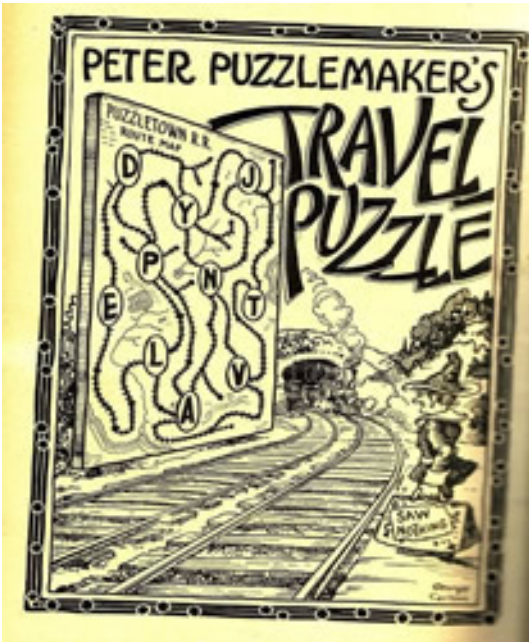


Figure 9. Carlson's Peter Puzzlemaker often merged visual and prosaic language systems, as evident in this example. His lifelong interest in trains, steamships, and other modes of industrial travel are also in evidence.



Figure 10. Carlson included a facing page of riddles, rebuses, and problems with the Peter Puzzlemaker feature. Image and word-based are common as is his signature interest in transportation.

Carlson's subject matter also varies tremendously but most pages focus on themes, anthropomorphic animals, nursery rhymes, holidays, and jovial tradesmen, bakers, glazers, shopkeepers, engineers, and sailors. Many examples reveal Ca

for generating a remarkable variety of graphic activities – all rooted in a distinct of text and image sequences.

16 In most cases, Puzzlemaker, who probably resembles Carlson himself, invites you to solve a problem rooted in unusual or expected similarities between certain concepts, letters, or phrases. Humorous or exciting scenarios like train travel and tea create an over-all theme that relates to the amusing challenge. In a sense, they suggest that the blurry boundaries between language and life are rife with curiosity and subsumed irony. This effusive world of silly congruencies and strange connections clearly anticipates the chaotic waves of puns and homonyms that would later flood Pretzelburg and Jinglejangleland. Due to their layered, often ticklish solutions, these puzzles soon became *John Martin's* "most popular feature" and eventually inspired a hardcover compilation in 1922 as well as a series of stand-alone puzzle posters.

17 *John Martin's Book*, the magazine and its subsequent series of best-of hardcover books called Big Books, folded in February 1933. Soon afterwards, Carlson devised a series of short paperback *Fun-Time* activity books for Platt and Munk Publishing; titles included *Fun-Time Puzzles, Mazes, Stunts, Drawing, Riddles, Games, Tricks, and Questions*, an omnibus, *Fun for Juniors*, following in 1939. Filled with similar cross-words, acrostics, memory games, and nonsense puzzles, these cheap volumes added to the same activities Carlson had rehearsed with Peter Puzzlemaker. Most of the games replace Peter with anthropomorphic woodland animals, industrious laughing children, but once again Carlson's backgrounds and settings are primarily rural with a new emphasis on occasional charismatic little folk like elves and gremlins clearly reminiscent of Palmer Cox's Brownies.





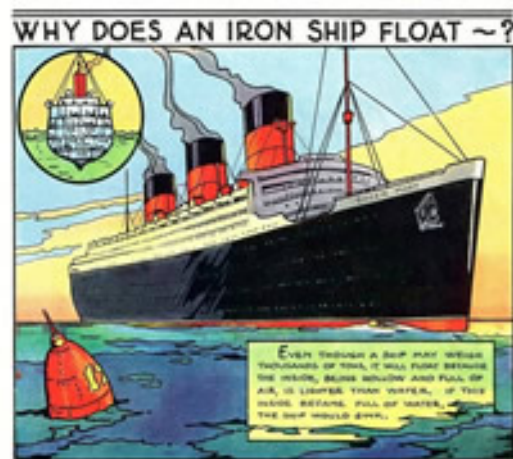
Figure 11. Carlson's colorful cover for his 1937 Platt & Munk compilation *Fun-Time Questions*.



Figure 12. Another cover from the 1937 Fun-Time series, this one emphasizing Carlson's continuing interest in encouraging young people's art with drawing and design exercises.



Figure 13. In the Fun-Time books, Carlson's work as a puzzle designer and riddle maker often exploit rich four-color printing as in this vivid example.



- 163. What is the highest mountain in the world?
- 164. What river forms part of the southern boundary of the United States?
- 165. In what country did Robin Hood live?
- 166. Is the Orient in the East or the West?
- 167. How many squares on a checker-board?
- 168. Which one of the Great Lakes is entirely in the United States?

Figure 14. A page from the 1937 *Fun-Time Questions* volume which also illustrates Carlson's skill as a technical artist. Years, before he had designed an impressive children's give-away for the Queen Mary that outlined the whole ship in visual terms.

At the same time, Carlson's Fun-Time work also expands on an apparent contemporary marvels of science, engineering, aviation, and transportation that initially peppered his earlier output for *John Martin's Book*. Few historians

consider the interactive Platt and Munk texts as influences on Carlson's celebratory art, but they clearly exhibit ample evidence of his growing pre-occupations with the inductive qualities of nonsense narrative and his continued manipulation of material, as well as a mounting fascination with contemporary machines.

18

Carlson's Fun-time books also testify to his developing status as a 20th-century Lewis Carroll. Carlson models many of his works on Carroll's mixture of riddles and childhood fantasies. Characters from Carroll's *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass* frequently reappear through Carlson's cartoons, riddles, and songs. One gimmick page in *Martin's Book* includes a game involving Peter Puzzlemaker's conversation with *Wonderland's* caterpillar and another game in which Carlson's piquant pilgrim solves a word riddle with the Carpenter who usually shares his stage with Carroll's



Figure 15. In this installment of Peter Puzzlemaker, Carlson creates a telling palimpsest of sorts. His own character cavorts with Carroll's caterpillar, taking the place of Dodgson's precocious Alice.



Figure 16. In another episode, Peter Puzzlemaker visits with Carroll's Carpenter and brings with him another of his word-image games.

In both cases, Carlson deftly revises John Tenniel's original illustrations to insinuate his own signature character – as if Carlson himself seeks to both challenge Carroll's nonsensical illustrations by forcing them to confront new counterparts. Carlson also references other seminal children's works. Mother G

friends are common themes in Carlson's Peter Puzzlemaker activities and Munk games.



Figure 17. Carlson's "Mother Goose Rebus" from the 1937 *Fun-Time Puzzles*, a dynamic fusion of children's literary themes, puzzle design, and lyrical illustration.

In one Fun-time book, Carlson even alludes to both Carroll and Mother Goose riddles and a maze game that clearly borrows from Tenniel's interpretation of Dumpty. Carlson's life-long anxiety of influence surrounding Lewis Carroll outlasted *John Martin's Book*, the Fun-Time series, and *Jingle Jangle Comics* failed post-Jingle Jangle fusion of comics and games, *Puzzle Fun Comics*, but his competitive association with Carroll even more explicit with the half-Pie-face hybrid comic, "Alec in Fumbleland," a broad and zany lampoon of Wonderland with a frantic rabbit, itinerant playing-card Queen, and a full-on Carlson-esque sneezing powder.

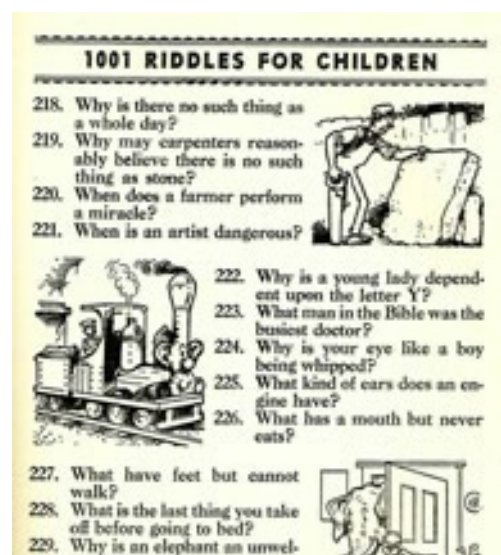




Figure 18. Carlson's "Alec in Fumbleland" appeared only briefly in the short-lived attempt to market children's games and riddles in comic-book form with *Puzzle Fun Comics*. The title lasted only two issues.

19

If Carlson fashioned himself as the American Lewis Carroll or a contemporary of Lewis Carroll, he also developed his own mode of edifying nonsense. Unlike the algebraic and satiric reversals that characterize the Alice books, Carlson focuses primarily on the liberating acts of drawing, writing, and reading. In fact, by the mid-1930s he had become an established master of cartoon puzzles and visual games. Besides writing activity books, he also authored several low-cost treasuries of meticulous amusements and diversions including *1,001 Riddles for Children*, *Picture Crosswords*, *Jokes and Riddles*, and *Little Folks Puzzles*.



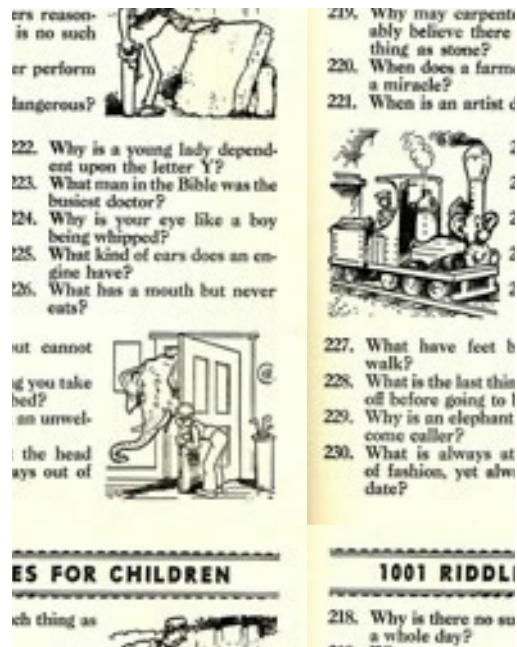


Figure 20. A sample page from *1001 Riddles for Children*. Note how Carlson's spot illustrations enhance and expand the absurdity of the written questions themselves.

Throughout the 1930s, Carlson was committed to producing interactive children's entertainment that promoted creative problem-solving through extended engagement with verbal and visual exercises. The ebullient spirit of these lively texts would even be reflected in *Jingle Jangle Comics* with its inherently manic yet intuitive spirit.

20 For example, this rebus from *Fun-Time Puzzles* allows readers to toy with the visual messages that arise out of juxtaposed words and images.

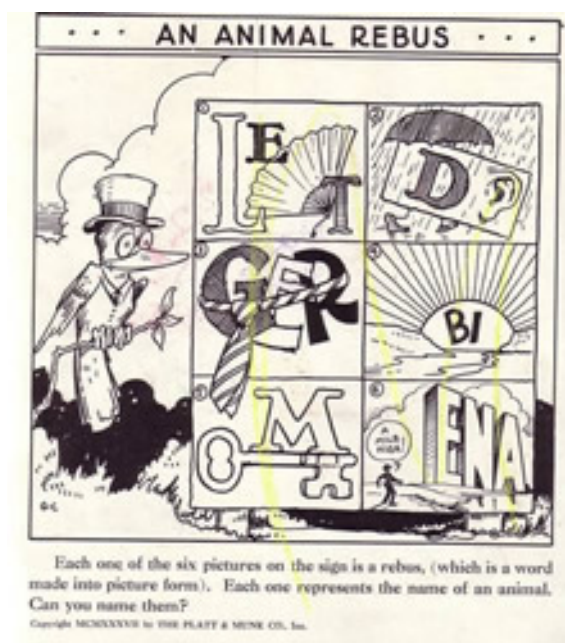


Figure 21. Another of Carlson's Platt & Munk rebuses, this one first

appeared in *Fun-Tim Puzzles*, but was also used in the later *Fun-Time for Juniors* compilation.

As we extrapolate from the sounds, shapes, and meanings of objects, letters, create new unusual linkages that lend humorous or ironic tones to otherwise pedantic signs and contexts. The resulting unconventional or nonsensical common feature of many children's classics, especially the works of Lewis Carlson's union of verbal-visual teasers with the intersubjective frameworks would create an even more enticing and spontaneous type of reader engagement exploring the irregular rhythms of Jingle Jangleland, however, our critical study deserves one final detour.

21 In the late 1930s, Carlson also produced his two most famous, non-comic- First, he created his superior illustrations for Howard Garis' *Uncle Wiggily* stories Platt and Munk, which still remain among the most loved in the medium.



Figure 22. Alongside Lansing Campbell and Louis Wila, George Carlson's illustrations for Howard R. Garis' *Uncle Wiggily* stories are among the most fondly remembered representations of the character. Carlson's interpretations are loaded with tight pen and ink detail, vivid forest backgrounds, and warm rustic interiors.



Figure 23. Uncle Wiggily and Grandpa Goosey marvel at that famous apple dumpling in Carlson's pen and ink illustration for his 1955 Platt & Munk edition of *Uncle Wiggily and His Friends*.

Ron Goulart astutely suggests that the paradoxical signature codas of Garis' tales may denote some affinity with the unnatural laws of Carlson's Pretzelk Encyclopedia 81). More importantly, however, in late 1938 Carlson produced a scrutinized book jacket for the first hardcover edition of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. The jacket represents a fusion of both nostalgic romanticism and urbane modernism. Figuring heavy broadside type against a background of oh-so-Deco gradie design becomes intriguingly old-fashioned yet ironically streamlined. The headpiece presents a strong but ultimately laconic memorial to the mythic pre-Civil War South. The accompanying finial drawing, dwarfed by the monumental title, includes a conversation between a gallant Confederate officer, an elegant aristocrat, and a gentlewoman in full plumage.

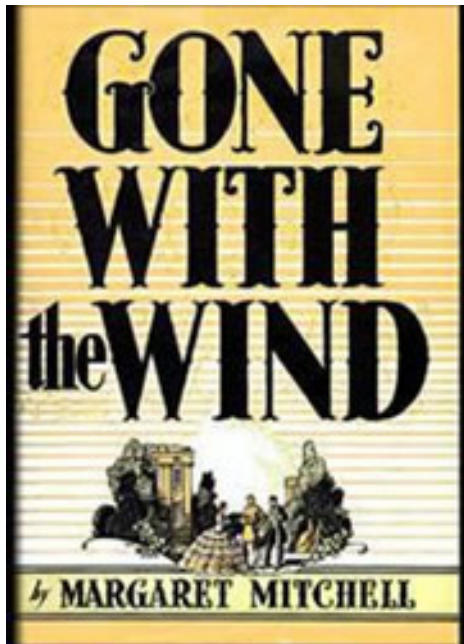


Figure 24. Ironically, Carlson's most famous work as an illustrator has nothing to do with cartoons, puzzles, riddles, or comic art. Still, his book jacket design for Mitchell's landmark *Gone with the Wind* does fuse classic and contemporary styles with a certain nostalgic panache.



Figure 25. A close view of Carlson's compact, but expressive finial for the *Gone with the Wind* book jacket.

Behind them rise the cornices of Tara, delicately sheathed in flowering trees (a darker counterpoint to the billowing clouds beyond). The silhouettes of other quaffed belles stand off to the right behind the threesome probably mean-

Scarlett O'Hara and her two suitors, Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes. Taken Carlson's jacket design for Mitchell's epic panegyric to the Old South may coldest, most harrowing accomplishment; a miniscule yet languid sketch of agrarian past surrounded or choked by unmistakably bold signs of c modernity.

22 As often as this uncharacteristically blockish and staid text gets mention Carlson's more dynamic material, it's a wonder that no one has thought to "jingle jangle world" as a fractured, schizophrenic corruption of Mitchell's plantation atmosphere. One critic quips that Carlson "apparently wasn't b requests for dust jackets of antebellum, bellum or even postbellum sagas," moved from the "sublime to the ridiculous" with *Jingle Jangle Comics*, but 1 evidence to the contrary (Vadeboncoeur).

23 First, Carlson's Uncle Wiggily drawings are, in fact, a loving homage to a woodland society rife with moments of ragged charm and sympathetic community. Although their settings are not distinctly Southern, Haris' stories all point to a certain down-home domesticity and small town tranquility where candy stripe barber's poles and apple dumplings have significant cultural power. A lifelong New Englander, Carlson worked and thrived happily in Connecticut, but much of his incessantly rural iconography embraces themes of rustic innocence and playful trickery often associated with the American South. In fact, one Peter Puzzlemaker story problem entitled "the Entertainer and his trained animals" seems to reference the stereotypical imagery of a showboat performer moving up and down the Mississippi. Yet, there is further evidence of Carlson's deliberate use of old fashioned Americana as well as regional Southern themes.



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24 In 1940, Treasure Chest publications, who focused primary on jaunty cor children's novelty songs and tutorial sheet music, released a special advertis:

for SweetHeart Toilet Soap, a 65-page compendium of *The Songs of Stephen* arranged for solo and group singing" in order to preserve, as one note explains, beauty of melody and musical color of this beloved American composer" (Swe 2-3). Carlson contributes his own distinctive color to the project; an exceptional realistic wrap-around cover depicting a 19th-century Southern pastoral scene with a steamboat, log cabin, banjo-strumming Uncle Tom, and cooing aristocratic lady through a cypress grove.



Figure 27. Carlson's painted wrap-around cover for SweetHeart Toilet Soap's premium, *the Songs of Stephen Foster*, represents his further connection with Southern themes as well as his continuing activities as a commercial contract artist in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Carlson's previous work for Treasure Chest seems more akin to his preferred genre of the collection of illustrated nursery rhymes, *More Songs and Games for Children*, which includes several examples of the intertextual fluidity that would define his *Comics* two years later, including yet another light homage to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* and Tweedle-Dee. Perhaps the massive success of Mitchell's novel made Carlson a *facto* artist of the moment for homespun depictions of the American South?





Figure 28. Carlson's wildly inviting cover design for Treasure Chest's 1940 series, *Songs and Games for Children*.



Figure 29. More wild homage to Lewis Carroll and his creation with Carlson's page design for the nursery rhyme, "Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee" from *Songs and Games for Children*.



Figure 30. Carlson's design for "There was a Crooked Man" from *Songs and Games for Children* includes an unusual mixture of musical notation and foregrounded illustration, another sign of his interest in continually illuminating children's media to increase its enjoyable visual energy.

In any case, the "unparalleled contemporary fables" that fizzle and splash Carlson's comic book world owe their rustic origins to his previous familiarit

visions of agrarian America (Ellison 242). Like the moral order of Walt Disney pastorals or the allegorical potency of Walt Kelly's *Oke Fenoke*, Carlson's *Jingle* enjoys an almost eternally bucolic summer of endlessly grassy fields, winding c a wise-cracking sun, and an infinite chorus of talking birds, smiling trees, sin and well-dressed houses. Carlson's Peter Puzzlemaker series, Uncle Wiggily di and Munk collections – and certainly his focus on 19th-century Southern proje 1930s – all point towards a continued fascination with an idealized but frenz rooted firmly in a past that, by the early 1940s, was slipping quickly and ch oblivion.

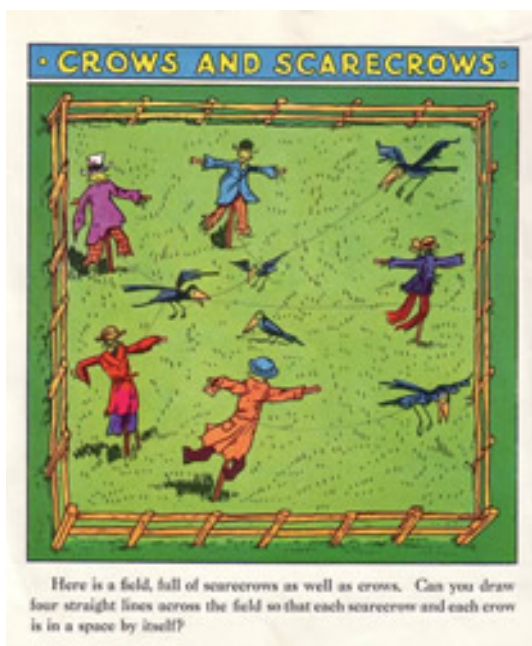


Figure 31. The farm-themed game "Crows and Scarecrows" from Carlson's *Fun-Time Puzzles* and later in *Fun-Time for Juniors* draws children's attention to familiar themes of rural American culture.



Figure 32. In this puzzle from *Fun-Time for Juniors*, a well-appointed, provincial rabbit teaches children that "Well Begun is Half Done" and "Look Before you Leap" against a pleasantly foresty setting.

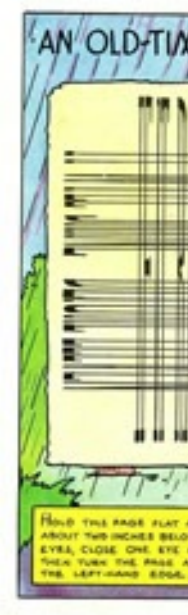


Figure 33. O from *Fun-Ti* equally likak that "if it rair shine before

The majority of Carlson's "Jingle Jangle Tales" and nearly all his "Pie-face P obsess over the contemporary shift from pre-industrial village life towards mo mechanized claptrap. To this end, Carlson fills his comic book stories with rat psychotic handcars, magical railroads, wind-up radios, malfunctioning steam antique bed-warming pans. Most of these stubborn inventions frustrate or users to supply Pretzelburg with its requisite parade of sudden explosions, fer and jarring clatter. As an older cartoonist with strong ties to two centuries, Ca an ambivalent fascination with the explosive potential of oil, coal, and ste

machinery. In his *Jingle Jangle* world – whose very name recalls the sounds of sleigh bells – steam-flavored buns, self-heating Yule logs, jolly trolley cars, balloons, steamboats, "parsley plated puff-engines," talking tea kettles, smoking cameras, wind-up radiophones, royal steam whistles, self-polishing stoves, motor balloons, and orphaned hand irons all run on fanciful forms of pre-electric power. At the same time, Carlson's work across so many genres clearly expresses his awe for the marvels of engineering like air travel, steamships, and transcontinental railroads. At one point, Carlson even designed a lavish children's give-away for the Cunard White Star Line entitled "the Queen Mary – A Book of Comparisons." From trains to steamships, Carlson loved to visualize adventurous travel and wild motion. In fact, Prince Dimwit and his supporting cast never seem to stop traveling and they chase, bicker, and are continually rescued from nonsensical threats like "red hot promises" and "snow-men," and Carlson's signature gimmick – explosive schmaltz oil. The whimsical schmaltz with its undertones of excessive, unabashed silliness often typifies Carlson's work of the foibles and pretensions of the world at large.

27

Carlson's whimsical characters and their inventions aren't the only sources of humor and satire in *Jingle Jangle Comics*. His riotous stories thrive on a predominantly contentions narrative voice that continually throws perplexing absurd situations at protagonists and readers alike. Drawing on his experience as a puzzlemaker, Carlson creates an inherently anarchic world of sudden shocks, confusing twists, and surprises that surpasses Oz, Wonderland, and even Hogwarts in its use of colorful and outlandish exaggeration. In just one *Jingle Jangle* episode, footprints are heard in the night, tents appear full of emptiness, day breaks into small change, and characters are found in seven different sizes.

28

On top of these ludicrous curiosities, literal puns and subtle word plays also appear frequently as Carlson's ubiquitous smiling flowers, grinning trees, and laughing





Figure 35. The "Very Royal Lion and the Sun-burnt Cheesecake" play for "high steaks" in one of Carlson's most inspired Jingle Jangle Tales.

Carlson floods every story with graphic entendres that combine sight and language, and verbal clues in a swarm of doubled and triple-corrupted meanings. In these stories, the plot is nearly absent – a mere formality to pull the reader through a series of allusions, riddles, and reversals. For example, when battling a trio of identical Prince Dimwitty ponders in homonymic wonder, "which witch is which?" In other stories, doublings in another story create a taxi-cabbage which announces when it will be eaten. The treatment of common idioms leads to Pretzelburg's tobacco-puffing smoking. The manipulation of common usage allows Dimwitty to notice that "morning has another character to leave his "carve" scratched into an office door. Blatant puns are common; one frustrated music student laments "I'll be flat" and another advisor advises his cohort not to take any wooden "shekels."





Figure 36. Carlson slyly debunks and debases the king of the jungle in another Pie-face Prince episode.

29

One recurring motif appears particularly odd. Carlson repeatedly defiles the no scrupulous glee. From story to story, he relentlessly forces the titular king of the uncomfortably absurdist roles including a town lion, side lions, 40-yard lion lions. In the course of any issue of *Jingle Jangle Comics*, Carlson lambastes the with a plethora of weird and compromising roles, perhaps as a sly self-mockery his early success with a 1924 John Martin's collection of *Aesop's Fables*.

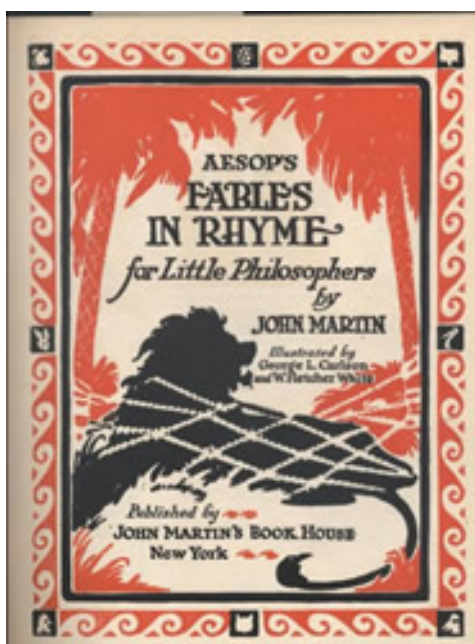


Figure 37. One of Carlson's first known uses of regal lion designs from the 1924 *Aesop's Fables in Rhyme for Little*



Figure 38. Carlson's treatment of the famous tale from Aesop originally appeared as a short feature in *John Martin's Book* then became a part of their 1924 compilation alongside other previously published verses. Again, Carlson's early interests

Philosophers. As his career progressed, Carlson's lions became distinctly less majestic and more delightful.

Deco figure-ground patterns built around solid-color print reveals his familiarity with many methods of graphic design and book illustration.

In a similar vein, he clearly kept Peter Puzzlemaker and the *John Martin's* mind during the production of many Jingle Jangle and Pie-face episodes. similar puzzle designs and even a few self-referential parodies frequently Pretzelburg's ever-shifting landscape.



Figure 39. A splendid example of Carlson's hybrid mixture of optical puzzles, word-based riddles, cartooning, and children's illustration from a late issue of *Jingle Jangle Comics*.

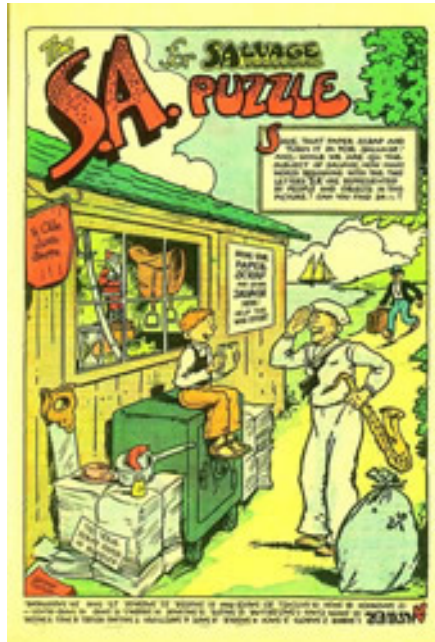


Figure 40. In this early 1940s puzzle from *Jingle Jangle Comics*, Carlson uses the same techniques he developed for Peter Puzzlemaker to help drum up support for World War II salvage drives.

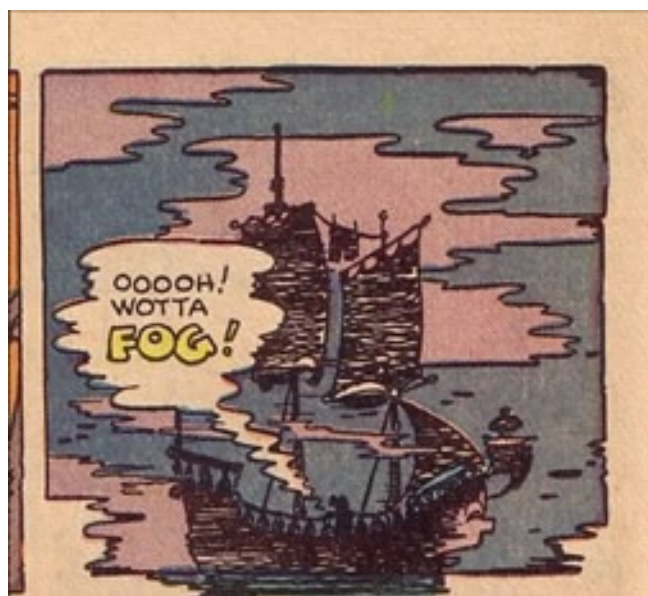




Figure 41. Comparing Carlson's 1926 cover for *John Martin's Book* [figure 41] with a single silhouetted panel from a 1947 story from *Jingle Jangle Comics* #36 [figure 42], we can begin to explore the rich moments of playfully self-conscious overlap that drives much of his distinctively slippery narrative.



Figure 42. From *Jingle Jangle Comics* #36.

Big cats and self-mockery aren't Carlson's only interests, however. In some inspired moments of paradoxical metaphor a "clock's hands get laid off due to" (*Jingle Jangle Comics* #11) a domestic knickknack reads "Ho-Hum Sweet Home umbrella stand full of exotic birds is marked for use by "parrotsols Only" (*Comics* #6). One moment of particularly astute lingual fission takes place when tricked by one of the Green Witches' bad spells. A serpentine series of alphabetic surrounds the young hero, but the spell is so poor that it cannot make out a correct word and the Prince soon frees himself from the pile of haplessly correct and consonants.

30

These moments of foregrounded cognitive fancy initiate a doubly chaotic conscious engagement. Most readers are well-versed in the experiential interpreting comics, although its precise theoretical explanation provokes debate. Whether you prefer R.C. Harvey's essentially codependent blending pictures, Scott McCloud's continuous gutter-driven use of subjective clock

Goffman's rim-balanced framework of successive experiences, Thierry systemic schema, or Phillippe Marion's psychically graphiated enunciation of st our "comics" experience hinges on a reader's progressive self-propelled infe space, plot, and timing. Yet, Carlson's comic book works hail a reader's abilitie ways that his puzzles test our intuitive mettle. His actual linear plots and his are mere fobs – the shell-like borders that contain his teaming enigmas. Our u through the comic story and its design matters less than our conte appreciation of the sudden confounding conceits that arise sporadically, with His anagrams, puns, and word corruptions rarely relate to the larger story in an consistent way. Instead, they spark confusion and curiosity, retarding our progress from panel to panel in order to draw more attention to the fascina meaning that lie within and between them. Like crosswords or riddles, backtrack and second-guess ourselves in Carlson's tricky switchbacks, I cognitively entangled in his contradictions, absurdities, and mysteries a characters. Unlike Dimwitty, Panatella, or the sun-burnt Cheesecake, however the surprising overlaps of image-text puns like "footmen," suggestive literalism yard lion," or allusive interpolations like one sidebar reference to "Moc Jiller's J we fight to finish the game, complete the riddle, or catch the allusion, we are 1 more deeply into Carlson's idiomatic worldview and refine our own analytic ab

31 From the 1910s to the 1950s, George Leonard Carlson forged fanciful texts to inspire young readers, but his interweaving of adult concerns with language, n and irony led to intensely evocative, stylistically daring, and unfairly neglig puzzles, and comics that Prince Dimwitty himself salutes as an "awful lot of a this slim and limited survey suggests, every phase of Carlson's work as a designer, cartoonist, and riddle-poet teams with rare intelligence and wild ene Peter Puzzlemaker games to Pretzelburg and beyond, Carlson's contributions visual media and children's culture are just beginning to receive their proper d

Acknowledgements

32 Special thanks to R.C. Harvey, Martin Gardner, Gary Groth, and Ron Gou

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Note

[1] Quotes in Paragraph 8 selected from Carlson's *New York Times* obituary of September 1962; an archival clipping from his September 1962 *Bridgeport Telegram* obit; and Martin Gardner's unpublished correspondence with Carlson's surviving family in February 1974.

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