

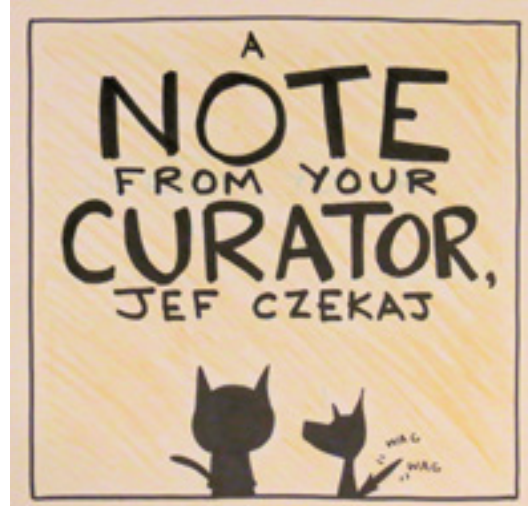
## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

Pam Rosenblatt

### How Somerville Cartoonist/Illustrator Jef Czekaj lets “doodles take their own paths”

On one December 30, 2013 afternoon, *Wilderness House Literary Review's* arts editor, Pam Rosenblatt,

was looking at her Facebook page and saw that an up-coming exhibit, “Doodles”, at the Nave Gallery Annex, Somerville, Massachusetts, was about to take place. The curator’s name is Jef Czekaj, a cartoonist and children’s book writer and illustrator whom Pam had interviewed a few years back when she reported for *The Somerville News*, Somerville, Massachusetts. The show happened from January 10, 2014 – January 26, 2014. Pam enjoys a good doodle, so she emailed Jef and requested an interview. Jef replied and agreed to a second interview. But he requested the interactions to be via email. Pam accepted the request. We hope you find the resulting interview’s comments from Jef as intriguing as *Wilderness House Literary Review* has!



WHLR: How would you like your name to be written in the Wilderness House Literary Review article?

JC: Jef Czekaj

WHLR: You currently live in Somerville, Massachusetts. Have you always lived in this city? Or are you originally from another place? If yes, where?

JC: I grew up on Long Island in New York State. I moved to Somerville, oh, about 15 years ago or so.

WHLR: Are you a college graduate? If yes, what college/university did you attend?

JC: I have a BA in Linguistics from Binghamton University.

WHLR: You’re an established cartoonist, a children’s book writer and illustrator, and now a curator for “Doodles”, an art show that occurred at Nave Gallery Annex at the beginning of 2014. You’re also a doodler. How did you get involved with these aspects of drawing? How did/do you develop your doodles?!

JC: I drew a lot as a kid and then, strangely enough, as I progressed through high school and college I more or less stopped drawing. I don’t think I took a single art or creative writing course in college. But then, after I graduated, I was living alone in Ithaca, NY and had a lot of time by myself. Writing and drawing reemerged. I started doing a mini-comic/zine about R2-D2 in a rock band and trading it with other people who were

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making zines. That eventually led to me getting a monthly strip in Nickelodeon Magazine, which allowed me to quit my day job.

I also silk-screened posters for local bands (including my own). The editor of a local publisher saw one of my posters and offered me the chance to illustrate a book. That led to my author/illustrator career. This was my first time curating a show by myself. It was very stressful. I love the way the show came out, but I wouldn't want to do this one a regular basis.

Doodling is probably the most important part of the creative process for me. I always carry around a sketchbook with me and try to draw in it as much as possible. I'm not really very interested in "drawing from life", so I just let my mind wander and let the doodles take their own paths.

WHLR: What materials do you work with to create your artworks? Pencil, pen, ink, marker, crayon? And, if you use more than one material, what is the process of creating a doodle, comic strip, or illustration?

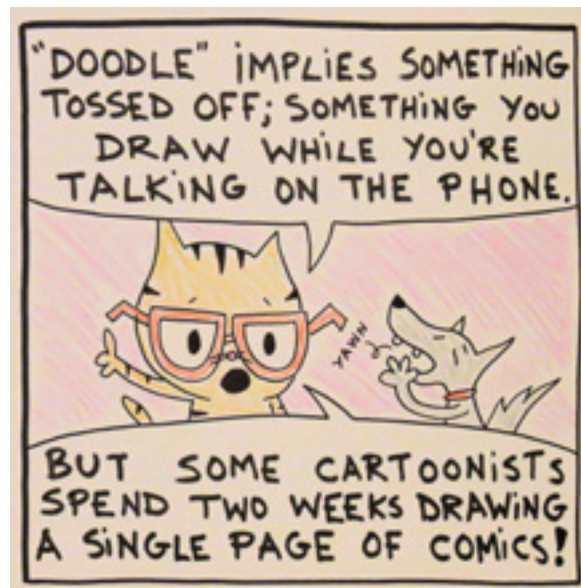
JC: For my sketchbook, I just use mechanical pencils or whatever I can get my hands on. For finished book art, I draw with a brush and ink on Bristol and then I scan it and color it using a really old version of Photoshop.

WHLR: You've written comic strips like *Grandpa and Julie: Shark Hunters* for Nickelodeon and books like *Yes, Yes, Yaul!*, *Oink-A-Doodle-Moo*, and *A Call for a New Alphabet*. These writings and illustrations are all humorous and geared for children, but I think they appeal to the adult sensibility as well.

JC: Thanks for saying that. I hate it when adults talk down to kids. I hated it as a kid and I hate seeing it now. I'd much rather have stuff in my books that kids have to ask their parents to explain than to be too simplistic. As a child, there's so much you encounter every day that you don't understand, and you just kind of roll with it. I remember watching *Bugs Bunny* cartoons and there was so much in it that I didn't "get." I didn't understand any of the references to old movie stars. I didn't care. I just knew that it was funny. Also, I know that parents are forced to read books to their kids over and over again. So, I try to put some stuff in there for the grown-ups too.

WHLR: Where do you develop your ideas from?

JC: From all sorts of places. Many of my ideas are sort of sparked by some other form of art: a song, a movie, a novel, a painting. Somehow my brain processes it and it comes out as a kid's book. I'm working on a book now that was definitely sparked by the very-NOT-kid-friendly Harmony Korine movie, *Spring Breakers*.



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WHLR: Are your ideas based on reality, or do they simply emerge from your creative imagination?

JC: They are certainly not based on reality. I guess I'm just not very interested in reality.

WHLR: What would you call your style of doodling/drawing?

JC: I definitely draw very "cartoony." No one would ever call my style "realistic." I like flat drawings. I like bright colors. I like bold line work.

WHLR: You have steady themes throughout your works: rapping, hip hop, dancing, friendship, politics. Could you name more themes?

JC: Um, that seems like a pretty good list. I don't sit down and try to write a book about a specific theme. Usually the themes emerge organically. Music and friendship are very important in my life, so it make sense that those would be themes that I turn to.

WHLR: Why create books based on these ideas? Why create characters like Yaul or X or Grandpa and Julie?

JC: I have no idea. I'm just trying to crack myself up. I'm just lucky that other people like them (and pay me money for them).

WHLR: What is the process you go through to write a comic strip or to create a book? Is it a standard process or have you developed a unique process?

JC: Like I mentioned earlier, I always carry around a sketchbook. I sketch and sketch and doodle and doodle and usually I find myself drawing one particular character and usually their personality and story slowly come into focus. Each book is a pretty different experience for me. A book like *Cat Secrets*, which, ironically enough is my most popular book, was more or less written in a day. The book I'm currently working on has been taking me a year and still isn't done.

WHLR: What part of cartoon history influences your artwork?

JC: My family wasn't very much of a reading family, so I have to admit that many of my influences are actually TV shows and comic strips. Uh, let's see: the *Muppets*, *Looney Toons*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Far Side*, *Bloom County*. As a kid, I loved *Spy vs. Spy* in Mad Magazine.

WHLR: Why do you create comic characters and stories?

JC: I'm not sure. I've done it since I was a young child and it's fun and rewarding.

WHLR: What do you get from the experience? And what would you like your readers, both children and adults, to learn from the reads?

JC: Honestly, I write my books entirely for me. The most satisfying part of the process for me is the initial spark of the idea. The rest of it, the actual writing, drawing, editing and publishing is obviously necessary for me to make a career out of this, but less interesting for me. I'm not really so concerned about people "learning" anything from my books. I don't want to force-feed a moral to anyone.

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WHLR: You teach comic character and comic strip drawing to children, as seen when you volunteered your time at the Somerville Public Library. Do you have some fun stories to tell about encounters with some of the children? And what do you receive from the experience(s)?

JC: I love doing school and library visits. Kids are incredibly honest. They'll tell you if they don't like something. So, when I get a good reaction from them, I know it's the real deal. I know I did something right. It also helps me to see what works and doesn't work in my books. For my first couple of books, I didn't actually try them out with any kids. I wrote them and then they were published. But then, once I started reading them in front of groups of kids, I could feel parts of the books where I started to lose their attention. And that definitely influenced the way I write my books now.

WHLR: Do you have any mentors or fellow cartoonists/illustrators that have played a role in your career development? And are there any words of wisdom that you would like to suggest to people who love to doodle, create comic strips or children's books?

JC: When I first moved to Somerville, I found an incredibly thriving underground comics scene. The comic book store Million Year Picnic was a meeting place for a bunch of people doing similar work to what I was interested in. I'm convinced that if I didn't fall in with these folks, there's no way I'd be doing what I'm doing now. Tom Devlin, who worked at Million Year Picnic and eventually founded Highwater Books, was incredibly supportive. Other local artists like Jordan Crane, Brian Ralph, Ron Rege, Greg Cook became friends and influences.

Chris Duffy, the editor of the comics section of Nickelodeon Magazine was also incredibly important in my career development. He had strong opinions, but it never felt like he was trying to change your work. He just would nudge you in the right direction and it would make your work much stronger and funnier. I think that's what a good editor does.

As far as advice, the only thing I have to say is: really just do it for you. Don't worry about your "career." Don't worry about your website, your portfolio, your promotional skills, how expensive and up-to-date your tools are. Just draw and draw and write and write.

