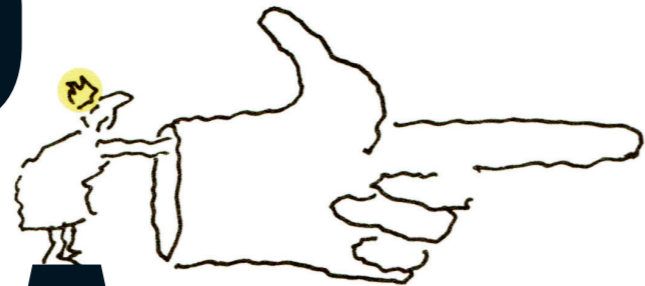


# FIRM GRASP ON A SHAKY LINE

Interview and  
introduction by  
Matt Willey.  
Photographs by  
Maria Spann



R.O. Blechman's career has spanned illustration, graphic design and film-making. His deceptively simple style masks a fierce intellect.



**R.O.** Blechman's first book, *The Juggler of Our Lady*, was published in 1953. Made in a single evening, that book (a graphic novel before the term existed) established a way of working that has remained remarkably consistent over a career now well in to its seventh decade. It is an extraordinary career. A career so wide ranging in its output and achievements that it becomes nigh impossible to summarise. (I would gently urge you to seek out a copy of his 1980 book *R. O. Blechman, Behind the Lines*, which includes a foreword by his friend Maurice Sendak.) Blechman, known as Bob to his friends, is many things – an illustrator, a cartoonist, a film-maker, a designer, a writer – but above all he is one of the great storytellers.

Blechman's trembling and unsteady-seeming line is instantly recognisable as his and his alone. It is a gentle style of drawing, tentative and honest, and it can be disarmingly direct. The drawings appear utterly benign and that somehow seems to allow them to sidestep some process within your thinking, a process with which other drawings must negotiate, and affect you emotionally – more directly. It's a trick of sorts, one that allows a mild-mannered man to get close enough, through sheer benevolence, to wallop you over the head with an idea.

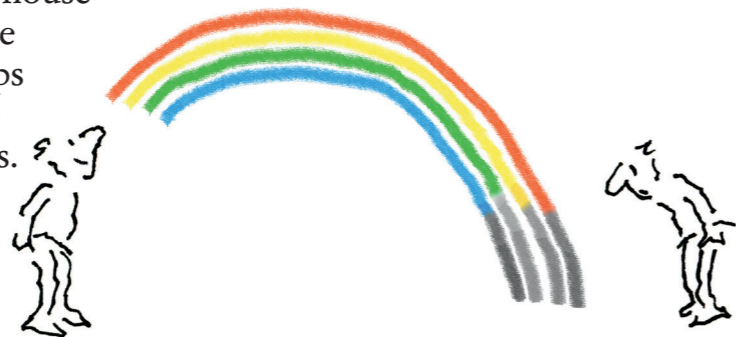
Few storytellers are able to deliver such emotional clout with such simplicity. Fewer still are able to wrap up complicated notions of humour, politics or anger in just a few carefully considered, juddering lines. That economy of line (it is often hard to imagine a way in which his drawings could be reduced any further) only works because the drawings are underpinned by a fierce intelligence.

Almost as unique as the line itself is the fact that a style of drawing so simple and so singular could be so powerfully effective for so long. Sendak noted 'It is, at first glance, a dangerous style for an artist to lock into. It's so specific, so special; where can you go from there? Blechman's refinement of that style – the paradox of his further condensing his miniature hieroglyphs to draw larger meanings – is a marvel.'

The apparent simplicity of Blechman's work, or rather the assumed ease with which the drawings appear to be created, is deceptive. Each line is scrutinised and deliberated over and, often, done again and again until it is right, until it works. The fact that the drawings then present themselves as effortless little scribbles is one of the more remarkable things about his talent.

When I met the artist and writer Tomi Ungerer in Dublin, his eyes lit up when I mentioned Blechman. 'Bob is one of the great gentlemen of life!' he said, raising a glass of red wine. He added later, by phone: 'Bob measures all of his words. Whatever he says absolutely reflects what he thinks. He is intellectually honest with himself and with the world he lives in ... He is a man of integrity.'

On one of my first visits to meet Bob, some time in the spring of 2014, he picked me up from Wassaic train station in a bottle-green '96 Volvo 940 with license plates that read INK TANK. We drove to his house talking about Saul Steinberg, Robert Brownjohn and the weather – there was a storm coming. On subsequent trips I took a tape recorder with me, but lacked the discipline to make those recordings work as meaningful interviews. I rather enjoyed it when our conversations meandered off to wherever conversations tend to when you're not worrying about a tape recorder. This interview was, eventually, conducted by email.



Previous page. One of Blechman's weekly spot illustrations for poetry in *The New York Times Magazine*, which he has been doing since the title's 2015 redesign. This image is for *From the King* by Nick Makoha, 2017. Below. Spot illustration for the poem *Remaking the Music Box* by Geoffrey Hilsabeck, published in *The New York Times Magazine*, 2017.

**Matt Willey: You were born in Brooklyn in 1930. Tell me a little about some of your early memories.**

R. O. Blechman: I was born a year after that great storm, the Depression, struck. But there was no sign of it on East 26th Street, Brooklyn. None. The men all went to work, ties neatly knotted on their shirts, Stetsons set firmly on their heads, the wives setting up tables for their regular games of Mah Jongg, and us kids playing stickball with our homemade bats – broomsticks with their brushes sawed off. No, life was good in our little suburban-like kingdom. The only interruption to our routine was when a long shadow lazily drifted over us, a Zeppelin returning to its home base in New Jersey.

I guess I was taught that I was special. My mother considered me a Blechman, the son of a father who owned a big Dry Goods Store in lower Manhattan (the building now houses Scholastic Publications). At 5pm every day, while the ladies were shouting Buff, Boom, Crack (or whatever those Chinese words were for Mah Jongg), I was dealing with Aleph, Bet, Gimmel, the letters taught in Hebrew School. I was a bad, or I suppose an indifferent, student. Who needed to learn that crazy language? And so I didn't, not well at least – although once I astonished Miss Berkson when I effortlessly translated a Hebrew passage as if it were a page from *Doctor Dolittle*.

That seemed to be a pattern in my life, that sudden explosion of energy and creativity. I remember one year in summer camp, I guess I was six or seven years old, I put on a one-person show (*Me!*) for the entire camp. I promoted it, wrote it, found material for it, put on my own make-up, and then performed it. Solo. All the while, the pennies I had collected for admission, which I had piled on a nearby piano, were rapidly disappearing – taken by a few of the kids. But did I care? You bet your life I didn't. Not when it was me on that stage, me, dancing, singing, strutting, speaking.

**Did you draw as a kid? Were there any early signs of what you would eventually end up doing? Or was there something that you wanted to be when you grew up?**

I had no real interest in drawing, not as a kid. Sure I drew Stukas and Spitfires in dogfights, and sure I copied comic-strip characters, but I did these as much to show off as to amuse myself. I was no Milton Glaser or Edward Sorel who just had to draw, who couldn't keep their hands off crayons or paint. Not me.

If I was fascinated by any art form, it was film. I built 'theatres', shoeboxes where I would turn a handmade crank to move strips of images, hand-drawn or cut from a Sunday newspaper comic, past an open 'screen'. But did I think of becoming a film-maker? Never. That was beyond my imagining.

Here's the crazy thing. As a thirteen-year old, now living in Manhattan, I applied to the High School of Music and Art, even though my art teacher in Junior High School refused to write a letter of recommendation for me. And how could she? I was unable to copy photographs from *The National Geographic* magazine. But I applied, handed in a portfolio, and took the examination.

Months later my mother asked me, 'Buddy,' (that was my nickname), 'Buddy, did you ever hear from that art school?'

'Yeah.'

'So what happened?' (Knowing full well they couldn't have accepted me.)

'They took me.'

'So you'll go.'

'I suppose.'

Maybe the reason I applied to art school was my next-door neighbour. She was a young, blonde, very beautiful, very Bohemian, French lady who happened to be an accomplished painter. She had covered every wall in her apartment with scenes of Central Park (we were living in an apartment house facing the park). One of her murals had a donkey painted over a light switch – the switch located in the donkey's ass. I was sometimes asked to turn the light on. Now if this was art, this was for me!

But did I ever think that I would become an artist? No. That never entered my head, not until college. It was only in college that I began to draw – political cartoons for the college newspaper, occasional posters, a cover for the literary magazine, and once, murals for a school dance – murals that covered every wall of the gymnasium.

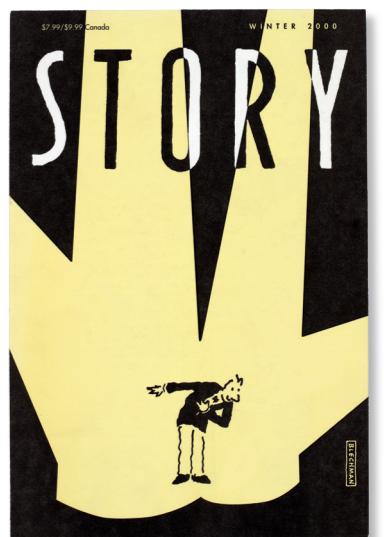
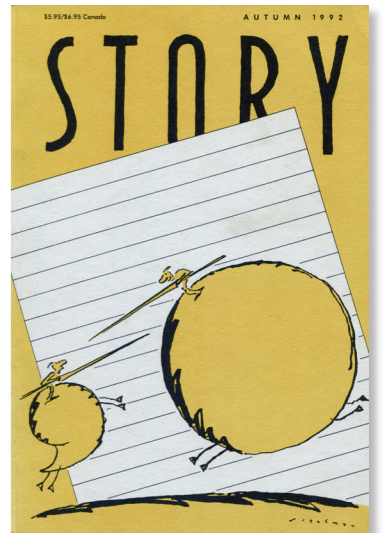
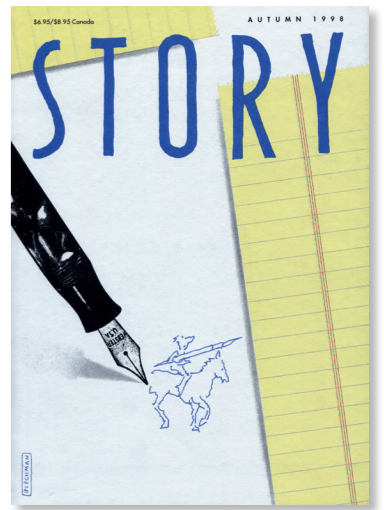
**I presume *The Juggler of Our Lady* put you on the map to a certain extent?**

The Korean War (euphemistically termed 'The Conflict') was raging, but I was never sent to Korea. That's a long story, which I'll go into later. For now, I'll speak about what happened when I graduated college (majoring in literature and history, with a minor in art history – no studio art classes at all).

My book *The Juggler of Our Lady* came out in 1953, soon after I graduated college. It received a lot of hoopla – things like a front page write-up in the book review section of a major New York newspaper, *The Herald Tribune*. I suppose Oxford University Press knew about it because they commissioned me to illustrate an edition of the Broadway play *Harvey*. As I look at those *Harvey* drawings now, I shudder. My lines – rigid, lifeless, no character to them at all. I tried different things – sometimes drawing with a pencil, liking the graphite quality that gave me, even adopting Ben Shahn's stitched line, a look that was then popular among illustrators. Eventually I settled on my now trademark shaky line, a look partly natural, partly contrived. Then the draft caught up with me, and I traded my pen and pencil for a rifle.

**I remember you telling me a story about bumping into the designer and illustrator Bob Gill at a bus station, and how that turned out to be a fortuitous chance encounter. Could you remind me what happened?**

Since I was now eligible to get killed in Korea I decided, what the hell, I'd try my hand at selling the cartoons I had done for my college newspaper. That and other work I had done in college, posters, brochures, the not-too-good cover for the literary magazine, things like that. Returning to Manhattan, I was in the Greyhound Bus Terminal when somebody shouted, 'Stop! Don't move. Stay there.' It turned out to be Bob Gill. He was drawing me for his sketchbook.



Fiction magazine *Story* (originally published from 1931-67) was revived in 1989 by Richard and Lois Rosenthal. Blechman designed every cover from its relaunch to its closure in 1999 with the Winter 2000 issue, above.

Gill, as it happened, was a classmate of mine from the High School of Music and Art, somebody I hadn't seen in four years.

'Bob,' I asked him, 'Why are you doing this drawing?'

'It's an assignment. Something for *Seventeen* magazine.'

When I learned that I asked if I could show him my artwork.

'Sure,' he said, handing me his business card (a business card!) 'Sure. We can meet.'

A day or so later he gave me a list of people to see. One of them was a designer who specialised in book jackets. Soon I met the designer, and because he was connected to publishers I showed him a picturebook I had done for a college seminar in humour.

My picturebook, *Titus Fortunatus*, or *Why Rome Fell*, was done as the final thesis for the seminar.

(Incidentally, I received a B-, the lowest grade in the class, although that B- was shared by one other student, William Goldman, the screenwriter for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* - ironic, as we were the only students in the class who went on to careers in our respective fields.)

The designer suggested that I show my book to an editor at the publishing house, Henry Holt. At Holt, the editor said that he could only publish picturebooks with holiday themes. He probably said this to get rid of me, but that night I called a college friend of mine and asked if he knew of any holiday-related stories. As it happened, he did - a story about a juggler, set in the Middle Ages.

The next night, a copy of Anatole France's *The Juggler of Our Lady* in front of me, and a copy of Will Durant's *Age of Faith*, next to me for research, I drew the book. And a few days later I surprised the editor by showing up with my version. The book was accepted for publication. Pure luck! If Gill hadn't been at the Greyhound station on an assignment for *Seventeen* magazine to draw a young passenger ... if that young passenger didn't happen to be me ... if Gill hadn't been my high school classmate ... if Gill hadn't given me the one name of the one person who knew the one editor who might have been interested in what I had done as a college thesis ... if I hadn't called the one friend who had given me just the right story to draw ... etc, etc, etc. You get the picture.

**And wasn't there a story about Bob Gill and Charlie Watts working at the same advertising agency? Then a further connection to Charlie Watts and you a couple of decades later?**

When you ask about Bob Gill and Charlie Watts [of the Rolling Stones] what you're really asking about is my life in film, so here it is. I had an animation studio for 27 years, The Ink Tank. During that time I managed to produce two 60-minute programmes for PBS [Public Broadcasting Service], a few short films, and dozens and dozens of commercials (and not many of them stupid, either). But my dream project was always to do an animated feature, something that had always eluded me. And at times I came close.

There was the time a friend telephoned me early in the morning. 'Bob, did you hear NPR [National Public Radio] this morning?'

'Not at ...' (looking at my alarm clock) '... ten before eight.'

'Well, Charlie Watts was being interviewed.

And he said, "I have two heroes in my life.

Charlie Parker and the cartoonist, R. O. Blechman, who I hear is still alive and drawing."

That got me up, and fast! When we bought his CD, *From One Charlie*, we noticed that there was a booklet included in the album, a small graphic novel written and drawn by Watts as a tribute to Charlie Parker. That got me thinking, 'Why not animate the story?' So my producer called Watts's agent, and a meeting was set up in London.

Now here's the back story. How did Watts learn about me? Before Watts was a member of the Rolling Stones, he was a guy in the bullpen of a small London advertising agency, Charles Hobson (described by Gill, then the agency's head art director, as a 'hack agency' - Gill was never one to mince words). Gill must have shown Watts my book *The Juggler of Our Lady*. Now Watts and Gill had more than art in common. They were both practising musicians. Gill's mother was a piano teacher, and Gill himself was an accomplished jazz pianist who, as a teenager, played the Catskills hotel circuit.

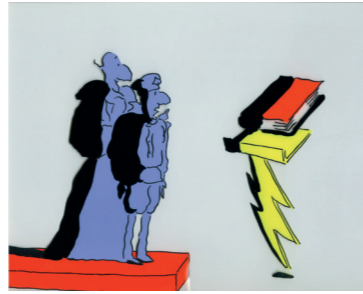
Occasionally Gill would play the piano, and Watts the drums, at agency events. And on more than one occasion Gill told me he would tell Watts (real Gill-speak, this): 'Forget this agency stuff. You're too dumb to be a designer. You ought to be a drummer.' And that's how the Stones got Rolling.

Now here's how I tried to get my Parker film rolling. I realised early on that Watts's Charlie Parker story, and his drawings, weren't making it for me, that I really had to do my own Charlie Parker film, that it had to be with my own drawings. Watts agreed, and I put pen to paper and did a storyboard called *Bird in Flight*, a double entendre - Parker as a high-flying musician and Parker as an addict. Since Parker was called 'Bird' I drew all my characters as animals of one kind or another. Not a bad notion, and one that allowed me to play with reality (something I'd wanted to do, since I had a political agenda about the Kansas City scene that I wanted to utilise).

A few meetings took place that year, maybe two in London, as many in New York, with Watts even mentioning at one point that his friend, Clint Eastwood, might want to get involved. But when Watts, at one of our meetings, asked me: 'Bob, why do you want me in this film?' I should have known, poof!, it was all over.

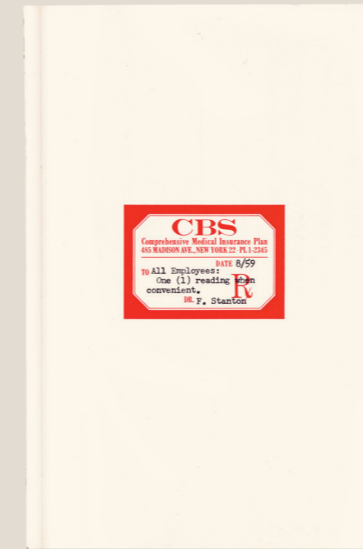
**You once told me that you consider yourself a film-maker more than anything else, and that it was with some regret that you were being interviewed as an illustrator. Is that a deep-seated regret?**

Now here's where I goofed - big time. Here's where I threw away my chance to become a full time, professionally trained, film-maker, threw away a career-changing, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. After basic training in the army, I received my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] which assigned me to a special arm of the military. The arm? The best. The greatest. The most unreal. An assignment to go to film school in New York City. New York, my city, my home. And to learn film. My dream!



Artwork from Blechman's 56-minute version of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* (*The Soldier's Tale*), made by his animation studio The Ink Tank for PBS's Great Performances series in 1984. The violinist soldier is repeatedly tempted by the devil, voiced by Swedish actor Max von Sydow. Blechman has said that *The Soldier's Tale* was 'one of the most gratifying things I was able to do.' D. B. Dowd writes: 'Blechman's film enriches Stravinsky with range and wit. The story, about a Faustian trade - a violin for a life of ease - supplies several turns of fate. Stravinsky's music samples early twentieth-century styles, and Blechman's film plays along. As always with Blechman, the modesty of the drawing belies his ambition. The directorial vision ranges from the pastoral to the Palladian, from Constructivism to Tenebrism to Art Deco, with visual quotations that range from Jean Arp to Maxfield Parrish. Like its source, the film engages questions of moral cost, yet retains a generosity of spirit.' On 22 April 2018, the film will be screened with live ensemble in Manchester, UK.

With this 1959 handbook for employees of broadcaster CBS, Blechman made an important but potentially boring official publication (an explanation of the CBS Comprehensive Medical Insurance Plan for eligible employees and their dependents) into a gripping visual narrative, complete with witty information graphics.



applied to any members of that family for the remainder of that calendar year.

NOTE: If you or a covered dependent have medical expenses that are applied toward the deductible amount during the last three months of the year—October, November, December—you can use those expenses to reduce the deductible amount for the following calendar year.

**Maximum benefits** The maximum payable for you and for each of your covered dependents is \$7,500 in a calendar year, for Type A and Type B expenses combined.

The total lifetime maximum payable for any one individual is \$15,000 for all sicknesses or injuries. However, when benefits of at least \$1,000 have been paid for any one individual and evidence of complete recovery and insurability is submitted and accepted by the insurance company, then the full \$15,000 maximum will be restored.

**The Plan in action** The way the Comprehensive Medical Insurance Plan can be applied to some specific cases is described on the next two-page spread.

**Maternity benefits** None of the benefits which are described in the previous pages apply to medical expenses due to pregnancy or resulting childbirth.

For a dependent wife, or a female employee insured for dependent coverage who becomes pregnant while covered under the Plan, benefits are payable as follows, without a deductible:

- \$175.00—for normal delivery of child or children
- \$262.50—for Caesarean section or ectopic pregnancy
- Up to \$87.50—for miscarriage

However, if there are severe medical or surgical complications arising out of pregnancy or resulting childbirth, any additional expenses will be covered if they qualify as Type A or Type B expenses under the Comprehensive Medical Expense Plan.

**Mental illness** If you or any covered dependent is confined in a hospital or similar institution, the Plan will pay benefits on the same basis as any other illness.



Left. R. O. Blechman (photographed by Maria Spann) at work in his studio, a converted outhouse with woodburning stove and kitchen in the grounds of the farm he and his wife Moisha moved to in 1980, in Ancram, Columbia County, New York. 'He tends to start work at 10am and continues until his wife, Moisha, calls to say that dinner is ready,' writes Matt Willey. 'Although Bob is at his studio seven days a week he says most of his work consists of getting ideas when he's not at his desk.'

So what did I do? (I'm breaking into a cold sweat as I write this.) I turned it down. Flatly. And why? Because I was told that once I finished film school I would be sent to the war zone, not with a rifle, but with a camera. Which was nonsense, of course. And here's the kicker – I believed it. Sometimes I think God gave me three legs. Two to walk with, one to trip myself up with.

Here's another instance of that third leg in action. Shortly after having finished my production of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* [*The Soldier's Tale*], I received a telephone call from a lady with a heavy German accent. She explained that she was the wife of the late H. A. Rey, the author and illustrator of the *Curious George* books, a series which I loved, and loved reading to my kids at bedtime. Now she also had a love. She loved, just loved, my treatment of the Stravinsky. Would I consider animating a feature film based on her late husband's books?

I said no. Now why? Here's why ... After having animated the work of Igor Stravinsky's soldier, was I going to animate a monkey? Not me. Not when my heart was set on animating a panoramic epic set in ancient Rome, *The Golden Age* – a project that ended up with no more than a few minutes of (glorious, as it happened) studio-funded animation. Of course, if I had agreed to animate *Curious George*, I wouldn't be stuck in my country home (a hundred long miles from New York City), typing this out. No, I would be reclining by my Hollywood pool. Ouch! That third leg!

**Tell me about some of your contemporaries. As well as Gill, it's a formidable troupe – Robert Brownjohn, George Lois, Seymour Chwast, Tomi Ungerer and so on.**

Tomi Ungerer and I crossed paths often, either in Manhattan or the Hamptons where he had a summer place. Once I saw his summer sketchbook, amazed at the meticulously rendered nature

studies – so different from the drawings in his children's books. He later brought it all together in his paintings for *Das Grosse Liederbuch*, exquisitely rendered illustrations of songs from his Alsatian childhood.

Every Thanksgiving, Tomi would hold a dinner for his bachelor friends. The dinners were very formal, with finger bowls, crystal knife rests, and hand-drawn place cards. Each card had a drawing of a roast turkey on a platter, its shapely drumsticks sporting ladies' shoes. Pure Ungerer. I wish I had kept them.

Which reminds me of other cards I never kept – from a neighbour, Andy Warhol. He was then doing illustrations for I. Miller Shoes. His mailings consisted of stylised shoes, each coloured by hand. He drew them using the stitched line of Ben Shahn, then popular with illustrators. As soon as they arrived in my mail I would toss them out. Those cute shoes! Those cute angels and butterflies! Not for me, thank you. Into the trash can they went.

Tomi had a studio on 42nd Street, off Broadway. At the time – the late 1960s – this was a crime-ridden street, the seediest in all of Manhattan. But he had a splendid suite of rooms in a 1920s skyscraper. His two rooms were covered with walnut panelling and the entire fourth floor, his studio, was surrounded by an ornately carved wrap-around stone balcony. Rumour had it that the floor was originally occupied by Florenz Ziegfeld (of the Ziegfeld Follies).

Every Friday a group of us would meet for a game of basketball. Tony Palladino was a regular, as was Robert Brownjohn (Bj to all his friends, see *Eye* 04), and occasionally, Bob Gill (*Eye* 33)

Below. Thanksgiving place card for Moisha. *Nicholas Blechman writes: "When it comes to wrapping presents, nobody spends more time, or is as much of a perfectionist, as my father. For birthday celebrations or Christmas, he not only meticulously wraps gifts in unusual papers, but also always includes an original pen-and-ink drawing. Witty, simple, graphic, I treasure these cards."*



Partially collaged family holiday card from the 1980s, signed by all the family (Blechman, Moisha, Nicholas and Max). The card is based on Blechman's identity design for the British film company BFCS. Fellow cartoonist and graphic author Seth (pen name of Gregory Gallant, a Canadian cartoonist), wrote that Blechman's work 'is an embodiment of the less-is-more maxim ... This is cartooning boiled down to its elemental form ... Blechman's lines do not represent real people – they are real people.'

and George Lois (*Eye* 29). We played at a midtown YMCA. Afterwards, we treated ourselves to ice-cream sodas at a corner drug store.

Bj was then at the design agency Brownjohn, Chermayeff & Geismar. One of their clients was *Craft Horizons* magazine. For the Christmas holiday issue, Bj took sheets of Christmas wrapping paper, and bound them into the magazine. What a wild, crazy, festive, and totally appropriate idea – an actual craft in a crafts magazine! Bj later left for London, one of a large group of American designers who found jobs there. I met Bj in London – this was in 1960, during my European honeymoon. Gone was the rail-thin person I knew in New York. No basketball for him now. Not for a Sydney Greenstreet lookalike.

He briefly returned to the United States, and when we met borrowed \$20 from me. Tony Palladino and I were then in a short-lived design partnership, Blechman and Palladino. Bj visited us and gave Tony a large wooden period [full stop], beautifully gilded. He gave me a cracked wooden comma, its gold already flaking. I now no longer have it, but periods and commas have entered more than one of my designs and drawings.

#### And what about Maurice Sendak?

One of my friends was Maurice Sendak – although, as he once wrote of our friendship, 'Bob and I are typical colleagues / friends – we hardly see each other ...'. I remember meeting him at his home, a brownstone on a tiny Greenwich Village street. His apartment took me aback. This was the early 1950s, and all my friends' apartments (for those few not living at home) had walls exposed to the brick, and candles stuck in old Chianti bottles. But not Maurice. No, his home had wood panelling, and his furnishings might have been out of a Henry James novel. I later learned that he was a collector of Henry James first editions.

We were both starting out then, and I suppose it was around 1959 that Maurice surprised me by asking, 'How do I break into advertising?' I suppose his lifestyle was such that he needed more income than his children's books provided. Well, I gave him a list of art directors and agencies, but I doubt that he ever assembled a portfolio or even visited a single agency. Soon enough his books caught on and he became a solid citizen on Easy Street.

Our paths crossed professionally in 1972. I was then producing a Christmas special for PBS, and I used one of Maurice's Christmas cards as the opening sequence. The soundtrack was created by a good friend and marvellous composer, Arnold Black, and I was so impressed when Maurice congratulated him, not merely for the musical setting of his film segment, but for its 'Schubertian' sensibility. Schubertian? But Maurice knew his composers. Self-taught, he was no intellectual slouch. We met several years later. I can't remember the occasion except that Maurice had done a watercolour and wanted my opinion.

'My opinion? Maurice, it's fabulous.' He hugged me. I could not believe that he doubted the worth of that watercolour (it was fabulous). Years later I read something he had said about his work. 'A little part of me whispers it's no good.' I suppose you can leave the *shtetl* of Brooklyn (as he once described his birthplace, his first language was Yiddish), but the *shtetl* can never completely leave you.

#### What pieces of your work are you most fond of?

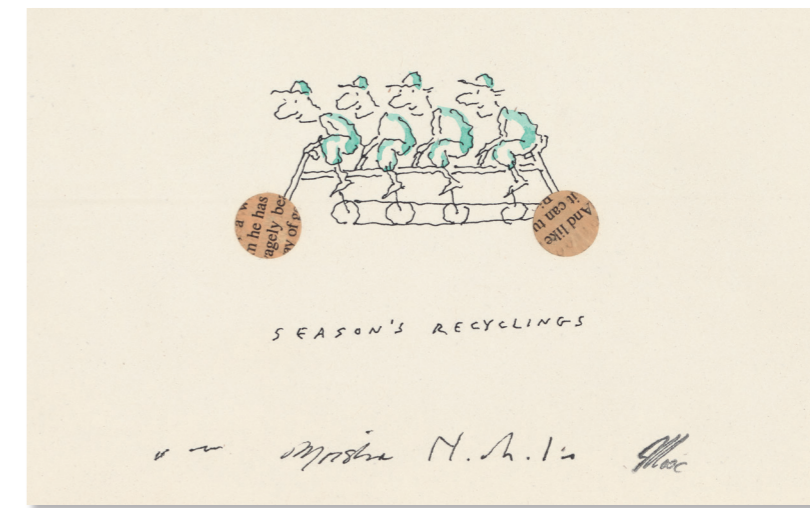
My favourites go all over the place, ranging from graphic stories to watercolours (my favourite medium). Sometimes I find myself amazed at how good some of them turn out. ('Did I do that?') In 1989 I received a telephone call from the publisher of *Story*, a magazine which was launched in the 1930s, died in the 1960s (the advent of television?), but was revived decades later by an Ohio-based publishing entrepreneur, Richard Rosenthal. His family had founded *Portfolio* magazine. He asked if he could buy some of my pick-up art to use as a cover for his magazine.

I said, 'No. I'll do something original for you.' 'But I can only give you an honorarium. \$100.' 'I'll take it.'

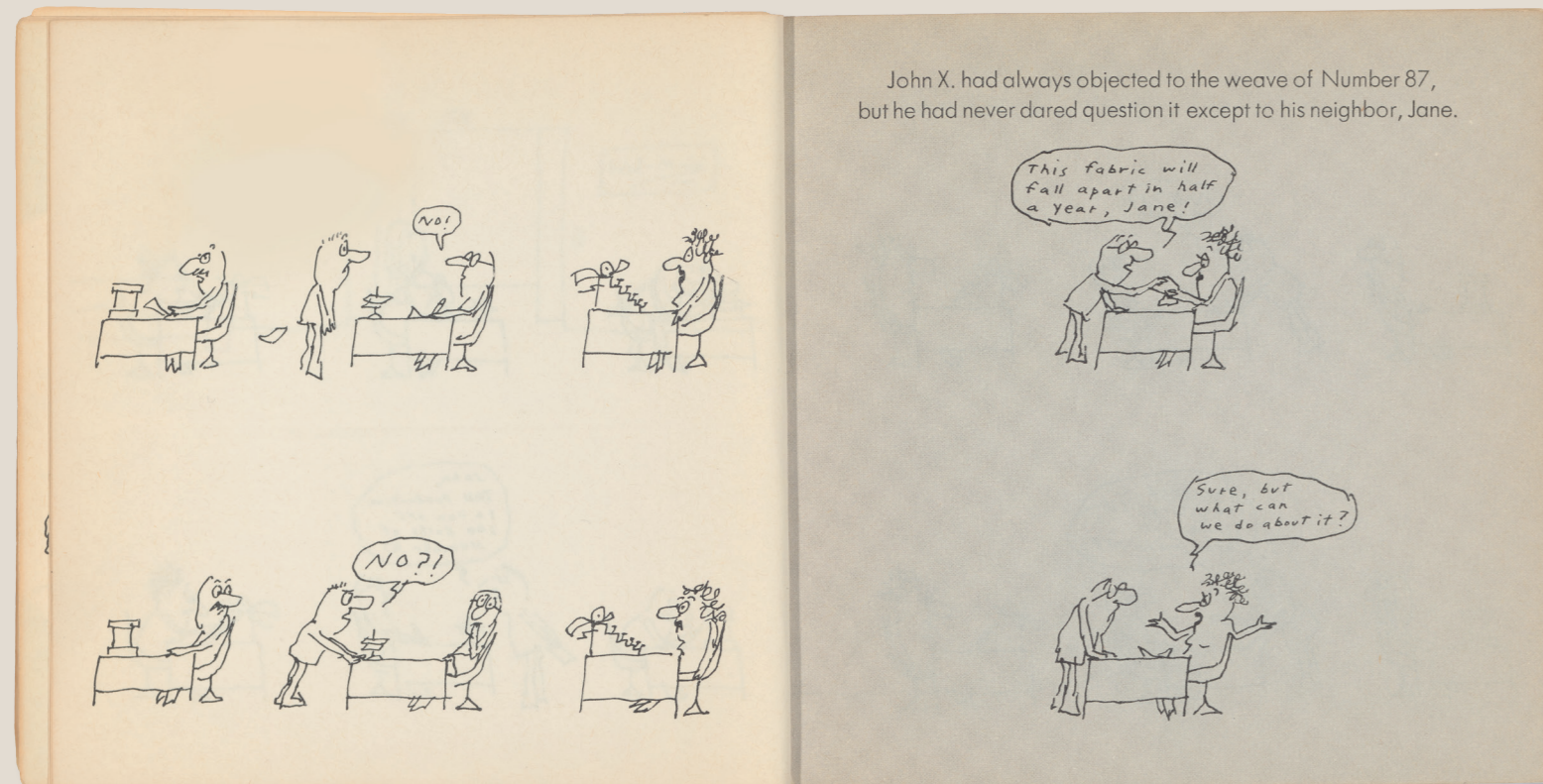
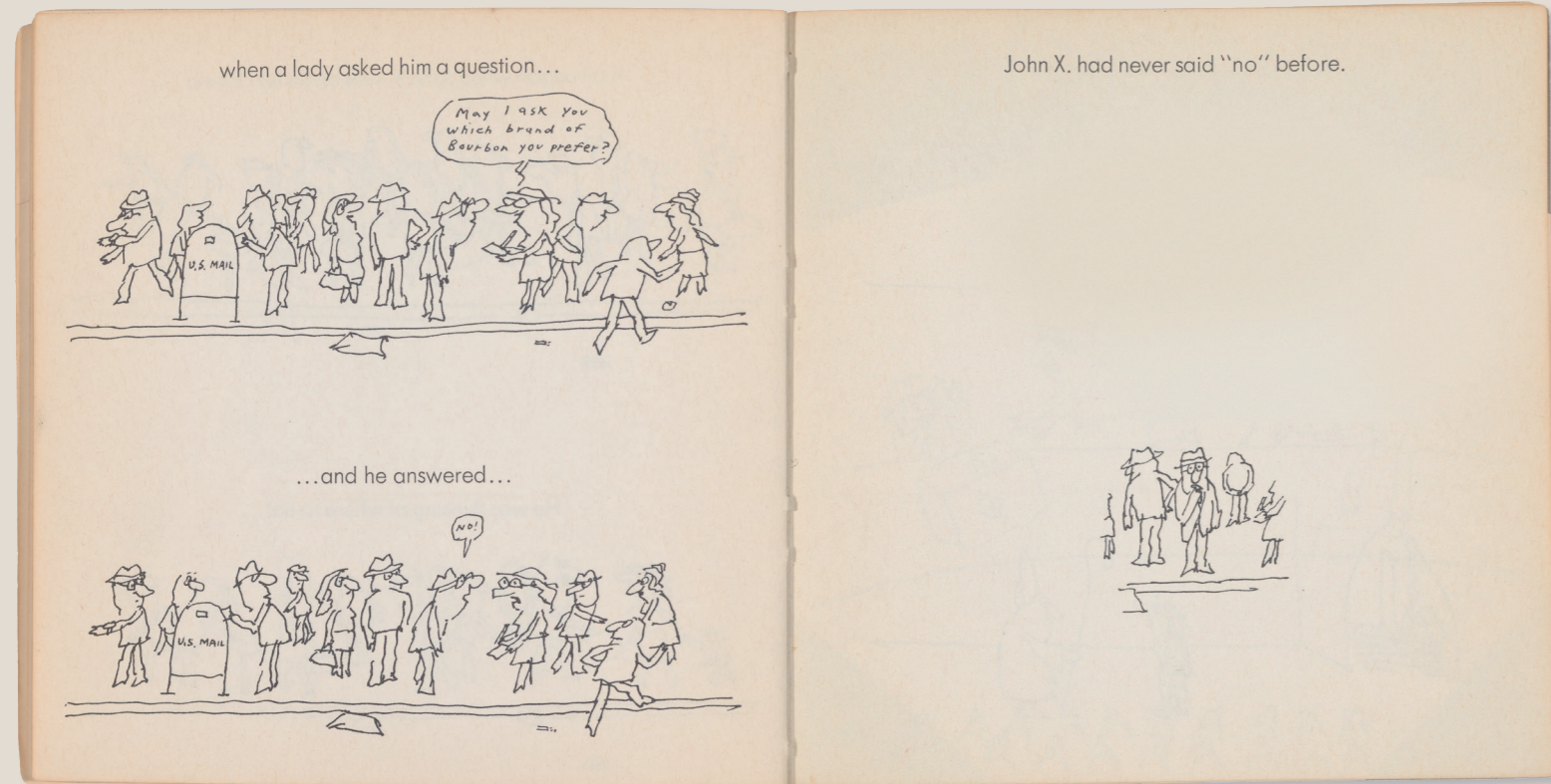
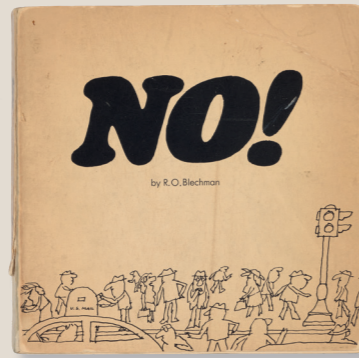
Why so quick? Because I love doing graphic design work, a welcome change from illustration.

My association with *Story* began a relationship in which I did every single cover for them – every one – during its ten-year lifespan. Incidentally, in a short while that \$100 a cover turned into \$1,200, but that was my least reward. My best was working for somebody with a good eye and an open mind.

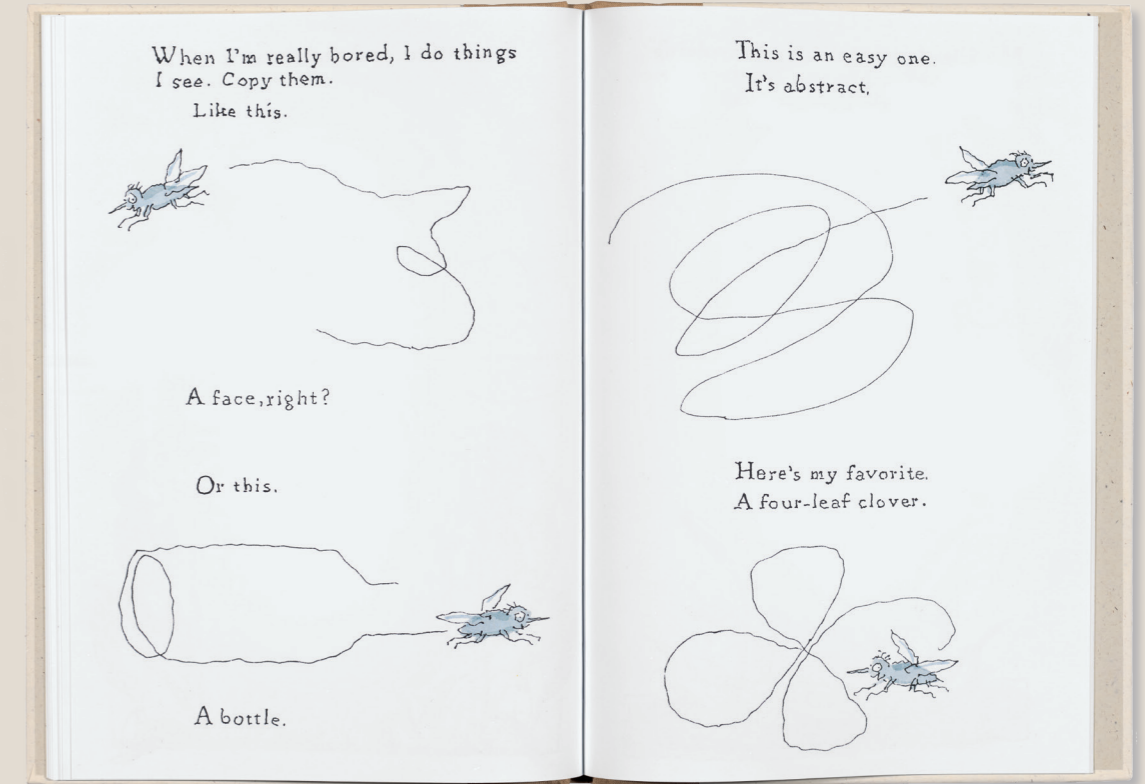
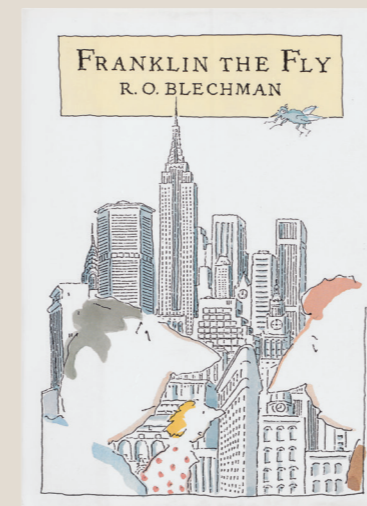
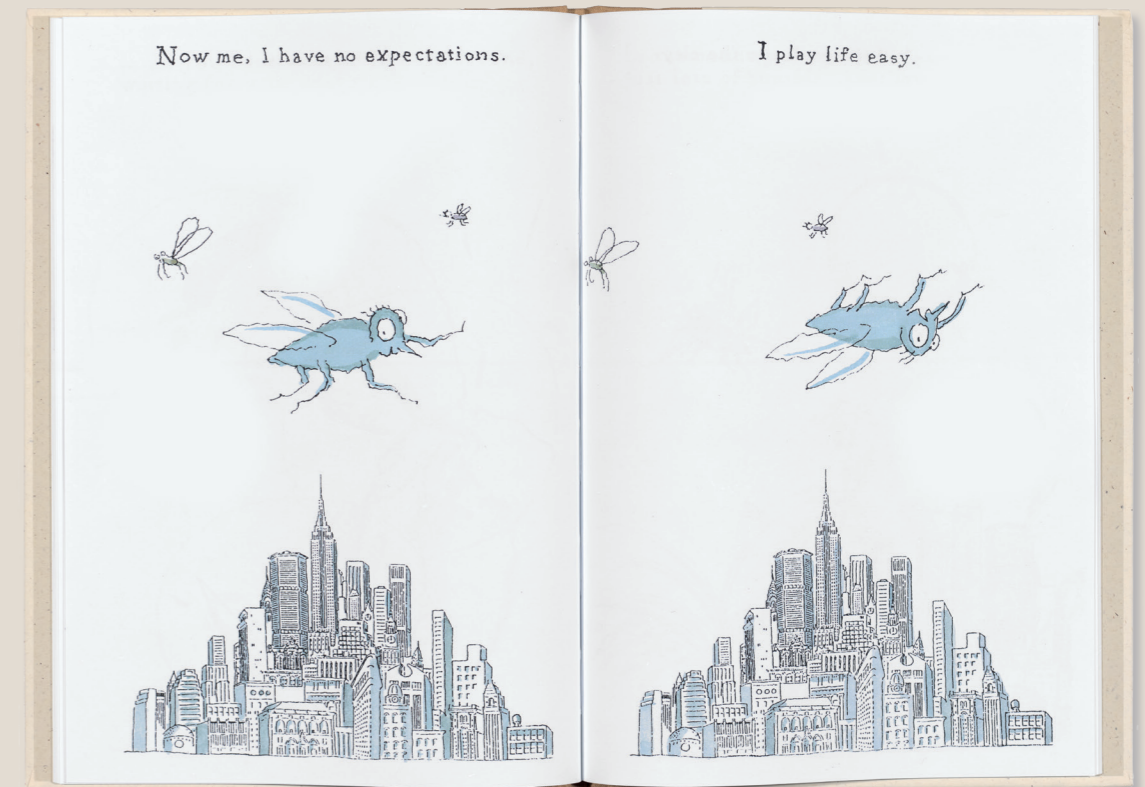
Moral: if money speaks, sometimes it pays to wear ear plugs.



**NO!**, The Dial Press, 1962. *Nicholas Blechman* writes, "One of Bob's earliest cartoon narratives is an exquisite, very small, black-and-white book, like a children's book for adults, which includes the story of a man who compulsively says "NO!". When his boss asks him to "tell production to run off 200 bolts of Number 87", John replies "NO!". I've always loved this one-man protest against the system."

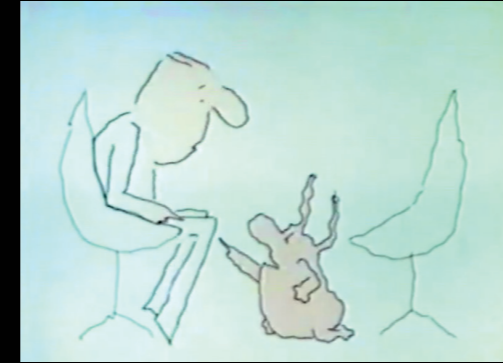
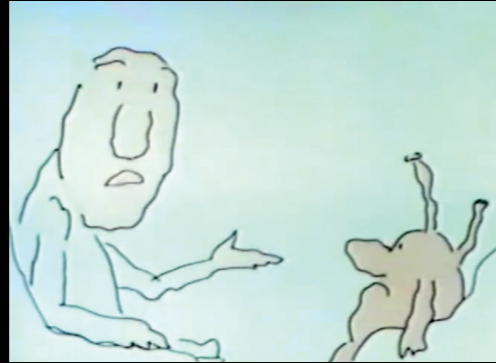


**Franklin the Fly**, Creative Editions, 2007, is a children's book about a philosophical fly from New York City. Franklin later saves a country-dwelling butterfly from capture by bothering a net-wielding collector.





You say one thing and your stomach says another ...  
Gentlemen!  
You've obviously never tried Alka-Seltzer.



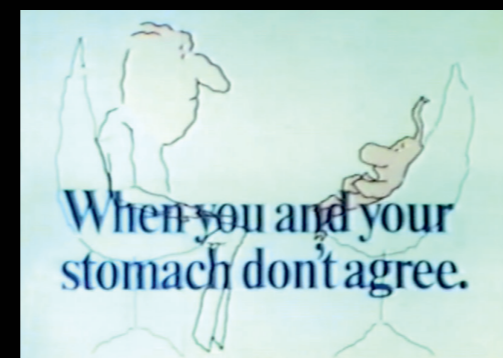
Now you can't expect him to give up the food he loves. Man does not live by bread alone ...



And you! When you eat spicy foods, when you over-eat, help your stomach out. Alka-Seltzer has alkalis that will calm your upset stomach and neutralise excess acidity. It even has a pain reliever for your head ...



You take care of him, and he won't bother you.



## The draughtsman's characters Blechman's Ink Tank made animations that were subtle, literate and humane

In an era of flat, cheap TV cartoons, R. O. Blechman offered the subtlety and humanity of an earlier era – films that were genuinely animated, writes *D. B. Dowd, whose library at Washington University in St. Louis holds Blechman's Ink Tank archive.*

He founded his animation studio The Ink Tank in 1977. At the time, he had worked in animation for more than a decade, having been apprenticed into the field at Storyboard Inc., under the great John Hubley, a co-founder of UPA, a landmark studio of the era. Blechman's work was introduced to audiences through broadcast bumpers and animated spots. One notable commercial, for Alka-Seltzer (voiced by Gene Wilder at his neurotic best), featured a disgruntled man and his agitated stomach in a therapy session. That ad – a classic – captured Blechman's gift for persuasive characterisation, incongruously delivered through a broken line that threatened to fall apart any minute.

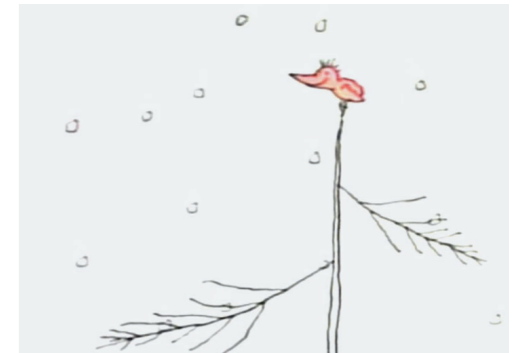
But Blechman had bigger ambitions. He wanted to direct animated features, to envision sequences and realise scripts at a larger scale. The 1970s had been an uncertain decade for American animation. The era of the well financed animated short (Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse) was long gone, and next-wave CGI was in its infancy: Disney's *Tron* would debut five years later. Ralph Bakshi's wayward animated fantasy *Wizards* was released the year Blechman launched The Ink Tank. Hanna-Barbera was still dominant as a producer of clunky animated television shows.

Blechman's animation work would be recognised as subtle, literate and humane – everything that most broadcast animation at the time was not.

Among his first major projects as a director was *Simple Gifts*, a Christmas television special produced for CBS in 1977-78. The programme included six independent story segments, most memorably a charming animated prologue by Maurice Sendak; a telling of the First World War Christmas truce of 1914 by illustrator James McMullan; and Blechman's own 'No Room at the Inn', a wry version of the Nativity.

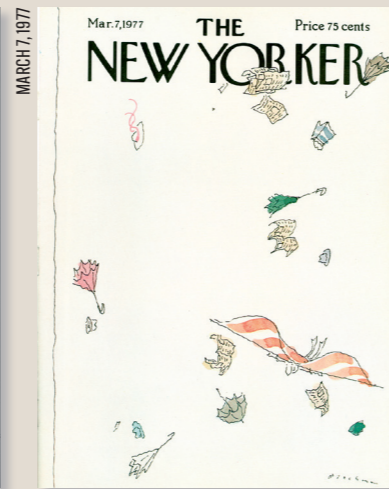
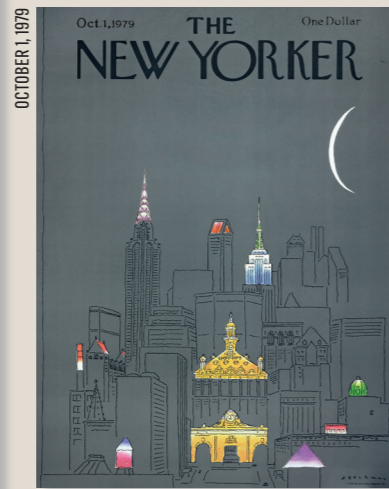
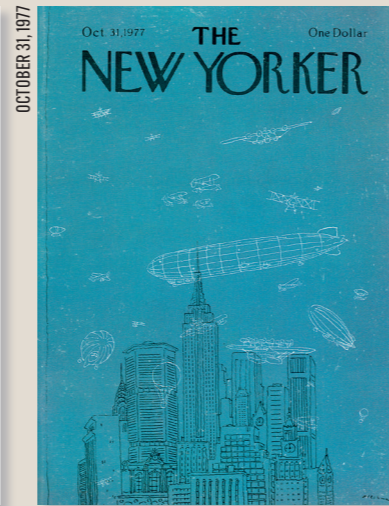
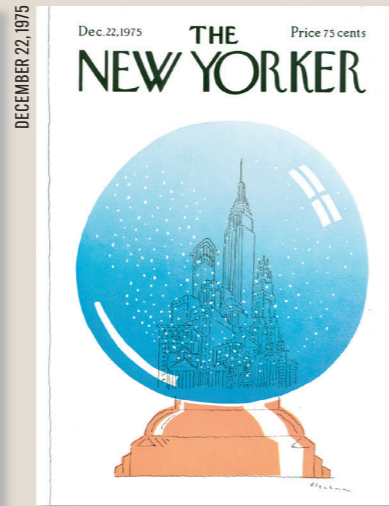
In 1984 would come his major work *The Soldier's Tale*, an animated treatment for PBS of Igor Stravinsky's music-theatre piece, which won an Emmy award. That film, equal parts folk-tale and corporate allegory, is characterised by imaginative conception, visual richness and savvy pacing (see p.40).

A proper appreciation of Blechman's film work would locate him in a draughtsmanly tradition that goes back to Winsor McCay, that pioneer of the field. McCay's animation work (*How a Mosquito Operates*, 1912; *Gertie the Dinosaur*, 1914; *The Sinking of the Lusitania*, 1918) is dominated by the style and touch of his drawing. Felix the Cat and his goose-necked progeny required no such sophistication, so hordes of in-betweeners could be hired to bang out frames in production. McCay recoiled from the slapstick industrialisation of the field. In his era, Blechman represents McCay-like subtlety and respect for audiences' intelligence in the production of animated film. His quivering drawings, which seem so slight at first glance, turn out to be supple things indeed.



Left. *When you and your stomach don't agree*, a 60-second animated bumper for Alka-Seltzer, 1967. Drawn and animated by R. O. Blechman. Produced by Jack Tinker & Partners Advertising. A man and his stomach visit a therapist to settle their differences. Voice-over by Gene Wilder.

Right. *Season's Greetings from CBS* broadcast bumper, CBS, 1966. Drawn by R. O. Blechman, animated by Willis Pyle. Snow falls as birds sing on a pine. A woodsman walks up to the tree carrying a saw, and we fear a violent harvest. But suddenly the man bends his saw into an instrument, produces a bow, and plays a verse of 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.'



**R. O.'s New Yorkers**  
Blechman celebrated the city's high days and holidays with wit and concision

Between 1974 and 1996, R. O. Blechman created fifteen *New Yorker* covers, many of which have become famously iconic, including his first and last, write Genevieve Bormes, *Covers Associate*, and Françoise Mouly, *Art Editor, The New Yorker*.

The first, 'April 29, 1974' (note: *New Yorker* covers didn't receive titles until the era of Tina Brown's editorship, from 1992-98, so until then they are known by their cover dates), depicts the New York City skyline, including the recently erected World Trade Center, with all its

buildings converted into windmills. 'After I did that first *New Yorker* cover, I slept for a week,' says Blechman. 'It just took it out of me ... I've since recovered,' he laughs. 'I was responding to fuel shortages throughout the city. I thought, well, New Amsterdam had it right. Bring back the windmills and we'll have a nice new energy source. This is long before it ever became an urgent undertaking to find new energy sources. So I guess I was a bit in advance of the times.'

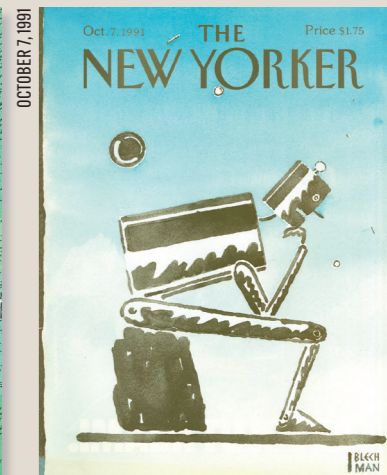
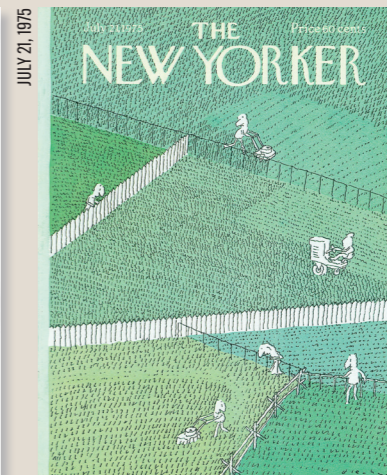
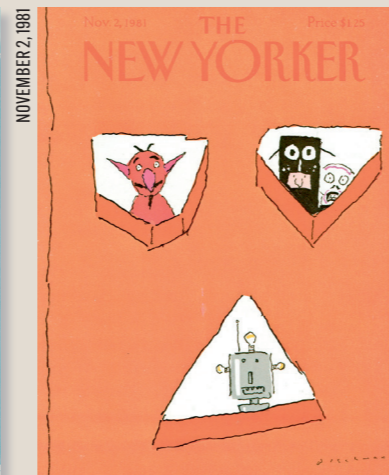
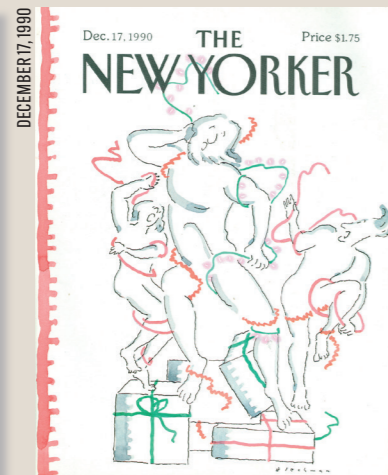
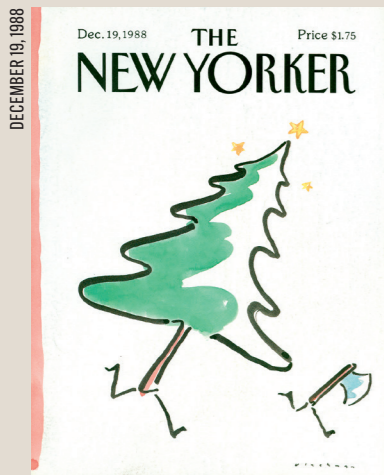
Many of his covers pay homage to the city he clearly loves. 'December 22, 1975', which shows the city encapsulated in a snow globe, remains a classic. 'October 1, 1979' shows the gem-like lights of the city at night, while 'October 31, 1977' shows the sky filled with aircraft, ranging from early airplanes to hot-air balloons to an alien ship. 'March 7, 1977' shows a whimsical hand-glider at the beginning of spring. Other covers offer a playful take on holidays. On the 'December 19, 1988' cover, a Christmas tree goes rogue.

'December 17, 1990' shows classical statues entwined with tinsel and lights. In 'January 2, 1978', a child peeks through a celestial curtain at the coming of the New Year. 'November 2, 1981' shows eager trick-or-treaters as seen through the eyes of a Jack-o'-lantern [a carved pumpkin face]. 'July 2, 1984' and 'July 7, 1986' celebrate the 4th of July. One of our favorites, 'May 14, 1990', celebrates Mother's Day with a wry portrayal of Whistler's *Mother* (aka *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1, 1871*), unmoved by the gifts piled at her feet.

Blechman did not limit himself to commemorating yearly milestones, though. 'July 21, 1975' pokes fun at a group of lawn-conscious neighbours. 'October 7, 1991' depicts *The Thinker*, a symbol of man's intelligence. However Blechman's man, unlike Auguste Rodin's famous statue, is replaced by a robot. Blechman's last cover was published when the stakes were high, back in 1996. Tina Brown was editor then, and many die-hard *New Yorker* staffers and readers were loath to open

up to the changes she was seeking. A mid-February anniversary issue was coming up and many wanted us to adhere to tradition and reprint the original Regency dandy known as Eustace Tilley, drawn by Rea Irvin for the magazine's first issue in 1925. We approached many artists, but Blechman's 'Eustacia' was one of the few that gathered consensus around the office. 'I recall when I did the "Eustacia Tilley" cover, there were objections to the fact that she looked old

and dowdy,' says Blechman. 'And I appreciated Françoise saying, "Well, wait a minute, Eustace Tilley doesn't look so great himself!"' R. O. Blechman's image of Eustacia had everything that makes his work so memorable: wit and concision. It was a perfect match to Rea Irvin's archetypal original cover. And, like all of Blechman's contributions, it helped the magazine navigate a new era, without losing any of its charm and sophistication.





**The anti-Rockwell Blechman pioneered a less-is-more aesthetic. His scratchy shorthand expresses ideas with a punchy surprise**

During the 1940s and 50s, Norman Rockwell and the members of the 'Famous Artists School' of realistic, romantic and often saccharine editorial illustration ruled the roost, writes **Steven Heller**. Before R. O. Blechman produced his earliest work, the typical narrative style of rigorously painted tableaux dominated American magazines and advertising from the late nineteenth century through to the 1960s. True, some of it was of high quality and many of its adherents' work won the lion's share of awards, lined the walls of New York's musty Society of Illustrators and filled the pages of its competition annuals, but it was doomed to extinction. Literal representation was de rigueur and art directors were required to circle the text passages they wanted to have illustrated. Form dominated content,

and conformity was its death knell. Gradually venerated realism lost its popularity. It became turgidly obvious, imaginatively bankrupt and was eclipsed in the postwar 1950s — first by more baffling impressionistic, and later by expressionistic, approaches. Clever concepts were soon valued over photorealistic obsessiveness. A new, modern illustration was influenced by certain Europeans, such as George Grosz in the 1920s and Saul Steinberg in the 1940s, among many, whose approaches, as a rule, were drawn more sketchily and relied on ideas that were expressed through gesture, as well as allegory and metaphor. This work proffered absurdity and surreal juxtapositions; simple, embolden lines added to the allure. Blechman was one of the pioneers of a less-is-more, comedic aesthetic that

**Above.** *A Museum Mile*, poster, 1981. **Blechman** packs all the highlights of New York's famous museum mile into one single image. **Opposite.** *The New York Times Op-Ed illustration*, Monday 9 March, 1998. **Art Director: Nicholas Blechman.** With his distinctive squiggle, Blechman makes an icon or cliché — like the Statue of Liberty in this drawing — appear fresh and engaging.

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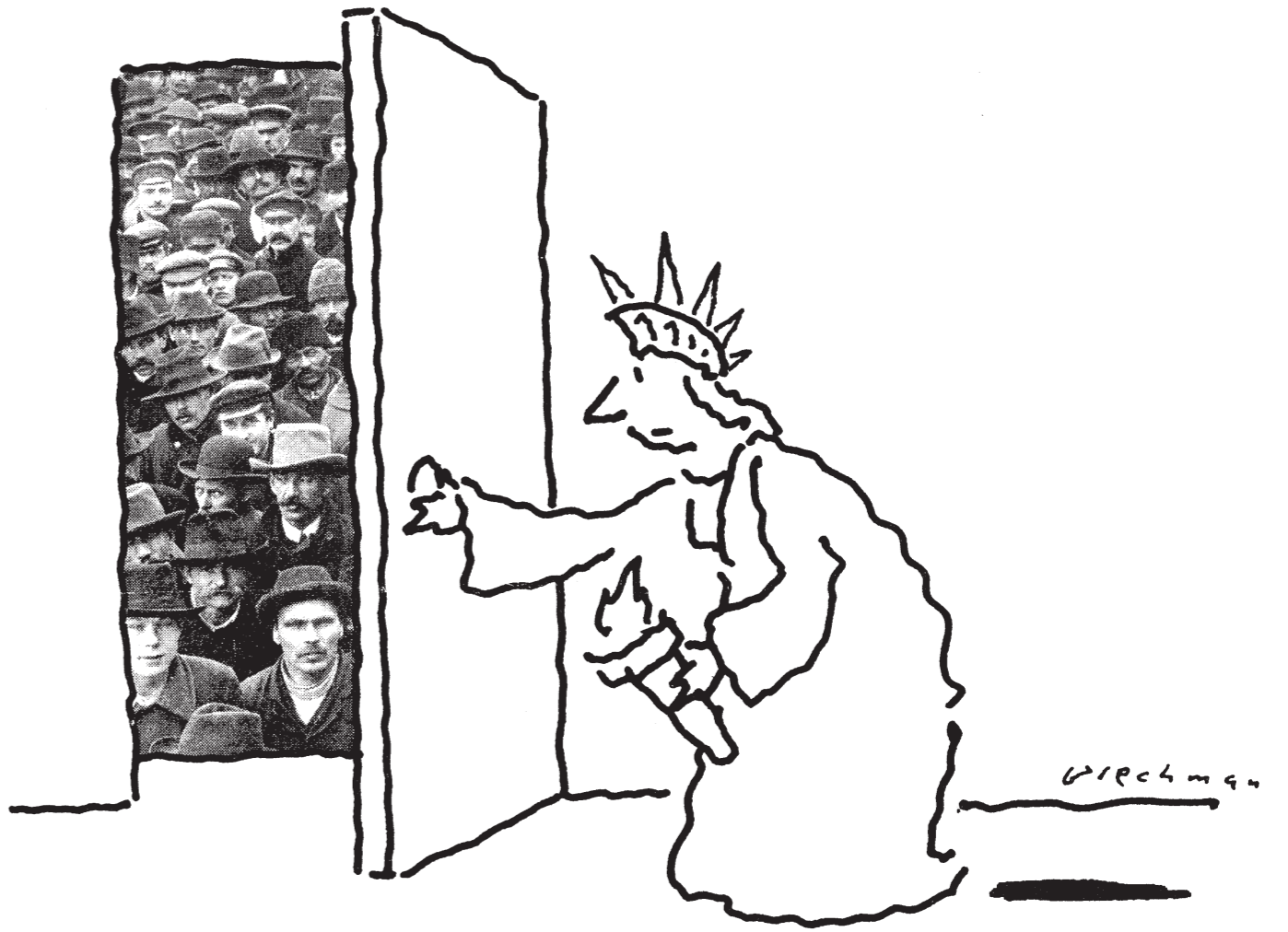
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the U.S.? management. Under my reform pack- age, we have achieved an actual de- crease in the United Nations bud- get, down to \$2.53 billion for the 1998 and 1999 biennium. Nearly 1,000 posts have been cut outright, bringing the staff size below 9,000, and other jobs are being held vacant. Administrative ex- penditures are being cut to 25 percent of the budget, from 38 percent. Our leadership and management structure has been tightened, making it more coherent and more responsive

outcome that alternative courses of action might not have yielded. The public becomes aware of United Nations contributions to conflict resolution only occasionally, when a crisis erupts that thrusts us onto television screens and into newspaper headlines. My recent trip to Baghdad

Kofi Annan is Secretary General of the United Nations.



## Immigrants Aren't the Problem. We Are.

By Bill McKibben

In the next few weeks, the half million members of the Sierra Club will vote to set the club's policy on the issue of immigration. Since the Sierra Club does not exactly control Congress, the final count won't matter, but the debate, which has already been spirited, represents an invaluable chance to raise the issue of how many people this country can and should contain. Immigration is about as difficult a moral subject as one can imagine, so even the proposed change in Sierra Club policy — in favor of an unspecified "reduction in net immigration" — has ignited controversy. In a world of desperate poverty, it is hard for citizens of the richest nation to argue that the door should be closed, especially since nearly all of us can recall our immigrant roots.

messier and more divisive question of our sheer numbers. While our birth rate is just below the replacement level of 2.1 — the number of children each mother would need to bear to keep the population constant — our total population continues to grow quickly compared with that of other developed nations. Part of this is because of our longer life spans and the echoes of the baby-boom bulge — even at two children apiece, we'll be increasing our numbers for decades to come. But our population is also growing because we have by far the world's highest level of immigration — something like 800,000 legal immigrants take up residence here each year (not to mention illegal immigrants, estimated at 300,000

ed, the margin for wildlife becomes slightly smaller. That endless growth places real stress on our supplies of everything from water to silence, from farmland to solitude. Such growth even strains our democracy. When the Constitution was ratified, each member of Congress represented 30,000 voters; now it's 570,000. But there's a bigger problem still. Americans, as the world's most voracious consumers, contribute far more per capita to the world's environmental problems than anyone else. So an extra hundred million Americans means, for instance, a staggering amount of carbon dioxide entering the atmosphere and warming the climate. It's true that we could alleviate some of that problem if each of us consumed less and consumed more efficiently — if we lived in smaller homes heated by the sun. I've spent most of my career writing about just such ideas, and believe in them wholeheartedly. But at the moment, we're building

Environmentalists confront an issue that divides them

deny them that chance? We of course already deny plenty of people that chance — even our current, historically generous immigration ceiling means many people aren't allowed in. Of the world's huddled masses, only the tiniest fraction will ever come here even with existing laws. And while some population-control advocates want to see immigration all but stopped, most whom I've talked to would prefer to see the limits cut roughly in half, to about 400,000 annually, with special provisions for asylum seekers. At that rate, if our birth rate simultaneously fell to the European average of 1.5 children, we could see our population stop growing within a generation.

Still, such a policy would be harsh. It would mean 400,000 more people a year who would be turned away at the door — people with particular hopes, particular sorrows.

all politics is local. But increasingly, all local politics has global consequences. And those global consequences, in turn, affect the quality of local life everywhere. A renewed partnership between the United Nations and the United States is, therefore, as much in the interest of the United States as the United Nations. But it has to be paid for. To paraphrase what Winston Churchill said to Franklin Roosevelt, "Give us the tools and we will do the job." □

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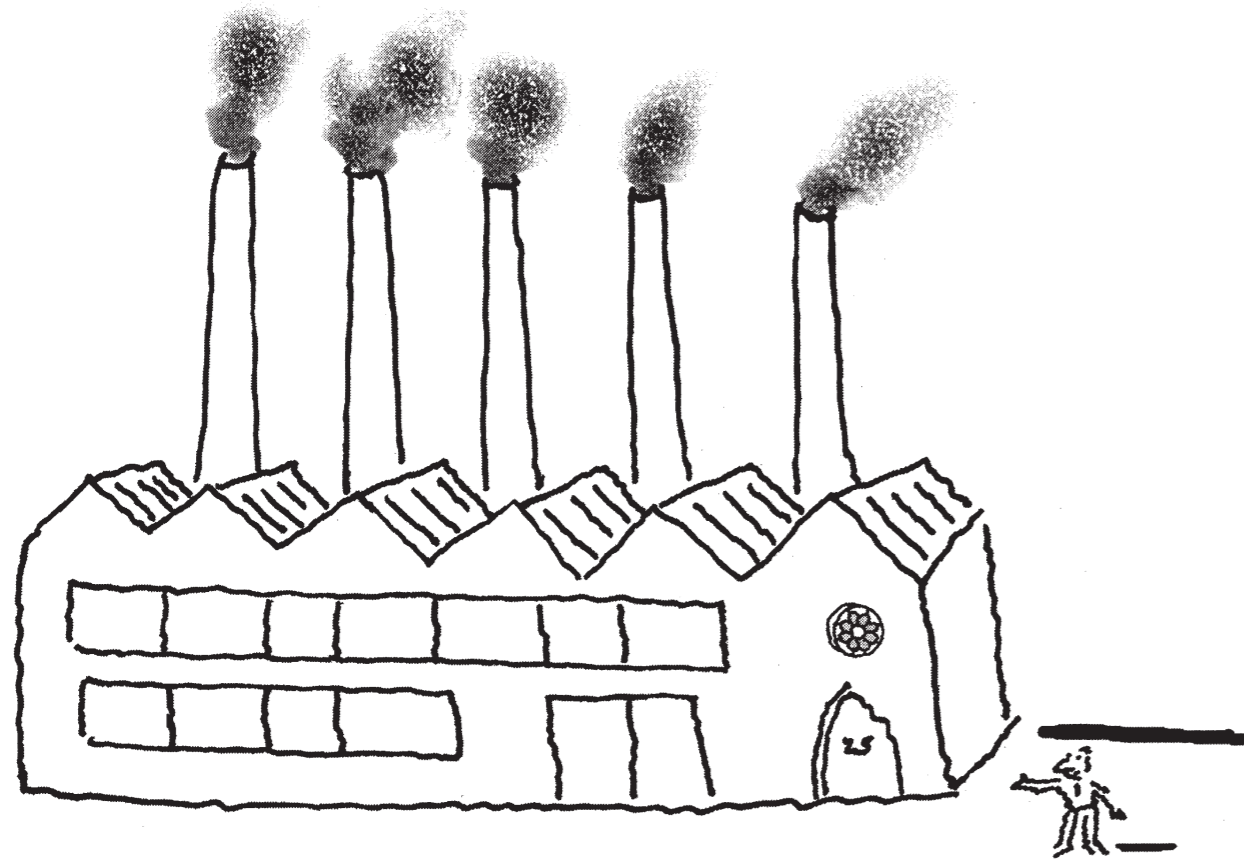
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R.O. BLECHMAN

BILL KELLER

# The Conscience of a Corporation

DAVID GREEN, who built a family picture-framing business into a 42-state chain of arts and crafts stores, prides himself on being the model of a conscientious Christian capitalist. His 525 Hobby Lobby stores forsake Sunday profits to give employees their biblical day of rest. The company donates to Christian counseling services and buys holiday ads that promote the faith in all its markets. Hobby Lobby has been known to stick decals over Botticelli's naked Venus in art books it sells.

And the company's in-house health insurance does not cover morning-after contraceptives, which Green, like many of his fellow evangelical Christians, regards as chemical abortions.

"We're Christians," he says, "and we run our business on Christian principles."

This has put Hobby Lobby at the leading edge of a legal battle that poses the intriguing question: Can a corporation have a conscience? And if so, is it protected by the First Amendment.

The Affordable Care Act, a k a Obama-care, requires that companies with more than 50 full-time employees offer health insurance, including coverage for birth control. Churches and other purely religious organizations are exempt. The Obama administration, in an unrequited search for compromise, has also pro-

constitutionally protected. The issue is almost certain to end up in the Supreme Court, where the betting is made a little more interesting by a couple of factors: six of the nine justices are Catholic, and this court has already ruled, in the Citizens' United case, that corporations are protected by the First Amendment, at least when it comes to freedom of speech. Also, we know that at least four members of the court don't think much of Obamacare.

In lower courts, advocates of the corporate religious exemption have won a few and lost a few. (Hobby Lobby has lost so far, and could eventually face fines of more than \$1 million a day for defying the law. The company's case is now before the Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit.)

You can feel some sympathy for David Green's moral dilemma, and even admire him for practicing what he preaches, without buying the idea that *la corpora-tion, c'est moi*. Despite the Supreme Court's expansive view of the First

cused from paying taxes just because he or she objects to the money being spent on war. Doctors who find abortions morally abhorrent are not obliged to perform them. But you cannot withhold taxes because some of the money goes to Medic-aid-financed abortion.

"Anybody who pays taxes can find something deeply offensive in what the government does," said Robert Post, a First Amendment expert at Yale Law School. "I'm not paying my taxes because of torture at Guantánamo. I'm not paying my taxes because of drones."

"People can't pick and choose their taxes, because you couldn't have a functioning tax system."

I don't know what the courts will say, but common sense says the contraception dispute is more like taxation than conscription. Nothing in the Obamacare mandate obliges anyone to use contra-ception if, for example, she is in the tiny minority of American Catholics who take the church's doctrine on birth control seriously. And Hobby Lobby's policy doesn't prevent the use of morning-after pills: it just assures that if an employee does use emergency contraception, she pays for it out of her Hobby Lobby paycheck rather than her Hobby Lobby insurance.

Douglas Laycock, a law professor at the University of Virginia who often sides with proponents of broader religious lib-

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Opposite. 'Op-Ed' illustration for *The New York Times*, Monday 11 February, 2013. Art director: Aviva Michaelov. Blechman was one of several illustrators used to offset the social critiques with subtle yet sharp graphic commentaries. Right. *The New York Times Book Review*, 4 December, 2011. Blechman's work could be caustic or comforting or a little bit of both. This cover for the holiday issue of *The New York Times Book Review* reveals a worried man happily deluged with books of wonder. Art Director: Nicholas Blechman.

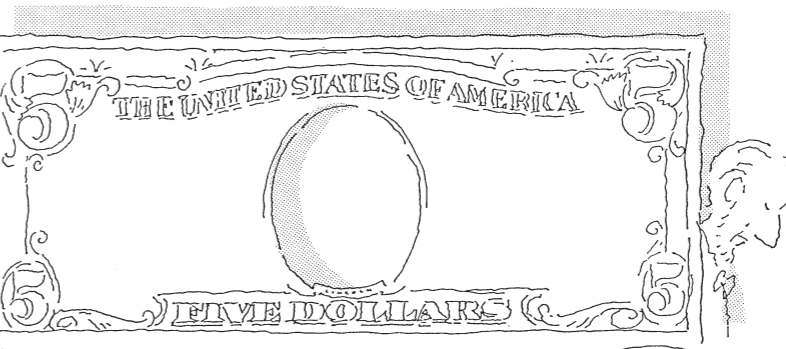


December 4, 2011 \$2

R.O. BLECHMAN

was an intentionally more scratchy graphic shorthand than laboured representation that expressed an idea with a punchy surprise. His work, along with others of his ilk, was also often untethered to text, more autonomous than the slavish conventional illustration, and therefore more entertaining and memorable.

Right. *Disappointed Abraham Lincoln*, a drawing made for *The New York Times*, October 21, 1985 to illustrate the article "Should Colleges Divest?" With just a few well placed and deliberately composed lines, R. O. Blechman could make even Abraham Lincoln show disappointment with US finance.



Blechman's method, especially his minimalism, however, not only distinguished itself from the preceding generation. His approach was unique within his own generation, which was awash with individualists that typified an exciting era of change in this artform. The wave of cartoonists,

illustrators and graphic commentators that emerged at the time were known for idiosyncratic conceptual styles and unorthodox content. At first they found outlets in large and small magazines that leaned politically left, or at least in the libertine ways they flaunted taboos. And Blechman was not alone. The other iconoclasts of Blechman's

era include Robert Osborn (who was a bit older), Jules Feiffer, Tomi Ungerer, Edward Sorel, David Levine, Lou Myers, Seymour Chwast, Milton Glaser, Randall Enos and Robert Grossman, who created stingingly satirical work for magazines such as *Second Coming*, *Monocle*, *Evergreen*, *Ramparts* and *The Realist*. The men's magazines *Playboy*, *Esquire* and *Cavalier* were fertile ground, as well.

Although stylistically these artists were all very different, what tied them together was an interest in addressing intimately personal themes using expressively sophisticated techniques that employed taboo-busting humour to attack a host of emerging social and political issues. To a large extent they reshaped the role of illustration that evolved into the illustrator-as-author ethos that is so vital today.