

THINK YOU KNOW YOUR COMICS HISTORY?

TAKE THIS QUIZ TO TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE!

1. Which of the following commonly known phrases comes from cartoon history?

- A. Sock Puppetry
- B. Slush Pile
- C. Yellow Journalism
- D. Vitruvian Man

2. What was the first successful daily comic strip?

3. Which of these comics creators was Jewish:

- A. Stan Lee
- B. Bob Kane
- C. Jack Kirby
- D. Charlie Gaines

4. What is considered the earliest known comic book?

5. Who was the first comic book super-heroine?

6. Who was the first female comic strip artist?

7. Where does the term cartoon come from?

8. Jewish humor derives from what form of traditional Jewish entertainment?

- A. Badkhonim
- B. HaZamir
- C. Purim
- D. Klezmerim



Answer key:

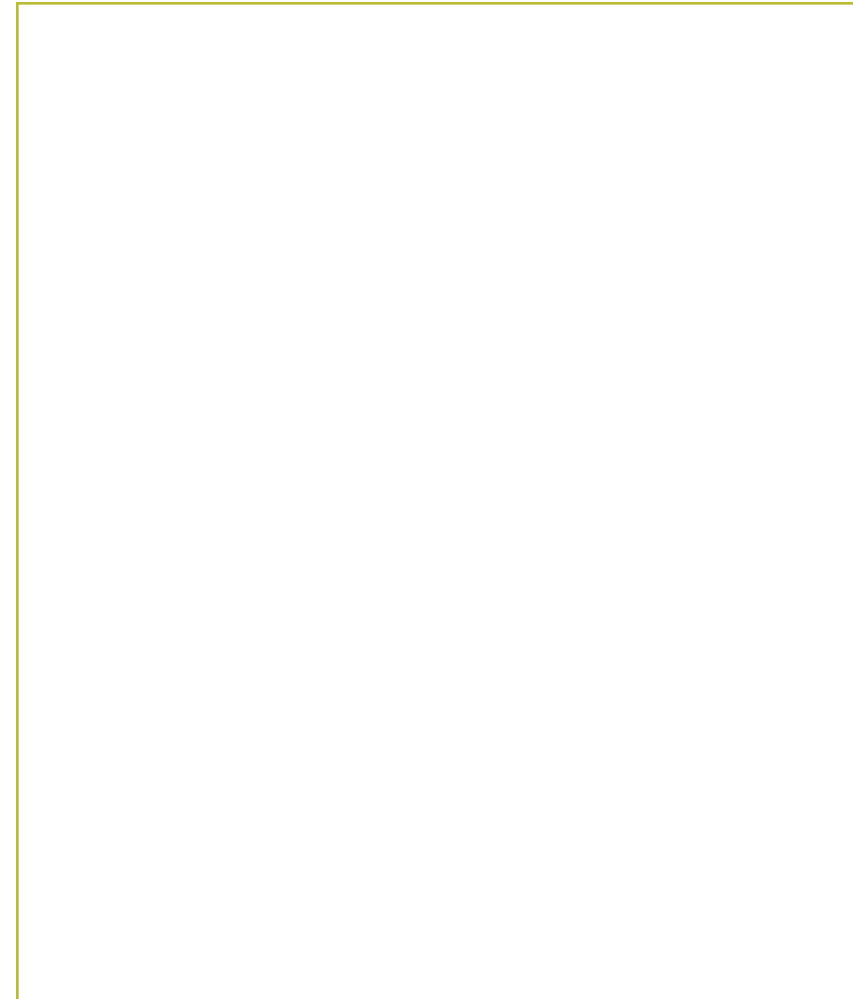
1. Yellow Journalism, which presents little or no legitimate well-researched news and uses flashy headlines to sell newspapers. The term originates from the comic *Hogan's Alley*, featuring the "Yellow Kid" who lives in the slums of the Lower East Side.
2. *Mutt and Jeff*. Geared towards adults, it featured two mismatched friends dealing with the absurd antics of life.
3. All of them. Many Jewish comic creators changed their names to assimilate in order to gain employment. Stan Lee, born Stanley Lieber, created many popular superheroes, including Fantastic Four, X-men, and Spiderman. Bob Kane, born Robert Kahn, created Batman. Jacky Kirby, born Jacob Kurtzberg, created Captain America. Charlie Gaines, born Maxwell Charles Ginsberg, invented the "comic book."
4. *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*. Printed in 1837 as a 40 page book, it was hard cover and contained captions as opposed to word bubbles. It narrates the story of Obadiah Oldbuck who continually attempted—and failed—to woo his "Lady Love."
5. *Fantomah: Mystery Woman of the Jungle*. Fantomah is an ancient Egyptian princess, who first appeared in *Jungle Comics* #2. She had a variety of powers, including the ability to transform and levitate objects, and cause humans to mutate into other forms. While fighting crime, she would morph into a blue-skinned, semi-monstrous figure with blonde curly hair.
6. Dalia (Dale) Messick created *Brenda Starr*, a comic strip about a beautiful, adventurous reporter.
7. Today, the term cartoon is associated with animation, but it originated from the Italian word *cartone*, meaning "card." Italian tapestry designers and fresco painters drew their designs on sheets of cardboard before transferring them to the cloth or walls they were intended for. The designs were then referred to as cartones, or "cartoons" for the material on which they were drawn.
8. *Badkhonim*, which describes sarcastic, 'roasting' style wedding and funeral performers, popular between the 16th-20th centuries.



Badkhonim, like the one pictured here, used deprecating humor, often making brides cry and rabbis blush.

SUPER SILLY ACTIVITIES

1. If you were a superhero, what would your crime fighting power be? Make a drawing that shows how you would fight crime with your super power.



Super Silly!
Superman Creators' Funnyman Fights Crime with Shtick
January 10–March 28, 2012
An exhibition that proves you don't need muscles to thwart villains

Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh
(412) 521-8011, ext. 105
jccpgh.org/page/ajm

Fine Perlow Weis Gallery, Kaufmann Building
Monday-Thursday 7:30 AM-10 PM
Friday 7:30 AM-6 PM • Saturday and Sunday 8 AM-6 PM

Berger Gallery, Robinson Building
Monday-Thursday 7:30 AM-10 PM
Friday 7:30 AM-6 PM • Saturday 1-6 PM • Sunday 8 AM-6 PM

Super Silly! is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, Feral House Publishing, Betty and Joseph Ellovich, and Marcia and Bob Frumerman. Major funding for the American Jewish Museum provided by the Allegheny Regional Asset Board, the Anna L. Caplan & Irene V. Caplan Fund of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, the Robert C. and Gene B. Dickman Fund, Ira and Nanette Gordon Curator Enrichment Fund, Edward N. and Jane Haskell Endowment Creative Projects Fund, the Nancy Bernstein and Robert Schoen Fund, Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts, and individual support.

2. Look at all the comic strips closely. Why do you think humor is a successful tactic to fighting crime for Funnyman?

3. How is Funnyman different from other superheroes you know? Compare and contrast below.

SUPER SILLY INTRODUCTION



Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Funnyman* #5 (July 1948), Wanted: One Corpse, image courtesy Adam Parfrey.

Funnyman, a buffoonish crime fighter who uses wit and gags for weapons, is the antithesis of noble Superman®. Superman's extraordinary abilities, selfless disposition and humanitarian mission thwart all manner of criminals. Funnyman lacks these traits, employing instead shtick—pranks, put-downs and gags—to subdue his foes. Ironically, not only were both characters created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, but the duo created Funnyman in 1948, on the heels of the unsuccessful Siegel & Shuster vs. National Allied Publishing lawsuit for ownership rights to

Superman. A further indignity, the Funnyman comic was a flop both as a series, lasting a mere six issues, and as a comic strip. Funnyman was the last project worked on by Siegel and Shuster, a creative team for over a decade.

On display for the first time ever, *Super Silly* includes 50 original Funnyman pen and ink storyboards. Displaying 65-year-old original comic book drawings gives audiences the opportunity to observe the blemishes that make them feel one step closer to the artists and their processes: erasure marks, hand-written notations, stains and white-out splotches.

This tactile evidence of the originality behind comic drawing is eliminated by the mass-production process, which downplays the richness of the imagery. The blemishes are also reminders that these original drawings were all done by hand with exacting precision and remarkable control. These are the same minds and sets of hands that created the world's archetypal superhero.

The multifariousness of contemporary society has extinguished the hierarchy of artistic modes, the primacy of originality, as well as the notion of comics as a sub-literate form of sophomoric entertainment. The McCarthy-era crusade against comics, which claimed they caused, at the very least, juvenile delinquency, is a distant, tarnished memory that most have long forgotten. Rather, the way comics function aesthetically—how meaning is created through the interplay of words and images—has blossomed into a mainstream and accepted creative and scholarly endeavor.

Viewing *Super Silly!* spread out in its entirety rather than in comic book form makes the intertwined relationship between words and images more concrete. Even though the Funnyman stories were reductively rendered and narrated, it is clear they must both be read and viewed for the comic to make sense, which is why it is accurate to indicate interchangeably *reading* or *looking at* comics. Furthermore, there are particular visual and literary rhythms at work. Linguist James Paul Gee puts it succinctly: "In such multimodal texts (texts that mix words and images), the images often

communicate different things from the words. Further, the combination of the two modes communicates things that neither of the modes does separately."¹ Unavoidably, consuming comics is simultaneously a literary and visual experience. The capacity this creates for discovery and imagination is part of the lure and staying-power of comics.

As the story goes, Funnyman is the alter ego of professional comedian Larry Davis. Although having an alter ego is a convention associated with heroes, Davis's original intentions in assuming the identity of Funnyman were anything but benevolent. In true comic fashion, Davis performed a hero-like stunt for the sake of publicity. Unbeknownst to Davis, he actually walked into a real crime scene rather than the staged jewelry store heist he was expecting. He thwarted the criminal all the while assuming he was apprehending an actor. Afterwards, Davis realized doing good deeds is worthwhile, even fun. So the act he got into for the sake of self-interest took a sincere turn when he proceeded to defeat villains out of good will.

Panel after panel illustrates Larry Davis's follies as he ekes out a living as a comedian. Others reveal Funnyman's ebullient persona, his slapstick use of props and gags, and his inelegant attempts to apprehend criminals. Whether as Davis or Funnyman, there is definitely no shortage of tomfoolery going on. However, as entertaining as his antics appear and despite the legendary status of Siegel and Shuster, Funnyman couldn't find his stride among readers.



Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Funnyman* #2 (March 1948), image courtesy Adam Parfrey.

Comic enthusiasts weren't ready for a bonafide Jewish clown until the Simpsons' animated Krusty the Clown. Krusty was revealed in the fifteenth season to be Herschel Shmoikel Pinchas Yerucham Krustofski, son of Rabbi Hymen Krustofski. Although Krusty's character was not overtly characteristically Jewish, except for his occasional use of Yiddish expressions, the episode parodied the reality of scores of American Jews throughout the 19th and 20th centuries who anglicized their names and distanced their personal Jewish identities from their secular professional identities. The Simpsons' creators had this unfortunate widespread phenomenon covered by revealing in the seventh season that the show's

egocentric television anchor, Kent Brockman, was born Kenny Brockelstein. Larry Davis, on the other hand, was not disguising a more Jewish-sounding name, his language wasn't peppered with Yiddish phrases nor was he revealed to be the son of an observant family. How, then, is Funnyman considered to be Jewish and how did he get to be attributed as the first Jewish superhero? Speculating in *Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero from the Creators of Superman* about why the character was unsuccessful, Danny Fingerth casually remarks perhaps Funnyman was too Jewish or perhaps not Jewish enough.² This contradiction is apropos in defining and understanding Funnyman's Jewishness, if not his unpopularity.

Funnyman's character seems to avoid mid-20th century hyper-conscious stereotypes surrounding masculinity. However, while Larry Davis was capable and smooth, it was Funnyman, the hero, who was physically weaker and more exposed than his adversaries, which nods to the social hierarchy Siegel and Shuster lived in. If it weren't for Funnyman's humor and quick wit, he would not emerge as the victor, yet his approach to crime fighting never let him down. Interestingly, Siegel had a life-long wish to be a comic writer. Tom Andrae points out that, in addition to being a known prankster, in 1938 Siegel wrote and copyrighted *How to be Funny, a Practical Course of Serious Study in Creative Humor*.³ While Superman's overt virility was a symbol for Americanism, Funnyman's humor and vulnerability mirrored Siegel's private identity.

Andrae also indicates that Shuster adored Danny Kaye and longed to launch a project that channeled Kaye's brand of shticky humor.⁴ Not only was Kaye an entertainer who concealed his Jewish identity, he played buffoonish characters who did not fit masculine ideals. Rather, based on anti-Semitic Eugenics theories of the time, Kaye's humor possessed the neurotic characteristics that were ascribed to Jews. Funnyman's traits, therefore, were inspired by a Jewish guy who outwardly disguised his Jewishness, yet could not escape being famous for mannerisms stereotypically characterized as Jewish.

Given that he was inspired by Kaye, it is easy to overlook Funnyman's Jewish qualities. He is not defined by stereotypically-derived clues that gentiles and Jews alike look for regarding speech patterns, bodily characteristics and manner of clothing used in various media to attribute

Jewish identity. Yet, Mel Gordon calls attention to the similarities between Funnyman and *badkhnim*, Jewish entertainers employed during various festivals and ceremonies.⁵ Commonly, a *badkhn* was the master of ceremony at weddings who used roasting-type humor, sarcasm and jabs. The role was a core part of wedding rituals, and remained popular through the 19th century. Gordon asserts that the very origins of Jewish humor derive from *badkhnim*, and that the belligerent, deprecating type of humor for which Jews are known, and which Funnyman himself uses, is rooted in these traditions.⁶

Superman evokes numerous cultural issues that could be perceived as deriving from Jewish perspectives, including immigration, assimilation and outsider anxieties. In some ways, the contradictions inherent in Funnyman—in addition to the series short life-span—make his identity harder to pin down and position in a fixed way. They also make Funnyman complex and more human-like.

Although Funnyman was a failure, *Super Silly* brings to light compelling ideas about Funnyman and Jewish humor proposed by Gordon and Andrae while enabling viewers to fully take in Siegel and Shuster's final collaboration.

—Melissa Hiller, *AJM* Director

¹James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 17-18.

²Mel Gordon and Tom Andrae, *Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero from the Creators of Superman* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2010), ix.

³Gordon 54.

⁴Gordon 51.

⁵Gordon 12.

⁶Gordon 14.