

The Masters Series:

JULES FEIFFER

Award exhibition honoring a great
visual communicator of our time.

October 24 – December 2, 2006

Exhibition organized by Francis Di Tommaso.



VISUAL ARTS Museum
at the School of VISUAL ARTS®



Now We Come to the Media (detail), 1973
Ink on paper



Jules Feiffer

Interview by Steven Heller
Co-Chair, MFA Design Department
School of Visual Arts

HELLER: The work you did after producing *Clifford* for Will Eisner's *The Spirit Supplement*, like *Sick, Sick, Sick* and *Munro*, were very personal expressions. How did these come about?

FEIFFER: When I was with Eisner, I began this strip called *Clifford*. In 1948, *Clifford* became the back page of *The Spirit* section. It actually was a pre-*Peanuts* *Peanuts*. The material, as I saw it, was to take kids as they really were—easy for me because I was 20 and very close to feeling eight or nine (a feeling that lasted into my forties). I had never seen a strip that recorded kids as they appeared to themselves. All the other strips recorded kids from the grown-up point of view. They were pesky Dennis-the-Menace types who got into trouble and were little devils; but nothing was out there that represented a kids point of view. That was what *Clifford* tried to be. (Sparky Schulz went much farther and dug much deeper with a similar idea.) But I didn't know how to draw it and I barely knew how to write it. I was figuring the whole thing out as I was working on that back page.

HELLER: How did that evolve into the Feiffer voice?

FEIFFER: *The Feiffer strip*, which was first called *Sick, Sick, Sick*, came about eight or nine years later in *The Village Voice*. In the early fifties I was drafted into the Army and, as a result of that experience, changed everything that I once thought I wanted to be, and wanted to do. When I worked for Eisner I saw myself as a young man who had in his future a daily newspaper strip laced with satiric humor of a gentle sort, sometimes with political content, and very much in the [Walt] Kelly-*Pogo*, Al-Capp-*L'il-Abner* mode.

HELLER: Those were your heroes at the time?

FEIFFER: Capp was still a liberal, and Kelly's *Pogo* was quite brilliant in its heyday. Another model was Crockett Johnson, who did *Barnaby* in the newspaper *PM*. I just wanted to be one of those guys.

HELLER: Was this something that Eisner wanted you to do?

FEIFFER: Oh, no. Eisner was only interested in who was working as his assistant on *The Spirit*. He liked me and he was encouraging, but he had no interest in my further career. I was just one of a stream-full of people who came in and out of that office who were affected by him.

HELLER: Why did you start cartooning to begin with?

FEIFFER: It was all I ever thought of doing from the time I was four, when I saw Sunday supplements and the daily strips, which were huge in those years, whether they were in the full-size papers or in the tabloids. They ran five to six columns. It was a universe that a kid could sink himself into.

HELLER: And you stayed sunk. Was there some magic there?

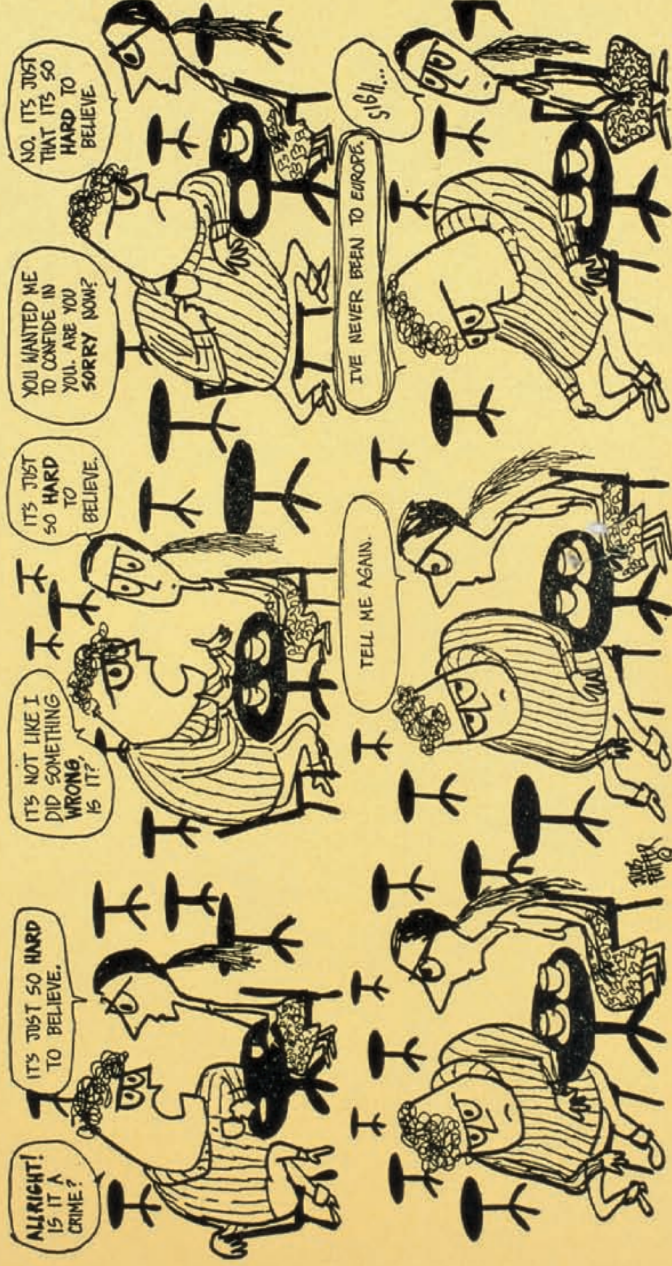
FEIFFER: I didn't get to see movies except every couple of weeks or so, because even 10 or 20 cents was a lot of money during the Depression, which are the years we're talking about. So the magic was in the comics, and the comics were, at that time, important cultural artifacts in America. Everybody read the comics, and one got to be a celebrity by drawing comic strips. Being a cartoonist was a lot more glamorous, a lot more ritzy, than it was when I entered the field, and it was something that I dreamed of doing from the time I was a little kid.

HELLER: Why newspaper strips?

FEIFFER: The quality boys were doing newspaper strips, and that's what I wanted. I had no ambition to write at the time. I liked to read, and every once in a while, as I got older, I would start writing something that I thought might make a short story. I always gave up after a couple of pages, and I never took myself seriously, or in any other way, as a writer. My sister, four years older than I, was going to be the famous writer. I was going to be the famous cartoonist.

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SICK,
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HELLER: Well, it worked out as you planned and then some.

FEIFFER: As with everything in my life, the work I moved into, I essentially backed into. It wasn't a deliberate choice of directions. It was based on events. For example, my initial dream, long before humor, was to do adventure strips. Prior to the Al Capp phase, there was the Milton Canniff and Alex Raymond phase. I loved their work (*Terry and the Pirates* and *Flash Gordon*) and given a choice, I would have done that—except I couldn't draw their way. So it was a lack of facility with a brush and a lack of drafting skills that made me move toward humor. It was the inability to develop a slick brush line, which was what the successful strip and comic book cartoonists knew how to do. That and only that was what made me move off into more arcane directions, and start looking at the works of William Steig, Saul Steinberg and Andre Francois.

HELLER: These were *New Yorker* cartoonists. What about another, James Thurber?

FEIFFER: I liked Thurber's cartoons, kind of (the longer ones, like the *War Between Men and Women*). But many of the cartoons people thought were hilarious I just didn't get. Okay, you heard a seal bark, what's funny about that? I liked his casual line but it was clearly accidental, not artful. Not so with Steig or Steinberg. The humor I loved in *The New Yorker* was Robert Benchley's. He made me laugh out loud, and led me to creating my own little characters—insignificant characters, clearly influenced by Benchley, except mine were Jewish. I realized that what I wanted to do eventually in the strip form, which became *Sick, Sick, Sick*, was to take the Benchley character and bring him into the urban post-Korean War world, and shift his genteel WASP angst into a more frenzied, Freudian Jewish angst.

HELLER: How much of that character in *Sick, Sick, Sick*, the little screaming boy, was inside of you?

FEIFFER: There was a lot inside of me, but it was only one part of me. What you do as a writer and a humorist is, you isolate a particular part of you and you make that the total. That's what's funny, and that's what makes a point. You can't do your life in all its complexity. For one thing, it wouldn't be funny, and more importantly, no one would care to read it.

HELLER: You knew instinctively that was the way to go?

FEIFFER: Oh, I knew instinctively all sorts of things, but I [also] learned lessons in my real school, as opposed to official school where I learned next to nothing. Real school was old-time radio—radio comedy shows—and my teachers were Fibber McGee and Jack Benny and Henry Morgan and *The Easy Aces*. I learned how to set up a joke. I learned about timing. I learned about silence. I got an education in entertainment by falling in love with these radio comics. It's certainly no accident that the forms I ended up practicing in my adult years all have to do with what I loved as a kid. Even the children's books, especially the picture books, which I didn't start until my mid-sixties. If you look at the picture books, you can see their roots clearly in the Sunday supplements.

HELLER: And *The Man in the Ceiling* is an autobiography?

FEIFFER: Emotionally, yes. The story itself is all fiction. When I'm about to start out on a new picture book, I go to my library and try to figure out who the cartoonist is I'm going to steal from, whether it's Winsor McKay or Frank King, whomever. The text—my text—essentially tells me what the drawings have to look like, so I search for suggestions in the color pages of my forebears and betters.



Illustration from *A Room With a Zoo*, 2005
Watercolor and ink

HELLER: Stealing is not exactly the right word. You've never copied others; you've always reinterpreted in your own voice.

FEIFFER: I figure, it's like jazz—the classics are there to riff on, and you learn from them, and you spin off them. You become more complete by channeling them. They somehow give you access to your own voice. My father was not a model for me, and I had no big brother. So there were these males I patterned myself after, either boys in school or in the movies. I would pick up their speech patterns, and I would start standing like them and moving like them. If somebody had an attractive stammer, I would pick up the stammer; and if somebody had a kind of accent that I found interesting, suddenly I would have that accent. Not only would I move into this quite casually, I'd find I couldn't get out of it—that my will was not strong enough to eliminate it until it processed itself out. And this is exactly what I think one does creatively.

HELLER: And eventually it all came out in your comics.

FEIFFER: If it didn't come out in my work, it would have come out in some other way. The way my politics formed, say, was a mix of [journalists] I.F. Stone and Murray Kempton. They were my Marx and Lenin. I evolved my own politics and my own views processed through their points of view and their sensibility.

HELLER: When I made cartoons as a kid, you were the one I modeled myself after, and I still have those cartoons where I copied you. But I couldn't do what you did because I didn't have your experience. Moreover, your style was so distinctive I couldn't honestly copy you and call it my own. When you created *Sick, Sick, Sick* there was an unprecedented breaking down of the comic strip walls. Did you feel that by doing this you had come into your mature state as an artist?

FEIFFER: No. When I started the weekly strip, it was an outgrowth of having already written several long cartoon narratives in the form of adult children's books. *Munro* was the first, and I got up three or four dummies in different styles, but the text was pretty much the same—I just couldn't figure out how to draw it. I had done a thing on the bomb, called *Boom*. I had done another thing, which was never published—a political story about warfare. Essentially, I was affected by what was in those days called one's "Freudian life," and our "Cold War life." I felt very hemmed in politically by the blacklist, and other repressive aspects of the Eisenhower-McCarthy Cold War years; and I felt hemmed in psychologically by my life, living without women, my continual guilt about everything, and a sustaining anxiety and even rage, now and then, about it all. I was devouring certain psychoanalysts, such as Erich Fromm, who wrote books like *The Sane Society* and David Reisman [who wrote] *The Lonely Crowd*. As a kid trying to figure out life, myself and everybody else, I was open to these influences, and I picked up publications and devoured them, and then tried to translate them into cartoons.

HELLER: But at that time there was no market for "serious" cartoons. There were the Sunday comics, which followed a tradition, and there were the *New Yorker* gags, and the Playboy gags after that, which were just the *New Yorker* gags made sexy. So how did you break in?

FEIFFER: I did these books, like *Munro*, and took them around to publishers, and the publishers all were very, very friendly. They loved the work, and they turned me down. They said, "There's no market for this." There was no market for *Munro*, this four-year-old kid who gets drafted into the Army by mistake, because it's not a kids' book. It's a grown-up book, but it doesn't look like a grown-up book; it looks like a kids' book.

HELLER: Was it too political for them?

FEIFFER: Well, nobody said that, but I think that was a possible subtext. They said, "If you were Steig or Thurber or Steinberg we could publish it because you'd be known." So the message became clear very quickly, within less than a year. The message was: I had to be famous in order to be published. I kept trying to figure out how to do that. Then I began to notice on all these editors' desks a copy of this new paper, *The Village Voice*, and I thought: "This is a paper that might publish me. If they publish me, these editors will think I'm famous, because this is the hot newspaper they read." I was cynical enough—even then—to understand the narcissism mixed with self-doubt of editors, and realized that it was all illusion: If they see me in somebody else's publication, they will assume that I'm marketable.

HELLER: And the rest, as they say, is history. . .

FEIFFER: I went to the *Voice* and showed Dan Wolfe and Ed Fancher and Jerry Tallmer my work. They offered me space immediately. I said, "Well, what do you want me to do?" They said, "It's up to you." I said, "How big should it be?" They said, "It's up to you." They were offering me something that nobody had ever offered me.

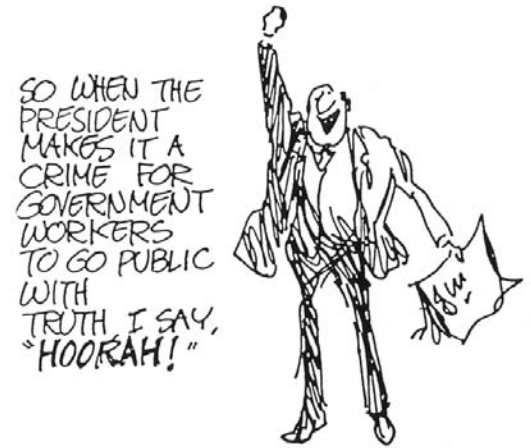
HELLER: Once in the *Voice*, were you writing for yourself or an audience, or both?

FEIFFER: It was both. Initially, my aim was to serialize *Munro* and break it down into weekly segments and run that. Then I thought: "That's not going to work unless readers have an idea of who and what I am, so introduce them at the beginning to my sense of humor and my sensibility by doing single strips, complete stories in six or eight panels, and then when they more or less understand what I'm doing, bring in *Munro*." But I never got over doing those introductory strips.

HELLER: What was the public's response? Were you surprised?

FEIFFER: As I said, I went to the paper in order to get known and to get famous and publish my books. I thought it would take a couple of years. It took a couple of months. I was amazed at how fast it was, but I was not overwhelmed by it. I kind of took it for granted. I, who had no security in any personal relationships, had a kind of low-key, self-effacing arrogance in regard to my ambition and my career. I didn't show it. I knew you couldn't show it. At the same time, the other part was, I was enormously flattered by this attention, and grateful for it. But I had no doubt as to how good I was, and I had no doubt as to how good this material was, and I had no doubt that nobody else was coming near this, that even the people who were my influences were not doing anything like this. When I moved into politics, which I hadn't intended to do at all, I knew that I was working from a perspective that simply was not allowed in mainstream newspapers, and that thrilled me. *The Village Voice* was being read by readers of mainstream newspapers—readers of the *Times*, readers of the liberal *New York Post*, which was not liberal enough to run me at the time—and they were getting a perspective on Cold War America that simply wasn't expressed anywhere else.

HELLER: These were fearsome, McCarthyite times with the blacklist ruining lives simply for believing certain political and philosophical beliefs.



Truth Hurts, 1983
Pen and ink

FEIFFER: I was full of fear, but as soon as I put it on paper, it made me brave. I became more or less fearless, egged on by the cartoons I did, which were infinitely braver than I was. Nothing threatened me. I mean, I could be anxious and nervous about all sorts of things, but nothing seriously threatened me because I was gaining an audience, acceptance and validity that were unprecedented in my life. That was an extraordinary psychological change. As a kid and young adult, I was afraid of my shadow. I was afraid to travel. I was afraid to go out in the street. I was afraid of getting beaten up. I was afraid of girls. I was afraid of big men who might hit me. I was afraid of everything. And my sister, who was a Communist, accused me of being a coward politically, and I was afraid that she had my number.

HELLER: Then you took U.S. presidents to task.

FEIFFER: Well, it was the work that began to define my inner character and gave me a reality. Just as it was the success that came from the work that gave me a finish as a human being, and a level to my character that I'd never had before. Instead of selling out, it made me tougher. Instead of compromising, it made me make bigger demands on myself. I suspect because it made me far more acute in my powers of observations, it made me less of a narcissist. All of the essentially selfish, self-centered world I lived in certainly didn't disappear—it hasn't disappeared to this day—but it gave me material and an incentive to work against it, and to squash it in me.

HELLER: You stopped making political cartoons in 1997—before the George W. Bush ascendancy. Why was that?

FEIFFER: I was increasingly losing interest, and when Bush v. Gore started, my take on both of these men was that they were turkeys. It didn't matter who won. I preferred Gore to Bush but I couldn't stand Gore, his politics or his person, and I thought if Bush wins it won't be a big deal, he'll be an ineffective president, he'll be voted out after four years. . .

I was absolutely certain of this. Now I'm just as certain that had there not been September 11, Bush would have ended up very popular anyway and would have won a second term. I think I was very wrong about his ability to translate his vapidness and stupidity into a social and political movement, the finishing of the dumbing-down of America that began with the Reagan Revolution.

HELLER: Did this discourage you from continuing the fight?

FEIFFER: I was angry politically, but I've been angry politically for many, many years. I suspect the disillusion that followed, and the loss of interest in commenting on politics, has had a lot to do with September 11 and its aftermath. I no longer saw my cartoons as doing much good, other than making my small audience feel better.

HELLER: As noted, you cut yourself off from political commentary before September 11. Was that because you started writing children's books?

FEIFFER: I discovered with *The Man in the Ceiling* that I had found another form, in addition to theater, that I could become obsessive about. I had been doing plays for many, many years, and I loved working in these long forms; but it was clear that I was never going to write a play that was going to run on Broadway, and make me and my family a living in the theater—although I love the work, and actors and directors loved working with the material. I was never going to go down well with the critics and I was never going to pull in audiences. Even when well reviewed, the plays seldom had a run. It was clear that nothing I was going to do in the theater was going to bring me an income that allowed me to protect my family in the future. And I was aging. I had to find a form that supplanted theater, could make some money, and still be something I could be proud of.

HELLER: You had illustrated a few children's books, like *The Phantom Tollbooth*, but how did you come to write your own?

FEIFFER: I stumbled into children's books just the way I stumbled into theater—all by accident—and discovered, as I started to work on *The Man in the Ceiling*, trying to understand how you write one of these damn books, that after a week or two I kind of knew how, and that I loved it. It was enormous fun, and very liberating.

HELLER: You had written two novels, *Harry, the Rat with Women* and *Ackroyd*. How different was it from writing for an adult audience?

FEIFFER: I hated writing *Harry, the Rat with Women*. By the time I wrote the second novel, *Ackroyd*, I was writing plays, so in *Ackroyd* I gave myself a character in the first person, and wrote it as an extended monologue. You can do it that way. But to do a traditional third-person novel as an adult book was something that gave me no pleasure. I didn't think I was any good at it. I managed to get through with *Harry, the Rat with Women*, and thought it was a good book, and I look at it now and think it's a very good book—but I enjoyed not a moment of working on it, and I have to have fun at what I do. It's not just the results that count with me. They do count. But if I'm not having fun, if I don't love it, if I'm not euphoric, I don't want to do it. It's got to translate into a life-enhancing experience for me.

HELLER: Which was the case with *The Man in the Ceiling*?

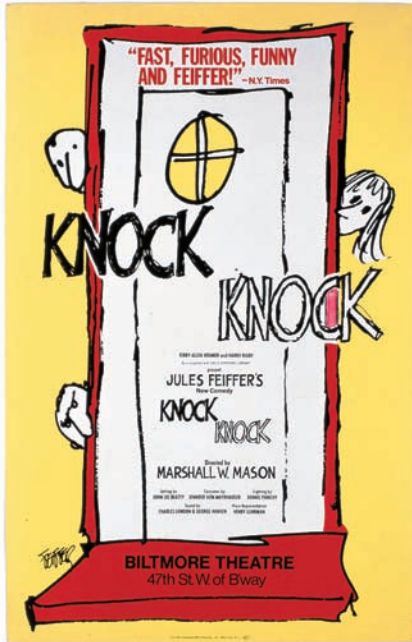
FEIFFER: I found that it was true when I started working on children's books. And another thing was true, which delighted me. For years I had been troubled by the fact that all of this work that I was very proud of and loved doing, the cartoons and the plays, were, with few exceptions, essentially abrasive and confrontational. I seemed to be unable to work into strips and theater the more

playful parts of my personality—the silly part, the jokey part, the charming part. Suddenly, with kids' books, the entertaining, not necessarily moralistic side of me came out. That the books ended up having meaning anyway was a bonus. I was just out to give kids a little fun, and a little grown-up support. That the kids' books turned out to be about something, that's not at all what I had in mind.

HELLER: Would this have been possible had you not started a second family?

FEIFFER: Oh, it's quite unlikely. I mean, I started out as a young married man in my first marriage not wanting children. I kept thinking I'd be a terrible father. I hated the idea of the responsibility and I didn't have that much interest in children. When Judy, my first wife, told me that she was pregnant, we both expected [that I would] react in horror. She was amazed, as was I, that I found myself happy and thrilled. My reaction came as a total surprise, and my reaction to fatherhood, even more so. It turned out I loved it. Kate, from my first marriage, is 20 years older than Halley, from my second marriage [to Jenny Allen], who is 10 years older than Julie. Kate is writing children's books and documentary films. Halley acts and writes and is in her senior year at college. Julie is in the 7th grade, adores animals and was the reason for my last book. The kids turned out to be the major event in my life. The raising of them and my interest in them, it's something I never could have predicted.

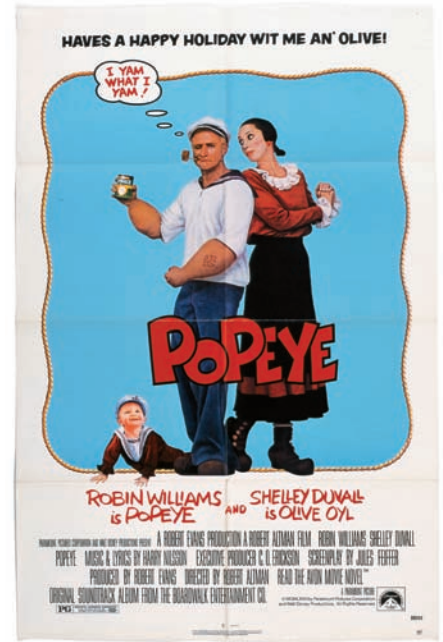
HELLER: In the children's book realm, you started with an autobiography, which is a very engaging and wonderful look at how you make pictures. Anybody reading it is going to be inspired by that need, want, desire and ability to make those things happen. Where do the other themes come from? Do you sit down in the same way that you would [to] make a comic and look for the entry?



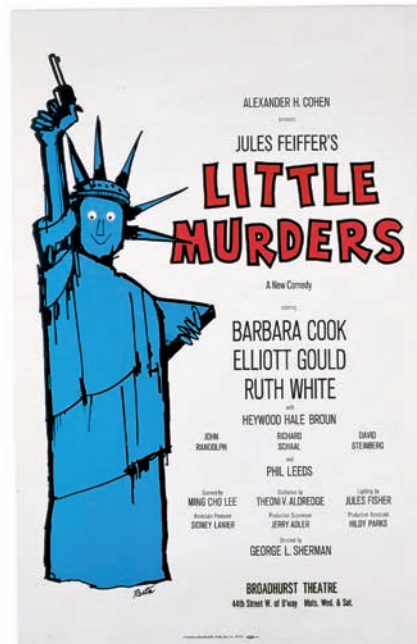
Knock, Knock, 1976



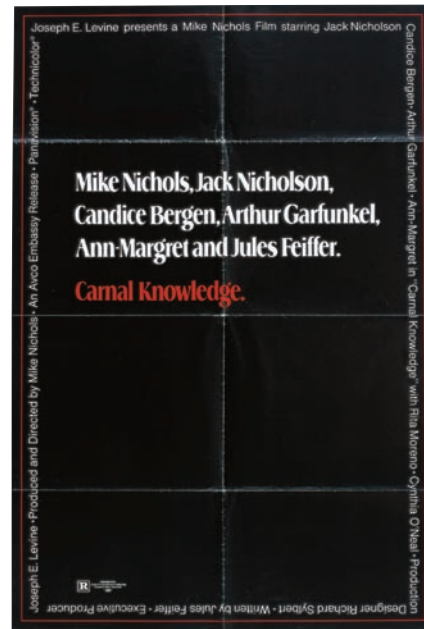
Hold Me!, 1977



Popeye, 1980



Little Murders, 1967



Camel Knowledge, 1971

Posters for films and plays written by Jules Feiffer.

A DANCE
TO
AUTUMN.



IN THIS
DANCE
I
CELEBRATE
THE
NEW
ME.



FREE
TO
BREAK
OUT OF
OLD
MOLDS.



FREE TO
EXPERIMENT
IN UN-
TRADITIONAL
WAYS.



FREE TO ESCAPE
THE PRISONS
OF MY PAST-



THE CHAINS
OF MY
WOMANHOOD.



FREE
TO
STRETCH
THE
LIMITS
OF MY
IMAGI-
NATION.



IT'S NOT
WORTH IT.



It's Not Worth It, 1972
Pen and ink

FEIFFER: Whatever the form, when I have the idea, it tends to go its own way. And it's a different way. There are different rules for writing a play than for writing a screenplay than there are for writing a children's book, but they all start the same: They evolve without me knowing what I'm getting into. It seemed to me, before *The Man in the Ceiling* came out, that this book was going to decide if I was going to do children's books for years to come. If it failed to sell what was my next step? Did I have another transition in me? There was a lot riding on that. So I decided that it might be a good idea to be well into a second book before this first book came out. I didn't want to be obsessed with failure or success, over which I had no control. I couldn't do anything about [that], but I could do something about another book.

HELLER: Which was a very different idea...

FEIFFER: But I had no ideas, so I went back over the cartoons, looking for themes. I've covered so much, but came up with nothing. I began thinking of this old story I'd done in a book called *Feiffer's Album* called "Excalibur and Rose," in which I was trying to evoke the language and style of a classic fairy tale: a young man who was a peasant who made people laugh; and a young woman, another peasant, who made them cry; and how they come together. I always thought it was a good idea, and I loved the illustrations, which were early works in color; but the story was labored, too moralistic, not at all successful. I thought it was a failure. So I decided to cannibalize myself—I had no other ideas—and do something about a prince who made people laugh. Maybe if he wasn't a peasant this time I'd have better luck. Once I started writing, the book took off. Each day's work involved getting Prince Roger into a death-defying jam that I didn't know how to get him out of. The next day would begin by my getting him out and getting him into another death-defying jam.

HELLER: Then you started doing picture books?

FEIFFER: I was sitting around one day with my daughter Halley, when she was little, and [became] fascinated by the fact that she would start a task, forget it, go on to something else, then start something else and forget it and that I, as a parent, was trying to impose some rule, some linear logic on it, and I was getting nowhere. I realized in the middle of this frustration that this was a book. Out of that came the first picture book, *I Lost My Bear*. I wrote it in about a day or a day-and-a-half about this kid who loses her stuffed bear, and it's all she's thinking of until she's distracted by one thing, then another thing, then something else. Basically, it was a book about how kids don't think linearly, as we do, and how to try to impose it on them drives us, and them, nuts. I did it up as a dummy, and that was the first of seven or eight picture books.

HELLER: You returned to comics—with an autobiographical theme—in *Meanwhile...*

FEIFFER: This was about a kid who sat around reading comics instead of drawing them, and wanted to fantasize himself out of his current life because his mother was calling upon him to do jobs he didn't want to do. He thought if only life had a "meanwhile..." inside a box with three dots after it that changed the scene, just as it did in the comics, then he wouldn't have to go answer his mother when she called. He'd just "meanwhile..." himself into another place. So he tried it out and it worked.

HELLER: The logic is impeccable...

FEIFFER: All of these stories were kind of like improvisational comedy. I'd start with a "what if..." idea, and it would take off or not. This was not unlike the six-panel strip, which would also begin as an improv. My early years of watching Mike Nichols and Elaine May work, and later in Chicago, the early Second City... Seeing how they used improvisation, all of that had a strong effect on me. You just start with an opening concept, a first line, and see where it goes.

HELLER: Do you first read these to your kids?

FEIFFER: I read everything to Halley and to Julie in the beginning. *Bark*, *George* was written for Julie. The idea came out of a bedtime story virtually word for word. In the early years, when the kids are young, they're very helpful. As they get older they tend to get more critical, so I stopped showing them work; because even when they were right, I didn't want to get beat up that early in the game by my own children. There are plenty of strangers around to do that job.

HELLER: How about your drawing technique? When you were doing *Clifford*, it was tighter, more conventional. Then your drawing loosened up, almost like a sketch. Almost to the point where people said, "Oh, he can't really draw."

FEIFFER: All I aimed for early on was to get to that point where people said, "He can't really draw." My aim in the early years was to be so minimalist that the drawings would go unnoticed, because I had a strong message to convey, and I didn't want to do it with different angled shots—close-up, medium shot, birds-eye, worms-eye—all the conventions of comic strips and comic books. I wanted to shoot with a fixed camera and as little art as possible so that the connection between words and text would go virtually

unnoticed, so that people wouldn't notice the art, except for a change of expression or body language. I learned a lot from the great *New Yorker* cartoonist Gluyas Williams about how kids and grown-ups move in our totally bourgeois environment: nobody is running, nobody is punching anybody; they're just shifting from one leg to another, or crossing a leg. How evocative that can be when the character is saying exactly the right word to the right body language. That's what I loved about cartooning in the first place: that words and pictures were so connected to each other that you couldn't tell where one began and the other continued, or which was more important, but you did know that it didn't work if you took away one or the other.

HELLER: Children's books tend to be more active in terms of drawing. Do you still primarily work with expression?

FEIFFER: Gesture is what my work is about. I loved the pencil drawings in my early years doing the strip, and I didn't like inking. For a while I was using a dowel stick—a butcher's dowel in ink—to get the kind of expressive line I wanted. Then when I found that too difficult and went back to pen, I wasn't crazy about the result. It looked okay, but not what I had in mind. It took me years to find the courage to give up penciling preliminary drawings. I switched to doing dozens of drawings, which I would then cut out and blow up or reduce in size, and lay them out on the paper, and put the lettering in around them. That's the way I did the strip. It took three times as long, but was much more fun, because the art, I thought, was so much more free and expressive.

HELLER: For the children's books you also had to turn on the color. How difficult was that for you, a former black-and-white man?



Illustration from *The Long Chalkboard and
Other Stories*, 2006
Charcoal pencil



Illustration from *The Daddy Mountain*, 2004
Watercolor and ink

FEIFFER: I had never worked in color before in a serious way, but here the color had everything to do with the success or failure of the mood of the piece, of the book. Each story demanded a different approach to color, either more muted or more poster-ish, whatever the story was that I was telling. So all of it became much more sophisticated, much more involving, and much more adventurous—and enormous fun because I didn't know what I was doing. The trick of my life in art is that I only feel happy when I really feel stupid, essentially unqualified for the work that comes up next; and even though I'm the guy who wrote the damn book, I don't have a clue how to illustrate it. It's enormously entertaining for me to figure that all out.

HELLER: Do you know what's coming next?

FEIFFER: I've just illustrated this book my wife, Jenny, wrote: *The Long Chalkboard and Other Stories*. My picture book with my daughter Kate comes out in the spring. A memoir's in the works. A Broadway musical. A new picture book... I never know. I don't want to know.

HELLER: But you know you'll stay with children's books?

FEIFFER: I'll stay with the kids' books, but I never thought of doing illustration for any other writer's book—the two exceptions being *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Norton Juster's book, which is now considered a classic; and Florence Parry Heide's wonderful *Some Things Are Scary*. Then suddenly I found myself illustrating a book that Jenny wrote, which I had to do, because it was brilliant, it clearly needed illustration, and she's my wife. So who else is going to do it? Sorel? And I had a wonderful time. I discovered a whole new way of working, because Steve Heller, whom you may have heard of, got me to do the special holiday section for *The New York Times Book Review*, and since it was the second one I was doing in three years, I thought

it had to look very different from the first one. I fumbled around and started working loosely in charcoal pencil, and I liked the results, and he liked the results. I did the whole section that way, and it got a great response, so I said, "I'll do Jenny's book that way." Now I feel I'll do everything for the rest of my life in charcoal pencil. My daughter Kate's new picture book, *Henry, The Dog with No Tail*, is done that way. And in color! So I seem to be illustrating books I didn't write, and loving it—perhaps as long as it stays in the family.

HELLER: Would you ever return to politics?

FEIFFER: I have no idea. After the failure of one of my plays, I said I'd never write another play, and while I waited ten years to go back to it, I wrote, finally, what may be my best play, *A Bad Friend*. I'm certain, in one way or another, I'll go back to politics. At the moment, I'd be much more interested in writing a political play than a political cartoon, but that, too, may change. In the meantime, I've got a memoir and the book for a musical to write. George W. will have to wait. But that's okay. The way things are going, this is one George everyone else is barking at. I'm not needed, thank God.

