

## HARVEY KURTZMAN'S JUNGLE BOOK: OR, UP FROM THE APES! (AND RIGHT BACK DOWN)

**Author:** Kurtzman, Harvey

**Artist:** Harvey Kurtzman (illustrator)

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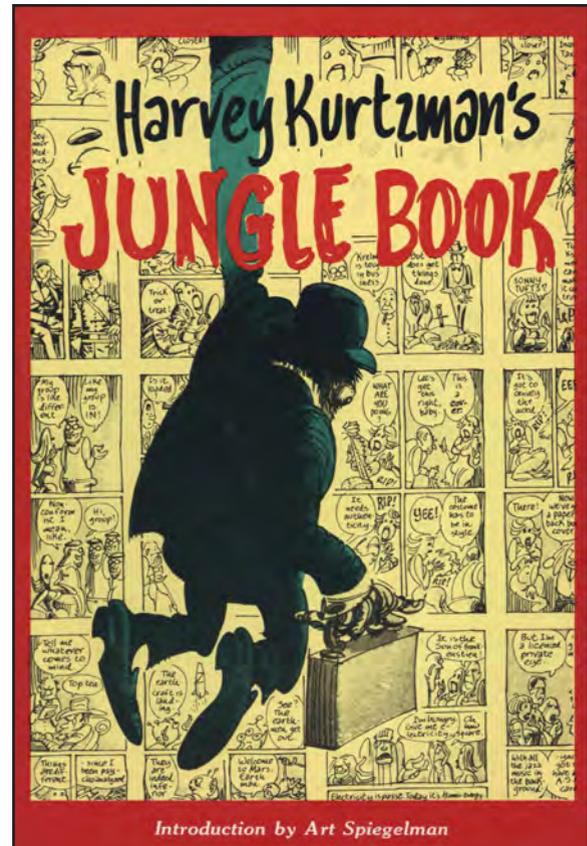
### Publication History

After leaving *MAD* magazine in 1957, Harvey Kurtzman, who had helped to found the magazine in 1952, supported himself primarily through freelance work. He developed an idea for a book of stories for Ballantine Books, which had previously published collections of *MAD* comics. Despite his misgivings, Ian Ballantine offered Kurtzman a contract.

The full title of the collection is *Harvey Kurtzman's Jungle Book: Or, Up from the Apes! (and Right Back Down)—In Which Are Described in Words and Pictures Businessmen, Private Eyes, Cowboys, and Other Heros All Exhibiting the Progress of Man from the Darkness of the Cave into the Light of Civilization by Means of Television, Wide Screen Movies, the Stone Axe, and Other Useful Arts*. In addition to the book's four stories, Kurtzman worked on a parody of science-fiction movies to be included in a second volume. However, the book was a commercial failure, and no second volume appeared. Nonetheless, it became a much-desired collector's item. In 1986, Kitchen Sink Press republished the book in hardcover and released a softcover version in 1988.

### Plot

All four stories parody popular fiction and nonfiction works of the 1950's. The inspiration for "Thelonus Violence" was *Peter Gunn* (1958-1961), a television series about a hip, sophisticated private investigator who dresses stylishly and loves cool jazz; the show is best remembered for its jazzy theme music by Henry Mancini. Violence, in a parody of hipster dialogue, tells about a young woman blackmailed for cheating at school. At different points in the story, he is pummeled by a thug who wants him to back off and surrounded by shapely women. It is revealed that Violence and the



*Harvey Kurtzman's Jungle Book*. (Courtesy of Kitchen Sink Press)

thug are partners and extortionists, and he ends the story as a professional wrestler.

The title of "The Organization Man in the Grey Flannel Executive Suite" is an amalgamation of the titles of three best sellers of the 1950's. Cameron Hawley's novel *Executive Suite* (1952) concerns success and succession in a business setting; a film version was released in 1954. Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) deals with the search for meaning in a materialistic, business-oriented United States, while William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) studies management practices in major American corporations. Kurtzman's story, an

autobiographical treatment of his experience working at Timely Publications in the 1940's, satirizes the venality of business in general and the publishing industry in particular through the initial naïveté and gradual corruption of Goodman Beaver. He begins working for Shlock Publications with high hopes but gradually comes to resemble the cynical editors he at first cannot comprehend. Like the others, he begins groping the secretary and, at the end, steals from the company.

"Compulsion on the Range" parodies the television Western *Gunsmoke* (1955-1975). Marshal Matt Dollin, obsessed with besting outlaw Johnny Ringding in a gunfight despite Ringding's superior skills, trails Johnny to American Indian country. Despite Dollin's incompetence, the chief swears Ringding will face "Indian revenge." Dollin pursues his nemesis to Los Angeles, where Zorro argues in favor of a nonviolent approach. Lacking a worthy opponent, Ringding leaves the country, and Dollin is counseled by a Freud-influenced doctor who helps him resolve his psychological issues. The story concludes with Ringding experiencing Indian revenge—in India.

Kurtzman claimed "Decadence Degenerated" was based on his experiences in Texas while in the military, but it also reads as a parody of certain southern writers such as Erskine Caldwell and Tennessee Williams. A group of ignorant men in Rottenville pass the time by complaining of boredom and mentally undressing the alluring Honey Lou as she walks by. Her rather masculine sister tries to protect her from the men and from Si Mednick, a bookworm whom the men criticize for his unmanly ways. When Honey Lou is murdered, the sheriff arrests the "queer" Mednick, who falls prey to a lynch mob despite the efforts of a journalist. The townspeople are abashed to learn that Mednick had been working on gifts for them, and the story ends with the revelation that the gifts were actually bombs.

### Characters

- *Thelonus Violence* is a good-looking and muscular private detective who believes himself to be more intelligent and capable than he truly is. His first name evokes jazz pianist Thelonious Monk, despite the alternative spelling, and relates to his

love of jazz, while his last relates to the violence in which television character Peter Gunn was involved.

- *Lolita Nabakov* is the young woman being black-mailed for cheating on an exam in "Thelonus Violence." Her name derives from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955). She is blond, curvaceous, and vapid.
- *Goodman Beaver*, the protagonist of "The Organization Man in the Grey Flannel Executive Suite," is a young man with blond hair and a wide grin. He is a good man at the beginning of the story, though a naïve and overambitious "eager beaver," but he is corrupted by his work environment. Kurtzman later featured the hopeful, naïve version of the character in stories published in *Help!* magazine.
- *Mike Verifax* is the secretary at Shlock Publications in "The Organization Man in the Grey Flannel Executive Suite." She is young, blond, and shapely, and she takes constant sexual harassment in stride. She admires Goodman's idealism in the beginning and is saddened by how he changes.
- *Lucifer Shlock* is the older, slovenly head of Shlock Publications in "The Organization Man in the Grey Flannel Executive Suite." Unscrupulous and concerned chiefly with the bottom line, he finds Goodman's idealism strange. As Goodman becomes more like him, he grows to admire the young man.
- *Matt Dollin*, the protagonist of "Compulsion on the Range," is a parody of Matt Dillon, the protagonist of the television series *Gunsmoke*. He is a confident but incompetent gunfighter obsessed with outdrawing Johnny Ringding. Later, with a doctor's help, he realizes that his obsession derives from his failure as a youth to hide from his father a racy picture of a woman that he kept in his dresser—he was unable to beat his father to the drawer.
- *Johnny Ringding* is an outlaw in "Compulsion on the Range." Faster on the draw than Dollin, he at first gleefully and then reluctantly bests him in gunfights. His crimes in American Indian country

and abduction of the chief's daughter earn him the threat of "Indian revenge." Before this happens, however, he travels to Los Angeles and is confronted by Zorro, whose refusal to fight him drives Ringding out of the country.

- Zorro is the "Marshaller" of Los Angeles in "Compulsion on the Range." Older and heavier than in his prime, he proclaims he is a modern

lawman, using words rather than violence to keep the peace. He attempts to subdue Ringding by appealing to his conscience and staring him down, taking Ringding's abuse until the gun-fighter departs in frustration.

- Honey Lou is an attractive young blond in "Decadence Degenerated." She pays no attention to the men who mentally undress her but appears



Harvey Kurtzman's *Jungle Book*. (Courtesy of Kitchen Sink Press)

interested in the more sophisticated Si Mednick, despite her sister's protectiveness. Her murder prompts Mednick's arrest and lynching, despite his innocence

- *Sam* is Honey Lou's beefy older sister in "Decadence Degenerated." Wearing masculine clothing and a bandana, she easily intimidates the men who leer at Honey Lou. She later confesses to her sister's murder, claiming she wanted to teach her not to run around with men.
- *Si Mednick* is a shy man in "Decadence Degenerated" who eschews his peers' rural attire in favor of glasses, a beret, and a parasol. He offers a present to Honey Lou, which prompts the anger of Sam and the town's suspicions when Honey Lou is murdered. He protests his innocence but is lynched anyway. The journalist who defends him says Mednick loved his fellow citizens, as demonstrated by the clocks he was working on as gifts; when the townspeople take the gifts home, however, they explode.
- *Chief Beeferman* is a corrupt sheriff in "Decadence Degenerated" who allows an innocent man to be taken by a lynch mob while he focuses on "fund-raising."
- *Etaoin Shrdlu* is a reporter from Fayetteville in "Decadence Degenerated." He is taken for a Yankee outsider by Chief Beeferman, even though he hails not from the North but from the northern part of the state. He tries to fight the ignorance and bigotry of Rottenville but also reveals his own self-interest in his desire for a good story.

### Artistic Style

The four stories of *Jungle Book* share a consistent artistic style, an exaggerated cartoonish approach to the human figure. Rounded, elongated figures prevail, suggesting fluidity in the characters' movements. Except for Sam, the women are ridiculously voluptuous. Shading and lines suggest shape, texture, and lighting, but the images tend to be spare and clean. Kurtzman's characters' faces are caricatures, expressing emotional states and vacuity. Often the eyes are blank circles, and the women lack noses except in profile.

### Harvey Kurtzman

One of the most celebrated cartoonists in American history—and a man for whom an industry award is named—Harvey Kurtzman is best remembered as the original editor of *MAD*, the generation-defining humor comic book. Working initially as a freelance creator of fill-in material and as a cartoonist for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Kurtzman made his reputation as the editor of EC Comics' war titles, *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*. In 1952, he launched *MAD*, the satirical magazine that would become one of the biggest sensations in comics for several decades. After leaving the magazine in 1956, Kurtzman launched a short-lived rival, *Trump*, with Hugh Hefner, then *Humbug* and *Help!* In the latter, he produced the *Goodman Beaver* strips that brought him the ire of Archie Comics. Starting in 1962, he and Will Elder began publishing Little Annie Fannie in *Playboy Magazine*, a feature that ran for twenty-six years. Kurtzman is among the most influential humor cartoonists of all time, ushering in a new era of sophisticated satire in American comics.

The black-and-white artwork has a range of gray tones, both to suggest color and to create shading and lighting effects. In addition, in most images, thin horizontal lines are detectable. As an experiment, Kurtzman drew the artwork on lined paper, with assurances from the printer that the lines would disappear in the finished product. The fact that they did not, he said later, indicates the low-budget nature of the original paperback book.

Kurtzman's lettering, unlike that of many comics, is not all in capital letters and evokes a personal handwriting style rather than type. Like many letterers, he employs boldface for emphasis and symbols for curse words. Speech balloons convey dialogue, and, because many of the panels are tall due to the vertical orientation of the book, words are frequently hyphenated to fit the balloons.

### Themes

The title *Jungle Book* and the first part of the subtitle, *Up from the Apes! (and Right Back Down)*, suggest one

of the major themes of the book: For all of humankind's vaunted achievements, it is hardly the pinnacle of civilization. Kurtzman presents this theme through satire. Characters who think they are intelligent are shown to be idiots, characters proud of their skills are revealed as incompetent, and characters thought to be virtuous are shown as corrupt or corruptible. In addition, the books and television shows that inspired Kurtzman's parodies, most of them from the 1950's, have in common a middlebrow sensibility that he also mocks. While not aspiring to the highest levels of art, his targets set themselves above lowbrow forms of entertainment; in poking fun at this middlebrow sensibility, Kurtzman ridicules its pretensions. Humanity in *Jungle Book* is depicted as fallen, not theologically but ontologically, perhaps resulting from humanity's root brutishness or its perpetual tendency toward delusion.

The objectification of women is also a prominent theme. Except for the masculine Sam in "Decadence Degenerated," whose imagined unclothed form is depicted as repulsive, the women's exaggerated curves are ogled and groped repeatedly in the four stories. Kurtzman himself objectifies these women through the hypersexualized way he draws them, yet the men who harass them are depicted as fools, creeps, and villains, pointing toward a critique of lewd masculine behavior.

### Impact

The commercial failure of *Harvey Kurtzman's Jungle Book* meant that the book itself did not make much of an impact, but Kurtzman's larger influence is enormous. While he was best known for his contributions to *MAD*, those who admired his work and sought it wherever they could find it embraced his keen satiric sense as well as his comically exaggerated artwork and rhythmic progressions from panel to panel, all of which are found in *Jungle Book*. It is little wonder, then, that in his introduction to the 1986 republication of *Jungle Book*, Art Spiegelman noted that his copy of

the original 1959 edition had literally fallen apart from repeated reading. Indeed, Kurtzman inspired the next generation of satirical cartoonists, many of whom, such as Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton, were associated with the underground comics of the 1960's and beyond. Although such cartoonists developed their own individual styles, Kurtzman's influence is evident in their work and throughout the industry. The Harvey Awards, given to comics creators by their fellow professionals since 1988, are named in his honor.

Darren Harris-Fain

### Further Reading

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**See also:** *A Cartoon History of the Universe; The Book of Genesis; The Complete Fritz the Cat; Ghost World*