

UNCORRECTED PROOFS

John Doe

MAD LAUGHTER

Fragments of a Life in Progress



EVELYN SIEGEL, 1946
Lake Windsor, So. Fallsburgh, N. Y.

PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING HILLMAN

MAD LAUGHTER

Fragments of a Life in Progress

By JULES SIEGEL

The Communication Company
CANCUN, QUINTANA ROO, MEXICO

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INQUIRIES

Russell & Volkening, Literary Agents
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New York NY 10001

DEDICATION

FOR MY CHILDREN

In Order of Appearance

Faera Siegel Jolly

Eli Siegel Brown

Jesse Siegel Brown

ALSO BY JULES SIEGEL

RECORD

MEMOIR

THE JOURNAL OF THE ABSURD

With Bernard Garfinkel

CANCUN: A BANKERS' FANTASY

Translated from the Spanish of Fernando Martí

CANCUN USER'S GUIDE

With Anita Brown and Faera Siegel

LINELAND: MORTALITY AND MERCY ON THE INTERNET'S

PYNCHON-L@WASTE.ORG DISCUSSION LIST

With Virginia Christine Siegel *et al.*

CONTENTS

PREFACE XI

I MY CRAZY FAMILY 19

II FAMILY SECRETS 39

III GETTING PUBLISHED 75

IV COPS & ROBBERS 99

V QUESTIONS OF THE HEART 167

VI BROTHERS AND SISTERS 207

VII THE REAL MEXICO 261

VIII THE RING AND THE FLOWERS 321

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 355

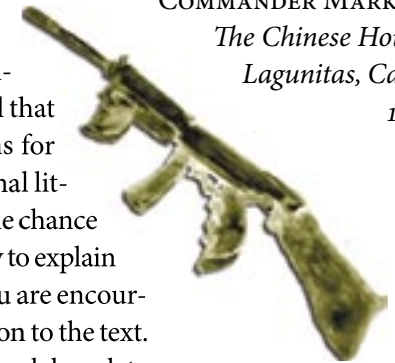
PREFACE

“IF you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it’s not going to be fired, it shouldn’t be hanging there.”

—ANTON CHEKOV, 1889

MORE THAN ONE professional reader has criticized me for apologizing for my work, but as I feel that my method does raise questions for those accustomed to conventional literary works, I am going to take the chance of trying your patience while I try to explain what I am doing in this book. You are encouraged to skip all this and go right on to the text. Perhaps you will want to come back here later.

COMMANDER MARK IV
The Chinese House,
Lagunitas, Calif.,
1973



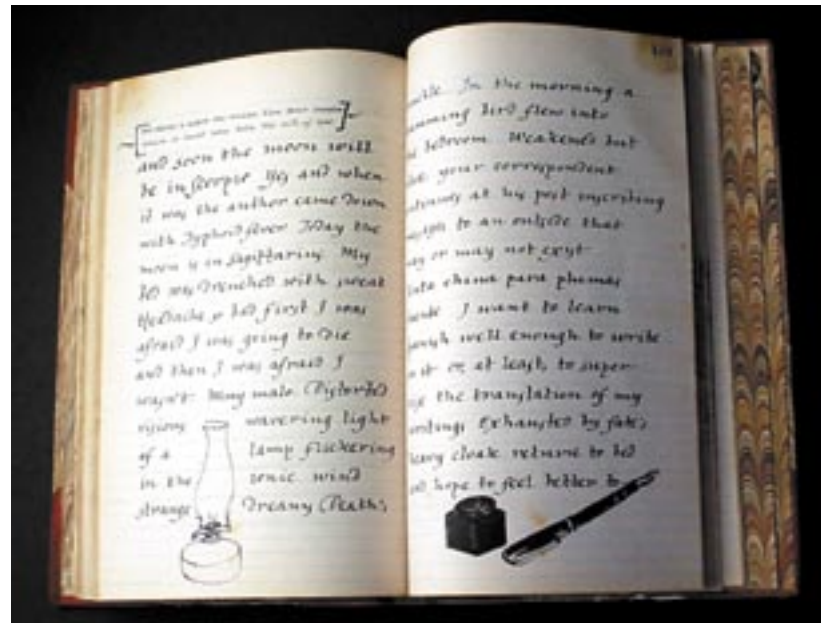
Mad Laughter is a series of narrative non-fiction essays about the 20th Century as seen through the lives of the people I knew and loved. It is concerned not with the history of the world, but the history of my immediate family, my extended family, my friends and my substitute families. *Mad Laughter* is neither an autobiography nor a statesmanlike memoir. The great events of the century—the world wars, the social revolutions, the march of progress—appear only as we experienced them. This is not History but history. I was not important in any real sense. I did know some famous people, mainly because of my work as a journalist. Although I hope that some day this book might serve as the raw material for some professional scholar, my aim is not to elucidate the meaning of my time, but simply to tell what I saw and

felt and heard in the most unpretentious and entertaining way possible.

The book takes place in the past and the present simultaneously. The segments progress forward through the century, but each may refer back to different scenes in the past. I understand some things at the beginning of the book, but each step forward leads me to new discoveries about myself and my family. There are gaps in the story that never get filled. That's why it's called "Fragments of a Life in Progress," recognizing the often frustrating fact that our lives are so full of incident that we can never hope to tell more than a tiny fraction.

This technique, based on the way people talk to each other rather than some formal academic structure, gives the book layers of development. There is the progress through time. There is also the psychological progress of knowledge. I consider my method architectural rather than literary in the conventional sense. My stories are like rooms in a house. They have entrances and exits, yet their elements don't fit together like Euclidean arguments but rather like furnishings. Let's say I'm an interior decorator of the mind. My main aim is to hypnotize the reader into a kind of dream-like state in which my subtitles point the way through a carefully painted *trompe l'oeil* labyrinth. By the end of the book, if I've succeeded, the reader has slipped across the borders of time into my fully developed world and feels what I feel.

In 1968, my mother wanted to meet Candida Donadio, then my literary agent, who was kind enough to invite us to dinner. Jonathan Cape and Allen Ginsberg were there for cocktails. Before they left, my mother raised her arms over Allen and blessed him: "Allen, I wish for you what you wish for yourself." She had no idea who he was. When she told her well-educated suburban nieces and nephews about this later they were



astounded that she had met the great man. On the way out, Allen said to me, "Be diligent! Be diligent!" I wish I'd listened.

After they left, we sat down to dinner. I noticed that all the table settings were different. Nothing matched. All the pieces shared a common taste, but they weren't a set. With a sense of foreboding, I said, "Candida, none of these things match." She replied, "That's right. They aren't table settings. They are my life." And then she explained how she had purchased her first silver spoon when she was twelve years old. My life changed on the spot. I realized that everything in my life came in sets. I had matched dishes, silverware, clothing, books, furniture. Everything fit.

When a dish was chipped, I felt heartbroken because now the set was not perfect, and I hurried to get a replacement.

During the following weeks, I also saw that my writing was a set. There was a master sentence that I was matching in my head. I measured each sentence that I wrote against it. Every story was composed of matching sentences that matched a master story pattern as well. I realized that I found it so hard to write because I was trying to get the voice in my head to match this invisible master template. It took me a long time to unlearn all those dramatic tricks of the trade entirely.

Ultimately, I realized that the concept of the matched set was essentially a construct of consumerism. I am not going to bore you with the full Talmudic disquisition. I think you can see how it would tend to increase consumption. You can also speculate on the anal need for uniform turds, for the relentlessly measuring superego clock, but ultimately you come to the assembly line and everything it implies—the rack.

I saw that Ibsen's well-made play was just another artifact of this process. I no longer wanted to write well-made stories. To be honest,

I couldn't write them any more. I could no longer turn out a story on demand. I had to grow my writings from the events of my life (or what I observed as a journalist) and tell them the way I would tell them in conversation. Anything else was artificial. Worse, it was phony. The concept of the plot is a dramatic device that, to me, is a cheap trick to keep people on the edge of their seats. We are taught that life is a story with a plot and a beginning and a middle and an ending. Even the psychoanalyst tries to see the patient's life as a story with a plot. There is no plot. You're born. You live. You die. Along the way, things happen that make you laugh and make you cry. That's what my work is all about.

"Family Secrets" was my first attempt to tell a story exactly the way I spoke. Over the years, I worked hard to do that in everything I wrote. Arthur Kretchmer (my most important editor) encouraged me enthusiastically, and he published some of my most dynamic stories. But the few book editors who looked at my stories insisted that I polish them into a seamless structure. I was unwilling to do that. Thus only a portion of this book has been published until now. As you will see, although the writing style is similar throughout, the tone changes drastically depending on when the section you are reading was written and what it is about. I could have gone over all this and smoothed it all, but then it wouldn't be as faithful to the truth as I hope it now is.

My style is very deliberately discursive. The thought continues until I am tired of it. I discovered this method on my own and then was very happy to learn that Mark Twain was there ahead of me. Mark Twain's greatest work is a series of narrative essays that have been published in part as his autobiography. He wrote and dictated this over the years with one rule. He began at a point that interested him and ended when it stopped interesting him. There is no chronological order.

He left instructions for the book to be published exactly the way he wrote it. Although I believe a complete edition is now in progress, it has never been published in the form that he intended. The editor of the last major edition rearranged everything chronologically.

If they do that to Mark Twain what will they do to me?

In the early 1970's I became dissatisfied with the lack of visual excitement of the standard trade book and I became interested in the way Time-Life Books was using magazine techniques to create books that made full sensual contact with the reader. Since I was deeply involved in magazine design, I saw many ways in which the literary book—novel, memoir, poetry—could be enhanced by adding visual elements. When I tried to get publishers to understand this they smiled and asked me what I had written lately. I was kind of a pioneer in the field of what is now book art, but I didn't know it until a friend brought my work to Martha Wilson's attention and she gave me a show in 1978 at the original Franklin Furnace Archive on Franklin Street. At the time, I was making one-of-a-kind books that I wrote out in my own handwriting (a rough-and-ready formal handwriting that sometimes approaches true calligraphy). Martha was one of the people who created the concept of book art. She had a huge collection of what she called book-like works by artists. There was also a distributor called Printed Matter, Inc. that sold all kinds of artists' books, most of them produced in tiny editions, often on copying machines and the like. People were still using mimeograph machines then.

Martha's collection was very much an attempt to define an area rather than to, say, curate a collection, and her definitions were very broad, so broad that I couldn't quite get what she was aiming at. I was then a well-connected media snob, working simultaneously for *Playboy* and *Penthouse* (where I created "Dreams and Diversions," which became the magazine's most popular feature, and I also worked on the original design for *Omni*). I was quite disappointed with Franklin Furnace, which looked like a Chinese laundry, not a private museum. But Franklin Furnace was eventually purchased by the Museum of Modern Art, and so I achieved a measure of recognition that I only found out about when I got online in 1996.

At first, the journals I exhibited at Franklin Furnace were just notes for a book that has had several titles but is now *Mad Laughter*. Then I realized that they could be illustrations, which is how I used them in my first collection, *Record*, published by Straight Arrow in 1972. The editor, Alan Rinzler, put the book together with Straight Arrow art director

Sandra Payne, who accepted my suggestions faithfully, while I was in Mexico, so it did not quite fit the definition of book art.

From 1974 to 1975, while living in Yelapa, Jalisco, I wrote *Memoir*, the first calligraphic novel that I created specifically for publication. I produced 350 copies at Mendocino Lithographers in 1975. These were done entirely under my personal supervision. Only the photo-mechanical work (making and assembling the negatives) and the printing were done by other craftsmen. Even so, the book is much more my own work than, say, the prints of Escher were his own work, as his drawings were interpreted under his close supervision by end-grain wood engravers. The negatives of *Memoir* were merely photographs of my pages, made by the cameraman to my exact specifications.

Ed Sorel looked at *Memoir* and he said, “The calligraphy is not very good.” I replied, “It’s not calligraphy. It’s a middle-aged man trying to create calligraphy. It’s the process, not the form. There’s a story he’s telling and the errors in his technique are part of it.”

“Well, still, the calligraphy could be better.”

It gets very dark sometimes (3:19 a.m., right now), you know, when people look at your work and say, “You realize that you will be famous after your death?”

In 1981 I walked away from what most people consider the real world to write a book called *The Real Mexico*. Before long, I found myself living and working in remote locations in which the written word was superfluous. I survived because of my commercial skills as a graphic designer and photographer. I am now almost 68 years old. I’ve worked entirely outside the world of professional art and academic studies all my life. With the exception of my 1977 show at Franklin Furnace, any recognition I’ve received has been decidedly commercial. I realize that one institution is not much of a recommendation but book art is a very young genre. I haven’t had the luxury of showing my work. I’m not Gauguin but I would like to point out that he didn’t have many shows either after moving to Tahiti. Despite this, I consider myself an artist in every sense of the word. I leave it to others and history to resolve the conflict between fine art and commercial art. My own position (as one

might expect) is that the anonymous graphic designers who created the original Campbell’s soup can were as worthy of serious attention as Andy Warhol, and I think, in fact, that was his point.

Mad Laughter doesn’t really look like book art. It looks like an ordinary trade paperback, which is exactly what it is designed to look like. The difference is that I created it in every detail on my computer and bound it on my kitchen table. It is the exact imitation of the conventional trade paperback down to the fact that it can be sold in conventional bookstores. It’s as if Andy Warhol made and sold his own line of canned soup, beginning with cooking the soup and constructing the can and making the labels and so on. Since books are works of art in themselves, whether or not made by book artists, the analogy is even more compelling.

A. J. Liebling said, “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” A laser printer is a desktop printing press. The digital book press is the laser printer to the next power. It hooks up the individual author/artist to the world book distribution system in a way that has never before existed—one individual in a small city on the edge of a vast jungle, working with a piece of equipment you can now buy in a supermarket in Cancun, communicating directly with the entire world without any form of editorial control or censorship, using a medium that was absolutely dominated by the industrial corporation when I left the United States in 1981. Why call it *Mad Laughter*? Because it is the only sane response to what we have all been through. What a century! It was so horrible and sad that no tears suffice to express our losses. What else can we do but laugh? Yet as crazy as it has all been, as crazy as we all were and are, our children—so sane, so beautiful, so loving—vindicate us. We survived and we produced them. For their pleasure, let us tell the stories of how we got here, who we were, and leave our modest mark for generations yet unborn to cherish, as we cherish these scratched and clouded daguerreotypes of times gone by.

~I~

MY CRAZY FAMILY

At the beginning of the 21st century—2001

“I HAVE remained true to my deepest convictions. I mean to the courage of those who are born to be defeated, the weaknesses of the strong, and the tragedy of misunderstandings and missed opportunities, which I have done my best to treat as comedy, for otherwise how can we manage to bear it?”

—PENELOPE FITZGERALD

[1] Taking Him to Meet Your Folks

WHEN my daughter, Faera, was ten years old, she started writing a book she called “My Crazy Family.” Everybody who knew us was sure that it would be a best seller. She never did get very far on the book, but I still feel it has great potential. Born in 1971, Faera not long ago sent me an e-mail that said, “Sometimes I want to run away and talk only to strangers.” That’s a title, I thought immediately. Basically, I myself have pretty much given up even talking to strangers. After you talk to them the first time, they are no longer strangers, my online friend, Otto Steinmayer, pointed out when I told him what Faera said.

Instead of actually talking to people, I just write e-mail letters. This gives me an automatic unfair advantage, as I am a professional writer, which is a bit like being a professional boxer when it comes to the Internet. I had a really hostile friend who used to go into bars and pick fights when he was feeling annoyed. Hugely muscled in superb condition, he roundly whipped all comers, until he ran into a skinny guy with glasses who somehow left him on the floor.

When it comes to the Internet, I am that skinny guy with glasses. I am not as good in person or on the phone. Like everyone else, I think of the best things to say later. Probably I would have achieved a higher station in life if I had been my own speech writer and sent myself all proposed conversational content by e-mail. Instead of my usual spontaneously mortifying off-the-cuff remarks, I would have issued carefully considered policy statements that furthered rather than hindered my ambitions, not to speak of my various marriages.

I can’t talk to my ex-brother, for example. Although my beloved bride, the beautiful Anita Brown, and I have been together since 1977, she has never met my ex-brother. I used to think I was the only person who had an ex-brother, but Faera tells me that it is a common thing in these days of fractured families. You have this brother for many years. He’s a known family fixture, not someone who comes in to fix a toilet



FAERA SIEGEL JOLLY
Newport, Washington, 1981

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANITA BROWN

once in a while. Turns out he is your mother’s child by a secret previous marriage. His real name is not Kenneth Siegel, but Kenneth Grossman. Everyone knows except you. Fearful that you might require mouth-to-mouth resuscitation if this were revealed to you in the wrong way, he tells you himself immediately after your father’s suicide.

Well, it was just one more fact about which nothing could be done at that point. I let it go by without comment and did my best to forget

that he had ever said it. By then he had changed his name to Kenneth Saunders to avoid being identified as a Jew. He tried to convince me to do the same. I don't think he ever forgave me for refusing. I understand that it is embarrassing for him to have an ex-brother named Jules Siegel, but I don't think that he really has ever appreciated how embarrassing it has been for me to have an ex-brother who is pretending to be a *goy*. When crude people asked about the different names, I explained that he was my ex-brother. They thought I was joking.

Several years later, Kenneth's father came back and married my mother again. Then she kicked him out again and he died in a nursing home. During this time, my ex-brother began acting like any other hostile ex (probably because he was still so angry that I refused to change my name and pretend to be a *goy*) and we pretty much stopped speaking to each other. Other family members did their best to try to work things out, but my few attempts at following up were like Salvador Allende coming back from the grave to discuss his feelings with Augusto Pinochet. A few years ago, at my late mother's insistence, Kenneth agreed to talk with Anita. To avoid inflammatory outbursts from me, she called him privately.

"He reminded me of my father," she said when I asked her how it went.

That is not as good as it sounds. When I first met Anita, she was 23 years old and hadn't seen her father since she was a toddler. Her evil stepfather had forbidden her mother to mention him. Anita's father, Alvin, became seriously depressed after his father's death and was eventually committed to Creedmore by her mother. He was walking backwards to the subway in order to assure good luck in finding a new job, among his more normal antics.

At Creedmore, he jumped out of the car and ran in ahead of Anne and told them that she was crazy and that he was there to have *her* institutionalized. They gave them both tests and put him away, but it was a close call for Anne. Alvin told them that he came from a wealthy family and that his brothers and sisters were cheating him out of his inheritance. They administered shock treatment and put him under restraint

for saying these crazy things. Little did they know that he was telling the absolute truth.

At the time Anita and I got together, Alvin was in a halfway house in Bayshore, Long Island, and, at my insistence, we went out to see him. Alvin was enraged.

"What took you so long?" he demanded.

"It's a long ride from Manhattan," Anita answered.

"Twenty years?"

Anita tried to explain, but Alvin went into his Hal the Robot behavior and began saying "I respond only to Una and Edward" (his brother and sister) and acting so weird that the attendant asked us to leave. We understood why Una and Edward did not exactly respond to him. As we drove away, he was out in the street waving his fist. And he wonders what took her so long.

The stepfather, an alcoholic, died of cirrhosis of the liver a few years ago in a public hospital in Texas, unmourned by anyone.

When we got back home, Anita said ruefully, "Taking him to meet your folks."

[2] Mixed Marriages

IT IS A WELL-ESTABLISHED scientific fact that all marriages are mixed marriages, regardless of race, religion, sex or place of national origin. Start with the differences among the sexes. We do have what are called same-sex marriages these days, but on more serious study we find that there are variants here, too. First of all, we have same-sex and same-gender marriages, representing different cultural strains. Usually, one partner is always on time, for example, while the other is not. On leaving the house, one partner will always have to go back and do something else, almost always after repeatedly urging the other partner to hurry up and get ready; it's time to leave. One partner will be spectacular on the computer; the other will pretend to be a Luddite in order to avoid revealing that he/she/it is incapable of learning how to use the mouse.

It's a shame they don't also add "condition of mental health" where "condition of previous servitude" used to go. This really takes us beyond mere mixing, as the different strains of disordered minds interact. Among my children's grandparents, we have the various states of social integration indicated in the chart. Study this. By way of definition, "psychotic" means that the person was institutionalized at least once for more than a few days; "criminal" means having been in prison.

This leaves Anne Gardener as the only technically sane grandparent, although even she went through a period while working for a major defense contractor where her general affect resembled a chronic dial tone. She also attended Lutheran church when married to Stan because it was a little easier for him to stomach than the

Catholic church. This can be considered a symptom of sanity or insanity, depending on your point of view. Nathan comes a close second, disqualified for failure to conform to normal standards of economic behavior.

So we've got rich material for a book here. Take a simple issue such as greeting cards. Anita and I don't ever send cards, as you can't buy greeting cards here in Cancun, just picture post cards, which we don't send either. I used to make my late mother beautiful birthday cards with watercolors and calligraphy on 100% handmade paper, but she just accepted them with polite regret. My ex-brother always gave her grotesquely oversized cards stuffed with velvet and glitter that came in their own boxes, not envelopes. Expensive equipment was required to manufacture these objects. Mother did not accept them with mere polite regret, you can be sure.

This is a major cultural divide. You can't even talk about it honestly. I think cards are synthetic and cheap. Then there is the forced quality

NAME	RELATIONSHIP	RELIGION	CONDITION
ALVIN BROWN	Anita's father	<i>Unknown</i>	Psychotic.
ANNE GARDENER	Anita's mother	<i>Devout Catholic</i>	Not crazy
STAN MACHOSKY	Anita's stepfather	<i>Atheist</i>	Alcoholic.
VIRGINIA JOLLY	Faera's grandmother	<i>Catholic</i>	Alcoholic.
TOM JOLLY	Faera's grandfather	<i>Catholic</i>	Alcoholic, suicide.
ELI SIEGEL	My father	<i>Atheist</i>	Alcoholic, criminal, suicide.
EVELYN SIEGEL	My mother	<i>Devout Jewish</i>	Psychotic, drug addict.
NATHAN GROSSMAN	My stepfather	<i>Jewish</i>	Criminal, not crazy.



FAERA AND GRANNY
Los Angeles, 1977

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY LOUZON

that other family members not only fail to see this as evidence of my superiority as a human being, but also assume that I don't care enough to send the very best.

Anita's family *always* sends cards. Anita's mother never fails to send us our annual Groundhog Day card, even though we have never so much as sent her a Christmas card. Anita has a sister, Alison O'Malley, who, in her thirties, not only made a birthday party for her horse—complete with a cake—but also gave it a birthday card.

Alison has devoted her life to becoming a member of the horsey set the way my ex-brother has devoted his life to becoming a *goy*. She's out there appropriately uniformed in John Peel pinks winning championships all over the country. It's the kind of thing you expect to read about in a John O'Hara novel written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Horses are important if you want to succeed at life. Look at what happened to poor Princess Di because she didn't understand this. A simple Catholic girl from a humble residence in Wantagh rides into the winners' circle at Ascot. A simple Jewish guy from the Bronx becomes a *goy*. It's so heartwarming to see people get ahead in life.

This is not to say that we aren't into animals ourselves, but it's on a much smaller scale than horses. Here in Cancun, we have only one residence, but we did have two turtles—one big, the other small. Little Turtle got sick. Big Turtle then carried it around on her back for days so that it wouldn't drown. We know that Big Turtle is female because they hiss, whereas males groan. When Little Turtle died, Big Turtle stopped eating for several days and then ate only every few days. She spent most of her time sitting in a warm corner and refused to stay in her tank. If we left her in it, we'd come home and find her on her back in another failed attempt to get out. We finally gave up and used it only for feeding, as she won't eat out of water.

A neighbor gave us two new little turtles. Big Turtle began eating heartily and could not be kept out of the tank with the two little turtles. One night, Anita woke up to go to the bathroom. Big Turtle scurried out and went charging smack into our children's bedroom door. The little turtles were inside. She used to do a little dance with her late partner in which she would stare at it fixedly and wave her front feet in front of its

of living in a totalitarian system where you will be sent to a work camp for failure to purchase and send greeting cards on the correct occasions. Expressing sentiment is not enough. The means to do so, even the words themselves must be purchased. I feel, you love someone, you sit down and say so in your own handwriting. Think of how much better this will look in court when it's used as evidence in the inevitable divorce proceedings. But I am a hypocrite. I love getting cards. I just don't like buying something that I can make better for free, and I am annoyed

face. Little Turtle would tolerate this patiently, although it did not ever seem to reciprocate. Big Turtle tried it with one of the new little turtles, which scrambled off in terror to the other side of the tank and hid in its shell, reminding me of the lobster scene in “Annie Hall.”

I am willing to concede that if the lowly turtle exhibits symptoms of grief and loss, it is probable that horses not only think and have emotions, but also might actually appreciate receiving birthday cards. Anita and I do talk about (and sometimes to) our turtles. This has, in a sense, brought me closer to her family. There is something I can learn from them about the social graces. At least Alison would have known to send Big Turtle a condolence card.

[3] You Can't Have a Book Like This Without Animals.

YOU can't have a book like this without animals, not if you want it to be made into a major television series. Think of how much more satisfying “The Simpsons” would be with the Ninja Turtles to balance Homer Simpson. Fortunately, we not only have turtles, but a cat, Moomie. In order to help *Mad Laughter*, I am teaching Moomie how to speak. This is not an original idea. I got it from the legendary Melvin B. Shestack, who was teaching his cat, Ringo, how to speak.



THE LEGENDARY
MELVIN B. SHESTACK
New York, 1966

PHOTOGRAPH BY J. NEBRASKA GIFFORD

“Two words,
Melvin would
plead. “Two
words, Ringo,
and we're rich.”

Speaking very clearly and slowly now and sounding out the syllables: “Ehhddd suhh-llih-VAHN. Got that, Ringo? Ed Sullivan.” Well, the Ed Sullivan show is long gone and so is Ringo, but Melvin was a visionary. I think he set his standards too high. Ed Sullivan is not an easy name for a cat to pronounce. Also, it's way too abstract.

Cats are not autograph hunters and I don't think they will ever really fully understand the concept of doing something for money. This is re-