

## Al Jaffee, Inventive Cartoonist at Mad Magazine, Dies at 102

For 55 years he created the fold-in (as opposed to, say, Playboy's fold-out), giving readers a satirical double-take on whatever was going on in the news or elsewhere.



By Neil Genzlinger

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Al Jaffee, a cartoonist who folded in when the trend in magazine publishing was to fold out, thereby creating one of Mad magazine's most recognizable and enduring features, died on Monday in Manhattan. He was 102.

His death, at a hospital, was caused by multi-system organ failure, his granddaughter Fani Thomson said.

It was in 1964 that Mr. Jaffee created the Mad Fold-In, an illustration-with-text feature on the inside of the magazine's back cover that seemed at first glance to deliver a straightforward message. When the page was folded in thirds, however, both illustration and text were transformed into something entirely different and unexpected, often with a liberal-leaning or authority-defying message.

For instance, the fold-in from the November 2001 issue asked, "What mind-altering experience is leaving more and more people out of touch with reality?" The unfolded illustration showed a crowd of people popping and snorting various substances. But when folded, the image transformed into the Fox News anchor desk.

The first fold-in, in the April 1964 issue (No. 86), mocked Elizabeth Taylor's marital record. (Unfolded, she is with Richard Burton; folded, she has traded him in for another guy.) No one, especially Mr. Jaffee, expected that fold-in to be followed by hundreds more.

"It was supposed to be really a one-shot," he said in a 1993 interview with The Kansas City Star. "But because of the overwhelming demand of three or four of my relatives, it went on to a second time, and on and on."

That "on and on" turned into a career that included other memorable contributions to Mad, like a "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions" feature, and that in 2007 won him cartooning's top honor, the Reuben Award, putting him in the company of Charles M. Schulz, Mort Walker, Gary Larson, Matt Groening and other luminaries of the trade.





With the fold-in, Mad was turning an industry trend on its head. “Playboy, of course, was doing its centerfold,” Mr. Jaffee told The Star. “Life, in almost every issue, was doing a three- or four-page gatefold showing how dinosaurs traversed the land, that kind of thing. Even Sports Illustrated had fold-outs.”

Mad went in the other direction, literally, although Mr. Jaffee said in a 2008 interview with The New York Times that he initially didn’t expect the magazine’s editor, Al Feldstein, and publisher, William M. Gaines, to go for the notion. “I have this idea,” he recalled telling them. “I think it’s a funny idea, but I know you’re not going to buy it. But I’m going to show it to you anyway. And you’re not going to buy it because it mutilates the magazine.”

The men did buy it, and then asked for more, and the inside back cover quickly became Mr. Jaffee’s turf. Although other regular Mad features changed artists over the years, no one but Mr. Jaffee drew a fold-in for 55 years.

In mid-2019, the magazine announced that it would stop printing issues full of new material, except for year-end specials. In the special issue that appeared at the end of 2019, the cartoonist Johnny Sampson, with Mr. Jaffee’s blessing, became the only other artist to draw a fold-in.

Almost as long-lived as the fold-in was “Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions,” a running compendium of the kind of retorts that people are never quite quick enough or brave enough to toss off in the heat of the moment. “Is it okay to smoke?” asks a man sitting directly under a no-smoking sign in an office. “Yes,” answers the receptionist, “the signs don’t apply to illiterates.”



Mr. Jaffee in his studio, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, in 2013. In real life he was the opposite of a smart aleck: a genteel, unassuming man whose humor was delivered with a wink, not a cudgel. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

In real life, however, Mr. Jaffee was the opposite of a smart aleck: a genteel, unassuming man whose in-person humor was delivered with a wink, not a cudgel. He adorned each of his drawings with a tiny self-portrait, a kind of logo, with his name scrawled in his hair.

“It’s not that Al does not have an ego,” Sam Viviano, Mad’s art director, said in 2008. “You don’t draw your face into everything you do without some kind of an ego. But it’s a really healthy ego.”

Abraham Jaffee (he later legally changed his name to Allan) was born on March 13, 1921, in Savannah, Ga. His parents, both Jewish, had immigrated from Lithuania, his father, Morris, arriving in New York in 1905 and his mother, Mildred, in 1913.

Morris Jaffee quickly adjusted to the pace of early-20th-century America, starting as a tailor in New York and then taking a job in retailing in Savannah. Mildred, though, was never comfortable in the United States, had some strict religious views and was somewhat unstable, leaving young Al with many traumatic memories.

“If you were to see some naked guy sitting on top of a mountain somewhere in India with pins stuck into his body, how would you know whether the guy was nuts or religious?” Mr. Jaffee recalled in “Al Jaffee’s Mad Life” (2010), a biography written by Mary-Lou Weisman and illustrated by Mr. Jaffee. “My mother was both.”





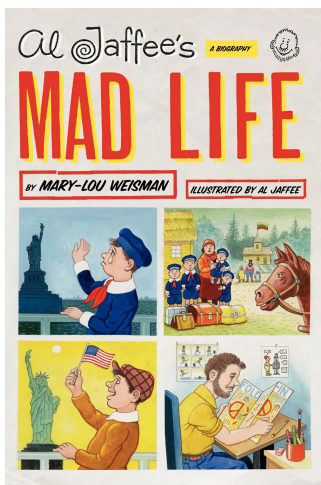
A fold-in Mr. Jaffee was working on in 2010. His first fold-in feature appeared in the April 1964 issue. Erik Jacobs for The New York Times





When Mr. Jaffee was 6, his mother threw their domestic life into turmoil by taking him and his three younger brothers back to her shtetl in Lithuania. The visit was supposed to last a month, but it stretched into a tug of war between the two parents that lasted six years, most of which Al spent in Lithuania living in what he described as 19th-century conditions. But there was a silver lining of sorts: Morris Jaffee sent the boys packages of the Sunday comics from American newspapers, and Al began to find his artistic talent.

His father finally brought him back to the United States for good when Al was 12. On the strength of his artistic ability, he was admitted to the first class of the High School of Music and Art in New York. His fellow students there included several who would later start Mad, but that was still years in the future when he graduated in 1940, directly into the golden age of comics.



The cover of "Al Jaffee's Mad Life" (2010), a biography written by Mary-Lou Weisman and illustrated by Mr. Jaffee.  
via Harper Collins

"I came onto the scene when they were buying original material, and in a burst of creative who knows what, I created Inferior Man, which was a shameless rip-off of Superman," Mr. Jaffee said in the 2008 interview. "My basic premise was that he fought crime and evil, but if it became too much for him to handle, he would sneak into some phone booth and change into civilian clothes."

Will Eisner, then emerging as a force in the comics industry, bought the feature, and Mr. Jaffee went on to do work for Stan Lee, another major name in comics, as well. He began contributing to *Mad* in 1955, three years after it was founded by Mr. Gaines and Harvey Kurtzman, Mr. Jaffee's former high school classmate.



Mr. Jaffee at work in 2010 in his studio in Provincetown, Mass., where he had spent summers for decades until selling it several years ago. Erik Jacobs for The New York Times

When Mr. Kurtzman left *Mad* in 1956 to try other ventures, including the short-lived magazine *Humbug*, Mr. Jaffee followed. By 1958, he was back at *Mad* to stay. He was never on the magazine's staff, however; all of his work was as a freelancer.

His early *Mad* contributions were as a writer, though he was honing his illustrating skills in other projects, like "Tall Tales," a syndicated comic strip he drew from 1957 to 1963. Eventually *Mad* made him a writer-artist, and with the fold-in and "Snappy Answers" (a feature that first appeared in October 1965) he became one of the stable of regulars who set *Mad*'s style.

In 1977, Mr. Jaffee married Joyce Revenson, who died in January 2020. His first marriage, to Ruth Ahlquist, whom he had met and married while in the Army in World War II, ended in divorce.

He is survived by two children from his first marriage, Richard Jaffee and Deborah Fishman; two stepdaughters, Tracey and Jody Revenson; five grandchildren; one step-granddaughter; and three great-grandchildren. Mr. Jaffee lived in Manhattan but for years had split his time between his home there and another in Provincetown, Mass.

His *Mad* work was republished in countless books, many with self-deprecating titles like "Mad's Vastly Overrated Al Jaffee." In 2008, Harry N. Abrams published a collection of his "Tall Tales" strips. In 2011, Chronicle Books came out with "The Mad Fold-In Collection: 1964-2010," a hardcover boxed set.

The impact of Mr. Jaffee's fold-in gimmick was evident in many imitations and homages over the years, like Beck's fold-in-themed video of his song "Girl" in 2005. Mr. Jaffee said he would often receive requests from high schools that wanted to create a fold-in for the school paper, mistakenly thinking they needed his permission.

"I write back and say, You have my blessings, go ahead and do it," he said in 2008. "But no one can copyright folding a piece of paper."

In 2020, *Mad* celebrated Mr. Jaffee with a "Special All Jaffee Issue," full of his work. It was to mark his formal retirement, and it included a fold-in that he had created in 2014 in anticipation of that eventuality.

It starts with an image of Alfred E. Neuman, Mad's mascot, amid assorted stores that have all posted going out of business signs, under the headline "Economy Collapsing! Unemployed Starving!" But when it was folded in, a new message appeared: "No More New Jaffee Fold-Ins." Mr. Jaffee's blissful image is seen hovering above the cityscape.

Alex Traub contributed reporting.