

A fantasy conversation with Carl Barks regarding story development and *Flipism*

by Joseph Cowles

Lucky-lucky am I to have been brought up in a world that includes stories written and illustrated by Carl Barks. I'm told I learned to read by my fourth birthday, a result of Mother reading Donald Duck stories aloud to me, dutifully pointing out each word as she spoke it, so my mind would eventually grasp the secret code of English alphabet.

Certainly, there were other favored comic book characters—Bugs Bunny, Andy Panda, the boys and girls of Our Gang—but the stories that captured my delight and have remained in my memory for well beyond half a century, were created by *The Good Artist*, whom I and fans around the world would eventually know to be Carl Barks. I'm a proud member of that first generation of Barks fans, from long before Western Publishing began reprinting his stories “by popular demand.”

It is February, 1953. I am eleven years old, about four months shy of twelve. I'm holding this month's issue of *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*. “Mr. Barks,” I say (in this imaginary conversation I already know his name), “I've

read your just published, hot off the press, ten-page Donald Duck story. I have, in fact, read it three times since I gave a drugstore clerk my dime for it a little while ago. Of all the comics I've read in the past eight years, I've never come across any tale so intriguing. How did you come up with *Flipism*?”

Laughing, Barks replies, “Well, I may have been poking a little fun at the present crop of wild-eyed soothsayers. But that's not how the story came about. I thought it would be interesting to see what mischief would unfold if Donald were to make decisions by flipping a coin. At some time, just about everyone has made a wager or solved a disagreement with a coin toss . . . heads or tails!”

“Once I have an idea, a premise, I see how many gags I can string together in telling the story. Sometimes the jokes are a little hard to come by, so I include a sub-plot. “In this case, the sub-plot is the reason Donald is flipping a coin. A huckster has sold him a self-help book extolling the virtues and benefits of *Flipism*. And there's also a subliminal sub-sub plotline in which Donald forgets he's made a commitment to take Daisy to

the movies, and a sub-sub-sub plotline of the ducklings wanting their uncle to take them to see the latest horror movie, ‘Gore in the Gully.’

“Ultimately, there's a string of gags linking these plots together—sandwiched between the story's beginning and conclusion.”

“My friend,” Professor Batty says to Donald, ‘for one dollar—*only one dollar*—I will sell you this brilliant book explaining the methods and benefits of *Flipism*.”

At eleven-going-on-twelve in 1953, one dollar packs a lot of wallop. It represents ten new comic books, twenty bottles of soda pop, or a Saturday matinee movie with popcorn, candy and a Coke. Therefore, Donald's parting with a whole dollar for the Flippists' book is an act of great significance, setting the tone for the tale.

Every gag is significant. Each of Donald's missteps begets another. It's the type of plot development we've come to revere in the longer Barks stories, polished to perfection in this fast-paced ten-pager.

I ask the cartoonist how he goes about doing his work. There is a yellow sofa in his modest living room where Barks likes to relax, long legs stretched out, feet on the blonde Formica-topped coffee table, notebook pad on his lap, pencil in hand. "I try to write a first draft for the ten-pagers in one sitting," he says. "Longer stories may take several days to get all the details worked out.

"The premise calls forth each of the gags I'm able to dream up. Some are funny, some not so hot. Some are bawdy, some slapstick. Some are introspective. Some are wild cards. I reject far more gags than I write down, discard most of the ones I do put on paper, and refine and polish those I decide to keep. By the time I'm finished, the gags that remain have sorted themselves into a sequence of events that's hopefully funny and plausible. The end result has to be a story

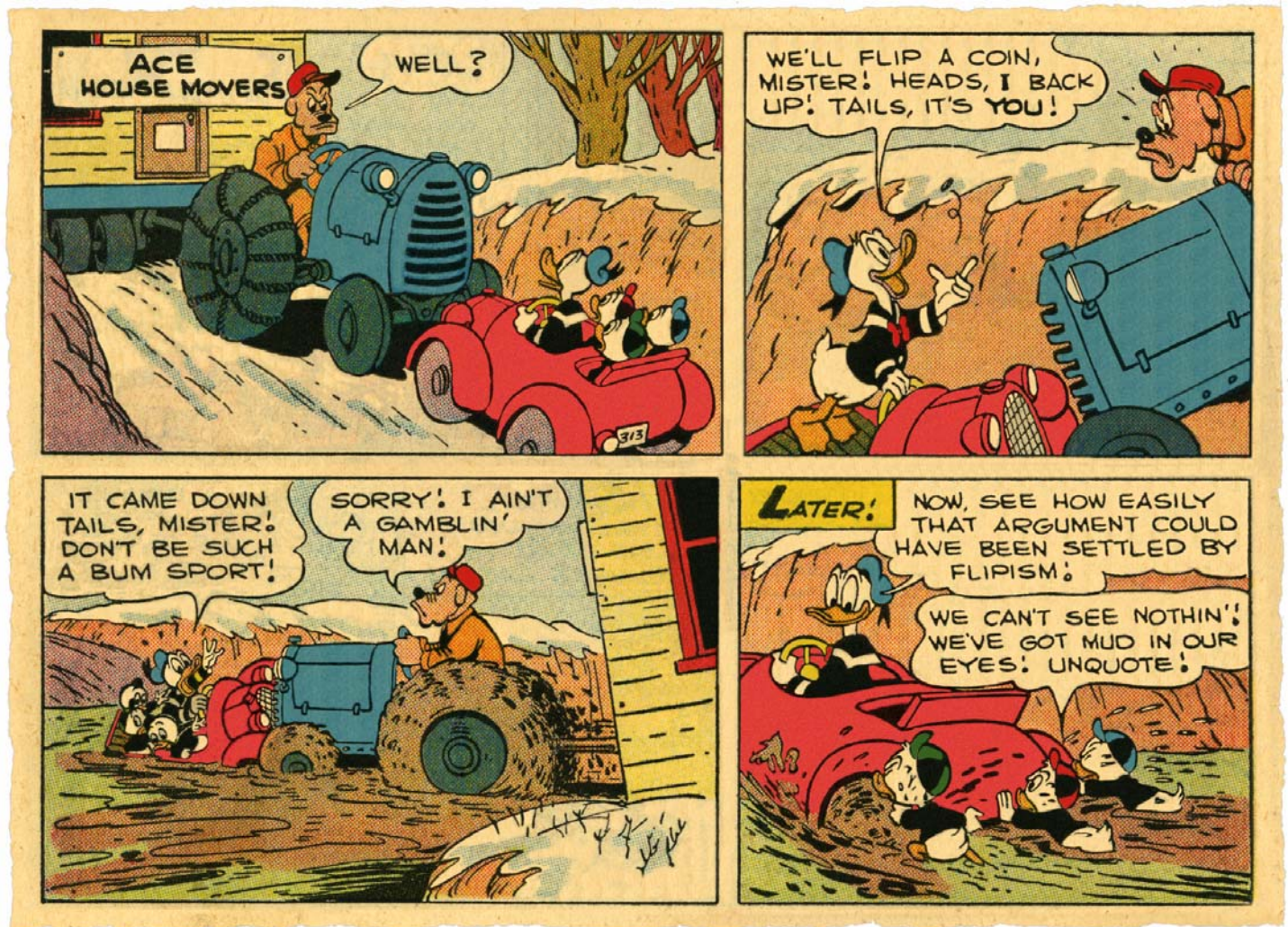
that's worth a dime. Buyers give themselves a good look at the first several pages of a comic book. If they're not intrigued, they put it back on the rack. I do my best to keep 'em intrigued, so they'll be willing to part with a little of their silver."

What sets the works of Carl Barks apart from and head and shoulders above that of the other comic book artists is *plausibility*. Barks achieves, on the printed page, the ultimate goal of motion picture directors: suspension of disbelief. In Barks stories, the talking waterfowl have daring adventures and zany experiences which are believable to the point of seeming real. Barks stories have a way of engaging the reader, while Duck stories by others are mostly flat and one-dimensional, eliciting ho-hum yawns and "So-what?" impressions. At best, Duck stories by others are poor imita-

tions—counterfeit, a waste of ink and paper.

Even during his years of peak creativity, Barks thought of himself as doing "hack work," to keep food on the table and a roof over his head. But if this is an accurate description, he certainly hacked his way to storytelling Mastery.

As an eleven-year-old youngster way back when, and today as a senior citizen years older than Barks was then, each time I've read or reread his *Flipism* tale, I become hooked on the plausible potential of being able to live one's life guided by the simple flip of a coin. Considering the innumerable twists and turns, forks and bends, ups, downs and switchbacks we all encounter on the road of life, it's easy to imagine that following a *Flipism* path wouldn't be all that bad. (Never mind that Donald's coin tosses guide him into awkward circumstances



throughout the pages of this humorous story.) And, politically speaking, *Flipism* might be more useful than the methods of determination our elected leaders have employed to get us where we are today. Quote: “Life is but a gamble! Let *Flipism* chart your ramble!” Unquote. Wouldn’t Barks have made great sport of the inherent lunacy in our 21st Century news stories?

So Donald experiments with *Flipism*, dragging his nephews along for the wild ride. “We want to see a movie! You want to take a drive! It’s always an argument,” the ducklings complain.

Donald flips a coin. “Heads, it’s movies, tails, it’s ride! Quote: *Flipism* will decide! Unquote. It came down tails! We hit the trails.” And which direction will they take? “Heads it’s *this* way, tails its *that*! The toss of a coin will solve the spat! Unquote! Heads, the little coin doth say! We will travel thisaway!”

“First time I ever heard of using a dime for a road map,” muses one of the nephews.”

“Who knows but what *Flipism* may lead us to great adventure, riches, or even fame,” counters Donald, as he nearly drives into a mudhole. Still bubbling with optimism, he flips the coin again. “Heads, we go ahead, tails, we turn back. It came down tails! We turn around!”



But now the road is blocked by a tractor moving a house. Donald says, “We’ll flip a coin, mister. Heads, I back up, tails it’s you.”

The driver of the tractor moves ahead, pushing the ducks’ little car into the deep mud. “Sorry,” he says. “I ain’t a gambling’ man!”

Several gags and pages later, Donald finds himself in court, having crashed into an oncoming car while driving the wrong way on a one-way road. When the judge asks for an explanation, Donald answers, “I’m a Flippist. I tossed a dime to see which way I’d go.” Naturally, the judge throws the book at Donald—for letting a dime do his thinking.

When he has finally received enough abuse, Donald decides to reverse his circumstances by turning *Flipism* against the con artist who sold him the book. Guided by the coin, he eventually comes

to a dead end street and a duplex apartment. Donald is absolutely certain Professor Batty is in one of the apartments, but the hall is dark. He can’t see well enough to tell which side of the dime is up. “Well, he’s in one of these apartments,” Donald exclaims. “I’ll try number one first.”

He raps on the door, the door opens and standing there is . . . Daisy! She doesn’t know how Donald has managed to find her, but immediately begins lambasting him for forgetting his promise to go with her to a movie. Five minutes of Daisy’s censure later, Donald is suitably cowed and ready to take her to the movie. “My three little nieces are going with us,” says Daisy.

Three little girl ducklings, the age of Donald’s nephews, come running out of the apartment. “We wanta see that horror picture, ‘Gore in the Gully!’”

“Well, ain’t this grand!” exclaims one of the nephews. “There must be something to this *Flipism* business, after all,” replies another, as arm-in-arm with Daisy’s nieces they head for the movie theater.

Yessir! There sure is something to *Flipism*, for in the final panel, Carl Barks allows us to peek inside the second apartment. “I better be packed and out of here when they get back,” says Professor Batty. “There was mayhem in that duck’s eyes, if I ever saw it!”

