

Crockett Johnson

and the Purple Crayon: A Life in Art

by Philip Nel

Crockett Johnson was born David Johnson Leisk (rhymes with "disc"). The surname is Scottish: His father, David Leisk, was born and grew up

in Lerwick, the capital of the Shetland Islands. At the turn of the 20th century, David, Sr., immigrated to New York City, where he found work as a bookkeeper at the Johnson Lumber Company. He met Mary Burg, a 20-something saleslady from Brooklyn, in a department store on 59th Street. They courted, married, and moved into an apartment at 444 East 58th Street, where, on October 20, 1906, David Johnson Leisk was born. At the time of David's birth, Mary was 29 and David, Sr., was 41, relatively old for first-time parents. On May 27, 1910, Else George Leisk—David's only sibling—was born. By 1915 (and possibly before then), the Leisks had moved out of their Manhattan apartment and into the second floor of a house at what was then 2 Ferguson Street (104-11 39th Street today), Corona, Queens.

Else, my best source for information about David's early life, said that her brother borrowed the name "Crockett" from a cartoon about Davy Crockett. There were a lot of Daves in the neighborhood, and "Crockett" helped distinguish Dave Leisk from all the other Daves, she said. Although friends knew him as "Dave," "Crockett Johnson" gradually became his public name. As early as 1934, Dave was signing his work "Crockett Johnson," and by 1942 he was even listed in the phone book under that name. Dave later told writer Lee Hopkins that he adopted "Crockett Johnson" as a pen name because "Leisk was too hard to pronounce" (124), but he actually began using the name in childhood.

As a child, Dave was relentlessly creative, always drawing. At church, he drew pictures in the margins of the hymnals. At home, he drew sketches of historical figures and made clay models. One summer, when his sister Else was away, he drew a cartoon adventure of what he imagined her to be doing, and gave it to her as a present. His earliest extant drawing may be the cover of the May 1923 issue of *The Newtown H.S. Lantern*, his high school's literary magazine. The publication's masthead lists "David Leisk" as "Artist" and in the cover's lower right-hand corner we can see a cursive "D" transposed onto a cursive "L." The illustration—of a young man who has fallen asleep while fishing, dozing by the water's edge—is a likely subject for Dave, who enjoyed the ocean and once described himself as "the laziest man in the world" (Baker). As a hobby, his father built sailboats, and took Dave sailing on Long Island Sound. As Else remembered, the family spent many a Sunday sailing and swimming in the Sound. (Then a new borough of New York City, the Queens where Dave and Else grew up was still quite rural.)

Apart from his interest in sports, little else



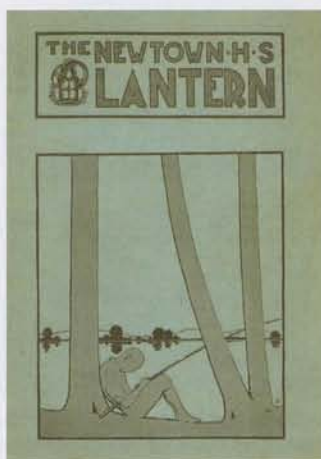
David Johnson Leisk, c. 1930s. Photograph by Eliot Elisofon. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution. Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

is known about Dave's curricular or extracurricular activities. Newtown High School did not save its yearbooks, but in 1964 the Newtown Historical Society's Marguerite V. Doggett wrote an early history of Newtown High School, and she *did* have yearbooks on hand. David Leisk graduated with the class of 1924, but he did not win any awards—not even any athletic honors, which is surprising. Else reported that Dave was a good athlete, excelling at track, baseball, and football. Newtown High School banned football "for fear of safety of the players," so perhaps Dave was playing football—and other sports—beyond school grounds (Doggett, 29). Many biographical sketches mention that he played professional football, but I have turned up no evidence (yet) that he did; I expect that he played semi-pro football, and Else thought that he may have played for the Flushing Packers some time after high school.

Before this brief football career, his academic talents won him a scholarship to Cooper Union, in lower Manhattan. In the fall of 1924, he commuted there, taking classes in art, typography, and drawing from plaster casts. It may have been there where he met Charlotte Rosswaag, a free-thinking, plain-spoken young woman who shared his intellectual curiosity and progressive politics. During their courtship, she and Dave read often and widely: literature, newspapers, and the Communist magazine *New Masses*.

During this same period, Dave's father passed away. David, Sr., would have been about 60 years old. Whether prompted by his father's death or motivated by other reasons, Dave left Cooper Union, and, on the strength of the courses he had taken thus far, became assistant art director of Macy's advertising department. He described the position as "a glorified office boy," and did not stay there for very long, quitting just before he was fired for wearing a soft collar instead of a regulation stiff one (Fisher; Baker). Charlotte, meanwhile, was working as a secretary and taking classes in social work. They married, and probably spent the early days of their married life living with Dave's mother and sister at 53 North Prince Street in Flushing, Queens.

Though the job at Macy's did not suit him, Dave stuck with the graphic arts. In November 1927, David Leisk became art editor of *Aviation* (known today as *Aviation Week*), and redesigned the magazine. In 1928, he took Frederic Goudy's night class in typography at New York University. When McGraw-Hill took over *Aviation* in March of 1929, Dave left it to work as art editor for several other McGraw-Hill publications. By the early 1930s, Dave and Charlotte had moved from Queens to Greenwich Village, where they became friends with members of the Book and Magazine Union—people like freelance editor Mary Elting Folsom, Viking editor David Zabolowsky, TASS editor Joe Freeman, and *Daily Worker* journalist Sender Garlin. As Mary remembers, "An awful lot of radicals knew



Cover for the *Newtown H.S. Lantern*, May 1923. Courtesy of Queens Borough Public Library, Long Island Division.



"Aw, be a sport. Tell the newsreel audience..." From Robert Forsythe's *Redder Than the Rose* (Covici, Friede, 1935), p. 232. First appeared in *New Masses*, August 28, 1934, p. 7. Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

other radicals in the publishing business" (Nel, interview with Folsom, February 15, 2002).

Like many artists and writers who came of age before and during the Depression, Dave's political beliefs veered leftward. His admiration for *New Masses* led him to begin contributing cartoons in April of 1934, and he became its Arts Editor in August of 1936. As Arts Editor, Crockett Johnson (as he was now signing himself) redesigned the weekly with the aim of increasing circulation beyond its radical readership. In a September 1936 letter to Rockwell Kent, Johnson wrote:

The idea now is to go in for decorative covers that are not too blatant (and often non-committal) about our editorial viewpoint. Titles, when we use them, will pose a question rather than dogmatically state a fact. The intention is of course not to deceive the prospective reader, but to try to avoid having him react unfavorably to our position as stated by headlines or an unpleasant or too strong political cartoon before he's bought the magazine and read all the facts we present. (Hemingway, 105)

Johnson's clean layouts made the magazine more eye-catching, and pleasant to read, too. As Andrew Hemingway notes in his *Artists on the Left*, "Under Crockett Johnson's direction *New Masses* became a much more lively journal visually" (105).

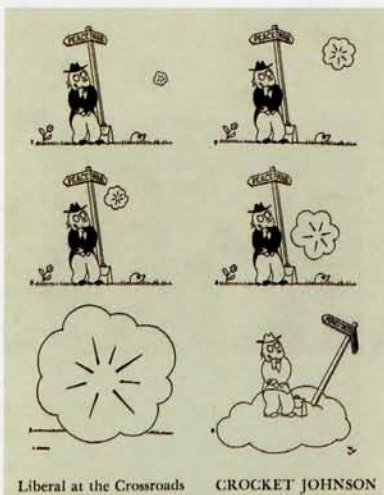
Crockett Johnson was also soliciting cartoons from some of the best in the business: Abe Ajay, Syd Hoff, Gardner Rea, Mischa Richter, Ad Reinhardt, and even Art Young (a mainstay of the original *Masses*) were all contributing. As Arts Editor, Johnson would phone Hoff with an idea and ask him to illustrate it, or Richter would come into the office while they decided together what political problems to expose that week. In addition to its Marxist politics, the *New Masses* was, according to Richter, "the only place where you could be published regularly with ideas that attacked the Fascists" (Nel, interview with Richter, February 5, 2001).

Johnson's own cartoons attacked Fascists, isolationists, and capitalists. In one from August 28, 1934, C. Johnson (as he signed himself) suggests that President Roosevelt's New Deal has not gone far enough, and that newsreels implying otherwise are simply not credible. In the cartoon, a director tells a starving family, "Aw, be a sport. Tell the newsreel audience you still have faith in the Lawd and good old Franklin D." However, a cartoon from May 17, 1938, in which a Primary Candidate makes a mountain out of "mole-hill"-sized opposition to the New Deal, not only displays a changed attitude towards Roosevelt but shows the clean, minimalist style that would become the hallmark of Crockett Johnson's work, its succinct clarity an embodiment of William Carlos Williams's dictum "no ideas / but in things." In another elegantly spare cartoon, he mocks British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's ineffectual attempts to secure peace with Hitler. Published on July 18, 1939, and captioned by the repeated words "NEWS ITEM CHAMBERLAIN WARNS HITLER," the illustration shows two scenes: in the first, Hitler kicks Chamberlain in the ass; in the second, Hitler looks apologetic as Chamberlain lectures him. Johnson then repeats these scenes seven times, ending on Hitler kicking Chamberlain.

On August 23, 1939, the Hitler-Stalin pact sent much of the radical Left into disarray. Having led the fight against Fascism, many U.S. Communists were shocked when Stalin and Hitler agreed to stop war preparations against one another and to instead divide Europe into two spheres of influence. Literary critic Granville Hicks, who had been a *New Masses* editor since 1934 and contributor since 1932, quit the Communist Party and resigned from the magazine's editorial board in October of 1939. Some of the younger members of the staff followed him, but, for a time, Johnson and others remained committed to the cause. In November, Johnson spoke with Syd Hoff about an idea for a cartoon based on Marx's idea (and Lenin's claim) that revolution is the locomotive of history. Published on November 28, 1939, Hoff—writing as A. Redfield—shows the locomotive's relentless progress, running over obstacles in its course and leaving everyone else behind. A group of former supporters marches away

from the train tracks, its leaders bearing a sign announcing themselves as "The 'Russia Was Okay Until...' Society," and followed by smaller groups carrying smaller signs such as "Until Trotsky Left," "Until Kerensky Left," and "Until that Pact." Despite the optimism of Johnson, Hoff, and others, the Pact marked the beginning of the end for *New Masses*. Though it continued until 1948, after the Pact "the magazine lost support, lost financial contributors, and so on," recalls editor A.B. Magil.

Johnson continued his alliance with *New Masses* into 1940, but the impending war led to major changes in his life during 1939. After Germany invaded Poland (causing Great Britain and France to declare war on Germany), Blanche Krauss Breger insisted that her daughter Ruth return from England. In September of 1939, Ruth Krauss came back to America and, sometime shortly after that, she met Dave at a party in Greenwich Village ("Wife of Barnaby's Creator...").



"Liberal at the Crossroads." From *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties*, edited by Joseph North (International Publishers, 1969), p. 187. First appeared in *New Masses*, May 14, 1940, p. 6. Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

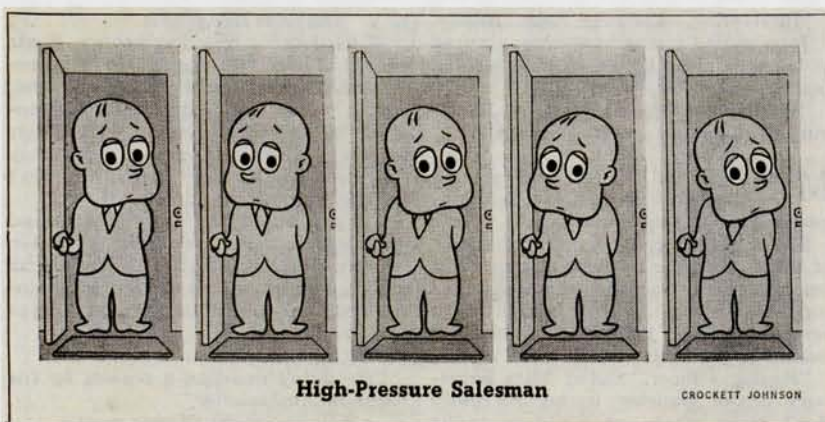
Born on July 25, 1901, Ruth grew up in Baltimore, the only child of Julius Leopold Krauss (a furrier) and Blanche Rosenfeld Krauss. As a child, she studied piano and violin at the Peabody Conservatory of Music. Her father died when she was 16—during her second year at Baltimore's Western High School. After his death, she left high school and quit music to study painting at the Maryland Institute of Art. I'm still working on the precise chronology of the following years, but I do know that she got a degree in costume design and illustration from the Parsons School of Fine and Applied Art, lived on a Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana, wrote pulp adventure stories, and even studied anthropology under Margaret Mead. At some point during these years, she married Lionel White, also an author of pulp stories, and for at least one winter they lived in a summer cottage in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. After her marriage to Lionel broke up, Ruth went to England, staying at youth hostels and with some artist friends who lived in a houseboat on the Thames (Krauss, letter to Miss Coker; Nel, interviews with Hahn, June 27 and August 6, 2001). When the War started, she returned to the States and met Dave at a party.

Dave's relationship with Charlotte had not been going well, although exactly why is not clear. Else said there was "not enough, inside, family-wise, to maintain" the marriage, and that Dave was more interested in his work than in having a family, while Charlotte would have been happy to have children. Cynthia Lemberg, Charlotte's niece, says only that Charlotte wanted more out of life than she was getting with Dave. Whatever the cause of his and Charlotte's marital troubles, when Dave met Ruth, they hit it off immediately. As Ruth liked to say, "We met and that was it!" (Nel, interview with Hahn, June 27, 2001).

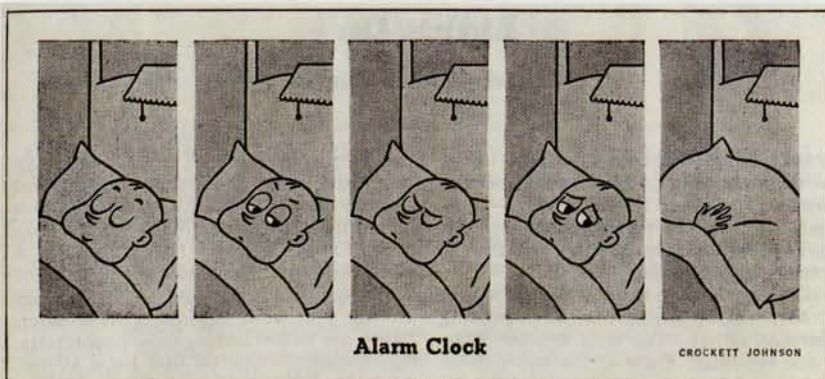
She and Dave were living in a Greenwich Village apartment by 1940, though they did not marry until 1943—possibly because Dave first had to get divorced from Charlotte, or possibly because, having endured failed first marriages, they wanted to make sure that this one would work before making it official. Ruth and Dave were complementary opposites: he was nearly six feet tall, taciturn, and soft-spoken; she was about five feet tall, exuberant, and ready to speak her mind. For example, soon after they moved in together, Dave was looking for a rag to clean up a mess he'd made, and he asked Ruth, "Where do you keep your rags?" Ruth, wishing to correct the impression that only the *woman* knew where the cleaning materials were, told him, "You mean, where do *we* keep *our* rags?" (Nel, interview with Heinrich). Dave quickly learned to correct such assumptions as he and Ruth both pursued careers.

Though Crockett Johnson stepped down as *New Masses'* Arts Editor after the end of January 1940, he remained friends with his former colleagues. In April, he donated some original artwork to an auction, helping raise money for the financially strapped magazine. And he continued to contribute cartoons, his final one—"Liberal at the Crossroads"—appearing in May of 1940.

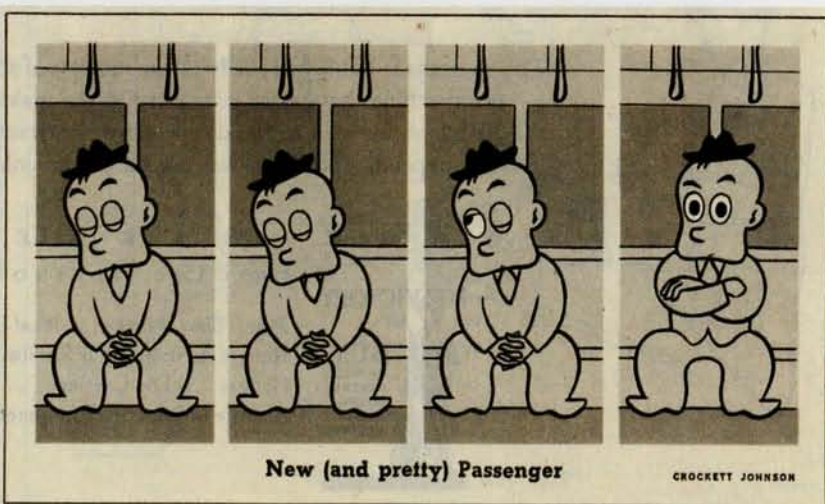
At a career crossroads when he left *New Masses*, Crockett Johnson was about to experience his first mainstream success. On March 9, 1940, his wordless comic, popularly known as *Little Man with the Eyes*,



"High-Pressure Salesman." *Collier's*, August 10, 1940, p. 35.
Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

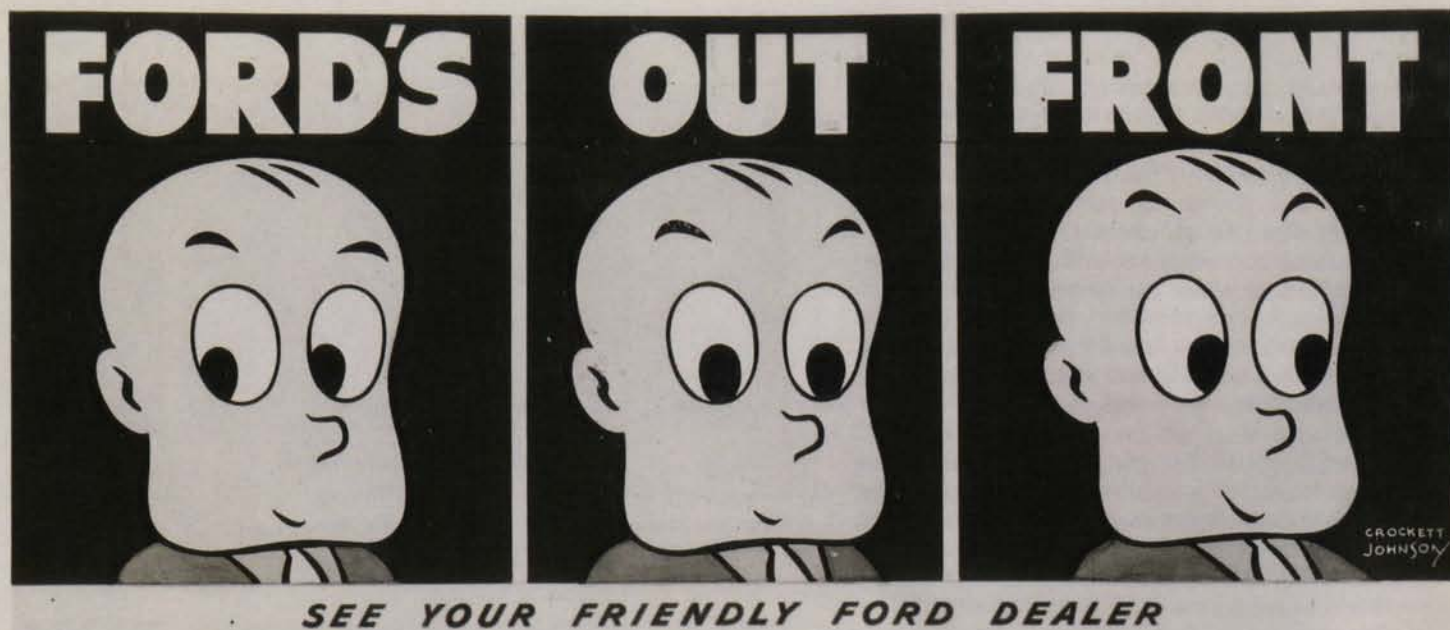


"Alarm Clock." *Collier's*, September 14, 1940, p. 29.
Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.



"New (and pretty) Passenger." *Collier's*, April 25, 1942, p. 44.
Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

appeared in *Collier's*. Recalling Otto Soglow's *The Little King* in both its economy of line and gently humorous tone, *Little Man with the Eyes* was largely apolitical. Because Johnson's little man "speaks" only with his eyes (never in words), the strip relies entirely on slight shifts in perspective to deliver its joke. In "High-Pressure Salesman" (August 10, 1940), the little man's face grows gradually more anxious: his eyelids move from horizontal to diagonal, his head slowly begins to droop, and the corner of his mouth makes the smallest turn downwards. "Alarm Clock" (September 14,



Ford advertisement, c. 1940s. Private collection. Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

1940) and "New (and pretty) Passenger" (April 25, 1942) make their jokes a bit more obvious. In the former, the little man goes from sleep to wakefulness, to determined sleep, to eyes open, and finally to a last act of resistance, when he places the pillow over his head. In the latter, he changes from dead asleep to eyes wide open, arms folded, sitting up straight—presumably in an attempt to impress that new, pretty passenger. Before he stopped drawing them in January of 1943, Crockett Johnson created over one hundred *Little Man* cartoons, and the strip itself became popular enough to be used in an advertising campaign for Ford.

Though one imagines that the Ford campaign may have brought him a nice check, what Johnson really wanted was a steady income. Thinking that a syndicated comic strip might be his answer, he decided to build a strip around a precocious five-year-old boy. After drawing a few episodes, he realized that his idea was not quite enough to sustain the strip. So, as he told *PM*'s Chan Norris in December 1942, "I fumbled around, just like O'Malley, and O'Malley came in by himself." Though many people would later ask him whom O'Malley was based on, Johnson always claimed that he had no one particular in mind. "None of my friends, in spite of what *their* friends have been saying, is Mr. O'Malley," he explained. However, when answering Norris's question, Johnson revealed a little more than he usually did, admitting, "O'Malley is at least a hundred different people. A lot of people think he's W.C. Fields, but he isn't. Still you couldn't live in America and not put some of Fields into O'Malley. O'Malley is partly Mayor La Guardia and his cigar and eyes are occasionally borrowed from Jimmy Savo" (Norris).

For all the attention that Mr. O'Malley would ultimately receive, Johnson always considered Barnaby the star. He explained to the *Philadelphia Record*'s Charles Fisher, "even if Mr. O'Malley gets all the notice, it's still Barnaby who is the hero. We're all looking at Mr. O'Malley through Barnaby. He couldn't exist without The Kid." And was Barnaby based on any kids in particular? "I don't get anything much from kids," he told Fisher. "How can you? They are all different. And I don't draw or write Barnaby for children. People who write for children usually write down to them. I don't believe in that." When Fisher mentioned that children also like Barnaby, Johnson smiled and said, "I'm glad when I hear they do. You see...well, when it comes

to knowing about children, it's a terribly old thing to say, but everyone was once a child himself." In other words, if Barnaby is based on any child in particular, he is quite likely based on young Dave Leisk himself.

At about the same time Johnson was experimenting with ideas for a new comic strip, he and Krauss moved to Darien, Connecticut, where they rented a house at 122 Five Mile River Road. One day, Charles Martin, Art Editor of *PM*, came to visit and saw a half-page color Sunday *Barnaby* that Johnson had done. Martin liked it, took it back to New York with him, and offered the strip to King Features. They didn't like it. But when Martin showed it to *PM*'s Comics Editor Hannah Baker, she loved it (Fisher).

Thanks to Ms. Baker's encouragement, *PM*'s readers met Barnaby Baxter on Monday, April 20, 1942. After his mother reads him a bedtime story about a Fairy Godmother, Barnaby sits in bed, thinking that *his* house could use "a couple of good Fairy Godmothers." He begins to make a wish, but stops as he notices a light moving towards his bedroom window. In the strip of April 21, Mr. O'Malley flies in through Barnaby's window and crash-lands on the floor, promptly breaking his cigar. "Cushlamochree! Broke my magic wand!" he exclaims. "You wished for a Godparent who could grant wishes? Lucky boy! Your wish is granted! I'm your Fairy Godfather."

In the earliest strips, Johnson is still working out his style, the characters, and the boundaries between O'Malley's world and the world of the grown-ups. Initially, O'Malley is wider, dumpier, and has a smaller head, but over the first six months his features change gradually, until November of 1942 when he has pretty well settled into the plump figure of mischief we recognize. During the first three months of the strip, Barnaby's grandmother lives with the Baxters, but she disappears (without explanation) on July 22. Perhaps the most unusual feature of these early strips is the character of Bilharzia Ogre/Mr. Jones, who is unique among *Barnaby* characters: he has a full life in both the "fairy world" and the "real world," interacting regularly with people from either realm. He is also unique in being the only truly menacing villain of the *Barnaby* series. As Bilharzia Ogre, "of the Nuremburg Ogres," he is a Nazi spy who radios Germany and tries to undermine the Allied war effort at home. As Mr. Jones,

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

It's true. The Hange Dogfood Company made me take back the camera and gave me this check.

\$500!

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

All I had to do was sign a release saying I wouldn't bring suit against them. Don't ask me for what.

It's amazing!

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

Amazing? On the contrary. Logical. Imagine the set-back to our way of life if John Q. Public refused gifts from radio sponsors. But enough of logic. The camera's handy in the hall closet, m'boy?

But, much to Viscounty's service and announced that he means to contest headquarters, (s. Jurey, president of the A.C.C. - struck by a bulldozer while on his small farm, Room 1915, 435 N. Michigan-av. ison, Topeka & Santa Fe. Among av. streetcar at 82d st.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

With this movie camera, m'boy, your Fairy Godfather will make an epic... In Technicolor, of course. A pulsing pageant of profound social significance.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

Its simultaneous release in a thousand nickelodeons from coast to coast will put the Biograph people out of business.

Do YOU know how to make a movie, Mr. O'Malley?

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

BARNABY!

J. Darryl O'Malley? Creator of... But enough. Place the camera back on the shelf. I detect a petulant note in your mother's voice.

yesterday. An automobile tire) soker leading from the Columbia apply at 329 S. Wabash av. or 3325 CONNOR ROAD, CHICAGO 16, ILL. W. Randolph St. He will talk on has given them trouble for sev- Products Co.'s warehouse at 2157 telephone Wabash 7850. Turn to the Want Ads now. "Poetry and History"

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

Shall I get the movie camera out of the hall closet, Mr. O'Malley?

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

Later, m'boy. Let us attend to first things first. An old maxim.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

To produce an epic and win a dozen Oscars... all that is required is a story, some film and a little capital. This is called know-how, Barnaby.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

The story is the least of our worries. Any movie executive will admit that. Film is available in all the better stores. Also elementary. Hmmm...

You're worried about money, Mr. O'Malley?

sages for you from him. He is not sure of the spelling of your name outside Riverview Park, a Railway Express Co. salvage bought his son, Christopher, 17, sale. due caution, this did not consti- the sheriff. They were taken tute a crime. to the school and hospitalized.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

Mr. O'Malley, my Fairy Godfather, is going to make an epic with my movie camera, Pop. Just as soon as he can raise enough money.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

Oh, he'll be able to. Tell him not to worry.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

Your Fairy Godfather's not worried, m'boy. He has decided to scrap Technicolor. A colossal saving. Besides black and white is a more pure art form. And it's art, not money, that counts. Any Hollywood producer would tell you that.

zone. A motorcycle police officer, Scientists of General Electric Co. and Western Reserve Med- were able to throw open the win- from compound fractures of both weather had prevented a shortage dows and summon aid. legs and shock. at the present moment.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

Even if you don't make the movie in Technicolor, Mr. O'Malley, you'll still have to raise money. Just to buy the film.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

I happen to know an easy way to get your hands on some cash.

Come, m'boy, he's in one of his talking moods. Very distracting at such a moment.

B
A
R
N
A
B
Y

But, honest, I HAVE got a swell idea.



Illustrations for "Sister, You Need the Union..." (UAW-CIO, 1944). Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

he works at Mr. Baxter's plant, and has been "giving [their] processing data to the Nazis for years." Jones intends to transmit the plans for a new project but—fortunately (and accidentally)—Barnaby and Mr. O'Malley intervene just in time.

World War II figures prominently in the strip's first six months, which was a very busy time for Johnson. In addition to *Barnaby*, he continued to write *Little Man with the Eyes for Collier's* and wrote the script of a War Bond strip drawn by Ellison Hoover. (According to Chan Norris, the comic ran "in house organs of big companies": I've never seen it myself, but would welcome any tips on how I might find it.) As he began to do fewer *Collier's* comics and to get settled into his war work, the imaginary community of *Barnaby* developed. Launcelot McSnoid (the invisible leprechaun) enters in October of '42; Jane (the girl next door) and Gorgon (a talking dog) both arrive in December; Gus (the timid ghost) emerges in January of '43; and Atlas (the mental giant) makes his first appearance in May. So, after its first year, *Barnaby* had a full and expanding cast of characters.

The strip rapidly built a devoted following among culturally influential people. Its fans included W.C. Fields, Milton Caniff, poet Louis Untermeyer, and Duke Ellington. When O'Malley and Barnaby visited a radio station in November of 1942, O'Malley says, "Give ear to the strains of this Duke Ellington opus, m'boy...Sizzling but solid—as we cognizant felidae say—" Ellington wrote in to *PM*, "Please tell Crockett Johnson to thank Mr. O'Malley on my behalf for coming out as an Ellington fan. That makes the admiration

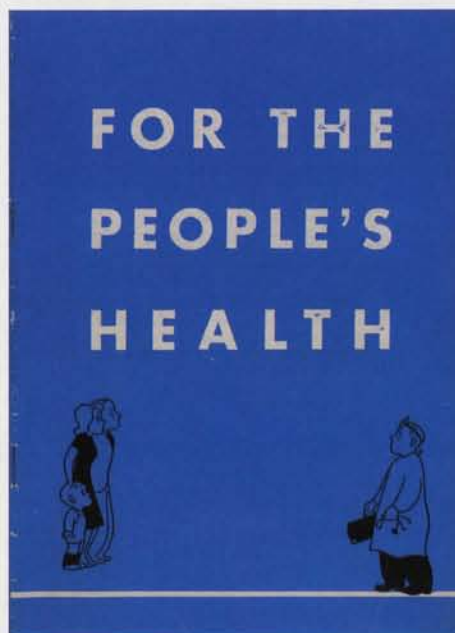
mutual." He concluded, "tell Barnaby that I believe in Mr. O'Malley—solidly." When the first collection of *Barnaby* was published in September of the following year, Dorothy Parker wrote, "I think, and I am trying to talk calmly, that Barnaby and his friends and oppressors are the most important additions to American arts and letters in Lord knows how many years. I know that they are the most important additions to my heart."

Though it quickly captured the hearts of smart and creative people, the comic's circulation grew quite slowly. By late 1943, *Barnaby* was in 16 papers, and by October of the following year it was in 33. At its height, *Barnaby* was syndicated in 52 American newspapers. By contrast, Chic Young's *Blondie*, a strip with perhaps the largest circulation, was appearing in as many as 850 papers at that

time. As Johnson wryly observed in late 1942, "If Dick Tracy were dropped from the *News*, 300,000 readers would say, 'Oh dear!' But if *Barnaby* went from *PM*, his 300 readers would write indignant letters" (Norris).

Barnaby never had the mass following of a *Dick Tracy* or a *Blondie*, but the strip's subtle political humor gave it a wider appeal than Crockett Johnson's *New Masses* work. As Ethel Beckwith observed in an October 1944 profile, "Nobody gets mad. Readers of both parties think they are slyer than the cartoonist in making it out for their side." Her comments refer to O'Malley's support for Thomas E. Dewey, the 1944 Republican presidential nominee. As *Barnaby* explains in a strip from September 1944, "Mr. O'Malley is for Dewey because a lot of generals got to be presidents, but, so far, not any ADMIRALS."

The reason for O'Malley's support is merely ridiculous, but Johnson—who was then supporting Roosevelt—does make sport of Dewey's campaign, identifying three ghosts and *Barnaby's* Fairy Godfather as the Admiral's strongest supporters. Of the ghosts, the one named Colonel Wurst is clearly a parody of two conservative newspaper owners. The name derives from Colonel Robert McCormick (owner of the *Chicago Tribune*) and William Randolph Hearst (owner of the *New York Journal-American* and several other papers): the *Chicago Tribune* and the Hearst newspapers tended to be anti-Roosevelt, pro-Republican, and pro-isolationism. Suggesting that these papers favor the wealthy over ordinary working people, Johnson has Wurst introduce A.A.



Illustrations for "For the People's Health" (1945). Courtesy of Erwin T. Holtzman.

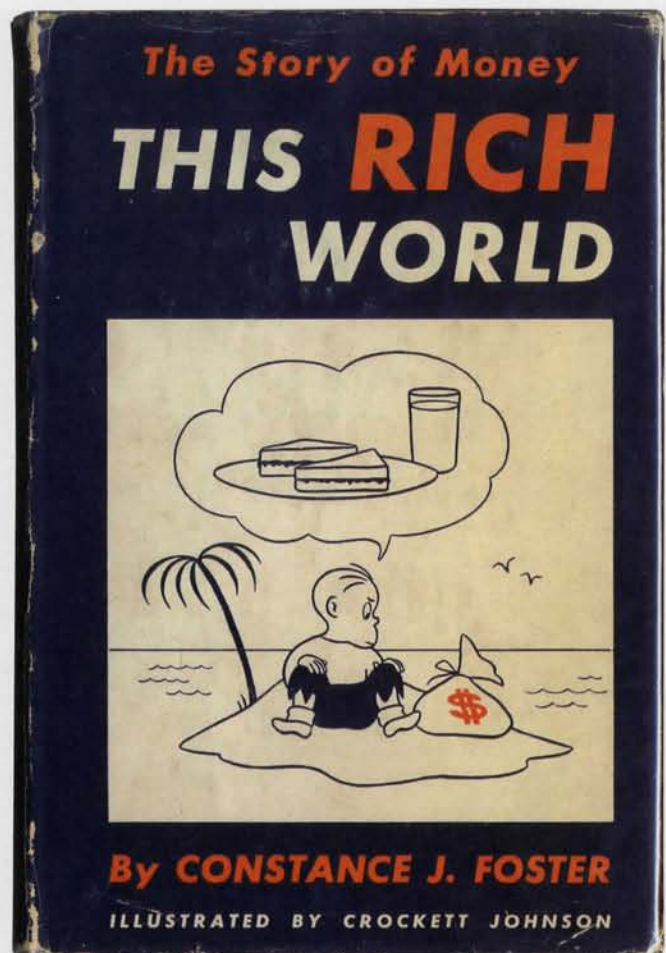
(another ghost) as "able to give us the direct, uncolored view of a 'Man in the Street.'" However, directly after this introduction, A.A. advises Barnaby, "Sell short, young fellow, sell short"—thereby reminding us that he's not a "Man in the Street," but an investor. Implying that Dewey's supporters are deluded by nostalgia, Johnson has Colonel Wurst printing newspapers from progressively earlier dates: one from October 31 proclaims "PEACE IN OUR TIME" (Chamberlain's defense of the Munich agreement, September 1938), and by November 7, 1944, they've decided that it's before the 1929 stock market crash. Concluding this *Barnaby* sequence, the ghosts stroll off, rejoicing in being rich, and singing "Happy days are here again."

Johnson himself continued working towards a better future, illustrating pamphlets in support of the United Auto Workers and national health insurance. Early in 1944, he illustrated a UAW-CIO pamphlet titled "Sister, you need the Union!...And the Union Needs You!" It reminded women to get involved with their union, and to help themselves by helping the union "MAKE A BETTER WORLD." It concluded by advising, "GET BUSY IN THE CIO POLITICAL ACTION CAMPAIGN. REGISTER and VOTE!" In 1945, Johnson illustrated the Physician's Forum's "For the People's Health," a pamphlet advocating passage of the Wagner-Murray-Dingell bill, which promised national health insurance and money devoted to building more hospitals.

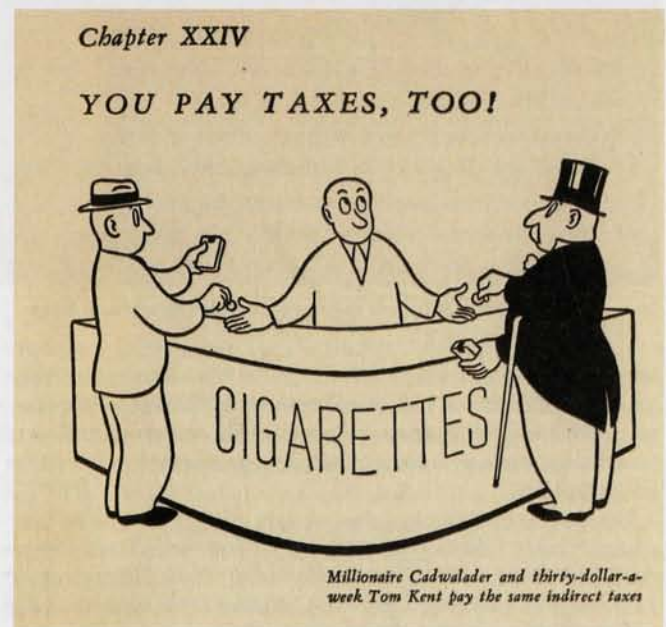
Johnson's understanding that most social problems have economic roots may have inspired him to illustrate Constance J. Foster's *This Rich World: The Story of Money*, published in the spring of 1943. The very first children's book Johnson illustrated, *This Rich World* is also his sole children's book to display any hint that he was once a *New Masses* editor. One illustration notes that "Millionaire Cadwalader and thirty-dollar-a-week Tom Kent pay the same indirect taxes" (143), a not-so-subtle criticism of the "flat" nature of the sales tax. Another suggests the precariousness of an economic system built on borrowing. One man-in-a-suit gives a \$1,000 deposit to a man-in-a-suit identified as "BANKER" (125). The banker gives a \$1,000 loan to another man-in-a-suit, who gives a \$1,000 check to our first man-in-a-suit. And around and around it goes. However, the rest of his illustrations for the book do not carry such specific political meanings. They simply illustrate how money works.

Amidst these side projects, Crockett Johnson was still working on *Barnaby* full time and usually at night. Like his character Harold (of *Purple Crayon* fame), Johnson tended to get his inspirations after bedtime. He regularly wrote and drew from 11 P.M. until 5 A.M. Usually, he spent the first two nights writing the week's script, and the next two nights drawing the strip (Norris). Sometimes he was running so late that, at 6 A.M., he would bring his strips—the ink still wet—over to his neighbor Bob McNell, who then dropped them off at the PM Syndicate on the way to his own job in New York City (Nel, interview with McNell). One might say that Johnson and Harold also relied upon their ability to improvise under pressure: even when falling off a cliff, Harold keeps "his wits and his purple crayon," and draws himself a balloon.

In addition to producing the daily strip, Johnson redrew the best episodes of *Barnaby*'s first 10 months for the book *Barnaby*, published by Henry Holt in the fall of 1943. His former *New Masses* colleague Rockwell Kent praised "Crockett Johnson's profound understanding of the psychology of the child, of grown-ups and of fairy godfathers." Kent said, "I yield to no one in my what Charles Fisher has called 'blathering admiration' of *Barnaby*." William Rose Benét, who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1942, called *Barnaby* "a classic of humor," and declared



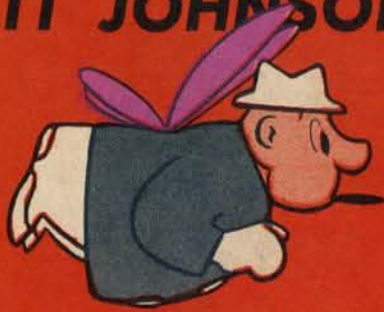
Cover for Constance Foster's *This Rich World: The Story of Money* (Robert M. McBride and Company, 1943). Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.



"You Pay Taxes, Too!" Illustration for chapter 24 of Constance Foster's *This Rich World: The Story of Money*, p. 143. Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

Barnaby

by CROCKETT JOHNSON



"Barnaby is about the best ever and no two ways about it."
—Frank Sullivan

Cover for *Barnaby* (Holt, 1943). Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

Mr. O'Malley "a character to live with the Mad Hatter, the White Rabbit, Ferdinand, and all great creatures of fantasy." *Barnaby* was such a hit that Johnson redrew another seven months' worth of strips for *Barnaby* and *Mr. O'Malley*, published by Holt in the fall of 1944.

The success of *Barnaby* gave Johnson enough income to buy a home. So, in February of 1945, he did just that. Directly across the Five Mile River from the Darien house they had been renting, 74 Rowayton Avenue was an ideal location for a man who liked to sail. The house faced the water, and directly across the street was a dock where Johnson could moor his boat. According to the deed of sale, this appears to be exactly what he had in mind. David Johnson Leisk not only bought 74 Rowayton Avenue and its surrounding property. He also bought the land on the other side of the road extending to "the mean high water line of

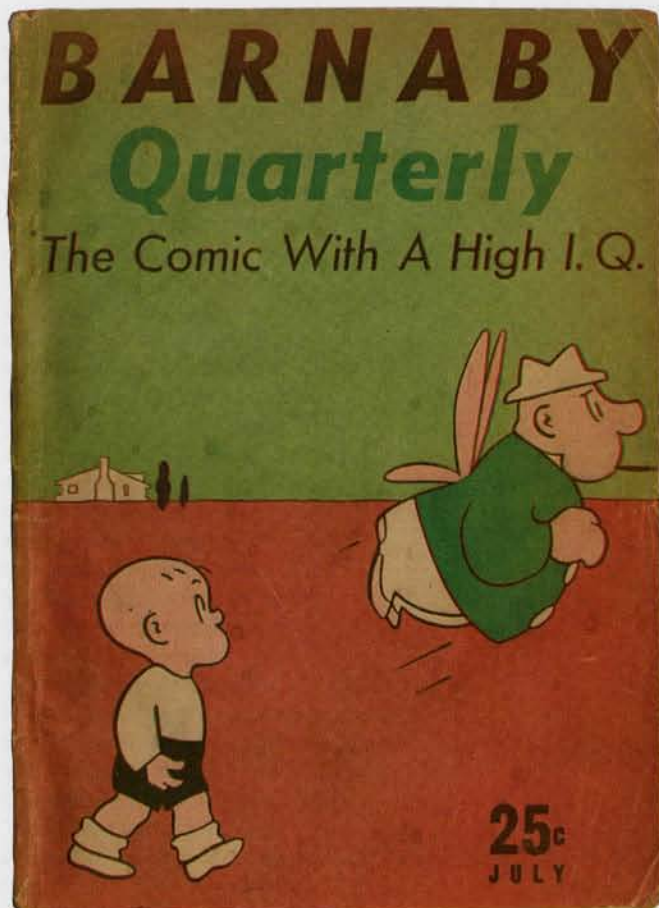
Rowayton Harbor" and "the land between the high water mark of Rowayton Harbor and the United States Harbor line of said harbor."

As they set up house, Ruth Krauss was starting her own career as an author of children's books. Ad Reinhardt had illustrated her first, *A Good Man and His Good Wife* (Harper & Brothers, 1944). At about the same time that she came up with the idea for this book, Krauss found herself having an imaginary conversation with the five-year-old boy who lived next door. This conversation grew into a 10,000-word story, which she in turn distilled into a 100-word story titled *The Carrot Seed* ("Ruth Krauss: Let Me Tell You A Story"). Crockett Johnson created and illustrated a dummy for the book, which they sent off to Ursula Nordstrom, director of Harper and Brothers' Books for Boys and Girls. Nordstrom, who would be their editor for many years, loved Krauss's tale of a little boy who believed that his carrot would come up even when everyone else kept saying that it wouldn't. It does come up, "just as the little boy had known it would." And when *The Carrot Seed* was published in the spring of 1945—with "Pictures by Crockett Johnson CREATOR OF 'BARNABY'"—the book was a success. It has never gone out of print, and has been as popular with adults as with children. Believing that *The Carrot Seed* emphasized the value of persistence, one company sent it to its sales personnel. A Catholic organization sent the book to its members, because *The Carrot Seed* taught the importance of having faith. And others have interpreted the book as being about following your heart, no matter what your parents or any naysayers may tell you.

Listening to his heart, Johnson knew that he needed some time off from the weekly grind of creating *Barnaby*. "There's nothing worse than the obli-

gation to be funny," he said ("Wife of Barnaby's Creator..."). Explaining the pressures of creating a daily strip, Johnson said, "I never feel that I can let down. If I did, the stuff wouldn't get to be just mediocre; it would be terrible" (Fisher). Thinking that quarterly deadlines might allow him to take some time off, Johnson once observed, "I'd like to do strips that were syndicated only in quarterlies" (Norris). Though he continued to create the daily strips, Johnson tried quarterlies in 1945. Subtitled "The Comic With A High I.Q.," the first issue of the *Barnaby Quarterly* hit newsstands in July of 1945, and the second issue appeared in November.

In early December, Johnson met with Ted Ferro and Jack Morley to see if they would be willing to take over the strip. Johnson planned to sit in on story conferences and to share in the strip's profits, but he wanted to give the writing job to Ferro,

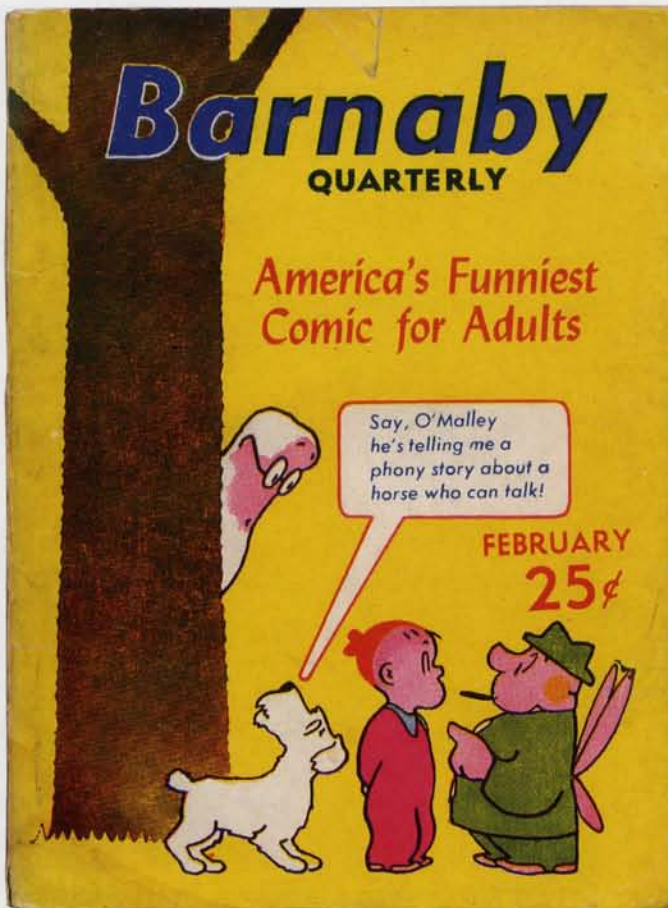


Cover for *Barnaby Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 1 (July 1945).
Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

who had co-written the radio serial *Lorenzo Jones* for nine years. Johnson hoped to give the drawing job to Morley, a former editorial cartoonist for the *New York Journal-American* ("Escape Artist"). Ferro and Morley agreed, and starting with the strip of December 31, 1945, the name "Crockett Johnson" stopped appearing on *Barnaby*.

Freed from the daily obligation of writing and drawing *Barnaby* strips, Johnson could undertake other Barnaby-related pursuits. The third issue of the *Barnaby Quarterly* appeared in February of 1946, and Johnson was working on an illustrated story about his *Barnaby* characters. Intended to be published in the fall of 1946, this *Barnaby* would be in a picture book format instead of the usual comic strip format ("Assorted Facts..."). The new *Barnaby* collection never appeared, perhaps because Johnson was too busy working with Jerome Chodorov, adapting *Barnaby* for the stage. Apparently, the dramatization began in 1944 and the play had been scheduled to open in 1945, but its opening was postponed so that the script could be revised. Chodorov joined the effort in 1945, but a series of miscommunications marred his collaboration with Johnson. Nonetheless, *Barnaby and Mr. O'Malley*, starring J.M. Kerrigan as O'Malley, made its debut at the Playhouse Theatre in Wilmington, Delaware, on September 6, 1946. From there, it was scheduled to move to Baltimore, Boston, and then on to Broadway in early October. If *Barnaby and Mr. O'Malley* had a successful run, RKO planned to turn it into a feature film. But the play never made it to Broadway, and so there was no movie.

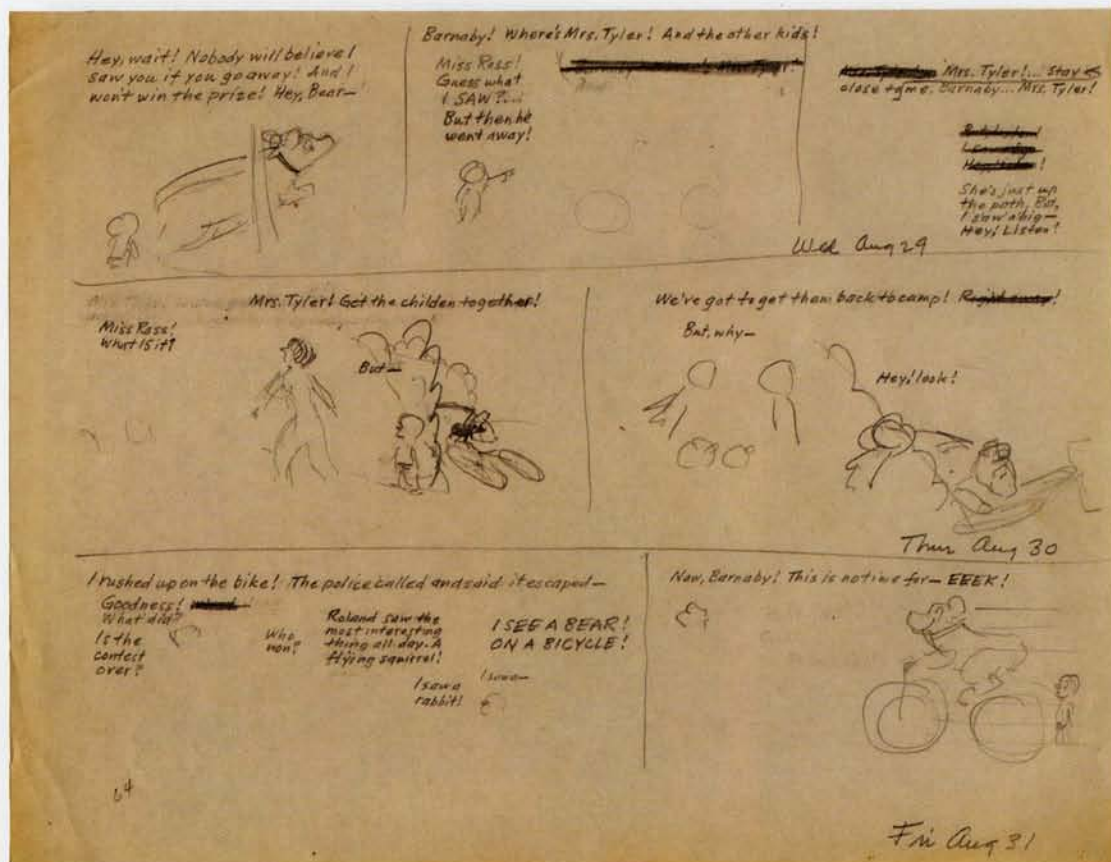
Possibly because he had grown wary of other people's involvement in *Barnaby*, Johnson took over the writing of his strip



Cover for *Barnaby Quarterly* vol. 2, no. 1 (February 1946).
Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

again in September of 1947, though Jack Morley stayed on to do the art. Now credited to "Jack Morley and CJ," the strip would continue to be a joint production until 1952. Though there are periods when Johnson appears to have left all the work to Morley (such as February 1949, when the strip is signed only by Morley), Johnson otherwise was actively involved in the creation of *Barnaby* during the remainder of its run. Johnson's drafts of the comic confirm his role, even though the earliest surviving drafts date only to 1950. These drafts indicate that Johnson was creating all of the dialogue, planning the layout, and sometimes providing rough sketches to guide Morley's art.

In the fall of 1950, Ruth Krauss was gathering material for a book project she was calling *Definitions*. She visited the Rowayton kindergarten class of Harriet Sherman, and played the Bank Street game of "Definitions," in which children offer their own definitions for words. Children found Ruth a sympathetic listener. They talked, and she took extensive notes recording the phrases and words they used. One three-and-a-half-year-old boy said, "I'm collecting animals that don't bite." Ruth asked, "Like what?" He replied, "Like a not-turtle." So, then, "not-turtle" would be defined as a non-biting animal ("New Words for Old"). Ruth also had Eleanor Reich, head of the Bank St. Nursery School (this is the Harriet Johnson Nursery School thanked on the copyright page of *A Hole Is to Dig*), asking teachers to collect definitions from four-year-olds and five-year-olds there. By January of 1951, Krauss wrote to Ursula Nordstrom, "I am getting so much wonderful material in the schools that I'm afraid I'll have a good book in spite of myself." She provided some examples: "stars are not only to twinkle, but also when you



Page of sketches for daily *Barnaby* strips, Wednesday, August 29 to Friday, August 31, 1951. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution. Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

make your bed you get a star"; "a face is something on your head"; "you put a house in a hole and a floor is to keep you from falling in the hole your house is in" (Krauss, letter, January 5, 1951). Nordstrom liked her ideas, but when she approached illustrators, they did not care for the book, and in fact did not even see why this would be a book at all. Nicolas Mordvinoff, who would win the Caldecott Medal in 1952 for *Finders Keepers*, said that no book or illustrations could be made for "so fragmentary and elusive a text" (Lanes, 42).

Maurice Sendak, then 23 years old and working as a window display artist at F.A.O. Schwarz, had illustrated two books for Nordstrom. After turning in the illustrations for the second, Nordstrom asked to see his sketchbook. He left it with her, hoping that she might like what she saw. In it were illustrations he had done in 1948 and 1949 of Brooklyn children playing in the street (Lanes, 40). Now that she had the manuscript to Krauss's new book, she realized that Sendak's little sketches could be just right. So, she invited him up to her office and showed him Krauss's manuscript for the *Definitions* book. He was enthusiastic. Nordstrom then invited both he and Krauss up to her office to introduce them. At the meeting, Maurice felt "very uptight," but Ruth immediately put him at ease. "I adored her," he says. "She had this little girl's laugh, this uncontrollable giggle." She was "very warm, very original. I never met and I haven't since met anyone like that." Ruth told him that his tiny little figures were just what she wanted for the book, and she proposed that they work together. He was thrilled (Nel, interview with Sendak).

During the summer of 1951, Sendak began working on sketches for *Definitions*. By the fall, at the invitation of Ruth and Dave, Maurice was spending weekends at their home in

Rowayton. Maurice recalls, "Ruth and Dave became my weekend parents and took on the job of shaping me into an artist" (Sendak, "Ruth Krauss and Me," 287). At their big house looking out on the Five Mile River, Ruth and Maurice would sit at a porch table covered with Ruth's words and sketches, encircled by what Maurice describes as his "scratchy, dumpy doodles" (287). According to him, they worked like this: "Ruth and I would arrange and rearrange and paste and unpaste and Ruth would sing and Ruth would holler and I'd quail and sulk and Dave would referee. His name should be on all our books for the technical savvy and cool consideration he brought to them" (287). Indeed, it was Dave's idea that the book be printed in a small size. On several draft pages of what would be titled *A Hole Is to Dig*,

you can also see, written in Dave's hand, suggestions for the book's layout.

Krauss and Sendak finished work on the *Definitions* book, which she would consider calling *Toes Are to Wiggle* and then *Stars and Mashed Potatoes* before settling on *A Hole Is to Dig* (Krauss, letter, January 8, 1952; Marcus, 42). It was published to critical acclaim. One of the first—if not the first—books to be written entirely in the language of children, *A Hole Is to Dig* was hailed as "entirely original in approach and content" by *The Horn Book*, which also described its illustrations as "perfect." The *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "that rare and wonderful [children's book] that is genuinely original and imaginative." As Sendak has said, Ruth Krauss was "the first to turn children's language, concepts and tough little pragmatic thinking into art" (Fay). Though concept books like *A Hole Is to Dig* were not common at the time, the book proved a commercial success, too. Fortunately, when Harper's was drawing up the contracts for the book, Krauss insisted that Sendak share royalties with her, half and half—something "unheard of" at the time. A new illustrator like him usually would have been paid an advance of a few hundred dollars, not half of the royalties (Nel, interview with Sendak). As a result of the book's success, he was able to quit his job at F.A.O. Schwarz and become a full-time free-lance illustrator. During the 1950s, Sendak became a frequent visitor to the Krauss-Johnson household, and would illustrate seven more books by Krauss.

As Krauss and Sendak were finishing work on *A Hole Is to Dig* and starting work on *A Very Special House*, Johnson was finishing one phase of his career and starting on the next. By late 1951, he had decided to end *Barnaby*. Johnson's friend, the

documentary filmmaker Gene Searchinger, believes that there are likely several reasons why Johnson stopped. First, it may have been that he had simply grown tired of doing the strip. Second, some papers had begun to drop *Barnaby*. I asked whether they dropped the strip as a result of blacklisting (since Johnson was a former editor of a Communist magazine). While Searchinger admitted the possibility, he pointed out that it would be hard to prove because of the way that blacklisting works: a newspaper would not say, directly, "We're dropping you because you're a Communist"; instead, they would simply say that they were sorry, but they no longer had a need for your comic strip (Nel, interview with Searchinger). Whether the cause was blacklisting, declining readership, Johnson's own declining interest in doing the strip, or some combination of these factors, Johnson drew *Barnaby*'s final episode himself, and the strip ended in February 1952.

That same year saw the first children's book that Johnson wrote and illustrated himself. Published by William R. Scott, *Who's Upside Down?* is a parable of perception, in which a kangaroo who had been "feeling on top of the world" picks up a geography book and sees herself on the bottom of the world, in Australia. "I'm down underneath and upside down!" she exclaims. Though surprised, the kangaroo decides that "It certainly seems to be so!" Johnson's narrator tells us, "When a thing seems to be so, kangaroos usually hop to the conclusion that it is so. She believed she was upside down. And once she really believed it, she began to feel upside down." The book illustrates the foolishness of hopping to such conclusions, explaining that "animals who have their feet on the ground any place in the world are not upside down, no matter how they seem to be in this picture. And it is ridiculous for them to feel upside down. Quite ridiculous."

After the publication *Who's Upside Down?*, Johnson does not initially seem to have been set on entering the children's book business. Indicating that his politics did not shut down all opportunities, he did advertisements for the Kimberly-Clark Corporation and for *Ladies' Home Journal*. He and Jules Feiffer collaborated on a comic strip—Johnson providing the dialogue, Feiffer creating the illustrations—but the strip was not picked up. Johnson also was inventing, creating a four-way adjustable mattress, for which he was seeking a patent. By 1954, he was getting back into illustrating children's books, doing two by Krauss and one by the late Margaret Wise Brown.

In November of 1954, Johnson finished



Crockett Johnson (text) and Jules Feiffer (art), untitled comic strip, 1953.

Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution. Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.



Panel from *Barkis* (Simon & Schuster, 1956). Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.

dummies for *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. The previous year, his sister Else had adopted a boy, naming him Harold David—"Harold," for Harold Gold, the attorney who helped with the adoption, and "David" for her brother David "Crockett" Johnson. So, Dave's Harold may be named for his nephew Harold David (Nel, interviews with Harold Frank and Else Frank). The character of Harold most likely comes from Dave's childhood, much of which was spent drawing. Johnson sent the manuscript to Harper and Brothers, but when Nordstrom received it, she was not enthusiastic: "It doesn't seem to be a good children's book to me but I'm often wrong—and this post-Children's Book Week Monday finds me dead in the head. I'd probably pass up *Tom Sawyer* today. Let me keep the dummy a few days, will you?" (Marcus, 83).

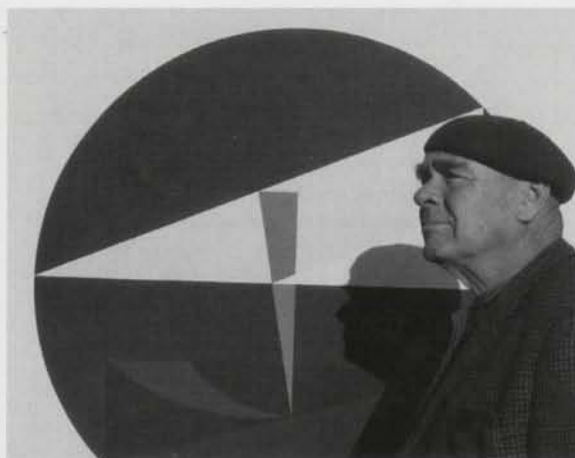
The original dummy has not survived, but its conceit may not have been as clearly expressed as it is in the final version. Responding to the dummy, Nordstrom had written, "I found myself asking such dumb questions—like *where* did he draw the moon and the path and the tree? And then when I get far enough to realize he was dreaming, *of course*, I was puzzled by the moon in the last picture. You can see from this heavy-handed comment that I didn't read the story with much imagination" (Marcus, 83). Initially, the picture of Harold drawing a tree appears to have been accompanied by text indicating that Harold is drawing a forest; the final version tells us that Harold "made a very small forest, with just one tree in it," clarifying the idea that although Harold thinks of his tree as a forest, it is in fact just a tree. Johnson took her criticisms to heart, making changes, for which she thanks him and apologizes for her "lukewarm and unenthusiastic" reaction to *Harold*. "I really think it is going to make a darling book, and I certainly was wrong at first." She confides that the recent successes of Harper children's books made her over-confident in her first impressions: "The Harper

children's books have had such a good fall...and...I thought gosh I'm really catching on to things, I bet, and pretty soon it ought to get easier. And then I stubbed my toe on Harold and his damned purple crayon" (Marcus, 84).

In December 1954, Nordstrom sent Johnson an advance for \$750 and a contract. When published in the fall of 1955, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* was a runaway hit. The first print run of 10,000 was selling so quickly that Harper ordered a new print run of 7,500 by November, and Nordstrom was already encouraging Johnson to write a sequel. She told him, "I know you don't want to do *Harold and His Green Crayon* or *Harold and His Orange Crayon*, but I honestly think further adventures of Harold would sell and not be a cheap idea, either" (Nordstrom, letter, October 13, 1955). Johnson had begun a new comic strip, *Barkis*, in May of 1955, but it had not caught on, and his syndicate had decided to drop it—the last *Barkis* appeared on November 5. And, though he had patented his four-way adjustable mattress, he was having a hard time marketing it. So, when Nordstrom suggested a sequel to the first *Harold* book, he went right to work on *Harold's Fairy Tale*, sending her a dummy of the book by the first part of December. With *Harold's Fairy Tale*, writing and illustrating children's books became Johnson's primary occupation: during the next 10 years, he would create five more *Harold* books and a dozen others.

Reviewing the dust jacket of *Harold's Fairy Tale* before publication, Johnson wrote to Harper's Sue Carr, reluctantly advising her to mention *Barnaby* to help promote the book. "I think I have discouraged the use of the word 'Barnaby' in the past," he said, "but recently in two public ventures it has been made plain to me that 'Barnaby' is much better known than my own name" (letter, January 28, 1956). In 1955, the comic strip was being adapted for a weekly TV series. That adaptation was never made, but in December of 1959, Johnson and Krauss flew to Hollywood to attend rehearsals for *Barnaby and Mr. O'Malley*, a full-color pilot episode for a new *Barnaby* series starring Bert Lahr as Mr. O'Malley, a young Ron Howard as Barnaby, and Mel Blanc as the voice of McSnoyd. Introduced by Ronald Reagan, this half-hour of CBS's *GE Theater* aired on December 20, and received strong reviews. The *New York Times*' Jack Gould called it "a charming and hilarious holiday spree," and thought Howard "the most engaging child performer in many a day." *Variety* predicted that Howard's agent's phone would soon be ringing "with enough offers to keep him [Howard] busy until next Yule time" ("Tele Review"). *Variety* was right. In 1960, Howard landed the role that made him famous: Opie Taylor on the *Andy Griffith Show*.

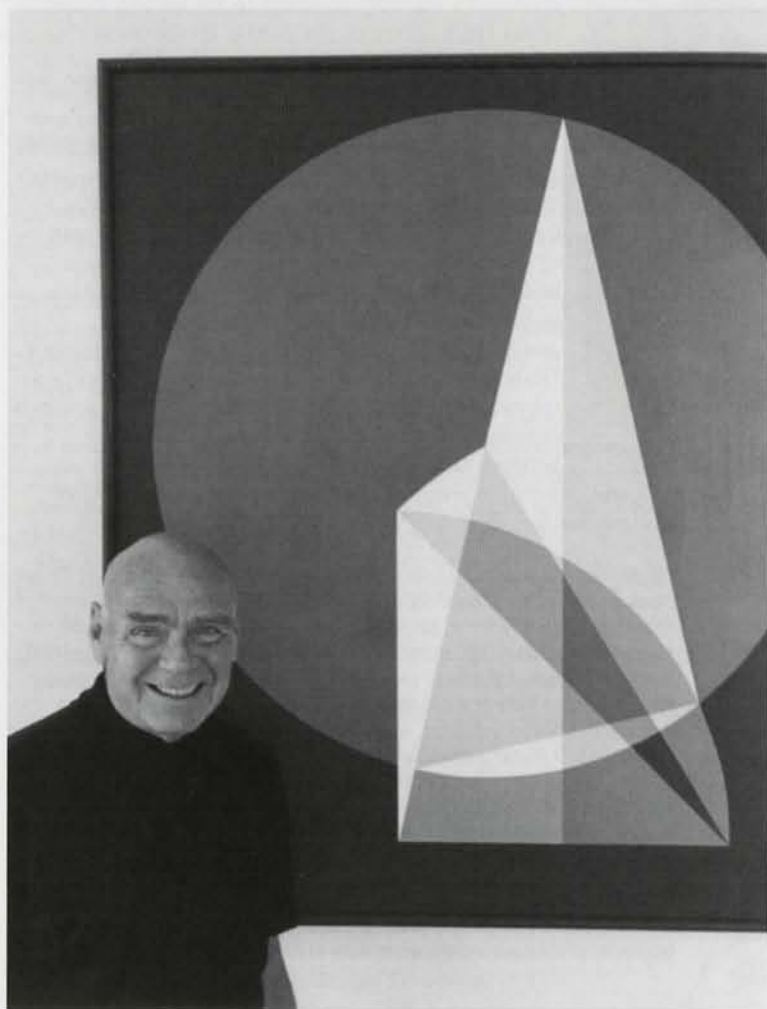
Although *Barnaby and Mr. O'Malley* was not picked up by the network, the Hall Syndicate suggested that Johnson give his *Barnaby* comic another try. Enlisting Warren Sattler to do the artwork, Johnson updated the original comics' plots for the 1960s—the Hot Coffee Ring became the Counterfeit Credit Card Ring, and the Victory Garden sequence became a story about Barnaby's attempts to start a garden (omitting any reference to World War II). He also added some new storylines that focused on contemporary topics like marketing and questionnaires. Looking back at his old comic strips as he prepared them for the new series, Johnson remarked, "I am amazed and stand in awe as I see how the characters solved their problems, seemingly with-



Above: Crockett Johnson with a version of his *Squared Circle*, c. 1970. Photograph by Jackie Curtis. Used by permission.

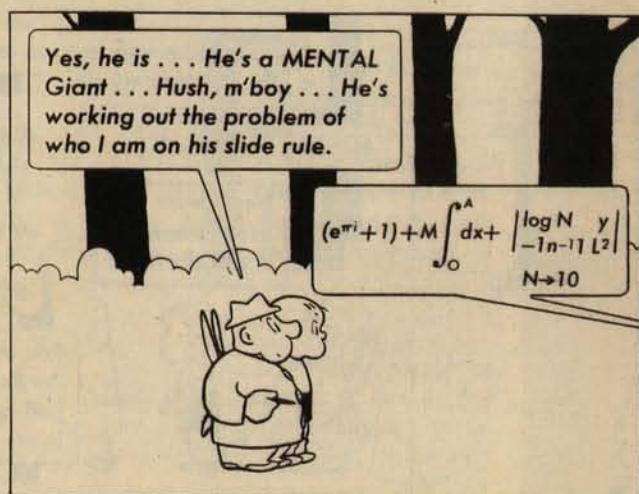
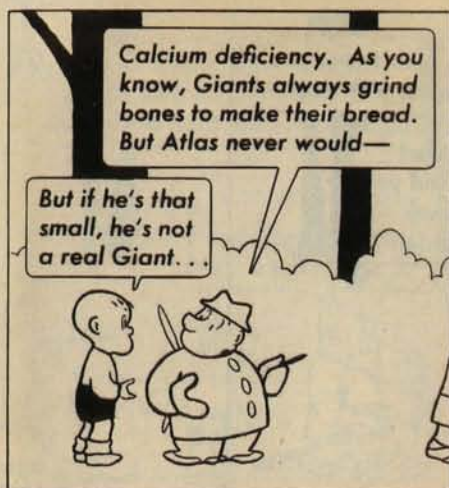
Left: *Squared Circle*, c. 1969. Private collection. Photograph by Dane Webster. Used by permission.

Left, below: Crockett Johnson with his *Heptagon from Its Seven Sides*, c. 1970. Photograph by Jackie Curtis. Used by permission.



out any aid from me" (Erwin). On September 12, the new *Barnaby* appeared in papers, to the delight of fans. Johnson did create some inspired new episodes, but he was no longer very emotionally invested in the strip. In January of 1962, Johnson wrote to syndicate head Robert Hall to tell him that, having written *Barnaby* through March, he wanted either to bring the strip to an end or—if Hall were interested—have someone else carry on the writing (letter, January 2, 1962). No one took the job, and so, after Sattler had finished illustrating *Barnaby* through March, Johnson took over, writing and drawing the final sequence, which concluded on April 14, 1962.

In the mid-1960s, Johnson started a new career. Turning away from children's books and comics, he became an artist and amateur mathematician. As he explained, "upon belatedly discovering aesthetic values in the Pythagorean right triangle and Euclidian geometry, I began a series of geometric paintings deriving from famous mathematical theorems, both ancient and modern" ("On the Mathematics of Geometry...", 97). During what might be called his third career, Johnson painted about one hundred large, vivid canvases of geometric shapes, all based on mathematical ideas. At first, he based the artwork on already existing theorems. As he grew more confident, he began to develop his own theorems and then translated them into paintings. Indeed, two of Johnson's original geometrical theorems—"A geometrical look at $\sqrt{\pi}$ " and "Construction for a regular heptagon"—were published in the *Mathematical Gazette* in 1970 and 1975, respectively. As Professor J.B. Stroud, the former chair of Davidson College's Math Department, says of Johnson's "Construction for a regular heptagon," "nobody thought of trying this until Crockett Johnson...The details of how he did it are high school mathematics, but it's not trivial. It's darn clever" ("Stroud studies...").



Page from *Barnaby and Mr. O'Malley* (Holt, 1944), p. 97.
Used by permission of the Estate of Ruth Krauss.


If Johnson's cleverness at mathematics surprises fans of Harold, fans of Barnaby will remember Atlas, the "Mental Giant" who works out everything on his slide rule. To recall Mr. O'Malley's name, Atlas turns to his slide rule, producing an equation that he recognizes as "O'Malley." As J.B. Stroud has proven in an unpublished article on Johnson's mathematical paintings, if you simplify the equation on page 97 of *Barnaby and Mr. O'Malley*, it becomes $O+MA+L^2+ey$, which equals O'MALLEY. Johnson's career as mathematician-painter was never as high-profile as his work in cartooning or in writing children's books, but his paintings were exhibited in galleries, including the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology, which today has the largest single collection of his art.

Johnson did his painting in the basement, where he had plenty of room to work. Since the house was located right on the coast, the basement tended to get flooded, and Johnson often painted while standing in water up to his ankles. To solve this problem

and to avoid the sounds of increased traffic near their Rowayton home, Johnson and Krauss bought a house in Westport, Connecticut, where they moved in 1972. Though it still overlooked the water, the new house had space for an above-ground studio where Johnson could paint, undisturbed by noise or water.

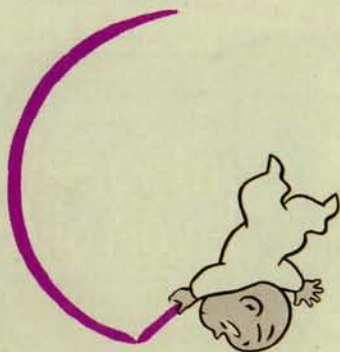
In early February of 1975, Johnson—a lifelong smoker—learned that he had lung cancer. By early July, he lay in a hospital bed, dying. One evening near the very end of Johnson's life, psychiatrist Gil Rose and journalist Andy Rooney—both friends from Rowayton—drove in to visit him at Norwalk Hospital. They found Johnson scared, in pain, and slipping in and out of consciousness. Hoping that he could help Johnson deal with his anxiety and fear, Dr. Rose began to talk about Johnson's fictional characters. He asked, "Well, what would Harold do?" Johnson grew interested in looking at his illness from Harold's perspective, and, as he thought about what Harold would do, he calmed down. Days later, on July 11, 1975, Johnson died. He was 68 years old. As the *New York Times*' headline put it, "Crockett Johnson, Cartoonist, Creator of 'Barnaby,' Is Dead."

It may be a cliché to say that Crockett Johnson lives on through his work. But he does. Not only do his round-headed (and frequently bald) characters resemble their creator, but people continue to read and be inspired by his stories. Art Spiegelman reprinted a *Barnaby* sequence in the second volume of his *Little Lit* series, the *Harold* books remain in print, and Harold recently became the subject of an animated series on the HBO Family Channel. Author-illustrator Kevin Henkes names *The Carrot Seed* and *Is This You?*—both Johnson-Krauss collaborations—as two of his favorite childhood books. In her poem "Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967," former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove writes of taking "the path of Harold's purple crayon through / the bedroom window and onto a lavender / spill of stars." And, in his Caldecott Award acceptance speech for *Jumanji* (1982), Chris Van Allsburg actually thanked "Harold, and his purple crayon." Like Harold's purple crayon and Barnaby's Mr. O'Malley, Crockett Johnson continues to transport his readers to that place

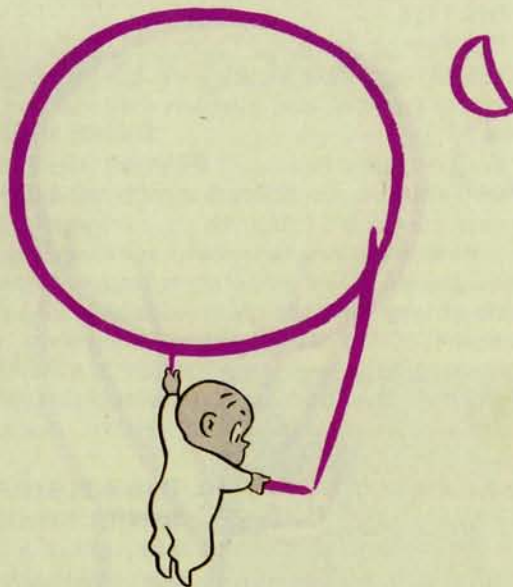
between fantasy and reality where, if we keep our wits and our purple crayon, we can be sure that we'll always land on our feet. 

For their help, the author would like to thank Edward and Lucy Appert, Daniel Clowes, Jackie Curtis, Matt Dunne, Frank Fay, Jules Feiffer, Mary Elting Folsom, the late Else Frank, David Frank, Harold Frank, Antonio Frasconi, Maureen Granville-Smith, Betty Hahn, Sonya Hals, Peggy Heinrich, Syd Hoff, Irwin T. Holtzman, A.B. Magil, Leonard Marcus, Robert and Helen McNell, the late Mischa Richter, Andy Rooney, Gil Rose, Warren Sattler, Gene Searchinger, Maurice Sendak, Nina Stagakis, J.B. Stroud, Terry Trilling, Ted Whitten, Tzofit Butler (HarperCollins Archives), Stewart I. Edelstein (Cohen & Wolf), Terri Goldich (Northeast Children's Literature Collection, University of Connecticut), John Hyslop (Queens Public Library), Peggy Kidwell and Alicia Cutler (the Smithsonian). For a complete list, please see www.ksu.edu/english/nelp/purple/thanks.html.

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But, luckily, he kept his wits and his purple crayon.



He made a balloon and he grabbed on to it.

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"But, luckily, he kept his wits and his purple crayon." From *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Harper, 1955; later paperback edition, n.d.).

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