

Al Feldstein conversation with Jon McClure (recorded, transcribed, and published with permission). My wife, Dyan Wilder-McClure and myself, in April 2010, drove over 800 miles from Durango, Colorado to a ranch about 10 miles outside of Livingston, Montana to bring five cats to a permanent home, an animal sanctuary called Deer Haven Ranch. We had fed and cared for the cats in an alley for three years, and in anticipation of moving, decided to locate a safe place for the animals to spend their days before we were gone, and unable to care for them any longer. I had the chance to meet with and record a conversation about life and art and comic book history with Al Feldstein as a result of this trip. Al and I spoke for a few minutes before I started the recording and after it ended. Some statements have been combined for clarity, with a handful of unrecorded comments added in the places they rightfully would belong, which helps to capture the great conversation Al and I had that evening. The following transcription is a reasonable facsimile, minus the ‘ums’ and ‘uhs,’ and is presented with a general audience in mind.

Jon: I’m speaking with Al Feldstein in his home outside of Livingston, Montana, in his art studio, April 20, 2010 at 5:20 p.m.

Al: I’ve been waiting all day! (laughter)

Jon: Just so you know Al, it is an honor to meet you, and your work has been enormously influential on me. My wife Dyan and I and some mutual friends just finished looking at your 300 acre ranch and its happy animal inhabitants. Your wife Michelle was our tour guide! It is so cool!

Al: Thank you.

Jon: Okay... in Overstreet #9, you mentioned that the comic industry had castrated itself based on, at least partially, Wertham’s Seduction of the Innocent...

Al: It wasn’t just Wertham’s book, it was the public being stirred up by many groups with many different agendas. It was not only Wertham that wanted to be an expert on teenagers, you know. The Kefauver committee itself was looking at juvenile delinquency at the time because there was a big rise in juvenile delinquency. They were looking for some cause in the comic industry because comics were the perfect scapegoat.

Jon: I think that’s true. Wertham was to some extent unfairly blamed, because in 1971, he followed up with a book on fanzines and...

Al: That didn’t help because we were already out of business! (laughter)

Jon: Right, and people’s reactions to the parent’s meetings and the book burnings of the ‘50s, that is when Bill Gaines stepped up... the only publisher that defended himself.

Al: Right.

Jon: ...in an era of McCarthyism and ridiculousness.

Al: He walked right into the lion's den and he got his ass bit.

Jon: Right. But he did it with integrity, and I don't think he ever regretted it.

Al: I'm not too sure about that. (laughter)

Jon: Well... you will notice this is an article about me from Gemstone's Diamond Dialogue from August 2001. (Jon gives the article to Al.)

Al: Thank you.

Jon: This article featured me after the AACBC banquet at San Diego con when I was awarded Researcher of the Year by Gemstone, for solving one of several comic-related mysteries at the time. This is the first magazine I published anything about comic book in (Jon hands Al Comic Book Marketplace #51) with a cover by your buddy Al Williamson.

Al: My buddy? (laughter)

Jon: You'll notice the picture of me in Diamond Dialogue holding this book (Jon hands Al a large hardcover book, Horror Comics of the 1950s, from Nostalgia Press, 1971).

Al: It's in nice shape.

Jon: Yeah, these are so cool. My parents wouldn't buy it for me (it cost \$19.95 in 1972), when I was almost eight years old. This book was the first chance outside of back issues that people got since the 1950s to read EC comics material. I finally obtained this copy about 20 years ago, and re-read your story "The Ventriloquist's Dummy," (originally presented in Tales from the Crypt #28) drawn by Graham Ingels, which really impacted me when I was a kid, standing there in that bookstore. I was glued to this book.

Al: You know Bill quit, we had such troubles with Murphy, the judge who was enforcing the code, and we were kicked out I guess by the other publishers and we were told... the judge was ordered to put us out of business. But that's a real personal feeling, he was just very difficult...VERY difficult... we tried to put out our Sci-Fi books and we were having a lot of trouble. Bill finally cashed the whole thing in. We all went out of business and I was walking the streets for a while. There was a panic that was going on in the country and people were looking for scapegoats. And of course I have always had a feeling that the kids were reacting against the establishment because they were being told to 'duck and cover' under their desks, in case the siren goes off, in case of an atomic attack, and they knew damned well that it wouldn't do a damned bit of good, really angry at their own situation and knowing it, having no control over it, and no responsibility for it. The adults were screwing up badly. They (young people) were getting anti-establishment but nobody was looking for that... they were looking for a scapegoat and the comics were an easy mark. I know there were so many other agendas going on, between the Bircher's and everybody else that wanted to get into this.

Jon: Oh, the John Birch Society was horrific.

Al: Yeah, they all wanted their foot in the door of censorship and control, and that sort of thing. It was just a terrible time. And it has not improved very much.

Jon: No... the state of the world in regards to telling the truth in the media has deteriorated.

Al: Absolutely.

Jon: Our intellectual standards have collapsed. What people could do a hundred years ago, you know, by Junior High or High School, today would be a graduate level accomplishment in terms of writing and reading.

Al: I assume so... I keep saying when I am interviewed, 'Where did all the flower children go?' You know, the ones that were in the '50s...what happened to them? Why did their kids turn out to be head-in-the-sand ostriches?

Jon: You guys had a moral code, you and Bill, with EC I mean. They were horror stories and they were weird and they were ahead of their time. The film industry enforced an undercurrent of "morality" upon screenwriters for decades, until the late '60s, around the time that George Romero did *Night of the Living Dead*: that evil must be defeated. But you guys had a sort of karmic moral code in the stories already, I mean, the bad guys would get an O. Henry twist ending and the punishment they deserved...

Al: Sometimes!

Jon: ...for the most part.

Al: I know, but we stepped over the bounds a lot. We had bad guys get away with it sometimes, kinda 'snicker snicker.'

Jon: Yeah... and you had a formula where you and Bill would have to do a story a day, correct me if I'm wrong...

Al: Yeah, that's right, four stories a week we did, and then on the fifth day I did a cover or whatever and that was after maybe he made me give up on the artwork. I used to do the stories and covers galore. He (Bill Gaines) wanted to get rid of all his writers who were mostly hacks because he was beginning to see that my stuff was a little above the level. Not much, I can't claim that this was great writing, but back then I treated that job like I was Rosie the Riveter—it was a job! I did what I had to do.

Jon: Your art style is very clear, regardless of subject matter. I like that type of finished pen and ink illustration.

Al: Thank you.

Jon: As much as you love art and as much as you remain an inspired artist, it seems you are now getting to paint the things that you really want to paint, mostly western stuff, and some MAD stuff, like the wonderful “What, Me a Doctor?” painting in your living room.

Al: Yeah.

Jon: I am sure that it is very fun for you, but I, uh, always had the impression that it was a job, and that’s why you had some of the frustrations you had, expressed in various interviews, in regards to the frailties of some people, the talent that worked for EC.

Al: Oh yeah... but we had empathy for them.

Jon: Some kind of moral compass is important. And that’s what’s missing, kids are as out of place today as then, and Wertham’s work was taken and paraded for many political agendas by various groups, who opportunistically filled the void with their own amemic ideas.

Al: Right... right.

Jon: Wertham was a medical doctor and he formed a conclusion using an argument fallacy, that is to say, he saw these juvenile delinquents, and most of them liked to read comic books and so naturally, comics became the cause, the root source.

Al: When I became the editor of MAD magazine, one of the first things I did was write about this stuff, write stories like “Baseball is Ruining our Children,” because every kid plays baseball. It’s kind of satire, this approach towards the curative aspects of how to clear up this mess... and the truth is, they weren’t going to be able to do it because they (adults) were screwing up themselves. Jesus, everyone seems to have forgotten this arms race that was going on and the threat of nuclear war present every day and the kids are there saying, ‘I’m going to be obliterated and what did I do to deserve this.’

Jon: And they’re supposed to listen to a teacher who tells them, ‘Get under your desk.’

Al: Yeah, right!

Jon: What about radiation? It’s not like all of the kids were idiots...

Al: No!

Jon: They even made bad movies where this type of dilemma was portrayed. A series of absurdities, one stacked one another. We settle for lies on the canned news with and the crappy, ill-conceived, pre-chewed nonsense they serve the public.

Al: And of course they swallow it. (laughter)

Jon: Corporations will never stop selling propaganda, they're still selling it, and they're selling it more effectively than ever.

Al: Oh yeah... well that's because they got more at stake and there are much more of them. Families have grown, the Rockefeller family has grown, controlling more and more wealth, and therefore they have more and more every day and it's something that we can't fight... I gave up on it. I have been very politically active for quite some time, on the internet, etc., but geez, I'm ready to toss in the towel. It just – we don't get anywhere-- for example, my address book (email), that I was sending this stuff to, I was preaching to the choir! These people are like you and like a lot of other fair-thinking people and that's that. But you run into these tea-party crowds...-

Jon: Ughh. (in a spooky voice) “They're coming to get you, Barbara.”

Al: You cannot adjust their thinking! I don't know whether it was because their daddies thought that way and they can't turn against their daddies or what...

Jon: I think that people—they used to say that ‘Everyone is entitled to an opinion’ — but I think that should be modified to say, ‘Everyone is entitled to an INFORMED opinion.’

Al: Oh yes.

Jon: Rupert Murdoch programming and similar information management systems, where they create reality, produce zombies that go out and parrot what they hear, and they act as if they actually know something, and yet there is no communication. I can listen to somebody's point of view that I don't agree with and try to understand it...

Al: Me too...

Jon: ...but if I try to say, ‘Here's what I see, and here's where I see your opinion falling short of reality,’ often they get angry and they call me names. And this is exactly why I am sitting in front of you, because I've had to defend the stray cats where I live, and now we bring them here to you and Michelle for safety, from an alley filled with imbeciles and rednecks and drug addicts and alcoholics who...

Al: Where is this?

Jon: Durango, Colorado.

Al: Wow.

Jon: This alley is not typical of Durango... it's just an impoverished, sketchy part of town where the feral cats happened to live until now.

Al: Durango is a pretty area. It's nice there, I remember going there.

Jon: Yeah, it's still a charming place for the most part. Durango is becoming more like one of those places where money is obviously an influence moving in, along with the endless sprawl, the mountain top mansions, and an omnivorous need to keep growing.

Al: Yeah.

Jon: You've got cultural elements here as well, that do not honor the atmosphere of this area. Yet the majority of the natural beauty here, around Livingston, is not destroyed.

Al: Not yet! (laughter) That's why we put a conservation easement on this place...

Jon: Cool!

Al: ...this hunk of land. I mean, I was lucky enough to have made the money with MAD to retire and do what I wanted to do, and quit at the right time.

Jon: You've done well, Al! Where I live, it's already gone or disappearing rapidly, with cookie-cutter developments.

Al: Yeah, we do that here to accommodate our exploding population. You can't stop people from having sex, and that's a big problem in this world. (laughter)

Jon: If only we could spay and neuter the idiots like we do the animals.

Al: Well actually, spay and neuter a whole generation of these morons! (laughter) I don't care what their political outlook is, just so they don't reproduce.

Jon: Amen to that. Speaking of livestock, we met all of your retired horses and animals by name. We drove around and met every one of them. Michelle introduced them all.

Al: (looking out the window of his studio) Oh, look at them go. I love it when they start running.

J It's quite a view. Your favorite horse is 38 years old I believe? It's an older one, I forget the name... I took a picture of him.

Al: Chico? That was my horse.

Jon: That's it... 35 or 38 years old, right? Michelle said he was getting up there.

Al: Well hey, I'm 85, I moved here in '91, we brought three horses, that's what we started with, and then we started to adopt all kinds of animals. (laughter)

Jon: You have an excellent selection, I might add. And they are very well looked after.

Al: She's great, she's great, she's great...

Jon: Michelle is a wonderful lady, and that brings me back to, I think the point of what is wrong with the people you are giving up on, because you can't communicate with them, is that people either see with their heart or they don't. In Saint-Exupery's book *The Little Prince*, there is a character called the Fox, and toward the end of the story there is the little boy and the fox tells the boy, "Here is my secret—a very simple secret. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

Al: Yeah! That's very, very good... deep.

Jon: For a children's book it is, and I think that's what we're missing—we're missing an essential desire to do right, know the truth, and stand for something. I've often joked, no good deed goes unpunished. But today is different. I'm rewarded, sitting here with you.

Al: Thank you.

Jon: But punishment for good deeds has largely been my experience. For example, my friend Jarrod Perrott and I made the first feature length film ever shot in Durango, a comedy called *Face Eater*, just a few years ago, and much like the card game that I'll show you later, it was influenced by yourself and Mr. Gaines and your wonderful, dark, sarcastic sense of humor. We made this film in Durango for \$4,000 -- most of that spent on pizza and beer. It took four years to complete, working on weekends, but we have special effects, a soundtrack, and it's not half-bad. Everyone worked for free including retired Senator Jim Dyer of Colorado who played the main villain, a crime boss named after B-Movie legend Roger Corman, and his son Matt Dyer, a professional actor and stuntman who plays a character named Ed Harley. I play Flecks Crushe, a mob enforcer.

Al: Not so much! (laughter)

Jon: Like I said, it's a comedy! I think you'll get a few laughs out of it. So, we got this thing done and presented it to the local film festival and they refused to play it for unknown reasons, although we always felt it was because it didn't fit their political agenda and artsy venue. And apparently they didn't comprehend what "camp" is.

Al: Did you write it?

Jon: I wrote it. The Durango Independent Film Festival stated in print that since we played it locally and collected money for showings, that it wasn't acceptable for submission, yet they were playing movies from Hollywood that were in thousands of theaters in the US and nominated for awards, and still out there collecting money. That didn't make sense, naturally. We asked them to explain themselves and they refused to discuss it, and basically said, 'Good luck,' as if we'd just disappear. So I wrote a letter to the local newspaper exposing what had happened, and then other people wrote letters, and it went on for almost two months back and forth, and we sold out a lot of shows, proving once again that there is no such thing as bad publicity. The truth is that there is a

measure of elitism in Durango, however beautiful the surrounding area may be. It's not the same, laid back, charming mountain town I moved to nearly 30 years ago. The director of Face Eater, Jarrod Perrott, was insulted in person downtown by some dingbat from the DIFF, a full year after this fiasco occurred in the paper. It was a lost opportunity for the DIFF and the town of Durango and many locals, but that's water under the bridge.

Al: You see a measure of that all over our country.

Jon: Folks with power exist in any size pond, even in the comic book industry, and you've got people who need to control everything, and if they don't like or comprehend what you're doing, they try to step on you, disrespect you, squash you, and keep you out of the game.

Al: That's what we went through with the comic books. It was never mentioned in the Kefauver hearings or all through that period, the good of the stuff that we were doing. It was instructive. It was appealing to tolerance and everything like that.

Jon: Your anti-racism stories, in particular, went on trial.

Al: They even took bad words like "spic" and stuff out of context to show how bad we were, instead of showing why we were using it in the first place, because of the story itself, which was some appeal to its tolerance.

Jon: They were some of the best comic stories ever written! And they were very strong appeals to tolerance and intelligence, and you wrote a lot of those stories.

Al: Yeah, I did, actually.

Jon: You cared about fairness by writing about injustice.

Al: What's amazing to me is that Bill Gaines was a dyed-in-the-wool sworn capitalist only because he had no other choice. He inherited money and that was what he was forced into doing when he took over his father's business with the exception of all of this kind of liberalism that we had, and in the messages of our stories. He was basically a liberal capitalist, if you can figure out what that is.

Jon: Bill was 25 years old when his dad died in 1947 in a boating accident.

Al: Yeah, right.

Jon: He was thrown into this position when you were also a very young man.

Al: He was three years older than me.

Jon: So you're 22, it's the late '40s, and you guys start working together, and initially your horror stories appeared in Crime Patrol, which quickly changed its name...

Al: Well, I'll tell you the story of how that happened. I used to bug him. I was working for Fox, doing teenage books, and Bill's father died in the accident, and Sol Cohen, who was his father's business manager, felt that the teenage books were doing well so why don't we put one out, and they were using Leroy Lettering which was Jim Roden's business, and I was using Roden lettering through Fox, going through teenage books, and he sent word for me to come down and talk to them. So I went down and talked to Bill and he loved my stuff and he was attracted I guess to the nubile females, etc... (laughter)...but anyway, we kind of hit it off and I sat there and I just... I was out of my mind at the time, and I said to him, 'I'll do a teenage book for you but I want a piece of it.' And he said, 'Alright, I can support that... what kind of piece are you talking about?' and I said, 'Not much, say 10% of the profits.' He agreed, and we do the contract, and we're working on the first story and Bill's mother and her lawyer are off the wall. You don't give an artist a piece of the, you know...

Jon: It was an important precedent. Steve Ditko, for example, is still lacking full credit for creating Spider-Man and was NEVER compensated as he should have been.

Al: Yeah. Well, and so, he called me up and said listen, the teenage market is collapsing and I've got to put out three issues because that's our contract and then we're finished, and I said, 'Okay Bill.' His partner was going out of business and I knew about it. He was tied up with some with some guys down in Puerto Rico in a racetrack and he was facing bankruptcy himself. And I said, 'Give me work and tear up the contract.' That's how we got together. But when we both lived in Brooklyn, he started driving me home, see, and he'd drop me off at my house and then he'd go off to his apartment. I used to bug him when we started the romance books which were...

Jon: A moon, a girl...romance.

Al: Yeah, Simon and Kirby, you know? I said to him, 'The whole damn industry is based on imitation.' There's nobody doing original stuff except the really interesting innovators like Bob Wood, Simon and Kirby, and everyone else jumps in and does the same thing badly. And I said to Bill, 'That's what you are doing. That's what your dad was doing,' I said. You know, he accidentally turned down Superman because he just didn't like it. But Shelly Mayer, his editor, sent it up to his partner at DC and that's how they got it, luckily. But anyway, he says to me, "What do you want to do?" And I tell him, 'I don't know, when I was a kid I loved horror movies, like Frankenstein and Dracula.' I remember when I was a little kid, 6 or 7 years old, sneaking downstairs and sitting on the steps of our home during the depression and we listened to the radio with my brother.

Jon: Inner Sanctum?

Al: Yeah, well that, and Lights Out, and the Witches Tale. So Bill says, 'Alright, I'll tell you what, tell me what you want. Let's try some horror,' and so Crime Patrol was one of two of his imitations of Crime Does Not Pay, and doing so-so. I created Tales from The Crypt with the Crypt Keeper, and Vault of Horror with the Vault Keeper. And they were

not great explorations, they were not wonderful creations, they were imitations of what I remember when I was a kid. But nobody was doing that stuff. There were a couple of comics at the time dabbling in ghosts, and I think one was called Adventures into the Unknown.

Jon: Late 1940s ACGs, yeah.

Al: But they weren't really great...

Jon: They improved after 1950, by employing fewer ghosts and more monsters.

Al: But I had done a story there, so I knew we were freelancing. So he said, 'Okay, try it.' And you know, in those days, when comics were king there were like 600 titles on the stands and they were moneymakers even at a dime, they were moneymakers because things were really tight in those days and the distributors who worked with the wholesalers had road men that used to go out and check to see how these were doing and report back so the publishers would know if they were on the wrong track or something. Now our Crime Patrol and War against Crime had ten day check-ups that weren't very good. And we had put this new ad on the front, New Trend, whatever...

Jon: Right.

Al: And kids were hungry for new stuff and we were lucky and we hit them at the right time. And Bill was a student of how to grab hold of the fact that this was happening and changed Crime Patrol and War against Crime into the two horror books immediately. And then that's when we got into them and of course, he used to drive me home and he used to say, that I was writing my own stuff. He was trying to get that stuff from his writers and he wanted me to write them all; all the horror stories. So we made a deal. He was very kind to me. He always took good care of me right until the end after he had sold MAD and he was just a figurehead and writing checks. And I took over MAD when Harvey left and he (Bill) had no feeling for MAD and there it was doing very well.

Jon: You retired in 1984.

Al: Yeah, I retired in 1984 because I could see the handwriting on the wall. Things were changing in the industry. The kids were now starting to pick up on electronics and I was starting to push Bill to do a television show....this was before Saturday Night Live. We dabbled in a few things that were parts of television shows. There was a MAD section for a show written by Larry Gelbart with several comedians, and I looked at that and saw what Larry had done and I said, geez, we should do a television show of MAD! We needed the push to keep up the sales because they were starting to slip, but I couldn't get him to do it. I could not get him to go for it. He had sold the magazine. I took over MAD in '56. Harvey knew that Bill was almost bankrupt. His distributor went bankrupt because there was this big fuss about crime and horror.

Jon: In the end they wouldn't distribute EC stuff at all.

Al: Yeah well, that's the point. Leader News was in trouble. They had on the side printed their own Sci-fi comic books and these imitations were bad. And so they declared bankruptcy and Bill was stuck with a lot of printing bills so he was ready to declare bankruptcy and so he told me goodbye. And he was actually going to quit everything. And Harvey Kurtzman talked him into keeping MAD. Now MAD had switched to a 25 cent magazine about 4-5 months earlier because Harvey had an offer at Playboy magazine. And he went to Bill and said, 'Hey look, I never liked being a comic book person and I want to be an adult magazine person,' and Bill said, 'Look Harvey, you'd make a crappy adult magazine.'

Jon: Was one of the reasons MAD went to magazine format the fact that you could avoid the industry's self-imposed comics' code and its disastrous effect on creativity?

Al: No, MAD switched to being a magazine just before the code. This was months before the code. It was an accident. MAD wasn't touched by the code. And so Harvey went to Bill and his mother on Walker Street after five years of all this Camelot and he said, 'You know, MAD's a good magazine, and it has potential, and you shouldn't let it die.' And he talked Bill into paying off all the printing bills that Bill was stuck with when the distributor went bankrupt. And he talked Bill's mother and sister and him into putting up the money, and Harvey saved MAD. And that was the 25 cent era, you see.

Jon: Okay, issue #24 on, I believe.

Al: So he puts out like the first two issues that were running parallel to what we were trying to publish and Bill was still gambling on crazy ideas like Picto-Fiction.

Jon: I liked Picto-Fiction.

Al: Well you know, it was an experiment that could have developed, except that we had no chance, the bundles were tied up and never distributed. And I made another mistake—the mistake of putting EC on it, which I shouldn't have done. The wholesalers saw EC and thought of many of the horror comics and so they refused to distribute them. But that was a mistake that I made. Bill was reeling from this crucifixion that they had done at the Kefauver committee on him and so he was, he never gave up all the other titles and I talked him into trying Picto-Fiction, and that wasn't working out, and then the distributor went bankrupt and so Harvey talks him into putting up the money he didn't get from the distributors to pay the printing bills and along comes Hugh Hefner and gives Harvey an offer: 'Come to my shop to do an adult humor magazine for me, a very slick one.' And Harvey went CRAZY. He didn't know how to get out of this terrible mess he was in. He talked Bill into putting up the money and he didn't want to quit, he didn't have the guts to quit! So he gets himself FIRED! He goes to Bill and he says 'I want 51% control of MAD Magazine,' and Bill says, 'Go fuck yourself!' (laughter) So first he called up his old business manager Lyle Stuart. Lyle had the Independent, which was a newspaper, and Mr. Lee was this old guy from his father's tenure, and he was getting too old to be the business manager, and so he retired and Bill asked Lyle Stuart to become the

business manager. Well, Lyle didn't care for me, because Lyle had a different idea of what a publisher should be and I won't even go into that, but the point is that he calls up Lyle Stuart who he had let go when the bankruptcy happened and he says, 'Harvey Kurtzman is here and he wants 51% of the magazine,' and Lyle says, 'Is he standing there?' and Bill says, 'Yeah,' and Lyle says, 'Tell him to get out!' So Bill says, 'Well what am I going to do about MAD?' And Lyle says, 'You know what--get Al Feldstein back,' and luckily for me and my career this carrot that was dangled in front of Harvey was a great break for me. One day I come home from plodding the streets and talking to a couple of publishers, and I'm kind of generating some system where I'm creating stuff for them, new stuff not imitation stuff, and there's Bill standing on a platform near the railway and I said, 'What the hell are you doing here?' and he says, 'I fired Harvey Kurtzman and I want you to go back to work for me.' And I'm walking around with a portfolio, and in the portfolio is an adult humor magazine that I wanted to use, sort of a showcase for off-the-wall humor and iconoclastic humor like Lenny Bruce, etc., because I had played with that with MAD. So I wanted to do a new showcase of that kind of humor for adults. When I agreed that I'd commit to go back to work for him, I was on the balls of my ass, I'd borrowed some money to stay alive and... I was lucky I had this opportunity, so I took over MAD and I immediately went out and got these names because that's what I wanted to do, is make it kind of like a showcase and they were all too expensive, but you know I got some, and I started to make deals where I would adopt things that were ready to be done, the routines that hadn't been done to death. I found out that the names weren't helping, so I was lucky in that. I also gathered together a lot of new writers who didn't really know what was going on with the turmoil with MAD. And in the door walked guys like Don Martin and Dave Berg. For an atheist, they were Godsend. (laughter)

Jon: You had a terrific group back at EC, too.

Al: He took 'em all—Harvey took all the good artists that were left to do MAD, and the other EC artists, I really was brokenhearted about it because I couldn't hire a guy like Johnny Craig for MAD-- his stuff was too illustrative.

Jon: Craig's art was great because it was so clean, which added to the horror stories.

Al: Yeah, I know!

Jon: Quite the opposite with Graham Engels, whom you encouraged to be very creative when the other publishers hadn't, and who had that moody, dark, atmospheric style.

Al: They encouraged him to go back, the other publishers. He was struggling with Romance and Western stuff in the old straight style of what everybody wanted and when I hired him, I said 'Graham, draw the way you feel.' I encouraged everybody to do their own handwriting with their art and that was a standard I adopted, everybody had their own style, nobody was told to imitate anybody else. And that was kind of like a friendly competition.

Jon: That is very cool, Al. Atheism or a belief in the almighty aside, one thing I believe in that is amazing, that relates to our meeting here today, is Jung's concept of synchronicity.

Al: What's that?

Jon: Meaningful coincidence. The fact that Harvey...

Al: Wait...wait. This was my belief too, but I used a different word. What did you say?

Jon: Meaningful coincidence...synchronicity... seemingly unrelated events converging.

Al: Synchronicity. I've never heard that word.

Jon: Synchronicity is Carl Jung's concept of -- if we were talking about, for example, the Crypt Keeper or something, and the moment that I brought it up, that signed picture of the Crypt Keeper from the TV show hanging behind you on the wall fell off onto the floor, then you might say, 'Well that's a strange thing to have happened just then.'

Al: Oh, I see.

Jon: In this case, we end up meeting accidentally because you live in Montana and you have an animal sanctuary that is near a wonderful woman and old friend named Bonnie Gibbs Goodman who I went to high school with in Durango.

Al: Oh yeah? That's great!

Jon: We graduated in Durango in 1982, and she was the first person I ever met in Durango when I moved there at seventeen. Bonnie knows you and Michelle, she knows my wife and I, and we're all into animals, and so this series of events began before I ever published anything in the industry and before I ever did comics, or taught comics classes, or wrote history or any of that stuff. We don't have time to talk about it, but here we are Al, and for me it is a meaningful coincidence.

Al: Yeah, okay.

Jon: The fact that Harvey got the Playboy offer right around the time that you needed to do something, and you're working on a humor concept, what a great fit. And you'd done Panic right before the code, making fun of the Senate subcommittee hearings. Awesome.

Al: Bill told me he could never tell the difference between Panic and MAD. Yeah, I'm trying to get a good staff together and in walk these people... I mean yes, you're right, it's, my God, I can't think of the word... it's much like that one, but not exactly.

Jon: When you think of it, please do tell.

Al: I will do that.

Jon: I'd like to digress briefly. I wrote an article that is coming out in the 40th annual Overstreet guide and it refers to Variant comics...

Al: I read about this. It's rather an intensive article...took a lot of time.

Jon: I spent almost an entire year writing it, and I did it because I was compelled to do it. I can't really fully explain it, all I can tell you, is that the guide, specifically Jeff Vaughn, the VP of Gemstone who I have known for years, asked me to do a 3-5 page update and I responded with a 24,000 word article, not including illustrations (laughter). Bob Overstreet will be a special guest at San Diego Con to celebrate the 40th annual guide... and I'll probably see him there. I told a handful of friends I was working on this, and they said, 'You're nuts, they've never published anything larger than 20 pages before.'

Al: Right.

Jon: This all started 13 years ago when I discovered some Marvel comic books called Price Variants, so I wrote an article about them, and today they stand amongst the most valuable comics, in grade, published in the last 45 years.

Al: What was the reason for the Price Variants?

Jon: Well, Marvel was experimenting to see if they could get more money per copy.

Al: Oh, really?

Jon: DC and others beat them to it by many years, but experimented in different ways, well beyond simple test marketing with cover prices. Marvel put out a small number of Price Variants in four major cities to test the market, and just like any other publisher that dares to experiment with the market, they didn't want to give any information to their competitors, which was primarily DC, so they produced limited numbers and obfuscated their methodology. This has been going on since the 1930s, and not just with comic book publishers. It's all about profits and the fact is, back in the day, a book like Walt Disney's Comics and Stories was selling 2 million plus copies per month and today, often some of the highest print runs are barely over 100,000 copies, even on titles like Batman.

Al: It's very sad. The comics are gone... I don't know...

Jon: Comics now average about \$3-4 bucks each.

Al: An issue of MAD magazine...?

Jon: Is \$5.99 on the stand. I saw one at a grocery store on the way here.

Al: They cost 25 cents a piece when I was editor.

Jon: Cheap! One of my favorite things about MAD was that constant sarcastic, self-disparaging, ludicrously apologetic presentation you had. Today it's in color, and filled with real advertisements instead of your hilarious fake ones.

Al: They've got everything I wanted, but it's not done the way I was going to do it!

Jon: No doubt. Sergio Aragones is one great talent that's still there.

Al: It's getting very chaotic, and I assume that this is how the modern kid takes it in. I watch some movies and weekly serial-type TV shows and they're getting so chaotic, you gotta be really hip to follow what's going on. I'm beginning to think, either it's my brain or it's just the temperature of the times, and the fact that people are more rapid with their needs and desires and what they're looking for in entertainment.

Jon: I think what's happened is the video games and advertising are hitting people with this quick-flash strobe type of delivery, and that is something that is relatively new to me because hey, you're 85, I'm 46, and the young people are used to these quick images (snaps fingers), and so maybe that is why they often have short attention spans.

Al: Yeah. Yeah... and I can't even understand some of the language they use. I miss a lot of dialogue, and it isn't 'cause I'm hard of hearing.

Jon: Part of it is the fast paced slang and lingo, and part of it the speed at which it occurs.

Al: The word is Serendipity!

Jon: Yes... almost the same meaning, something cool that's meant to be!

Al: Well, it's not meant to be, it's---an accidental happening, a good one. That's the word. I've lived my life with that. Serendipity, for example... I was awarded an honorary doctorate at Montana University in Bozeman-- Rocky Mountain College—and they wanted me to give the commencement speech, and when I was given the doctorate I sat through this really boring speech this other guy was giving. (laughter) And then the next year they wanted me to do it, and I wanted to, you know, give the kids a little bit of MAD, because that's what I was known for, and so I came up with this whole idea that life was a party and it was a tea party, a MAD tea party.

Jon: Not even close to the Fox News kind.

Al: Yeah... I said to enjoy life as opposed to living it as Alice in Wonderland. Anyway, I've said to the graduates, you're going to live this party, and I suggest you take three keys that will make it a lot more fun for you. The main one was Opportunity. I told them about serendipity and gave them an example: I was on a trip in the west with my wife when we saw a road that said 'Grand Canyon 12 miles,' and we were very early for our reservation at the Grand Canyon Lodge so we took the road! And we drove the 12 miles, and suddenly there's the canyon in front of us, nothing around, and it was the most

exciting thing that I've ever had in my life, because we were headed to the lodge at the rim and here we were, looking at the canyon like we were some pioneers who had seen it for the first time! Anyway, it was fun, they enjoyed the speech. My mother used to tell me, opportunity knocks but once, and I went through my life scared shitless that I'd be in the shower or on the toilet when opportunity knocked! (laughter) And I said to them, 'Don't worry about it, opportunity comes very often but you gotta be able to grab it and have the sense to know that it's there and deliver what it's looking for.'

Jon: And if you don't walk through that door, then your life takes a different course.

Al: Yeah, right.

Jon: A door happened to open for me with the comic books I was telling you about, and that's why I ended up writing this massive piece on Variants, which is going to impact the industry in some interesting ways, and that also indirectly led to us meet here today.

Al: I think it's very sad that the industry has so shrunk in its reach... I mean 600 titles on the stands, and they had stands! -- and now you can't even find MAD in some supermarkets.

Jon: We're becoming a non-reading world.

Al: Yeah!

Jon: A paperless world, full of people that choose to be, if you will, mindless sponges that absorb entertainment.

Al: You're right.

Jon: Being spoon fed material that you or I enjoy creating is now considered fun, and yet such "sheeple" have no desire to create anything. They're used to a quick fix. They make promises they'll never keep about things they'll never be. And that's not just youngsters.

Al: And they have no desire to experience for themselves.

Jon: And therefore they don't grow intellectually, they don't grow spiritually, they don't grow as a human being and they have little to no ambition. There are a few exceptions.

Al: Right, and I feel sorry for the young people today. Because, first of all, our nation and our success depends upon them developing as individuals and contributing, and they just sit there...

Jon: They text each other. I feel sorry for them too.

Al: I cannot believe the texting!

Jon: But it's also bad parenting. Elementary school kids have access to cell phones. They're all texting each other all day long. How did anyone ever live or walk the earth prior to ten years ago, as a kid, without a palm pilot or some damned thing (laughter) while they're not learning anything.

Al: I have a cell phone.

Jon: Me too. That's how business is done.

Al: Michelle uses it only to keep in contact with me.

Jon: (laughter) It's a private walkie-talkie! A Bat-phone straight to Al!

Al: Yeah right...but geez, if you watch the plotting of TV shows today, they are dependent upon cell phones, in the progression of the plot.

Jon: You can now type in meaningless comments of your own during some of the shows that invite that kind of live interactive participation. It's depriving kids of the joys of discovery and creation. When I was young, your comic books, and the early horror movies I watched, I just loved that stuff. I listened to recordings of movies on audio tape with my uncle before videotape existed, especially *The Invisible Man* (1931) and *The Wolfman* (1941). They fascinated me. They made me want to take part in fun things.

Al: The werewolf film that I saw that I remembered was *The Werewolf of London* with Henry Hull.

Jon: Yeah, 1935. You can cure lycanthropy with a flower--very silly stuff, very fun.

Al: Oh yeah. Well you know, I think it's a natural progression, and that's a problem in entertainment, to satisfy human nature's desire to be entertained, that the previous stuff has to be done better and more intense so that eventually you go from simple entertainment to very complicated entertainment. And then it gets to a point, like for example, I think a lot of the movies today are dependent upon...

Jon: Special effects?

Al: That's what I was thinking of, special effects, but the plots, I mean, Jesus, they are blowing up everything. (laughter)

Jon: Yeah, it's very well done, it's amazing...

Al: What they can do is amazing.

Jon: But you can't replace the story! The story is the whole point, the story is what matters.

Al: Young people aren't tuned to that anymore, and that's why they connect the stories with a dot. I don't know what's going to happen to the story.

Jon: They're desensitized by all of it, they are overwhelmed, and they are trapped in a system that fosters obedience more than individuality.

Al: Are you a creative writer, as opposed to a journalist?

Jon: I write screenplays, comics, and short stories, so yes, but also historical nonfiction.

Al: Do you have a desire to get into that whole mix in Hollywood?

Jon: We'll see where it goes.

Al: Have you made any submissions?

Jon: I haven't because I have been working on all of this dry comic book research that I basically finished recently.

Al: You'll have to give me a copy.

Jon: I will. In fact, here it is, an advance copy of my article – in case you have trouble sleeping. (Jon hands Al his Variant article.) As a kid, I always wanted to be a writer. This article is the culmination of my work in comics history.

Al: Be sure and send me a copy of the article in its final form.

Jon: I most certainly will. It will be bound inside an Overstreet Guide.

Al: The thing that fascinates me is that the EC material that you have read would have died if it wasn't for a guy named Russ Cochran.

Jon: Sure, absolutely. Thank God for the EC library.

Al: Oh yeah, he did all those great boxed sets of black and whites, and it was really spectacular and then he started, just recently the archives... I don't know exactly what is happening with that, but they were beautiful.

Jon: Bill kept every piece of original art except for a single Frank Frazetta cover that Frank couldn't part with, because it was one of his favorite drawings. And every other original drawing Bill kept.

Al: Wasn't that the cover that he brought in that was originally Buck Rogers?

Jon: Yes, I believe so.

Al: We turned it into a primitive man?

Jon: Right. It was Weird Science-Fantasy #29.

Al: Fighting gorillas. Yeah, I remember that. He got to keep that?

Jon: Yes, he got to keep that one piece, and that is the ONLY exception. I read about it in an old interview. Frazetta had to not get paid \$50 to keep it. Every Russ Cochran EC comic reprint, except for this cover, were reprinted from the original art in black and white, and although the comics were published in color, the reprints are magnificent.

Al: Bill was very instrumental in preserving the EC comic art and then -- after he had this all preserved -- he gave Russ the original art to auction off and that's how it got out into the public. You know, recently, at a Heritage Comics Auction, a piece of my original art, one of my covers I did for thirty five bucks, or forty maybe, if Bill was feeling generous, (laughter) sold for \$59,900.

Jon: Wow. Original art has really gone through the ceiling.

Al: Oh my God! But you know I've done revisited covers, but I can't get anywhere near that stratosphere. I've raised my price for an original reproduction from \$3,500 to \$4,000, to \$6,500 to \$7,500, and I'm not getting very many takers because right now it's tight anyway, to order reproductions of my old covers. (Al picks up Horror Comics of the 1950s and points at his cover). That's a cover for example that I'd love for someone to commission me to do.

Jon: Oh yeah!

Al: That and many others I haven't done, but some I've done over and over again. Favoritism...it's interesting. But I think Russ Cochran is responsible for my being able to go to a convention like I'm going to in Motor City (May 2010) with a line asking for my autograph, because they are reading this stuff that has been reprinted and preserved.

Jon: This is the very reason that comic books are barely being published anymore: they are being published as arms of corporations that make most of their money from the movies, toys, videogames and other licensed byproducts and spin-offs...

Al: Marvel just got bought by Disney for the characters.

Jon: I know and unfortunately, with no offense to either company, when big fish swallow smaller fish we lose elements of creativity.

Al: There's no question about it, they do.

Jon: When we talk about the youth of today and education and creativity, the chance that I had as a kid being exposed to a book like this (Jon points to Horror Comics of the 1950s) before the EC library, hey, it made a huge impact.

Al: That book preceded Cochran's stuff and it's a good book.

Jon: It's wonderful and it's rare and it's expensive but if it was only worth \$5 I would still never part with it. If I hadn't had exposure to some of these things as a kid, I wouldn't have had the ambition to try and write such things within an industry that I love and that helped me survive childhood.

Al: Huh!

Jon: Comics taught me basic elements of story. That's why special effects, no matter how good, will never replace a story—you can't beat a good story or the power of the imagination. It's with stories that we learn about each other and things in life that really matter. Sure, Bill Gaines was a capitalist at heart, but he was like a father to everybody, he took care of everybody, he took everybody to lunch.

Al: Not everybody! Anyone who happened to be in the office, yes, but when MAD was starting to be successful, he did take people on trips. He gave Christmas bonuses and stuff. He was very paternal.

Jon: When you guys were copying Ray Bradbury stuff, before you gave him credit, a fan wrote to Bradbury and said, 'Hey, you know these guys took two of your stories and melded 'em into one?'

Al: I didn't know it was a fan, but **SOMEBODY** told him!

Jon: One of the books I read identified the guy as a Bradbury fan. Anyway, as I understand it, Bill apologized and sent Bradbury a check and then Bradbury said, 'Why don't you just keep adapting them and give me credit?'

Al: Well, at last we asked him if we could. I had read some of his stuff and Bill of course was a Sci-Fi guy, and Bradbury was not yet a top-notch celebrity, he had not yet written the "White Whale," and so he agreed and oh God, it was the best collaboration...do you know the story about me and Bradbury, that I had never met him? I had never spoken to him or anything in all these years since I adapted I think, 27 or 26 of his stories into our comics? I had NEVER talked to him! He wrote back and said he'd love to talk, but Bill was in between us and wouldn't let us talk. And so it's now many years later, I'm retired, I'm invited to San Diego for one of the first times--they're very careful about how they invite people, right?—I've been there like six or seven years ago and then two years ago and it's a great convention.

Jon: Yeah.

Al: Anyway, I'd seen that Ray Bradbury was having a panel with his original editor at DC.

Jon: Julie Schwartz?

Al: Julie Schwartz! So I called my contact in San Diego and I said, you know I adapted these stories, we've never met and I'd be interested in speaking at the panel, and he said, 'No, I don't think that Schwartz will allow that but I'll think about it,' and I get a call back from Mark Evanier and he says, 'I am hosting that panel,' and he says, 'Get into the audience and we'll see what we can do.' (laughter) So I'm sitting in the audience and Bradbury comes hobbling up with a walker and oh God he's gotten so old, 'cause I remember when he was young, and Evanier steered the conversation into the comics and into EC's adaptations, and asked Bradbury, did he ever meet the guy who did them all, and of course Bradbury said no. And so he called me up and well, I was so touched that I cried, I really couldn't help it, tears came to my eyes. And we embraced, and he was very sweet, and then later on we did another thing for Jim Salvia, who did that CD twin pack of comics of the '50s. Ever seen that?

Jon: No.

Al: It's a very nice job. He does the whole thing on EC in the '50s and then he has the second CD where Bradbury and I have an interview with Jerry Weist as part of it. And Grant Geissman brought their artwork so that things that we've done—that I've done—have edited, could be seen... it was nice stuff, he's a very nice man.

Jon: Very cool. I'll have to get a copy of that. So I'm going to show you a card game I've been working on for the last 27 years, with my own art and ideas.

Al: A card game?

Jon: An old fashioned card game, a humor game based on what we do to ourselves and our world. I refer to it as the game of "Hostility, deception and revenge," and it has the same name as the film, Face Eater.

Al: (laughter)

Jon: And it was influenced by MAD magazine, EC comic books, and by all the pop culture, horror movies, etc., that I have enjoyed all of my life. More Trash From MAD #2 (1958) was the only comic that survived my uncle Raymond Lee's childhood, and I read it over and over from age five on... hilarious stuff.

Al: That's great!

Jon: I've played my game, FaceEater, a couple of thousand times over the last 20 years privately with friends, and have worked out the bugs in the process. My friend and business partner, John Harris, used to publish a comic fanzine when we were 14 years

old, which was 1978, and I would contribute drawings, and we finally met several years ago in person when he walked into the bookstore my wife and I owned in Durango.

Al: Who's producing the card game?

Jon: John Harris is... he runs a branding and marketing company called a5 based in Chicago, very classy, cutting edge stuff. And we have formed our own company, Variant Media, to publish the game as well as future FaceEater products, like additional cards and comics. We are self-publishing for now and intend to work with a distributor later.

Al: Great. You're gonna have a booth at the San Diego Con?

Jon: We intended to, but there's a list with a five year waiting period! We had no idea.

Al: Really?

Jon: Really. That's why they do this other thing called WonderCon and so that's where we will probably set up in 2011. Anyway, we might get to meet Bradbury this July. John knows a close friend of Bradbury's biographer and there's a chance we may get to meet with him, at least briefly. If so, I'll tell him you said hello!

Al: Oh, please. We've had a lot of contact since that original meeting that was so moving for me. But to talk about the adaptations that we did in the comics, I think they were pretty damned good, they really captured it. The captions got pretty big, but they captured his writing style, and then the artists were sensational, Bernie Krigstein did some wonderful things with some of the stories he had based in Asia with the Chinese tapestry style of artwork, it was really great. You know, 1950, 1949, actually was when I started with Bill, but in '50 the horror comics started, until '56 when they were put out of business, and I had the most wonderful time of my life, it was just wonderful.

Jon: Well, it looks like it when you read the stuff.

Al: Yeah I enjoyed it immensely. But you know what, I was never a writer, I never wanted to be a writer, like you. I never thought I was a writer, and all the time that I was doing that stuff I never knew it was going to become collectible. There was no sign of that kind of thing. Yeah, we had some fans writing letters and we had something called the EC Fan Addict Club and it was all within the confines of the industry—it was—I was never aware until the '60s that there was a collecting craze going on that had started.

Jon: Well it was before MAD, when you were doing EC horror stories that you guys would hash out these four stories a week. Bill would throw out ideas using some of the formulas you had, sometimes a bunch, and Bill said you sometimes would object and say, 'I won't do it!' So you two would eventually agree to something, would get to what you'd like well enough and then you'd work on it, and one time you came up with a story called "My World," which is entirely different than what you'd discussed with Bill!

Al: Well, we didn't even discuss it.

Jon: Bill claimed otherwise in a 1972 EC Fan-Addict interview, but what does it matter?

AL: I remember he said, 'Go write a story.' And "My World," when I got to the end, and I was writing out of my heart, I said on the side to myself, 'Am I a Science Fiction writer or am I a Science Fiction artist?' That's the way it became Wally Wood's "My World," because I stepped back from it in order to give the artwork and credits to Wally.

Jon: You are very humble in terms of your writing. But I do think that you are a very competent writer.

Al: Thank you.

Jon: I think sometimes we are things before we realize we are such things.

Al: Yeah, well, that may be. When I retired, this was after 29 years at MAD, and I was getting kind of tired of it and also Bill wasn't doing anything to promote it—he'd already sold it and been paid off and I was kind of bored with it—it was getting repetitious and I said to myself, okay, how are you going to retire, what are you going to do with yourself, you gonna be an artist or what, because I originally was an artist! And I ended up doing writing only because that was where I could make the money that Bill wanted to pay.

Jon: Sure.

Al: Of course the ending went badly, which is entirely different. So I made this decision in 1984 to go back to my artwork. Now I could have written something like Stephen King, but really... but anyway, I sometimes think about it. (laughter)

Jon: You are a writer even if you didn't mean to be!

Al: Well, it's interesting that the stuff has maintained legs. I read them, occasionally I will read a story I wrote, and I'll think...did I write that? (laughter)

Jon: I'll bet there are certain ones that stick in your mind, that you really like, and "My World" turned out really well. From what I have read, if there was a seven page story, you could storyboard and plot out the entire thing, without an outline or guide, and you were brilliant enough to do it panel by panel and it would end in exactly the right spot.

Al: I wouldn't call it brilliant. I had a sense. I had done enough freelance work, working with other scripts and writing my own teenage books for Fox, and writing my own stories for Bill originally, and so it was easy for me. There were people who insisted it was phenomenal, if it was a six pager and it ended on the sixth page. (laughter)

Jon: Not everybody can do that.

Al: Well, alright, but I never attributed great talent to that I guess.

Jon: Well, I attribute intelligence to it! I'm trying to compliment you.

Al: Thank you.

Jon: You're welcome. So as I recall, the EC formula was plotted out as to where the panels would be, and the caption boxes and word balloons as well, so the artists would have to draw around them.

Al: Yeah, they had to illustrate.

Jon: And with Bradbury, since he was so pithy, the text was particularly overwhelming.

Al: The artists would complain that they had to draw hunchback characters. (laughter)

Jon: Well, that's a good way to put it! So without further delay... this is a prototype of my card game and here are some of the illustrations.

Al: How many cards are there?

J Two hundred and eight, which is four decks...half are regular playing cards, half are Power Cards, all with my "monstrous" illustrations. One game reviewer said, 'Think Gin Rummy meets Dawn of the Dead.' And it's all done with a dark, sarcastic sense of humor like MAD was. The object of the game is to have the lowest score at the end of the game.

Al: It's like our MAD game, "Go Broke!"

Jon: Not exactly, but yes! It's completely cynical. We have a Televangelist card, a Politician card, an Environmental Disaster card, and here's the world Extinction card.

Al: It looks like one of my covers... it's an atom bomb!

Jon: Yes, it look like that—almost--but it's a meteor hitting the earth in this case.

Al: Oh alright, I see.

Jon: You did more than one atomic blast cover. Weird Fantasy #14 is very similar to this.

Al: Your artwork is pretty interesting. This is all your art?

Jon: Yes.

Al: It's fantastic.

Jon: Thank you. I'm very slow at drawing. Call it my generation's imitation of yours.

Al: How are you going to publicize this game?

Jon: We have a full page color ad in the Overstreet guide coming out, so that won't hurt.

Al: Oh yeah.

Jon: I expect that once my Variant article is out, it's going to affect a lot of aspects in terms of comic book collecting, and thereby promote FaceEater through publicity.

Al: Do you think young people are interested in playing card games these days?

Jon: Oh, I think so, yes. I guess we're going to find out!

Al: I'm not familiar with modern games.

Jon: Nor I, especially. Not to compare the two, but there is a popular card game called Magic the Gathering played by many young people, which is more about role-playing. So there are many gamers out there, and in FaceEater, you Lobotomize, Nerve Gas, Zombify, and otherwise shaft your opponents. (laughter) People have fun when they play, and laughing ranks high on a "having fun" scale. And you can learn to play in minutes.

Al: What is this? (Al picks up a card that reads, "Single FaceEater.")

Jon: If you get stuck with that in your hand when another player goes out, it counts as 100 points against you.

Al: And you can't get rid of it?

Jon: You can get rid of it if you set down regular cards like in Gin Rummy.

Al: Are there more than one of these cards?

Jon: Yes, there are eight so-called FaceEaters.

Al: I see.

Jon: I created this game at 19 years old, 27 years ago now, because I like games, and primarily because I wanted to have more fun and do things that don't occur in other games, such as going back in time to undo an attack, or sending powerful options into the future. FaceEater combines classic retro-type horror images to reflect, in a darkly humorous way, the sociological aspects around us. If a dialogue results from playing the game, maybe people will think about it. It's an ironic way of making our world better.

Al: That's great!

Jon: Kind of like you and Michelle making the world better a better place with your animal sanctuary, but without the dark MAD magazine humor; just doing good humane work. Here is the connection I was trying to draw earlier. Other than the synchronicity of events in life that brought us here together today, with one seemingly unconnected event leading to another, I never intended to put this game out as a product. I never intended to publish it. I made this game for myself, to play with my friends. It is a predecessor to, as well as a byproduct of, writing for Gemstone magazines and being a comics and pop culture historian. One day I run into John Harris, who has sought me out, he comes into my bookstore, with me having contributed to his fanzine Comic Book Collector 25 years earlier... Anyway, I'd never met the guy in person, like you had never met Bradbury prior to Evanier's panel.

Al: Yeah!

Jon: So John walks into my store and he says, 'I just wanted to see if you were the same Jon McClure I knew through the mail years ago with your name and picture in the guide.' He told me that he was a professional marketer, and I basically said, 'That's great, and guess what! I created a card game. I should show it to you sometime.' And so that's how these things came to be, once we reconnected, and events were set in motion.

Al: He walked into your store!

Jon: It is a store called The Bookcase, that Dyan and I ran from 2002-2006, where I sold comic books and used books. The day he walked in, I had received the first shipment from a lady in Illinois whose husband had recently passed. He had been a comic book collector in the '40s and she had found his collection in an old trunk in the basement and promptly disposed of them in her garbage can. Her daughter just happened to be visiting on that day, opened the garbage to toss something in, saw the comics and pulled them out, and told her mother they should check to see if they had any value. She contacted me and I asked her to pick one a title at a time and send them to me for evaluation. Well, I had opened this box just an hour before my old friend walks in the door, and it contained Captain America, by Simon and Kirby, numbers #1-6 and #8-15!

Al: You had the first Captain America?

Jon: Yes, from 1941. So my friend walks in and says are you the same guy....? And I said, 'Yes!' And I said, 'Take a look at THIS—Captain America Comics #1!'—I had it in my hand at that moment -- and his jaw dropped! He is momentarily speechless. His young son Emerson is with him, so John says, 'Emerson, look at this!' And I handed Emerson the book and John says to his son, 'You are holding a piece of history.' It was a big deal to see and to share and a very cool moment in time.

Al: Oh I know! I went to see them (Simon and Kirby) in the beginning, when I first found out that a kid in school was making \$20 a page doing comic book art, and I decided I needed that because I didn't have money for dates, and my folks were very poor.

Jon: Al, your own history is significantly more important than you'd admit! I'd love to talk all night, but I am afraid I have to leave now. A whole passel of folks came here with me to deliver the five stray cats to your wife Michelle, three of which are feral, and the ladies and I really enjoyed the tour, and Michelle's heartfelt company, and your hospitality.

Al: I thought it was three cats.

Jon: Michelle drives a hard bargain. I had to throw in two extra fleabags to swing the deal.

Al: I guess it's my lucky day.

Jon: So now that I have made my argument that the Hand of Fate has directed events thus far, and since you seem to like my art and the humor behind it, the inevitability of shameless self-promotion rears its ugly mug and forces me to ask: How about a humble endorsement of the game?

Al: What would you like?

Jon: Oh, I don't know... 'Your life has changed having finally seen FaceEater... the earth moved... it's the greatest thing since white bread...' whatever, really. Just about anything will do, as long as I don't have to beg.

Al: How about this: "I think the Crypt Keeper would go MAD to play the putrescent pestilence known as FaceEater."

Jon: Yeah... that'll do.

Al: Okay.

Jon: Al, I just really want to thank you again for inviting me to speak with you, and for sharing your home and your memories with me, and for sharing them with the people that read this, and with such heartfelt candor. Wallace Stegner once said, 'Culture is a pyramid to which we all bring a stone,' and even if that isn't true anymore, you've certainly contributed more than your share. It has been a genuine pleasure, sir.

Al: Thank you, Jon. I enjoyed it.

Jon: I hope to see you again.

Al: I'd like that too.
