

# Current Comments®

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## *Science Goes to the Dogs* and Other Tales: Up Close and Personal with Cartoonist Sidney Harris

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*Current Contents*® (CC®) readers are no doubt familiar with the graphic witticisms of Sidney Harris, whose cartoons on scientific subjects have enlivened the pages of CC since January 1976. Many of you may also be aware that Harris has just completed a new book, *Science Goes to the Dogs*.<sup>1</sup> Published by ISI Press®, the book is a collection of cartoons portraying a dog's-eye view of science, society, the world, and assumptions in common about them all. Other collections of Harris's cartoons are listed in Table 1.

If you're like me, you may have occasionally wondered about the mind that conceived these cartoons. Fortunately, I recently had the opportunity to meet Harris and discuss his work with him. Let me share with you the impressions I received of this warm, gentle—and yes, funny—man. As an added treat, I've asked Sidney to select some of his favorite cartoons for publication with this essay (Figures 1 through 8). Some, interestingly enough, have never before been published. I'll have more to say about them later.

No essay on a successful cartoonist could be complete without a few words concerning the fascinating history of cartoons and cartooning. According to John Geipel, author of *The Cartoon: A Short History of Graphic Comedy and Satire*, the roots of cartooning are to be found in the art of caricature, which in-

volves the distorted or exaggerated line drawing of a widely recognized person, class of persons, or activity.<sup>2</sup> (p. 45-6) The practice dates back at least to antiquity.

In an example from ancient Egypt (circa 1305-1080 BC), a humorous drawing on limestone depicts an unshaven stonemason with exaggerated features. In another drawing from the same period, role reversals and anthropomorphism provide comic elements in a scene in which a cat with a fan serves an enthroned mouse. The scene parodies the standard tomb representation of human servants attending the deceased.<sup>3</sup> Only the first example is classified as a caricature by Emma Brunner-Traut, Egyptologist, University of Tübingen, Federal Republic of Germany, who restricts the term to exaggerated portraits of people.<sup>4</sup>

Caricatures in the modern sense—societally sanctioned parodies of well-known public figures or stereotypes, intended to make a serious point or comment of a political or social nature—are first recognizable in the Western tradition in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Most notable among the artists whose work sometimes fell within this definition are the Dutch masters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel the Elder.<sup>2</sup> (p. 47-52)

The line between caricature and cartoon is blurred at best. The original meaning of the word "cartoon"—de-



Sidney Harris

rived from the Italian *cartone*, a large sheet of paper—was (and still refers to) a full-size, detailed line drawing that served as a pattern, or guide, from which a painting, tapestry, mosaic, mural, or some other form of art was executed. In Renaissance studios, it was the final layout stage in a series of preliminary sketches. By the mid-1800s, however, “cartoon” began to incorporate the idea of pictorial parody in its meaning, thus acquiring—and, to a certain extent, superseding—the realm of caricature.<sup>2</sup> (p. 13-15; 80)

According to Geipel, the first appearance of a cartoon (in the modern sense) is usually traced to the year 1843 in Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> (p. 14) In that year, a competition was held to select designs

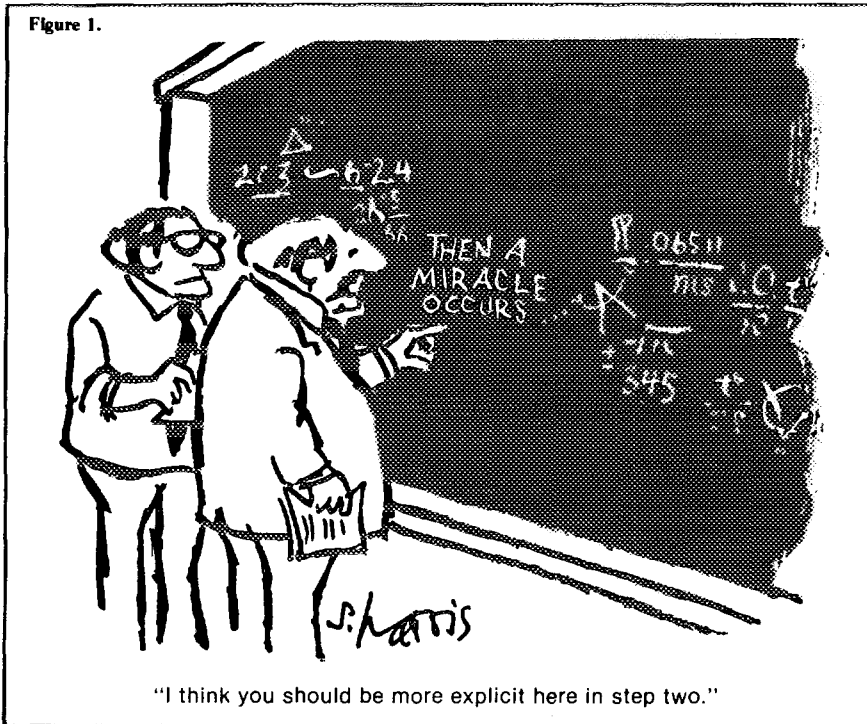
for the walls of Westminster Palace (the present Houses of Parliament), then under construction. Artists were invited to submit cartoons (in the original sense) of paintings to be rendered in the fresco technique—the art of painting on wet plaster—on the vast walls of the edifice. When a selection of these cartoons was exhibited, it became obvious that few of the artists were accustomed to working on such a heroic scale. The newly founded British satirical weekly *Punch*—which was vehemently opposed to the royal family and in particular to Prince Albert, the sponsor of the contest—seized the opportunity and commissioned an artist named John Leech to ridicule the designs in a series of satirical drawings called “Mr. Punch’s Cartoons.”<sup>2</sup> (p. 14) Thus, the cartoon as a regularly published, capsulized version of editorial opinion or social commentary—usually humorous, sometimes savage—was born.

Today, in the English language, the term “cartoon” embraces both the graceless animated television programs for children as well as the often sophisticated satirical sketches appearing in the mass media. Less commonly, the word is also used to refer to comic strips, comic books, and full-length animated feature films, such as the classic motion pictures created by the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, California. Ironically, in most languages other than English, “caricature” is the term used for most forms of comic or satirical graphic art. Derived from the Italian *caricare*, to load or surcharge, it thus serves much the same

Table 1: A bibliography of books by Sidney Harris.

- Harris S. *So far, so good*. Chicago: Playboy Press, 1971. 123 p.  
....., *Pardon me, Miss*. New York: Dell, 1973. 120 p.  
....., *What's so funny about science?* Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, 1977. 120 p.  
....., *Chicken soup, and other medical matters*. Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, 1979. 101 p.  
....., *All ends up*. Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, 1980. 121 p.  
....., *What's so funny about computers?* Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, 1982. 122 p.  
....., *Science goes to the dogs*. Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1985. 110 p.

Figure 1.



function that "cartoon" does in English.<sup>2</sup> (p. 14; 56)

A full account of the development of the cartoon is beyond the scope of this essay. Briefly, though, early cartoons were usually as ornately executed as any work of fine art, with exacting attention to perspective, detail, and background. In addition, they often were accompanied by voluminous amounts of text—usually written by the artist—that served to emphasize the point of the drawing. Among the most notable of the early "cartoonists" was Spain's Francisco de Goya, whose famous paintings entitled *Desastres de la Guerra* (Disasters of War) depicted the brutality of war. Another early master of the cartoon was England's William Hogarth, creator of several delightful series of etchings, among them *A Rake's Progress*, *Marriage à la Mode*, and *A Harlot's Progress*, which comment on societal con-

ventions. And in France, Honoré Daumier's lithographs caustically lampooned the French courts of law and affectionately commented on married life; later, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's drawings and prints both immortalized and parodied Paris of the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> (p. 59-78)

The nature of graphic humor in general, and of cartoons in particular, was altered by World War I and the fast-paced changes that followed it. Sensitive subjects, such as sex, were exploited in a more straightforward fashion. Cartoons with one-line captions, or no captions at all, became popular. And the drawing styles of cartoonists began to reflect the influence of such movements as Impressionism, Postimpressionism, Expressionism, and Cubism—so much so that now one of the prerequisites of comic or satirical art seems to be an appearance of impulsiveness and spontaneity to the



lines. "In the cartoonist's order of priorities," Geipel notes with tongue in cheek, "...it seems that artistic adroitness [ranks] several notches below the ability to put across an idea with a minimum of effort and a maximum of comprehensibility."<sup>2</sup> (p. 32) This is another version, so to speak, of the one-liner.<sup>5</sup>

The informal, quickly executed style of Sidney Harris's cartoons places him firmly in the mainstream of modern cartoon drawing, but the subject matter he often depicts puts him within a unique category that he has created. As renowned science and science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov notes in his foreword to *Science Goes to the Dogs*, Harris has "virtually patented the science cartoon."<sup>1</sup> His is a special brand of humor that endears itself to his subjects by af-

fectionately illustrating their foibles and puncturing the myths that surround them.

The subject of science and cartooning is discussed in several articles that mention Harris's work. In the April 1985 issue of *CHEMTECH*, for example, chemist George M. Bodner, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, muses on the nature of humor and science cartoons.<sup>6</sup> In an article published in the September 1980 issue of the *Science Teacher*, Larry E. Schafer, Department of Science Teaching, Syracuse University, New York, suggests the use of science cartoons as teaching aids. Cartoons can serve as springboards for discussions on values, science, and society or present students with problems to solve and situations to analyze.<sup>7</sup> A se-

lected list of several journals devoted to cartooning is presented in Table 2. It does not include publications such as *Punch* and *Krokodil* that feature many cartoons.

Harris has been a free-lance cartoonist since 1956, when he made his first professional sale to *Iron Age*, a steel-industry trade publication, for \$7.50—minus an agent's commission. Interestingly, however, Harris started out to be neither a scientist nor an artist, and, in fact, he does not have the thorough academic grounding in science that his insightful cartoons might lead you to assume. As Harris puts it, he just "fell into" cartooning and has been doing it ever since. "I started out as someone who went to college for a couple of years and didn't know what I wanted to do," Harris said. "But I felt I had a propensity for writing; I thought I'd write humor. Just by chance, though, I saw one of these directories for writers and found out that there were magazines other than the *New Yorker* and the [now-defunct] *Saturday Evening Post* that use cartoons; I thought it would be quicker to make a few little cartoons than to write a

**Table 2:** Selected list of journals on cartooning. The first year of publication is given in parentheses.

Best Editorial Cartoons of the Year (1973)  
Pelican Publishing Company  
1101 Monroe Street  
Box 189  
Gretna, LA 70053

Cartoonist Profiles (1969)  
Box 325  
Fairfield, CT 06430

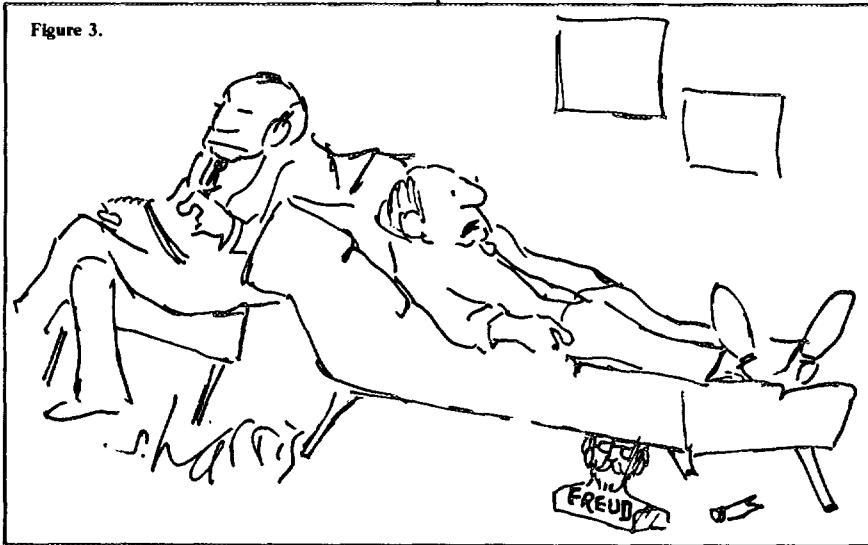
Cartoons International (1974)  
4 Lal Bagh  
Lucknow 226001  
India

Phenix (1966)  
Société d'Etudes et de Réalisations Publicitaires  
38 rue Marceau  
94200 Ivry sur Seine  
France

Target (1981)  
461 Sharon Drive  
Wayne, PA 19087

whole article. And after 30-some years, I'm still wrestling with that problem, although I haven't yet written the article!"<sup>8</sup>

Born on May 8, 1933, in Brooklyn, New York, Harris exhibited a slight interest in drawing as a child. But unlike some of his colleagues—who were sub-



mitting cartoons to such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* when they were only 13 years old—he harbored no aspirations toward a career as a cartoonist. “I really had no formal art background, and I really didn’t have any high hopes of being an artist,” he says now. “I didn’t even know what it took; I didn’t know that much about art. I regret that now. I have a feeling that I should have had some art education as a kid.”<sup>8</sup>

Still, if there was a turning point for the artist as a young man, Harris recalls, it occurred when he was 14 years old. “I was walking down the street with a friend of mine; we went into a candy store in Brooklyn. In the front of the store was a rack of paperbacks, and I saw a book by Saul Steinberg, the cartoonist, called *All in Line*.<sup>9</sup> I had no idea about cartoons at all, or who Steinberg was or what he was doing, but I picked it up. And I said to my friend, ‘This is satire!’ and I bought the book for a quarter. And I kept saying, ‘This is satire!’—I didn’t even know what I meant. But I loved it, even though I had no preliminary training to appreciate Steinberg. And I still have the actual 25-cent book!”<sup>8</sup>

Harris attended Brooklyn College, where he fitfully pursued the study of English and writing. His college education, as he puts it, was “not very specific—I wasn’t there long enough.”<sup>8</sup> However, it was during this time, in his early 20s, that it dawned on him that what he liked best was to draw. He decided to drop out of college and instead join the Art Students League, a “free-form art school,” in New York. At the same time, he started drawing cartoons on his own. “I found out that you could get by without being a virtuoso artist,” he said. “There just seemed to be a niche that I could fill.”<sup>8</sup>

Harris’s first sale to a science-oriented publication came in the autumn of 1969.

It was at that time that Jane Olson, then the newly appointed editor at *American Scientist*, received an inquiry from Harris concerning his cartoons. Her positive response was supported by the magazine’s editorial board of scientists. Thus, in the spring of 1970 began the unbroken tradition of including several of Harris’s cartoons in each issue of the periodical.

Although Harris often speaks of his cartooning in a humorous and self-deprecating way, the hard work involved in the process belies his casual remarks. “[The process] is very hard to pin down,” Harris explained recently. “I read through things, looking for certain subject matter. If some subject rings a bell, I guess I then start speculating on that subject—the way anybody comes up with an idea on anything, really. Occasionally, something occurs to me spontaneously. When you’re walking down the street, you might see something that suggests a funny line or story, and you might say it to your friend; I just say it to myself, and I interpret, or translate, a humorous line into a drawing. I just take it another step.”<sup>8</sup>

Harris draws 15 or more cartoons a week, or some 780 per year; of those, however, he himself likes only about 10. Familiarity breeds contempt, he explains. “Once I think of an idea,” Harris said, “I usually think, ‘It’s so obvious, why bother? Everybody knows this.’ But of course, then I usually agonize over it until I get it right. I guess what appeals to me in the few I do like is the feeling they arouse in me of ‘How the hell did I do that?’ or ‘Why can’t they all be as good as that one?’ But then I sell a lot more [than 10 a year], and once they appear in print, they sometimes look almost of equal quality.”<sup>8</sup>

The life of a free-lance cartoonist—even a successful one such as Harris—is not easy; even consistency and high quality do not guarantee regular sales.

For instance, a cartoon may be very good but not be what an editor is looking for. And cartoons do not receive equal attention at every editorial office. Whereas some editors recognize cartoons for the circulation boosters they are, others may consider them a nuisance more properly handled by assistants—who may or may not be qualified to judge cartoon art. Thus, having an established “name”—a boon in other fields, such as fiction and nonfiction writing, painting, poetry, and music—means little, due to editorial turnover and the low priority sometimes accorded cartoon selection. Even an established free-lance cartoonist such as Harris, like a scientist submitting a paper for publication, faces the process of critical review. I have always regarded this selection process as critical and have rejected

those cartoons that I just did not understand or find funny.

The selection of cartoons for this essay presented us with a special case, however. We wanted to publish some of Harris's personal favorites as well as his most successful cartoons—and the two categories weren't mutually inclusive. So we allowed Harris to select the cartoons for this essay, with very little interference. They are reproduced in Figures 1 through 8.

Figure 1 presents Harris's “bestseller.” Since its first publication in *American Scientist* in 1977, “I think you should be more explicit” has been reprinted about 100 times and has appeared on T-shirts, book covers, and in textbooks and newsletters. “A poet once told me that this illustrates the way she writes her poems,” Harris recalls. “And I wish that I could

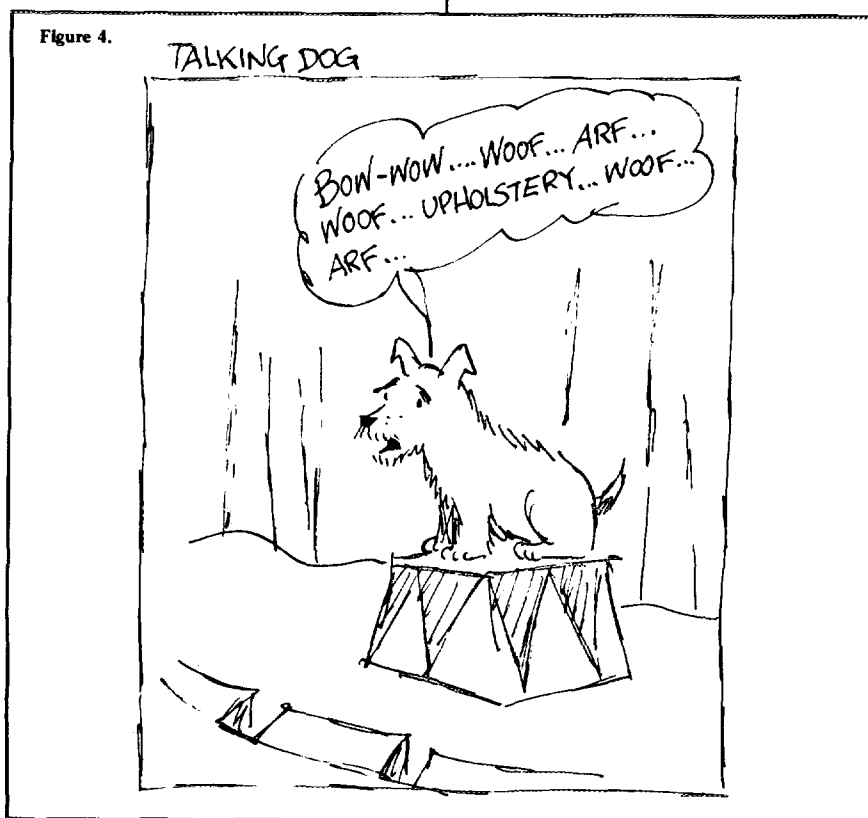


Figure 5.



"Dear Dostoevsky,  
We feel your new manuscript, 'Crime, Punishment and Repentance,' is  
much too long. You should cut it by a third."

do more cartoons that seem to work as well as this one does."<sup>10</sup>

The cartoons in Figures 2 and 3 each appeared in the journal *Psychiatric News* in the mid-1970s. In Harris's comments on "Delusions of Grandeur" (Figure 2), he gives us an impression of the way a cartoonist sometimes works. Harris says that he probably arrived at this idea by coming up with the words and then fitting the best image to them. The bust of Freud supporting the psychiatrist's couch (Figure 3) is an example of Harris's use of symbols, in the same way that political satirists use drawings that have been standardized by a sort of informal consensus to represent a given public figure, institution, or stereotype.

The talking dog cartoon (Figure 4) is one of many you will find in the ISI Press

edition of *Science Goes to the Dogs*. Of "Dear Dostoevsky..." (Figure 5) Harris writes, "It's always interesting to speculate about real people, and literary people are my favorite subjects. Of course, I don't have to know too much about *Crime and Punishment* to get away with a cartoon like this and to convince most people that I know a great deal about it."<sup>10</sup>

Neither of the cartoons in Figures 6 and 7 has ever been published before, and Harris is somewhat mystified as to the reasons for their consistent rejection. Of "Tim's Bar" (Figure 6) he writes, "This appears to me to be an example of taking a familiar idea to a somewhat logical conclusion and is a good example of the type of idea I enjoy coming up with."<sup>10</sup> "Mars Express" in Figure 7 is



Figure 6.

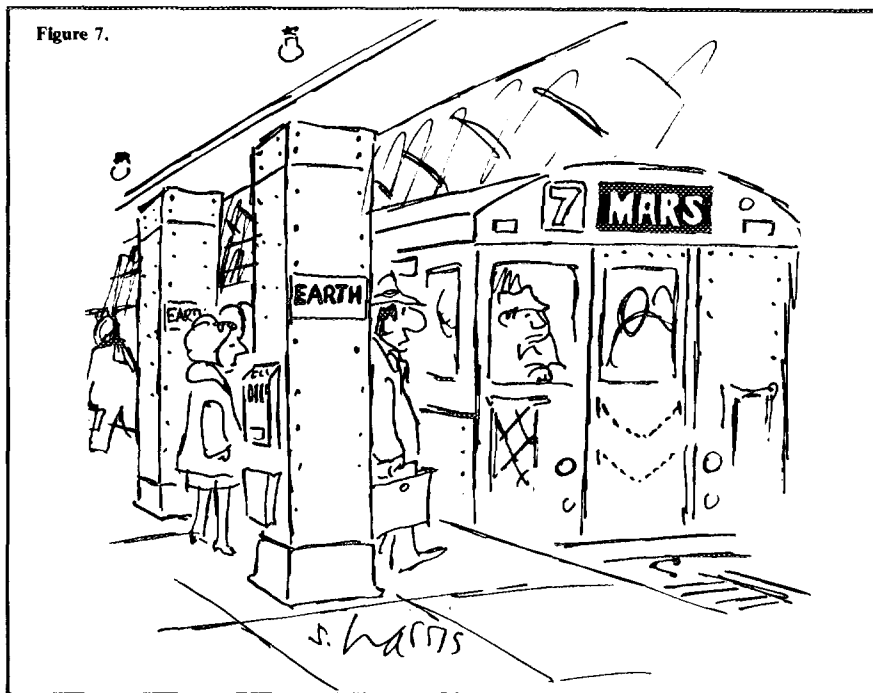


perhaps Harris's favorite cartoon. According to the cartoonist, it depicts a large metropolitan mass-transit system—"probably the New York subway," he writes<sup>10</sup>—and the fascination, mystique, and feeling of folklore it holds for those who have grown up traveling its endless tunnels. Harris compares the emotions the cartoon tries to capture with those that the ocean or the mountains evoke in many people. Despite Harris's fondness for the cartoon, it has suffered one rejection after another. "I would guess," he writes, "that editors don't know what to make of it."<sup>10</sup>

"Sonata for Piano and Dog" (Figure 8), published in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1981, inspired avant-garde composer Kirk Nurock to write a piece for his "natural sound ensemble," which

had been performing choral music with animals for several years. Entitled "Sonata for Piano and Dog," the piece is a chamber work in four movements, loosely following classical sonata form and actually calls for the "voices" of three dogs, as well as passages on piano and harmonica. Thirty-two canines were "auditioned" for the parts before three were chosen. In the sonata's first three movements, each dog "sings" separately; they join howls for the fourth movement.<sup>11</sup>

Over the years, Harris has been a frequent contributor to *American Scientist*, *Discover*, *Science '85*, *Datamation*, *Physics Today*, and *Medical Economics*, as well as to the *New Yorker*, *Playboy*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Lampoon*, *Punch*, *Chicago Magazine*, and



the *Washingtonian*. His cartoons are wonderfully funny commentaries on the trials and tribulations of being a scientist. But perhaps Asimov, in his foreword to *Science Goes to the Dogs*, best expresses my feelings toward the cartoons of Sidney Harris:

What is humor? I'm in no mood to be learned about it. I don't wish to become very abstract, and to generalize. I don't want to seek for the fundamental basis of the ludicrous, the comic, the funny. I am, instead, going to be very scientific and give 'humor' an operative definition.... Humor is what makes me laugh.... Of course you may say, 'But it doesn't make me laugh.' Well, don't boast about it. I have long ago come to the conclusion that people who don't laugh at what makes me laugh have no sense of humor and should be ashamed of themselves. On the other hand, if they laugh at what doesn't make me laugh, they are peculiar, and ought not foist themselves on normal people....

Sidney Harris is funny.... [H]is humor is particularly delightful because no one else mines quite the vein of fun that he

does. If he didn't draw his cartoons, no one in the world would produce anything even faintly like them.... Leaf through [*Science Goes to the Dogs*] and be prepared to laugh joyously at Sidney Harris's peculiar and special sense of fun, and (just possibly) see the world as you've never seen it before.<sup>1</sup>

We plan to offer cartoons by Sidney Harris in the pages of *CC* for years to come, and more collections of his work are in the planning stages. If you'd like to obtain a copy of *Science Goes to the Dogs*, use the order form in this issue. Or write to the Book Order Department, ISI Press, 3501 Market Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104, or call (215) 386-0100, extension 1399.

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Figure 8.



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