

THE POPNECKER PAPERS

A Herbie History

by Bob Hughes



It is 1964. A young comics fan has just returned from the newsstand where he passed up "The Rainbow Faces of Superman" and "The Mad Menace of the Macabre Mole Man" in order to read the latest adventure of his new favorite hero. He settles into his favorite chair and begins to read. Faced with an international crisis when the glamorous Rani of a buffer state between India and China is suspected of falling under the influence of a mysterious adventurer named Lastoza, the Secretary-General

of the United Nations calls upon one of his most trusted operatives to break up the plot. That agent is a short 13 year old boy who is (to put it mildly) overweight, wears glasses, continually appears to be three-quarters asleep and is sucking on a lollipop. The agent replies "Marble tournament isn't for two weeks yet. . . . Swell western coming to the Bijou, but it'll play at the drive-in later. Gotta get my teeth cleaned, but that can wait. . . . I guess I can take the case."

He then hitches a ride to Red China

on an ICBM, lands in Peking where he stuffs worms in Chairman's Mao's mouth during a speech, disguises himself as a lamp while trying to eavesdrop on invasion plans, and then makes love to the Rani herself. (He teaches her to make a cat's cradle and gives her a lemon lollipop.) Unable to beat this strange American's time, Lastoza captures him and throws him to a tiger, but instead of devouring the boy, the tiger asks for his autograph. Next Lastoza gets a maddened elephant to charge him, but the Plump



Lump grabs the elephant by the trunk and hurls her to the top of a mountain and then punches Lastoza into outer space. Declared a national hero in the Himalayan kingdom, our hero returns to America where he flunks an English theme on the topic of adventures he has had. "What can I say?" he shrugs. "I'm too fat to have adventures."

What's going on you ask? You have just entered the world of Herbie, the Little Fat Nothing with the Moe-Howard haircut, a speech pattern that makes the Hulk seem loquacious, and a glassy-eyed stare that could curdle anti-freeze. Although he certainly didn't look it, Herbie packed more power than any supernatural being this side of the Spectre. Although his last appearance was over 20 years ago, Herbie's popularity among fans and pros of that generation has never altered. Back issues command stiff rates in the collector's market on the rare occasions when they are offered for sale.

Herbie was virtually the first satirical comic of the silver age. As such his influence over the years has been enormous and can be seen from Forbush Man to *Ambush Bug* and *Boris the Bear*. Yet Herbie is almost unknown to a younger generation of fandom. One of the reasons for this is that Herbie's publisher, the American Comics Group, went out of business. Unlike a Marvel or DC character who has lost his title, Herbie has had no place to guest star or make cameos (other than an occasional convention program book cover). Probably more

important is the fact that humor comics in general, and Herbie in particular, are hard to describe in print. Writing a synopsis of the average Herbie adventure is about as effective as trying to explain a joke to a person who didn't get it. At least 50% of the appeal to Herbie was in the visuals which defy description. The hapless would-be fan writer is reduced to muttering "Well you had to be there." Still, Herbie occupies such a critical point in the history of humor comics that it would be a crime to ignore him. Consider the following an attempt to explain the unexplainable.

The First Adventure

Although I stated above that Herbie was the first satirical comic of the silver age, Herbie himself was not really a silver age character. He was born in that comic book limbo (at least to costume hero fans) known as the '50s. The first unsuspecting world ever heard of Herbie Popnecker was in August of 1958. He surreptitiously slipped himself into the pages of *Forbidden Worlds* #73, an otherwise fairly run-of-the-press "mystery" title published by the American Comics Group (on the cover) or Best Syndicated Features (inside). The eight page tale, "Herbie's Quiet Saturday Afternoon," was not intended as the start of a series. In fact, creator Richard Hughes basically loathed series comics and believed strongly in the superiority of the one shot short story with the twist ending. At the time, ACG specialized in just that. Before The Code, the company had been one of the foremost peddlers of blood and gore horror stories. Their title *Adventurers Into the*

Unknown had a legitimate claim to be the very first horror comic. After the code, Hughes, along with every other surviving editor, had readjusted his vision of the supernatural into a place filled with ghosts, magicians, and other unexplainable, but basically innocuous phenomena. To Hughes, Herbie Popnecker was just one more of those phenomena.

The tale began at a PTA meeting of all places, as the featured speaker exhorted parents to take an interest in their children. "What this country needs is boys of action," he says. "Get them out doing something. No more laying around wasting time." Mom and Dad are there, clearly worried that their boy Herbie doesn't measure up to the speaker's standards. "He doesn't do anything or say anything or have any imagination! Good gosh! That I should be the father of a Little Fat Nothing!"

This first version of Herbie looks, if anything, even less alert than the later standard version. Dressed in white shirt and blue pants with a three inch long black tie and a bowl-shaped haircut, he wears round glasses and is not much taller than he is wide. The readers receive their first clue that there is something really strange about this boy when Herbie chides a tiger for growling at the zookeeper. "All the time he's cleaning up he keeps poking at me!" growls the tiger. "Now I'm gonna get even." As the tiger leaps at the zookeeper, Herbie grabs it by the tail and tosses it back into its cage. Next, Herbie rescues Senator Stevens who is lost at sea. He walks down to the docks, out to the end of the pier and just keeps right on walking! Unlike most heroes who could defy gravity, Herbie never bothered to learn how to fly. He just acted like the ground was still under his feet. The effect was eerie, though somewhat reminiscent of Wayne Boring's then current technique of having Superman fly more-or-less standing straight upright. Herbie walks out to the wrecked plane and tells the Senator that there are emergency flares in the cabin. On the way home, Herbie defeats an alien invasion by vaporizing their ship with one of their own weapons. "It's about time

you got home," yells Dad. "Where were you?"

"Just around" answers Herbie. "It was pretty quiet for a Saturday afternoon."

It may be hard to believe, but this type of story was pretty typical ACG fare. The despised misfit who turns out to be the only one who can save the world was a pretty popular gimmick with editor Hughes. It was also popular in the proto-Marvel and DC mystery books of the time. What made Herbie stand out was his appearance. Of all the losers ever concocted by Hughes and others, Herbie was the most complete. He was short. He was fat. He wore glasses. He was dull. Nobody liked him. He looked suspiciously like a teenage version of Charlie Brown. Yet inside, he was the most powerful creature who ever lived and never mind how! How could such a character fail to appeal to the average comic book reader, who, let's face it, was probably sitting alone in his room on a Saturday afternoon reading, instead of being out playing baseball? If a schlemiel like Herbie could save the world, there was hope for everybody.

As I said, Richard Hughes never intended for Herbie to become a regular feature. It was the public which demanded the return of the character. Still, it took almost three years for Hughes to bow to that demand and bring the Fat Fury back in *Forbidden Worlds* #94 (June, 1961). Though the first story had been signed by artist Ogden Whitney, Hughes didn't want

to admit that he wrote virtually every single tale appearing under the ACG banner. Thus, "Herbie and the Spirits" was credited to "Shane O'Shea," one of Hughes' extensive list of pseudonyms, which also included "Zev Zimmer," "Pierre Alonzo," "Greg Olivetti," and many others. It was another two years before Herbie returned again, this time for three quick appearances in *Forbidden Worlds* (110, 114, and 116) the last two featuring his name on the cover in larger letters than the magazine's title. Four months after that Herbie had his own title.

By now his character was in full bloom. His face became rounder and Whitney omitted his eyebrows, making his spectacles smaller. This made his face look even more expressionless, furthering the impression that the Plump Lump was actually a member of the walking dead. His sentences became shorter; many contained only one word. Most did not have subjects. "Bop you with this here lollipop," became his battle cry (actually it was more like a mumble. Herbie may have been the first comic character to forgo exclamation points). Readers loved him. Herbie was soon ACG's best selling title. Tony Isabella declared him the greatest character ever. Marv Wolfman submitted plot ideas unsuccessfully.

In many respects, Herbie's popularity had similarities to Spider-Man's. Despite his great powers and the fact that he had saved the world many times, he remained an unsung hero,

stuck in high school, looked on with contempt by his parents. Although he could help other people, there seemed to be nothing his powers could do to improve his own lot. The big difference between the two was that while Peter Parker constantly bitched and whined about his problems, Herbie simply shrugged his shoulders, stuck a new lollipop in his mouth, and went out to save the world again. In this manner, Herbie was probably heir to the existentialism of Eisner's Spirit or Segar's Popeye.

The other thing that made Herbie stand out (I mean besides the fact that it was funny) was the art. Ogden Whitney was an old timer from the golden age of comics who in many respects was in the twilight of his career. However, he still brought decades of professionalism and talents not generally associated with action/adventure comics to his work. Even back in the '40s when Whitney was churning out cardboard-copy heroes like Skyman, he was noted for his ability to draw real people. While many current artists are hard pressed to draw a realistic business suit, Whitney excelled in wrinkles and creases. While other artists concentrated on action poses, his characters knew how to relax, and what better talent could be asked for a strip in which the main character always seemed to be three-quarters asleep?

Whitney was also a master of facial expressions and caricature, which was necessary because of the incredible number of real people who paraded through the pages of *Herbie*. Guest stars included Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Khrushchev, Mao, Castro, U-Thant, Queen Elizabeth, Sonny Liston, Muhammed Ali, Rockefeller, DeGaulle, Cary Grant and the Beatles. Unlike the practice in most comics of the time, they were all referred to by name and the resemblances were painstakingly accurate. Also, unlike Superman and Spider-Man, Herbie was not above letting his political feeling be known, such as the time he dropped worms in Mao's mouth in the middle of one of his speeches (#5).

Whitney was also called on to draw one of the oddest assortment of villains and monsters, from two-headed, pink polka-dotted dragons, to dinosaurs with lion heads, camels with dual elephant heads, and others that are completely indescribable. All of these he managed to pull off with maximum verisimilitude. The anatomy, no matter how outlandish, looked right and the faces, no matter how inhuman, will still be capable of the widest range of expressions. Throughout all this, Whitney managed to avoid the two dimensionality that

Some folks from the Unknown give Herbie grief.



most artists seem to feel is acceptable when grinding out humor comics.

Just Am, That's All

Unlike your standard generic superhero, Herbie never had an origin story. However, a number of incidents throughout the series do shed some light on the whys and wherefores of this remarkable being. In issue #3, Herbie vacations on his Grandpa's farm because Dad can't stand the sight of him any more. Grandpa looks, sounds, and acts just like Herbie except that he has grey hair. When the Loch Ness monster threatens England, Grandpa says, "Offer your services. You're younger than I and even fatter. . . ." In #21, Herbie meets a viking princess who looks just like him. This is just one of a remarkable number of people Herbie meets that appear to share his gene structure. In #17 Herbie visits Miles Standish, who is one of Mom's ancestors. Except for the fact that Miles is taller, they look exactly alike. Then there's Ticklepuss, a cavegirl who is one of the few characters to appear in more than one story (#6 and #10). Not only does Ticklepuss look like Herbie right down to the glasses, but she appears to have most of his powers also. The biggest revelation comes in #15's "Call Me Schlemiehl," when we find that Dad himself used to be a little fat nothing before he had himself stretched on the rack in college in order to impress Mom.

It is clear from this that at least one source of Herbie's power is genetic, a double whammy in fact, since there are Herbie prototypes on both his mother's and his father's side of the family. Possibly an even more important source, however, is lollipops. In issue #12 we find that Herbie was given his first lollipop by circus owner Chuck Beeple, who earned his undying gratitude. In #22 it is revealed that orange lollipops are for flying, lemon for strength, and strawberry for invisibility. Beginning in issue #1, Herbie kept all his lollipops in a locked supply cabinet in his room with separate drawers for each flavor and a special drawer in the bottom for the really fancy ones. The source of all these lollipops was revealed to be the Unknown in issue #15. The new director there discovers that an unauthorized mortal has been buying lollipops from their special factory and attempts to put a stop to it. Deprivation of lollipops depletes Herbie's strength, as in #2's "The Purloined Pops," in which a famished Herbie has to ask a flock of seagulls to pull him through the air. When the arch villain destroys all lollipops on Earth, Herbie is helpless, until he discovers that the sign on the Whammo factory is actually a giant



Herbie makes a political gesture.

lollipop (built to demonstrate how long they last). In issue #1, all of Herbie's pops are shattered. He manages to glue one mongrel pop together out of the pieces, but it causes him to fly around uncontrollably, boring into the ground and zipping high into the air, like a jumping bean. Even regular lollipops have strength-giving properties, as Herbie finds when he meets Hepzibah Higgins, a skinny, buck-toothed girl who has super-strength and wants him to marry her. Too late, he discovers that her father owns a lollipop factory.

Still another source of power seems to be Herbie's fat itself. In #18's "Clear the Road for Skinny," Herbie experiences drastic weight loss when bitten by a Hissian, a snake-like resident of the tiny nation of Hissia. His strength and powers are depleted until he manages to regain his standard avoirdupois. In Herbie, we have a character who makes the standards of proper behavior appear absurd. Herbie is fat, eats an improper diet, speaks ungrammatically, has no ambition, does not do well in school, yet is one of the most powerful beings in the universe, and is continually called upon to bail out those who do follow the rules of proper behavior. This is possible because the people who follow the rules are made to appear ridiculous slaves to ideas they barely understand and clichés they blindly follow, even when the evidence in front of them is plainly contradictory.

Elder Olson, in his book *The Theory of Comedy*, defines comedy as "an imitation of valueless action effecting a katastasis of concern through the absurd." This definition is based on the classic definition of tragedy in which the action brings about a catharsis due to fear and pity. Comedy, instead of producing catharsis, produces katastasis, which is a relaxation of concern by showing that not only was the concern unjustified, but totally absurd in the first place. Thus, in *Herbie*, the readers' concerns over being able to meet the general standards and expectations of the adult world are relaxed by showing that these stan-

dards and expectations are in themselves absurd and valueless.

Herbie himself is not the object of ridicule. Hughes expects his readers to identify with Herbie and to be entertained when his actions cause people and ideas of whose value they are already highly suspicious to be ridiculed. In *Herbie* it's the kids vs. the grownups and the deck is stacked so that the kids always win.

This reader identification was precisely what made *Herbie* successful. In many other attempts at humor comics, the object of ridicule is the readers themselves. People are much less likely to be entertained when their own values and identities are being ridiculed, although a certain amount of this can be slipped in once a general state of humorous good feeling has been established. Comics which become overly self-referential and find the majority of their humor in ridiculing the conventions of comics or the fans themselves alienate much of their potential readership and are less likely to gain commercial success. Although *Herbie* did occasionally parody the conventions of comics, it was never the major thrust of the magazine and was done in such a way that the readers' beliefs and values were not challenged. Hughes never confused the katastasis of his own concerns with that of his readership, unlike so many comic book professionals today.

Never Mind Where I Got It Either

Like all good super-heroes, Herbie had a collection of special weapons to help him in his quest for justice (although in Herbie's case it was probably a quest for peace and quiet). As noted above, he had a special lollipop chest where he kept all his special lollipops under lock and key. In the bottom drawer he kept special-purpose pops like the Which Way Pop used to track villains. Herbie also had a special ticker tape signal watch that President Johnson could use to contact him in emergencies. He was known to use

a utility belt to carry extra lollipops for emergencies. On special occasions he also exhibited the ability to produce just about anything that was needed, such as a bicycle pump ("Just happened to have on me").

Unquestionably, Herbie's main weapon after his lollipops was his parents' grandfather clock. Armed with a special time travel lollipop, he would tip the clock over on its side, climb into the pendulum cabinet and go sailing off into the time stream, usually in an attempt to prove that everything grown-ups thought they knew about history was wrong.

In the first recorded time trip (*Herbie #1*) at the request of Johnson and Khruschev, Herbie goes to Merlin's time to find dragon tears which the super powers need in order to make Leonardo da Vinci's newly discovered rocket formula. He brings the dragon home and forces it to peel onions. "Other boys get a dog—Man's best friend! But not my boy, no sir! He has to come up with a monstrosity like that!" laments Herbie's singularly unobservant Dad.

In #4 Herbie visits the OK Corral and has to hypnotize Doc Holliday into losing his fear of guns in order to make the facts agree with the history books. In #6 Herbie brings back a caveman in order to show his teacher how smart they really were. In #8 Herbie proves that the American Revolution was caused by the fact that Washington's wooden teeth didn't fit properly. Seems George. . . . Oh, never mind, you wouldn't believe it anyway. If it wasn't for Herbie, Chris Columbus would have sailed right off the edge. "Very embarrassing. Thought the world was round" Herbie thinks as he eases Columbus's ships around the corner.

Of course things didn't always work out that easily. In #15 the new director of the Unknown attempts to get rid of Herbie by giving him a time lollipop that doesn't need the grandfather's clock. Unknown to Herbie, the pop is designed to only work one way. He doesn't realize he's trapped until he's

back in the time of Napoleon. Fortunately, our resourceful hero has the presence of mind to use a super-aging lollipop to age himself and Napoleon back to the present. Once back home, the now 169-year-old Herbie has to battle the director for a special age restoring pop. Some of Herbie's visits to the past were very profitable for him and the family. In #17, Herbie visits the pilgrims after Mom finds out that she still owes money for her ancestor's passage on the Mayflower, plus 346 years interest! Herbie pays the fare, but leaves before John Alden can give him change. Dad then sues John Alden's descendants for \$16.02 plus interest, which comes to six million dollars. (For the skeptics among you, at 3.5% interest compounded annually this is actually correct.)

Of course no good time traveler can go for long without a paradox, and Herbie gets his in #21's "Viking To Your Liking," in which he tries to exorcise a ghost. The ghost tells Herbie that he betrayed his crew in the past and so is doomed to haunt the Earth forever. Back in the past Herbie finds the Vikings about to invade England and ends up being the very person he went into the past to stop. After bopping himself with his own lollipop, Herbie returns to the present and explains to the ghost that there is nothing to do in Valhalla all day anyway, and convinces him that being doomed to roam the earth forever isn't really such a bad deal after all.

Of course, walking off with the family grandfather's clock is bound to be noticed eventually, even in the Popnecker household. Dad did notice it missing in issue #2 and called the police, but Herbie had it back in place by the time they arrived, which made Dad look like an even bigger fool than normal. To forestall these kinds of complications, Herbie was always looking for other ways to travel through time. He finally found one in issue #23 when he used a super-deluxe time travel pop and a propeller beanie to go back to the time of David and Goliath. Whatever drawbacks this

approach might have had were never made clear as this was the last issue.

Help Keep My Dad Out Of Jail

Probably the most important supporting character in the series was Herbie's dad, the incredible, inimitable Pincus Popnecker. Dad firmly believed in the American Dream and the Protestant Ethic. Hard work and business acumen were the secrets to everything. Unfortunately, though Pincus was capable of the first, he had absolutely none of the second. Continually involved in get-rich-quick schemes, he would have left the Popneckers in the poorhouse if it wasn't for Herbie's intervention. And for his troubles, what thanks did Herbie get? A continuing torrent of insults and abuse. Herbie's approach to life was just too different from his father's for him to be able to see any merit in him at all. Herbie was just a "little fat nothing," who would never amount to anything and wasted his time lying around all day. The fact that most of this lying was done in mid-air never seemed to register on Pincus.

Somehow, despite an avalanche of evidence to the contrary, Herbie managed to keep his great powers a secret from Dad. Herbie seemed to realize that Dad just wouldn't be able to handle it. In spite of all the abuse he received, Herbie loved his father and would do virtually anything to keep him happy. In *Forbidden Worlds #116*, for example, Herbie sells his soul to the Devil in order to make Dad (who was currently unemployed) a big business tycoon. Satan fixes it so that Pincus inherits, of all things, a lollipop factory. Everything worked out fine until old Lucifer sent Dracula and Frankenstein's Monster to collect. When Herbie organizes all the imps and demons into a union and they go on strike, Satan tears up the contract and throws Herbie out of the underworld. All is not perfect, however, for when Herbie gets home he finds that Dad has sold the lollipop factory because Herbie was eating up all the profits!

Dad kept trying to better himself though. In issue #3 he ran for president of the local chamber of commerce. As part of his campaign, he organizes a drive to collect money for the poorhouse. When the money he collected is stolen, Dad figures he's ruined. Herbie attempts to replace the lost money by, among other things, standing on a street corner in a Santa Claus suit with a bell and a kettle yelling "Help keep my Dad out of jail!" When Herbie discovers the money was filched by the professional fund raisers Dad had hired, the poorhouse

Our boy finds a pet, courtesy of his time-travelling clock.



ends up with twice as many donations as expected. In fact, so much money is raised that the inhabitants of the poorhouse take to lighting their cigars with \$10 bills!

Dad went through many other businesses. In issue #6 he had a balloon factory. Predictably, the balloons wouldn't float. In #10, Pincus went into the bowling ball business, unknowingly acting as a front for the Black Whack's crime ring. In #12 Pincus Popnecker became a private eye in a story plotted by contest winner Richard Roesburg (a certain M. Wolfman was the runner up). With captions written in the best (or is it worst?) Sam Spade tradition, Pincus tries to track down a criminal who is stealing people's fat. In the process, he gets assaulted by a baby, is almost eaten by a bear, and hit by a falling safe. When Mr. Molecule decides to kidnap the biggest fathead in town, he unerringly chooses Dad.

In #18 after Herbie asks his friend Lyndon Johnson to get Dad a job, he's appointed ambassador to Houngandigia. To Dad's chagrin, his first duty is to settle a war between a race of snake people and a race of pig people. Of course Herbie does the real work and Dad takes all the credit.

Deep down, however Pincus Popnecker wanted his son to succeed and Herbie wanted to please him. In #9 Herbie used a magnet to fool Dad into thinking his attempts to teach Herbie archery had succeeded. Dad's bragging about Herbie's archery prowess gets Herbie into real trouble when Dad enters him into an archery tournament. Herbie has to get Robin Hood to really teach him to shoot. After this, he decides it's better to keep Dad in the dark, reasoning "If parents knew about me, they'd be so proud they'd bust. And who wants busted parents?"

Sometimes it was difficult keeping Dad in the dark though. In *Herbie* #11, Dad decides to take Herbie to Washington "to see where Pochahantas was born and Napoleon was buried." When President Johnson sees Herbie walking past the White House, he drags him inside to help him recover the B-Bomb (it's made from beans). Johnson has to cover for Herbie by telling Dad that he's being sent to a special camp for little fat nothings. In #18, Dad almost loses his mind when everyone in Washington claims to know Herbie and the Queen of England tells Herbie what a great honor it is to meet him. Dad finally decides he must have dreamed the whole thing.

Pincus Popnecker's biggest role was in #15's "Call Me Schlemiehl!" in which Pud Bimbo, Dad's old roommate from Peepwhistle Prep shows up and mistakes Herbie for Dad! He invites himself over for dinner and is



Pincus Popnecker on the job... as a private eye, this time.

surprised to find that Pincus is not a little fat nothing anymore. It turns out that Dad had originally looked very much like Herbie, but while trying to win Mom away from Pud Bimbo he had dieted, exercised and undergone stretching on the rack in order to make himself handsome. Dad and Pud begin competing for Mom all over again. With Herbie's help, Dad finally beats Pud at boxing, swimming and the high jump. Mom's reaction is unexpected, however. "All of a sudden you're a loudmouth, just like that Pud Bimbo!" I can't stand him and I never could—and now I see that you're no better." Dad has to apologize and promise to go back to being his old schlemiel self!

If Dad was supposed to represent the fate of all those who bought into the ways and mores of adulthood unequivocally, then Professor Flipdome represented the adult who refused to grow up at all. Even so, the Professor could be as much trouble for Herbie as Dad. The professor lived next door to the Popneckers. When he can't find anyone to try out his new machine, he disguises himself as a busdriver and kidnaps Herbie's dad. The machine reduces a person in size and sends them to Miniturea, where everyone has a tiny duplicate. Herbie has to go in and rescue Dad. Once there, he finds the air too thin to support himself, so he's reduced to walking everywhere. When Dad sees Herbie in action beating up a bevy of monsters, he attributes it to Herbie's miniature double. After being restored to normal

size, he chalks the whole adventure up to being a dream. For Dad to admit that such things could happen in real life would be to admit that all the values he stood for were meaningless.

Despite Flipdome's cavalier treatment of his father, Herbie considered him to be a friend, albeit one that could stand for some close watching. It was Professor Flipdome who invented the machine which created four duplicate Herbies in issue #9. When Herbie gets sidetracked at a lollipop sale, one of his doubles goes on to school and takes his place. Unfortunately, all it can say is "Bop you with this heré lollipop." Over and over again. The doubles run amok all over the city and when the unsuspecting Herbie gets home, his parents are outraged, blaming him for all the damage. Puzzled and hurt, Herbie decides to run away from home. Once on the train, Herbie is finally confronted with his duplicates. "Odd. Other Herbies." Is his shocked reaction. "Eat me out of house and home. Better get away from them."

The four superfluous furies end up playing football for the New York Giants and Herbie feels he is well rid of them. However, he's certainly glad to have them back when Swami O'Toole and his gang seize all of Popneckerville as hostages. When the Swami traps Herbie in a vat of melted lollipop syrup, only the doubles stand between Popneckerville and oblivion. Unfortunately (?) their plastic finish is ruined by machine gun bullets and Herbie has to consign them to elec-



Uninvited guests drop in for dinner.



tronic oblivion.

The Professor was a genius certainly, but a totally undisciplined one. None of the gadgets he invented made any sense. They all worked, but who cared? In #15 he invented oxygenated pancake syrup so that it would never be necessary to breathe again. Flipdome was ambitious, industrious, and full of energy and ideas, just like Dad. His ideas were just as ludicrous and his chances of succeeding in becoming famous just as slim. The main difference between Dad and the Professor was that Flipdome accepted Herbie for what he was and treated him as an equal. His ambition was not tinged by the paranoia that seemed to plague Dad. (Well, he did kidnap Dad that one time, but he didn't mean any harm.) Perhaps the Professor was Hughes's conception of the best you could hope for in an adult—bumbling incompetence, childishness, but no rancor or hostility.

A Cheer And A Beer

For a series essentially about a young teen-ager, there was remarkably little reference to school in *Herbie*. Still, the same can be said for most modern "kid group" books. Perhaps children simply don't want to be reminded of school, and would rather believe their heroes are exempt from it.

In *Forbidden Worlds* #94 Herbie and his family move to a new town. Initially, the kids at school are distrustful of Herbie. When he brags about being very brave, they taunt him into staying in a haunted house overnight. Herbie ends up missing a day of school while battling spirits from the Unknown, but tells his teacher he was helping Mom with her crocheting. Besides the obvious parody of the old "dumb excuse to protect his secret" schtick, we see again the pattern of suspicion and mistrust of adults that so strongly pervades this book. Not that the kids in Herbie's class were much help in the haunted house either. In issue #6, Herbie uses his time-traveling grandfather's clock to bring a cave man back to modern times in

order to convince his teacher that primitive man was just as intelligent as his descendants. Not only does Bumbum impress Miss Marleybone with his ability to handle quadratic equations, but she ends up marrying him.

In issue #7, Herbie graduates from PS 45 and is faced with a big decision. "Not figuring on any more schooling. Got important things to do—like improving the world." However, a talk with President Truman straightens the boy right out. Education is important, even if you have to go to school to get it. Dad, of course, is set on sending Herbie to his old alma mater, Peepwhistle Prep (class of '44) and even wants him to pledge his old fraternity Tappa Kegga Koke (that's the *soft drink!*). The frat boys don't really think Herbie would be good for their image and put him through intense hazing. Herbie passes everyone of their fixed initiation stunts, including winning a ball game by batting with his lollipop. (The ball was an old friend. Used to be his grandfather's horse.) Nothing moves the frat boys, however, and in one of the few fits of temper he has in the series, Herbie flattens the frat house. Herbie still believes in education though, so when the school goes broke he manages to find oil on the property and brings in so much wealth that every school in America is improved. "Studying a little harder these days, you'll know why—I'm responsible. And if you've got any complaints—You want I should bop you with this here lollipop." (All right so he didn't pay attention in grammar class).

Since Herbie didn't succeed at Peepwhistle Prep, he enrolled at Hasenpfefer High. In #21, Dad locks up Herbie's lollipops until Herbie joins the football team. Desperate for lollipops, Herbie tries out, using all his magic powers and is, of course, wonderful. But since we all know that Herbie's powers can never be used to his own personal advantage, the actual game is a disaster. Murgatroyd Wumpus, who is in line to be the next coach, smears glue on Herbie's shoes

in order to ensure that the game is lost and the old coach is fired. No longer on the team, Herbie has to resort to subterfuge to help Coach Bumpo get his job back, like disguising himself as the ball or the goal posts. Good triumphs over evil in the end and Wumpus is sent packing, but it doesn't do Herbie much good in getting his lollipops back. He finally has to resort to begging.

In #20's "Adventure at the Center of the Earth" Herbie tries to help Dr. Plumduffle, a teacher who is going to be fired if he can't learn to keep his class under control. In a gimmick reminiscent of issue #4's *Minaturea*, Herbie finds a race of fire-breathing demons at the center of the earth, every one of whom is an exact duplicate of someone on the surface. He brings Plumduffle's duplicate back and puts him in charge of the class for one day. You can imagine how good a literally fire-breathing teacher was at controlling the students. The principal is so impressed he doubles Plumduffle's salary.

In many respects, Herbie's teachers serve the same role as Dad. Despite almost overwhelming evidence, they refuse to see Herbie's powers. While Herbie has no problems at all dealing with Lyndon Johnson or Khrushchev as equals, local authority figures, the kind the leadership would most likely come into contact with, remain intractable. Although this made life difficult for Herbie, it also made these characters objects of ridicule for the "knowing" readers and increased their ability to identify with a character who was otherwise nearly omnipotent.

What Have They Got That Lollipops Haven't Got Better Than?

Any discussion of Herbie's relationships with women must keep in mind the fact that these stories were a product of their times. In 1964 Sue Storm's primary role in the *Fantastic Four* was to moon over the Sub-Mariner and Brainiac 5 refused to let Saturn Girl go on any of the "dangerous" Legion missions. Lois Lane spent all her time scheming to get Superman to marry her, or pulling Lana's hair out.

The first hint we had of Herbie's power over women was in "Herbie Goes to the Devil" (*Forbidden Worlds* #116). In an attempt to get Herbie to sell his soul, Satan offers to make him a great actor and sends him to Egypt to replace Richard Burton in "Cleopatra." Elizabeth Taylor attempts to make love to him, but Herbie refuses to take his lollipop out of his mouth. When he leaves, she is devastated and

refuses to accept Burton as a replacement.

The first time Herbie shows any actual interest in the opposite sex is in "What You Need Is a Girl, Herbie," from #2. Of course, now that Herbie actually *wants* a girl, his ability to attract one seems to have disappeared. Louella uses Herbie to make her old boyfriend, Alexander Bimble, jealous. First she asks him for a pet (he brings her a dinosaur) then Cinderella's original glass slippers (she can't walk in them), then Marie Antoinette's jewels (she doesn't believe they're real and throws them in the river). Frustrated, Herbie is last seen clutching a large package of lollipops, intent on drowning his sorrows in sugar.

In "A Caveman Named Herbie" (#6) our Fat Fury meets his match in a cavegirl named Ticklepuss. Ticklepuss was basically a female version of Herbie. The resemblance was uncanny, right down to the anachronistic glasses. Armed with a huge club, she clobbers Herbie over the head and drags him off to her cave. Our hero manages to escape but finds her brother Bumbum guarding his grandfather's clock. Bumbum accuses him of playing fast and loose with his sister and declares he will follow Herbie until he makes an honest woman out of her. Undaunted, Herbie brings him back to the 20th century and marries him off to his teacher.

In the only sequel ever in the series, Ticklepuss returned in issue #10. Dad gets an incredibly good deal on a new house, then finds out there's a salt mine next door. Things take a turn for the worse when the miners unearth a pterodactyl and a cave girl. Yes, it's Ticklepuss! She immediately picks up where she left off, dragging Herbie off by the hair. Since she is at least as strong as Herbie and has a pet pterodactyl to help, Herbie appears to be trapped. However, her attention is distracted by the man who sold Dad the house. Herbie tells him he'll get rid of Ticklepuss if he'll buy the house back from Dad. Once Herbie gets the check, he surrenders himself to Ticklepuss, but she rejects him and forces the shyster to marry her. "Well, did what I could," shrugs Herbie.

Herbie turns his talent for attracting women to positive use in "Beware the B-Bomb Buster" in which he makes suspected spy Lovely Horowitz fall in love with him in order to locate the B-Bomb. Unfortunately, she turns out not to be the spy at all.

In number #16's "It's Love, Lover" Herbie does his best to help out his school by raffling himself off at a charity bazaar. Hepzibah Higgins, a skinny, orange-haired, buck-toothed girl wins him and demands that he marry her. He tries to palm her off on

Richard Burton, then he gets Lyndon Johnson to name her to his cabinet, but even that won't divert her attention. In desperation, Herbie reveals his magic powers to her, but she isn't fazed. In fact, she can do everything he does! Finally, Herbie gets her to drop him (she marries a gorilla instead) only to find her father manufactures lollipops!

While these stories can hardly be looked upon as breaking new ground in the relationship between the sexes (indeed, Hughes was criticized even in those unenlightened times for his portrayal of women), they do express the Herbie philosophy quite well. Even infinite power can't do much about human nature, which gains its own strength from being completely irrational. Bearing in mind that, at 13, Herbie was really too young to have any serious interests in this area, Hughes pictures love for the most part as the accidental by-product of two persons who are acting at cross-purposes to each other. Granted, his women are pictured as venal and avaricious, but then, so are his men. There is only one successful love match in the Herbie canon and that's Mom and Dad. In "Call Me Schlemiel," which is basically the story of their courtship, even they are seen at cross-purposes. Dad spends his entire life trying to make himself over into his arch-rival, Pud Bimbo, even sacrificing (perhaps unknowingly) the magic power the Popnecker family seems to gain from their fat, only to find that

Mom never liked Pud anyway and most admires the qualities Dad has spent his life trying to repress.

Herbie's power over women seemed to be one of the few powers over which he had no control whatsoever. It worked sometimes and sometimes it didn't, usually to Herbie's detriment. The humor in the situation stemmed from Hughes's making love appear to be a valueless action, the results of which were almost always absurd. On the one hand, it is absurd that a woman could ever love a creature that looked and acted like Herbie, and on the other, when women turned him down, it was always for someone even more absurd, like Tickelpuss for the shyster real estate agent and Hepzibah Higgins for a gorilla. In this way Hughes deflates his adolescent reader's real concern over present or future relationships by making it clear that love is irrational and beyond even the control of the omnipotent.

You Got Bad Press Down On Earth...

The closest thing to a "universe" that ACG had was Hughes's concept of "the Unknown," a mysterious spirit-filled resting place where the dead waited while it was determined whether they would go to heaven or hell (excuse me, "Hades"). Bilibious green civil servants in druid robes called Grim Reapers were responsible for keeping the spirits in line during their

Ticklepuss, one of Herbie's many loves.



often centuries-long wait for processing. To relieve the boredom, spirits often returned to Earth for some fun.

Herbie's first recorded encounter with these characters was in *Forbidden Worlds #94*'s "Herbie and the Spirits." Taunted by his classmates to spend the night in a haunted house, he meets Frankenstein's monster, a witch, a ghost, and a ghoul. He defeats them by soaking a bunch of lollipops in cough syrup. When the spirits eat them, they fall asleep, allowing Herbie to push them back through the doorway into the Unknown and seal it.

In *Forbidden Worlds #110* Herbie actually seeks aid from these same spooks in order to track down Frenchy Horowitz, who has stolen all of the salad oil on Earth. This new, friendly, relationship with the spirits was a stroke of luck for Herbie. In *Herbie #15* it is revealed that there is a lollipop factory in the Unknown which is the source of all of Herbie's really "special" lollipops. Herbie's first shipment of those pops must have been received some time before issue #1, because he needs them (along with the grandfather's clock) for time travel.

In #3, Herbie goes to the Unknown to ask help in subduing the rampaging Loch Ness Monster. The Reaper looks it up in his book and tells Herbie that Nessie has won the Tough Monster Championship 400 years running. "Nothing we can do to help." Back on Earth Herbie finds the two-headed monster playing football with some British tanks. Old Nessie tells Herbie that she's tired of not being believed in, then flattens Herbie like an accordion. This is only a temporary setback for our Plump Lump, however, and, after a dose of lollipop power, he bops Nessie clear back to the Unknown. Elizabeth is so pleased she makes

Herbie Duke of Popnecker.

In "High Spirits" a population explosion in the Unknown causes many spirits to be sent back to Earth. Predictably, they decide to haunt the seacoast vacation home Dad has just bought. In order to end the haunting Herbie has to discover the ghosts' worst fears and scare them away. The ghost of Eric the Red is scared of walrus; for example.

In "Pass a Piece of Pizza, Please" the Unknown appoints Dracula as a goodwill ambassador to Earth in order to help clean up their image. Drac is real upset when he visits a blood bank and they take blood from him. Then he discovers pizza is a suitable substitute and plots to steal every pizza on Earth until Herbie stops him.

In issue #22, after Magical Moe has destroyed all the lollipops on Earth, Herbie entreats a billy goat and a flock of goony birds to help him get to the Unknown so he can take magic lessons. Unfortunately, he only gets a 50 on the final and so can only perform feats of half magic. Herbie is saved when he finds an exhibit of ancient Assyrian lollipops in a museum and is able to restore his normal powers.

Fat, Fat, Like A Water Rat, And All Over Red!

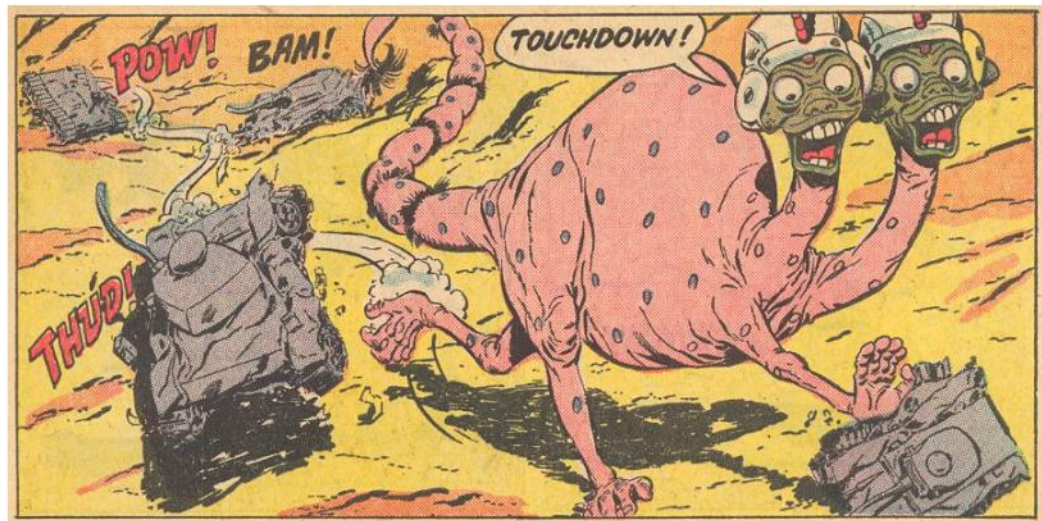
By 1965, the super-hero boom was in full swing. Everyone was getting into the act. Even Archie Andrews had become a super-hero. Although Hughes had created and written several super-hero strips in the '40s, he had often expressed distaste for them. Regular characters with heroic powers who "win despite stupendous odds were the commonest formula of all and did not lend themselves to amazing stories

which run the gamut from science fiction to supernatural with every conceivable type of lead character."

Still, declining sales for his anthology books finally forced him to give in and enter the super-hero derby. He certainly let his feelings for the genre show through in Herbie's premiere as the Fat Fury (#8), in which Lyndon Johnson called on the citizens of America to help defeat Mr. Horrible, a giant with super strength who was terrorizing the country. Herbie decides to go to American Hero School in order to get a license to fight crime. Typically, he flunks out, being unable to grasp the rudiments of flying, villain-spinning, and other fine arts. However, Mr. Horrible clobbers all the heroes who do graduate and when Dad threatens to try his hand, Herbie decides to take the law into his own hands and become an unlicensed vigilante. Dressed in Ma Hunkel's traditional red underwear (a garb he would later pass on to Forbush Man), with a bath towel cape, a balloon with holes in it for a mask, a plunger on his head, and no shoes, Herbie leaps into action. In an epic battle at the Statue of Liberty, Herbie finally masters elementary villain-spinning and puts paid to Mr. Horrible. The Fat Fury continued his career after this, appearing in one story in every other issue. Dad loved him and demanded to know why Herbie wasn't more like him. He battled amazing villains like the Black Whack, Magical Moe, and ?, generally lampooning the style of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's Marvel Comics. The fantastic three-page fight scene in #12's "Good Gosh! The Gorilla!" features just 10 dialogue balloons with an average of 3.5 words per balloon.

Herbie: "Fat Fury."
Gorilla: "Gorilla."

The Loch Ness Monster goes up the middle for a goal.



In #2's "Just Like Magic" the obligatory fight scene is reduced to one panel with the caption "72 pows, 6 socks, and 3 bams later. . ."

Generally, being a hero caused problems for Herbie. He kept trying to fly and crashing into the ground, stuck on his plunger. Elementary villain-spinning made him dizzy. The major drawback was that he was more famous as Herbie than as Fat Fury. His animal buddies, who could normally be counted on for support, ran screaming "It's fat, fat, like a water rat and all over red!" whenever they saw him. In "Good Gosh! The Gorilla!" he gets tossed into the elephants' cage and they flatten him. Afterwards they ask, "Who are you?" "Flat Fury" he replies (it says that on his shirt). Puzzled, they pull off his mask, discover it's Herbie and apologize.

Herbie had been preceded in ACG's costume hero sweepstakes by Nemesis, who began in *Adventures In the Unknown* in December 1964 and Magicman, who appeared in Herbie's old home *Forbidden Worlds* beginning in February 1965. Both of these characters were ostensibly "serious" super-heroes. In actuality, they were so influenced by the camp craze that, when the inevitable team-up occurred in *Herbie #14*, they made the Fat Fury look realistic. Unlike Herbie, who knew that what he was doing was ludicrous, Nemesis and Magicman did not realize that they themselves were ridiculous. Even teamed up, Nemesis and Magicman were incapable of handling the evil machinations of Halfaman, Moronman, Pizzaman, and Garbage-man, but required the Fat Fury to pull their (ahem) fat out of the fire, or in this case, the ice, as criminal mastermind Roderick Bump had frozen them solid.

Having rescued the two heroes, Herbie stands stock still while they try to pummel him into submission in the standard hero-versus-hero battle. Since they can't make any impression, they offer to team-up and try to teach him to fly the right way. Of course, they fail miserably.

It is interesting that the only meeting of these characters took place in *Herbie*. The impression is that Hughes was trying to use the Fat Fury to boost the other characters' sales. The three heroes now united track down Bump and his gang stealing marshmallows. After falling into a vat of the stuff, the Plump Lump finally catches up to Bump and sits on his head reasoning "Marshmallow sticky. Villain stuck."

In his later adventures the Fat Fury battled Fu Manchoo, a two-headed, pig-tailed Chinese, hand picked by Mao Tse Tung to invade America because he looked just like an average American (it worked too). The incred-



Herbie as the Flat. . . er, Fat Fury.

ible scientific genius destroyed all the lollipops on Earth and then built a robot Fat Fury to commit crimes and destroy Herbie's reputation. Dracula imprisoned him in a pizza oven; Magical Moe (who wore a paper bag for a mask) also destroyed all the lollipops on Earth with his magical powers.

All in all, there were eight Fat Fury stories. By then it was 1967. The camp boom was over. ACG dropped the heroes and replaced *Herbie* with *Gasp!* a new "mystery" title. It lasted four issues, then ACG stopped publishing comics. Ironically, less than two years later, horror anthologies entered a new boom period that threatened to drive the super-heroes off the stands. It would be too late for ACG though.

Pretty Quiet For A Saturday Afternoon

Herbie occupies a unique niche in comics history. From 1958 to 1967, *Herbie* was virtually the only comic feature of its type available to the average comics fans. All the other heroes of the so-called silver age were deadly serious, with only an occasional bit of forced levity (such as the April Fool Superman stories). No other character seemed to be willing to stand up and admit that being a super-hero was a ludicrous occupation or that the average super-villain belonged in a mental institution. This condition had not existed in the '40s when any number of features which poked fun at the whole genre were running, including Scribbly and the Red Tornado, Supersnipe, Plastic Man and the Spirit. In the '50s, this humorous approach culminated in *Mad Comics* and its legion of spin-offs and imitators. By 1958, *Mad Comics* had become *Mad Magazine*. The super-hero parodies which had been one of its staples were replaced by features like "Celebrity Wallets" and Melvin, the original mascot, was replaced by Alfred E. Newman.

Although there continued to be hu-

mor in comics like *Sugar and Spike* and *Fox and Crow*, it was a humor born of innocence. More cynical "adult" humor pretty much disappeared. *Herbie* was alone in exposing a new generation of readers to the possibilities of a humorous approach to the adventure genre. After *Herbie* came the *Inferior Five*, *Not Brand Echh!* (whose Forbush Man inherited Ma Hunkel's outfit from Herbie) and many others. The camp craze had begun as a result of the Batman TV show, so it's doubtful that Herbie was the direct cause of this explosion. Camp was different anyway. Instead of providing a katastasis of concern for the problems of adulthood, it ridiculed the dreams and values of childhood. Instead of assuring their readers that the Real World was even more ludicrous than comic books, the camp comics simply reinforced the average adult's judgment that reading comics was a silly waste of time. The readers of these titles quickly took the hint and overall sales dropped.

Still, the influence of *Herbie* can definitely be seen in the comics produced by the generation that grew up reading it. *Howard the Duck* re-invented the idea that comic book humor did not have to simply lampoon other comics. *Cerebus the Aardvark* proved that comic books could lampoon anything and still last over 100 issues. A case could even be made for Herbie's influence on straight adventure strips. The speech patterns of the Incredible Hulk and Rorschach of *The Watchmen* both bear an uncanny similarity to that of the Fat Fury.

The Canadian publisher Sword in Stone has just acquired the rights to ACG's comic line, including *Herbie*, and they promise to revive the plump lump in both new and reprint adventures.

But until then, and even as parody comic after parody comic (and even comics which are parodies of parodies) bites the dust, and publishers lament the sad state of humor in America, we can all look back on *Herbie* and think "Bop you with this here lollipop!"