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Interview with Ed King

Ed King

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Interviewer: Catherine Fisher
Interviewee: Ed King
Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine
4.25.2015

CF: Today is the 25th of April, year 2015. I'm here at the Portland Public Library makers fair, Makers@PPL, with Ed King of Portland, and Ed is going to talk to us about what he makes.

EK: I was going to say, my name is Ed King. I'm a cartoonist and I've been drawing cartoons since I was in about third grade, which is 50-something years ago. I stopped every once and a while, but I've been doing it pretty steady for a long a time, and I've produced a lot of different kinds of cartoons, from books to magazines to posters. What else?

CF: Maps.

EK: Maps. Birthday cards for my friends. That's it. I try to keep it simple. Draw a picture and maybe sometimes color it in a little bit. It's not that complicated. Anybody can do it. In fact, I brought some 8.5 by 11 sheets of paper, if there's a cartoonist in the room who wants to get started on a great career today.

CF: What got you started when you were in the third grade?

EK: I can remember exactly. At that time, they celebrated Lincoln's birthday and Washington's birthday separately. This was around 1960. The teacher had us drawing a picture of Abraham Lincoln. It turned out I could draw Abraham Lincoln better than all the other kids. And I had no idea that I could draw. Comparatively, I can draw better than most people, but not really that good. Anyway, all of a sudden, here I was, this great artist in the third grade because I could draw Abraham Lincoln. And I thought, "Wow, there's something." And I've been pretty much drawing ever since.

CF: Incredible. And this is how you've made your living?

EK: Pretty much. Yeah, for the most part. I've had to do a lot of other things to fill in the cracks. You name it, I've done it. From driving trucks to working in restaurants. Name it, I've done it.

CF: And your work has been in various publications.

EK: Yup. Most recently, I did a little illustration for *Portland Magazine* a couple of weeks ago, and that's in the current issue. I've done a lot of magazines and newspapers, including *Highlights Magazine for Children*.

CF: And the *Café Review* locally, right?

EK: Oh yeah, the *Café Review*. I have to be reminded of a lot of things because my hand has outlived my brain.

CF: That's great. I'm glad that your hand is still going.

EK: It is still going, yup.

CF: Where do you do your work, Ed?

EK: I have a little studio set up in my house. I've always said I don't take any jobs bigger than my drawing board. After you've been collecting your work for 50 years, if you do anything that's sizable in any way, you can run out of storage space. But I've never had that problem, because all my drawings are fairly small. So I don't need a lot of space to work. I have, in the past, set up a little space off the kitchen. I try to keep it simple. I don't need a lot of intricate tools. A pencil, and pen, and paper, and that's basically it. And watercolor. Fortunate. It doesn't take a lot to get together the few tools I use, need, to do some fun cartoons.

CF: I'm thinking of one exception that I know of as far as the size of the work are the maps that you've done for various regions. I think about how intimately you become connected to the place that you're working in. Could you just describe the maps you've made and how you've gone about doing that?

EK: I've done, perhaps, about twenty what I call cartoon maps. What I do is I'll go into a fairly small-sized town, usually. A town that's big enough to financially support this kind of project. I go around to all the business people in town and, for a fee, I will include them and the building their business is located in in a big picture, basically, of the town. It usually takes—or did take me when I was doing a lot of them—about three or four months to complete one map. That includes, basically, going around and talking to everybody and then doing the actual drawing. I used to say that by the time I finished doing a map, I knew the town better than most of the people who lived there. Which was, to a large degree, true, because I had to go around and basically introduce myself to everybody, and then tell them what I was doing, and then actually do it, and then come back. So, like I said, it took about three or four months to do one project and then I'd go on to the next town.

CF: Sounds like an incredible amount of work. What's the process like when you're making a map or when you're making a cartoon? Do you draw the line first and then color?

EK: The map process is a little different than doing a gag cartoon, say. With the map, I didn't know at the beginning who was going to be on the map or who wasn't going to be on the map, so I really couldn't lay it out until I had a fairly broad idea of how much participation there would be from the particular business community that I was dealing with. There was a lot of erasing going as I went on, and I was fairly well into it before I would have an idea of what would be where and how it would be laid out. Which is kind of different than drawing just basic gag cartoons.

Gag cartoons are fairly simple. You sit down with a piece of paper and draw a pencil drawing of whatever the scene is. It varies. Sometimes I use a particular scene, a photograph of a scene, and work from that. Or sometimes I'll just make up something. Or sometimes I'll do a little bit of both. Usually, the idea for the joke comes before the drawing. Not everybody works like that. Some artists do the drawing first and then they look at the

drawing and they figure out a gag to put on the drawing. Sometimes I do that, but usually, for me, it's the other way around.

CF: Would you like to say anything about how you feel about where you make your work? The city, the state, and how it might impact your work? Or how where you make your work impacts the kind of work that you do?

EK: The particular kind of thing that I do, you can really do it anywhere. Because it doesn't require a lot of fancy tools or equipment. I could sit on a park bench and do it. Or sit at my kitchen table and do it. I don't even really need a drawing table to sit at. That's one of the props I use.

CF: Some of the cartoons that you've made are political. Do you want to talk about politics and how it might relate to your work?

EK: Actually, I've done a number of political cartoons and that type of work, but I've really tried to avoid that over the years. Not because I want to avoid politics, because I have and I had been involved in politics over the years. But I don't find political cartooning as challenging as humor-based cartooning. To me, it's more a question of what is more fulfilling to me to accomplish as an artist. To me, drawing gag cartoons is more challenging for the skills that I've been given or gifted. I've done my share of political cartoons, but that's not really my biggest thing.

CF: I wonder if you'd like to talk about writing, as, of course, it's an important part of your cartoons. Also, you've been the founding publisher and editor of the local newspaper the *West End News* for many years.

EK: Writing is essential, probably the most important part of doing gag cartoons. There are gag cartoonists whose drawing skills are pretty minimal, and they strictly get by on their writing skill. Doing it the other way around, I don't know if that flies. Writing is essential to gag cartoons in particular. I'm writing a book. Should I mention that?

CF: Sure!

EK: That's a totally different process. I'll tell you a little story, and I took this literally for many years. Doctor Seuss said that he once wrote the great American novel, and it was ten volumes, which he said he was able to edit down to five volumes. And then he got it down to one, large volume. And then he kept working on it. He got it down to a long short story, then a short short story. And according to him, his great American novel ended up as a gag cartoon that he sold to the *Saturday Evening Post*. I really believed that for a while, until I tried to write a novel myself. I said, "This isn't quite exactly the same thing." Every time I did a gag cartoon, I would give myself credit for writing the next great American novel. Been there, done that. On to the next project.

CF: There you go. There's always the next project. That's great.

EK: Always. Never. Never stop. Keep coming in the door. Thank god.

CF: Thank you so much, Ed.

EK: Thank you, Catherine.

CF: Ed King! Thanks.