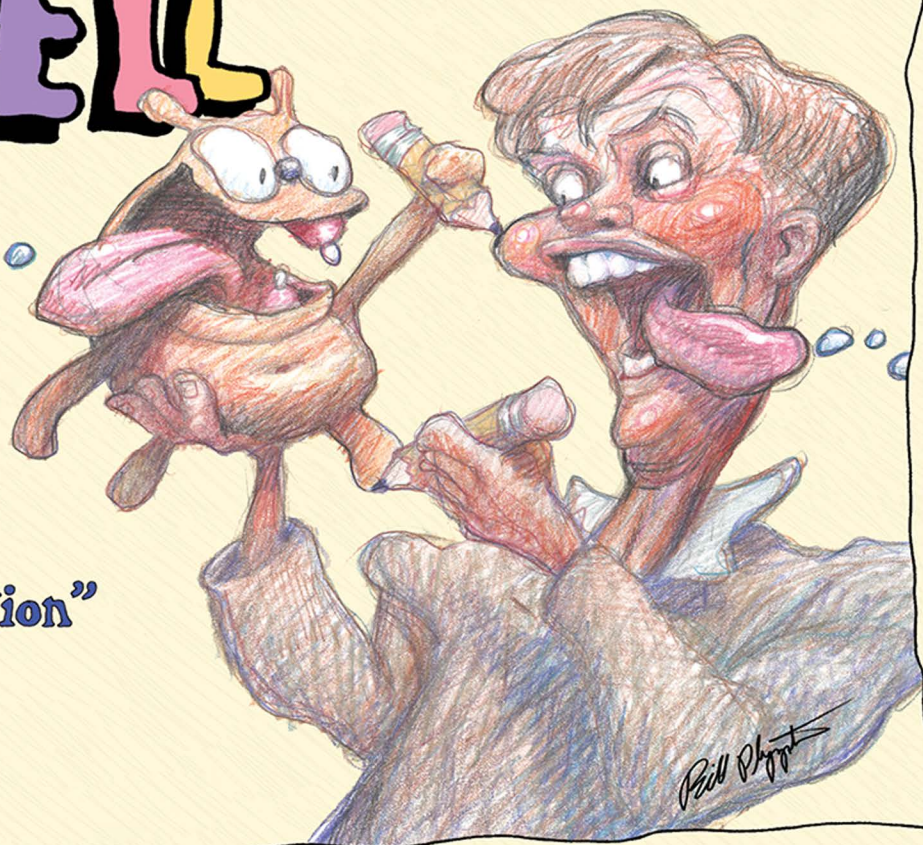


# MAKE TOONS That SELL

10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition

without  
selling  
out!

by  
**Bill Plympton**  
"the King of Indie Animation"



**CRC** CRC Press  
Taylor & Francis Group

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# PREFACE



Back in my 20s, when I was a struggling illustrator in New York, things weren't going so well—no one liked my artwork, my syndicated strip was going badly, it was in only 20 newspapers, and they were diminishing. Any time I tried to create a cartoon that I felt was hard-hitting, the newspaper editors thought it was offensive and in bad taste.

At that point, it felt like my career was a big flop. I could barely pay my rent, my meals consisted of ramen noodles and popcorn, and my landlord (who worked at a fabric store on the ground floor) made it very difficult for me to get in and out of my apartment without him yelling "Pay the damn rent!" at me.

Consequently, I had to spend my days wandering around the city or going to movies all day, in order to avoid any confrontation with my landlord. What was I going to do? Get a normal job? Even though I'd graduated from college with an art degree, I was totally untrained and unprepared for any other kind of normal profession. Besides, I loved walking around the city, proudly carrying my black



leather portfolio that subtly suggested, “There goes a professional artist, an *illustrator*! Someone who’d just done the current cover of the *New Yorker* or *Vanity Fair*, no doubt!” I was just one tiny step away from Cindy Crawford or Claudia Schiffer, who also carried around black leather portfolios and appeared on magazine covers.

I could always call it quits and return to Oregon as an artistic failure. Maybe I could sneak back to my hometown in the middle of the night so no one would notice. But I liked New York City. I loved the excitement, the variety, the weirdness—I didn’t want to leave.

I was in a total funk. I decided to walk the streets of this mad city and ponder my next move. As I exited onto the bustling East Village Street, my landlord yelled at me for the thousandth time: “Hey, Plympton, the rent!” But I ignored him. After all, if I did decide to vacate the Big Rotten Apple, paying the rent would be a moot point.

I wandered the late-evening streets; the sun was about to set. I had no idea where I was or where I was going—I was a sleep-walking zombie. As it

started getting darker, I realized that I was lost. New York is a very easy city in which to find one’s way because most of the streets are numbered—tourists love that! But the street signs around me were no help at all—as far as I could tell, I was at the corner of “Nowhere” and “Eternity.”

But that wasn’t the only strange observation. As I looked around me, the streets were deserted—which by itself is not too rare a condition for certain neighborhoods at that time of night—but I mean not a single living thing. No people, cops, pets, birds—nothing.

To top it off, all of the apartments seemed abandoned. There was no advertising, no decorations, no signs of human culture anywhere—I felt like I was on a Hollywood backlot, after hours. Oddly, I wasn’t concerned—it wasn’t like I had any pressing meetings or art deadlines to meet. Actually, I was kind of digging the surrealism of the moment. But wait: it got even more bizarre.

I noticed an object flying straight at me out of the golden glow of the setting sun. It was hard to



make out at first because of the solar glare—was it a large bird? A plane? As it got closer, I realized it was some guy riding on a missile—kind of like the last scene in *Dr. Strangelove*, when Slim Pickens rode the nuclear missile right into the destructive mushroom cloud explosion.

But what really blew my mind was that the guy flew right up to me and parked his missile in front of me. Then I realized that it would have been more normal if it were Mr. Pickens—instead, it was a bright red naked man with horns, riding on a #2 Ticonderoga pencil.

Okay, I know that I live in the weirdest city in the world, but this appearance crossed even my weirdness threshold—I stood smack in the middle of the intersection of “Twisted” and “Strange” streets.

Dear readers, I know you’re getting very impatient with this absurd story and you’d like me to get on with my tips for animation success. So I’ll just paraphrase what took place on that magical NYC evening. In his raspy voice, the man offered me a way out of my career dilemma. He had a deal for me, and

the deal sounded quite good. As I recall, it was something about how I could be a great success in the cartoon business, but he wanted two things in return.

I was pretty much down on my luck, and I was open to any kind of offer at that point. His offer was this. Point one—he wanted me to change from print cartoons to animation. Point two—he wanted my eternal soul! Okay, big problem—although I loved animation (as a kid, Daffy Duck was my favorite character), I had absolutely no idea how to make animated cartoons. But he replied that this was no problem—he’d snap his fingers and I’d magically know everything there was to know about animation.

“That’s cool!” I said. “Let’s do it!”

The hovering pencil quickly came alive, and his body turned into a giant red hand, guiding the pencil as it drew some kind of sketch, right there in midair. The hand was definitely that of a quick sketch artist, and the sketch looked just like me! What happened next almost defies description—I know what I’ve stated already pushes the limits of credibility, but this was the *crème de la crème* of bizarre—the sketched

doppelganger came to life and walked into my body! Then the giant flying Ticonderoga pencil put its graphite point into my heart, and I heard a ghoulish, cold wind sound, as if I were taking my last breath.

Just then, a manhole cover blew sky high with a loud bang, and flames erupted from underneath the pavement. The bright red man on the #2 pencil swirled around and flew down into the opening and under the city streets with a great shaking and thunder like an earthquake. Then silence settled over that deserted intersection. It took me about 30 seconds to regain my breathing, and then suddenly that desolate street was filled with people—the buildings came to life with ads and signs, and it became a normal neighborhood . . . odd!

As I skipped home with a new sense of optimism and excitement about my now-prosperous future, visions of success swept through my imagination: women, money, power, prizes, accolades, red carpets, and fancy film festivals. It was a dizzying walk home, and as I bounded up my apartment stairway, the door was blocked by Mr. Landlord. I brushed by him, exclaiming, “Your wait is over, I’m going to be a big cartoon star!”



As I disappeared behind my apartment door, he yelled, “You’re not a star, but you’re certainly a cartoon!” And that’s how I became the rock star of animation.

Okay, so maybe it didn’t happen exactly that way, but part of it is true. In animation, anything can happen, and the only limits are those of the animator’s imagination. And I hope this book can be your magical Ticonderoga to success.

No one is born to be anything—except maybe for royalty. People often say to me, “You were born to

be an artist.” I wasn’t born to be anything—I worked my proverbial ass off. If I were to offer any reason for my so-called success, it’s that I freaking love to draw. I wake up in the morning fantasizing about what I’m going to draw that day, and at the end of the day, I feel so happy that I’ve spent the day at my drawing board creating characters.

People call me a masochist for drawing a whole film by myself, but I think I’m a hedonist!

Just beware of naked red men riding on Ticonderoga #2 pencils!



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—Bill Plympton





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# MAKE TOONS THAT SELL—INTRO

Hey, folks, budding and fully budded animators—it's me, the Guard Dog. You may have seen me in a bunch of Bill Plympton's cartoon shorts. Anyway, I want to introduce to you the cool, updated REISSUE of Bill's hugely successful book *Make Toons That Sell Without Selling Out*.

In these days of the exploding animation industry, young kids and artists everywhere are crazy about making cartoons. It's not just in America, but also Japan, Russia, England, France, Canada, Germany, Spain, Korea, and China. It's a veritable landslide, tidal wave, and tsunami of animated features and shorts, and we're in the middle of it.

In fact, the whole world is turning animated—everything is crazy, bizarro, and surreal.

So, this book answers the most common question Mr. Bill gets asked, which is, “How can I become an animator and get rich and famous like you, Mr. Plympton?” But let me give you the real deal—he's not that famous. Maybe a few weird French nerds know who the hell he is. And rich? He just finished running his sixth Kickstarter campaign, that should tell you a lot about his finances.

“So why the hell does Bill continue making his animated films?” you may ask. Well, you'll have to read this wonderful book you're holding in your hands to find out the answer to that question.

—Guard Dog



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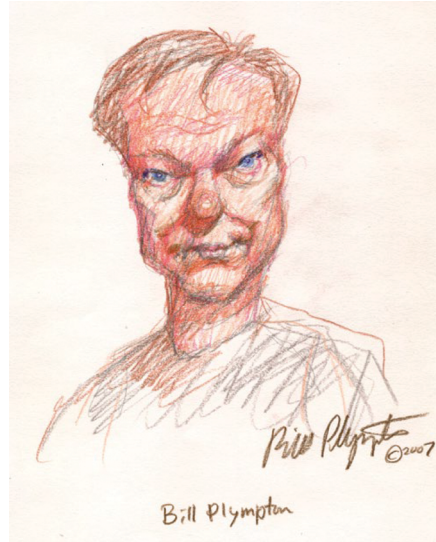




Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION





## The Second Golden Age of Animation

You students today are extremely fortunate to be living in a time that many people refer to as the Second Golden Age of Animation. You should now bend down and kiss your Wacom tablet, laptop, computer workstation, or whatever you use to create cartoons in eternal thanks for being born in a blessed time for animators. As for myself, I will kiss my ancient wooden drawing table and light box.

The First Golden Age of Animation lasted from around 1930 to 1956 and pretty much coincided with Walt Disney's rise to power, but then Walt got bored and directed his energies to television, live-action, and theme parks.

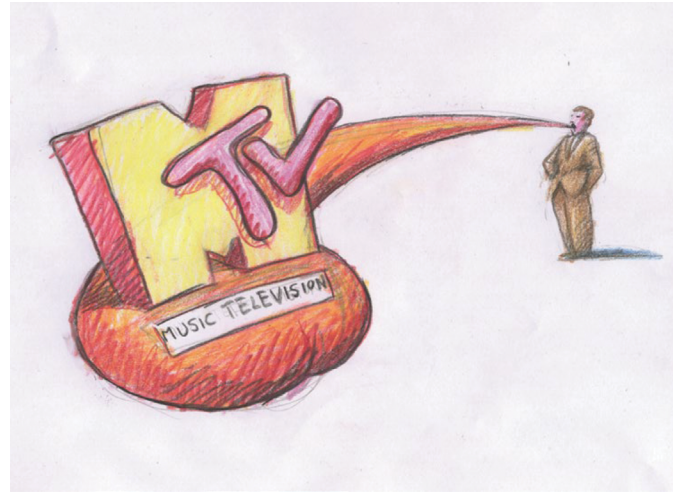
In my opinion, this era created some of the most wonderful characters ever: Mickey Mouse, Goofy, Popeye, Betty Boop, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and the Road Runner—and great films: *Snow White and*



*the Seven Dwarfs, Bambi, Song of the South, Dumbo, “Red Hot Riding Hood,” and “The Great Piggy Bank Robbery.”*

Jobs in animation were plentiful. Because no one studied animation in school and there were no graduate programs, most early animators were political or humor cartoonists looking for extra money. Suddenly, because of Disney, these part-time cartoonists became superstars, going from studio to studio and project to project, and each time they changed jobs, they got a big bump in pay—kind of like today’s superstar athletes.

However, for many reasons, the period from the late 1950s to the 1980s became the Death Valley of animation. I think the prominence of TV animation killed off the great cartoons. All of the Hanna-Barbera and Rankin/Bass series showed that animation didn’t have to cost as much or use as many great artists. Also, movie theaters decided to cut back on showing short films before the main features. So all of this great reservoir of talent were forced to either retire or work on Hanna-Barbera’s crap.



MTV LOGO: ART FOR MTV 10 SECOND PROMOTION, COLOR PENCIL, 1988.

Things then mysteriously changed. For some strange reason, by the mid-1980s, animation started to wake up. The art form finally passed through the arid desert of TV cartoons and arrived in the lush valley of the Second Golden Age of Animation. I believe it was just a happy accident that all of these great influences came together in just a few short years.

MTV started showing animation in the 1980s; *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* was a huge hit. Japanese

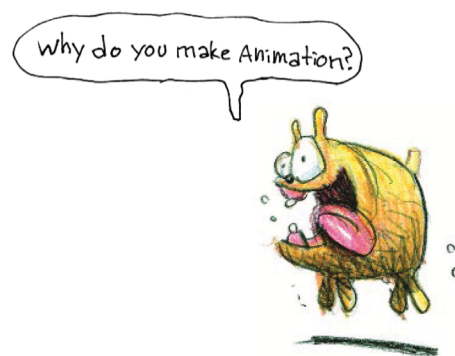
animation, including *Akira* and Hayao Miyazaki's films, started to invade American shores. The Disney studio decided to get back into animation with films such as *The Little Mermaid* and *The Rescuers Down Under*, which were both moneymakers. And of course, *The Simpsons* showed that TV animation could be biting and controversial—and not just for kids.

I believe one main reason for this huge animation revival was an audience ready for an art form that took their minds into a whole new realm of imagination. After years of true-to-life, hard-core, politically relevant films, the audience was ready for magic and fantasy, and animation was the only art form that could take the viewer to different worlds so easily—luckily for you, dear readers, because animation is now ubiquitous and extremely profitable. In 2010, five of the top ten grossing films were animated: *Toy Story 3*, *Despicable Me*, *Shrek Forever After*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, and *Tangled*.

Animation studios are starting up all over the world—India and China are making a big push to overtake the United States in animation production,

and France and Germany are putting government funds into animation production. Everyone all over the world sees the financial success of Pixar, DreamWorks, and Blue Sky Studios, and they want to emulate these studios' stupendous profits.

What does this mean for young animators looking for work? *Money!* Not just jobs but opportunities to create stories that are different, exciting, and moving. And that's what this book is about: how you can be part of this never-ending (I hope) explosion of animated cartoons. This book, I believe, will ably prepare you to be a creative and successful participant in the Second Golden Age of Animation.



This question may be the most important one in this book. I do a lot of press interviews, but I'm never asked this question: "Why do you make animation?" I believe that a person's answer to this question has a great bearing on his or her success or failure. There are numerous answers; in fact, there are almost as many possible answers as there are animators: money, awards, approval from family and friends, stardom, self-esteem, creative outlet, childhood fantasy, and so on. They're all valid reasons.

But I will now give you *my* (numerous) answers:

1. Boredom—I find it very entertaining and amusing to create cartoons; it keeps life interesting.
2. Fear—Fear of failure, poverty, and unemployment. A wasted life.
3. The sound of laughter—I love making people laugh; it gives me a great feeling, knowing that I'm responsible for people's enjoyment.
4. Playing God—The high I get from spending all day creating whole worlds from my imagination.

There are other reasons, of course, but those are the main ones.

I often talk to students who believe that once they get a job at Pixar, they'll be rock-star rich. That's fine, but I'm not really in it for the money. In fact, I make my own sandwiches for lunch—I'm not a gourmet, just give me food to keep me drawing; all of my clothes are secondhand; I don't have a car; and I don't do drugs—all of my profits go into my next feature film.

For me, the biggest reason is that I love to draw! I sometimes draw all day, from 6:00 in the morning to 10:00 at night—and after these all-day sessions, I feel great! Refreshed! Like that was the best day of my life! I'm reborn! I don't exactly know why, but to me drawing is an exercise in self-discovery—I'm trying to see how good I can get and to experiment with how interesting I can make my drawings and my story.

Gourmets are obsessed with what they put into their mouths—I love what goes into my eyes; you could call me a visual gourmand.

I think that if I were ever arrested (though I can't imagine what for) and thrown in jail,

I would thrive there. I'd finally have some peace and quiet to draw my films. If I did a five-year stretch, I'd emerge from prison with two feature films completed—how cool is that? I'd be the happiest guy in prison.

In fact, I'm so obsessed with the pencil that I fantasize that I will die because of the pencil. I plan out little scenarios of my death. Perhaps I'll be drawing such long hours that I fall asleep at the drawing board, and my head falls to the table, with the sharp

end of the pencil piercing my eye and going into my brain.

Or perhaps I'll be walking across my studio, I won't see the pencil on the floor, I'll step on it, my feet will slip out from under me, and I'll crack my skull on my art table. Or after working late one night in bed, I'll fall asleep and roll over, piercing my heart with a discarded pencil.

Ironic, isn't it? It's like they say: "You live by the pencil, you die by the pencil."





Chapter 2

# MY HISTORY



## Early Influences

My earliest memory of animation—and remember, this was many years ago, and I don't have a photographic memory—is watching cartoons on TV at the age of 5.

I loved the craziness, the surrealism, and the humor of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Popeye. Then along came the Disney shows—*The Wonderful World of Disney* and *The Mickey Mouse Club*. (I was a card-carrying member.)

I'm always amazed at the huge influence Walt Disney has had on our culture. If he had only created Mickey Mouse, that would be huge, but he also pioneered animated features and paved the way for the Pixar, DreamWorks, and Blue Sky films of today. He was also one of the first to show how merchandising can significantly increase a studio's income.

His studio was the first to move full force into television, at a time when all of the other film studios were deathly afraid of electronic media. And, of course, he was the guy who reinvented and reinvigorated

amusement parks. Plus, he knew how to synthesize all of these elements—TV, films, amusement parks, merchandising—into building a huge brand of cartoons and fantasy. Mr. Walt Disney gets my vote as the greatest entertainer of the twentieth century.

So I would draw from memory all of these cartoon characters that I loved so much. But I never had enough paper, and I was forced to steal old envelopes and typing paper from my folks to draw on.

I remember one time very clearly—I must have been around 7 or 8—when my dad gave me one of those phone notepads that was about 4 × 3 inches because I was always running out of paper. I was so excited! Finally, I could draw everything I wanted and never run out of paper! (There were about 100 sheets in the pad.)

So I started with the simple things—cars, trucks, airplanes, houses, animals, trees—and then I got to people, and I realized that there weren't enough sheets of paper for all my planned drawings. "Wow," I thought, "I'm going to need a lot more of these notepads."