



Fear Factor

JACK CHICK IS THE WORLD'S MOST PUBLISHED AUTHOR—AND ONE OF THE STRANGEST **BY ROBERT ITO**

FOR THE LAST FIVE DECADES Jack T. Chick has been writing tiny comic books about damnation. In the pocket-size tracts, people are stabbed, burned alive, and eaten by snakes. There is cannibalism and human sacrifice. The apocalyptic works are equal parts hate literature and fire-and-brimstone sermonizing, with a tough-guy Christ—"Jesus is not a weak fairy," he writes—as protagonist. Chick, a funda-

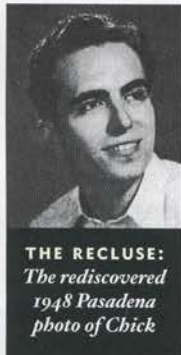
mentalistic Christian and president of a Rancho Cucamonga-based publishing company, wants his books to scare the hell out of you.

The format is inviting—so small, so handy, mostly pictures. The first panel immediately plunges you into the action, as a paramedic huddles over Bobby, a teen who just overdosed on speed (we know this because the paramedic tells the crowd "HE OVERDOSED ON SPEED!").

"Wow! What a drag!" thinks one bystander. An elderly man preaches the gospel to a kid and is mocked and beaten by a man in a leisure suit. The bully drives off with the kid; their car is immediately hit by a speeding train. "YAAAAAAA!" they scream. In the next panel they're in the Inferno.

The experience of reading a Chick tract can seem disarmingly familiar. In many ways the stories adhere to the standard rules and visual language of comic books: When people are angry or stressed, huge beads of sweat shoot off their foreheads. Bad men say things like "@#\$%!"; exclamation points are everywhere. Characters, with their side parts, bell-bottoms, and stilted language, have the stuck-in-time quality of *Archie* comics. But behind the reader-friendly style is a disturbing, hateful message: There are demons hiding everywhere. There are devil worshipers in the federal government and gay men plotting to taint the nation's blood supply with AIDS. The pope is an agent of Satan. So is your next-door neighbor.

With more than 500 million copies of his 142 books in print, including translations in more than 100 languages, Chick is the world's most published living author. Even if you haven't heard his name, you've probably seen his works, handed out on subways and campuses or left behind in diners and bus stations. His international fan base includes missionaries, academics, and clergymen as well as a legion of collectors who meticulously analyze every tract and newsletter he releases. Last year his 35-employee company made nearly \$3 million in sales, mostly to churches, youth groups, and evangelically inclined individuals. His books have been displayed at the Smithsonian, parodied in *National Lampoon*, and praised by underground comic artists like Daniel Clowes and Robert Crumb. When Clowes, whose screenplay for the indie film *Ghost World* received an Academy Award nomination, was in college, he read



THE RECLUSE:
The rediscovered
1948 Pasadena
photo of Chick

80 Chick tracts in one sitting. “By the end of the night I was convinced I was going to hell,” he says. “I had never been so terrified by a comic book.” According to media watchdog group the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which has kept a running file on Chick for three decades, this is precisely his aim. “Everything’s a big, frightening conspiracy with him,” says Louis Giovino, the league’s communications director. “They’re done to scare.”

If his books inspire terror, the man himself inspires intense curiosity. In many ways Chick is the Thomas Pynchon of the Christian comic crowd: He hasn’t granted an interview since 1975. Until his Pasadena Playhouse class photo was discovered in the course of researching this story, the only published image of him was from a high school yearbook. Accounts of his life, including articles in the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Village Voice* and two published books, only give an approximate date of birth, sometime in the early 1920s. There have been rumors that he is dead, or never existed.

After a career in which his books have been banned in Canada and denounced by everyone from the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles to the popular magazine *Christianity Today*, Chick, now 78, has been working for ten years on a massive, all-consuming project: a film version of the Bible, which he plans to exhibit in churches in this country and on the sides of buildings in South America. Friends describe the almost-finished project as his swan song, his final, greatest work.

Chick’s primary contact with the outside world is his secretary, Karen Rockney. She is a kind, friendly woman who always takes my calls and answers my questions—even if it’s to tell me that she can’t answer my questions. Through letters, faxes, and e-mails she informs me several times that I cannot see or speak with Mr. Chick. When I visit Chick Publications, she is my guide. When I go to his Glendora home, uninvited, she is the one who scolds me afterward. His reclusiveness, she tells me, is not just because of shyness. “There are many people,” she says, “who wish him harm.”

JACK CHICK WAS BORN IN HIS parents’ Boyle Heights home on April 13, 1924. His mother, Pauline Olga Freas Chick of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, was 20 at the time (40 years later she would tell her son that she had tried to have him aborted). He was a sick child, and a doctor had to lance his ears 21 times before he was a year old. After the family moved to Alhambra, Chick attended Alhambra High and was a member of the drama club. In 1942, he won a

moon, while visiting his wife’s family in Canada, he was forced to listen to Charles E. Fuller’s *Old-Fashioned Revival Hour* radio show, aired live from the Long Beach Municipal Auditorium. He found God.

Chick quickly became disillusioned with the movie industry after a visit to the 20th Century Fox lot. “[I] saw how they treated women and I said me and my wife are not going to be a part of this,” he wrote in his bimonthly newsletter. For years he dreamed of becoming a missionary, but his wife wouldn’t let him (when Lola’s aunt was a missionary in Africa, an alligator bit off the leg of a man who was carrying her across a river).

Still, the fires burned within him. Chick had come of age during L.A.’s Protestant evangelical boom of the 1930s, when flamboyant ministers like Aimee Semple McPherson and “Fighting Bob” Shuler waged holy wars on the public airwaves. After he found the Lord, he searched for ways to spread the gospel, but he was a shy man paralyzed by the thought of public speaking. In the 1950s, he heard a radio missionary explain how the

Chinese came up with the idea of using comic books as Communist propaganda after seeing their popularity in the United States. He remembered how, as a boy, he used to love drawing warplanes and cartoon men. The idea came to him in a flash: He would create tiny illustrated tracts that would bring readers to Christ. It was the perfect vehicle for a man of God ill suited to the pulpit. Who, after all, knows the cartoonist behind the cartoon?

He soon found work as a technical illustrator at Astro Science Corporation in El Monte, one of the scores of companies that sprouted up across L.A. during the region’s postwar aerospace boom. At night he would go home and draw. George Otis, CEO of Astro Science and a former senior executive at Learjet, financed one of Chick’s first publications and encouraged his young employee, who had doubts about whether his books would succeed. “Bill Lear and I were very close, and he was the same way about the Learjet,” says Otis. “If you invent things or create things, you’re always wondering whether they’re going to fly.”



UNDERGROUND COMICS:

No one can say Chick doesn't tackle the big subjects

two-year scholarship to the now-defunct Pasadena Playhouse School of Theater, alma mater of Gene Hackman and Dustin Hoffman. A year later he enlisted in the army and served in Australia, New Guinea, and Japan. (The biographical information for this article was gathered from interviews, Chick’s writings, and public record searches.)

At the end of the war Chick returned to the playhouse and participated in several productions, one of which was recorded—in kinescope—in the school’s third-floor television studio. While at the school he met Lola Lynn, a vivacious 21-year-old. The couple married in 1948. A foulmouthed nonbeliever, Chick proved unpopular with his Christian in-laws. On his honey-



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Chick's most popular book, *This Was Your Life!*, was published in 1964. At 21 pages, it is a masterpiece of shorthand horror. By the second panel, the Scotchswilling, 'Vette-driving protagonist has dropped dead of a heart attack. "Review his life!" the Lord commands, and an angel produces a massive CinemaScope screen in the night sky. The man watches scenes from his wasted life, in which he tells filthy stories, leers at blonds ("ummm nice!" he says to himself), and thinks about a ball game in the middle of church.

This Was Your Life! created a template—sin, damnation, the possibility of redemption—for scores of future tracts. The artist's formula and drawing style have changed little in five decades. When an archivist at the Pasadena Playhouse began rooting through old boxes in the late '90s, she discovered drawings that he had done in 1948. The single-panel cartoons revealed the same perspiring characters, pop-eyed faces, and 1940s Sunday-comics sensibilities of his current tracts.

"He's not worried about impressing other cartoonists, which is kind of what motivates a lot of cartoonists to pick up their chops a little bit," says Clowes. "There's something really interesting about seeing a cartoonist not develop at all." Art Spiegelman, who won a Pulitzer Prize for *Maus*, a graphic novel about the Holocaust, is less kind. "It makes me despair about America," says Spiegelman, "that there are so many people who read these things."

Chick's choice of medium was not that odd—for the 17th and 18th centuries. He comes from a grand tradition of pamphleteers, writers like Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, and Thomas Paine, who exploited the new technology of movable type to reach the masses in previously unimaginable numbers. Starting in the 1640s, pamphlets about everything from religious reform and phrenology to the injustice of the Stamp Act were everywhere,

their authors at the forefront of the world's first true media boom. In many ways the pamphlets of that era functioned much like today's Weblogs. Chick, however, has done bloggers one better, finding ways to get his message to places still untouched by the Internet. Missionaries regularly take his tracts into the world's most isolated regions—and pay Chick for the privilege, at about 14 cents a tract.

While Chick's stripped-down style was well suited to tracts, he realized he needed a more accomplished artist for *The Crusaders*, a full-color, full-size comic starring Tim Clark, an ex-Green Beret who found Jesus after surviving a VC ambush, and James Carter, a former drug lord and "ex-

pert in street fighting trained as a black militant." In 1972, he hired Fred Carter, an African American painter and illustrator from Danville, Illinois, who had studied at Chicago's American Academy of Art. Carter's realistic illustrations and distinctive inking style made him a perfect fit for the series' action sequences and

exotic locales. Witch burnings and ritual murders are captured in gleefully visceral detail, while the books' sexual overtones—as well as scantily clad biblical sirens like Eve, Delilah, and Semiramis—have led critics to describe Carter's work as "spiritual porn."

At once, the artwork improved tenfold. Chick, however, kept Carter's name off all of the comics. Rumors and speculation about the identity of the so-called good artist at Chick Publications began to spread. For years fans theorized that Carter's work was produced by a team of illustrators, or an unknown Filipino man dubbed "Artist J." Chick finally revealed Carter's identity in 1980, claiming that the artist is "rather shy and declines to put his name on his art."

In 1979, Chick and Carter embarked on a series of *Crusaders* comics about the life of Alberto Rivera. According to the



SEX ED: These kids don't know Jack

comics, Rivera was a former Jesuit priest who had left the Catholic Church in 1967 after discovering the Vatican's plans for world domination (as well as its involvement in the Holocaust, the Jonestown massacre, and the rise of communism). Christian bookstores refused to stock them, and Catholic organizations claimed that Rivera had never been a Jesuit priest. In 1981, Chick quit the Christian Booksellers Association, stating that the Catholic Church had infiltrated the organization.

During this period, Chick became involved with a number of questionable characters. In 1984, he publicly supported the ministry of Tony Alamo, an L.A.-based cult leader who has been accused over the years of tax evasion, felony child abuse, and the theft of his late wife's corpse. In 1978, he based his antiwitchcraft comic *Spellbound* on the allegations of "former Grand Druid" Johnny Todd, who claimed that Satanists throughout the United States were routinely engaging in human sacrifice. Todd was later exposed as a fraud. Meanwhile, pastors and churches continued to denounce Chick and his tracts. "The churches thought he was just another crackpot," says Richard Lee, a former minister and longtime friend of Chick. "I think that hurt his feelings a lot."

Despite the criticism, Chick kept up his anti-Catholic rants. According to Fuller Theological Seminary evangelism professor Chapman Clark, as mainstream Evangelicals in the 1950s moved away from fire-and-brimstone tactics to a softer approach to soul gathering, Chick's message became stuck in time. "The tracts really reflect the church's separatist, we/they mentality of the '50s," says Clark. "I don't think that [the tracts] have evolved with a sensitivity to where the culture has gone." While Chick managed to skewer just about all of the world's major religions over the years, he saved his most hate-filled language for the Vatican, a reflection of the fundamentalist movement's long-standing animosity toward the Catholic Church. For many of Chick's ilk, the Inquisition is recent history, the existence of the Illuminati indisputable fact.

Chick completed the final Rivera book in 1988 and quietly retired the series. Lola



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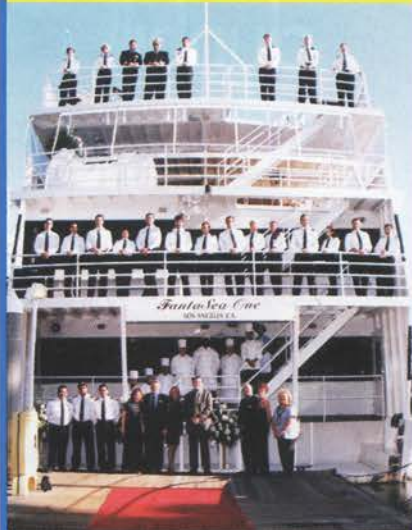
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passed away in 1998; his daughter died three years later. For the past ten years he has been working on his Bible film project, which many see as a deliberate move away from conspiracy theories. "Nobody likes being the kook," says Dwayne Walker, the Christian film director of *Bible Madness* and *Spring Break Missionaries*. "He wants to get back to where he started, to make a movie that's just pure gospel."

The movie will consist of a series of oil paintings that the camera will dramatically pan across to give the appearance of movement. Carter has completed most of the paintings, which are being stored in the offices of Chick Publications. Fans have encouraged me to try to see them. Kurt Kuersteiner, Web master of the Jack Chick Museum of Fine Art (an online fan site that carries news and reviews of nearly all of Chick's works), describes them as modern masterpieces. "There is this beautiful picture of people languishing in hell, with a dragon's head blowing hot flames," he says.

Kuersteiner's enthusiasm is evangelical, and I feel myself being drawn, like an acolyte, to Chick's desert lair.

CHICK PUBLICATIONS IS IN A strip mall in Rancho Cucamonga, sandwiched between a hardware shop and a carpet store. Farther north on Archibald Avenue is a large empty lot peppered with big red ants and jackrabbit droppings. The office's front window—a huge pane of black reflective glass—is cracked in several places.

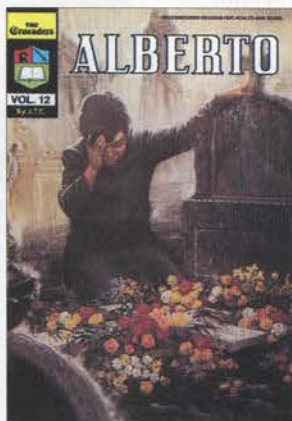
I am greeted by Chick's secretary, Rockney, a sweet middle-aged woman wearing slacks and a floral-print blouse. The lobby is tiny, barely large enough for six people. It resembles a dentist's waiting room, but there are no chairs. Along one wall are three carousels full of Chick tracts; on the opposite wall are shelves of books with names like *Unveiling Islam* and *The Secret History of the Jesuits*. The door in the back, which is closed, has a sign on it

that reads PLEASE DO NOT ENTER UNLESS INVITED and a caricature of a winking, guffawing demon.

We go through the door. The hallway is poorly lit, but even in the dim light the paintings along its walls are creepily glorious. A beautiful blond angel springs from the dying body of an elderly woman. A red-eyed wraith hovers over a sleeping child. Rockney points out the texture in each painting. Carter, using some type of putty or modeling paint, has rendered drops of rain that look like real water, and lava with

pits and crags. There are grimacing warriors and a charging woolly mammoth. The paintings have the 3-D, hyperreal beauty of Viewmaster pictures. "Fred Carter has been blessed," says Rockney.

When we return to the lobby, she tells me about the film. There are going to be more than 250 paintings in the hour-long production. As I'm speaking with her, a pair of elderly men rush out the door behind me. Fans have debated the legitimacy of depictions of



LAPSED CATHOLIC:
*Chick's Alberto Rivera series
torches the Vatican*

Chick and eyewitness accounts, which have painted him variously as fat and bald, a "dead ringer for Slim Pickens," and an elderly Jon Lovitz. Is one of these men Jack? I realize I wouldn't know even if I saw their faces.

After several more interview requests and subsequent denials, I try to meet Chick at his home. I locate his address on a real estate search engine, put on slacks and a white shirt, and pack a tape recorder and a notebook full of questions. I place a copy of *This Was Your Life!* in my shirt pocket for him to sign.

On the way there I think about some of the things that people have told me about Chick. He likes videos (*The Godfather* series, *Shaka Zulu*) and small dogs. He enjoys James Clavell's books (*Shogun* and *Tai-pan* are favorites) and steak dinners at Sizzler and Black Angus. He doesn't listen to much music. I've picked up hundreds of details from *The World of Jack T. Chick*, an obsessively researched book by Bay Area-based fan Bob Fowler that catalogs the tiniest

and seemingly most insignificant Chick facts. I've also enjoyed Dan Raeburn's eminently more readable *The Imp*, a funny, scathing critique that both documents and has spawned controversies within Chick fandom. Both writers, without ever having met Chick, view him with a mix of disgust, humor, and grudging respect.

When I approach his home, his garage door is open, an American flag hanging inside. A silver Cadillac is parked outside, and a large welcome mat is laid out in front of the house. I ring the bell and wait.

Chick's new wife, Susie, answers the door. She is Chinese, pretty and young, with short bangs and tied-back hair. She is wearing a white T-shirt with a small American flag design on the front. I identify myself, and she tells me that Chick is sleeping. Can I come back in a couple of hours, I ask, after he's woken up? She doesn't really answer but tells me that he doesn't do interviews. I stall for time, making small talk. I ask again

if it would be all right to come back in a bit. "I don't think so," she says. "No."

I talk to the neighbors. It's a nice day, sunny, and there are lots of people out. Across the street one resident says he has seen Chick but has never really spoken to him. "We'll smile and wave and that's about it," he says. Chick's next-door neighbor tells me that he gives tracts to her son, who is in the marines. "He's friendly but keeps to himself," she says. "Not too many people know him." I tell her that he is the world's most published living author. "Oh really!" she says. "Now, see? I didn't know that." I am in Archie's Riverdale. It's hard to believe that one could live in such an idyllic place for four decades and still believe such horrible things about so many people.

I get lunch at a nearby McDonald's to kill time, then return to Chick's home. The garage door is now closed. I ring the bell, and Susie answers. "I asked him," she

says, "and he says he can't talk to you. I'm sorry." She seems slightly friendlier this time. I ask her a few more questions, then give her a business card, "in case Mr. Chick changes his mind." "I'm sorry, but he doesn't do interviews," she says again.

On Monday, Rockney sends me an e-mail. "Mr. Chick did tell me this morning that you had visited his home this weekend twice," she writes. "He understands that you are just doing your job, but I don't think you would like people showing up at your home on your day off, either." She

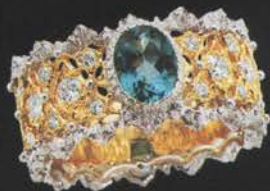
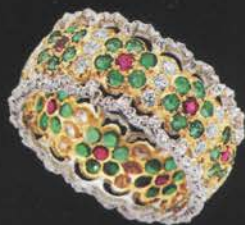
goes on to tell me that he has become very reluctant to meet with reporters after similar run-ins. "He said to tell you he was sorry, but he just cannot meet with you. He thanks you for your understanding."

Everyone who has met Chick has his own theories about his reclusive nature. "He really is a shy person," says Lee. Kuersteiner feels that Chick genuinely fears for his life: "He has stated in the past

that the Jesuits would gladly see him dead if they could arrange it." Raeburn thinks "he's probably paranoid," although not in a strictly pejorative sense. "People just want to be able to walk down the street and not be bothered," he says.

Personally, I think Chick wants to be a star, with the fame of the Jimmy Swaggarts and Billy Grahams, yet hates himself for having such vain urges. On one hand he plasters the Chick brand name on everything he produces. Why not call his comics *Heavenly Tracts*, after all, or his company "Give God the Glory Publications"? The Jack T. Chick brand is synonymous with his products in ways that few media moguls' names are. Yet he holes up in a small office in Rancho Cucamonga, as his works circle the globe. He hides, listening to an angel on his shoulder whisper pride, pride, pride, the one sin guaranteed to get a body tossed into the piping-hot lake of fire. (L.A.)

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