

# Enjoying some colorful memories

## KIDS STUFF

By William Feldman

Welcome to *Kids Stuff*. Today's column, Part 1, includes a tribute as well as a trip down memory lane with Roy Freeman, son of the late author, lithographer and artist Don Freeman. This interview was unique in that it took place over the Internet, as Roy resides in Switzerland.

Who does not remember the 1968 book *Corduroy*? Corduroy is that lovable teddy bear wearing the green overalls with a large button missing. Believe it or not, Corduroy just celebrated his 40th anniversary. I received an e-mail about the new release of *Corduroy* on DVD, and I thought that since everyone has read this book one time or another, it would make a great interview.

Well, I found out that Don passed away; however, his son Roy has kept his legacy alive by creating Web sites and answering news media requests. Don published 31 books for children throughout his life. Roy has published three of his father's books after he died.

Donald Forward Freeman, born Aug. 11, 1908, went by the pen name of Don Freeman. Don's mother passed away when he was about 5 years old from a long illness. His father gave Don and his older brother Warren over to a guardian. It is not really known why Don and Warren were orphaned; however, Roy imagines it was because Don's father had to hold his job down and trying to be mom and dad might have been too much for him to handle. Moreover, Don's father would happily come and visit both boys every other weekend.

Don writes about this time in his life in a humorous way in an unpublished autobiography *Jigsaw Summer*, and in his published autobiography *Come One, Come All!* Don in his younger years met Lydia Cooley and they married. Don and Lydia gave birth first to Christopher, who died shortly after birth. Roy was their second child.

As for his education and some of his training, he graduated from The Principia School in St. Louis, Mo., in the late 1920s and attended a summer school program at the San Diego School of Fine Arts, which was a graduation gift from his grandmom. However, he did not quite make it through the summer program:



He was kicked out for drawing. If they only had had a crystal ball to see Don's future!

Roy quoted his dad from his book *Come One, Come All!* "... a series of cartoons of the various members of the life class and used the edge of my paper for that purpose. When the director came around to criticize he was furious at my frivolity. Apparently he didn't believe anyone should enjoy life in a life class."

Moreover, one of his classmates was Lydia Cooley, whom he later married in New York. The rest of the summer he played trumpet in and around San Diego until he had enough pocket money to hitchhike to New York. Once in New York he studied at the Art Students League, where he encountered his mentors, John Sloan and Harry Wickey.

The name Ash Can School was only applied to this movement much later. At this time, it was simply realistic art. The Ash Can School, according to the Internet, is a realist artistic movement that came into prominence in the United States during the early 20th century and is best known for works portraying scenes of daily life in New York's poorer neighborhoods.

With sharing this brief background history with my readers, you will come to realize that Don always drew from his own life experiences, and his own fantasies became his sources.

Don's creative talents utilized chalk powder with a lot of his art work. Roy explained to me that in the 1950s his father had an idea about having a roll of large paper, on an easel, connected to a foot motor so he could control how and when the paper roll would be taken up as the paper was drawn across. This way, Don could continue to draw while standing up in front of an audience and just keep drawing and drawing as he told stories.

Don knew Manuel Tolegian, an inventor, and together they created a motorized easel. Manuel called his invention the "power easel" and patented it. With his power easel, Don went around the U.S. giving these "chalk talks." He used large pieces of chalk, accompanied by background music that Don taped together.

A special part of many of these shows was when he used fluorescent chalk and an ultraviolet light so that the chalks glowed in the dark. Moreover, especially in his children's books, Don's artistic tools were oil crayons, color pencil, pen and ink, and charcoal. However, illustra-



In this photo from a long, long, long, time ago, Roy, 5 years old, and his dad, Don, are having a relaxing father-and-son moment.

tions in an unpublished book, *Cattiva*, are done with chalk.

In 1951, Don and Lydia wrote and illustrated their first book for children, *Chuggy and the Blue Caboose*. Lydia was on text; Don was on illustrations.

"Marjorie Rankin, the librarian at the Santa Barbara Library, encouraged Don to send *Chuggy* to a publisher," Roy said. "When Don asked which publisher, Marjorie said, 'Why not try for the best? May Masee at The Viking Press.'"

Roy wanted me — and his dad's readers — to know that Don was an extremely creative artist. Each of his children's books was illustrated differently.

"He simply could not do the same thing twice," Roy said. "Also, he insisted on doing all color separations himself, even in an era when most artists let the publisher do the color separations."

Don's color illustrations were created as four black illustrations: one for blue, red, yellow and black, Roy added.

"The color picture of how all these looked when printed together existed only in Don's mind," he said. "This was probably why he always wanted to be at the printers when his final color illustrations went to press. It was only Don who knew what the 'correct' colors should look like."

Roy explained that his father was first a sketcher on the streets of New York and then an illustrator for the New York

Theater in the 1930s and '40s.

"During this time he also painted many oil paintings," he said. "Some of these are very well known."

Believe it or not, Roy has seen some of them only as black and white photographs.

"Don was an avid writer throughout his life. In the late forties, Don wrote his autobiography, *Come One, Come All*, which was published in 1949," he said. "He focused on putting his sketches and drawings together as stories or books. Today these are 'graphic novels.'"

This process became popular in the early '50s into creating books for children, he continued.

In one of Don's lectures ([www.don-freeman.info/childrens-books/dons-lecture/](http://www.don-freeman.info/childrens-books/dons-lecture/)), he said: "I have never sat down in front of my drawing board and wondered what story I should do next. Stories come chasing after me from out of the blue. I am patient to the point of permitting a story to take its time in forming in my mind, then whichever characters takes my fancy first, I grab hold and follow where it leads me. Hardly ever do I start out with a moral, but sometimes after the book is printed and is out, I discover to my amazement that a moral has somehow sneaked in!"

I read that when World War II broke out, Don used his talents to work for the war effort.

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## STUFF

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Roy elaborated on this topic for me by mentioning that Don was in the Army in Camp Gruber, Mo., and drew for the military newspaper. He also painted a series of strong paintings for the book, *Our Flying Navy*, published in 1944 by the Office of Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. (12 paintings, four drawings by Don, plus works of seven other artists), MacMillan Press.

How did growing up during the Depression affect his life? Don came to New York, penniless, actually a few days before the stock market crashed. Don was an artist in New York during the Depression. This meant there was little money around, and he got by with what he had — but he was always in good humor and spirit.

Roy pointed out to me that in an interview in 1965 with Betty Hoag — a writer involved with the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution — his dad felt his financial status was like living through the Depression. Moreover, Don thought it was a matter of everybody else at a higher financial status coming down to his level. He was content just knowing

he had some way of earning a living. As Don once stated, “But it was just such a bare living.”

I know from my intense studies of history in high school that the early 1900s to mid 1900s were filled with prejudice. I was curious if Don ever experienced prejudice.

“The Freemans arrived in one of the first ships from England shortly after 1620 due to religious prejudice in Great Britain,” Roy explained. “Also, Don was fervently concerned with equal rights. Most of his friends were African-American or Jewish, or both. He was very upset when a good friend and neighbor of his, Beauford Delauney, was racially prejudiced.”

Don covered the 1960 civil rights debate in Washington, D.C., and was so depressed by the murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that he stopped working on children’s books for a while. Don and Lydia were politically left-wing socialists and just squeaked by the McCarthy era without personally being directly affected. They were lucky.”

On the personal side:

- Don illustrated at least 37 books by other authors.

- Don enjoyed the work of two artists: Daumier’s drawing and the

Berlin-born George Grosz (July 26, 1893 – July 6, 1959), who caricatured everyday people in a very natural way. Grosz emigrated to the U.S. in 1932 and became an art teacher.

- Don Freeman passed away Feb. 1, 1978.

Next week, Part 2 will discuss Roy’s father’s legacy being carried on for a new generation of Corduroy fans, the deeper meanings behind the words of Corduroy, and about the Corduroy celebrating his 40th anniversary.

### CRYPTOGRAM

ARLFEAK RLENWV CLZRH L  
ARLFEAK CNWP LWP JSPK

Hints: A is H; J is B; C is M; P is D

### CONTEST WINNERS

The two winners to an eight-week session at Baby Power Forever Kids, located at 402 2nd Street Pike (Hampton Square Mall) in Southampton (215-355-5053), are: Joan Hucke and Jo-El Alba-Steinmetz. ●●

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## Benefit set for family of fallen officer

A benefit will take place on Saturday, Oct. 4, at the Ancient Order of Hibernians Division 87 hall, at 2171 Wakeling St., for the family of Isabel Nazario, the Philadelphia police officer who died in the line of duty earlier this month.

The benefit will run from 2 to 6 p.m. Tickets cost \$25, which includes draft beer, wine, food and entertainment.

Money will also be raised through T-shirt sales and a Chinese auction. The public is invited to donate an item.

Nazario died on Sept. 5. She was a passenger in a police vehicle that was pursuing a suspected stolen car in West Philadelphia. The teenage driver crashed the car into the police vehicle, and Nazario died of her injuries.

To purchase tickets, donate an item or for more information, call Matthew McIntyre at 215-704-6302 or Sharon McIntyre at 215-266-3726. ●●