

OFF THE WALL

BY DALE WHITE

A fat lady with her dog stands in front of the Evanshire Drug Store, chatting with a gentleman who has just purchased cigarettes and a newspaper. She glances down the block at the opening of an alley, from which has emerged a little boy, heavily bundled in a cap and coat.

"Here comes that Wilson boy — all alone as usual," she comments.

Although the little Wilson boy appears to be quite alone to her, around him are all kinds of lurid creatures of his imagination — a cloaked ghoul, a prehistoric bird, a mammoth monster with tentacle legs. They saunter along like faithful puppies.

The fat lady, the drug store, the man with the cigarettes, the boy and his imaginary creatures are all parts of a Gahan Wilson cartoon, one of the numerous drawings in his 1978 collection *And Then We'll Get Him*.

What makes the picture so frighteningly funny is its element of truth. Wilson, 52, grew up in Evanston, Ill. (not quite Evanshire, but close) — and although he was not truly considered to be an odd fellow, he did seclude himself (with the assistance of his trusty pen) in a world of demonic and hideous creatures.

A painter rendering a tree on his canvas with an assortment of non-existent spiders and serpents in another of his comics tells a little girl, "I paint what I see, child."

And that's exactly what Gahan Wilson does. His sense of humor is amazingly perverse, shiveringly morbid. He finds something to laugh about in all sorts of wicked and uncommon things: hospital patients connected to i.v.s, hanging judges, mad scientists, fallen angels, emotionless business executives, man-eating plants.

"Well, I always wanted to be a cartoonist," Wilson says. His voice on the telephone is deep, even and precise — rather like Vincent Price's. "Forever and ever. At my mom's place recently she came across something that I once did. It was a comic book with stuff similar to what I do now — monsters, rockets, that sort of thing. There were balloons over the characters' heads. And instead of words in the balloons there were just scrawls. It was sort of pre-literate. I tried commercial schools but I found them to be very superficial. I wanted someone to teach me to draw as well as I could. I knew no one could teach me to be funny. I was the only cartoonist who was admitted at the Institute (Art Institute of Chicago) at that time (1948-1952). Whenever someone came in requesting a cartoonist, they sent him to me. Now I've heard the whole place has gone to hell and they've even got a cartoonists' course in the curriculum."

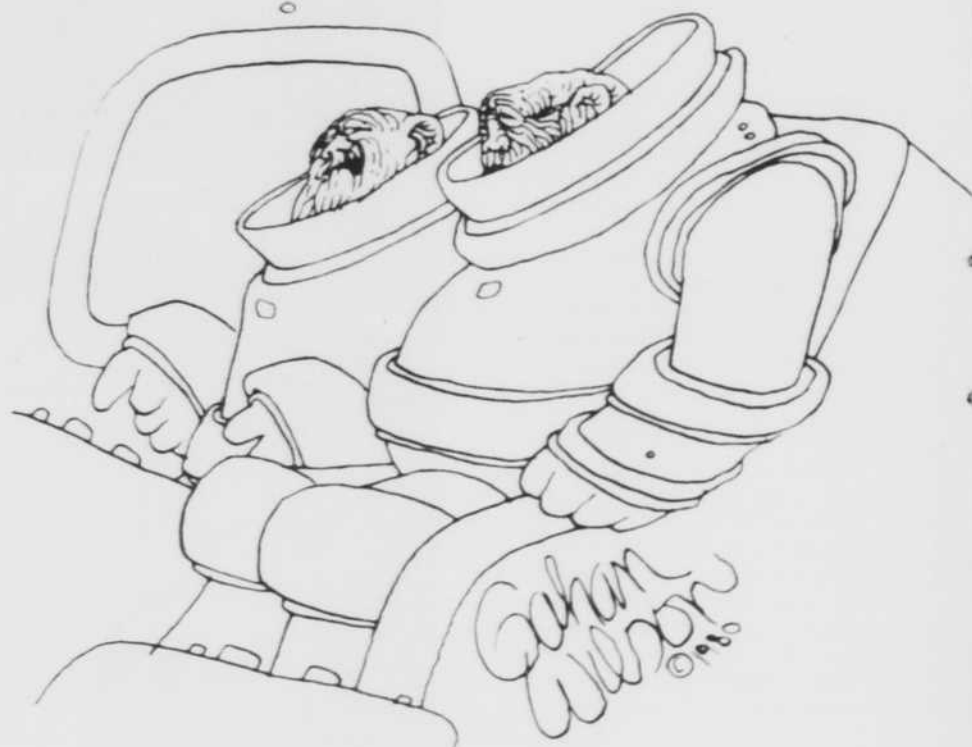
Although he is tall, sandy-haired and blue-eyed, Wilson suspects the public pictures him as "little, wrinkled and green . . . Or they think I'm English and evil, a Dr. Moriarty. That's okay with me. In time, I'll probably turn into that."

A descendant of P. T. Barnum and William Jennings Bryan, Wilson insists he "was not born, although people keep asking me that. I always tell them, I was constructed during the 12th century by a mad scientist, and sent forward in time and placed in the body of a cartoonist."

Actually, Wilson was stillborn. "They were about ready to drop me and forget the whole thing when the G.P. rushed in and dipped me in hot and



"I just don't understand it, Captain. Equal shares of food and water to all, yet those two thrive while we wither away."



"Well, it won't be long, now!"

Wierd & Wonderful

Gahan Wilson

iced water alternately and kept whacking away at me and got me breathing," Wilson explains. "There must have been brain damage."

A devotee of Carl Jung, Wilson believes there is little difference between existing and imaginary monsters. He considers fast food stores and self-service gas stations parts of "a massive plot to prepare us to live on space-ships." He says he has "no idea" why nobody has sent him to a psychiatrist and happily disclaims rumors that he spends two months each year in a psychiatric ward.

But why is he so — different?

"I don't know what to say."

Well, then — what led to his style of comic art?

"I don't know what to say. Dick Tracy impressed me when I was a child. I never could figure out how that cartoonist did it. Those faces were just scrawls but he could get such expression out of those scrawls. It's the best comic strip that ever happened. *Krazy Kat* also impressed me. In the movies, W. C. Fields. In fine arts, Goya. It's an endless list."

Isn't his humor close to that of Charles Addams?

"We're coming from the same area. Addams was more influenced by the movies of Karloff and Lugosi, because of the Sixties we're pooled together. I was influenced by Frankenstein and Dracula also — but more often, most of my material comes from TV news. The news itself is so grotesque and bizarre. It gives me material that is much more productive, stimulating."

His humor also has been compared to that of Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain and Woody Allen — and such diverse publications as *Playboy*, *The New York Times*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *New Yorker*, *Collier's*, *Look*, *Punch*, *Esquire*, *Paris Match*, *Audubon* and *Gourmet* call on him to add a little life (if that is the correct word) to their pages.

"When I started out I had a lot of trouble. Editors thought my stuff was funny and they'd laugh. But they'd say that their readers wouldn't understand it. There are still some old stuffy magazines that won't buy it. But most publications respect their readers' intelligence more now and I'm able to give it my best shot . . . I keep in mind the intended magazine before drawing something because each one's different. Each one has a different voice and a different way of life. *The New York Times* has a certain image and then *Playboy* has another image. Like when I do something for *National Lampoon*, I make sure it's in bad taste."

He drew a daily newspaper strip "for a brief time. It was a sort of comic page. I got into editing it myself too. But I kept softening it up so I wouldn't offend all the little old ladies and I wrecked it. I got tired of doing a continuing thing every day and having to watch the thing."

His books include *Gahan Wilson's Graveyard Manner*, *The Man in the Cannibal Pot*, *I Paint What I See*, *The*



"You fool! there's no more of me! That's it! I'm the last of my species!"

Weird World of Gahan Wilson, *First World Fantasy Collection Anthology*, *Nuts*, and his latest, *Is Nothing Sacred?* He has written several volumes for children, such as *Harry, the Fat Bear Spy*, *The Bang Bang Family*, and *Harry and the Sea Serpent*.

"I've been getting into short stories. I'm in radio too. I do a regular commentary, sort of like Alfred Hitchcock, on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*."

His comic "Nuts," in which he explores common childhood fears, appears each month in *National Lampoon*. "Not all of them are drawn with my childhood in mind — but a good many. I find that it's much stronger than I think at times. At a coffee or a lecture somebody will pull me aside and ask me 'How did you know' about that very secret thing he did as a boy. I've discovered that we all went through amazingly the same things as children. And it's very touching to me. Everybody's stuffed a ruined T-shirt in a drawer, thinking his mom wouldn't find it. And every kid in history thinks he's the first to do it."

Wilson's gags must be approved by a final authority before they meet the public's eye. "The only person whose opinion I value is my wife, Nancy Winters, the novelist (*The Girl on the Coca-Cola Tray*, *Daddy*). She's a very good editor and has a good sense of humor. I'll give one to her routinely and if she says it's not funny I listen to her and ignore the idea. She's a swell writer. We both work all the time. We don't have regular jobs. We have our own jobs. We're our own supervisors so I think we work harder than people who work at regular jobs. We get up at 9:30 at the latest, take a half-hour break for lunch, and then get back to it until about 5 or 5:30. Actually, calling it work is not honest because we enjoy what we do so much. We have a little joke in the morning where we kiss each other good-bye and wish the other a good day at the office — before retreating into our separate rooms."

Then Wilson sits alone in his studio in front of his blank drawing board. The imaginary creatures surface once again and the cartoonist starts to draw what he sees.