

WHAT'S YOUR STORY, TOM LICHTENHELD?



I am a kid who loves to draw and make up silly stories, stuck in the body of a middle-aged man. When I was a kid in a kid's body (a skinny one with buck teeth), I lived in a neighborhood seven blocks from Lake Michigan, so in the summer, my brothers and I would spend all day goofing off at the beach. On weekends, my dad would drive us there in the family station wagon, but we didn't really ride *inside* the car. Instead, we'd sit on the tailgate that dropped down and we'd dangle our feet over the street below all the way to the beach. It's one of a thousand things that kids used to do which were fabulously fun at the time but we now know to be fabulously dangerous. I consider myself lucky to have lived (and survived), in a time when kids could do these sorts of dangerously fun things.

One my earliest memories is of sitting in the kitchen, drawing on a green blackboard while my mom made dinner. I remember drawing a ship, which looked like this.

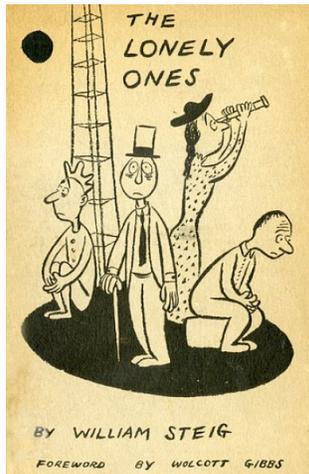


My parents encouraged my creativity, but I got lousy grades in school so the counselors didn't know what to do with me. The best career they could come up with for me was "sign painter" so I did that for a few years during high school. Learning how to perfectly draw letters two-feet high was actually great training for a career in design. After that, I made my way through art school, where I mostly learned how to talk about art and live on five dollars a week.

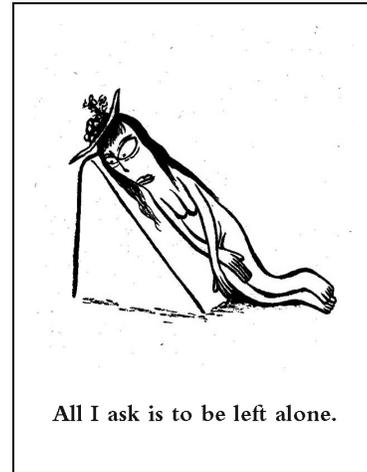
What books were favorites as a child?

I was not a great reader, but I remember being fascinated by a couple of books my parents had lying around on the coffee table when I was about 7 years old. They weren't

children's books, nor were they inappropriate for kids. In retrospect, I can see that I was attracted to them because they were odd and visual.



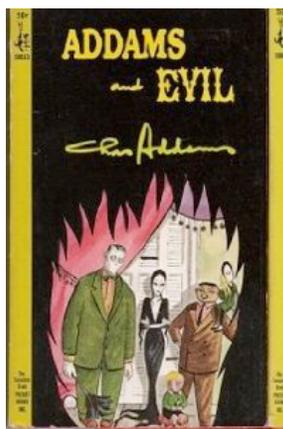
Who are all these others?



All I ask is to be left alone.

The Lonely Ones is a little chapbook of drawing by William Steig, created back when he was still a struggling artist. It's full of troubled characters in surrealistic situations, accompanied by captions that barely make sense. I found it mesmerizing. (Plus, it had some pictures of naked ladies!) See more of the book [here](#).

The other was a book of early cartoons by Charles Addams. Again, I was mesmerized, especially by the wordless cartoons, like the classic one of the skier impossibly going around a tree.



From looking at these two books you may conclude that I was a dark and sullen child, but my mom tells me I was one of the happy-go-luckiest kids she'd ever seen. I think what attracted me to these books was that their very book-ness legitimized creativity for me. Most of the other books in my grade-school life were textbooks or children's picture books, but these books were both beautiful and conceptually inventive, which told me that it's okay to be conceptual and inventive – in other words, it's okay to be an artist.

What one thing can you tell readers that nobody knows?

My wife, Jan, is instrumental in every phase of my book making. I know it sounds like a cliché, but none of this would happen without her. In addition to providing moral support, organizational skills, bookkeeping expertise and scheduling logistics, she's an excellent editor and creative director. In particular, she's good at writing the ending of a story. Case in point, I was recently whining to her about my inability to come up with a good ending for a story. She not only came up with a perfect solution in an instant, but she seemed to do it as a tertiary thought, all the while looking out the window in search of a fox who'd been making tracks through our yard lately. Thank you Jan, and thank you, fox.

If you weren't a writer, what would you like to be?

When I was a kid, I told my parents I wanted to either be a clown or an artist for National Geographic (because they get to draw all those cool cut-away views of pyramids and stuff). Now, I sort of do both those things.

What advice do you have for aspiring young readers and writers?

Not everyone can be, or wants to be, an author. But being a better writer is important no matter what job you dream of, because better writers are better communicators, and better communicators are better speakers, which means they're the ones who usually end up standing in front of a group of people telling them what to do. So, if you want to be the boss, start by being a better writer

What's the hardest part about writing a book?

Coming up with an ending. (See above)

Is there a question you want to answer that we haven't asked?

How do you get to be a good artist?

By drawing -- plain old pencil-on-paper drawing. And the best thing to draw is humans or animals in motion. If you can capture the fluidity and grace of a dog running in as few strokes as possible, there's a pretty good chance you'll be able to draw the house your dog is running toward.