

I was first introduced to Jim Woodring by Gil Kane in 1986. At the time, Jim was a storyboard artist at the animation studio Ruby-Spears, where he worked with Gil. Gil, who can be a relentless proponent of discoveries, insisted that I meet Jim, whom he told me was a great artist as well as a great human being. Against my own better judgment — why would a great artist, much less a great human being, work for a second-rate animation studio, I wondered — I got together with Jim and discovered that Gil was, as usual, a fine judge of art and character. Like many people who complain of intense alienation from their fellow man, I learned that Jim navigates better than most in our dog-eat-dog world social order, and like many artists who profess modesty, falsely or otherwise, Jim is indeed a virtuoso artist and craftsman.

In order to maintain his creative sanity while working in animation, Jim published a little Xeroxed "autojournal" titled *Jim*, a fabulous showcase for his idiosyncratic and visionary comics. I immediately inquired about publishing Jim as a comic, and the first of four issues, comprising new and reprinted work, came out in 1987. Subsequently, Jim's work appeared in *Weirdo*, *Prime Cuts*, *Whole Earth Review*, and *The Kenyon Review*. Tundra published six issues of *Tantalizing Stories*, which was half Woodring and half Mark Martin. In February of 1993, *The Book of Jim* came out, collecting the best from the four issues of Jim, and a brand new quarterly Jim comic debuts this month.

All this publishing activity would seem to indicate that Jim is swimming in fame and wealth, but Jim appears to be very much an acquired taste. I have been told that Jim's work is disturbing, which may account for his cult status, but it is also, paradoxically, likable. Alan Moore may have put it best when he referred to Jim's work as "unsettlingly alien and intimately familiar." And as if Alan Moore weren't authority enough, I recently read an observation by Eliot that is uncannily applicable to the work of Jim Woodring, and that, I think, nicely summarizes his place in comics. Eliot is describing the "peculiar honesty" of genuine poetry:

It is merely a peculiar honesty, which, in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying. It is an honesty against which the world conspires because it is unpleasant... nothing that can be called morbid or abnormal or perverse, none of the things which exemplify the sickness of an epoch or a fashion, have this quality; only those things which, by some extraordinary labor of simplification, exhibit the sickness or strength of the human soul. And this honesty never exists without great technical accomplishment.

GARY GROTH: I'd like to start early and ask you what your upbringing was like. You grew up in California?

JIM WOODRING: I was born in Los Angeles in 1952. My father was an engineer and my mother worked at the L.A. County Coroner's office as a toxicologist. She did a lot of morbid things at that job, a lot of forensics. I recall her telling me how one of her jobs was to examine the brains of dead animals to see if they were rabid. She described peeling off the skin and putting the raw skull in acid which

dissolved the bone and left the brain.

GROTH: Jesus.

WOODRING: But my parents were actually kind of secretive, and I never really knew much about them... still don't. After my father died a few years back, my brother and I found in his house a huge cache of family documents — magazine articles about my mom, letters, photographs. It was very eerie, 'cause it made my folks seem about 10 times more real to me than they had been before. When they were young and vital they rode the crest of that post-World War II optimism. They were always going to cocktail parties and going out to plays and movies and things. They had a rich social life in our neighborhood in Burbank. In fact, my father invented an electronic babysitting device, a huge beacon which he attached to the roof of our house and which was activated by my sounds and movements in my room so he could go somewhere in the neighborhood at night and if I woke up the beacon would go off and my father from anywhere around would see it and go and check on me.

GROTH: So your father was something of an inventor?

WOODRING: Of sorts. He was very creative, very clever at making things. Our house was cluttered with cool devices of his own manufacture. His father was a bona fide inventor. He invented a lot of electrical hardware that is still in use. He invented a gopher trap you can still get in most hardware stores.

GROTH: Do you get any royalties for the gopher trap?

WOODRING: No, he sold the design and the machine that made them outright. He designed and built a tractor that hinged in the middle and had controls at each end.

GROTH: That could go both directions?

WOODRING: Not at the same time. I never understood what the purpose of it was. [Laughter.] My grandfather had a small farm in the San Fernando Valley on Magnolia near Woodman. Well, not a farm, but a small field. He raised crops, peanuts and potatoes. When my father was about 16 my grandfather gave him an 8mm movie camera for a present, and the first thing he did with it was to take the two-headed tractor out in the field, start it up and put it in gear, and put a small weight on the gas pedal so it moved very slowly forward. He then lay down in front of it with his camera so he could film the thing rolling over him; there was just enough clearance, he thought. Well, there wasn't, and the oilpan began to press his head down against the ground and his father just happened to come along in time to prevent his skull from getting crushed.

GROTH: Do you have the film?

WOODRING: No, it was thrown out — considered, I guess, too much of a reminder of a deed too shamefully stupid to go documented. But I'm proud of him for it.

GROTH: Sounds like a true Woodring.

WOODRING: Proto-Woodring. I think he had a nature similar to mine, but his was a very supportive, straight, conservative family; very hard to rebel against. I think he felt there was a straight and true path that was worth sacrificing everything to.

GROTH: So what was your childhood like? Was it entirely typical?

WOODRING: I guess not, because I recall being a child and discussing my experiences with my friends and finding out that they weren't having... I hallucinated when I was a kid. I saw apparitions when I was a child. I'd be lying in bed and I'd see large, silent, rotating faces hovering over the foot of my bed, faces that were very cartoony, actually. Big, horrible, grimacing, deeply-lined faces with their mouths open, yelling at me silently, moving their mouths rapidly. I could make these things go away very easily. There were also things that I saw when I closed my eyes that I couldn't make go away. Like a staring eyeball that I would see with my eyes open or shut sometimes. It would scare the shit out of me and I would leave my bed running to the living room, I'm sure my folks had no idea what was going on with me.

GROTH: How old would you have been when you started seeing these apparitions?

WOODRING: Three or four. I can also remember back to when I was under a year old. I verified this. They say you don't have a memory of things until two. But I can remember crawling around before I could speak. My memory started at the point where I could start understanding what people were saying to me. I can remember that. I can remember seeing my father coming into a room and saying words to me that I could understand and then him coming and picking me up and having my first sense of the world as normal, that there was order to it. And that's when I started remembering things.

GROTH: These apparitions weren't just dreams.

WOODRING: No, no, they were hallucinations. Actually they were apparitions, something different from hallucinations. They were always threatening but they became so commonplace that they didn't frighten me any more. And like I say, they were easy to get rid of — I would just turn my head and shut my eyes and look back and they'd be gone.

GROTH: How are hallucinations different from apparitions?

WOODRING: Apparitions are usually presences that come to people, usually at night, and they have a really vivid decal-like intensity, and they are people. Hallucinations are a much wider, more loosely defined spectrum of phenomena.

GROTH: You must have given this some thought. Do you have any ideas as to what you attribute these apparitions to?

WOODRING: Nope. Just some people get 'em.

GROTH: Are these purely constructs of your own mind, or do they exist?

WOODRING: No, I'm sure that they were just constructs of my own mind.

GROTH: If someone walked in the room, he wouldn't see the same thing you saw.

WOODRING: No, no. And if someone else who saw apparitions was in the room with me, they wouldn't see the same one. It's a form of hallucination.

GROTH: Have you investigated this at all?

WOODRING: Not really. But for a long time I just assumed that was part of life, that everyone had them. But aside from these visions... I guess I'd say my childhood wasn't entirely typical because I was in a state of great fear or anxiety a lot of the time.

GROTH: More than most children, you think?

WOODRING: I think so. For one thing, I was obsessed with death at a tender age. I can remember the moment when I was about 4 when I first understood what death was... at least that it meant that life would end, and that in particular *my* life would end and that there was *nothing* I or anybody else could possibly do about it. From that day until now death has been the first thing I think of when I wake up and the last thing I think of when I go to sleep. Every day.

GROTH: You must have been a gloomy child.

WOODRING: Not gloomy, but desperate. I'm still looking for a way out of this. It still doesn't seem fair that we are born to die, but I've learned to live with my anxiety and only seldom do I get deeply upset at the thought of death. But in those days I used to lie in bed thinking about death until I would throw up. And at one point I was convinced that my parents were going to kill me.

GROTH: Because of something you'd done?

WOODRING: No, just because... I didn't know why. I was so afraid all the time, and the world did not make sense to me. I would lie in bed and wonder when my folks were going to come in and do it. This went on for months and I just... I figured they weren't going to do it after all, so I stopped worrying about it. But the fear of death persisted. I was a driven boy. I spent a lot of time looking for clues. I looked behind things, around things, into things... I was searching all the time.

GROTH: Well, you can see the connection between that and the work you're doing as an adult.

WOODRING: Yeah, well, it was also a piece of the rest of my life. I was really alienated as a kid and I didn't get along well. I was really high-strung, really self-conscious, and I just didn't have any sense at all of what was normal. I would be told how to curtail my behavior and I just couldn't do it.

GROTH: What kind of behavior couldn't you curtail?

WOODRING: I couldn't stop talking. I couldn't stop myself from wandering around when I was not supposed to. I couldn't stop myself from doing things that I was not supposed to do. I remember one day my mom bought me a new pair of blue jeans and told me that since we had very little money these pants were an extravagance and I should consider myself lucky to have them. She walked out of the room and I picked up a pair of pinking shears and just cut big, jagged holes in them. And while I was doing it, I was thinking, "This is going to get me into a lot of trouble!" And it did. It was something my mom reminded me of until her dying day. It really, really made her unhappy. It was a symbol of all the trouble I caused her, and I did cause her a lot of trouble.

GROTH: Well, this alienation apparently manifested itself in rebellion. Do you think that's accurate?

WOODRING: No, not conscious rebellion, just inappropriate behavior. I just did screwy things without knowing why I was doing them and without being able to stop doing them. It's a difficult thing to describe.

GROTH: Do you think it was compulsive? You needed to do it?

WOODRING: Yeah, I would say it was compulsive; although it wasn't like ordinary compulsive behavior that has got a sort of definite theme.

GROTH: There was no design to this.

WOODRING: Yeah, It wasn't like oral compulsion or hand-washing or anything like that. It was just a real inability to bring myself in line.

GROTH: Did you ever bring yourself in line at some point?

WOODRING: Yeah, after I got married I decided I sort of needed to change the way I was living.

GROTH: But it took you that long?

WOODRING: Yeah. And it's still an ongoing process. I'm still not comfortable around people, I'm not comfortable with myself, I'm not comfortable in the world at all. [Pause.] That's not true: I am comfortable when I'm alone, when I'm in a setting that I really like. Then I'm completely comfortable. I really feel at home in settings and places where there are shadows and enigmas and certain natural aspects, if not almost all natural aspects. Going to a redwood forest doesn't mean anywhere near as much to me as going down an alley that has the right configuration of things. If I'm in a setting that has the kind of props and elements that lend me my life I can burst into euphoria, which used to be something I did all the time when I was a young adolescent. I would just trance out constantly.

GROTH: Does what gives meaning to your life have some sort of rational or coherent design that you've been able to determine?

WOODRING: Only to the extent that it may point to something intangible that I'm seeing through symbolic or reflective means. Fluorescent waves are a big symbol for me because you can't see them but they make some materials fluoresce. And the quality of light that is produced when they fluoresce is different from regular light. And I feel that in a lot of things in this world, mostly things that are out of the consensus reality, you see the reflection of things which are invisible and intangible, but which are forces that govern us. And I've always, I guess, had the instinctive feeling that the closer you can get to those forces, and the better you can understand them, the better one can govern one's life in certain essential, fundamental ways.

GROTH: Can you elaborate on these invisible forces that govern our lives? I suspect most people assume that what governs their lives are just necessary day-to-day obstacles that they have to get through — jobs and work and marriages and relationships and so on. I think you're talking about something that transcends all that.

WOODRING: Well, I guess I am, but I can't say what that is. If you look at religion, for example, you find that one thing that is common in all religions is the state of super-consciousness, whether you call it Christ consciousness or samadhi or nirvana or whatever you call it. There's evidently a state that human beings can experience where they see completely beyond this skein of unreality that we're all trapped in and it's something that people devote their lives to attaining. And they do it without *knowing* that it's there. So they must have a hint that such a thing exists before they undertake a lifelong practice of devotional

work in order to attain this. On what level it's perceived, I don't know. I think we get a closer glimpse of it in dreams. I believe in a collective unconscious and I believe that we are all connected mentally on some level — psychically or otherwise.

GROTH: Earlier you said you felt so alienated from other people, and now you're saying that you feel that there has to be some kind of powerful spiritual connection.

WOODRING: I feel alienated because I don't understand the social order. I don't understand why the people who are top dogs are top dogs and I don't understand why certain traits are considered admirable, and I don't understand why practically everything I like and am interested in is practically valueless in this culture.

GROTH: [Laughs.] Well, all that seems pretty understandable to me.

WOODRING: But just in terms of what's interesting to me, I grew up with kids who all wanted to play baseball and what I wanted to do was go look at a lizard for three hours, and there wasn't a lot of camaraderie.

GROTH: Did you become a juvenile delinquent when you were old enough to become one?

WOODRING: No. In fact I was a really good little boy. I went around and *un*-did crimes, if you can believe that. I did do a couple of irrational, destructive things that I was just moved to do... Moral judgments, I guess you could call 'em.

GROTH: How did you segue from being a difficult child to a good kid?

WOODRING: It's the same thing. When I was a difficult child I wasn't bad or rebellious or evil or destructive, I was just *out of it*. I just didn't know what the hell I was doing any of the time. I wasn't an incorrigible criminal by any means, I just didn't understand the social contract. I wasn't a part of it. I didn't know how to behave, what was right, what was wrong.

GROTH: My understanding is there was a time when you led a pretty unsavory existence, I don't know if we could chart that from when you became a garbage man — are you willing to talk about this?

WOODRING: Sure.

GROTH: Weren't you a garbage man at the age of 16 or 17?

WOODRING: No, it was the age of 19, right after high school. I had applied for the job while I was still in high school and working at the Griffith Park Merry-Go-

Round. About six months after I graduated, I got a letter from the city saying this garbage man job was waiting for me. So I went down and got the job, and it's romantic to say that being around a bunch of booze-swilling trash-haulers turned me into a swashbuckling drunk, but that isn't the case. The first time I ever drank anything at all, which was a glass of beer, I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, which was to consume alcohol. So I just got drunk every chance I got, and there were complications because I could drink a prodigious amount of liquor and stay up 'til three in the morning, sleep, get up at five — still drunk, but feeling fresh as a daisy — and go out and haul rotting trash around in the boiling sun and come home just feeling fine and repeat the process over again. I never got hangovers. I've had about three hangovers in my whole life — a life that contained about eight solid years of boozin'.

GROTH: What would cause a hangover?

WOODRING: I don't know. But every so often there would be days where I couldn't get out of bed. I felt like I'd been poured into a bed with a ladle and that I had pain twisters going out of me all over the place and I would just stay in bed all day.

GROTH: Did you drink for the first time after you became a garbage man?

WOODRING: No, before that. Right after high school. Actually, the first intoxicant I ever took was LSD, and that was when I was a really repressed kid — I was wearing Penneys short-sleeved madras shirts with a T-shirt underneath and black horn-rimmed glasses. I was a perfect innocent and somebody gave me a hit of really dirty, really strong LSD, and I had a horrible life-transforming experience which basically showed me that reality wasn't all that real. I mean, I knew how much LSD there was in that pill and there wasn't very much, it was mostly chalk and rat poison and gunpowder and whatever else they put in that stuff in those days and I realized that I had eaten a dust speck which had just wiped away the world like wiping away watercolor with a wet sponge.

GROTH: Why would it do that?

WOODRING: Well, I guess it's probably something that people who have taken LSD have in common: the sense that the world is largely illusionary. It's a sensation you get from it. You really feel like you're looking through things that are made of gauze and wind and electricity and not much else. Things don't seem very solid.

GROTH: You caught the tail end of the '60s, you were a teenager in the '60s. Did that whole countercultural period affect you?

WOODRING: Oh yeah, that's when and how I got interested in comics, for one thing. I never read comic books until the undergrounds started coming out.



GROTH: And that would have been 1967, '68?

WOODRING: Yeah.

GROTH: But you were still a geek wearing penny loafers. You weren't a hippie.

WOODRING: No, that's true, I wasn't.

GROTH: I would think that you would have naturally gravitated toward that alienated countercultural perspective that would embrace people like you.

WOODRING: Well, I just didn't have the *savoir-faire* to become a hippie; I was still basically a basket case. I liked all that stuff because it was pointing to something outside of the accepted social contract and it really did seem to be saying, "Tear down the existing order and start over again." And that appealed to me tremendously, fool that I was. But I didn't have any power, I didn't have any strength, I didn't have any way of acting out my impulses. I just read the comic books and thought, "These people are aware that there's a bigger and more sane world outside the one I'm experiencing here in Glendale." It was LSD, of course.

GROTH: What kind of a student were you in high school?

WOODRING: Lousy. I barely graduated.

GROTH: Just academically lousy.

WOODRING: Yeah.

GROTH: Is that because you have no interest in it?

WOODRING: Yeah, I did well in things that interested me. I did well in English and I did well in art class. But everything else, lousy,

GROTH: When did you first decide or have inclinations to become a cartoonist or an artist?

WOODRING: I always figured that that's what I would do because I had always drawn all my life.

GROTH: How early an age?

WOODRING: I starting drawing when I was 4 or 5 like most children. The desire to draw something that wasn't there was always of paramount importance to me. That was my goal as an artist. That's why my technique is so scattered, because I always concentrated on the content and I was trying to nail down something

that I couldn't see. I didn't even hear about Surrealism until I was in high school, and then in 1968 there was a huge retrospective of Surrealism at the Los Angeles County Art Museum and I went with a group of students. It was an experience that took me about three days to get over. It really, really floored me, I had no idea that that sort of thing had ever existed or ever been done. And it was so manifestly what I had been trying to do. It gave me an incredible amount of hope because I didn't feel like a complete anomaly. And then on the other hand it filled me with despair because this movement had many, many people in it who were doing this incredibly powerful work, these physical portraits of invisible things, work I couldn't match. And the movement had been dead for a bunch of years, this was all in the past, so I felt like I really arrived too late.

GROTH: Now, I would have thought you would have gone from high school to college, but you went from high school to being a garbage man.

WOODRING: Well, right out of high school I went to Glendale Junior College for about two months and took an art history class which I wasn't really interested in and gave that up after a while. In fact, I had the most significant hallucination of my life in this art history class. I took it as an omen that I should just get the hell out of school and stay out! [Laughs.] This hallucination was so much more interesting than the class — it seemed to have forced its way into the classroom and jumped out of the screen where these slides were being projected in order to tell me that I should be somewhere else. I felt that this image had gone to a lot of work to get into the building and get into that room and wait for the screen to turn blank and then appear at me to honk at me to go. So I did.

GROTH: Did you have a religious upbringing?

WOODRING: No, not at all.

GROTH: So your parents were —

WOODRING: My parents were Glendale Presbyterians, which means they were alcoholics.

GROTH: And you became an alcoholic.

WOODRING: I like to think I was born an alcoholic and became a practicing alcoholic.

GROTH: Right. And how long did that last?

WOODRING: About eight years.

GROTH: How destructive was that to your life?

WOODRING: Well, it hampered a lot of my own progress, but I think it's more destructive to the lives of others because I had a lot of energy and mobility while I was drunk. I could have killed people driving around drunk a million times over — that's one thing I'm really ashamed of and I'm really grateful nothing bad happened as a result of... I caused a lot of ugly scenes and hurt a lot of people's feelings and alienated a lot of friends and just did a lot of stupid, unseemly things. Sometimes I was a charming drunk and other times I was just an obnoxious drunk. And at those times I, with all the energy and ingenuity of an intoxicated misfit who suddenly feels like Jesus Christ, would do stupid, bad things.

GROTH: And this would have been in your 20s.

WOODRING: Yeah.

GROTH: Were you constantly drawing during this period?

WOODRING: As much as I could.

GROTH: What were you doing to earn money? You went from a garbage man to what?

WOODRING: I went from being a garbage man to being a cartoonist, basically. I drew some comics for *Car-Toons* magazine, which seemed like the big time to me in those days. I kept my expenses to a minimum and scrounged for cartooning jobs. That was the heyday of the faux-hippie business creep, and I met with a number of stoned middle-aged long-haired connivers who thought that if their tiny perspiring brains could only be harnessed to some stupid cartoonist the marketplace would surrender to them like a lovesick whore. I remember this one guy who had come up with an idea for a comic strip that he wanted my friend John and me to draw for him. We met him at his apartment and it was obvious from the get-go that this guy was probably a good man with an axe-handle but that he had no business messing around with ideas. He was a thug and he had one of his thug pals on hand to pretend that he worked for King Features Syndicate. It was like casting Arnold Schwarzenegger as Oscar Wilde. This guy's comic strip idea was a two-panel celebration of life's little close calls. For example, in one of them a big fat girl's boyfriend is dragging her onto a public scale; in the second panel the scale is broken and the girl is spared the humiliation. He had written literally a dozen of these things. He said to us, "Now the one thing I'm not going to tell you is the symbol I've got figured out to use at the top of this strip. It's an old symbol used to denote happiness and unhappiness on life's stage, and it's going to put this strip over the top. You'll never guess what it is, which is why I get 75% of any take, 'cause I thought of using this great symbol." I said, "It's not the comedy and tragedy masks, is it?" There was a bad silence but the guy managed to control himself enough to mutter, "No." Anyway, it didn't work out, like most of the work I tried to get in those days.

GROTH: Didn't you live in Seattle for a while around that time?

WOODRING: Well, in 1974 my mom died and I decided to get away from L.A. for a while and I moved to the woods near Everson, north of Bellingham. My friend Kevin and I rented a great little house in a bend of the South Pass Road.

GROTH: How did you survive? What did you live on?

WOODRING: We made some money by helping farmers get the hay in, or by doing other menial chores. I enjoyed that kind of thing because visiting the farmers and their families was an experience for a city kid like me. I remember this one farmwife who had decorated the house by placing glass jars of water with food coloring in them all around. It struck me as unutterably sad. I was also working for *Car-Toons* through the mail.

GROTH: Sounds pretty Spartan.

WOODRING: It was, it was. I lived on apples for a while because there was an orchard on the property. I saw a bear throwing up there once. I had practically nothing and lived on practically nothing and it was a great experience for me, the first time I had ever gotten away from the wreckage of my life so that I could look at it from afar and make some observations and choices before getting back into it.

GROTH: And how long did that last?

WOODRING: A couple of years.

GROTH: And you were constantly drawing?

WOODRING: Well... sort of. I spent a lot of time just thinking.

GROTH: How did you teach yourself to draw? Are you entirely autodidactic?

WOODRING: Well, I didn't go to art school, and the art classes I attended in high school and junior college didn't do anything for me, but I've got the collected Famous Artists correspondence school material and I've learned a lot from that.

GROTH: You took the Famous Artists course?

WOODRING: No, I bought it used at a bookstore. Also, when I was an adolescent my best friend John Dorman and I drew comics all the time.

GROTH: This is the guy who persuaded you to work at Ruby-Spears.

WOODRING: Yes, but we're still friends. [Laughs.] He was, and is, an incredible natural cartoonist. All my life he has represented a standard of control and expressiveness which is allied to my own approach but beyond my reach. He did a drawing in our ninth-grade yearbook that was like a dagger in the guts to me because it was better than the work of many an adult practitioner and it was obvious that, of the two of us, he was the genius. We drew lots of comics together in high school and beyond; we called ourselves Barking Dog, and some of our work from those days is still around in some underground publications.

GROTH: Is he still working in animation?

WOODRING: Last I heard.

GROTH: When was that?

WOODRING: This morning.

GROTH: Doesn't it seem a shame to you that all these talented cartoonists you describe are working on this crap?

WOODRING: Everyone has their reasons. Obviously he feels differently about it than I do. It's frustrating to me to only be able to see his work in storyboards, though, and the world is missing out.

GROTH: So you two would draw cartoons together in your rooms.

WOODRING: Right. And egg each other on. That was a great thing for me, having a cartooning pal. I'm sure it had a lifelong effect on my work. I wish I could revisit those days and re-experience that fine, fine blend of energy, enthusiasm, and blissful ignorance. I used to love to look at my own work back then. Today it's a different story.

GROTH: What do you mean?

WOODRING: It's hard for me to look at my drawings, it's a painful experience for me to look at my stuff because I know what good drawing is, I've seen plenty of it, I've got lots of examples of good drawing in this house and when I look at my stuff it just looks like a collection of mistakes strung together with my own technique.

GROTH: Is that false modesty?

WOODRING: Of course not! I have high standards!

GROTH: When you say it's a series of mistakes, are you talking about it in a purely academic sense in terms of anatomy and perspective and formal

techniques, or in some sort of artistic sense, mistakes of the imagination?

WOODRING: I'm talking about drawing mistakes, which as far as I'm concerned represent holes in knowledge or understanding. It's crucial for a draughtsman to put the viewer at ease with a display of mastery. A poorly foreshortened arm, a composition that draws the viewer's attention to the wrong area, a face that does not read... these things are always embarrassments. It's frustrating for me because I've always felt, to borrow a phrase from Gil Kane, that I am a virtuoso yet I'm not doing virtuoso work. And when I see a great drawing, a drawing by T.S. Sullivant, one of his 10 or 12 greatest drawings, for me it's like looking at the pyramids or the Taj Mahal — it's such a wealth of beauty and of the love that a human being could have for the natural world and for the order of existence and for all good things in life that it can move me to tears, and it's such a great thing to be able to achieve that with a bottle of ink and a pen and a piece of paper. And I feel like I should know how to be able to do that. I feel like, just in my blood, like I am that kind of an artist, but I can't draw that way, I don't know how to draw that way, and it's a frustrating dichotomy. I always feel like I've had a stroke and amnesia at the same time — I can't function properly and I can't remember why, but I know I should be doing better.

GROTH: Do you think you've ever achieved that in any single composition or any single drawing?

WOODRING: Every so often I'll do a drawing that comes together in a way that I really like. But those things are rare. And usually they're using techniques and media that relatively easy to master. I can do charcoal drawings that I like a lot, but I feel that it's almost cheap — cheap when you're getting a psychological effect with charcoal, because you can almost do that without a pictorial thing, you can just make great shapes moving around and excite a person's mind. Pen and ink is much different, pen and ink for me is the *ne plus ultra* of drawing.

GROTH: What is it about a drawing that you look for? In other words, I don't think you're looking just for pure correctness of drawing because a perfectly correct drawing can be sterile and dull and unimaginative. It's far preferable to have something that's slightly less than perfect that's filled with some sort of imaginative virtues, but what do you consider those virtues to be?

WOODRING: Well, I guess oddly enough the thing that hits me the most and stays with me throughout the viewing of the picture is the composition of it. The less straightforward and more successful a composition is, the more amazing it is to me. And that's evidence of the artist who set himself a near impossible task, which is to approach a description of the world from the position of a real handicap. That's why I like Sullivant so much — he draws a lot of his main figures in three-quarter rear views. You can't see their faces. He puts all their personality in their posture. That's just astonishing to me, it's like those guys who write novels without using the letter "e."

GROTH: If composition is that important to you, you must find drawing comics daunting, because in a comic you have four or five, six, seven, eight, nine compositions per page, plus the page itself is a composition. That's got to be incredibly intimidating.

WOODRING: It would be if I worried much about it, but I don't because I know composition isn't my strong suit, and while I greatly admire the compositional skills of others – Moebius comes immediately to mind — I don't hold myself to the same standards because I can get the effects I want without great composition. In a way, excessively skillful composition can obscure the grittier messages of a psychologically charged work. From a pure composition standpoint nobody's pages are better than Will Eisner's, but his work has very little emotional impact for me. Even his dramatic, overtly emotional stories don't hit me very hard, and I think part of the reason is that his composition is so perfect and graceful that his grim stories glide by sweetly like a mouthful of meringue. Evidence of a certain kind of artistic struggle makes a drawing more real, more precious to me. I have a drawing that Justin Green did years ago in his Binky Brown days, and it is so worked over and patched and re-worked and whited-out that it's just painful to look at because you can see all too plainly how hard he fought to achieve it — and this agonized-over quality works with the subject matter to amplify it to an extent that is almost viscerally affecting. When I first saw a T.S. Sullivant original, I was astonished to see that the whole surface of it was picked over and rubbed and peeled away, He would ink down a line and then he would peel the whole edge of it. When you see reproductions of his work they look like bad reproductions, but that's what they look like in person.

GROTH: What contemporary cartoonists do you stand in awe of? If there are any?

WOODRING: The Fantagraphics logrollers, of course. Pete Bagge is one of the ultimate greats. Dan Clowes is a great cartoonist. The Hernandez brothers defy comprehension as far as I'm concerned. I was listening to Jaime talk about how he draws and his total lack of need to use any reference for anything and it made me very unhappy.

GROTH: You couldn't get much farther apart from someone like Jaime and someone like Peter.

WOODRING: Except that they're both keen observers of and commentators on humanity. R. Crumb is the world's greatest living cartoonist, in my opinion. Justin Green is still my all-time favorite underground cartoonist.

GROTH: Even more than Crumb?

WOODRING: Yeah... I think Crumb is a greater cartoonist, but I enjoy Justin's

work more. He has access to a view of life that is deep and rare.

GROTH: Was Crumb a formative influence when you first got into undergrounds?

WOODRING: Oh yeah. In fact, I've had to fight hard not to imitate him slavishly. But there'd be no purpose, 'cause he's an open conduit and you can't imitate that. Just to be able to draw like that, that comfy-as-an-old-slipper way he has of drawing, and to be able to draw anything as he can, and to have a line that is so informed that it functions wherever you put it, like Picasso, I wish I had that guy's talent.

GROTH: Who else do you admire?

WOODRING: My current red-hot favorite is Rachel Ball, in England. She has work in the UK *Deadline*. When I look at her work my head just spins 'cause it's so monstrously appealing, sly and insinuating like a horse, slightly sloppy and eye-lickingly sweet. To top it off, Peter Kuper told me she's really beautiful.

GROTH: Made her more of a favorite?

WOODRING: Well, hearing that actually kind of brought me up short because now I feel like I can't be such a rah-rah boy about her work because it might make me look... I don't know, suspect. Vile flattery. I'm also crazy about Mark Martin's work, and he keeps getting better and better. He's a great natural cartoonist. Working with him on *Tantalizing Stories* was great because... well, because he's real easy to deal with, but also because his constantly accelerating rate of improvement spurred me on to improve my own work. Terry LaBan is great. *Cud #4* is so good it makes me slightly ill. Chester Brown is a genius, of course. Joe Matt, Seth, both terrific, Charles Bums, Mack White, Wayno, Roy Tompkins... Mark Newgarden... Paul Mavrides... ah, I'm forgetting a bunch of 'em.

GROTH: You like Kim Deitch?

WOODRING: Oh yeah, I love Kim Deitch's work, He's great.

GROTH: S. Clay Wilson?

WOODRING: Um... I loved his early stuff, It seems to have gotten less poetic to me, which is what I liked about it. There was a huge amount of poetry in his *Zap* stuff... Lester Gass and all that. The way his people would speak while conducting their necrophiliac orgies made me shiver. I don't know, I haven't seen any of his new work for a while.

GROTH: As I recall, you have mixed feelings about Joe Coleman.



WOODRING: Well, when I first heard about him I was terribly intrigued at the idea that he might actually be a potential mass murderer who kept the impulse in check by sublimating it through his artwork, which is how he described himself. I came to doubt that, and that took a bit of the bloom off the rose. But it's for him to say. He's an amazing artist, just astounding. I wouldn't hang one of his pictures in my house; they're too upsetting to me.

GROTH: You mentioned earlier that you thought I was a little trepidatious interviewing you, and that's true to some extent —

WOODRING: I was just asking - you seemed to be putting it off.

GROTH: There were a number of reasons, and I guess it comes down to certain things about you that I don't understand. One of the many things that I don't understand is some of your interests that I find hard to comprehend. For example, you're into Mark Pauline and Survival Research Laboratories, and you're interested in body piercing and that sort of thing. Can you tell me what you find fascinating about... Well, maybe you can talk about Mark Pauline?

WOODRING: Mark Pauline interests me because he's a really smart guy who's doing things that nobody's ever done before. He's using technology as a medium of expression and as a medium of aesthetic exploration instead of using it to build products with. I don't know anybody who's done that to the extent that he has, and I also am amazed by him because he seems to be completely fearless and completely willing to push anything to the furthest extreme. He's willing to put himself in jeopardy at the hands of the law and he's willing to risk killing himself or risk killing others. [Laughs.] He thinks big and works big and there's a tremendous amount of destruction to his work. I don't like explosions and loud noises and things like that — I've been to a couple of his performances and I was just a nervous wreck. I don't even like firecrackers. When I'm up at your house, Gary, and you're setting off bombs, I always go down to the basement and sit on the floor against the wall with my fingers in my ears.

GROTH: [Laughs.] Is that right?

WOODRING: Yeah, So I don't really enjoy experiencing that kind of stuff as much as I enjoy thinking and reading about it afterwards.

GROTH: What value do you think that has? Exploding... I mean, I can see it as an amusing distraction...

WOODRING: I think one value it has is that it takes elements that people are familiar with and puts them in an entirely different context. And that has the potential to really shake up the world. If people start thinking differently about very powerful objects that they're surrounded with, that can bring on a revolution.

GROTH: You think that's plausible, that anything like that would bring on a revolution?

WOODRING: Well, "revolution" is too strong a term, I guess. But it's significant that he's doing these things at a point in history when the mechanical is becoming obsolete. I think Pauline's work is either a final flowering or an emerging new beast. I think what he is doing is not just entertaining, it is showing us a side of technology we haven't seen before. Exactly what value does it have? I don't know. What value does Rembrandt have? Can his paintings change your life? Do they say something valuable, something usually unexpressed about humanity? Do they point to the divine? Maybe Pauline's work has no catalytic value, but I think it does. He's a great conceptual artist who doesn't let his ideas remain concepts. He actually goes out and builds the huge dangerous juggernaut that goes galloping around with a guinea pig at the controls. It's a great concept but an absolutely astounding reality.

GROTH: I remember we were at a show at COCA [the Center On Contemporary Art in Seattle] and Mr. Lifto was there—

WOODRING: The Jim Rose Sideshow.

GROTH: Yeah. And you were pretty mesmerized by that stuff.

WOODRING: I think everybody there was pretty mesmerized by that. There were pools of saliva on the floor, I noticed, as people were filing out. Weren't you taken by that?

GROTH: Yeah... I think it was almost more of a transcendent experience for you than... I mean, I was certainly in awe of the sheer perversity of it all.

WOODRING: Well, I was too. I wanted to see if Mr. Lifto was going to pull his dick off with a cinder block.

GROTH: [Laughs.] Right, we're all interested in that.

WOODRING: And I wanted to see if his nipples would rip out. But also, that kind of thing, it's like a lot of things that are hideous to watch but quite different to experience. There was another show at COCA... Well, let me tell you. Some acquaintances of mine were in town and wanted to do something. They were rather conservative people, out here on vacation — one guy was a banker and he brought his friends up to Seattle, and I said, "Well, there's this thing down at the Center On Contemporary Art, we can go see that." And it turned out to be this heavy duty S&M lesbian extravaganza where, among other things, there were these gigantic bull dykes sitting in cages wearing leather pants with their breasts exposed and *filled* with needles so that they looked like hedgehogs. And these heavy-handed death and mutilation themes, little tableaux with frightening

women in them. My right arm still doesn't quite work right from where this one woman grabbed me by the biceps to steer me around from going behind one of the cages which I was trying to sneak behind. She tore my muscles permanently with her fingers.

GROTH: Jesus!

WOODRING: This was a woman who could have torn my head off with a punch in the face. [Groth laughs.] It would have been like punching at a cantaloupe or something. Strapping monster of a woman. But there were things there that were... I thought they were a lot less frivolous than the Jim Rose Sideshow — women with really serious, large piercings, big holes in their bodies. If you look at National Geographic and you see those pictures of people extending their lips or their ears or scarring themselves, and you get sort of a strange nostalgic feeling, kind of a compulsion to look at those pictures, and a sense that they're not doing it because they're crazy, but because there is some reward, then there's something there for you. I suppose that's something that most people have the potential to do to themselves and derive the benefits from. And right now, of course people are doing it in this country in unprecedented numbers — there is a lot of interest in piercings and all the things that go with it.

GROTH: What personal benefits do you think can be derived from that?

WOODRING: For one thing, it messes with your head in a really interesting way. When you see a big, huge, glittering, stainless steel needle going through an inch of your flesh, it does something funny to your mind: it goes against everything you ever thought about protecting your body and avoiding pain and everything else. It releases endorphins which can make you feel good, it does funny things to the sex current in your spine. It's a very tantric thing in that you experience a really strong, but subtle, non-orgasmic sexual current flowing through you that can also have a strong psychological effect on you. People who really subject themselves to heavy duty torment of that sort, God only knows what they're experiencing, but it must be, like you say, transcendental.

GROTH: Do you think there's a sense of desperation to doing that? People just having to find new experiences because the experiences we're used to no longer register with any intensity?

WOODRING: No, I don't really think so. That's like saying that people have sex because they're so jaded that attending church socials just doesn't do it for them anymore. I think it's wholesome to take psychological risks, and if it's done safely with medical precautions, jabbing a steel rod through the head of your cock messes with your mind more than your meat. And that, after all, is the point. But people confuse this sort of thing with self-destruction. Installing an ampallang has a large element of pain, of course, but it's part of a bigger experience, and the pain is not necessarily pain per se. Catching your penis in your zipper, now

that's pain! *Nobody* in their right mind would do *that* for kicks.

GROTH: Earlier, you said you didn't know what value Mark Pauline's machines might have, and that you didn't know what value a Michelangelo or a Rembrandt might have either, but clearly you value good drawing over bad drawing and you look for certain transcendent qualities in art, so you must have a core belief of what good art is and what its potential is.

WOODRING: Well, for myself, good art points towards the invisible world. Either it's just really beautiful because it puts you in mind of some unbearably sweet aspect of this world, or — and this is the case, I think, with Rembrandt — it puts you in mind of something which is, to use that word again, transcendental, something divine. Rembrandt's old women have a divine quality which is very, very rare and precious and not faked; it comes out of a quality that he had, an understanding of life and humanity and he manages to transmit it. It's a message about life from a superior human being. Those things are rare — a damn sight different from Leroy Neiman.

GROTH: [Chuckles] right.

WOODRING: So there's that. And in a way, I think that that's sort of the cheapest thing but it's also the most potent. And this also ties into a question that I've had for a long time about whether comics are capable of being as important and significant an art form as, say, literature. I guess I've come to the conclusion that they can't be.

GROTH: That's sobering.

WOODRING: I guess I think that it's true because the example that always comes to my mind is Jean Valjean's redemption in *Les Miserables* — if you're locked into the flow of that story, when that moment comes it can just completely knock you down, even if you don't have any thoughts about Christianity in your mind or any early experiences with Christianity to be revived by this experience. It makes you know what Christianity is all about, BOOM! in that one second. And he conveys it like a saint conveying an experience and imparting knowledge. And I think you couldn't do that with a comic strip because those words flowing through your mind trigger an internal revelation, and I think a picture connected to those would be self-limiting. You couldn't draw that as well as you can experience it in your mind, as deeply. It goes beyond images and it goes beyond even the words and I think that will never be drawn as well as it is conveyed in those words. I think what pictures and words both do is they trigger responses, they set off bombs deep inside your inner system, and these things pop up to the surface where you see them and it can be a life-transforming experience.

GROTH: Do you think painting or film is intrinsically inferior to literature for much the same reasons?

WOODRING: Well, "inferior" may be the wrong word. I think literature is a better medium than drawing for conveying profundities because it is more abstract. The word "table" is a much, much more abstract symbol for a table than a drawing of a table, and is less likely to conjure a codified notion that may stand between the reader and the message.

GROTH: You said something that I can't imagine too many cartoonists saying, and that was, that there haven't been any Victor Hugo-caliber cartoonists or Shakespeare-caliber cartoonists, but you did go on to say there were William Faulkner-level cartoonists, which is a reasonably subtle distinction. So there's this ceiling that you perceive. But you see the same ceiling for film?

WOODRING: Well, film is a special case because it can be so unspeakably manipulative. But yes, I do feel that. No screen version of *Les Miserables* will be able to do what the book does. I'm talking about reality; the less artifice the better when it comes to transmitting the truth.

GROTH: This is a very difficult area to get into and impossible to resolve, but I think it's really fascinating.

WOODRING: But I think you can nail it down bit by bit until you find that you have quite a bit of the terrain staked out. Actually, I guess that language isn't the best way to impart information — psychic connection is. People can transmit with their minds, saints can do that, I think. I've experienced people putting thoughts that I couldn't have had ordinarily in my head for two seconds. And whether it was just me doing it or whether it was them doing it, I don't know. I was in the presence of a Eastern Orthodox Catholic bishop, and I have a powerful antagonism for Catholicism and Christianity, so I'm not predisposed to like his kind, but he was doing saintly work, he was going into Cambodia and working against the Khmer Rouge, and he told this very simple anecdote about Saint Francis, a story that I had heard before, and in the telling of it, he conveyed to me a sense of what divine love is — I mean a wholly different emotion from human love — and I just experienced this profound feeling for a few moments and the impact stayed with me. I really feel that there is something there to work towards.

GROTH: More profoundly than if you'd read it?

WOODRING: Yeah. Because I personally think he did impart something. He made a connection on a different level — it was something that he experienced and something that was driving his life, and it was communicated.

GROTH: Do you think that same feeling could he imparted in theater?

WOODRING: I suppose it could if that sort of a person were onstage trying to do it. Yeah, I think there's no question that it could. And I guess that it's possible that

someday some cartoonist will come along and produce things that nobody has ever seen and everybody will go, "This is the greatest art form that ever existed. This goes beyond literature, this is better than Homer, this is better than Shakespeare." But that's something I can't imagine at this point.

GROTH: It's something we shouldn't hold our breaths waiting for.

WOODRING: No, But then again, people didn't do what Gilbert Hernandez has done until he did it. People just didn't see it.

GROTH: Well now, do you agree with me that comics have somehow been held back farther than the other art forms that have progressed in this century? I mean, it just seems like film has progressed to a far greater extent than comics have.

WOODRING: I can't think of a filmmaker whom I think is a better artist than George Herriman. I think films are harder to assess than comics because it is so easy to wring emotions from a viewer with a film. You know, you put a sad kid or a hot woman up there and run the right music over it and wham! It punches buttons by the acre. Everyone in the audience may be deeply stirred; that doesn't mean the scene was good. Film is dangerously affecting; that much verisimilitude is a potent thing. A great comic is a greater achievement, in my opinion, because it has less equipment to stir the audience with. But I think the reason there are so many good filmmakers and so many good films is because it is a more alluring profession and many more people are drawn to it. I don't think comics have been held back; I think that cartoonists are a breed apart, born to do their work. It's much easier for me to imagine someone drifting into the filmmaking profession than drifting into comics.

GROTH: So you feel comics are superior to film?

WOODRING: Yeah. There may be films that will really, really move me, but I can't get away at some point from the fact that I'm watching actors on a screen, and that what I'm seeing is not really real. Even if the director or the writer is really responsible for the message of the movie and manages to convey his message through this medium, I don't buy it. I still have that obstacle of seeing it as a construct.

GROTH: It's funny you should say that, because Gil Kane would say exactly the opposite when we talk about this. He'd say one of the advantages of film is there are real people on the screen, as opposed to comics where you're drawing these people who are supposed to represent real people but obviously aren't.

WOODRING: Well, obviously what one looks for has a lot to do with it. If you really love comics and then you come across one that's really great, you feel this huge rush of warmth at the fact that this practitioner has succeeded and melds

with the message and the other effects you're deriving from it. So there's that. Two of my all-time favorite films are *Koyannisqatsi* and Fellini's *Satyricon*. *Koyannisqatsi* is a transcendental film as far as I'm concerned, the most perfect blend of images and music I've ever seen, and a message that is bone-chilling, completely horrifying, completely terrible, and undeniably true, to a certain extent at least. And then for my money, *Fellini Satyricon* is the best portrait of humanity that I've ever seen, the most accurate and deep portrait of people that I've ever seen.

GROTH: You told me that one of your favorite films, or a film you thought was one of the most flawless you've ever seen, is *It's a Wonderful Life*, which surprised me. What was it about that film that took you?

WOODRING: Not the message at all, the message is silly, but the technique is inspired from one end to the other. Perfect, perfect cinematic storytelling in my opinion. From the first frame where you see a sign that says, "You are now in Bedford Falls." It doesn't say, "Now entering Bedford Falls," or "Bedford Falls, population 2,000" — "You are now in Bedford Falls." OK. That's so perfect! Another thing that I think is a stroke of genius in that film is at the pivotal moment where the angel is first shown, when George Bailey is standing on the bridge and he's about to jump, you have this head shot of George, and then you cut to a head shot of the angel standing there, and they're both just occupying the screen at approximately the same place, and that is an absolute cinematic error. When you do that, it's a *pop!* All of a sudden it looks like one character has turned into the other character. But Capra does that, he cuts from George to the angel and then he cuts back to George and it's your first glimpse of the angel and it's breaking the rules like any good artist will do in order to derive a skewed, abstract effect. And it's just such a brilliant fucking touch. I'm astounded at his audacity and his understanding that that would work as well as it does. It fucks with your head to introduce this error — at the same time your senses are kind of outraged and you're wondering how to cope with this, this essential character has been introduced.

GROTH: When you were in your 20s — and I guess they were pretty tumultuous 20s, since you were an alcoholic and struggling...

WOODRING: And a roister.

GROTH: And a roister... What's a roister?

WOODRING: It's a roistering joyboy, basically.

GROTH: And yet you're incredibly knowledgeable about the history of cartooning and illustration and art and so forth. When did you find the time to refine your tastes and educate yourself? Was it during this unsavory period?

WOODRING: I wouldn't say I'm "incredibly knowledgeable" about anything, but sure, I've studied and sought out and tried to learn about drawings all my life because I have an abiding interest. There's no innate reason. I was attentive to drawing even in my marathon cups.

GROTH: So were you simultaneously unruly and disciplined?

WOODRING: Well, I wasn't disciplined in the manner of someone who goes to school and does a lot of exercises and really teaches themselves the fundamentals so that they become second nature and then goes on to apply them. I just always drew because I wanted to draw. So I was not disciplined other than I worked at it. In a way I really wish that I had learned some technique early on so that I could be applying it to myself now. But then again, on the other hand, to get back to T.S. Sullivant again, he didn't turn into what he ultimately turned into until he was in his early 50s and 60s, I believe. And I've seen some people become hamstrung by what they've learned early and they don't break out of it. So it may be that by not teaching myself anything solid at the outset, it made it more possible for me to use different techniques and different styles of expression — which is important to me, for what I do. But I would like to know how to do things better than I do.

GROTH: So how did you learn your technique? Was it sheer repetition, or did you study certain artists carefully?

WOODRING: Well, I would study artists carefully, but then I would try not to copy them. I realized early on, for example, that R. Crumb's invaluable draughtsman asset was his wavery line. Using that line he could draw anything, and if it came out looking tight, it was a miracle, and if it came out looking sloppy, what could one expect? The line was so wobbly. So I immediately started making all my lines really smooth and straight because I didn't want to rip him off, and I tried to get some of his effects anyway. Sounds masochistic, doesn't it? But that has been the way it worked all my life — and now my own line getting wobbly, organically.

GROTH: You went into animation. When was that?

WOODRING: 1979. I was living in Santa Barbara and I had just gotten married; I moved to San Francisco because I thought I could work there, but the work didn't materialize so I moved back to Santa Barbara and it was just impossible for me to find any work in that town. My friend John Dorman was working in the animation industry and he said, "Hey, if you move to L.A. I'll give you a job and you can make \$12.50 an hour," and I said, "Sure!" So I did. Because I felt desperate about not having any kind of a way to make money, really. So I moved to Los Angeles and the job did not materialize right away. [Chuckles.] So I got a job as the in-house production for a little public relations firm, working for this horrible little bug-eyed sleazeball and his rapacious, thin-lipped, ball-cutting



partner and bitch. Speaking of the bug-eyed sleaze ball, he really was bug-eyed. His eyes bulged so far out of his head that when he got excited and opened them wide I reflexively put my cupped hands under his face to catch them. So I did that for a while, and then I started working at Ruby-Spears, working on the most egregious shit the world has ever seen, the crappiest, most horrible cartoons.

GROTH: Just to skip back for a minute, you graduated from high school in 1970?

WOODRING: Right.

GROTH: And immediately segued into garbagehood and stayed there for a year?

WOODRING: A year and a half.

GROTH: What was your life like between then and when you got married?

WOODRING: Chaotic. I made no provision for the future, just got drunk constantly and took drugs and devoted myself to having fun. I shudder to think of those days, 'cause I was really out of control. I permanently alienated a lot of my friends by acting like a total asshole. But it was during that time that I began to develop what has become my functional persona. I read a lot — Henry Miller, Malcolm Lowry, Knut Hamsun, Camus, Kenneth Patchen, Victor Hugo, Max Shulman... I went to museums and staggered around ail over the landscape... got myself beat up a few times... had some desperate love affairs... hopped trains... slept in the dirt...

GROTH: Sounds chaotic all right.

WOODRING: Aye. Of course, there were moments, sometimes seasons of great happiness, bliss even. I had a sense of expanding, exploding even. I couldn't control myself.

GROTH: What was your parents' reaction to all of this? Did they know that their son was a runaway train?

WOODRING: Well, yes and no. They knew I was plenty screwed up, but they had problems of their own and didn't look after me much at all. My mom was dying... God, the regrets...

GROTH: So you moved to Washington state and then...?

WOODRING: Then I moved to Santa Barbara, took up again with my long-time, long-suffering girlfriend Meredith, and then moved by myself into a great little shack on Anapamu Street.

GROTH: I assume you were something of a free spirit then... you were single,

you didn't have too many obligations, not much overhead.

WOODRING: Right. And those were the days! Santa Barbara was an idyllic place then. Everyone in town was tan and healthy, and sex was almost impossible to avoid, so I didn't try. There was this incredible atmosphere of promiscuity. I remember going to a wedding and being only mildly surprised when the bride and groom each picked up someone else at the reception and went home with them.

GROTH: Holy Toledo.

WOODRING: It was during this time that I began to bring my drawing together in a way that made me realize I could be successful at it, but even so I didn't draw much then.

GROTH: Is that because you were taking part in the promiscuity and good times?

WOODRING: As much as I could be. Being somewhat socially backward and not a natural-born charm boy it was hard for me to derive maximum benefit from this Garden of Eden, but I managed to have a good time.

GROTH: What convinced you to settle down with Mary?

WOODRING: We just had a really deep rapport. We hit it off right away and it seemed like the only thing to do.

GROTH: Did you meet her in Santa Barbara?

WOODRING: Yeah, I was going out with a friend of hers actually, as part of the ongoing hand-off from person to person, and it sort of stopped with her.

GROTH: Was that an immediate recognition?

WOODRING: Pretty much. It wasn't love at first sight, but it was definitely deep mutual intrigue at first sight.

GROTH: So you were living in San Francisco, moved to L.A., and ultimately wound up at Ruby-Spears?

WOODRING: Yeah, Ruby-Spears.

GROTH: Did you have any goals at this point? Did you want to become a comic artist, or were you reasonably content to do animation work?

WOODRING: No, I wasn't content to do animation work. I wasn't good at it, I did storyboards mostly. Storyboards during the production season and presentation

work during the off-season. I wasn't good at doing storyboards. I learned how to do cutting and staging and all that kind of stuff, I can still produce storyboards that work, but I wasn't a virtuoso by any means. I had a terrible attitude about that job and I'm sure I was a real pain in the ass to work with — I'd drag down the whole operation with my constant whining.

GROTH: Define your terrible attitude.

WOODRING: I hated the industry, I hated the shows, I hated the fact that everyone I worked with could draw better than me. One of the problems I had was I worked with these tremendously talented individuals and I was envious.

GROTH: Technicians?

WOODRING: Yeah, technically excellent people. It was a little bit exasperating. This one guy I used to work with, Thom Enriquez, is now head of Special Projects at Disney and this was a guy, I mean, he was a lady-killer, he was a great guitarist, and a fantastic cartoonist. He derived all of his technique from copying Wallace Wood and Disney comics and so forth, so it was a constructed style, but it was just slick as grease, and he was really good at it and he applied it beautifully when he did his own original work. So he was an intimidating guy to work with. My friend John [Dorman] is also a natural born genius when it comes to drawing. He never practices but just manages to get better and better all the time anyway. And I worked with a guy named Duncan Marjoribanks who's now a directing animator at Disney Features. I worked with a woman named Kathy Alturi who is now head of Background at Disney Features. I worked with a guy named Tom Minton, who is the most hysterically funny person I ever met — he looks sort of like Edgar Allen Poe — he'd sit in the corner and mutter. If you got close enough to him to hear what he was saying, it was always just devastatingly funny stuff. He was incredibly funny. I remember one time I was on the phone to Bill Hanna's secretary because Hanna-Barbera was having a picnic that we hadn't been invited to — there was no reason for us to be invited, but I was high or something so I decided to call up and ask why we weren't invited to their parking lot party. And this woman was patiently trying to explain it to me and Tom Minton was sitting over on the extension phone kind of glowering to himself, obviously getting more and more fed up with her unwillingness to comply with my unreasonable demands, so at one point he said, "Hey!" The woman said, "Pardon me? Who's this?" He said, "This is Ken Spears, and you know what?" (Ken Spears was one of the co-owners of Ruby-Spears). And she said, "What is it, Mr. Spears?" And Tom said, "If Bill Hanna gets another facelift, his penis is going to flop over his collar and everyone will be able to see his swastika tattoo!" [Groth laughs.] And this woman was just completely flummoxed by this, she didn't know what to say or think.

Another time a new restaurant opened up down the street and they had Xeroxed menus written in felt pen, so Tom took one and made up his own and Xeroxed a bunch of copies and went up there and switched them, and there were things on

the menu like, "Mule chops" [laughter] and "Bacon crucified on a hard-tack cross," and all this great stuff. He was a laugh riot, still is I'm sure. It was great working with these people, and the atmosphere was very loose. I used to come home every night and regale my family with outlandish tales of hi-jinks at work.

GROTH: Such as?

WOODRING: Oh... One time there was this fellow named Kurt, a great cartoonist and sculptor — he designed the "Slimer" character for the first *Ghostbusters* film. And one day he said he was not going to come in because it was his birthday and he was going to go fishing. Well, it wasn't his birthday and everyone knew it, but what we did is we trashed his office and made it look like an apocalyptic blowout birthday party for him had occurred there while he was out fishing. We had a big HAPPY BIRTHDAY banner half tom off the wall, we emptied every ashtray in the building into one overflowing ashtray on his desk, we took Polaroids of employees simulating sex on a mattress in the corner. There were buttock prints in Thousand Island dressing on the walls, half-eaten food and booze everywhere. It stank to high heaven and was totally convincing. Then we all stayed home the next day and let Kurt discover the wreck himself.

GROTH: [Laughs.] Did he fall for it?

WOODRING: Yes! And we had snatched Ken Spears' executive tiki mug from his office and filled it to the very brim with whiskey and left it on Kurt's desk. Then in the morning we called Ken and told him Kurt had taken the mug. Ken angrily called Kurt and said, "Do you have my coffee mug down there?" Kurt was just standing amid the ruins when Ken called; he looked for the mug, saw it on his desk, and grabbed it and sloshed whiskey all over himself, and in that condition he had to go up to the third floor and return the mug. There were many other memorable events; somebody ought to write a book. I had a reunion with these people last year or so and the success quotient was unbelievable. They had all gone on to these stellar things.

GROTH: Including yourself, eh?

WOODRING: No, I was the odd man out. They were all high rollers, they're just up to their eyeballs in filthy lucre and prestige and hot tubs and Sunset Boulevard at twilight and palm trees and sweet winds and all the rest of it.

GROTH: But you recognize that all of that is bullshit, right?

WOODRING: Well, personally speaking, I couldn't be happier that I moved away from L.A. I just despise Los Angeles, not just because it's a stinking cesspool like everybody knows it is, but just because the Hollywood ethic is so fucked, it's such a worldwide corrupting influence. They say you can smell Calcutta from 12 miles away, but you can smell Hollywood all over the world. It represents something

that is just absolutely ignominious, the propensity for putting entertainment at the top of your list of priorities. So I say, fuck all that shit! Fuck it! That's what I say!

GROTH: How do you account for its worldwide influence if it's so degrading, stupid, and idiotic?

WOODRING: Because the people in Hollywood are all racing each other to see who can come up with a new and improved method of appealing to our base instincts so they can extract money from us. They work like beavers at figuring out how to get us to surrender our virtues and notions of what's high-minded so that we will be susceptible to some new degraded form of entertainment. Hollywood is a hive of skilled social scientists trying to get behind our humanity so they can manipulate us and make themselves rich.

GROTH: You mean you don't believe the ultimate consumer *reductio ad absurdum*, that if the people didn't want this they wouldn't accept it? In other words, people do want this and therefore that's why they accept it? That Hollywood is simply catering to people's needs?

WOODRING: That is an odious rationale. It's true enough that people are panting for the shit that comes out of Hollywood, but that's because we've been skillfully manipulated into wanting it. We have to fight the natural tendency to degenerate; Hollywood encourages it. It's exactly like R.J. Reynolds going to Indonesia and having cute girls in cowboy outfits give packs of Marlboros to young concert-goers. That's criminal, in my opinion, and just because these kids will end up "wanting" cigarettes doesn't make R.J. Reynolds an innocent supplier of their needs.

GROTH: Why should Hollywood want to condition people in one direction rather than another, an ignoble direction rather than a noble one?

WOODRING: Because that's where the money is. What are they going to do, try and persuade people to stay home, save their money, and better their minds? Come on! The goal is to create an addiction.

GROTH: So what people prefer is a matter of conditioning?

WOODRING: I think so. What would people 30 years ago have thought of a film like *The Killer*? They'd have been horrified! Now people just lap it up.

GROTH: There's a very respectful piece on John Woo [director of *The Killer*] in the latest *New Yorker*. How do you account for this?

WOODRING: I don't know. Maybe he's a great filmmaker. I can't see it. Personally, I think he falls into that category of "someone had to do it eventually." You know... someone had to be the first to make a painting that was solid white,

someone had to be the first to make music that was silence, someone had to be the first to write respectable literature that used the word "fuck" freely. Someone had to be the first to make a film that is wall-to-wall gunplay. I don't know. I'm obviously not a sociologist, but I do feel that this is a culture in decline and that it's going to end in catastrophe or revolution.

GROTH: Or both.

WOODRING:, My fear, a lot of people's fear, is that we're really opening things up for the ultra-conservative element to take over because common sense is looking more and more attractive even if it's coupled with the worst kind of fascism. I mean, even though my parents were not particularly morally minded, they did offer me the kind of consensus views on what was noble and what was right and what we were obligated to do as human beings in America pursuing our life, liberty, and happiness, and I think that's largely disappeared. There isn't any standard social contract anymore that you should be upright and forthright and honest and hard-working.

GROTH: Right. The new social contract is basically whatever you can get away with. How would you define what you referred to as a social contract, or the ideal social contract?

WOODRING: I don't know of an ideal social contract — mine would be something unrecognizable, I think, for most people. It's different for every culture and it's always changing. It has changed a lot in this culture. But a social contract is what people agree is acceptable, what they agree is not. For example, a clause in the current social contract says that if you feel you are being discriminated against in any way at all, you are justified in going to the ACLU and having them instigate a lawsuit on your behalf. Whereas 30 years ago everybody would have said, "Fuck you! Don't do that! What on earth are you trying... Just shut up, quit whining and accept your lot. If you're a 40-year-old man, don't try to get into the Girl Scouts. No, you can't pass a law making it illegal to tease the obese." But nowadays people have gotten used to that kind of completely selfish society-corrupting action. I really don't think that there is very much that's good or bad per se in a culture; it's just what people think is good or bad. I think changing a lot of that without substituting something solid can be tremendously destructive.

GROTH: What's the distinction between what is good and bad, and what people think is good and bad? I mean, are you saying they are not absolutes?

WOODRING: I would guess that in any culture, murder is bad.

GROTH: [Laughs.] Right!

WOODRING: But in some cultures, killing a slave isn't murder. In some cultures, killing a woman or a child isn't murder. So you got this free-floating absolute that

takes a few vaguely recognizable forms — whether or not pornography or child marriage or incest is bad varies from culture to culture. Those are not absolutes. Or cannibalism. Stealing I think is regarded as uniformly bad throughout cultures. There is no culture that says, “Hey, pick up anything you want, it’s ours,” as far as I know. There have to be laws like that in order to maintain order.

GROTH: It seems to me that you've done what you ought to do to cultivate your talent and your skill. Do your friends in Hollywood recognize that they're part of this huge amoral machinery?

WOODRING: I don't think they feel that way about it; it is, after all, a matter of opinion. Because for the most part they've succeeded at it. And also I've run into a lot of cartoonists who didn't want to put their skills at the service of anything higher than the creation of sub-standard cartoons. I could never understand that. Even going into a woebegone chamber of horrors like Hanna-Barbera, I'd see these cubicles that were decorated with, for example, incredible caricatures, really wonderful drawings. But all these guys did with their lives was they drew for Hanna-Barbera during the day and they went home to highballs and barbecue at night. For them it wasn't a tool to use for creative expression. But then again it's not so easy to say, “I’m going to be an artist and I'm going to make my ideas my stock in trade and that's what I'm going to offer up to the world.” I sure can see why people don't do that, because it's shaky ground.

GROTH: Well, it's difficult.

WOODRING: It's also hard to feel justified. Even for oneself. There's a large tendency to frown on that. A real willingness to not try and find value in art and to not let people get away with doing what they want to do. That's something that exists.

GROTH: I read an interview with James Dickey recently and he said that the kind of poets he admires are “Incredibly strong people who will drive headfirst through a steel wall to get their work done.” I think by that he meant that there were a lot of obstacles to being a good poet that anyone striving to be a good poet has to overcome. I tend to think our culture creates ease as an end in itself, and teaches people to follow the path of least resistance as long as they don't have to compromise their material comfort.

WOODRING: That's true. This culture has *really* isolated and hybridized the entertainment aspect and the aesthetic experience and made it a *raison d'être* for creating anything. In other countries, a poet can fill up an auditorium, and over here you can't get people into your living room to hear poetry, even if you offer them food - “stuffies,” as Charles Krafft calls such enticements.

GROTH: [Laughs.] Right... So how do you think you surmounted your success, in effect?

WOODRING: The sort of thing that I do is really the only thing that I can do. I don't have any other skills, really. And also I set myself this task — it's important for me to learn how to draw well at some point in my life. It's important for me to communicate certain things. And I realize I can only do it piece by piece and the only hope I have to achieve what it is that I want to achieve is by doing a lot of work, because I'm never going to be able to draw like I want to, I don't think. I'm never going to be able to produce work that is as eloquent as T.S. Sullivant's work. I just don't think I'm ever going to be able to do that. He could do a humorous cartoon that had as much meaning in it, as far as I'm concerned, as an illuminated manuscript of devotional work. And I just don't think I have it in me to do that. But I think I can, by going about it roundabout and through piecemeal efforts, create a huge mosaic mount of the terrain I want to chart. Because I've noticed it's not easy to talk about a lot of this stuff. But by learning to talk about it, I teach myself more and more about it. I have an idea that at some point in my life, when I'm an old man, I'll be able to withdraw from work and devote myself to contemplation, which is what I would really like to be able to do at some point. When my hand is shaking and my eye is dim, that's the time to immerse myself in meditation and contemplation.

GROTH: To what end?

WOODRING: Self-liberation. Samadhi. Nirvana. Transcendental experience of some sort. And even if that doesn't happen, meditation's minor benefits are still very great. So my personal feeling is that to not give some part of one's life over to the pursuit of the great intangibles, it's a wasted human existence. And I'm haunted by my father's death, which was so wretched and so pointlessly ugly and miserable.

GROTH: How do you mean haunted?

WOODRING: I'm reminded. His death didn't inspire me to want to devote my life to contemplation, but it reminded me, it reinforced it. He basically drank himself to death. And it was just such a stupid, ugly waste of a good life. His last decade was just for shit. But it was an attitude problem, you know? I feel like there should have been some little switch that he could have turned and made everything better. And also I'm sure that a big part of his problems was me. I mean, I'm one of the major things in his life that didn't turn out the way he wanted.

GROTH: Are you an only child?

WOODRING: No, I have a brother. He's six years younger than me, a classical musician.

GROTH: Did your brother turn out more like your parents wanted?



WOODRING: Nah.

GROTH: [Laughs.] So you were both —

WOODRING: Yeah, we were both a couple of misfits. We're really close, actually. Still are.

GROTH: Does your brother understand your work?

WOODRING: Oh, yeah. He's one of the few people I can really communicate with about this kind of stuff. And he turns me on to classical music that I would never run across otherwise that almost always becomes my favorite stuff. So he's invaluable to me that way also.

GROTH: You wrote an *Aliens* series for Dark Horse, didn't you?

WOODRING: Yep.

GROTH: It's hard for me to imagine you writing an *Aliens* story. How did that come about?

WOODRING: Well, thanks to you, in part. I worked with Ryder [Windham] on that *Freaks* series for Fantagraphics, and after he went to Dark Horse he invited me to do an *Aliens* series.

GROTH: Did you jump at the chance?

WOODRING: Pretty much. I loved the first *Alien* movie and I really enjoyed working with Ryder on *Freaks*... he does what I imagine an editor ought to do, which is deal with the structure of the story as it relates to the requirements of the project, and he introduces a lot of elements. He provided the title, "Labyrinth," and the maze idea...

GROTH: I assume it paid well.

WOODRING: By my standards, yes.

GROTH: Did you enjoy writing it?

WOODRING: Pretty much. I was really gratified to be having the opportunity to sort of take up my tool kit, like a plumber, and go do a job of commercial work. And I was looking forward to seeing the artist's version of what I'd written. His name is Kilian Plunkett and he's real young. In fact, I think this is his first comic book. He can draw like a house afire.

GROTH: Are you happy with the work he did?

WOODRING: Well, I'm not entirely happy with the series as a whole, but for the most part I'm pleased. The writing isn't the best stuff I've ever done, parts of it really embarrass me, and Plunkett's storytelling skills aren't as good as his drawing, but all in all I think it's worth tearing down a few forests for. I did try to make the book extremely disgusting, just so people would notice. It's just a snot nightmare. But I teach a cartooning class on Saturday mornings to kids through Coyote Jr. High, and I was becoming alarmed at the comics these kids were all flipping out over — the level of violence and depravity in these things were very great, and these guys were just lapping it up like poteen in the dungpit of the yard. It made me want to write a comic that would make them shudder in revulsion rather than lick their lips and go, "Oh, yeah!"

GROTH: These are Image comics I assume.

WOODRING: I'm afraid so. The other thing that disturbs me about these guys' approach to comics is the speculation horseshit. It makes me see red to hear an 11-year-old say he spent all his discretionary income on a comic he didn't want 'cause it would appreciate.

GROTH: In spite of this mercenary attitude, are there any budding Alex Toths or Gil Kanes in your classes?

WOODRING: Oh, a lot who could be, I think. But it seems like what most of them want... who said it, someone told me that what kids like this want is to get to be almost as good as, say, Rob Liefeld, 'cause then they'll be almost as rich and powerful, they think. It's a strange idea, but after observing some of these kids with this assessment in mind I think it's true to an extent. It's an ugly, alien way for a young cartoonist to be, as far as I'm concerned. When there are standouts... in the class that's going on right now there are three or four really outstanding cartoonists, and they seem to be self-motivated. That's great to see, obviously.

GROTH: There's something I'd like to follow up on... earlier you made reference to samadhi, or nirvana, saying that there is evidently a state that human beings can attain in which everyday life as we all experience it is seen to be an illusion. And you refer to a life-transforming LSD experience which made you believe that life is an illusion, and this seems to me to go to the heart of your aesthetic, the idea that we're living in a non-reality. Can you tell me what you mean by that? How do you differentiate reality from unreality if we're living in an unreality?

WOODRING: I feel that anytime you're having a philosophical discussion about morality, religion, or metaphysics, you first have to determine whether you believe the universe is a machine or an entity. If you believe it's a machine I can't really discuss life with you because I don't believe that. But a lot of people do. I believe the universe is alive, that matter is alive, that everything is made up of the flesh of God and that everything in the cosmos has personality. Obviously a

chunk of stone isn't organically alive like a mouse, but our perceptions are limited, to say the least. The universe may be impossible; that may be necessary to explain it.

GROTH: Impossible how?

WOODRING: Impossibly complex. We perceive so little, and so much of what we perceive is only our minds playing back our models to us. When we enter a new situation or meet a new person, we experience them only as much as we want. The mind starts to build models instantly and they can become everything. It's possible to be cut off from the cosmos by the mind. It's a filter, after all, and it can get so gummed up nothing can pass through. Contrariwise, you can keep it open, and even open it more. Spiritual discipline does that; keeps the mind fresh and open to the universe.

GROTH: What sorts of spiritual disciplines do you practice, if any?

WOODRING: Unfortunately for me I haven't been doing anything much recently, but when I'm on top of things I meditate, do hatha yoga, read about Ramakrishna, things like that.

GROTH: And all this does what for you?

WOODRING: It makes me feel clean, sane, and in touch with reality.

GROTH: I wanted to get back to when you were in animation. I met you in '83 or '84, and you were at Ruby-Spears then. Can you tell me a little bit about what that was like? The day-to-day routine and who you worked with, what shows you worked on, how truly horrible it was, and so on?

WOODRING: Yeah. I worked on *Mr. T*. The big gimmick there, the crazy capper, was that the kids, Mr. T's sidekicks, would cartwheel instead of walking whenever possible. Great stuff. Also I worked on *Rubik the Amazing Cube*, based on the Rubik's Cube. Ruby-Spears wisely waited until the Rubik's Cube fad was dead as a manhole lid before dragging their mutant hybrid onto Saturday morning TV. It was a lamentable piece of shit. The main characters in this cartoon were a Hispanic family, and, having struck this bold blow for cultural relations the show's creators tread eggshells to not have them say or do anything that might be even remotely construed as stereotypical. So the mother would say, "And now let's have a plate of nice, fresh tacos!" because if she just said, "Lunch is ready, we're having tacos," viewers might assume that these people were eating old, stale tacos. It was pathetic. Then I worked on one of the masterpieces of shit — it was called *Turbo Teen*, about a guy who turned into a car. Not just any car, it was a big muscle car. And the people who wrote that show were such jackasses that... I remember there was one character who was dancing at a dance in one scene, and this guy called out, "Get it down, Jack!" — the writer evidently couldn't quite

remember if it was "Get it on" or "Get down," and then to just give this '80s show an authentic '50s touch, "Jack!" It was just so sad! [Laughter.] Somebody brought in an anti-drug pamphlet that showed on the cover a horribly deformed baby whose head looked like a wad of silly putty that had been mangled, and John hung it up on the door and had it saying, "Oh no, I'm turning into *Turbo Teen!*" That summed it up nicely.

GROTH: Did the people you worked with share your contempt for this thing?

WOODRING: Oh yeah, we all did. But they were able to work on it better than I was. I was just depressed by the stuff all the time. My job was to do storyboards for these things. I actually worked very little, I goofed off a lot — that's when I started doing *Jim* in fact, when I was working at Ruby-Spears. The presentation things were better, because one of my jobs for a couple of years was to ink in and color Jack Kirby's drawings. He'd walk in with a big stack of Crescent board under his arm and they were his show idea drawings. I think he drew them with a lumber pencil, because there were these huge, wide strokes of the pencil. He'd bring in 20 or so of these things every week and none of them were used for shows — they were all used to pitch shows. He must have done hundreds of them over the years.

GROTH: Now, these were huge.

WOODRING: Well, they were half-sheets of Crescent board.

GROTH: How big is that?

WOODRING: That's about 20" by 30". They were big. And they all had to be inked in with nothing but the best Series 7 brushes, \$75 dollar brushes. It destroyed the brushes inking them. And colored with watercolor. And I used to do that day in and day out. I didn't know who Jack Kirby was because I didn't read comics when I was a kid. I mean, I knew he was a comics figure, but I didn't realize what a big deal he was.

GROTH: Did he start working there when you were already there?

WOODRING: No, he'd started working there before I did.

GROTH: You know why he was called in to do this sort of thing?

WOODRING: Just because the company had lots of money and no idea what to do with it, basically. And that's where I met Gil [Kane]. John was responsible for getting Gil hired. The social aspect of that job was great — that's why I stayed on for so long. We had long lunches, we had a bowling team at one point that we set up because the writers had a bowling team. We formed a bowling team called "The Dizzy Toilet Devils," which is what Koko the talking gorilla would call her

trainer when she was mad at her. We would go and bowl with the writers and do things like push the reset button while they were bowling and fall down laughing and everybody would get drunk. The writers just hated our guts.

GROTH: Writers of Saturday morning cartoons?

WOODRING: Yeah. These very pretentious, self-important guys.

GROTH: Huh.

WOODRING: And the stuff they produced was the most debased, sub-literate drivel, just the most stupid, empty-headed crap I have ever seen in my life. And they were so fucking proud of it, so full of themselves, such incredibly pompous windbags. I remember I was at a studio Christmas party and one of the writers there organized this little Broadway musical-type song-and-dance type of thing, and he got some of the secretaries to get up and perform it. And these poor, shame-faced women got up and na-na-na-na'ed their way through the song and everybody was turning away in shame, it was such an awful fucking spectacle. At the end this guy rushed over to them like Billy Rose and gave them each a little gift, a bottle of perfume or something. Opening night largesse. It was just beyond belief.

GROTH: Wow. They were actually proud of what they did?

WOODRING: They seemed to be. They seemed to feel that they were underemployed, that they were just marking their time until they wrote the next *Birth of a Nation*.

GROTH: Where did they come from? Were they Hollywood hangers-on?

WOODRING: Yeah. Gil, who knew more about these matters than I did, said that they were people who had failed at other careers — low-level careers like working at the Kinko's — and so they became writers. There was one guy there who actually started out in the Xerox room, if memory serves, who rose through the ranks. One of the big bosses had a chronic bowel irritation and he was always running to the bathroom and people would leave the bathroom and he would enter the stall and cut these obscene, volcanic grumblers, "AAARGGGH!" It sounded like he was suffering, but our man contrived the brilliant idea of going and hanging out in the bathroom with him and talking to him and lighting his cigars and making him feel like he wasn't some deplorable piece of shit. So the next thing you knew, the guy was a writer.

GROTH: [laughing] That's what it takes! A little networking.

WOODRING: Yeah, exactly. And he would write scripts that were more lamentable than almost anybody else's. He would do things like have the

characters on opposite sides of a deep chasm and then the next thing they'd be walking away together. [Groth laughs] And as storyboard guy you'd say, "Hey, how's this going to work?" and he'd go, "I know, it's a cheat. Let's cut to a cloud and then we'll see them walking away together." Stuff like that. He really tried to be our benefactor. He tried to tell us to cheat and fake it and to light cigars and then we'd get to be rich too. He went on to write for TV and he's doing films now. A complete no-talent guy who didn't take himself seriously and was just milking the system and knew it, so I sort of respected him for that. When he moved on, he was replaced by a woman who was much worse. Just imagine this stupid, semi-attractive blonde dip-shit sitting at her computer in a gown, drinking white wine and writing the latest *Rubik the Amazing Cube* scene out on the balcony of her Hollywood Hills apartment as tears of joy at her own brilliance drip off her face.

GROTH: Jesus, God!

WOODRING: Yeah, it was very bad.

GROTH: Sounds like Norma Desmond.

WOODRING: Yeah, well... A really, really unhealthy and unwholesome situation. And working with these deformed walruses and jelly giants and cripocrats was bad enough, but to see them fruggin' on the dance floor at the Christmas party was soul-turning.

GROTH: Those people are invariably ungraceful.

WOODRING: Well, for the most part. At least I had the decorum to stay the hell off the dance floor. A lot of comics writers worked there, and you know what? Occasionally there would be cute girls who would be hired there, usually secretaries, and they usually became writers too. [Groth laughs] There was one girl who had the "recently raped" look — you remember the "recently raped" look? Clothes torn off the shoulder? Well, she combined the "recently raped" look with the "Catholic schoolgirl" look and she had these really beautiful heavy-lidded eyes and she and this other woman, who was a Grade A sex bomb, evidently got into a competition with each other to see who could bag the most writers. So I'd be working there late at night and I'd see these dishes tip-toeing into some blubberball's office where he'd be hammering away at his keyboard, and my head would be spinning. I just couldn't believe what was going on right before my very eyes! [Groth laughs.]

GROTH: Well, were those particular writers — what was their attitude toward doing this?

WOODRING: With the exception of the cigar-lighter, all the very worst writers in that place thought they were hot-shot writers... real artists.

GROTH: Jesus. That's almost beyond belief.

WOODRING: Yeah, it is beyond belief.

GROTH: I've never reconciled what's better or worse: the person who is doing the best he can and puts as much effort into it as he can but it turns out shit, or the person who simply knowingly and happily and cheerfully turns out shit and knows it's shit. Can you reconcile this philosophical conundrum? The end result is shit in any case.

WOODRING: I guess I prefer the guy who knows that he's turning out shit, because he's not going to have an artistic crisis and beat his wife and kids over *Turbo Teen* like I imagine some of these guys did. The guys who take themselves seriously do bad for the world. Most artists I think are anxiety-ridden types who strew a bunch of misery around.

GROTH: But, conversely, the artists who drew all the material pretty much had their heads screwed on straight and knew all of this stuff was garbage and accepted it as such and accepted their role in it as such?

WOODRING: Well, my perception is that's the case. But I had far and away the worst attitude problem of anyone there. I mean, I was a *bad* co-worker.

GROTH: Now, was this because of your greater sensitivity?

WOODRING: No, it's just my personal problems, the fact that I didn't want to be there and I didn't want to be doing it and I didn't have the balls to just shut up and do my work and try to make something better occur on the side. I bitched and moaned and griped the whole time and I would have been fired early on in the game if I hadn't been working for my friend John, who was bound and determined to keep me working there because John is a demon and one of his first priorities at bastard central was to work with the people he wanted to work with. So that's how I kept that job.

GROTH: Do you have any great Kirby anecdotes?

WOODRING: Oh yeah, I have a lot. One of my favorites is there was a man who would show up without any arms — they were amputated at the shoulders. He would come in and for some reason he would wait until Jack came in because Jack was approximately his age, and he would ask Jack to take him to the bathroom down the hall and unzip his fly and take his cock out so he could pee. And Jack would evidently do it. You'll have to ask Jack about that, I never saw it actually happening, but I was told by other people that it happened more than once. [Groth laughs wildly.]

GROTH: Was this person an... Well, this person couldn't have been an artist, I guess...

WOODRING: [Laughs.] I shouldn't think so, unless he was...

GROTH: But he could have been a writer. I mean, was he just a person off the street? Did he have any connection to the studio?

WOODRING: He wasn't a bum, he was just someone who knew there was a bathroom in there and knew there was a 60-year-old man there who wouldn't try to rob him or something and would help him do what he had to do.

GROTH: Did you talk to Jack?

WOODRING: Oh yeah, I talked to him all the time. He was fun to draw out in conversation because everything he said was unpredictable. I remember he told me a war story. He told me he was in Italy in WWII and that his division was being hemmed in by some Axis affiliate and they were all going to die, it was obvious. There was one little skiff that was reserved for the officers, so Kirby crawled through the mud to his commanding officer and he said, "Listen pal, I'm afraid I'm gonna get shot." His CO said, "We're all going to get shot!" And he said, "But I'm Jack Kirby." The CO said, "Who?" "I'm Jack Kirby. I invented Captain America." And the guy said, "Oh, really? Well look, that boat is supposed to be for me, but you take that and you row over to that village across the land and you'll be safe." So Jack got in the skiff and rowed across the water while the rest of his division get slaughtered over there. He crawled into a barn and peasant women brought him breadsticks and cold consommé. At least that's how I remember him telling it.

GROTH: [Laughs.] Did you get the impression that Jack was a little pixilated?

WOODRING: Meaning what? Drunk?

GROTH: A little bent, not all there.

WOODRING: Oh yeah, he was definitely... My understanding is that he couldn't drive a car. He'd get behind the wheel of a car and he'd think he was in a jet plane or a rocket ship or something. That's what [his wife] Roz told me. So he never drove.

GROTH: What did you think of the work he did?

WOODRING: I was always amazed by his invention. His work seemed sort of like something a computer would do because a lot of times it didn't make any sense at all. And he would keep doing these drawings, but they never got used for anything. So I think he got kind of bent out of shape about that. He also taught



me something about fame. Because at the height of the Jack Kirby "God Save the King" kind of thing, when the *Journal* and I think *Amazing Heroes* did a big thing on him and Jack was the talk of the town, while all this was going on, we had gotten an assignment to do some character designs for a client. So Jack went and did some and I went and did some and some other people went and did some, and we all brought them in on Monday and Jack had done 15 or 20 drawings, naturally, and he was showing them all, and he showed his first. The guy looked at them, "Oh yeah, this stuff is great, this is great." And then I was next and I brought my drawings out and the guy was looking through and he picked up one of my drawings and said, "Oh, this is good, I like this one." And Jack took the drawing out of his hand and put one of his under the guy's nose instead and said, "You don't want his work — this is what you want! This is the real stuff! I learned my trade on the editor's floor!" And what that means exactly, I don't know. [Laughter.] I don't like the sound of it. But what he meant to say was that he wasn't some young upstart like me. And this is a guy who was having accolades dumped on him by the bucketful. He didn't like the idea that this guy liked my drawings as well as his.

GROTH: I have a feeling we're going to just skim the surface as to which shows you worked on. You worked on *Superman*, didn't you?

WOODRING: Yeah. Worked on *Superman* with Marv Wolfman, the story director.

GROTH: And was that an enjoyable experience?

WOODRING: You know, I can't remember that much about it. I don't think it was. Marv was OK, but he kind of breezed into town and took over in a way some people resented, especially since he didn't have anything fresh to bring to that project. So no, that wasn't very enjoyable.

GROTH: What was working with Gil Kane like? Or did you work with Gil?

WOODRING: I didn't really work with him, I just mostly hung out and went to lunch with Gil. We became good friends. He's a great guy.

GROTH: Now, you didn't know who Gil was before he showed up there?

WOODRING: I actually knew who he was better than I knew who Jack Kirby was.

GROTH: Oh really?

WOODRING: Yeah, because John had given me a big stack of *John Carter of Mars* comics and I looked through those and was impressed with his drawing ability. So I sort of knew who he was. Yeah, it was great going out with Gil, going out to lunch and hearing him talk about life and about cartooning's past. He really

made me feel like I missed out on just about everything good that the cartooning industry had to offer, because he would describe these meetings and shows at the American Cartoonists' Association, gatherings where Rube Goldberg and Walt Kelly and Milton Caniff and other luminaries would absolutely scintillate. And he would describe these parties that cartoonists had at their houses back east, and the way he described 'em just made my glands swell. He would say, "My boy, you simply had to be there. It was a time when the sap gushed forth, when men and women were bursting with raw animal intensity that could not be held in check, and when diners in heavily curtained restaurants would succumb to the musk-laden atmosphere and copulate joyfully on the tables among the radishes." He'd say, "My boy, I remember going to parties in the winter, and beautiful, beautiful women with deliciously overripe bodies and roving eyes, and men with cocks like crowbars. We cartoonists were all like lust-crazed bulls, and the sweet nerve of life throbbed in us until we were all driven out of our minds with passion, which we satisfied with these gorgeous women in languorous, salacious couplings in the snow."

GROTH: Yeah, he definitely saw that period as like the last days of the Roman Empire.

WOODRING: Oh man, it made my mouth water to hear about it.

GROTH: So what did Gil do for Ruby-Spears?

WOODRING: He did character designs, primarily.

GROTH: And he was he good at that?

WOODRING: Yeah. He was great at it. Then again, he'd produce great drawings that were unusable as character designs because they were too complex. But what the hell? They were beautiful pictures.

GROTH: And you inked and colored Gil's work too.

WOODRING: Gil preferred inking his own work, and I preferred to let him. So I colored in a lot of his work but I didn't ink practically any of it.

GROTH: Did you enjoy inking Kirby's stuff?

WOODRING: Oh yeah, it was fun. It was a ton of fun. Like I say, I had the best materials, a Windsor-Newton #8 Series 7 brush and fresh India ink, and I could just stick that brush in that ink and *zipp!* make a line three feet long and half an inch thick with one stroke and then start doing the details. It was a lot of fun.

GROTH: How long were you in animation?

WOODRING: About six years.

GROTH: What did you learn during that period, if anything?

WOODRING: I learned a lot of unpleasant things about human nature. I mean, I used to see Telly Savalas and Angeline driving around.

GROTH: Telly Savalas and who?

WOODRING: Angeline. You don't know who Angeline is?

GROTH: Mmmm... Some hot babe?

WOODRING: Sort of. She cuts records that are unreleasable and has billboards put up about herself. She's famous for doing nothing. John Waters called her a female female impersonator.

GROTH: Yeah, you know, I think I saw a billboard of her which is why I didn't know who she was, but thought she must be somebody who is on billboards.

WOODRING: Yeah. Big, pink billboards. Big, pink knockers.

GROTH: Yeah, on Sunset Boulevard.

WOODRING: Yeah. Telly Savalas has evidently got a restaurant on the Universal Studios lot now. One of the guys I used to work with, Brian Chin, went up there for the express purpose of getting his autograph on a magazine article — it was one of those “Where Are They Now?” things! “Where is Telly Savalas? Remember him?” So he got his autograph. This was typical of Brian's cruel sense of humor, incidentally. Another time... You know Doug Wildey, who draws that beautiful *Rio* book?

GROTH: Right.

WOODRING: Well, he also used to do work for Ruby-Spears, presentation art. He had this cool cat persona... He used to heckle Brian, call him The Yellow Peril and other hilarious things. One time he came sauntering into Brian's office where Brian was working on a board in his cold, methodical way, and Doug said, “Hey, The Yellow Peril! Y'know, I wish I had a job like you where I could just dress snappy and relax all day!” And Brian said, without looking up, “Well, Doug, maybe you could be a model for an iron lung catalog.” You could see it went right through Doug's sensitive ego like a howitzer shell. Another time Brian walked into John's office while John was listening to the Grateful Dead and said “Say, John, when the Grateful Dead open up their golf and retirement community in Laguna Hills next year, are you going to go there to live?” Oh, he had a knack for inflicting pain.

GROTH: So what else did you learn at that job?

WOODRING: I learned how to storyboard. And I learned there were lots and lots of cartoonists around who were really good but not doing much with it. And I learned some things about staging.

GROTH: Did doing all those storyboards help you with the compositions of your comics?

WOODRING: Yeah, it did to a certain extent. I still try to adhere to the world of cinematic storytelling. When I'm drawing I have a camera line that I try not to cross over and I try to manipulate time in the same way. I try to use establishing shots in the same way. Yeah, I did learn a lot. It's been useful.

GROTH: Why didn't you write the stories?

WOODRING: I tried. But the writers didn't want anybody else to cash in on it because that was where all the money was.

GROTH: The writing?

WOODRING: Oh, yeah. Those guys made *lots* of money.

GROTH: More than the artists?

WOODRING: Oh, much more.

GROTH: Well now, that seems a little backward.

WOODRING: That's the way it was. The writers were all closer to the heads of the company.

GROTH: And that's what dictated the pay scale. How weird.

WOODRING: Yeah, it was weird.

GROTH: Was it deadening in a certain way? Did you feel after a while you were treading water and had to get out?

WOODRING: Yeah, there were times when I'd come home and just be loaded up with despair because it all seemed so wrong and so futile.

GROTH: And it clearly wasn't what you wanted to do.

WOODRING: No, not at all. I hated it. Towards the last years I was living and

working there I would just be driving everywhere saying “I hate this town. I hate this town! I hate this job, I hate this work! I hate this life, I hate this shit.” Like a mantra.

GROTH: During that period, what *did* you want to do? What would be your ideal?

WOODRING: To do a comic book. To do some hybrid blend.

GROTH: Were you paying attention to comics then, on what was coming out and who was doing what and so forth?

WOODRING: Yeah, I was paying attention to your comics, specifically. And I was paying attention to a few underground comics that were still coming out. But *Love and Rockets* was a revelation to me, and even *Neat Stuff* when it first came out, even though it was a pale foreboder of what it became. I mean, I could just see something there that was so unique and so driven that it was great.

GROTH: Those were the days.

WOODRING: Yup. Those were the days all right. And there was other interesting stuff happening all the time — Kitchen was putting out good stuff...

GROTH: Yeah, '84 to '88, something like that. And there was *RAW*.

WOODRING: Yeah. And then there was *Weirdo*. I read *Weirdo* religiously.

GROTH: Did you read *RAW* pretty religiously?

WOODRING: I bought it. I haven't read all of them yet, I mean I haven't read every story in all the *RAWs*. Not all of them grabbed my interest. But I bought them all.

GROTH: Was your interest in *RAW* as great as your interest in *Weirdo*?

WOODRING: Oh no, no. *Weirdo* I thought was a terrific magazine. I thought it was great.

GROTH: What was it in *Weirdo* that appealed to you? The anarchic quality?

WOODRING: No, Crumb. I didn't think it was anarchic at all, I thought that it just acknowledged that there were informed tastes that were out of the mainstream and that Crumb was a connoisseur of such things and he was bringing them together for like-minded people. I always thought that *Weirdo* was very, very calculated and specifically driven.

GROTH: And a great showpiece for Crumb.

WOODRING: A great showpiece for Crumb, who really seemed to give it his all.

GROTH: Now, you met Crumb at some point.

WOODRING: Yeah, I met him about 1982 I think, in Los Angeles. Somebody had made a film on him that premiered down there. So we went to this premiere and he was there, which surprised me. I was there with Mary and her sister. I was too tongue-tied to really talk to Crumb. I tried a little bit but he completely discouraged me from being friendly with him and glommed onto Mary and Nora and jumped up on Mary's back and said, "Come on, girls! Let's go!" and of course played around with them and so on and so forth.

GROTH: How did you react to that?

WOODRING: Mary is a fan of Crumb's, so she was hugely flattered and being cute about it, you know, putting her hand to her face and going, "Oh, my!" So that was fine with me. I had figured he was a skinny, gawky kind of guy but I didn't realize how insubstantial he really is. He looked like he was made out of green bamboo. I'm sure you or I could kill him with one hand. So there was absolutely no physical threat from the guy. I didn't feel like some guy was hitting on my woman — Mary said it was like having a huge grasshopper jump on her back, moaning and vibrating. [Laughter.] So after that, Pete [Bagge] started editing *Weirdo* and I sent him some stuff and he accepted something, so I wrote a letter to Crumb saying, "Hey, I'm in *Weirdo*, I'm really pleased and I'd like to know if the cover to #11 is available because if it's affordable I'd like to buy it." He sent me this postcard saying, "Yeah, you can buy that drawing if you want, but it's real expensive and you can't afford it. I hated you when I met you... But I'm sure crazy about your wife! I was in awe of her! And I'll tell you what, I'll give you that cover if you bring your wife up here and let me have my way with her for a few hours." So I wrote him an angry letter back and he wrote me an apologetic note back. That pisses me off in a way because I really do have an almost unbounded respect for Crumb as an artist and he's in town occasionally and I run into him occasionally and I feel like my relationship with him is completely fucked up because of this and I can't just relax and chat with him. He's always giving me that... He does this thing with his eyes where, I don't know if he's sizing somebody up or assessing his chances or thinking of some horrible scheme, but his mouth kind of hangs slack so you can see his teeth and his eyes get squinty and he has this reptilian, unpleasant quality when he does that. And he's always giving me that, "Don't talk to me! Just get away from me!" kind of a look. So what the fuck? I don't know what to do about it. Except ignore him. I try to stay out of his way.

GROTH: Was that disappointing? Did he live up to your expectations? You know what they say about "Never meet your idols."

WOODRING: Actually, he came over here that evening after we went to dinner and he seemed pretty relaxed and we just hung out and talked. I read that great interview that you did with him, and just hearing him talk was a treat because he's informed and he's smart and he knows how to turn a phrase. So from that standpoint, no, and he is such a strange-looking individual, he wasn't disappointing from that standpoint either. So no, he didn't disappoint me as a person. I'm just disappointed that I can't relax in his presence and have him relax around me.

GROTH: I remember the first time I saw Crumb, I drove up to his house with Jaime [Hernandez] and it was late at night. He gave me these directions on how to get to his place, which went something like, "You go down and turn left at the oak tree and right at the gravel pit and proceed down a dirt road..." So I was doing all that and I came up to his place and it was dark and I had the high beams on and I guess he was in the front of the house and he walked into the street to wave at me, so I caught him in the high beams, and it struck me at that moment what a living cartoon character he was, because he draws himself so perfectly. I didn't even realize what an icon he had become. There he was with his hat on, looking exactly like how he draws himself.

WOODRING: Yeah, he dresses the part. For which I salute him. Not enough people are willing to work that hard at making themselves personalities. But he's a great artist, I feel privileged to share the world with him.

GROTH: Do you keep a sketchbook?

WOODRING: Yeah, I do as a matter of fact.

GROTH: I've never seen anything like that from you. Do you sketch in it every day?

WOODRING: No, not every day. Actually I just started another one. I just got this sketchbook in Pasadena and I have exactly one drawing in it.

GROTH: So what do you do in your sketchbook? Do you work out problems?

WOODRING: Yeah, I work out problems, I do diagrams for things. Not beautiful, pristine works of art like Crumb's.

GROTH: Do you sketch in ink without penciling?

WOODRING: Yeah, I do both. It depends on what's at hand mostly.

GROTH: Were you somewhat surprised to learn that Ralph Steadman doesn't pencil?

WOODRING: No, I wasn't surprised. In that interview you did with him he said he doesn't pencil because that would be like drawing twice. I saw in that remark the kind of ignoble thing that certain cartoonists, probably all cartoonists, are tempted to say at one time or another in order to injure their peers. I was talking with Jaime and he said that he never uses any reference at all, that every so often he'll discover that he is drawing people in the same postures more than once so he will go out and look at a crowd of people for a while until he's assimilated enough information to revivify his style and then he'll go back to drawing. But he never, ever uses reference. 'Course, I suspect that he and Gilbert are bullshit artists, or so I've been told. They told me that they had absolutely none of the comics that they wrote and drew when they were kids, that the one that's in the new *Love and Rockets* was a sole survivor of a large batch and that all the others were gone. Then Dan Clowes told me that when he was at Gilbert's house, Carol brought out a huge stack of things they had done when they were kids.

GROTH: Is that right? Because Gilbert told me that too.

WOODRING: Yeah, I think they're deliberately misleading. I think they like to fuck with people's heads. But that's OK, I think that's a valuable thing to do. I like to make up rumors about myself and put them out there just to see how far they'll go, like those colored smoke weathered balloons that they send up to watch the way the air currents make the plumes drift. I told Ed Brubaker that I like to go walking around the neighborhood at night, go down to Frat Row and look in the sorority windows. It wasn't true, I just said it for effect, but almost immediately I began to hear that I was a peeping tom. The speed with which that rumor got spread is astonishing.

GROTH: The grapevine is potent.

WOODRING: Yeah. Well, he's a mighty vine.

GROTH: [Laughs.] Ed Brubaker?

WOODRING: A mighty vine at the mighty rock.

GROTH: Imagine what he'd be like if he put that in his drawing.

WOODRING: Yeah, well, he's an assiduous worker, I think.

GROTH: Is he? Because he comes out with a book every 18 months.

WOODRING: Well, I think Ed's working at his life, which is the stuff of legends. His actual cartooning is only a small part of it. Actually, I thought he stated his case really well at that party for Chester Brown at Russ' house. Ed got three sheets to the wind and confronted Kim [Thompson].



GROTH: I wasn't there for that.

WOODRING: He said, "You know Kim, I've got to tell ya. I wouldn't be drawing these comics if it weren't for Fantagraphics probably. I've given up the idea of getting a regular high-paying job so that I can draw self-expressing comics. I work really hard at my work and I make it as good as I can and when I bring it around to show it to you, it really hurts me when you give it a glance and then cut me down. I really expect some kind of support because you guys are sort of advocates, and I feel like I'm working in an art form that you helped to foster and it's surviving against all odds, and I don't see why you have to be so brutal to me when I'm trying so hard to do something that I know is meaningful to you." And I thought, "Well, that expresses it quite well." Kim said, "Well Ed, you're just going to have to learn to live with the fact that not everybody is going to like your work!" And I thought, "Well, that expresses that standpoint pretty well. We've got a classic stalemate here."

GROTH: Did you get out of animation when you moved to Seattle? Or before that?

WOODRING: Before that. The company I worked for was I think a victim of all that strange, corporate takeover stuff that was happening during the Reagan financial riots. It was bought by a larger company which just siphoned off all of its resources, cut everybody's pay, and ultimately ran the company out of business. At least that's my take on what happened. So I started coloring that 200-page *Ring* adaptation that Gil did and that was the job that I used to finance our move to Seattle.

GROTH: Right. That almost broke your back, right?

WOODRING: No, it was a long job and a lot of work but the money was reasonably good, I could live on it and I was glad to have it. I was glad it was such a big job because I needed it for that transition.

GROTH: Let me skip back as far as I have to skip back —

WOODRING: Let me say also I have no great love for animation per se. I go to these animation tourneys and I occasionally see something that I like by Sally Cruikshank or somebody. I'm not an animation aficionado.

GROTH: You aren't?

WOODRING: No. Not really. I like old cartoons.

GROTH: You like Tex Avery...

WOODRING: Yeah, and the old Fleischer Betty Boops with big bands in them.

But I'm not very interested in animation.

GROTH: I would think that old Fleischer cartoons would be your meat and potatoes, because he did some stuff that was not Betty Boop you probably have seen that are just completely outrageous. I mean they're imaginative beyond anything else I've seen in animation.

WOODRING: Well, one actual Betty Boop cartoon, or a Bimbo cartoon, *Bimbo's Initiation*, is one of the things that laid the foundation for my life's philosophy.

GROTH: Which specific cartoon was this?

WOODRING: It's called *Bimbo's Initiation*. There are strong echoes of it in a film made by Richard Elfman called *Forbidden Zone*, a live-action film that harkens back to that cartoon. It's just a very potent, inspired cartoon.

GROTH: But you're not an aficionado per se.

WOODRING: No, I'm not an animation buff exactly. I love some animated cartoons. And there are some cartoons that will completely stand me on my ear, like *Akira*, and *My Neighbor Totoro* is my new favorite cartoon, a kids' movie. It's great.

GROTH: And you like *Akira*?

WOODRING: Yeah.

GROTH: Why'd you like that?

WOODRING: Because it's such a tour de force, it's such a spectacle, it's so prodigious it's flabbergasting. And the ideas behind it are interesting. It has a lot of vague, hard to grasp ideas. I mean, the idea of a huge power represented in forms that are hard to grasp is enticing. A good subject.

GROTH: How did you see *Jim* when we published that? You probably didn't have any idea that this would be huge-paying work, but did you see it as a sideline activity?

WOODRING: No, I didn't expect it to be a huge high-paying work, but I expected it to do better than it did. I guess I was surprised at the amount of interest it did not generate. No, I actually thought that if somebody could sell 250,000 copies of a superhero comic, I could sell enough copies of *Jim* to get by. I figured there were enough people in the world with similar interests who would want to buy it. That I could at least make a meager living off it.

GROTH: I see.

WOODRING: And also I started up that line of goods that I advertised in the back of the book as a supplement to my income which it has been and actually still is. No, I knew it would never be a big mainstream hit. Most of the artists that I really like and identify with were not hugely popular. People I like, like Malcolm Lowry and Alfred Jarry and Rimbaud and Herriman were not raging successes in their day, but they have a small, ever-changing devoted audience. I figured that's what I would have, if I had anything.

GROTH: I wanted to skip back: you have a terrific command of language. It's probably one of the most distinctive prose styles in comics. How did you formulate it? How did this come about? Did you work as hard at writing as you have with drawing?

WOODRING: No, most of the things I write are written really quickly and not edited at all. But it's kind of a nasty little ivory tower thing, I have to be in a certain kind of a mood, I have to be relaxed and receptive. And since moving into this house with this big ravine nearby, I go down into the ravine and I write as quickly as I can. Every so often I will have a project that I have to finish no matter what, and I can't let it go if I don't catch it. So then I'll have to drag the thing back in its unfinished state and hammer it out and that can take days. Or I try to simulate the feel of something quickly written. But for the most part I write my stories in five minutes and spend two weeks drawing them.

GROTH: You write the finished version?

WOODRING: Yeah. Well, actually, I did that for the Frank stories because I would just write actions. When I'm writing the text, it takes longer to write them, a half an hour or 45 minutes, but I write them lickety-split.

GROTH: I wouldn't have guessed that. They don't seem labored exactly, but they seem very carefully constructed. You've written prose stories too. Are those written as quickly?

WOODRING: Yeah. Generally, by and large. I'm supposed to write something for the upcoming *Whole Earth Catalog*, a long story with illustrations, and it makes me somewhat nervous because I have no idea what I'm going to write about, but at some point when I get *Jim #5* finished, I'm just going to have to sit down, get ready, sort of like what I understand Zen painting and writing is like, where you just sort of do it. But you have to know when to do it. And you have to not know that you know. It's hard to explain, but I know when the mood is there. The sticky one.

GROTH: Can you trace back where you picked up your particular style of putting words together? Are there influences? Because it's incredibly distinctive. Nobody writes like you do.

WOODRING: No, that's something that's pretty organic.

GROTH: Your art is also unique. There is no one drawing like you.

WOODRING: I'd say my art is more synthesized. It's something that I really had to work at. I've always been able to write like this, for what it's worth. I've always been able to just sit down and turn on this faucet and have this stuff come out. In fact, I've got... I guess you can call it a novel, or at least it's a book that I've just been working on in longhand when I'm in that mood and I don't have a specific project and I'll just catch it in this book, and it's a few hundred pages long. I haven't even read the whole thing through yet, it just goes all over. I actually kind of like it, I think.

GROTH: Why were the Frank stories in *Tantalizing Stories* wordless? That was obviously a deliberate aesthetic strategy.

WOODRING: Just an exercise. Actually Mark Landman, who was editing *Buzz*, asked me to do a three- or four-page comic for his magazine that was sort of like a regular comic, but with unfamiliar twists. I thought that in order to make it unfamiliar, it would be best if I avoided language because when you use language you necessarily get culture-specific somehow unless you just strip it down until you're communicating essentials. There are clues in there that tag it and tie it in time and I didn't want to do that. I thought it would be more timeless and more enigmatic. And as an exercise, like writing the novel without using the letter "e," an obstacle or handicap to work against. On the other hand, it was just a good idea, I really liked those stories a lot. I was really, really pleased I was able to do them. They obviously wouldn't have worked as well as they do with words in them.

GROTH: Your work has shifted a bit — you did several autobiographical stories in the initial *Jim* magazine, and then I think you segued into Frank, which is presumably about as non-autobiographical as you can get.

WOODRING: Yeah, that stuff was completely contrived. But this [pointing to "Quarry Story" in *Jim* vol. 2, #1] is an autobiography.

GROTH: Oh, really?

WOODRING: Yes. It's a dream. It's a verbatim retelling of a recurring dream that I had in which I was the central character. I didn't know whether to identify it as such. It's a 10-page story, and I actually like the story a jot.

GROTH: Do you wake up and then write these dreams down?

WOODRING: Yeah, I have a dream journal.

GROTH: My dreams are not coherent enough to make into stories. They aren't stories, they're bits and pieces and fragments. Are your dreams coherent, linear?

WOODRING: Yeah. They're irrational a lot of the time, but they're linear.

GROTH: When you do something like that that's from a dream, how much of it are you filling in after the fact?

WOODRING: When I retell a dream as a comic I try to make it as verbatim as possible. If I can't remember a certain phrase or conversation, I try to come as close as possible. I try to keep the setting and the props as accurate as I can because these things almost always have... editorial meaning. Frequently I'll dream a dream as a comic or a picture and then I'll notice a rebus in objects, or a pun, or some other coded message from my unconscious to me, and usually they aren't very nice and I hope nobody will notice it. *Jim* is full of these. Of course I can't draw these things with the richness of a dream, but I do try to capture the feeling.

GROTH: It seems like you draw to a certain extent on childhood memories and impressions.

WOODRING: Yes, that is important to me.

GROTH: Does that get more difficult as you grow older and childhood becomes more remote?

WOODRING: Not really, because... I spend a lot of time mining my memories of those days for information and sensations. I can remember looking long and hard at a light bulb for the first time, thinking it was a natural object like a flower, or being very young and watching an airplane, a Constellation, cross the sky without understanding how big it was, how far away it was, that there were people in it... Knowledge extinguishes the flame of curiosity. I'm always on the lookout for new mysteries that will shine like the old ones. I still find them in the old areas: corners, spaces behind couches and under shrubs, around walls, in inaccessible recesses... "The black paper between a mirror breaks my heart 'cause I can't go," as Captain Beefheart says.

GROTH: Doesn't it get harder to maintain that point of view with age?

WOODRING: Well, I work hard to retain it. Did you ever read *The Basketball Diaries* by Jim Carroll?

GROTH: No.

WOODRING: Well, there's a refrain at the end, "I just want to stay pure, I just

want to stay pure." That's essentially what I've prayed to myself over the years, because the only way I can redeem my life's errors is to maintain my relationship to the, as I see it, divine.

GROTH: Are there any childhood influences that have stayed with you?

WOODRING: Yes, particularly *The Golden Book of Science*, illustrated by Harry McNaught. His drawings gave me all the basic information I still draw on about rendering, color, mystery, melancholy, sound in drawings, and the beauty of science. Strangely enough, I was visiting Paul Mavrides last year and he has the same book in his work area. He told me it had a similar value for him.

GROTH: Really?

WOODRING: What do you think, I'm making this up?

GROTH: No, no, I believe you. Any other early influences?

WOODRING: Boris Artzybashef hit me like a ton of bricks and is still an all-time favorite. And I remember seeing a picture in a book of oil paintings that has stayed with me, though I haven't seen it since and haven't found anyone who knows it.

GROTH: What was that?

WOODRING: It was a painting in the Italian style of a group of psychotic-looking musclemen cowering, drawing away in abject terror from an egg with feet coming out through the bottom of its shell. I'd love to know what it was. If anyone out there has any idea, please drop me a line in care of this magazine.

GROTH: You mentioned surrealism as something that had a big effect on you.

WOODRING: Natch.

GROTH: Is there anything else in the realm of fine art that has influenced you?

WOODRING: 17th century Dutch painting... the attempt to convey spirit through pure technique, as I see it.

GROTH: Is technique important to you?

WOODRING: Yes, because great technique can be not only a *raison d'etre* but a medium of impartment. Look at Vermeer, or Ingres. There's something mystical about that level of perfection. But then again perhaps I admire technique so much because of my own lack of mastery in that area.

GROTH: It seems to me that your technique is just improving by leaps and bounds.

WOODRING: Really?

GROTH: Yeah. And it seems to me that the black and white patterning is far more sophisticated than it was in the *Jim* magazine.

WOODRING: I guess it is. I have that wavy line, that chaotic line that I use in "Frank" that I hung onto because it's distinctive. I spent a lot of time avoiding doing things that I would ordinarily do because somebody else does it. When I was in high school I had this obsession with lobsters and I did lobsters all the time, I was just crazy about lobsters. When I found out about Salvador Dali and that he had an obsession with lobsters, I quit doing them because I thought people would think I was ripping him off. So I've tried to find the basic shading element that I can cultivate into something distinctive.

GROTH: Speaking of dreams, have you read *Sandman*?

WOODRING: No, I haven't. I've seen the covers of it and it looks interesting. That's just one of a lot of things that I haven't... I avoid looking at things that I think are going to strike me as being really good and in some ways similar to what I do. I didn't look at *Yummy Fur* for years after I was aware of it, just because I thought, I mean, I could look at it and I knew this guy is really good, he's inspired, he's brilliant, this is great stuff, he's weird, it's autobiographical — I was afraid in some ways it might be similar to what I do. I didn't want to deal with that somehow. So I just avoided it.

GROTH: But you eventually have looked at it?

WOODRING: Yeah, eventually I gave in. But I was steeled at that point, I gradually let myself in so that it couldn't make any inroads into my consciousness and take me over.

GROTH: So ultimately what did you think of *Yummy Fur*?

WOODRING: Oh, I think *Yummy Fur* is great.

GROTH: You've drawn strips for Harvey Pekar, so I assume you like his work?

WOODRING: Oh yeah, I like his work a lot.

GROTH: What's working with him like, and drawing his strips? Does he give you a full script?

WOODRING: No. What he's given me to work with, and what I assume he gives

everybody, is a piece of paper that has got hieroglyphics on it, stick figures that look like children's drawings, standing with their arms out and their feet are parted whether they're walking, running, sitting, or anything. Then all the text is hand written and there are some notes. It's all crammed onto a page, divided up into little boxes, doesn't reflect the page break up. He would send that to me and then he'd call and go through it with me step by step and make sure that I did a few things right. There was one I did about one of the black guys he works with in the hospital and he was afraid I wasn't going to draw the guy looking black enough. He gave me a little talk about how people shy away from making black people look like black people. In fact, he told me he was working with Michael Gilbert on one of those things and he sent one of Gilbert's drawings back saying, "This guy doesn't look black enough. Make him look more like a negro." So Gilbert colored it in with a brown felt pen and sent it back and said, "How's that? Black enough for you?" [Laughter.] That's what I heard. Probably another one of those unfounded bullshit stories.

GROTH: A wonderful apocryphal story. And you've drawn Denny Eichhorn's stories.

WOODRING: Yeah.

GROTH: What's the difference between drawing for Denny Eichhorn and drawing for Harvey Pekar?

WOODRING: Denny's stories are typewritten and they're kind of brisk, they don't have that tortured quality that Harvey's do. And Denny's a lot more easygoing. I don't think he takes what he's doing seriously. It's strange, because I don't really think of them working in the same field, they're so different somehow even though it's a similar thing.

GROTH: Does he break down the panels?

WOODRING: No. It's written like a regular story.

GROTH: So you have much more latitude with Denny.

WOODRING: Oh yeah. He's a lot more easygoing about it. I never know how to deal with Pekar when I talk to him on the phone. He always sounds like somebody put a gun to his head and told him to call me.

GROTH: Right. To me he always sounds like he's chasing a bus.

WOODRING: Yeah. He's rushed and he's gotta go. That kind of "I'm outta here" quality that Steve Gerber developed so perfectly.

GROTH: But he also made me feel like I should be in a rush for some reason.



WOODRING: Yeah, right. Like, "What's the matter, slowpoke? Get on the ball! Time's a-wasting, time's running!" In a way I feel really nurtured by having Denny nearby because he's so avuncular and he seems sort of like a spiritual godfather of this burgeoning Seattle cartooning scene to me.

GROTH: Is that right?

WOODRING: Yeah, he's got such a commonsense way of putting things in perspective. I liked one of the things Pete wrote in one of his recent editorials which was that you'd never believe alternative comics were such a low-stakes game considering how worked up the participants get.

GROTH: So true.

WOODRING: I can understand why people are so worked up about it in this town because the Seattle cartooning scene is so vibrant and so full of really, really good aspects, like being able to go over to Pete and Joanne [Bagge]'s house for dinner. That's a great experience!

GROTH: Does that mean you feel less alienated in this environment?

WOODRING: Yeah, I think that must be a function of getting older, too. I still feel like a fifth wheel on the wagon. I went out with Pete and Charles Burns and Larry Reid over to SubPop and met with Bruce Pavitt and went out and had a drink, and I just felt like I didn't belong in that group. It wasn't because I was dazzled by Burns' prestige and presence, or by Pavitt's, I was just in my usual, "Oh, I don't belong here, I don't belong to the human race" feeling that I've always had. It's become a habit more than anything else at this point. But I still feel awkward in almost all social situations. It took me a long time to work up the nerve to converse normally with the Hernandez brothers.

GROTH: [Chuckles.] Is that right?

WOODRING: Yeah. And it's hard for me to talk to Pete sometimes, too. Sometimes we'll just be chatting and then I'll think, "Yaw! This guy is one of the greatest cartoonists nature has produced!" And I'll get tongue-tied, I won't know what to say.

GROTH: You don't seem to me to do that.

WOODRING: I don't?

GROTH: No.

WOODRING: Oh shit, I was counting on communicating it so people would cut me a little slack.

GROTH: I think you'll have to work on that.