

# GAHAN WILSON: A REAL WOOZER-DOOZER

BY PAULA GURAN

There are few people in the world with whom you can spend a more entertaining time with than Gahan Wilson. Sure, he's one of the greatest cartoonists in the world, but he's also a raconteur who can tell a story with impeccable timing and enliven it with expressions that would be contortions on some other face. *The Spook* spent some time chatting with him in April at the World Horror Convention in Chicago where he was fulfilling his role as Toast Master for the event with his usual wit and style. It's home turf for Wilson. Currently a resident of Sag Harbor, NY, he was born in the Chicago suburb of Evanston 72 years ago and was later a student at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Although his work was first professionally published in *Amazing Stories* in 1954, he was initially rejected by numerous editors because they felt the broader public would not understand them. But after a break came through *Collier's* (a temporary cartoon editor didn't realize Wilson's stuff was supposedly incomprehensible to the average American and started buying it), he became well known through his cartoons in national magazines such as *Look*, *Playboy*, *The New Yorker*, and many more. Fifteen compilations of his cartoons have been published over the years.

Wilson's "cartoons" are more than simple chuckles, bizarre wit, or even darkly droll commentaries on the times. They are a rip in the fabric of our reality through which we can glimpse another world. It's a world similar to ours, but slightly skewed and very strange. There are, for instance, far more creatures with tentacles than we



are used to and plants tend to be robustly carnivorous. Simple acts like going fishing or eating a meal invariably turn disastrous, surreality is commonplace, scientists are all mad, and there are no average citizens.

Wilson's wonderful weirdness is not confined to cartooning. He's illustrated numerous books and book covers, done graphic novels, executed a set of trading cards featuring demonic baseball players, provided animation for an animated short released by 20th Century Fox — *Gahan Wilson's Diner* — and had a CD-ROM game "Gahan Wilson's The Ultimate Haunted House."

Wilson is also a writer. A collection of his short stories, *The Cleft and Other Odd Tales* was published in 1998, he's published two mystery novels, several children's books, and edited two anthologies. Among science fiction/fantasy and horror fans he is known as a reviewer as well.

Our conversation took place mid-morning in a hotel restaurant staffed with very nice waiters to whom English was a second language. We struggled to get coffee, then cream (for Guran), then milk (for Wilson).

Wilson also tried to order a breakfast roll of some type, but this desire was lost in translation. We misplaced our waiter, but eventually a croissant was delivered. The next challenge was honey and more coffee. But Gahan Wilson is the most amenable and gracious of celebrities, even under adverse conditions.

Several years ago, Gahan Wilson — never one to deny the appellation "weirdo" — told me that the odd little boy in his cartoons, the one in the hat, coat and muffler, was him. I'd wondered ever since just what kind of childhood he'd had.

**GAHAN WILSON:** I think I had a very dysfunctional mommy and daddy, so that was a large part of it. But the swell thing was that I grew up in this apartment building in Evanston that had a million children in it. We all formed this kind of tribe and played in this big back yard and that absolutely super. But I also remember later, as time went by, becoming quite solitary for a long stretch. I think that's true of a lot of people in the arts, to go through a phase like that until everyone grows up a bit. It shifts again with the start of high school, when it



*"Don't let it get away!"*

shifts more to the positive for you.

**THE SPOOK:** Did the art start during this solitary period?

**WILSON:** I have no idea when the art started. Like everyone I know who has succeeded in the arts, they didn't decide to do it, they just did. One time I was president of the Cartoonists Guild and we were negotiating something very important about rights and whatnot. I was in this room with some of the best cartoonists in the business, all adult men and women. And after a while someone else stood up to speak and I noticed that he had drawn funny little faces in the borders of this paper we had handed out. Then I looked around and discovered that EVERYONE else had drawn funny little things. And then I looked down and realized of course I, too, had drawn funny little faces on my paper. I thought, "Forget it! We just don't have the right attitude to deal with this."

So I think that people who are involved in the arts — any of the arts — are just that way. They are stuck with it and they stick with it... I mean, you have to be nuts. The odds are against being any kind of real success in the arts — any of the arts, some are worse than others, but every damned one of them really — it's silly.

**THE SPOOK:** What have you been doing lately?

**WILSON:** The *Playboy* thing and *The New Yorker* are going along very well. There was a scary phase there for all periodicals, but things seemed to have perked up. Of course, God only knows what will happen next with magazines.

I'm going off more into the television and movie thing. I find most of it is just development, although one project did get as far as completing an entire pilot. I have fun doing it, but then sort of... nothing... ever happens. That's the way things are in that business. But it's interesting and there are a couple of things that ARE moving along rather nicely. One I don't think I should publicly speak much about — but it's absolutely dazzling and it does look good [as far as completion.] It involves H. P. Lovecraft and I've always been very sorry that there haven't been more passable movies based on Lovecraft stories. This one could be a woozer-doozer, really spectacular.

**THE SPOOK:** What would your involvement be?

**WILSON:** I'd be the "Giger" [designing the film] and also work on the script, which had a problem that I think I've solved very nicely. I've always wanted to do Lovecraft in period. So much of his work needs that. "The Dunwich Horror," for instance [which specifically relates events from 1913 to the

year 1928 "when the Dunwich horror came and went"] — do it out of that time and it doesn't work. Or "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," which comes out of the Depression period — you need that era, the poverty of it is so important to the atmosphere. But *this* story for this project could be easily done in contemporary times. I've worked out a connection — which is *snappy*, really good — that is tied in to this Lovecraftian thing that is really happening to us, the destruction of the ecology. It fits and would make it work. It also solves a series of problems the original story presents that would make it unconvincing if you did it in period. So, that's there and I'd be doing the design and the script.

**THE SPOOK:** What about writing short stories?

**WILSON:** A very interesting thing happened to me when I started doing all this developing and writing for film and television — they want me to "do me," then they precede to change it all. It's the standard Hollywood thing. But I found that this had no effect at all on my cartooning. Writing for motion pictures and TV jammed up the fiction writing, though. I guess it used another very different kind of operative "think." I was concerned. I would try to do stuff and just couldn't get into it. Nothing. Then, about a year and a half ago, the jam just went, it evaporated and I was fine. It just took awhile for the brain to adjust, but it did and I was writing short stories again.

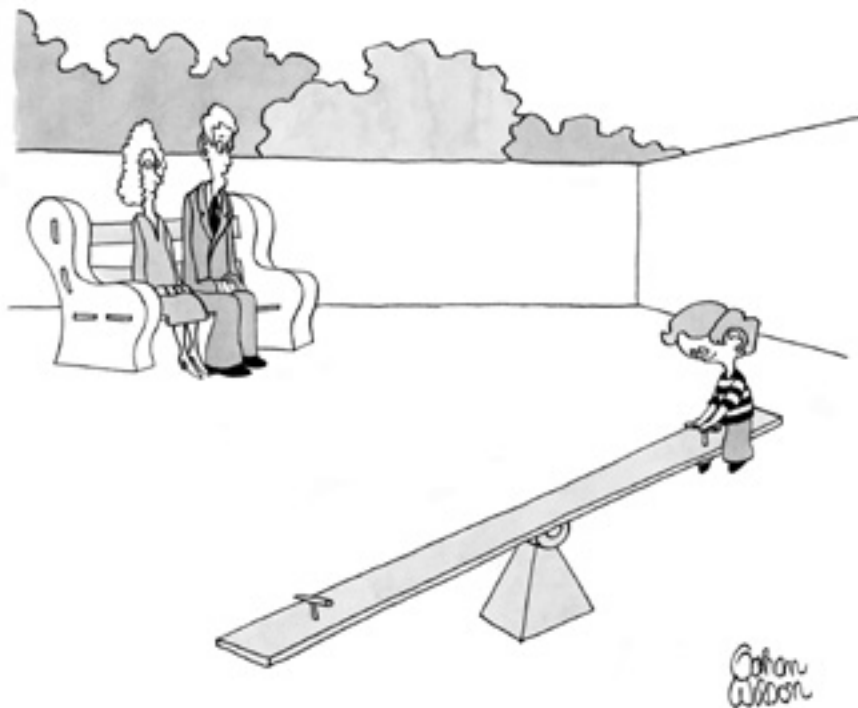
I doing this neat little kid's story, for instance, that sort of just popped up. That's still in process, but I am very happy with it and it's kicking right along. It's quite cute with swell little characters with nice appeal. It will be a novelette kind of thing with lots of illustrations.

As far as the cartoons, we are doing another collection of them soon.

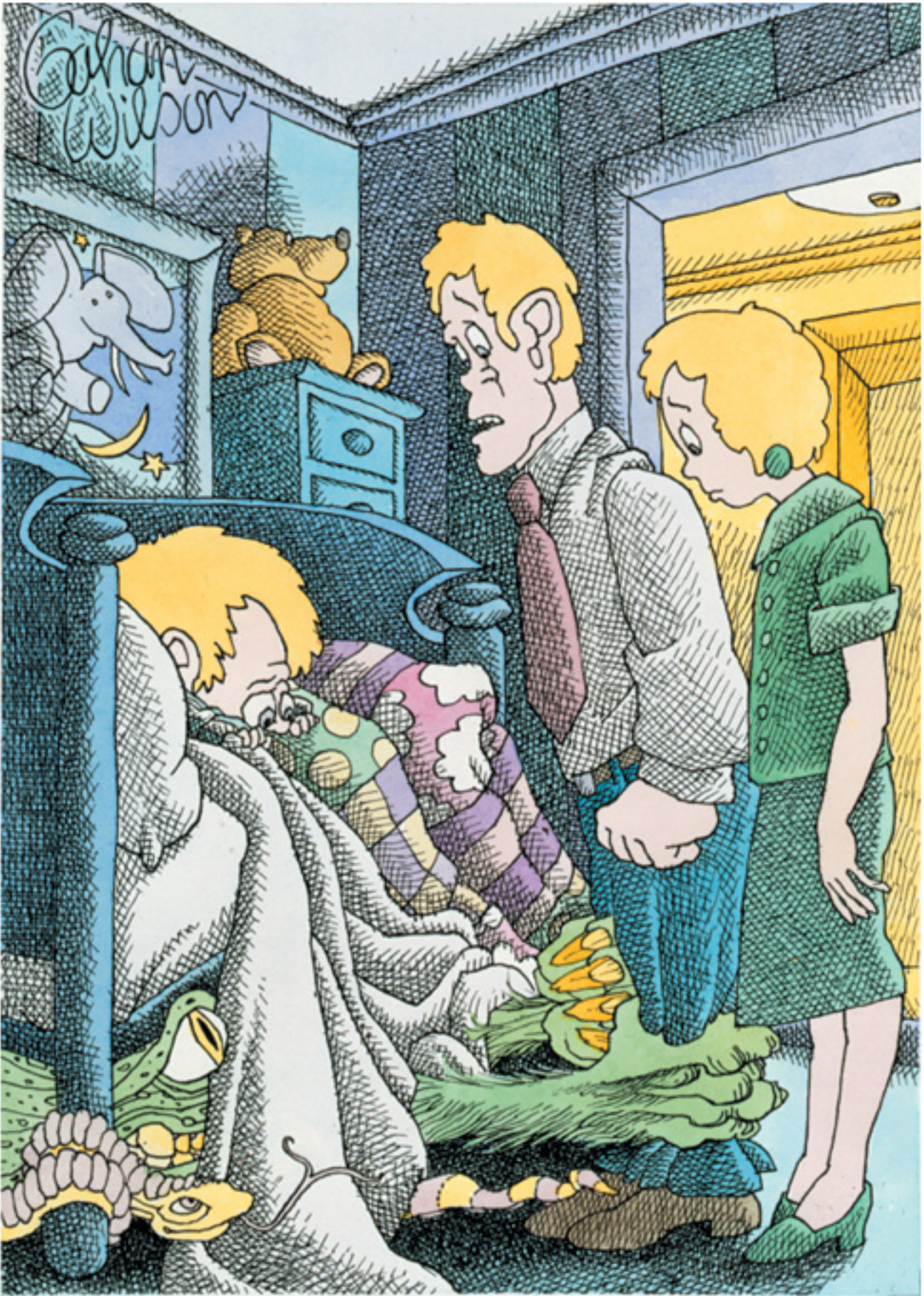
**THE SPOOK:** Did you ever have this "switching gears" problem with art?

**WILSON:** My general experience has been that I benefit from doing all kinds of different things. If you stretch out and do something that is a whole other business it doesn't mitigate the other stuff, it strengthens it; your skills increase exponentially, the whole thing perks up and everything *freshens*.

For example, I'm a pretty good painter, but I'm a *really* good cartoonist. So I stay with the cartooning and I have not ever been tempted to go with the paintings. I don't think that would be a good idea. But I do paint. I paint 'em and I toss 'em. It's



*"Apparently, Philip and his imaginary playmate are more or less the same weight and size."*



*"He's right—there is something under the bed!"*

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Someone once said to **Boris Karloff**,  
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wonderful exercise, like doing Tai Chi or something, it gets things flowing. So, the more things you do, the merrier. But the problem with the fiction writing and the TV/screenwriting — that blocked for a stretch there. Apparently there are synapses in the brain that connect differently. For me, one jammed the other.

**THE SPOOK:** Maybe it’s because with TV and film work, your original ideas are not protected. People muck about with them. Whereas in other areas, you are freer to create and no one is telling you what to do

**WILSON:** That’s how I feel about the cartoons and story writing. But with the movie thing — you know, this may not be publishable — there’s a story they tell out in Los Angeles that’s a bitter little joke, but it never fails to get roaring laughter from all present: There’s this creative type and this producer and they’ve somehow gotten themselves lost in the desert. They’re crawling across the sand and they are dying of thirst. Then suddenly they see a tiny rise of green ahead. They speed up get to it and, sure enough, it’s this teensy little puddle of water. So the creative guy starts to lean over to get a drink, but the producer holds him back and says, “Wait a minute, wait a minute...” Then he proceeds to stand up, open his fly, and urinate into the water. The creative guy says, “Why did you do that?” The producer says, “I was trying to make it better.” Best Hollywood joke I ever heard.

**THE SPOOK:** Well, there’s always the one about the dumb blonde starlet trying to sleep her way into a movie part. How did they know she was dumb? She slept with the writer.

**WILSON:** Yes, writers... The best writing story I ever came across personally was that I ran into this guy who was a dear old friend, big Hollywood guy, and a producer of the best kind (he wouldn’t piss in the oasis). He was greeting me with “Gahan! How are you?” and there were this group of guys with him, so he started introducing them. “This is Fred Yuckaduck; and this is Sam Such-and- Such, and Ron Mumble-dumble... and this is my writer.” No name. The poor writer just sagged a little but more.

I’ll never forget my first pitch meeting. I was with this writer they brought in and we were talking to the producer and the writer is going, “Yeah-yeah-yeahyeahyeah...” to everything the producer says. So I mention there’s this little spotted dog in the story... The producer says, “Sp-spotted?” And the writer immediately says, “We’re not committed to spotted!” And the producer says, “Maybe instead of a dog, we could have a cat...” And the writer says, “Yeah, yeah, a cat’s swell! We can do cat!” Which is why writers get that reputation.

**THE SPOOK:** But that’s what you have to do to survive as a screenwriter.

**WILSON:** That’s just it. You don’t. YOU don’t survive. For me, the basic technique seems to be that you seriously consider what you are going to be involved in and have your name put on then you draw a circle around the core, the precious area, the part you will die for before you let them change. And if they do, then you walk. You take that football [he drops into a sports announcing voice] and you run doowwn the field right to the goal posts and spike

that ball and... and all those sports metaphors.

**THE SPOOK:** You’ve been in *this* game a long time. What changes have you seen?

**WILSON:** Certainly in publishing things have changed. One thing that’s happened is that the Hollywood people have essentially blocked the publishing industry and, in various ways, control it completely. Everything now is a spin-off. So that’s where the attention is focused. That’s one reason I got into the TV and movie thing. Of course, I always loved the movies.

I’ve done remarkably well, compared to others, but talking to *other* people... The publishers don’t really care. They’ve gotten into this ruthless thing where they put all their eggs into the bestseller basket and just sort of toss everything else out there. They don’t promote any more, really, not seriously.

For me — I am, happily, a property, a commodity. But I’ve heard terrible stories from people who write. They get letters from editors who tell them they really, from the heart, liked the book, but that the publisher doesn’t feel it will sell at a certain level, so thank you very much, but we can’t take it.

**THE SPOOK:** Where do you think it will all end?

**WILSON:** I haven’t the faintest idea. I had a fascinating discussion with some guys



*“Pleased to meet you, though of course I’m sorry about the circumstances.”*



*"Chemical spill? What chemical spill? Anybody here know anything about a chemical spill?"*

from publishing at lunch yesterday, It was very educational. And I was recently at the San Diego Comic Con and everyone was totally occupied with variants of “Screw the publishers. We’ll publish some way or another.” I suspect there’s something in the offing. I know it’s going to take forever and I know that huge numbers of well-intentioned people are going to be disastrously slaughtered, but I think it’s going in a different way. The publishers will be screwed unless they shape up and do what they are supposed to do. You give them an absurd proportion of what the book makes, because of the stuff — like promotion — they are supposed to do for you. They don’t do it. One thing they claim they give you is distribution, but they don’t even do that. They throw it on the shelves and it sells out and that’s it. They claim it’s the fault of the chains, and definitely that’s part of it — I just have never seen publishing be more... silly!

**THE SPOOK:** Now that you finally have the croissant, I’ll ask one more question, then let you eat. What do you think you’ll be remembered for?

**WILSON:** The cartoons.

**THE SPOOK:** The weird, strange Gahan Wilson cartoons?

**WILSON:** Someone once said to Boris

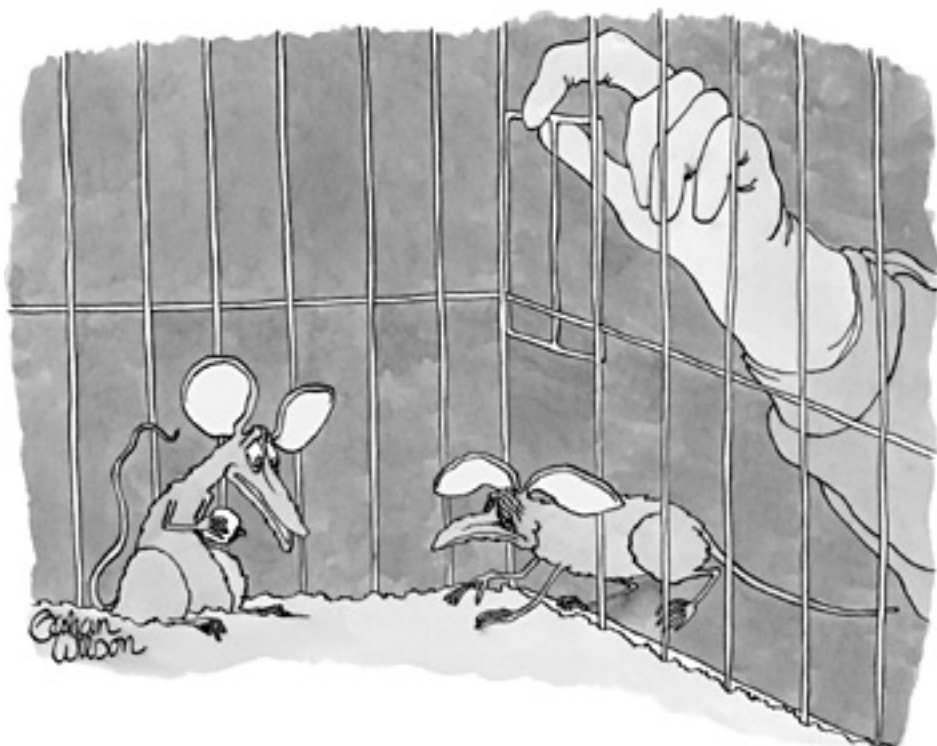
Karloff, “It’s a dreadful shame, Mr. Karloff, that a man of your talents and range is restricted to doing these horror movies.” Karloff said [Wilson drops into an absolute dead-on Karloff impression], “I am ever so grateful.” I feel the same way.

There’s a long tradition of what I do. My earliest inspiration, really, as far as direction — I mean outside of the comics and so on, I loved Dick Tracy because he was so horrible, I couldn’t believe that he was getting away with what he was doing, all these rotting corpses and all, bless Chester Gould’s heart — came from 19<sup>th</sup> century cartoonists. I went to a thrift shop in Evanston and saw a bunch of old bound copies of *Punch* — not the magazines, but anthologies of cartoons and jokes from *Punch* on various topics — a whole shelf of these things for a nickel a piece. I went home and begged the three or five bucks or whatever it was for the whole lot. I took them home and I loved them. They had all these wonderful Victorian cartoonists — [John] Leech, [Sir John] Tenniel and so on — and there was this somber, dark, interesting thing popping up in their cartoons. So this spooky thing is a fine old tradition and I’m happy to be an exponent of it. It’s swell with me. ~



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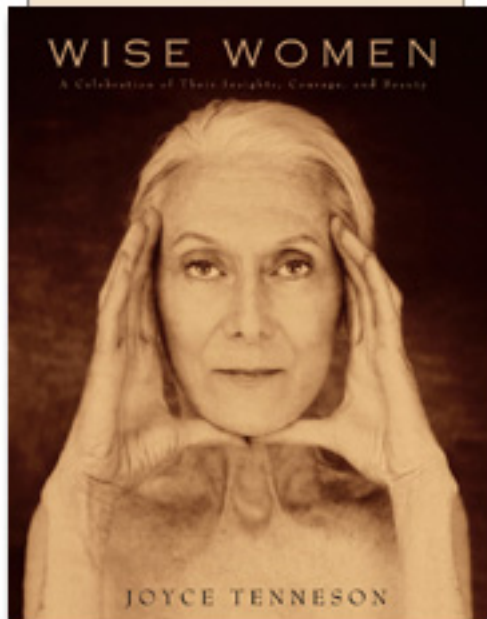
*"Tough day at the labyrinth?"*

TENNESON

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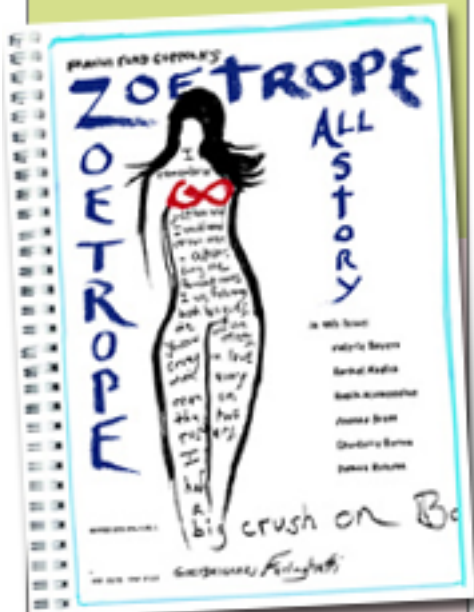
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