

“OPEN ME, I’M A DOG”: *PAT THE BUNNY* FOR SEMIOTICIANS

A conversation between Françoise Mouly
and Art Spiegelman

Françoise Mouly: So, we’re talking about *Open Me, I’m a Dog*, which you have called “*Pat the Bunny* for semioticians.” Can you recall the origin story, tell me where the idea came from?

Art Spiegelman: Yes. It was a very, very long time ago that I thought of this book.

FM: It was first published in 1997.

AS: Yes, I did the book in 1997, well after *Maus One* and *Two* had come out, when I was looking to express other facets of my personality. Now that I had kids who were at that point...

FM: In 1997, our daughter was ten and our son around five.

AS: Yes, it seemed like it was time to do a kids book. I recalled something that I had thought of when I was nineteen—a concept for a book, a strange concept. It first came to me in a period when I was having a lot of strange ideas, because I think what objectively would have been said about me at the time was: he’s having a nervous breakdown and he’s going crazy.

FM: When you were nineteen, you were in college.

AS: Yes, I was in college in the 60s, which implies the nervous breakdowns and strange drug experiences that were part of that. Part of my flipping out—and it did lead to me being sent to a mental hospital—was that I had all these interesting thoughts. I couldn’t sleep because of them. Among them, I was thinking a lot about language and words and the relationship between words and things, about the difference between, say, a table and T -A -B -L -E.

How do words conjure up something? Is a word too general? Is it too specific? Are languages smoke screens for things or are they gateways to things? At the time, those kinds of thoughts were actually urgent –not just philosophical queries.

Parenthetically, I was a philo major because I’d wanted to be an art major but the administration wouldn’t let me unless I took the preliminary courses. I had gotten A’s on all the advanced art courses so I didn’t understand why they would let me be an art major only if I took the foundational courses. So I became a philosophy major to find out.

In the context of all of that, one night, while I wasn’t sleeping very much at all, I was writing things down and writing sprawling words like HOW is equal to WHY with EQUAL underlined three times. One of the things I was thinking about is I need to make a kids book to explain language to kids. And that immediately came in the form of personification.



FM: So the concept and the title came in 1967, a good thirty years before you even made the book.

AS: Yes, and it stayed with me. It was a scrawl in a sketchbook, to make a book called “Open Me, I’m a Dog,” to explain to the reader how this is not a book. It’s a dog that’s been turned into a book by a magician. That was the concept.

FM: And as we had children, both of us were spending a lot of time reading books with them.

AS: Right, including *Pat the Bunny* which was another source of inspiration. Most people probably know it, but just in case, it’s a tiny book that you can pet because it has fur. It’s a nice tactile object and it came to mind when thinking about this idea. It had to be a little bit like a dog.

FM: *Pat the Bunny* was one of our kids’ favorites. Almost inevitably, as a parent, you fall in love with the books that your kids love because you’re reading them over and over again. That book is such a treat to give to your kid because they immediately grab it and touch and pet it.

I remember when I launched the TOON Books, there was a lot of appreciation from librarians, teachers, parents, but one of the best compliments came from a young girl who came over, holding a TOON book over her heart, with her hand going in circles over the shiny spot UV, petting the book, and saying: “I love this book. I love this book.” That was like a perfect understanding of what a book—a well-made hardcover book can provide, a tactile gift that you can keep returning to.

When we were reading comics to our children, we had to reassess the importance of kids books. When we did RAW magazine in the eighties, we spent all those years saying comics aren’t just for kids. We were intent, with RAW, and you with *Maus*, on making the world take the measure of comics as a medium for literary and artistic endeavors, not just as a kids’ medium. And it’s only once we were reading and rereading comics with our kids that I realized, comics are also a fantastic medium to bring kids into literacy.

AS: Right. As you said, when we were doing RAW magazine, the parenthetical tagline was “comics are not just for kids anymore.” And lo and behold, a few years later, after *Open Me, I’m a Dog* and *Little Lit*, and you launched TOON Books, the tagline became “comics are not just for grownups anymore.”

And when you're talking about the book as an object, that's important for both of us. Like when we did RAW magazine, the whole point was its objectness.

FM: In this day and age, when everybody decries the loss of literacy and the loss of print, I think that, for a child, the foundation of an understanding of the world is having it all held in a treasury box, which is a book, an object you can go back to. Every time you turn the pages, everything is in the same place, which of course doesn't happen with digital media.

AS: We don't see digital media as an adequate replacement for the book because of the objectness of a book, which we both experience firsthand by being involved in the production and printing of books. What will be the size? What kind of cover stock and what kind of different papers inside? And what surprises can you have in a book? That was certainly true in the making of *Open Me, I'm a Dog*. Instead of a bookmark, it has a leash. When the book first came out, I saw so many kids wander around with their dog on a leash.

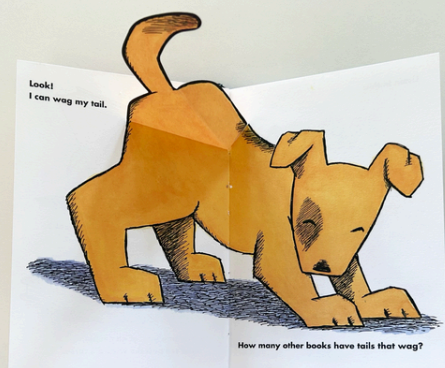
FM: And you can take it to school.

AS: Yes, it suggests that you do. It says, please take me to school. It has velvet endpapers that feel like you can pet a dog.

FM: It has a pop-up.

AS: Well, yes. He's explaining that he really is a dog. He says, look, I can wag my tail and the tail just pops up and the dog reminds you that it's pettable by having little velvet inset in the shape of a dog. Pet the dog on your lap. I'm so glad it's getting a chance to come back in print. It even has a dog-eared page with something hidden under it. Dog-eared, get it?

FM: One of the things that you do is to make use of the page turns with a single vignette over here, a title page, the tail that pops up, and then, for the dramatic moments, you use a spread. The rhythm and the page turns in a book are very much part of the reading experience. You read it once, you read it again and again—here, the more you read the book, the more you see it as a dog?



AS: Let's make sure people understand the premise. This is a book which is telling you it's not a book, it's a dog. It just had some bad luck. It met a witch and then a wizard and then a magic mountain maiden and they transformed him from one thing into another.

And so eventually, by really making the wizard angry, he got transformed into a book, and that's the book you're holding, but the book itself talking to you, appealing to you, to say, understand, I'm not really a book, I'm a dog, I'm a dog, I'm a dog, I'm a dog! So it's words and pictures, but also words and reality interacting in this particular case, giving you this kind of paradox.

FM: And I think that anyone who loves dogs would love this book. What's your relationship with dogs?

AS: When I was a small kid, when we came from Europe to America after the war, we lived in Pennsylvania with my aunt and uncle. They had two little dogs, kind of miniature Dobermans, and there were no other kids around for me to play with, so I spent the entire day with these two dogs, sitting in their little dog box with them. Well, their dog house was a cushion with some kind of comfortable area for them. I was around four years old, and I just chatted with them all day.

FM: That may be the true origin of this book, you being a dog. Well, let's wrap up. There's plenty more to be said, but the best way to understand what we're talking about is to actually find a copy that you can hold on a leash and that you can pet.

AS: And it's great for parents whose kids want a dog and there's not room for one, as long as they have at least a bookshelf to keep the dog on.

FM: And coming up, you'll do, “Open me, I’m a Bunny,” “Open me, I'm a Frog,” etc ?

AS: I know, I'm supposed to have done an entire series of the follow up animals, but no, this was one time in and out.

FM: Well, I'm glad this one time is now out in the world again. Thank you for your time.

AS: And thanks for doing it with me.