

by Tiffany Meyers **John
HENDRIX**

But now, it's clear that the fire-and-brimstone drawings scattered about his blog, are not ironic. Rendered "pew side" during church sermons, they're Hendrix's sincere attempts to make sense of, say, false idols, God's glory and the Pentecost.

Hendrix, who describes himself as "very much a guy with a sketchbook-," feels most at home as an artist when drawing. It shows. The church sketches are freer and weirder (in the good way) than anything you'd expect from church. They're also much funnier. Whatever serious stuff he's working through in his head, he's also clearly having fun with the surreal tropes of Biblical scripture. There are robots. Nearsighted rabbits. And dry bones, rising from the dead.

Later, in a St. Louis coffee shop named, hilariously, Meshuggah, Hendrix talks openly about being a young, evangelical Christian illustrator in a secular world. In his T-shirt layers (short-sleeve over long), Hendrix fits in at Meshuggah, where Washington University hipsters and—educated guess—Lit Grit majors drape themselves across varied pieces of furniture.

Critical of the inclination for some Christian artists to relegate themselves to the "Christian art ghetto," Hendrix never went in for the idea that he had to choose between making art for the secular world and being a Christian. And he's committed to debunking the notion that Christians can't also live a life of intellectual rigor and reason.

In fact, Hendrix grew up professionally in a stronghold of intellectual rigor and reason, when his 2003 grad-school internship at the *New York Times* Op-Ed page turned into a post as assistant art director. Working under art directors Steven Guarnaccia and Brian Rea until 2005, when he was offered a Washington University teaching job, Hendrix had the terrifying pleasure of talking shop with the likes of Milton Glaser, Chip Kidd and David Macaulay (pleasure) and occasionally requesting different ideas on the *Times'* behalf (terror).

Hendrix also illustrated letters on occasion, working on tight deadlines. "It really was the extreme sport of illustration," says Hendrix, who loved working with the intense, politically fraught subject matter. "I wanted to be a part of that page in a newsy way. I wanted that responsibility."

Today, Hendrix's editorial work has appeared in *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Wired*, the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *Newsweek*, earning recognition from American Illustration, Society of Illustrators and *Communication Arts*, among others. Hendrix is also something of the go-to guy for calamity illustrations.

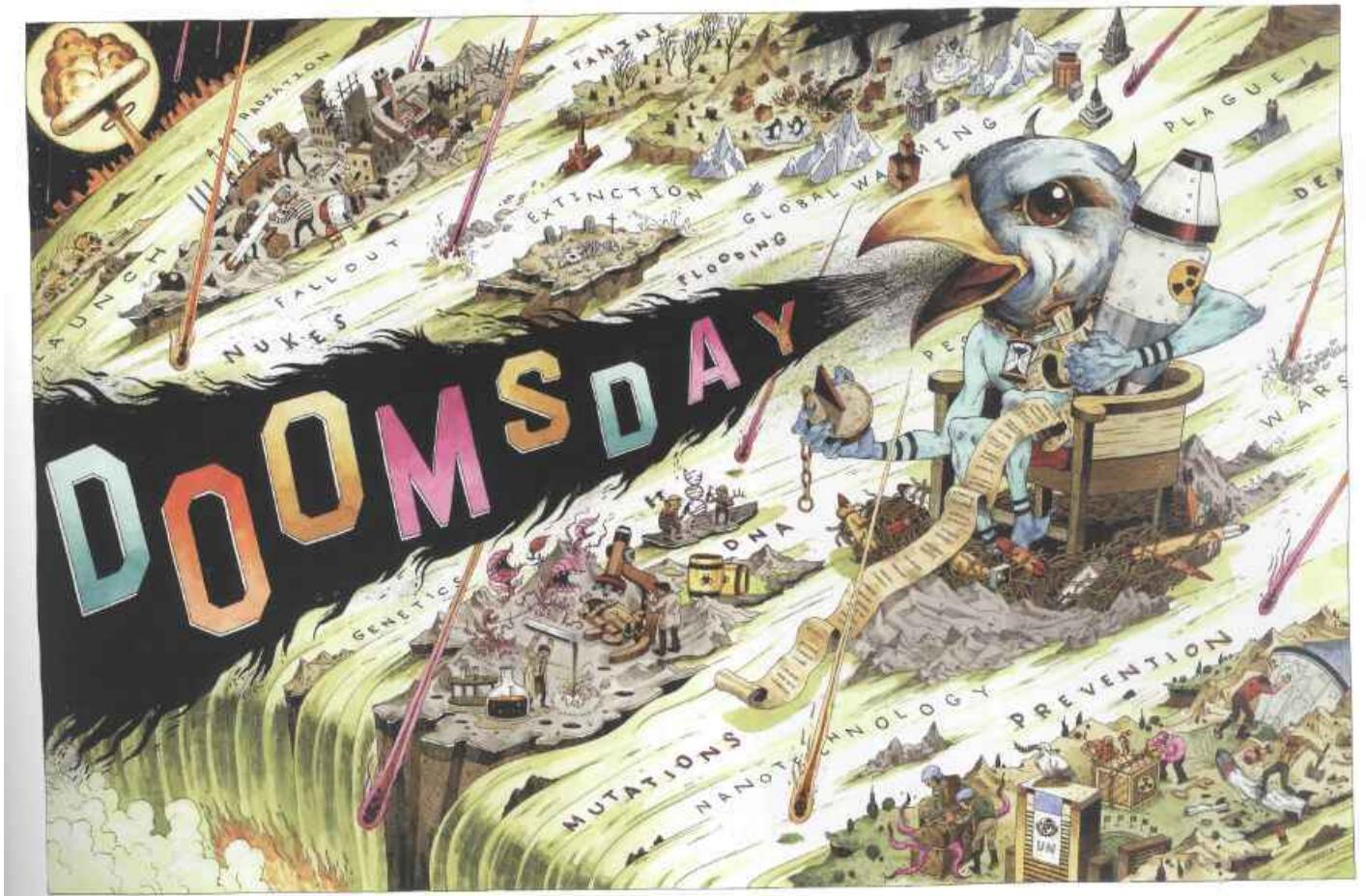
Annually, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* estimates how close we are to the end. In Hendrix's 2007 illustration, the world—ravaged by flood—hurtles toward obliteration. You'll recognize the central figure—a Satanic, horned bird with freaky blue talons—from the medieval hellscape of *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

Hendrix's *Doomsday* gets its party atmosphere from action-packed, miniaturized vignettes scattered throughout: melting icecaps, concerned penguins, evil scientists, genetically mutated octopi. If this is Armageddon, it's Armageddon on a sugar high—as if you've binged on the horribly fun, make-it-stop-no-don't candy of a Roald Dahl book.

"With John, you get this overabundance of drawing ability," says Rea, who was sad to see Hendrix go in 2005, even as he encouraged him to take the next step. "And he draws those vignettes with an overabundance of detail—without ever losing sense of the whole. Within all those elements, there's tremendous storytelling. For an illustrator to be able to do all that, is unique. It's the kind of thing you see in some of the greats."

Right: "In 2007, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* celebrated the 50th anniversary of the **Doomsday Clock**, a to-the-minute measure of how close humanity is coming to destroying itself. This image was a double-page spread opening the full-issue article, highlighting several different areas of concern including the environment, genetic research, nuclear proliferation and global warming." Joy O. Miller, art director; Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, client.

"This image comes from my School of Visual Arts MFA thesis titled **The Worst of Times**, about real and imagined disasters."



John Hendrix

As a young artist, Hendrix resisted his over-abundant drawing ability, since "Serious Art" happened with a paintbrush, but life kept nudging him back. While reviewing Hendrix's tightly rendered, dry-brush paintings at a college art fair, Jon Swindell, a University of Kansas (KU) professor, asked about the sketches and comic books hiding in the back of his book.

Hendrix thought he'd been found out: "Oh, those aren't meant to be there. They're just nothing."

But Swindell recognized an illustrator in Hendrix, who lit up at the professor's description of illustration, starting at KU in 1994. Not that he ditched the dry brushwork; he graduated with a dual degree in design and illustration, and a pile of paintings. "I was trying to make them important. That was my first mistake."

By the time he got to grad school, Hendrix was working over-time to ignore an uncomfortable feeling he had about the important paintings. But when SVA instructor David Sandlin noticed Hendrix working on a piece in red and blue pen, he told his student to stop. He was done.

"What makes John's drawings great is that you can see the artist's thought process," says Sandlin, who remembers Hendrix explaining ardently that this was just the under-drawing for a *painting*. "They're full of his off-the-cuff, improvised sense of humor. I thought he was losing some of that in the paintings."

Eventually, Sandlin convinced his student to put the brush down and back slowly away from the drawing. For his thesis on disasters large and small, he depicted a zeppelin, crashing into a water tower. When *American Illustration* accepted it—a mere drawing—scales fell. "It blew my mind. I realized, OK, the stuff I love to do and the stuff I'm doing aren't the same."

In April 2009, the tenure-tracked Washington University professor sits in his attic studio, reviewing a stack of color proofs for *John Brown: His Fight for Freedom* (Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2009), which he wrote and illustrated. And he's feeling like life is good in the land of books. With his ultra-thin, "recipe for insanity" pens, over which he uses fluid acrylics, the illustrations are full of rich detail and Hendrix's



signature, hand-drawn type. But from start to end, he sustains the same, free immediacy of drawing.

Hendrix got-hooked on books when he illustrated Deborah Hopkinson's *Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek* (Random/Schwartz & Wade Books, 2008). Already, he's illustrating another: Marisa Moss's story of spy Sarah Emma Edmonds, who dressed as a male soldier during the Civil War (Abrams Books, 2010).

His adventures with John Brown started at a 2003 portfolio review, when a Scholastic art director saw a Brown drawing from Hendrix's thesis. She suggested a book. Hendrix didn't take it too seriously, but then she called: Did he have anything to show yet?

Absolutely, Hendrix lied, which was not very Christian of him. He cranked out a dummy book, landing a deal with Scholastic in a matter of weeks. When Scholastic later decided that Brown was too controversial, Hendrix approached Abrams with success.

Brown wanted his 1859 raid at Harper's Ferry to broadcast the message that the fight to abolish slavery was on. It failed, and Brown was hung at the gallows. Since then, he's polarized Americans. Many support a theory that Brown was a fanatic who killed in the name of God. Others, including Hendrix, believe he was a freedom fighter who, however imperfect, awakened a complacent nation to slavery's brutality.

That's a lot of gray area for a children's book, even if you share Hendrix's conviction that kids can handle ambiguity. In order to tell the whole, violent truth while protecting his readers, he wrote the story with factual remove, leaving the bloodshed and broadswords out of the illustrations altogether.

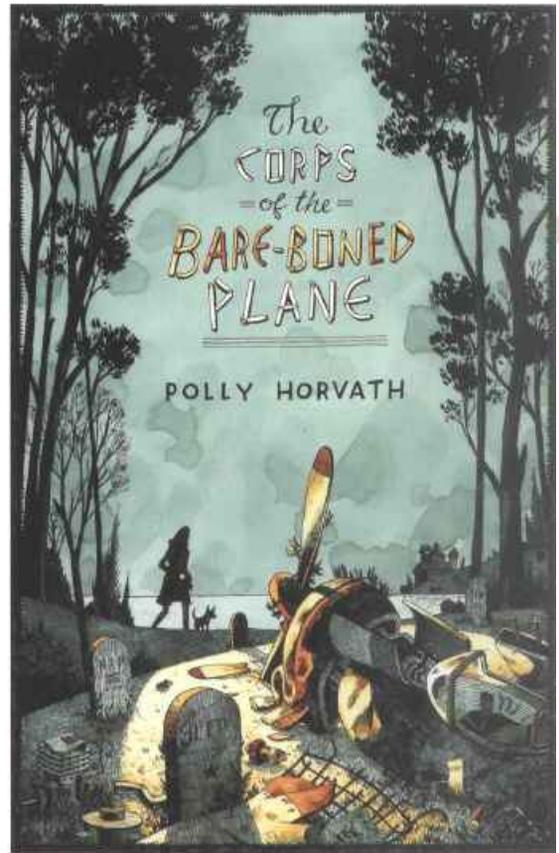
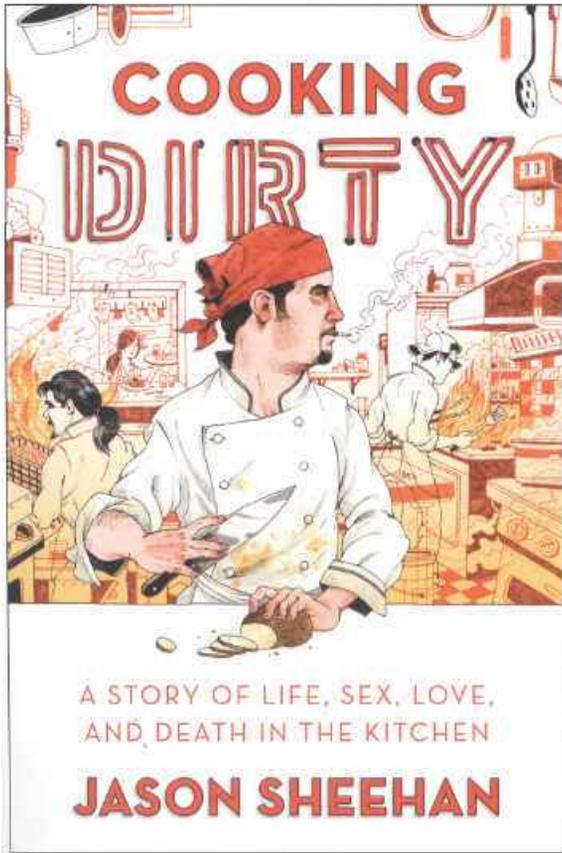
But this is John Hendrix, drawer of horned birds. So in early iterations, his apocalyptic leanings tried to sneak in. At one point, Abrams suggested that Hendrix's depiction of Brown on the cover was slightly too "Saturn about to eat his children."

So Hendrix did what any self-respecting child of the mid-/os would do and researched Superman imagery, fusing his gestures with those he found in Moses imagery. On the final cover, Brown is mission-driven and mentally stable.

Right: "The content of this manuscript, about a **wandering chef's** career odyssey, cooking everywhere from roadside diners to fancy restaurants, seemed like a perfect opportunity to use a more rough-edged sketchbook mode of drawing. The goal was to contrast the precise act of cutting with the chaos of the scene around him. The way the drawings were made also needed to reflect that contrast." Aaron Artessa, art director; Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, client.

"A young girl is orphaned when her parents die under suspicious circumstances. She is sent off to stay with her uncle on a remote island in Nova Scotia. Exploring the island, she discovers that her father and uncle were involved with a dangerous and **illegal group of pilots** who flew planes without any instruments. Standalone book covers are becoming my favorite kind of work. The challenge of capturing a large narrative arc in one single image is a thrilling problem to solve." Beth Potter, art director; Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, client.

"This image accompanied a review of *Last Rights*, a book about the growing number of elderly people who are just waiting around to die. The historical tradition of sudden death has been replaced with anticipated mortality." Alecia Sharp, art director; Christianity Today, client.



John Hendrix

Had Hendrix plucked from history one of the myriad heroes we pretty much all agree on, he'd have made things way easier. But he stuck with his flawed protagonist, even when his first publisher wouldn't, in part because he identifies with Brown.

Hendrix's faith doesn't come up in professional contexts, so it's not like anyone's calling him a fanatic. But the fact of his evangelical Christianity does make him vulnerable to people's knee-jerk assumptions and, well, double takes. "We come from a similar faith background," says Hendrix of Brown. "I think that people use his passionate faith to cast him as a madman."

And then, there's the fact that Hendrix never met a complicated topic he didn't want to discuss or draw. When he jokes about doing a "controversial figures in history" book series, it's only sort of a joke. For Hendrix, the disorder of ambiguity is far more interesting than squeaky-clean absolutes.

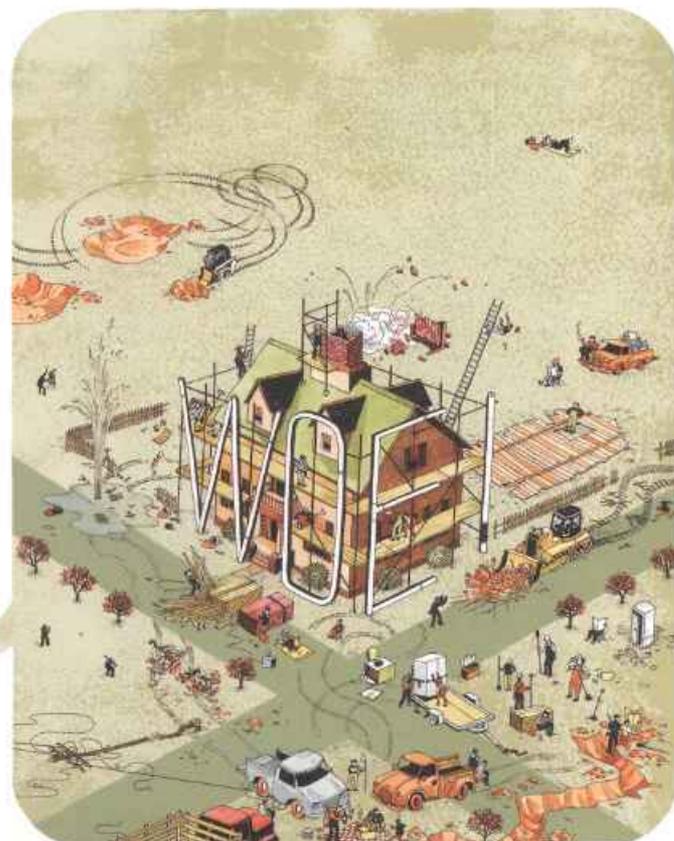
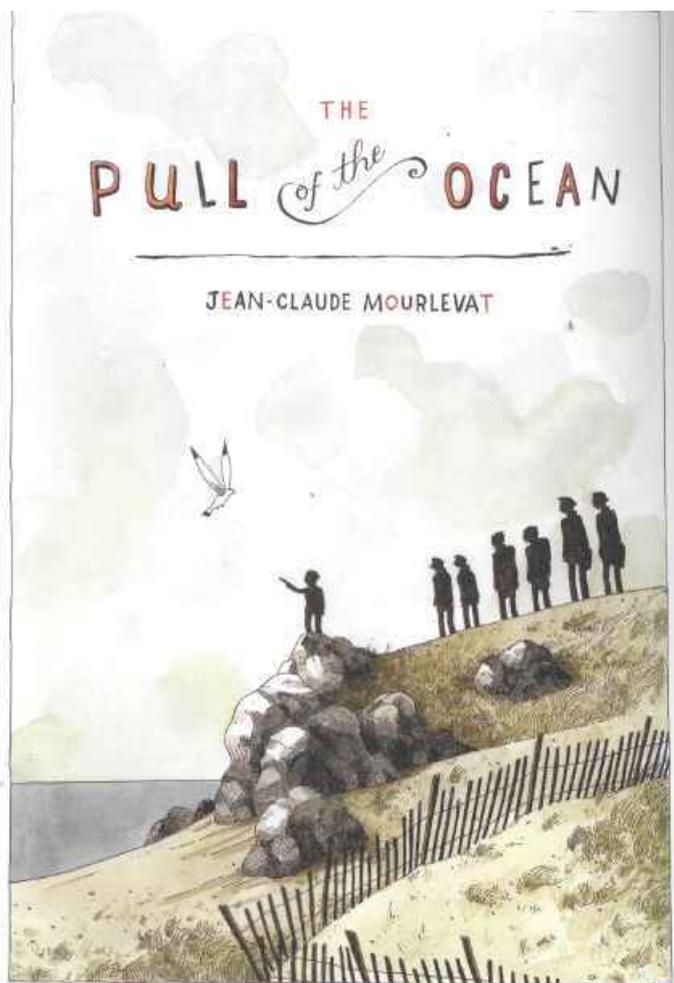
"As an artist, I just don't see any other choice but to describe all the uncomfortable, ambiguous and messy things in the world, as well as the things that are good and beautiful. I think that's why we make art. It helps us sort these things out." CA

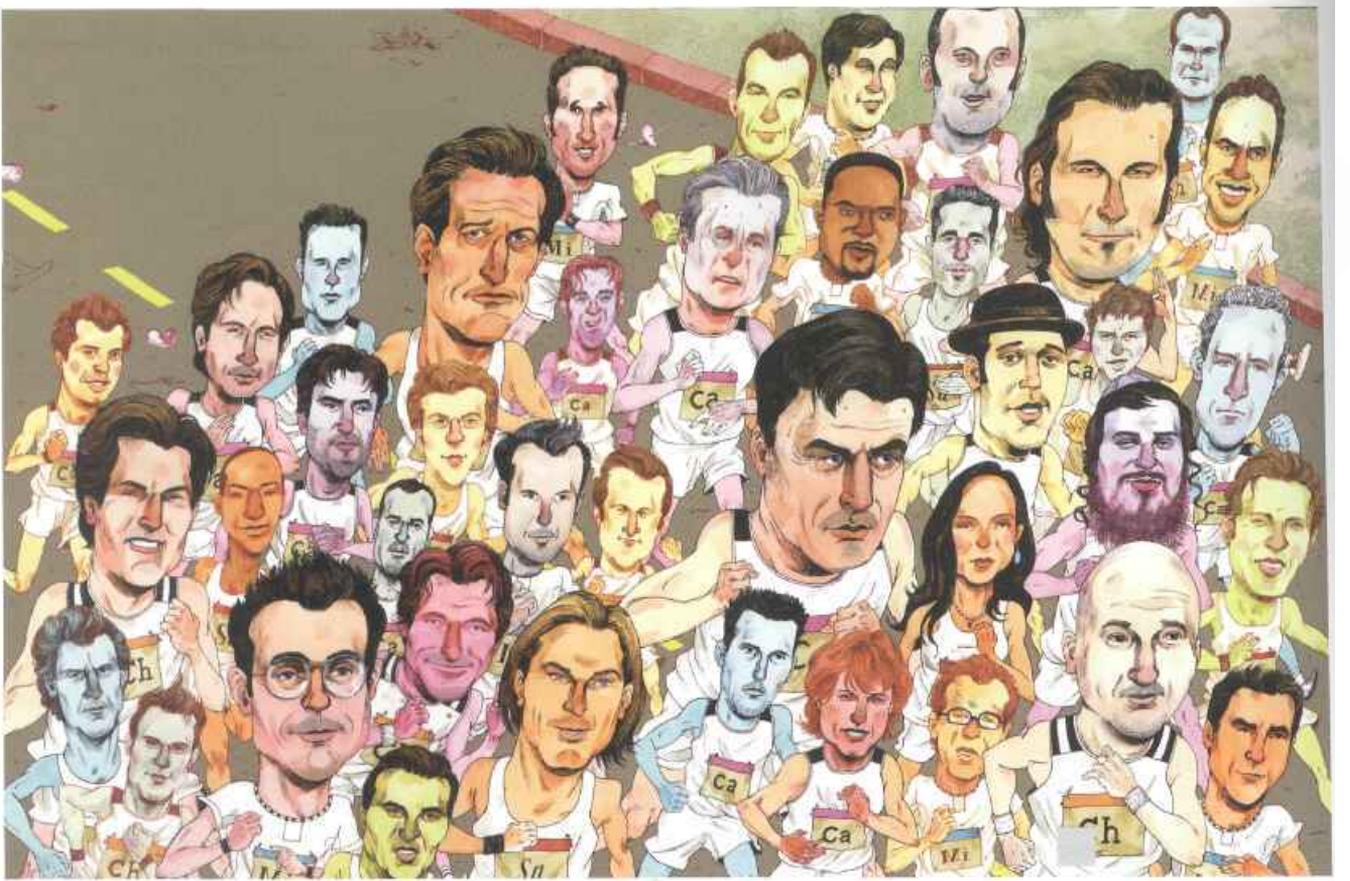
This page: "On projects like book jackets, working with an art director that understands your voice, and not just your style, is really important. *The Pull of the Ocean* is a translation of a French retelling of *Little Tom Thumb*. It seemed from the manuscript that I should make the environment as important as the characters themselves. Drawings that suggest little stories, like this, are really satisfying to me." Kenneth Holcomb, art director; Knopf, Delacorte, Dell, client.

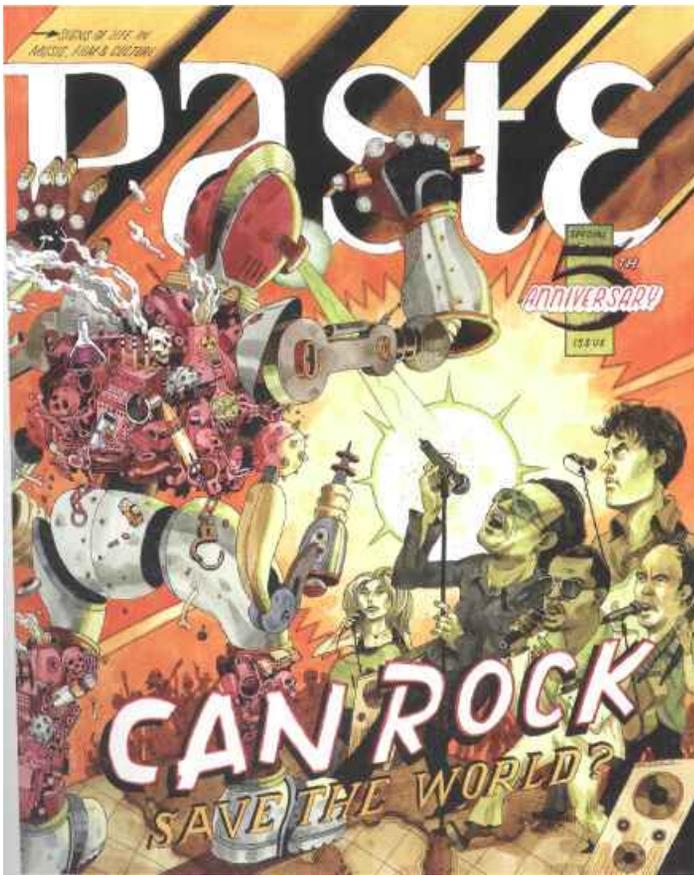
"A collection of truly horrible stories from homeowners dealing with **worst-case-scenario rebuilding projects**. Many involved contractors, house additions, remodeling—and all included total chaos." Douglas Adams, art director; This Old House magazine, client.

Right: "*John Brown: His Fight for Freedom* is my interpretation of how a man who saw violent oppression, chose to fight it, no matter the consequence. His decision to wage war on slavery in the U.S. made him an outlaw and ultimately cost him his life. We should remember John Brown because he was not afraid to fight for the freedom of an oppressed group to which he did not belong. John was not a vigilante. The goals of his crusade were never mayhem, self-glorification or personal vendetta, but freedom for all who were persecuted. It is difficult to say if his war against slavery was simply 'right' or 'wrong'; ultimately, John Brown's contribution was not freedom itself, but an unbridled vision of conviction."

Chad Beckerman, art director; Howard Reeves, creative director; Abrams Books for Young Readers, publisher.







John Hendrix

Left: "Entertainment Weekly approached me with the problem: 'We want to depict all the major male characters from HBO's *Sex and the City*, can you do that?' I figured that was probably twelve or fifteen guys tops. Then I received an e-mail with photo reference for 40 guys! We decided to depict them as running a marathon. You'll notice they are all coded with letters that tell you who they dated." William Hooks, art director.

"Esquire contacted me to do a drawing of, all things, Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes. This drawing contains neither of them. In quite an interesting piece, the author of the article I was illustrating was drawing a conclusion about how we trust the media today versus 70 years ago. Tom Cruise, starring in *War of the Worlds*, who lavishly professed his adoration for Katie Holmes was nearly universally doubted by most of the media and U.S. populace. Yet, when *War of the Worlds* was first broadcast on the radio in 1938, the tale of imminent alien invasion nearly sent the entire country into pandemonium. After being exhausted by the endless 'TomKat' imagery floating around the media world, we settled on this tormented metaphor about the **decline of trust** and the American people." Andre Joint, art director.

This page: "With bands like U2 trying to do more with their global fame and fortune than make more pop hits, *Paste* magazine asked the question, '**Can Rock Save the World?**' I chose an old pulp-style cover featuring a robotic threat to the world (full of scary junk), while our heroes—with very stylish eyewear—fight the bad guy." Jose Reyes, art director.

"A remarkable true story of two fisherman whose tiny boat was literally **run over by a giant seafaring ship**. They fought off drowning and shock and made it back to shore. Who says fishing is boring?" Elaine Ann, art director; Salt Water Sportsman, client.

