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Cartooning with Compassion: A Conversation with Megan Herbert

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This article presents the outcome of a semi-structured interview with Australian writer and illustrator Megan Herbert. Conducted online, the conversation revolved around Herbert's cartooning work published online during 2020 and 2021. The annotated transcription offers insights into process, personal and professional issues in freelance cartooning, and the challenges and opportunities of cartoon publishing on social media. This article offers qualitative data that can be useful for researchers interested in the history, techniques, and current developments of cartooning, and for cartoonists interested in the experience of fellow professionals during pandemic times.



About Megan Herbert

Megan Herbert is an Australian writer, illustrator and cartoonist whose career writing for television and film, cartooning, live-drawing, designing products, and creating children's books has spanned over twenty years. Her children's book, *The Tantrum That Saved The World* (Herbert & Mann, World Saving Books 2018; reissued by North Atlantic Books in 2022), was awarded a 2018 Moonbeam Award for books about Environmental Issues and the 2019 American Meteorological Society's Louis J. Battan Award for best children's book, in the K-12 category. In 2019, she was chosen to be an Artist for the Earth by The Earth Day Network,¹ for whom she created weekly cartoons on the topic of climate change. She is a regular editorial cartoonist for Australia's *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* newspapers. After 13 years living in the UK, Iceland, and the Netherlands, in 2020 she returned to Australia's Mornington Peninsula where she now lives.

The Interview

An edited and annotated transcription of the interview is presented below. The annotations, in the form of in-text citations, endnotes and figures, were added by the interviewer. EP stands for the interviewer, Ernesto Priego, and MH for Megan Herbert, the interviewee.

The initial written invitation was emailed to the interviewee on Monday, 27th September 2021. Advance written consent to conduct, record, transcribe, edit and publish the interview in the form of an academic journal article was obtained from the interviewee on Wednesday, 6th October 2021.

The conversation took place in the form of a synchronous semi-structured interview. It was conducted between the United Kingdom and Australia via video conferencing software Zoom on Thursday, 7th October 2021. The call was videorecorded; the conversation lasted 57 minutes.

EP: This interview is for a comics studies journal. What are your thoughts about the differences between 'cartoons' and 'comics'?

MH: And of course you can add into that graphic novels! The difference between traditional comics and graphic novels is also merging and blurring and blending. There are gag cartoons, which I love and I'm trying to improve at all the time and, as a result, I make lots of them. Some are good, some are not, but the only way you get better is to do them all the time. When I think of "comics" I think of a more long-form thing, even if it's just three panels. That's just what comes to mind, for me, whether that is the

¹ <https://www.earthday.org/>.

official definition I don't know that. I'm interested in both forms; in fact I'm interested in all forms of visual storytelling.

My background has always been really equally divided between my writing and my drawing so I've always been fascinated by storytelling: visual and written and the combination of the two. So to me if you can express an idea in a single cell, a single panel, that is like the haiku for me. I love that if you can get across the full story, a full idea, a joke (even a lame joke); that is the ultimate. I think we might talk about this a bit more when discussing more serious topics like the climate: to get people not to be defensive, but to *think* – that's the hardest thing of all. I just love trying to investigate how you can successfully do that: "comic." And I make a lot, as I said, because there's only one way to get better at it and that's to put lots out there. And I can see which ones actually connect because some don't at all. Some really upset people and some quite by surprise, really, really resonate and then they get passed all around the world. You really can't always guess which one will do that. I feel like I'm constantly learning the difference between those things; where they overlap.

EP: Did you grow up reading comic strips or how did you start drawing?

MH: Not really, I mean I loved kids' comics like *Garfield* and things like that, but I wasn't a comics kid. I wasn't obsessed by comic books or anything like that. I was obsessed with drawing. I was obsessed with stories and writing, but my mom always said to me that I have a very sharp tongue. When I was a child, she said you've got to be careful because you're smart and you're funny and sometimes you say things that are really hurtful. She said that to me at a young age and it really stuck with me and she sort of said to me: "Look at your superpower, but you'll destroy people if you don't use it wisely" and I don't know why, but that resonated so deeply. I've tried to be really conscious of how to communicate jokes or witty thoughts without destroying or alienating people. Now I can think that thought and sometimes I'll write it down, that first impulse then you have to take time to think about, okay well, what's the depths of it, how are you going to put that into a cartoon so you don't instantly upset people or you're not attacking someone? Usually at the heart of those sarcastic quippy ideas there's something; there's some kernel.

EP: You touch on something that really interests me too which is the power of cartoons to cause offense. I had just been reading about the death of Swedish artist Lars Vilks (BBC 2021). What kind of things do you take into account, are those considerations part of your creative process? Some cartoonists have editors who can help them with that...

MH: This is the thing; I'm a one-package deal because I'm actually a trained journalist so it's in my DNA to be constantly editing and cutting out things that are not useful. One of the main ways I've earned money over the years is as a TV scriptwriter and editor; and as story person in the story room, and story producer.

EP: *Neighbours!* (TV series 1985–present)²

MH: That's right. When I was living in the UK [I wrote for] *Neighbours* and for a while *EastEnders* (TV series 1985–present) and *Holby City* (TV series 1999–present) and a couple of other things when I've been living in other parts of the world. I'm still writing for *Neighbours* since I came back to Australia because I've always had a connection with them. I just love them so much because I learned everything on the job. Soap operas are the most brilliant training ground for storytelling because of the incredible pace that shows are produced at. I know a lot of people look down at soap operas. But I still hold that the reason you see all the actors, the famous Australian actors who make it big (I'd say about 90% of them started in *Neighbours*), the reason they're so good is you have to be incredibly disciplined to do that work. There's no time and you have to make it look good and there are no special effects, and so the ones who are bad at it don't survive. And it's the same in the writing department there.

So I don't have anyone else to help me. I'm very self-critical and I think I've built up a thick skin working in writers' rooms where if the idea is bad, it's bad and you get rid of it and move on. I don't have to sort of hold on to any idea. You do get to know every time the ones that are worth persisting with and coming back to and really sort of fine-tuning, but others are just throw-away things.

EP: Are you thinking about your audience all the time when you create or when you publish?

MH: I don't really know who my audience is. I'm not being silly about that, I mean even on my Instagram³ until very recently, I only had a couple of thousand people following us, which is not insignificant. That was great; I was happy that there were that many people paying attention. But then, a couple of things went a little bit viral in the last month or two, and all of a sudden my follower count jumped up to quite a high number.⁴ It's not ridiculous but It seems very high, for me, so a lot of the people following me they come for those little viral things. I can't create with them in mind, because I actually

² On 6 February 2022 The *Guardian* reported that "The UK's Channel 5 announced it would no longer air the program and unless it is picked up by another broadcaster the show will end its record-breaking 36-year run in August" (Meade 2022).

³ <https://www.instagram.com/meganjherbert/>.

⁴ At the time of copyediting this interview Herbert's Instagram account indicates "12.5k" followers.

don't know who they are, and I'm not actually being employed by anyone to make these cartoons right now.

So some people come to me and ask to publish some cartoons or buy the rights for them, but I'm not employed by a newspaper or anything like that. I'm mostly making comics for social media right now with the view of hopefully making more of a living from it. But I definitely don't make them with my audience in mind. They are a very personal thing. But I do try to apply all the principles of "is this good?" "How can I make this sharper or tighter?" "Is this going to offend?" There are a few people I think of, when I try to work out if a cartoon will turn them off so they don't hear what I'm trying to say. That's more to the point. Offending someone is sometimes called for [laughs].

If I'm trying to say something to make people *think* that's a different thing because you want to be reaching out to people who are not already converts to that idea. When I first started making climate cartoons I didn't always get it right. They were quite finger-pointing. We all get really emotional about the climate and there's a lot of unprocessed anger when you think how badly things need to change, how little individual power we have, how much the people who have the power are being inactive or wilfully stopping the changes that are needed. So there are all those feelings and your first urge is to attack that and say *you* are doing this and *we* are not, and all that just doesn't turn into a powerful cartoon. For example I think about a few people in my life, who are not not climate deniers or anything, family members or friends, who have reacted badly to some of my cartoons, and I think about *them*, I think how I can reach them. There's no point making a cartoon which is going to reach somebody who already agrees with you on the climate.

EP: Are they like your sounding board?

MH: I don't show them but I just think about it. And I think when they see this will they get angry and think that I'm attacking them? Or will they see it and think "oh! I hadn't thought of it like that before", and that's the goal.

EP: I first came across your cartoons during the first UK lockdown. I wanted to ask you about the role the pandemic and lockdown had on your creative process. Did you draw more because of it, did it trigger more cartooning for you or did it not affect you creatively?

MH: Yes. Covid and the Covid experience in my cartooning are quite interlocked. I was living in Amsterdam up until July 2020 but we were trying to get home. We bought flights and – I don't know how much this is well known elsewhere – but in Australia, they basically closed the borders. Even Australian citizens weren't able to come home. All of a sudden, all the flights were being cancelled. It was a real nightmare, and there's still something like 35,000 Australians overseas still unable to get home, right now, because there are

strict caps on the numbers of people allowed to enter.⁵ You had to pay for hotel quarantine and the flights were almost impossible to get and incredibly expensive.

When I finally got back to Australia, in July of 2020, we did our quarantine in Sydney and then got back into my little house which I'd been renting out here in the Mornington Peninsula and I was very happy to be back in it, but all of a sudden, I thought, oh no! I've arrived in the middle of a pandemic, I need to very quickly start earning money and get out there and also re-establish all my contacts. I was doing that in so many different ways, but I knew that I wanted to do more cartooning. I thought, okay I'm going to

do a 100-days project immediately, because it would force me to get good fast. So from quite early on, I think it was November of 2020 I started doing a new cartoon every day. I'd get up at five o'clock in the morning (and write down the idea the night before) and quickly draw something before my son woke up and post it and move on with the day. I just kept doing that and it started to get a bit of traction, or at least people were seeing them and a few things got shared around.

There was one cartoon set in a bookstore where there's a customer looking a bit puzzled and the attendant the bookstore says oh we've had to change all the categories (Herbert 2020) [Figure 1].



Figure 1: "We've moved a few things around...". Cartoon by Megan Herbert, 16/11/2020. Reproduced under a Non-Commercial Web/Publication license from CartoonStock Ltd. © 2020 Megan Herbert. All Rights Reserved.

That was my first cartoon that really connected with people. It went crazy viral on Twitter and I was really surprised because I thought that was quite wordy and that I probably once felt I could have tweaked it a bit, but it doesn't matter because people loved it. At the same time, I was just trying to get the illustration work here, and was reaching out to all my old contacts. So my Covid experience in my cartooning went hand in hand and I discovered that as soon as people start to pay attention that it was the

⁵ Only a few days before this interview was conducted the Australian government had announced that Australia would reopen its international border from November 2021 (BBC, 1 October 2021).

best use of my time as a way to get people to say “oh yes I’ve seen this” or try and re-establish a community here in Australia, and get work.

EP: Where does the creative process start for you? Is it an idea or a doodle first or both simultaneously? Is it possible to describe a sequence?

MH: Oh, it’s very possible to describe a sequence and I’ve learned it in the last year as well. I’m still trying to learn so much about this form. I’ve been gobbling up as much information as I can, about how others work because I’m really interested in that process too. I’ve learned that there are actually some cartoonists who start with a sketch: that is not me. I always start with the writing and it’s always the thought or the joke or the arrangement of words and then I do a drawing to illustrate it. That’s the best way to describe how I do it. It’s very rare that I think of a joke that’s visual. The exception would be the little sort of simple graphic ones, which are like pie charts and things like that (Herbert 2021a) [Figure 2]. That’s often the only time when actually do a drawing first. Here’s my ideas book [she shows the notebook].

EP: That’s all writing!

MH: Yeah, it’s just page after page of written notes. There’s not a single drawing. I’ve got only maybe two doodles in there. That’s it.

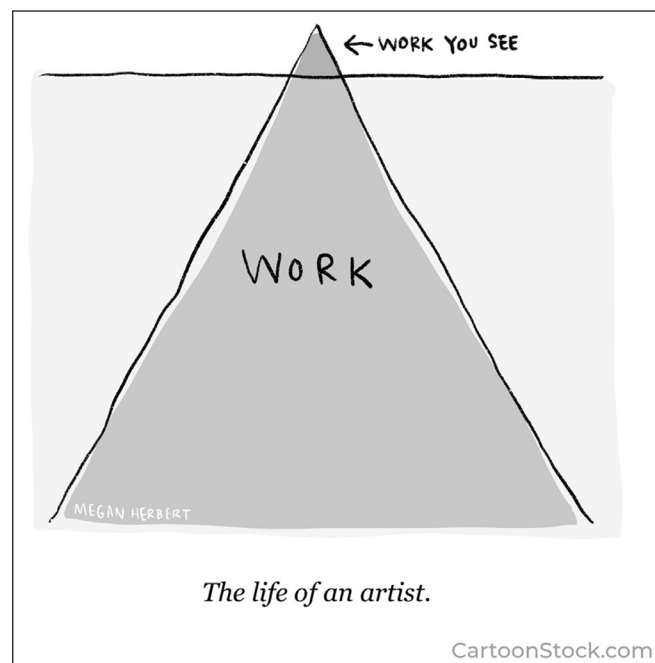


Figure 2: “The Life of an artist”. Cartoon by Megan Herbert. (No date; uploaded to CartoonStock on 14/08/2021). Reproduced under a Non-Commercial Web/Publication license from CartoonStock Ltd. © 2021 Megan Herbert. All Rights Reserved.

MH: I probably write down about five ideas a day. It's not like I do sit down going, "Huh what are my five ideas going to be today?", I just make sure my ideas book is nearby at all times because all the ideas come at different times. The terrible thing is when they happen in a place where you can't get to the book and you don't have a pen and you don't have your phone. That's the worse because you think, "I haven't got the brain to remember one idea!" I don't know, if it's a little kernel of a thought, if you don't write it down, it is gone.

I've got one list in my ideas book, which is things that annoy me. When I'm going about my day and I discover things, asking why do they have it like that, that thought goes in the book because there's definitely a joke there, but it just hasn't come to me. It just takes time and once you've written it down then your subconscious has got it and it will come to you later.

EP: I mean you've mentioned the haiku form before. Is there something about the rhythm of the verbal form of that thought, about alliteration or about length that you take into account? Or is that honed down later, once you have drawn to make it fit with the illustration?

MH: That's right; the final editing of the words will happen after I've done the drawing. So I know that I've got the joke to a point or not. Sometimes the thought is at a point where I can then edit the text down in a way that fits neatly. When you're looking at a square-shaped cartoon, the ideal is to have a caption that's going to fit in one line; that is the best. Or nothing at all, or like two words that would be fantastic. But that doesn't happen every time. If it's like that cartoon I was describing before in the bookstore [Figure 1] I think that's three or four lines of text! I did think quite a bit about what words should be in and edited it and had several different versions for it. Normally that would feel way too wordy for me now and I tried to get it to be much more concise.

EP: It is possible to imagine different ways of categorizing your work by themes and techniques. Some trends are already clear in your body of work. Do you plan different cartoons using different themes and techniques as different series or do you improvise?

MH: I guess the more I do, and observe which cartoons people are moved by or find funny... I'm now at the point of the experiment where I can predict a little bit which ones people will be interested in. On certain days I might think I've been really caught up in Australian politics this week or I want to just do something a little fun today, so I am at the point now where I'm being a bit more conscious about it. Definitely earlier on there was zero plan whatsoever.

I don't know if you've heard this concept of writing on stage. Stand-up comedians talk about it a lot. I think the benefit of doing these hundred-day projects or any sort of thing where you're committing yourself to putting work out publicly really regularly is that you do write on stage. You have to be at peace with the fact that it's not an exercise on perfection, and you have to be comfortable with that. That was a big hurdle for me earlier on in my career as an illustrator. I think I was raised to not show anyone the process or the mistakes or the failures. You only showed people something when it looked perfect and if you couldn't do that you didn't show it. I don't know why that was so much part of the way I felt about work but it's taken many, many years to overcome that and actually

be very comfortable with being quite vulnerable and saying, "I only had an hour; this is what I did in an hour and I'm posting it."

So only now, after a year and a bit of doing that really every day, am I feeling like I do understand a bit more what responses might come back from certain cartoons. I do become aware that part of the process of doing this, with such immediacy and every day is that some days I'm feeling really terrible, because we all are at the moment. You know it's ups and downs; it's the "Coronacoaster"! Actually I did a cartoon about that (Herbert 2021b) [Figure 3].



Figure 3: "All aboard the Coronacoaster!" Cartoon by Megan Herbert. (No date; uploaded to CartoonStock on 12/08/2021). Reproduced under a Non-Commercial Web/Publication license from CartoonStock Ltd. © 2021 Megan Herbert. All Rights Reserved.

EP: Yes; I loved that one!

MH: And sometimes I don't feel like telling a joke. Sometimes it's therapy in a way, doing a little piece of art and writing and putting it on the Internet, so it's a little bit of "Is anybody out there?". But I don't like to do that too much, because I know that it's more fun for people to see something that takes them out of their own problems for 30 seconds or as long as it takes them to scroll.

EP: In that sense I wanted to ask you about the role of Instagram and so-called ‘relatable’ content (Mead 2014). When it comes to comics or cartoons it seems to me like the social media age has created or has fostered a whole movement of autobiographical, confessional or mental-health related cartoons. There is a demand for this kind of work; it’s almost a genre. Do you see that way?

MH: Oh, definitely. I actually see that the people who fall into that category are the people whose work I really admire. A lot of them are *New Yorker* cartoonists and through posting so much I’m sort of connected with quite a few of them. I’m amazed that we can actually talk to each other and message each other because I think they’re just so good at what they do and have worked at that art form for longer than I have. I think now that I’ve done as much as I have and have looked at so much of their work, I can tell that they also understand what’s a good cartoon, how to construct it. It’s not just haphazard thoughts; they’re doing a job. But there is also a danger of falling into that. And I think there are so many cartoonists that with this confessional stuff, you can see that a lot of them (and I would probably include myself in this), are using social media in a way that helps them and are aware of its pitfalls and will probably get out when once it’s the right time to get out. A lot of people are building their own email lists and taking their work off social media and that’s happening more and more. Some of the really good cartoonists are just not on Instagram anymore; they’re just gone.

EP: Have you ever participated in the *New Yorker* cartoon caption contest?

MH: No, I haven’t and I’ve started listening to the cartoon caption contest podcast. I don’t think it’s a really funny thing to listen to, because they’re so serious and they really analyse every inch of it and in a way suck up all humour by talking about it! I’m very amused by it. I’m going to have to do a cartoon about that!

EP: And In a way, I suppose the contest implies the inverse process to the one you described where you start with a written idea and then draw, is that right?

MH: Yes. On some days when I’m very pressed with deadlines I will take one of my own cartoons from earlier days and I’ll revisit it and say “What’s a better caption for this cartoon?” For instance, I recently revised an earlier cartoon which originally was about how mothers have every weird things in their handbag. Last week I was just reading article after article about women’s safety and the fact that no woman can walk anywhere in the street. I live in this beautiful part of the world with all these really natural bush tracks you can walk down but I literally have to think: “Okay, what time of day is it, can I walk where the trails are not going to be too crowded while not

being empty, because I can't be the only person on the trail." I hate that and that's just everywhere, so I had to revise that cartoon to sort of express the frustration I was feeling (Herbert 2021c).

EP: It's a cliché but being funny is really serious business, isn't it?

MH: It's a really great time to be a creative person, because there are so many creative people in every field who are willing to share all their processes and the things they do to hone their work. From masterclasses through to podcasts and articles there's so much right now, and if you're curious about things you can really learn from the best. I've been doing that for the last few years. It started really again when living in Amsterdam, I was actually quite isolated and lonely there and I wasn't able to find a community of creative people that I clicked with. I tried very hard and just couldn't break in anywhere, so I just ended up working alone all the time. I think that as a result of that I just craved information or community, so I started to listen to every podcast and read books and just gobbled up information as a substitute for actual real-life people.

EP: Not all creative people find it easy to know how to break into what they want to do, or sometimes it's difficult to know what it is that they want to achieve. You seem to have it well sorted-out in a way.

MH: You need a long time. I'm 44. It's taken me ages to build up confidence. In fact it sort of took some of the crises of the last couple of years of my life to say "Right. Now's the time. You know exactly what you can do, and you know what skills you have, and you know you've been doing it for a long time, and now's the time or it's too late." And that's just how I started to feel. Also my son is getting to the age now where he doesn't need me to be as present. He's nine years old, which means Minecraft! This is something I am exploring in my work. I'm at the beginning stages of writing a graphic novel about my late grandmother, who was a painter and poet and created the most incredible body of work, despite having five children and being married to a fairly well-known sculptor here in Australia. She died completely unknown.

We talked about this battle that mothers have between their creative life as an artist, and having to be a mother. "Having to be" sounds wrong when you want to do that, but it is so all-encompassing that it means you can't concentrate on your art the way that men can. That's a massive generalization but it's also pretty true. It may be changing a little bit now, but still the lion's share of that sort of fractured existence, where you're concentrating, or saying "Mummy's working now," but getting pulled away, that is still so often the mother. The ability to get into deep work is taken away. I forget where we started talking, where I got into that but...

EP: It's absolutely spot-on and relevant. We were talking about learning the strategies to get to do what you want to do as a creative person...

MH: Knowing what I want to do, yes. It became very clear to me exactly what I wanted to do and I suddenly had the ability to do it, and a little bit more time. There was this sort of urgency, because I was suddenly back here and I had to start making money to pay the mortgage. I mean there was just no option. Also I couldn't say oh I'll just go and get a "normal job" because there weren't any. We were in lockdown. We are still in lockdown. Melbourne, Victoria, the state, has had now officially the longest lockdown.⁶ It's an insane thing to go through, and it means that there weren't really any other jobs. I had to work out ways to earn money from my house as quickly as possible.

EP: Have you been able to "monetise" your online presence, the work that you share essentially for free on social media?

MH: In a very small way I started by accident when I discovered a cartoonist whose name escapes me who was using a platform called Ko-fi which is like Patreon, I guess, but a little more streamlined. I had a Patreon account for a long time, but I never set up a page or actually used it, because it seemed a lot like a Kickstarter campaign. I actually did a Kickstarter campaign for my children's book back in 2017 and it almost killed me. It was a successful campaign, the book was made which was great, but it was the hardest thing I've ever done.⁷ I didn't jump into the Patreon thing for that reason, because having to come up with rewards and then give people their monthly this and their weekly that I thought, "Oh my God, I can't do that; I'll be working for Patreon!"

EP: It takes so much of your time!

It's bad enough that we're all kind of working for Instagram. But to also be doing all that on top I couldn't stomach it. Then I saw this Ko-fi platform where it was a lot more relaxed and people could just put \$4 into your thing, and there was no pressure and they never had to do it again. So I thought, yes! That's what I like, because if someone's moved to do that once I'm so incredibly grateful and then they just go about their day. You don't have to come and do that again. There's been enough people buying my original art from there, and occasionally putting some money in. It's at least a little income stream and I hope to grow it, because I think it's quite a generous platform in that it allows people to give something back, but there's no pressure; it's not like I'm fleecing anybody, it's purely voluntary.

⁶ On 21 October 2021 Reuters reported that "Melbourne readies to exit world's longest COVID-19 lockdown" (Jose 2021).

⁷ <https://www.kickstarter.com/profile/worldsavingtantrum/created>.

EP: I'm glad to hear that it's working for you. It reminds me that 20 years ago or so a cartoonist such as Scott McCloud did pioneering thinking on micro payments (McCloud 2003). Micropayments didn't really work out as he or we thought they would in the early years of the 21st century, however these days there seem to be real examples where people are financially rewarding creative works posted online.

MH: Yes. I was lucky enough to be invited to be part of the Cartoon Collections group of people that Bob Mankoff runs.⁸ I've only put maybe 15 or 20 works out there and I need to go back this week and add some new ones, but I've received my first very modest royalty check from them and I was really surprised! I thought, "okay, people are actually going there and getting a license to use my work", which is great. They handle all the paperwork and they just split the profits and you get a nice little royalty check. I'm hoping that I can set up several passive income streams. I think that's what many cartoonists are now doing, whether it's those print-on-demand companies where you can buy a bit of merchandise and the artist gets a percentage of that sale... if you've got three or four of those things running it might add up to sort of paying half your electricity bill, I don't know!

EP: Can you tell us more about *The Tantrum*⁹...?

MH: The first edition I self-published and printed myself. I learned a lot, but it almost killed me. It did get a couple of awards.¹⁰ People in the scientific community and educators loved it and said, "This is the best kids book about climate and where can we get it?". I couldn't handle distribution on my own so when the print ran out that was it. I knew that I wanted to get it out there further so I kept reaching out to publishers. I don't know how many I reached out to but probably around about 40. Eventually I found this publisher called North Atlantic Books, who are distributed by Penguin Random House. They bought the book and it's been the most fantastic thing because a second edition is coming out in February.¹¹ They've been so amazing to work with. I've had an opportunity to do tweaks to the artwork and revise bits that I wasn't happy with. It's just a dream come true because usually once something's published that's it, you can't do anything, but I've had this incredible chance to tinker with it and it's great. So it will be coming out again and thank God somebody else will be handling the distribution!

⁸ <https://www.cartoonstock.com/>.

⁹ <https://www.worldsavingbooks.com/about-1>.

¹⁰ The 2018 Moonbeam Award for books about Environmental Issues and the 2019 American Meteorological Society's Louis J. Battan Award for best children's book, K-12.

¹¹ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/688064/the-tantrum-that-saved-the-world-by-megan-herbert/>.

EP: That's awesome. What advice would you give to other self-employed or freelance artists out there?

MH: The hardest lesson for me was about overcoming my perfectionist tendencies and being too finicky with work and not wanting to show anything till it's finished. I think that that's the benefit of social media.

It's ephemeral; it's moving so fast. It's a fast-flowing stream. There are a zillion things in it; don't worry too much. Just post it and move on and just keep making the work. That's what it's good for. It's not going to make you any money necessarily, but it'll make you improve your practice and it means that you're building up your own muscles. So that all of a sudden you've got these skills and you can pump out work because you've been doing it. So don't do it just for social media, but allow yourself to get the exposure through social media.

EP: You do backup your work online so it's available somewhere else, apart from Instagram,¹² right?

MH: Yes! I also have a regular website as well and I update fairly regularly. Several times a year¹³ I'll do a big update with all my new work.

EP: Finally, for you, what's the power of cartooning to address important issues in society?

MH: I think that humour is disarming. The key though is to find ways to get across a message that's meaningful but doesn't instantly divide people. It is a big challenge, because we are in such a divided world right now. There are so many instances, from politics to climate to Covid vaccination; there's an Us and Them in everything. Whichever side you're trying to communicate with, it's usually to try and inform or make people think differently or as I mentioned earlier to look at a thing that they see every day in life and go "Oh yeah! I hadn't thought of it that way." And that's true for the big questions or the big issues as well as just the little fun cartoons. It's usually twisting a point of view to make somebody think differently. So I think that to approach these things, the best way to do it is through the lens of compassion, not finger-pointing. You can do this in a few different ways: for example, you can centre yourself in the joke. A lot of my cartoons that are critical usually have me as a subject. When they start

¹² Three days before this interview was conducted, Facebook and its subsidiaries, including Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp, became globally unavailable for a period of six to seven hours on October 4, 2021, at 15:39 UTC (Heath 2021).

¹³ <https://meganherbert.com/>.

out in the notebook it's not really about me, but as I go through the thought process I think "Oh, I'm a bit guilty of that too in such and such a part of my life." And so it becomes about me and I think people are more likely to listen to it when I'm not drawing somebody who's clearly not me. You hear this in comedy podcasts where people talk about different types of humour. Cartooning and comedy have similar things so often you'll see a lot of successful comedians doing that. It's self-deprecation. They're not pointing at the audience and saying "Look at this stupid guy!". That doesn't work as well as when you approach things through the lens of compassion. If you need to make a bit of a sharp point, point the dagger at yourself and people are much more likely to listen. That's what I've experienced.

EP: I really appreciate your time.

MH: I feel honoured that anyone's paying attention really. You just get up in the morning and you do a little thing. I'm still quite amazed that my work is resonating anywhere. That's great and I'm very happy for that.

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Author's Note

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