

How not to succeed in advertising



The Learners
By Chip Kidd
Scribner, \$26

More mad men in Chip Kidd's new novel

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Chip Kidd's breezy second novel continues the adventures of Happy, a bright-eyed child of the '50s plunged into the world of advertising. We first met Happy in 2001's "The Cheese Monkeys," the story of his college career marked by a delightfully unstable friend named Himillsy and a dominating, inspiring graphic-design teacher named Winter Sorbeck.

You don't need to read "The Cheese Monkeys" to enjoy "The Learners," but why wouldn't you? Now it's the early '60s, and Happy has finagled his way into the run-down New Haven, Conn., ad agency where Sorbeck began.

Happy is thrilled about his first real job, of course. You might not be able to recognize the difference between Helvetica and Bodoni Bold, but you'll still enjoy his obsessive references to fonts, as well as the thrill of coming up with a slogan for a footwear company ("When It Comes to Buckle Shoes ... It's a Shame You Only Have Two Feet!").

And the firm he works at provides more mentors for our pliable hero. There's Tip Skikne, a lightning-quick wit who's a bit light in the loafers (though discreetly, since this is the early '60s), and Sketch Spear, a gifted illustrator squandering his talent on brilliant but unappreciated ads for Krinkle potato chips.

The characters' outlandish names — which even Dickens would have blushed to use — set the right, whimsical tone.

Mind you, there are some dark shadows, including suicide, the closeted world for gays and especially the famous Yale experiment in which volunteers proved all too eager to follow orders and give violent, painful shocks to fellow test subjects.

Happy is sucked up in that experiment and deeply disturbed by how he behaves during it. Frankly, Kidd is much more convincing with the screwball atmosphere than the brief moments of soul-searching. But that's probably not a surprise. The darkness is really just there for contrast, and some timely vomiting ensures a slapstick finale.

Kidd is, of course, a famous designer of book covers for other authors, and the design of "The Learners" is especially inventive and clever. Why didn't he tell this tale in a graphic novel? Perhaps that would have seemed too close to his day job? Or perhaps he just wanted to prove he could do just as much with words as he can with images?

Mission accomplished though, happily, we haven't heard the last from Happy.