

FIG 1: Taylor bookhead. Opening illustration of the Idaho School for the Deaf and Blind "chapters" in Castle's autobiographical edition recovered from the Castle family icehouse circa 1970. Shown is W. E. Taylor, Director of the school. Pictured inside his head: presumably his wife, a teacher at the school (she holds a blackboard pointer) and their children or other staff. Circa 1913.

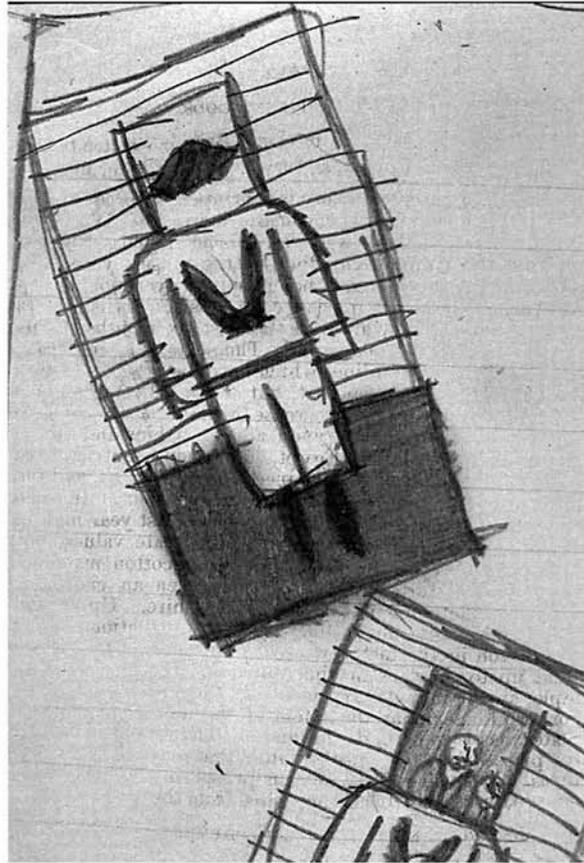


FIG 2: Liphead bookhead. One of a series of portraits of Gooding school classmates. Like those on "Mona Lisa," the lips that Castle draws are open to interpretation. Was this young man to be remembered for his ability to speak, read lips, or for his ability to buss? Or did he just have well-endowed lips? (Castle invariably draws male and female student neckerchiefs upside down.) Circa 1913.



FIGS 3-4: Photograph and drawing of James Castle. Photograph by Nellie Castle of James Castle (1911) and Castle's re-drawing of his sister's photo (date unknown).

Autism, Physiognomy & Letter Forms:



The Faces of James Castle Tom Trusky

OF INTRIGUING SUBJECTS in illustrations by self-taught artist James Charles Castle (1899-1977), one of the most paradoxical is the Idahoan's depiction of the human face. Many of his human figures appear to be wearing cereal boxes for heads. They have thin square or rectangular craniums with circles for eyes, little ski lifts a la Bob Hope or V's or U's at various slants for noses, while simple O's, dots or dashes suffice for mouths. Tongues are never seen.¹ Sometimes these heads have ears; sometimes they do not.² Other Castle people periodically shoulder what have been termed "Bookheads" [FIG 1]. These biblio characters have heads that are illustrated pages, often captioned with squiggly lines representing writing above or beneath them. Cereal Boxheads and Bookheads frequently contain portions of anatomy (a drawing of a hand, for example) or small collages (bits of illustrations or text from magazines and catalogues) or drawn scenes or tableaux where facial features should appear.³ [FIG 2] Both types of portrait styles are in stark contrast to the artist's detailed, realistic renditions of the interiors and exteriors of houses, barns, and outbuildings. It is as though the architecture of the human face was either beyond the artist or not of interest—as if the Mona Lisa should have consisted of a simple, Cheshire cat smile centered on an otherwise blank canvas.⁴

There are, however, exceptions to Castle's surrealist approach to portraiture and these are often self-portraits. A number of these portraits have been based on photographs snapped by the artist's sister, Ellenor ("Nellie"). At least four

times, Castle re-drew Nellie's photograph of the artist, reportedly taken the fall day in 1911 when Nellie and James left their birthplace, Garden Valley, for the Idaho State School for the Deaf and Blind in Gooding [FIG 3-4]. Copying a photographic portrait, compared to rendering a sitting subject, face-to-face (or himself, in a mirror), was apparently easy for the artist.⁵

Castle's apparent aversion to, disinterest in or inability to render faces of live human subjects is paralleled by his treatment of live animals. Although Castle lived in the country most of his life, we seldom see wildlife (deer, elk, frogs, hawks, bears, raccoons, badgers) and only infrequently see domesticated animals (sheep, horses, cows, cats or dogs) in the artist's drawings or illustrations. Castle does re-draw animals, notably the black and white Scotties in Dewar's Scotch Whisky advertisements, a Thanksgiving turkey, or American political party symbols, in cartoons showing donkeys or elephants. Yet, Castle's drawings of the family homestead in Garden Valley rarely includes family livestock, except for fowl, such as their flock of geese that always descended upon and terrified Castle's young cousin, Eleanor Scanlon, when she came down the valley to visit.

It may be that the problem with drawing live animals (or people) was simply that they would not sit still. While sister Nellie could take a snapshot with her Kodak "Brownie" in a second, the best James could do with his soot and saliva ink and stick ink pens was to produce "simple" caricature-like sketches in perhaps minutes. Or could it be that Castle found live creatures dangerous, unpredictable, unknowable or unbearable in their motility?⁶ Castle was often free to roam Garden Valley and surely he had contact with wild creatures on his expeditions. We can understand how one could be momentarily startled by a deer or terrified by a mother bear guarding her cubs. But how intimidating or unfamiliar were domesticated animals, grazing or chewing their cud? Castle's mother tended flocks of sheep and reportedly husbanded the family cattle while her husband managed their general store and post office. Many Garden Valley

¹ Daniel McNeill notes that "this odd and agile organ [the tongue] rarely emerges onto [depictions of] the face, and its appearance is often aggressive" (McNeill 1998, 41). Of the thousands of Castle books I have reviewed, I recall only one instance where a Castle tongue appears. Although it is not "aggressive," it is a memorable tongue. The front and back covers of the small volume in question have been appropriately colored red (with ink), except for centered rectangles on the covers. In the front cover rectangle, in red, Castle has written "KOTEX," while in the back cover rectangle he has inked an egg-shaped self-portrait with his tongue extended out and downward in dismay or distaste. It is not clear, if covers or text pages of the Kotex Book come from discarded Kotex boxes Castle recycled.

² Because Castle was deaf or autistic and unable to process sounds, the earlessness of his portraits, if intentional, is understandable. For discussion of autistics misdiagnosed as being deaf or of hearing autistics not paying attention to spoken language, see Park (1967, 71) and Grandin (1996, 67-71). In a personal letter to the author, Grandin has written, "People with milder forms of autism like myself have problems hearing hard consonants like 'b' or 'd'. I mix up words like fog or bog. Autistics who remain non-verbal seem to only be able to hear vowel sounds. Even though their hearing test is normal the brain does not process the complex sounds of language. They are deaf to words but they can hear tones very well." For information about the deaf, see Note 25.

³ McNeill tells of anthropologist Edmund Carpenter's giving New Guinea tribesmen Polaroid portraits. "They were confronting their visual images for the first time and the shock was deep. But later some wore the Polaroids on their brows, as a proclamation of self" (McNeill 1998, 109). Bookheads may be seen as imaginary Polaroid portrait-wearers created by Castle.

⁴ Castle does a quirky re-drawing of DaVinci's portrait, likely at the urging of art professors and dealers who surrounded him in the late 1950's and early 1960's. This drawing—now reportedly lost—is reproduced in Trusky (1998, *Raw Vision*, 38-44). Castle's own Mona Lisa is the "Liphead Bookhead," a circa 1913 Icehouse book portrait of a Gooding school classmate—male—whose square head is featureless but for a set of large lips. See FIG 2.

⁵ Also easy was recopying cartoon figures (Henry, Dennis the Menace), political caricatures (Stalin, FDR and Truman), photographs of Idaho politicians—males (from newspapers and campaign literature) and a multitude of advertising figures (from Sir Walter Raleigh on cigarette packs to the Gerber baby in baby food ads).

⁶ Animals (cows, geese, turkeys) are subjects of Castle's constructions; however, perhaps the artist only felt secure creating animals when he could physically control or manipulate them in his hands. Yet Castle's "friends," the term the artist's family gave to his doll-to-pygmy size constructions of humans, are most often the standard issue, cereal box or book-headed individuals found in Castle drawings. One notable exception to the standard "friend" appearance is Castle's cardboard rendition of himself. Not surprisingly, this more-realistic-than-usual construction is based on a photograph of the artist taken by his sister Nellie in Garden Valley in 1908.