



# A Pleasurable Pencil: **THE BLACKWING 602**

STORY BY  
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**F**or many today, the pencil has become utterly ordinary—unremarkable and commonplace. And the more digital the world gets, the less relevant—the less *necessary*—a simple object like the pencil can seem. What a shame. Clearly anyone under this impression has never encountered a Blackwing.

The Blackwing 602—a distinctive, elegant-looking pencil in a grey-gloss finish—seems to belong to a different era; an era not just of tangible, pre-digital creative tools, but one that valued craftsmanship and good design no matter how ordinary or utilitarian the tool. In this sense, the Blackwing is a remarkable object: functional, yet elegantly and thoughtfully designed, even graceful and stylish.

The Blackwing is hallowed among pencils, with a storied legacy and near-universal admiration. It has earned its reputation, having graced the studios of countless writers, illustrators, composers and designers since the 1930s. But you would be wrong to think of it as a historical relic, for it continues to enjoy a mass following: old as it is, the Blackwing is as modern as it gets.

Eberhard Faber introduced the pencil in 1934, and for the next six decades it built up a devoted following, including such famous writers as Truman Capote, John Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe and Vladimir Nabokov; composers Stephen Sondheim, Quincy Jones and Igor Stravinsky; and the Warner Brothers animator Chuck Jones, who used the Blackwing exclusively to draw characters like Bugs Bunny and Wile E. Coyote throughout his career.

By the 1990s, however, times had changed. The demand for higher-quality, professional pencils had waned, subsumed by a flood of low-quality products, often produced overseas on the cheap and sold in bulk in office supply megastores. Sales of the Blackwing were plummeting. When the machine that made the Blackwing's unique ferrule—the metal piece attaching the eraser to a pencil—broke down, the company behind the Blackwing (by then Sanford, after a series of corporate takeovers) decided it was no longer profitable to have it fixed. Sanford let their remaining supplies run out, and then, in 1998, discontinued the line.

The pencil world was thrown into disarray. In the months and years that followed, distraught and desperate Blackwing users scrambled to stockpile whatever Blackwings they could find, hunting them out in shops and online. Things got out of control. On eBay, single Blackwing 602s began selling for \$20, then \$40 and \$50.

The mythology of the Blackwing 602 ballooned during these dark years; its fans became fanatics; and the

“I have found a new kind of pencil—the best I have ever had. Of course it costs three times as much too but it is black and soft but doesn't break off. I think I will always use these. They are called Blackwings and they really glide over the paper.”

JOHN STEINBECK, *PARIS REVIEW* (1969)



“What’s the allure? Well, just look at it!  
It’s the DeLorean gullwing coupe  
of the pencil world. And not only  
beautiful, but adept.”

ALEX BEAM, BOSTON GLOBE



Blackwing became a legend. Its devotees took to the Internet, penning (penciling?) eulogies and waxing nostalgic about its demise. Even the *Boston Globe* took notice, publishing an article about the plight of these “Blackwing addicts.”

What was it about the Blackwing? It was well constructed, yes, and beautifully designed; but more than this, it was the quality of its graphite: the way it drew a line was sublime; it wrote and drew like a dream. The graphite was soft yet durable, producing a dark, luxurious line. And it was smooth—deliciously smooth (leading to the somewhat perplexing slogan “Half the Pressure, Twice the Speed,” embossed in gold on the side of each pencil). “No other pencil produced a line quite as supple, bold and creamy smooth,” wrote Seth Abramovitch in the *Hollywood Reporter*.

It was this quality that made the Blackwing utterly irreplaceable.

And then, in stepped Charles Berolzheimer II, a sixth-generation “pencileer,” and owner of California Cedar Products (CalCedar), a family-run 100-year-old manufacturer of cedar slats, the blocks of wood from which

pencils are made. In 2003, CalCedar began producing its own line of pencils, most notably the Palomino. For many Blackwing devotees who had been searching for a suitable replacement, the Palomino came as close as anything, and they began calling on CalCedar to revive their beloved pencil.

Luckily for them, Berolzheimer was not just a businessman, but a fellow pencil lover. In 2008 he acquired the Blackwing trademark, and relaunched the Blackwing under the Palomino umbrella brand—first the matte black Palomino Blackwing, a softer artist pencil, in the

fall of 2010, followed by the Palomino Blackwing 602 in June 2011 (then followed once more by the white Palomino Blackwing Pearl, graded between the two).

Relaunching the fabled pencil was something of a gamble. Although the Blackwing had by then become truly iconic, it was difficult to tell if the pencil’s cult following signaled widespread consumer interest, or if a new Blackwing would only appeal to a small, nostalgic minority.

Well, the gamble paid off. Despite some online grumbling about Palomino exploiting the Eberhard Faber legacy, the Palomino Blackwing took off, filling the hole left by the original Eberhard Faber and then some. Pencil aficionados could barely contain themselves: the Blackwing was back. It proved to be so much more than just a fetishized trademark, and has almost single-handedly helped revive an appreciation for quality pencils in the West.

Today the Palomino Blackwings are selling just as successfully as the original Eberhard Faber design, and the pencil has gained traction among an entirely new generation of illustrators and writers and other creatives, many of whom are unaware of its legacy. This new generation has the added pleasure of picking up a beautiful, tangible tool in an age of digital creativity.

And they are eager to do so. As Caroline Weaver writes in her book *The Pencil Perfect*, the Blackwing has reminded us all “that there can be such a thing as a pleasurable pencil.” What a wonderful accomplishment that is.





## Blackwing Craftsmanship

The first thing one notices about the Blackwing is its distinctive ferrule: it is long and flattened, holding a likewise flat and rectangular eraser (likened by writer and editor Mary Norris to “an elongated Chiclet”). A small clamp fitted inside the ferrule allows the eraser to be extended, reversed or even replaced. The slightly widened ferrule also cleverly keeps the pencil from rolling off your desk. Round, shorter ferrules have become so standardized that CalCedar had to custom-make its own ferrule-manufacturing machine. Palomino Blackwing ferrules are glued on, rather than crimped, giving it a smoother look.

Palomino Blackwings are made exclusively from sustainably harvested California Incense-cedar—a slightly softer cedar that sharpens smoothly, without splintering. The softer cedar also helps absorb the shock if the pencil is dropped, preventing the graphite inside from shattering. (And it happens to have a pleasant smell.) Incense-cedar was once the most popular pencil wood but today is considered a premium material.

Though a California product, the Blackwing, and its graphite, is manufactured in Japan, a country renowned for its high standards. As such, the Blackwing’s graphite is superb, holding its shape as it draws, without any of the crumbling or residue typical of cheaper graphite, and drawing with a smoothness that would make any pencil lover swoon. Japanese graphite tends to be softer and darker than North American standards, and indeed, the Palomino Blackwing is not graded to any standard scale—the 602 roughly corresponds to a 2B, or a No. 1. **U**

[blackwing602.com](http://blackwing602.com)

[blackwingpages.com/no-ordinary-pencil](http://blackwingpages.com/no-ordinary-pencil)

### THE PENCIL SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

“It’s nice to have a tool that has history to it,” says Clare Simpson, marketing manager at Palomino. “In some ways the legacy will always be a part of the Blackwing—and that was our initial customer base, the people who loved pencils, who collected pencils, who knew all about the Blackwing and were thrilled to have it brought back, or critiqued us when we did. But today we’re finding more and more our customers don’t necessarily know about the history; they just want to use high-quality tools. We’ve definitely shifted some of our messaging toward letting the pencil speak for itself.”

### AS ADDICTIVE AS OREOS

I bought my first Blackwing while reading *Between You and Me*, a book by Mary Norris, a.k.a the Comma Queen, and copy-editor extraordinaire at the *New Yorker*. Norris writes about being desperate for a source of No. 1 pencils, when a friend gave her a box of Palomino Blackwing 602s, soon after they were launched: “I was addicted,” she writes. “They were like Oreos. Soon I was consuming them by the dozen.” After I read this I went straight to my local stationery shop (the fabulous Nota Bene, in Montreal) and purchased one. It was the most I had ever spent on a pencil, and it was worth every penny.



### QUICK LOOK

#### PENCIL PACKAGING

New York-based graphic designer Louise Fili is featured in UPPERCASE’s newest book, *Ephemera*.

The tome highlights how our love for old graphics inspires our creativity anew. Louise’s collection of vintage Italian pencil boxes, for example, informed the design of her Peretto line of gift pencils.

[louisefili.com](http://louisefili.com)



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