

"My" collection of comics is really my father's, and begins with the *Peanuts* books that he bought in the late 1960s and managed to save from the purges conducted by my grandmother, whose expensive folly in throwing out my Dad's vast collection of original *Spiderman* comics after he left home does not bear thinking about. Charles Schulz's sparse and quiet world was at once a bridge back to my parents' generation and an environment that I thought of as mine, even as the material aged gracefully and its protagonists did not age at all but remained (mentally) just like me. Though *Good Grief, More Peanuts!* was first published in 1957, and comprised strips going back to 1952, Linus's remark - after careful empirical observation and experiment - that "No matter how hard you try, you can't throw a potato chip!" is as true, funny, frivolous, and charming as it was the day Schulz drew it. His little-known aside on a different stage of life, "*Teen-ager*" is *Not a Disease* (1961) is very much of its time and place, dealing lightly with some of the tensions and incongruities that more or less forced membership in a Protestant congregation (and its corresponding "youth group") could impose on teenagers. Though the cultural distance is part of what makes it charming, many of the volume's quips remain too pointed to be dismissed as merely quaint, as when Harold, the young protagonist, shakes hands with a minister after service, remarking cheerfully: "I enjoyed your sermon on young people, Reverend Hartman. ... I almost got the impression that you were human once yourself!"

The capacity of such cartoons to act as time capsules is only one aspect of their appeal to me; the short format of cartoons or of strips designed for daily newspapers (still more condensed in the case of *New Yorker* cartoons and other single-panel strips) imposes a haiku-like economy of expression, and often moves the subject into the observation of delights and absurdities scaled to everyday experience. Instances from *The Complete Cartoons of the New Yorker* are, of course, legion; cartoons like Jack Ziegler's posh party scene, which a scared-looking well-dressed man has just entered with bulging eyes and the thought bubble "Yipes! Grownups!!" provide much-needed occasions for me to laugh at myself while also congratulating myself with a reassuring "It's not just me!"

Strangeness and familiarity are seldom joined so irresistibly as in my two favorite English-language comics, Gary Larson's *The Far Side* and Bill Watterson's inimitable *Calvin and Hobbes*. Larson's brilliantly idiosyncratic visual language alone is, like his rotund figures, genially ugly, cockeyed and sympathetic at once. At the top, bottom, and middle of my wish list are *Far Side* albums, which remain the great oversight in the pattern of my collecting. Of *Calvin and Hobbes*, on the other hand, I am proud to own every album, although the compendia (such as *The Inimitable Calvin and Hobbes* or *The Lazy Sunday Book*) republishing the material with additional poems and watercolors would fully round out my holdings in this acknowledged masterpiece. Watterson's exhibition catalogue *Calvin and Hobbes Sunday Pages, 1985-1995* and his *Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* expound upon and confirm what fans of the strip had surmised all along as to the integrity, insight, and formidable artistic seriousness driving the project.

Growing up in rural France (where I lived from ages 7 to 18), comics were at once a way of becoming French (I was also reared on the Franco-Belgian pantheon of *Asterix*, *Tintin*, *Gaston*, and *Lucky Luke*) and of acquiring some frame of reference for what it meant to be American. I was only a shade older than Calvin when I began to read *Calvin and Hobbes*, in which the range of vocabulary, idiom, and cultural references in play were well beyond my seven or eight years of experience. I don't remember when it was that I acquired a taste for old *Doonesbury* comics, but reading them and asking my parents to explain the jokes was what taught me most of what I know about the history of American politics in my parents' generation.

For all its satirical edge and political chops, what appealed to me first about *Doonesbury* was its zany innocence, from Zonker's wheat patch and talking plants to Phred the Terrorist's anecdotes about his Mom (to which a shocked B.D. replies in thought, "Terrorists have Moms?!?").

Within a few years, Keith Boepple, an American colleague of my parents' began to send me the Sunday funnies every few weeks; when the manila envelopes arrived, all activity would cease until the treat had been thoroughly savored and every strip read, carefully saving the best ones for last. Through this rich gift, I became a fan of several other strips, the first of which was Bill Amend's delightful *Fox Trot*. It was no great surprise to read Bill Watterson's foreword to the first *Fox Trot* album (first published in 1989) and to discover the kinship between my hero's work and my new crush. This is one of several such interconnections, and the relative smallness of the world of funnies is evident in everything from homages, affectionate digs, and inside jokes within the strips themselves to forewords and "dust jacket" quotes. Bill Watterson praises Schulz's achievement with *Peanuts* both implicitly in his writing and explicitly in comments on his own work; Gary Trudeau (praised and envied by no lesser comic writer than Art Buchwald) pens the foreword to the first *Calvin and Hobbes*; Watterson joins Lynn Johnston (creator of *For Better or For Worse*) in penning forewords for Bill Amend's *Fox Trot*, while Bill Amend provides a book quote that could not be a more apt introduction to the humor in Stephan Pastis's *Pearls Before Swine*: "Book quote? You're calling for a book quote? What I want to know is how you got this phone number." Pastis also finds more vocal supporters in Scott Adams (creator of *Dilbert*), and in *Get Fuzzy* author Darby Conley, who fondly and prominently acknowledges *Bloom County* and *Calvin and Hobbes* in his work. The sense of collaboration among a handful of men whose daily task is so fundamentally solitary is at once a link among many of the components of the collection and a welcome grace note, attesting to the variety and strong commonalities among the comics discussed here.

It was also with *Fox Trot* that the main impetus of collecting passed from my parents to me, although the family hoard of which I have custody remains a joint effort of acquisitions spread over the years. The younger generation of comics represented in my collection continues this collaborative trend: while it was my father who discovered the broad puns and dour slapstick of *Pearls Before Swine*, I was introducing the family to Darby Conley's lawless and exuberant take on the *Garfield* narrative format (a sweet dog, an evil cat, a loser owner), the wickedly hilarious *Get Fuzzy*. As an alumna of Kenyon College, my school pride reaches its peak in having studied, however briefly, under the same studio art professor as both Bill Watterson and fellow-alum Jim Borgman, the co-author with Jerry Scott of *Zits*. Dr. Martin Garhart, our common teacher, is a legend in his own right, and it came as no surprise to his students to see Borgman's dedication in *Are We an "Us?"* (2001): "For Martin Garhart, who flipped the light switch on," or to see shades of his teaching cropping up in *Calvin and Hobbes*.

My interests in comics are narrow by the standards of any specialist in the medium - I own no graphic novels, no Marvel or D.C. heroes, no underground series, no cult authors' works (such as Neil Gaiman or R. Crumb). I like the relative innocence and light touch of the old-fashioned "funnies," which are already, by their very format as newspaper features, relics of a disappearing era of print. Perhaps it is my book-and-paper junkie nostalgia or a stubborn Luddite streak that gives me such affection for a format that has often proven vexing to the cartoonists themselves. Nevertheless, I maintain a certain pride in having grown up in a golden age for such comics, though it began in my parents' childhood and is gradually ceding to the blog (of which I also have strong favorites and new loves) as the format of choice for cartoon writing. The collection listed here is one small portion of my collection of comics overall - which, while still

narrow, includes impressive holdings in such Franco-Belgian classics as *Asterix*, *Tintin*, *Lucky Luke* (including a solid collection of the soft-cover first editions), and *Gaston Lagaffe* (all in French, apart from a handful of Asterix albums in German translation), or little-known gems such as Murray Ball's *Footrot Flats*, about life on a farm in New Zealand, told from the perspective of the sheepdog. The American comics are quite different from these in both form and tone, and the Francophone *Bandes Dessinées* might be argued to represent an even more venerable tradition; I do not know which I would grab first in the event of a fire. These books represent a special bond of affection and a kind of shared hobby with my parents, especially with my Dad. As I grew up in France, the French comics felt like home (and still do); the American comics taught me and helped me to think of this country as home, and to understand the sort of home that it had been to my parents, to whom I am grateful for having and sharing a great love of books and laughter. Thanks for sending the funnies to France, Keith. Thanks for reading them and laughing with me, Mom and Dad. Thanks Dad for still quoting the same lines from them and laughing with me all over again.