

*Eulogy for Barry McWilliams, Small Town Editorial Cartoonist
by his son, Colin McWilliams - August 26, 2021*

The Punchline

Consider a cartoon
You've all seen them
They're all different as the people that draw them
And by that I mean
Some are much more different than others
Some are strips and some are panels
Strips are the ones with multiple boxes that tell a little story
You see them every day in the big time newspapers
Usually buried back on some left side page in Section D
Next to the crossword, horoscope, and the word jumble
Advice from Ann Landers and Hints from Heloise, which by the way were ages
ago no longer being written by either of them
No worries, because you came here for the comic strips
They're hilarious, better than Saturday morning cartoons
And gosh, you can see them every darn day

Maybe you can game the system a little bit
Maybe you get yourself a paper route
So you can be there when the big international harvester delivery truck drops off
a bundle of newspapers
That smell of fresh newsprint literally hot off the presses
With the ink so wet it can smear at your fingertips
And even before you do your route, you rip the bundle open right there on the
curb, snatch up the top copy, find Section D and read em all
Honestly, some of the comics are better than others
Maybe you like a squashy little possum named Pogo, a heroic serial adventure
called Prince Valiant, or one about a boy and his dog, called Peanuts
Maybe you start noticing names like Walt Kelly, Hal Foster, Charles Schulz
Maybe seeing them every day, getting that burst of joy, maybe those names
became your heroes

Have you ever noticed how American English humor is rooted in irony and edged with contrasts and contradictions?

Have you ever seen 3nuts?

Somebody took Peanuts comic strips, which were always drawn in four boxes, and cut away the last box

You know, the box with the punchline in it?

Without that critical last box

Peanuts was darkness

A terrible, embarrassing, listless, depressing moment of ennui

"I'll never get to be President." says Charlie Brown.

"Don't let it bother you," says Linus.

"I can't help it ..." says Charlie Brown. Dot dot dot ...

And no punchline

It's just awful

Try it!

And it is a deep revelation into the cartoonist's psychology

Which, without humor to get them by, is actually pretty dark

I wonder if Charles Schulz, our American treasure, was actually all that fun to be around

But that punchline

Well, it's everything folks

You can walk in loneliness

Sorrow, loss

Misfortune, the hopelessness of Charlie Brown

Even the hard rains of a dark, terrible, fearsome war in Europe

Trudging along with two miserable grunts named Willie and Joe

And the punchline

redeems that moment

Brilliantly

With a zap of human spirit

electric!

Amazing!

Ama—ZINGER

That's a Dad joke, y'all.

Or is it a pun?

I digress

So we have the comic strips

And there are hundreds of em

All on one page of the Daily rag

Then there are cartoons that aren't strips

They are less story

They are more moment

ONE panel only

So the whole underlying pathos of the situation, the predicament of the cartoon characters

The revelation of cartoonist psychology

And the punchline

Has to be captured in only ONE box

And that's actually really hard

It's a real art form

It's a trade

And there are novices, journeymen, and masters

Abstractions of us, people who have real problems

Conflict makes the drama work

And the darkness cannot be stoppered

So the lightness must be unstoppable too

So now

Maybe you decide to draw a cartoon

Pull out a piece of clean new vellum paper and a pencil

Start with just a light sketch

The contours

Thicken some of the lines to give them bold definition

Clean up the rest
Then take a black Flair felt tip pen
And bleed it into the lines
If you develop the hand for it, watch how some of the lines thicken at the curves
Or maybe, as time passes and technology improves, you might just scan it into
your computer
Open it up in photoshop
Perfect the drawing, pixel by pixel
So perfectly that you even devise the flaws
Looks more hand drawn now than it did when you first started

Then you hone the joke
And fix it in your signature lettering
Fix it in time

Then you print it on a press
On enamel paper down at the print shop
Or you post it up on the internet

Discriminating editors review your cartoon
Paste it up on the editorial page
You know that cartoons consume valuable column inches
If you are running late, you sometimes let them know how many inches in
advance

Finally the plates are made and the big presses roll
The paper comes out, neatly folded
They load it up and put it out all over the county
Somebody in a cafe picks it up, scans the headlines
Somebody at home reads the first few pages
News, local events calendar, story about some stressful subject
Turns the page
And there you are

Sometimes the joke doesn't quite land
Sometimes a typo shows up a few days later

A stupid misspelling
A thing you realize you coulda said better
Even the simple turn of a line
And it hurts — you are certain to agonize over it, sometimes for days, or the end
of your days

Sometimes you nail it and that person bursts out laughing
Like some unstoppable force from deep inside
Spitting coffee all over the newspaper
And they love you for it
They absolutely love you

Maybe they even show it to their spouse, and the joke is shared and they smile
together
And know a moment of love

Maybe then you need to rest
After all you just worked for five days on end
You put away your pencils and vellum

Maybe you write a poem
Reach out to a friend
Drive to town
Pick up a bottle of brandy
Pick up another funny joke

You might capture a moment
You might capture a week or a month or a season of a year
You might capture a season in a man's life
Childhood, love, parenthood, old age

Maybe you draw a cartoon a few times as a kid
Maybe you do it for years
Maybe you do it for 43 years
Maybe you shrug off a retirement that you never prepared for
Maybe you don't know how to escape the deadlines

Maybe you love this so much you don't really want to
Maybe you die with a pencil in your pocket
A hilarious idea in your mind
Maybe you go out laughing.

And folks, that's the punchline

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