

The Funny Papers

An illustrated history of American newspaper comics, from the Yellow Kid to Dilbert.

BY JEFF SHESOL

IN 1906, the poet Ralph Bergengren, in the name of “common sense and Christianity,” denounced the Sunday comics supplement as “pandemonium, . . . the clamor of hooting mobs, the laughter of imbeciles, and the crash of explosives.”

More than a century later, it’s hard to imagine what the fuss was about. Could it be that the comic strip — that sweet, sad little relic now crammed between the Dai-

THE COMICS

The Complete Collection.

By Brian Walker.

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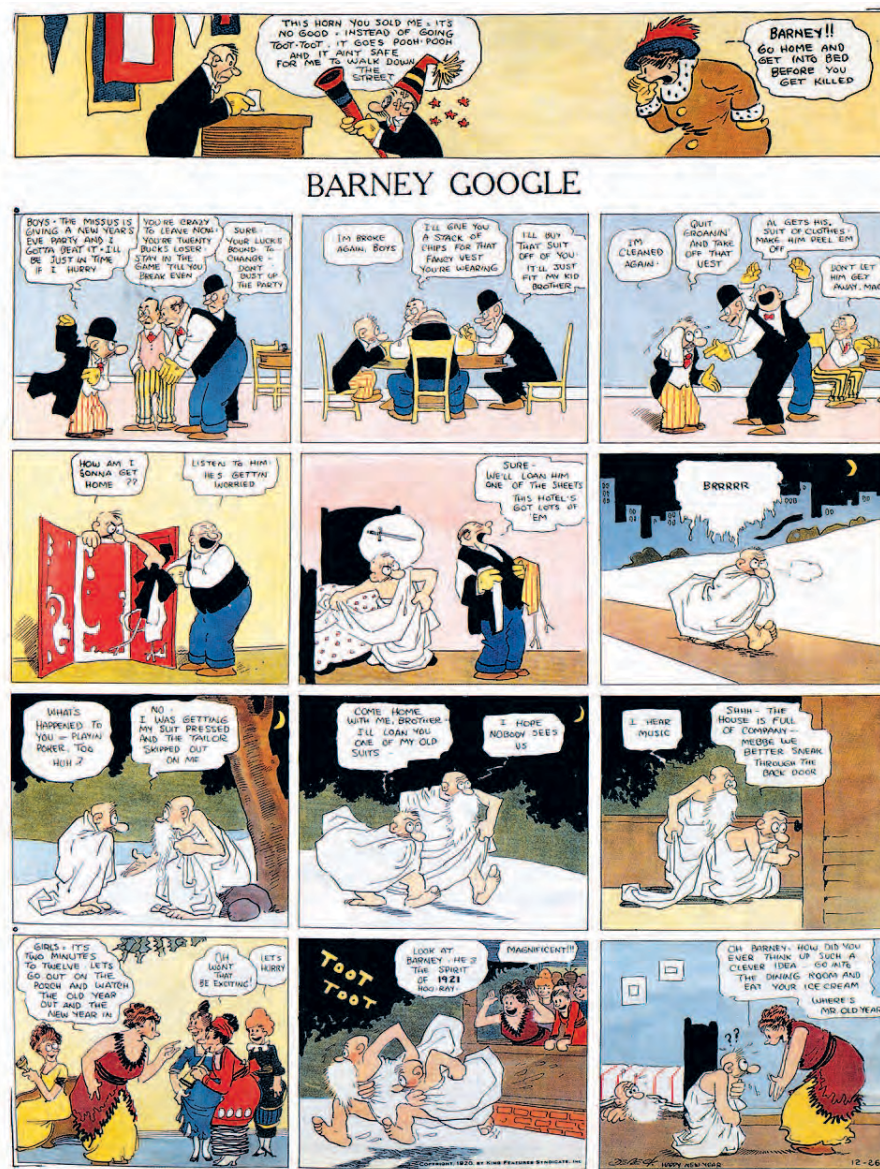
ly Jumble and the Sudoku puzzle — once roused readers to anger, once dared to offend? It’s hard to believe. Except for an occasional outburst of slapstick violence, decency hangs like a pall over the comics page, or what remains of it.

Brian Walker’s book “The Comics: The Complete Collection,” which brings together his two previous volumes on the subject, makes clear how much the comics once mattered and why. The son of Mort Walker (creator of “Beetle Bailey” and other strips) and a cartoonist himself, Walker is one of the comics’ greatest enthusiasts, and there is plenty here to be enthusiastic about. The strips he assembles — many familiar, others obscure but well worthy of attention — are beautifully reproduced and carefully annotated.

As Walker’s book states, the advent of the high-speed rotary color press in the 1890s started a riot in the staid Sunday paper, which became a haven for some of the most gleefully weird characters in popular culture, then or since. Creations like the Katzenjammer Kids, the fiendish Hans und Fritz; squinty-eyed Popeye, the steroidal star of “Thimble Theatre”; and Crazy Kat and the brick-slinging sadist Ignatz Mouse ran amok, shouting in invented dialects. Other strips, notably Winsor McCay’s “Little Nemo in Slumberland” and the weekly hallucinations of Lyonel Feininger, challenged basic conventions of narrative and design. Altogether, it was the most fun anyone had ever had in print.

This freewheeling period was unfortunately brief. Walker explains that when comics caught on as mass entertainment, cartoonists faced editorial pressure to clean up their act. By the 1920s, most of the miscreants had been domesticated or escorted off the page, and the premium, increasingly, was on gags about golf, money and henpecked husbands.

Jeff Shesol, the author of “Supreme Power: Franklin Roosevelt vs. the Supreme Court,” was a speechwriter for President Bill Clinton and for four years wrote a nationally syndicated comic strip.



Horsefeathers: Billy DeBeck’s “Barney Google,” in “The Comics” (Dec. 26, 1920).

But this sells them short. Even within these constraints, the comics crackled with energy and irreverence. Panels filled up with flappers, hustlers and orphans, many of them enduring creations. The 1930s and ’40s brought innovations in form and content, including the adventure strip — for better (Milton Caniff’s noirish “Terry and the Pirates”) and for worse (nearly everything else, unless you’re into that sort of thing). The comics page became, in itself, an industry; cartoonists like Bud Fisher (“Mutt and Jeff”) won six-figure syndication deals, and “this peculiar American taste,” as Editor & Publisher put it in 1927, was “now popular even in the Orient.”

Yet as comics entered their second half-century, a sort of staleness set in. “Continuity strips” like “Mary Worth” looked tired at their inception, while popular franchises like “Barney Google” and “Blondie,” once exuberant, grew exhausted and refused to admit it, grinding on, gag after gag. The pickings, therefore, are slimmer

in the postwar half of Walker’s book. Most readers, I suspect, would join me in elbowing Dilbert, Cathy and even the most adorable members of Family Circus out of the way in search of someone, anyone, with something fresh and funny to say.

Of course, there were bright spots: Pogo and Snoopy, B. D. and Uncle Duke, Calvin

Back in the day, Popeye, Crazy Kat and the brick-slinging sadist Ignatz ran amok on the comics page.

and Hobbes, Opus and Bill the Cat — memorable, meaningful characters, popping up at a rate of one or two per decade and blasting the dust off the comics page (or, in the case of “Doonesbury,” wherever editors hid it from the children). They made comics worth reading when little else did.

Even so, they didn’t reverse the medium’s slow slide into obsolescence. Breakthrough strips like “Peanuts” and “Doonesbury” have had many imitators, but no peers — and, at present, have no likely successors. It’s been more than a decade since Berke Breathed, Gary Larson and Bill Watterson retired, opening up prime real estate on the comics page, but most of it remains creatively barren.

Is the comic strip dying? Walker argues otherwise, and his book makes a good case for the medium’s resilience. As he points out, “doomsayers” have been predicting comics’ imminent demise since at least 1909, when R.F. Outcault (“Yellow Kid”) carped that cartoonists’ “supply of ideas” had already been spent. Radio, movies, television, comic books, magazines like Mad — all were seen as comic killers. Strips still survive.

Resilience, however, does not equal relevance, either cultural or political. In their heyday, as Walker recounts, “Barney Google” inspired hit songs and new slang (“heebie-jeebies”); “Pogo” took on Senator Joseph McCarthy; “Peanuts,” in an era before Thomas Friedman invented globalization, became the closest thing to a universal pop-cultural touchstone the world had ever seen; and “Doonesbury” and “Bloom County” took aim at hypocrisy and earned Pulitzer Prizes. By contrast, the leading strips of recent vintage, “Zits” and “Mutt’s” — whatever their merits — are hardly candidates for inclusion in that list. (Neither, let’s be honest, was my effort, “Thatch.”)

Of course, it may well be that the next great strip is right around the corner. If so, it is less than clear that anyone will notice. For there is one thing the comics in their present form cannot survive, and that is the death of the host organism: the newspaper. Comic strips can be found online, though they look a little displaced and perplexed, like your grandpa at a hipster coffee shop. So today’s newspaper cartoonists play on, gamely, like the band that remained on deck while the stern of the Titanic tipped straight upward and the ship plunged undersea. The tune they’re playing is humdrum and tired, but let us — who now get our news in fragments on our iPhones — not judge, lest we be judged.

What will be lost when the great ship goes down is a singular, perhaps irreplaceable, form of storytelling. So-called sequential art is alive and well in comic books and graphic novels, but would Garry Trudeau have emerged as a voice of his generation had “Doonesbury” been released in book form alone? A depth of meaning and strength of connection flows from the daily dose, from a strip’s gradual evolution over many years. The comic strip, as Umberto Eco wrote in an ode to “Crazy Kat” and “Peanuts,” “acquires flavor only in the continuous and obstinate series, which unfolds, strip after strip, day by day.” Amen, and good grief! □