

---

# Watterson and Walker Differ On Comics

'Calvin and Hobbes' creator criticizes today's cartooning while 'Beetle Bailey'/'Hi and Lois' creator defends it at meeting

By David Astor for *Editor & Publisher*  
November 4, 1989 edition; pg.78

Reclusive **Calvin and Hobbes** creator Bill Watterson used a rare public appearance last week to strongly criticize cartoonists, syndicates, and newspapers for what he sees as a precipitous decline in the quality of comics.

Watterson's October 27 speech angered **Beetle Bailey / Hi and Lois** creator Mort Walker, who responded the next day with a much more optimistic address about the state of cartooning.

"Much of the best work was done in the early history of comics," Watterson told an overflow crowd of 300 at Ohio State University's 1989 Festival of Cartoon Art. "It seems to me that cartoon evolution is moving backward."

The former Ohio resident, whose four-year-old Universal Press Syndicate strip has enjoyed phenomenal critical and popular success, explained why he feels this way.

For one thing, Watterson cited the shrinking of daily and Sunday comics. He noted that many Sunday comics used to run a full page, and held up a huge 1924 strip by **Krazy Kat** creator George Herriman to illustrate his point. He then contrasted it with a Sunday **Calvin and Hobbes** that was about one-fifth the size.

"You can only eliminate so many words and pictures before the cartoon suffers," declared Watterson, who said he has avoided certain storylines because of space considerations. "Now [many comics] sit in blank boxes spouting silly puns. Comics are simpler and dumber than ever."

He observed that many newspapers are adding color photos, graphics, and "bold designs" to compete with television yet are not giving one of their most popular features -- comics -- adequate display.

"Couldn't newspaper editors add more space?" Watterson asked. "Couldn't an advertiser or two be asked to sponsor [another comics] page?"

If newspapers continue to run the funnies so small, Watterson posed the possibility of syndicates sending papers preprinted cartoon inserts containing larger comics.

Maybe, continued Watterson, syndicates should "abandon" papers and put their comics in "quality cartoon magazines" for weekly sale by subscription and in retail outlets such as bookstores and supermarkets.

One audience member suggested that cartoonists get together on a specific day and all do comics about the shrinkage of funnies. Watterson seemed hesitant about whether or not this would work, but did urge readers to ask their papers for larger comics.

Also hurting comics is the proliferation of product merchandise featuring cartoon characters, believes Watterson. "Licensing has become a monster," he declared. "Cartoonists are not very good at recognizing it and syndicates don't care...Syndicates are only too happy to sell out the comic for a quick buck."

Watterson stated that "some very good strips" have been "cheapened" and "corrupted" by licensing. He said products can't reflect the "nuances" of comics, lead to more "blandness" on the funny pages, and take away from the time cartoonists spend on their comics.

An audience member agreed, asking Watterson sarcastically: "Don't you feel the world needs more striped cat dolls on car windows?" He was referring to the popular **Garfield** product.

Watterson said Universal has the contractual right to license **Calvin and Hobbes**, but has so far accepted his pleadings not to do so.

"Everything I want to say I can say in the comic," stated Watterson, who praised Universal for respecting his wishes.

The cartoonist added that Calvin just won't work on a greeting card. "Calvin is the last kid on earth to wish anyone well," stated Watterson. "It distorts the character."

Watterson said animation is "tempting," but that he's still against it. "Do you want to hear what Calvin sounds like?" he asked. "I don't. [**Calvin and Hobbes**] was designed for this [comic strip] medium. It should stay in this medium."

A Universal spokesperson said it will not license **Calvin and Hobbes** without Watterson's approval but still hopes he will one day agree to some licensing done "with integrity." Watterson said his current contract with Universal lasts until the year 2005.

The spokesperson and a non-Universal syndicate executive at the Ohio State festival also noted that licensing helps keep syndicates afloat at a time when revenues from the sale of features to newspapers are static or down in some cases.

Watterson asserted that another reason for the decline of comics is the use of assistants. He said this leads to comics becoming "utterly predictable," because anything really quirky would make it hard for different members of a cartooning "committee" to write and draw in the same style.

If writing and drawing has become a burden [for the comic's original creator], let's see some early retirement and make room for others," commented Watterson.

He added: "I consider it a great privilege to be a cartoonist. Cartooning is an art. I don't have assistants...I want to draw cartoons, not supervise a factory."

Also, Watterson said the state of cartooning is not helped when comics are passed on to someone else after the original creator retires or dies.

"There has never been a successor to a strip half as good as the creator," declared Watterson. "Cartoonists are told they're not good enough to draw their own strip but good enough to draw a legend! If a cartoonist can't make it with his own work, he doesn't deserve to be in newspapers.

"The newspapers are full of deadwood -- Depression-era strips continued by baby boomers...Comics have a natural lifetime. It's time syndicates stopped maiming their comics by passing them on..."

Watterson said syndicates are able to do this because they have ownership rights to the comics (although some cartoonists with ownership are also willing to have another person continue their creation).

It's not right, stated Watterson, for syndicates to have ownership of something they don't create.

As for the argument that no one forces cartoonists to sign contracts without ownership, Watterson observed sarcastically that creators are always "free to stay in a \$3.50-an-hour bag boy position."

When asked for a response to Watterson's speech, Universal vice president / editorial director Lee Salem said: "I think Bill raised some valid and critical concerns and that all of us -- cartoonists, syndicates, and newspapers -- can work together to address them."

But Mort Walker, who is distributed by King Features Syndicate, wasn't pleased with many of Watterson's comments.

"I'm one of those old dinosaurs he [Watterson] spoke of who draws one of those stupid strips," Walker told the audience as he began his speech. Then he drew a sketch of Beetle Bailey and added, "I thought I'd do that to show that I actually do work. No one but me has drawn Beetle for 40 years. I take a great deal of pride in my work."

Walker said he uses assistants partly because you "need someone around to tell you your mistakes. Your wife can't do it all! I use ideas from my assistants although I retain the right to be the editor. I almost always change these ideas and develop them."

As for the passing on of comics, Walker said some successors fare quite well. He noted, by way of example, that John Cullen Murphy "does a marvelous job" on the Hal Foster-created **Prince Valiant** distributed by King.

Walker said he supports the licensing of comics. "I love to see cartoon toys and t-shirts," he stated. "They add color, life, and good humor to the world."

Licensing also adds to the income of cartoonists such as **Garfield** creator Jim Davis and **Peanuts** creator Charles M. Schulz, he said, but added that the two United Feature Syndicate cartoonists "would draw even if they didn't get a dime. I knew them when they were doing that."

Walker said licensing is a personal decision. "If you don't want to do it, OK," he stated, "but you shouldn't say others can't do it."

The cartoonist said he's also happy to see the increased number of movies, plays, and television specials based on comics -- including a **Beetle Bailey** tv special slated for next year.

Walker did say that he agreed with Watterson on the importance of comics sizes, and noted that he has been working on this for years via the Newspaper Features Council.

As for the general health of the cartooning industry, Walker said it's "alive and well" and will have "an even better future" despite comments by "prophets of doom."

"Comics are still the second-best-read features in the newspaper next to the headlines," he declared. "[Readers and editors] love comics and need them. They're a very important part of the paper."

Walker said this year's war between the two Dallas dailies over Universal features illustrates just how important papers think comics are.

"And one of the reasons for the continued interest in comics is that comics are continually interesting," observed Walker, citing "new blood" over the years such as **Doonesbury** by Garry Trudeau of Universal, **The Far Side** by Gary Larson of Universal, and **Calvin and Hobbes**.

Walker -- who called Watterson a "brilliant talent" -- said comics continue to "add to the language of the country, comment on the foibles of society, and add to the fun of living."

He added: "Cartoons say a lot to a lot of people. Cartoonists are the best-read authors in the world. They're historians, psychiatrists, healers...A good laugh is good for you.

"Cartooning is a moving, breathing, growing art form. The comics page is not just dopey jokes...The comics page covers the whole gamut of life. I think we should consider our cartoonists national treasures -- and name some streets after them!"

Walker said other positive cartooning developments include the high sales of paperback comic collections, the increase in minority cartoonists, and the rapidly escalating value of and interest in original cartoon art. He said the Rye Brook, New York-based Museum of Cartoon Art (which Walker was instrumental in founding) is doing so well that it will move during the next few years to a building "five times the size" in Norwalk, Connecticut. Included at the new site will be hands-on exhibits, videos, cartoon characters walking around, working cartoonists at easels, and more.

Another "good sign," said Walker, is the increase in the number of cartoonists owning their comics. Walker said he owns the 35-year-old **Hi and Lois**, and is negotiating with King for ownership of his 39-year-old **Beetle**.

Walker did note that he owes "much" of his early success to King, which "advised me, encouraged me, and had salespeople out there selling for me."

Watterson and Walker also made more general comments about their work and influences.

The **Calvin and Hobbes** creator said the comics that inspired him most were **Peanuts**, the original **Pogo** by Walt Kelly, and the aforementioned **Krazy Kat**.

Watterson noted that people today don't realize how much the Schulz strip "changed comics" with its "deceptively simple" drawings, emotional depth, "intellectual children," innovative treatment of animal characters like Snoopy, and so on. Watterson, however, did not comment on the huge amount of **Peanuts** licensing.

**Pogo**, continued the cartoonist, had "lush" drawing and dialogue, the courage to "attack the far right," and more.

And Watterson praised **Krazy Kat** for its surreal, "idiosyncratic" writing and drawing.

Speaking about the origins of his comic, Watterson said Calvin first surfaced in an earlier strip as a supporting character who ended up "stealing the show" whenever he appeared. Watterson said United recommended that Calvin and Hobbes the tiger become lead characters, but ultimately rejected the comic. Universal signed **Calvin and Hobbes** after another syndicate turned it down.

Watterson, whose two characters are named after philosophers, said he tries not to be "heavy-handed" in **Calvin and Hobbes** but has touched on environmental issues and satirized political polling (via the surveys Calvin takes of his father's popularity).

Walker said he sold his first cartoon at the age of 11, and sold about 500 more before he was 15. He developed **Beetle** in his 20's, and based many of its characters on people he knew.

One audience member asked about the Miss Buxley character, and Walker said he is "dressing her more

modestly" these days and trying to be more sensitive to sexism.

Walker and Watterson also had very different approaches to dealing with the public at the three-day festival. Walker agreed to numerous requests to do autographed sketches and pose for photos, while Watterson declined to give autographs and requested no photos and no taping of his remarks.

---

---