

HAROLD WILLIAMS, SUNDAY EDITOR OF THE BALTIMORE SUN AND CHAIRMAN OF THE NEWSPAPER COMICS COUNCIL, WHO PRESIDED AT THE SPRING MEETING, 1972, ANNOUNCED THE NAMES OF THE NEW OFFICERS OF THE COUNCIL AND THREE NEW MEMBERS WHO HAVE BEEN ADDED TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE. THEY WILL TAKE OFFICE AT THE FALL MEETING:

Chairman: Robert Lubeck, Associate Editor-Features, Detroit News
Vice-Chairman: Alfred Andriola, KERRY DRAKE
Finance Chairman: Arthur Laro, President & Editor,
Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate
Projects Chairman: Toni Mendez, Toni Mendez, Inc.

New members of the Executive Committee:

Bill Baker, Sunday Editor, Detroit Free Press
John Caldwell, Features Editor, Cincinnati Enquirer
Jack Tippit, AMY

THE THEME OF THE MEETING WAS RELEVANCE IN THE COMICS. ARE TODAY'S COMICS CONCERNED WITH THE ISSUES THAT ARE DEVELOPING IN OUR PRESENT-DAY SOCIETY -- ISSUES LIKE RIOTS, PRISON REVOLT, RACE, DRUGS, THE GENERATION GAP, WOMEN'S LIB AND LAW AND ORDER?

THE SPEAKERS WERE ASKED TO ADDRESS THEMSELVES TO THESE POINTS -- AND HERE, CAPSULIZED, ARE SOME OF THEIR REMARKS:

STAN LEE, PUBLISHER AND EDITORIAL DIRECTOR OF MARVEL COMICS, WHOSE COMIC BOOKS HAVE CAPTURED THE COLLEGE STUDENT AUDIENCE, GAVE HIS VIEWS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF "RELEVANCE":

I often wonder how important "relevance" is. I never knew our comic books were relevant until newspapers started writing that they were. . . We had a couple of conferences and said, "Hey! It seems we are relevant; what are we doing that is relevant?" We started reading our books with a different eye. . .

I think maybe there is a better word than relevance. Maybe empathy is the word. If the reader can empathize, he finds some relevance in what is being done, whether it is a serious story or humor. If the reader can identify with the characters and the situations (even though they are not situations that he may experience and the characters may be alien to the characters that he lives among), you have a more successful result.

We publish a book called THOR, the story of the God of Thunder. It is about gods and goddesses. . . When I lectured on campuses, I found the students were asking me more about Thor than about any other character. They asked, for instance, how I relate the Norse legends with the Judeo-Christian philosophy. . . I was just trying to write good guys and bad guys. . . so I began to realize that you can be relevant if you write with some sincerity, if you make the characters seem real and if you make the public believe in what you are writing.

The character should never be out of character. . . I think you can get characterization if you are writing about superheroes just as well as if you are

writing about the kind of people you find in MARY WORTH. When we have our superheroes see a monster, like as not the first thing they say would be, "Who's that nut in the crazy get-up; where's the costume party?" I don't imagine if you saw somebody who looked outlandish walking toward you, you would automatically assume he was an alien here to destroy the earth. So we tried to be a little bit sensible, or a little bit realistic. This seems to be what the college students felt was relevant.

An odd thing happened. After writing these books for awhile, we would get write-ups in college newspapers and I found myself being referred to as a satirist. . . Again, I re-read the stories. I found that they felt I was satirical when I was trying to be realistic. For example, we have a character called SPIDERMAN, who has been referred to as an antihero. . . In an effort to make SPIDERMAN realistic, it is very possible that while he is having a fight with a villain, his costume will get torn and he will break off the fight and run away because maybe people will notice his identity through his torn costume. I wasn't trying to be satirical. The only thing I was saying was: Suppose there were such a nutty thing as a superhero in a costume, how would he act? What would happen to him in the real world? It doesn't necessarily follow that all women would love him or that he would always win every fight, so we try to assume that here's a guy who has a super power, but he could be a loser as much as a winner. . . Then it occurred to me that maybe the world is so crazy anyway that if you try to tell things the way you think they really are, it has to come across as satire or humor.

To sum it up. . . You must concentrate on characterization. Don't let your character or the situation be out of character. We very often have given up what we thought was a good plot because it didn't fit the character we were writing about. . . Keep the dialogue true to what the character is; only let him talk the way he really would talk if there were such a person; keep the situations genuine. If you do that, the reader is going to have to start believing in your character.

I don't think "relevance" means that you have to have a sequence which deals with the election or drugs. It is fine if you want to do that, that's relevant, too, but I think relevance is simply having characters behave like real people within the real world that you are creating for them.

RAYMOND K. ROGERS, GENERAL SALES DIRECTOR OF KING FEATURES SYNDICATE, BELIEVES THAT TIMES ARE CHANGING AND THAT THE ATTITUDES OF BOTH THE NEWSPAPERS AND THE PUBLIC TOWARD WHAT IS TABOO IN THE COMICS ARE MUCH MORE LIBERAL TODAY:

There was a time in recent syndicate history when relevance dealt not so much with what you put into a comic as with what you didn't put into it. . . One of Sylvan Byck's chores in years past was to act as censor of belly buttons. If any cartoonist dared to insert this note of realism, Sylvan immediately got out his eraser and took out the belly button for fear it would offend some wholesome-minded reader of a family newspaper. . .

After belly buttons became an accepted part of the anatomy, our artists became a little more venturesome and one day along came one with that totally unmen-

tionable object, a toilet bowl. It threw everybody into consternation. Here was relevance in all its stark reality. . . Daring took command and they decided with a gulp that they were going to let that toilet bowl go through. Arms were thrown up in full anticipation of the onslaught that was going to come from editors and the public. I can't think of one response we had to it. So we clearly stood on the very threshold of a new era of morality in the comic strip; an enlightened morality.

Then, just a few weeks ago, Milton Caniff came through with one that caused a little more gulping: he showed a young lady from the back who was bare to the waist. Her arms were raised and her profile was slightly turned so you had a view of her bared bosom. Again, with much fear and trepidation, the bare bosom went through. There was a little static from it, but nothing serious.

These are changing times, but I don't believe the day is necessarily tomorrow when we are going to see Playboy's LITTLE ORPHAN FANNY in a family newspaper. In the meantime, what are the syndicates and the creators doing about keeping the comics in tune with the times? Actually, the path for most has been one of subtle and continuing change, frequently resulting in almost a complete about face in the nature and character of a comic strip. . . What is the catalyst for this? It is simply that the syndicates and the creators recognize the need to keep apace with the changing times, rather than any real cause or motivation coming from the editors who are doing the buying.

To cite just a few examples of changes that have taken place: We might look at MANDRAKE THE MAGICIAN. We recall the days when Mandrake had as his companion one Lothar, who was perhaps a stereotype; but look at him today. He is well-dressed, well-groomed, highly articulate; the leopard skin is gone, the fez is gone; he is contemporary, he is well-equipped to hold his own with anyone.

Look at Ted Shearer's QUINCY, dealing almost exclusively with the Black experience in America. This is another step in the direction of relevance, and yet QUINCY is doing well, not because he is Black, but because he is every inch anybody's kid. Sure, it depicts the ghetto, but it is never in a maudlin or preachy way. QUINCY takes life as he finds it and he is usually able to find it in a humorous vein.

Yet, what is one man's relevance can be another man's irrelevance. We do have to move ahead, but move with some degree of caution. . . When Mort Walker came up with his Lt. Flap, there was some sucking in of breath around the syndicate. It would have been a different thing if BEETLE BAILEY were floundering and change were necessary to reverse a trend, but Beetle was one of the greatest successes in the field of syndication. . .

Mort didn't say, "This somehow relates to relevance." What he did say was, "I just thought the time was right." Mort really laid his success on the line. His judgment was vindicated; only three newspapers offered any form of objection to Lt. Flap and there were no cancellations of the feature.

One of the biggest social problems on the American scene today is drug addiction among the young. Milton Caniff met it head on by doing a sequence in which STEVE CANYON's own stepson was involved, and he dealt with it forthrightly.

I think the relevance in comics is almost endless and the fact that each of you has kept his creation in step with the times is most commendable. I think it is what has maintained the comic strip as a viable, prospering portion of the industry. I think today the comic strip is both alive and well and living in the minds and hearts of people all around the globe.

WILLIAM ATTWOOD, PRESIDENT AND PUBLISHER, AND WILLIAM SEXTON, ASSISTANT TO THE EDITOR, OF NEWSDAY BELIEVE THAT COMICS PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN THE SUCCESS OF A SUNDAY NEWSPAPER. MR. ATTWOOD SPOKE FIRST:

When we decided to investigate the possibility of a Sunday paper, one of the first things we did was to have a reader survey. You can't swear by reader surveys --- except in our case we are 80% home delivered, which means we have close to 400,000 people who get Newsday every day and they can be reached very quickly by our carrier boys. So we took a large sample of our readers (eventually it became a reader panel) and we asked them what they wanted, what they liked and what they didn't like.

We said, "If there were a Sunday paper, would you take it?" The response was such that it encouraged us to go on. In almost every case where the question came up, "What would you expect to see in this paper?" whether the answers came from kids or from adults, a substantial majority and, in the case of the kids, an overwhelming majority, said that color comics were a must. We had a subsequent comics survey and asked which were the favorites. Certain comics were so far ahead in the poll that we felt we just had to get them. Many of them, of course, weren't available to us, but of those that were, we were able to do a good job on what we needed. But the most impressive message that came through to us was that the comics were very much alive and well. In fact, without them, I would have serious doubts about how well we are going to do two weeks from now when we start the Sunday Newsday.

SEXTON: Thirty-one years ago when Newsday started on the fringes of New York, every feature was tied up in the city. There were at that time at least six Sunday newspapers. What do you do for comics when you have six papers buying them all? So, not by choice as much as necessity, Newsday decided it would have to succeed without any help from the syndicates because nothing was available. . .

Along came plans for a Sunday paper. The one immediate feature that distinguishes the Sunday paper from the daily paper in everybody's mind is "The Funnies."

One of the things we have done to introduce the Sunday paper to our readers is to have a very low key contest in which we invite school children to tear out their favorite daily comic, write a paragraph or two on why they like that comic and then color it the way they would like to see it in the Sunday paper. There was no big radio advertising, just a little mention in our comics section. We have been hearing from kids at the rate of between 200 and 400 letters a day over the last ten days. It blows my mind to think of this, because I was one of those guys that belonged to the "funnies are dead" school. Obviously, there is a very direct relation between kids and the comics section. It is a readily established one, because we barely had a daily comics section until about a year ago. You could hardly find it in the paper, and when you did, you wondered why it was there because there was very little in it. . .

In organizing the Sunday package for Newsday, the first decision we made was that we would have to provide anything the people were used to getting from a traditional Sunday newspaper. So, we decided that we would have a sports section, a magazine, a TV section and a color comics section.

The second decision was that, since we are selling against some of the most sophisticated feature people in the world, The New York News and The Long Island Press, and one of the strongest Sunday papers anywhere, The New York Times, each element of our Sunday package will have to have some very special something extra which is immediately identifiable in the customer's mind so he will remember that this newspaper is different. . .

What do you do in the comics section to be different from everybody else's comics section? You buy from the same syndicates, you print on the same press in the same kind of color and you can't really afford to create any fancy design. . .

The comics reader is a creature of habit. The inner quality of the strip may not be as important as what the newspaper does with it, and boy, did we learn that! So we bought all of the old familiar comics we could get which had been dropped when one New York paper after another went out of business and all the strips that were familiar to mom and dad when they moved out from the Bronx and Queens. Second, we bought some of the exciting new things to attract people's attention.

Finally, the pressure came on. "Great! You've got all this lined up, but what are you going to do that nobody else can do?" We came up with our nostalgia page, in which we dip every week into the archives of King Features Syndicate and take out a comic strip of the 1920's or 1930's in living black-and-white, and present it for exactly what it is: a classic comic from the good old days. This posed an awful lot of problems because you can't put some of the gags of 30 or 40 years ago in the paper today, as we found out when we had the KATZEN-JAMMER KIDS with African pigmies appearing almost every week. You have to be very careful to read those gags against the relevancy of 1972. Whether this will be a good ploy for a year or two years, I don't know, but it gives us a simple, promotable angle that we can work on. . .

We also realized that comics are a matter of habit as well as quality, so we jumped into the daily paper. The first step was to make the comics section easily found by putting it in the exact center of the paper in a section all its own which we called "Fun." The second step was to start buying comics, and we tripled the number of comics in the section.

Finally, we went on radio and spent a couple of weeks saying, "Look at the great new Fun Section right in the middle of Newsday," and on our page 2 summary, we had daily boxes identifying each of the strips and panels as it came into the section. This was a sum total of about four weeks of standard newspaper promotion.

Let me tell you a success story on that. One of the features that went into the daily section is called JOHNNY WONDER. It is not one of the historic great features. The kids write in a letter asking questions and, six months or so later, some of the questions are printed in the paper with answers and

you get a globe or a camera or maybe even an Encyclopedia Britannica junior middle sized atlas as your prize for sending in a question. We did no promotion on that particular feature whatever. We even tucked it away on the inside where you could hardly find it in the Fun Section. Within two weeks after the promotion on the Fun Section --- not on JOHNNY WONDER, but on the Fun Section --- the mail started rolling in from kids. Within three weeks it was outpulling ANN LANDERS. Within five weeks, it received twice the mail of ANN LANDERS and we were forced in self-defense to start giving our own prizes at considerable expense and trouble.

What this says to us is not that JOHNNY WONDER is a great feature, but that if you use the comics for what they are, if you work at it, if you don't tuck them away as a hangover from the past, the kids will react to them and so will many of the adults. . .

We worked very hard on the comics section because that will be the wrapper on the paper that will identify Newsday from the Press or the Sunday News. As a result of some of the surveys we have made, in spite of our intellectual pretensions, the comics section is one of the most important things in the week for many people.

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TED SHEARER, CREATOR OF QUINCY, WHO ALSO GAVE AN ENGAGING CHALK-TALK, FEELS THAT CARTOONISTS HAVE A MISSION TO ENTERTAIN AND AMUSE, BUT THEY CAN ALSO MAKE A STATEMENT:

I personally would find it very difficult as a Black cartoonist who has been trying to make the scene to give a talk without making some sort of statement, but I also feel that I have a mission --- a mission to entertain and amuse. You might ask, "How do you entertain and amuse and still get some statement going?"

To begin with, I try not to preach, because I can conceive of no faster way to be unamusing than having a ten-year-old character (ten going on forty) getting up every morning and lecturing to an audience. I didn't sign a contract with King Features to do an editorial cartoon. Although at times I feel that I would like to be belligerent, I don't think it would be wise to carry this over into the strip. So what do I as an individual, as a Black cartoonist, try to do?

I feel there are a number of people who are surely not Black, surely not poor, that never had the experience and they need help to understand the plight of a lot of people, and this we try in some way to do with the strip. We feel that there are still multitudes of people whose children are cold and hungry, there is not enough meat in the pot and their sneakers have holes in them.

These are all the things that are in the back of my mind and from which I would like to draw a little bit of sympathy from the viewing audience. We also feel that there are so many people who do not have the ability or are not given the opportunity to make a decision for themselves. I think the idea of being old and obsolete is also relevant. I try to be concerned about this as an individual. One of the things that concerns me is the whole bit of the brotherhood of man, the family of man, how we relate to one another. . . .

I would like the cartoonists and the editors to understand that there are poor people out there. We as cartoonists have such a beautiful vehicle. A number of cartoonists are doing some beautiful things, but if we could only be aware of that, great!

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(See PROFILE of Ted Shearer accompanying this report)

THESE EXCERPTS ARE FROM THE QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD WHICH FOLLOWED:

Q. What incentive did you have for the young folks to write in about color in the comics?

Sexton: There were 500 souvenirs. It was not intended to be a big promotion contest. We never told them what the souvenir was. It's just a token, costing about 98¢.

Q. What kind of advertising do you foresee in the Sunday comics?

Attwood: We never projected very much. We were surprised that in the first one we have two pages out of eight.

Q. Retail or national?

Attwood: Both. Obviously, if we get a page out of eight, we will consider that very good. That is standard size. Actually, the Sunday paper will be a mixture of tabloid and standard size sections, which is probably unique in the country.

Q. Was there any clue in the letters or in the surveys as to the preference for continuity versus gag strips?

Sexton: We did not phrase questions that particular way and I don't think you can reach any conclusions from the figures on the individual comics. Children obviously have a short attention span and if they are reading the continuity strips, they are not writing letters about them. I don't think that is true about grown-ups, but we didn't offer any inducement to the grown-ups to write in.

Q. You mentioned that you have two pages of advertising in your first issue. At what point do you anticipate increasing the number of comics pages? Do you have a minimum number of features you get in each week without regard to advertising?

Attwood: We don't intend to kick it up. We don't see any prospect of advertising increasing to the point where we would have to. We would have to kick it up in such multiples that we would have to have a lot more strips available.

Sexton: The economics of the comics section are unlike any other part of the paper. In the rest of the paper we do run around 29-30% editorial and the rest advertising, so every time we get three more pages of advertising, it is economically desirable to have one more page of editorial and go up four pages. In the comics section, you start out knowing you are never going to pay for the section with your advertising. There is just no way because your ratio of content is absolutely the reverse. You put out the comics section and if someone wants to advertise in it, you are glad to take his money . . . When we get to two pages of advertising, we turn the ads down.

Q. How many copies of the paper do you print?

Attwood: Our circulation is 450,000. Our press run will be roughly what it is today. We will be able to tell after a few weeks what we will level off at.

Q. Is there any significance in the fact that Newsday, as a tabloid, went for a standard size comics section?

Attwood: As we mentioned, we have to make every section a little bit better. . . The standard size thing was really just a means of surprising people to see Newsday look standard; then they will open it up and it will be tabloid and then they will open up more of it and say, "Why, this is standard!"

Sexton: In addition to that, there was an underlying emotional feeling on everybody's part who worked on this section that comics were really drawn to be standard size. You can scrunch them into tabloid, but it is just not the same on Sunday morning.

Q. How many features do you have lined up on the nostalgia page?

Sexton: Three. . . We will change them when we think it is time to have a little promotion or when we feel they are getting a little tired. . . I don't think we will make a change until summer or fall and then we will tell everybody, "Look who's coming back." It's a very flexible thing.

Q. A lot of the comics are geared for the younger people. Some American strips, such as PEANUTS and LI'L ABNER and others which seem to have a higher literary content, go over very well in Europe. . . Don't you think it might be wise to experiment and get some of the millions of Americans who are adult and who have money to spend?

Sexton: We try to have a heavy adult interest, the teen-age and young adult, and then hope that whatever people were reading as they grew up, they will continue to read. I think that is what the continuity strip is all about. I read the funnies. I know Bill Attwood does. My God, does he read the funnies!

Sylvan Byck:
(King Features) Outside of SESAME STREET, we don't have one strip drawn especially for kids. . . I agree with Stan Lee completely about the word "relevance." I don't think it means a darn thing. The great comics have always been relevant to their period. They are not relevant in the sense that the gags are based on the Viet Nam War or pollution, but they are relevant in a much deeper sense.

Q. Stan, you think a character should be kept "in character." How do you account for the tremendous success of strips like B. C. and THE WIZARD OF ID, where frequently they are not in character in time or in the world in which the strip is placed? The gag is about something that couldn't possibly have happened to them, about something that is relevant to today, and yet it is a great gag.

Lee: That always seemed to me to be the shtick of those strips. . . He would be relevant, but he wouldn't get out of character by having him discover an automobile --- he would let him play with that little stone wheel. To me, this is in character. If I am wrong, I will cop out by saying that just has to be the exception.

Dan Poole:
(Washington Star) They are relevant because they are anachronistic and through anachronism they become relevant. I want to say that, at the Washington Star, I don't think we would buy a comic strip that we didn't think relevant, but by the same token, we wouldn't buy it just because it was known as relevant. A comic strip has to be relevant so that people can relate to it and identify with it, but it can't succeed just on that; it has to be entertaining and funny if it is a gag strip, and highly adventurous if it is a continuity strip.

Lee: I think the public almost actively resents it when they feel you are obviously trying to be relevant. We had a case in point. I received a letter from the government asking if we would mention the drug theme in one of our magazines. We did it in SPIDERMAN. SPIDERMAN's friend had taken an overdose and while SPIDERMAN was fighting his usual supervillain, he was worrying about his friend, Harry. He thought how foolish Harry was to get involved in that sort of thing. It was just a peripheral plot.

We talk to our readers. We have what we call a Bull Pen Bulletin Page and in all of our little talks, I don't think I have ever even mentioned the word relevance. . . Everybody wants to be amused; that is why they read comics. What happens is that the public, finding a relevant theme, is impressed and enjoys it. . . But if you say, "Here's a great strip about Blacks living well with Whites," or "You should worry about ecology," you seem to hit the reader over the head. He begins to think he is being lectured to and it becomes more like reading a school book and less like fun.

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