

Gary Larson

By John Rogers

April 21, 2023

For most baby boomers our earliest memory of television watching was of cartoons, maybe Mickey Mouse and Donald or Bugs Bunny. The vibrant colors and action held our rapt attention. Later when we were read to and or started to read it was probably something like Dr Seuss books. As we aged to our teen years and became more sophisticated we turned to comic books – Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman and Bat Woman among others. At about this time I started paying more attention to our two newspapers (The Journal Gazette and News Sentinel) and of course their respective comic sections. Daily in black and white, and on weekends in full color. Blondie with her hapless husband, Dagwood, Beetle Bailey, Hi & Lois among others. These were cute, but not “laugh out loud” funny; and some were serious like Mary Worth, Rex Morgan M.D. and Dick Tracy. Kind of serious, but really the idea of wearing a two way communicator on your wrist was just too far out!

At some point however these comics, whether in standard 3-4 panel or single panel format, started to get dated. They just weren't funny anymore. One of the more obvious exceptions to these examples, was Charlie Brown and Peanuts. The gentle wisdom that Charles Schulz brought to comics, animated shows and books had a huge impact on young and old.

The Far Side was different: off the wall and irreverent, strange creatures and odd shaped humans, doing weird things. Some of it was really funny and some of it I just didn't get. It was sort of like watching the really good stuff on Saturday Night Live, mixed in with some of their odd and sometimes I thought not very good stuff. The Far Side was not your Father's or Mother's Comic Strip, in fact it wasn't a strip at all. It was a single panel comic that had no recurring characters. You could read it in a second, and you either got it, or you didn't. It always was largely not political, as opposed to say; Doonesbury, whose curmudgeonly critics often said that the comic, if not banned totally, should at least be on the editorial page. No, the Far Side allowed you a quick jolt in most cases and it soon gained a large audience.

Gary Larson first debuted the Far Side in 1980 and it grew to be distributed in 1900 newspapers and supported the sale of millions of books and calendars.

His first illustrated book was published in 1998 titled "There's a hair in my dirt: A worm's story" It became a New York Times best seller. He published a total of twenty-two books of cartoon collections.

Larson retired the cartoon in 1995, fearing repetition and tiring of constant deadline pressure. So who is Gary Larson?

According to Wikipedia: he was born August 14, 1950 in Tacoma Washington and he graduated from Washington State University with a degree in Communications. While in school he played Jazz guitar and banjo, eventually returning to guitar. He is married to an Anthropologist, Toni Carmichael, who also was his first Business Manager.

In the mid seventies Larson was working at a record store in Seattle and hated his job. He started drawing cartoons and attempted to sell them to some local publications, ultimately succeeding with the Seattle Times. During this period he supplemented his income by working as a Cruelty Investigator for

the local Humane Society. This probably influenced his extensive use of animal characters in his comic.

In January of 1980, Larson was published in the San Francisco Chronicle.

Up to that point, the Cartoon had been titled “Nature’s Way”, the Chronicle renamed it “The Far Side”, and then started publication. One week later, by chance, the “Seattle Times” dropped “Natures Way”. But it was the Chronicle connection that led to “The Far Side” syndication by Universal Press Syndicate and eventually Andrews McMeel Syndication, and by the aforementioned 1900 newspapers, and books, and calendars, etc. The result was that Larson and his wife became very wealthy and successful. But – through it all – this slight and balding man has remained a very private person who generally does not like to have his picture taken. Though I was able to watch some videos of a much younger Larson being interviewed. In one article he was referred to as a cartoonist’s version of “Catcher in the Rye” author JD Salinger, though Larson is not as reclusive as Salinger by any means, but he does enjoy his privacy. He has also asked consistently since about 1999, that his work not be reproduced

without permission. So I will depend on my descriptions to illustrate some of his work.

Larson has said his sense of humor was influenced by his family and growing up in the Puget Sound area. In particular his brother Dan had a wacky sense of humor.

Larson credits him, with learning the joy of slapping your brother in the face, with a jellyfish. I didn't take this literally. Some examples of Larson's pre 1995 humor are as follows:

1. "The Untold Ending of D.B. Cooper" it shows a parachutist about to land at "Ben & Vera's Rottweiler Farm". The problem is that he is landing in a fenced in pen of Rottweilers.
2. Another example: shows Pinocchio suddenly appearing on an African plain in the middle of a Pride of Hungry Lions. The caption reads "While vacationing in Africa, Pinocchio has his longtime wish to be a Real Boy suddenly and unexpectedly granted".
3. From 1985 there is the moral dilemma for the Mother Chicken: as she stands in her kitchen getting ready to bake a cake. She has cake mix,

flour and sugar, but she's looking out of the corner of her eyes at her nest with three eggs...

4. "How dinosaurs became extinct" pictures three presumably teenage dinosaurs standing around smoking cigarettes.
5. Then there is the cartoon of a cat food bowl turned slightly. You can just make out a few letters of the cat's name on the bowl, GARF.... It's obviously Garfield's bowl, but no Garfield. However wrapped around the bowl is a large python snake with a big lump in his full stomach.
5. And probably my favorite is titled "Midvale School for the Gifted" showing an earnest young student pushing on a door that says PULL.

I got that one immediately! Incidentally I did the same thing at Chase bank a couple of weeks ago.

Larson and Creative Pressure

As I mentioned earlier, by 1995 Larson was getting worn out by the deadline pressure. He was publishing seven cartoons a week, and not every one was accepted. So he would try and create maybe eight a week so as to

build up some spares for when his syndicator would turn down an idea. I watched a video from a 20/20 interview on ABC from 1986, conducted by correspondent Lynn Scheer. During the course of the interview Larson agreed to create a cartoon for submission. Far from being ready for pen and ink, he started with a blank sheet of white paper, a pencil and a very large eraser.

His idea that day was a nude sunbathing beach for chickens. Over several hours and a lot of head scratching and erasing, the cartoon developed. The end product was a beach scene that pictured several chickens that looked as if they had been plucked with just a few feathers sticking out here and there. We see chickens talking and having drinks while others play volley ball and of course some are sunbathing. Off to the left is a sign that may indicate some sort of bird discrimination or segregation. In big block letters it says: No ducks allowed!

The Far Side – Present Day

Since 1995, he has published calendars and eventually some collections in book form, but with little exception he was not producing new work. Oh, he did and does elaborate Christmas cards for his wife and in 2003 he had the opportunity to draw a cover of the “New Yorker” Magazine. Entitled “Quick Draw”. It pictured two cowboys on a dirt street facing off against each other with horrified townspeople on either side of the street. Only instead of guns the cowboys were seated at easels drawing each other – wait for it – QUICKLY!

Some sixteen years later Larson announced the creation of Thefarside.com. Its purpose was to be the official home of “The Far Side”. The website was and is not to be a return to the daily deadline grind.

Instead it features occasional new work and reprints of old work, and yes, merchandise sales.

Comfortable financially and career wise, thefarside.com is probably the extent of Larson’s work (for at least now). One estimate that I read put his net worth in excess of \$70 million. And again: I was also able to read at least

two more current letters to the public, from Larson; asking that his work not be used outside of his approved products and website. This massively published artist says that his work is very personal. While this is undoubtedly an effort to control monetary returns from his work, it also fits in with his general reclusiveness.

When Larson's career started he was, like most of us in that age group, an analog type guy at the start of an evolving digital world. For his finished work, he used a pen that often clogged with ink and a drawing pad. During his "retirement" he at some point started experimenting with computer assisted drawing. He likened the switch from pen and pad to the computer, as being something like sitting at the controls of a 747. You've got a lot of potential if you know how to use it. It's also a lot less dangerous, usually, operating a computer as opposed to flying a 747!

Throughout our marriage, Suzie, has been something of an amateur artist using pen and ink. And now she wants to use a computer as well, so I've got at least a basic idea of the process that Larson is now using. It

allows for the new Far Side's "new stuff" (and he does call it stuff) to be more colorful and maybe more painterly. Anyway it's the same old weird humor, with a new method.

Through the years Larson has received numerous awards from the National Cartoonist Society. This, if you're a cartoonist, is sort of like having multiple Oscars.

In addition, a type of chewing louse, found only on owls is now called the *Strigiphiles Gary Larsoni*. As columnist Dave Barry would say: I'm not making this up. Also an Ecuadorian rainforest butterfly is known as *Serratoterga Larsoni*. And then in one of Larson's comics there is a caveman professor lecturing a class of cavemen and presumably cavewomen. He is pointing to the large spikes on the tail of a stegosaurus dinosaur. The caption reads: "Now this end is called the thagomizer....after the late Thag Simmons". Hopefully the implication is obvious. As a result the tail of a stegosaurus is today, at least casually referred to as a thagomizer.

Gary Larson, as an Environmentalist and Animal Rights Activist

The following is a quote from Larson. "I don't believe in the concept of Hell, but if I did I would think of it as filled with people who were cruel to animals."

As the amount of animals in Larson's cartoons might suggest, he has had a long term interest in the fate of wild life that has extended to the environment as well. Growing up he referred to the area near his childhood Puget sound home as being swampy and full of clear sand bottom pools, stuffed with flora and fauna: particularly various types of lizards. Now though, a lot of those areas have been filled. And while no mention was made of remediation or wet land trade offs, his conclusion is that the filled areas are now suitable for habitation mostly for humans, not native species. To support his interest in the environment Larson was approached by his then and current publisher, Andrews McMeel, in 2006 about putting together a calendar of past work.

While prior to 2002 he had published other calendars, in 2006 the publisher was suggesting all proceeds from a run of 3 million calendars (around \$2 million) go to a not for profit called Conservation International, to help end the illegal wildlife trade in Southeast Asia, this according to a 2006 article in USA Today, by Elizabeth Weise. Weise also quotes the 2005 United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment as reporting “That in the past 100 years there have been 50 to 100 times more extinctions than would have happened without human interference.” At the time the USA Today article was written, Borders Bookstore reported that “Far Side” Calendars had sold four to five times better than any other calendar, according to Weise. So the charitable potential was great.

Influencers and similar cartoons

Alley Oop: Larson credits the cartoon Alley Oop as having been a major influence on his style. Cartoonist V.T. Hamelin worked on creating his crudely drawn caveman – Alley Oop and Alley’s girlfriend Oola in 1931 and 1932, finally Newspaper Enterprise Association picked up the strip in 1933.

At about this time the Chicago World's fair featured animatronics dinosaurs and the movie King Kong was released with a giant gorilla from a Dinosaur Island. So, public awareness was ripe for a caveman and dinosaur cartoon, even if in reality the timing for cavemen and dinos, at the same time, was a little off. It still made for a popular cartoon.

Alley Oop continued through successive cartoonists through the years, with a revival in 2018.

Gary Trudeau, while a contemporary of Larson's, he has approached his cartooning very differently. It's a strip and the characters are more normal looking, and are based on real people, including Doonesbury as a Trudeau-like character. And unlike Larson, the strip has never shied away from controversy. Writing from a decidedly liberal standpoint, the strip has, in some instances, ended up on the editorial page and in 1975 Trudeau was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning. While a liberal (liberals can be patriots too!) he has been supportive of U.S. Troops, visiting wounded in hospitals, touring with the U.S.O. and in one

case being snuck into Kuwait by the Army during the first Gulf War, so he could see troop conditions.

A side note to Trudeau: He is married to Jane Pauley, CBS Sunday Morning host. As a Purdue student in the early 70s; my favorite weather forecaster on WISH TV in Indy, was Jane Pauley. At least I remember it as the weather. I was paying much more attention to her, than what she was saying. I'm much, much more mature now.

Along with Trudeau, in the 80s and 90s a new group of cartoonists started coming to the forefront. They had a new take on cartooning. It was a combination of humor, a little harder edge and in some cases, the outright absurd. In addition to Larson and Trudeau, this group included, among others, Berke Breathed and the now infamous Scott Adams, creator of "Dilbert".

Cartoonist Berke Breathed, like Trudeau, writes with a little harder edge. One of his first jobs was a part-time editorial cartoonist for the Austin American Newspaper. The job didn't last, as "The Washington Post" hired him to create a strip for syndication. In 1980 this brought about "Bloom

County". The characters were very, very close to Trudeau's Doonesbury. So close in fact, that Trudeau wrote several letters to Breathed noting the similarities. In a Los Angeles Times article from 1987 Trudeau is quoted as having told the Washington Post that "There's a point where imitation ceases to be flattering". Breathed readily admits the "Doonesbury" influence. And like Trudeau, he has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial cartooning.

Another odd contemporary of Larson is "Dilbert" creator Scott Adams. You may have heard in February that on his podcast he pretty much cast the black race as a terrorist or hate group and suggested separation of the races. Not quite what you would expect from a funny paper author. The resulting career implosion was as spectacular as it was fast. Within a week he lost his syndication with Andrews McMeel and therefore his newspaper exposure. He also lost merchandising deals. The whole episode left fans and non-fans wondering why in the heck did he do that?

My amateur analysis is that entertainers, in particular, sometimes forget that they are in essence selling a retail product to the public – a public that can make you or break you. A prime example of this is the Dixie Chicks, country music group. During the George W Bush administration the Dixie Chicks openly and in a mean manner criticized the President of the United States while they were touring in England. Now Bush probably survived the criticism without hurt feelings, but the Dixie Chicks lost a great deal of their audience. It's kind of like being in the grocery business and selling spoiled milk – you are going to lose customers!

Larson, on the other hand, has always gone out of his way to pretty much remain mostly non-controversial. A couple of cartoons in particular however, did spark controversy of a sort.

In October of 1982 a cartoon with the caption “Cow Tools” was published. A cow was standing upright behind a table. On the table were several crudely made tools supposedly hand crafted by the cow (I think). That was it. Now in 1982 not everybody had a computer at their fingertips

that allowed them to, in knee-jerk reaction, comment on any and everything. None the less, numerous phone calls were received at the distributors (at the time Universal Press) One letter writer reported that he had shown the cartoon to forty PHDs, and none of them had any idea what it was about. I'll let the PHD's in the room draw their own conclusions! Larson himself received hundreds of letters. Right now you are probably wondering – who in the world cares? However, the reaction was large enough and sharp enough that Larson felt compelled to issue a press release:

“The cartoon was intended to be an exercise in silliness. While I have never met a cow who could make tools, I felt sure that if I did, they (the tools) would lack something in sophistication and resemble the sorry specimens shown in this cartoon. I regret that my fondness for cows, combined with an overactive imagination, may have carried me beyond what is comprehensible to the average Far Side reader.”

According to Brian Feldman in “The Intelligencer” “Cow Tools” to this day remains a popular internet meme

In 1989 Larson drew another controversial cartoon. This one featured two chimps sitting on a tree limb with the female grooming the male. The female says in the caption: "Well, well – another blond hair. Conducting a little more 'research' with that Jane Goodall tramp?" That one I got right away! With Jane Goodall out of the country at the time, response was left to representatives of the Jane Goodall Institute and they demanded an apology from Larson.

However, when Goodall returned to the United States and saw the cartoon she was really amused and instructed her Institute to back off.

Eventually Goodall reached out to Larson and they formed a friendship.

Larson licensed the cartoon to the Institute to produce a T-shirt for fund raising.

Goodall also wrote the forward for one of the Far Side's collected Editions. *I think you'll agree that Larson comes from a much kinder place, and when offends, has either explained or apologized.*

Another example of controversy is a 1988 panel titled "Tether Cat". It pictures two dogs playing tether ball, but instead of a ball there is a cat attached to the end of the rope. This outraged cat owners across the country. Suzie and I

have a cat and a dog and we have no doubt that our Maine Coon cat could defend himself against our Standard Poodle. In our case, I think it would be our dog that would get used as a tether ball.

Two last examples of controversy. In 1981 and 1983 The Dayton Daily News accidentally swapped the caption on the cartoons, Dennis the Menace and The Far Side, which were usually placed side by side. In 1981 the Far Side pictures a family of snakes sitting around the dinner table. The Dennis caption underneath reads: "Lucky thing I learned to make peanut butter sandwiches or we woulda starved to death by now." The Dennis cartoon shows Dennis and a friend eating sandwiches, but now Dennis is saying "oh brother, not hamsters again!" Cute, but not too serious.

The second caption swap was in 1983 and the effect was a little darker. The Far Side drawing shows two cavemen sitting at a table. The Dennis caption under it has one of the cavemen saying "if I get as big as dad won't my skin be too tight?"

Then the Dennis cartoon pictures Dennis and his parents sitting at the dinner table, but now Dennis is looking at his mother and says "I see your little petrified

skull....labeled and resting on a shelf somewhere.” Readers were shocked!

Breathed and Trudeau have been a little more political or cultural in their creations but not particularly mean. Dilbert creator Adams, however is in a category of his own. He allowed his personal views, and hatred to ruin his career. Unfortunately his type of view is not all that uncommon today.

Television:

We all know that a huge part of Peanuts and Charlie Brown’s success came from media other than the funny pages. Charlie Brown’s television shows, especially holiday shows, are a part of our culture. Even music – who doesn’t think of Peanuts when hearing Vince Guaraldi or David Benoit , playing the Peanuts Theme Song.

But what do you do with a single panel cartoon with no recurring characters? Oh, we do see plenty of cows, bears and kids with big heads wearing glasses with no eyes behind.

But with no character names or continuing story how do you create a television show, let alone, a Holiday Special?

Well, on October 26, 1994, CBS tried, but with limited success. Written by Gary Larson and directed by Marv Newland, CBS Broadcast “Tales of the Far Side”, a Halloween Special. It was a series of vignettes with no real story line. On a you tube video, from October 31, 2020, commentator Jim Gisriel said that while some things from the Far Side worked in animation, a lot did not.

After watching several clips, I would agree. What makes the anthology of the Far Side work is the immediacy of the panel – you look at it and laugh – or not –and you move on. The audience and CBS agreed. The show was never replayed. It did however, win the grand prize at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival for the year and featured an original score by well known jazz guitarist, Bill Frisell.

In 1997 the BBC produced and released tales of the Far Side II. It was shown in Great Britain, but not the United States.

In short, the legacy of “Far Side I and II”, the TV shows, is that there isn’t much of a legacy. It seems that much of the American audience preferred and I think still does, a coherent story line, with known characters that we are comfortable with in a TV show. This was a rare miscalculation for Larson.

So, for now...

For the last couple of months, I've lived with my topic as I'm sure most of you have with yours. It's been Gary Larson notes on the kitchen counter, in my car and office, and in my travel bag on vacation and in the middle of the night. He was a young man who with wit, hard work and yes luck, became a major influencer of humor in the late twentieth century and continues today in the twenty-first. And it might not have come about. As mentioned earlier, a week after the "San Francisco Chronicle" picked up "Far Side" the Seattle Times dropped Larson. Were it not for the Chronicle, Larson said in an interview, that he would have given up and taken a "Real" job, and look at what we would have missed.

In summary, while I obviously don't know Larson, "I've gotten a feel for him. He's an unlikely celebrity and financial success, and with a few quirks and probably because of them has remained stable and not overcome by his success. No Kim Kardashian star turns for him. He thankfully doesn't appear on the covers of gossip magazines. I read a quote somewhere in the past by singer Lionel Richie commenting on his daughter Nicole's 15 minutes of fame as Paris Hilton's side kick. Ritchie said

that in his day you actually had to do something, before you became famous. Well, Larson through 4,400 published comics and millions in book sales and calendars, has done something and in a modest and quiet way. In the crazy world we live in today, that makes him all the more enjoyable.

Bibliography

1. "The Far Side is back, sort of." George Gustines, New York Times, 12/17/19.
2. "The Far Side Returns to a Weird World." Sarah Larson, The New Yorker, 7/25/20.
3. "Far Side Creator Gary Larson Publishes First New Cartoons in 25 Years." Allison Flood, The Guardian, 7/9/20.
4. "Gary Larson Net Worth." Celebrity Net Worth.Com.
5. "Gary Larson Biography." The Famous People .Com.
6. "Larson Apology for Cow Tools." Spokesman Review, 10/29/82.
7. "Cow Tool Meme." Intelligencer, 12/17/19.
8. "Jane Goodall Friendship. Shaun Corley, Screen Rant, 10/12/22.
9. "The Comic He Thought Would End His Career." Andy Davis, Screen Rant, 9/23/22.
10. "Far Side and Dennis the Menace Caption Swap created Surreal Genius." Emily Satchelczyk, Screen Rant, 7/14/22.