

# Newspaper Funnies: A Review from Inception through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

A Paper for Quest Club, Inc. Fort Wayne

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Newspaper funnies, an entertaining, thought-provoking art form, are a phenomenal part of America’s history. The genesis of the newspaper funny is readily accepted to have taken place in 1896 in America, a fact that was “officially reaffirmed by a meeting of an international panel of scholars in Lucca, Italy, in 1989” (Horn, 1996, p. 16). A newspaper comic typically possesses several key characteristics that contribute to its appeal and effectiveness, which include a focus on humor and relatable characters, often exaggerating the characteristics of ordinary people or animals. The comic strip is typically written in panels that have been designed to maximize space, therefore requiring the message to be written succinctly. Most funnies include “thought balloons” above the characters’ heads. The artistry is visually appealing and supports the text in the balloons to convey the message. Funnies consistently include messages about society, politics, or social norms that are thought-provoking. These characteristics combine to create a unique form of storytelling that resonates with readers and keeps them coming back for more.

A brief description helps understand the nomenclature related to the creators of this art form. The designer of newspaper funnies is commonly referred to as a "cartoonist." Cartoonists are artists who specialize in creating humorous illustrations, often in comic strips or single-panel cartoons, which are published in newspapers and magazines. They use their artistic skills and wit to convey humor, satire, and commentary on assorted topics through their work.

This paper focuses on a selected comic strip for each decade in the twentieth century. This exploration has been enlightening to the author, and one hopes the Questers and guests in the audience may find it interesting, perhaps adding to their perspectives on the contributions of newspaper funnies to American life.



The rivalry between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, two titans of American journalism, began in the late 19th century. Pulitzer purchased *New York World* in 1883, while Hearst purchased a rival paper, the *New York Journal* in 1895.



The feud was fueled by the introduction of the comic strip *The Yellow Kid*. This character, created by Richard F. Outcault, first appeared in Pulitzer's newspaper, *New York World*, in 1895 and quickly became a cultural phenomenon. *The Yellow Kid*, with his distinctive yellow nightshirt, captured the public's imagination and drew readers to the comic pages (Heller, 1991).

As the popularity of *The Yellow Kid* soared, Hearst, the owner of the competitor newspaper *New York Journal*, recognized the potential for profit and influence that such a character could bring to draw readership to his paper. In a bold move, he lured Outcault away from Pulitzer's *World*, securing the rights to *The Yellow Kid* and launching his own version of the comic strip in the *New York Journal*. This act of poaching not only intensified the competition between the two newspapers but also marked the beginning of a fierce battle for readership and advertising revenue.

The contention escalated as both Hearst and Pulitzer employed sensational tactics, including eye-catching headlines, scandalous stories, and the strategic use of illustrations and comics to attract a wider audience. *The Yellow Kid* became a symbol of this new era of journalism, with the color of his gown influencing the term “yellow journalism” representing the shift towards more entertaining and sensationalized reporting. The competition between Hearst and Pulitzer ultimately transformed the landscape of the American media, setting the stage for modern tabloid journalism and leaving a lasting legacy in the industry.



Syndication connects artists with newspapers and fosters broad distribution of funnies

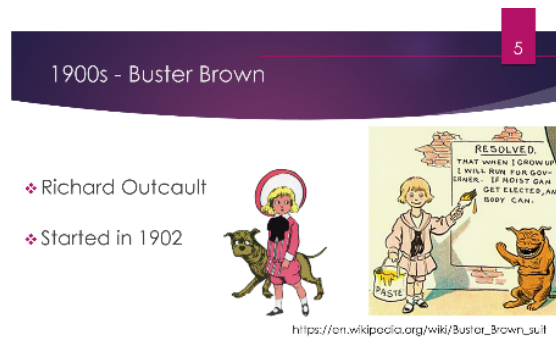
The success of *The Yellow Kid*, and the antics of Hearst in stealing the comic, led to the establishment of syndicates, which functioned as intermediaries between comic creators and newspapers. These syndicates license the rights to publish comics, allowing newspapers to feature popular strips without negotiating directly with the artists. This practice began in the late 19th century with the rise of mass-circulation newspapers that sought to attract readers with engaging content and continues today. Syndication allows popular comics to reach millions of readers nationwide and internationally.

As the media landscape evolved, comic syndication adapted to include digital platforms, allowing comics to be distributed online and reach new audiences. Despite changes in technology and consumer habits, newspaper comic syndication remains a significant part of the comic industry, continuing to influence popular culture. Several major syndicates distribute newspaper funnies, also known as comic strips. Some of the most prominent ones include:

- King Features Syndicate - One of the oldest and largest comic strip syndicates, known for classics like *Popeye* and *The Phantom*.
- United Media – Offers popular strips such as *Peanuts* and *Dilbert*
- Tribune Content Agency – Includes *Garfield* and *Calvin and Hobbes*
- Andrews McMeel Universal—Publishes *the Far Side* and *Doonesbury*

- Creators Syndicate - Features *Rex Morgan, M.D.*, and *The Boondocks*
- Comic Mix - A newer syndicate focusing on traditional and digital comics.

Having established a brief history of the beginning of the newspaper funnies, an overview of the next ten decades begins with the cartoon series titled *Buster Brown*.



### Buster Brown – Decade of the 1900s

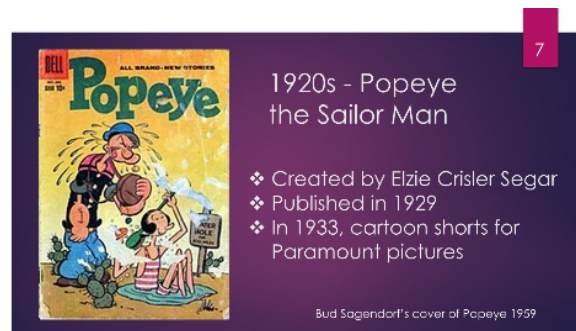
The *Buster Brown* cartoonist is none other than Richard F. Outcault, the famed creator of *The Yellow Kid* cartoon. Buster Brown is a jauntily dressed, blonde, and handsome lad, perpetually dressed in a Little Lord Fauntleroy suit. His female companion, Mary Jane, is an elegantly clad girl wearing black flat shoes. The two of them continue to be remembered today in the Buster Brown line of children’s shoes, and the name Mary Jane continues to be used to describe a style of girls' and women’s shoes. One of the defining characteristics is that Buster commonly makes resolutions, such as “Resolved: that when I grow up, I will run for governor. If Hoist can get elected, anybody can.”



## Gasoline Alley – Decade of 1910s

*Gasoline Alley*, the comic strip representing the 1910s, made its debut on November 24, 1918, and continues in syndication with the Tribune Content Agency. This makes it the longest-running newspaper comic currently in publication. *Gasoline Alley* was created by Frank King, a renowned cartoonist best known for creating this beloved comic strip in which he introduced readers to a charming cast of characters living in a small Midwestern town. King's innovative storytelling and character development allowed *Gasoline Alley* to evolve over the decades. His work not only entertained but also reflected the changing social landscape of America, earning him a special place in the hearts of comic strip enthusiasts. The comic initially appealed broadly to a male audience; however, with the goal of increasing readership, the Tribune editor aimed to broaden its appeal to women. He suggested the introduction of a baby, which posed a challenge since the main character, Walt, was unmarried. This dilemma was creatively resolved when, on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1921, the bachelor found an adorable baby left in a basket on his doorstep. King allowed his characters to age as the years passed, which was a unique twist at the time. For example, the baby, named Skee-zix, eventually grew up and served in World War II. In the twenty-first century, the cast now includes two centenarians, Walt, and his son. Walt married later in the storyline. A practice began with these characters that

is mirrored in other funnies, where the characters from *Gasoline Alley* cross into other comic strips as guests. They appeared in the comics *Blondie*, *Beetle Bailey*, *Dennis the Menace*, and *Snuffy Smith*. The characters have undergone significant development over the decades, existing within a richly expanded world (Goulart, 1995, Blackbeard & Williams, and Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gasoline\\_Alley\\_Comic\\_Strip](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gasoline_Alley_Comic_Strip)).



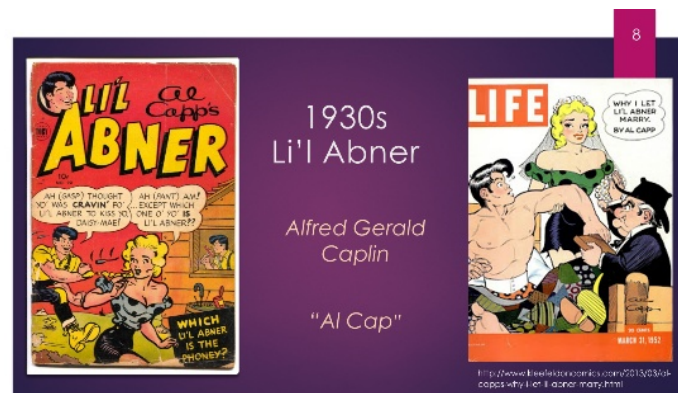
## POPEYE The SAILOR MAN – Decade of the 1920s

*Popeye the Sailor*, the iconic comic strip character, was created by Elzie Crisler Segar, an American cartoonist. Segar introduced Popeye in his daily comic strip "Thimble Theatre" on January 17, 1929. Initially, Popeye was a minor character, but he quickly gained popularity and became the strip's focus. Segar's unique artistic style and humorous storytelling contributed to Popeye's enduring appeal.

Popeye, with his iconic squinty eye and anchor tattoos, is often portrayed as a hero who stands up for the underdog. His adventures usually begin when Bluto, a burly and brutish character, tries to win Olive Oyl's affection or causes trouble in their small town. Despite Bluto's size and strength, Popeye's secret weapon is his love for spinach. Whenever he consumes a can of spinach, he gains superhuman strength, allowing him to overcome any obstacle and defeat Bluto. Popeye embodies the spirit of resilience and determination, making him an enduring character in popular culture (Goulart, 1995; Horn, 1996). Understandably, the



character became a successful merchandizing undertaking as Popeye appeared in books and cartoons, with toys created in his likeness.



### LI'L ABNER – Decade of the 1930s

*Li'l Abner* is recognized as the first successful comic strip set in the South (Inge, 2011). Interestingly the creator, Alfred Gerald Caplin – known as Al Capp, was from New Haven, CT. The cartoon series was launched on August 13, 1934, and ended on November 13, 1977. Over its 43-year history, it is credited with introducing the terms “the double whammy” and “Sadie Hawkins Day” into American language and society (Goulart, & The Library of American Comics, retrieved 1.9.2025 from [libraryofamericancomics.com/product-category/loac/lilabner](http://libraryofamericancomics.com/product-category/loac/lilabner)).

The setting for the story is Dogpatch, USA, a fictional mountain town in Appalachia. As one might expect, the denizens of the city are of a lower socioeconomic status and are uneducated. The heroine of the cast is a beautiful and voluptuous blonde by the name of Daisy Mae Scragg Yokum. The main plot revolves around Daisy Mae’s great affection for Li’l Abner Yokum who himself is dedicated to resisting and denying his feelings for her. The plot unfolds with multiple visitors to Dogpatch becoming completely infatuated with Daisy Mae—only to find themselves soundly rejected. As the complicated storyline unfolds, a



feud between the Scragg and Yokum families is revealed, which naturally complicates the situation between Daisy Mae and Li'l Abner. Other characters, including Mamy Yokum, who possesses quite a punch; Pappy Yokum, who is lazy and slovenly; Honest Abe Yokum whose tendency toward theft earned him the name; Tiny Yokum notable for his seven-foot stature; and Salomey, the Yokum's pig. Marryin' Sam is a traveling preacher who has the honor of conducting the nuptials of none other than Daisy Mae and Li'l Abner. This event occurred in 1952, and the wedding even made the cover of Life magazine on March 31 of the same year.



## THINGS TO COME – Decade of the 1940s

In the 1940s, the comic book industry experienced a significant transformation, reflecting the tumultuous events of the era and the hopes for a brighter future.

*Things to Come* emerged as a visionary series that captured the imagination of readers, blending science fiction with social commentary. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the comics explored themes of heroism, innovation, and the potential for a better world post-World War II. The vibrant illustrations and dynamic storytelling resonated with a generation yearning for hope and a brighter tomorrow.


*Things to Come*, created by Henry “Hank” Barrow, was first published in 1942, but then a gap followed in its publication until 1946, with the gap being attributed to World War II. The strip ran only until 1949.

As the storyline progressed, *Things to Come* evolved to include more diverse characters and narratives, reflecting the changing social landscape. The series became a platform for addressing issues such as equality, peace, and the importance of community, making it a significant cultural artifact of the 1940s. Through its imaginative tales, *Things to Come* not only entertained but also encouraged readers to dream of a future filled with possibility and promise.

1950s - Peanuts 10

**Charles M. Schulz**

- ❖ Beloved characters include Charlie Brown, Snoopy, Linus, Lucy, Sally, Schroeder, Woodstock, Pigpen, Franklin, and Peppermint Patty
- ❖ Established in 1950, running for 50 years until February 13, 2000
- ❖ Legacy is long-lasting with movies, specials, books, and specials such as a *Charlie Brown Christmas* and *The Great Pumpkin*.



## PEANUTS – Decade of the 1950s

The *Peanuts* comic strip, created by Charles M. Schulz, was launched on October 2, 1950, and features a group of children led by the lovable yet insecure Charlie Brown. The strip often explores themes of friendship, childhood struggles, and the complexities of life through humor and poignant moments. Key characters include the optimistic Snoopy, the autocratic Lucy, and the philosophical Linus, each contributing to the rich tapestry of interactions and life lessons. The simplicity of the art style contrasts with the depth of the storytelling, making *Peanuts* a beloved classic that resonates with readers of all ages.

*Peanuts* is one of the most significant of all cartoons in that it continued for fifty years while consistently being penned by the same author. Schulz drew the strip in

its entirety, with no assistants, including the lettering and coloring process. At the time of his death, *Peanuts* ran in over 2,600 newspapers with a readership of over 355 million across 75 countries and had been translated into 21 languages. Its popularity resulted in extensive merchandising and inspired a movie adaptation with Blue Sky Studios.

Interestingly, *Peanuts* started quite small. Goulart (1995) reports that when it first appeared, it was in only seven newspapers. This seems a very inauspicious start for a comic strip that is so loved and has achieved such a broad, international distribution. Schulz was strategic in the introduction of new characters over time including the addition of Franklin, a Black character. NPR's website tells the story of how this came to occur. After the death of Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Glickman, a teacher in Los Angeles wrote to Charles Schulz suggesting the addition of a Black character to the *Peanuts* comic strip to help promote "tolerance and interracial friendship" (NPR.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/11/06/454930010/how-franklin-the-black-peanuts-character-was-born). Schulz replied that he was concerned that Black families might feel he was condescending. She, with his permission, explored the matter with her Black friends, sending Schulz some of their ideas. And so it was that on July 29, 1968, Franklin was introduced into the group. Schulz received both commendations and concerns for this insightful addition.

Charles M. Schulz died on February 12, 2000, at the age of 77 years. The final *Peanuts* strip was published the next day, February 13, 2000, depicting Charlie Brown talking on the phone and Snoopy sitting atop his doghouse typing a message that began, "Dear Friends, I have been fortunate to draw Charlie Brown and his friends for almost fifty years. It has been the fulfillment of my childhood ambition" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peanuts>) and goes on to relate that his

family did not wish the series to be drawn by anyone else, so he is retiring. It was the end of an era.

1960s - Doonesbury

- ◆ Created by Garry Trudeau
- ◆ First published in 1968 in the Yale University newspaper "The Yale Daily News" from 1968 – 1970
- ◆ 1975 became the first daily comic to win a Pulitzer Prize – Editorial Cartooning
- ◆ Known for its political and social commentary



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doonesbury>

## DOONESBURY – Decade of the 1960s

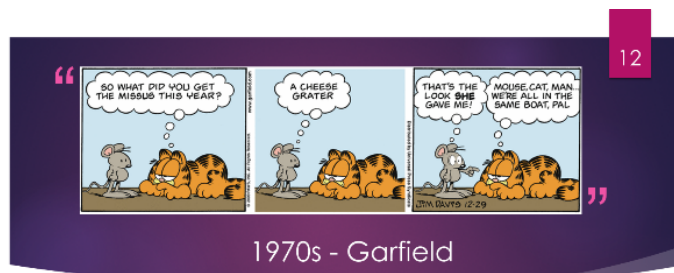
In 1968 the *Yale Daily News* ran the first cartoon strip by Garry Trudeau, who was an undergraduate student there (Trudeau, 1975) and which took an irreverent and incisive approach to characters from the Yale quarterback, to the young president of Yale, to a variety of characters across campus. Fast forward two years as the Universal Press Syndicate sold *Doonesbury* based on the strip from that campus newspaper (Goulart, 1995). The launch of the *Doonesbury* comic strip officially occurred on October 26, 1970, and debuted in 28 newspapers. The comic was written and penciled by Trudeau, then inked and lettered by his assistant, Don Carlton. Since 2014, new strips have appeared only on Sundays, with repeat strips during the week.

*Doonesbury* has long been known for its sharp commentary on American society, politics, and culture. The strip often features a cast of characters who navigate the complexities of contemporary life, reflecting the attitudes and issues of various generations. One of the recurring themes in *Doonesbury* is the exploration of counterculture movements, particularly those that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s.

In the comic strip, Trudeau depicts the struggles and triumphs of those involved in the counterculture. The strip serves as both a reflection and critique of the counterculture, highlighting its impact on American life and the ongoing quest for social change.

*Doonesbury* became the first daily comic strip to win a Pulitzer Prize in May 1975. There was, at the time, no category for comic strips, so the selected category was Editorial Cartooning. Trudeau took a sabbatical from 1983 to 1984, during which time he helped create a Broadway musical that showed the graduation of the main characters who heretofore had been perpetual students living in a commune together near Walden Pond. After the movie, the characters moved into their adult roles; B.D. became a quarterback for the Los Angeles Rams, and Mark lived in Washington, DC, and worked for NPR. Mike dropped out of business school to work as an advertising agent.

Through its witty dialogue and relatable scenarios, *Doonesbury* not only entertains but also educates readers about the complexities of the counterculture, encouraging them to think critically about the values that shape society. The strip remains a poignant reminder of the power of art and satire in addressing important social issues, making it a timeless piece of cultural commentary.



1970s - Garfield

- ❖ Created by Jim Davis, born in Muncie, Indiana
- ❖ Created in 1978, syndicated by Universal Press 1994-present
- ❖ Appears in books, movies, Emmy-winning specials, merchandise, internet, cartoon, and Ball State reading initiative

[https://www.gocomics.com/search/full\\_results?term=cat&category=comic&short\\_name=garfield](https://www.gocomics.com/search/full_results?term=cat&category=comic&short_name=garfield)

## GARFIELD – Decade of the 1970s

*Garfield* is a beloved comic strip created by Jim Davis that first appeared in nationwide syndication on June 19, 1978. However, the Garfield enthusiast recognizes that it was originally published as *Jon* in 1976, then changed to Garfield in 1977 prior to syndication. The even more discerning aficionado can articulate the hometown of the author and the setting for the cartoon, which is Muncie, Indiana. Davis purposefully chose to base the cartoon on a cat because he thought there were plenty of cartoons with dogs, but no prominent ones featuring cats. Over the years he benefitted from Charles Schulz' mentorship, particularly as related to the franchising and merchandising of Garfield.

The strip centers around the life of Garfield, a lazy, orange tabby cat who has a sardonic sense of humor and a penchant for sarcasm. He lives with his bumbling owner, Jon Arbuckle, and Odie, a dim-witted but lovable dog.

Each strip typically features a punchline that highlights Garfield's unique personality, making it a staple in the world of comic strips and a favorite among readers of all ages. In the foreword to a collection of Garfield cartoons Jim Davis (1980, p.1) shows Garfield with a balloon comment "Look inside this book and see this cat ... eat lasagna, chase dogs, destroy a mailman, laugh, cry, shred his owner, and much, much more!"

The comic often explores the humorous dynamics of pet ownership. Garfield's witty observations about life, his disdain for Mondays, and his relentless pursuit of food make for a delightful read. The interactions between Garfield, Jon, and Odie provide a comedic look at the challenges of everyday life, with Garfield often outsmarting his owner and finding clever ways to avoid any form of work.

Garfield has been expanded exponentially, with numerous animated pictures, several half-hour televised shows aired on CBS from 1982 to 1991, as well as two



live action movies with the Garfield character being narrated by none other than famed actor Bill Murray.

1980s - Sally Forth

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**Greg Howard**

- ❖ Established in 1982 – continuing to the present with author Francesco Marciuliano (since 1997) and illustrator Jim Keefe (since 2013)
- ❖ Sally, a 40-year-old HR manager, husband (Ted,) and daughter (Hilary)



## SALLY FORTH – Decade of the 1980s

*Sally Forth* was created by Greg Howard and launched on January 4, 1982. It is distributed by King Features Syndicate and continues to be published, although authorship changed from Greg Howard to Francesco Marciuliano in 1997. There is a play on words in the title, where the meaning of the term *sally forth* is to *set out on an adventure*. It is a comic strip that follows the life of a working mother named Sally Forth, who balances her career, family, and personal life with humor and wit. Its launch date coincides with the increasing prominence of women's careers. The strip often highlights the challenges and triumphs of modern parenting, relationships, and the workplace. Sally is depicted as a strong, independent woman who navigates the difficulties of her daily life, often with the help of her quirky husband, her precocious daughter, and a cast of supporting characters. The humor in "Sally Forth" often stems from relatable situations, clever dialogue, and the dynamics of family life, making it a beloved strip for readers who appreciate its blend of comedy and realism.

Sally Forth's character is reminiscent of many women who are pursuing careers. One might assume this cartoon to be written by a woman. However, the author is a male lawyer-turned-cartoonist who understands and accurately portrays the nature

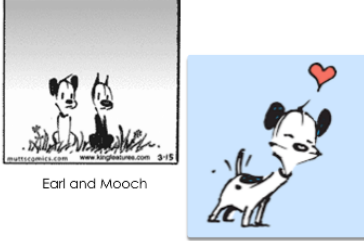
of a woman's role in the nuclear family. The National Women's Political Caucus presented Howard with its "Good Guy" Award for this sensitive portrayal of working women (slphistory.org/howardgreg/).

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1990s - MUTTS

**Patrick McDonnell**

- ❖ MUTTS introduced in 1994
- ❖ Continuing to the present
- ❖ Supports Animal Adoption
- ❖ King Features syndicate



Earl and Mooch

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutts\\_\(comic\\_strip\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutts_(comic_strip))

### MUTTS – Decade of the 1990s and the Last in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

*Mutts* is a beloved comic strip created by Patrick McDonnell that launched on September 5, 1994, in syndication with King Features Syndicate. *Mutts* features the adventures of an adorable black and white Jack Russell Terrier named Earl, his human companion, Ozzie who is a bachelor, and a black and white cat named Mooch. The comic has gained quite a following with publication in 700 newspapers across 20 countries in 10 languages. McDonnell was recognized with the Reuben Award for Cartoonist of the Year in 1999. Patrick McDonnell and his wife enjoyed the companionship of their Jack Russell Terrier, also named Earl, for an extended period of 18 years. Earl, the pup in the comic strip, is his namesake.

The strip captures the everyday lives of these two characters, showcasing their friendship, humor, and the simple joys of life. With its charming illustrations and heartwarming themes, *MUTTS* often touches on topics such as animal welfare, love, and the beauty of nature. The comic strip is known for its clever wordplay, poignant messages, and the ability to evoke laughter and reflection in readers of all ages. Through its endearing characters and relatable situations, "Mutts" celebrates

the bond between pets and their humans, making it a delightful read for animal lovers everywhere. In the cartoon, there is a sweet nod to Valentine's Day, as it is Mutts' adoption day.

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Newspaper comics can entertain, influence, anger, inspire, instigate, and promote reflection.

In summary, American newspaper funnies have chronicled history, fashion, regional differences, adventure, relationships, and more since their inception in 1896. The deftly drawn panels convey the whole gamut of humanity and emotions, from love to disdain, adventure to boredom, kindness to sarcasm, and realism to fantasy. As one picks up the newspaper or peruses a digital cartoon site, perhaps something in this paper will encourage a more thoughtful review of this iconic art form as it continues to evolve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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