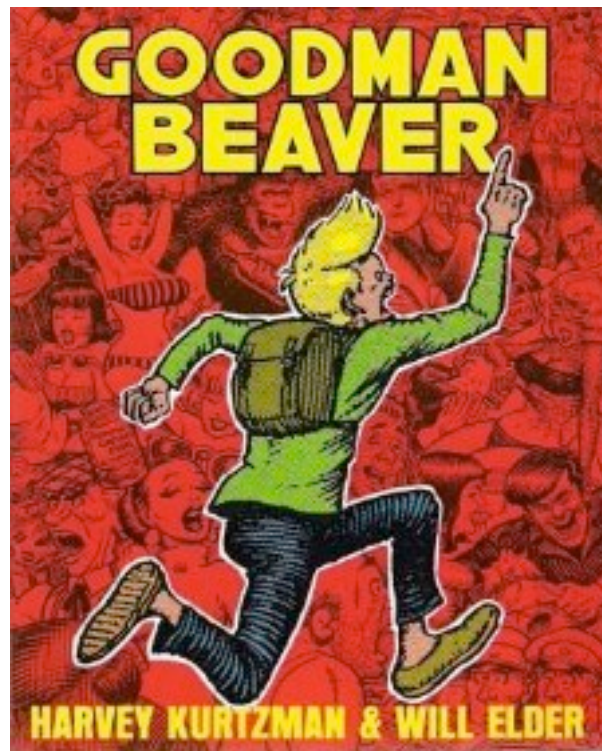


The Child is Father to the Man..er, Mother. To the Woman. Whatever.

By Karen Green

Friday October 3, 2008 09:00:00 am

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As you may remember from the column I wrote about my own comics history origins, the *New Yorker Album 1925-1950* had a profound effect on the shaping of my comic and intellectual sensibilities. But it wasn't the only influence, not by a long shot. I won't even get started on Tom Lehrer, for example; this simply isn't the place. But there were definitely other factors and one of the more influential was Will Elder.

In my family, we kids all had chores (do families even do that anymore?). One of my own chores, from about the age of 7 or 8 onward, was dusting the house. This provided the perfect cover for me to sneak into my older brother's bedside table and pore over his collection of *Playboy* magazines—trying to learn what I was going to look like when I grew up (why yes: the genesis of yet another young girl's body image issues)—which is how I discovered Elder's work with partner Harvey Kurtzman, *Little Annie Fanny*.

I didn't get all the jokes, of course—I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have realized, for example, that the native chief in "*Little Annie Fanny Joins the Peace Corps*" was supposed to be Barry Goldwater—but I did get how every frame was crammed with sight gags and visual puns. It was like the cartoon version of a Marx Brothers movie. Annie herself, I'm afraid, was of little interest to me; I was mesmerized by all the things that were going on around her. No space was left unfilled (hmmm, maybe I *did* get Annie Fanny after all); Elder clearly, like nature, abhorred a vacuum.

And so it began. Next came my exposure to *MAD Magazine*—also via my big brother, who had a subscription—which I could peruse more openly. And here was the legacy of Elder and Kurtzman, that crazy New York Jewish vaudeville humor taken to its most illogical extreme. The two geniuses were gone, but their mark had been made, and through their heirs I learned words like "fershlugginer," the vocabulary of My Tribe.

When I was 10, we moved to the east coast, and I learned what it was like not to have to wait for a ride in order to go anywhere remotely interesting. In fact, just downstairs from our apartment was a Genovese drugstore, which carried *MAD* anthologies in its book aisle. For years, I would spend *hour*s sitting on the floor of that drugstore, reading voraciously through whatever *MAD* books they had, drinking in the crazy visuals of 1950s Elder masterpieces like "Mickey Rodent!" or "Starchie." (The latter brought me particular joy because, at the same time, I was poring over stacks of Archie comics in the waiting room of the orthodontist whose coffers my parents filled from 1970 to 1974. I tell you, between Archie comics and "The Patty Duke Show," I was left singularly unprepared for the realities of high school life in the mid-1970s.)

And that was literally the extent of my exposure to the Elder universe until recently, when, after Elder's sad passing earlier this year, the wonderful site bOINGbOING introduced me to Goodman Beaver.



How on earth had I missed Goodman Beaver? Besides, you know, not yet being old enough to read when the scant number of strips ran in *Help!* magazine? I don't know. I blush to confess it. But miss it I had, despite a terrific compilation that had been produced by Kitchen Sink Press in 1984 (now, tragically, out of print, but still available secondhand).

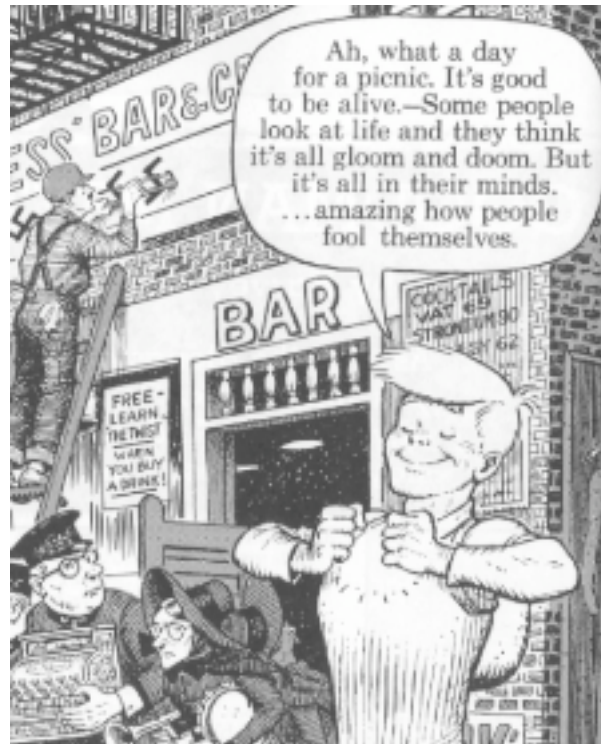
The bOINGbOING post linked to a PDF of "Goodman Goes Playboy," a controversial strip that had been suppressed after it was originally produced. In it, eternal innocent Goodman Beaver returns home to Riverdale, to "Archer" and "Joghead" and the whole RHS gang, only to discover that his former classmates have given themselves over completely to the hedonistic lifestyle preached by Hugh Hefner (when that lifestyle still had punch, decades before Hef became a punchline—he is kind of a punchline nowadays, isn't he?). The

publishers of Archie, not best pleased, sued for trade libel and copyright infringement (nearly inconceivable today, with the protection given to parody) and that was the end of "Goodman Goes Playboy." The irony of course, if you read the strip—and, oh, I do so encourage you to, because it is delicious—is that the real injured party turns out to be Hefner himself, who we learn by the final panel is the devil incarnate, to whom Archer has sold his soul in return for orgiastic pleasure.

Having read this online, I ran not walked to order that 1984 Kitchen Sink collection for the library. Included—since at the time of its publication the Archie copyright was still enforced—was a history of the lawsuit, a synopsis of the story, and a couple of panels to give readers a sense of the story but still protect Kitchen Sink from lawsuits of its own. (Archie's publishers let their copyright lapse early this decade, for reasons not entirely clear to me, and *The Comics Journal* jumped immediately to restore the banned strip to public view.)

Will Elder once said that the Goodman Beaver strips were the best thing he'd ever done, and I believe him. The sight gags cramming each panel call on every element of the cultural landscape, from *Yiddishkeit* humor to movies to television to music to advertising to literature to art to history. In the introduction to that 1984 collection, it's revealed that one of Elder's two favorite artists is Pieter Bruegel the Elder (the other was Velasquez). The Bruegel influence is immediately identifiable—he, also, jammed his works full of action, making each painting an anthology in which to browse. When I was a little girl, my parents bought me a gift of a museum brochure depicting Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*, with a key to identifying each saying. I used to pore over that image, trying to find each proverb in the claustrophobic mass of painted humanity. In retrospect, in a nice cause-and-effect example of historical synchronicity, I realize I was poring over that image at the same time as I was poring over Elder's *MAD* anthologies.

Goodman Beaver himself (and, oh, that NAME: the forename possibly inspired by the Nathaniel Hawthorne story Young Goodman Brown; the surname...well, let's just say it was "Leave it to Beaver," shall we?) is an innocent who could make Voltaire's *Candide* look like a hardened cynic. With his blank Little Orphan Annie eyes, he enters each story almost like Hitchcock's McGuffin, the catalyst to set all the action in motion and allow the story of man's insanity to unfold. In "Goodman Goes Underwater," in which Goodman has an encounter straight out of "Sea Hunt," a parallel is explicitly drawn between Goodman and idealistic, windmill-tilting Don Quixote. Look at Goodman as he strolls blithely down an action-packed street in "Goodman Meets S*perm*n," a street resembling the chaotic Lower East Side or Elder's Bronx childhood environs, completely unaware of the madness around him:



From the detritus being dropped out of a half-dozen windows to the "Professional Building" with the hookers on the stoop to the Hitler-esque sign-painter adding swastikas to the Ness's Bar sign to the Cold War headlines on the newspaper, the eye doesn't know where to go first. It doesn't need to. It will all still be there the next time you look. Elder loved it when people found new things every time they re-read one of his comics.

You never know what you'll find, though, and your own personal pop culture brain store needs to be pretty full. In the illustration higher up, from "Goodman Meets T*rz*n," the little blonde girl with books and ruler being hooted at by the African natives rang a bell for me. A short Google search later, my suspicions were confirmed: Elder and Kurtzman were inverting Norman Rockwell's famous painting "The Problem We All Live With," illustrating the vile, racist reception given young Ruby Bridges when she attended a newly-integrated school. In another frame of the same story, as T*rz*n and J*ne stand on a dock preparing to leave for America, three apes with cigars, bowlers, and overcoats are clearly comedy pioneer Ernie Kovacs' Nairobi Trio.

Over the Goodman Beaver stories hangs the inescapable shadow of the Cold War and the civil rights movement. On a shipwreck lies a copy of a newspaper called *The Red Herring*; its headlines read "Negro Students Banned from School in White Russia" and "Soviet Bathers Restricted from Black Sea." The Tarzan satire ends in a showdown between T*rz*n and Tarshanov of the Russian people's foreign service, who has arrived to relieve the exploitation of the jungle animals. S*perm*n, who has exiled himself to the countryside and is living like a beatnik, complains of what happens when you're "policeman of the world": "I helped the democracies—I was called a capitalist warmonger. So I helped the Russians—I was called a communist..." During the Cold War, not even Superman can be neutral.

The Goodman Beaver stories—like those Tom Lehrer songs I'm not gonna talk about—encapsulate the cultural and political landscape of the early 1960s. Like all good satire, it's

their job to hold up a mirror to their times, especially if the mirror distorts like the one in the funhouse. Will Elder helped teach me to recognize the chaos and absurdity of the world around me. You can't put a price on that.

Image credits:

Harvey Kurtzman & Will Elder

Goodman Beaver

Kitchen Sink Press, 1984

pp. 21 and 95-95.

Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.

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