

The Australian

Comic strip of record

- Glenn C. Altschuler
- From: **The Australian**
- February 05, 2011 12:00AM

[Recommend](#)

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

[Share](#)

0 tweet

- **Doonesbury and the Art of G.B. Trudeau**

By Brian Walker

Yale University Press, 261pp, \$49.95

GARRY Trudeau is "as much journalist as artist -- an investigative cartoonist, zeitgeist megaphone, flight attendant for his generation", reporter Jonathan Alter declared 20 years ago.

Realising he may be taking himself -- and his subject -- a bit too seriously, Alter hastened to add: "This is beginning to sound like a bad imitation of one of his baby-boomer strips."

Trudeau has, indeed, stretched the bounds of comic strip commentary, taking on American pop culture and politics.

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of Doonesbury, Brian Walker, the curator of more than 70 cartoon exhibitions, assesses his art. Accompanied by nearly 500 illustrations, many of them in colour (including strips, animation drawings, magazine covers, posters, and product designs) and commentary by his collaborators, Doonesbury is a feast for Trudeau groupies and food for thought about his creative processes and the import and impact of his satire.

Trudeau has had a wide range of targets.

He ran photos of Frank Sinatra with members of the Gambino crime family after the crooner was awarded the Medal of Freedom. He savaged the anti-abortion film *The Silent Screem*, Donald Trump, and the tobacco industry. He conducted a mock debate: "Is USA Today a newspaper?" And, despite a boycott by some newspapers, he created Andy Lippincott, the first gay character in a major comic strip, who died from AIDS in 1990.

Trudeau, Walker reminds us, has never felt obliged to be fair. "Balanced satire," the cartoonist insists, "is a contradiction in terms." Former US president Bill Clinton may have been a waffler, and "may have rained disgrace on himself", but, unlike his predecessors and successor, he never did "irreparable harm to the country".

Trudeau's most memorable strips have lampooned Republican presidents. He used Max Headroom, the star of a movie in England and an American TV series, as the inspiration for Ron Headrest, Ronald Reagan's alter ego.

He turned George H.W. Bush's "thousand points of light campaign", the centrepiece of "compassionate conservatism", against the 41st president, by representing him as a vanishing point of light (and Dan Quayle, his vice-president, as a

feather).

With Bush 43, Trudeau acknowledges, he had so much to work with -- "the cocky personality, the mangled syntax, the prideful ignorance" -- that he "almost stopped writing about other subjects. He depicted "W" as a point of light under an otherwise empty cowboy hat; then as an asterisk (to note that he hadn't "really" been elected president); after the invasion of Iraq, the cowboy hat gave way to a Roman Legionnaire's helmet.

Trudeau's most compelling critique of Bush was in a series of strips, in which B.D. loses his leg in Iraq after his armoured vehicle is attacked by insurgents.

Trudeau did not abandon humour -- B.D. tells his family, "Well, the good news is I'm finally down to my ideal weight" -- but the narrative was grim. For a school report about how her father was wounded, B.D.'s daughter downloads a photo of the damage done by an atomic bomb. Not surprisingly, conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly denounced Trudeau for using personal tragedy "to advance a political agenda".

Walker also provides a fascinating analysis of Trudeau's increasingly experimental style.

With more than 70 words in each episode, Doonesbury has always had much more dialogue than other comic strips.

In the 80s, however, Trudeau replaced his minimalist aesthetic -- three static images followed by a subtle take in the last panel -- with more arresting visual elements. He shattered and melted panel borders, disassembled images into puzzle pieces, used chiaroscuro film noir-influenced techniques, and shifted from real to imaginary perspectives.

In the 90s, although he recognised that the technique should be used sparingly, Trudeau introduced self-referential comments (dubbed "meta-comics") to Doonesbury, with characters speaking directly to readers, and digressing about the inner workings of the strip. In the 21st century, Doonesbury may be fading a bit from the national consciousness. After all, the number of newspapers -- and the number of newspaper readers -- in the US has declined. Trudeau's boomer liberalism, moreover, has fallen from favour.

In 1972, one critic has suggested, "the strip was engaged with the world: now it is engaged with itself". And, the cartoonist admits, "nobody sees comic strips as a viable profession any more".

For President Barack Obama, it's true, Trudeau has not yet found an iconic representation.

In May 2009, Walker indicates, Trudeau has an aide ask the president to appear in a strip: "They provide the art, you provide the words. Four panels and out -- easy as pie."

Other presidents, from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush, did it, he adds. "What if I'm not funny?" Obama asks.

Trudeau remains alert and engaged nonetheless, Walker says. He has no plans to retire.

So while it's surely the right time to celebrate him and "America's Comic Strip of Record", it's far too early to count him out.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

Share

0 tweet

2010 Doonesbury and the Art of G. B. Trudeau. Launch Date: Publisher: Yale University Press Origin: United States, English Volume Issues. Click to Rate. User Rating: 0/5 from 0 users. QuickRate. Rate trending movies in seconds and rise to Ultimate Status. Launch QuickRate. Volume Issues.