

Left Behind
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Worth-less? Classic Newspaper Comics and *Mary Worth* in a New World of Nostalgia and Irony

One of the oldest and most obvious remnants of “old media” still lingering is the daily newspaper comic strip. While webcomics like *Penny Arcade* or *Toothpaste for Dinner* dominate the “New Media” realm of strip comics, titles such as *Gasoline Alley* (in print since 1919), *Dick Tracy* (est. 1931) and *Blondie* (est. 1930) continue their decades-long domination of the daily printed page. While relatively newer strips (like Aaron MacGruder’s now-defunct *The Boondocks*) have occasionally broken into mass syndication, many of the oldest strips have stubbornly retained prime property on ever-shrinking comics pages. Reader terminology used to describe them, such as “legacy strips” (with art/writing duties handed down, often within the same family) or “zombie strips” (such as *Classic Peanuts* or the most recent incarnation of *For Better or For Worse* in which decades-old strips are simply reprinted) sum up the feeling that such strips are beyond old, beyond dead.

As the look of classic strips often remains faithful to their founding era, a modern page of newspaper comics can feature a bizarre mish-mash of otherwise forgotten styles, situated right next to contemporary news stories and editorials. The effect can be disorienting. But also comforting. The process of changing out strips, in which a paper will usually print a poll listing strips on the chopping block and ask readers to vote off their least favorite, more often than not results in the axing of newer, less ingrained strips, while the anachronistic 1920s-era hillbilly jokes of *Barney Google* and *Snuffy Smith* live on. This practice, long the bane of emerging comic strip creators, will soon, however, be irrelevant. The smorgasbord of full-color comics made available on the *Houston Chronicle*’s website is the exception, not the rule in bringing such strips into the 21st century. If/when print newspapers like the *Chronicle* fold? Will any non-newspaper-based sites pay for these relics? Enough to keep the cartoonists, writers, color houses and syndicates in business? Such a future seems doubtful.

In the meantime, we find ourselves in a curious moment. As strips have become available online at sites like that of the *Chronicle*, an active community of a new type of fan has sprung up on the internet. Popular site, *The Comics Curmudgeon*, in which blogger Josh Fruhlinger provides mocking commentary on various newspaper strips is the epicenter, with posts often receiving several hundred comments daily. From this site, numerous commenters have created spin-offs to follow individual strips in greater depth. These include *This Day in Milford* (mocking *Gil Thorpe*), *The Foobiverse* (taking on *For Better or For Worse*) and the self-explanatory *Me and Mary Worth*. In the new media realm of blogs and snarky commentary, the stodgiest strips are the most celebrated, with their unfashionably dated style and hokey plotting. Many who were never fans of the strips in the paper are now avid readers in order to keep up with (and expand upon) the online community discourse.

Of particular interest in this odd meeting of old media and the new is the case of *Mary Worth*, perhaps the most awkward strip of them all. Started in 1939, it centers on the adventures of the title septuagenarian as she solves the problems of her friends and neighbors. A new media fan favorite, *Mary Worth* has inspired numerous Facebook pages and YouTube tribute videos. One especially ridiculous storyline in which Mary is stalked by a younger man who later drives his car off a cliff, inspired a flurry of fan activity that eventually received coverage in the trade press. This apparently caught the attention of the creative forces behind *Mary Worth* who seem

to be attempting to embrace this newer, youthful fanbase. In recent months, Mary dealt with phishing and a hoarder neighbor, attended a Swell Season concert, and had an oddly postmodern storyline in which a rival meddling septuagenarian moved into Mary's condo community. An official *Mary Worth* store is now open on Café Press where King Features Syndicate sells travel mugs and mouse pads commemorating Mary's stalker. Following *Mary Worth* has become a rich experience of play between old media producers and new media fans who delight in the absurd continued existence of this relic.

Could there be room in the world for an updated webcomic-style *Mary Worth*? Not at all. This curious moment is appealing simply because it is so strange—self-awareness would hasten the death of classic newspaper comic fandom quicker than the demise of the printed page. And yet, there is no lack of love in their ironic embrace. Commentators often reveal vast knowledge of these strips' histories and nostalgia for their 'golden eras' or even the lost world they continue doggedly to depict. The strips are kitsch and living historic document in one, a reminder of our first childhood ventures into reading the newspaper or even just a childhood we wish we'd had. We should not expect developments like those in *Mary Worth* to presage a legacy strip renaissance. Instead, let us revel ironically (and perhaps sentimentally) at this last unexpected hurrah of a dying breed.