



Per Ardua Ad Asterix

Article Author:

[Colin McNaughton](#) [1]

[87](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Colin McNaughton and his love-hate relationship with **Asterix**.

Colin McNaughton ruminates on his love-hate relationship with one of the world's greatest cartoon characters

<!--break-->

One day in 1970 I was poking about the basement of a house in the medieval town of Lavaur in south-west France (as you do) when I came across a huge stack of magazines. There were hundreds of them. All bore the masthead `Pilote' and all of them were absolutely stuffed with page after page of comic strips. I sat down on the stone floor and started to read...

There weren't many books in my house when I was a kid: a set of encyclopedias, a home doctor book, a family Bible and an atlas made up our library (all of them maroon for some reason). Apart from the huge brassbound and clasped Bible which had marvellous tissue-covered, sticky-inked, vivid-gory, technicolour biblical scenes (I'll never forget the deliciously bloody, nail in the head picture - forget video-nasties, I'm talking the stuff of nightmares here!) I had none of the classic picture books that so many illustrators drool on about when discussing their childhood influences. No, my influences came from comics. A mixture of British and American - from the genius of Dudley D Watkins, creator of wonderful characters such as 'Oor Wullie', 'The Broons', 'Desperate Dan' and 'Jimmy and his Magic Patch' to the super-slick brushwork and full-colour of the American super-hero publications. Most of the kids I knew then collected them. Negotiating 'swaps' under lamp-posts and on back doorsteps is one of my strongest childhood memories:

'I'll give you two Superboys for one Captain America.'

'Get lost!'

'All right, two Superboys and a

Captain Marvel.'

'It's a deal.'

I learned how to tell stories from Dudley D Watkins, not from Robert Louis Stevenson. Look at any page of 'Oor Wullie' and see a master picture book author/artist at play. (Check for his signature at the bottom of the strip - if it's not there it's almost certainly not by him and, usually, inferior.)

Cut back to dank basement in south-west France several hours later. A bat detaches itself from whatever bats attach themselves to and flaps noisily over the head of the authors 'Sacre Bleu' he cries (the author, not the bat - he sort of squeaked ultra-sonically) and pulls himself together. Strange expression that 'Pull yourself together!' I've always preferred my friend Pete's expression 'Pull yourself to pieces!' - more of Peter, later.

[Get on with it, McNaughton... Ed.]

You see, and here's the connection with all that drivel about my childhood, I thought I'd left comics behind in the fifties and early sixties. I reckoned comics (apart, of course from Robert Crumm and the American underground comix) were kids' stuff.

Fool! Fool! and thrice Fool!

*Here was our old enemy the French showing me that comics have nothing to do with age. They are for the child in everyone. In France everybody reads comics and throughout the late 1950s and 1960s everyone was reading **Pilote**.*

*Underneath the title **Pilote***

were six little words, 'The Journal of Asterix and Obelix' (in French, of course -it would be silly if it was in English, wouldn't it, I mean what would be the point?). Contained within the hallowed pages were dozens of strips and buried in the middle - a double-page spread entitled: 'Asterix the Gaul'.

*Over the next few days (I'm still in France here) I read through those piles of **Pilote***

and, to be honest, I wasn't bowled over by the Asterix strips. This was mainly because there were so many other wonderful things to devour - 'Lucky Luke' by Morris and Goscinny, 'Le Grand Duduche' by Cabu, 'Philemon' by Fred, 'La Rubrique-a-brac' by Gotlib and 'Lieutenant Blueberry' drawn by a man called Gir, aka Jean Giraud - later to become better known as Moebius, one of the half-dozen best comic book artists in the world (a legend to comic freaks). So you see it wasn't surprising that the poor old vertically-challenged, moustachioed Gaul didn't stand out - he was just one of many.

Perhaps I should point out that at this time my French was almost non-existent. What knocked me sideways was the visual strength of these comics so the almost slick brushwork of Uderzo (I prefer pen and line) was far too Disneyesque for my taste. Both Uderzo and Goscinny were brought up on, and heavily influenced by, Disney. Also, whereas many of the other artists in **Pilote** were experimenting with layout, I found Asterix rather too conventional. And so I found myself flipping past Asterix onto something more visually interesting. It wasn't until I got back to England and started to read the texts in English that I began to appreciate fully the world of Asterix and Obelix.

I use the word 'world' quite deliberately because that is the secret of Asterix. Goscinny and Uderzo have brilliantly created a *complete* world. It's so complete, and consequently believable, one never questions the incredible adventures: one just enjoys them. I still don't really like the drawings, but in the end it doesn't affect my enjoyment of the books. Very quickly I stop looking at the technique and become submerged in the story.

Of course, the attraction of the stories is obvious: as Uderzo told Tony Bradman in **BfK** 7 (March 1981), 'People have said that it was because it's about the "indomitable minority" fighting back against the great machine of the state. There's an element of that, of course, and it's based on the contrast which we tried to emphasise between the rigid, rectilinear Romans with their roads and laws, and the anarchy of the Celts.'

However, more to the point and again in Uderzo's own words, 'We wrote it originally for children, but we never aimed it at a specific age range or audience. We realised at the beginning that adults would probably like it, too. The spirit in which we started was very simple. We wanted to amuse ourselves and we weren't surprised when adults liked it as much as they did - we liked it, and we're adults after all.'

I'll go along with that, especially when he adds -'I think humour is universal, anyway. It doesn't need to be too intellectual or too simple, it's just got to be good. In the end, either it's funny or it isn't. There are no other rules. Our sole aim at the beginning - and it hasn't changed - was very simple - we wanted to give people enjoyment.'

That, my dear French friend, you have certainly succeeded in doing - by the chariot-load!

One huge beef (or perhaps that should be boar) I have about Asterix has nothing to do with the authors. I've never

understood why such poor quality paper is used in the printing. Could it be because they're only comics? I mean, would the publisher print a picture book on this sort of paper (it goes yellow after five years for goodness sake!)?

I don't think so. I beg the publishers: Please, please, please next time you're reprinting, spend a titchy bit of the Asterix millions on some decent paper. The little guy has earned it!

The translations: sometimes they're great, sometimes not so great - usually within the same book. Anthea Bell and David Hockridge have, on the whole, done a splendid job for the past 25 years on what is an incredibly difficult task - that of translating humour. Occasionally they seem to get a little lost (at least, they lose me) as they desperately try to find equivalent jokes and puns. But, as Anthea Bell says: 'In the end, however, it all depends on the wholeness of Goscinny and Uderzo's imaginary world. The soil of that world is rich enough to cling to the roots of the joke and keep it alive even when it's transplanted to another language.' (Which just goes to show, you shouldn't ask a writer's opinion if you're short of space.)

*Back in the basement (did I ever leave?)... Interestingly all the comic strips in **Pilote** were credited with both author and artist's name - some even had little caricatures of them, too. As a waiter in my hotel in Kingston, Jamaica said, after seeing me on Jamaican TV: 'Maximum respect'. Show me a British comic of this time which ever credited the creators in this way, apart from perhaps *The Eagle* with Frank Hampson - and then only because he wrote it on the artwork himself. Moreover, the paper **Pilote** was printed on was proper paper! Bright, white and smooth. The colours shone! Compare that to *The Dandy* and *Beano* which looked as if they were made from recycled beer mats.*

My friend Pete [At last! I thought you'd forgotten about him... Ed.] and I used to share a studio in the Caledonian Road many years ago. When we weren't playing ping-pong on the desk or solving the world's problems in the pub opposite, we would talk comic technique. Pete would often say 'There are two sorts of people in the world: Tintin (i.e. pen) people and Asterix (i.e. brush) people. I'm an Asterix sort of guy and you, if you'll pardon the presumption, you pumpkin-headed plonker, are a Tintin-type person.' I would ponder this deep philosophical notion for several minutes and reply, 'Pete, my old china, you're drunk.'

PS. That pile of comics, I've been blathering on about, patient reader, is still in the basement of that house in France (my mother-in-law's as it happens). The scurrilous rumour that I, soon after discovering the hoard, did woo and marry the daughter of the house simply to gain possession of said treasure is, unlike the house in question, wholly without foundation - By Toutatis!

Asterix stories are all published by Hodder & Stoughton. Two new omnibus editions are to be published shortly: **Asterix the Strong** - a paperback bind-up of **Asterix in Britain** and **Asterix and Cleopatra** (0 340 61947 3, £4.99); and a hardback bind-up of **Asterix in Spain**, **Asterix in Britain**, **Asterix and Cleopatra**, **Asterix and the Soothsayer**, **The Twelve Tasks of Asterix** and **Obelix & Co** (0 340 62658 5, £9.99).

Among the festivities to celebrate 25 Years of Asterix in Great Britain will be a one-day Convention at the Commonwealth Institute, London on Saturday, 17th September 1994.

The Convention will include something for Asterix fans of all ages - games and competitions, discussions and literary debates, as well as stands from Parc Asterix and Sega. Albert Uderzo will be the guest of honour and there'll even be a wild boar buffet!

If you'd like to know more about it, contact Andrea Reece of Hodder & Stoughton at 338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH (tel: 071 873 6212).

Colin McNaughton is... well, do we really need to tell you? His latest, title, **Captain Abdul's Pirate School** has just been published by Walker Books (0 7445 2562 4) at £10.99. Wisely, his friend Pete wishes to remain anonymous.

Page Number:

Source URL (retrieved on *Jun '20*): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/87/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/per-ardua-ad-asterix>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/colin-mcnaughton>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/87>