



WATTERSON, TWENTY YEARS AFTER...

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Exactly twenty years after ceasing *Calvin and Hobbes*, the cult series that made him famous around the world, and a few months after being awarded the Grand Prize by the Angoulême International Comics Festival, the American artist Bill Watterson, agreed against all odds, to take up his pencils and brushes again in order to create the original poster of the Festival's 42nd edition. An artistic gesture as unexpected as generous, that is as exceptional in its value as it is a declaration of love and faithfulness to the comic strips of which Watterson remains one of the most notable practitioners.

In 1995, after ten years of creation, Bill Watterson decided to end the publication of *Calvin and Hobbes*, retiring from comics and public life. Exhausted by the pace of daily publication and the struggle against the commodification of his creation, the author felt no more desire to draw. Since then, the legend says he spends most of his time painting, away from the crowds, perhaps even under a pseudonym.

A secret personality, rare public statements and virtually no photographic documentation available ... Bill Watterson, whose reputation now seems inversely proportional to his media exposure is to comics what JD Salinger or Thomas Pynchon are to literature: a world famous unknown personality whom many believed that nothing could get him to draw again. However, in early 2014, one or two discrete initiatives augured a possible change: in spring, he signed a poster for a documentary about comics, *Stripped*, and on this occasion gave an audio interview for the first time. A few weeks later, he made three drawings for the American author Stephan Pastis, which were later sold at an auction in benefit for research against Parkinson's disease.

The poster of the 42nd Angoulême's international comics Festival

But still no comics on the horizon for 20 years. This is what makes the event of the original poster devised for the Angoulême International Comics Festival 's 42nd edition so unique. After months of reflection and sustained dialogue with the Festival's Programming Committee, this *comic strip* creation is a perfect synthesis of what embodies Bill Watterson today: the last major upholder of typically American comics that are organically linked to daily newspapers, and a vision of entertainment and reading as catharsis in a hostile world. Bill Watterson has just made a huge honour to the Angoulême Festival: that of designing, for the first time since 1995, a 16 box cartoon, silent and therefore universal, expressing his undying love to comic strips.

Neither Calvin nor Hobbes are present on the poster; Bill Watterson says he abandoned them too long ago to draw them again. But their moral and philosophical legacy continues to radiate through each image he creates. He who, by stubbornly refusing to yield to the dictates of his publishers, became one of the few authors to decisively change the culture of comic strips and who reminds us how reading comics can remain an inexhaustible source of happiness for each and everyone of us.

Questions/answers

FIBD: Where does the idea of the poster come from and what did you want to express with this poster ?

BW: I wanted to have the poster loosely relate to my own work and still be somewhat relevant to all the different kinds of cartoons that the festival celebrates. I went through a lot of ideas and approaches that didn't work, but finally came up with the idea of making the poster a comic strip about reading the comics. I chose to depict the non-digital world of the morning newspaper as a sort of a joke on myself and how long ago my work was published. The poster circles around this again by presenting my cartoon as if it were in a newspaper Sunday comics section. But mostly, I just wanted the cartoon to be fun to look at. This is always what I tried to do in my own work.

FIBD: As an artist you're interested in a variety of disciplines, such as painting. And you expressed in many interviews your thoughts about the creative process, and about comics as a medium of expression. From your point of view, what makes comics unique, as a form of expression and creation ?

BW: By combining words and images, comics are incredibly versatile—they can say anything. I love the comics' unpretentious simplicity and directness—their ability to cut through the clutter and get to the essence of things. But most of all, I admire the beauty of comics. I think their expressive drawings hold their own against any other art.

FIBD: I feel you never thought Calvin and Hobbes would become such a great phenomena. It wasn't even one of your preoccupations when you began. Still, Calvin and Hobbes became one of a kind of a success. At the time, Maybe you were wondering what made the difference and triggered all this passion ? But 20 years later, have your look upon changed or shifted on your creation? How do you look back on this era, and on this achievement as an artist ?

BW: The only part I understand is the part that happened at my own desk—the writing and drawing. My goal was simply to make this the kind of comic strip I would like to read. I tried to write honestly, and I think my love of comics comes through the drawings, but obviously the strip's fate was out of my control as soon as the brush left the paper. I'm delighted readers have responded to the work, but I'm as surprised by its long success as anyone.

