

### The Impact of a Fictional Six-Year-Old

I grew up a spunky little girl with three brothers. I loved to catch crawdads, walk through the forest behind my house, and get purple feet from stepping on mulberries as I was picking them to mush them up and try to make “tea.” When I started reading Bill Watterson’s books of his comic strip “Calvin and Hobbes,” I found an amazing new friend with an imagination even bigger than my own. Now as a young adult the adventures of the six-year-old and his tiger friend are just as meaningful to me. One particular strip about the inability to enjoy Sunday knowing Monday is coming probably rings truer now than ever. What I didn’t realize was that Watterson’s realm of influence goes far beyond this little girl from Iowa. Bill Watterson and his comic strip “Calvin and Hobbes” greatly impacted the comic strip format, influenced how merchandising of comics is perceived, and inspired many cartoonists both contemporary and current.

#### **Stopping the Shrinkage**

Bill Watterson and “Calvin and Hobbes” have had a big impact on the format of comic strips and the battle against a shrinking comics page. According to Watterson in an interview in 1988, newspapers are trying to keep up with television by adding color graphics, charts, and photos to catch the eye; ironically newspapers are allowing the shrinkage of the truly visual part of papers that television can never beat: the comics page (“Watterson Knocks”). To save money on paper, newspapers began printing the comics smaller and smaller. Nearly all Sunday strips consisted of three rows of eight panels that newspapers often rearranged to squeeze in between

other strips. It was not uncommon for newspapers to lop off the top row including two panels to save space; it frustrated Watterson that this practice forced cartoonists to waste an entire third of the comic on throwaway jokes so the rest of the comic would not be affected by the reduction (West). In 1992 Watterson requested an unbreakable half page for “Calvin and Hobbes” so that he had a consistent shape to work with. Client newspapers would no longer be able to rearrange panels in Watterson’s strip (“Cartoonist Discuss”).

The debate over Watterson’s new requirements caused a large stir in the cartooning industry. Some, such as “Fox Trot” creator Bill Amend, enthusiastically supported it while others, including “Family Circus” creator Bil Keane, passionately opposed it (“Cartoonist Discuss”). There was a general assumption that if comic strips got more space on a page, newspapers would drop all but the most popular strips instead of expanding the comics page for economic reasons. This fear of having their strip dropped forced cartoonists into accepting nearly any reductions. Watterson also argued for the layout of the comics page as a whole, stating that white space attracts the eye, so when there are twenty strips piled on top of each other detailed adventure strips like “Calvin and Hobbes” get lost in the mix (“Watterson Knocks”). Not only are these strips lost in the clutter but most cartoonists, in an attempt to ensure their strips were legible when shrunk down, were forced to simplify drawings to make room for larger speech bubbles, losing crucial character development, storytelling ability, and intelligent humor (West). According to Watterson, “we seem to have trouble accepting that comic strips are legitimate vehicles for comment, satire, and criticism. This is unfortunate because it’s one of the things cartoons do best” (“Watterson Knocks”). With the cuts comic

strips were essentially reduced to talking heads and jokes that could easily be told on the radio (West).

Watterson wanted his half page to make “Calvin and Hobbes” more intellectually and visually appealing. “Fox Trot” creator Bill Amend says that Watterson would have loved to see all comics given more space, but “Calvin and Hobbes” is the only comic Watterson had influence with (“Cartoonist Discuss”). Watterson decided unless someone took a stand “[comics would] only continue to get more insipid, and have less pull on their audiences” (West). Because of Watterson’s contract he could not take his strip with him if he left, and he was in no legal position to object if the publisher hired someone else to replace Watterson (Rossen). Watterson risked losing the comic strip he worked hard to create to take a stand and get back those precious inches of space (“Cartoonist Discuss”).

### **Keeping the Characters We Love in Our Hearts and Off the Shelves**

Bill Watterson also took a significant stand against merchandising with his refusal to license “Calvin and Hobbes.” Comic strip merchandising is a \$12 billion dollar industry with two of its highest sellers being Charles Schulz’s “Peanuts” and Jim Davis’s “Garfield” (Watterson). Garfield at one point was on 5,000 different products (*Dear Mr. Watterson*). The theoretical “Calvin and Hobbes” industry would take in an estimated \$3-4 million annually, but Watterson wanted no part of that. Watterson cites Schulz as one of his major influences but laments that the “Peanuts” licensing program obscures what a well-crafted, beautiful strip it is. In the beginning Watterson wasn’t against all merchandising, but each product proposed to him seemed to lead further and further from the spirit of the strip and its message (Bill Watterson Answers Fans’ Questions). Watterson explains, “When the cartoonist is trying to talk honestly

and seriously about life, then I believe he has a responsibility to think beyond satisfying the market's every whim and desire" (Jung 5).

Cashing in on a strip's popularity may corrupt the strip's integrity in the public's eye. This can cause all of the discussion in "Calvin and Hobbes" about commercialism, artist's integrity, the meaning of life, and other serious subjects to ring hollow. Licensing also cheapens the comic strip. When people see the cartoon plastered on products all around them they inevitably get bored with it and even come to be annoyed with it; the appeal and value of the original work are diminished (Jung 5). "Calvin and Hobbes" doesn't lend itself to merchandising that well. Watterson's strip depends on storytelling, relationships, and the contrast between fantasy and reality; those qualities don't translate well onto a coffee cup. "Calvin and Hobbes" was designed to be a comic strip, and that is where it reaches its full potential.

Watterson stated, "I think the comic strip world is much more fragile than most people realize and that wonderful, lifelike characters are easily corrupted and cheapened by having them appear on every... shelf and rack.... Several fine strip have turned themselves into shameless advertisements for products ("Waterson Knocks"). Watterson kept up a friendship via letters with his fellow cartoonist Berkeley Breathed, creator of "Bloom County," "Outland," and "Opus." Breathed jokes that he and Watterson were the yin and yang of the 1980s (*Dear Mr. Watterson*). Watterson vehemently refused to license "Calvin and Hobbes" while Breathed had no problem merchandising his characters. Watterson drew on some of his letters to Breathed, and one drawing made Watterson's low opinions of exploiting characters very clear: the drawing depicted Breathed kicking his characters, yelling at them to get their faces on a pair of boxer

shorts, and stuffing his motor boat with money given to him by the syndicate boss (*Dear Mr. Watterson*).

Watterson disclaimed any desire to become wealthy. If Watterson licensed “Calvin and Hobbes,” his creativity and art would be work for pay, and money would be expected to give Watterson all the motivation needed (Watterson). Watterson refused to let his characters be made into dolls because they just cash in on a character’s recognizability and take the character out of the world for which they were intended (West). Watterson feels a Hobbes doll would be particularly horrible because it would take away the question of whether Hobbes is real or just a stuffed animal. One of the main aspects of “Calvin and Hobbes” is the juxtaposing of Calvin’s reality with everyone else’s. The strip never asserts that Hobbes is not live; that is just the assumption the other characters make because they don’t see Hobbes the way Calvin does (West). Creating a Hobbes doll would definitively answer that question and label all of Calvin’s adventures “fantasies” instead of “different reality.”

### **Influencing an Entire Industry**

Even though Watterson stopped drawing “Calvin and Hobbes” in 1995, he had a great impact on many contemporary and current cartoonists. Norm Feuti, cartoonist of “Retail” and “Gil,” states Watterson was a huge influence on his wanting to become a cartoonist. “Of Biblical Proportions” and “The Bun Bunch” creator Chari Pere cites “Calvin and Hobbes” as her biggest influence and where she learned to draw wild facial expressions (*Dear Mr. Watterson*). In fact Joel Allen Schroeder, director of the documentary *Dear Mr. Watterson*, interviewed fifteen cartoonist; each speaks fondly of “Calvin and Hobbes” and holds great admiration for Bill Watterson. Jenny Robb, curator of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, says that she

can definitely see aspects of “Calvin and Hobbes” pop up in other comic strips. For example, Jeremy’s fantasies in Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman’s comic strip “Zits” often have a similar mood to Calvin’s imaginative adventures (*Dear Mr. Watterson*).

It’s really hard to find a comic strip artist from the 1990s on who wasn’t influenced in some way by “Calvin and Hobbes.” Watterson’s editor John Glynn says Watterson is probably the most cited influence for cartoonists; second perhaps only to Schulz. Glynn gets many submissions every year with some note saying, “I’ve always loved “Calvin and Hobbes” so I wanted to give cartooning a try” (*Dear Mr. Watterson*). Watterson’s work is so wonderful “Dog Eat Doug” creator Brian Anderson calls it comic strip perfection on every level. Berkeley Breathed, “Bloom County” cartoonist, says the first time he saw “Calvin and Hobbes” he thought, “This guy is making it harder for the rest of us” (*Dear Mr. Watterson*).

In a profession becoming more formulaic, Watterson created one of the most successful comic strips of the 1980s by not following the formula (West). Wiley Miller, cartoonist for “Non Sequitur,” expresses admiration of Watterson for not falling into the formula gag stuff that most comics do (*Dear Mr. Watterson*). “Calvin and Hobbes” may have a punchline, but it is more than that. The humor lies in the situation, conversations, and various personalities. Watterson worked hard to give even the minor characters a distinct personality. Even though they are never given names, Calvin’s parents do more than just function as parents; they are unique individuals (West).

In 2014 Watterson collaborated with “Pearls Before Swine” cartoonist Stephan Pastis for a couple comics. Pastis likes to make fun of his own artwork in his strip, so Watterson proposed the idea that in “Pearls Before Swine” Pastis get shown up by a second grader whom Watterson

would draw for (Pastis). During the e-mail correspondence between the two, Pastis was very nervous about whatever he sent. Pastis posted on his blog, "...it's one thing to write a strip read by millions of people. But it's another thing to propose an idea to Bill Watterson" (Pastis). Pastis' awe of Watterson was very evident when he suggested changing a line of dialogue in the strip they were working on by prefacing it with "I feel like a street urchin telling Michelangelo that David's hands are too big" (Pastis). David Kellett, creator of "Sheldon" and "Drive," similarly states that looking at "Calvin and Hobbes" now as a professional cartoonist, Watterson is truly a master at his craft. "For Better or for Worse" cartoonist Lynn Johnston fondly stated that Watterson inspires all [cartoonists] to do a little bit better (*Dear Mr. Watterson*).

"Calvin and Hobbes" inspires us all to do a bit better, dream a little bigger, and think a little differently. Watterson and his amazing comic strip had a large impact on the newspaper comic strip format, the perception of merchandising comics, and many other cartoonists, but I think it would mean more to him that he had an effect on countless children. Watterson didn't draw "Calvin and Hobbes" for money or fame; he drew it for the joy of drawing and celebrating the six-year-old boy inside us all. Regardless of age, region, or gender, everyone I know who has read "Calvin and Hobbes" connects with Calvin, be they a mother of two from Oregon, a middle school boy from New York, or just a spunky girl from Iowa.

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