

The Rarebit Fiend Dreams On: An Interview with Ulrich Merkl

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Winsor McCay, aka Silas, is regarded as one of the founding fathers of newspaper comics in the United States, a pioneer in the panel-based artform and early animation techniques at the turn of the 20th century. Drawn to McCay's fantastic, imaginative storytelling (which famously includes the *Little Nemo in Slumberland* series), German author and editor Ulrich Merkl has produced his first major publishing effort, a limited-edition book about and DVD compilation of McCay's Dream of the *Rarebit Fiend*. Merkl, who has previously authored three books about medieval book illumination and many articles about art historical themes, is an avid collector of comic books and original comic art, making him an apt steward to preserve the 1904–1913 strip for future generations. The massive, over-stuffed (12x17-inch, 464-page) volume is a pleasure for the initiated and uninitiated alike. We caught up with Merkl long enough to discuss why and for whom he painstakingly crafted this compendium.

Heller: Ulrich, you are the second entrepreneurial publisher to revive a Winsor McCay classic strip in a mammoth format. What enticed you to do this?

Merkl: Well, an artistic giant deserves a giant book. But seriously the unusual format is simply reflecting the original published size. The large horizontal *Rarebit Fiend* episodes were originally published in newspapers where they took up half a page, about 15 inches wide. All earlier reprints had been reduced to [around] a third of the original size, resulting in microscopic, almost illegible lettering, and in general a loss of detail and impact. I received many positive feedbacks especially regarding the presentation in original size, and the full-size strips were a surprising discovery even for people who believed to know the *Rarebit Fiend*—however, during the course of the work I had to learn that such a large horizontal format cannot be bound automatically, therefore requiring hand-binding.

Heller: And did your own passion play a role?

Merkl: I decided to collect, edit and reprint the *Rarebit Fiend* because it is one of the best comic strips of all times. While mainstream artists like van Gogh, Monet, Klimt, Picasso, etc. are reprinted again and again—they do deserve it—Winsor McCay, whose work is a hundred percent the same quality, is more or less unknown among the broad public. McCay, and the public, deserved an adequate publication of his artistic legacy.

Heller: What were some of the challenges, or obstacles, in obtaining all this material?

Merkel: Anyone who has worked with vintage newspaper comics is confronted with the problem of obtaining good quality copies of the illustrations. Since most of these strips have never been reprinted since their original publication a century ago, only two kinds of picture sources are available: original newspaper tearsheets and microfilm. Hardly any of the original printed newspapers are still in existence. The bound volumes kept by the public libraries were disposed of as they took up too much space and the poor quality paper had become brittle. I was lucky enough to win a large collection of original *Rarebit Fiend* newspaper clippings on eBay. Other copies from original clippings were contributed by the Cartoon Research Library of the Ohio State University, the only public collection of its kind. Imagery that is no longer accessible in the form of original clippings had to be reproduced from microfilm, which was purchased from the New York Library and from the Library of Congress. Additional material was provided by collectors, by online newspaper archives, scanned from original artwork, purchased on eBay, etc.

Heller: It must be a gargantuan effort to maintain high quality.

Merkel: All pieces had to be scanned and digitally restored, and there is an average of six restoration hours in each *Rarebit Fiend* episode. Ninety percent of the work on this book was devoted solely to obtaining and working on the pictures.

Heller: *The Rarebit Fiend* has been republished in the past; what makes your book different from the rest?

Merkel: When I decided to work on this project in 2001, only 200 out of 820 episodes had ever been reprinted. Unfortunately, from 2003 to 2006 a series of cheap and careless Winsor McCay reprints was thrown on the market, containing about half of the *Rarebit* material I had intended to reprint for the first time. Despite all its merits, this reprint is fairly disappointing, and its shortcomings made me determined to continue my project, despite the loss of exclusiveness.

Heller: What did you learn about McCay while compiling this material that you didn't know already?

Merkel: My most surprising discovery—apart from hundreds of never reprinted *Rarebit Fiend* strips—is that Winsor McCay incorporated real daily life in almost every episode: from fashion, sport, politics and work through to prominent personalities, architecture, technical progress and many other features. The strip is a mirror on the United States and New York City in the early 20th century. You will find everything: automobilization, baseball, vaudeville, alcoholism, people with German accent, tramps, fraternal organizations, New York City landmark buildings, the quest for the North Pole, elections, women's hats and clothing, horse racing *and, and, and...* The strip is an encyclopedia of everyday life and a fantastic reference work and collection of material for anyone interested in the early 20th-century history and culture of the United States.

Heller: How does this strip compare with McCay's classic *Little Nemo in Slumberland*?

Merkel: *Little Nemo* was addressed to children and mainly lived from its spectacular layouts. *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* has a darker side, is more inventive, and is devoted to decidedly adult nightmares and phobias, making it one of the weirdest, most amazing and shocking comic strips of all times—simply “the most bizarre newspaper feature in American history,” [according to] Jeet Heer. I think *Rarebit Fiend* is the better strip, overall. Visually, *Little Nemo* is tops, even though *Rarebit Fiend* also has its share of wonderful visuals. But *Rarebit Fiend* definitely has the better ideas—indeed, so many *Nemo* strips are just reimagined from *Rarebit* originals—and the more enduring content. Its imagery and ideas reflect the unconscious life and the psychology of dreams with a startling reality that's somewhat lacking in the more fanciful *Nemo*. *Rarebit* is still, even today, shocking and horrifying and brilliant.

Heller: Tell me about the business model for this project. Did you see a viable audience? Did you finance it yourself? And how are you getting it into the right hands of readers?

Merkel: I never submitted this project to any publisher because I knew from the beginning that the book was too expensive, too unusual and too crazy to even be considered. The whole book is a one-man-show. As some of my previous publications had suffered due to indifferent editors and printers, I took the risk of monopolizing all the work myself—I used to work as a chief editor and know the tricks of the trade. That meant text and image research, obtaining pictures, copyright research, image scanning, image restoration, printing, promotion, selling and shipping. Advantageous as this may be in terms of having total control and reducing costs, the risk remains that mistakes can easily be overlooked. And it costs a lot of time.

Heller: At a price of \$114 apiece, how many must you sell to break even?

Merkel: Eight hundred out of [the total] 1000.

Heller: What were some of the design considerations in creating this book? Did you want to present a purely neutral frame for the work or, as it seems to me, were you hoping to editorialize through your book design?

Merkel: An unusual comic strip requires an unusual design. I found a brilliant designer who knocked my ideas into shape, the only person besides me who contributed substantially to the book. And what a fantastic result, if I may say so! First, I believe we did a good job on the organization of those giant oblong pages, which are really difficult to handle. Note our text layout with one wide and two narrow columns, mirrored on opposite pages. Note the recurring element of pieces of newsprint paper, alluding to the fact that all of Winsor McCay's work was published in newspapers. Note the use of black and red. Note the wonderful endpapers!

Heller: Obviously, McCay is a key figure in comics. What would you say is his ultimate

contribution?

Merkel: Winsor McCay's art is timeless and incredibly rewarding. It is modern, exciting, inspiring, fresh, appealing, brilliant and shocking—even today, after one hundred years. He is standing there like a monolith in the desert. He had no precursors; he left no pupils. The sheer volume of his output is breathtaking. He single-handedly invented and refined most devices the entire comics and movie medium rely upon to this day. He was the founding father of animation, of surrealism—and of pop culture. He was a brilliant visionary whose work was not only ahead of his time, but ahead of ours as well. McCay must be ranked not only among the greatest cartoonists but among the greatest artists of all times, comparable only to giants like Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Mozart. Read the book and you will agree.

Heller: Your enthusiasm for McCay is certainly infectious.

Merkel: Discover Winsor McCay! Enjoy Winsor McCay! Be inspired by Winsor McCay! He will never, never disappoint you!

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).