

IT'S A MAGICAL WORLD

REMEMBERING BILL WATTERSON'S REVOLUTIONARY CALVIN AND HOBBS

By Nevin Martell

Like many households, the morning routine for my family consisted mostly of two things: breakfast and the new day's paper. Between bites of whole-wheat toast and oatmeal, I would devoutly read the comics section, jump-starting my day—and more importantly, my imagination—with a few laughs, while my father furrowed his brow over the actual news. With Dad worrying about grown-up things like international crises and stock investments, my young mind was free to roam through the punch lines and word balloons of the funny pages, and it was there, in 1987, that I discovered *Calvin and Hobbes*. Its creator, Bill Watterson, had been drawing the strip for two years and was hitting his artistic and storytelling stride, resulting in a comic that was instantly thought-provoking, eye-catching and hilarious in a way I had never seen before in the funnies.

I loved the relationship between the boy, Calvin, and his stuffed tiger, Hobbes, which was at turns playful, combative, philosophical and fantastical. They acted and sounded like real best friends. You could feel the depth of caring and understanding between them, although their friendship was constrained

not only to the boy's mind, but also within three or four black-and-white panels on a piece of newsprint.

Calvin and Hobbes did everything I always wanted to do—they time-traveled, dug for dinosaur bones and built legions of abominable snowmen. They took on alternate per-

sonas of interplanetary space explorers and film noir private investigators, played menace to their parents and the neighborhood girl, invented ingenious schemes to avoid schoolwork and embraced the wonders of a childhood spent outdoors. It was like a cheat-sheet for using your imagination.

But while Calvin left every ounce of his being on the page each day, the man behind these intriguing characters and gorgeous landscapes was a complete enigma. Bill Watterson rarely gave interviews, couldn't be found signing autographs at conventions and refused to license his creations for any amount of money. He seemed a polar opposite to his hero, *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz. And at the height of Watterson's fame, he gave it all up without warning. As a teenager, I accepted these choices, not knowing what a rare route this incredible artist was taking. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized his decisions were extraordinarily singular.

Intrigued that someone could achieve such obscurity in today's hyper-connected world, I set out to find Bill Watterson and get to the root of his extraordinary life. I chronicled my yearlong search in *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and his Revolutionary Comic Strip* (Continuum Press, October 2009). Along the way, I had the great fortune to talk to some of today's most intriguing pop culture figures, including Pixar genius Brad Bird, esoteric cartooning legend Berkeley Breathed, celebrated novelist Jonathan Lethem and comedian and actor Patton Oswalt. Each interview brought me a little bit closer to one of the most inscrutable and reclusive artists of the modern era. This is a glimpse into the journey to find that most intriguing of trios—a man, a boy and his tiger.

A MAGNUM OPUS

With BERKELEY BREATHED

As the creator of Bloom County and Outland, Breathed was one third of the Holy Trinity of '80s newspaper cartoonists, alongside Watterson and The Far Side's Gary Larson. Breathed's unparalleled surrealist humor and lovably scrappy art made his work some of the finest and most singular to ever grace the funny pages.

Where does Bill Watterson's art stand in the pantheon of cartoons?

Like the greatest comic artists, he exemplified the craft's most dogged virtue: less is

more. I think that all of the popular arts could focus a bit more on that these days. Bill's lines were always filled with motion, even if what they described were characters in repose. They belied an artist as concerned about the sublime perfection of a character's facial emotion as he was the impact of their dialogue. In this, Bill was blessedly Old School. He entered a comic culture preoccupied with the preeminence of dialogue and almost compulsively static art (*Doonesbury* and my own, to a degree) and then blew a big cartoon razzberry in our faces. People loved it. Any comic you can enjoy even removed of its dialogue is a sublime rarity.

What's your estimation of Watterson as a man, not just as an artist?

We exchanged quite a number of letters while he was fighting to get his copyright back from the bastards at Universal. I had to push the nuclear button myself during my own fight for self-ownership (threatening to quit) and he was looking for support. Except for some marvelously twisted and sick drawings that he would add to the bottom of his letters—mostly at my or my character's expense—I can't say I ever got to know him. From most reports and reported anecdotes... he is most assuredly a serious whack job. I say that with enormous affection. I work toward this myself every day.

Did Watterson influence you in any way?

Regrettably. Watterson reminded me daily that my own success was built on a flimsy foundation of fraud and cultural timeliness. I walked in as the half-talent that I was and found that the comic page was waiting for the only thing that I overwhelmingly shined at: a smart-ass attitude. Certainly not good comic art. *Bloom County* was only going to work on the American comic page of 1981. Today it would disappear to the Web instantly, invisible against the tidal wave of snarky cultural commentary. *Calvin and Hobbes* would always find a wide audience... although much diminished if introduced now. But that reflects the state of the newspaper, not his audience.

You and Watterson diverged on the matter of merchandising your work. What did you think of his stance and why did you choose to go the way you did?

I was both mystified and impressed...the latter because he stood up to jaw-dropping pressure that nobody can really appreciate. This, of course, was the source of his compulsion to gain legal control of his work. People need to realize how much money was turned down by Bill's very simple ambivalence toward extending *Calvin and Hobbes'* economic world, including movie and TV: hundreds of millions of dollars. Schulz-like income. And [Schulz] was one of the wealthiest entertainers in world history.

Imagine Bill's conversations—or lack thereof—with his syndicate. Bully for him for standing on principle against a cyclone of resistance. If he didn't want to see his work in plush dolls, jolly good. Junk is junk. Although to one's fans, it's not junk at all. It's an opportunity to extend their affection for your work into something more tangible in their lives: a figure on their work desk that will make them smile. To deny them that—to tell them that their wish for the little vinyl figure is corrupt—is an abstract bit of selfishness maybe. But still one for the author to decide and the rest of us—especially the press syndicate—to shut up about.

On the other hand, I have to be honest: I don't understand the preciousness that Bill applied to the integrity of his characters in their manifestation on the comic page. Why did he feel that he couldn't oversee their transference to the greatest art form of the 20th century: film? Seeing one's two-dimensional characters enter the third dimension was a singularly exciting experience for me, so it's very, very hard for me to understand.

But in my own mind, my work didn't solely exist as ink on paper...as I suspect it did for Bill. I had no intrinsic love of my ink strokes. I enjoyed how my characters were real to people. It mattered not at all in what medium they were presented... as long as they reflected my steerage of their natures. For the life of me, I can't imagine how Bill would lack the desire to meet the characters of his id and hear their voices. To hear them

say hello and look you in the eye. It's a heady experience, I can tell you. But that's just me.

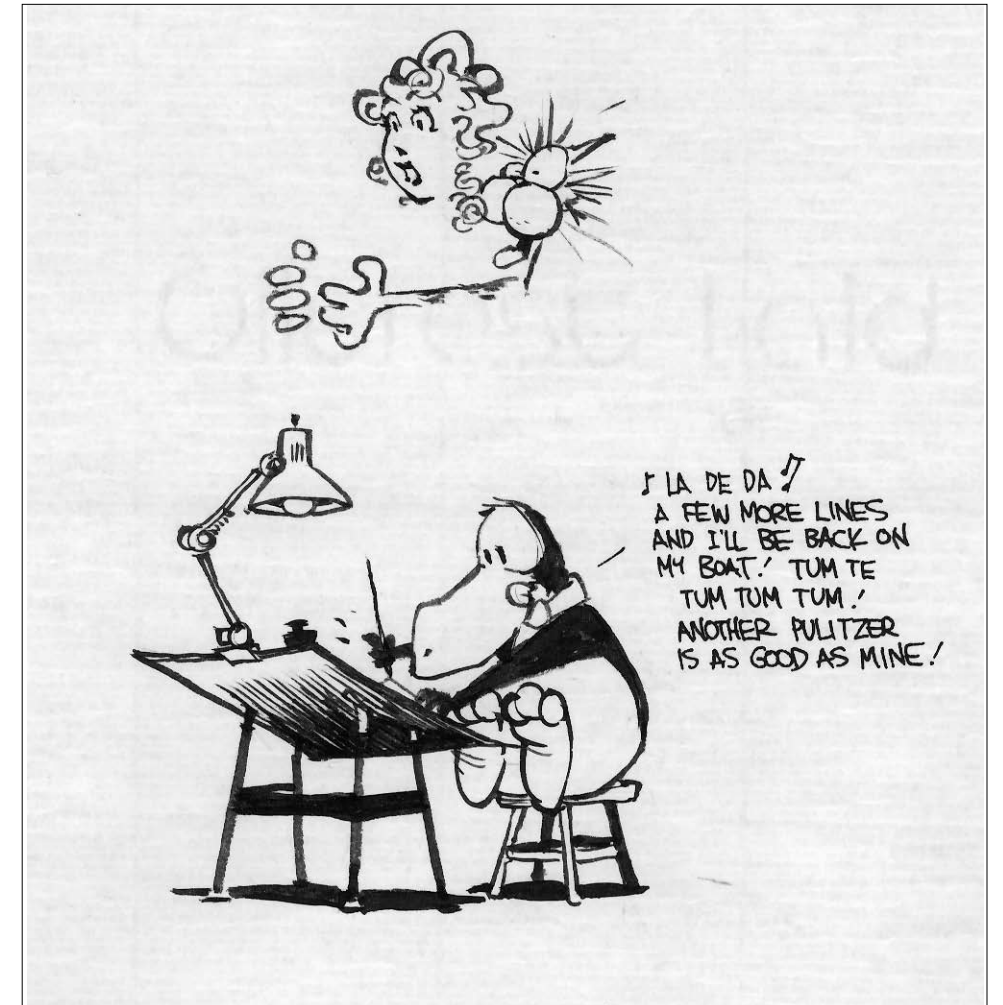
He had a vicious sense of humor that you rarely got to see in the strip. He was highly opinionated, which you also didn't see in the strip, and this stuff was viscerally important to him, regarding his own business. Merchandising was, for whatever reason, just caught in his craw; in fact, beyond that, any sort of extension of the comic strip was a corruption.

By not merchandising, was it a bigger task for him to then police all the contraband? Certainly there were things made that were not authorized, which must bring a major consternation for him.

Yeah, and imagine how he feels passing all the cars and trucks with Calvin pissing on something. Does it ruin his day; does it push him further back into his recluse life? Was that the nail in the coffin, passing a truck and seeing some unclean version of Calvin? It's the last argument that the syndicate makes to those of us who are cautious about getting into merchandise; they say it's the best way to fight the black market, to have your stuff out there. I guess he didn't buy it. I love a guy who refuses to play the game. It's my favorite scenario. It's deeply annoying, but anyone who can resist the siren call of merchandising, I just love them.

Do you have a favorite *Calvin and Hobbes* moment?

I never read comic strips regularly and I never read his in a newspaper, frankly. But I once cut out every Sunday *Calvin and Hobbes* from his books and made a file, so I could leaf through and see how he did it in one sitting. I did this with *Peanuts* when I began *Bloom County*. I luxuriated in Bill's graphic flights of fancy—the planets, the monsters, the imagination of a little boy. For me, his work was of most interest when he was drawing something wonderful or ridiculous. He rarely made me laugh, but that's not why we go to *Calvin and Hobbes*. We go to live in his graphic world.



Drawing by Bill Watterson courtesy Berkeley Breathed

What is the appeal of *Calvin and Hobbes*? Will it be read 100 years from now?

I find it stunningly ridiculous when people describe *Peanuts* as a strip about childhood. Never in a single frame of *Peanuts* did Schulz enter the realm of childhood. That was Bill's territory. Unabashedly. I would have loved to do that myself. I tried, actually...and inevitably the name of the president would slip in and I'd be back into the dreck of contemporary culture. It's to Bill's credit that he had no interest in the petty dramas of our popular culture. And it is why the books will remain a joy to read for decades to come.

THE IMAGINATION GIANT

With BRAD BIRD

Watterson has remarked to friends that he holds a deep respect for *Ratatouille* and The

Incredibles director Brad Bird. So, how would the Pixar star choose to direct a *Calvin and Hobbes* movie? How would he handle the question of Calvin's reality? And would he even want to touch a comic strip that has been dubbed "The Holy Grail" by animators?

What was it about *Calvin and Hobbes* that attracted you?

Animators tend to gravitate toward it because, more than a lot of strips, it has sort of an animator sensibility towards it; you feel like you're never seeing the same drawing twice. It's very much like an animator's sensibility where you're capturing a moment in time. You're capturing a pose or an attitude that's of the moment and it's like a candid snapshot. The poses don't feel machined and generic; they feel unique to the moment and to the particular strip.

As an animator, what resonates in terms of that reality of motion?

Well, it's a feeling...it's hard to put into words. The more I am involved in different art, the more I see common elements between all of them. That's probably why I like movies; it's a blend of all the arts. They teach you in acting that the moment doesn't begin when you come onstage; you're coming from somewhere, a series of experiences that have led to this moment, not only in terms of your overall character's life but that particular day. It all has an effect on how you enter so it's not a generic thing. The same goes for movement; you're coming from somewhere and you're going towards something. Watterson always seemed to find great middle moments that felt like the whole body was feeling the attitude. You can feel the moment before, and you can feel the moments that are coming after it. It feels like



Brad Bird (top) and Patton Oswalt exhibiting Calvin-inspired behavior at a "BAFTA tea." Photos courtesy Patton Oswalt.

a piece of action rather than a pose.

[Watterson's strips] don't feel like flat, little diagrams of a character, but they are very stylized. There's nothing real about them in terms of draftsmanship. They're beautiful, but they're cartoon characters. I think what I like about them is that they feel tactile; you feel like you could touch them and smooch them around a little bit—they inhabit space. He's got the whole package. When he draws a background it has as much character as the characters. Watterson always seemed to choose very simple but specific things to inhabit the frame. When he drew trees, they were specific kinds of trees, and he did this with a minimum number of lines. I feel like he's kind of a filmmaker in a way.

As a filmmaker yourself, you must want to see *Calvin and Hobbes* as an animation.

Oh, sure. As long as the strip has been around, animators have been talking about it, and some have even done little pencil tests as school projects. They know they can't get the rights to it and they could never show it publicly, but they like the characters so much they just want to move them around a little bit. Everyone respects the fact that Watterson's not out to turn a quick buck and have something lousy done with his characters. He's kind of a purist: he did *Calvin and Hobbes* the way he wanted to do it and he finished it the way he wanted to finish it, and that's his statement on *Calvin and Hobbes*.

But I think everyone also believes that there is a version of it that exists in the ether, that if the right choices were made and the right voices were done and the right animators came along and talked to him about how he felt the characters would be, that you could make something great. So, it's always had a bit of that wistful dreaming aspect to it; they always imagine, "What if?" I think animators would hate a bad *Calvin and Hobbes* film just as much as Watterson would. But they also believe that there's some magical combination out there that, with luck, could come together.

Were you impressed by the more fantastical elements of the strip?

I think the fact that Watterson was willing

to dump his own strip style is hysterical, like when he's imitating other strips—*Mary Worth*—that are very serious with serious, adult characters, and then you realize it's Calvin's imagination. You see Watterson's knowledge of other kinds of strips coming into play. It was just a really wonderful surprise.

When he stages some of the big stuff, like Spaceman Spiff, they feel like big-budget animation movies. It's very much a kid's imagination. People oftentimes will illustrate kids' imaginations with kids' drawings, but I think that Watterson was really good about that because the drawings were as real as reality. A kid's imagination of something that might be goofy or fantastic is vivid; their particular skills about putting it down on paper are limited, but that's not their imagination. When Calvin would imagine something, the Watterson drawings were these huge, expansive vistas. It felt like a summer blockbuster, which is more how an 8-year-old kid is going to imagine something.

In the overall pantheon, where would you place Watterson and his work?

If Earth suddenly had to be evacuated and I was limited to grabbing the 10 best, he'd definitely be in there. I have never arranged them chronologically. There is a point where you stop rating people; you just rate them among the best. Can I say that Mozart is better than The Beatles? I can't. I can just say that they have gone above the cloud layer and are up there near the sun; they are on that short list of things that are essential.

BOUND AND DETERMINED

As told by JONATHAN LETHEM

There are few writers who can talk as literately about comics as Jonathan Lethem. In his critically lauded bestseller, The Fortress of Solitude, the Brooklyn native indulged in his longtime love of the art form.

At some point in pretty early childhood I switched from reading *Dick Tracy* and *Beetle Bailey* in the Sunday paper to reading comic books, which I saw as much deeper and much richer, and I just disconnected from



Jonathan Lethem

any sense of possession or real conscious interest in contemporary newspaper strips. And even the great one of my personal era—I'm 44 now, so *Peanuts* was still in its great heyday when I could be reading it in the newspaper—I really received that transmission more in the form of paperback collections. So by the time Watterson comes along, my sense of the context is extremely poor. Newspaper strips resembled things I was excited about, but a place where my consciousness said, "No, that's not where the action is." And of course, now I think George Herriman [creator of *Krazy Kat*] is maybe the greatest cartoonist who ever lived and I realized that *Peanuts* is not just a thing of my childhood but maybe great art, but it never made me go while it was there.

When I heard there was a newspaper strip that people were excited about, I had that kind of pre-formatted cynicism: Yeah,

well, people like *Garfield*, too. And of course it's the case with anything so brief that you need to accumulate some impressions before you really realize that, aside from being attractively drawn, there's something going on that really deserves your attention. So, it probably still wasn't 'til I saw a bound collection that I really realized what Watterson had accomplished.

He did something so totally intimate, so weirdly substantial in that form. The problem with that form for me has always been that—short of the kind of space that someone like Herriman was given, or the genius of brevity with Schulz—it's just very hard to do anything that sinks in at all. The more I looked at *Calvin*, the more they did sink in, and they bore re-reading and, very much like Schulz, Watterson found some kind of rhythm of gently associated sequences of strips. He tended to run with a

motif or set of images or jokes. That becomes very hypnotic, just as it does in Schulz when you realize each one is a perfect little thing implying a whole universe, and you can read them all out of sequence and receive a great impression; but also you could read them day-to-day and there was this gentle, deepening, almost tidal quality to the motifs, where one would tumble into the next.

It's like an arc of gestures. In a funny way, it's almost like a poetic cycle. As a comparison, you want to reach for this sort of quality of compression and gesture that each one of them has. And then let them accumulate. One of the tricks to storytelling—this centers in my understanding of someone like Dickens—the real way you make a story irresistible is through character. From Dickens to someone like Sherlock Holmes, when people really rave about a story what they really mean is that they can't get enough of a character that's been given to them. And that's where the energy is, and that's what Watterson knows instinctively, and that's where he makes his investment: in that intimacy of the characters.

What's incredible is what a small number of them he has and how little time he gets to share them with us on any given page. But then, of course, his big stunt is that one of the two main characters doesn't exist, it's just a projection of the other. Or, on some level, you're invited to consider this. So, the thing is also very strangely lonely. It has a little undertow of solipsism and darkness that's really interesting for someone like me. That becomes one of the attractions of it, that he's letting the sadness of the kid's private world creep in around the edges here and there. The amount that he prefers the tiger to the rest of the world could be seen as very... I don't know exactly who to compare it to, but it reminds me almost of a child in a Shirley Jackson ["The Lottery"] story or something.

Calvin has this immensity of freedom that comes from an imaginative life, and he has the maladjustments, or the inaccuracies, that come from preferring—or from all his strengths coming in the realm of—his imaginative life. It's something that writers and artists identify with really strongly.

I don't know if I thought of it [in terms of

having a favorite character]. It's not really an ensemble piece. In *Peanuts*, you could say, "I love Linus," even though you know Charlie Brown is meant to be the reader surrogate, but you can pick from the others. The world of *Calvin and Hobbes* doesn't have quite so much breadth. It doesn't make sense to say, "I don't really like Calvin"—I mean, his parents are quite real and the things that make them real are lovely, but it would be nonsensical to say, "Oh, I love the Dad." And of course it would be weird, as much as he's so charismatic, to say I prefer the tiger to Calvin. What would that mean?

I have a weakness for the rocket ships and dinosaurs. But I also liked some very prosaic situations with Susie. I felt echoes of *Peanuts*, in a way; Susie's view of Calvin was very interesting, and it was a place where the loneliness entered the strip in a way that I liked. I liked the utmost fantasies, but I also liked the very work-a-day grounded ones, too.

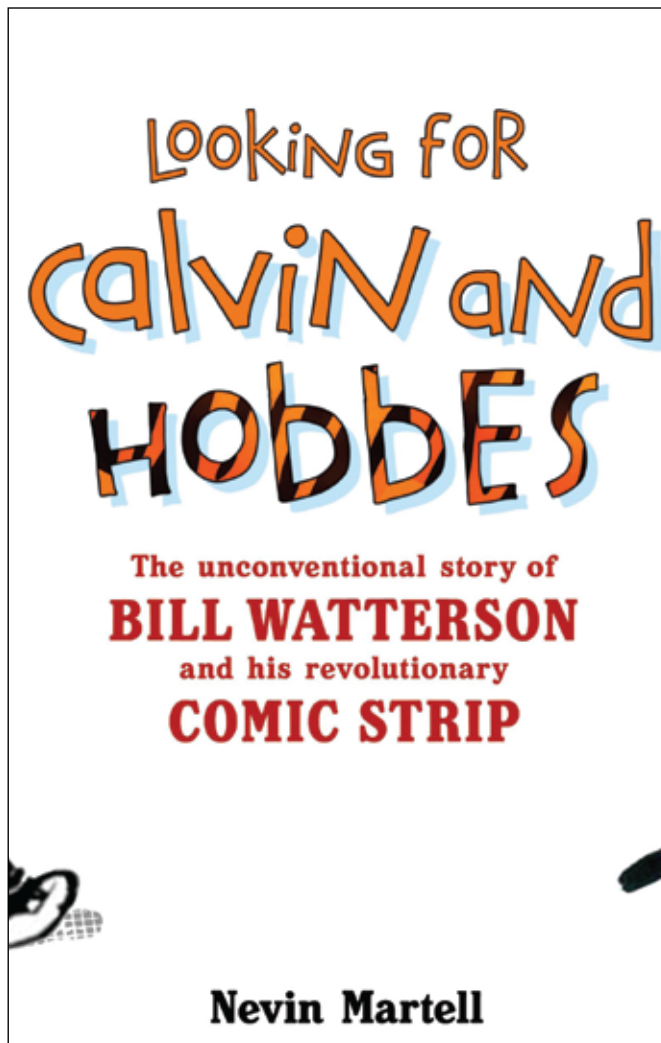
With people who make anything special, you just have to honor how remarkable it is. Some people make a lot of stuff and only some of it is good, and the point is then to celebrate the good. Some people pull off a kind of amazing stunt, as Watterson has, to appear magically with a masterpiece and then vanish again, and that's also an admirable path, but it's his own—he can't do anything wrong, as far as I'm concerned. If he wants to make something again I'd certainly be curious, but there's no judgment one way or the other.

GOOD GRIEF

As told by PATTON OSWALT

Comedian and actor (and voice of Remy in Pixar's Ratatouille) Patton Oswalt grew up just a few miles away from where Bill Watterson was born. Though the two men have never met, they both possess a rare talent for creating insightful humor that invokes as much thought as it does laughter.

I remember the very first strip, the day that it first ran in *The Washington Post*. I was in high school. It was the one where Calvin traps Hobbes when he's eating the tuna fish sandwich. Me and a lot of my friends were



very much into comic strips; we would read *Peanuts* and *B.C.* and all that stuff, and that one strip was like, "Hey, there's this really cool new strip, you have to check it out." It was pretty exciting. I think because I was so young it worked on the same level as *Peanuts* and *B.C.* did—it was something I couldn't describe. It was instantly drawn well and instantly had personality and it just instantly worked.

It was really understood that you were in a fantasy—like when Snoopy would be on top of his doghouse—Watterson could really outline what the boundaries of that fantasy were and how the rest of the world was reacting to it, and how the kid was reacting to it. You always knew what the parameters were. Watterson just understood how kids do it and the weird kid rules they have for fantasy and imagination.

I loved Spaceman Spiff. I loved the strip where he accidentally tells Susie the capi-

tal of Poland when he's fighting aliens. The way me and my friends would create these big, sprawling fantasy worlds, there was a lot of Calvin in us. There was a lot of Calvin in what we did already, so I think that's why we identified with it so much. I think it reconfirmed my sense of humor. It made me go, "Oh, yeah, cool, I'm on the right track."

By the time it got to the end, it was 10 years on and I was in college and so many things I had loved had gone on too long. It was like, "He's ending this thing the way he wants to." Suddenly, it was up there with *Blackadder* and *Fawlty Towers*, things that just ended perfectly. I never felt like he was trying to give me a message so much as, "Here's an attitude you could emulate." That's what I took away from it.

I think his whole thing was that imagination is more powerful than despair. Clearly he was influenced by *Peanuts*, but it was a gentle rebuke. Where a lot of *Peanuts* is total depression, Watterson was like, "Yeah, but there's wonder out there, too." I thought Charles Schulz' introduction to the *Calvin* collection was one of the best introductions I've ever read. He talked about all the little things that make the strip great: Watterson draws great water splashes, he draws Calvin's shoes to look like little muffins, he draws really good end tables...that's stuff I never realized was so crucial.

If I could talk to Watterson I would just say, "Thank you." I wouldn't try to bother him with, "and then there's this one strip where..." Whenever I see people I really respect and who mean something to me, I never try to waste their time. Hopefully they'll do more stuff if I just go, "Hey, thank you." **F**

PORTIONS OF THIS ARTICLE APPEAR IN LOOKING FOR CALVIN AND HOBBS: THE UNCONVENTIONAL STORY OF BILL WATTERSON AND HIS REVOLUTIONARY COMIC STRIP BY NEVIN MARTELL

CONTEMPORARY
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