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Posted on Tue, Oct. 25, 2005

### 'Doonesbury' creator: 'You can't have too many voices in a democracy'

The Associated Press  
Associated Press

**KANSAS CITY, Mo.** - The following are excerpts from an e-mail interview with "Doonesbury" creator Garry Trudeau, who discusses the relevancy of the comic strip, allegations that he's anti-Republican, and what he thinks about being edited.

AP: What role do you think Doonesbury serves for readers?

Garry Trudeau: Well, it's a humor strip, so my first responsibility has always been to entertain the reader. But if, in addition, I can help move readers to thought and judgment about issues that concern me, so much the better.

AP: Is it still relevant in the political discussion 35 years later?

Trudeau: That's for readers to adjudge, but I will say that in general, public commentators have nowhere near the clout that we enjoyed 35 years ago, the age of four TV channels and no Internet. There's simply far too much competition for any one voice to prevail above others. Even media stars that people think of as indispensable, like Jon Stewart or Bill O'Reilly, are reaching less than 2 percent of the viewing public. As far as I'm concerned, it's all good. You can't have too many voices in a democracy. Talented people will find their audiences.

AP: Has the public's reaction to political satire changed?

Trudeau: There now seems to be an insatiable appetite for political satire, which was not in great evidence when I started out. Those were very self-serious times, and there was only a handful of little outposts - "Pogo," "Second City," "The Smothers Brothers" show - where you could reliably find political humor. The end of the Vietnam War changed all that. The nation exhaled, "Saturday Night Live" hit big, and satire really took off.

AP: Has the nature of how writers and artists employ satire changed? How so?

Trudeau: The most obvious change is in the tone - it's become far coarser. Satirists are stooping lower and lower to get their laughs. "South Park," which is often brilliant, couldn't exist without fart jokes. "Opus" is almost exclusively bathroom humor now. On the other hand, there's a ton of really sharp writing that didn't

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used to exist in pop culture, particularly in television: "Seinfeld," "Will and Grace," "The Daily Show" - the list goes on and on. Our best and brightest are no longer going into journalism and fiction - they all want to write for Letterman. It's also true in comic strips - the best strip of the last decade is "Dilbert," and it sure isn't because of the drawing. That's my greatest influence, by the way: By emphasizing writing, I made the comics page safe for bad art.

AP: How do you think Doonesbury has influenced how comic strip artists include political and social commentary in their work now?

Trudeau: Anyone who stretches the prevailing boundaries, and gets away with it, is bound to have an influence. Walt Kelly and (Jules) Feiffer were the trailblazers for topical humor in comic strips, and I just built on what they had accomplished by introducing the preoccupations of my generation. Doonesbury in turn freed up options for cartoonists that followed. We're all part of a continuum.

AP: Many of your targets have been Republicans. How do you respond to critics who say you're simply anti-Republican?

Trudeau: I think it would surprise them that the first political strips I ever drew attacked campus radicals. In fact, right after I was syndicated, TIME magazine called the strip "reactionary." And some years later, "The Wall Street Journal" reprinted two weeks of strips on the op-ed page. The truth is my politics aren't particularly exotic - I'm a stone dull moderate - a little to the left on social issues, a little to the right on cultural. Personal responsibility is a constant theme in my work. I've actually supported some Republicans through the years, and intend to vote for one in a few weeks. But they're thoughtful centrists, not mindless ideologues like the ones who've had a stranglehold on power the past five years. The damage that's being done to the country, on multiple levels, is so massive that it's a real struggle to wrangle my outrage into something that isn't too toxic to read.

AP: Doonesbury was opposed to the Vietnam War as it is to the current war in Iraq. How have your responses to these two conflicts differed and how have they been the same?

Trudeau: The strip today is a good deal more realistic than it was in the early '70s. For instance, I'm not likely to create a lovable Islamic terrorist character comparable to Phred, the (Viet Cong) who befriended B.D. during his tour of duty. It was a hippieish fantasy (Can't we all just get along?) unencumbered by any real understanding of the grunt experience in Vietnam. Anyone who doesn't know generally what soldiers in Iraq are enduring is averting his eyes. It's available in real time in excruciating detail in a multitude of media - from CNN to milblogs. So both writer and audience today have a far more sophisticated understanding of the conflict.

AP: Does it surprise you to see the outpouring you've received for B.D.?

Trudeau: No, but I do think it would surprise B.D., who, it's fair to say, didn't seek it. About the characters in general, I would say that if they weren't at least a little ingratiating, I'd be out of the business. As with storytelling generally, the more strongly readers identify, the deeper the bond.

AP: What is your daily media diet?

Trudeau: About what you'd expect - New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today every morning. newsweeklies. Lots of Web surfing - Slate, Salon, milblogs - and cable news, primarily CNN. I've been following mainstream outlets for years, long before I knew they were all liberal. Someone should tell that to Clinton, by the way - he was crucified by all of them.

AP: Ever look at media that may be on the opposite side of the fence?

Trudeau: Wall Street Journal, except editorial page. David Brook and John Tierney at Times. Sometimes Andrew Sullivan. Occasionally National Review. Fox, for a laugh. I think it's wild that the government has its own network now - never thought it'd happen here.

AP: In a country where people get a lot of their political and social news through entertainment channels, if at all, does that make it tougher to write a strip that depends on a well-versed audience?

Trudeau: It's a challenge, but with a general audience, a certain amount of exposition is always a good idea. I

try to get in as much as possible without becoming didactic or slowing the story down.

AP: How do you feel about papers that may pull or edit a strip?

Trudeau: When a strip is pulled, it isn't always for the most substantive or honorable of reasons, but it is an editorial prerogative, against which I don't really have recourse. With 700 different sets of community standards at issue, being pulled from time to time is an occupational hazard. As to physically editing a strip, we do everything we can to discourage it. It's like editing haiku - almost impossible to do without damage to art or intent or both.

AP: How will you know when it's time to retire?

Trudeau: Like everyone else, I probably won't. It's possible the deadline grind will take me out, but it's a great privilege to do what I do.



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