By Kurt Andersen

I have always found it odd and a little frustrating that the largest, most concentrated cohort of Garry Trudeau’s core constituency—that is, we readers of this newspaper on newsprint—must go elsewhere to read “Doonesbury.” And so as a New Yorker who only occasionally buys The Daily News and always forgets that the strip also runs every day in Slate and at nytimes.com, I have had a relationship with “Doonesbury” not unlike my relationship with the Metropolitan Museum and “Nightline” and the Union Square Cafe and my siblings: they’ve been around forever, so I take them for granted, and get to them more seldom than I’d like, although when I do I am always reminded, in a kind of self-flagellating D’oh! moment, just how splendid they are.

“Doonesbury” collections ordinarily have titles that are funny (“The Revolt of the English Majors”), funnyish (“Talk”) Continued on Page 10

Robert Alter on the city and the novel  Sally Satel on brain ethics
Philip Caputo’s war in Sudan  John Crowley writes Byron’s novel
to the Hand") or at least jaunty ("Flashbacks"). The title of this compact new anthology — "The Long Road Home: One Step at a Time" — is earnest, without any wink or embedded irony whatsoever. And that's because it is all about the disabling war injury suffered by B.D., the quarterback-cum-coach serving as an Army officer in Iraq. In April of last year, a rocket-propelled grenade hit his Humvee near Fallujah, nearly killing him, and "The Long Road Home" is just that — B.D.'s evacuation to Baghdad, recuperation at Army medical centers and convalescence with his family back in the States. The cover illustration shows B.D. in a wheelchair with an artificial leg and (for the first time ever) without a helmet. There is no joke in the first strip, or the second, or the third. And the whole 84 episode series is thick with arcana about Army hospitals and prosthetics and rehabilitation.

But Garry Trudeau has not, thank goodness, fallen victim to Woody Allen Syndrome, neither Stage 1 (trying too desperately to be serious) nor Stage 2 (losing the ability to be funny). There's certainly more bittersweetness and melancholy here than in, say, "Buck Wild Doonesbury," but only as a matter of degree. Trudeau has always leavened his main dish — social and political satire, boho comedies of manners — with flavors from the wistful and elegant end of the shelf. And there are plenty of chuckle-out-loud punch lines in the book. As when, during B.D.'s first phone call to his wife from the hospital, he beams around the bush about the particulars of his injury: "Well, the good news is I'm finally down to my ideal weight." And when a visiting buddy shields his eyes from B.D.'s stump and says, "Thanks for your sacrifice, dude." And when Boopzie, Mrs. B.D., reconsiders her plan to buy him a fabulous giant-screen TV because a nurse has warned her it could make him too sedentary, and he screams: "No! That's wrong! The data on that is weak!" And in maybe the funniest strip in the book, the hippie-slacker Zonker, now nancy to B.D. and Boopzie's daughter, tells the child they need to prepare the family home for her father's return by "taping the wall sockets." She pauses and says, "I thought that's for babies," and Zonker replies: "Um... is it? I saw it on some program."

So a story of war and amputation and depression and physical therapy manages to be funny and, maybe more surprisingly, entirely devoid, as a result, of rue. The merits of the war in Iraq are never questioned or debated. For more than two years, Trudeau has used "Doonesbury" to rail against the war on every ground possible, but none of that material is here. Missing from this collection, for instance, are the exquisite Rumsfeld parodies to which one of B.D.'s men defaults like a tic; the Hunter S. Thompson-esque character, Duke, liberating the city of Al Amok; and one Army officer's explanation of the present Catch-22 — that "we've got 150,000 troops in Iraq whose main mission is to not get killed."

Two weeks into the injured-B.D. series run in newspapers, Bill O'Reilly wrote a column accusing Trudeau of using "someone's personal tragedy to advance a political agenda." This was an odd and disingenuous criticism on a few counts. When are important political agendas — antwar or pro-war, anti-abortion or pro-abortion rights, whatever — not advanced by telling stories about "someone's personal tragedy"? If one weren't otherwise aware of his hard-core lefty politics, it would be reasonable to infer that the author of "The Long Road Home" was conventionally pro-military, maybe even a Republican. When he went on television last year to defend these strips, Trudeau had it exactly right: "Whether you think we belong in Iraq or not," he said to George Stephanopoulos, "we can't win it. We have to remain mindful of the terrible losses that individual soldiers are suffering in our name."

Getting John McCain to write an introduction to the book was the perfectly shrewed move to inoculate himself against any further carping from O'Reillyland. Trudeau's cheerful, love-the-warrior-but-hate-the-war sympathy for American soldiers is longstanding and seems altogether sincere, not (like, say, Michael Moore's) a cynical posture in the service of his political and commercial interests. Moreover, it has been reciprocated: during the war in Vietnam, "Doonesbury" ran in Stars and Stripes; during the early 90's, the Pentagon mounted a touring show of Trudeau's Gulf war strips for the United States troops stationed in the region; and the military invited Trudeau to postwar Kuwait to award him medals of commendation.

O'Reilly and Moore notwithstanding, most people don't ideologically vet their entertainments before permitting themselves to enjoy them, just as good artists don't let political messages outshine story and character and sensibility. Plenty of veterans and pro-Vietnam War Republicans (like my father) loved Robert Altman's "MASH," for instance, since its boisterous black humor and foxtrot existentialism were the point, not its presumed antivar subtext.

"The Long Road Home" is very "MASH"-like, although as a result of the single-minded focus on B.D.'s injury, it seems more like the TV series (soft, sensitive, wise) than Altman's masterpiece (sexy, wild, anarchistic). "MASH" came out in 1970, the year Trudeau graduated from college and took his college paper's comic strip national. Trudeau has collaborated on TV projects with Altman, and calls him one of his
great influences (along with Jules Feiffer, Charles M. Schulz and E. L. Doctorow). Perhaps it's through Altman that Trudeau has channeled the spirit of another artist of that older generation, the cartoonist Bill Mauldin, whose presence seems to hover over the Iraqi war strips and particularly “The Long Road Home.” Mauldin enlisted as a regular G.I. before World War II, but by the end of the war his cartoons for Stars and Stripes were appearing in civilian papers in the States. His main characters were a pair of irreverent, non-gung-ho grunts, and General Patton raged about “Mauldin's scurrilous attempts to undermine military discipline.” One of those cartoons—a bedraggled, downcast soldier like Mauldin, with a caption that began, “Fresh, spirited American troops, flushed with victory”—was mentioned by the Pulitzer judges when they awarded Mauldin a prize in 1945. Sergeant Mauldin was 24 (two years younger than Trudeau when he won his), and had a great career as a (liberal) newspaper editorial cartoonist for another half-century.

“The Long Road Home,” given its absence of any explicit ideological line, reminded me of “Doonesbury” strips by Garry Trudeau. Trudeau began syndicating in 1970 as a kind of liberal answer to “Doonesbury.” Taking equivalent shots at its author’s fellow travelers. And whereas Tinsley seems concerned only with politics, narrows defined, Trudeau is interested in the whole range of passions and quirks and flaws of his two dozen major characters. (Again, it was this way from the start: a good half of his original, proto-“Doonesbury” strips from the Yale Daily News between 1968 and 1976 were not, rather amusingly, about Black Panthers or the war or politics, but dating and football—the Yale of George W. Bush, class of ’88.) Another significant difference between “Doonesbury” and all the other “political” strips, from “Pogo” to “Shoe” to “Mallard Fillmore,” is that Trudeau’s characters are not talking animals but human beings. The stakes and daily writerly challenge seem inherently greater. For their first 15 years of existence, the characters in “Doonesbury” were like the Simpsons (and nearly every other comic strip character in history except those in “Gasoline Alley”)—they were ageless. When Trudeau entered middle age himself, he started letting his creations grow older—and then promptly took an almost two-year hiatus. That could have turned into his shark-jumping moment, when the familiar rules of his fictional universe were overturned in a reckless bid for new juice. But instead of jumping the shark, which is born of boredom or creative bankruptcy, Trudeau actually raised his stakes some more. His characters graduated from college, got married, had children (who became characters themselves), got divorced, died. The strip became more ambitious, not less.

As his characters grew more real, he pushed “Doonesbury” more into the actual world as well, sometimes undertaking true journalistic tasks. His strips about a Palm Beach ordinance requiring servants to carry ID cards led to a Florida statute eliminating such crypto-racial laws. Where did I learn that the current president and vice president have been arrested five times between them, and that 20 Reagan administration appointees were convicted of crimes? For better or worse, in “Doonesbury.”

As most of the characters became more human, it seemed to inspire Trudeau to make others more surreal. I don’t love every result of this tendency—depicting presidents and vice presidents as leathers, waffles, points of light, Stetsons and Roman legionnaire’s helmets, a Trudeau dressed in a suit and much more the first time the saw the 500th. On the other hand, I never tire of Duke, and the whimsy of the propagandistic talking cigarette, Mr. Butts, was brilliant. “The Long Road Home” is “Doonesbury” at the other, ultra-realistic extreme. The point is that Garry Trudeau, who by all rights should be phonin’ it in by now, still takes his responsibilities to the strip and his audience seriously, and in service to them still has a large and interesting risks. Which is one reason I am much more enthusiastic about the Democrats’ favorite comic strip than I tend to be about the Republicans.

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