

LOOKING FOR CALVIN AND HOBBS

The UNCONVENTIONAL
STORY *of* BILL WATTERSON
and HIS REVOLUTIONARY
COMIC STRIP

By Nevin Martell





PROLOGUE

If earth suddenly had to be evacuated and I was limited to grabbing the ten best people to save, Watterson would definitely be in there. 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 both have gone above the cloud layer and are up there near the sun. They both are on that short list of things that are essential. Watterson is an essential.

— Brad Bird, Academy Award-winning
director of *Ratatouille* and *The Incredibles*

I was a diehard *Calvin and Hobbes* fan from the moment I first stumbled across it in the *Utica Observer Dispatch* in 1987. Its creator, Bill Watterson, had been drawing the strip for two years before I discovered it. During that time, he had hit his artistic and storytelling stride, resulting in a *Calvin and Hobbes* that was instantly thought-provoking, eye-catching and funny in a way I had never seen before in the comics section. I loved the relationship between the boy, Calvin, and his pet 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 within three or four black-and-white panels.

In my mind, it was the perfect strip. Calvin and Hobbes did everything that I always wanted to do — they time traveled, dug for dinosaur bones in the backyard and built legions of abominable snowmen. And they always had each other, which made all those adventures even more fun and exciting. Every day, I would cut out the strip and paste it into a black composition notebook, now lost somewhere in my mother's attic, waiting for my future children to discover it. That was my way of joining in and enjoying their fun.

I loved that I could relate to Calvin like no other comic character. Charlie Brown was always too depressed, Garfield was too obsessive-compulsive and Hägar the Horrible was never violent and bloodthirsty enough. On the other hand, Calvin had a wildly creative mind, a devil's flair for mischief and a flamethrower-powered desire to go on as many adventures as possible before his mother made him go to bed. And with Hobbes by his side, Calvin always had someone to play with, talk to and comfort him.

Sometimes Watterson would sketch out memorable parables that drove their point home with a chuckle (often at Calvin's unwitting expense) and at other times he gave us straight-up gags, explored family dynamics or sent his intrepid duo hurtling through time and space and over cliffs. At other times, Watterson made us scramble for the encyclopedia and the dictionary to answer perplexing questions such as, What does *Weltanschauung* mean?, Is that really what a pteranodon looks like?, and Who are the Australopithecus Woman and Paul Gauguin? But what he always did best was inspire his readers to use their imagination. He wanted you to think about

what happened in the slender white spaces between the frames of the strip and beyond its ending. No matter what magic Watterson concocted, there was rarely a moment when the strip felt forced or, worse yet, meaningless.

The true measure of art intended for children is whether it resonates on a deeper level when you interpret it as an adult. J. R. R. Tolkien's books, Walt Disney's movies and the soundtrack to *Yellow Submarine* all took on a new life when I crossed the threshold from youth into relative maturity, and so did *Calvin and Hobbes*. I still learn new things about the work and about myself when I burrow into my old paperback collections on those rare, truly lazy Sundays.

Rivaled only by *Garfield* and *Peanuts*, *Calvin and Hobbes* was one of the most popular comic strips in the world when Watterson suddenly retired it on New Year's Eve, 1995. His departure — as well as that of Gary Larson's *The Far Side* and Berke Breathed's *Outland* that same year — signaled the end of the last Golden Age of newspaper comics. Though there have been some worthy successors to take their places, newspaper comics have failed to collectively seize the zeitgeist and capture the public's imagination in the same way.

Calvin and Hobbes remains incredibly popular today, in spite of a marked lack of promotion. In 2009, Calvin took home the Best Hair in Comics trophy at the first annual Nickelodeon Magazine Comics Awards. When *Opus* retired in late 2008, the *Washington Post's* *Comic Riffs* blog ran an unofficial poll to ask readers what they'd like to see as a replacement, over 600 fans asked for the paper to rerun *Calvin and Hobbes* strips rather than any new strips. To this day, the collections sell more than a million copies a year around the world. As if to illustrate this point, when I went to Oaxaca,

Mexico, the main bookseller in town told me he couldn't keep the Spanish-language versions on the shelves because they always sold out quickly.

Looking back at *Calvin and Hobbes* now, I would, without hyperbole or doubt, say that Bill Watterson is the most brilliant pop artist of the late twentieth century. Like the masters of cartooning, humor and social commentary who came before him, Watterson stood on the shoulders of giants before becoming one himself. His expansive color Sunday strips and thoughtfully etched black-and-white dailies rivaled the classic cartooning work of his heroes, Charles Schulz, Walt Kelly and George Herriman, while the wonderfully bizarre wars Calvin and Hobbes waged on each other recalled the antics of *MAD* magazine's *Spy Vs. Spy* and their thoughtful discussions were sometimes evocative of *Winnie the Pooh*.

Though Watterson's influences are somewhat easy to ascertain, the man himself is an enigma. During the ten years that *Calvin and Hobbes* was drawn and was entrancing millions and millions of readers around the world, the man behind it tried to remain as anonymous as possible. As the boy and his tiger reached new highs in readership, their creator shrank deeper into self-imposed obscurity. Watterson never felt comfortable sharing himself with his readers in a public way and he never allowed his work to be licensed. On the extremely rare occasion that he did make a public appearance or grant an interview, he only spoke openly about his work and went to great lengths to avoid discussing, or divulging any details from, his personal life.

To call him the J. D. Salinger of American cartooning is to take the easy road, but the fact remains that this incredibly talented comic artist is one of the most elusive characters of the late twentieth

century — so elusive, in fact, that only a handful of pictures of him have ever been published. He gave his last interview with a journalist in 1989 and his last public appearance was a commencement speech he gave at his alma mater, Kenyon College, in 1990. Since officially retiring *Calvin and Hobbes*, Watterson has emerged infrequently and sporadically, and never in person.

So how do you find the man who doesn't want to be found? How would that same man react to the idea of a book that sought to examine him at length and in depth? What would I say to Watterson if I got a chance to meet him? What began as a childhood dream turned into a journey through the strata of popular culture to discuss the genius of *Calvin and Hobbes* and Watterson's profound influence.

Initially, I told my friends about the project with equal amounts of boastfulness and fear. I was happy, because this was the gig of a lifetime, but I was afraid of what my peers would make of my work. Because while they said, "Of course I know who Bill Watterson is! *Calvin and Hobbes* was the best comic strip ever!" I could read between the lines. What they were really saying was, "If you screw this book up, you will be pissing on some of the fondest memories of my youth. Don't *#@I#? with my inner child . . . I will *not* be amused!" Ultimately, discussion of writing this book was banned from my cocktail-party conversational repertoire in a bid to maintain my sanity.

Frankly, I would have had the same reaction my friends did. I made peace with my inner geek long ago and he has high standards. As a kid, I loved graphic novels, comics strips and comic books, but always fell for the off-the-beaten-track stuff that challenged my imagination: Asterix and Obelix, Tintin, *Groo the Wanderer* and

Elfquest. Okay, so I also loved *G. I. Joe*, *The Punisher* and — before I knew what the word “lame” meant — *The California Raisins*, but none of those mean as much to me in hindsight or resonate as strongly when I reread them now. *Calvin and Hobbes* is different. It’s as timeless as Bach’s cantatas, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. And that’s what everyone I discussed this project with seemed to realize as well.

I am not the first writer to attempt to find Bill Watterson. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* sent a reporter in 1998 and the *Cleveland Scene* sent out another in 2003 — both men returned empty handed. A bigger expedition was launched by Gene Weingarten, humor columnist for the *Washington Post*, around 2003. Backed by the paper’s expense account, his editor’s blessing and a first edition of a *Barnaby* book to woo Watterson into cooperating, Weingarten headed to Chagrin Falls, where Watterson was living at the time. Deciding that the best tack would be to approach Watterson’s parents, he showed up on their doorstep with a letter to Bill and the book. The letter said Weingarten would be in a nearby hotel room and that he was willing to stay as long as it took for Watterson to contact him. Though he says the Wattersons were kind and promised to pass along his package, they also told him he had no chance of scoring the interview. Nonetheless, he drove to his motel and began his vigil.

The next morning his phone rang. It was Watterson’s editor, Lee Salem, telling him to pack his bags and go home, because it was not gonna happen — no where, no how, no Watterson. Weingarten never published an article chronicling this mini-odyssey, but when he told me the story, he did it with a good sense of humor and his best wishes for my success. After I heard Weingarten’s account, I didn’t know how to feel. On the one hand, I was buoyed by the

thought that I might be the first writer to crack into Watterson's inner sanctum in almost two decades. However, it was depressing to know that the path ahead would be littered with the failures of reputable journalists who had given it their all, but to no avail.

On 7 July 2008, about six months into the actual writing of this book, I finally worked up the courage to send a letter to Bill Watterson, in the hope of scoring an interview with him. I had obtained his current address from public records, and thought that a letter would be the least intrusive way of contacting him. After all, showing up on his lawn — like Lloyd Dobbler with his boombox in *Say Anything* — was probably not going to win me any points, and could very well land me in jail. Admittedly, a phone call would have been more direct than a letter, but again, I felt as if Watterson wouldn't appreciate such an intimate intrusion. While the call would be expedient, I was fairly certain that it would hurt my chances.

So, I settled down and wrote him a letter. Then I rewrote it, again and again and again. I still don't know if I hit the perfect pitch, but that just may be the devil of doubt whispering in my ear. In any event, rehashing my creative angst won't change anything, and you can judge it for yourself, because this is an amended version (I removed our contact information for the sake of privacy and a few other non-essential sentences for the sake of clarity) of the letter that I finally mailed:

Dear Mr Watterson,

My name is Nevin Martell and I have long been an avid fan of your work. I am writing to you now, however, as not only a fan but an author as well. I am writing a book about

you and your work, and wish to secure an interview with you. I know of and respect the decisions you've made with regard to your privacy. It is with this knowledge that I lay my case before you in what I hope is the most non-invasive way possible.

I have already interviewed a number of your friends, colleagues and contemporaries so this may not be the first time you're hearing of this project. Regardless of whether or not you have heard about my efforts, I encourage you to ask the people I have interviewed about my intentions, manner and methods. I feel certain that they would all vouch for my professionalism, politeness and dedication to getting the story right. I have not pried, knowing that such actions may compromise relationships or cross boundaries that should not be crossed under any circumstances. Unlike some writers, I do not believe that the ends justify the means nor do I act in kind. I wish to preserve something of personal and social consequence and to pay tribute to its creator, not to destroy or weaken the very same in unbridled determination.

Since I first read of *Calvin and Hobbes* as a teenager, I have been curious about its genesis and the man who drew such memorable characters into being. That you have so laconically eschewed any and all offers to merchandise or exploit the strip may seem inconceivable to some, but it is the very lack of material besides the strip itself that makes its sentiments pure. Since my youth, *Calvin and Hobbes* has remained unravaged by time and unadulterated by conspicuous overexposure. It is this seeming purity that piqued my adult curiosity.

A couple of years ago I was batting around ideas for a new book project. I had written a couple of very straightforward rock ‘n’ roll biographies in my early twenties for Simon & Schuster’s Pocket Books imprint, but they had mostly been motivated by what I thought other people wanted to learn more about. I was incredibly unhappy during the writing of my second book about a musician named Beck, and vowed to write only about what profoundly interested me. I started thinking about the things I loved that made me happy and that I didn’t know much about, and that’s when I realized that you and your work were largely undiscovered territory. The book is intended to be a serious study of *Calvin and Hobbes* as I explore the strip’s success as a pop culture phenomenon and its enduring influence. I promise I will forgo the kind of fanboy blathering that litters the blogosphere, though it won’t be without warmth and humor.

I know you have made few forays into the public eye since the strip’s retirement, and I understand that you may have some natural hesitance in talking with me. I assure you that I am an excellent interviewer who does his research and can feel out his subject’s boundaries. I’d be happy to do the interview in whatever way was best for you — in person, over the phone, via email, carrier pigeon, with tin cans connected by string — and with whatever parameters you need to feel comfortable.

Come what may, it has been a rare privilege to embark on this project and I expect that I will do you and your work justice. *Calvin and Hobbes* helped shape my worldview and developed in me an appreciation for humor and wit. Reading

the strips again and revisiting them with people who hold them in similar esteem has been awesome. I've found myself laughing at the antics of Calvin and Hobbes, and thinking about the larger implications of their behavior. It is a rare skill that can provoke such a reaction in many, and I appreciate the countless times you've done that for me.

Thanks so much for taking the time to read this letter and your consideration of my request for an interview. I have enclosed all of my contact information below, and I hope to talk to you further on this matter.

Even though I was happy with the letter I wrote, I was still hesitant about actually mailing it to Watterson. My reservations were born of overactive perfectionism and fear of rejection. Okay, okay, so it was mostly a fear of rejection, but I knew this book was going to consume my life and I didn't want to blow it with my star subject.

I sent the letter Priority Mail with delivery confirmation and anxiously checked and rechecked the US Postal Service website to see if it had been received like an OCD kid on crack. Three days later — after the page refreshed for what must have been the thousandth time and delivery was confirmed — I sat back and waited, though no less anxiously. I felt like Calvin after he had mailed away for the cereal premium prize, a beanie with a propeller on top, only to be told, "Please allow 4–6 weeks for your package to arrive." I mean, you might as well tell Calvin, or an adult writer named Nevin, that it'll be here in infinity times forever.

I eagerly flipped through the mail every day, hoping to see a Cleveland postmark or an envelope with Calvin and Hobbes on it, like Watterson used to use when responding to fan mail. But this

virtual surveying of the horizon didn't end at the mailbox. I would scan new cars parked on my street and suspiciously check out passing pedestrians, imagining Watterson had decided to answer the letter in person. And every time the phone rang with an unfamiliar number I picked it up excitedly, imagining that Watterson had chosen to reach out to me using the phone number I had included in the letter. Weeks passed, but nothing happened. I chewed my fingers, slept poorly and developed heavy bags under my eyes that looked as if they were about to head out on a globe-circling adventure.

One day — finally — an unfamiliar Cleveland area number did come up on the phone early one morning. All of these disjointed thoughts ran riot through my head: Really? Now? I hadn't even had my second cup of coffee, I couldn't record conversations on my iPhone but I also couldn't let the call go to voicemail . . . so I got a grip and picked up.

"Hello, this is Nevin Martell," I tried to say in my coolest and most professional tone, knowing full well that I sounded neither cool nor particularly professional. "Hello, Nevin," a gravelly but warm voice replied. My head spun and in my mind's eye I saw glorious fireworks exploding all around me in celebration of my victory as the Flaming Lips song "Do You Realize??" played on a quadraphonic stereo at an ear-jarring volume.

But wait, something wasn't right. "This is Harvey Pekar," the voice continued. What? Did he just say Harvey Pekar? The fireworks stopped instantaneously and the psychedelic pop fell silent. For the smallest of seconds, my disappointment danced unchecked through my mind and on my heart. Then the rational part of my brain kicked the idiotic part, screaming, "Harvey frickin' Pekar is on the phone! That's damn cool!"

As it turned out, the *American Splendor* cartoonist had called to say that he was flattered that I had asked for his opinions on *Calvin and Hobbes* and Watterson, but didn't feel as though he could contribute. He went on to wish me good luck in my remaining interviews and writing. Now that's class. By the time I got off the phone, my excitement was once again at full throttle. Sure, it wasn't Bill Watterson, and sure Harvey Pekar didn't feel like he'd be a good interview for the book, but it was inspiring that part of the universe was acknowledging and responding to my efforts.

A similar high point was the postcard I got from England a week or two after that confidence-bolstering call. On the front was a picture of Raymond Pettibon's ink painting of a question mark and the back held this short handwritten note:

Dear Nevin,

I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I have never in my life read a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip. There are people I know who love it — my brother-in-law, for instance — but I've never been a reader of the funny pages.

Sincerely,

David Sedaris

David Sedaris just sent me a postcard! I still have it on my desk, next to an old issue of a *Space Family Robinson: Lost in Space* comic book and a series of small toys I've gotten from inside Kinder Surprise chocolate eggs. Again, it didn't matter that he was saying he couldn't be of help; it was still a responsive shout from the void.

That isn't to say that I was only getting rejections, because it wasn't the case at all. During this time I interviewed everyone from

Watterson's editor Lee Salem and *Garfield* cartoonist Jim Davis to *Pearls Before Swine* creator Stephan Pastis. I also extensively interviewed an old friend of Watterson's from college, Richard West. Aside from Salem, he was one of the few people I had spoken to who still kept in touch with Watterson. Maybe I would be able to feel him out on the subject of the letter I had sent, to see if he might have any insights. I wanted to clarify a few points from our first interview, so this was a perfect excuse to get him on the phone again.

As I followed up on some questions that arose from our first interview, I managed to bite my tongue and not press West about Watterson's reaction to my letter. I assumed that West had mentioned our first conversation to Watterson, which would have alerted him to the possibility of my contacting him. However, that wasn't the case. "Your letter was news to him," West told me. "And he's not sure what the point is about talking about *Calvin and Hobbes* again," he added. I felt as if my heart were being trampled by a herd of rabid wildebeests. While I knew that Watterson hadn't given an interview in almost 20 years, and that securing an interview would be tantamount to catching the Loch Ness Monster with a 5-pound fishing line, I had still imagined — against all evidence to the contrary — that it would happen.

Unaware of the wildebeests tattooing my heart with their hooves, West kept talking, "We've had long debates — since I'm the historian and he's the artist — about the value of art history. At one point he took the position that the art is all that matters and who cares what the artist's story is. As in, you can look at a Rembrandt and appreciate a Rembrandt without knowing a single thing about Rembrandt's life. And my argument back to him is that people are drawn to genius and that they want to have a better understanding of what

creates greatness. Plus, an artist's story gives a texture and meaning to the human effort. Whatever Bill decides about cooperating, it's not going to be personal."

Did he just say what I thought I heard? Be still my beating, sorely battered heart! If Watterson hadn't decided yet, it meant that he hadn't said no! Plan A — Watterson agreeing to my interview and making this whole process infinitely easier — was still a possibility.

While I clung tenuously to this possibility, I had long ago admitted to myself that it was improbable that Plan A would ever take effect because Watterson would say no to any intrusion into his self-imposed solitude. I had planned accordingly. According to Plan B — otherwise known as the Morbidly Realistic Plan — I was going to write the book as if Watterson were dead.

No matter what I discovered at the end, the search itself was going to be a globetrotting expedition of mythical proportions. I was Tintin trying to track down the yeti, Indiana Jones seeking out the Ark of the Covenant or a *National Enquirer* reporter hunting for Elvis. It was an incredibly daunting task, but I can honestly say it ended up being one of the most rewarding experiences in my life as an author. *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes* is the culmination of a year-long journey to find Bill Watterson and figure out what made him tick. I hope you enjoy retracing my steps as much as I enjoyed taking them.