

'For Better or For Worse' to end, begin again

By Pam Becker | TRIBUNE REPORTER

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Comic strip artist Lynn Johnston relishes a challenge, and she isn't afraid to break tradition. These traits are front and center as the creator of "For Better or For Worse" negotiates an unprecedented path toward what she calls semi-retirement.

Johnston says she will end the current plotlines of her 29-year-old strip by September. Then she will do something unheard of in the comic strip world: start from the beginning again, rerunning the old strips -- but tinkering with some to "augment" or "fix some of the stuff," she says in a phone interview from her home in Corbeil, Ontario. She also will have to redraw a number of strips for which original images are missing, she says.

Comics expert Lucy Shelton Caswell says, "I am not aware of anybody doing [this] before." Caswell, interviewed by phone, is professor and curator of the Cartoon Research Library at Ohio State University.

Johnston has been working toward retirement for years, but her plans have changed several times along the way. She had hoped to end the current story lines in September 2007, then segue into the old strips in the guise of flashbacks experienced by the present-day characters, who would appear occasionally. According to her plan, this "hybrid" form of the strip would mostly leave her free to pursue other interests.

But she found she could not wrap up all her plotlines on her original timetable. And in April 2007, her 32-year marriage fell apart, leaving her to face a retirement without her husband. She decided to devote more time and space to the present-day story than she had planned, though still running some old ones.

The hybrid strip debuted in September 2007. As of now, readers are seeing present-day strips on some days, and old strips -- some from as far back as 28 years ago -- on other days. Some readers have expressed confusion because they don't realize some of the strips are old. They think someone else is drawing it on the days when old strips appear, because Johnston's earlier drawing style is significantly different from her current one.

For example, a letter to the editor published Feb. 12 in the Tallahassee (Fla.) Democrat said: "Has anyone else questioned the differences in the drawing of the comic strip 'For Better or For Worse'? Every few days it looks as if someone completely different from Lynn Johnston is doing the drawing, and I don't recognize the characters."

New direction

Johnston has not been happy either. "I wasn't that comfortable with it," she says. So she made the decision to pursue this new course.

"Now that I look back at the material that is going to run again, I see some significant areas that I want to work on -- the day that Michael discovers that he has a crush on Deanna in elementary school, for example," she says.

As word spreads, it's possible that newspapers will drop the strip to make way for new ones.

The Ventura County (Calif.) Star in January announced plans to drop the strip in the fall when the reruns begin. Editor Joe Howry was quoted in his paper saying that "rehashing old strips" is "unfair to our readers."

Johnston is aware of that criticism, but she and her syndicate believe strong demand for the older strip still exists. The current hybrid "is surprisingly popular," Johnston says. "A lot of people, even if they have the books, are surprised that they don't remember what was there. Many people never saw the original work because their paper maybe didn't pick it up for 15 years."

If the reaction to the current form is any indication, the figures back her up. The strip, which runs in about

2,000 newspapers, has had about a dozen cancellations since July, but eight new clients signed on in that time, according to Kathie Kerr, a spokeswoman for Universal Press Syndicate, which distributes the strip.

For Johnston, beyond the challenge of holding onto readers is that of re-creating her drawing style of more than 20 years ago.

"The work that I'm doing now is very structured," she says. "The characters are much more realistic. I draw every brick on a building. The way I used to draw was much more fluid and easygoing and big expressions and lots of slapstick. ... I would like to go back to that, and I think I can."

Johnston isn't the only one who believes that.

"I think she's a good enough artist that she can do that," says Caswell, who founded the Ohio State cartoon library in 1977, two years before Johnston's strip debuted. She also thinks demand will still exist for the old strips. Johnston "touches people where they live in a way that a lot of comic strips don't," Caswell said.

When it comes right down to it, Johnston cannot bring herself to let go of the strip. "I do want to continue," she said. "It is a joy for me. I love this work."

Considered leaving strip

At one time she had considered passing the strip on to a new cartoonist, and even got as far as beginning talks with an artist and looking at his work.

"We got into it and we realized it wasn't going to work, because anybody who has the kind of skill it takes to do 'For Better or For Worse' should do their own," Johnston says. "It's hard to put your heart and soul into somebody else's dream, isn't it?"

Does Johnston envision a time when she will be completely retired?

"I think if I was ill, yeah," she said. "I think if I was really not healthy and couldn't concentrate and couldn't draw, I think that would be the case."

But Johnston does plan to say goodbye to her readers when she ends the present-day story. "There will be some printed material the day following the strip's story line ... ending," she said.

"I don't know exactly word for word, or I'd have it all written out in front of me. But I know what I want to say after all this time. I want to give a special message to everybody from me personally and thank the people that I've worked with and segue into the beginning again."

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