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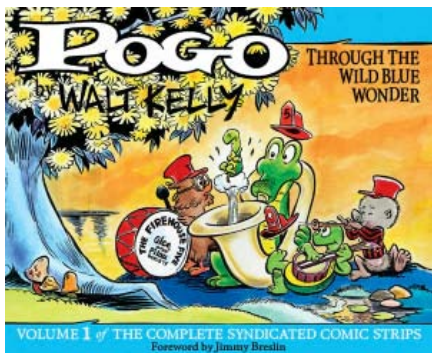
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**POGO: THROUGH THE WILD BLUE YONDER -- THE COMPLETE SYNDICATED COMIC STRIPS VOLUME 1 BY WALT KELLY** (\$39.99; Fantagraphics)

For many years, the comic strips that deserved legendary acclaim had to be taken on faith. We can watch old movies and TV shows and listen to classic albums and read great books. But practically speaking, many classic comic strips hailed as influential, ground-breaking, hilarious and the like were simply unavailable or in such a bastardized and incomplete form that it was nigh on impossible to judge them fairly. Even something as wildly popular as *Peanuts* wasn't really available to read from start to finish the way you would with any other work of art.

No more. We're finally seeing comic strips receive the attention and care they deserve. Classic works like

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*Krazy Kat* and *Gasoline Alley* (aka *Walt And Skeeze*) and *Prince Valiant* and yes *Peanuts* are receiving or have received gorgeous reprints in multi-volume sets that for the very first time since they first appeared in newspapers or magazines lets us appreciate the work and see how it's stood the test of time.

The latest to be lovingly restored is *Pogo*, Walt Kelly's strip that I have dutifully recognized as probably one of the greats (according to everyone else, at least) though I'd never seen so much as a single panel of it. [Fantagraphics](#) has made the wait worthwhile with Volume 1, which covers strips from October of 1948 through December 31, 1950. The book is bursting with useful, entertaining extras, from a foreword by Jimmy Breslin to an in-depth introduction by Steve Thompson that helpfully spells out Kelly's life and the history of the strip to footnotes (called Swamp Talk) by R.C. Harvey. The heart of the book are the daily strips presented with six days of work on every two page spread with the color Sunday comics in a separate section followed by the early daily strips for the New York Star before *Pogo* was syndicated. Here's a look at this gorgeous, enjoyably hefty volume.

That's all well and fine. The book is lovingly made and the strips presented with care and pleasure. But is it any good? Oh yes. It's funny and charming, bursting with witty wordplay and vivid characters you love immediately. You can see the influence the Marx Brothers and *Krazy Kat* and Mark Twain had on *Pogo* and its love of silly grammatical puns and Southern dialect. And you can see the influence *Pogo* had on *Doonesbury* and *Calvin & Hobbes* in its playful recognition that it was a comic strip (*Pogo* acknowledges letters about the strip just as *Doonesbury* would occasionally open a mail bag to answer reader letters) and gentle humor. The lovably grumpy Porkypine is surely a cousin of Eeyore and (later) Oscar the Grouch. *Pogo* even ran for President, with the catchy slogan of "I Go Pogo" to counter "I Like Ike."

In short, read *Pogo* and you can immediately see it slide into the pop cultural matrix and how it drew upon the work that came earlier, moved forward the art form of comic strips and influenced artists after it for generations to come. But most of all you'll laugh and savor catch phrases like "We have met the enemy and he is us!" (surely the strip's most famous) as well as Southernisms like "Dog my cats!" and the like.

*Pogo* is famous for its political satire but in this first volume the denizens of Okefenokee Swamp are (swiftly) defining themselves. Some modest teasing of newspaper reporters and elections don't really square with the image I had of the strip, but that is surely yet to come. Here we engage in simpler pursuits by *Pogo* Possum, Albert the Alligator (forever swallowing -- by accident -- fellow critters), Porkypine and the rest. They dive deliriously into baseball in October, take care of a stray pup, search for the Fountain of Youth, try to convince little critters to go to Owl's new school ("It's Saturday!") and so on.

Whether they go digging in the dirt for a square root for math class or insist it ain't cricket to hit a baseball with your tail ("Who's playing cricket?" shouts Albert the Alligator as he rounds the bases. "Look out for Home Run Baker!"), the heart of this first volume is Kelly's delight in language and Southern improvements on it. Milwaukee is "fraught and ree-plete" with cows and other Western wonders. When Albert tries to learn his numbers he insists that eleven follows seven. "Like the night the day...seven come ee-leven. Anybody knows that!" (The teacher gives up, graduates Albert and makes him a truant officer.) When Owl suggests *Pogo* actually break some of his New Year's resolutions instead of being a do-gooder, *Pogo* asks what kind breaks easy. "Any kind I makes," says Owl. "Man, I is got resolutions left over from last year what I isn't even had *time* to break yet!" *Pogo* responds, "Bring a couple over, size 6 1/2."

Here's a New Year's resolution for you: dive into *Pogo*, one of the best comic strips of all time. You don't have to take my word for it anymore; you can read it yourself.

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