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Good Grief! Celebrating Peanuts

Posted October 29, 2007 | 01:18 PM (EST)

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Tonight on **PBS's *American Masters***, they take a close look at the life of *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz. Linked to the **new biography by David Michaelis**, it focuses on the parallels between Schulz's real life and the strip, as well as the very real melancholy Schulz dealt with his whole life.

The book and this episode are both acclaimed, but personally, watching the story of an artist's life always makes me antsy - if they're important enough to write a biography or make a documentary about, I'd rather focus on the work that made them famous in the first place.

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With *Peanuts*, the most successful - and most successfully merchandised -- comic strip in history, that's always been easy. There's a **Charles Schulz museum**, DVDs of animated specials and of course countless reissues of the strips in book form over the years. But the most exciting and satisfying *Peanuts*

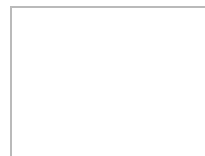
project is **the ambitious 25 volume masterpiece *The Complete Peanuts*** being created by publisher Fantagraphics.

They've recently put out volume eight, *The Complete Peanuts: 1965-1966* (\$28.95; Fantagraphics), and like all the previous volumes, it's beautifully designed by graphic novelist Seth and a joy to behold. The influence of *Peanuts* is obvious, of course, and reflected by the range of people who've written introductions to these volumes: director Hal Hartley, novelist Jonathan Franzen, jazz artist Diana Krall and newsman Walter Cronkite are just some of the names who've revealed their passion for *Peanuts*.

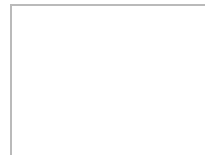
What's less obvious is the pleasure to be had in reading *Peanuts* in big gulps. Comic strips are really on the lowest rung of appreciation among hardcore comic book aficionados. At the heart of their love is the comic book, followed closely by the graphic novel, mangas and the like. Frankly, go to most comic book stores and they care more about movie spin-offs of *Spider-Man* than a childish comic strip, collections of which are usually relegated to a dusty bottom shelf. And I can't tell you how many artists and fans I've spoken to who foolishly dismiss **the landmark *Doodles* strip** as poorly drawn and without interest.

So Fantagraphics took a major gamble in devoting so much time and effort to *Peanuts* and it's paid

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off tremendously. While serial strips like *Doodles* and *Gasoline Alley* (aka *Walt & Skeeze*, just out with **Volume Three of its complete strips**) are obvious beneficiaries of being reprinted in full, the appeal of reading one or two years of *Peanuts* in a row is less obvious.

Certainly a poorly done comic strip would be a bore. Heck, they're a bore even one day at a time. Alternately, a brilliant one panel work like *The Far Side* by **Gary Larson** has been rightly collected in two massive volumes, but devouring them one after another dulls the pleasure.

Not so with *Peanuts*. The first volume saw Schulz find his feet. Later editions saw characters change and morph into the people we know so well. The most recent book -- covering 1963-1964 -- was Schulz's most wacky and satirical, a key moment when he was deciding whether to commit fully to the reality of these kids or use the strip as a launching pad for less durable but more easily produced social satire.

Schulz chose the kids and the results flower in the current volume. Snoopy battles the Red Baron for the first time and becomes a writer, Linus grapples again with his belief in the Great Pumpkin, baseball games are lost and Lucy proves that if she were emailing people in the computer age you can be certain most of her messages would be delivered IN ALL CAPS! Your favorite character depends on your mood - I love Lucy's crabbiness one minute and Linus's sweet nature the next. But the eternal loser Charlie Brown is the heart of the matter.

Read the strips one after another and you'll marvel how Schulz balanced so nimbly between the genuine concerns of childhood (the kid you have a crush on, nervousness over meeting new people, fighting with your siblings and friends) and droll comments on the wishy-washiness of life.

Linus is watching TV and gets furious when Lucy arbitrarily turns it off, righteous in his anger. Then when he's exhausted his pique, Linus says to himself, "It was a lousy program anyway."

When Schroeder gets annoyed by Lucy draping herself over his piano and he walks away, she barks, "THE TRUTH IS YOU'RE EMBARRASSED BY A PRETTY FACE! THAT'S IT, ISN'T IT?" And in the next panel: "A PRETTY FACE MAKES YOU UNEASY, DOESN'T IT? HUH? DOESN'T IT?" And in the final panel she says reflectively, "He shouldn't feel that way.... Lots of people get embarrassed in the presence of a pretty face..."

It's that final panel that nudges the strip into greatness -- the way Schulz quietly shows us comforting and deluding ourselves just to get through the day. The cultural impact of *Peanuts* has been ongoing for decades. (Would Christmas be the same without them?) But republishing the entire series in one gorgeous volume after another is really the first time we can truly take a step back, appreciate his work as a whole and ultimately wrap our arms around the accomplishment of Charles Schulz. Sometimes, happiness is a warm book.

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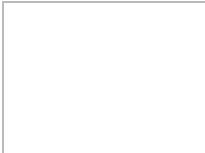
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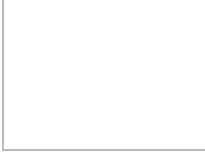
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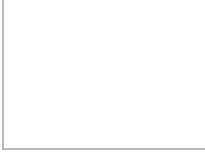
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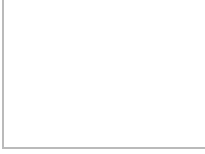
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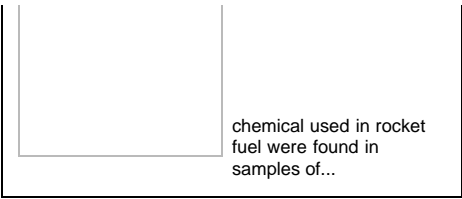
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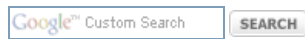
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