

The March of His Penguin

Berkeley Breathed's brain wanders a strange space within the American cultural landscape. The characters populating his comic strips—from *Bloom County* to *Opus*—have included a little boy with a bedroom closet full of monsters, a sensitive and idealistic penguin, an unapologetic former frat boy, a deceased-yet-strikingly-lively cat, and many a political and media figure. (It's unclear whether Opus the Penguin harbored more fantasies about herring feasts or assignments with Diane Sawyer.)



While the Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist and children's book author has millions of devoted fans, it's fair to say that his

terrain is bewildering to many. When it comes to penguins in underpants, some people just don't get it!

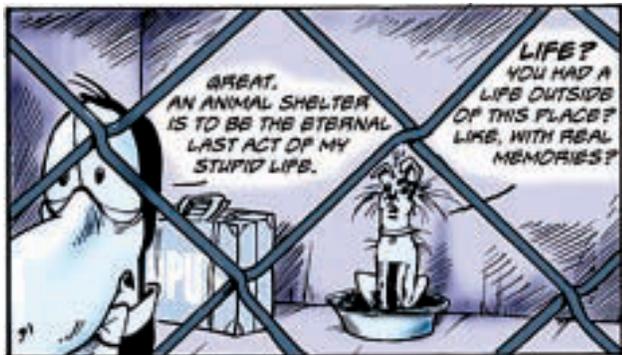
But any animal lover can grasp the artist's commitment. A vegetarian and longtime friend of animal welfare organizations, Breathed supported Proposition 2 in California, a groundbreaking measure that—thanks to its landslide 63 percent victory on Election Day—will compel farmers to allow veal calves, egg-laying hens, and pigs enough space to turn around freely, lie down, stand up, and fully extend their limbs. (See page 6 to learn more.)

Breathed recently asked fans to guess the final destiny of his now discontinued *Opus*; the grand prize of the contest, held in partnership with The HSUS, was a \$10,000 gift to the animal shelter of the winner's choice.

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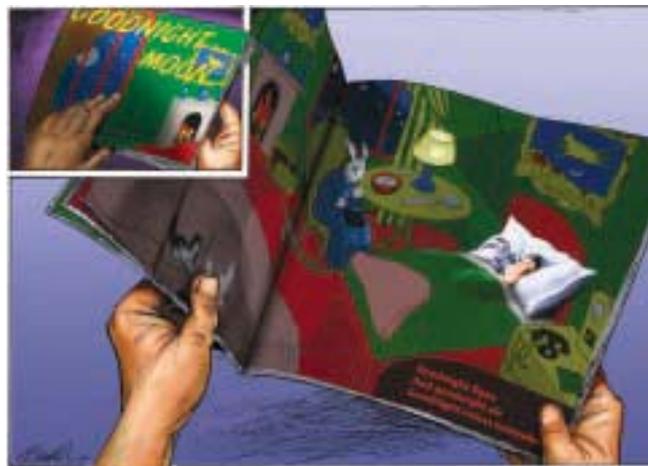


Q: Your strips are difficult to describe. They seem to be a mix of *Doonesbury's* politics, *The Far Side's* weirdness, and *Calvin and Hobbes's* cuteness—but in the end, they're unique. Did you know what you were doing when you first started out, or did your style evolve?

BREATHED: I'd never read a comic before I drew my first one. I had seen *Doonesbury* in college and was familiar with *Peanuts*. But *Bloom County* was born of brazen ignorance.

Q: On Nov. 2, you put *Opus* to bed, literally. How did you decide how the penguin's saga should end? Did the book *Goodnight, Moon* have a particular resonance for you?

BREATHED: Only after I had kids. I had never heard of it before, shockingly. Now that I'm a children's author, it has taken on weird significance. People love their memory of it ... yet it's one of the ugliest books ever drawn. This fascinated me.



Q: About the timing of *Opus's* departure: Was he scared to stick around to see the election results?

BREATHED: He was avoiding a Cabinet post with Obama. *Opus* always ran from responsibility.

Q: Why did you first get involved in animal welfare causes?

BREATHED: Twenty-five years ago my wife showed me a postcard from the Doris Day Animal League. It showed a beagle puppy in a steel cage in a burn research center. Most of its back was burned off. That was it. I've been struggling with the anger over that picture for all these years. I have to confess ... I'm a dog guy. It's my button. And it was pushed.



Q: You drew an editorial cartoon for the *Los Angeles Times* in support of Proposition 2 in California. Why did you get behind this issue?

BREATHED: That's like asking, "Why do I drink two triple mocha espressos every day?" Because it feels good! And it's so stupidly obvious, who can resist? It's also shrewdly designed by The HSUS, by the way. There's simply little way to argue against it, especially for meaters. I hope they don't mind that I call them that.

Q: You've expressed some tension between your comedian side and what you've called your "Michael Moore" side. Does the cessation of *Opus* mean your Michael Moore side is disappearing, or do you plan to continue your activism through other venues?

BREATHED: My big mouthism is now retired. Healthier for me. I get angry.

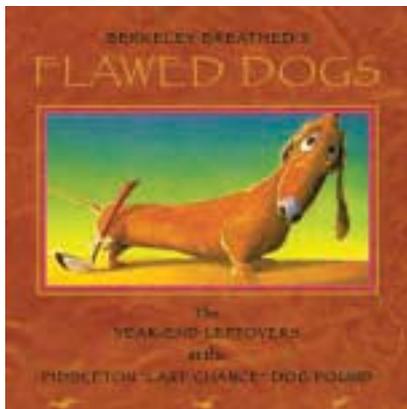
Q: How and why did you start working with The HSUS?

BREATHED: I knew [president and CEO] Wayne Pacelle, of course, as I worked as his french fry taster in the '80s, making sure there was no lard in them. Aside from that ... in the philosophical world of animal welfare, it fit like a splendid cotton nonleather glove.

Q: Your book, *Flawed Dogs*, promotes the beautifully "different" pooches available at animal shelters. Was there a particular event or animal who inspired the project?

BREATHED: All of the flawed dogs who've been running roughshod throughout my house for the past 30 years. Fifteen by my count, all shelter pups, save my one initial foray in 1981 to a breeder for a baset hound. I love getting the dogs who are only a few days from being put down. I think they know in some odd way. It may explain why so many of our adoptees tend to clean the house while we're gone for the day. It also explains, of course, why so many look like the outtakes from my book. Lovely, lovingly flawed outtakes themselves, come to think of it. The best kind.

The dog numbers in the Breathed pack came down to manageable proportions when my children arrived and the dogs went back to being dogs and I had to stop letting them kiss me in the full biblical sense.



Q: In your strip, children are often smarter than adults (well, at least smarter than character Steve Dallas), and animals talk. And wear underwear. Please explain.

BREATHED: Ah, this is the *Peanuts* effect. Ever since that strip, children in comic strips have to act smarter than adults. This has been carried to TV shows and movies now. I deeply regret this, as I'm now a parent.

Q: Why a penguin? And was Lyle Lovett's song about sensitive penguins inspired by *Opus*?

BREATHED: I can't speak for Lyle. I needed an animal who fit into a vertical comic strip frame. And he needed to look dressed to get by the censors. Voilà. A penguin.



Q: What (or who?) is your favorite animal and why?

BREATHED: Tipped my hat already. Dogs. Bull terriers especially. Then elephants. One day I'll have both.

Q: Are you a cat lover?

BREATHED: I'll take the Fifth on this. I like elephants, though.

Q: Binkley's battles with the monsters in his anxiety closet were a frequent feature of *Bloom County*. What's in your own anxiety closet?

BREATHED: That beagle with the burned back, looking out at the person who'd just burned him with a typical beagle loving look.

Q: Do you have pets? Are they wearing underwear right now?

BREATHED: Listen, if there was a way to get jockey briefs on a pit bull, mine would be wearing them. Nobody would run from pit bulls if they wore 'em. By the way, we pit bull cultists know the big secret: They are, weirdly, the most loyal, loving, gentle, patient, and affectionate breed. My personal, untested theory to explain the occasional horror story is that, given their almost hyper-propensity for affection, they simply don't do well when the inverse is applied to them: abuse. Chaining in the mud. Isolation. The push to aggression. This, by the way, is exactly why you probably don't want to put friendly Buddhist monks into Marine boot camp. Bad things happen.

