

Dennis the Menace - Introduction by Brian Walker

This introduction is reprinted in its entirety from Hank Ketcham's Complete Dennis the Menace 1951-1952, the first volume in our comprehensive collection of Dennis the Menace daily strips. This volume is available in a handsome, brick-like hardcover and, now, an affordable softcover edition.

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One afternoon, in October 1950, Hank Ketcham was working on a cartoon for The Saturday Evening Post when he heard a commotion coming from the bedroom area of his new home in Carmel, California. His wife Alice suddenly burst into the studio and exclaimed, "Your son is a MENACE!" Four-year-old Dennis Lloyd Ketcham, who was supposed to be napping, had just demolished his room. "Dennis... a menace?" Ketcham mused. "Let's see, there's Tillie the Toiler and Felix the Cat. Why couldn't there be – Dennis the Menace?! Wow! Why not!"

Ketcham penciled up a dozen mischievous kid gags and sent them to his agent, John Kennedy, in New York. Ten days later he received a telegram: "BOB HALL NEW PRESIDENT OF POST SYNDICATE WANTS TO SEE ANOTHER TWELVE SAMPLES STOP LOOKS LIKE WE MIGHT HAVE A SALE – JOHN."

Dennis the Menace was launched in sixteen newspapers on March 12, 1951. By the end of the first year, it had over 100 clients and the Post-Hall Syndicate asked Ketcham to add a Sunday page to his weekly duties. In 1952, the first Dennis the Menace book collection, published by Henry Holt, sold 121,000 copies in six months and Ketcham won the award as the "Outstanding Cartoonist of the Year" from the National Cartoonists Society. A live-action television adaptation, starring Jay North as Dennis, was produced in 1959. Tie-in merchandise included dolls, puppets, books, toys and clothing.

Fifty years and more than 18,000 episodes after its debut, Ketcham's panel was still appearing in over 1,000 newspapers in 48 countries. Fifty million Dennis books had been sold and the 1959-1963 television series, as well as 96 animated programs, were being distributed by King Features Syndicate. Dennis had transcended pen and ink to become an international cultural icon.

Henry King Ketcham was born in Seattle, Washington on March 14, 1920. In his 1990 autobiography, *The Merchant of Dennis the Menace*, he remembered, "I grew up in a wondrous cartoon world inhabited by Barney Google, Harold Teen, Mutt and Jeff, the Toonerville Folks, the Gumps, and many others, and was mesmerized by the funny-looking people who could live in a bottle of ink – amusing characters who with a mere squiggle of a pen did as directed." Young Henry practiced his new-found craft by copying all of the strips in the Seattle Times and the Post-Intelligencer and before he graduated from elementary school, had decided to pursue a career in cartooning.

In 1938, after a year at the University of Washington, he left for Hollywood to get a job in the animation industry. He spent fourteen months at Universal Studios, working as an in-betweener for \$16 a week on the Andy Panda series for Walter Lantz before moving on to the Walt Disney Studios. While at the Mouse Factory, Ketcham served as an assistant animator on Pinocchio, Bambi, Wind in the Willows, Fantasia and dozens of Donald Duck shorts. He later claimed that he received his art training at the "University of Walt Disney."

Less than a month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Ketcham enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve as a photographer's mate third class. From Bremerton Navy Yard on the Puget Sound, he was transferred to Washington D.C. where he designed posters, animated training films and other materials for the War Bond program. During this time, he also supplemented his military income by selling freelance cartoons to the magazine market and created a diminutive

sailor character, "Half Hitch," who appeared regularly in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

When the war was over, having tasted success in the publishing world, Ketcham decided to pursue his fortune in New York City, rather than return to the Disney Studio. He soon became one of the top magazine cartoonists in the business, selling his work to *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Liberty*, and *The New Yorker*. He lived in Westport, Connecticut, where many famous cartoonists and illustrators had their studios and made the weekly trip to Manhattan, known as the "Wednesday rounds," to show his latest gag roughs to the editors of the major magazines. He often stopped for lunch and drinks with his fellow freelancers at the Pen & Pencil or Danny's before taking the train home to the suburbs. In 1948, tired of the unpredictable nature of east coast weather, he moved to California with his wife and two-year-old son.

During his years as a magazine cartoonist, Ketcham became adept at rendering single-panel gags. He was influenced by the masters of the medium: Peter Arno, George Price, Whitney Darrow, Jr., and Gluyas Williams. Although his first effort to break into syndication, *Little Joe*, was a comic strip, it was more natural for him to design *Dennis the Menace* as a panel. "That's what I'd been doing all those years in magazines," he explained. "I wasn't doing strip stuff – my mind was not geared that way. I wanted to do an eye-catching single panel in which the reader would give you only ten seconds of his time."

The main characters in Ketcham's creation, Dennis, Henry, Alice, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, and Ruff, were all fully developed by the mid-1950s. Joey, Margaret, and Gina took a little longer to evolve into their definitive form but, once in place, the core cast changed very little in appearance and temperament over the years.

Dennis Mitchell, who is an only child, has always been a spunky "five-ana-half" years old. He has an unruly shock of blond hair, a freckled face with a smudged nose, and button eyes. His favorite outfit is a striped shirt, worn with overalls and crepe-soled saddle shoes. Dennis' constant companion is Ruff, a big, fluffy mutt who doesn't mind being bossed around.

Henry Mitchell is a thirty-two-year old W.A.S.P. who was born in a bustling mill town in central Minnesota. He is six-feet tall, weighs 162 pounds, wears horn-rimmed glasses, suffers from allergies and is an avid weekend golfer. After a stint in the U.S. Naval Reserve, he majored in business administration in college. He now earns a decent income from an aeronautical engineering company, which enables Alice Mitchell to stay at home and take care of their rambunctious offspring. The former Alice Johnson studied diet and nutrition at the state university, was a good tennis player and manages to maintain her trim figure and perky good looks. She also works hard to keep the house clean and her family fed.

George Wilson is a retired U.S. Post Office worker who collects stamps, plays the ukulele, and putters in the garden. George and his wife Martha don't have any children of their own so Martha more than makes up for it by doting on the neighborhood kids and pets. Dennis' next-door-neighbors are among his closest friends and provide him with an endless source of wisdom and conversation. He never has any qualms about making himself at home in their house.

Joey McDonald is like the younger brother Dennis never had. He follows Dennis everywhere like a shadow and is convinced that his mentor has the right answer for every situation. Dennis' nemesis, Margaret Wade, is attracted to him because she thinks she can mold him into her ideal of a respectable young boy. Although her curly red hair, good grades, clean room, accomplished piano playing, and ballet dancing fail to impress Dennis, she never gives up. The

constant rejection only encourages her unshakable self-confidence and bossy nature. Gina Gillotti, who was named after the famous Italian actress and the Gillotte #170 pen that Ketcham used, has the warmth and charm of her European ancestors. Unlike Margaret, she accepts Dennis for who he is and their relationship is one of mutual attraction. Dennis remains blissfully unaware of the competition between Margaret and Gina for his affections.

To establish credibility, Ketcham conjured up a detailed and specific world for his characters to inhabit. In his conception, the Mitchell family lives in a two-story, three-bedroom colonial-style fixer-upper with an attached garage on a quiet residential street on the outskirts of Wichita, Kansas. Inside the home is a front hall, a kitchen, a dining room, a living room, a bathroom, a master bedroom, and, of course, Dennis' messy room. The houses in the neighborhood are close together and have small backyards with white-picket fences. The nearby town has many of the common amenities of a typical American hamlet: a main street lined with stores and restaurants, doctor and dentist offices, a barber shop, soda fountain, bank, post office, library, movie theater, church, park, art museum, and schools.

Thematically, Ketcham adhered to a positive approach. "I make a point of staying away from the ugly side of life," he explained. "It's just my nature. I'd rather have upbeat things around me. Lord knows, there are enough things dragging you down."

Dennis tends to be insatiably curious rather than mischievous. When he gets into trouble, his parents make him sit in a small rocking chair facing the corner of the living room. At night, Dennis apologizes for his transgressions and promises to do better in his bedtime prayers. Repeated situations like these reinforce Dennis' basically wholesome nature.

Ketcham reflected the cyclical patterns of daily life in Dennis by marking the changing seasons and celebrating holidays, like Valentine's Day, Easter, July 4th, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, as well as special family occasions, such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, and birthdays. He avoided specific events, like the World Series or the Superbowl, in deference to his many foreign clients. One exception was a special two-week sequence he did to commemorate America's Bicentennial in 1976. In the story, he transported the Mitchells back to colonial times where they tried to cope with life in pre-revolutionary America. He spent many hours researching this series for historical accuracy. Other continuing story-lines, which were featured on an occasional basis over the years, included a visit to Uncle Charlie's farm and Dennis' first trip on a commercial airplane.

Unlike his contemporary, Charles Schulz, who wrote, penciled, inked and lettered every Peanuts strip for almost 50 years, Ketcham never had any reservations about hiring assistants to help meet his daily deadlines. "This sort of thing is rarely a 'one man show,'" he explained. "An individual quickly scrapes the bottom of his creative barrel and, unless he has professional assistance, the quality suffers, noticeably. The readers soon lose interest, and the newspapers start to cancel." In 1959, Ketcham's staff in Carmel consisted of Lee Holley, art assistant, Fred Toole, comic book script writer and office secretary, Arch Garner, merchandise designer, Al Wiseman, comic book artist, and Bob Harmon, gag writer.

Many of his former assistants described Ketcham as a demanding taskmaster. There was never any doubt who was in charge of the production process. Each panel was designed by Ketcham, who saw his role as similar to that of a film director. "I set the thing up with the camera and spot the actors in a certain area," he explained. "If I don't like it I move the camera to the left or right or bring one of the people up close and balance it that way. When I have that figured out I go in and draw. I become the actor for every character. So it becomes an acting situation after you've done the staging."

Although the style of Dennis the Menace remained fairly consistent over the years, Ketcham tried many different tools and techniques. "I went through an experimental phase where I vacillated from pen-and-ink to brush only, to pencil only, to inking finishes directly with no preliminary pencil guide whatsoever," he recalled. He eventually settled on the Gillotte #170 pen and the #3 Winsor and Newton sable brush, both popular with cartoonists. Noel "Bud" Sickles, an accomplished

comic artist and illustrator who was a neighbor in Westport, once showed Ketcham how to attack a piece of paper aggressively with a pen. He learned to push the instrument to its limits, alternating between thin lines and bold strokes, and discovered that he liked the way “the tiny, flexible pen point skates across the two-ply plate-finish Strathmore.”

Ketcham earned respect among his peers for his single-minded devotion to the craft of cartooning. Bil Keane, creator of *The Family Circus*, once called him “the best pen-and-ink artist in America today. He still is a brilliant technician when it comes to drawing the lines that make his cartoons so beautifully artistic.” He was a stickler for detail and objects such as automobiles, bicycles and appliances had to be rendered meticulously. A master of composition, he varied the angle of perspective for the maximum dramatic effect. A skilled draftsman, he used all of the tools of the pen-and-ink medium, including cross-hatching, silhouetting, and chiaroscuro. His lines were smooth and clean and he brought his characters to life with subtle nuances of expression and posture.

Ketcham approached each panel as a mini-masterpiece. “I seem to have trapped myself over the years into creating such realistic situations that I must resort to elaborate designs that penetrate space and give the illusion of depth – like peering through a window in the page,” he remembered in his autobiography. “I try to draw so convincingly that the reader won’t notice.”

In the late 1960s, Ketcham decided to add a black character to the cast of *Dennis the Menace*. “I named him ‘Jackson’ and designed him in the tradition of Little Black Sambo with huge lips, big white eyes, and just a suggestion of an Afro hair style,” he explained. In the introductory panel, Jackson was in the backyard with Dennis, who said to his mother, “I’ve got a race problem with Jackson. He can run faster than me.” The ill-advised attempt to integrate the feature did not go over well. Protests erupted in Detroit, Little Rock and Miami and, in St. Louis, rocks and bottles were thrown at the offices of the *Post Dispatch*. Ketcham issued a statement explaining that his intentions were innocent and Jackson went back into the ink bottle.

Around this same time, he decided to try launching a second feature. He observed that strips like *Steve Canyon* and *Beetle Bailey* had succeeded with a military theme, but none had starred a Navy character. He resurrected *Half Hitch* from his WWII-era freelance cartoons, developed a concept for a comic strip, enlisted the aid of Herb Gochros and Bob Saylor as writers and Dick Hodgins, Jr. as artist, and sold it to King Features Syndicate. *Half Hitch* ran from 1970 to 1975, but failed to build up an adequate list of clients to make it profitable.

After decades of meeting his daily deadlines, Ketcham finally retired from the production process. In the early 1980s, Ron Ferdinand took over the *Dennis the Menace* Sunday page and, in the mid-1990s, Marcus Hamilton began drawing the daily panel. Ketcham continued to closely supervise these artists until his death on June 1, 2001, at the age of 81. In his final years, he had more time for other artistic pursuits and painted a series of portraits of famous cartoonists and jazz musicians.

Although he tried to convey a positive outlook in his cartoons, Ketcham was not immune to tragedy in his own life. In 1959, after his first wife died of a drug overdose, he relocated with his son Dennis, who was twelve years old at the time, to Geneva, Switzerland, where he remained for seventeen years. Dennis was eventually sent to boarding school in Connecticut and later served a ten-month tour of duty in Vietnam. After the war he suffered post-traumatic stress disorder and became estranged from his father. Ketcham always regretted the burden he created for his son when he named his famous character after him. “He was brought in unwillingly and unknowingly,” he told an interviewer, “and it confused him.”

Ketcham’s second marriage ended in divorce and he was survived by his third wife, Rolande Praepost, and their two children, Scott and Dania. He lived long enough to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Dennis the Menace*.

“You hope it will last a week or two,” he told an interviewer. “You can’t project, you can’t sit and dream, you go in there with your positive thoughts and concentrate on what you’re doing and let the professionals do their job. If you both do your jobs, it will be a success.”

Asked to sum up the appeal of his famous character, Ketcham mused paternally, “He makes people smile and laugh when they read his words and see his actions, which express an innocence shared universally by five-year-olds. Some things fortunately never change.”

Looking at a Dennis the Menace panel is like seeing the world through Hank Ketcham’s eyes. His unique artistic perspective enabled readers to briefly recapture the simple joys of childhood and imagine a life of white-picket fences, green grass and golden sunsets. Although it portrayed an idealized picture of American family life, Dennis the Menace has endured because Hank Ketcham’s vision was timeless.

Hank Ketcham's has always been a secret pleasure and comfort to me. It's one of the true classics of the comic strip genre, and as American as apple (and mud) pies.

Brian Walker has a diverse background in professional cartooning and cartoon scholarship. He is a founder and former director of the Museum of Cartoon Art (now the International Museum of Cartoon Art), where he worked from 1974 to 1992. Since 1984, he has been part of the creative team that produces the comic strips Beetle Bailey and Hi and Lois. He has written and edited more than a dozen books on cartoon art, including a two-volume history for Harry N. Abrams Inc., *The Comics Since 1945* and *The Comics Before 1945*, as well as numerous exhibition catalogues and magazine articles. He has served as curator for over 65 cartoon exhibitions including three major retrospectives, “The Sunday funnies: 100 Years of Comics in American Life” at the Barnum Museum in Bridgeport, Connecticut, “100 Years of American Comics” at the Belgian Center for Comic Art in Brussels and “Masters of 20th Century American Comics” at the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. He is currently the chairman of the Connecticut chapter of the National Cartoonists Society.

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