

# The Sphere

Vol. 196 no. 1, published for the 225th Mailing of The Southern Fandom Press Alliance by Don Markstein, 14836 N. 35th St., Phoenix, AZ 85078, (602)485-7860, [ddmarkstein@home.com](mailto:ddmarkstein@home.com), [don@toonopedia.com](mailto:don@toonopedia.com), <http://www.toonopedia.com>, <http://www.stormloader.com/markstein>. Headline type: Tempus Sans. New e-mail address coming next mailing. If home.com doesn't work, switch to cox.net, same prefix, or use the Toonopedia address.

How time flies. It wasn't very long ago that 2001 was sci-fi. Now it's history. And what history!

The comic strip at the bottom of this page may have been reprinted in SFPA already, but even if it has, it's just too choice. I predict it'll be a classic, like the "Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!" episode of *Doonesbury*. It was the buzz connected with this Thanksgiving installment that attracted me to the strip (name of *Boondocks*, by the way). I've been glancing at it on-line once in a while — I guess, by now, to the point where you could call it part of my morning rounds on the Internet.

The cartoonist, Aaron McGruder, is among the few Americans with a prominent platform from which to speak, who doesn't see the September 11 attack as his cue to go blind with patriotism. His main character, Huey Freeman (the one saying grace below), makes points about post-2001 America that nobody else in the media seems to be making. McGruder (a very young guy, by the way, like Garry Trudeau when *Doonesbury* was making its reputation) says he felt like he was risking his career when he started doing this stuff (which he considers more "common sense" than taking a political stand). And of course, when you buck the tide of public opinion, there's always the chance of getting washed away. But there's also a chance your brand of "common sense" may strike a chord with enough others to make a real splash.

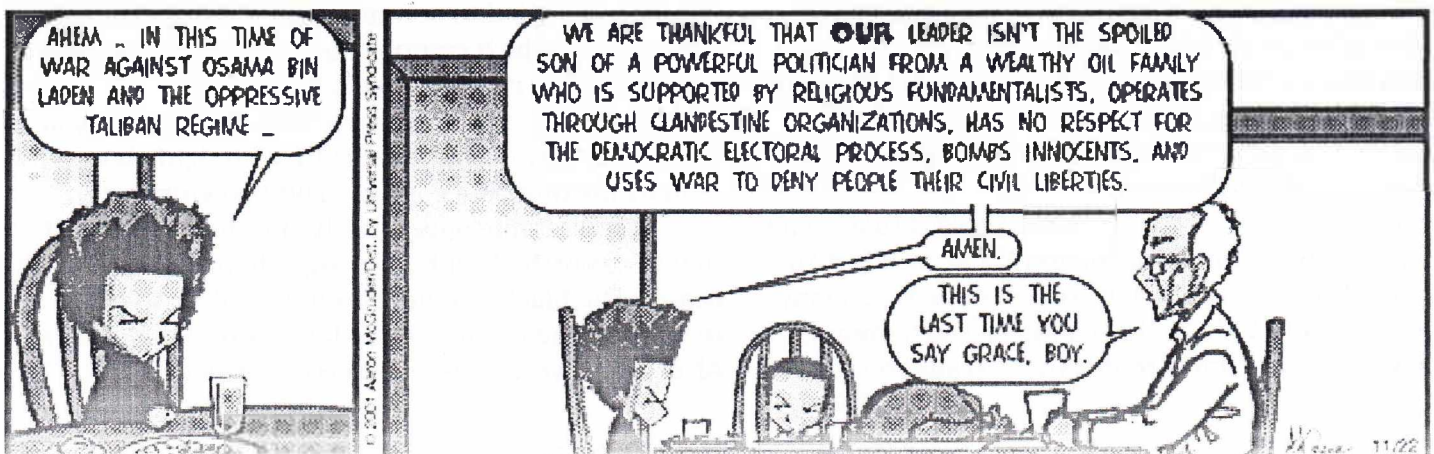
Anyway, in a time when Political Correctitude seems to lie in waving the flag and loudly support-

ing Washington's endless crusade to rid the earth of former CIA terrorists who now freelance, I admire this guy for speaking his own mind (especially seeing as how he's so clever and funny about it), and hope he and his strip prosper.

Speaking of comic strips with a point of view, anybody here read *Mallard Fillmore*? There's another one whose cartoonist (Bruce Tinsley) isn't afraid to make a statement — but in this case, he's not especially clever or funny about it, and he's not saying anything that strikes me as requiring more courage than shown by the average caller-in to talk radio. While it's okay to not say a darned thing that I can't hear in a grocery store check-out line, I'd find the strip a lot more enjoyable if he said it more cleverly.

I want to add it to the *Toonopedia*<sup>™</sup> (mainly because I'm partial to ducks, but also because it's such a bizarre artifact of Clinton-era right-wingerism), but I have a rule (unofficial, but I still observe it) against anything that started less than ten years ago (historical perspective, y'know), and *Mallard* only goes back to 1994. So the plan is to write it up around 2004 or '05. That will make it a better article, I think, because I'll have a chance to evaluate the effect on it of an entire Bush term of office.

As of the close of the Clinton presidency, *Mallard Fillmore*'s circulation stood at about 400 papers. Not in the *Blondie/Hagar the Horrible* range, but very, very respectable. But back then, he had Clinton to kick around. Clinton jokes were funnier, even when told by a guy who strikes me as a curmudgeonly



humorist without enough of the humor, because they were new. Now, tho, all Tinsley does is trot out the same tired old liberal media, evil Democrats etc.

Not to say that sort of stuff can't be entertaining. Rush Limbaugh, for example, is a fine entertainer — it'd be really cool if he'd do a daily strip! It's just that this guy, who comes off too bitterly sarcastic to be very funny, isn't.

So it's my guess, he'll slide over the next few years — not to a point that would endanger the strip's viability (there are probably enough people who think a guy like him is tellin' it like it is, and are themselves too bitterly sarcastic to know whether or not they're reading something funny, to support it), but noticeably. In fact, he's probably sliding already, tho it's hard to tell yet, since King Features hasn't updated his profile in a couple of years.

But maybe I'm putting him down unjustly — he might have just set up the scenario badly. One reason *Boondocks* is funny is the variety of characters in it — Huey would sound like a broken record if he didn't have Grandad to provide counterpoint, for example in the last balloon of that Thanksgiving strip. Mallard, however, generally isn't challenged by any credible character, just an occasional liberal buffoon. That's probably a plus with the people who agree with him, who are very emphatically not interested in any other point of view, but to me it's the difference between a conversation and a tirade.

Don't take my word for it. Check out both strips for yourself. You can find links to practically every syndicated comic strip that's available online at my site, <http://www.toonopedia.com/onlinesn.htm>

## Nathan

At three months (as you read this, at least), my grandson is growing by leaps and bounds. We're taking a photo of him on a regular weekly basis to record his physical growth, but right now he seems to be growing intellectually for the most part. He gazes intently at things, apparently trying to figure them out. He holds his hand in front of his face and moves his fingers, just to see how they work. He pokes and prods, investigating the world around him in every possible way.

He "talks" now — that is, makes noises that aren't desperate wails for help, apparently in an effort to imitate human sounds. Lots of vowels, not so many consonants — in fact, I haven't heard any, myself, tho others sometimes report them. (I suspect they're

being generous with borderline sounds.) He also smiles, and don't you tell me it's just gas at his age, because I've done babies before, and I know the difference. He's even starting to learn how to laugh.

He likes *Sesame Street*. Hard to say how much he's getting out of it, but the bright colors, simple designs and clearly enunciated voices definitely attract his attention. By the time we started turning it on for him, tho, I was already reciting the alphabet and reading to him a little. I also spell his name for him, and count from one to ten.

Lately, I've been counting to five in several different languages, showing him the requisite number of fingers as I do. Of course, he doesn't understand it yet, but anything he's exposed to regularly at this age, he'll eventually get. In any case, he does seem to enjoy watching my fingers move around.

Neat kid. It's been a long time since we had a baby in the house, so I guess anybody his age would look pretty neat to me — but this one, if you ask me, is particularly so. (Not that I'm biased.)

You can see pictures of him at <http://www.stormloder.com/markstein/nathan.html>

## Toonopedia™ Stuff

Articles added since the last SFGA: The Black Widow (1940); The Black Widow (1964); Classics Illustrated; The Comet; Fantomah, Mystery Woman of the Jungle; For Better or for Worse; Friday Foster; The Hangman; Jay Ward Productions; King Leonardo & His Short Subjects; Harvey Kurtzman; The Little King; Redeye; The Red Tornado (1940); The Red Tornado (1968); Scribbly the Boy Cartoonist; Secret Agent X-9; and Snow White & the Seven Dwarfs. New total: 424.

Without really meaning to, or thinking very much about it, I somehow seem to have gone on a minor quest to find and articlize the first female superhero. Of course, this begs the question, what's a superhero? I tried to accommodate most definitions of the word, which complicated it, but that was only the first of the complications.

It started when I wrote an article on Black Fury (a newspaper strip about a socialite who fights boredom by putting on a costume and launching a crusade against crime and/or evil), and mentioned in it that she was the first female superhero (having beaten The Black Cat and Phantom Lady into print, to say nothing of Janie-come-lately Wonder Woman). After a few weeks, I remembered — The Red Tor-



nado came before Black Fury. So I corrected the article, and wrote one on The Red Tornado, which I'd been meaning to do sooner or later anyway.

But if I have an article on The Red Tornado, who debuted in 1940, then I also have to have one on The Red Tornado who debuted in 1968, because that's the one most comics fans of the last 30 years expect. (The Toonopedia isn't mainly aimed at comics fans, and I doubt they're a majority of the audience, but they're a noticeable and vocal portion of it and I'd rather educate than confuse them.) Also, since the 1940 one started out as a Scribbly supporting character, I figured it was best to do one on Scribbly, too.

So that's three articles written, to get the one up that I wanted. Not all that bad, since I was **eventually** going to get all of them done anyway, tho there's a lot of more important stuff that I still haven't gotten to.

Then I picked up on a real obscure that Marvel did in 1940, called The Black Widow. A strange and interesting character, and by some perfectly reasonable definitions, a superhero. **And**, she predated The Red Tornado. But if I'm going to write her up, then I **certainly** have to do the 1964 version as well.

So the obscuros pile up; and while a comics fan wouldn't necessarily call any of those characters obscure (except the 1940 Black Widow), the only reason I'd include some of them in a work aimed at the general public (which this mostly is) would be to provide what I think of as "texture" — a lot of "B-list" stuff to augment the major draws by helping to put them into context. As for what my audience itself wants, I get occasional requests for *Our Boarding House* or *Calvin & the Colonel* on an individual basis, but the only requests for The Red Tornado or The Black Widow come from people who are just listing a dozen or more superheroes — confirming my belief that it's important to have a bunch of such things, but no single one matters very much.

Anyway, next I caught wind of a character called "Fantomah, Mystery Woman of the Jungle". She's definitely not of the general superhero mold, but she does have bizarre powers and a dual identity, and she uses them to combat evil. And she appeared before **any** of the others I'd done. So I took a couple of hours to do a quickie article on her. (At least, characters like her are easy to add — it doesn't take long to track down and write up what little is documented about them.)

By this time, I'm starting to wonder — how many of these characters are out there? So instead of just waiting to run across them, I put some effort into

digging them out. And I found no less than **ten** female characters that could, by more-or-less reasonable definitions, be construed as superheroes, **all** of which came before Wonder Woman. And I'd only done articles on six of them!

So I dropped the Quest after Fantomah — she's the earliest of the candidates anyway (that I know of). Eventually, I'll do articles on at least some of the other four — which, by the way, include *Invisible Scarlett O'Neill*, which somehow managed to slip my mind during all of this. Maybe the next I do from that list will be Madam Satan — no real reason, except that I happen to have a bad attitude toward Archie Comics right now, over their treatment of the creative people who have contributed significantly to their success (not just Dan DeCarlo), so I'd like to help them avoid living down the fact that they once published characters like her. But that would be another obscure — this one's major claim to fame is that the character who took up her slot when they dropped her was Archie himself.

Speaking of Archie Comics, tho, I ran across a really good picture of one of their 1940s characters, The Comet, and did a little prepping to get it ready to plug into a Toonopedia page. A few weeks later, I needed a quickie article (I try not to go more than a few days without doing any), so I wrote him up. But it's another of those paired things — I realized after writing it that it was incomplete without one on The Hangman (read them to see why), so there's another obscure. In fact, they're both obscuros (tho The Comet, at least, has the distinction of having been created by Jack Cole).

Then there's Friday Foster, another obscure, which I wrote up on the strip's anniversary because I didn't have anything better for "Today in Toons". It's justified by the fact that she was the first black female lead character in a syndicated newspaper strip, but that's a fairly thin distinction, and geez — even tho I did *Classics Illustrated*, *Snow White*, *The Little King* and *For Better or for Worse* in the past couple of months, it seems like there've been an awful lot of obscuros lately.

Not that it matters a whole lot — there's so much bulk to the site now, the average general-public recognition factor won't be dragged down by a string of stuff like that. Besides, I like writing up the ones that are obscure but interesting. But I can't let myself be **too** self-indulgent about that sort of stuff when I still haven't written up Smurfs, Mad magazine, Filmation, Dark Horse Comics, Alphonse & Gaston, Walt Kelly...

Of course, that kind of stuff is way more work than just digging up the few available facts about Friday Foster...

By the way, Feb. 13 (when Nathan will be three months and one week old, by the way) is the first anniversary of Opening Day.

## Funnybook Writing

I have almost twice as many Egmont assignments this year as last, making 2002 my biggest year yet in that venue. First time it's gone up in a couple of years. Gotta run like hell to stay ahead of the work, but I got off to a good start and already have one in the pipeline.

I wrote a story for them last year, about Mickey chasing a monkey through a deserted exhibit hall full of practical joke equipment (and it only took four pages to set all that up). When the monkey is introduced, his trainer claims he's skilled in all the practical joking arts, and is available for weddings, bar mitzvahs, funerals... David Gerstein, my editor, who has amazingly detailed knowledge of Disney lore, says he thinks that might be the very first mention of bar mitzvahs in a Disney comic book. Didn't realize I was making history there — I just wanted something to stick in the sentence that was a little more interesting than "birthday parties".

The goofiest error of my career happened in that story, by the way. One of the practical joke items was what I called a "catapult land mine" — you step on it and an enormous spring, far larger than could possibly fit inside, catapults you far, far away. I described it as round and flat, maybe a little oblong, looking more-or-less like a turkey platter.

And the artist drew it looking like a turkey platter — **with a turkey on it!**

Good thing I didn't say it looked like a toilet seat!

This ranks right up there with a page they reproduce in the writers' guidelines, where for no apparent reason, a guy has a steering wheel around his neck. (This happened because of the artist's imperfect grasp of the writer's language.) But that one was corrected before it got into print, and mine wasn't, because none of the editors and proofreaders who saw it before me thought there was anything odd or unusual about Mickey not noticing he's about to step on an entire roast turkey, and by the time I saw it, it was too late to change.

It got "covered" (if you want to call it that) in dialog by changing the device to a "catapult turkey

dinner" — which is actually kind of amusing in a dadaesque sort of way, but surely, at least one or two of the tens of millions reading it will scratch their heads over that.

For the first time in a couple of years, I also have non-Egmont possibilities, some Disney and some not, in the works. (Aside from the self-generated stuff that I'm always working on to one extent or another, of course.) Maybe I'll be able to talk about one or two next mailing. Early indications are that 2002 may be a significant year for me in this area.

## True Pirate Tales

Back in the days when all ships carried big guns, it was usually, for various reasons, found convenient to keep cannonballs near the cannons. But if they just laid the things on the deck, the balls would roll all over the place and wreak havoc. So they made holders to keep them in place. For some no-doubt very clear and perfectly understandable reason, which I unfortunately don't happen to know, these holding devices were called "monkeys".

A "monkey" consisted of a thick slab of metal, bolted to the deck, with 16 circular indentations, each deep enough to hold a cannonball in place. The indentations were arranged in a square, and spaced so the balls would just touch one another. The 16 balls formed the base of a pyramid with nine in the second layer, four in the third, and one on top. Since objects made of iron and kept outdoors on a ship have a tendency to rust together into a solid mass, the "monkeys" were often made of brass.

In extreme temperatures, brass expands or contracts to a much greater extent than iron. In very cold weather, then, it would occasionally happen that the "monkey" would contract to the point where its indentations were no longer large enough to hold the cannonballs, which would then slide out and create a hazard by rolling around on the deck.

So — what did you think the expression "Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey" referred to?

## Ned Brooks:

Yeah, yeah, Babybush took us to war without bothering about a formal declaration thereof. Big deal. So did his predecessor, and his predecessor's predecessor, and every other predecessor all the way back to Truman, plus quite a few earlier ones. Every



single president who has held office during my lifetime has taken us to war, and not one of 'em bothered about a formal declaration thereof. The last time the U.S. legally declared war was in 1941. The U.S. has evolved beyond declaring war. Nowadays, when Congress acknowledges a state of war (which it doesn't always do — sometimes the troops are there and back before anybody even finds out), it generally does so by snipping off a few more civil liberties.

Gary Brown:

That story you reprinted is typical of election recount coverage in the "liberal" media. Big headlines and lead paragraphs proclaiming that Bush would have won anyway, even without the mostly Republican-appointed Supreme Court putting in the fix. Several paragraphs detailing various mixes and matches of counting ranges and procedures that yield a Bush win. Then a bone to Gore, mentioning a couple of mixes and matches that might have given him a slight advantage. Way down at the bottom, in the type they throw out by the handful when the story runs too long, grudging acknowledgment of the fact that when you recount everything, even figuring the Palm Beach County votes as legitimate because the folks there were flimflammed out of 'em fair and square, Gore does seem to have gotten more Florida votes than Bush.

Liberal, man. Real, real liberal.

The artist on that Mickey Mouse story is named Xavi (pronounced Shah'-vee). I don't know whether that's his first or last name, or what his other name is (Egmont artists tend to use just one name for a by-line, and this guy hasn't been around long enough for me to have picked his up elsewhere). I think he lives in Spain. I don't like the art on that story as much as some of my others, because the characters looked out of proportion and it seemed to me there was too much noodling (I like a clear, bold line). (Xavi is also the one who made the "Turkey Platter" error mentioned earlier, under "Funnybook Writing".) I like some of the other stuff of mine he's done, but that one, not so much.

Yeah, being used as an information resource is one of my goals for the *Toonopedia*<sup>TM</sup>. I might have mentioned this already, but shortly after it opened, there was something in the mainstream news about Mighty Mouse being used in a "Power of Cheese" commercial. It mentioned who created the character; and while there's no way of knowing for sure the

writer got that factoid from me, it seems likely because I'm about the handiest source of it — I'm high in the search engines, and I do have that relatively hard-to-find info right at the top of my page. Makes me feel good — I've created something people seem to be actually using.

What's your source on *Turok, Dinosaur Hunter* being one of the best-selling video games of all time? I thought the only reason I'd ever heard of it was because of the comic book connection. I'm asking because sooner or later, I'm going to write the character up for the *Toonopedia*<sup>TM</sup>, and a factoid like that would be worth mentioning, if I can substantiate it.

I was OE when Joe Staton rejoined SFPA. Lon was OE when his first membership ended.

Gack! When did Ronn Foss become "the late"?

Janice Gelb:

No, I don't think the personal hatred heaped on Clinton was because his only substantiatable crimes were sexual. It began before he even took office, by which time they hadn't yet uncovered any more sexual impropriety than average for a politician (maybe because they hadn't yet spent \$50 million only to exonerate him of everything else). People really, truly don't care about that — as proven by the fact that they re-elected him.

I think it has more to do with the fact that he's a Democrat. In these days of widespread belief in Liberal Media, the Press, which (like everything else in the world) already tends to reflect the point of view of its mega-corporate owners more than its rank and file, got into frenzied competition with one another to see who could revile him the worst, so as to avoid (ironically enough) being accused of bias.

But that wouldn't explain it sufficiently either, because other Democrats have held office, and most of them are no less vulnerable to such tactics. In Clinton's case, tho, there also seems to have been a heavily funded hate campaign orchestrated by certain extreme right-wingers. But the last time I mentioned Richard Mellon Scaife and the Vince Foster-like way reporter Steve Kangas turned up dead in his bathroom, the only response I got was Toni telling me it's his money and he can spend it any way he wants.

And if you scoff at the heavily funded hate campaign, then where did that amazing, unprecedented and mind-numbingly sustained spate of vitriol come from? Neither your suggestion (that it's sexual — that would apply to too many politicians) nor Toni's

(that Clinton is extraordinarily evil — that was disproved by Kenneth Starr) can explain it.

## Steve Hughes:

I suppose "not on speaking terms" would be one way of describing how things are between you and me. I wouldn't put it that way, tho, because it would imply a state of dudgeon of one level or another, which is both more active than the way I perceive the situation, and more likely to change in response to future interactions between us. From my point of view, you're a guy I used to know, found no pleasure in knowing, and left behind with the rest of my "life's too short" baggage. I have no objection to speaking to you — in fact, I'm doing so right now. The reason I don't on a regular basis is, that would constitute maintaining a relationship with you, and life, as I said, is just too damn short.

Which is why it came as such a surprise when I opened your zine (not noticing whose it was — I usually don't when I'm paying better attention because that would constitute maintaining a relationship with you) and found that after all these years, you're **still at it** — deliberately sticking yourself into unpleasant situations that you could easily avoid, for the sole purpose of making negative remarks about me and no other party. You didn't happen to mention exactly what you're chastizing me for this time, but does it matter?

And this lovely treat comes complete with speculation about my personal affairs, based on — what? Certainly not anything I've said in SFPA. Do you have some other means of thinking you know what's going on in my life?

Un. Fucking. Believable.

Please don't tell me you're only saying this because you're concerned for my immortal soul, or whatever it is you and one or two others used to be (still are?) concerned for. That would be a bit more '70s nostalgia than I really need.

## Norm Metcalf:

I think it's legit for a critic (such as John M. Baxter, whom you cite) to enjoy stories that don't meet his critical standards. An honest critical evaluation of such a story might be that it's entertaining fluff, a thing of no real consequence that does at least have the virtue of providing an enjoyable read. It's okay for critical standards to require story elements that portray memorable characters, make us

see things in a new way, help us clarify our thoughts, or in some other way give us more than **just** entertainment. Entertainment value is a minimum requirement for good fiction, but it's not the **only** thing worth considering.

## Sheila Strickland:

Actually, the Clinton Body Count is one of the few things the more rabid Clinton-bashers claimed that I can halfway take seriously. I've already seen several versions of the Bush Body Count, and I believe much of what's in that too. A few names, such as Vince Foster, are on both lists, and I find either version reasonably plausible — if I were paranoid enough, I could probably believe both at once. In neither the Clinton case nor the Bush do I claim there aren't a few pretty far-fetched names on the list. On the other hand, both contain deaths that were a little too unexpected, a little too convenient, and a little too difficult to explain any other way.

I've seen what kind of person succeeds in politics even on the level of workplaces or convention committees, and I've seen that as a general rule, the higher the stakes, the nastier the successful politician must be. Anybody who has what it takes to get nominated for president by a major political party — Yeesh! I very much doubt such a person would scruple at leaving a few corpses in his wake.

Politics favors the more ruthless party. It seems more fantastic to me that anyone who balks at murder for political reasons could rise past those who don't, than that Our Trusted Leaders are murderers.

I trust my point of view in this matter is understood to be thoroughly bi-partisan.

Almost ten pages before formatting. Minac once again, and I don't even have to do it in ridiculously large type. Woo hoo!

Don't pay any attention to the white space below. I sure don't.