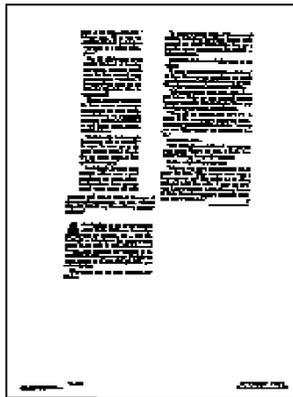
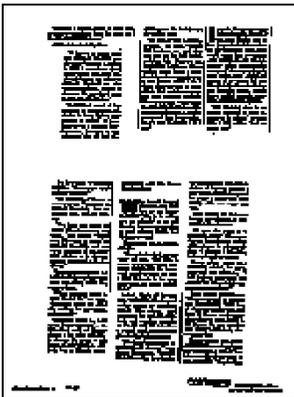
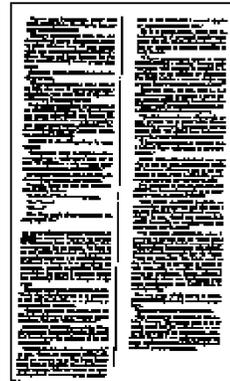
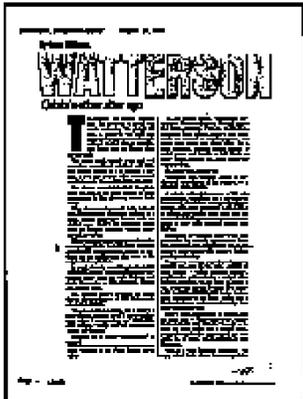


WATTERSON

Calvin's other alter ego

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by Gene Williams
[Gene Williams is the Plain Dealer sports editor.]



These reduced scans were made from a microfiche copy of the article (NewsBank Reference Service Plus; Fine Arts; 1987 FAA 18:C4). The original copies were white on black, and when converted to the black on white text included here, were not high enough quality to be run through an OCR program. Therefore, the entire text was typed in by hand, and reproduced on the following five pages.

The few speeches and interviews from Bill Watterson that appear on the Internet are often from untraceable sources. For this reason, I am producing this as an Adobe Acrobat PDF file so that this citation will remain intact. This is to keep valid the article that I have spent so many hours typing and arranging for the fans.

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Calvin and Hobbes: Unplugged
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The house is not exactly Hudson chic. The driveway is paved with weeds and rocks. The garage out back is listing to the right and looks as if at any moment it might collapse on the orange Volkswagen Beetle and red Honda Civic parked inside.

The house itself, though clean and well cared for, is small and cramped, and difficult to find, wedged as it is between a nursery, a pub, and several other commercial establishments. Sneeze and you've missed it.

But what is remarkable about the place, truly amazing, is the thick blanket of quiet surrounding it. The silence is almost deafening.

Why, there is no 6-year-old living here, no loud-mouthed little hell-raiser engaged in a noisy, deadly squirt-gun battle with his stuffed tiger. There's no perpetual pillow fight, no horrible monsters lurking under the bed, no ruckus.

Which is indeed surprising since this is the once and soon be no more home of Calvin and Hobbes, the 6-year-old darling of millions, and the stuffed tiger that roars to life only in his imagination.

In truth, the only ones living here are Bill Watterson, creator of the phenomenally successful comic strip, his wife Melissa, and their three cats – Pumpernickel, Sprite, and Juniper Boots.

Yes, it's true, there is no living, breather Calvin. He is a figment of Bill Watterson's mind. So is Hobbes.

"People are always asking me if there's a little Calvin at home, or if I had a stuffed tiger growing up," Watterson says, smiling. "I think they are disappointed when I tell them no."

Perhaps not so much disappointed as amazed.

As any parent knows, Watterson's portrayal of Calvin is dead-on. The kid, named for 16th-century French Protestant reformer John Calvin, doesn't like girls, won't eat oatmeal or anything green, and treats bath water like bread mold. He is rude, petulant, pouting, totally lacking social graces and lovable as hell. He is, in other words, exactly like every 6-year-old who ever lived.

Or in this case, doesn't live.

Watterson does, however. And if he isn't the total embodiment of his creation, he is infinitely more complex.

A warm, soft-spoken man of 28 who laughs easily, Watterson had a wry sense of humor and, like Calvin, is eminently likable.

Though quiet, he is passionate in his pursuit of privacy, hot-blooded in his anger over the country's shrinking comics pages and down-right in love with drawing Calvin and Hobbes.

Although he dislikes interviews, and grants very few, he recently agreed to sit down and discuss his now-complicated life as the creative force behind the nation's fastest growing comic strip.

Watterson, wearing large-frames glasses, answers the door to his home dressed in work clothes – yellow high-top sneakers, purple socks, yellow slacks, a striped shirt and a thin blue belt. On his wrist he wears a red, green and purple Swatch. His moustache is neatly trimmed, but bushy, a startling contrast to his hair, which has a Marine basic cut – close to the scalp. Any closer and he'd be bald.

After a quick introduction of Melissa and the three cats – "Stay away from Juniper Boots, she's not very friendly," he says – he drops his bony frame into a nearby chair, prepared to probe the mysteries of the universe. Or, at least, the mysteries of Bill Watterson.

"This is a very fictitious enterprise," he says, asked from where his tummy-tickling ideas spring. "It sometimes baffles me that people think I have some insight into children. I don't think people change much from children. They learn to cover up their initial reactions, but I think that there's this childish part in all of us. The little kid thinks of the world how it affects him. He is the center of the universe. I think those things are still in us and if you can tap that you don't need a special insight into children."

But you have to know them a little, and Watterson does. When Calvin digs speed bumps in the year, or seeks permission to set fire to his mattress, or insults the little girl down the street by asking, "Is that your face or a possum stuck in your collar?" you know Watterson has done his homework.

"The way I conceive Calvin," he says with a smile, "is all that I hate about little kids and try to make it worse."

Yeah, we know what you're thinking. If he doesn't have a kid of his own, Watterson must be basing Calvin on person experiences. Right?

Wrong again.

Watterson grew up in Chagrin Falls, the oldest of two sons born to James, a patent attorney, and Kathryn, a city councilwoman. He has an early interest in cartooning and often would spend hours in his room drawing. His father remembers him as very quiet and

unassuming. Not at all like Calvin who seems to be in training as the next Sam Kinison.

"He was a conservative child," says James Watterson. "Not that he was unimaginative, because of course he was. But not in a fantasy way. He and his brother (Tom) would make time-lapse movies and that certainly showed a certain amount of imagination. And he would draw his characters. But he was nothing like Calvin. He didn't have an imaginary friend like Hobbes and he wasn't a Dennis the Menace."

James pauses and laughs. "If he was, I don't know if we would have made it or if he would have made it, to tell you the truth.

If Watterson's personality mimics anyone in the strip, it is that of Hobbes, name after John Hobbes, a 17th-century English political philosopher.

"People ask that all the time," he says. "I guess I'm much more like Hobbes. He's much more rational."

Not that he isn't funny. He is. Hobbes is more the straight man, however, an Abbott to Calvin's Castello. His character is a bit more complex and thus, harder for Watterson to grasp.

"Calvin is pretty easy to do because he is outgoing and rambunctious and there's not much of a filter between his brain and his mouth," says Watterson. "Hobbes is more of a subtle character and it took me a little longer to get a bead on him. And what's surprised me and is gratifying is that people think that Hobbes is the one who has captured their hearts and imagination. It surprised me because he's a little harder to get a feel for. Maybe it's just because he is fuzzy that people warm up to him."

Whatever this reason, Watterson says he must be careful not to dominate the strip. Animal characters tend to take over when the artist isn't watching.

"Animal characters in general tend to get more attention," he says. "You can almost hang yourself with it. Almost as soon as you put an animal in the strip they take over. Bloom County for example really took off when Opus came. There's always some danger of the character running away with the strip. In Peanuts, Snoopy has taken the lead role. You have to watch that kind of thing. Just make sure the animal isn't changing the strip in a direction you don't want to go in."



It would be hard to imagine anyone, Calvin and Hobbes included, taking Bill Watterson anywhere he didn't want to go. He is a

strong-willed, no-nonsense man who knows what he wants and doesn't want, what he likes and doesn't like.

Recently, when Universal Press Syndicate, which handles the strip, asked him to do the standard tour to publicize his first book "Calvin and Hobbes," he refused.

Though it would have benefited him to make the tour, Watterson is an extremely private person who is "shell-shocked" by his celebrity, and he didn't like the idea of further exposing his face to the public. As it turned out, his face wasn't needed to sell books. The initial printing was 50,000. At last count, there were more than 500,000 in print.

More than anything, the success of the book testifies to the popularity of the strip, which started with 35 papers just two years ago and now runs in "a little over 300," including The Plain Dealer.

"You have to say a little over 300 because I'm not sure," says Lee Salem, editorial director at Universal Press Syndicate. "We sign five or six more papers every week and it's hard to keep up with the exact figure.

"I saw some recent surveys which said the strip is No. 1 in reader support, that it was their favorite. The papers were the Sacramento Union, the Chicago Tribune, and the Westchester-Rockland papers. That's a pretty diverse group. People just love the strip.

"I don't think we've ever had a strip take off as fast as Calvin and Hobbes."

Faster than Doonesbury, faster than Bloom County, faster than The Far Side, the top strips of the '80s.

Which is not surprising, really. The strident political tone of Doonesbury, drawn by Gary Tudeau, turns off many readers, while the quirkiness of Berke Breathed's Bloom County and Gary Larson's The Far Side appeals mostly to the young adult crowd.

Calvin and Hobbes seems to come alive for all age groups.

"When we first started it, I took it home to my kids, who were 11 and 13 at the time," says Salem, "and they loved it. My oldest said it was a Doonesbury for kids."

Such acclaim is satisfying to Watterson, if not altogether gratifying. He likes the idea that people enjoy Calvin and Hobbes. He likes the idea that he can make a comfortable living from Calvin and Hobbes. He doesn't like the idea that Calvin and Hobbes has made him a celebrity.

Fortune is one thing; fame is quite another.

"The celebrity aspect of the job has taken me aback and I really can't stand it," he says. "It mystifies me why so much attention is generated by my personal life."

He is nearly obsessed with maintaining his distance from the public, and the media.

Recently, Salem let slip that Watterson was planning to move.

"Is this true?" Watterson was asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Where?"

"Out West, that's all the information I'm going to give you."

Now before you write off Watterson as an arrogant ingrate, be advised nothing could be more wrong. He is not ungrateful for his success. Far from it. He just doesn't understand why people feel the need to know him – to poke through his underwear as he puts it – as well as his characters. And he is genuinely flabbergasted that his job as a cartoonist makes him something special in the eyes of the world.

He doesn't like those eyes focused on him. That's why, when he agreed to an interview it was only by his rules – no pictures, no questions about his lifestyle.

"One guy wanted to do a story about the lifestyle of the soon to be rich and famous cartoonist," he said. "I don't want that."

His reactions, he's told, is surprising. Given the success of Calvin and Hobbes, he surely had to anticipate the onslaught of fan and media attention.

"Success alone doesn't seem to answer it," he says. "There are successful lawyers who don't get written up in The Plain Dealer three times in two years. The same for successful doctors. There are people out there making much more substantial contributions to the world that I am and they're not receiving the attention I get."

He is, of course, acutely aware that the vast majority of us would readily trade places with him. Nearly all of us hunger for that 15 minutes of celebrity promised by Andy Warhol.

"I know most people dream of being famous or being a celebrity," he says, smiling thinly. "The attention is thought to be gratifying, or ego building, or something. I've found it to be a nuisance all the way around. There's very little of it that I enjoy."

There are some times, he says, when he and Melissa are eating, or enjoying a cup of coffee and he is approached by fans. Once, when

Melissa was ill, he went to a drugstore to buy a magazine for her and was recognized.

"You become a cartoonist all your life, all day," he says. "It's no longer a job. You are defined by your work. You suddenly have no private time. You cannot be a husband to your wife, you are still a celebrity cartoonist."

"If find that aggravating. If you can't have a personal life, it really seems to me to be a sacrifice."

That is why he refused the book tour. And why he does not want pictures of him taken for interviews. Photos rob him of his anonymity. A piece of him is offered for public consumption every time the camera clicks.

It is disturbing to him, he says, the need people have to set other people up as examples, or worse, as objects of interest.

"As a culture, we embrace people for no reason other than the fact that they have a job that puts them in a position of recognizability," he says. "People who have no other virtues necessarily are somehow made into these things that we devour."

"I'm especially uncomfortable when it pertains to myself, but the whole thing makes little sense at best. I mean, has Bruce Willis or Cybil Shepherd ever said anything that bettered anybody's life? Or Vanna White for god's sake. Yet people rush to buy their books or see them in person. If they have a baby or an affair it's splashed across the newspapers. "There's something very strange about our fascination with other people's lives that I don't think is entirely healthy."

But it is a fact of life and his is slowly, albeit reluctantly, coming around to accepting it.

That doesn't mean he likes it, however.

"The position I've been put in is unfortunate," he says. "My choices seem to be to buckle under and get walked over or else spend the rest of my life building walls around myself. I can make avoiding the press and the attention a full-time job and neither of those is very palatable."

"Someday I hope to arrive at some compromise or something I can live with, but I haven't found that balance."

And he is frustrated by that.

"If I go on at length about how I hate all this stuff, people think I'm either a grouch, or that I somehow think myself better than other people and I'm just not willing to expose myself to the unwashed masses. Neither is the case. It's just that I want to have my own life, too."

Understood, much of his reticence is connected to his desire to keep Calvin and Hobbes as popular 10 years from now as it is today. Over-exposure, he says, is the quickest way to kill the golden goose. Or in this case, the stuffed tiger.

"As part of this devouring process," he says, "people love to have you, and then they use you up and there's nothing left. They're not interested anymore. It's a cyclical thing and if I want the strip to be successful over a long period, which I do, I think there's a level of saturation that certain cartoonists have already reached. There are trends where there is a hot strip and then people don't care anymore. A certain amount of that is inevitable, but I'd like to control it if I can."

In truth, Watterson wants to control every aspect of the strip. That is why he has been reluctant to cash in on licensing deals that could make him a wealthy man. Though he and the syndicate make substantial money off the strip and book, they could make *enormous* money if he would OK the almost daily offer for Calvin and Hobbes shirts, lunch boxes, stuffed animals, post-cards, and television specials.

"The licensing man is no longer looking at this as money to be gained," he says with a wry smile, "but as money lost."

Yet he resists. "I'm trying anyway. These guys smell blood in the water."

The syndicate, of course, is encouraging Watterson to license the strip, but not pushing him. Not yet, anyway.

"The thing that drives the whole phenomenon is the strip," says Salem. "Right now, Bill wants to devote his time to the strip and not worry about all of this other stuff. He has to be the best judge of his time and creative efforts."

Watterson knows there is a market. A big one. Fans write every day asking where they can get shirts.

"They not only want it, they expect it," he says. "Somebody wrote the other day asking for six shirts, three in blue."

Watterson won't say he'll never license the strip – as Breathed said of Bloom County a few years back only to change his mind – but insists he won't jump in with both feet as Charles Schulz (Peanuts) and Jim Davis (Garfield) have.

Why doesn't he grab the brass ring while he's on the merry-g-round? Why is he willing to give up millions? Is the guy drawing his own

money when he isn't drawing Calvin and Hobbes, or what?

His reasons are, as always, complex.

"Money isn't why I got into this," he says. "The strip is more important than anything. If I got into the licensing I might not have the time I want to devote to the strip. And that's all I ever wanted to do."

Indeed, that's all he ever does. Most of his time is spent either doing, or thinking about the strip, and answering fan mail. He reads little, and watches virtually no TV. In fact, his television is a small black and white set given to him by his parents.

"Bill doesn't place a lot of emphasis on money," says James Watterson. "It's not what drives him. As a family, we downplayed the significance of having things. I don't think he'd be happier if he made a whole lot more money. He's not made that way."

Still, turning his back on a fortune isn't as easy as Watterson makes it sound.

He spent nearly five years as "a starving artist" after graduating from Kenyon College with a degree in political science. "I thought I was going to be a political cartoonist."

Strip after strip was rejected, which, he says, wasn't all that surprising. "I look back on them now and most of the things I did were acutely embarrassing."

Says James Watterson: "He got rejected some much it was discouraging. We'd look at what was coming back and knew it was so much better than what we were seeing in the papers. We kept thinking why doesn't somebody else recognize this."

Though always supportive James Watterson thought his son was drawing himself into a corner with ambition to be a cartoonist. "I kept telling him it was such a longshot," James says. "If he had listened to me, he'd probably be working in a bank someplace."

But Bill didn't listen to his father. He kept on turning out strips, some of which even he has hard times remembering. "Usually, I thought of the name for the strip as I typed the letter to the syndicate."

Finally, someone suggested he focus on two minor characters from one of his anonymous failures – a loudmouth little boy and his stuffed tiger – and bingo, bango, boingo, instant success.

"I obviously had enough faith that I kept on doing it," he says. "It never got to the point where I wanted to quit. On the other hand, it was quite discouraging."

In hindsight, he says, those hungry years were a good experience. He had an opportunity to learn from his mistakes. "Some people hit right away and they have to learn on the pages of the nation's newspapers," he says. "I could flop and fall on my face without anybody noticing."

After battling to get on the nation's comic pages, Watterson is now battling to maintain his – and cartooning's – integrity on the nation's comics pages. If you want to work him into real frenzy, just mention the subject of the incredible shrinking comic page. He flails his arms, fidgets in his seat and generally gets red in the face.

"This really gets my blood pressure up," he says.

To conserve space, many of the country's papers, including The Plain Dealer, have reduced the size of comic strips. It is not a popular move with readers or artists – especially artists.

Watterson is more vocal than most on the subject.

"It think that papers are killing the art form," he says. Because the drawings are being reduced, he says, they are becoming simpler. Thus, there is almost no room for writing.

"Adventure strips have gone right down the tubes. Strips are just getting stupider because they have to be so simple. There's no drawing, no movement, no expression.

"With all the competition from TV, it seems to me newspapers should be capitalizing on things television can't do. Cartoons are one thing nobody but newspapers can do."

Watterson smiles.

"You know, it sounds like all I do is gripe, gripe, gripe. That's not true. I really love what I'm doing. I've got the ideal job."

Ideal, or not, he'll do it his way.

"I figure, why start compromising values now," he says. "Why tamper with what's important to me? The whole fun of doing this is I beat the odds. I beat the system. I get to do what I want, the way I want to do it. There's no point in buckling under now after I've made it."