

Steve Breen, Pulitzer Prize-Winning Cartoonist, Views Life Through Prism of Faith

By Ann Aubrey Hanson

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — There's no other way to put this: Steve Breen is a really nice guy.

This is refreshing in a man who earns his living by creating sometimes acerbic editorial cartoons. But while his cartoons zero in on their targets with laser-like precision -- whether it's politics or one of society's many other hot buttons -- there is nothing mean-spirited about them.

Breen, a parishioner at St. John the Evangelist Parish in Encinitas, Calif., views the world through the prism of his Catholic faith and, in his cartoons, lays his values on the table for readers to see.

He says he sees his platform as a "mini billboard," where he has a "chance to influence people and change minds."

The strongest cartoons, he says, are those with the fewest words, where people "look at it and get it."

He cites his post-Sept. 11 cartoon with the American eagle sharpening his talons. There was no doubt in the readers' minds how Breen felt about the attacks.



When a cartoon is right, says Breen, "the reader supplies the background and the passion."

Anger, Sometimes

There is a risk, however. He can become a target of people's anger. Typically the anger reaches him through email or voice mail.

Sometimes the feedback is so vicious that Breen says he is happy to have a phone line between himself and his readers.

"I could never be an editorial cartoonist and have all those people hating me," Charles F. Schulz, creator of the "Peanuts" comic strip, told Breen early in Breen's career.

"This is definitely not a good profession if you need to be loved," says Breen, who takes the negative comments in stride, understanding that, "it's not personal, it's just politics."

Breen estimates that 70 percent of the feedback he receives on his cartoons is positive.

It's those positive comments -- when someone calls to say "you really hit the nail on the head" -- that really make his day. He fondly recalls one woman who saw his cartoon about the dire situation in the Sudan and called to tell him that his cartoon prompted her to send a donation for relief aid.

Each year Breen creates 270 editorial cartoons, one for every weekday. He also creates the "Grand Avenue" comic strip which appears in 150 papers nationwide seven days a week.

Breen also recently put his talent into a children's book, *Stick*, a story about a frog which he wrote for children 4-8 years old. Penguin Press publishes the book.

"I can see myself writing children's books for the rest of my life," Breen says of the project.

A Hectic Schedule

Cartooning fills a hectic schedule, contrary to what some might think.

"I know some people at work think I'm overpaid and underworked," he laughs, but being creative every day can be tough work, especially for a cartoonist who agonizes over cartoons which "aren't just right."

"It's easy to come up with ideas," he says, "but the real challenge is to come up with something good, something truly inspired."

There are topics du jour, such as Iraq or the Middle East, U.S. politics or social ills, from which he can draw on a regular basis. But it's the unexpected news that truly delights him. When Pluto was demoted from planet to dwarf planet, cartoonists such as Breen rejoiced. Here was new fodder, the unexpected and inspiring.

"It's not only cartoonists who get bored with the same old topics, the readers also get bored," said Breen. And he's not in the business of inducing yawns.

Breen won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998, for a collection of work he created in 1997, his first full year working as an editorial cartoonist. Breen's submission of 20 cartoons was one of 130 submissions reviewed by Pulitzer judges. Two of his heroes, Jeff MacNelly (creator of "Shoe") and Paul Conrad, were named as finalists -- each had three previous Pulitzer wins. The third finalist, Joel Pett, looked to be a shoe-in for the prize. Then out of the blue, the newbie Breen was announced as the winner. (Pett won in 2000.)

(Update: Breen won a second Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartoons in 2009.)

Looking Out for the Little Guys

In the years since winning the Pulitzer Prize, Breen has pushed to continue to improve his art, fighting any temptation to just "make do" or to cave in to "infotainment."

In his cartoons, Breen says he "looks out for the little guys," showing respect for life at all stages. He doesn't hesitate to make his values known on the topics of abortion (against it), embryonic stem cell research (against it, seeing value in post-natal or adult stem cell research), minimum wage (in favor of an increase), immigration (obey the law but look at the human factor), racism (against it) or sexism (also against).

"I like to ask myself — and this may seem a little silly — but what cartoons would Jesus clip out of the paper and put on his fridge?"

"It's a privilege to have this job," Breen says, "but it comes with a responsibility. It's not the Pulitzer Board judging your work when you die."

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