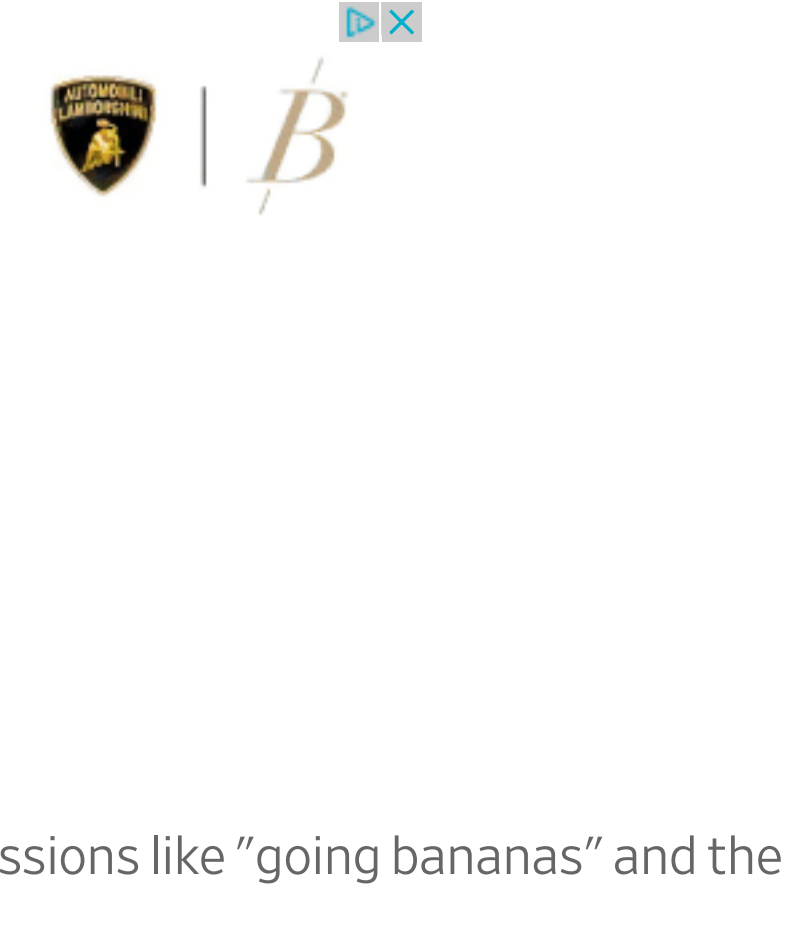




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The Unlovable Founder of Dogpatch

Al Capp's "Li'l Abner" comic strip gave the world dopey Abner and voluptuous Daisy Mae, as well as expressions like "going bananas" and the "double-whammy."

By Edward Kosner
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When I was a kid, my randy pals and I were fascinated by the accepted wisdom that Al Capp's "Li'l Abner" comic strip was a trove of pornographic images if you only knew where to look. The idea was that if you clipped the image of a recumbent Daisy Mae from one frame and superimposed on it a sketch of Abner from another, you'd have—well, you get the picture. We never scored, but not for lack of squinting.

It turns out that, back in the 1950s, congressional committees actually pored over photostats of Capp strips surreptitiously provided by a resentful rival cartoonist looking for crypto-smut, but they failed to find damning examples. This is but one of the indelicate tales told in Michael Schumacher and Denis Kitchen's "Al Capp: A Life to the Contrary," the first biography of a man who was a pop-cultural comet for four decades but has faded today into a Wikipedia entry.

AL CAPP

By Michael Schumacher & Denis Kitchen
Bloomsbury, 305 pages, \$30



Ad Lib Li'l Abner, Daisy Mae, Mammy Yokum, Pappy Yokum and a Shmoos—a type of playful creature that became a pop culture craze after their 1948 introduction.

CAPP ENTERPRISES, INC.

Capp, who died at 70 in 1979, gave the world not only the dopey Abner and the voluptuous Daisy Mae of Dogpatch, Ky., but also Fearless Fosdick and Sadie Hawkins, the lovable, edible Shmoos, Lower Slobbovia, Joe Btfsplk, who walked around under a rain cloud, and Lena the Hyena, the ugliest woman in creation. "Hogwash," "the double-whammy" and "going bananas" went from Capp's speech-balloons right into the American vernacular. At Capp's peak in the late 1950s, "Li'l Abner" ran in newspapers with 90 million readers. He had radio and TV shows and a multimillion-dollar business of merchandise and advertising tie-ins.

For all his manifest talent, Capp appears to have been a miserable human being. He was a habitual fabulist who turned nearly every story he ever told into an extravaganza of imagination. Indeed, his earnest biographers spend much of the book comparing Capp's version of events to the recollections of those he dealt with, invariably to Capp's disadvantage.

He feuded with ex-bosses and employees, most hysterically with one of his own brothers, who ran his merchandising empire. "There must be some way I can rid myself of the thieving, crazy sonofabitch," he wrote to another brother. "He is a cancer."

And Capp was so fervid a lecher that he would have been a rapist had his victims not been so determined to repel his clumsy advances. He was married to the same woman for four decades but conducted at least two long-running affairs, and when "Li'l Abner" was turned into a Broadway musical and a movie, he made casting-couch grabs at Goldie Hawn, Edie Adams and Grace Kelly, among many, many others.

Capp always believed that the turning point in his life came when 9-year-old Alfred Caplin (as he then was) lost his left leg in a streetcar accident in New Haven, Conn., where he grew up in an unhappy family closer to penury than the middle class. His handicap made him an anguished outsider, but overcoming it by sheer force of will and creativity propelled his career. "With two legs I had been a nobody," he said. "With one leg I was somebody."

The germ of Dogpatch came to Alfred at 14 when he and a friend sneaked away from home in New Haven and hitchhiked through Appalachia. He returned after a month but never finished high school and conned his way into a succession of art schools by claiming that a fictitious "Uncle Bob" would soon pay his tuition. At one of the schools, he fell in love with a young beauty from outside Boston named Catherine Cameron and soon married her. Her parents took it well, he said later, "for a family that had never met a Jew." Years after, while working for the cartoonist Ham Fisher, Capp introduced hillbilly characters into "Joe Palooka," the top strip at the time. Soon, Capp struck out on his own, and Abner, Daisy Mae and the rest came pouring from an abundant brow.

"Li'l Abner" started slow in 1934. But the strip's deft and entertaining social satire and its endless menagerie of characters won over readers. Everything in popular American culture was a target for Capp's sharp pen. He sent up Frank Sinatra, John Steinbeck, Orson Welles, Liberace and later Elvis Presley. Other strips were fair game, too. Fearless Fosdick was a parody of Dick Tracy. Lovable, empathetic Mary Worth emerged as the busybody "Mary Worm." Milton Caniff's intrepid Steve Canyon became "Steve Cantor," by "Milton Goniff"—Yiddish for thief.

As an amputee, Capp couldn't serve in World War II, but he drew pamphlets and other material for the war effort and paid hundreds of military hospital calls, mainly to servicemen who had lost limbs. His pointed satire of American life aside, Capp considered himself a patriot, and his disgust with the emerging culture of the 1960s and the student protests against the Vietnam War almost unhinged him.

He lampooned folk singer Joan Baez as "Joanie Phoanie," a guitar-strumming antiwar minstrel, and he even, as a derisive publicity stunt, followed John Lennon and Yoko Ono to Montreal, where he confronted them during their weeklong "bed-in" that culminated in their recording of "Give Peace a Chance." In a long Playboy interview in 1965, he spewed bile: "Under today's corruption of welfare," he groused, "any slut capable of impregnation is encouraged to produce bastards without end."

Old liberal friends like John Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. sided away. New chums like Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew took their place. He began touring college campuses, where he basically baited his young audiences. One of these tour stops led to his undoing in 1971, when he cornered a 20-year-old student, whipped open his bathrobe and tried to force himself on her. The story ultimately got out, and Capp's career was doomed. He finally retired "Li'l Abner" in 1977 and subsided into a drug-addled depression. He died two years later.

"I'm a novelist," Capp liked to proclaim. One cartoonist compared him to Dickens. An obituary writer called him the "Mark Twain of cartoonists." He certainly broke ground for satirical cartoonists like Garry Trudeau and his "Doonesbury." But, as Messrs. Schumacher and Kitchen's conscientious account shows, the man who made Dogpatch a metaphor for America was a sad, tormented soul who never could enjoy the gaiety he so freely gave others.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me," of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and The New York Daily News.

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