

Fritz the Cat Special Agent for the CIA



COMIX: The politics of a Crumbly cartoonist

By BARBARA COWARD
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It's a 35 page 10 x 4 format cartoon strip called SECRET AGENT FOR THE CIA, and its full colour cover shows a stealthy and slimy Fritz the Cat running past the 'slit-eyed hordes' of Chinese rats. In the background, the red sun is rising or setting (probably in this case setting). It sells for a dollar.

This pamphlet from Ballantine Books, New York, skilfully written and illustrated by Robert Crumb merits critical attention for many reasons. First, the cartoon format, which is both acid in character and nostalgic (looking back to the days of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck), is undeniably one of the most popular vehicles of ideology.

The 20-30 year olds of today consumed and lived out the fantasies presented in animated cartoons (television), and the pages of Buck Rogers and G.I. Joe comic books. If support for the military effort in imperialist wars, or a romantic notion of love was needed to bolster the ideological underpinnings of a corrupt capitalist society, then the

necessary groundwork could be effectively laid through the narrative and graphics of comics.

The form which we so avidly devoured in adolescence now reappears, recognizable to our senses (when we pick it up and leaf through, it has the same 'feel' as 10-15 years back), but apparently 'transformed' to fit the 'change of consciousness' which world events of the last decade, the American anti-war movement, and the counter-culture explosion have collectively generated. This pretended change of consciousness is a colossal shock.

Certainly Crumb (his name is appropriate) is a highly successful technician, that is he does his job with impeccable skill. His cartoons sell outrageously well, especially among current and even semi-disaffected members of the counter-culture. They pose as witty satire of the 'establishment'. This coherence of readership and content is the greatest indicator of what Crumb as a writer is doing and not doing. The story behind SECRET AGENT FOR THE C.I.A. corroborates this in

exacting detail: what tends to be a satire against racism, sexism, and myths about the Communist Chinese, is, in fact, patent reinforcement of these very attitudes. Fritz is a furry James Bond, sent to China to get details of the 'secret bomb' which the Chinese are concocting. He is so farout that he is constantly victim to the rape-attacks of assorted women-secretaries (Miss Oglemouse) and Su-Su "Chinese sex-bomb"). And he has such amazing cunning and finesse that he wins Tung Nchiki (get it?). No. 1 scientist of the People's Republic, over to the side of America, by offering him a job as a sports-car designer for G.M. The outcome of this stroke of ideological genius is that the secret bomb

(which is made up of 400 million Red Chinese people, who upon release will over-run America) has its course reversed, explodes in China, thus turning the "Reds" wicked energy upon itself. The narrative concludes with the hero Fritz enjoying the amenities of a secret agent, i.e. women, one after the other in gruesome succession, in his plush New York apartment.

In between these major events are strewn a whole range of grim but informative allusions. The extended metaphor of American cat and Chinese rats is obvious. The Chinese characters speak the conventionally reversed "r" and "l". The military is significantly brutal in their liquidation procedures, and the

scientists appropriately malleable as imperfectly brain-washed workers eager to defect.

The overall effect is quite devastating. Though the exaggeration borders on being, at times, ludicrous, the cynical stance presented by Crumb is attractive to those who find more serious treatment of politics too "heavy". Most people say they find Crumb's cartoons hilarious and inoffensive. I'm sure that this vicious attack on the Chinese people will be a real winner.

Leandre Bergeron has also identified the cartoon strip as an important format for information. What he wrote was the people's history of Quebec.

Students occupy over prof firing demand say in staffing decisions

TORONTO (CUP) — About a hundred students occupied the mathematics department office at the University of Toronto Tuesday to protest the effective firing of three popular math professors and a refusal to give them a voice in staffing decisions.

While students occupied, administrators quibbled over the establishment of a parity faculty-student committee to discuss student complaints about their lack of input in decisions of the department.

Math department chairman George Duff has opposed students in their attempts to get on department staffing committees. Duff told a noon rally Tuesday that university rules forbid students to sit on these committees.

Yet last week, Don Forster, university vice-president and

provost, told the sociology department that students could sit on such committees as these are only advisory bodies to the chairman and therefore not subject to restrictive guidelines.

Students have mobilized around the plight of a professor denied tenure last spring and two other professors who have been notified that their contracts will not be renewed when they expire this spring. The professor denied tenure will likely be unable to hold his job once his current contract expires.

Math students have collected more than 1,000 names on a petition asking that these professors be kept on staff and demanding to sit on the department staffing committee.

Arts and science dean Bob Greene said Tuesday he doubted that anyone other than Duff could reverse the firing decisions. He

maintained that both he and U of T president John Evans were unable to interfere.

The move to occupy came after Duff failed to respond to student demands at a noon hour rally Tuesday. Duff dismissed students' praise for faculty; "students rate highest those teachers from whom they learn the least."

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