

Krazy Kat

by Kent Blinston

I have learned one thing in trying to explain Krazy Kat to people: you cannot explain Krazy Kat to people.

Some people see the gentle humor and subtle ironies immediately. Others are slowly led to see what is going on; bit by bit they find wit and meaning in the small variations of life in Coconino County. The rest of humanity never see more than a crudely drawn cat being hit in the head with a brick.

The first and last groups above are settled in their respective fates. For the middle group, however, while I have given up trying to explain Krazy Kat, I will pass on what information I can, in the hope of helping potential fans organize the disjointed thoughts it creates.

"The most highly praised of all comic strips," according to the editors of the *Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics*, was the creation of George Herriman. Born in 1880, Herriman started drawing while working in his family's bakery. He moved to New York in 1901 and started working as an illustrator until 1908 when he joined the Hearst Syndicate as a cartoonist. He created three moderately popular strips; Baron Bean, Stumble Inn, and the Dingbat Family.

In the Dingbat's basement and in a small strip just below their own were a cat and a mouse. Strangely, the cat did not chase the mouse but instead the mouse attacked the cat with

bricks. Even more strangely, the cat enjoyed it. In fact the cat seemed to live for it.

By 1916 the antics of the cat and mouse were far more widely followed than their Dingbat owners so they struck out on their own. They moved to the surreal surroundings of Coconino County, a place where buildings, fences, open space, trees and giant stone "J"s could appear at any time. Even night and day were capable of changing from frame to frame.

The mouse, Ignatz, still threw bricks at the cat, Krazy, but another character was added: Offisa Pupp, a dog whose self-sworn duty was to protect Krazy Kat and put Ignatz mouse in jail.

For 28 years, until Herriman's death in 1944, these three chased each other through the unstable Coconino background. Though the strip was highly acclaimed, it was never the financial success of such contemporaries as the Katzenjammer Kids, Mutt and Jeff or Thimble Theatre (the original Popeye cartoons). *Krazy Kat* was never in danger of being cancelled, however, because its biggest fan was William Randolph Hearst, himself.

And that is it. This is the point where anything I say will be a waste of time. Here are some strips and a few notes to keep them in context. I hope you understand. I hope you enjoy.



"The strip itself is based on the age-old lovers' triangle, but one with a peculiar and unexpected difference, for the triangle is a dog, a cat, and a mouse. Offisa Pupp, a very masculine canine, is crazy about Krazy, a cat of indeterminate gender (sometimes referred to as "she" but often as "he"), who is in turn mad about Ignatz Mouse, a male rodent who lives only to vent his hostility on Krazy by hurling bricks at her loving head. Ignatz will go to any lengths to find a brick to hurl at the head of Krazy.

"She doesn't, moreover, love someone who hurts her." Quite the contrary: she loves someone who gives her unmitigated joy. How? By always trying his limited worst to make her unlove him, and always failing.

e.e. cummings

And Krazy lives to be beamed with that omnipresent brick. To our heroine — or hero — it is a sign that her "I'il angil" Ignatz is constant and true: "He neva fahgets," as Krazy puts it. Her persistence in seeing the situation in her own way gives the strip its distinctive flavor. It also causes Offisa Pupp to love the innocent cat even more, and impassions him with an absolute determination to protect her from the vicious blows of Ignatz; but even he cannot fail to see, as the rest of us do, that those swiftly flying bricks are the prime source of Krazy's happiness."

Barbara Gelman

One day in 1936 Krazy Kat returned from afar with a sack of "Tiger Tea" and for two years it turned her and the rest of Coconino County topsy-turvy. Innocent, loving, Krazy withdrew and huddled over her teapot like a San Diego Charger cooking freebase. She would then emerge aggressive and belligerent. Both Ignatz and Offisa Pupp drew back in fear and became allies in trying to understand what had changed the cat they loved. Krazy gave Tiger Tea to other passive residents of the county, further upending the natural order. Later she became obsessed with the idea that people were trying to steal her tea and spent all her time trying to hide her "I'il sickrit". Eventually the tiger tea ran out and life returned to its normal rhythm of flying bricks. But nobody in Coconino County, especially Krazy Kat was ever quite so innocent.



Herriman stories like his oddly decorated background were sometimes surreal and sometimes just plain silly. The existential love story was often told through slapstick humor and old vaudeville jokes.

