

Book Review: "Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography"™

by John Wilkens, CNS

"Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography" by David Michaelis; Harper; 655 pages; \$35.

The funny thing about this book is how unfunny it is. The artist as tortured soul is a familiar enough theme, but who knew Charles Schulz was such a mope?

'SCHULZ AND PEANUTS' - For 50 years, Charles Schulz drew 'Peanuts,' creating a new kind of comic strip that became more widely syndicated than any before it. A new biography says Schulz was saddled with melancholy throughout his career. CNS Photo courtesy of Harper Collins. For 50 years Schulz drew "Peanuts," creating a new kind of comic strip that became more widely syndicated and beloved than any before it. Or any since. It's still in reruns in many newspapers seven years after his death.

And, if this compelling and frequently insightful biography is to be believed, he did it with a wrenching inability to take delight in the delight he brought to millions of readers. Good grief, indeed.

The "if" is important because members of Schulz's family have come forward in recent weeks to claim that author David Michaelis got it wrong. His second wife, Jean Schulz, told the New York Times, "It's not a full portrait." His son Monte labeled it "preposterous."

The evidence, much of it words out of Schulz's own mouth (numerous media interviews given over the years as part of the well-oiled promotional machine that made Charlie Brown, Snoopy and the gang famous), seems to support Michaelis.

It shows that the man everyone knew as Sparky was shadowed for most of his life by what he called "melancholy." Depression might be a better diagnosis, but Schulz steadfastly refused to seek professional help, fearful that any cure - especially medication - might plug his creative juices.

But Michaelis is a biographer, not a prosecutor, and his job here isn't just to convince us that Schulz was frequently unhappy, but to put it into context, to show how that unhappiness fueled the art - and how Schulz was able to harness it, day after day, and still be funny.

He does a great job with the art-fueling part. We learn how lonely Schulz was as a child, and how he discovered cartoons as a way to impress people. He felt he was "born to draw comic strips" but he had to overcome his parents' doubts about whether he would ever make it. When he finally did, his struggles to be liked and understood made "'Peanuts' different," Michaelis writes:

"Charlie Brown reminded people, as no other cartoon character had, of what it was to be vulnerable, to be small and alone in the universe, to be human - both little and big at the same time."

After a while, though, the frequent references to the cartoonist's low self-esteem are overbearing. The skepticism Michaelis showed toward Schulz's other self-serving claims of hardship - being bullied as a child, for example - is too often absent when it comes to the melancholy. The result is a portrait of Schulz as a guy who was funny only at the drawing table. That seems unlikely.

But if the author's portrait of Schulz's emotions is a little skewed, much of the rest of the book is riveting. Michaelis read every one of the almost 18,000 "Peanuts" strips and then matched them with events in Schulz's life. That was a stroke of genius. The strips - 240 are sprinkled throughout the book - turned out to be incredibly autobiographical.

It wasn't just that Schulz knew three real Charlie Browns, or that his mother suggested Snoopy would be a good name for a dog. Michaelis writes:

"He gave his wishy-washiness and determination to Charlie Brown, the 'worst side of himself' to Violet, to Lucy his sarcasm, to Linus his dignity and 'weird little thoughts,' his perfectionism and devotion to his art to Schroeder, his sense of being talented and unappreciated to Snoopy."

He put his own questions about faith into Linus' annual wait for the Great Pumpkin. His marital troubles with his first wife, Joyce, surfaced in Lucy's mean-spirited put-downs.

Even an affair he was having made its way into "Peanuts"; after Joyce discovered the mistress through phone bills, Schulz had Charlie confront Snoopy over his relationship with "that girl-beagle." In the final frame, in bold lettering, he yells, "And stop making those long-distance phone calls!"

Michaelis also does a remarkable job showing how "Peanuts" shaped popular culture and the national imagination. For a while, everything Schulz touched turned golden. He eventually was making as much as \$60 million annually, thanks in large part to advertising contracts and merchandizing: toys and snow globes and books like "Happiness Is a Warm Puppy." Snoopy was painted on fighter jets and etched on gravestones.

Ultimately what Michaelis discovered is that Schulz was hiding in plain sight, in his comic strips. Almost everything we need to know about him is there: the loneliness, yes, but also the determination. Charlie Brown may be a loser, but he never gives up. Schulz fought for years to become a cartoonist, and once he did, he gave it all he had, day after day, month after month, decade after decade. He was "Peanuts."

One time in the late 1960s he was in a cafe in San Francisco, eating with cast members from the play "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown." They were going around the table, talking about what they would be doing if they weren't in the show.

"If you weren't doing the strip," one of them asked Schulz, "what would you be doing?"

His reply - "I would be dead" - stunned the others at the table, but it won't be a surprise to anyone who reads this book.

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