

Contemporary Collectibles: Nancy, Sluggo and Aunt Fritzi

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

In 1922, the comic strip "Fritzi Ritz," created by Larry Whittington, made its debut, starring a typically pretty and stylish Jazz Age flapper. But it only took a few years - after the strip was taken over by Ernie Bushmiller - for Fritzi's 8-year-old niece Nancy, whose most distinguishing feature was black hair that looked like it had been cut with pinking shears, to take over the starring role, establishing a supporting cast of characters of her own.

When Nancy appeared, she had a slimmer shape than the chunky one later associated with her, but she did come complete with her characteristic bob and white hair bow. She appeared sporadically at first, traveling with her aunt to Hollywood where the glamorous Fritzi hoped to pursue a movie career.

By 1937, Nancy was looking more like the Nancy we know, and the following year her tough-looking, Brooklynese-talking chum Sluggo Smith entered the picture. They became so central to the story line that the daily feature was renamed "Nancy" in 1938 (though "Fritzi Ritz" continued as a Sunday feature into the 1960s) and it went on to become the longest-running daily strip ever. Gradually other characters were added to the cast, namely Rollo, the spoiled but considerate rich kid; Irma, Nancy's friend and cohort in mischief; Spike, the town bully; and Marigold, Sluggo's tomboy cousin.

Bronx-born Ernest Paul Bushmiller, the son of an immigrant artist, left school at 14 to become a copy boy on the New York World newspaper, studying at night at the National Academy of Design. He switched into the art department, where he worked alongside such future successes as Milt Gross.

In 1925, when Whittington began working on a strip called "Maizie the Model," Bushmiller, then age 20, took over "Fritzi Ritz," which became a Sunday comic in 1929, and the next year Bushmiller added a strip called "Phil Fumble," a redhead like himself, who later became Fritzi's main squeeze. (The artist used his fiancée, Abby Bohnet, as his model for his Fritzi sketches.)

Widely appreciated by the public and his peers as a master gagman, Bushmiller's humor was considered so clever that iconic silent-screen comedian Harold Lloyd approached him to contribute gags to his films. His drawing style became more simplified and minimal over the years, with stark blacks and whites. Though he died in 1982, "Nancy" continues to this day, having been done by several different writers and artists since his death.

Nancy went on to have quite an extra-curricular life. In addition to appearing in Tip Top, Sparkler and United Comics books, she appeared briefly in a couple of Terrytoons animated cartoons, she was the subject of a 1961 Andy Warhol painting, and she's appeared in several Mad magazine parodies as Nansy, who is transported into several other comics, such as "Dick Tracy" and "Donald Duck." And, most recently, she had the honor of appearing on a U.S. postage stamp in 1995, along with several other comic strip icons.

COLLECTIBLES

Although Nancy & Co. did not ignite a firestorm of merchandise, there are quite a few collectibles to look out for. In the 1930s, there was a celluloid over metal "Fritzi Ritz" spinner and a "Nancy" Journal-Transcript Funnies Club pin promoting Peoria, Ill., radio station WMBD.

The next decade saw comic books; a Whitman Better Little Book titled "Nancy and Sluggo"; rare hard-plastic 7 1/2 inch Nancy and Sluggo dolls from Post Grape-Nuts Flakes (valued at up to \$1,250 each); an even-rarer Comic Capers Club celluloid button, courtesy of the Sun-Times newspaper (\$2,000); and stuffed cloth, rubber and vinyl dolls.

The Milton Bradley Company produced a "Nancy & Sluggo" board game in 1944. Original "Nancy" Sunday comics pages, particularly early ones by Bushmiller, are also collectible.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 18 books, including "Cool Names for Babies" and "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press). She cannot answer letters personally.

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