

George Joseph Herriman



The creator of the zenith of comic strip art Krazy Kat, George Joseph Herriman, was born on August 22, 1880, in New Orleans. When he was still a teenager, George and his family moved to Los Angeles, as many African-American Creole families did, to escape the restrictions of the Jim Crow laws.

Herriman never publicly acknowledged his ethnicity, probably fearful of its effects on his reputation. Some people believe that Herriman always wore a hat to hide his "kinky" hair, but a comic historian suggests that the hat covered an unsightly bump on his head. Herriman's death certificate lists him as Caucasian.

George began his career as an engraver at the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner in 1897, where he produced spot illustrations, political cartoons, and daily strips. In 1900 the artist moved to New York, where he sold cartoons to Judge magazine and painted signs for sideshows in Coney Island, where he was occasionally a carnny barker.

Between 1901 and 1910, Herriman produced his first, regular strip, Musical Mose, as well as other features like Acrobatic Archie, Professor Otto and His Auto, Major Ozone's Fresh Air Crusade, Mary's Home from College, and Gooseberry Sprig, for the Pulitzer papers and the prestigious T.C. McClure Syndicate.

In 1910, the artist inaugurated The Dingbat Family, later renamed The Family Upstairs, for The New York Evening Journal, a Hearst paper. The strip featured the adventures of an ordinary family dealing with their annoying upstairs neighbors. Herriman was the first to use the word "dingbat" to indicate a silly, empty-headed person.

In The Family Upstairs the artist used the bottom part of each panel to narrate the stories of the Dingbats' pet, Krazy Kat, and a mouse named Ignatz. Herriman stated that he was doing it to "fill up the waste space." The cat and mouse adventures were unrelated to those of the Dingbats. On July 29, 1910, Ignatz Mouse threw an object at Krazy Kat's head for the first time. Bonking Krazy's brain with a brick, with all its attendant meanings, became the strip's main



motif. In 1913, Krazy Kat and Ignatz finally had a strip on their own, while *The Family Upstairs* folded in 1916.

Herriman's creative use of the language narrates the whimsical adventures of three characters, Krazy, Ignatz, and Offissa Pupp, locked in a love triangle. The unfortunate feline is in love with Ignatz, who does not reciprocate his feelings (or her? Krazy's gender was never clearly established) and likes to hurl bricks at the cat's head. This violent treatment only seems to throw Krazy more deeply in love. The third character, Offissa Pupp, besotted with Krazy and motivated by a strong sense of duty, tries to bring sanity back by locking up the repeat offender Ignatz.

In regard to Krazy's undetermined gender, Herriman has been quoted to respond, "I don't know. I fooled around with it once; began to think the Kat is a girl—even drew up some strips with her being pregnant. It wasn't the Kat any longer, too much concerned with her own problems—like a soap opera. Know what I mean? Then I realized Krazy was something like a sprite, an elf. They have no sex. So that Kat can't be a 'he' or a 'she.' The Kat's a sprite—a pixie—free to butt into anything. Don't you think so?"

The strip features many other characters, Mrs. Kwak Wakk, "Bum Bill" Bee and Don Kiyote, and the ever-changing landscapes of the imaginary desert of Coconino County, Arizona.

The characters speak in a poetic mix of phonetically spelled words inspired by parts of Creole, African-American, Brooklyn English, Yiddish, American-Indian and Spanish.

The strip's subtleties and surrealism never made it very popular with the public en masse, but it had an enthusiastic following among artistic and intellectual circles. Writer Gilbert Seldes dubbed Herriman "the counterpart of Chaplin in the comic film" in his *Seven Lively Arts*, in 1924. President Woodrow Wilson never missed reading it. Picasso was reputedly a fan. But the artist's most ardent supporter was William Randolph Hearst. Hearst owned the King Feature Syndicate and refused to drop Herriman's *Krazy Kat* even when it was carried by fewer than 50 papers. It was Hearst who ordered the strip to be cancelled in 1944, upon learning of Herriman's passing. In his opinion, no one could replace the artist and *Krazy Kat* was possibly the first strip to die with his creator.

Two family tragedies marked Herriman's life. In 1931 his wife Mabel died in a car accident, and in 1939 his daughter Bobbie passed away at age 30. He retired to a lonely existence, brightened only by his cats and dogs. Herriman died in 1944 of "non-alcoholic cirrhosis of the liver" and, at his request, his ashes were scattered over Monument Valley, Arizona.

—Clizia Gussoni