



## Tributes to Richard Thompson

By: Warren Bernard, **Craig Fischer**, and Charles Hatfield

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### Tributes to Richard Thompson

BY THE EDITORS AUG 1, 2016

#### WARREN BERNARD:

About eight years ago, a small group of us started to get together here in the DC area for what I called a Political Cartoon Salon. The group consisted of myself; Matt Wuerker, Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist for [Politico.com](#); Mike Rhode, one of the great bibliographers of the comics field; Nate Beeler, political cartoonist for the Columbus Dispatch and winner of both the Thomas Nast and Berrymen Awards; and Rueben Award-winner Richard Thompson. It was an august group of creators with which to spend an afternoon eating pizza and looking at political cartoons from bygone days.

Richard was big fan of the old pen and ink slingers: Thomas Nast, Ding Darling, and others. He enjoyed going through issues of *The Masses*, where such greats as Boardman Robinson, Art Young and Robert Minor plied their talents. Looking at these cartoons, Richard would wax philosophically about their technique and how fast the old guys used to work. These salons were a joy and Richard's presence made them even more so.

In November 2008, I found out that Richard and I had a common food hatred, that of the lowly, wrinkled raisin. He expressed his raisin-phobia in a daily strip of *Cul De Sac*. Upon seeing it, I tore it out of the paper, put it on my refrigerator and instantly wrote him an email to tell him I was a raisin-hating kinfolk



When he came for the next salon, I was totally floored when he presented me with the original to that cartoon. Richard was a one-of-a-kind artist, but the anti-raisin strip touched on his magnificent mastery

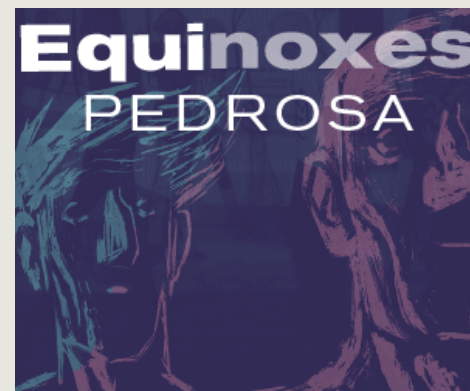


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of the written word, as no one else could ever come up with the line expressing his total hatred of those shriveled grapes as spoken by Petey Otterloop: “*Stupid sneaky raisins! How I hate the unfoodiness of them!*”

At another one of the salons, I remarked how I did not have a copy of his book *Richard's Poor Almanac*, which reprinted the strips he did for the *Washington Post* before he developed *Cul De Sac*. Sure enough, the next time we got together to look at more ink slingers, he brought a copy that he inscribed “To Warren; Gentleman, scholar, bibliophile & tour guide. Here’s another damn book for your shelves. Your Friend, Richard Thompson”.

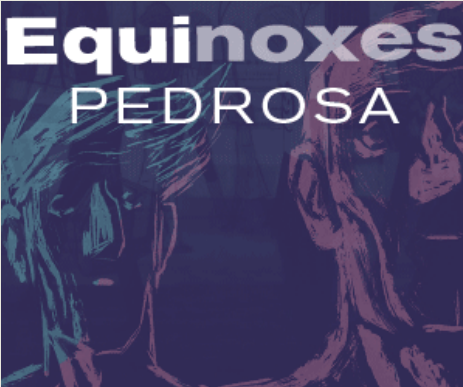
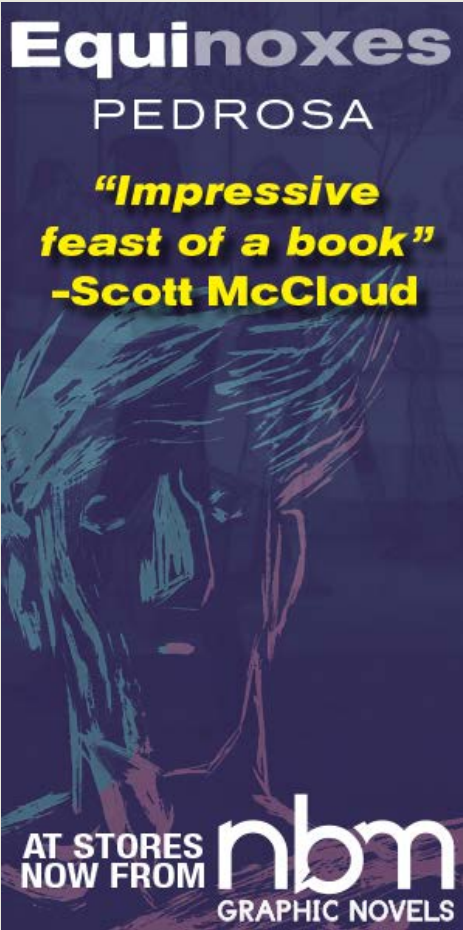
Though Richard himself was a pure gentleman, the best word to describe him does not exist in English. Richard was a *mensch* in the truest sense of that old Yiddish term. And as a tribute to Richard the Mensch, that anti-raisin *Cul de Sac* strip, along with another on the same unfoodiness subject, hangs on my refrigerator door to this day.

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**CRAIG FISCHER:**

I met Richard Thompson at HeroesCon in Charlotte, North Carolina in June 2008. This was my second Heroes, and I was co-chairing, with cartoonist and friend Ben Towle, an ambitious two-hour panel on EC Comics and *MAD* magazine. Ben and I organized this panel because long-time *MAD* editor Al Feldstein was on the Heroes guest list, but no one else asked Feldstein to participate in programming, a crazy oversight. This would be the first of our self-dubbed “mega-panels,” and we’ve done eight others since. We’re a Heroes tradition now.

When I told my friend Mike Rhode about the EC/*MAD* panel, I mentioned that I’d like to have cartoonists influenced by *MAD* help me interview Feldstein, and Mike suggested Richard Thompson. I was only marginally familiar with Richard’s art (I had fallen out of the habit of reading newspaper cartoons, even when available online), but I trusted Mike. I e-mailed Richard, he agreed to participate, and four of us (Ben, Richard, Roger Langridge, and I) convened to interview Feldstein. As it happened, we hardly said anything: Feldstein was a world-class raconteur who didn’t need prompting from us, and Roy Thomas—another enthusiastic talker and expert in comics history—asked questions from the audience.



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HeroesCon 2008, Al Feldstein and Richard Thompson. Photo courtesy of Mike Rhode.

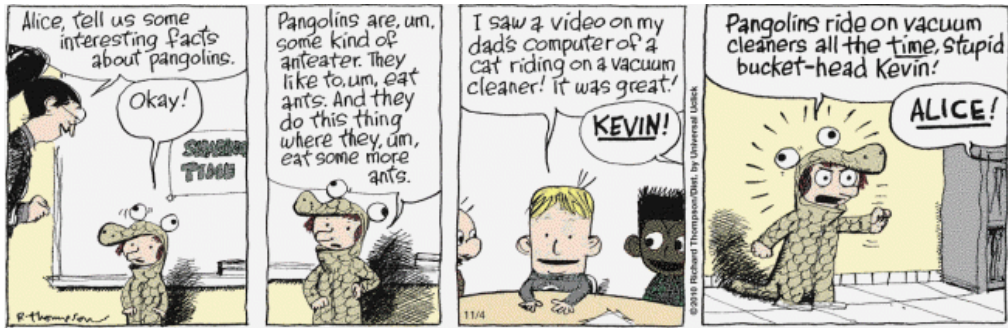
During that weekend, I got to know Richard better. He was amazingly thin (though he would lose more weight as Parkinson’s ravaged him), and talked in the quietest voice I’d ever (never?) heard. Mike joked that he only heard Richard speak when Richard sat on his lap and whispered in his ear. But he was worth listening to: in group conversations, Richard would quietly sit back, everyone would forget he was there, and then *sotto voce* he’d lob in a comment that opened up an absurd perspective on the subject under discussion that made us all laugh. Richard was thoughtful and whip-smart, but he also stuck to a comic view of the world that refused to take anything or anyone too seriously.

The *Cul de Sac* original art Richard brought to HeroesCon was also richly communicative: I adored Richard’s whimsical writing, and his cute-but-ragged-like-Searle style of cartooning. He was clearly reinvigorating the domestic-comedy comic strip, and newspaper comics as a whole. I was so smitten with *Cul de Sac* that I bought original art from Richard, a daily strip from April 30, 2008:



I chose this one because my daughter Mercer, who met Richard at that 2008 con along with the rest of my family, had a habit as a toddler of leaving the dinner table, stripping off her clothes, and running outside. Richard signed the strip “To my friend Herr Doktor Professor Craig Fischer,” and I can imagine him saying that phrase in his paper-rustle whisper of a voice.

For about three years after our 2008 meeting—until his health prevented him from traveling—I saw Richard at Heroes and occasionally at other comics events. We both attended the 2010 Ohio State University Festival of Cartoon Art, and I remember eating dinner with him when our conversation turned to the ways we use social media. I mentioned that my wife Kathy was very open about expressing her personal feelings in her status updates on Facebook, but that a typical FB post for me was “Hey! Check out this video of kittens on a Roomba!” Richard chuckled at that line, and three weeks later, imported a non-copyrighted variant into *Cul de Sac* (11/4/10):



Richard credited me with the line in a post on his tremendously entertaining *Richard's Poor Almanac* blog. I worried that Richard was working only three weeks ahead of publication, probably because of tardiness (Richard was always late for appointments and with deadlines) but also because the Parkinson's was interfering with the steadiness of his drawing hand.

By 2011, the Parkinson's was profoundly affecting Richard's health and mobility. When I saw him at Heroes that year, for what would turn out to be his last visit, he was on metal crutches. Still, we kept the con as upbeat as possible. I debuted a fanzine I'd edited called *Favorites* (featuring essays by critics and cartoonists about their most cherished comics) as a fundraiser for Team Cul de Sac, a charity in Richard's name that raises money for a Parkinson's cure. (To date, the Team has earned over \$200,000 for the Michael J. Fox Foundation, a few hundred of which came from *Favorites*.) Richard drew a lovely cover for *Favorites*:

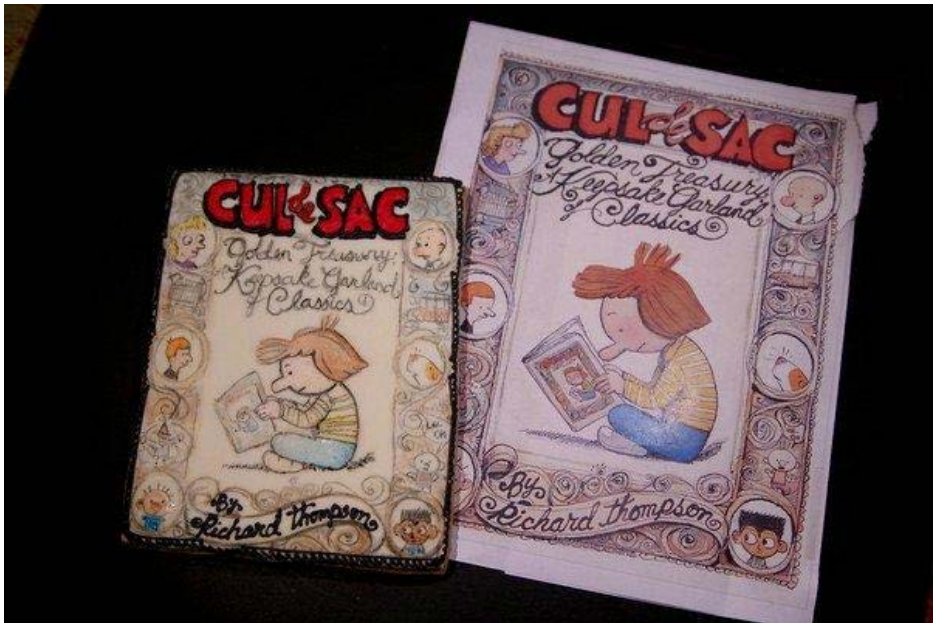


To thank him for the cover, my wife Kathy asked Leila Pratt Jackson, a friend and professional cookie decorator, to make a set of *Cul de Sac* cookies based on the strip's characters. Leila also made one large cookie based on the cover of the *Cul de Sac* collection *Golden Treasury Keepsake Garland of Classics*. We had a little party in our hotel room in Charlotte, where Richard, my family, and Team Cul de Sac



friends got one cookie each. Richard graciously gave Alice to my daughter, and devoured Mr. Otterloop himself.





I saw Richard less after he stopped traveling to Heroes. Three months later, in September 2011 at SPX, he relied on his crutches more, but was determined to meet Roz Chast. He also whispered to me a slightly naughty joke—Richard’s humor was too gentle to be truly “dirty”—and the way he managed to hold onto his sense of humor struck me as both life-affirming and heart-breakingly poignant.

For two years after SPX 2011, we stayed in touch through a handful of letters I sent Richard, and that he was unable to answer. The tone of my letters was jovial, flippant; Chris Sparks, the founder of Team Cul de Sac, kept me updated on Richard’s condition, and I didn’t know how to write to someone in ever-declining health. I now wish that I’d tackled more serious issues in my letters. I wish I’d told Richard that I loved him, and talked about the pain my family was experiencing as my wife’s parents passed away.

The last time I saw Richard was at the opening weekend of the exhibit of his work at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum in March 2014. It was inspirational to see Richard’s family and friends—and people unfamiliar with his art before the exhibit—crowd around him to offer congratulations and good cheer, but I also couldn’t ignore how folded-in on itself his body had become. That weekend, Richard also held court at the Columbus Hampton Inn for invited visitors, and I stopped by. His increasingly wan voice and my punk-rock-damaged hearing made conversation difficult, so much of our last time together was spent silently, with me holding his hand and smiling at him. Nothing—and everything—left to say.

Now I miss my friend Richard, just like the people who supported, loved, and cared for him before, during, and after his Parkinson’s diagnosis, including his wife Amy and daughters Charlotte and Emma; Nick Galifianakis, Chris Sparks, Mike Rhode, David Apatoff, Nell Minow, Bono Mitchell, Caitlin McGurk, and others I didn’t have the good luck to meet; and the HeroesCon personnel (Seth Peagler, Heather Peagler, Rico Renzi, Shelton Drum, Shannon Gallant, others) who have organized and staffed Drink-n-Draws over the last six years to raise funds for Team Cul de Sac. (The HeroesCon Drink-n-Draw will continue.) I think I speak for all these people, and I certainly speak for myself and my family, when I write: Richard, we love you.

**CHARLES HATFIELD:**

A great cartoonist teaches you to see cartooning, and the world, in a different way. A great cartoonist entrains you to their way of drawing, listening, and observing, to their rhythms and to their linework, to the sheer gutsy outpouring of their personality on the page. A great cartoonist can get into your head, and make you see the world in their line, whether slick or scratchy, fluid or choppy, from the elbow or from the wrist (and with great cartooning, it’s always from the heart and mind too).

A great cartoonist makes a personal world, and invites you in. Such was Richard Thompson, whose death became news last Wednesday, July 27. That was a blow—not wholly unexpected, because Parkinson’s Disease, that terrible, idiopathic, unpredictable thing, had ravaged his body and severely changed his life, but still a blow, resounding and painful. Thompson’s passing hit me hard from two angles: a personal one, because his work had come to mean a great deal to my wife and me and because my own father has Parkinson’s; and a historical one, because Richard had come to represent, for me as for so many, the last

great hope of comic strips in the newspaper funny page tradition. From my perspective, his *Cul de Sac* was the most refreshing newspaper strip of the past twenty years, with the richest set of loopy, endearing, maddening, beautifully cartooned characters. I consider it the last great example of the kid ‘n’ family domestic strip (home, school, playground, et cetera), and one of the most delightfully eccentric microcosms ever to grace the funny pages. The vein of comic strip art that includes *Barnaby* and *Peanuts* and *Calvin & Hobbes* also includes *Cul de Sac*. Once I read it, I knew, I’d never look at comic strip children the same way again.

*Cul de Sac* (launched for the *Washington Post* in 2004, then taken national by Universal Press Syndicate in 2007) came fairly late in a busy career. Thompson had already built up a great vita as a gag cartoonist, editorial illustrator, and caricaturist. In fact I first learned about Thompson not through *Cul de Sac*, but through his work in *Richard’s Poor Almanac* (2004), a collection of his purely local, inside-the-Beltway *Washington Post* strip (begun in 1997). My good friend Mike Rhode, proprietor of the [ComicsDC blog](#) and a close friend and colleague of Richard’s, showed this book to me and sold me on it. Good call: even though I lived far outside the Beltway, and knew little about the local details Thompson was riffing on, I found the book mesmerizing in its deadpan absurdity, wacky drawings, and hairy, energetic line. That was in 2007, even as *Cul de Sac* was going national.

*Cul de Sac* catapulted Thompson from stratosphere to exosphere. It was a classic-from-the-first-week comic strip based on premises that he himself worried might be “corny” and “stale”: kids, parents, neighborhood, that sort of thing. But it was uncannily good. Alice and Petey, the Otterloop siblings, he thought of “unstoppable force” and “immovable object” respectively, and the strip pitted their two tempers against each other in the same house—and also pitted the both of them, together and separately, against the world, including school and a splendid cast of other weird kids. Alice and Petey’s long-suffering parents were along for the ride, and Thompson wrote knowingly about how parents accommodate their kids’ quirks, manias, and fears. The great *Cul de Sac* characters, I’ve noticed, have that same combination of manic fixedness, anxious perseveration, and oblivious self-regard that I see in many of Schulz’s *Peanuts* characters, or Milne’s Pooh characters, or Tove Jansson’s Moominland critters. They are obsessives, each awirl in their own orbit, each in the grip of their own ideas—but when they come together, or ricochet off each other, sublime comedy ensues. The beauty of this (as with Schulz, Milne, and Jansson) is that we don’t find these characters grating or unlikable despite their little madnnesses and fixed ideas, their neurotic self-regard. We forgive or even relish their quirks. This is so very like the attitude of Alice and Petey’s parents toward their kids: an attitude of bemused affection that sometimes just barely manages to skirt exasperation, but never turns into outright resentment. Yesterday at breakfast, in a local café, my wife Mich and I observed a patient and crafty mother managing the sibling rivalry between her two children, big brother and little sister, sometimes with little needling notes of annoyance, but on the whole with grace and shrewdness (all this because of an argument over waffles). I was reminded of Mrs. Otterloop telling Petey not to chew his arm off.

On the personal side, Mich and I have a pastime of reading *Cul de Sac* strips to each other before bedtime, usually one or two weeks’ worth (culled from *The Complete Cul de Sac* of 2014). She takes Alice, Mrs. Otterloop, and other “girl” characters like Miss Bliss and Viola, while I do Petey (who for some reason I like to do in a sort of phlegmy, backed-up, nasal intonation), Mr. Otterloop, Mr. Danders the guinea pig, and other “boys.” I could do this for the rest of my life, frankly. Also, we were fortunate to catch, in 2014, [the Thompson exhibition](#) curated by Caitlin McGurk for the Ohio State’s Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum. In fact we made a point of vacationing in Columbus that summer just for the purpose of seeing the twinned Thompson and Bill Watterson exhibits there. The Thompson show, a wonderful, eye-opening overview of his work, brought the *Almanac* back to me, full force, while also showing the breadth of Richard’s work in caricature and illustration. I understood then—and this was reaffirmed later that year, when the gorgeous book *The Art of Richard Thompson* came out—that Richard was not only a great strip artist but a great artist, period. As a caricaturist, he was in Hirschfeld, Levine, and Sorel territory. As a humorist, he was on par with bone-dry masters of the absurd like Bob and Ray. As an all-around cartoonist and writer, a great, unpigeonhole-able talent, he was matchless.

To have had any personal connection to such an artist is a gift. I was fortunate to meet Richard briefly, maybe a couple of times, thanks to friends like [Mike Rhode](#) and Chris Sparks. That’s like being rewarded for doing nothing at all (besides being a hopeless fan). I offer my condolences to all of his colleagues and loved ones; I know his passing was not quite unexpected, but that it still hurt like anything.

I’m saddened by Richard’s death, but thrilled by the work that [Chris Sparks and Team Cul de Sac](#) have done in his name to support Parkinson’s research and raise awareness of the disease. I hope TCJ readers can contribute to that cause: part of the legacy of a peerless cartoonist.



# CUL de SAC

## Golden Treasury



Signature by Richard Thompson in the Cul de Sac Golden Treasury, 2010.

FILED UNDER: [Charles Hatfield](#), [Craig Fischer](#), [Richard Thompson](#), [Warren Bernard](#)

## 2 Responses to *Tributes to Richard Thompson*



**Anton Scamvougeras** says:

Aug 1, 2016 at 7:25 PM

He had a wonderful eye, ear and hand, and many, many of us will continue to enjoy the works he graciously created.



**Scott Bukatman** says:

Aug 2, 2016 at 4:30 PM

These are beautiful tributes, guys. Many thanks for them.

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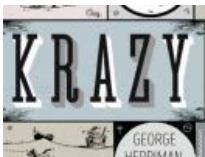
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