

[PDF] Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and his Revolutionary Comic Strip

Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and his Revolutionary Comic Strip

Nevin Martell

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"Is this a definitive biography? No. But it's in many ways better and truer to the spirit of Watterson's creation." *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*

LOOKING FOR CALVIN AND HOBBES

THE UNCONVENTIONAL STORY OF
BILL WATTERSON
AND HIS REVOLUTIONARY
COMIC STRIP



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Nevin Martell : Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and his Revolutionary Comic Strip before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and his Revolutionary Comic Strip:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Spoiler Alert: The Author Never Finds Bill Watterson

By JJ
This is what happens when you tell your publisher you're going to write a biography of notorious recluse Bill Watterson, including an interview with the famous artist and author, but you never actually get an interview with Watterson. There is nothing new here; some awkward and unnecessary interviews with people who knew Watterson in the distant past or maybe know someone who went to college with him or something like that. This narrative would have been far better suited as a long-form piece for a magazine or website; as a book, it's mostly filler.

196 of 202 people found the following review helpful. An Oft-Interesting Labor of Love (3.5 stars)

By Timothy P. Young
There are problems with Nevin Martell's book, *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and His Revolutionary Comic Strip*. While the title encourages the reader to think he or she will be reading the story of how Calvin and Hobbes came to be, what we get instead is one man's personal odyssey to score an interview with the elusive creator of the strip, Bill Watterson. It's true that we DO get to read the results of Martell's research (which include lots of tidbits regarding the aforementioned story), and it's often interesting. However, the book suffers from the plethora of personal asides about his wife, prior writing projects, and rock star interviews Martell had done. Another problem rises due to the fact that Bill Watterson owns "Calvin and Hobbes" lock, stock and barrel. As a result, there are no comics printed in the book. Instead, Martell resorts to taking page upon page to describe individual strips, from first panel to last. While I acknowledge that this wasn't the author's fault, it adds a level of tedium to some sections of the book. And yet another issue with the book comes in the writing itself. Martell primarily writes for magazines, and that's how this book reads: as a series of magazine articles on the same subject, rather than as a coherent whole. He repeats quotes from earlier parts of the book, summarizes earlier chapters in later ones, and so on. This would be fine if we were reading the book one chapter at a time over several weeks or months, but it doesn't work in book form. Also, his description is sometimes clumsy: "Everything was drenched in pure white, as if God had forgotten to shake the Earth as he would a snow globe." That's a long way to go for a simple image. In addition, Martell sometimes makes errors when discussing the comics themselves. When talking about Calvin's use of the cardboard box (one of the great conventions of the strip), he states that the Atomic Cerebral Enhance-O-Tron is one of the box's many uses. Well, the ACE was a colander that Calvin put on his head. A small error to be sure, but one that a fan will easily catch. Several more are scattered through the book. However, the book is worth reading. His interviews with Watterson associates are illuminating, and his chapter on how Calvin and Hobbes influenced other comic artists is a must. He rounds up a who's who of current and former comic artists and syndicate bigwigs for these chapters. No one can fault the man's legwork. Overall, I'm not sorry I read it. It was obviously a labor of love for Martell, and that comes through on every page. The problem is, that often comes through too strongly. It's interesting, but not essential to one's appreciation for, or understanding of, the wonder that was Calvin and Hobbes.

3.5 stars.

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful. "Lost in Chagrin Falls," a memoir...

By ewomack
In the film industry there's a well known curse on the filming of Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote*. Cinematic giants such as Orson Welles and Terry Gilliam have attempted to capture this legend on cellulose. Though various musical, theatrical and made-for-television productions have appeared, none have yet succeeded in the realm of major motion pictures. Gilliam even released a documentary about his misery called "Lost in La Mancha" (he's apparently exhumed the "Man Who Killed Don Quixote" project, set for 2011 release). Nevin Martell's short book "Looking for Calvin and Hobbes" provides a biographical equivalent to the motion picture *Man From La Mancha* (though in this case the "curse" originates from the subject). The book could probably carry the title "Lost in Chagrin Falls." Unfortunately, despite the book's actual title, Calvin, Hobbes and their elusive creator, Ohioan Bill Watterson, still remain at large. In fact, this three-parts authorial memoir, one-part biography may even add to the Watterson mystique. The obstinately elusive cartoonist dodges the author at every step. But this just validates the law of induction, for he has turned down just about every interview ever sent his way. Given the glut of evidence concerning Watterson's attitude towards publicity, this project was Quixotic from its very conception. Drooling, blathering fans of "Calvin and Hobbes" probably know everything relevant contained in this book. Nonetheless, those who love the strip but know next to nothing about its creation or its creator will learn quite a bit. Unfortunately, even readers in that demographic will have to wade through pages of memoir that may or may not prove interesting. And this book is more of a memoir than a biography, which the main title states pretty clearly, though the subtitle belies with the words "the unconventional story of Bill Watterson." In the sometimes meandering, largely first person narrative, only fragments of Watterson's story appear. A few of Watterson's interviews and essays get quoted nearly in entirety. These quoted passages stick out neon-like as highlights. The surrounding intrusive narrative doesn't really add much to them. Along the way, readers learn far more personal information about the author than about Watterson. Though some anecdotes, such as Watterson's famous quote "why would I want to talk to Steven Spielberg?" and his berating speech at the 1989 Festival of Cartoon Art prove rewarding even if some experience them as reruns. The author does seek out numerous people who knew or worked with Watterson. He demonstrates admirable persistence here. Unfortunately, these episodes typically relate no more than good memories or reminiscences from many people who no longer know the cartoonist. Raving fans may soak up every word, though they may not learn much new. Others may find them uninspiring along with the author's ruminations about his comic collections and memories. Most unfortunate is what the author refers to as "the finale." Yes, a member of the

Watterson family does finally come forward, but the encounter, rare as it is, reveals as much as the other encounters. The family respects the cartoonist's privacy. And the cartoonist himself seems extremely uninterested in further talk about "Calvin and Hobbes." Further, he seems to subscribe to the Sartrean notion of genius, namely, that genius resides in creative works rather than in the people that create them. Though Martell does not find Calvin, Hobbes, or Watterson, "Looking for Calvin and Hobbes" nonetheless provides a good overview for the uninitiated. Those interested in Watterson's pre-"Calvin and Hobbes" work will find adequate information here, but unfortunately only in narrative form. The book sadly contains no pictures. Doubtless anyone who reads this book will learn something from it, though the sections that read more like memoir could have withstood extensive reduction. One thing remains certain, this is no "Schulz and Peanuts," the massive 2007 Charles Schulz biography that Watterson actually reviewed for The Wall Street Journal. This reads more like a memoir of an attempt to write a book as in-depth as David Michaelis' magnum opus. But to be fair, Schulz frolicked in the limelight relative to Watterson's hermetically sealed public attitude. In the end, Martell asks the question many fans have likely asked: will Bill Watterson appear again? Will he change his vow of silence towards his cartoon masterpiece? Though he supposedly now paints (though some in the book say he's not too satisfied with the results yet) many foresee the artist's potential "second coming" in this medium. Maybe. Maybe not. If he does come out again and speak openly, this book will instantly become obsolete except as a documentary of the thick shell the cartoonist maintained in "retirement." And this begs one big, nagging question that undergirds the book. Obviously Watterson doesn't want attention. This book hammers that point in like a suspension bridge rivet. Obviously the time isn't ripe for a resurgence. So why, given the evidence available, even prior to this book's publication, was this project undertaken? Skipping the obvious answer, Martell and the publishers sort of got what they deserved. If anything, this book should stand as a warning to those who want to seek out Watterson. He will only appear when he's ready and he will appear on his terms. And if he doesn't, then his amazing strip remains. And isn't that enough? Those who voraciously covet a Hobbes doll may protest. But Watterson doesn't owe us anything. He's living his life the way he wants and maybe we should just leave him alone until he's good and ready.

For ten years, Calvin and Hobbes was one the world's most beloved comic strips. And then, on the last day of 1995, the strip ended. Its mercurial and reclusive creator, Bill Watterson, not only finished the strip but withdrew entirely from public life. In Looking for Calvin and Hobbes, Nevin Martell sets out on a very personal odyssey to understand the life and career of the intensely private man behind Calvin and Hobbes. Martell talks to a wide range of artists and writers (including Dave Barry, Harvey Pekar, and Brad Bird) as well as some of Watterson's closest friends and professional colleagues, and along the way reflects upon the nature of his own fandom and on the extraordinary legacy that Watterson left behind. This is as close as we're ever likely to get to one of America's most ingenious and intriguing figures - and it's the fascinating story of an intrepid author's search for him, too.

"Nevin Martell's book provides a rare glimpse of the riddle wrapped in the mystery inside an enigma that is Bill Watterson and his brilliant work, which I now know was almost called 'Marvin and Hobbes.'" - Stephan Pastis, creator of Pearls Before Swine