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LOVEY-DOVEY COUPLE smooching on a settee awaken the tiger rug that sleeps beneath their feet, and it proceeds to eat the man. A husband hides his gambling winnings in his pants hanging on the end of the bed, only to see the bed stretch away from him. A sleeping drunk is bitten by a mosquito, who then wobbles around in an alcoholic daze. A catty socialite wearing a fox scarf runs into a rival showing off the same outfit; this leads to a brawl not only between the two women but their suddenly feral scarves.

You might think that such outlandish nightmare scenes were conjured up by a bohemian artist in Paris hoping to shock the bourgeoisie. But in fact, these surrealistic images, created a full generation before Salvador Dali and Max Ernst, came from the pen of Winsor McCay, the American cartoonist best known as the creator of the beloved and influential kiddie strip "Little Nemo in Slumberland." In 1904, a year before "Nemo"—a child's adventure in an art deco fantasy land, regarded now as a high point in the history of comics—debuted in the New York Herald, the 34-year-old McCay launched "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend" in the New York Evening Telegram. As with so many other early comics, the black-and-white week-day strip had no regular characters, just a recurring basic plot: nightmares brought on by eating too much rarebit (spicy cheese on toast) before napping. Frequently tackling sexual and religious taboos, "Rarebit Fiend," which ran until 1913, made a daring claim: All it takes is some cheese and suddenly the unseemly underside of conventional social life becomes visible.

Besides the fact that both strips were about nocturnal adventures, it's difficult to reconcile "Little Nemo" and "Rarebit Fiend." Whereas "Little Nemo" is predominately a visual strip, marred by stilted dialogue and a vapid lead character, "Rarebit Fiend"—perhaps the most bizarre newspaper feature in American history, a daily dip into the netherworld of the human psyche—gets its bite from its sharply etched portrait of duplicity and self-deception. Perhaps too sharply etched: Apparently we'd prefer to remember McCay as a harmless fantasist, not as a penetrating critic of social life.

Today McCay is celebrated primarily for "Little Nemo," which is held up by devotees of comic strips and children's literature as a supreme ex-

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ample of storytelling. Children's writer Maurice Sendak's classic 1970 book "In the Night Kitchen" is an extended homage to "Little Nemo." McCay's pre-Disney animated films, particularly the 1914 "Gertie the Dinosaur," are also hailed as instrumental in carving out a space for animation as a distinctive cinematic art form.

Yet brilliant as they are, "Gertie the Dinosaur" and "Little Nemo" ought not to eclipse McCay's equally important legacy: In a wide range of satirical and allegorical comic strips tackling concerns like adultery, drug use, and the fear of death, he gave early proof that comics didn't always have to be humorous or escapist. Artistically ambitious contemporary cartoonists like Art Spiegelman ("Maus") and Chris Ware ("Jimmy Corrigan") see him as a patron saint.

The more mature side of McCay is now available in "Daydreams and Nightmares," a lavish new art book published this month by Fantagraphics. "Rarebit Fiend" and his editorial cartoons can be seen as representing the two major poles of McCay's personality and artistic career. All his life, he sought to balance childhood dreaming with adult responsibility. With this new book in hand, we can finally get a full view of this protean and complex artist.

Winsor McCay loved, above all else, to draw. When bothered by marital squabbles or mundane worries about money, he would roll up his sleeves, dip his pen in the inkstand, and get lost in his art. During his ceaselessly productive career as a pioneering comic strip artist and animator, he astonished his contemporaries by issuing a seemingly endless flow of illustrations and cartoons, almost all of them impeccable examples of draftsmanship.

McCay lived in a time when cartoonists were celebrities, earning huge salaries and setting off fierce bidding wars. His marital difficulties were fodder for gossip columnists (in 1891, at the age of 24, he married a 14-year-old and their domestic life was bedeviled by accusations that she was unfaithful). More happily, he was much in demand on the vaudeville stage, where his lightning-fast drawing skills earned applause, landing him a spot on the theatrical bill next to W.C. Fields and Harry Houdini. But the drawing was always the thing. By one estimate, more than a million finished drawings issued from his pen

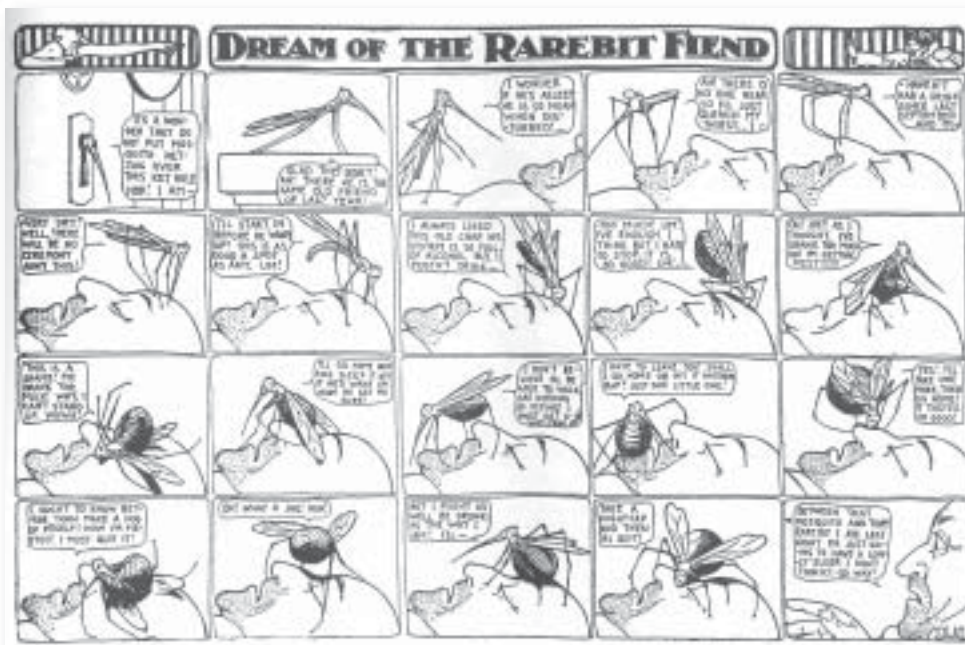
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# The DREAM ARTIST

'Little Nemo' made him famous when it debuted in 1905. But Winsor McCay's wild, penetrating adult work is what makes him a patron saint to today's comics artists.

BY JEET HEER



In "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend," a strip first published in 1904 in the New York Evening Telegram, Winsor McCay's characters experienced a nightmare world after eating too much rarebit (spicy cheese on toast). At right, a detail from the strip.



MCCAY PHOTO: CORBIS/BETTMANN

before he died in 1934 at age 63.

Although McCay did a great variety of work for many publications, a unifying theme is his persistent exploration of how dreams make visible the secrets we hide in our daily life. McCay started cartooning at the end of the 19th century, just as Freud started investigating dreams as evidence of subconscious desire. McCay's dream strips—published under a variety of titles, including "Daydreams" and "It Was Only a Dream"—might be seen as a popular, visual counterpart to Freud's theories.

Comics work by juxtaposing images in sequences. McCay's dream strips achieved their greatest effect by using juxtaposition to highlight hypocrisy and deception. Typically, his strips would show outlandish dreams that demonstrate great discomfort and unease—for example, a conceited artist has his head expand like a balloon while listening to praise—but end with a shot of the dreamer, almost always a run-of-the-mill white middle-class American. In effect, McCay was trying to show that beneath the decorum and delicacy of everyday life, most people are beset by terrifying fears.

As John Canemaker, author of the biography "Winsor McCay: His Life and Art" (2005, rev. ed.) notes, in "Rarebit Fiend" the state of matrimony is often depicted as "a minefield of hypocrisy, jealousy, and misunderstanding." Further, money matters almost always weigh down McCay's dreamers, giving them restless nights of tossing and turning. Religion offers little solace: McCay shows preachers covering as they imagine being devoured by cannibals with a taste for missionary meat, or being hurled into hell where demons pitchfork them.

Despite the bleakness of his vision, McCay's dream strips were transformed into a popular movie and optioned for Broadway. Yet his very fame was to prove his artistic undoing. In 1911, McCay was hired by newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst to be a staff cartoonist on his papers. Hearst paid him a salary that put him in league with movie stars and the most successful athletes of the day. Alas, it came at a high cost: Hearst decided that so highly paid an artist belonged on the editorial page, and McCay was placed under the thumb of New York American editor Arthur Brisbane, who—according to a 1927 essay by McCay reprinted in "Daydreams and Nightmares"—remarked, "McCay is serious, not funny." McCay was assigned to illustrate Brisbane's editorials full-time.

An extravagant and feckless spender, McCay needed Hearst's hefty salary. But in order to earn it, he was forced to give up the art that he cared about. Although he was able to revive "Little Nemo" briefly in the 1920s and produced a few more adult dream strips, by then his creative fires had gone out.

The last section of "Daydreams and Nightmares" gives a selection of McCay's editorial cartoons for Brisbane. Visually, they are often stunning, giving full evidence of McCay's ability to draw sweeping scenes with utter authority. When he imagines a modern city destroyed by bombing, it looks like an uncanny prophecy of London or Dresden during World War II. Yet the editorial cartoons were little more than well-executed bromides, self-congratulatory exercises celebrating the benefits of material progress and modern life, their relentlessly booster-ish tone at odds with the bracing irony of McCay's finest strips.

While working in the novel form of the comic strip, McCay enjoyed the freedom granted to court jesters; paradoxically, elevation to the editorial page put him in an aesthetic straitjacket: Contrary to what Brisbane believed, McCay achieved true seriousness only when working for the funny pages.