

## Popular Cartoon Will Stay On -- As Old/New Hybrid

Lynn Johnston

By Dave Astor

Published: January 08, 2007 7:40 AM ET

**NEW YORK** Millions of readers will breathe a partial sigh of relief when they learn that Lynn Johnston won't completely end "For Better or For Worse" around the time it turns 28 this September. Instead, the strip will continue as an old/new hybrid that has little precedent in cartoon history.

"I'll be flying by the seat of my eraser," joked Johnston, whose comic is one of only five with more than 2,000 newspapers. Details were still being worked out when Johnston spoke to E&P, but it's possible the hybrid "FBorFW" will focus a lot on Michael Patterson and his family, who are about the same ages Elly Patterson and her family were when the comic started in 1979. Elly is the mother of Michael, who was a little boy in the early days of "FBorFW."

In the hybrid, many previously published "FBorFW" strips and scenes will be reprinted. The jumping-off point for those comics (which could include some redrawn and recolorized content) might be Michael looking at old photos or scrapbooks.

Johnston will also offer a certain amount of new material about Michael; his sisters, Elizabeth and April; his parents, Elly and John; and various other major and supporting characters. But one of the signature elements of "FBorFW" — the gradual aging of its cast — will come to a halt. "What I'd like to do is freeze the characters at the ages they are now," said Johnston, who turns 60 this May. "No people will grow older. No dogs will grow older and pass away."

The strip's creator was referring to Farley, the shaggy canine whose heroic 1995 death (after saving April from drowning) brought Johnston an avalanche of reader mail.

Actually, the aging of characters was not planned when "FBorFW" started in 1979. "I didn't intend for everybody to grow up," Johnston said. "They just did."

Why is the Canadian cartoonist opting for a hybrid approach, rather than ending "FBorFW" completely or passing the Universal Press Syndicate comic on to someone else? Johnston said if "FBorFW" were continued by another creator, she probably would keep looking over that person's shoulder. She recalled once talking to a cartoonist who had taken over a comic while the original creator was still alive, and that artist was a bit relieved when the original creator died. "I don't want anyone dancing with maracas on my grave," Johnston said with a laugh.

Offering the hybrid after this September means "FBorFW" fans won't have to go cold turkey. And Johnston will keep alive her partly autobiographical comic while not having to devote as much time to it. This will not only mean less writing and drawing, but also less of the heavy research Johnston does before creating some of her sequences.

"I want to travel more," said Johnston. "I won't have to work nights and weekends before going on vacation."

Another reason the cartoonist wants a less hectic schedule is that she has some health issues, including a neurological condition (dystonia) she controls with medication. That's one reason Johnston has assistants in her Ontario office who ink the "FBorFW" dialogue and background art by hand, and add grays and colors via computer. Johnston still writes all the scripts, pencils in the dialogue and art, and inks the characters.

Still another reason Johnston doesn't want to continue doing new "FBorFW" strips every day is

that she's not as clued in as younger people are to the latest technology, language, and attitudes. "I'm showing my antiquity," she said wryly.

One example of this involved a December 2006 sequence featuring a fire in the building in which Michael, Deanna, and their two young children live. Johnston originally showed Michael, a writer, rushing in to save his manuscript. Someone told her it would be more realistic for Michael to rush in to save his laptop, and Johnston ended up redrawing the sequence that way.

One sequence "FBorFW" readers wonder if they'll see this year is Elizabeth getting into a relationship again with former boyfriend Anthony. Will that happen? Johnston is not saying.

Among the most memorable sequences in the comic's history was the 1993 one in which Michael's friend Lawrence came out as gay. Because of it, Johnston in 1994 became one of the few comic creators ever to be named a Pulitzer Prize finalist in the editorial cartooning category.

Eight years earlier, Johnston became the first woman to win the annual Reuben Award as top cartoonist from the 1946-founded National Cartoonists Society. She's also won dozens of newspaper comic polls.

Prior to starting "FBorFW," Johnston did medical art and commercial art, and published three books. Her work came to the attention of Universal, which asked her if she was interested in creating a comic.

What career path might Johnston have taken if she hadn't become a syndicated cartoonist? Perhaps animation or music, she replied. "I used to play the guitar and sing in coffeehouses," she said. "I wanted to be Joan Baez!"

Johnston's love of music is reflected in the instrument-playing ability of characters such as April, Jim Richards (Elly's father), and Phil Richards (Elly's brother).

While cast members have aspects of the cartoonist's personality, the thousands of "FBorFW" readers who write Johnston each year say the characters also reflect their lives. "I'm really glad people have enjoyed the characters and identified with them so much," she said.

Johnston obviously could have continued a non-hybrid "FBorFW" for years, but decided that wouldn't be the right thing to do. She said, "I know if I tried to push it further it would not be my best work."

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