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The first cartoonist I ever met was Len Norris, editorial cartoonist for the Vancouver Sun. My dad took me to Eaton's, where Len had set up a drafting table and was actually working as we watched. I was about 8, I guess; old enough to know that this was a big deal! Len was there to promote his books, which my dad collected and kept in pristine condition. My dad was a serious admirer of Len's work.

Each cartoon was more than an editorial opinion, it was a wonderful glimpse into the lives of Vancouver citizens — especially those living in the anointed heights of West Vancouver. These “terribly British” folks were often shown to have one leg longer than the other — from walking sideways along the steep mountain roads where unaffordable mansions had the best views of the gulf islands and the harbour below. The PGE railway, the rain, the beaches, the bridges, the insides of “terribly British” homes — so many iconic images were part of the incredibly funny and wonderfully irreverent comic art of Len Norris.

My dad taught me to scan Len's work for the “extras” — the added imagery that made each panel worth studying. In a “terribly British” home, for example, Len would show the occupants in tweeds and brogue shoes, with cups of tea, postulating on the latest downturn in the economy. On the wall might be a painting of a seascape, slightly askew — but the horizon would be in line with the ceiling and floor. There might be a bird cage and inside, the bird's feet would be seen above the edge of the base of the cage — as if it had been deceased for years. Wallpaper patterns were drawn with the finest of detail as would wainscot and mantle piece. His background as an architect was visible in every building inside and out and the “extras” he placed in every drawing were something to admire, to study and to learn from. In fact, if I ever had a comic art teacher (other than my dad) it was Len Norris!

When I was 17, I decided to go and meet Len Norris in person. I made an appointment with someone at the Vancouver Sun and had dressed up for the occasion. As I was getting out of the streetcar, I slipped on the cobble stones, fell onto the wet road and tore my dress and my stockings. Embarrassed, I went to the public washroom inside the Sun



“Brush them twice a day, vote for fluoridation tomorrow . . . and let's see if we can keep our
vitals well below twice a year . . .”
December 10, 1957

building to clean up. I didn't take long, but as I started to walk up the stairs to Mr. Norris' office, I saw him coming down. Too shy to ask him to stop or to tell him I had an appointment, I continued on up the stairs. He said “Good day” and I answered “Good day” as we passed on the stairway.

On the second floor, I found his office with the door open. I hoped he would come back, but I guess he was not told of the appointment with me and had gone out for lunch. I stood in the doorway, looking at all the things he used as an editorial cartoonist. He had all the things I had. I was sorry to have missed him, but perhaps the chance to just look around his studio was better than talking to him in person.

I saw his drafting table and the pens he used. I saw the discarded sketches in his waste basket, his coffee cup, his ink and pens and brushes. There was no magic in the items

he used. The magic was Len Norris himself. With this wonderful thought in mind, I knew I could do what Len did ... maybe not as well, maybe not as successfully, but with a little magic and a lot of practice, I knew I could be a cartoonist as well.

Many years later, when *For Better or for Worse* had been running long enough to

have become a recognized syndicated property, I had the courage to contact Len again. This time I had his personal phone number and I made an appointment to see him at his home. I took my dad who was beyond delighted to finally meet his comic art hero in person. We had tea with Len and his wife and we talked about cartoons and materials and deadlines — all the things professional cartoonists talk about. It was great! I then told Len about the day I passed him on the stairwell at the Sun and he looked at me in surprise. “Why in the world didn't you stop me?”

he asked. He couldn't believe I had been too shy to talk to him.

I often wonder what would have happened if I had stopped him on the stairs. I wonder if we'd have been friends; if my life, perhaps might have taken a different direction. In the end, I've realized how much he has influenced my work, how much I learned from just being in his studio. I tell young artists who visit me, “Just look at the things I use. You have everything I have. The magic comes from you. With a lot of practice and a little magic, anything can happen!”

Lynn Johnston created the syndicated comic strip *For Better or for Worse* which ran from 1979 until 2007. It continues in reruns and is still carried by more than 1,000 papers. Bored with retirement, she now works as a graphic artist and lives in North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
