

INK STAND

An interview with political cartoonist JEN SORENSEN

By Audrey Bilger



Don't be put off by its sluggish title: Jen Sorensen's long-running comic strip, *Slowpoke*, is incisive and action-packed.

Every week, in alt-weeklies around the country and online, Sorensen holds up a funhouse mirror to the world and shows us what's really going on, taking particular pleasure in skewering conservatives, the wingnut fringe, and the media for being prone to outrageous claims and ridiculous posturing.

As the titles of two of her collections—2004's *America Gone Bonkers* and 2008's *One Nation, Oh My God!*—make clear, Sorensen responds to political insanity with humor, sending up “Croxx” News, Republican sex scandals, the Tea Partiers, and more, giving readers something to laugh about in the midst of the craziness. Odds are you have one of her cartoons tacked up on your bulletin board or taped to your office door. If not, you definitely should.

Many of your cartoons offer up social commentary, and you frequently make the kind of political points that are characteristic of op-eds. How do you think that cartooning compares to op-ed writing?

As it stands now, I would say writers of prose are taken a lot more seriously than cartoonists. We're at the bottom of the entertainment food chain, to quote my friend Ruben Bolling, who draws *Tom the Dancing Bug*. Because cartooning tends to be devalued, and perceptions remain that comics are for kids or just fluff, no matter how sophisticated your cartoon is, you're not going to have the gravitas of an op-ed writer, at least in the eyes of most of the public.

[But] if you look at the medium itself, I think it's very subversive because it's much more immediate than a long, texty column. And if you can get people to laugh at something, they might agree with you. I think it's an excellent way of communicating political ideas.

Reading through your cartoons, especially the ones from the George W. Bush administration, is like getting a history lesson on what was really going on then. You coined the phrase "Taxorexia Nervosa"—"a mental and fiscal disorder that causes lawmakers to be intensely afraid of collecting revenue despite the reality of dangerously underfunded programs"—to describe how Republican tax cuts were gutting important programs like public education and health coverage. You even updated a cartoon from 2006 about the Supreme Court's views on corporate campaign contributions and free speech when they took that position even further this year.

Some cartoonists—and political cartoonists in particular—feel that once their cartoon is out there, it's current for a day or two, and then it becomes fish wrap—you know, it starts to stink. But I've always felt differently. My husband has this huge collection of all the Garry Trudeau *Doonesbury* books. If you go through them, it's like a history lesson. I don't think cartoons really lose their value that much.

You deal in political satire, and sometimes just repeating what people say and do can be a form of satire, right? When you tell the truth about politicians and their wicked maneuverings, it's cathartic for your readers, who are often as frustrated as you are by the situation.

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One of the more satisfying aspects of doing *Slowpoke* is knowing that every Monday, there's a bunch of people tuning in to my site because it does make them feel better. I always say that cartooning may not have the greatest financial rewards, but it does have nice existential rewards.

[But] an awful lot of things are so ridiculous it's almost hard to satirize them. That certainly became a trope among cartoonists, especially during the Bush years. It does become hard to exaggerate things that

are already kind of unreal. The most recent thing would be some of the Tea Party stuff, the "death panels" and such. In one cartoon I satirized the Teabaggers with a joke about *Soylent Green*, suggesting they thought socialized healthcare turned people into tofu. I found out like a day later that on Fox News, Neil Cavuto had shown clips from the movie *Soylent Green* while discussing Obama's healthcare plan. So it wasn't satire at all. I hadn't gone far enough.

You're particularly good at pointing out incongruities in the culture, whether it's a weird Internet ad geared toward moms or something that's completely and transparently disingenuous.

I think that's what every cartoonist strives for, basically. In my case, certain things just stand out for me, and I think, "Wow, that is just so weird, I've got to do a cartoon on that." The beginning of a cartoon almost has an emotional origin: You go with whatever moves you, and then you start with the intellectual work of making it funny or thinking up a concept where you can exploit that craziness.

Have you ever been worried about the response to your comics from hostile readers, particularly when you go after right-wingers?

I do worry that our culture is becoming more and more violent. You're constantly hearing about these mass shootings, and just recently that guy flew his plane into an IRS building. The right-to-carry people are really into packing heat these days. People are bringing guns into Starbucks. I think it ties into the whole paranoia about Obama. I do feel a little self-conscious doing cartoons about guns, though I don't censor myself. Other cartoonists I know have received more vicious hate mail than I have—Mark Fiore was recently featured on Bill O'Reilly [because of his] "Learn to Speak Tea Bag" video, and he got so much awful mail. It's kind of scary.

Do you think that women get attacked in more negative ways than men do when they take on political subjects in their humor?

I've been pretty lucky so far. I get the occasional idiot, but it's been maybe a little milder than what other women in media have experienced. I have a lot of male readers—more than half are male, and they're very supportive. I'm a generalist, and I don't focus on just feminist issues, necessarily, although I do draw feminist cartoons. Women writing about certain issues will invariably encounter some nasty backlash.

There's a perceived distance, also, between you and what's going on in the strip.

I do like having one foot in reality and one foot in a surreal imaginary world. Even in the way I draw. Some of my characters are really simple and abstract, like Mr. Perkins, whereas other people I'll draw more realistically. I like mixing it up like that. It feels like I'm breaking boundaries by having [both] cartoony characters and realistic caricatures in my strip.

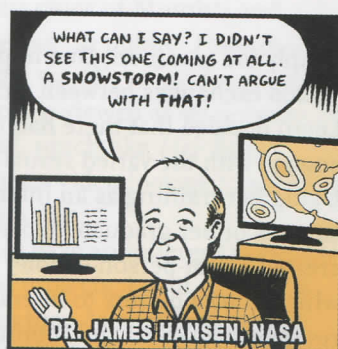
When the strip started off, before it was political at all, it was pure Cartoonland—and I like some of those early strips. The 2000 election was a really galvanizing event for me and for a lot of cartoonists. Suddenly, you just didn't feel like doing completely meaningless, funny cartoons. So that was definitely when I became more political—everyone did. There are times when I'm just so sick of politics, because it all just seems so clichéd. I don't want to sink so low as to dip into the muck again. But then sooner or later something will happen that I'll get genuinely upset about.

You drew a cartoon on climate change this past February, when conservatives were citing the record-breaking snowstorms in D.C. as "proof" that there's no such thing as global warming. Your strip was called "World's Scientists Flummoxed by Snowstorm," and featured climatologists exclaiming how shocked they are to see snow in winter. This one went over some of your readers' heads, didn't it?

Some people—not the majority of readers—but some people completely missed the sarcasm of the cartoon and thought I was actually saying snow disproves global warming. I think some people just read things at such a literal level, especially those who are used to reading more traditional daily cartoons, which tend not to be as conceptual as alt-weekly cartoons. I guess some people do

Humor has always been gendered. When boys are growing up, status is conferred on them for being the class clown, whereas girls typically achieve status by being pretty. What's interesting to me, though, is that a lot of my female friends over the years have been really funny. Cracking a joke is an aggressive act, so it's possible that women aren't as comfortable doing it in front of a group of guys as they are among other women. After all, you know what aggressive women tend to get called! Fortunately, the number of female comedians and cartoonists seems to be growing. I feel like I've been a little overlooked by feminist blogs, maybe because I don't draw specifically feminist cartoons all the time. Personally, I'd love to see more attention paid to women who are generalists doing creative things.

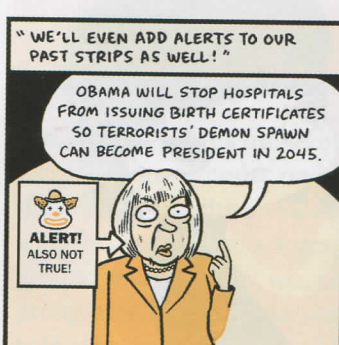
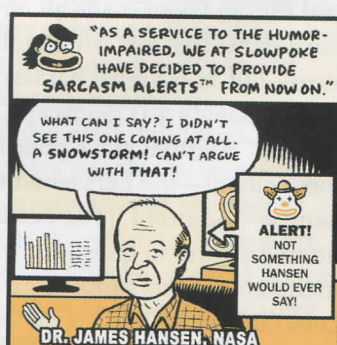
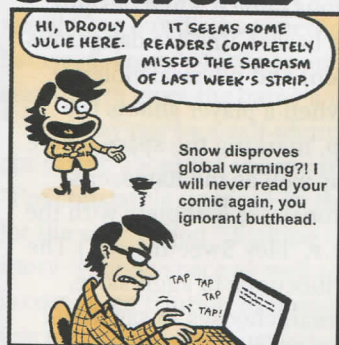
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go through life without learning the skill of appreciating humor. Also, there's been a rash of terrible editorial cartoons about global warming this winter, so readers have probably been trained to expect [tired] jokes that confuse weather with climate change.

Enough people wrote me angry e-mails about my "ill-informed" views that I decided to issue a clarification the following week. I drew a cartoon containing "Sarcasm Alerts" for the humor-impaired, explaining the previous week's strip in very elementary terms. I considered this cartoon to be something of a throwaway, but to my surprise, lots of readers found it hilarious. Go figure.

Every few years somebody writes a piece on how women have no sense of humor. Most recently, both Christopher Hitchens and Germaine Greer claimed that men are just naturally funnier than women. Why do you think the stereotype of female humorlessness is so persistent?

Even more often than we hear that women don't have a sense of humor, we get these ongoing reports on the death of feminism. Do you think feminism is dying or dead?

It does seem like the backlash is as strong as ever and the public impression of feminism is not necessarily improving. On the other hand, I really like the new generation of feminists. One of my favorite bloggers is Amanda Marcotte, who I think is very funny; she's got this big, brilliant analytical mind. The new school has an irreverent sensibility, and seems to have lost some of feminism's hoier trappings. [Laughs.] That's h-o-a-r, not w-h-o-r-e! I think there are some exciting things going on. **B**

Get a weekly fix of *Slowpoke* at slowpokecomics.com. **Audrey Bilger** teaches literature and gender studies at the Claremont Colleges, and is a frequent contributor to *Bitch*.