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My Life with Charlie Brown, Charles M. Schulz; introduction by M. Thomas Inge (2010) Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 193 pp. ISBN: 978-1-60473-448-5, Hardback, \$25.00

Reviewed by Ernesto Priego, University College London

'It is probably impossible to discuss holidays and children without talking about school', wrote Charles Monroe Schulz (1922–2000) when the year was 1976. By then he had been signing *Peanuts* for more than a quarter of a century, and he was perhaps at the peak of his popularity and storytelling power. The sentence sums up in an indirect manner what Schulz's philosophy and main thematic preoccupation was in both form and content. This is indeed a sentence written by a philosopher or a pedagogue.

We cannot talk about one without the other, writes Schulz, and this expresses in a simple and innocent way the tragic awareness that makes *Peanuts* a classic of twentieth century American literature. Childhood is indeed the topic that Schulz mastered, but if he did it was because in his work the literal becomes metaphorical and the metaphorical literal: the tragedy of human life is that it is precisely human, and that therefore we can often only realize it fully through its caricature. One and the other (holidays and school; childhood and adulthood; life and death) need each other to make sense, and this is something Schulz knew very well.

My Life with Charlie Brown is perhaps the ultimate *Collected Writings* by Schulz. M. Thomas Inge has compiled here Schulz's major published and unpublished prose writings (and a poem). The book is beautifully and cleverly designed by Todd Lappe, who has inserted selected panels and strips from Schulz's comic work, and used the trademark Schulz font (or a very similar one) for headings and subheadings. It is not an exaggeration to say the jacketed hardcover edition is soft and warm to the touch, almost like one would imagine Linus's 'security blanket' to feel.

The book is divided in three sections, titled 'My Life', 'My Profession' and 'My Art'. It also includes a short introduction by Inge, which sets in context Schulz's artistic and literary importance and the provenance of the chosen material. Everything is complemented by a chronology of Schulz's life and an appendix. This final section comprises a very basic review of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* by Katherine Anne Porter, which Schulz wrote for a course on the novel he took in 1965, and a hit-and-miss poem he wrote for his second wife, Jeannie (Jean Forsyth).

The main division in three sections emphasizes the tragic dimension of Schulz's graphic storytelling and, as proven by this collection, prose writing. But the borders between life, profession and art very quickly prove to be useless in this case. As Inge (2010: xiii) points out in his introduction, the intention with this collection is 'to round out the portrait of the man as he saw himself', and what comes out of the book's pages is not only the portrait of the man as he wrote about himself, but the portrait (or more appropriately, the portraits) of a man as

a comic strip artist, or the written portraits of a comic strip artist who was also a man.

Perhaps the most poignant passages come from essays that had been previously published in *Peanuts Jubilee: My Life and Art with Charlie Brown and Others* (1975), such as the homonymous 'My Life and Art with Charlie Brown and Others' and 'Creativity', which in this tome can be read under a different light in the context of equally important pieces, such as 'The Christmas that Almost Got Stolen' (1976); 'I'll Be Back in Time for Lunch' (1985); and '*Peanuts* – How It All Began' (1973). These pieces of writing are literary essays in their own right, and offer clear evidence of how talented Schulz was: with sheer simplicity, through short sentences and plenty of autobiographical and conversational elements, Schulz the writer is humble but wise; fragile and secure; experienced and naïve.

Memory, childhood, loss, love, friendship, God, innocence, maturity, religion, craftsmanship, work, everyday life, hockey and baseball, writing and art are, as expected, the main themes interwoven throughout the different pieces. What is truly admirable about these texts is that they can be read by anyone, even if this virtual reader has never read a complete *Peanuts* comic strip before or has never been even interested in comic strips: moving and endearing, Schulz writes with the voice of a teacher; his subject matter the conflation of art and life through the habit of work and contemplation.

This book remains utterly unique because artists like Schulz remain a rarity, in comics and elsewhere. He achieved unbelievable commercial success throughout his lifetime, at home and abroad, and yet his work retained an integrity no longer seen in mainstream 'creative industries'. It is almost heartbreaking to read him write that he did not regard what he did 'as Great Art', and thought that comics was 'a field that is generally regarded as occupying a very low rung on the entertainment ladder' (Schulz 2010: 3). Nevertheless, it soon becomes evident that the lack of 'greatness' he perceived in his own work and that of other comic artists was not anything inherent to the field or form, but a question of popular opinion: 'the fact that when a reviewer for a sophisticated journal wishes to downgrade the latest Broadway play, one of the worst things he can say about it is that it has a comic-strip plot' (Schulz 2010: 3–4). 'The comic strip can be an extremely creative form of endeavour', Schulz wrote. 'On the highest level, we find a wonderful combination of writing and drawing, generally done by one writer', but Schulz knew that comic strips were 'reproduced with the express purpose of helping publishers sell their publications'. This explained the industrialized nature of printed comics, which was for Schulz another great obstacle against the development of comics as art: 'the paper on which they appear is not of the best quality, so the reproductions lose much of the beauty of the originals [...] there are always annoying things like copyright stickers, which can break up the pleasing design of a panel [...] the true artist, working on his canvas, does not have to put up with such desecrations' (Schulz 2010: 4).

If Schulz, acknowledged as one of the greatest and most successful comic artists of all time, did not consider his own work 'Great Art', what then? Schulz recalls

what 'may have been [his] first day at kindergarden', and how he had been mortified by a problem of perspective in his first drawing (a shovel in the snow). The teacher came to him, looked at his drawing and said, 'Someday, Charles, you're going to be an artist' (Schulz 2010: 5). It is these kinds of episodes that define the tone of the texts. The pages are impregnated by nostalgia of unfulfilled promises and dreams, very much like the characters of his strips. The autobiographical passages are almost devoid of make-up: 'My mother also encouraged me in my drawing but, sadly, never lived to see any of my work published. She died a long, lingering death from cancer, when I was twenty, and it was a loss from which I believe I never recovered' (Schulz 2010: 9).

My Life with Charlie Brown will interest lifelong fans and comics scholars, but it should be read by aspiring comic artists as well. Like all great masters, the best advice he gives is not the most formal type ('design involves not only the composition of the characters but the proper drawing of the other elements within the strip'; 'it is nice to be surrounded by reference books and be where it is quiet, but being in the same place each day is important') but rather what we could call a philosophical one. Schulz (2010: 81) offers an unsystematic philosophy of comics composition: 'you must not confine yourself to any particular ideas'. Instead of resorting to facile explanations, Schulz links comic art and life indivisibly: 'Life has many finalities, and readers being able to make their own interpretations is, I suppose, what makes a cartoon idea successful' (2010: 152). The book is full of examples like this.

Schulz (2010: 153) writes about his characters as if they were real people, revealing how conscious he became of their traits. To the uninitiated this may appear upsetting at first, but Schulz proves that this is the consequence of a profound preoccupation with character development: 'the comic strip [...] should have a variety of personalities so that you are not always striking the same note. You must have a full keyboard on which to play out the themes and variations demanded each day'. In spite of its almost embarrassing autobiographical honesty, the book gives evidence of the great critical and methodological insight Schulz had into his own work: 'people speculate that I am Charlie Brown. Well, maybe. But only in the sense that all my characters reflect some aspect of me' (Schulz 2010: 174).

Baseball is of course a central theme in *Peanuts* ('Charlie Brown can never be a winner. He can never win a baseball game because it would destroy the foundation of the strip'). In fact, one of the best essays in the book is 'The Fan: Baseball is Life, I'm Afraid' (1985). This short piece contains several clues to understand Schulz's life and art better. After reading the whole book one realizes it is in reality an essay describing how he understood his art. One can paraphrase its last paragraph, replacing 'baseball' with *Peanuts*, like this:

Peanuts reflects the problems we have in our lives – fear, loneliness, despair, losing – all these things can be talked through the medium of comics. That reminds me of what Linus said to me: '*Peanuts* is a caricature of life.' I looked at him and said, 'Gosh, that's a relief. I was afraid it was life.'

It is probably impossible to discuss the art of Charles Schulz without talking about the triumphs and defeats of everyday life, and this is why this book is such a treat.

References

Schulz, Charles M. (1975), *Peanuts Jubilee: My Life and Art with Charlie Brown and Others*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.



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