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Decoder Ring — A Look Back at John Allison's *Bobbins*

Column Editor: **Jerry Spiller** (Art Institute of Charleston) <yeri.spiller@gmail.com>

Manchester's **John Allison** may still be young, but he is an elder statesman in Webcomics. He first put pen to his comic *Bobbins*¹ in 1998. After having his samples rejected by **United Features** and **King Features Syndicate**,² he put those first pages of *Bobbins* up on his own site and kept trudging along.

That early incarnation of what would become **Allison's** "Tackleverse," a series of comics spanning over 16 years and several generations of characters in the fictional Yorkshire town of Tackleford, looks very different from **Allison's** comics today. While always keeping a loose and instantly accessible style, the look of **Allison's** comics has evolved quite a bit over the years, as has the direction of his writing.

Bobbins focused on a cast of young professionals writing for a Tackleford magazine. Those characters, music writer and inventor Tim Jones, his record store buddy Ryan Beckwith, wild-eyed ingenue Shelley Winters, and Bourgeois Boheme editor's daughter Amy Chilton, became the center of a growing cast. Plots revolved around office and romance drama often spurred along by Tim's inventions, which gave a dose of sci-fi flavor to an otherwise earthly setting reminiscent of television sitcoms.

As the stories started to feature more and more sci-fi and supernatural elements, **Allison** spun the strip off into *Scary Go Round* in 2002.³ Eventually he switched from vector illustrations with soft colors drawn in Adobe Illustrator back to scanned pencil illustrations colored digitally. For my money, this is really when **Allison** started to hit his stride, in the middle chapters of *Scary Go Round*. Amy and Shelley came to share a flat with a freeloading fishman named Desmond, who liked to lounge around in his underpants, or less. Shelley and her sister Erin went to Hell at one point, somehow resulting in the latter Winters becoming a demon queen and being removed from the town's memory. New characters continued to rotate through, and much of the original *Bobbins* cast fell out of sight.

In 2009 **Allison** made another big change, moving the clock forward with *Bad Machinery*. This third era focused on a new generation in two competing groups of adolescents (boys vs. girls, of course) growing up and solving mysteries that grew out of all the inexplicable otherworldly goings on in Tackleford. The setting of Griswalds school gave readers the British grammar school vibe with a bit of Northern roughness, more *Hetty Wainthropp Investigates* than *Harry Potter*. Familiar characters popped up in new age-appropriate guises. Newly married, Amy Beckwith-Chilton started running an antique shop in town, while husband Ryan graduated from the record store to the role of a young instructor at Griswalds.

For the last several years **Allison** has been producing four pages or more each week. In fact *scarygoround.com* is often updated seven days a week, depending on his schedule with other projects. Side stories often revisit old characters from the *Bobbins* and *Scary Go Round* incarnations on Fridays or in weeks between larger *Bad Machinery* stories. Secondary characters take the spotlight under his *Giant Days* moniker, as well.

years and counting of the same continuity, the greatest difficulty I have is making my work approachable to new readers while retaining the old ones," he notes on his blog. "But I don't have the luxuries that the creators of an issue of [Marvel's] *Alpha Flight* from 1988 had. I don't have an editor to straighten things out. I have a fallible human memory of nearly 5,000 pages of comics, with no master document detailing the relationships between various characters."⁶ Library and information professionals: is anyone good with TEI and up for encoding 5,000 pages of **Allison's** work in Comic Book Markup Language?⁷

These strips' digital birth does not mean there are no **John Allison** works in print. He has long offered prints of individual strips, books, eBooks, and merchandise through **Topatoco**⁸ and his own site.⁹ Since the third *Bad Machinery* story he has been working with Oregon's **Oni Press**¹⁰ to collect that title for print. **Oni's** wider reach, especially in the States, difficult for **Allison** to reach with convention and bookstore appearances, has given the author new readership. He told *Comic Book Resources*, "I know the work's



Figure 2: Panels from *Bad Machinery* 9/21/2009, Image: *scarygoround.com*⁵

Not being tied to print opens up many possibilities for a creative entrepreneur like **Allison**. But it can also make for confounding continuity. **Allison** himself admits that the lines between *Bobbins*, *Scary Go Round*, and *Bad Machinery* are hard to find. "After 16

found a lot of readers through libraries. That's an audience I never would have access to. [Oni] works hard to get things out into all kinds of channels that I had no concept of."¹¹ *Giant Days* is also available in print from **Boom Studios'** creator-owned imprint **BOOM! Box**.¹²

Still, **Allison** has clearly been itching to write and draw stories beyond Tackleford. He wrapped *Bad Machinery* in 2014, feeling its young detectives had grown up enough and had perhaps suffered more than their share of ghostly MacGuffins. The last storyline on *scarygoround.com* gives readers a finale for many of the original *Bobbins* crew, including a reunion for the long separated Winters sisters.

Lately **Allison** has been tweeting about a robotic policeman named Robert Cop and offering up sketches on Tumblr of an upcoming project called *Yawning Sky*. "At the start of April," he writes on his blog, "it will be time for something new."¹³



Figure 1: Panel from *Scary Go Round* 9/2/2008, Image: *scarygoround.com*⁴

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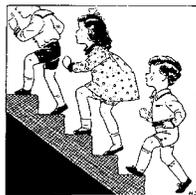
Little Red Herrings — The Moving Finger...Blinks, and Having Blinked, Blinks On

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

At the end of February, amid the snow and the false alarms for snow and ice, came the following headline: “Why Digital Natives Prefer Reading in Print — And Yes You Read that Right!” (<http://wapo.st/1BcFIZo>). No, it didn’t come from the pen of this column’s author (though it could have), nor did it come from any number of those whom some wish to brand as Luddites: **Nicholas Carr**, **Mark Bauerlein**, or **Sven Birkerts**. Rather it came from Maryland reporter **Michael S. Rosenwald** and *The Washington Post*. The piece is eye-catching if for no other reason than it *isn’t* from the usual suspects!

What **Rosenwald** discovered is precisely what **Carr**, or **Birkerts**, or **Bauerlein**, or your faithful columnist has been saying for at least a decade: yes, online reading occurs, and many digital natives use it for a variety of reasons. But no one, including them, prefers online reading when trying to comprehend a difficult text.

It is as if **Rosenwald** is reading over **Carr** or **Bauerlein**’s shoulder. The students he interviews do not like online reading because it is distracting. They find online reading difficult because when they read an online text,



90% of the time they are also doing something else: checking email, checking in at a social network, or even playing a game. **Rosenwald** opens with a young man, age 20, who simply

prefers reading text because of the smell, the feel, and even the *silence* of the text: it isn’t making sounds, ringing bells, or offering a rabbit hole in which to get lost, literally or figuratively. Further, online readers tend to skim, cannot fully comprehend what they are reading, and find that their minds really wander — all over the place. Some even complain that the light in their eyes rather than over their shoulders is problematic.

Some of those interviewed said they would not even attempt a difficult text in electronic form. And who can blame them? Most anyone can scan a newspaper or even take on a *Harry Potter* book. But **Tocqueville**? **Plato**? **Joyce**? It simply cannot be done. **Joyce** underscores the print versus online problem in high relief. Perhaps no other author lends himself better to the online format of hyperlink hype than **Joyce** because he requires so much elaboration. “Met him pike hoses” isn’t going to resonate with many that **Joyce** is word-playing with metempsychosis. But readers find that even

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