Decoder Ring: A Look at John Allison's Bobbins

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Manchester’s John Allison may still be young, but he is an elder statesman in Webcomics. He first put pen to his comic Bobbins in 1998. After having his samples rejected by United Features and King Features Syndicate, 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 Beck, with, wild-eyed ingénue 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. 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 the look of 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.

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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 Griswolds 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 Griswolds.

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.

Not being tied to print opens up many possibilities for a creative entrepreneur like Allison. But it can also make for confusing continuity. Allison himself admits that the lines between Bobbins, Scary Go Round, and Bad Machinery are hard to find. “After 16 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.” Library and information professionals: is anyone good with TEI and encoding 5,000 pages of Allison’s work in Comic Book Markup Language?

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 Topato.co and his own site. Since the third Bad Machinery story he has been working with Oregon’s Oni Press 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
A 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...