

One Frame at a Time: Dave Coverly Captures Life as a Cartoonist

by Ryan Rusin

They are one of the few things you can connect to without knowing language. All that's required is vision and a dose of humor.

They arrive on your front porch every morning, before most of us are even awake and the dew is still setting on the grass.

But most importantly...it tells a story quicker than anything else out there.

You can finish them over your cup of Sunday coffee, or even stumble upon it mindlessly scrolling through your social media feed.

Single-panel cartoons re-defined the way in which stories could be told. And even though they have been around since the 19th century, their popularity has only grown.

They draw in to the moments of our everyday life, and sculpt them into something funny or touching for everyone to crack a grin at during our mundane day-to-days.

Most novelists require 300 pages to tell a story. Filmmakers take two hours or more of your time to get through three acts. And journalists like myself, will make you read through 1,200 words to reach a conclusion.

But this art form is unlike the others...

Small-town Michigan native, husband, and father of two, Dave Coverly, is one of the few that can bring entire stories to life in the restricted space of a 7" x 7" strip of paper.

He sparked his success as the creator of the renowned, single-panel cartoon series "Speedbump", which is now syndicated in over 400 publications, such as *The Washington Post*, *Parade*, *The Globe & Mail*, and many more.

To find such success as a career cartoonist, however, was no easy task. Even after two decades of working on his panel, it still sculpts a hectic schedule for Coverly to navigate.

"It's sort of desperation mistaken for inspiration. Because I start from scratch every single Monday, with zero ideas," Coverly chuckled.

"I'm at the point now where I don't even worry about ideas anymore because I've

done this process for 20 somethin' years, but I still require that little adrenaline rush to keep me going', and deadlines do that for me," Dave said.

Every Monday morning, Coverly opens his eyes, turns off his devices, and begins to brew idea after idea in the attic-turned-studio of his Ann Arbor, MI. home. All of the concepts eventually come to fruition by the week's end.

"By Monday's end, I have my big idea for the Sunday papers ready. Then Tuesday and Wednesday is my syndicate deadline stretch from hell, when I unplug my phone, ignore email, forget to bathe, and generally look up from my drawing table Wednesday night to discover I'm wearing the same clothes I put on Monday," he said.

The cartooning bug latched onto Coverly as he started doodling sketches as a kid. While most people gave up after their youth, Coverly luckily had a solid support system both from his parents, as well as his instructors, to motivate him to keep pushing forward.

But the moment the passion really consumed him was when he became the cartoonist for his high school newspaper, and his work started transforming into something tangible.

"My high school journalism teacher, who has ended up becoming one of my best friends now, one day brought me a New Yorker magazine. And it was sort of one of those moments, where I was like, 'Ohhh shit. Those are cool.' I mean, I didn't understand about 3/4 of the magazine, but I loved that they were deeper and a joke about hating Monday's or whatever," said Coverly.

Coverly later earned his BS with a double major in Imaginative Writing and Philosophy at Eastern Michigan University, and received his MA in Creative Writing from Indiana University.

And while Coverly had never actually had any formal education in illustration or design, much of what he studied was still applicable to creating cartoon panels. Not to mention, it also acted as a strong presence to push him in the direction of his present career-path.

"I had a very, very normal childhood. All these people in grad school, you know, they have these stories...you couldn't believe these dark, cathartic things they had to write about. I kind of realized that I liked writing, but I didn't have a lot to say. So cartooning really worked well for me, because you give like these little ideas, then you get 'em out, and then you move on to the next idea," Coverly said.

As his career launched off, and Coverly left grad school starting out as a editorial cartoonist, he faced a moment that would soon change his life, and his creativity, forever.

He went to go meet one of his heroes at his office in Cincinnati, Ohio: Jim Borgman. Who many might recognize as the creator of the renowned comic strip "Zits".

To this day, Coverly remains steadfast in saying that an original art piece given to him by Jim Borgman, featuring a comical moment with George Bush Sr., would be one of the first things he'd grab out of his studio in the case of a fire.

"He [Borgman] told me first that my work was really nice, but then he said something that struck me...he said, 'What if you just stop reading cartoons? Set everybody else's work aside, and just see what comes out of you. Draw what you want to draw.' And I was just like, 'That sounds so f***ing hard!' But I tackled it on regardless because I respected him so much, and it kind of changed my life. Since all of a sudden? I started drawing differently," Coverly stated.

That moment redefined Coverly's career and forced him to break the habit of copying or latching onto the work of other cartoonists that he aspired toward. By cutting out the imagery of other works, it required Dave to look for something unique that would bring his single-panel work to life. A style that soon would embody the success of his career as an artist.

"So if you open the paper and you're looking for SpeedBump, you'd look for my drawing style, not a specific character. So it's doubly important that I created my own style, because that's really the only thing goin' for me," Coverly laughed.

While Coverly remains humble in reflecting on his achievements, it is no doubt for many in his audience, that his successes are well deserved.

An avid fan of Coverly's, Michael Zettler, recently wrote to him about the profound impact his work has had on him and his life.

Zettler described how his brother had recently passed away unexpectedly, and that one of Coverly's panels that came out at the same time, helped keep his head in perspective.

The panel was a picture of a man walking past a cemetery...in his thoughts, was "Time=\$"...but on the tombstone passing him by was "Time> \$".

Following the confusion and depression surrounding the death of his brother, seeing a panel that related so heavily to his circumstance, helped steer his life in a new, less-stressed direction. So much so, to the point that he pinned up the comic in his cubicle, and has let it remind him every day how grateful he should be to cherish his own life.

After talking to him, Zettler said that the panel has been there so long as a reminder, that it now has grown yellow and brittle. The age showing how everlasting the message is to him.

“I greatly appreciate what [Coverly’s] work has done for my life, and it will always remind me of how precious time is, of the wonderful brother I lost well before his time, and help keep me level headed and appreciative of what I have today,” Zettler said.



The piece Zettler is referring to.

In 2009, Coverly received the equivalent of the Oscar in the cartoonist’s world: the illustrious Reuben Award, naming him “Outstanding Cartoonist of the Year”.

The award is given each year by the National Cartoonists Society, and grants awards to the best-of-the-best cartoon creators each year.

“Like the general public doesn’t really know shit about it. I mean, we all joke about it. You know, it’s like the plumber’s have their convention to give out their best toilet repair. Only the plumber’s really understand how big of a deal it is,” Coverly laughed.

“But for me, the lucky thing in that moment was that year, it happened to be hosted in Hollywood. And my only other family in the world was in California, near Hollywood. So, I literally had my entire family there. And we didn’t know if I was gonna win or not yet, and then I did. It was one of those moments where it was so perfect that you thought, ‘Well, it only goes downhill from here.’ It was a deathbed moment -- you know what I mean? Like, I know I’ll be thinking of that moment at the end of my life,” he added.

Coverly now has become a well-decorated artist, even earning additional praise in 2003 and 2014 from the National Cartoonists Society, getting his work named “Best in Newspaper Panels”.

But even the most experienced still face challenges that can sometimes arise out of nowhere. And if there has been any great change in Coverly’s career, it has been one that’s impacted all of the modern world: the expansion of technology.

“I think that with the digital world there’s a lot more opportunities for people with talent to do stuff. You can do it faster, and easier, and I mean, I’m one of the old dinosaurs...in fact I’m one of the only people who still doesn’t do anything digital, except for scanning. I barely know how to scan, and email, then that’s about it. But a lot of my friends do it all on the computer or a tablet or whatever,” Dave said.

“I just hope that this digital world rewards the creativity. Opens the doors for more Bill Waterson’s or Gary Larson’s to enter into the field, rewards those who take a chance to break new ground...and doesn’t destroy the sort of uniqueness of cartooning in general,” Coverly added.

While skeptical, Coverly does, however, remain optimistic that the new digital medium offers more of a chance for *all* aspiring artists to have their shot at the field – not to mention, have a platform to showcase their content without the involvement of a middleman. In that sense, he feels that these new mediums will ultimately remain democratic and give pay off to those who work their heart at it.

But after long-becoming a veteran in the field now, Dave Coverly will remain less focused on the change of technology. At 53-years old, Coverly will instead be working to create more of his work the way he’s known how to do it best. Pencil in-hand, Monday-Wednesday deadline stretches ahead.

“I really just love the process...coming up to the studio in my attic, discovering new ideas, and just doing my stuff. Then I go and I play tennis, I drink some beer, then I start over the next day. It’s a good little life...I don’t really need more than that,” Coverly said.