

Jim Davis

Born: July 28, 1945; Marion Indiana

Active: ca 1960s-present

Interesting Facts

Jim Davis grew up on a farm in Fairmount Indiana and wanted to be a farmer. However, his severe asthma attacks frequently forced him indoors. In a pre-television era, his mother would “shove a pencil and paper” into his hands and tell him entertain himself.

By his own admission, his early drawings were terrible. In an interview, Davis said, “My first drawings were so bad I had to label them. I'd draw a cow and label it with an arrow pointing to the cow. But, over time, I improved.” In another interview, his father added: ““You couldn't tell if it was a horse or a dog. His people always had belly buttons though.”

Davis stuttered as a child. He attended a small, three-room school with blended classes, and his teacher encouraged him by saying, “The words are there, you just have to let them out one at a time.”

Davis went to Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, where he claims he had one of the two worst-GPAs in university history. He credits David Letterman with the other low GPA record.

Davis's first strip featured an all-insect cast. When editors told him insects aren't funny, he looked around and realized there were many cartoon dogs, but no cats. Drawing on the farm cats of his childhood, Garfield (named for Davis's grandfather) was born.

In addition to the Garfield and U.S. Acres Strips, Davis has also been a screenwriter, television producer (he's won four Emmy awards), and musical playwright.

He still lives in Indiana.



Vocab

Cartooning:

Appears in the 1670s in English, meaning “a drawing on strong (stiff) paper”. During the Renaissance and after, cartooning meant the final drawing an artist did in preparation for a large painted work. Most paintings at the time were done on thin wooden boards, or frescoed walls, so the final drawing would be the same size as the soon-to-be-painted surface. Since most “cartoons” were destroyed in the transfer process, the few cartoons we have from the Renaissance and later periods are those whose final painting were never made.

By the 1840s, with the rise of newspapers, a “cartoon” meant a drawing attacking a political person or idea. Later, the term included drawings which told a humorous story. In 1916, with the rise of animation, “cartoon” expanded again to include these moving drawings which told a humorous story.

Etymology:

Cartoon comes from the French word *carton*, which comes from the Italian *cartone*. In Italian, “*carta-*” means paper, and the suffix “*-one*” means “large”.

Interestingly, the word “Carton”, meaning a paper box to hold something, also comes from the same root words as “cartoon” because boxes were made of the same heavy paperboard artists drew on.

Quotes from Jim Davis:

“There are so many opportunities in life, that the loss of two or three capabilities is not necessarily debilitating. A handicap can give you the opportunity to focus more on art, writing, or music.”

“I’m still a farm boy at heart. If I hadn’t suffered from asthma as a child, I would be a farmer today.”

“It’s amazing what one can accomplish when one doesn’t know what one can’t do.”

“An imagination is a powerful tool. It can tint memories of the past, shade perceptions of the present, or paint a future so vivid that it can entice...or terrify, all depending upon how we conduct ourselves today.”

Early Cartoons

To transfer cartoons to their final surface, the artist would prick hundreds of dots along the lines of the drawing. Then, pinning the cartoon to the final to-be-painted surface, they would bounce a bag of charcoal dust against the cartoon. The charcoal dust would fall through the holes in the cartoon, leaving a follow-the-dots outline on the final surface. The surface of the cartoon would be destroyed, coated in the charcoal dust, and the cartoon would be abandoned. What cartoons we still have are those which were never transferred for painting.



Left: a cartoon of the artist Michelangelo Buonarroti by his student Daniele de Volterra. This cartoon was actually pricked in preparation for transfer (see detail on right) but never was, making it a unique artistic sample of early cartooning.

Early Political Cartoons

Though the name wouldn't be applied until the 1840s, the first political cartoons were born during the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution (or War of American Independence, as they now call it in Britain.) On the left, the first political cartoon ever published, drawn by Benjamin Franklin in 1754. Franklin continued to draw political cartoons through the Revolution. The art form took off. On the right, a political cartoon in the British papers in 1779: "The American Horse Throwing its Master".



Take home:

The trick to a cartoon is, like Norman Rockwell, to tell a complete story in 1-3 panels. The story can be funny or can make a point.

Look at 3 panel cartoons, such as those seen in the daily paper, or cartoons like Garfield, Peanuts, Calvin and Hobbes, Beetle Bailey, Hagar the Horrible, 22 B.C., Mother Goose and Grimm, and many others. How does the cartoonist draw a stylized character and tell a story?

What details do they add or subtract to tell the story better?

At home, you can either copy a comic directly¹, or create your own comic.

Books:

For Jim Davis, the best books to look through will be Garfield books. Note some of the differences between his early Garfield strips and later ones. As Davis practiced his art, he made changes to some of the forms of the characters. Charles “Sparky” Shultz, of Peanuts fame, once advised Davis to change Garfield’s feet to “human” feet and let him walk upright, so look for that change. Otherwise, look at different comic books from the library or online, or in your own collection. How does each artist tell his or her “story” within the limitations of the three comic boxes?

Videos:

YouTube: “**How Garfield is Drawn**” uploaded by “Wayne Shellabarger”. This six-minute cartoon shows how the Garfield strip is created from start to end, including start, lettering, inking, and coloring.

YouTube Channel “**Garfield & Friends**”: Jim Davis’s Company, Paws Inc., has an official YouTube channel, which uploads a new cartoon of the “Garfield and Friends” TV show every Monday. If you want to watch these cartoons and see how animation changes the story telling of the cartoon, yet keeps the style, check it out.

YouTube: “**How to Draw Garfield**” uploaded by “chloeangelsutton”. This three-minute video features Jim Davis walking you through hand-drawing Garfield.

Interactive:

Davis created an interactive website, professorgarfield.org, with games, a comic drawing section (you will need to create an account in order to save your work, but the website says its free!) and reading section. If this may appeal to you or your student, check it out! (As always, be sure to thoroughly vet anything online for your children.)

¹ Copying another person’s work directly is a legitimate technique for learning how to draw or cartoon. As long as you don’t pass your work as the original artist’s, or attempt to sell the copy, this is a proper centuries-old practice to learn an art form. When we draw or hand-copy something, our brains pay deeper and better attention to how the original was constructed, and the work helps us more accurately remember how it item worked.