

Johnny Hart: 'I Did It His Way'

As the creator of the B.C. comic strip, Johnny Hart dreamed of one day offering a collection of his inspirational comics in a book. Though he wasn't able to see this dream fulfilled before his death in 2007, Hart's wife, Bobby, was determined to carry on the vision. With the help of her family and friends, she compiled the most memorable of Hart's work into a brand-new book, I Did It His Way (Thomas Nelson). Along with pages and pages of the best from the B.C. comic strip, readers will enjoy getting to know more about Hart's career and how he became a Christian. This special spotlight of The Buzz is an adaptation from I Did It His Way, as well as a link to a flipbook that offers several pages from this special tribute to a special man.

John Lewis "Johnny" Hart was born on Feb. 18, 1931, in Endicott, N.Y. As a boy, he demonstrated a talent for art as well as an original sense of humor. "As far back as I can remember," he recalled, "I drew funny pictures, which got me out of, or into, trouble depending on the circumstances." But Hart, who is remembered internationally today as the creator of the comic strips *B.C.* and *The Wizard of Id*, never considered cartooning as a serious profession until after he graduated from Union-Endicott High School in 1949.

At age 19, Hart met Brant Parker, a young cartoonist who influenced Hart's artistic development and eventually became Hart's creative partner for *The Wizard of Id* comic in 1964. Soon after high school graduation, Hart enlisted in the Air Force and was stationed in Warner Robins, Ga. It was there that he met Ida Jane "Bobby" Hatcher. In 1952, Hart and Bobby were married in the base chapel.

In 1953, Hart was deployed to Korea, where he produced cartoons for the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*. After his discharge, the couple lived at his mother-in-law's farm in Georgia. It wasn't too long before Hart sold his first freelance cartoon to *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine.

Hart returned to his hometown in New York State with his bride and took a position

in the art department at General Electric while continuing to sell cartoons to major magazines. Intrigued by the whimsical and informal style of the Peanuts comic he saw in the local paper every day, Hart set out to create his own strip. He looked to the simple life of the prehistoric caveman for his inspiration, and soon the characters that were destined for fame began to emerge. *B.C.* signed with *The New York Herald Tribune* for syndication and made its debut on Feb. 17, 1958.

With his career as a cartoonist well under way, Hart left his position at GE and began working full time on the strip. Hart and Bobby were happy living in Endicott, raising their two daughters and enjoying *B.C.*'s success. In 1964, Hart created a second comic strip, *The Wizard of Id*, with Brant Parker, his friend of 14 years.

Producing two thriving comic strips was very rewarding, but coming up with funny ideas every day was challenging as well. Hart found it particularly demanding in 1965 when his mother became very ill. Grace Hart lost her battle with cancer at age 53. Hart struggled with his grief and became very angry with God. He felt unable to accept the loss and needed answers that he could not find. Beyond the success of his professional life, he was struggling. In the years that followed, which Hart later referred to as his "backsliding years," he suffered from a lack of fulfillment and drank more than he knew he should.

In 1976, a local realtor called Hart to see if he might be interested in looking at a large wooded property in a neighboring rural town. Hart fell in love with the peace and serenity of the place. It was a beautiful home surrounded by nature and set beside a pond. Unknown to Bobby, Hart purchased the property for her birthday and put it in her name. He knew she would love it as he did.

The place was located in the small hamlet of Nineveh, N.Y. Hart would later joke about how those who run from God's purpose for them, like Jonah did, get deposited in Nineveh sooner or later. After moving in, Hart took up fishing and boating, and built a large studio on the property. Life seemed perfect. He had the career he had always dreamed of and had become one of four cartoonists in history to have two comic strips with more than 1,000 papers. He had a wife, children and grandchildren who adored him, and a wonderful home. Yet something still seemed to be missing.

In 1984, Hart decided he wanted better TV reception and called in a company to install a satellite dish as his studio. It became quite the operation and took longer than expected. A born-again father and son team owned the company Hart had

hired. They spent nights at the studio and used a Christian network to test the system. At first this annoyed Hart, but he couldn't help but listen to the preachers on the station. To his astonishment, he was hearing that the Bible not only had all the answers he'd been searching for, it was the answer.

Hart soon found his life taking on a new purpose and meaning. One Sunday morning he woke up and asked Bobby if she would like to go to church. Bobby didn't answer right away, so Hart began silently praying that she would want to go. The following Sunday she came to him and asked, "Do you want to go to that church?" Hart smiled and together they began attending the Nineveh Presbyterian Church. They became members and made many new friends within the church family. Hart began to gain an inner peace and the profound knowledge that he was right with God.

His newfound faith called him to share the Word through his work. This decision was met with mixed reviews, which ranged from outright protest to enthusiastic applause. Although occasionally troubled by the debate, Hart knew in his heart that this was God's purpose for his life.

Hart would often recall one particular letter he received from a fan. A woman wrote to thank him. She had been seriously contemplating suicide and happened to open the paper one day, where she discovered one of his inspirational strips. It changed her life.

"I couldn't believe it when I read that letter. God managed to use my strip to reach that precious soul," Hart said. He said that one fan letter alone made all the controversy worthwhile.

Hart's incredible wit and creative comic ability allowed him to reach the pinnacle of his profession. Lauded by his peers, he received numerous honors for both his comic strips, including The Reuben—the highest honor bestowed by the National Cartoonist Society. Although internationally famous, Hart never forgot his roots, and freely donated his time and talent to his local community. Evidence of his generosity can still be seen all over Broome County, N.Y. From artwork to countless logos, including a PGA tour event, The *B.C.* Open, which ran for 35 years, Hart has left his mark on the world.

Hart died on Easter eve 2007 as he sat at his drawing board, doing what he loved most.

Sometimes Controversial

One of the most controversial *B.C.* strips that Hart produced appeared on Sunday, Apr. 15, 2001.



The power of the images he used made some believe that he was portraying the replacement of Judaism with Christianity, but he said he was only honoring two important holidays—Passover, represented by the menorah; and Easter, represented by the cross. The thinking behind the strip was that Christianity is rooted in Judaism.

“I noticed one day that the center section of the menorah bore the shape of a cross,” Hart explained. “I wanted everyone to see the cross in the menorah. It was a revelation to me, one that tied God’s chosen people to their spiritual next of kin—the disciples of the risen Christ. This was a holy week for both Christians and Jews alike, and my intent, as always, was to pay tribute to both.”

Of the resulting hype, Hart’s wife, Bobby, said: “When John began doing religious strips we knew there would be controversy. All he really wanted was for his readers to enjoy his work, look up Scriptures, maybe get a few laughs, and tell others about the message he prayed they would receive. Hart never wrote a strip with the intention of offending anyone. That simply wasn’t his nature.”

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Would you like to see a few more *B.C.* comic strips? Click the image below.



Click here to purchase *I Did It His Way*, which released earlier this month.