

# A Superhero for Cartoonists?

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Rick Newcombe wants to rescue artists and columnists from unfair contracts.

By KATINA ALEXANDER

**R**ICHARD NEWCOMBE is fond of saying that he is "like Lincoln, freeing the slaves." Six months ago, Mr. Newcombe founded Creators Syndicate, which claims to offer its cartoonists and artists emancipation from what he calls "indentured servitude" — the 10- to 20-year contracts and the signing over of ownership rights that have characterized the syndication business for years.

The great-emancipator image may be just what the 36-year-old Mr. Newcombe needs to succeed in this industry. Syndication is a tough business for newcomers: The industry has been consolidating for years — much like the nation's newspapers that are its market — and is dominated by eight big operations.

But already Mr. Newcombe, who founded Creators Syndicate after two years as president of News America Syndicate, has had some notable successes. He has signed three industry winners: Ann Landers (Eppie Lederer); cartoonist Herbert Block; and the Johnny Hart comic-strip "B.C."

This week, Mr. Newcombe will announce several new features, including Tom Batiuk's new cartoon strip "Crankshaft," about a bus driver. Mr. Batiuk already has two successful strips with North America (the new name for News America after the Hearst Corporation took it over



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Richard Newcombe, with Herbblock (above). Mr. Newcombe has also signed Ann Landers and the "B.C." comic strip.

earlier this year), "Funky Winkerbean" and "John Darling."

Mr. Hart, who left his other strip, "The Wizard of Id," with North America Syndicate, said he went with Mr. Newcombe because "I thought by going I could make a statement or champion the cause."

That "cause" is an important one for many cartoonists and columnists. Though not all syndicates require creators to hand over the rights to their work — United Press Syndicate and Tribune Media Services prefer to leave ownership with the artist — the largest syndicates, King Features and United Media, usually want these rights, which stay with them "for life," said David Astor, associate editor of Editor and Publisher.

And nearly all syndicates draw up long-term contracts with creators, typically specifying a 50-50 revenue split and in many cases requiring artists to go along if the syndicate is sold.

Mr. Newcombe's promise of a new deal is getting a mixed reaction in the industry. Industry rivals, who dislike being characterized as feudal lords, are critical. "Obviously, his game is to raid existing talent at other syndicates by promising shorter contracts and ownership of copyright," said William Dickinson, general manager of the Washington Post Writers Group. "There's no question among comic-strip creators that these have become pressing issues. It's a powerful argument."

**D**AVID Hendin, senior vice president and editorial director of United Media, which syndicates "Peanuts," refused to discuss Mr. Newcombe, but he did say that "to suggest that Charles Schulz is an indentured servant is ludicrous."

To be sure, not all creators object to long contracts or to handing over ownership rights. Jim Davis, creator

of "Garfield," who is syndicated by United Features Syndicate (under United Media), said his syndicate handles "the unfunny stuff and that's fine with me." But he added: "A lot of my good friends in cartooning don't agree with me at all."

Indeed, many cartoonists seem to be cheering on Mr. Newcombe. "He's an innovator and the first breath of fresh air the syndicates have had in 100 years of existence," said Bill Keane, creator of "Family Circus," which is syndicated by King Features. Another King artist, Mell Lazarus, creator of "Momma" and "Miss Peach," is credited with giving Mr. Newcombe the idea of fighting for creators' ownership of rights. "He has a humanistic approach that is hard to discount," said Mr. Lazarus.

"I'm applauding his efforts," said Hank Ketcham, creator of "Dennis the Menace," also syndicated by King, where, he says, he is generally happy. Mr. Ketcham has long opposed the long-term contract system. "I've been hog-tied for the whole length of my career," he said.

Mr. Newcombe says he understands why syndicates feel the need for multi-year contracts. With most syndicators investing about \$25,000 to \$35,000 initially for unknown talent, he said, "there's something to the argument" that the talent should stick around long enough to make money for the organization. "That's why Creators Syndicate has five-year contracts for unknown artists and columnists. But 10-year and 20-year contracts are ridiculous."

**M**R. Newcombe has been around such contracts for years. Before News America, he was at the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, where, at the age of 29, he became general manager.

When News America was sold in January to Hearst's King Features, Mr. Newcombe was offered a job as "property manager" — a big-money job he said, but it did not give him the authority to do what he wanted: grant free-agency status to creators,

So he left North America and founded Creators Syndicate with private financial backing. London-based publisher Robert Maxwell owns 40 percent of the company.

Mr. Newcombe's wife, Carole, an attorney, incorporated the business, and the first corporate minutes were taken at the kitchen table in the Newcombes' home in Santa Monica, Calif.

The company's board members include Andrew Gaty, a film producer, and Don Kummerfeld, a New York investment banker who was president of News America Publishing and who is now in business for himself.

Mr. Newcombe says that he is also gathering an advisory board of prominent cartoonists to discover new talent. Creators Syndicate now employs 14 full-time people. He projects 1987 revenues in excess of \$2.5 million.

Will the new syndicate have an impact? Some cartoonists may be banking on it. Bill Keane says that when his contract with King is up in 1988, "I'm asking for ownership of my own feature." Syndicates will have to change, he said, to save face and appeal to cartoonists of the future.

Said Mr. Astor of Editor and Publisher: "This syndicate is potentially revolutionary — if it makes it." ■