

HOT TYPE



Rick Newcombe

photo: Dana Attanasio

Changing the Rules of Syndication

In the twilight of the 20th century, feudalism has suffered another maiming blow. Ownership of comic strips is falling into the hands of the artists and writers who create them.

A young man from Chicago prominently identified with this reform, Rick Newcombe, was confronted with the business's medieval propensities on becoming president of the News America Syndicate a few years ago. News America is what Rupert Murdoch had renamed the Field Syndicate when he bought it along with the *Sun-Times* in 1983. Newcombe called a meeting, and Mell Lazarus, creator of *Miss Peach* and *Momma*, cleared his throat.

"I challenged him to be the first syndicate president in history to give back ownership to the people it had been withheld from for years," Lazarus remembers. "I said, return their rights to them, and not only will your name go down in history but you'll probably become the biggest, strongest syndicate in very short order."

Lazarus spoke as a freeman. In 1957, he'd taken *Miss Peach* to the old Herald-Tribune Syndicate and been offered the usual terms: a long-term contract with automatic rollover provisions binding the cartoonist to the syndicate essentially forever. And the syndicate would own the strip. "I picked up the drawings and went home," says Lazarus. "I constitutionally couldn't do such a thing."

The syndicate called back later the same day and offered Lazarus a contract he could live with. His triumph was not unique but it was rare; the biggest syndicates—King Features and United Media—have routinely insisted on buying the properties they handle.

Rick Newcombe heard Mell Lazarus's message. Two years ago, when Murdoch sold News America to King Features, Newcombe opened his own shop, Creators Syndicate, in Los Angeles. He issued fliers that shouted in huge black letters FREEDOM and COME JOIN OUR REVOLUTION (although he overlooked the classic California call to action: "Serfs! Up!").

"I started out with a Radio Shack telephone, a Rolodex, a one-room office, and two actors helping me out part-time," Newcombe told us the other day. What he needed now was talent. He quickly signed up an old friend of his, someone he'd met through his father, Leo Newcombe, the former general manager of the *Sun-Times*.

The friend was Eppie Lederer. For 31 years she'd been the world-famous Ann Landers, a name she'd actually owned only since 1985. Interestingly enough, it was Rick Newcombe (and then *Sun-Times* publisher Bob Page) who gave it to her in the course of signing her to a News America contract. The contract also contained a helpful escape clause that made Lederer a free agent the instant Murdoch sold the syndicate.

"I couldn't have done it without her," Newcombe told us. "The fact that she appeared in 1,200 newspapers meant that Creators suddenly had 1,200 newspaper clients overnight." Johnny Hart's *B.C.* came next, followed by Herblock, and Mell Lazarus brought his two strips aboard. Now Newcombe says Creators is the syndication industry's sixth biggest; a recent *Editor & Publisher* survey of the 1988 year in syndication was little more than a list of his acquisitions: Lazarus, the *Archie* strip, columnists Joe Bob Briggs and Percy Ross, editorial cartoonist Mike Luckovich, and Doug Marlette, who draws both editorial cartoons and the strip *Kudzu*.

"We had been in negotiations," says Newcombe, speaking of Marlette, "and his attorney called me on the day the Pulitzers were to be announced and said 'Congratulations, your newest editorial cartoonist today won the Pulitzer prize.'"

Newcombe has just signed up Hunter F. Thompson.

"When I started I was criticized heavily for what my competitors said was raiding the talent at other syndicates," Newcombe told us. "I don't use that word. I think it's an insult to the creative talent. . . . It sounds like cartoonists are helpless children who can be carried away in the night kicking and screaming against their will."

Actually, they can't, if for no other reason than that most are shackled too firmly to their benevolent lieges. Tom Batiuk was teaching school in Ohio in 1970 when he decided to try to syndicate a teen strip he'd been drawing for the local paper. A strip his own students had named —*Funky Winkerbean*.

"I took it around to the major syndicates," says Batiuk, "and what you were basically faced with, if you wanted to get into the game at all, your ticket of admission was signing away all your creations to the people who syndicate you."

Batiuk went with Field, which became News America, which disappeared into King Features, with Batiuk being passed powerlessly from hand to hand, office to office, city to city. Several years ago, he suggested doing a sequence on teen pregnancy. Inappropriate, said his bosses at Field. In 1986, when News America was issuing his checks, Batiuk suggested the idea again.

"Let's go for it," said Rick Newcombe.

Batiuk appreciated that. It's one of the reasons he brought *Crankshaft*, his new strip, to Creators. The two big reasons, of course, are that he still owns the strip, and that Newcombe signed him to a sensible three-year contract.

What about his contract with King Features? "It goes on forever," Batiuk said. Could he just stop drawing *Funky Winkerbean*? "Technically, they say I can't. It ties me up for life, technically. It does have options that they can cancel me, technically. They can get rid of me tomorrow and keep the strip going."

Mell Lazarus runs a sort of hotline for the National Cartoonists Society. He tells new cartoonists negotiating their first contracts what they're entitled to.

"They can reasonably expect to get ownership of their feature," Lazarus told us. "The time was when refusing to give the syndicate ownership was tantamount to refusing syndication. That's not the way it is anymore."

"Did you hear about Bill Keane, who does *Family Circus*? After a long, long hassle, he just got from King Features the ownership of his feature. That's a watershed. That's absolutely remarkable. They returned his rights to his work after 30 years because he refused, absolutely refused to work beyond his current contract, which expired in December of '88. He refused to work and said he'd enjoin the syndicate from continuing the strip without him. So they gave him ownership and a short contract. It says something about his guts."

And about Rick Newcombe's impact.

—MICHAEL MINER

CREATORS SYNDICATE