

# Current Biography®

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## Kate Beaton

**Born:** September 8, 1983

**Occupation:** Cartoonist

When cartoonist Kate Beaton first began posting installments of her web comic *Hark! A Vagrant*, she could not have predicted that her work would bring her not only significant popularity among comics readers but also substantial critical acclaim. Dealing with a wide variety of subjects, from historical figures to literary characters to Beaton's younger self, her comic strips blend factual elements with offbeat, anachronistic humor, appealing to readers of all disciplines. "I think that I'm like a big magnet ball, running through the Internet, picking up things that I find interesting, and storing them away," she told Laura Bradley for *Slate* (10 July 2015) when asked about her comic's diverse subject matter. A native of rural Nova Scotia, Beaton started out publishing comics in her university newspaper, but she first gained extensive attention in 2007, when she began posting her work online. By the end of 2015, she was the best-selling creator of three collections of comics as well as *The Princess and the Pony*, a children's book she wrote and illustrated.



(Wikimedia/Flickr) "Kate Beaton" by 5of7 - Flickr: Kate Beaton. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons

### EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Kathryn Moira Beaton was born in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia on September 8, 1983. The second of four daughters born to Marion and Neil Beaton, she grew up in Mabou, a small town on Cape Breton Island. Her mother worked at a bank when Beaton was a child, while her father was a butcher. For most of

her academic career, Beaton attended Mabou Consolidated School, which taught students through twelfth grade. The school closed in 2000, and Beaton spent her final year of high school at Dalbrae Academy in Mabou, graduating in 2001.

Beaton developed a love of drawing at an early age. Mabou's schools offered little in the way of art education, but her parents encouraged her artistic pursuits and for a time arranged for her to take lessons from a local painter. Beaton has noted in interviews that although she began drawing comics early in life, she had very little exposure to the superhero comics and long-form graphic novels popular among comics readers; however, she did have the opportunity to read newspaper comics and particularly enjoyed Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* and Bill Amend's *FoxTrot*.

Although Beaton had become known in her family and school as "the one who could draw," as she told Chris Mautner for the *Comics Journal* (4 Nov. 2015), a career in art seemed far too risky for a resident of rural Nova Scotia. "[I]f I said, 'I want to be an artist,' a lot of people would have been like, 'Are you sure? Being a nurse is much safer, being a teacher,'" she explained to Mautner. She added, "People make fairly safe moves there, which is what happens when you're in an economically disadvantaged place. Risks are for privileged people with money to fall on their face if it doesn't work out." Instead of pursuing an education in art, Beaton opted to study history and anthropology while attending Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, from which she earned her bachelor's degree in 2005. During her time at the university, she began drawing comics for the student newspaper, the *Argosy*, and also wrote a humor column called Super Quiz. Having gained an outlet for her comics, Beaton over time began to develop the offbeat sense of humor that characterizes much of her later work, although she admitted to Mautner that many of her *Argosy* strips were "so bad."

## EARLY CAREER

After graduating from college, Beaton faced the daunting prospect of paying off her student loan. Returning to Mabou was not an option. "You grow up in Cape Breton and you have to leave. If you want to make a good living you have to leave," she explained to Mautner. "There's an immense sense of loss over generations. . . . There's all kinds of songs about how much people miss home and how they had to go. But there's an emphasis on doing better for yourself." Instead, Beaton took a job in Fort McMurray, Alberta. Located in the Athabasca oil sands of northern Alberta, Fort McMurray is the site of extensive oil extraction processes and a common destination for young Canadian jobseekers, particularly those, like Beaton, from the Maritime provinces. The experience proved to be a formative one for Beaton, who told Sam Thielman for the *Guardian* (14 Sept. 2015), "I had just finished school, so you have your kind of academic-head-in-the-clouds thing that you do when you're writing a paper, and you're like: 'This is important!' And then you get to the oil sands and people are dying, and the earth is being destroyed and you're like: 'Oh, this is important.'"

Beaton remained at Fort McMurray for a year, working in a tool warehouse at a mining site. She spent the following year as an administrative assistant at the Maritime Museum of British Columbia in Victoria. A history buff, Beaton enjoyed working in a museum environment and considered enrolling in graduate school with the goal of becoming a professor.

### **HARK! A VAGRANT**

Although Beaton no longer had a publication venue for her work after graduating from university, she continued to write and draw comics, creating many of the strips for which she would first become known while working at the Maritime Museum. Emily Horne, one of the creators of the comic *A Softer World*, was the programs manager at the museum, and upon witnessing Beaton's talent, she encouraged her to post her drawings on the Internet. Beaton began posting her work online in 2007, initially on her LiveJournal blog and then on a personal website.

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Unlike her comics for the *Argosy*, which primarily focused on campus life and current events, her *Hark! A Vagrant* strips (named after a line from one of her early comics) deal with topics such as history and literature, areas that had long been of interest to Beaton. Despite the interesting tidbits of information they present to readers, however, her comics are not solely educational in nature; rather, they blend facts with an offbeat brand of humor that is joyfully anachronistic and often employs puns and moments of sheer absurdity. "I like going back and forth between the stuff that is just silly nonsense and the stuff that is a bit more book heavy," Beaton told Mautner of her writing style. "Because if you do one or the other all the time I think you'd get tired of it and people would get tired of seeing it. I like throwing in different stuff. 'Cause we all have a broad taste like that. We like to laugh, we like to learn, we like to look at something silly, and we like to think about things a bit more sometimes."

*Hark! A Vagrant* frequently features historical figures such as Elizabeth I of England, inventor Nikola Tesla, and journalist Ida B. Wells as well as references to numerous literary works, including Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 classic *The Great Gatsby*. In addition to its real-world and pop-cultural influences, the comic also features a number of original characters who recur from time to time. One particularly notable character is a fat Shetland pony who appears in several comics and is a favorite among Beaton's fans; the pony has made a guest appearance in an episode of the Cartoon Network program *Adventure Time* and also has a costarring role in Beaton's first children's book, *The Princess and the Pony* (2015). Other recurring characters include the Mystery Solving Teens, essentially a more realistic version of teen detectives such as the Hardy Boys, and the Strong Female

Characters, who represent a satirical view of the representation of women in popular media.

## SUCCESS IN COMICS

Still financially unable to commit to comics full time, Beaton ultimately returned to Fort McMurray, working there for another year. She later wrote a five-part comic, “Ducks” (2014), about her experiences in Alberta during that period. Finally, in the fall of 2008, she moved to Toronto to focus on writing comics, where she lived for a time with Horne. By that point, she had also changed the name of her site to *Hark! A Vagrant*. In an interview with Raju Mudhar for the *Toronto Star* (28 Oct. 2011), Beaton explained that as she grew into the creative process, she had learned to let her work stand on its own: “It used to be KateBeaton.com but I got rid of that because I didn’t want to be the focus of the comic. I wanted the comic to *be*.”

*Hark! A Vagrant* has amassed a dedicated readership in the years since the site’s launch, and the success of the web comic has enabled Beaton to make a living from her work, in part through the sale of merchandise such as T-shirts and a stuffed animal version of the fat pony. In addition to maintaining an archive of comics on her website, Beaton has released three collections of strips, beginning with the publication of *Never Learn Anything from History* in 2009. She has drawn comics for the *New Yorker* and contributed to the Marvel Comics anthology *Strange Tales II* (2010). Not long after her second collection, *Hark! A Vagrant* (2011), became a *New York Times Best Seller*, she was the recipient of the 2012 Harvey Award for best online comics work. In December 2014, her art appeared on Google’s Canadian homepage to commemorate the birthday of Canadian suffragist Henrietta Edwards.

Perhaps the most intangible yet significant of Beaton’s accomplishments is her success in introducing readers to historical figures and events with which they are unfamiliar. Although Beaton does not design her comics to be educational tools, their humorous take on history has proven highly effective. “I really believe in the power of comics as an educational thing, even ones as silly as mine, because they’re a gateway to the actual thing,” she explained to Tasha Robinson for the *A.V. Club* (14 Oct. 2011). “They’re like an easy entrance.”

## THE PRINCESS AND THE PONY

Following the publication of the *Hark! A Vagrant* collection in 2011, editors from the book publisher Scholastic approached Beaton about writing a children’s book. Intrigued by the idea, Beaton contemplated a number of potential stories before ultimately writing what became *The Princess and the Pony*. Published in 2015, the book tells the story of Princess Pinecone, a child from a family of warriors who requests a warhorse for her birthday but instead receives a fat pony—an animal familiar to readers of *Hark! A Vagrant*. Asked about the process of writing for children rather than her usual audience of adults, Beaton told Laura Godfrey for *Publishers Weekly* (9 June 2015), “I think everyone who likes their

kids knows that it's a mistake to talk down to them. You're talking to them on a level that's respecting their intelligence, because they're a very discerning audience. So are adults, but when I write for adults, I'm talking to an audience that seems invested in nostalgia, a thing that doesn't exist for kids. So the language changes." As further proof of her versatility, her third comics collection, *Step Aside, Pops* (2015), also landed on the *New York Times Best Sellers* list.

## PERSONAL LIFE

Beaton, who still lives in Toronto, has acknowledged that although she is grateful for the success she has experienced, she has increasingly striven to separate her work and her personal life: "My day-to-day isn't as bothered by it now. Maybe it's because I retreated, and now I'm a more private person. In the beginning, you're so excited that people are reading your work, and you're way more open and giving of yourself. . . . Then you get a little older and you want to live by the sea in a hut," she explained to Laura Hudson for *Wired* (23 Sept. 2015).

## SUGGESTED READING

Beaton, Kate. "Hark! A Vagrant's Kate Beaton on Making History Funny and Who Should Be on the \$10 Bill." Interview by Laura Bradley. *Slate*. Slate Group, 10 July 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Beaton, Kate. "'I'm a Careful Person': An Interview with Kate Beaton." Interview by Chris Mautner. *Comics Journal*. Fantagraphics, 4 Nov. 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Beaton, Kate. "Kate Beaton: 'We Watched Print Die from up on Our Hill of Youth.'" Interview by Sam Thielman. *Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 14 Sept. 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Beaton, Kate. "Q & A with Kate Beaton." Interview by Laura Godfrey. *Publishers Weekly*. PWxyz, 9 June 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Hudson, Laura. "How Internet Magic Helped a Quirky Cartoonist Find Success." *Wired*. Condé Nast, 23 Sept. 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Robinson, Tasha. "Kate Beaton." *A.V. Club*. Onion, 14 Oct. 2011. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

## SELECTED WORKS

*Never Learn Anything from History*, 2009; *Hark! A Vagrant*, 2011; *The Princess and the Pony*, 2015; *Step Aside, Pops*, 2015

—Joy Crelin