

Krazy Kat (review)

K. N. Llewellyn

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KRAZY KAT. By George Herriman. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1946. Pp. unnumbered; many, but not enough.

Artists have from time to time over the years found the sure knowledge that law and lawyers are an essential part of human life. But mostly they have worked without understanding. Thus, Daumier and Rowland and Hogarth bite, and when we grow stale or slow on our great tasks it is good, though unpleasant, to get such sound strong teeth sunk into our legs. Dickens bit, too, and bit with effect. Dreiser bit deeper, but he bit with less skill and so with less effect. And there was a French dramatist whom I read when I was young who used inexorable Law as a modern substitute for the Fate of Greek drama. He also had no effect.

Never in history, before Herriman's Offissa Pup, has an artist *done*, for lawyer and for layman, the true essence of our job, for all of us to see together. Offissa Pup has more than an office. Offissa Pup has, to begin with, a deep love for the public whom he protects, to wit: our Krazy Kat. Offissa Pup, moreover, does not merely have and use a jail, he does not merely detect and punish, he also schemes and polices most preventively. Law should. But Offissa Pup is big enough to understand that even his hard-bitten adversary, that Ignatz Mouse, is a person with qualities. Himself the voice and arm of present Order, Offissa Pup yet knows that in the Ungovernable of this Moment may lie the seed of a needed and unreckonable Future. An intelligent Tory, an upright and skilled and so needed official, a very Backbone of any Administration, Offissa Pup.

No lawyer should leave this gathering of Herriman's "comics" unstudied. I mean *unstudied*. The first time over, they will simply charm, and by their charm keep you from thinking. Krazy—sometimes a "he," but emerging with a definite and dominant persistence as the "she" of all she's—is at once "out-of-this-world" and in the middle of it. Ignatz Mouse, beloved, hating, and conquered, is at once all that Rugged Individualism can hope to be and the prey of two plain facts:

The first fact that beats him is the fact of Order: even this most obstreperous of individuals finds habit and precedent reducing his range of throw to a single target, Krazy, and to a single missile, a brick in one form or another. Herriman cut here by intuition much deeper, I think, than he knew. So the professional criminal finds himself limiting his "line" and his method.

The other fact which beats Ignatz is the power of simple love. I doubt that, Francis of Assisi excepted, any person has spread to so many persons since Jesus preached on the Mount the utter power of patience and understanding and just plain simple love. Such love is, of course, a necessary part of any right law. In our own case-law system it is also a possible part of actual law. In the U. N. it is, by other means, a possibility. Our own courts (let us give thanks) are courts which know their given duty to be the working out of Law and Justice into some combination. That is our Grand Tradition. What some have missed is that love and understanding are one essential part of that Justice which is the one half of the job.

Herriman did not miss that. That is why this is a book which men of the law need to work over not a single time for amusement, but many times, for study.

Had there been nothing else, the sustained presentation of Krazy, speaking Brooklynese in the middle of New Mexico, would in itself have been a contribution to America.

K. N. LLEWELLYN

Betts Professor of Jurisprudence, Columbia University School of Law.

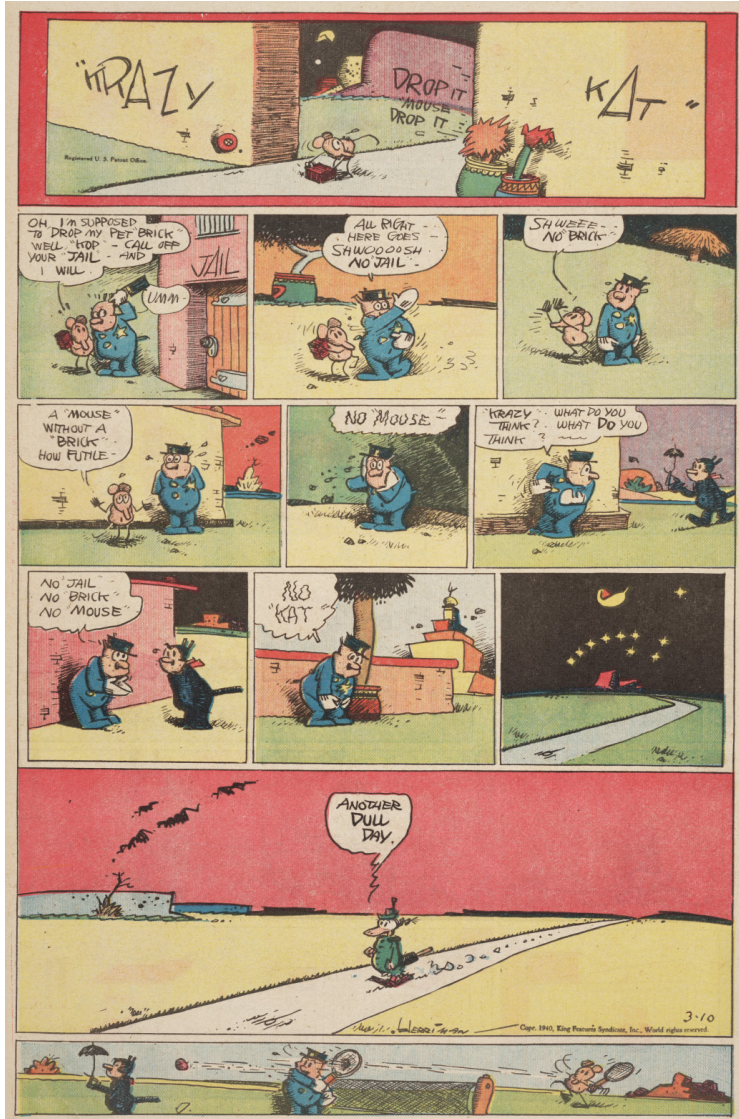


Figure 1: (Herriman 10 March 1940: 126)

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